

to close with a more particular application, it is probable that the writers of antiquity, like those of modern times, did not always express their meaning with the strictest possible accuracy.

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LOVE THAT COVERS SINS

WE read in *i Peter* iv. 8, that "Love covereth a multitude of sins." The source whence these words are taken is *Prov.* x. 12, "Hatred stirreth up strifes, but love covereth all transgressions." The expression "cover a multitude of sins" occurs again as the closing words of the *Epistle of James* (v. 20), "He which converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins."

The form in which *Peter* and *James* present the saying differs slightly from the original Hebrew and still more markedly from the LXX; and this suggests that we have here not a conscious quotation from the Book of Proverbs, but a saying in common use taken from an independent Greek translation of a text differing slightly from that of the Masora.

We need not spend time in refuting a common misunderstanding of the A.V. rendering in *Peter*,—"charity shall cover the multitude of sins"—as though it meant that amiability compensates for a great many moral shortcomings; though it is fair to say that the future tense "shall cover" for "covereth," read in the Received Text, which comes from *James*, rather favours this false exegesis.

Again, it is sufficient to mention, without elaborate refutation, a wrong turn that has been given to the passage just cited from *James*, "He which converteth a sinner from

the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins." This has been thought by some to mean that the merit gained by the conversion of a sinner will, in the Day of Judgment, outweigh the discredit due for a multitude of sins committed by the converter. We are not now concerned immediately with the passage in *James*; but a brief consideration of the expression "to cover sins," as there used, will help us to a right understanding of the saying in *Peter*, "Love covereth a multitude of sins."

The commonest Hebrew word for "to atone for" sin, or "pacify," "or propitiate," means literally "to cover over," *kipper* (hence *kopher*, a ransom; *kapporeth*, propitiatory, mercy seat). The following passages illustrate this use of the verb:—Nehemiah (iv. 5) prays against the enemies of Israel, "Cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee"; the Psalmist says, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. xxxii. 1); and again, "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin" (Ps. lxxxv. 2). And there are many places in which man is said to "cover over" the sins of others by providing an atonement for them; though the English versions naturally avoid in these cases a literal translation of the Hebrew term. We have, then, in *James*, the consequence of the conversion of a sinner presented in two aspects, the particular and the general: the soul of the individual sinner is saved, and there is at the same time a demonstration of the working in the moral sphere, through the agency of the converter, of that power which covers over a multitude of sins; and that power is love.

I suggest that we should interpret these passages of the New Testament, especially the text from *Peter*, in the light of what we know about the operation of love, God's cosmic moral force, which works with most intense power in the

Church of Christ, and which God now uses to check the growth of sin, and which will finally eliminate evil altogether from the universe. It is always best to take large views, to look at things in relation to the whole of which they are a part ; and it is allowable, as it is certainly practically helpful, to think of the "multitude of sins," of which the apostles James and Peter speak, not as the sins of any particular person or persons, but as the volume or mass of sin in general, "the sin of the world" which "the Lamb of God taketh away."

But we must, of course, take note in the first place of the working of the force of love in detail. "Love," says the apostle Paul (1 Cor. xiii. 5), "taketh not account of evil." That is to say, a man who puts himself under the control of the love of God acts, when a private personal injury has been done to him, as though nothing had occurred. In this way, by simply ignoring the unkind act or the insulting word, he does not merely conceal from view something that is there all the time, as we put a screen or curtain to hide what we do not wish seen, but he brings the evil thing to an end ; it dies and leaves no seed. "Hatred," as the Wise Man says, "stirreth up strifes" ; because hatred is like one of those germs familiar to pathologists, which, in a favourable environment, propagate themselves a million-fold in an incredibly short space of time. "Love covereth transgressions," not so much by the act of ignoring them, as by the result of ignoring them, the consequent cutting away from the transgression all that would nourish it, and enable it to live, and be fruitful and multiply ; love makes an end of transgression much in the same way as sunshine destroys the germs of disease. Thus evil is overcome by good. The class of sin which is most obviously overcome by love is peculiarly of the self-propagating kind. I may quote in this connexion a suggestive passage from Bishop Butler's sermon

on the Forgiveness of Injuries: "Malice or resentment towards any man hath plainly a tendency to beget the same passion in him who is the object of it; and this again increases it in the other. It is of the very nature of this vice to propagate itself, not only by way of example, which it does in common with other vices, but in a particular way of its own; for resentment itself, as well as what is done in consequence of it, is the object of resentment; hence it comes to pass, that the first offence, even when so slight as presently to be dropped and forgotten, becomes the occasion of entering into a long intercourse of ill offices." He concludes: "Put the case then, that the law of retaliation was universally received, and allowed, as an innocent rule of life, by all . . . there is no going on to represent this scene of rage and madness; it is manifest there would be no bounds, nor any end."

