A Parable of the Atonement

by R. G. Crawford

A contrast has frequently been drawn between our Lord's parable of the prodigal son and the doctrine of the atonement expounded in other parts of the New Testament, and the conclusion is often reached that the essence of the gospel is to be found in the former and not in the latter. Various kinds of reply have been made to this argument, but few replies have been so uncompromising as to claim that the parable of the prodigal son is in fact a parable of the atonement. This is the claim here made by Dr. Crawford, head of Religious Studies in the Department of the Humanities at Brighton Polytechnic.

THE parable of the prodigal (Lk. 15) has been at times interpreted as giving a perfect picture of the forgiveness of God. Here God as a Father freely forgives without any problems of satisfaction or punishment or payment of debt or sacrifice. This, it is argued, is an advantage over some other theories of the atonement which strive after an objective view of the work of Christ. This parable it is said, especially when it is linked with the moral theory of the cross, is the proper way of understanding how God forgives on the basis of a sincere repentance.

It is the purpose of this article to examine this claim. A deeper understanding of this famous parable tends to convince that it does not contain a full exposition of the New Testament doctrine of the atonement. This has been fully worked out by Nygren in his *Agape and Eros*[1] and Sydney Cave in his *Doctrine of the Work of Christ*[2]. Here we notice that it does not show how the Father takes the initiative in atonement.

The context indicates two other parables which bring out this very thing, and must be taken into account in any full statement of the work of Christ. The parable of the lost sheep, for example, teaches the cost involved in forgiveness: the shepherd in his search not only faces the rigours of the journey and dangers but actually bears the sheep upon his shoulders. Effort, pain, cost, burden-bearing are all here. The woman in the story of the lost coin is worried and anxious about her loss. It may have been a coin lost from her head-dress. In Palestine the mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. She scraped and saved to amass her ten coins, and if one was lost it would be a tragedy. Hence the frantic search.

1 pp. 59 f.
2 pp. 24 f.

If it is said that the parable of the prodigal is the key to God's forgiveness and it has no atonement in it, then it must be acknowledged that there is no Christ in the story either. Further, why did the Apostles not make full use of this parable in their preaching of the gospel? In fact they never seemed to have used it. Again, why did Christ himself, having delivered it, not consider his mission discharged and return to heaven?

> Or, on the other hand, why did He not continue to live to a ripe and useful age, reiterating in various forms and in different settings this waiting (but inert) love and grace of God?[3]

It should be recognized that the parable makes one main point: but the atonement emphasized a different one—not the freeness of God's pardon but its cost. Besides, any proper doctrine of atonement should be based, not on a single parable but on the whole fact of revelation: the life and teaching, death and resurrection of our Lord and the experience of Christians.[4] To neglect this is to separate fact from interpretation which today is not done, and to set aside the Pauline doctrine of the atonement.

But the parable itself has more to teach. Surely there is even here the conception of a suffering Father: i.e., he must have undergone anguish and agony as he thought of his lost boy in the far country. Besides, it cost the son something. The Father does not give any of the elder son's portion to him; the prodigal has to bear the loss which his folly has brought. The elder son retains what he has deserved. "Son, thou art ever with me and all that I have is thine". Here is a delicate balance between justice and charity.

What too, is the meaning of the prodigal's cry: "I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight?" Is this not the acknowledgement of sin, not only against the Father's love but against a Divine Order? He has broken the moral law of the universe, and this requires punishment.

> It may be said that the Almighty Lawgiver Himself is not bound by His own laws, and that He can overrule the Moral Law, if He wishes to forgive without the due penalty being paid. But would such an easy solution build up a righteous character in His children, or effect (what a true atonement must involve) that God and man should be "at one mind" regarding sin? Would it not rather be to translate to the skies that fatal easiness of a good-natured parent which has been the ruin of so many sons? There is no problem in the world so difficult as that of forgiveness! How to pardon a wrong and yet to vindicate the right! How to restore the guilty and yet to teach the offender to hate his offence! It has been well called "a problem fit for God".[5]

However it is contended that God must forgive as He calls upon men to forgive. The parable shows this. But what has just been said

3 P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 106.
4 A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel*, p. 87, footnote.
5 L. W. Grensted, *The Atonement in History and Life* (1929 ed.), p. 330.

