

THE ATONEMENT IN MODERN
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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in Modern Religious Thought

A THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIUM

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I. NEGATIVE

“BACK to Christ” is a most necessary movement in every unsettled age; but the Reformers’ version of it is the true one. If the word is taken in spiritual earnest it means “hack to the Cross,” and hack to the Cross means not only hack to the moral principle of sacrifice, hut hack to the religious principle of expiation. Moreover, to go hack to a principle which is really the act of a person is to go hack to a power. And the one power the Church needs to have revived is that power of personal faith which gathers about the reality—and the experience—of justification. There is no real revival of the Church which does not revive that.

It is impossible in this region to separate religion from theology. A religion of sympathy may he so separated, hut then it is not,

strictly speaking, a religion. It might be Positivism, or some other fraternity. But a religion of forgiveness must be a religion of theology. It is our answer, not to a human need, but to a Divine revelation.

If the faith of the Church is take a new departure it must proceed from a new and practical grasp of revelation; and of the revelation which deals with the central human situation—the situation of sin and guilt. It is a faith and revelation which are concentrated in an Atonement.

The mind and soul of the Church returns to this perennial interest. The Church must always adjust its compass at the Cross. But in so returning it does not simply retrace the steps or tread the round of those that have gone before. There is a deepening evolution of human thought in this regard. The efforts to pluck the heart from its mystery are not a series of assaults renewed with blind and dogged courage on an impregnable hold. They form the stages of a long spiritual movement of slow battle, of arduous illumination

and severe conquest. We have gone, *e.g.*, through the 'moral theory. and come out at the other side, not where we went in. To this movement little or nothing is contributed by the inferior branches of human thought or knowledge. The revelation of God in the Cross of Christ is its own reforming principle and its own cleansing light. Nothing gained in anthropology, psychology, or philosophy can really do more than remove the misconceptions which they themselves created in their first blundering stages. The Cross is its own interpreter, and its own reformer, and its own sanctifier. It is its own principle, its own corrective, its own deliverer from misconception rational or irrational. It is its own evidence to our moral need. No conclusions of anthropology, for instance, about a historic fall, or the connection of sin and physical death, affect the matter. The need of Atonement does not rest on an historic fall, but on the reality of present and corporate guilt. And the fact of it rests on an experience as real as any which forms the basis of science. The Christian

mind, moved and lightened by the Holy Ghost, does not rotate but march. And the progress is no less sure because it is neither continuous nor direct. We have much to drop on the route as a condition of getting home. We have to save truth by losing it, though it seem part of our soul. We shed the husk to grow the tree. And in this matter of Atonement some things are clearly learnt to be wrong, some are as clearly found to be true as we move from faith to faith.

1. We have outgrown the idea that God has to be reconciled. We see, as we never did before, how unscriptural that is. We know that the satisfaction made by Christ, no less than the sacrifices of the old law, flowed from the grace of God, and did not go to procure it.

2. We have outgrown the idea that Redemption cost the Father nothing, that He had only to receive the payment, or even the sacrifice, which the Son made. We realise more clearly that the Son could not suffer without the Father suffering. We realise that forgiveness did cost, that it was not a matter of course to paternal

indulgence, that it involved conditions of sorrow which were not confined either to Christ or to man, that a forgiveness which cost the forgiver nothing would lack too much in moral value or dignity to be worthy of holy love or rich in spiritual effect.

3. We have outgrown the idea that Christ took our punishment in the quantitative sense of the word. What He offered was not an *equivalent*. So also there can be no imputation as transfer of quantitative merit. We are agreeing to see that what fell upon Him was not the equivalent punishment of sin, but the due judgment of it, its condemnation. But we are also returning to see that what He bore *was* sin's condemnation, and not a mere sympathetic suffering. He did not indeed bear our guilt in the sense of a vicarious repentance. That for His holiness was impossible. He who was made sin for us could never be made sinful, nor, being made a curse for us, was He accursed. But yet what He bore was much more than the *Weltschmerz*, the human travail; it was the condemnation of sin in the flesh.

4. We are only just escaping from the modern and sentimental idea of love which found no difficulty placed by the holy law of God's nature in His way of forgiveness. It is an immoral love which has no moral hesitation about mercy. There are conditions to be met which reside, not in man, but in the very nature of God Himself, and so of human dignity. The key to the whole situation on this question lies in some words I have already quoted in public.

“The dignity of man would be better assured if he were shattered on the inviolability of this holy law than if for his mere happy existence it were ignored.”

