

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.

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WHEN lecturing on the comparative study of religions, I advise my students to test each religious system by its doctrine of forgiveness. This doctrine is not primary, but in it as in a focus meet the doctrines of God, of man, of the nature of the world and of immortality, and it is therefore invaluable as a criterion of the value of each system and of its practical efficacy. In Islam, the doctrine seems to me trivial; in Hinduism, it does not exist, its place being taken by a rigid law of expiation. No argument for the truth of Christianity is stronger than that it alone takes a sufficiently serious view of the gigantic evils of the world, and provides a remedy which is adequate to the greatness of God, the dignity of man and the integrity of the universe in which we live. The distinguishing characteristic of the Christian Church is the proclamation of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

In the Old Testament, forgiveness is proclaimed only uncertainly, and as it were by way of anticipation. We are conscious of a certain disparity between the law and the prophets. The purpose of the law was to deepen the sense of sin and of the holiness of God. Its whole ritual of offerings and atonements was directed to the covering over of sin and a ritual cleanness which would make it possible to draw near to God. But only certain classes of sins could be dealt with by these provisions; for sins done with a high hand, there was no propitiation, but only the severity of judgment. But surely most of the sins which we commit are done with a high hand. As men's sense of alienation from God grew stronger, and their yearning for fellowship with Him became more insistent, almost in spite of themselves, they won through to a deeper hope. There was the classic case of David, who sinned most deeply, yet was forgiven. In Psalms and prophets, there is a wistful confidence that in some way, God, through His own grace and goodness and without law opens a way to return to them that seek Him. "For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it thee; thou delightest not in burnt offerings." "If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared." There is no theology of forgiveness in the Old Testament, only a profound conviction of its reality. The problem is left over to a dispensation which has richer materials for its solution.

In the New Testament, forgiveness is incarnate in Jesus Christ. He proclaims it as one of the blessings of the Kingdom on the basis of faith in God. The scribes and Pharisees were quite right in thinking that when He calmly told the paralytic "Thy sins are forgiven thee," He was going beyond the limits of the highest

prophetic claim. It is surely very striking that none of those to whom He spoke the word of pardon ever seems to have questioned His right to speak it. It was effective in bringing the sense of release, and fellowship with God. In Him the kingdom was visibly present, His word was the creative word of God, setting men free literally into a new world. It is also worthy of remark that Christ, true to His plan of never teaching ahead of what men could apprehend, scarcely ever associates forgiveness with His death; the reference to "the blood which is shed . . . for the remission of sins" is only in St. Matthew's Gospel, in which we find that many of our Lord's sayings are given in an expanded and explanatory form.

In the early chapters of the Acts, in which Christian theology is represented in its most rudimentary stage, with an insistence which I think cannot be set aside as a Lukan predisposition in favour of this theme, forgiveness is put forward as one of the chief blessings of the new covenant in Christ. It is the gift conveyed in baptism. "Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." "Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a prince and saviour, for to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." In the first account of Paul's preaching: "Be it known unto you, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins." The time of theological explication came later. The earliest church lived by the proclamation of a fact and an experience. The Apostles knew that they were in fellowship with God, the evidence of forgiveness was the gift of the Spirit shed forth by the glorified Christ, the Church was the fellowship of those who through forgiveness had been enabled to receive the gift of the Spirit and to enter into the new world of redemption and joyful hope. This is the kernel of all later preaching and Church life. Just in so far as the Church is really a fellowship of the Spirit, just in so far as it is really living in the world of redemption, is it able to make effective to men the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through the love of God in Jesus Christ.

II.

The subject of this Conference is the Ministry of Reconciliation. It therefore need hardly be said that we are dealing mainly with the manward aspect of the mystery of our redemption. We are taking for granted the Godward aspect, God's provision of all that was needed for the salvation of men in the perfect self-oblation of His Son. We are dealing not so much with sin and its removal, as with the sinner and the problems that arise in connection with man's apprehension and acceptance of the gift that has been made available for Him in the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Let me lay down three propositions as a help to the definition of the sense in which we shall use the term forgiveness.

