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ARTICLE VI.

THE ATONEMENT IN THE LIGHT OF CONSCIENCE.

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SALVATION by the atonement, whatever else may be true of it, is certainly *right*. This is the least that can be said in its favor. Yet on this very point our theories of the atonement present the greatest difficulty. They do not commend themselves plainly to the *conscience*. But no theory can stand without this endorsement of our sense of right. If the conscience is not satisfied the reason cannot be.

The strength of the Old School theory of the atonement lies in its seeming response to the demand of conscience, that *sin must have its desert*. Premising that the desert can come only by punishment, and then conceiving of a penalty *per se* that can exhaust itself upon the intrinsically innocent, the advocates of this theory satisfy themselves that sin has, in the person of Christ, received its penal desert. What sin really deserves we will consider further on; but it seems to us self-evident that sin cannot be punished without the punishment of the sinner. Hence, speaking for ourselves only, the theory under notice cannot satisfy our conscience, because the conscience cannot be satisfied by what the mind sees to be absurd.

But we are no better satisfied with any theory that leaves out of account the intrinsic desert of sin. We may see, with Dr. Bushnell, how the atonement satisfies our highest conceptions of love; but this makes more intolerable the want of a correspondingly full satisfaction of the sentiment of justice. The conscience is set for the defense of justice, and, though dazzled for a while by the overpowering rays of love, it never quite loses its hold on the idea of desert.

What is called the "governmental theory," but which ought, we think, to be called the "manifestation theory," is

often presented in such a way as to leave conscience and its demands very much out of sight. Dr. Taylor made the support of *authority* to be the end of both punishment and atonement. "When applied to denote the attribute of a perfect moral governor, justice is a benevolent disposition on his part to maintain by the requisite means his authority, as the necessary condition of the highest happiness of his kingdom." [1] But how can authority be maintained to any good purpose by punishments that are in the view of conscience unjust? Although, as we hope to show, the atonement does more than meet the ends of punishment, yet to do as much as that, must it not satisfy the sense of desert? In other words, if punishment must have such a relation to sin as the unperverted conscience pronounces *just*, why must not the atonement, if atonement takes the place of punishment, wholly or in part in the divine government? Here we discover the weak point of the governmental theory, or at least in many expositions of it. It is easy to discern in it the reforming power of the atonement, but not so easy to see its absolving power.

Without any further statement of difficulties, let us take up two questions which lie at the foundation of the subject:

I. What, in the view of conscience, does sin deserve?

II. What does a sinner deserve?

I. What does *sin* deserve? The answer may be embraced in one word — CONDEMNATION. But we must unfold that word to discover the complete answer. This condemnation must be unqualified, effective, and supreme; unqualified, because sin and righteousness are incompatible; effective, because to pronounce a thing condemned is nothing, unless it is reprobated with such force of character as to be effectually branded as vile and abominable, and utterly expelled from the sphere of goodness; supreme, because if the condemnation is reversible by any higher will or character, it is not effective. The last court of appeal has more weight than all others together.

[1] Moral Government, Vol. ii. p. 280, Essay on Justice.

It is apparent, then, that repentance cannot satisfy the conscience for past sins. How can a feeble, finite creature, who is sinning every day, make any condemnation of sin that the conscience looks upon as effective? And how infinitely below the supreme condemnation does it fall! Conscience, as we have said, looks after desert. What boots it that you and I, and ever so many sinners in our poor, halting, self-justifying way loathe sin? Does this brand sin as it deserves, so that the moral universe can look on and say: "Behold how this curse and shame is crushed and made abominable for ever and ever?"

We may find an illustration, on a low plane, in our attitude toward ordinary crimes. Would the conscience be satisfied by the repentance of all criminals, without any punishment? We say nothing about what the interests of society require, nothing about authority; we inquire whether there is a voice of our moral nature which demands something more than repentance. When a criminal repents, will any right-minded person assert that sin has received its *due?* Certainly not. And why? Because crime is not thereby adequately condemned. The extorted testimony of the culprit, even if perfectly sincere, has but a feather's weight compared with that overwhelming burden of reprobation which sin and crime deserve.