shows that God is not only Father, but the upholder of the moral law of the universe. The analogy between father and child—as representing God and man—breaks down at this point, even if it is fully acceptable. This is a vital point in the argument for the necessity of atonement. As R. W. Dale puts it:

> The power of a father is limited by a higher Authority; he is not the supreme moral Ruler of the child; the father is a sinner as well as the child. You cannot argue that because a father does not ask for an "atonement" that God cannot ask for an atonement before He forgives us. God is the Representative and Defender of the Eternal Law of Righteousness in a sense in which an earthly father is not.[6]

Thus Paul tells the Romans that they are not to avenge themselves, and that vengeance belongs unto God; men are not to imitate the acts by which God requites injustice (Rom. 12: 19).

The analogy between divine and human forgiveness must not be overpressed. When man forgives he dismisses his personal resentment and tries to love the offender despite his sin. All this God does without asking for atonement.

> But His forgiveness obliterates the sense of guilt—which ours cannot do; liberates from penalties incurred by the violation of the moral order of the universe—which ours cannot do; and that God might be able to grant us this ampler deliverance, this completer redemption, Christ died for us. . . .[7]

Indeed, one can say that if man's forgiveness had these implications (endangering moral order in the world through its social or public effects) then it would be impossible.

It is possible, too, to see in the parable of the prodigal a prophecy of Christ's death. The future attitude of the elder brother is not disclosed, but he is typical of the Pharisees who were contemplating the death of Christ (the occasion of telling the parable according to the context is the grumbling of the Pharisees at our Lord for preaching the gospel to publicans and sinners). That attitude was to grow and develop to such an extent that Christ's death became inevitable.

In the mind of Christ, there seems to be the necessity of his death for sinners (Mk. 14: 21, 49; Lk. 22: 37). This is confirmed if it is held that he interpreted that death in the light of the Servant concept of Isa. 53, as Luke 22: 37 seems to indicate.

It is true that Christ from the beginning of his ministry pronounced forgiveness,[8] but he ended it at the Cross whereby men received forgiveness.[9] If atonement was eternally in the mind of God, it may be that He gave Christ the power to confer such forgiveness in

6 R. W. Dale, *Christian Doctrine* (1894), p. 242.
7 R. W. Dale, *ibid.*, p. 248.
8 See a modern presentation of this idea in G. S. Hendry, *The Gospel of the Incarnation.*
9 At the Lord's Supper there is shown that forgiveness is radiated through the blood of Jesus. This is true not only of Paul, but of the Gospel records.

virtue of his acceptance of the Cross. Paul in Rom. 3: 24ff. makes the Cross the basis of the acts of God's forgiveness.[10].

It is apparent, that any interpretation of Acts 2: 23 which omits this is inadequate; the atonement *was* in the mind and purpose of God. This is confirmed in the same book (Acts 4: 27, 28).

The New Testament writers were convinced that this was so.

> The Cross has been, not God's defeat, but God's purpose and victory. Human, historic forces had doubtless played their part. Pharisaic blindness and intolerance, priestly exclusiveness and self-seeking, imperial policy and power, popular disappointment and resentment—all had a share in Calvary. But none of these had been the final, determining factor. Jesus had gone to death, not driven like a slave, but marching in the freedom of His own unconquered soul. Necessity had been laid upon Him—"the Son of man *must* suffer and be slain" (Lk. 9: 22)—but it had been the necessity, not of mortal tyranny and violence, but of His own love for the souls of men. In the cross of Jesus, the divine purposes had been, not thwarted and broken, but embodied and proclaimed."[11]

While it is true that already in his life and ministry our Lord was numbered with the transgressors; i.e., his acceptance of baptism; and was continually making the "dark responsibilities (of men) His own", yet the Cross is the full and definite self-expression of this. In the New Testament, as H. R. Mackintosh points out, it occupies disproportionate length. The Gospels indicate this in their narrative of the Passion, and the Epistles are constantly pre-occupied with the glorious meanings of Christ's "exodus".[12]

In the story of the prodigal, forgiveness is more than the Father's declaration to the son. Forgiveness is a creative action; something done and borne by God, e.g., the Cross. This is the basis on which God proclaims forgiveness which is apart from the changed attitude of the sinner. Otherwise the government of the universe would be unstable and uncertain.[13]