We can now see that St. James, in the closing words of his epistle, holds out as an incentive to efforts for the conversion of a sinner, that the man who succeeds in effecting this not only saves alive the soul of another, but he also helps forward the accomplishment of the great cosmic purpose of God, by diminishing, ever so little, the sum total of evil. Nay, the experience of the Christian centuries assures us that the conversion of a sinner transmutes, by a divine alchemy, that which is evil, and a source of evil, into a source of good. John Newton, the slave-dealer, becomes John Newton, the evangelist and hymn writer.

The context in *Peter* is even more plainly favourable to the large, and almost cosmic, reference of the saying which I am seeking to establish. The apostle is urging upon the Christian society the duty of self-preparation—the preparation of the Church by itself—for the Second Coming of Christ:—"But the end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore of sound mind, and be sober unto prayer; above

all things being fervent in your love among yourselves ; for love covereth a multitude of sins ; using hospitality one to another without murmuring ; according as each hath received a gift, ministering it among yourselves." The notion of mutual help is here very emphatically reiterated :— " among yourselves . . . one to another . . . among yourselves." The love here spoken of, like the exercise of hospitality and the generous use of spiritual gifts, affects the common life of the church, her self-education, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, for the fuller life in Christ which will be hers. And so, " the common salvation," as St. Jude terms it, is worked out not merely by the salvation of souls one by one, but by each Christian taking his part, co-operating with Christ in His age-long purpose of " presenting the church to Himself a glorious church, not having a spot or wrinkle or any such thing ; but . . . holy and without blemish."

And when we look back over the past, even that short stretch of the past which we can see with any distinctness, we find solid grounds for our belief that the apostle was no vain dreamer when he projected the golden age into a future, distant indeed, but certainly coming. " The vision is yet for the appointed time . . . " though it tarry, wait for it." Pessimism is due to forgetfulness of the past, and it is nourished by a disregard of the past. For when we compare the present with what we know of the past, we must perceive that progress has been made.

Christianity is essentially an optimistic religion ; it does not deny the reality of evil, or seek to explain it away ; but it does claim to possess in the fullest degree a power, a force, an influence which is a solvent of evil, and which will one day cause evil and sin to cease ; and that force is love.

We may state the Christian theory of the relation of love to sin briefly thus :—Sin is a by-product of that free-will

which is an essential quality of human nature ; the abuse of free-will brought disorder into the moral order which is God's ideal ; " sin is lawlessness " (1 John iii. 4). On the other hand, the divine remedy to restore order, and make disorder cease, is love ; " love is the fulfilment of law " (R.V. m.) ; love, that is, which, in the nature of man, is the emotional personal expression of harmony as opposed to discord. What order is in the world of physical nature that love is in the moral world of human society ; a force ever-prevailing in spite of set-backs, increasingly dominant notwithstanding defeats here and there, the only effectual solvent of evil ; and in the application of this force to human needs man works with God and God works with man.

This consideration gives dignity and worth inestimable to the feeble efforts of the most insignificant of us to make love the controlling principle in our daily lives. We measure the worth and importance of human actions, not by what the eye sees and the ear hears, but by the worth and importance of the whole transaction in which the men and women are taking part. The eye sees a man writing : it may be a tourist writing his name in a visitors' book, or it may be King John signing the Great Charter of English liberty ; the ear hears a man speaking : it may be the empty conventionalities of polite conversation, or it may be the Sermon on the Mount. Is it not stimulating to know that when we " check the hasty word " and " give gentle answers back again," we are not only making peace in our own narrow environment, but we are working out with God the accomplishment of His beneficent plans for the whole creation. The love of God is the supreme example of that love which covereth a multitude of sins ; for " God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses " (1 Cor. v. 18).

" Our God is marching on . . . He has sounded forth the

trumpet that shall never call retreat." But "His banner over us is love."

It is as in some great funeral march. The notes that tell of hope and triumph are low at first, almost overpowered by sounds of loss and everlasting farewells ; yet as the music goes on, we hear joy and victory growing on the ear, ever more and more predominant, until at last sorrow and sighing quite pass away in one triumphal crash of sound.

Even so they to whom "the love of God" and "the love of Christ" are not the empty phrases of an outworn speculative system, but living and active realities, they hear the persistent melody of that love through the confused noise of bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour and railing, and malice ; and they go quietly on, in sure and certain hope that these things will pass out of being when God Who is love shall be all in all.

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