1. Forgiveness is concerned only with relationships between persons. It does not apply to the impersonal relationships of societies and corporations. Societies are held together by duty

and mutual obligation ; they are governed by law, and this law is impersonal and strictly just in its retributive action. A judge and jury are concerned with determining whether an offence has been committed, if so, by whom, and with affixing the penalty according to law. A judge has no power to remit the penalty even in favour of a genuinely repentant offender. Society from time to time does to its own general advantage remit penalties, but this is the furthest that it can go ; it cannot be said to forgive. It happens, however, that the issue is complicated, because societies do constantly acquire a quasi-personal character. We do speak of the king pardoning an offender. Two men die for their country ; one serves as a conscript, the other for love ; there is surely a great difference here. There is a growing demand now that the state in its relations with its subjects should not fall below the level of personalities ; we see this in the very marked change in the way in which the State deals with juvenile offenders. The Headmaster of a school is the embodiment of law, but he is also *in loco parentis* to his boys. This is only to say that life is more complicated than theory. But for the sake of clear thought, it is essential that these two things should be kept quite distinct, and that we should use the term forgiveness only in the realm of personality, where the highest rule is not that of law but that of love.

2. The purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of fellowship between persons, which has been marred by the wrongdoing of one or both. Once this is grasped, it is seen that the question of pains and penalties is due to the intrusion of legal considerations. These may be important and have their place, but they are irrelevant to the main issue. Forgiveness may involve the remission of pains and penalties or it may not. I think this is very important. The one penalty which is necessarily involved in wrongdoing is exclusion from fellowship. Am I wrong in thinking that the only penalty of our sin against God is exclusion from fellowship with Him, and that the course of theology would have been enormously simplified if this had been constantly borne in mind ? Can we give any intelligible sense to the word Hell other than that it is the complete exclusion of the sinner from the presence of God ? If this is granted, then what we are asking in all our questions about forgiveness is what is the present bar to fellowship, and how can it be removed ?

3. Forgiveness is always two-sided. Fellowship cannot be restored unless both parties consent. It cannot become actual by the desire or action of either without the other. The one who has been wronged must of his free grace be willing to bear and to forget the wrong. The one who has sinned must be willing to accept forgiveness as a gift to which he has no right, and for which he is wholly dependent on the good will of another. Clearly there is a double problem. How can one who is righteous forgive ? That is the problem of the Atonement. How can one who has sinned become forgivable ? That is the problem of reconciliation. Theology has perhaps suffered by excessive concentration on the first of these in isolation from the other.

Some time ago, a friend after listening to a paper on the doctrine of the Atonement said to me : " You have left out that point about forgiveness being a bad and dangerous thing." It is true that this is the point from which I generally start my consideration of the subject. We assume that forgiveness is a good thing. This seems to me defensible as the conclusion of a long and rather intricate argument, as an uncriticised assumption it seems to me highly dangerous. Forgiveness involves treating the sin as though it has never been committed and the sinner as though he had never sinned. It appears to make him a present of a purely fictitious righteousness. Will not the inevitable effect be to make him think lightly of sin and of the authority of goodness ? Will it not encourage him to think that, whenever he sins again, a similar forgiveness will be cheaply available for him ? Will it not do him the fatal injury of making it easier for him to do wrong ? Everyone will answer that it does not work like that. But if not, why not ? We know from experience that there is a strong tendency in all of us to dodge the consequences of our own acts. Unregenerate nature loves to take advantage of leniency. And history shows that the preaching of the doctrine of free forgiveness has from time to time led to outbreaks of antinomianism. St. Paul himself was aware of this danger. If, knowing this, we still feel that the doctrine of forgiveness must be preached, we may reasonably be asked to show why we think that contrary to probabilities forgiveness will have the paradoxical effect of making the sinner not worse but better.

We had better start by recognizing that our answer will not be convincing, unless we show that the forgiveness of which we speak is catastrophic in its effects. I should like to pass on to you a remark of my friend Dr. H. R. Mackintosh : " I always ask my students to start their consideration of the problem of miracles from their experience of the forgiveness of sins." The definition of a miracle is, I think, that it is a creative act ; it introduces something new, which is not merely the result of existing forces. Forgiveness is a creative act, it works within the world of life and not within that of law. It operates to the creation of a new man. If we are speaking of human relationships, I should say to the creation of two new men, since the one who forgives is changed no less than the one who is forgiven. It issues in a perfectly restored relation of fellowship, firmer, perhaps we may say, and stronger than if it had never been broken.

What are the conditions under which this creative act can take place ?

