

The Wondrous Cross.

STUDIES IN THE ATONEMENT

IV

[CONCLUDING ARTICLE]

IN view of the difficulties connected with this subject, some suggestions may fitly be made.

(a) There are scientific difficulties. With the evolutionary theory of man's origin and nature there seems to be no room for sin, and therefore no room for the Atonement. It is sometimes said that there is no trace of a Fall in nature, and this is, of course, true of physical nature and it is not to be expected. But what about moral nature? What of the sense of guilt and responsibility? Surely this is a fact in the moral universe. In a recent work¹ the author argues that evolution has really emphasized the need of Atonement, but he is careful to insist upon the fact that the doctrine of evolution does not admit of any outsider entering in, so that a theory of substitution which seems to require the entrance of such an outsider is rejected. Such a view as this, however, seems to come under the condemnation already expressed, that "there have been conspicuous examples of essays and even treatises on the Atonement standing in no discoverable relation to the New Testament." If, as one critic² of this book remarked, human thought is moving in the direction of identification rather than simple substitution, yet since, as the writer proceeds to say, such identification may undoubtedly involve some form or degree of substitution, the theory of the book will certainly be destroyed. It seems impossible on any fair statement of the theory of evolution and on any proper exegesis of the New Testament view of sin and atonement to explain the Atonement by evolution. Evolution cannot give an ethical basis for a theory of sin, and therefore all definitions of sin furnished by it are at the least defective. Sin concerns the relation of man to God, involving separation from God, and this can never be explained adequately in terms of evolution. It is no case merely of being hindered in upward progress, but, what

¹ Stuart McDowall, *Evolution and Atonement*, with Preface by Bishop Ryle, Dean of Westminster.

² Dr. Hastings in *Expository Times*.

is much more serious, the consciousness of being alienated from God through sin for which we are responsible.

Then, too, from a scientific standpoint man's littleness is used as an argument against the thought of the Son of God coming down to redeem him. It is suggested that for such a speck in the universe it would be unworthy and unthinkable of God so to act, but, in reply to this, it may be at once said that even in nature the value of things is not judged by their size, and for this reason it is impossible to argue with fairness, because of man's relative insignificance in the universe. This would apply equally to the conception of any revelation of God quite apart from the thought of Atonement. On every ground, therefore, we maintain our New Testament position, and notwithstanding all scientific theories, which seem to run counter to it, we must continue to teach the great realities of sin and redemption.

(b) There are theological difficulties. For many years past there has been in certain quarters a tendency to preach the Incarnation. But this is not the Gospel. In the New Testament the heart of Christianity is found in the grace of Christ, and recent theological thought has been bringing us back to a truer perspective in which we are enabled to see much more clearly than before the centrality of Calvary. It is the supreme value of Denney, Forsyth and Simpson that they are recalling thought to the right direction, and the recent little volume by Mozley confirms this general line and justifies what the author himself said a few years ago :

"It cannot be said too often that the Cross, not the manger, Calvary, not Bethlehem, is the heart of the New Testament. In England the influence of Dr. Westcott from Cambridge and of the Anglo-Catholic successors of the Tractarians from Oxford combined has tended in the opposite direction. In the writer's judgment it is a perilous course to throw the doctrine of propitiatory Atonement to the wolves of Rationalism, while yet believing that the Incarnation can be preserved in its integrity, and it is a course against which the New Testament, as he reads it, stands opposed" (Mozley, *Review in Record*).

It is also sometimes argued that there is no real reason for the Atonement, since God can hardly be different from man, who is willing to forgive on simple repentance. But we have already seen the essential identity of Divine and human forgiveness, and it may also be answered that the relations between man and man have vital differences compared with those between God and man. In the latter there are governmental as well as personal aspects,

and the fact that righteousness is in the very constitution of the universe seems to suggest the impossibility of God overlooking sin, especially with its many and terrible results on the profession of repentance, however genuine.¹

(c) There are also moral difficulties. The offence of the Cross has not yet ceased, and it is either a "stumbling-block" or "foolishness" to many to-day. A thoughtful writer has called attention to the way in which the doctrine of the Atonement tends to be omitted from much modern teaching, because it makes man as a sinner need such an interposition of God. This is rightly said to be due to the tendency to shape religion to people rather than people to religion.

