

The Atonement in the Writings of St. John.

A SUPERFICIAL estimate of the writings of St. John tends to assign a very minor place to the Atonement in his works, whilst the general prominence given by St. John to certain elements of the life and teaching of Christ tends to obscure the importance which the death of Christ has for St. John in common with the other writers of the New Testament. Moreover, the general tendencies of the present age have gone far to deepen this impression. The present age has been described as "the age of St. John," in the sense that the spirit and teaching of St. John is laying its impress upon the mind of the present generation in a way that it has not done before, and the saying and the idea are used both to draw a contrast between the spirit of former ages, and also to infer a generalization which is only half true. The saying is used first of all to draw a contrast between the first age of the Christian Church, dominated by the spirit of St. Peter, the spirit of authority—*i.e.*, in the primitive and early middle ages; this age is then supposed to be followed by the age dominated by the spirit of St. Paul—*i.e.*, from the time of the Reformation onwards, when the truth of the Atonement, with its corollary, "the priesthood of all believers," became the central tenet of Christianity. In contrast with these ages is supposed to be the present age, ushering in the Johnian idea of Christianity, with its emphasis upon the earthly life and teaching of Christ, with its insistence upon the mystical union between Christ and the believer—a Christianity, in short, which lays no emphasis upon the death of Christ, and consequently assigns little importance to the Atonement.

The purpose of this essay is to show that the Atonement has a very definite place in the writings of St. John. It is quite true that there are certain phases of St. John's teaching which stand out very prominently, and which seem at first sight to have little connection with the Atonement—*i.e.*, such as the isolating of certain incidents in our Lord's life to bring out

particular ideas associated with the Logos, or the choice of certain signs to sift believers from unbelievers, and to bring the believers to a belief in Christ which should insure eternal life (*cf.* xx. 30, 31)—but a closer examination will serve to show that the fact of the Atonement is behind all the doctrinal teaching of St. John, and that the Atonement is strongly entrenched in all his writings.

The subject will be examined as follows:

1. In the Gospel: The Historical Fact of the Atonement.
2. In the Epistle: The Present Working of the Atonement.
3. In the Revelation: The Future Hope from the Atonement.

THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN.

1. *Introduction—The Atonement.*

The opening words of the Gospel (i. 1-14) are a résumé testifying to the truth of Christ as the Logos, and they summarize the truth which is worked out through the Gospel. Following immediately upon this prologue come the words of the Baptist as the Forerunner of Christ (i. 15-18), witnessing in general terms that Christ was both Messiah and Logos. This general introduction to the Gospel is followed by the story of the query from the Jerusalem priests and Levites (i. 19-28) as to whether the Baptist was himself the Christ. The succeeding verse, however (i. 29), tells of the first contact of the Baptist with our Lord, and the public proclamation of the fact is made by the Baptist in terms which reveal without ambiguity his conception of the life and work of Christ—*i.e.*, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” The phrase itself reveals quite a clear idea of what the Baptist considered to be the reason for the presence of Christ in the world, for “the Lamb” took the mind back to the prophecy of Isaiah (l. 7), which held in it both the sacrificial system of Judaism and the Paschal Lamb of the Passover, whilst “of God” revealed the source and reason for the coming of Christ. The concluding part of the phrase—*i.e.*, “which

taketh away the sin of the world"—is generic, explaining the purpose of Christ's presence in the world. It is a fact of deep significance, therefore, that the first words of the Baptist in testifying to the Person and Mission of Christ should be words which proclaim the fact of the Atonement. To the Baptist the Atonement explains Christ's Person and Christ's Life.

The same fact of significant import is to be seen in the narrative of the next interview with our Lord (i. 35-37). The Baptist and two of his disciples are represented as meeting "Jesus as He walked," and again the Baptist utters the words, "Behold the Lamb of God!"¹ Immediately, and without further parley, the two disciples follow our Lord. The fact of Christ as the "Lamb of God"—in other words, the fact that God had sent Christ into the world for the Atonement of men—was sufficient to make the disciples of the Baptist into the disciples of Christ (i. 41).