1. It is usually said that a man can be forgiven when he is sorry for his sin. This is true, but so often we make the mistake of thinking that it is easy to repent for sin. The effect of sin is blindness and hardness. When a man is sorry, the battle is won. The problem is how to make him sorry. As soon as I have said that, you know that it is almost impossible. We sometimes say " I'll make you sorry for that," but we don't mean it, all we mean is " I'll make you afraid." That is easy, but it doesn't lead to any-

thing; real repentance is not a child of fear. We are rightly suspicious of conversions which are gained by the preaching of hell-fire. Some of them are certainly genuine, but only as it seems to me by accident. Fear is self-regarding, it is concerned with the self, and its gains and losses. Conversion is essentially self-giving, it is centred in God. Repentance comes from a revelation of the real nature of sin and its consequences, not of course to the sinner, but to the one whom he has wronged. Repentance is the child not of fear but of love. This is true of human relationships, it is true also of our relationship with God. We do not feel the reality of sin, until it is seen in its true nature as an outrage against the love of God. It is true in the mission-field, and perhaps at home too, that the bitterest repentance comes often after conversion and not before it. This is not unnatural. The soul first experiences something of the love of God in the fellowship of Christ, the loving friend and Master. Then the Cross is suddenly revealed with shattering power as the cost of our sins to the love of God. From our knowledge of human love, we might have inferred the sorrow of God for our sins; apart from the Cross, we could never have known for sure. The Cross both reveals our sin, and makes possible for us true repentance.

2. Forgiveness is possible only for those who accept full responsibility for the wrong that they have done. We are not required to be more than just in our estimate of ourselves; we may make full allowance for defective education, for the weight of temptation, for the influence of heredity and all the rest of it. But when we have done the best we can for ourselves as counsel for the defence, we change our rôle, and become judges of ourselves, and it falls to us to pass the solemn sentence of condemnation on our own acts. This is part of the paradox of penitence, that we take sides with God against ourselves, that we view ourselves as He views us, and pass sentence of death upon ourselves for the wrong that we have done. There are two practical tests of the reality of this acceptance of responsibility. The first is confession. Confession to God, of course; without that no progress can be made. But for many transgressions, confession to man is a necessary part of our purgation; and the extreme reluctance with which we bring ourselves to it is good evidence of its importance. The early Church held that all sin is committed against the Body as well as against God, and demanded public confession from the offender. Our Church accepts this view, and holds that it is much to be wished that this discipline should be restored. This is not likely to occur at present; but I hope that during this conference careful consideration will be given to the argument put forward in favour of private confession, that since all sin is social and an offence against the body, the Church in the person of its ordained minister has a right to know of it, and to add to God's general pardon its particular ministry of reconciliation. The second test of sincerity is the willingness to bear the penalty of wrongdoing. But in our dealings with God, as we have seen, there is no penalty but that of separation

from Him. This is the dilemma of the penitent sinner ; he both desires to bear the penalty of his wrong-doing, and also to be in fellowship with God. He finds that these desires are incompatible, he comes to the end of his resources and is driven back upon the atoning mercy of God.

3. Forgiveness must be made available for the sinner in such a way as to assure him that sin has really been dealt with. On the one hand, he must not feel that it has been lightly passed over. It is humiliating and morally harmful, when we have screwed up our courage to make confession of a fault, to find that the one against whom we have done it regards it more lightly than we have ourselves and is ready to pass it off with a word. On the other hand, there must be no suspicion that the forgiveness is merely outward and conventional, that though the word has been spoken, the one who has suffered wrong is still keeping a grudge in his mind, or worse still is awaiting an opportunity to pay off the old score. Forgiveness must give the assurance that the sin is as though it had never been, it is so effectively buried in the depths of the sea that it has lost all its power to trouble and destroy. Is not this the point at which we experience a real and acute difficulty in our forgiveness of others ? I wonder whether you have felt it in your dealings with children or young people. Someone comes to us with a confession of a fault. What sign or token can we give that we have felt keenly and to the full the sting of the fault, and that yet we are willing to put it wholly from our minds, and to receive the offender just as he was before ? If you have felt this difficulty, I think you will see that in God's forgiveness of us, the real problem is not in the satisfaction of His abstract justice, but in making available for us the gift of forgiveness in such a way as to make sure that it will really do its healing work. Do we not see at this point that the Cross was indispensable in the scheme of redemption ? How else should we have known both that God regards sin more seriously than we could ever regard it, and also that as far as we ourselves are concerned, the sin has been taken away, abolished and buried out of sight, so that it can never return again to disturb our relation of fellowship with God ?

III.

