

The Atonement considered as Forgiveness.

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THE Atonement may be considered from either of two standpoints,—as a doctrine or as a fact. Of course these are not entirely distinct, much less opposed, for a doctrine is nothing else than an expression to thought of a fact,—an expression which has met with more or less general acceptance. And a fact cannot be comprehended (even if it be apprehended) without some interpretation by the mind, which at once makes it more than a fact, and puts it into its place in philosophy. But the distinction between a doctrine and a fact is none the less a useful one, because it answers to a real difference in the point of view; and there is often more to be gained by taking up another standpoint in thought than by any other course. And there is a further practical advantage. A 'doctrine' at once suggests, if it does not imply, an obligation of belief which rests finally upon some moral authority; but a 'fact' challenges rational investigation, without in any way restricting the moral and spiritual value of the truth.

Strictly speaking there is no single doctrine of the Atonement; for while several radically different doctrines have been more or less widely held by Christians at different dates and in different places, no one of them has ever come near the standard 'quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus' in the Christian community. On the other hand, there is no one point on which Christians, from the apostolic age to our own, have been more invariably agreed than in their belief in the fact of an Atonement: every preacher assumes it, every believer rests upon it, every religious revival witnesses to its reality. Whether the Atonement stands in closest relation to the Incarnation, or to the Death of Christ, or to His Resurrection, may be disputed, but no Christian doubts, or ever has doubted, that it is a fact, and a foundation of hope for us all. Thus the only authoritative doctrine of the Atonement is the broadest and simplest of all, namely, the doctrine of 'Repentance and Remission of sins, and Life in the Name of Jesus Christ,' which makes it almost coextensive with the Christian Faith.

There can be no doubt then as to the standpoint which should be taken up in any hopeful

inquiry into the Atonement: it must be considered not as a doctrine but as a fact to begin with. And this is the more needful because of the remarkable way in which this topic has receded in the religious thought and language of the present generation. In our childhood the Atonement held a place in the forefront of the teaching of most Christian preachers: now one may go to church year in and year out in the majority of churches and hardly so much as hear the word once uttered. But while the change is very noticeable, and fully justifies some disquieting reflections, it does not imply nearly so much as appears. The doctrine of the Atonement which was commonly preached fifty years ago is now very generally discredited, having been found both inadequate and out of accord with some of the facts of life and of religion, and for most minds to-day it is simply dead, neither commanding credence nor requiring refutation. But it would be a great mistake to suppose that because for the present generation this doctrine has passed into the limbo of obsolete beliefs no living faith upon the subject remains. The fact of the Atonement survives, and is as surely believed as ever by all who are Christians, only it is less spoken of; and the reason for this is largely that it has found no expression satisfying to this generation. Of course this is far from a desirable state of things; but it is probably a necessary transition from the past to the future, due to the great readjustment of ideas which the recent prosecution of science and history, together with the material progress of the modern world, have conspired to bring about. And we shall serve our own days best, and prove most loyal to our Christian callings, not by seeking to galvanize into a brief and simulated life doctrines once held but since proved wanting, but by looking steadily and with all reverence at the fact of the Atonement, and trying with all frankness to give it an expression to thought which may be true and helpful to ourselves and others who have felt the influence of our times.

To achieve this it is important not to aim at too much at once. For this reason the present paper is limited to the consideration of the fact of Atone-

ment in relation to Forgiveness. The remission of sins has always been a leading factor in the whole truth of the Atonement, and in this Forgiveness is one of the chief elements. It will be enough in support of this to refer to the parable of the Prodigal Son. That has aptly been called 'the Gospel within the Gospel'; for in a single living picture our Master set forth there the Atonement of God and man under a human figure. And in this repentance is met at once by forgiveness, while the father's love, never estranged, eagerly welcomes home the reckless boy who had wandered off into evil through self-will. In this wonderful picture drawn by the hand of the Lord Himself, it is well worth remarking that the only steps in Atonement which are emphasized are the son's repentance and the father's forgiveness. No conditions are indicated, no means employed, for the restoration of fellowship, no mediator between father and son appears, there is nothing transactional, nothing forced. The young man in his adversity comes to himself, he thinks, and acts upon his thought, and on arrival confesses his wrong; but before he has done so he is forgiven, and taken back with joy to the natural home-life which is pervaded and directed by the father's unalterable love. To argue that because there is nothing here beyond simple repentance on the one hand and forgiveness on the other, therefore this must be a complete account of the Atonement, would of course be quite unwarranted. A figure always fails at some point, or it would be not analogy but identity. So every parable must be interpreted as it is intended, to bring out some salient truth, and not to prevent us from seeing others which may be important also though not there expressed. But that the Lord should have found any figure fit to convey His meaning which did not hint at the points of primary importance is not credible. We are therefore justified in regarding the aspect of Forgiveness as one of the chief aspects of the Atonement.