Right across the first page of the Gospel, therefore, is the Atonement witnessing to the purpose of Christ's coming into the world, and emphasizing that it is by the Atonement that men are brought to Him.

2. *The Method of the Atonement.*

The first chapter of the Gospel shows us that the Atonement explains the meaning and mission of the Person of Christ, but the chapters which follow go on to explain the method of the Atonement. In the second chapter occurs first of all the miracle of Cana of Galilee, the heralding sign which revealed that Christ could change a lower subject or nature into a higher. Immediately following upon this comes our Lord's encounter with the Jews in the cleansing of the Temple, which resulted in the demand for such a sign as would justify both the cleansing

¹ It has been stated that John the Baptist could not have really seen the "Lamb of God" in the Person of Christ, and that therefore John the Evangelist puts the words and idea into his mouth. Assuming, as we may, that John the Evangelist was one of the two disciples mentioned in i. 35, it seems somewhat gratuitous to think he misrepresents what must have been a most solemn impression made on him by the Baptist's testimony.

and the assumption of authority in the claim "My Father's house" (ii. 16). The answer of our Lord throws the first ray of light upon the method by which the Atonement is to be wrought—*i.e.*, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. . . . He spake of the temple of His body" (ii. 19-21). By His Death and Resurrection, therefore, the Atonement is to be wrought.

The same fact is developed more fully in the following chapter, in which is recorded the interview between our Lord and Nicodemus. The general drift of the conversation of our Lord in the interview seems to be the interpretation of the heralding sign of Cana, *viz.*, that man needed his nature changing from a lower to a higher (iii. 3), and that he needed a spiritual as well as a natural birth (iii. 5-8), all of which could be secured by Him who had shown His power in the changing of water into wine (iii. 16). The means, however, by which this change is to take place is now clearly stated in iii. 14, 15: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life." The "lifting up" of Christ on the Cross is the method by which the Atonement is wrought; the Cross is the means by which the needs of personal regeneration are satisfied (iii. 7); the Cross is the way which leadeth to eternal life (iii. 16).

It seems quite clear, therefore, to assert that St. John has so far laid down that the Atonement explains the purpose of the Logos in the world, and that the method of the Atonement is to be through Calvary.

In the next two chapters there is no mention of the Atonement as such, but the narrative reveals certain general teaching which prepares the way for the next aspect of the Atonement—*i.e.*, its results. The interview with the Samaritan woman lays continual emphasis upon God's attitude towards the spiritual needs of man—*i.e.*, "the gift of God" to satisfy human needs (iv. 10), the offer by Christ of "a well of water springing up into eternal life" (iv. 14), the revelation of Christ as the One

who will show all things of God to man (iv. 25, 26). The whole incident thus reveals the beneficent attitude of God towards man's needs. The incidents which follow give the necessary obverse facts—*i.e.*, the way by which man with his needs can appropriate all which God offers. This is brought out first of all by the sign of the healing of the nobleman's son (iv. 46-54), which showed how faith in Christ procured the blessings of Christ. This fact is, moreover, emphasized by the healing of the paralytic (v. 1-18), which shows that a man vitiated by sin (v. 14) can also by faith secure what Christ offers. This general teaching only prepares the way for the next aspect of the subject, which is—the results of the Atonement.

3. *The Results of the Atonement.*

Having first of all stated that the Atonement explains the coming of Christ into the world, and then having proceeded to show that the Atonement was to be effected by the Cross, St. John now proceeds to show what results would follow from the Atonement. The first of the results is seen in chap. vi., and can be summed up as "the life of Christ offered to men."