We may illustrate further the demand of conscience for effective condemnation. Would it be satisfied by any declaration of the magistrate, condemnatory of the crimes brought to his notice? Most certainly not. Because his personal testimony is just as inadequate as that of the penitent criminal. Even if we grant that the judge, as a representative of the moral sentiment of the state, pronounces the judgment of the whole body, we are but little nearer the desert of sin. If sin escapes the condemnation of the Supreme Judge it is forever uncondemned and triumphant.

Where then can conscience and justice find satisfaction under human law? *In God's ordinance of punishment.* Punishment is God's mode of condemning crime in human

society. Though not always effectual in *preventing* crime, it is effectual in bringing it under the law of condemnation. It is executed by human hands; but its range of results, as seen especially in capital punishment, is far beyond human calculations. It is a divine sanction.

We are brought by this illustration to our second question: What does a *sinner* deserve? Let us take the simplest answer of conscience, and then try to interpret it. Conscience says: The sinner deserves punishment. This seems to shut the door of investigation, and make it impossible for a sinner to be saved with any satisfaction to the sense of justice. But the door opens to us again when we consider the relation of the two testimonies of conscience to each other. Are the two propositions, "Sin deserves condemnation," and "The sinner deserves punishment," logically independent of each other? It can hardly be so. Are they identical? Obviously not. What then is their mutual relation? Is it not twofold, as follows: The sinner deserves punishment because, (1) Sin deserves to be condemned. In all the ordinary categories of human action punishment is an indispensable means to condemnation. The history of the world exhibits but one example of the fact that a general offer of pardon is compatible with the condemnation of sin. Now the testimony of conscience which we are considering is obviovsly *not* delivered with any reference to the unique example of atonement. We may wonder at this, but it will hardly be denied. When conscience says: "A sinner deserves to be punished," it unites an acknowledged means with its own end. In a word, punishment as the desert of a sinner is not a first principle, like condemnation as the desert of sin. Punishment is an expedient; and it is solely *as such* that conscience and justice are satisfied by it. The sinner also deserves punishment because (2) *his* sin deserves to be condemned. This is the personal end of punishment; and although it may thus be expressed in few words, it will be seen to cover the whole ground of sin as a personal matter.

We have thus given comprehensively what we understand

to be the testimony of conscience respecting the desert of sin and sinners. Sin deserves the effective condemnation of supreme righteousness, and the sinner deserves punishment considered as the means of carrying out that condemnation.

Now is there anything that can take the place of punishment so that sin can be condemned and yet the sinner escape? Here we reach the blessed atonement. If the dreadful difficulty is not beyond the power of infinite wisdom and infinite love we shall find it overcome here. And who that believes in the Deity of Christ can doubt that sin is condemned, most unqualifiedly, effectively, and with supreme authority in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ? Consider the infinite abasement of that life in which, amid incessant and awful trials and temptations, he exemplified a perfect righteousness. Consider that in this and in the ignominy of his death he incurred the bitterest woes sent upon our race for sin, thus endorsing in blood its penal desert. Consider the unveiling of human sin produced by contact with Jesus's holy life — a contact ending in the blackest of human crimes, because the darkness could not endure the light by which it was revealed. Consider that sin, in all the forms in which it can assail a moral being, was met and vanquished. Sin as enthroned in Satan; sin as actuating sinful men; sin as doing its last and worst through death; sin as casting upon him the very curse under which sinners lived — this sin was vanquished, and thus condemned with an emphasis vastly beyond that which the obedience of a race, or the punishment of a race, could have produced.

If then, sin, considered by itself, deserves condemnation, there is no question that it has received its desert, strictly and fully, in the atonement. The whole human race may say with one voice: "Our eternal punishment could never brand sin as the 'blood of Jesus' has." And each sinner can say: "So far as my eternal punishment is the means of condemning sin, there is no need of it. That work is done. 'God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.'"