"Every false religion aims at forming a creed that can be carried into the life as it is, instead of transforming the man so that he may live up to his creed. The religion of Christ demands that the man shall be altered, not the truth; other religions demand that the truth shall be altered, not the man."²

It is possible to preach the Incarnation in such a way as to exalt human nature. It is possible to proclaim the Trinity in a way to interest and even please reason. But the preaching of the Cross is altogether different, and tends to humble and even humiliate human nature, because it requires submission to a crucified Saviour. And yet it is the Cross which is the Christian Gospel. If it be said that God is love, and therefore will deal gently with sinners; if it be said that God is merciful, and therefore will show mercy to the wandering; if it be said that God is Father, and therefore will be pitiful to His erring children—the answer is that the facts are true, but the inferences are wrong, because this is not the Gospel. It leaves out Christ. God is Love; God is merciful; God is Father, but not apart from Christ. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John iv. 10).

Further, this attitude leaves out sin, and yet it is only when we see sin in the light of the Cross that we ever get adequate views of its reality and enormity. There is far too great a tendency to-day to forget that sin is the rebellion of man's will against God, and since this is in some respects one of the fundamental Christian doctrines, it is clear that its acceptance or rejection will determine

¹ Mabie, *Under the Redeeming Aegis*.

² Rev. F. E. Marsh.

our attitude to all else. Notwithstanding all studies in Anthropology, indeed, it may be almost said because of them, it is essential to insist upon the truth that "every single human being needs not progress only, but recovery." Herein lies the difference between the New Testament teaching and all ideas that arise in Unitarian quarters. The issue is not at all a question of historical evidence for this or that truth, but concerns the different views of what sin is and of what it requires. No one can doubt that with the New Testament before him the deep and severe conception of sin constitutes an essential truth of the Christian revelation. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and our view of what He is and did will almost entirely depend on our conception of sin. If God's forgiveness is exactly the same as man's, why did Christ die at all? Sin is a fact, and Fatherhood is not the only attitude of God to us. He is a Lawgiver, Judge, and Ruler, and cannot be indifferent to sin, because Fatherhood is always moral and righteous. The only adjectives used by Jesus Christ of the Father were "holy" and "righteous" (John xvii. 11, 25). And so it is essential to emphasize the Cross. We must not proclaim the Cross without Christ, the work without the Person; nor must we proclaim Christ without the Cross; the Person without the work; we must not proclaim the substitutionary work without its practical bearing; nor must we proclaim the practical side without the vicarious element. The New Testament teaches the two sides, the objective reality of the vicarious sacrifice and the subjective power in the life of the believer. Christ saves, sanctifies, satisfies.

"There is little doubt that the sympathetic tendency is the more popular to-day, and to press salvation in a real sense is to be accused of a reactionary bias to theology. But a God who is merely or mainly sympathetic is not the Christian God. The Father of an infinite benediction is not the Father of an infinite grace" (Forsyth, *ut supra*, p. 58).

"If we spoke less about God's love and more about His holiness, more about His judgment, we should say much more when we did speak of His love. . . . It is round this sanctuary that this great camp is set and the great battle really waged. Questions about immanence may concern philosophers, and questions about miracles may agitate physicists. But the great dividing issue for the soul is neither the Bethlehem cradle, nor the empty grave, nor the Bible, nor the social question. For the Church at least (however it may be with individuals) it is the question of a redeeming Atonement. It is here that the eventual issue lies" (Forsyth, *ut supra*, p. 73).

It is sometimes said in regard to the Old Testament that we

ought not to teach anything to children which they will afterwards have to unlearn. This is undoubtedly true, and it applies with equal force to the doctrine of the Atonement. This is what we teach our young people :

“ He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious Blood.

“ There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.”

