

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ST. PAUL'S DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT.

BY THE REV. G. ESTWICK FORD, B.A.

THE object of this paper is simple : it is to examine what St. Paul in his epistles teaches on this subject, without any discussion of the theories of Atonement that have from time to time been prevalent. This examination will necessarily include a study of particular words used by St. Paul in connexion with Atonement, and an inquiry into the origin of St. Paul's doctrine.

Throughout the whole of his epistles St. Paul treats the fact that Christ died for our sins as one of the elementary truths of the Christian religion, just as he regards the fact of our Lord's resurrection from the dead ; and it is evident from what he says in 1 Corinthians xv. 3 that the gospel of Atonement through the death of Christ was a primary and essential element of his teaching, forming part of that body of Christian doctrine which he himself had received.

In one place only does he attempt to expand that doctrine so as to show in what sense Christ died for our sins ; and even there his words, however important, are exceedingly few. We are thus led to the general inference that St. Paul was not concerned about elaborating any theory of Atonement, but that his great object was to impress upon his converts the fact of Atonement, and the means by which that divine fact could be made effective for their spiritual needs.

The passage to which I refer is Romans iii. 21-26. Let us take this passage as our central point of study, and group around the different propositions which it contains the kindred ideas that appear elsewhere in the epistles. The passage is as follows :—

But now, apart from the law, a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets ; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe ; for there is no distinction ; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus : whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by His blood, to show His righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime in the forbearance of God ; for the showing, I say, of His righteousness at this present season, that He might himself be just, and the justifier of Him that hath faith in Jesus.

This remarkable statement is preceded by an examination of the moral condition of Gentiles and of Jews, leading up to the conclusion that by works of law—whether of natural law, innate even in heathen, or of revealed law, bestowed upon the Jewish race by God Himself—no flesh could be justified ; for the universal testimony of human experience showed that by law there came only the recognition of sinfulness, but not the power to be holy. If righteousness, therefore, is to be achieved by man, it must be in some other way than by the operation of law : and the new method which God has provided is through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ; a redemption which implies faith in those who are redeemed, and involves the suffering of death for the Redeemer (cf. Rom. viii. 3-4).

We note, therefore, at the very outset that the fundamental idea underlying the whole of St. Paul's doctrine of Atonement is the Divine effort to produce righteousness in men. It is moral perfection in man that the Heavenly Father is striving after ; and because no other means, such as natural law or revealed law, can avail to secure that result, the Heavenly wisdom has devised and carried out the redemption that is in Christ.

This fundamental idea of the object of the Atonement, i.e. that it is God's method of producing moral reformation in man, will necessarily affect our judgment as to the purposes intended to be served by the death of Christ. It will be evident, for example, that the main object of that death could not have been that adequate punishment might be inflicted for man's sin, for punishment is but the sanction of law ; it is part and parcel of the operation of law, whether natural or revealed, whether human or Divine ; and, however useful and necessary it may be in its place, it is a failure, along with the whole legal system of which it forms a part, as far as the production of righteousness, or moral rightness is concerned. It is just because law, with all its sanctions of punishment, could not get rid of sin that Christ died for our sins. His death, therefore, could not possibly have been intended as a sublime act of punishment.

Similarly when St. Paul speaks of God's justice or righteousness as being manifested in the death of Christ for the sin of man, it is clear that he cannot mean the justice of the law-court, the aim of which is to clear the innocent and to punish the guilty ; for on St. Paul's own showing there are, in this case, no innocent to be cleared, and law, in spite of all its punishments, is helpless to effect the purpose which

God designs to accomplish. The Cross of Christ is indeed the

“ Trysting-place, where Heaven's love
And Heaven's justice meet ” ;

but the justice of God that here co-operates with His love in man's salvation is that Divine holiness which makes it impossible for Him to ignore sin, and which lays upon Him the obligation of extirpating it ultimately from His universe.

It is in this sense that we are to understand the words, “ to show His righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime in the forbearance of God.” It might well seem to any one that God was indifferent to human sin and the havoc wrought by it, seeing that for such long ages men had sinned and suffered and God had made no sign to show that He either knew or cared ; but the death of God the Son is the measure of God's concern for the sin of the world, and the redemption from sin and its consequences which is effected by that death is available for all who have lived and have sinned, even though they may have died before or without the revelation of God's redemption in the death of Christ.

