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THE ATONEMENT*

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Distinction is often made between *fact and theory* in the doctrine of atonement; but it will be evident from what has been said that an element of what is called 'theory' i.e., of doctrinal significance, attaches to even the simplest statements of Scripture on this subject. 'Fact' and 'theory' are at all times relative terms. The Copernican 'theory' of the heavens is now accepted as an established 'fact' of nature. 'Gravitation' was once 'theory'; it is now universally treated as 'fact'. The bare 'fact' in Christ's death is that a man, called Jesus, was once crucified. So soon as an interpretation of that death which sets it in relation to human sin is given—so soon as doctrinal significance is attached to it—we enter the region of what is misnamed 'theory'. 'If, however, the explanation is of the essence of the 'fact'—if it is in its relation to sin that the death of Christ has its chief meaning and importance for the Gospel—the distinction between 'fact' and 'theory,' so far as the relation is revealed, disappears. The New Testament will not allow us to believe that everything remains vague and undetermined in the meaning we are to attach to Christ's doing and dying for our salvation. It is not every conception of the Cross that suits the full and varied representations given of it in Scripture. Many questions, doubtless, remain, into the answers to which an element of human 'theory' enters; and no view of the atonement can claim to be adequate to the divine reality. Our thoughts here, also, are ever enlarging. But the great basal lines of the doctrine are laid down from the first with unmistakable clearness.

In seeking a connected view which shall do justice to the many-sidedness of the truth of the atonement, and help to correct the misapprehensions and remove the difficulties sometimes felt in regard to it, it is very important to see clearly where the *difficulty* about the atonement principally lies. The real difficulty does not lie where it is often put, viz., in the mere fact of the *innocent suffering for the guilty*. It does not lie there, for this is not a thing confined to Jesus Christ, though He is the most

* Concluded from April issue.

glorious example of it. The world is full of the suffering of the innocent for the sins of others. More than this, the world is full of substitutionary, of vicarious, forces—of the *voluntary* enduring of suffering for the sake of others. This is the point in Bushnell's book on *Vicarious Sacrifice*, and it is true and good so far as it goes. Bushnell lays stress on the substitutionary forces at work in human life, and shows how, in His perfect sympathy with men, these were at work at their maximum in the case of Christ.

It is not there that the difficulty lies, but *here*: how this suffering of Jesus, the innocent for the guilty, should *become expiatory*. Here other elements enter which a mere theory of sympathy does not explain. The Old Testament, as we have seen, has much to say of the sufferings of the righteous for the sins of others (cf. Ps. 22); but it is not till we come to Is. 53 that we have the representation of One Whose sufferings are *atoning*. Suffering for another's sins has of itself no expiatory character. It is an *aggravation* of the sin; not an atonement for it. A prodigal breaks his mother's heart; but the grief he causes her does not wipe out his sin. It adds to its enormity. A martyr perishes at the stake, but this does not atone for the crime of his murderers. Jesus declares that on Jerusalem would come all the blood of prophets and righteous men (Matt. 23:34-36). Christ's own crucifixion was an unspeakable crime for which repentance was demanded (Acts 2:23; 3:14-19).

What, then, was it in Christ's death, in distinction from that of a martyr-sufferer, which constituted it an atonement for the sins of the world?

(1) Subjective theories here fail, which seek the explanation of Christ's reconciling work solely in the *moral* effect of the spectacle of suffering love in breaking down the enmity of the sinner, and bringing him to repentance. The Gospel is such a 'moral dynamic'; but the efficacy lies not in the bare exhibition of suffering goodness, but in the conviction that Christ suffered thus *for our redemption*—that through His death we have pardon and peace with God. The fault of all such theories is that they leave out of account the God-ward aspect of Christ's work—that aspect

which Scripture peculiarly emphasises in speaking of His death as a 'propitiation'. Bushnell did good service in laying stress on the deep and vital *sympathy* of Christ as a qualification for His work as Redeemer (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:14-16). But Bushnell himself came to see later that he had done less than justice to the idea of 'propitiation', and sought to find a place, though still an inadequate one, for it in his theory.

(2) Shall we, then, with others, seek to find the essence of Christ's sacrifice in the yielding up of His *holy will* to the Father? Sin, we are reminded, has its essence in self-will—in the setting up of the human will against God—and Christ has retracted this root-sin of humanity by offering up to God, under experience of suffering and death, the well-pleasing sacrifice of a will wholly obedient and self-surrendered. 'Lo, I am come to do Thy will' (Heb. 10:9). 'Not as I will, but as Thou wilt' (Matt. 26:39). There is again deep truth in this. It was assuredly not the mere physical suffering in Christ's death that pleased God—so much torment. Christ's sacrifice was an act of 'obedience' (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8). Christ's obedience as a whole—not in His death only—constitutes our standing ground before God. In saying this, however, we do not state the *whole* truth, and the most characteristic declarations of Scripture remain unexplained, if we do not go further and see in Christ's death for our sins a relation, not only to the *preceptive* or *commanding*, but also to the *condemning* and *punishing* will of God—to the aspect of sin as *guilt*, and to God's *judgement* upon it.