I hope that we are beyond the idea that punishment is an arbitrary ordinance of God, that the conjunction of sin and suffering is the result of a mere decree, and that the same will which decreed it can dissolve it at His kind pleasure. We realise, in our moral progress under the Christian revelation, that the law which ruins the sinner is as eternal and holy in the nature of God as the passion to make

him a saint. And we have in the whole New Testament a standard of Divine love which is truer than those domestic analogues so dear to a theology popularised among great classes with no interest in life higher than the affections. There are some to whose experience the parable of the prodigal means more than the death of Christ.

5. We have outgrown also the other extreme—that forgiveness cost so much that it was impossible to God till justice was appeased and mercy set free by the blood of Christ.

6. We have further left the idea behind that the satisfaction of Christ was made either to God's wounded honour or to His punitive justice. And we see with growing and united clearness that it was made by obedience rather than by suffering. There is a vast difference between suffering as a condition of Atonement and suffering as the thing of positive worth in it, what gives it its value. We are beyond the idea that there was any saving value in the mere act of dying, apart from the spiritual manner of it.

It is not a mere fact, but the person in it, that can mediate between soul and soul. It is true the effect would not have been won if Christianity had been complete in the Sermon on the Mount and Christ had passed to heaven from the Mount of Transfiguration; but not because He would not have paid the death penalty, but only because a vital and terminal portion of human experience would have been excluded from acknowledging in Him the righteousness of God. The saving value both of His sorrow and death came from—a holy obedience, owning, in His most intense and extreme actuality of life—viz., agony and death—the righteousness of the broken law. The law was a law of hungering holiness, and the submission and sacrifice were not to mere clamant justice or Divine wrath.

The wrath of God, we all must agree, could not fall in this form of displeasure on His beloved Son. There can be no talk of placation or mollifying. And by the wrath of God we mean, and see that the Bible means, the judgment of a holy God upon sin even

more than the disposition of God towards the sinner.

7. We can no longer separate Christ's life of obedience from His expiatory death. He was obedient, not simply *in* death, but *unto* death. But this means not a tuning down of His death, but a tuning up of His life. It means that His whole person was expiatory in its ultimate function and supreme work. It was on this ground that He forgave sin during His life. Each miracle cost, and was preceded by, a small Passion. His sorrowful existence was an expiation. All His sufferings were death in advance, deaths manifold, chastisements of sin, and in their nature expiatory. He was inwardly in deaths often before He died the outward death.

8. We are, I hope, all giving up the tendency to twist Scripture into support of our theories, orthodox or liberal. In particular, scholarship more and more unanimously compels us to give up the Roman idea that justifying in St. Paul means making just and not declaring just; or that "the righteous-

ness of God” means the ethical attribute of God conveyed to us, rather than the gift of God as a status conferred on us. On such points the old theology and the new exegesis unite. The finality of Paul’s authority, of course, is a separate question, hut his meaning should not he longer in dispute.

By justification Paul at least meant something more forensic than ethical, a fiat more than a verdict of God, something more creative than appreciative, more synthetic than analytic. It was most original and wonderful, a new morality more moral than any natural ethic, and high removed from the judgment of the natural traditional conscience.

9. We are leaving behind us, to all appearance, the hazy idea that we have the fact of the Atonement and that no theory need be sought or can he found. The fact of the Crucifixion does not depend on theory, hut a fact like the Atonement can he separated from theory of some kind only by a suffusion of sentiment on the brain, some ethical anaemia, or a scepticism of the spiritual intelligence.

10. We are abandoning the idea that any adequate treatment of this great and solemn theme can rest on the basis of a merely personal experience. Amateur and dilettanti theologising, however devout, is, by its very individualism, disqualified for any very valuable verdict on such a universal theme. The history of the question in the Church is as little to be despised as it is to be idolised. If we fall back on experience the question is too vast for any single experience, and what we must use is the experience of the Church. Yet even that is not final. The Bible must still save us from the Church. And I hope we have outgrown the idea that anything so subjective as the Christian consciousness can be the test of truth which, in its very nature as a saving power, must be in the first place objective. Our forgiveness has an objective ground, and is inseparable from the death of Christ, and from that death considered as something more than the source of a new type of experience.

