

THE ATONEMENT

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The Christian world as a whole believes in a substitutionary atonement. This has been its belief ever since it began to think. The doctrine was stated by Athanasius as clearly and fully as by any later writer. All the great historic creeds which set forth the atonement at any length set forth a substitutionary atonement, All the great historic systems of theology enshrine it as the very Ark of the Covenant, the central object of the Holy of Holies.

While the Christian world in general believes in a substitutionary atonement, it is less inclined than it once was to regard any existing theory of substitution as entirely adequate. It accepts the substitution of Christ as a fact, and it tends to esteem the theories concerning it only as glimpses of a truth larger than all of them. It observes that an early theory found the necessity of the atonement in the veracity of God, that a later one found it in the honor of God, and that a still later one found it in the government of God, and it deems all these speculations helpful, while it yearns for further light.

THE GROUNDS OF BELIEF IN SUBSTITUTION

If we should ask those who hold this doctrine on what grounds they believe that Christ is the substitute for sinners, there would be many answers, but, perhaps, in only two of them would all voices agree. The first of these grounds would be the repeated declarations of Holy Scripture, which are so clear, so precise, so numerous, and so varied that they leave no room to doubt their meaning. The other ground is the testimony of the human heart wherever it mourns its sin or rejoices in an accomplished deliverance. The declaration of the Scriptures that Christ bore our sins on the cross is necessary to satisfy the longings of the soul. The Christian world, in general, would say: "We believe in gravitation, in light, in electricity, in the all-pervading ether, because we must, and not because we can explain them fully. So, we believe that Christ died instead of the sinner because we must, and not because we know all the reasons which led God to appoint and to accept His sacrifice."

THE MORAL-INFLUENCE THEORY

While the Christian world as a whole believes in a substitutionary atonement, the doctrine is rejected by a minority of devout and able men, who present instead of it what has often been called the "moral-influence theory." According to this, the sole mission of Christ was to reveal the love of God in a way so moving as to melt the heart and induce men to forsake sin. The theory is sometimes urged with such great eloquence and tenderness that one would find it sufficient as an interpretation at once of the Scriptures and of human want.

Now, no one calls in question the profound spiritual influence of Christ where He is preached as the propitiation of God, and those who believe the doctrine of a substitutionary atonement lift up the cross as the sole appointed means of reaching and saving the lost. They object only when "the moral-influence theory" is presented as a sufficient account of the atonement, to the denial that the work of

Christ has rendered God propitious toward man. One may appreciate the moon without wishing that it put out the sun and stars.

THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST SUBSTITUTION

The advocates of this theory must clear the doctrine of substitution out of the way. They attempt to do this by advancing many arguments, only two of which need detain us here, since, these removed, the others, of lighter moment, will fall of themselves.

a. Substitution is impossible.

It is said by them that the doctrine of substitution supposes that which is impossible. Guilt can not be transferred from one person to another. Punishment and penalty can not be transferred from a guilty person to an innocent one. An innocent person may be charged with sin, but if so he will be innocent still, and not guilty. An innocent person may suffer, but if so his suffering will not be punishment or penalty. Such is the objection: the Christian world, in believing that a substitutionary atonement has been made by Christ, believes a thing which is contrary to the necessary laws of thought.

The reader will observe that this objection has to do wholly with the definitions of the words guilt and punishment and penalty. It is, perhaps, worthy the serious attention of the theologian who wishes to keep his terms free from offense; but it has no force beyond the sphere of verbal criticism. It is true that guilt, in the sense of personal blameworthiness, can not be transferred from the wrongdoer to the well-doer. It is true that punishment, in the sense of penalty inflicted for personal blameworthiness, cannot be transferred from the wrongdoer to the well-doer. This is no discovery, and it is maintained as earnestly by those who believe in a substitutionary atonement as by those who deny it.