What then is Forgiveness? 'So far as I have gone in life,' said Robert Louis Stevenson, 'I have never been able to discover what Forgiveness means.' Perhaps most of us will feel more than half inclined to endorse his saying. And yet forgiveness is a constant duty for us all, and (thank God!) a tolerably common experience: we both exercise it ourselves and receive it at the hands of others. Let us clear the ground a little by dis-

tinguishing it from what may be confused with it to begin with.

First, then, forgiveness does not consist in the remission of penalties or the renouncement of reprisals. There are of course many cases in which these are reckoned as forgiveness in current language, but only loosely so. *E.g.* a criminal who has received sentence of death may receive the king's pardon and be set free from motives of policy and leniency alone, as was the case with some of the rebels at the Cape not long ago. Or in a matter of a private injury the man who has suffered may profess to forgive the other because he sees no likelihood of profiting by reprisal, though continuing to nurse hatred in his heart, and ready to welcome any misfortune that may befall his foe. We have no difficulty in seeing that whether the motives which lead to remission of the consequences are themselves good or bad, such remission can never be counted rightly as forgiveness, which is essentially a moral act, not one that is external.

Again, forgiveness does not consist in forgetfulness. We say, 'Forgive *and* forget': for while in practice the two things are connected, and often closely, they are two things, not one; the second being a proper sequel often to the first, and a useful evidence of its reality. But forgiveness may be perfectly genuine where there never is forgetfulness; and in the case of the deepest wrongs forgetfulness becomes impossible. On the other hand, many a minor injury is forgotten which has never been forgiven; and if the frailty of memory were less, we might sometimes stand aghast to find how unforgiving some among us are.

Nor, again, is forgiveness to be confounded with forming an estimate which is not true to fact. If a child deceives you with a lie, perhaps on several occasions, you cannot help seeing that you are dealing with one who is not straightforward in heart. You may genuinely enough forgive, but you cannot think of the child better than he deserves. Your estimate of his character is inevitably lowered; but this only leads you to do all in your power to help him in overcoming a besetting sin, till truth shall make him free of this defect in nature. To induce yourself to hold the child truthful when you find clear evidence that it is not, would be neither kind nor moral; it would be fostering spiritual obliquity in yourself, and would be rather folly than forgiveness.

These false notions of forgiveness must be carefully excluded from our thoughts of the Atonement. However fully God may spare the penalties and consequences of our sins, His forgiveness does not lie in that. He does not always spare them in this world, nor perhaps in the next, even when He has forgiven. And it may well be that He does spare them sometimes when there is no forgiveness. This single consideration is enough to show how inadequate and misleading those doctrines of the Atonement are which emphasize the remission of penalties for us on the ground of their being exacted of Christ. Whether Christ paid a debt of punishment instead of us or not, that does not bring us forgiveness. Nor can we imagine that God forgets the sins that have been done. Forgetfulness is so largely a product of time that it is only by a latitude of speech that we can suppose it in the Eternal, to whom past and present are one. But even if we believe that God so puts our sins behind His back as to forget them utterly, this would only mean that He forgives *and* forgets, not that the forgiveness lies in the forgetting. Moreover God cannot misjudge any man in his favour. God is Light, and the stains and defects which are in us are all naked and laid open before Him, otherwise there would be a measure of darkness in His light. And if we could suppose that such false and favourable estimate were consistent with God's truth, it would not harmonize with His love—

True love works never for the loved one so,
Nor spares skin-surface, smoothening truth away.
Love bids touch truth, endure truth, and embrace
Truth, though embracing truth love crush itself.¹

There is a real peril in this direction in what one sometimes hears put forward on the subject of the Atonement, as if God so looked on us in Christ as to persuade Himself into thinking that we are what we are not, and so into treating us as He would not treat us but for this initial deception of Himself. And a good deal of the teaching that has been, and is popularly given under the name 'imputation of righteousness' falls under the same condemnation. It is just because this last error in connexion with forgiveness, which confounds it with a false estimate of fact, is the one that comes nearest to a true perception of its nature, that it is the most insidious and dangerous of all in connexion with the Atonement.

