

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DEATH IN RELATION TO THE ATONEMENT

THE AIM of the present article is not to expound or to defend a particular theory. To prevent misconception, it may be stated that the author himself accepts the statements of Scripture without qualification, and considers the Reformed emphasis to be in the main the most loyal to the Scriptural teaching. The less ambitious task is here attempted of considering the bearing of the fact and meaning of death upon our soteriology. The discussion will concern particularly the widely criticised penal and the much advocated subjective or ethical views.

A preliminary point is that death in general, and more particularly the death of Christ, cannot be considered in isolation. Clearly, if the Bible message means anything at all, it means that the death of man is somehow related to his standing before God. It means too that the death of Christ is organically related to that alteration in the standing of man before God which we call the atonement. The significance of the death of Christ cannot be understood apart from the significance of death in general. The death of Christ has meaning because it was a deliberate and voluntary entry into a human experience which also has meaning. If death itself has no meaning, if it is no more than a biological accident or a biological necessity, then clearly the death of Christ can have no very great theological significance. And if the death of Christ was fortuitous, then it can have no particular relevance : it is a loss of life without aim or point. Even as a demonstration of the love of God—granting, that is to say, an incarnation—it loses significance, for no event which is purely contingent or fortuitous can be meaningful in itself and in relation to its own end. The entry of Christ into the human tragedy demands explanation, both in relation to death itself as a meaningful experience and also in relation to the will and purpose of God which prompted it.

We may notice at once that subjective or ethical theories always seem to show signs of weakness at this point. They have no very clear or coherent theological explanation of death. They have a correspondingly inadequate conception of the purpose

of the death of Christ. To develop for a moment the latter point : the entry of Christ into the suffering experience of man is regarded as a demonstration of the love of God. So much we may grant, although we may want to know why the experience of man should be an experience of suffering. It is concluded then that this demonstration of divine love is the whole purpose and explanation of that entry of Christ. But this does not by any means follow. If God wished to demonstrate His love, why should it be necessary for Jesus Christ to die? After all, the love of God is demonstrated in the ministry of Christ and the person of Christ. If it is replied that the death was a necessary consequence of a righteous life, then the death itself is robbed of particular meaning. At the most it is only a more ample confirmation of that which is confirmed already. Even as a self-sacrifice it loses most of its point, for it is a self-sacrifice for no very apparent end. There is no particular virtue in the mere seeking of death, even for the sake of the truth. We have to choose then between the alternatives, either that the death of Christ was forced upon Him, in which case it was contingent and not voluntary, or else that it was a real self-sacrifice, a deliberate giving of the self for the purpose of accomplishing some work on behalf of others. Escape can of course be sought in the supposition that that work was the evocation of a response of penitence and love on the part of sinners, but such a supposition is an evasion, for not only does it fail to explain death in general, but it also fails to offer any real explanation of the necessity of Christ's death.

But that is only a preliminary consideration, debatable and not therefore decisive. There is far more to the matter than that. The demonstration of the love of God took the form of an entry into the suffering experience of man. Identifying Himself with the human race to the uttermost, Jesus Christ accepted the final suffering of death. Now, granting for a moment that the death was only for the purpose of a full identification, and that it accomplished no more than the challenging of sinners, we must return to the question why it is that the human experience entails suffering and death in the first place. That question takes us to the very heart of the problem, and the answer will carry us a good way towards its solution.

The Bible brings death openly and conclusively into relationship with sin. No theologian who lays claim to the name of

Christian can altogether evade or escape that interconnection. It is not possible even to distinguish between the death of the body and spiritual death, ascribing the latter alone to sin and attributing the former to finitude or creatureliness. The Liberal theologian is necessarily driven to take refuge in a naturalistic dualism of this kind, with the corresponding intellectualisation of the concepts both of sin and of the future life. But in doing so he parts company at once with the Biblical revelation.

