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Christ's Sacrifice considered as Vicarious.

IT speaks little for the grasp that the Church of Christ has of the principles of its own faith, that the doctrine of the Atonement, which lies at the centre, should present itself so largely as a puzzle to be solved. Every doctrine assuredly raises many questions, but it is the very essential meaning of the Atonement upon which men are so divided. Is a theory necessary to our appreciation of the fact? If so, what theory? And the theories offered us to choose from differ not merely as to the answers they give to the question, but as to the very question that they answer.

Indeed, I think, when we have properly fixed the question, the answer lies to hand. In this paper no allusion will be made to the doctrine in many of its various aspects: I shall keep to the exact subject expressed in the title, and even that only in respect of its most fundamental point. What is the *rationale* of the Atonement, regarded as the specific and historical Divine act which opened the way for the creation of the Church of Christ and for our individual forgiveness and salvation? To very many it seems as if such an act is, if not superfluous, at least something that specially needs to be explained. But surely, if the Cross of Christ is the supreme revelation of what God is to man, it ought to shine in its own light. It ought to reveal its meaning in our deepest and most distinctly Christian experiences. Now that throws us back upon the very meaning of Christianity itself. If we agree —whatever our differences—in believing that Christianity is the religion of Redemption—that it means a definite entrance of God into history—then this alone, I take it, should afford the key to the understanding of the Cross. It will lead us, as I shall try to show, face to face with a doctrine of Substitution that shall be free from the encumbrances of obsolete modes of thought, and yet shall not be liable to the charge of explaining away the fact it undertakes to explain.

The late Dr. Denney, in an incisive passage, maintains that there *must* be a theory of the Atonement, for a fact without a theory, or even a fact of which *we* have no theory, could never enter *our* world at all. We may heartily agree with this, and yet our very agreement may almost be stated in terms of the opposite view

For a theory suggests some distinctness from the fact. It seems to imply that the latter is at least capable of statement without the other. Indeed Denney himself prefers the word "doctrine," and says something to the effect that the Scriptural theory so immediately suggests itself to the unsophisticated mind that we hardly think of it as a theory at all. This, I think, is even more true of the form in which it is here proposed to state it than of the so-called "forensic" form to which he adheres.

What we need is to state the fact in terms of God and His relations to men :—the history, not as a mere record of earthly events, nor yet as a mere symbol of eternal realities, but as history on its inward and eternal side, yet still history : not to begin by affirming that we are saved, or forgiven, through Christ's Death, and then append an explanation, but to express the fact at the outset in such a form that the necessity of the connexion is involved. Divine forgiveness, once seen as Atonement through Divine self-sacrifice, should be henceforth unthinkable otherwise.

Now the reality of Redemption implies the reality of Sin. Those who tell us that Christ only came to disillusion us—to show us that the apparent barrier between us and God was not overcome but imaginary—either evade the whole idea of a specific revealed religion, or merely push the problem further back. But let us here assume a general agreement on this point. Sin has a meaning *per se*, an essentially religious meaning. It cannot be defined as selfishness. It *is* selfishness, in one aspect, but to *define* it as such is to reduce religion to terms of morality, and so to do is the very negation of religion, and therefore the undermining of morality itself. Sin is simply—Sin.

And so we must include in our idea of God a necessary aspect of His being which is directly antithetical to moral evil. For if Sin were merely of the nature of a disease, then the very idea of a historic Atonement, as distinguished from the subjective healing of individuals, would be unmeaning. Now it is difficult to express this antagonism in language that shall not lend itself to the importation of unworthy anthropomorphisms. The old-fashioned way of expressing that element in the Divine nature which rendered Atonement necessary, was by using the term "justice." I think this term is to be deprecated, and that it introduces a spurious element into our idea of goodness, due to a mixing up of the two

senses in which the term is currently used. Moreover, I think it has no support in Scripture; for δίκαιος means "righteous." Now the idea of righteousness may include the punishing of Sin, but not because this is *due* to the sinner, but because punishment is included in the wider idea of *repelling* Sin—reacting against it in some form or another. What conscience requires is that forgiveness should come in some form which expresses, instead of limiting, this antagonism. The sense of this necessity is brought home to it by the Gospel itself, which *reveals the problem and the solution in one.* It is not a question of justice, as we use the term to express a particular virtue. It can never be *unjust* to forgive, though in some cases it may be unjustifiable. The problem, if it be such, lies deeper and yet is simpler. If Sin were not a violation of something in the Divine nature which must react for its own vindication, Sin would not be Sin or God would not be God.

