"Every Minister Ought To Know That Book": John McLeod Campbell And The Nature Of The Atonement

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John McLeod Campbell is a name to conjure with in Scottish theology. Arguably he was 19th century Scotland's most original and influential thinker on the doctrine of the work of Christ. When T. F. Torrance, Scotland's most internationally respected theologian of the 20th century, wrote his history of Scottish theology, he entitled the work *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell*, as if Campbell brought the whole theological history of Scotland to its finality and maturity. Of course, many would dispute that assessment.

Even so, there is no doubting the seminal character of Campbell's 1856 treatise *The Nature of the Atonement*. R. S. Franks, in his magisterial *History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, described Campbell's book as the most systematic and masterly volume produced by a British theologian on the work of Christ during the whole of the nineteenth century. The great Congregationalist theologian P. T. Forsyth once said, "I hope you have read McLeod Campbell on the Atonement. Every minister ought to know that book, and know it well… [A] great, fine, holy book."[1] Forsyth went on to offer some criticism of Campbell's masterwork, but in the context of acknowledging its enduring significance and value.

Certainly, Campbell's *Nature of the Atonement* has become a classic in Scottish theological history. It has always been a provocative work. Some have resoundingly rejected it: I guess the great majority of Westminster Calvinists fall into that category. Some have accepted its key arguments: see for example C. S. Lewis's treatment of the atonement in *Mere Christianity*, the chapter entitled *The Perfect Penitent*, a thoroughly McLeod Campbellian account of Christ's atoning work. Some have appropriated it selectively, building on some of its views but critiquing others (P. T. Forsyth fell into this category). Who, then, was John McLeod Campbell? And what was it that inspired the writing of his highly stimulating *magnum opus*?

John McLeod Campbell was born in 1800 at Armaddy House, near Oban, Argyllshire: so there is the Highland connection, which of course we also discern in the Campbell name. He was the eldest son of the Rev

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1 P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, ch.5 "The Cross the Great Confessional", at https://ccel.org/ccel/forsyth/work/work.vii.html accessed 14.10.2024

Donald Campbell, a Church of Scotland minister. Campbell senior was a widower, so that his son grew up without the abiding influence of a mother. The period 1811 to 1820 saw the young Campbell studying at Glasgow University with a view to following his father into the Church of Scotland ministry. As well as becoming competent in Latin and Hebrew, he also discovered the fascinations of natural beauty, and read Byron and Shakespeare with enthusiasm.

Having completed his divinity course, Campbell then spent the winter of 1820-21 at Edinburgh University; and it was at this point that he received a call from the Church of Scotland congregation in Hatton Garden, London, Edward Irving's future charge. This was one of those odd coincidences that pointed the way towards Campbell's embrace within Irving's circle, which included Irving himself, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, Robert Story of Rosneath, and Alexander J. Scott.

The call to Hatton Garden failed to actualise, however, and Campbell had to wait another four years before being inducted to his first pastorate. He filled up the time by studying Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise on Religious Affections*, the Scottish "common sense" philosophers such as Thomas Reid, and in particular Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, the most celebrated British response to the Enlightenment religion of Deism. He also read *The Force of Truth*, the spiritual autobiography of the Anglican Calvinist clergyman and commentator Thomas Scott, and was influenced thereby in an Evangelical direction. In 1824, Campbell openly declared his personal faith in the merits of Christ as the sole source of salvation. This was a significant step, as his father belonged to the non-Evangelical Moderate party within the Scottish Church. Prior to Campbell's acceptance of Evangelicalism, he had (he later confessed) been a disciple of the latitudinarian Archbishop Tillotson.

At last, in May 1825, Campbell was presented by the Duke of Argyll to the Church of Scotland congregation at Row, and inducted to the charge in the September of that year.[2] The parish of Row was on the eastern shore of the Gareloch in Dunbartonshire. Opposite Row on the western side of the Gareloch stood the parish of Rosneath, whose minister Robert Story had been the fellow student of Edward Irving at Edinburgh University. Story and Campbell became intimate friends. Below both Row and Rosneath, on the south side of the Clyde, stood Port Glasgow, which was to assume a poignant significance when the future controversy around Campbell entered its charismatic phase.

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[2] Row was at that time spelt as printed but pronounced "Rhu". Later the spelling was changed to Rhu to reflect the pronunciation.