How, then, shall we understand St. Paul's statement in the Epistle to the Galatians, that Christ was made a curse for us in order to redeem us from the curse of the law ? Obviously in the sense in which St. Paul explains his own words, viz. that Christ submitted Himself to the indignity of crucifixion, the doom of the accursed, as it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. It is voluntary humiliation to the utmost that is here indicated, not punishment. And all expressions to the effect that Christ died for our sins are clearly intended to signify that it was on account of our sins, and not as a punishment for our sins, that Christ died.

Consider next the expression, “ The redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Here there would at first sight appear to be the suggestion that the suffering and death of Christ are to be regarded as a price paid for the liberation of man from the penalty due for his sin. Dr. Dale, in his well-known book, has called attention to the remarkable fact that for nearly a thousand years there prevailed in the Christian Church the rude and coarse hypothesis that the death of Christ was the price paid to the devil for liberating the souls of believers ; and to the kindred idea of Anselm, viz. that Christ, the Mediator, rendered honour to God by sacrificing His life ; that the Son, being

equal to the Father before His incarnation, could receive no recompense ; but that this recompense is fitly bestowed upon those for whose sake He became man.

Both these ideas depend upon the use of the word " redemption," in the sense of paying something to another person on behalf of the redeemed ; but St. Paul's use of the word involves no such suggestion. He uses it simply to indicate the fact that the salvation of man was not procured without cost to Him Who procured it ; for nowhere does he suggest that the cost involved was paid to any one ; and twice he explains the word redemption by adding the expression, " even the forgiveness of our sins " (Eph. i. 7 and Col. i. 14). The cost to the Redeemer is " His blood."

There remains to be considered the central statement in the passage with which we are dealing, " Whom God set forth to be a propitiation through faith, by His blood, to show His righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime in the forbearance of God." How are we to understand this word " propitiation " ? If there were nothing in the context to govern it the natural course would be to take the word in its ordinary signification, viz., a means of appeasing an angry person. But the context here most effectively governs the meaning of the word. The Divine Being to whom the whole design is ascribed is in no way represented as an angry person who has to be appeased ; but, on the contrary, as a holy Governor of the world who is most deeply concerned about the wrong-doing that prevails and has prevailed, and who has planned and carried out a supreme effort, the objects of which are (i) to put it within man's power to attain to that rightness of conduct that has hitherto been found impossible of attainment, and (ii) to make it evident that He Himself, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, has never been indifferent to the existence of the evil, but has always been intensely concerned on account of it.

St. Paul thus finds himself in the position of him who translates the New Testament into the language of races very low in the moral scale, having a noble idea to express but without any adequate word with which to express it, and therefore obliged to use a word, the common interpretation of which may lay him open to misconception. St. Paul therefore selects a word which, although it has a popular significance that may mislead the unwary, has nevertheless a biblical use and interpretation that should act as a safeguard against

any such misconception ; for this word *ἱλαστήριον* is the Septuagint word for the golden cover of the sacred ark—the mercy-seat—the place where, on the great Day of Atonement in Israel, God met with repentant Israel ; the place on which the blood of the Atoning Sacrifice was sprinkled. Christ crucified is thus the reality of which the blood-stained mercy-seat was the symbol. He is the meeting-place between the Heavenly Father and His erring children whom He longs to see reconciled to Himself ; displaying to the full God's concern with reference to man's unrighteousness, and at the same time providing the only effectual means of putting away that unrighteousness.

The salvation achieved by Christ's self-sacrifice is a salvation from sin. It becomes also a salvation from the final consequences of sin, that moral ruin, with whatever else it may involve, which is the inevitable result of unchecked sin ; but primarily and essentially the deliverance is from *sin*, and its operation can only be *through willing renunciation of sin*. In other words, the sinner must co-operate with the Saviour ; his heart and will must be influenced ; and the death of Christ is the supreme manifestation of two facts, which beyond all else are calculated to move the heart and the will. It demonstrates in the most convincing way the depth and fullness of the love of God, for God commendeth His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us ; and it impresses upon the mind, as nothing else can equally do, some adequate idea of the consequences of sin, in the fact that in order to avert those consequences God the Son Himself was incarnate, and was crucified, and died.

Thus in Christ crucified the sinner gets into touch with God ; he sees the face of his Heavenly Father—all the distress at human sin, all the Divine and infinite love for the sinner, the awfulness of his own danger, and the wide-open door of the haven of refuge. If he is willing, salvation is his. There is nothing artificial or unreal about the matter ; none of the fictions, forensic or otherwise, with which theologians have occupied themselves, but heart to heart approach of the Father to the prodigal, and, through the Divine Mediator, the return of the prodigal to the Father's home.