¹ R. Browning, xii. 171.

Having marked off these mistakes in order to avoid the errors into which they have led many who tried to grasp the truth of the Atonement, we must face more closely the question, 'What *is* Forgiveness?'

In reply, the first thing to be said is that forgiveness is essentially personal. True, we commonly speak of forgiving an act or a fault, but this is not a very exact way of speaking. We always mean that we forgive the act or fault in a person, and without this personal reference the word forgive is quite inappropriate. It is properly the person we forgive, and the secondary object of the verb only defines the point in which he or she requires forgiveness. So we pray, 'Forgive *us* our trespasses, as we have forgiven those that trespass against us.' We must thus be careful, in thinking of the Atonement, to consider God's forgiveness of sinners, not God's forgiveness of sins:—except, of course, so far as the latter expression means (as it does in the creed) God's forgiveness of us sinners in respect of the sins which make us need forgiveness at His hands.

A second point may be gained if we consider who are the persons whom we most readily forgive. Beyond all controversy they are those whom we love. If we want to see forgiveness in full operation in human life, we must not look upon the dealings of strangers with one another, nor watch the mutual attitude of enemies when a truce has been established between them after a quarrel; in such cases real forgiveness is sadly rare. We must look rather at the dealing of parents with their children, where the latter are self-willed and selfish, but are still beloved and are forgiven day by day though still offending; or at friends whose love is deep and genuine notwithstanding the fact that they often provoke each other, and occasionally lapse into a real and galling wrong against the other. It is, of course, where love is strongest that the worst injury can be done. A cruel word spoken in haste, or a want of truth or purity betrayed, does not cut so very deeply if the delinquent be one for whom you care little; but let the same thing be found in one for whom you care more for than any other, and it cuts you to the very quick. Yet it is in the latter case that you are more ready to forgive although more deeply wronged. It is sometimes said that 'love is blind,' but that is never true of true love. One is really far more quick-sighted for the faults and sins in

whose one keenly loves, only in their case one is so willing to forgive and love on none the less or seeing the blemishes that appear. And so we must not overlook the fact that the foundation of the Atonement is just this—that God is love. This is itself enough to shut out all doctrines of the Atonement which assume God's estrangement from His sinning children, and pretend that His forgiveness is the re-establishment of love in Him. He forgives because He loves; He does not love because He has forgiven. 'God commendeth His own love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.'

But while forgiveness must be personal, and always implies love, it does not mean this alone. What remains to be added? Why faith, *i.e.* trust, and hope. In short, forgiveness implies that you can and do believe in him whom you forgive.

This at once explains its connexion with penitence. You may continue to love one who has wronged you while he is persisting in his wrong, but you cannot quite forgive him till you believe that he is sorry for it, or at least unless you believe all through that he is certain to be sorry presently. Penitence is the promise of a life that leaves the wrong behind; and accepting the promise in advance, you forgive, and wait for the full performance, for which you are ready meantime to rust the penitent, and hope. You may know enough of his character to trust him and already hope even before the first sign of penitence; but even so, you look of course for repentance as one of the first evidences which justify your belief. So repentance and forgiveness are intimately connected even in those cases where the one does not form the condition of the other.

And this also explains why it is those whom we love that we are readiest to forgive; for in these we see clearest whatever good there may be. It may be intermixed with much that is faulty and reprehensible, but while we see the faults we see at all events the good, greater or less, that goes with them, far the most plainly in those we love. And goodness, be it great or small, always has the potentiality of becoming greater than it is. The hopeless man is not the man who in much is bad, but the man who is in nothing good. Let there be some soul of goodness discernible, even though it seems nearly smothered under evil, and hope is possible; we may still say, 'Go, and sin no more.' Whatever the degree of good or evil, however,

whether it be a trifling wrong which calls for pardon, or a dastardly injury which is the outcome of moral disease of old standing, forgiveness always looks to the future rather than the present. You take it on trust that the offender will become better than he has proved. And if in any instance this appears to be impossible,—and happily such instances are rare, while our own fallibility of judgment and limitation of insight may well make us doubt whether we are ever justified in deeming such a case to be before us,—then, though we may restrain our feelings, and avert the natural consequences so far as they are under our control, we cannot really forgive. 'There is a sin unto death. Not concerning this,' wrote the apostle, 'do I say that a man should make request' of God for his brother's life. Where the sin issues in death there is no more room for hope that the man may become a truer man. We have not belief in him to forgive him ourselves, and we are bidden pause, and not plead that God will forgive where He cannot believe in this one who has earned the full and fatal wages of his sin.