But how does the atonement answer the other question: What does the sinner deserve? The *general* end of punishment has been fulfilled by the cross; but how is the personal end fulfilled? In order to accomplish this, two things seem to be requisite.

1. We must be marked as sinners. The punished culprit, willingly or not, is the marked man; the one in whom that abominable thing to be condemned has been found and acted out. Now by faith we come to Christ as a Saviour from sin. The act of coming gives us our place as sinners. What the culprit does whether he will or not, the believer does freely. He says: "I am the sinner, else I would not be here with my Saviour."

2. We must be directly involved in the condemning of our sin. The culprit is by punishment made the means of condemnation; his pains, privations, disgrace, or death are indispensable to condemnation by punishment. Now by faith we come to Christ not only as a Saviour from sin, but as a condemner of sin. Hence in this respect we do freely what the culprit does generally of necessity. But let us see clearly that this is not mere repentance. The part which a culprit bears in the reprobation of crime is not dependent on his repentance. Repentance condemns sin in our own name. This is a small matter. But the atonement condemns it in the name of God, and with all the force of the highest possible manifestation of God's character. Faith accepts this import of the atonement. Faith is sometimes called "taking God at his word"; but the atonement is the mightiest word of God respecting sin, and each one's sins. To take God at this word of his is to acknowledge and adopt God's own condemnation of sin, and of *our* sins. Here is the deepest point in the relation of faith to absolution. By this faith we lay our sins upon the Lamb of God; or rather, the Lord hath already laid upon him our iniquities, and what he asks of us is to own that they *are* ours. We do not suffer condemnation, but we accept it as a thing accomplished by another. If we suffer forever we can make no valuable addition to

that condemnation. The work is done, and by faith our interest in it is as intimate as if we had borne the full penalty of our sins. A fully punished sinner, if such there can be, has no advantage over a believing sinner. All that either can say is: "Sin has been fully condemned as sin, and as *my* sin." With this conscience and justice are satisfied.

We have thus tried to show that the atonement, by itself, answers the general end of punishment, and "through faith" answers the personal end of punishment. We may add here that if the atonement, by itself, answered *all* the punitive demands of justice, both general and personal, then faith would not be essential to salvation. But according to the view we have taken, the sense of justice cannot be satisfied in the salvation of any individual, in a condition of responsibility, without faith. If, instead of exercising this faith, we reject Christ, it is plain that we deserve a greatly aggravated punishment.

The satisfaction of conscience, which we have all along considered as practically equivalent to the satisfaction of justice, is evidently quite consistent with pardon. It is not only safe, but altogether right, to pardon with an atonement. Sin being already under the deepest possible condemnation, no plea can be put in at the bar of conscience why pardon should not be freely granted, if individuals are in a proper condition to receive it, i.e. if they have faith. Thus the same faith that fulfils what we have called the personal end of punishment prepares the soul for pardon. The pardon is genuine, because it is the bestowal of grace by the Sovereign upon the guilty. It is right, because it belongs to a system that satisfies justice.

We turn now to consider very briefly the idea of reward as found in the atonement, and as viewed by the conscience. This idea seems to have fallen into the background in the later New England soteriology; but why should it? Is not the idea of atonement incomplete without it? Not that there are two distinct lines of efficacy, one of which terminates in pardon and the other in reward; but there is a twofold

efficacy throughout, corresponding to the twofold need of sinners. We need not only a removal of God's disfavor, but his positive approbation. How can such sinners as we are get it? How, in the view of conscience, can it be right for us to have it?

In answering these questions we will pursue a path similar to the one followed in treating of punishment, but leading, of course, in the opposite direction.

I. What does righteousness deserve?

II. What does a righteous man deserve?

Righteousness deserves APPROBATION, unqualified, effective, supreme. Whether a reason can be given for this or not, conscience affirms it with the clearness and quickness of intuition. This is enough for our present purpose.