Let us use other words, if these are not clear, but let us hold fast the truth which they were once used to express. The world is so constituted that it bears the idea of substitution engraved upon its very heart. No man or woman or child escapes from suffering inflicted for the faults of others. In thousands of instances these substitutionary sufferings are assumed voluntarily, and are useful. Husbands suffer in order to deliver wives from sufferings richly deserved. Wives suffer in order to deliver husbands from sufferings richly deserved. Children suffer in order to deliver parents from sufferings richly deserved. Parents suffer in order to deliver children from sufferings richly deserved. Pastors often shield guilty churches in this way, and sometimes at the cost of life. Statesmen often shield guilty nations in this way, and sometimes at the cost of life: If, now, we shall teach that Christ suffered in order to deliver us from sufferings which we richly deserve, we shall avoid a strife about words, and shall maintain that, coming into the world as a member of our race, He suffered to the utmost, as many other heroic souls have suffered in a lesser degree, by subjecting Himself to the common rule of vicarious suffering, instituted by God in the formation of human society bound together by ties of sympathy and love, and existing in daily operation from the dawn of history till this present time.

The vicarious sufferings, by means of which the innocent deliver the guilty from sufferings richly deserved, are frequently assumed in the fear that over-much grief will harden the culprit and in a hope that a stay of judgment and the softening lapse of time may lead him to better things. May we not believe that Christ was affected by a similar motive, and has procured that delay of the divine justice at which every thoughtful person wonders? But the vicarious sufferings which we observe in the world are frequently assumed for a stronger reason, in the belief that the culprit already shows signs of relenting, and in the assurance that patient waiting, even at a great cost, will be rewarded with the development of the tender beginnings of a new life which the thunder-storms of untempered equity might destroy, So it was predicted of Christ before His coming that "He should see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied."

Thus, if Christ suffered in order to deliver us from sufferings which we richly deserved, it was also in order to deliver us from sin by reason of which we deserved them.

b. Substitution is immoral.

The second argument by means of which the advocates of "the moral-influence theory" seek to refute the doctrine of a substitutionary atonement is equally unfortunate with the first, in that, like the first, it criticizes words rather than the thoughts which they are employed to express. The doctrine of a substitutionary atonement, it is said, is immoral. Let us inquire what this immoral doctrine is. The doctrine, it is answered, that our guilt was transferred to Christ and that He was punished for our sins. Here again let us "strive not about words." Let us admit that the theologian might well express himself in other terms, which would create no prejudice against his meaning. But, if he amends his statement, let him retain every part of his meaning. Let him say that Christ suffered in order that guilty man might escape from sufferings richly deserved. Is this teaching immoral? Then the constitution of the human race, ordained by God, is immoral, for, since its ties are those of sympathy and love, human beings are constantly suffering that others may escape sufferings richly deserved. Then sympathy is immoral, for this is what it does. Then love is immoral, for this is what it does. Then the best persons are the most immoral, for they do this oftener than others.

The objector does not maintain that the doctrine of a substitutionary atonement has equally produced immorality wherever it has been proclaimed. He does not venture to test this charge by an appeal to history. The appeal would be fatal. For nineteen hundred years the only great moral advances of the human race have been brought about by the preaching of a substitutionary atonement. "A tree is known by its fruits." It is impossible that a doctrine essentially immoral should be the cause of morality among men.

THE MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY IS NOT ADEQUATE

Let us turn now to "the moral-influence theory" and consider why it ought not to be accepted.

a. Too circumscribed.

As a complete theory of the atonement it is far too narrowly circumscribed, and too near the surface. Were it universally adopted it would be the end of thought on this high theme. The substitutionary atonement promises an eternity of delightful progress in study. It can not be exhausted. All the theories which have been advanced to cast light upon it are valuable, but they leave a whole universe to be explored, and one may hope to extend the field of discovery at any time.

To shut us out of this boundless prospect, and limit us to the petty confines of "the moral-influence theory" would be to shrivel the ocean to the dimensions of a pond and bid the admiral sail his navies in it, or to blot out all the worlds save those of the solar system and bid the astronomer enlarge his science. As the adoption of this circumscribed view would be the end of thought, so it would be the end of emotion. The heart has always been kindled by the preaching of a Christ who bore our sins before God on the cross.

