

Christianity and the Supernatural.—III.

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THE supernatural character of our Lord's person and life becomes far more evident when we pass from the Incarnation to the Atonement. The very conception of Him as One who by His death delivered us from our sins, making our pardon a possibility, sets Him outside and above the range both of natural law and of ordinary moral experience. It is for this reason, doubtless, that the modern mind, which has been trained in the methods of scientific thought, shrinks from approaching the very subject of the Atonement. The whole question seems to belong to the realm of the mystical, and to be out of touch with everything which is now regarded as exact thinking.

Only in one way will those who have adopted this attitude of mind allow the subject to be presented. The death of Christ, they will permit us to think, was the final instance of our Lord's self-sacrifice, and so became, along with His life, a revelation of Divine love. The Atonement, if the word is to be employed, is, then, simply a manifestation of a truth which is quite independent of the death of Christ. It is the greatest exhibition of the character of God, and helps us to rise to the thought of a Divine love so great that it will receive every sinner who repents.

There can be no doubt that, for those who believe in the Divinity of our Lord, His death is the greatest possible revelation of Divine love, and the strongest assurance of God's readiness to pardon the penitent. But, as has been very often pointed out, if this is the whole of the Atonement, what is to be said about the Divine justice? Is there to be no vindication of those great laws of righteousness which as truly belong to the nature of God as that supreme love which we delight to attribute to Him? Dare we so conceive the love of God as to deny His justice? Is a love great which so operates as to

permit the laws of righteousness to be set at naught with impunity?

These are old questions, and very important, and it is not too much to say that they have never been answered satisfactorily by the adherents of that view of the Atonement which has just been mentioned.

But in discussing the question thus we are dealing with abstractions. It is far more important to come face to face, if we can, with the concrete facts of that moral situation with which the Atonement, if there be such a thing, must deal. It is not too daring to say that in the controversies concerning this question there has been too much of the abstract; the concrete problem has been largely overlooked. Yet if we are to find the real problem, we must find it in the concrete.

Sin is sin; it acquires, that is, its character as sin, rather than as moral failure, because it is an offence against God. But great as is the illumination which this truth sheds upon the nature of sin, it provides no measure, no moral standard, by which to bring the question within the bounds of our judgment. What thus appears is not quantity, but quality. We gain, not a measure, but the impression of the immeasurable. It may be that this impression conveys the highest truth, but we are not in a position to see that it does. It used to be sometimes said that sin, as an offence against God the Infinite, must be infinite in its nature, and therefore demand infinite punishment. The argument is seldom pressed nowadays, and wisely; for the statement is one which is equally hard to affirm and to deny. It is even difficult to know exactly what it means, but it seems to confuse quality with quantity, and to argue that the most awful characteristic of sin must necessarily, on account of this highest degree of awfulness, imply an endless result.

There are, however, ways of regarding sin which, while equally true, are more within our comprehension, and which supply a means of measurement, so far as measurement is possible in such a case. Sin may, like goodness, be regarded from the side of character and from the side of end. Every

action, every decision of the will, corresponds to a particular determination of the character of the agent. When the action is in the right, the character is formed or strengthened to some degree; when the action is in the wrong, the character is injured or weakened to some degree.

So, again, every decision of the will aims at some end. In the case of right conduct, the true end is attained; in the case of wrong conduct, the true end is not attained—some end which is not the true good prevails. And, let it be noted, the true good in each instance is perfectly individualized; it corresponds exactly to the circumstances, which are unique and can never be reproduced. The moral situation can never be repeated.

Further, all good ends are stages in a great universal process designed to bring about the supreme end, the kingdom of God. No other supposition will satisfy the demands of the Christian conscience and the Christian revelation. God's purpose in creation, if there be any truth in the Christian view of the world, is the establishment of a perfect order of things through the loving co-operation of the wills of His moral creatures, working under His guidance and in harmony with Himself. And, corresponding to the external order, there is the internal order created in each moral being who participates in the great process, a character which results from the exercise of a will in harmony with the will of God.