Christ is more than the prophet who proclaims forgiveness; he is, as the Epistle to the Hebrews testifies, the priest who procures it by the sacrifice of himself. Christ is an example for us to follow, there can be no doubt about that; but how can those whose eyes are

10 It cannot be held that there was any difference between the Pauline view and that put forward in the Gospels. Paul tells his converts that the gospel he "received" was identical with that preached by the original apostles, that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15: 3). Moreover, he never accuses his opponents of denying the significance of the death of Christ. If Paul had preached a doctrine which differed profoundly from the primitive Christian community, something would have been heard of it. Cf J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (1915), pp. 63 f.

11 J. S. Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (1935), p. 230

12 *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, p. 172. See what he says about the Cross for the mind of Jesus.

13 T. H. Hughes, *The Atonement* (1949), p. 222.

blinded by sin perceive it or those who are chained to sin rise up and follow?[14] Men need to know and experience that God has not only shown His love and given them an example in Christ, but that "He has wiped the slate clean, that despite their sin, something, independently of them and their attitude, has been done by God in Christ".[15]

Here it is seen clearly that the work of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King cannot be separated. As J. B. Torrance has pointed out, this is the weakness in R. Bultmann's *Jesus and the Word*, where Jesus is reconstructed from his words only, or G. Aulén's *Christus Victor*, where emphasis is on Christ's Kingship at the expense of His priesthood.[16]

The example of Christ not only inspires, but it is an example which contains in itself power and life, the principle of its own reproduction. Christ himself, dwelling internally—not from afar externally—is the power by which the example will be produced.

This leads to the next question for discussion: the moral influence theory of the atonement. This theory is not so much false, as inadequate. It appears to say that men are redeemed not by the work of Christ on the Cross, but by their response to it. Such a response however may be only pity which is inadequate for the changing of human nature.

The problem of sin in human nature is that it blinds to what love really is. It was a Unitarian (James Martineau) who said that sin was unique: the more we practise it, the less we know of its nature. It weaves its own cloak of deception, and makes us incapable of truly responding to a pure love.

Besides, as James Denney pointed out, if the Cross only expresses a love which goes even to death, it is no more than a display of love. If it has no objective purpose, then it merely parades the love of God. Denney argues that if two men are standing on a pier that juts out into the ocean, and one says: "I love you and to prove it I am going to jump off this pier and drown myself," this would be nothing but suicide. On the other hand, if one man fell into the water, and the other jumped in to save him, and died in the attempt, this would show purpose. He died trying to save him.[17] In short, unless there

14 L. W. Grensted, *The Atonement in History and in Life* (1929 ed.), p. 337.

15 R. S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (1961), p. 191. If God has stopped short with a message from an appointed messenger one might question His love. If a man were struggling for his life in a river and his friends merely stood on the bank shouting their affection, the quality of such affection would be rightly suspect.

16 *Essays in Christology*, p. 163.

17 *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

was some objective purpose in Christ's death, it seems to have been without reason.

This theory, too, seems to be unfair. The hardened sinner does not appear to have as good a chance of salvation as the more respectable person. The second could respond more easily than the first; yet it is the first who needs it most. Again, since men have different natures, the ones who were more easily moved would have a better chance than the less emotional. Yet it is the latter who prove the most stable.

That there is truth in the moral theory is shown by the fact that it has been embraced by such eminent thinkers as R. S. Franks[18] and N. Micklem.[19] The atonement interpreted in terms of love, and brought to bear upon the human situation, has never failed to appeal. It does contain a facet of the truth, but like every other theory of the atonement fails to probe the full meaning of the Cross. The verdict of Oliver Quick must be endorsed:

> The truth is that to accept fully Abelard's affirmation that the cross is the supreme manifestation of God's love for man must, if we follow out its implications, carry us beyond Abelard's theory of the atonement.[20]

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[18] *The Atonement* (1934), p. 172 ff. Cf. H. Rashdall's praise of Abelard in *The Idea of the Atonement*, pp. 360 f.
[19] *Faith and Reason* (1963), pp. 130 ff.
[20] *Op. cit.*, p. 228.