He also parts company with the facts. It is not true, of course, that so much individual sin brings a proportionate suffering to the individual. It is not true that every death is caused directly either by the sin of the person who dies or by any particular act of sin. What is true is that by and large the suffering of the race is due directly and indirectly to the sin of the race. Everyone knows that if sin were banished from the world then suffering would immediately be relieved and quickly eliminated, even that suffering which is the result of physical evils uncontrolled by sinful man. What is true of suffering in general is no less true in particular of death, the final suffering. In a world which obeyed perfectly the laws of an all-powerful and holy God, there could be no place for death as we understand it, not even as a biological necessity. The world in which death exists is a fallen world. Death came into the world by sin.

It is not difficult to see why this should be so. By its very nature, sin is alienation from God, and alienation from God means necessarily alienation from life. Furthermore sin, again by its very nature, is destructive. Indeed, even in the most literal, the physical sense, the sinful acts of men are frequently directly responsible both for suffering and for death. But beyond that, in the wider spiritual sense, sin destroys the moral and spiritual being. It brings both the understanding and the will into bondage. The final result of sin is the destruction of the moral personality, or spiritual death.

But when we say that, we say that death stands in a teleological relationship to sin. Put it in the most impersonal form, and it may be said that sin brings death in accordance with a necessary moral and spiritual law. Such a statement will conveniently explain the relationship of sin and death for those who find unwelcome the notion of a personally inflicted divine penalty. But the teleology is not avoided. There is still more to it than a necessary law. The question must be asked why the

law is necessary, and who made it so. The answer is that in a world created and providentially ordered by God the necessary law is the expression of the divine character and will. In other words it is deliberately and purposefully that death is the drastic consequence of sin. The alienation from God is not merely an automatic but a willed alienation, deriving its necessity from the being and activity of God.

The fact that the alienation is willed means that in a very real sense it is penalty. Sin is the infringement of the divine law, the opposition to the divine will, the affront to the divine righteousness. It provokes necessarily a reaction on the part of God. The word is inadequate, for it suggests a breach of the divine impassibility. But it may be used so long as it is understood that the reaction is not an emotional response, as is, for instance, human anger. The wrath of God is the righteous will of God in its relation to sin. The penalty takes the form of the recoil of sin from God's holiness, alienation and death. That recoil is a penalty both because it is the direct consequence of the divine righteousness, and also because it is under the control and according to the appointment of the divine will. The consequence of sin is neither an accident nor is it something which is necessary without reference to the will and direction of God. It is therefore penalty.

But when we say that God wills to punish sin, do we not forget the divine love? Or do we not introduce a contradiction into the being of God, the contradiction between the divine love—the will to save—and the divine wrath—the will to punish? The contradiction is more apparent than real, for no-one surely wishes to suggest that the love of God means a love of sin. In other words, it is the sin which God hates, while it is the person of the sinner that He loves. Of course, sin has only an abstract reality: it exists in the person who commits sin, and the penalty falls necessarily upon that person. But the divine wrath falls upon the sinner only because of his sin, not for what he is himself. That is to say God hates the sinner *qua* sinner while at the same time He loves him *qua* person. When we speak loosely although not quite properly of God being reconciled to the sinner we have something of this in view. God's love to the sinner is not kindled afresh by the removal of an obstacle, for He loves the person of the sinner all the time. God is reconciled because by virtue of the atonement, which He Himself has planned

and executed out of His love for the sinner, He can now receive the sinner again *qua* person where once he must have been rejected and destroyed *qua* sinner. The constant will to destroy sin and the constant will to save the sinner are not by any means mutually exclusive.

The divine penalty may perhaps, if we choose, be thought of as a self-inflicted consequence of sin. Such an understanding may not ultimately be the correct one, but it certainly avoids the, to some, difficult concept of a direct infliction of punishment by punitive acts. No matter what the understanding, however, the very fact that the consequences of sin derive finally from the divine will justifies us in thinking of them as penalty. Indeed, if the divine governance of the world means anything at all, it impels us to that position. The consequences of sin may be thought of as in a very real sense the ideal penalty, since they proceed logically and necessarily from the sin itself.