And, having regard to the infinite importance of the death of Christ in thus opening up a way of hope and deliverance for sinners, and the imperative necessity for the fullest assurance that it means all that Christ claimed for it, we can understand why St. Paul has so

closely linked together the death of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. It is not the death alone by which Atonement is effected, but the death and the resurrection combined : Christ died for our sins, and rose again for our justification : we are reconciled to God by His death, and saved by His life : if Christ be not raised our faith is vain, *we are yet in our sins*, we are of all men most pitiable. But Christ's resurrection is the sign from Heaven that all the significance which He Himself attached to His death is real, even as it is also, to all who believe, the visible pledge of immortality.

In thus uniting the resurrection with the death of Christ as an essential part of the work of Atonement, St. Paul is but carrying out in his teaching what had been foreshadowed in the law of the sin-offering of the Day of Atonement, which provided a duplicate sacrifice—one goat for death, its fellow for life ; both dedicated equally and identically to Jehovah, and *the two regarded as one offering for sin* : " He shall take of the congregation of Israel two he-goats for a sin-offering " (Lev. xvi. 5 ; see also verse 7). He is also expressing the teaching of the Lord Jesus Himself who declared that He laid down His life in order that He might take it again : " I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again ; this commandment have I received from My Father."

We ask, in conclusion, What is the source from which St. Paul derived his doctrine of Atonement ? The answer is, From the teaching and the experience of the Lord Jesus. Let us very briefly note the leading ideas expressed by St. Paul as they appear in the teaching of our Lord.

1. It is God's love, not the necessity for inflicting a penalty for sin, that is the fundamental cause of the incarnation and death of Christ : " God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

2. The death of Christ is not a necessity imposed upon Him from without, either by God the Father or by the devil ; but it is a voluntary sacrifice made for the sake of those whom Christ desired to save, in fullest conformity with the Father's will ; and, in a sense, is the occasion of a still fuller intensification of the Father's love : " Therefore doth the Father love Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." It is evident at a glance how utterly inconsistent with such teaching as this is the suggestion that God the Father regarded Christ on the Cross as an object of aversion, as

being identified with human sin, or that Christ was there abandoned by the Father, or in any other way made to endure punishment as the object of God's wrath and vengeance.

3. His death is a "ransom" in the sense that it cost Him something. Into all the meaning of His agony in Gethsemane and the distress which broke His heart upon the cross, it is impossible for us to enter; but the fact of that agony is beyond question, and our Lord anticipated it, and reckoned with it as the costly ransom that He was willingly to furnish in the accomplishment of His purpose of redeeming love.

4. In that sublime prayer in which our Lord, on the brink of Gethsemane, dedicated Himself to God for the sacrifice that He was about to accomplish, He makes it plain that the object of that sacrifice is to bring men into touch with God. The words to which I refer are the following: "Even as Thou gavest Him authority over all flesh, that whatsoever Thou hast given Him, to them He should give eternal life. And this is life eternal, *that they should know Thee*, the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." And the climax of His prayer, as of His whole ministry and sacrifice, is this, "That the love wherewith Thou lovedest Me may be in them, and I in them."

G. ESTWICK FORD.

CHURCH MUSIC.

CHURCH MUSIC. By Rev. A. S. Duncan-Jones, M.A. *Robert Scott.*

This, like other volumes in the series—"Handbooks of Catholic Faith and Practice"—represents the view-point of the extreme party. We are at least grateful to the author for emphasizing the fact that while the Choirmaster has a distinct province of his own, his concern is the proper rendering of the music, but the Incumbent's right to censor the music is unquestionable. As Mr. Duncan-Jones says—"if peace and edification are to be achieved here, the only way is frank comradeship and mutual understanding." We draw attention to this because sometimes the Incumbent's suggestions are resented and resisted. For the rest the author is obsessed with the idea that Anglican chants are the invention of the Devil (he approvingly quotes Dr. C. W. Pearce as saying this), and he pleads for the introduction of plain-song. "Barnby and Dykes have ridden us too long and are doomed." We are freely treated to such-like opinions. We confess to being unconvinced. We know churches in which the experiment has been tried and failed. We suppose that the majority of persons who read this book will not object, as we do, to the way in which the author persists in calling the Communion Office the Mass.