These thoughts give us insight into God's forgiveness. For Him time, which for us is broken into past, present, and future, is 'all one act at once.' And so, as Augustine remarked long since, 'He loves us not as we are, but as we are becoming.' It is because He sees in us already what is not yet manifest, but what shall be when we see our Saviour as He is and become like Him, that God can and does believe in us as well as love us, and therefore can and does forgive. To us—creatures of ignorance, creatures of time, as we are—it sounds a paradox to say, 'Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin'; but to one who is able to look upon eternal facts undistorted by the refraction which is inevitable to eyes that look through time, this is the simple truth: for whosoever is begotten of God is becoming, if he be not already, sinless; and already his sins are forgiven.

And here we reach at once the limit of what may be said about an act of God's forgiveness, and gain a point of sight from which a vision of the Atonement as a whole breaks into view. Christ came, as He said Himself, that we may have Life; and where Life begets life there is a mystery which we cannot fathom. The creative impulse is His, and not our own. It brings into being in us the promise and potency of a new

life—although we have not already attained—leading God to believe in us, and so winning our forgiveness. He summed it up in a figure when He likened Himself to the vine, of which we are the branches, and charged us ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ And ‘whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not,’ but bears the fruits of Life,—becoming not what he is, but even as his Lord is, if He shall be manifested. So all is gathered up in those two words, ‘in Christ’; and who can unfold all their mysterious wealth of infinite meaning? ‘In Christ’ we are at one with God:—that is the great fact of the Atonement. In Christ Himself: not simply in His incarnation, or in His

passion, or in His resurrection. In Christ Himself we are forgiven, and are ‘saved in His Life.’ And so when sin lies heaviest, and we seem to be standing afar off from God, though we may hardly venture to lift up so much as our eyes to Heaven, we may yet smite upon our breast and plead—

Look Father, look on His Anointed Face,
And only look on us as found in Him.

And the answer to such prayer, made by One who knows our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking, is a forgiveness that is already a fact, an Atonement which in Christ is very deed.

The Theology of Auguste Sabatier of Paris.

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Two great questions engage the attention of every reflecting man, and particularly of every religious thinker: the question concerning *truth*, and the question concerning *salvation*. These two questions are closely allied; they have their spring and *raison d'être* in the two groups of evils under which humanity groans: on the one hand, ignorance and error; on the other, sin and suffering. The uncomfortable sense of ignorance and error awakens the desire for *truth*; while the painful sense of sin and suffering gives birth to the desire for *salvation*. According as the thinker feels the pressure of one or other of these evils to be greater, he will devote himself specially to the solution of the one problem or of the other.

Sabatier was led by his spiritual bent in the first of these directions. He felt keenly the evils caused by ignorance and error, and, without neglecting the question of salvation, he applied himself with passionate and indefatigable ardour to the search for *truth*,—for religious truth in the first place, and then for the historical, psychological, philosophic, and scientific truths that stand related to religion. Profoundly convinced of the unity of true science and of true religious faith, he consecrated all his strength to the reconciliation of

faith and science in theology. His solutions may not be accepted, but one thing is certain, that this reconciliation was the great endeavour of his life.

Christianity is an historical religion. Such is the truth, a commonplace one seemingly, but eminently suggestive in reality, which lies at the base of Sabatier's theology.

Christianity is an *historical religion*. It has therefore the essential characters of *religion* and *history*. As religion, it is divine and eternal; as history, it has elements that are contingent, transitory, and subject to the laws of evolution.

In order, then, to determine what Christianity is, one must make a separation between the religious element and the profane. The very suggestion of such cleavage has been like an arrow entering the joints of tradition, and has drawn down indignant attacks on Sabatier's head. And yet, so soon as we admit that Christianity is an historical religion, the necessity of such a separation follows by the very nature of things.

But it is just the truly historical character of Christianity that is questioned by some; while others deny its supernatural character. Catholicism and orthodox Protestantism err in viewing Christianity, not merely in its essence, but in its entire historical manifestations, and notably its dogmas, as a supernatural, unchangeable fact, free from the contingency that attaches to other facts of history.

¹ Translated by the Rev. J. Dick Fleming, B.D., from the *Revue Chrétienne*, with the authorization of Professor Ménégöz.