(a) *The Life of Christ offered to Men.*—The course of the narrative shows that a considerable number of people had been attracted to our Lord by the three great "signs" which He had performed, and that their journeying had taken them beyond the area where food could be bought. In their hour of need Christ came forward, and by the miracle of the five barley loaves and two small fishes supplied their bodily wants. The "sign" revealed Christ as the Giver of Sustenance to men (vi. 1-14). The narrative proceeds, without interruption, to tell the incident of the troubles of the disciples on the sea of Capernaum, and "the darkness," the "great wind," and the "rising sea," all of which produced the fear of the disciples, are all a setting which heightens the position of Christ as One who can help man when weighed down and troubled by things of earth, and One, moreover, whose power can be seen working through earthly things (vi. 15-21). In Capernaum, however,

came the didactic application of the signs from the lips of our Lord. Christ first of all declares that they had been attracted to Him by the sign of the feeding of the five thousand (vi. 26), and urges them to work now "for the meat which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you" (vi. 27). This appeal to their inner nature drew forth the query which was in itself a half-confession of belief in Christ, "What must we do that we may work the works of God?" (vi. 29); and, "What then doest Thou for a sign, that we may see and believe Thee?" (vi. 30). In answer to this half-faith, which betrayed the longing needs of the Jews, our Lord declared: "I am the bread of life; he that cometh to Me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst" (vi. 35); and also: "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven; if any man shall eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: yea, and the bread which I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world" (vi. 51). These and such-like statements which appear in the words of Christ at Capernaum did not in themselves contain any difficulty. The Jews were brought up in an age which constantly used this simile, and they were traditionally taught by the Rabbinical writers to look to the Messianic era for gaining new life in this way; and their difficulty was only how to reconcile Jesus of Nazareth, "the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know" (vi. 42); how "this man" (vi. 52) could give them His flesh to eat, and thus implicitly proclaim Himself the Messiah. It is in answer to these questionings that our Lord declares: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have not life in yourselves" (vi. 53). The words are a plain declaration to the Jews that He Himself is the Messiah, and that the new life and strength which they expected from the Messiah were to be obtained from Christ. The form of the expression, however, points clearly to the death of Christ. This can be seen from the following considerations—*i.e.*: The Rabbinical writers constantly use the idea of the Torah being "bread from heaven" and "living water." Examples can be seen in such references as

Midrash Shir Rabba, 1, 2 : "As water refreshes the body, so does the Torah refresh the soul"; in Midrash Sifre, 84a : "As water gives life to the world, so do the words of Torah give life (*i.e.*, eternal life) to the world." Again, in Bab. Talm. Shabboth, 120a, and Midrash Beresbith Rabba, 70, reference is made to the "bread of the Torah" as spiritual food ; while in the Midrash Sifre, 12a, it is said that the Torah gives spiritual light to the world. It will at once be seen that, since such ideas were common property amongst the Jews, there was nothing new in our Lord's use of such similes as "living bread" and "bread from heaven"; what was new, however, was Christ's application of them to Himself—as we have seen above.

This brings us, however, to the second fact which has to be borne in mind, and that is that Jewish writers looked forward to the Messianic era, when the elect amongst the Jews will be present at the great Messianic banquet and will feed upon Leviathan. This can be seen from such a passage as the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch, xxix. 3-8 : ". . . Then will the Messiah begin to manifest Himself. And Behemoth will show himself from his land, and Leviathan will ascend from the sea : and these two mighty sea-monsters, whom I created on the fifth day of the work of Creation, and have reserved until that time [*i.e.*, the Messianic era], shall then be food for all those who are left." The idea is no doubt a development from such passages as 2 Esdras vi. 49-52, Ps. lxxiv. 12-15, Zeph. i. 4, and Isa. xxvii. 7, which look forward to the time when Leviathan will be slain, and will become food for the triumphant Jews. Bearing these two current traditions in mind, we are at once able to appreciate the attitude taken up by the Jews with reference to our Lord's statements in St. John vi. ; but the point with which we are particularly concerned is their bearing upon the Atonement. That the statements in St. John vi. do refer to the Atonement seems clear. The phrases "bread from heaven," or the "bread of life," or "the bread of God . . . which cometh down out of heaven and giveth life unto the world" (vi. 32-35), do not in themselves contain the fact of