11. Expiation and forgiveness, it has been said, are mutually exclusive. If a sin has been

expiated the account is cleared; there is then no need of forgiveness or question of Grace. This was the criticism of Socinius on Anselm. May we hope that we are beyond that, that it is seen to miss the mark as soon as the quantitative and equivalent theory of Christ's suffering is given up? Of course, an expiatory *amount* of penalty purges the offence; and, the debt being paid, the culprit is beholden to no grace for his open door. But if we say that God, who had a right to destroy each sinner, offers pardon to those who really own in the Cross the kind (not the amount) of penalty which their sin deserved, then the contradiction vanishes. Grace is still sovereign, free and unbought. It is grace in God to accept an Atonement which is not an equivalent but a practical, adequate, and superhuman acknowledgment in man of the awful debt foregone.

II.—POSITIVE.

12. We must go beyond even the texts bearing on this subject. The classic texts have for the present been well-nigh exhausted.

The separation of Biblical from dogmatic theology has left the Church free as it never was before to recognise where the value of texts ceases and to abstain from pressing them to their hurt. And I come now to the more positive part of my work when I say that we must start from the actual spiritual situation of our day, and begin with the ruling contemporary idea to which the Spirit has led us in His teaching and unteaching of His Church. That ruling idea is revelation. Jesus Christ makes the claim He does upon the world not as being a religious genius, but as being the Revelation of God. What, then, is involved in the way of Atonement or Expiation in the Christian revelation of the love of God; in God not simply as the Father, but as the Father *of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and Him crucified*? I mean by the Christian Revelation the revelation that Christ effected, and not only what He taught. Is it a revelation of such love as includes in itself, in its own spiritual necessity, the judgment upon sin, and includes it not as a mere principle, but as an accom-

plished and exhibited moral fact? Have we a revelation of love which not only produces repentance by its effect upon man, but also includes within itself the actual judgment and destruction of sin; and includes it not as a necessity probable in human thought, but as an active constituent of the revelation? Is it possible to have any adequate sense of the actual love of God in Christ without an equally real sense of His actual condemnation of sin?—its condemnation *in act*, note, not its mere hatred; and its condemnation, not in our experience but in Christ's. Is revelation separable from judgment, as an actual element of it and not merely as a coming corollary? Can there be any assertion of *forgiving* love without an assertion, equally actual and adequate, of the moral majesty of that love, and its difference from mere kindness? Was the revelation of holy love not equally and at once, in the same fact, a revelation of sin, a developing of sin to its utmost crisis, and to its final judgment? "God is Love" has in the New Testament no meaning apart

from the equally prominent idea of righteousness, of God as the author and guardian of the moral holy law. The Christian principle of pardon is not forgiveness to repentance (no strong man forgives a real wrong on a thin repentance, a mere attrition), but to due repentance. And a due repentance means a repentance not only sincere (and certainly not equivalent), but containing some adequate sense of the evil done. And that means an adequate recognition in experience of the majesty and inviolability of the law of holiness. But such a recognition is not possible to a sinful soul or race. It could only be made by a conscience unblunted in its moral perceptions because sinless in its moral obedience, yet identified in sympathy with the sinful race. It is this practical and experienced recognition that is the Atonement or Expiation. It is ratifying by act and experience, by assent which was response and by a response which was lived and died, God's death sentence on sin. It is not repentance in Christ's case, but it is the source of repentance in us who are

joined with Him. And the two polar experiences, joined in one spiritual and organic act of mystic union, form the complete type of Christian faith. The repentance is ours alone; the penalty is not, the judgment is not. The penal judgment or consequence or curse of sin did fall on Christ, the penitential did not. The sting of guilt was never His, the cry on the cross was no wail of conscience. But the awful atmosphere of guilt *was* His. He entered it, and died of it. Our chastisement was on Him, but God never chastised Him. The penalty was His, the repentance remains ours. His expiation does not dispense with ours, but evokes and enables it. Our saving repentance is not due to our terror of the judgment to fall on us, but to our horror of the judgment we brought on Him. The due recognition of the wounded law was His, but the sense of having inflicted the wound is ours alone. Yet not possibly ours till we are acted on by what was His. The truth of penalty is penitence. The end and intent of the judgment on Him was our judgment of ourselves in

Him. The use of penalty is to rouse the true punishment in all penalty, viz., the sense of guilt and personal repentance. Repentance is never regarded in Christianity as a thing possible by itself, or a condition effectual by itself without God, but only as that part or action of the complete work of Christ which takes effect through us. It is the form assumed by the work of Christ, the judgment on Christ, as it enters our atmosphere of personal guilt.