Here we are provided with a means by which we can estimate sin. Regard it from the side of character, and its relation to the whole moral economy becomes sufficiently clear for our purpose. Every collocation of circumstances which provides a field for moral activity is a perfectly unique opportunity for the construction of character. Misspent, the loss can never be made good. No amount of goodness at a later stage can repair the injury which was inflicted—the scar remains. The goodness of the later life was due in any case.

Or think of the situation from the point of view of the end. Each attainment of the true end of life is, as it were, a stone laid in its true position in the great temple of existence. Every

failure is a stone laid askew, or, rather, it is an undermining of the foundations. And here, again, as we have seen, the circumstances are in each case unique. The evil once done can never be undone. And it is an evil which affects, not the individual only, but also the whole purpose of creation. One element which was intended to take its share in the production of the supreme result has been withdrawn, and can never be restored—or, rather, in its place has been inserted a destructive element, which no subsequent effort can remove.

The case is even more terrible when we consider the evil which one soul can do to another. No man's sins affect himself alone. In some cases a sinful life becomes a centre of moral pestilence. Yet such a life can be changed; the man who has lived it can repent and, as we believe, be forgiven. But his change of heart and life will not undo the evil which he caused in others, nor stop the spread of the pernicious influence which he originated. It is possible to imagine terrible cases. An innocent soul falls victim to the temptations spread round it by another, is dragged through the deepest depths of shame and degradation, and dies an outcast. The tempter lives to repent, perhaps to devote himself to good works; but no effort of his can restore the purity he destroyed or brighten the blackness of the despair with which the poor outcast faced the terrors of death.

These reflections may be familiar to many readers, and it may seem needless to repeat them here, but the fact is that they have not been sufficiently considered by those who have taken in hand to deal with the doctrine of the Atonement.¹ Dr. Denney, one of the most recent and one of the ablest of modern writers on this doctrine, regards them as the consequence of a purely physical conception of the universe. And it is perfectly true that the argument from the impossibility of undoing the physical results of sin has been pressed in a

¹ Dr. Moberly, in his great work, "Atonement and Personality," does not deal with this problem. Dr. Dale approached it in his criticism of Dr. Young, but cannot be said to have dealt with it generally. His criticism is addressed to a particular and very unsatisfactory statement of it.

way which put aside unduly the moral aspect of the truth. As Dr. Denney says, "The modern mind has given passionate expression" to the belief "that forgiveness is impossible. Sin is, and it abides. The sinner can never escape from the past. His future is mortgaged to it, and it cannot be redeemed. He can never get back the years which the locust has eaten. His leprous flesh can never come again like the flesh of a little child. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, and reap for ever and ever. It is not eternal punishment which is incredible; nothing else has credibility. Let there be no illusion about this: forgiveness is a violation, a reversal, of law, and no such thing is conceivable in a world in which law reigns."¹

This is a fair representation of the manner in which the argument has been presented. But to dismiss it, as Dr. Denney does, with the remark "that sin and its consequences are here conceived as though they belonged to a purely physical world, whereas, if the world were only physical, there could be no such thing as sin,"² is to turn aside from the very central problem of the Atonement. It is perfectly true, as he says, that the question "is not one of logic or of physical law, but of personality, of character, of freedom." But, as we have seen, the unpardonableness of sin becomes even more terribly distinct when we view the question from the side "of personality, of character, of freedom."²

From the purely physical point of view there is, it is true, no such thing as sin. It is for that reason that, as we are told, "the modern man is not worrying about his sins." If the physical world, conceived as a universal evolutionary process, be the final truth, penitence becomes a meaningless weeping over spilt milk, and the less there is of it the better. No wonder, at a time when the influence of physical science on the whole of life is so great, and when so many have learned to think of physics as the one really certain form of knowledge, that the

¹ Denney, "The Atonement and the Modern Mind," p. 78.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

sense of sin should seem to disappear. But when the moral and spiritual faculties are awakened, the consciousness of sin revives, and then it is discovered that the inexorableness of the laws of Nature is but the under side of this most terrible of all facts—that there is, and can be, no way of making reparation for sin.