According to his own account, Campbell began his ministry with a somewhat elementary theology. He claimed that at the outset of his ministry at Row, the only doctrines that were "realities in my mind" were "the fact of an Atonement and the necessity of regeneration."[3] He could not subsequently remember what, if anything, he believed at that time about the extent of the atonement. "As to Election, I was content to hold it simply as a matter of fact, and to excuse myself for not considering it much by regarding it as a mystery..."[4] He determined that he would maintain "a perfect neutrality" in respect to the Evangelical and Moderate parties in the Scottish national Church, and to read the Bible alone in preparing his sermons, consulting commentaries only for linguistic and never for theological purposes.[5]

Campbell's troubles soon began. To his dismay, he found over his first year that his preaching was manifestly failing to produce the desired effect among his congregation. This sterility he traced to a prevailing legalistic mentality:

> I came to see that, in reality, whatever I preached, they were only hearing a *demand* on them to be – not hearing the Divine secret of the Gospel as to *how* to be – that which they were called to be. Of this they themselves had no suspicion; they said, and honestly, that they did not question Christ's power to save, neither did they doubt the freeness of the Gospel or Christ's willingness to save them; all their doubts were as to themselves... In this mind the Gospel was practically a law, and the call to trust in Christ only an addition to the demand which the law makes – an additional duty added to the obligation to love God and to love man, not the secret of the power to love God and to love man.[6]

Campbell's parishioners felt that they were not entitled to draw near to Christ without the warrant of some perceived goodness of their own. A barrier of spiritual introspection was thus erected between themselves and trusting Christ. Campbell's solution to this problem was straightforward:

> Seeing this clearly, my labour was to fix their attention on the love of God revealed in Christ, and to get them into the mental attitude of looking at God

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3 John McLeod Campbell, *Reminiscences and Reflections referring to his early ministry in the Parish of Row, 1825-31* (London 1973) p.11.

4 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.11.

5 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* pp.11-12.

6 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* pp.132-3.

> to learn His feelings towards them, not at themselves to consider their feelings towards Him…[7]
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> I was gradually taught to see that so long as the individual is uncertain of being the subject of love to his God, and is still without any sure hold of his personal safety in the prospect of eternity, it is in vain to attempt to induce him to serve God under the power of any purer motive than the desire to win God's love for himself, and so to secure his own happiness... And thus I was gradually led to entertain the doctrine commonly expressed by the words 'Assurance of Faith'.[8]

He hoped his proclamation of the assurance of God's grace would bring his people "under the natural power of the love, the forgiving, redeeming love which was set before them" in the gospel, thus begetting that joyful confidence in Christ which until now had eluded their grasp.[9] From the autumn of 1826, the assurance of God's forgiveness in Christ for sinners thus became Campbell's great theme.

Interestingly, Campbell denies that Calvinism was the cause of the legalistic and doubt-ridden attitudes he was trying to change.

> Those who are familiar with our Scottish theology, and know how early it is taught to our children, may, perhaps, be inclined to trace to Calvinistic preconceptions the difficulty found in endeavouring to lead these earnest minds to look simply at the discovery of the mind of God towards sinful man, which He has made who came to reveal the Father. I do not remember that it was so... What I met with in the earnest minds to which I refer was different. It was a difficulty in rising to the conception of free grace – that is, to the apprehension of a love in God to us which is irrespective of what we are, and is sustained by the contemplation of what He both wills us to be and is able to make us.[10]

This is an important point. Although the train of Campbell's thought was ultimately to carry him beyond Calvinism, we have his mature reflection that Calvinism as such was not the original problem. The problem was the innate legalism of the human heart.

Campbell's view that one could not love or serve God without first being assured of one's "personal safety in the prospect of eternity" led him to a fateful conviction. He became convinced that a faith not characterised by this assurance was incapable of producing love for God, and therefore was not true faith at all. This brought him into direct conflict with

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7 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.133.
8 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.18.
9 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.133.
10 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.133-4.

the widespread view that assurance of salvation was to be derived from the spirituality of one's life as proof of the reality of one's faith. Campbell insisted against this that if one's sense of peace with God depended on one's perceived sanctification, this was *de facto* justification by works. True faith was self-authenticating:

> the light of life is its own protection. He that so knows himself and Christ in the light of Christ has the witness in himself... Fruits of faith are, indeed, given as a test to be applied to the professions of others, or – it may be – to the doctrine they teach. But how can our own faith be thus tested? We may, and we should, so test what we are called to believe; and we must have evidence of its tendency before submitting to it, or accepting it as of God. But to ask me to stand in suspense as to my trust in Christ – whether it is a right and saving trust – making this depend on the consciousness of fruits of holiness in myself – this is really to suspend trust – that is, to suspend faith – until I am conscious of the effects of faith: a process which, if intelligently followed, obviously makes fruits of faith impossible.[11]

The system of assurance by evidences of holiness, Campbell felt, led only to despair.

This, then, was the character of Campbell's preaching from autumn 1826 until roughly the autumn of 1827. Thus far, no public antagonism was generated, except that some of Campbell's parishioners complained that he "carried the subject of assurance too far".[12] Yet in that complaint lay the origins of the coming storm.

It was in September 1827 that Campbell became acquainted with the intellectually brilliant Alexander John Scott, soon to be Edward Irving's pastoral assistant. Scott, having just been licensed to preach, conducted a Sunday service for Campbell at Row. Campbell was deeply taken with his new friend. Scott at this juncture was a sort of four-point Calvinist or Amyraldian in his view of the extent of the atonement, accepting its universality, and was not shy in communicating it. As his biographer Philip Newell points out, it could well have been the freshly felt influence of the impressive and articulate Scott which prompted Campbell to move towards a belief in universal atonement, as the basis of that assurance of divine love to sinners which was now the burden of his message.[13]

We have Campbell's own testimony about his progress from the assurance of faith to universal atonement. He traces it to the opposition to his preaching of assurance which he began to encounter from traditionally

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11 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.138-9.

12 Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.19.

13 Philip Newell, *A.J.Scott and his Circle* (PhD Edinburgh 1981) pp.38-9.

minded Calvinist ministers in the closing months of 1827, by which time his views were becoming more widely known. Campbell's account is clear:

> The controversy in which I was [from now on] constantly engaged in almost all my intercourse with my [ministerial] brethren urged me to examine narrowly the foundation furnished by the communications made in the Gospel for Assurance of Faith. This led directly to the closer consideration of the extent of the Atonement, and the circumstances in which mankind had been placed by the shedding of the blood of Christ; and it soon appeared manifest that unless Christ had died for all, and unless the Gospel announced Him as the gift of God to every human being, so that there remained nothing to be done to give the individual a title to rejoice in Christ as his own Saviour, there was no foundation in the record of God for the Assurance which I demanded, and which I saw to be essential to true holiness. The next step therefore was my teaching, as the subject-matter of the Gospel, Universal Atonement and Pardon through the blood of Christ.[14]

Campbell, then, by the beginning of 1828, had moved towards a belief that all humanity had been placed in an objective state of pardon through Christ's universal atoning death, so that this simply had to be believed in order to produce love for God and subjective salvation. Campbell could not have foreseen that three long, bitter years of controversy lay ahead of him, a controversy that would be carried up to the highest authority in his Church, its General Assembly, and result in his being deposed from the ministry.

The controversy that engulfed Campbell from 1828 to 1831 was complex and explosive. It swept up into its fury not only Campbell, but a number of other leading figures in the Scottish Church, all of whom were perceived as challenging the Westminster Confession. These others included Alexander John Scott, Edward Irving, Robert Story, Hugh Baillie Maclean, the lay theologian Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, and indeed others. Almost all of these who held ministerial rank ended up being deposed or resigning.

It is difficult to explain the reactionary zeal that seemed to convulse the Church of Scotland's General Assembly in 1831, when Evangelicals and non-Evangelicals combined to cast out Campbell and others. One would not be exaggerating much to compare the 1831 Assembly to a French Revolutionary Committee of Public Safety, dispatching one person after another to the guillotine. Probably contributing to the reactionary purge was a revulsion against the charismatic or Pentecostal movement that had sprung up in Port Glasgow in 1830, and had (one way or another)

[14] Campell, *Reminiscences and Reflections* p.24.

touched Campbell, Scott, Irving, Erskine, and others. This movement was the seedbed of the Catholic Apostolic Church, popularly nicknamed Irvingism: a High Church liturgical and sacramental Pentecostalism that foreshadowed the actual Pentecostal movement of the 1900s.