(3) Is this, moreover, not an essential aspect of any adequate doctrine of atonement? If Christ, as the upholders of these previous views admit, completely identified Himself with us must He not have taken part and lot with us in our *whole position* as under sin—not simply as under law, but as under a *broken and violated law* and exposed to God's just condemnation on that account? It was part of His identification with us that He took His place with us, as Paul phrases it, 'under the Law'—the law that had entailed a curse upon us (Gal. 3:13; 4:4). Jesus could not be under that law, and refuse to take account of its righteous condemnation of sin, or be without desire to do honour to it. How, indeed, if the law was not 'magnified' in this respect as in others,

could atonement be made? The very fact in our situation which necessitates atonement is that we stand in this condemnation before God. How then can that fact, in any act of atonement be disregarded? We have seen that, in the full Scriptural view, it is not disregarded. All that is written of Christ bearing our sins, being made sin for us, redeeming us from the curse, reconciling us to God, taken in connection with what is taught of our condemned position before God, and the effects of Christ's death in delivering us from that condemnation, imply this truth. Jesus, in His death, is regarded as doing honour to the *condemning* as well as to the *prescriptive* will of God.

If, going further, we press the question of *how* Christ in this way bore our sins—what made His endurance of suffering and death an atonement for sin, we have to confess ourselves in presence of a mystery on which only partial light is available. Yet in the larger context of Scripture certain considerations present themselves which serve as aids to comprehension. As bearing on the possibility of atonement, there is the *dignity* of Christ's person as Son of God, and His actual *sinlessness*—'a lamb without blemish and without spot' (1 Pet. 1:19). Deeper still, there is Christ's unique relation to our race, formerly emphasised, which creates the possibility of a *representative* relation such as no other could sustain. There is again the *organic constitution* of our race, which permits of His entrance into it as its new Head, to redeem it by His obedience and death from the ruin entailed upon it by the disobedience of the first Adam.

These are conditions of the *possibility* of atonement; for the *essence* of the atonement itself we must doubtless think of the *complete honour* which Christ, in our name and nature, standing in the relation to God and to humanity that He did, was able to render to the divine righteousness in His endurance of death for us. Here, first, is the historical fact that Jesus, in His complete identification with us, did voluntarily enter into the penal conditions of our state as sinners, and, at the last, into death, the culminating form of these evils, and expression of God's judgement on sin. But this was no mere outward experience for Jesus—no simple fate overtaking Him. Christ, in these sufferings, entered, we must believe, as no other could have done, into the whole

meaning of the sin of the world before God, and into the whole mind of God in relation to that sin. His sympathy was perfect with *both* God and man. As representing man, He took the whole burden of the sin of the world upon His heart—palliating nothing, acknowledging all, justifying God in His condemnation of it, passing Himself under the doom of it (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus He became one with the sinner to the uttermost point to which love could carry Him. In God's adorable wisdom and grace He was permitted to enter into the whole realisation and experience of what death for sin meant, that His atonement might be complete. He was made our *sin-bearer*. There were mysterious elements in Christ's sufferings in the Garden and on the Cross which showed that it was not death only as an outward fact which He endured, but death with all the darkness and horror, the separation from the comforts of God's presence, which belong to it as the wages of sin (Mark 14:33-36; 15:34). He *tasted* death for every man (Heb. 2:9). Entering into His experience, there went up from His innermost soul, in J. McLeod Campbell's expressive phrase, an 'Amen' to the judgement of God upon our sin, which had in it all the elements of a true and perfect atonement for mankind, and was accepted by God as such. Through His death for us, we live.

From what has been said it will be evident that, when the Scripture speaks of '*reconciliation*' with God, more is meant than simply the reconciliation of man to God: a change of heart and will on man's side. On God's side also there were obstacles to forgiveness and fellowship. Though God loved the world, its sin had still to be dealt with. There was a guilt that had to be put away, a wrath that rested on the sinner (John 3:36), a condemnation that had to be lifted off (Rom. 8:1). The work of reconciliation on God's side is accomplished on the Cross—the grandest expression of His love (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9). God also is reconciled to the world. We are no more 'enemies' (Rom. 5:10, in the objective sense; cf. 11:28). What remains is for man to appropriate the reconciliation thus brought to him, and to be himself reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).