We may use the word "holiness" as convenient to express that aspect of God by virtue of which He reacts against Sin. Now God certainly "is Love," but that does not imply that the idea of holiness is reducible to that of love. For if so, there could be no distinction between holy and unholy love. It is true that Sin may be viewed as an opposition to Love, which is similar to saying that it is selfishness. But wrong acts are not necessarily *direct* violations of the law of Love, and, if not, we can only regard them as such at all because we *first* regard them as sinful, and because He that is the infinitely holy is also Love. In short we cannot explain away holiness. God is known to the Christian consciousness as an Object not simply of grateful response, but of reverence and adoration. Our sense of an infinite Purity, which asserts itself as such against its opposite, is not subjective—is not simply relative to our ignorance; it is as truly a glimpse of God as our sense of His love, and as truly final in our analysis of spiritual experience.

I emphasize this, not only for its own sake, but because it places the necessity of atonement on the very deepest ground of Christian experience, and enables us to recognize this necessity without recourse to those transactional conceptions, which can only be metaphorically and relatively true, and without implying views of God that are justly repellent to the modern Christian mind. Now the old-fashioned theory of substitution, led astray by holding to a supposed necessity of "justice" rather than the simple

fact of a direct antagonism *ex definitione* between God and Sin, was content with the bare substitution of one duly qualified Victim for those who deserved to suffer. The primary idea was that of deliverance from the *penalty* of Sin; deliverance from its *power* being a matter reserved for the doctrine of Sanctification, and the link between the two was forged afterwards. That our deliverance even from the *power* of Sin is *directly* involved in the Atonement itself can hardly be said to have been recognized at all. And the New Testament is clear on that point, even when it speaks of substitution. "God made Him to be Sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." "Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness." So, I take it, throughout the Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul's teaching leads to this result: that we are delivered by Christ's death not simply from condemnation in the abstract, but from a state of subjugation to Sin, the deliverance from which directly involves not merely justification, but germinal sanctification. Thus the problem is not the problem of an initial condition, on God's side, of forgiveness: forgiveness, on God's side, is *presupposed* by the atoning act; but how God's forgiveness can express itself—how it can reach man for his salvation, if Sin is a *real* barrier. If God merely *cures* it, then we should have to ask: Why did not He prevent it or cure it at its first appearance?

This last question will be answered by the reminder that these things are hidden in the insoluble riddle of the Origin of Evil. But I reply, if the Atonement depends for its significance upon our confession of pure ignorance of the situation with which it deals, then it loses its character as a revelation of God. For it solves no problem—if we are not allowed to trace any element of necessity in it; if, that is to say, there was any alternative course, even relatively to our own limited minds. Now if Sin is not merely an affection of the soul, but rebellion, then there is a real problem, and therefore a real solution. For free-will is fundamental to our idea of personal beings; it does explain the central anomaly of the presence of Evil in God's world; Sin then is no mere cloud but a barrier: it creates a situation objective to God and man: it sets a genuine practical problem comprehensible even to us: therefore the solution is a real solution: therefore a revelation.

That, I take it, is the problem, if problem it can be called, which, only comes into clear consciousness in the light of its answer. The Atonement, in overcoming Sin, must express, in so doing, its inherent and real antagonism to Him who overcomes it. There can be no real victory over an unreal foe.

Now is this precisely what the New Testament account of Christ's work discloses. Once admit His divinity, and the principle of the Atonement (as the Dean of Canterbury has shown in his "Sacrifice of Christ") lies on the very face of the history. Christ came to offer forgiveness, salvation. He used every effort to induce men to accept it, culminating in the dramatic Triumphal Entry which appealed to the crudest minds. His coming into the world was God's coming to save man, by disclosing to him his guilt and need and proclaiming pardon and renewal. Sin, thus challenged, came to a head. Belief on the one hand and unbelief on the other, as St. John's Gospel specially shows us, developed *pari passu*. Sin became more completely Sin, because the Light had come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light. It was not the Jews as such that crucified Christ, but the Jews as representing the human race. The crisis came because Sin was forced into the open. There was, as it were, a deadlock. God and Evil stood face to face, as never before or since. Men would not repent, and so Sin had to work out its consequence—because it *is* Sin and God is God. The eternal antagonism had to reveal itself and find its culminating and most awful expression. The only question was: Shall its consequences fall on the sinner or on Him who was sinned against? Either alternative would express that antagonism. Either would express the Divine holiness, considered simply as holiness. God made the choice. He suffered, in the giving of His Son and in the suffering of His Son. The impact of the collision was endured by Him, in order that there might be no rebound.