By this truth the hardened sinner has been subdued and in it the penitent sinner has found a source of rapture. An atonement of infinite cost, flowing from infinite love, and procuring deliverance from infinite loss, melts the coldest heart and inflames the warmest. To preach a lesser sacrifice would be to spread frost instead of fire. But the will is reached through the reason and the emotions. That which would cease to challenge profound thought and would cut out the flames of emotion would fail to reach the will and transform the life. The theory makes the death of Christ predominantly scenic, spectacular, an effort to display the love of God rather than an offering to God in its nature necessary for the salvation of man. It struggles in vain to find a worthy reason for the awful sacrifice. Hence, it may be charged with essential immorality. In any case, the work of Christ, if interpreted in this manner, will not prove "the power of God unto salvation" (<Rom 1:16>). The speculation is called "the moral-influence theory," but when preached as an exclusive theory of the atonement, it is incapable of wielding any profound moral influence. The man who dies to rescue one whom he loves from death is remembered with tears of

reverence and gratitude; the man who puts himself to death to show that he loves is remembered with horror.

b. Not Scriptural.

Still further, the chief failure of those who advance this view is in the sphere of exegesis. The Bible is so full of a substitutionary atonement that the reader comes upon it everywhere. The texts which teach it are not rare and isolated expressions; they assemble in multitudes; they rush in troops; they occupy every hill and every valley. They occasion the greatest embarrassment to those who deny that the relation of God to the world is determined by the cross, and various methods are employed by various writers to reduce their number and their force. They are most abundant in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, and some depreciate his authority as a teacher of Christianity. The doctrine is implied in the words which our Lord uttered at the last supper, and some attack these as not genuine. Christ is repeatedly declared to be a propitiation. "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by His blood" (<Rom. 3:25>). "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world" (<1 John 2:2>). "God sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins" (<1 John 4:10>). "Wherefore it behooved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (<Heb. 3:17>).

Many special pleas are entered against the plain meaning of these declarations. It does not seem difficult to understand them. A propitiation must be an influence which renders someone propitious, and the person rendered propitious by it must be the person who was offended. Yet some do not hesitate to affirm that these texts regard man as the only being propitiated by the cross. Special tortures are applied to many other Scriptures to keep them from proclaiming a substitutionary atonement. Christ is "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (<John 1:29>). "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (<Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45>). "Him that knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (<2 Cor. 5:2>). Such are a few examples of the countless declarations of a substitutionary atonement which the Scriptures make, and with which those who reject the doctrine strive in vain. Any speculation which sets itself against this mighty current flowing through all the Bible is destined to be swept away.

Yet further: A theological theory, like a person, should be judged somewhat by the company it keeps. If it shows an inveterate inclination to associate with other theories which lie wholly upon the surface, which sound no depths and solve no problems, and which the profoundest Christian experience rejects, it is evidently the same in kind.

The theory which I am here opposing tends to consort with an inadequate view of inspiration, and some of its representatives question the inerrancy of the Scripture, even in the matters pertaining to faith and conduct. It tends to consort with an inadequate view of God, and some of its representatives in praising His love forget His holiness and His awful wrath against incorrigible wrongdoers. It tends to consort with an inadequate view of sin, and some of its representatives make the alienation of man from God consist merely in acts, rather than in an underlying state from which they proceed. It tends, finally, to consort with an inadequate view of responsibility and guilt, and some of its representatives teach that these cease when the sinner turns, so that there is no need of propitiation, but only for repentance. A distinguished representative of this theory has written the following sentences: "All righteous claims are satisfied if sin is done away." "divine law is directed against sin, and is satisfied when sin is made to cease." "If grace brings an end of sinning, the end sought by law has been attained. It can not be, therefore, that in the sight of God there is any need of satisfying law before grace can save sinners." These words are like the voice of "a very lovely song"; but many a pardoned soul uttered a more troubled strain. A man may cease to sin without reversing the injury he has wrought. In the course of his business, let us suppose, he has defrauded widows and orphans, and they are now dead. Or, in his social life, he has led the young into unbelief and vice, and they now laugh at his efforts to undo the mischief, or have gone into eternity unsaved. In a sense his sinning has come to an end, yet its baneful effects are in full career. His conscience

tells him he is responsible not only for the commission of his sins, but for the ruin wrought by his sins. In other words, he is responsible for the entire train of evils which he has put into operation. The depths of his responsibility are far too profound for such light plummet to sound.

