

# Atonement Ideas in Communist Practice

BY A MISSIONARY FROM CHINA

WHEN the Communist armies overran the part of China in which I was living, and we had been "liberated", one of the first things that happened was that everyone had to learn a new vocabulary. Very few people had any idea of the meaning of the vast mass of Marxist technical terminology, and they had to buy special dictionaries for the purpose, and get down to hard study. That meant that in order to preach in a language understood of the people I had to learn the terms too, and attempt to use them in sermons, to link on what I was saying to what everyone was thinking about. In practice, I found that especially in sermons dealing with some aspect of the Atonement, or in evangelistic meetings, there were a number of phrases and ideas frequently used by the Communists, which seemed to be definite parallels to Christian ideas, and were therefore quite useful for illustration and for providing a point of contact.

First, there seems to be some kind of parallel to the idea of Original Sin in the condemnation of the corporate sin of the landlord class. At this point Communist practice is technically at variance with its theory. In theory, the landlord class, as all other classes, is just part of the historic process working out in the development of society; it is not their fault that they are in existence, they have their necessary part to play in the dialectic process, and there is no moral issue involved. In practice, they are cursed up and down for the sins of their class, and every means is used to arouse moral indignation against them. The interesting point is that their sin is conceived as corporate or solidary sin, and is not connected with anything they have done or not done as individuals. Two true stories can illustrate this.

In one village there was a landlord who had always treated his tenants quite decently. When the time came for the land reform, and as a preliminary he had to hand back to them their deposit money with enormous interest, he called them all together and made a speech saying he was going to obey the government, and be a loyal citizen and so on; he then gave them their money, and they all went off very happy and cheerful. Shortly afterwards, the local Communist officials descended on the village, summoned all the tenants, and roundly rated them because they had dealt with the landlord as an individual, and not as a member of his class. He was then summoned, and the tenants had to stand up and abuse him for the sins of his class, after which he had to confess publicly those sins, and then at last they were allowed to go.

In a certain school, there was talk of providing free scholarships for a certain number of poor students. Landlords' children were not allowed to receive these, not because they did not need them, as by

that time they had been despoiled of nearly all that they had, but simply because they belonged to that class, and, as it were, inherited the taint.

Second, the word "liberation" has for the Communist some of the emotional value and appeal that "salvation" has for the Christian. Before the revolution, it has great propaganda value, appealing to anyone who finds life hard and is only too eager to listen to promises that he can be freed of all his problems and burdens. After the revolution, fervent gratitude is expressed to the liberators in all sorts of ways, and there are many verbal parallels between Communist songs and Christian hymns. Mao Tse Tung is compared to the sun, and he has come to save us and so on. There is a popular Hymn to the Liberating Armies, set to a very lovely Chinese folk tune; it begins in a way that we should consider rather unromantic, "You are my lighthouse", but whenever I heard it, it always reminded me of the hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling", I think because the emotional appeal was much the same. Of course, after about nine months, when people begin to discover that for many of them liberation is just a form of slavery, this appeal is not so effective, but by then its work is done.

Third, there is much talk and propaganda about the cost of liberation. A piece of waste ground in the city in which I lived was transformed into a kind of miniature Nuremberg Rally ground, though it would not have been tactful to mention that resemblance, and squads of picked soldiers came from the neighbouring counties for a kind of prize-giving for those who had fought best in the liberation. Dominating the whole ground was a big tower, with red decorations, the Memorial Tower to those who had died that we might be freed. Great use was made of this line of talk by the Communists, especially in talks to students.

Fourth, there is the notion that the liberation, though in one sense accomplished, yet is not complete, and we must toil and labour for its completion. This is somewhat parallel to the doctrine of "Between the ages", between the salvation wrought on the Cross, and the final victory of God. I knew very slightly a young teacher in a primary school, and after the revolution I found he had been one of the leaders of the underground movement in the city. He was given a big job in the new Government, and one of his tasks was to indoctrinate the students in a school I knew. I well remember him exhorting them with a fanatical gleam in his eye, and telling them Chairman Mao had said that only one thousandth part of the revolution was yet accomplished, and the rest awaited their toil for its fulfilment. He not only talked like that, but lived it himself. Shortly afterwards he developed T.B., mainly through overwork, and for a long time refused to go to hospital, although he was spitting blood. Eventually he had to go, and I do not know what finally happened to him.

Fifth, there is the concept of making new men. The Communists definitely claim that by indoctrination and training of various kinds they can make new men; a very popular catchword is "Manual labour corrects and creates new men". They claim to have wiped out all the old corruption, and to be building a new society with new

and changed men. At first, it almost looked as though they had succeeded. There was a tremendous outburst of idealism among young people, and for a time nobody dared to try any dirty work. But in practice it does not last. The old Adam cannot be kept down, in spite of violent efforts to do so. Corruption is beginning to appear again in various small ways, and so disillusion begins to come in.

Those are a few parallels to Christian ideas of the atonement in Communist practice. I am not going to attempt to assess their theoretical significance, or speculate about their origins; some are obviously more important than others. But there is one practical point I want to emphasize in conclusion.

The Communists are utterly cynical about truth, and past masters at propaganda. The fact that they use these ideas and phrases shows not that they necessarily believe in them, for some of them are quite out of the line of Marxist doctrine, but that they find in practice that they have an effect and find a response in men's hearts. Of course, when men find out that they are empty words with no reality, then disillusionment comes, but by that time they have done their work, and the Communists have their grip. That means for us in practice that we need not be too apologetic about the doctrine of the atonement, and go to men saying that it is really rather difficult and hard to understand. We can go to them proclaiming it in confident expectation of getting a response, because in the souls of men there are longings which respond to these ideas. "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Finally, we have the overwhelming advantage over the Communist propagandist of really believing that these ideas are true, and of knowing that no man who sincerely turns to the Cross of Christ seeking atonement and salvation can ever be disappointed or disillusioned.

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## James Denney's Doctrine of the Atonement

BY THE REV. DOUGLAS WEBSTER, M.A.

THE evangelical understanding of the atonement owes much to three great books: *The Atonement* by R. W. Dale (1875), *The Death of Christ* by James Denney (1902), and *The Work of Christ* by P. T. Forsyth (1910). The first of these is usually available, the last has been reprinted recently by the Independent Press with many of Forsyth's other works, and the second has now been republished by the Tyndale Press (associated with the Inter-Varsity Fellowship) and costs 9/6. Like all the productions of the I.V.F. it is characterized by a high standard of printing, binding and accuracy. Such a book at such a price will earn the gratitude of a very wide circle.

James Denney (1856-1917) has been described by J. K. Mozley as