I am glad to acknowledge that this interpretation of the Atonement directly by the history first came before me through the little book of Dr. Wace's that I have just referred to.[1] I think that the importance of such a method of interpretation cannot be exaggerated. It brings the doctrine into that living contact with

[1] There is a difference, however. The Dean treats the subject in terms of Divine economy; he would probably think my thesis too metaphysical: yet it is only the metaphysic that is presupposed by the terms of our religion.

fact that the modern mind demands. And the result seems to be to dispose absolutely of the central difficulty which the Atonement presents to men. Of course we must grant the reality of Sin on the one hand and the Divinity of Christ on the other. But these truths themselves are not abstract dogmas, but rest upon corporate and individual experience. And, in the light of them, the atoning act explains itself.

Other methods have been employed to explain the manner in which Christ's Sacrifice vindicates the righteousness of God. The extraordinary idea of a vicarious penitence stands prominent among these. Christ, we are told, repented, on our behalf, for our sins. It is difficult to understand how any one can make such an idea real to himself for a moment. Even if it were sound in principle, how could the Sinless repent? How could any one repent even of his own sins, if we could suppose that he had *become* sinless since he committed them? Surely there can be no such thing as repentance *merely* for the past as past—sins *wholly* detached—without any consciousness of our present condition as being still infected. If we felt ourselves severed from the past, if we knew that its *stain*—its actual taint—was annihilated, how could we feel that its guilt remained? Of course this can never be, because even the imperfect renewal which is granted us in this life *presupposes* repentance and forgiveness, but the supposition I have made surely helps to show *mutatis mutandis* the impossibility of repentance in any sinless being, even if the idea of vicarious repentance could be tolerated ethically.

Such theories are even, I think, condemned by the very fact that they are mere theories. They do not work by way of simplification, but by way of elaboration. They do not show us how the doctrine—when once we have cleared away impedimenta—emerges directly from the history itself. And surely they are not drawn from the New Testament teaching as a whole, but have to be reconciled with it afterwards as best they can.

And then, if we approach the subject, not from the side of Sin, but from the side of Substitution in itself, we are confronted with highly unsatisfactory explanations. To treat of Christ's Sacrifice as simply the supreme instance of self-sacrifice, and of life through death, is to surrender its significance as the unique act of Atonement. What we need is to show, not that Christ's Death comes under an empirical law, but that Divine forgiveness actually

requires and involves a Divine self-sacrifice. To explain the central fact of Christ's Substitution as if it were a natural phenomenon which merely requires to be brought under a general law—even though it is the one perfect instance—is to misunderstand the very meaning of theological interpretation. Explanation—so far as it is not simply exegetical—must seek to set the central facts in their proper light : to eliminate accretions : to relate these facts with the fundamental data of religious experience and with one another. That is the only way to interpret a Divine revelation. For such revelation must, in the first instance, be luminous, not illuminated ; and further understood by us, not in the light that it receives but in the light that it sheds upon the facts and problems of life.

Of course, the maintainers of the empirical explanation of Substitution might well assent to this, yet still assert that Christ's Death reveals to us its meaning by the light it throws upon *all* self-sacrifice. But none the less it must shine first in and of itself, or it can illuminate nothing.

I have alluded to the direct connexion of the Atonement with renewal. Notice how this appears when we thus interpret the doctrine on the lines of the history. Christ came into the world to set up His Kingdom, and to proclaim repentance—which means the *forsaking* of sin—as an essential condition of membership. The resistance of man's sinful nature reveals the necessity of the Atonement—that is to say, a resolution of the deadlock between Sin and Divine Holiness—at the cost of God. It is at this point that the infinite condemnation of Sin appears. " How shall we escape, *if we neglect so great salvation* ? " The awful consequences which all sin holds in the germ are revealed both historically and to the individual conscience in the light of Christ's offer ; for thus, whether by accepting or by rejecting it, man passes sentence on himself. But the offer relates directly to deliverance from the dominion of present and concrete sin—a present deliverance which contains the germ of progressive sanctification. There is no forgiveness of sin merely in the abstract, antecedent to that renewal of the will which is expressed in the renunciation (not conquest, which is a *process*) of our actual sins. As it was in the history, so it is in the individual. In the history Sin actually and in the concrete condemned itself by condemning Christ. In the individual cases, men condemn them-

selves in "crucifying the Son of God afresh;" and when they accept Him, even then their sin is condemned in the light of His Cross, because, even in accepting Him, they are conscious of that in them that pulls the other way: the old self asserts itself in the face of, and against, the Cross: the totality of the sinful nature starts into a fuller life—a clearer consciousness and so deeper guilt—when confronted by that which calls for its destruction.