God forbid that we should ever alter this teaching by a hair's-breadth, whether we are dealing with children or adults. It is this that gives such force to the oft-quoted splendid words of Hooker :

“ Such we are in the sight of God the Father as is the very Son of God the Father. Let it be counted folly or phrensy or fury or whatsoever. It is our wisdom and our comfort ; we care for no knowledge in the world but this, that man hath sinned and God hath suffered, that God hath made the Father the sin of men and that men are made the righteousness of God.”

To the same effect is the magnificent, bold, and yet true paradox of Luther :

“ Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness. I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken what was mine and hast given me what was Thine. What Thou wast not Thou didst become that I might become what I was not.”

A few years ago Professor Mackintosh of Edinburgh addressed a large gathering in Toronto on “ The Preaching of the Atonement.” He said that the present generation was looking for something much simpler, and brighter, and clearer than has been the case in the past. Young men and young women are anxious to have the Christian light put before them with clearness and intelligence, and in his opinion the belief that sermons on doctrines are not wanted to-day is wholly wrong. Dr. Mackintosh then told of a man of whom he had heard having gone through the Communion Service without once mentioning the name of Jesus Christ, and, said the speaker, “ he could not have done it better for a wager, but anything more dreary he had never heard.” Then came these words addressed to the large gathering of preachers present :

“ The Cross is the flesh and blood of the New Testament, and if you take any part away, you have only the skeleton left. It is the duty of the preacher to preach of this, the central point of the New Testament ; there is a life which beats out of its pages which we call Divine. Everything in God is

great, but nothing so great as the blotting out of transgressions. I submit that this can be preached, preached even by men who feel that it is not possible for us to say how the death of Jesus Christ affected God. And I submit further that if it can be preached, then we fail to introduce to men the whole grace of God which is in Christ Jesus as long as we leave it out. If we condemn ourselves to silence in the Cross, in the Gospel, the odds are terribly great that we may come to preach about men instead of God; but if we decide to proclaim resolutely and affectionately all that God has revealed to us by His word and Spirit concerning Atonement following after truth, and believing in the light, then our message will be pervaded by those deep tones which men love to hear in a preacher's voice."

It is now a familiar story, but is worth telling again and again. Gipsy Smith and others have passed on an incident regarding the late Dr. Charles A. Berry of Wolverhampton, who was invited to follow Beecher at Brooklyn. Late one night Dr. Berry's door-bell rang. Every one else in the house being in bed, he answered the call. At the door stood a typical Lancashire girl, with a shawl over her head. "Are you Dr. Berry?" she asked. "I want you to come and get my mother in." Thinking that her mother was in some drunken stupor, he directed the girl to the police. "No," she said, "she is dying, and I want you to get her into heaven." The Doctor did not want to go, but he yielded under the importunity and earnestness of the girl. When they came to the house, Dr. Berry found that it was a house of shame. Drunken carousing was going on downstairs. Upstairs, in a small room, he found the woman dying. It was in the early days of his ministry, and his beliefs were carrying him towards Unitarianism. So he told the dying woman of the beautiful life, the loving ministries, and the noble example of Jesus. He urged her to follow Him, but she shook her head hopelessly, saying: "That's not for the like o' me: I'm a sinful woman, and I'm dying." "It flashed upon me," said Dr. Berry, "that I had no message of hope for that dying woman, and like lightning I leaped in mind and heart back to the Gospel my mother taught me. I told her of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dying on the Cross, that just such as she might be saved; of His blood poured out for the remission of sins, and all the blessed truths of the old, old story. And," he added, "I got her in, and I got myself in, too."

"I sought Thee, weeping high and low,
I found Thee not; I did not know
I was a sinner—even so
I missed Thee for my Saviour.

“ I saw Thee sweetly condescend
Of humble men to be the Friend,
I chose Thee for my way, my end,
But found Thee not my Saviour.

“ Until upon the Cross I saw
My God Who died to meet the law
That man had broken ; then I saw
My sin, and then my Saviour.

“ What seek I longer ? Let me be
A sinner all my days to Thee,
Yet more and more, and Thee to me
Yet more and more my Saviour.

“ Be Thou to me my Lord, my Guide,
My Friend, yea, everything beside ;
But first, last, best, whate'er betide,
Be Thou to me my Saviour.”

W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS.