The human drama at Campbell's trial for heresy was intense. Campbell's father made a moving plea on behalf of his son at the Assembly:

> I can say that I never heard any preacher more earnestly and powerfully recommending holiness of heart and life. It was certainly what I never expected, that a motion for his immediate deposition should have come from my old friend, Dr Cook; but I do not stand here to deprecate your wrath. I bow to any decision to which you may think it right to come. Moderator, I am not afraid for my son; though his brethren cast him out, the Master whom he serves will not forsake him; and while I live, I will never be ashamed to be the father of so holy and blameless a son.[15]

Even some Evangelicals were opposed to taking disciplinary action against Campbell, notably Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the Evangelical party in the Scottish Church. But Chalmers' generosity was not shared by the majority, and he found himself thwarted in his cautious opposition to the reactionary Assembly. The hearings dragged on all through the night to the following morning. When the vote was taken, there were only 125 Assembly members present out of a total of some 300, the rest having sensibly retired to their beds. 119 voted for Campbell's deposition, and six for his suspension.

Prior to the official pronouncement of the sentence of deposition, a disagreement as to the order of procedure occurred, during which the chief clerk of the Assembly, Dr MacKnight of Edinburgh, declared – or meant to declare – that the Church of Scotland would remain and flourish long after the doctrines of McLeod Campbell had perished and were forgotten. Unhappily, Dr MacKnight mixed up his words, and was heard to say, "These doctrines of Mr Campbell will remain and flourish after the Church of Scotland has perished and is forgotten."

At which point, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, who had watched the day's proceedings with a pained and disconsolate spirit, turned and whispered to those sitting behind him, "This spake he not of himself, but being high priest, he prophesied."[16]

So it was that at quarter past six in the morning, on Wednesday 25th May 1831, John McLeod Campbell found himself deposed from the min-

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15 R. H. Story, *Memoir of the Life of the Rev Robert Story* (London 1862) p.178.

16 William Hanna, *Letters of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen* (2 volumes, Edinburgh 1877) vol.1 p.137.

istry of the Church of Scotland by its supreme court. Some Evangelicals who had not attended that very late session were shocked by the outcome when they turned up for the next meeting of Assembly. Thomas Chalmers in particular was disappointed, commenting that if a window could be opened up into the ex-pastor of Row's breast, it would be seen how little he had differed from his brethren. Chalmers' view was that Campbell was "in conduct irreproachable – in doctrine unexceptionable – but in language rash".[17]

The majority in the Assembly, however, remained in a fierce mood, and went on to depose both Alexander Scott and Hugh Baillie Maclean, and to take the first steps toward deposing Edward Irving. Probably Robert Story of Rosneath, the bosom friend of Campbell, would also have been deposed, had he not held back from using Campbell's "rash language" on the disputed topics.

The ongoing life and ministry of Campbell post-1831 are lacking in huge interest, until he published his ground-breaking work on the atonement in 1856. The two years immediately following his deposition saw him as an evangelist in the Scottish Highlands. In 1833, he became the pastor of an independent congregation in Glasgow, in a church building especially constructed for him and those who appreciated his preaching. He was invited to minister alongside his friend Edward Irving in the Catholic Apostolic Church, but preferred to keep his distance from the Pentecostalism of the new denomination. During his own trial and deposition, Irving spoke out passionately on behalf of Campbell as a martyr for truth, whom Irving was privileged to follow out into the ecclesiastical wilderness.

> The greatest gift ever bestowed on the people of Scotland since the days of Knox – yea, a greater than he – I mean John Campbell – has been cast out. He was a spotless man of God. In him was no fault – albeit no fault that man could lay to his charge. He was a godly man. But him ye have cast out with scorn; and shall I not take his part – shall I not receive him to my bosom? – because in receiving him I receive Christ.[18]

And so we come to McLeod Campbell's 1856 treatise on *The Nature of the Atonement and its Relation to the Remission of Sins and Eternal Life*. After his deposition from the Church of Scotland ministry for teaching that Christ's death had, in some sense, situated mankind in an objective state of pardon, which (personally appropriated) produced individual sal-

[17] Story, *Memoir of Rev Robert Story* p.175 (note).