Let us now glance at the main features of the interpretation I have put forward.

Substitution is commonly regarded, both by those who hold the older views and by those who adopt rationalizing interpretations, rather on the side of Christ's humanity than on that of His Godhead. Not that the latter is, by the orthodox at least, forgotten or regarded as unessential to the idea, but, so far as Substitution is concerned, it is explained with an eye rather upon the distinctness of Christ's personality from that of the Father than upon the identity of His mind and being with the Father's. The view I advocate, on the contrary, explains it primarily with reference to the divinity, not the humanity, of Christ. Both, of course, are essential, but it is the oneness of Christ with the Father that gives the key to the meaning of His death. Thus only can we fully understand how Atonement *presupposes* the love of God, and does not call it forth. "*God* so loved that He gave." This is the element of truth in Patripassianism. The Sacrifice of Christ was the Father's self-sacrifice, just as the place of Christ in the awakened conscience is no lower than the Father's place. Sin revealed, condemned, and destroyed itself, not simply by the crucifixion of the perfect Man, but by the imposition of that sacrifice upon the eternal God.

Here I may briefly meet a possible objection. It may be said that in the developed teaching of the epistles, this view of Substitution does not appear. For instance: "God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin." Here we have the substitutionary position apparently assigned by the Father to Christ, with the emphasis certainly on the distinction rather than the unity. Now of course this is *only* a question of emphasis, for, since Christ was Man, there is no contradiction between this passage and the interpretation I suggest. But it must be admitted that the doctrine of Christ's divinity is not directly used in the New Testament to elucidate Substitution. My reply is this. That doctrine, in the order

of revelation, emerges from that of His redemptive work, *just because implied in it.* Even in the New Testament the former is seldom directly set forth, though it pervades the whole. This is in line with our Lord's own method. He made men to *feel* His divinity—assent to it implicitly in heart and will, before they understood it intellectually. First through His human personality and then through His redemptive work, His Godhead was revealed. Then, once revealed, it is seen to belong to the very foundation of any doctrine of Redemption. It is seen to have been implicit in experience from the beginning. In the experience of His saving power Christ's Godhead is realized. And even in the vision of the Cross, with all its human anguish and shame, we experience the fulfilment of His unfathomable words : " He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father."

And yet a few words more may be desirable on the bearing of the idea of Substitution on that of the Manhood. " Christ," says St. Paul, " redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us : for it is written, ' Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree ' " (Gal. iii. 13). Are we to regard God as having passed a sentence upon Christ that rested on a fiction ? Certainly not, we reply to this old question. But the very way in which we reject an error, the direction, as it were, in which we diverge from it, affects our positive conclusions. If we are not to accept empirical or imported theories of Substitution, how shall we deal with the problem of the curse ?

Now I think that the quotation made by St. Paul in this passage—one of those quotations that we are apt to slip as superfluous and rabbinical—really helps us to view his pronouncement at the right angle. The mechanical connexion of curse and penalty—as we may think it—which is implied in the words " Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree " actually seems to give us the required clue. Man can impose the curse, because he is a deputed administrator of that Moral Order which is of God. Man's infliction of punishment is, in one aspect, a part of the carrying out of God's law. Man, then, imposed the penalty : he misused the instrument placed in his hands for the vindication of the law. He perverted the " curse " itself, when he crucified the Son of God. So, then, Christ did actually endure the penalty of Sin, but it was man who inflicted it, thus revealing Sin and his own need of forgiveness. And yet, again, it was God the Father's act. God " made Him to

be sin for us." But not judicially. The judicial act—a false one —was man's. God's action was action in the sphere of Providence, it was "economic." The sentence was not pronounced by Him, for it has been committed long ago to man. If the curse seems attached mechanically to the penalty, whether justly inflicted or not, this only means—if we penetrate beneath the judaic form of the thought—that human condemnation, even when wrong in its application, is in the abstract an assertion of eternal Divine law.

God brought this about simply as the Jews always regarded Him as bringing about any event. The Man Jesus did not meet His fate by chance. The condemnation *as such* proceeded from unjust men; the necessity of facing their injustice, from God.

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