What does a righteous person deserve? He deserves a *reward;* but, as we have said in regard to punishment, only as a means — the means of making approbation effective and personal.

Now if righteousness, considered by itself, receives an adequate seal of approval through the atonement, then the general purpose of rewards is fulfilled. And who can doubt that it has received such a seal? Who can doubt that the perfect rectitude of all human beings, followed by the rewards of heaven to their merits, would have been a less powerful approbation of righteousness than the manifestation made by the Incarnate Son, and the eternal glory that follows? But we need not put the choice between rewarding all, on the one hand, and the incarnation, on the other. Man having fallen, any suitable rewards were impossible. Where was the righteousness to reward? God could give a law, but who would keep it? He could fully show his approbation of righteousness only by the appearance of his beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. Thus "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness." Sin so deep as man's was is as fatal to a system of rewards as to a system of punishments. The atonement was needed to fulfil the end of the former as much as of the latter.

But how about the personal ends of rewards? How is this reached in the atonement system? We answer: *By faith.* Just as the sinner says: "I do not suffer for the condemnation of my sins, but I humbly accept the condemnation that comes through the sufferings of Christ," which is faith "resting in the blood"; so, in view of Christ's righteousness, he says: "I possess no righteousness that can be rewarded, but I endorse, and love, and trust in that righteousness which is worthy of the highest reward," which is faith resting on the righteousness of Christ. By faith we trust in Jesus, not as a mere person, but as the one who possesses a pure and spotless righteousness, the only one who *deserves* heavenly bliss. When we think of heaven as a reward, we think of Jesus, and of his transcendent worth. Then it is right for us to enjoy heaven because we accept it as the reward of righteousness. Our acceptance of Christ points us out as proper participants in the glory which is his well-earned reward. The righteousness is not ours by achievement, but ours by dependence. The position of a sinner enjoying the fruits of Christ's merit is nowise repugnant to conscience, for there is a reason for it. It is not a case of partiality. He stand among the lovers of righteousness, himself not righteous inherently, but in the depths of his soul, *adherent* to righteousness and the righteous Lamb of God. For no other sinner would it be right, even if it were possible, to enjoy that bliss which is the reward of Jesus. Thus "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."

We close with a few words on the satisfaction of divine justice. The human conscience, if it is anything, is a copy of the divine conscience. We are like God in our perception of right and wrong and our sense of justice. This is our foundation for the knowledge of God's moral attributes. But we must be sure to draw our conclusions from an unperverted conscience. If we have done so in the preceding pages, it follows that the satisfaction which divine justice receives in the atonement arises from its overwhelming con-

demnation of sin, and a corresponding approbation of righteousness; sin being reprobated with a moral force exceeding that which would attend the everlasting punishment of all sinners, and righteousness being vindicated with a glory that could hardly beam from rewarding a universe of righteous men. Here is one of the wonders of redemption, that even salvation can be made to satisfy justice. The Eternal Monarch, humbling himself to save rebels, accomplishes in his infinite condescension more for justice than if he had bared his right arm for justice without mercy. The loving heart, shrinking from the pain of punishing, accepts the pain of humiliation, and saves the lost.

Is not then God's so-called "obligation" to make atonement just this, that being able to satisfy his attribute of justice by the atonement, it cannot be that his other attribute of love should fail of the satisfaction of saving sinners? It must be that he who can, *will* make atonement. In other words, the atonement is God-like.

ARTICLE VII.

CONSCIENCE, ITS RELATIONS AND OFFICE.

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We are sometimes startled by the profound significance of words, by the precision with which they etymologically penetrate to the root of the idea indicated, and lay open its essential features. It seems, either as if those who first applied them must have possessed wonderful insight into things, or as if, by some force or law of growth in themselves, they had come to cover and hold with strange perspicuity the germs of knowledge. Thus the word "consciousness" expresses a sort of double knowing — a knowing with one's self, a knowing that one knows, which is the essential feature of what it designates. This two-sided character of knowledge, by which