[18] Margaret Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving* (2 volumes, London 1862), vol.2 p,348.

vation, Campbell had continued to reflect on the meaning of the atonement. At length he put down his mature thoughts, twenty-five years after the original atonement controversy. This time, he focused on the nature rather than the extent of the atonement. He took his cue from a conjecture offered by Jonathan Edwards: perhaps a surprising source, but we remember the early influence of Edwards on a young McLeod Campbell.

Edwards once expressed the opinion that, if only fallen man had been capable of giving to God a perfect repentance for his sin, such repentance would have sufficed to restore him to a right relationship with God.[19] Campbell built on this conception, setting forth a doctrine of Christ's death as an act of vicarious repentance and confession. On Man's behalf, as Man's representative, Christ the Second Adam, the True Man, renders to His heavenly Father a perfect confession of human sin, and a perfect repentance for it. Christ thereby, for our sakes and in our name, does for us what we, corrupted by sin, could never do for ourselves.

We should not be misled by the word repentance here into thinking that Campbell believed Christ had any personal sin requiring personal repentance. Campbell instead was conceiving of repentance in the sense of a heartfelt acknowledgment of humanity's sin, a holy sorrow over it, and a humble submission to God's judgment upon it, all enacted perfectly on humanity's behalf by Him who was the living Head of the human race. This view of the nature of the atonement had in fact already been articulated by Campbell's friend Thomas Erskine, in his 1831 treatise *The Brazen Serpent*. But Erskine's book (to be frank) had been long-winded, turgid, and muddled up with premillennial speculations and a full-blown Irvingite Christology (that Christ had a fallen nature), which had robbed the book of its impact. Campbell's book by contrast is a comparatively clear, systematic, focused, and theologically well-framed account of the ideas he shared with Erskine. It was therefore Campbell's 1856 treatise, rather than Erskine's treatise of 1831, that burst like a flaming meteor in the sky of British theology.

Campbell insisted that one must not bring any preconceptions to a study of the atonement. In other words, we should not approach the matter with a preconceived idea of what an atonement must be. Rather, one must seek to grasp the reality of the atonement in its own light. The key question, Campbell says, is what the atonement was intended to accomplish, which we learn from the atonement itself. His answer to the question: it was intended to bring God and Man together. But who is God and what is Man? Campbell argues from what he takes to be New Testa-

[19] This is in Edwards' *Remarks on Important Theological Controversies*, ch,5, 'Of Satisfaction for Sin'.

ment Christology that God is not primarily a legal Master, with Man as His slave or bondservant, but primarily a loving Father with Man as His created child. In Campbell's words, "our relation to God as our righteous Lord is subordinate to our relation to Him as the Father of our spirits, the original and root-relation, in the light of which alone all God's dealings with us can be understood."[20]

The atonement is thus grounded, not in a context of law, but in God's Fatherhood: a father's desire to reclaim his lost and erring children. The heavenly Father does not need to be conditioned into forgiving; His willingness to forgive is as eternal as His fatherly nature. The question is how sinful Man can be effectually brought to the Father so as to receive and enjoy His forgiveness. This was the purpose of His work in and through the Incarnate Son.

Campbell seeks to explain the atoning work of Christ under two broad headings, what he calls its retrospective and prospective aspects – how it deals with our past (what we are saved *from*), and how it deals with our future (what we are saved *for*). Under each of these aspects, Campbell considers Christ as dealing with Man on God's behalf, and dealing with God on Man's behalf. This, too, he sees as truth contained in, and shining from, the atonement itself, rather than a preconceived framework imposed upon it.

Let us see what Campbell teaches about the retrospective side of the atonement (what it saves us *from*). How did Christ deal with Man on God's behalf? In and through the sinless perfection of His humanity, He revealed the nature of God's will as perfect and holy love towards men. This revelation involved Christ in suffering, and it reached its culmination on the cross. Everything Christ did and suffered was part of His bearing witness of God's love for humanity. Integral to this revealed love in Christ's life and death is God's holy grief over human sin. This enables us to see sin as God sees it.

What about Christ's dealing with God on Man's behalf? This is where Campbell teaches that Christ, as the Representative Man, fully and completely confessed Man's sin to God. Famously he states that Christ's acknowledgment of Man's sin was "a perfect Amen in humanity to the judgment of God on the sin of man".[21] The Spirit of the risen Christ now unites us with Christ's Amen to God's holy rejection of sin, so that it is echoed in our own hearts. This is our personal repentance.

