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THE CHURCHMAN

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The Wondrous Cross.

STUDIES IN THE ATONEMENT.

III

PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS.

THE true idea of the Atonement is wide and inclusive, and danger lies in limiting it to one explanation. We need at least the four ideas of the representation of the sinner before God ; the substitution of the Saviour for the sinner ; the identification of the sinner with his Saviour ; and the revelation of God in Christ to the sinner. Thus, if only the objective view is accepted as fundamental, there is no reason whatever why all that is true in the subjective theories should not also be accepted as the natural sequel and consequence. As Priest, Christ is our Representative, but as Sacrifice, He is of necessity our Substitute.¹ If, therefore, as Birks points out, sin were only debt, substitution would be all that was necessary, while if sin were only disease, no Atonement but only healing would be required.

“ A Creed in which there is no substitution and a Creed in which there is nothing but substitution depart equally on opposite sides from the truth of God.”²

Three aspects of truth should always be included in the true view of the Atonement : (a) The removal of sin by expiation : (b) the removal of enmity by means of the moral and spiritual dynamic of the indwelling Christ ; (c) the provision and guarantee of fellowship with Christ by means of our oneness with Him. Then, too, the word “ for,” by reason of its ambiguity, necessarily includes several aspects. (1) It means Representation. This can be illustrated by the position of a Member of Parliament, or an Advocate in a Court of Law. David may be said to have represented Israel in his fight with Goliath (1 Sam. xvii), while we read of the elders representing the people (Lev. iv. 15), and princes standing for the entire nation (Josh. ix. 11). (2) It means Exact Substitution. This is the literal idea of the term “ vicarious,” and may be illus-

¹ Bruce, *ut supra*. p. 307.

² T. R. Birks, *Difficulties of Belief*, pp. 176, 179.

trated by the well-known instance of a substitute in military service. Scripture has similar instances of exact substitution, as the ram for Isaac (Gen. xxii. 13); Judah for Benjamin (Gen. xlv. 33); the Levites for the first-born (Num. iii. 12); David for Absalom (2 Sam. xviii. 33); and Paul for Onesimus (Philem. v. 17). (3) It means Equivalent Substitution. This is to be distinguished from identical or exact substitution, for, as it has been illustrated, a man who rescues another from drowning does not substitute himself by being drowned instead, but does what the other is incapable of doing. This is the meaning of the ransom (Lev. xxv. 47-49), and is illustrated by the payment made for Richard Cœur de Lion in Austria. It is the second of these two ideas of substitution that applies to the Atoning Sacrifice of Christ, and it is obvious that everything depends upon the power of the substitute and the adequacy of his work. No man could accomplish this task; it must be done by some one who is capable of rescuing the whole of humanity, because He Himself is more than man.¹

No theory can be satisfactory which does not include and account fully for three factors.

(a) The adequate exegesis of the New Testament teaching both Godward and manward. The true doctrine will never be realized unless it is approached first from the Godward side, as the New Testament does. Every theory must start here or else it will inevitably go wrong. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." The key is found in Rom. iii. 25, in which the Divine propitiation is shown to vindicate the Divine righteousness. It is this that warrants the bold and yet true statement that the Atonement was offered by God to God.² This is the only view that satisfies men who are oppressed with sin. Repentance never suffices. There is always some demand for satisfaction and restitution. Man's inner sense of rectitude requires that vindication of the Divine law of righteousness be made. Man inevitably feels that God must necessarily demand from Himself that which He requires of man, the vindication of His own righteousness, and the supreme value of the Cross of Christ is that it at once vindicates God's righteousness and assures of Divine pardon. It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the

¹ For a fuller treatment of these various aspects see Girdlestone, *The Faith of the Centuries*, pp. 200-202.

² By Forsyth. See his books, *passim*.

importance of insisting upon the fullest, clearest interpretation of all the New Testament passages dealing with the Atonement.

"There have been conspicuous examples of essays and even treatises on the Atonement standing in no discoverable relation to the New Testament" (Denney, *The Death of Christ*, Preface).

"One may, or may not, accept the teaching of the New Testament, but it is at any rate due to intellectual honesty to recognize what that teaching is" (Law, *The Tests of Life*, p. 163).

"We must find a theory that will harmonize with everything that comes under New Testament authority" (Creighton, *Law and the Cross*, p. 25).

(b) The proper interpretation of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Our familiarity with the New Testament tends to make us forget that sacrificial terms and phrases are there stated without explanation, and for these it is essential to go back to the Old Testament. When it is said that "Christ hath once suffered for sins" (1 Pet. iii. 18), has "redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal. iii. 13), and is "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" (John i. 29), it is impossible to understand these and similar passages aright unless we are familiar with Old Testament ideas and expressions. Nothing could well be plainer than the record of the Passover (Exod. xii.), where the first-born was exposed to judgment, but saved from it by the death of a victim. So also the firstling of an ass was only saved from death by a lamb being substituted for it (Exod. xiii). All this and much more shows the necessity and importance of understanding aright the Old Testament teaching on sacrifice, since "without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. ix. 22).