So far, I have been trying to deal in general with the doctrine of forgiveness and the conditions under which it is safe and practicable to preach it. We may now come nearer to the subject of this Conference, and ask what is the special responsibility of Evangelicals with regard to this doctrine. Let it be said at once that all preaching of forgiveness through the death of Christ is evangelical ; this is not a matter of one party or of one theory of the Atonement, it is a point at which happily different churches and schools of thought meet in one. But Evangelicals of the Church of England may feel that they have a special responsibility, that there are some aspects of this truth which are committed to them, and which

they must maintain if evangelicalism is to have any true life. I can suggest three such aspects :

1. That Christ died for all, and that through Him, reconciliation and acceptance with God are available at any time for those who need them. From this follows necessarily the missionary responsibility of the Church, that this grace of God in Christ is not merely a possession of the Church, but a treasure in which all the sons of men by their creation have a right to share. There follows also the possibility of instantaneous conversion, that the worst sinner who turns to God through faith in Christ does at that moment receive pardon for all his sins and new life. The working out of this redemption in changed character may be the task of a life-time, but from that moment he is in Christ and therefore a new creature.

2. That it is the will of God that every Christian should have such inner certainty of forgiveness that he is able at all times to approach God without fear, and should have in fellowship with God assurance of His present possession of eternal life. Thus every Christian becomes an independent witness to the reality of the working of God. His testimony is not to doctrine or to a message heard from others, but to a reality within him. In more formal language, every Christian should be equipped to share in the prophetic ministry of the Church, which is the testimony to the reality and power of God based on unmistakable personal experience.

3. This certainty is the work of the Holy Spirit alone, and depends not upon man's voice, but upon the quickening power of the Spirit. The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. Conversion is always miraculous ; it is more than the sacramental regeneration of baptism, in that it is the conscious acceptance of the will of God, and therefore makes actual, though not necessarily consciously experienced, the supernatural operation of the Holy Ghost. A great mistake in much of our evangelistic work is that we allow young converts to gain their assurance from our ministry or from some ordinance of the Church, instead of pointing them to the living Spirit, who alone can give the peace and assurance which come from fellowship with the death and the life of Jesus Christ our Lord.

If this is true, what place is there in this whole affair for the work of man ? The answer is plain ; God's redeeming work is all His own, but there is apparently no part of it which He carries out in the world except through man, or at least with man's co-operation. There are at least three ways in which the Church's ministry of reconciliation is to be exercised.

There is first the proclamation of the grace of God, in such a way that the sinner both comes to understand his need for God, and also realizes that the way is open for him to turn his back on the past, and through Christ to draw near to God.

There is the solemn pronouncement of the word of absolution to the worshipping company of believers. This is not so much for the initiation as for the renewal of the covenant of forgiveness. We do not pass through the world without contracting something

of its stain and its defilement ; but we are only as those who need to wash their feet, in order that they may be every whit clean. In preparation for partaking of the royal banquet of the king, we need to be cleansed from our travel stains.

There is the personal ministry of exhortation, instruction and comfort, which is a necessary part of the work of the Church. Every minister of Christ knows that, though conscience may be quickened by the preaching of the word, realisation of peace with God is rarely attained without personal dealings with an experienced Christian, who can draw out hidden needs, answer doubts, apply Scripture to the particular problems of the inquirer, and give encouragement from his own experience of fellowship with Christ and deliverance from sin. This most necessary and priestly ministry can be carried out by any Christian man or woman, who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In all these ministrations, in which the word of God is mediated through the lips of man, the aim of the preacher is to direct attention away from himself and to concentrate it on the God who pardons and heals the sinner. Is it ever right that the minister of Christ should go further, and not content with declaring God's purpose of forgiveness, should himself in God's name and in God's stead pronounce the words of pardon ? The Prayer-book contains the words, " By his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Is it fitting that these words should be used in our ministry of reconciliation ? If so, why and when ? I take it that the purpose of this Conference is to give a clear answer to these questions.

THE TRACTARIAN MOVEMENT, 1833-1845. By the Right Rev. E. A. Knox, D.D. *Putnam*. 5s. net.

Bishop Knox's great book on the Tractarian Movement has reached a second edition and is now issued at the small cost of five shillings which will bring it within the reach of a still larger circle of readers. As the book has already taken its place as a standard work on the history of the Movement it is not necessary to point out its merits again, as we did so at the time of its first appearance. The only change in the present edition is the addition of an appendix answering some objections raised by critics of the first edition to the Bishop's statements in regard to the French influences that contributed to the Movement. Fresh evidence has come into the Bishop's hands, and he makes use of it to confirm his original contention.