These are some of the reasons which lead the Christian world as a whole to reject "the moral-influence theory" of the atonement as inadequate.

CHRIST, THE SIN-BEARER

I shall not attempt to set forth any substitutionary theory of the atonement. It is not absolutely necessary that we have a theory. It may be enough for us to hold the doctrine without a theory. The writers of the New Testament did this. The earliest fathers of the Church did it. The world has been profoundly influenced by the preaching of the doctrine before the leaders of the Church began to construct a theory. What was done in the first century may be done in the twentieth. We may proclaim Christ as the Sin-bearer and win multitudes to Him without a theory. Men will welcome the fact, as the famishing welcome water, without asking about its chemical composition.

Yet the Christian thinker will never cease to seek for an adequate theory of the atonement, and it may be well for us to consider some of the conditions with which it is necessary for him to comply in order to succeed in casting any new light upon this divine mystery.

THE ADEQUACY OF SUBSTITUTIONAL ATONEMENT

1. Any theory of the atonement, to be adequate, must proceed from a fair and natural interpretation of all the Biblical statements on the subject. It must not pick and choose among them. It must not throttle any into silence.

2. It must make use of the thought which other generations have found helpful. It must not discard these old materials. Though they are not a completed building, they constitute a foundation which we can not afford to destroy. They may be covered over with an accumulation of verbal infelicities from which we must set them free; But whoever would advance our knowledge of the peace made for us by Christ must not disdain to build upon them.

3. It must take account of all the moral attributes of God, for all are concerned in our salvation. It will find the chief motive of the atonement in the love for God, who "so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son" (<John 3:16>). It will find one necessity of the atonement in the righteousness of God, who "set forth Christ to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing of His righteousness at this present season; that He might Himself be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus" (<Rom. 3:25-26>). It will find one effect of the atonement in the aversion from man of the wrath of God, the product of love and righteousness outraged by sin: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His blood, shall we be saved from wrath through Him" (<Rom 5:8>).

4. It must accord with a profound Christian experience. It will not toy with Socinian interpretations of the Godhead, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the product not only of a sound exegesis and a sound philosophy, but also of a sound Christian experience. It will not picture God as a Father in a sense which would deny His kingship, as a weak-minded father who bewails the rebellion of his children but has no courage to wield the rod. It will not cover His face with feeble smiles or inane tears and deny to it the frowns of wrath, for a profound Christian experience pronounces such portraiture untrue. It will not join those excellent Christians who see in sin only a temporary fault, a disease of the surface, the product chiefly of circumstances, and probably a necessary stage of man to higher things, for these roseate hues are known to be deceitful by all who have entered earnestly into battle with the corruption of our

nature and have achieved any great moral triumphs. It will not diminish the guilt of the transgressor, for it is the pardoned transgressor who knows best the awful demerit of his deeds and of the state of alienation from God from which they issued. In short, it will take into account the judgment of those wise souls who have learned "the deep things of God" in much spiritual conflict, and will reach conclusions acceptable to them.

5. It must view the sacrifice of Christ as an event planned from eternity, and effectual with God from eternity, He is "the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world" (<Rev. 13:8>). He "was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but manifested at the end of the times" (<1 Pet. 1:20>). Sin did not take God by surprise. He had foreseen it and had provided a Redeemer before it had led us captive.