The question really is, Where did the difficulty lie that was to be overcome by Redemption? Was it in forgiving the penitent, or in producing the penitence that could be forgiven? Was it in God or in man, in the Divine conscience or the human? Where did Christ feel that the obstacle lay with which He had to deal? Was the objective of the Cross our human impenitence or something superhuman? Did He close with something which had no right, or something which had every right, with human hostility or Divine claim? Was He dealing with a human attitude or with a Divine relation? Was He engrossed with

what He was doing toward men or toward God?

If we select one of these ways of putting it and ask whether the difficulty lay in producing forgiveness or forgiveableness, we must answer that it was both. The antithesis is but on the surface. They unite below. That which really produces forgiveable penitence in man is the expiation to law which bore first on God. It was to the law that produces penitence that forgiving grace had to die. The moral effect of the Cross on man is due to a nature in man continuous with the moral nature of God.

Love's awful moving cost in satisfying the broken law and maintaining its holy and inviolable honour, is the only means of producing such a sense of guilt as God can forgive. The difficulty of true repenting is the difficulty of realising that God took the broken law of His holiness so much to heart that it entailed the obedience in agony and death of the Holy One. Without the death of Christ the sinner feels that he is pursued only by an unexhausted judgment; and the end of that may be panic,

but not penitence. It is the exhaustion of judgment and not its remission that produces the penitence which is forgiveably sensible both of the goodness and the severity of God.

It is the impossibility of remitting judgment that makes possible the remission of sin. The holy law is not the creation of God but His nature, and it cannot be treated as less than inviolate and eternal, it cannot be denied or simply annulled unless He seem false to Himself. If a play on words* be permitted in such a connection, the self-denial of Christ was there because God could not deny Himself.

I repeat, the form in which the question presents itself to-day is whether Bedemption is a constituent element of Bevelation or only a consequence of it; and whether it is so, both in a theological analysis of the idea, and as an interpretation of the spiritual fact and act, Christ, in His historic totality.

We may mark these stages at which my space will only allow me to hint.

* I take shelter under Matt. xvi. 25.

(1) Redemption is a part of Revelation. Revelation is not Revelation till it is effectual, *i.e.*, till it come home as such. A revelation merely displayed is none. It is not revelation till it strike light on the soul. The very first revelation involved the creation of a man to receive it; Revelation and Creation were one act. So the second and greater Revelation was not mere illumination or mere impression. It was Redemption. It involved the recreation of the soul to take it in. Revealing was *ipso facto* remaking, as a great and original genius has slowly to create the taste to appreciate him. The act which reveals his soul makes his world. If only we could grasp the idea of revelation as something done instead of something shown, as creation instead of exhibition, as renovation instead of innovation, as resurrection instead of communication.

(2) Atonement is a constituent of Redemption. The thing we are to be redeemed from is not chiefly ignorance or pain, but guilt. The thing to which revelation has first to address itself is guilt. The love of God can

only be revealed to sinful men as in primary relation not to lovelessness but to guilt. It can only appear as atoning love in some form of judgment.

We are to be redeemed by judgment somewhere from condemnation, from the wrath of God. There is no question of placation, but there is of expiation, of owning the holiest law by the holiest sacrifice and the humblest grief. There is a question of that law which to recognise as co-eternal with love is *the* sign of religious earnestness and virility. Salvation must be salvation not *from* judgment, but *by* judgment. Christ did not simply pronounce judgment, but effected it. And He gave it effect in His own person and experience. He bore the infinite judgment He pronounced. The prophet of woe becomes in a few chapters the victim of woe (Matt, xxiv., xxv., xxvi.). The agent of judgment becomes the object of judgment, and so becomes the agent of salvation. As Judge of all the earth, as the Conscience of the conscience, Christ is absolute in His judgment, unsparing

and final in His condemnation. But as the second Adam and Man of men He attracts, accepts and absorbs in Himself His own holy judgment; and He bears, in man and for man, the double crisis and agony of His own two-edged vision of purity and guilt. He whose purity has the sole right to judge has by the same purity the only power to feel and realise such judgment. And His love made that power for Him a duty. And so He was their Saviour.

(3) Heed it be said that Atonement for us is as impossible by us as it is necessary to holiness? Amendment is not reparation; and repentance even cannot lift itself to the measure of the broken law or gauge how great the fault has been. If made, the reparation must be made by God Himself. The sacrifice flows from grace and does not produce grace. It is not a case of altering God's disposition but His relations with man, of enabling Him to treat man as He feels. It is persistently overlooked that it is an act of grace and not of debt on God's part to accept even the satisfaction and

atonement of Christ for human forgiveness. We must never use the word satisfaction, even of Christ's sacrifice, in any way which would suggest equivalence, and constitute mere claim on God, any more than mere exemption for us.