Thus we find ourselves face to face with the most tremendous of all human needs, the most awful of all problems. Surely it is the dim consciousness of this truth which explains those strange facts of penitential experience which may be found, in one form or another, in all ages and among all races. The feeling that it is necessary to do some great thing, to undergo some great suffering, to submit to some severe discipline, to make some great sacrifice; all strange forms of asceticism, doctrines of merit and means of acquiring it; the belief in a fate which pursues a man to his death—these, with the ever-present sense of failure, are witnesses to the existence of a great moral dilemma in which humanity finds itself placed, and from which there is no escape. The Atonement is the most necessary of all things, and, so far as our faculties can discover, the most impossible.

On the plane of natural law and, to rise higher, on the plane of moral experience, it is, then, useless to seek for a solution of the problem; the categories of our thought are not adequate to the task. But are we to conclude that what is impossible with men is also impossible with God? Surely not. The true conclusion is that an Atonement, if it is to be at all, must be transcendent: it must belong to a realm of being to which our minds cannot ascend; it must be in the strictest sense *supernatural*.

In the present condition of thought we have great need to distinguish carefully between the *transcendent* and the *transcendental*. The latter term has become the mark of a school of philosophy which holds that thought is, when rightly employed, adequate to the explanation of all reality. Thought and reality are, they hold, conterminous—indeed, identical. *Transcendental*

is an adjective which describes this employment of thought. It implies, not the existence of a realm beyond thought, but, on the contrary, the power of thought to pass beyond limits which shut in the common understanding. In this sense the word may be rightly and conveniently used even by those who are unable to regard transcendentalism as the final philosophy. The *transcendent*, on the other hand, is that which lies beyond the reach of our thought. Those who use it commit themselves to the belief that there is a region of being which is outside our experience and above the grasp of our faculties.

It may be noted as a characteristic of the present situation in philosophic study that there is a growing conviction that the final reality is beyond us.¹ The categories which belong to our thinking, whether in the abstract scientific understanding or in the more concrete philosophical reason, are not able to contain the ultimate truth of the universe. All the new forms of doctrine which have arisen out of the ashes of the Hegelian philosophy agree with the quasi-scientific agnosticism on this point. It is a notable fact, and one that Christian thinkers would do well to ponder.

Now, there is no conception which has come to light in recent years which should prove more fruitful in the field of theology than that of *degrees of reality*. We can see its meaning most easily by thinking of the spiritual, as known to us in our own conscious experience, in relation to the material. How is it that man is able to control for his own ends the iron laws of Nature, to bend them to his purposes, and yet not break them? It is, indeed, as we saw,² just because of their absolutely trustworthy character that man can depend upon the laws of Nature to effect his designs. The truth is that the spiritual belongs to a higher order of reality than the material, and to the higher the lower submits without suffering any violation of its nature. To those who are familiar with the idealist criticism of experience, the meaning of the distinction will be apparent.

¹ See F. H. Bradley, "Appearance and Reality," chap. xxvii.

² CHURCHMAN for January, p. 19. See Sir O. Lodge, "Life and Matter."

If man, then, can supervene upon the material world, because of his spiritual nature, and effect results which material forces left to themselves could never accomplish, can we, considering the ragged ends of all our theories, doubt the existence of a Reality higher than any known to us, which, supervening upon our world, can bring all that hangs disconnected in it to a final unity?

This Higher Reality and the final unity which corresponds to it are for us, at least in our present existence, transcendent.