6. It must take a broader view of the self-sacrifice of Christ than that once presented to us. His self-sacrifice culminated in His death, and we speak of that very properly as His atonement. But His self-sacrifice had other features.

It had two principal moments one in eternity, and the other in time. The first was the laying aside of some of His divine attributes that He might take our nature; the second was the endurance of the evils of human life and death, which He would not remove from His lot by miracle. Both are brought before us in the statement that, "being in the form of God, He counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even as far as unto death, yea, the death of the cross" (<Phil. 2:6-8>). And all this pathetic history of self-sacrifice is rendered yet more pathetic when we reflect that He anticipated His sufferings from eternity, and moved in the creation and government of the universe with the vision of His coming sorrows ever before His eyes.

We can form no conception of the cost at which He laid aside some of His divine attributes to become incarnate. We can form but little conception of the cost at which He died for the world. No mere man ever laid down His life for others in the sense in which Christ laid down His life for the world. Every man must die at some time; "there is no discharge in that welfare" (<Eccl 8:8>). When a man sacrifices his life he does but sacrifice a few days or years; he does but lay it down earlier instead of later. But Christ did not choose between dying at one time rather than at another; He chose between dying and not dying. Thus, viewed in any light whatever, the voluntary sufferings of Christ surpass our powers of thought and imagination, reaching infinitely beyond all human experience.

7. It must make much of the effect produced upon God by the infinite, voluntary, and unselfish sacrifice of Christ for the world. Here all human language breaks down, and it sounds feeble to say that God, the Father, admires with the utmost enthusiasm this holy and heroic career of suffering for the salvation of man. Yet we must use such words, though they are cold. The Scriptures speak of His attitude toward His incarnate Son as one of unbounded appreciation and approval, and tell us that His voice was heard repeatedly from heaven, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (<Mt 3:17; 17:5; Mk 1:11; 2 Pet 1:17>). When we say that the sacrifice of Christ is meritorious with God, we mean that it calls forth His supreme admiration. Such was His feeling toward it as He foresaw it from eternity; such was His feeling toward it as He looked upon it while being made; and such is His feeling toward it now, as He looks back upon it and glorifies Christ in honor of it.

8. It must find that the work of Christ has made a vast difference in the relations of God to the fallen world. It was infinite in the love which prompted it and in the self-sacrifice which attended it, and hence infinite in its moral value. We can not but deem it fitting that it should procure for the world an administration of grace. Provided for eternity and efficacious with God from eternity, it has procured an administration of grace from the moment when the first sin was committed.

No doubt it is for this reason that God has suffered the world to stand through all the ages of its rebellious history. He has looked upon it from the beginning in Christ, and hence has treated it with forbearance, with love, with mercy. It did not first come under grace when Christ was crucified; it has

always been under grace, because Christ has always offered His sacrifice in the plan and purpose of God, and thus has always exercised a propitiatory influence. The grace of God toward man was not fully revealed and explained till it was made manifest in the person and work of Christ, but it has always been the reigning principle of the divine government. Men are saved by grace since the death of Christ, and they have always been saved by grace when they have been saved at all. The entire argument of the Apostle Paul in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians has for its purpose the defense of the proposition, that God has always justified men by grace through faith, and that there has never been any other way of salvation. The entire administration of God in human history is set forth, in the light of "the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world" (<Mt 13:35; 25:34; Lk 11:50; Jn 17:24; Eph 1:4; Heb 4:3; 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8>), as one of infinite kindness and leniency, notwithstanding those severities which have expressed His abhorrence of sin.

But if the self-sacrifice of Christ has made a difference in the practical attitude of God toward the world, it has also made a difference in His feeling toward the world. God is one. He is not at war with Himself. He is not a hypocrite. He has not one course of action and a different course of feeling. If He has dealt patiently and graciously with our sinning race it is because He has felt patient and gracious, and the work of His Son, by means of which His administration has been rendered patient and gracious, has rendered His feeling patient and gracious.

It is to this different administration and to its basis in a different feeling that the Scriptures refer when they present Christ to us as "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the whole world."

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