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WHY AN ATONEMENT?

THE NATURE and meaning of Christ's atonement seems never absent for long from the thought of the Church, if the history of theology be any guide. This is but natural. It is to be expected that when Christian believers think in terms of their personal relationship to God, they should enquire into the ground of their acceptance and the source of their salvation. And this eventually resolves itself into the question: What did Christ do to effect my salvation? To many this narrows down to the further question: Why did Christ die?

During the first three decades of this century, when theology was at a discount, and a strong anti-intellectualism in religion had set in, Christian believers were not encouraged to ask these leading questions. Suffice it to know that we are following Christ, and that the historical Jesus has blazed a trail for us through temptation and sin into the presence and forgiveness of God. In those days religion was easy-going, and its doctrinal content was reduced to a minimum. But Christian thought cannot for ever be denied access to truth in the form in which it can be conveyed to heart and conscience, and the days of easy, non-doctrinal religion have passed. Men are asking again for solid foundations for their faith, that they may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them.

It has not been surprising, therefore, that among the doctrines to be re-discovered and re-assessed the atonement takes a high place. Hence the republication of such classics of a bygone age as *The Death of Christ* and *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, two vital books by Dr. James Denney, and *The Nature of the Atonement*, by Dr. Macleod Campbell, a book that became the storm centre of theological controversy a full century ago, as well as the emergence of new books on the atonement by Emil Brunner, Vincent Taylor, Leon Morris, and others. All these works deal in one way or another with the vital question: What did Christ *do* for men in His life and death? And of course they answer differently, each throwing emphasis on a fragment of the truth, often to the neglect or denial of other elements of truth. It is plain that an adequate doctrine of the atonement — or put more simply, an adequate explanation of why Christ died — must take account of its objective and subjective significance, of all the parties involved, of its bearing on God and on man, of what it means in terms of divine relationships and of human experience. The history of theology indicates that it has not been easy to maintain a true balance between these two aspects of Christ's work.

Moral Influence Theories

Those who give prime importance to the subjective significance of the atonement are approaching it from the side of man's experience of salvation. They argue that since salvation may be described as an experience of the forgiveness

of sins, all we need to discuss is the ground on which God forgives sin. The common answer is, repentance. God forgives man's sin on the ground of man's repentance and on no other. Indeed, God cannot but forgive sin, if man adequately repents. This raises the further question: what is adequate repentance and how is it attained? It is at this point that the 'work' of Christ comes into focus. The death of Christ is thought to have some bearing on man's repentance, but there is a sharp difference of opinion as to what the precise bearing is.

Historically two main answers have been found and pressed into theology, giving rise to two different, though closely related, schools of thought. The first is that Christ does it by exposing in His life, and particularly in His death, the evil of the human heart, and by giving, at the same time, a manifestation of God's love for the sinner. By this revelation of human sin and divine love the opposition of the human heart is broken down, and we are brought home in penitence as prodigals to our Father's arms. Thus the work of Christ consists in bringing to bear upon us inducements to appropriate action, and the response of the human soul to the influence and appeals that proceed from the cross of Christ constitutes salvation. Repentance and faith are born in the human heart and are all that is needed to secure God's favour and make amends for our sinning. It is obvious that Christ is not understood, under this interpretation of His work, as having done anything *for us*; He merely brings moral influences to bear upon us that lead us to do something for ourselves. For that reason this has been known as the Moral Influence Theory of the atonement. It will be noted that, under this theory, the death of Christ does not remove any obstacles on God's part to the forgiveness of sins, because no obstacles are seen to exist on God's side.

But there are those who feel that, even if repentance is all that is necessary for forgiveness, Christ should have a more definite place in man's salvation, and that He must be credited with having done something for man which man could not do for himself. Dr. Macleod Campbell was, perhaps, the first theologian to elaborate the theory that what Christ did for man in order to bring him to repentance was to offer His own repentance to God on man's behalf. This He did in virtue of His sympathetic identification with sinful men that led Him to make our sins His own, and so offer to God an adequate repentance for them. While Macleod Campbell rejected the doctrine of substitution and penal suffering outright, he retained the 'representative' character of Christ's work in his theory of 'sympathetic identification', while the doctrine of expiation was replaced by his theory of 'sympathetic repentance'. This proved in his own day so unsatisfactory a doctrine of the atonement that Dr. Macleod Campbell was tried before the General Assembly of his church in 1831 and deposed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland.¹

Whatever we may now think of his deposition, his theology remains as unsatisfactory as ever. It raises two questions to which it gives no answer: Is repentance all that is necessary for forgiveness? Can there be such a thing as vicarious repentance? It did, and does, seem clear that on this interpretation of the atonement, what Christ did for man was to repent in order to lead man to repent for himself. In other words, He did not save us, but He did show us how we could be saved. Patently this falls short — very far short — of the New Testament presentation of Christ as Saviour, and of the apostolic interpretation of Christ's death as the means of our salvation.

The Satisfaction Theory

It is clear that in both these theories we have a subjective view of the atonement to the exclusion of anything objective having been accomplished in the death of Christ, whereas the New Testament leads us to understand that the death of Christ had both an objective and a subjective significance, and lays the primary emphasis on the objective aspect. This is to say, Christ dealt with God first on behalf of man before He deals with man on behalf of God. Sin has affected our total relationship to God and has involved us in guilt, in corruption, and in bondage. Since guilt affects our standing

¹ *The Nature of the Atonement*, by J. Macleod Campbell. Introduction by Edgar P. Dickie. (James Clarke and Co. 17s. 6d.)

before a holy and righteous God, and is, indeed, the source of our corruption and bondage, it must be dealt with first, and this Christ has done in becoming our sin-bearer. What that means we cannot fully comprehend, but it involved His incarnation in order to become our representative, His obedience to provide our righteousness, and His death to make expiation for our guilt. Thus God is just to Himself before He is merciful to His creatures who rebelled against Him. His own character is vindicated, and the eternal laws that uphold the moral universe are reasserted before the revolt of His subjects is pardoned. It was the work of Christ in life and death that made reconciliation, that secured the pardon that could be offered to the rebel, the forgiveness that would be made over to the sinner, the peace that would be the portion of the forgiven one. So we assert that in His life and death Christ *did* something that affected God's total relationship to a race that had sinned. This has rightly been named the Satisfaction Theory of the atonement.

The Subjective Aspect

This is not to belittle, far less deny, the subjective significance of the work of Christ. Rather it is to ensure it. Having put our relationship with God right, Christ made it possible that our natures should be made right, so that our condition might be worthy of our position. To this end He secured for us the Holy Spirit to quicken us, to give us repentance, faith, and new obedience; in short, to make over to us in our personal experience the blessings of His redemption, and so deal effectively with our corruption and our bondage.

Thus the Satisfaction Theory of the atonement has the merit of setting the doctrine in its true relation to the nature of God and the nature of man, to the holiness of God's character and the reality of man's guilt. In this light the work of Christ must be regarded as having reference first to God in making atonement and reconciliation, and then to man in ensuring that the divine reconciliation is made over to him in peace of conscience and holiness of life and character.

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