But the punishment fits the crime in another way, and that brings us to our second reason why God has ordained death as the final consequence of sin. Death is the logical outcome of sin, but it is also the means to contain and to destroy sin. Nowhere perhaps is the divine providence more clearly manifest than at this point. Death is cruel and final. Yet death is the weapon by which sin itself is broken and destroyed. In that sense even death is an instrument of justice and of mercy. A world in which sin constantly increased and could never be restrained would be a world too terrible to contemplate. But as we have seen, the penalty involves not only the sin, but also the sinner, for sin itself has no concrete existence apart from the person of the sinner. Sin is destroyed by death, but the penalty falls necessarily upon the sinner. Hence the problem of the atonement. There is, of course, no question of an atonement between God and sin, for the will of God to punish and destroy sin remains. But there is a problem of atonement between God and the sinner, for God wills constantly to save the sinner, who is involved necessarily and justly in the consequences or penalty of sin. The atonement is then the divine will and action to destroy sin without also destroying the sinner.

But cannot this action take place in the purely ethical sphere? Jesus Christ entered voluntarily into the consequences of human sin, even the final consequence, death, in order to share sympathetically the lot of the sinner, and by this demonstration

of the divine compassion He evokes a response of penitence and love. The sin is thus destroyed by the conversion of the sinner, and the sinner is enabled to avoid its penalty. This solution is attractive, and it contains an important element of truth. But taken by itself it is all too simple. For one thing, a conversion to God does not kill sin, which even in the individual is a far bigger thing than an emotional or intellectual attitude to God. Sin remains in the individual even after conversion, and it must still be destroyed. But again, the consequences of sin are not arrested by conversion. Conversion cannot dispense from the penalty of past faults. Indeed, we may say that unless God denies Himself, no power in the world can arrest the inevitable consequences of sin, for those consequences are of divine appointment and they are divinely used to destroy sin. From the Liberal angle the only solution is dualism. Abandon the body to the consequences of sin, and believe that the awakened soul will evade the ultimate penalty. It is not for nothing that the ethical theories of the atonement go hand in hand with the minimising of sin and the replacement of resurrection by immortality.

We return to the entry of Jesus Christ into the consequences of human sin. It was a demonstration of love, but that love was purposeful. Jesus Christ entered into the consequences of human sin not merely to take His place with the sinner, but to do something for the sinner: to break the entail of sin. He did die *with* the sinner, but He also died *for* the sinner. That means that He not only entered into the consequences of sin, but He bore the consequences, as penalty. In other words, by taking the sin of man to Himself, and giving Himself to death, He accomplished the separation of sin and the sinner. Thus sin could be destroyed in accordance with the divine righteousness, and the sinner saved in accordance with the divine love. The death of Christ was far more than a gesture of sympathy. It was a voluntary entry into the destructiveness and penalty of sin, by which God, in the person of His Son, vindicated both His righteousness and His love.

But how could the death of Jesus Christ break the entail of sin? It could do so on three grounds. First, it was an acceptance of the consequences of sin which involved a literal exacting of the penalty upon sin, and its consequent destruction. Second, it was an acceptance by One who had no sin in Himself. Jesus

had indeed, in His own person, faced and overcome the most insidious and powerful temptations to sin. Thus sin could be destroyed in Him without involving either the permanent death of Christ Himself, who was no sinner, or the death of the sinner, from whom the consequences were removed. As a submission to death on the behalf of others by One over whom sin and death had no claim, the death of Christ was thus an act of the purest self-sacrifice. Third, it was an acceptance by One who was representative man, but also infinite God, the point so admirably made by Anselm. Fourth, it was an acceptance of such a kind as to call forth the response of a loving self-identification with Christ on the part of the sinner.