"The institutions of the Old Testament are to a large extent a dictionary in which I learn the true sense of the language of the New."¹

(c) The full meaning of Christian Experience. There can be no doubt that one of the great essentials is a working theory adequate for the experience of ordinary men and women. In all ages the truth that "Jesus died for me" has adequately met and perfectly satisfied the conscience of the sinner, and it will always remain the test of a satisfying doctrine of the Atonement that it meets the demand for peace with God and assures the conscience burdened with sin and guilt.

"This, therefore, must be the test of a satisfactory doctrine of Atonement still, viz., its power to sustain the consciousness of peace with God under

¹ Dale, *Jewish Temple and Christian Church*, p. 146.

the heaviest strain which can be put upon it from the sense of guilt, and of the condition which guilt entails " (Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, p. 235).

" Explain it how you will, it yet remains true and, while human nature continues what it is, it will always remain true that no religion will satisfy the heart of man which does not turn upon the presentation of an offering for sin " (Simpson, *Christus Crucifixus*, p. 207).

The idea of substitution has given such unfailing comfort that it cannot be regarded as ethically wrong.

" Even if the doctrine of penal substitution be regarded as only one among several possible theories, we cannot but appreciate the intensity of the moral earnestness which it presupposed and also its singular adaptation to meet a deep religious need. It has been criticized as unethical; but it may be doubted if a more splendid tribute was ever paid to the dignity and the claims of the moral law than in the conception that sin is so awful an evil and so shameful a scandal and that it so entirely merits the extremity of punishment that it was impossible for God to forgive it in the exercise of a paternal indulgence—that, on the contrary, mercy could only come into play when the appalling guilt had been expiated in the death of the Son of God who was also the representative of mankind. Regarded merely as a measure of the conception formed of the heinousness of sin, it has no parallel in point of moral earnestness in the speculative thinking of the schools. It is no less obvious that it met an intellectual need of the religious life. We feel more sure of the Divine mercy if we think that we perceive the grounds on which God acted, and by which He was enabled to act, in the dispensation of mercy. The believing soul feels more sure that God forgives for Christ's sake. . . . There is no theory which is so intelligible as the theory of penal substitution; and there is no religious message which has brought the same peace and solace to those who have realized the sinfulness of sin and the menace of the retributive forces of the Divine government as the conception that the penalty due to sin was borne by the crucified Saviour and that the guilty may be covered by the robe of His imputed righteousness " (Paterson, *The Rule of Faith*, p. 285 f.).

A well-known English Congregational minister, the Rev. J. Morgan Gibbon, tells of a friend of his, belonging to the most advanced schools of theological thought, who was called to see a sick man in one of the mean streets of a great town. He found him very ill and very poor. The room was bare of all comfort and lacked even most of the necessities of human existence. After a little while the minister said, " What can I do for you? Tell me fully and frankly what you want and I will do my best to help you." " I only want one thing " was the startling reply, " the forgiveness of my sins." The minister's eyes had roamed the room, and he had already made a mental note of several things which were sorely wanted. But the dying man ignored these trifles. He was beyond the reach of men's harm or help. He was independent of wealth and comfort and all the things men strive for. One great deep-sea

need had come to the surface and scared all lesser wants away. "I only want one thing, the forgiveness of my sins." Mr. Gibbon then sums up the incident by saying, "Now what can one do in such a case? I know only of one thing. There is only one word I know of to be said, 'Jesus Christ died for you. Ye are made near in the blood of Christ.'" It is, of course, impossible to explain it fully, and no one really believes that the death of Jesus Christ was demanded by the anger of God. On the contrary, God gave His Son, because before He gave, He loved the world. We cannot help speaking in terms of earthly justice by referring to penalties and satisfaction, but we know that the righteousness of God is not contradictory of, but in full harmony with His love. Yet Jesus Christ died, the just for the unjust, shedding His blood for the remission of sin, and when conscience is aroused in a man, the only antidote to despair is the Cross.

Another striking testimony to this fact of experience, that a man's conscience when awakened cannot accept God's love without atonement, will be found in Falconer, *The Unfinished Symphony*, telling of a conversation with the late Professor Pfeleiderer, who asked for an actual instance. On one being given, Pfeleiderer replied, "If a doctrine really meets a deep human need, it must be true" (pp. 243-245). To those to whom the use of the word "satisfaction" is objectionable it may be said that so long as the truth enshrined in it is emphasized, the word itself counts for very little. "If the disuse of a word would reconcile thoughtful men to the truth intended to be conveyed, one might easily forgo it."¹ All that is desired is that the conscience and heart of a man convicted of sin shall find perfect rest and peace, and apparently this is impossible apart from the acceptance of a Saviour whose death was at once a vindication of righteousness and a guarantee of pardon. "We cannot in any theology which is duly ethicized dispense with the word 'satisfaction.'" ²

W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS.

(*To be concluded.*)

¹ Bruce, *ut supra*, p. 316.

² Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 214.