Atonement is substitutionary, else it is none. Let us not denounce or renounce such words, but interpret them. They came into existence to meet a spiritual necessity, and to sweep them away is spiritual wastefulness, to say no worse. We may replace the word substitution by representation or identification, but the thing remains. Christ not only represents God to man but man to God. Is it possible for any to represent man before Holy God without identifying himself in some guiltless way with human sin, without receiving in some way the judgment of sin? Could the second Adam be utterly untouched by the second death? Yet if the Sinless was judged it was not His own judgment He bore, but ours. It was not simply on our behalf, but in our stead—yet not quantitatively, but centrally. Representation apart from substitution implies a foregone con-

sent and election by the represented, which is not Christ's relation to humanity at all. Let us only be careful that we do not so construe the idea as to treat the sufferings of Christ as in real parity with ours. That is a moral impossibility, and lands us, as has been said, in all the anomalies of an equivalent theology which it is the merit of Socinus to have destroyed. The principle of a vicarious Atonement is bound up with the very idea of Revelation, of love emerging into guilt. There is an atoning substitution and a penal; but a penitential there is not.

(4) I can only here say a closing word on this last distinction. I do not see why we should avoid describing the suffering of Christ as penal. Nor do I see how we can. Sin is punished by suffering. And it was because of the world's sin that Christ suffered. It was the punishment of sin that fell on Him. He came deliberately under that part of the moral order which we may call the Divine and universal Nemesis. Christ loved holiness at least as much as He loved man; and the willing

penalty of the Holy One was the only form in which wounded holiness could be honoured, and love be revealed as in earnest with sin. It was, moreover, the only way in which penalty or law could produce its fruit of repentance, and so of reconciliation. Expiation is the condition of reconciliation. Penalty, if not vicarious, if its source do not also suffer, only hardens and alienates. The suffering was penal in that it was due in the moral order to sin. It was penal to Christ's personality, to His consciousness, but not to His conscience. It was not penitential. There was no self-accusation in it. He never felt that God was punishing Him, though it was penalty, sin's Nemesis that He bore. It was the consequence of sin, though not of His sin. And it was the consequence attached *by God* to sin—sin's penalty; and He so recognised it. It was judgment, and therefore penalty, and not mere pain or trial. Suffering does not repair sin; only penalty does, working to repentance. But it was not substitutionary *punishment*. There is no such thing in the

moral world. The worst punishment is to see the penalty we brought on Christ—whether we see it with faith in a saving way, or without faith to our deeper condemnation.

To the question what the worth was which God saw in the work of Christ, and what the delectation which gave it saving value to His eye of grace, the answer can here be but in useless brevity. First, the practical and adequate recognition of a broken law in a holy and universal life is an end in itself, and therefore a Divine satisfaction. Second, the effect of that vicarious and loving sacrifice on men must bring them to a repentance and reconciliation which was the one thing that God's gracious love required for restored communion and complete forgiveness. He could now deal with them as He had felt from before the foundation of the world. It satisfied the claim and harmony of His holy nature, and it satisfied the redemptive passion of His gracious heart. Thirdly, that effect on men is due to the satisfaction of God's moral nature in the constitution of man. God was in Christ

reconciling the world by the sacrifice and satisfaction of Himself.

Human illustrations are more useful for impression than for explanation in a case so original and unique as Christ's, yet I may close with one less common than some.

Schamyl was the great religious and military leader of the Caucasus who for thirty years baffled the advance of Russia in that region, and, after the most adventurous of lives, died in 1871. At one time bribery and corruption had become so prevalent about him, that he was driven to severe measures, and he announced that in every case discovered the punishment would be one hundred lashes. Before long a culprit was discovered. It was his own mother. He shut himself up in his tent for two days without food or water, sunk in prayer. On the third day he gathered the people, and pale as a corpse, commanded the executioner to inflict the punishment, which was done. But at the fifth stroke he called "Halt!" had his mother removed, bared his own back, and ordered the official to lay on him the other ninety-five, with

the severest threats if he did not give him the full weight of each blow.

This is a case where his penalty sanctified her punishment both to herself and to the awestruck people.

Every remission imperils the sanctity of law unless he who remits suffers something in the penalty foregone; and such atoning suffering is essential to the revelation of love which is to remain great, high and holy.

Finally, if the Cross be penal we have not only to *admit* that it is so, but to *urge* it; for it is of the essence of its value for the soul, and the real secret of the Church's action on the world.