The death of Christ may be considered under three aspects. It may be considered as a voluntary offering. The commonly preferred charge that it is immoral to lay upon the innocent the penalty of the guilty breaks upon this rock. Christ was the innocent man who was willing, indeed who willed to take upon Himself the penalty of the guilty. And He did it not only as innocent man, but as also Himself God : it was God Himself in the person of the Son who entered into and bore the penalty of human sin. The death of Christ may also be considered as the bearing of the penalty of sin. Jesus Christ identified Himself with the race in such a way that in Him the sin of the race was both punished and destroyed. The consequences of sin were diverted, as it were, from the sinner to Christ, but falling upon Christ they involved the final destruction of sin alone and not of the sinbearer. The consequences had to be accepted. Hence Christ died. But sin having been destroyed in the flesh, death had no power over the righteous and eternal Christ. Hence the resurrection. Finally, the death of Christ may be considered as the declaration of the divine love, which impels the sinner to repent of sin and to commit himself to Christ. But the declaration of divine love is all the stronger because Christ has taken upon Himself the sin of man and the penalty of sin. As an act of sympathy the death of Christ would no doubt have a certain appeal, but as an act of gratuitous redemption it sets forth the divine love with compelling and convicting power.

But when we say that Jesus Christ entered into the consequences and penalty of human sin, do we not say substitution ? Looking at it from the point of view of the individual, we undoubtedly do. If sin was punished and destroyed in Jesus

Christ and not in the sinner, then the sinner can say with truth, " Christ died for me ", " Christ died in my place ". And that is to say that Christ was my substitute. But true though it may be in the experience and thought of the individual believer, substitution is not perhaps the most felicitous term by which to describe the work of Christ in general. A fuller picture is perhaps given when we say that Christ died not as the substitute for the individual but as the representative of the race. It was not only the battle of the individual that was fought out on the Mount of Temptation and in Gethsemane. It was not only the sin of the individual that was borne at Golgotha. The battle fought was the battle of humanity, the sin borne the sin of the race. In application it was the battle and sin of the individual too—the representative is also the substitute. But Jesus Christ entered the world not only as the substitute of the individual, but as the new Adam, perfect man. As the representative man, the Head of the new creation of God, He accepted the experience of man, faced the temptations, entered into the sufferings, and gathered into Himself all the sin of His fellows, enduring the penalty of it on their behalf.

The charge is sometimes made that it is artificial for the sin of one man to be visited upon another, indeed that it is unjust that the innocent should suffer for the guilty. The answer to both these criticisms is the incarnation. The One upon whom the penalty was laid was Himself God, and yet in all points, sin only excepted, He was one with His fellows. The charge of injustice is thus groundless, for Christ was not an unwilling victim, but Himself the administrator of justice and the author of salvation. The charge of artificiality and irrelevance is equally beside the mark. To argue from a human analogy, a father cutting off his finger because of the fault of the child, is quite misleading. For Jesus Christ accomplished His work entirely on the human level : He became one with the sinner in His humanity, and He entered into that penalty of sin which God in His wisdom and justice had rightly ordained. In so far as He was God, His suffering was just ; in so far as He was man, it was relevant to human need.

Yet sin and death remain. Does not that fact make nonsense of the expiatory value of the work of Christ ? Not by any means. Jesus Christ endured death and destroyed sin as representative man. But the atonement must still be realised and the victory

won in each individual experience. Had God been dealing only with stocks and stones, He could easily have wiped out sin and endowed them with immortality in a moment. But then in the case of stocks and stones there would not really be any sin. Sin arises only within the moral and spiritual personality, and because it is with moral and spiritual personalities that God deals, the work must be realised in every individual separately. In the absolute sense the atonement has been made, for the representative man took the penalty and in His own person destroyed sin and death. In the individual and relative sense, death must still be endured and sin destroyed, for each man must enter into the experience of Christ for himself. This entry into the experience of Christ is the process which begins with conversion, continues in mortification, and is finally completed in the resurrection from the dead. The moral power of the Cross of Christ to provoke to this self-identification will be immediately apparent.