the Atonement, but simply the mystical element which is contained in the looking upon the Torah as the "bread of life." The other conception, however, of the Messianic banquet does carry with it the fact of the Atonement. In the Messianic feast, at which the Messiah was ruler, the Jewish elect were to feed upon him whose strength was betokened in the name Leviathan. But Christ bids His hearers at Capernaum to eat, not the flesh of a powerful enemy who held them in bondage, but the flesh of Him who offered Himself as their Messiah: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have not life in yourselves. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life . . ." (vi. 53, 54). In other words, Christ points His hearers to the time when He Himself will be in the position of the slain Leviathan, with His body broken and His blood poured out; and when the "eating and drinking" of Himself will be a mark, not of victory over a powerful enemy, but a sign of the life of God which flows out through Christ to men: "He who feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood remains within Me, as I remain within him" (vi. 56). The close of the incident at Capernaum shows that the Jews generally were not yet prepared to accept the Messianic claims of our Lord which were involved in the statements made by Him, and hence the appeal made by Christ to the inner consciousness of the Jews when He met them in Jerusalem (viii. 17). This appeal, however, was only the prelude to the enunciation of the second of the results of the Atonement—viz., that by it the Spirit of God would be fully revealed and given to men (vii. 39).

(b) *The Gift of the Spirit of God to Men.*—It will be noticed that the expressions used in vii. 37, 38, fall into the category of those which were current amongst the Jewish writers, particulars of which were given above when dealing with our Lord's discourse at Capernaum. The simile that the Torah is "thirst-satisfying" and "life-giving" is applied by our Lord to Himself, but it is followed by the significant addendum of St. John: "This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believed on Him

were to receive : for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (vii. 39). It is a clear statement that the gift of the Spirit of God must be preceded by the Cross. There is a sense, of course, in which the Spirit of God has always been at work in the world, and the realization of this must have been greater while Christ walked the earth. Men could not fail to see and feel the Spirit of God working through Christ, and because of this our Lord could say to His disciples (as one reading puts it) that the Holy Spirit "abideth with you, and is in you" (xiv. 17). The full and perfect realization of this, however, was to come, not by the teaching of Christ, nor by the sublimity of His life, but rather by His death. In the Cross was to be found the means by which the life-giving properties attributed to the Torah would be showered forth from Christ, a life which came forth from God, and thus revealed the Spirit of God in men (xiv. 26, xvi. 7, etc.).

The narrative then proceeds to develop a third point, which seems the necessary correlative of the two points already considered. St. John has shown first of all that one result of the Atonement will be the offering of Christ's life to men, and that this will be accompanied by the gift of the Spirit of God to men; he further declares that the Atonement will be a witness to the identity of Christ and God, and that it will be a revelation of the Father.

(c) *A Revelation of the Father.*—The discourse of our Lord recorded in chap. viii. is uniform with the speeches given in chaps. vi. and vii., for the similes are parallel on each occasion. Here in chap. viii. our Lord again uses a simile which was current with reference to the Torah (*cf. supra*), and declares Himself to be "the light of the world," and that whoever follows Him "shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (viii. 12). The general trend of the narrative is to show that the man who believes in Christ will have an illumination which will completely alter his outlook on life, and that this illumination will come when Christ is admitted to control the mind and conscience of man. The justification of this statement

by our Lord is based by Christ on the unity of Himself with God (*cf.* viii. 16, 18, 26), but the truth of this latter assertion could not be grasped by the Jews owing to their limited and material outlook (*cf.* viii. 15, 19, 23). It was in answer, therefore, to this incapacity on the part of the Jews that our Lord declared: "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He, and that I do nothing of myself, but as the Father taught Me I speak these things. And He that sent Me is with Me: He hath not left Me alone, for I do always the things that are pleasing to Him" (viii. 28, 29). The words are a plain statement on the part of Christ that the Cross will witness to the identity or oneness of Christ with God, and that the Cross therefore will give reality or effect to the teaching of Christ and to the purpose of His life. In short, it is the Atonement which will bear witness that God was in Christ—the Atonement will be a revelation of the Father.

This summary of the results of the Atonement shows how in the eyes of St. John the Cross of Christ is inseparably linked with the three Persons of the Trinity, and that, as is usual with this profound topic, the Christian enters into the knowledge of the Trinity by practical experience—an experience, however, which starts from the Atonement.

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(To be continued.)