We might have thought that Campbell would soft-pedal biblical teaching on God's wrath. It is, however, clearly present in his view of the atone-

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[20] John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (London 1867) p.339.

[21] Campbell, *Atonement* p.136.

ment; he says that Christ's vicarious confession of human sin involved a total submission to God's judgment against it, and that this confession and submission "absorbed" God's holy wrath. Campbell does, therefore, give a significant place to God's wrath against sin, but differs from the traditional Evangelical view in affirming that this wrath has been dealt with by Christ's vicarious confession, rather than by penal substitution. The atonement is thus objective and effective but not penal in character.

In his section on the prospective aspect of the atonement (what it saves us *for*), Campbell emphasizes that its purpose is to restore Man to God, so that men become what God always meant them to be. Speaking purely personally, although I by no means accept everything that Campbell teaches, I always found his strong accent on what the atonement saves us *for* to be rich and helpful. I think we too often dwell one-sidedly and negatively on what the atonement saves us *from*. But as Campbell points out, the Bible is replete with teaching on the positive blessings that flow from the atonement. It brings us to God (1 Peter 3:18). It sanctifies us (Ephesians 5:25-27). It embraces us into eternal life (John 3:15-16). It is the source of the gift of the Spirit (Galatians 3:13-14). In short, the positive purpose and outcome of the atonement is to transform us into the perfect humanity that was both embodied and made known in Christ.

In expounding the prospective side of the atonement, Campbell again distinguishes between Christ dealing with Man on God's behalf, and dealing with God on Man's behalf. He deals with Man on God's behalf by manifesting the Father, thereby enabling men to enter into true fellowship with Him. The very incarnation of the Son of God demonstrates God's fatherly mind and heart towards humanity, His infinite and costly desire to reclaim us as His children. By knowing who and what Christ is, we discover what Man is intended to be and is capable of becoming.

Christ's dealing with God on Man's behalf in the prospective side of the atonement lies in His consecrating human nature to God as God's child. The Son of God incorporates manhood into His Sonship, and thinks, feels, acts, and lives toward God as a loving, trusting, obedient child. This empowers Him to catch us up, so to speak, into His filial manhood, so that in Him we become God's children, sharing in His Sonship to the Father. Campbell goes so far as to say that Christ's instilling the spirit of sonship into us, so that we commune through Him with God as Father, constitutes the finest fruit and perfection of His atoning work.

Campbell's treatise expresses some strong critiques of the High Calvinism that dominated Evangelical theology in his native Scotland. He especially critiqued the doctrine of limited atonement or particular redemption, on the grounds that it necessarily and catastrophically undermined Christ's manifestation of the Father's love for all human-

ity. He was also less than satisfied by the so-called Moderate Calvinism associated in Scotland with the pre-eminent Congregationalist theologian Ralph Wardlaw, and in England with the innovative Baptist thinker Andrew Fuller. Moderate Calvinism accepted the universality of the atonement. But Campbell's dissatisfaction here was motivated by what he perceived as Moderate Calvinism's excessively legal, governmental vision of the atonement and its consequences, in contrast to the filial and familial conception so dear to Campbell's heart.

The Nature of the Atonement is certainly one of the most brilliant and original works of theology in Scottish church history. In that respect, it is a true classic. No less a figure than B. B. Warfield (a stalwart defender of traditional Calvinism) spoke appreciatively of Campbell's treatise, as at least vindicating the objectivity of the atonement, by virtue of its insistence that Christ did something for us in relation to God (vicarious confession and repentance) that we could not do for ourselves. This view, says Warfield, was "set forth in his remarkably attractive way by John McLeod Campbell" among others (Warfield mentions the eminent Anglican theologian R. C. Moberly as another).[22]

Even the critics of Campbell's *magnum opus* were often moved to acknowledge that an authentic sense of spirituality and holiness pervades the book, quickening the reader's piety, even when failing to command his intellectual assent. I may be forgiven for quoting Thomas Hywel Hughes on this feature of Campbell's work, since he gives voice to it so eloquently. (Hughes was the Principal of the Scottish Congregational College and examiner in divinity at London University). The quotation is from Hughes' *The Atonement: Modern Theories of the Doctrine*. He says:

> We are conscious that this [Campbell's book] is a fine spiritual treatment of the subject. Its influence on subsequent thought was very great in its liberating power… We can see on the surface the strong points of the theory. It commended itself to thinking men by its surrender of the extreme penal views held in Dr. Campbell's day, by its change from the legal and commercial basis of the older views to the personal and spiritual realm. Again its appeal to Christian experience in dealing with forgiveness and the other facts, made possible by the Atonement, rang true, and found an echo in the souls of men. Moreover, the fine devotional spirit with which the author approached his subject made the appeal of his book very powerful.[23]

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[22] B. B. Warfield, 'Atonement' in *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, at https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_atonement.html accessed 15.10.2024.

[23] Thomas Hywel Hughes, *The Atonement: Modern Theories of the Doctrine* (London 1949) p.145.

But even those, like Hughes, P. T. Forsyth, and H. R. Mackintosh, who saw heart-kindling piety and genuine theological value in Campbell's work, were not unwilling to express various reservations and criticisms. Allow me to mention two. Forsyth argued that in Campbell's doctrine of vicarious confession, he over-emphasised Christ's confession of Man's sin, and failed properly to set forth His confession of God's holiness. The heavenly Father is a holy Father; unless His holiness is recognised as central, and unless the atoning work of Christ is understood as glorifying the Father's holiness, the full and true meaning of the cross is not rightly appreciated.

A second criticism made by several theologians was that Campbell did not seem to make it entirely clear why precisely Christ's vicarious confession of Man's sin required His death. Campbell stresses that the precious element in the cross is not Christ's physical suffering in the abstract, but the spirit in which He underwent that suffering – His humility, obedience, trust, love, spiritual sorrow, and self-surrender. Without these, His mere bodily suffering by itself would have been without value. We can grant this. Yet still one wonders why this would strictly necessitate His death. On Campbell's assumptions, could Christ not perhaps have atoned for sin in the Garden of Gethsemane without actually dying? Some further significant theological ingredients appear to need adding into Campbell's framework, if the physical death of the incarnate Son is to be made fully intelligible.

Perhaps the missing ingredient is that Christ's confession of Man's sin, His vicarious acknowledgment of the judgment sin deserves, entails that He submit to physical death as an integral aspect of that confession and acknowledgment. After all, in the Bible, death is involved in God's holy judgment on sin. If so, we seem to be veering back into territory that incorporates some kind of penal element in the atonement, but one that emphasises not so much the *external suffering* of Jesus, but much more His *internal attitude* of submission to God's rejection of sin. "Righteous art Thou, O LORD, and upright are Thy judgments" (Psalm 119:137). "Thou art righteous, O Lord, because Thou hast judged thus" (Revelation 16:5).

Without this internal attitude on Jesus' part in our name – without this profoundly personal, moral, and spiritual acknowledgment of the sinfulness of sin and God's holiness in judging it – no atonement would have taken place on the cross. Christ as Representative Head offers to God *everything* that we owe; and we owe, not mere passive suffering, but an active and positive acknowledgment of our sin, and a subjective bowing to the holy judgment it deserves. If the Head does not offer these things

on our behalf, He has failed to give what we owe, and has therefore not rightly or fully atoned for sin.[24]

John McLeod Campbell will always have a special place in the ecclesiastical and theological history of Scotland. The earlier part of his life saw him intimately connected with the foremost creative innovators and spiritual influencers of the day – giants like Thomas Erskine, Edward Irving, and A. J. Scott. He also, we recollect, won the sympathy of the mighty Thomas Chalmers, who vainly threw his weight against the movement to depose Campbell from the Church of Scotland ministry. The later part of Campbell's life as a Congregationalist pastor in Glasgow was less exciting than those Springtime years of sound and fury, but it gave him sufficient leisure from the bitterness and distraction of controversy to be able to produce his masterwork on the atonement in 1856. There can be very few theological volumes that have extorted such praise from those who could not accept some of its most central teachings. It was reprinted as recently as 2022, and will probably go on being reprinted and studied for as long as the subject of the atonement still holds sway over the human mind.

[24] I therefore think it possible to draw together the best of McLeod Campbell's insights with a more traditional doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. The more traditional doctrine, in my judgment, is entailed by such passages as Isaiah 53 and Galatians 3:13.