The believer must still expect to experience both sin and death, but sin and death do not mean quite the same thing to him as they do to the unbeliever. Sin remains, but the sting of it has been withdrawn. For one thing, the penalty has been borne: sin and the sinner have been separated. For another, sin is under sentence of death, a defeated enemy. Already the will and personality have been reorientated, indeed re-created, so that they are no longer the servants of sin. In Jesus Christ all things become new.

Death remains, but it remains as the means of a progressive entry into the victory of Christ over sin. The fact of death is the same both for believer and unbeliever, but the meaning is quite different. For the one death is the consequence and penalty of sin, by which sin is contained and destroyed. For the other it is still the means to contain and to destroy sin, but it is no longer penalty: the penalty was borne by the One who, knowing no sin, was made sin for us. Thus death for the believer is no longer a penalty to be borne, but an offering to be made, in order that the sin which has been destroyed representatively in Christ might be destroyed individually in the Christian. By virtue of the death of Christ the sin can be destroyed without also involving the penal death of the sinner. The believer's giving of himself to death, for the destruction of sin and in hope of the resurrection, is the correlative of that self-sacrificial act by

which the new Adam identified Himself with sin and its consequences in the death of the Cross.

The Christian self-offering in death is accomplished in three successive stages of identification with Christ, which correspond to the three stages by which in Adam he came under the divine penalty. First is spiritual death, conversion, corresponding to and reversing the spiritual sentence under which Adam fell at once by his transgression. Second is moral death, mortification, corresponding to and reversing the process of moral corruption. Third is physical death, the literal dissolution of the body, corresponding to and reversing the mortality which again was a direct consequence of Adam's sin. The self-offering of man in identification with Christ is not itself the atonement. Without the prior work of Christ there could be no death to sin but only a death in sin: death as penalty but not death as self-offering to God. But by virtue of the atonement, and under the compulsion of the divine love, man is enabled so to identify himself with the representative or substitute Christ that death is no longer for him a penalty, or end, but a way of renewal, a means.

Yet the objection might be made that this theological understanding is all a matter of words, without grounding in reality. After all, death comes to all, whether they are believers or unbelievers. And death itself is the same, whereas the understanding of it is no more than opinion. It may be that the non-Christian approaches death with hopelessness, indifference, or even terror. It may be that the believer approaches it with confidence and hope, and in a voluntary self-surrender. But the upshot is always the same.

The answer is that it is not the same. In the spiritual and moral sphere the death to sin of the Christian is demonstrably different from the death in sin of the non-Christian. But even in the physical sphere there is a difference, for the work of Christ included not only His death but also His resurrection. And the resurrection is the guarantee, first, that the penalty of sin was truly and fully borne; second, that the self-offering to God which involves death is a self-offering which opens the way to a new and fuller life. Conversion is not death only: it is the awakening to righteousness. The mortification of the flesh is accompanied by the vivification of the spirit. The dissolution of the body is in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life. For the man in sin, death is a final obstacle which can neither be removed nor

turned. For the man in Christ it is a step to the resurrection, the sting having been withdrawn by the forgiveness of sins. The resurrection of Christ is the hope and pledge both of forgiveness and of renewal.

The key to the atonement in its application to the individual is to be found in the Apostolic watchword "In Christ". In Christ the penalty is paid. In Christ the guilt of sin is removed and the power broken. In Christ, sin is separated from the sinner. In Christ the death to sin becomes a possibility. In Christ the believer enjoys already by imputation that perfect righteousness which one day will be his inherently. The Christian life is, in fact, a complement of the incarnation. Jesus Christ identified Himself with man that man might identify himself with the Divine Son. Jesus Christ died the death of sin in order that man might be made free from sin and might give himself up to God. The entry into the person and work of Jesus Christ is made by penitence and faith, themselves evoked by the atoning love of God, under the power of the Holy Ghost. In penitence and faith man gives himself up voluntarily to a death to sin, in order that sin and all its works might be put away, and an entry made into the new life which is his in Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature ; old things are passed away : behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. v. 17).

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