Now, surely if there is any point at which it is necessary to discern the supervention of the Higher Reality, it is at the supreme problem of human life. The Atonement is God's dealing with the problem of evil. It is the solution of that problem, not in theory, but in the realm of fact and life. But all the difficulties which belong to the theoretical solution of the problem must beset our endeavour to understand and explain the practical solution. Can there be a question that this is the reason why no theory of the Atonement has ever proved completely satisfying, and why the categories which are employed to convey the truth to the mind are always more or less inadequate?

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the Atonement presented to us under a great variety of conceptions. It is a redemption, a propitiation, a reconciliation. It is specifically identified with the death of Christ. In His death our Lord bore our sins in His own body on the tree. He died for all. He redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. He was made sin for us. He gave His life a ransom for many.

Many great efforts have been made to work these ideas up into a consistent whole; with what degree of success is known to all students of theology. One fact has emerged with great clearness: no one image or conception will bear being elaborated into a system. Contradiction arises from every such attempt.

But it is only theology which has suffered from this failure. Christian experience is absolutely unfaltering in its testimony to

the fact that salvation through the death of Christ is the message which brings conviction to the human soul and gives assurance of pardon and power for the spiritual life. The influence of the Cross of Christ upon the life of man is witnessed to by all the ages of Christian history, and in the experience of that influence certain elements may be clearly discerned. These elements are mainly : death the inevitable penalty or result of sin ; the sinless Son of God of His own free-will, and as the expression of the Father's love, undergoing death for us ; deliverance from sin, otherwise impossible, manifested first as free forgiveness and secondly as spiritual power. These elements have never been absent from the Christian experience.

Let it be noted that the sense of sin gives to death a meaning, or rather force, which death as a mere physical fact does not possess,¹ and that this meaning is not adequately represented by such words as "penalty" or "result"; and secondly, that the death of Christ derives an awful significance from our belief as to the personality of Him who underwent it. Here are two elements which, from the very nature of things, pass beyond the grasp of our faculties, and, *for that very reason*, have all the more power over us. It is the depth of these elements which makes the soul accept with gladness statements about the death of Christ which would be meaningless if made about any other death. We interpret the language in terms, not of ideas, but of experience, and have no difficulty in believing that, in such a case, the greatest meaning is the truest.

And here is the clue to the logic of the position : when we are dealing with the things of God, the greatest meaning is always the truest. For when we speak of God we have to use inadequate language. In His true nature He is transcendent—that is, all our human categories when applied to Him are but symbols of something greater, and the greatest meaning we can give them is not great enough. We call God "Father," for example, but we know that the highest significance we can give to the word is not high enough.

¹ Well shown by Dr. Denney, *op. cit.*, pp. 63 *et seq.*

If this principle applies anywhere, it applies to the case of the Atonement ; for, as we have seen, if there be such a thing at all, it is concerned with the most inscrutable of all mysteries.

To sum up, then, the Atonement must be a fact belonging to the very highest realm of truth. It must be transcendent. It can, therefore, be conveyed to our minds only by means of symbols, which are inevitably inadequate. To construct a consistent and perfectly rationalized theory of it is impossible. But to say this is not to condemn the efforts of the theologian, for the Atonement is known as a fact in the living experience of the Christian faith, and the mind must ever do its best to keep pace with the soul's experience. Every true effort of the Christian thinker is, to some degree, an approach to a mystery of Divine love, which can manifest itself under an infinite variety of forms to the human intelligence ; and the fact that all such modes of representation reach out towards a truth too great for our comprehension corresponds exactly with the teaching of our human experience concerning the problem of evil.



The Red Sea Passage of the Exodus.—II.

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WE have now some idea of the feelings which animated the Israelites on leaving Egypt. They "went out with an high hand," which may be paraphrased as under strong Divine guidance. There was a spirit of elation in having escaped the bondage of their oppressors, and a confidence at first that the journey to Canaan would be of short duration—not longer in performance than it was for their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There was some apprehension of war upon the way, as they could hardly have hoped to reach the promised land without some hindrance from their hereditary