

Some Modern Views on the Atonement.

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MODERN difficulties in accepting the doctrine of the Atonement are, I venture to think, a most hopeful sign of the times. For, in general, they come to this: that men cannot and will not believe any doctrine which contradicts their fundamental moral instincts. For example, it is simply impossible for any one who is in the least affected by modern thought to believe God can be appeased or (as we say) propitiated by the death of an innocent victim. Still less can this belief be entertained by one who has grasped the Fatherhood of God as the fundamental truth in the teaching of our blessed Lord, as the truth, in fact, which is conveyed in all His words, pictorially represented in all His acts, perfectly embodied in what He was—in His Person who is Son of God and Son of man. To believe that 'God is love' is to be incapable of believing Him to be a jealous and angry tyrant whose wrath must be satiated with blood and death; and who is party to an immoral bargain (which the punishment of the innocent for the guilty undoubtedly is), by the terms of which the guilty are let off a justly deserved punishment, because a spotless Victim offers Himself in their place. Our whole mind and soul revolts against the Miltonic view of the Atonement. Besides offending our moral sense, this particular doctrine of substitution is in direct conflict with the Catholic teaching on the Person of our Lord, and logically and rapidly leads us to undiluted Arianism.

In consequence of this healthy revolt against immoral views of the Atonement various theories have been suggested which seem, in one way or another, to fall short of the teaching of the Bible.

1. This applies to all those views, so common in our day, which make the death of our blessed Lord merely the supreme manifestation of the Divine Love, intended to win men from their sins by a crowning revelation of the character of God. The point is, the Passion is meant to supply men with a moral motive, a moral dynamic sufficiently powerful to overcome sin in the man who yields himself to its influence. Men sin through ignorance of God. If they knew God as He is—His infinite

love and compassion—they would leave off sinning. And the Atonement conveys to sinful men, in the most impressive form, this saving knowledge of God.

This is the view advocated by Archdeacon Wilson, in his lectures on the Atonement. It is admirably defended by Mr. Rashdall, in the *J. Th. S.*, in his criticism of Dr. Moberly's book, and referred by him to Abelard as its source.

Now I think we may say two things about this theory. (a) No view of the Atonement can be complete which does not take it into account. (b) No view of the Atonement can be complete which does not take another side of the truth into account. For we have to remember that our blessed Lord is not only Son of God, revealer in our manhood of the Eternal Father, but also Son of man, the Representative of our race. As Son of God He indeed reveals on the cross the unfathomed depths of the Divine Love, but as Son of man He also gives His life as *λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν*. His Death is teaching, but it is also for men, *i.e.* it has a representative character.

And the doctrine of Abelard seems to leave this aspect of the truth altogether out of account.

2. I pass on to consider the teaching of Dr. Dale. I give this in his own words. 'He on whom the sins of men had brought the dread necessity of asserting the principle that they deserved to suffer, and who, as it seems to us, could not decline to assert it—He through whose lips the sentence of eternal righteousness must have come, condemning those who had sinned to exile from the light and life of God—He by whose power the sentence must have been executed—He Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, laid aside His eternal glory, assumed our nature, was forsaken of God, died on the cross, that the sins of men might be remitted. It belonged to Him to assert, by His own act, that suffering is the just result of sin. He asserts it not by inflicting suffering on the sinner, but by enduring suffering Himself. . . . The mysterious unity of the Father and the Son rendered it possible for God at once to endure and to inflict penal suffering, and to do both needed conditions which constitute

both the endurance and the infliction the grandest moment in the moral history of God.'

Now I will not stay to apologize for criticising one of such splendid intellectual and moral gifts as Dr. Dale, else this paper would wholly consist of apologies. I pass on to say at once that Dr. Dale's view, which no doubt contains elements of truth, also embodies two profound errors: (*a*) He explicitly separates the idea of God's eternal righteousness and justice from that of His Fatherhood in regard to men. There is no doubt that the doctrine of God's Fatherhood has been grievously misinterpreted in our time. It has been so preached and taught, as to convey the idea that He is a weak and indulgent Father. God's love has been so represented as to obscure His essential righteousness. This is a simply disastrous error, which leads directly to the practical and incalculably mischievous conclusion that sin (to put it roughly) does not matter, that God will somehow make everything right in the end. But admitting or rather emphasizing all this, the truth still remains untouched, that the Fatherhood of God is really fundamental, in the sense that it is the foundation of everything which we can assert truly about God. And therefore we cannot talk of an eternal law of righteousness in any sort of separation from the Divine Fatherhood. God is not Judge as well as Father. His judgments are not those of an Executor of an eternal law of righteousness, but of a Father dealing with rebellious children. I have no time to touch further on this point, only let me repeat that no words can express the morally disastrous consequences of either confusing God's love with a weak and complaisant regard of sin, or of separating, even for a moment in thought, His functions (if I may reverently use the term) as Judge and as Father.

(*b*) But there is a further and equally fatal objection to Dr. Dale's view in respect of his idea of the punishment of sin as retributive. Too much stress cannot be laid on this point. We need have no hesitation in saying that this is an utter misconception of the meaning and purpose of punishment. Retribution has no place in the best human idea of justice, *à fortiori* the thought of it must be utterly excluded from our conception of the Divine justice.

Plato had a far finer conception of the Divine character than many Christian theologians when he wrote that God can only punish men with the intention of making them better. There are three

possible views of the meaning of punishment: (*a*) that it is retributive; (*b*) that it is disciplinary; (*c*) that it is deterrent.

Now, regarding for a moment the human administration of justice, it will be clear that (*a*) must be altogether excluded. For it rests ultimately on vindictiveness towards the offender, whether of the judge personally, or of the judge as representing society, and is therefore immoral. It implies, besides, the possibility of a common measure subsisting between punishment and sin, so that so much punishment can be regarded as precisely equivalent to a certain degree of sin, and is therefore irrational, for no such common measure can by any possibility be conceived.

The third aspect of punishment, in which it is viewed as a deterrent, is obviously, to a certain limited extent, justified by the present very imperfect moral condition of society.

But we are coming more and more to see that (apart from this last consideration) the disciplinary view of punishment alone commends itself to the moral sense. That is to say, society in punishing an offender must not be inspired by vindictiveness (that is the retributive view), nor punish him, at least primarily, for the sake of others (according to the deterrent view of punishment), but must be wholly and solely actuated by a desire for the offender's good, which in this case means his complete moral amendment. In other words, the ideal human conception of punishment is, the infliction of pain on the criminal in order that, through such discipline, he may cease to be a criminal. It is immoral to punish in the spirit of vindictiveness; it is immoral to punish one man for the good of others, for this is to treat humanity in him as a means and not an end. True human justice is disciplinary.

What is true of the loftiest of human ideas of punishment must *à fortiori* be true of all punishment inflicted by God—to use our ordinary anthropomorphic language. The Divine punishment of sin is, we may say with the utmost confidence, inflicted for one sole purpose—the amendment of the sinner. We cannot conceive of God as punishing for any other reason. The Divine chastisements of sin are wholly disciplinary. They are indeed infinitely varied in character, but all alike are means devised by His Divine wisdom, whereby 'His banished' may 'not be expelled from Him.'

This is a truth finely brought out, though unfortunately not maintained with absolute consistency, by Dr. Moberly.

But it follows from this, that any view (such as Dr. Dale's theory) of the Atonement which regards God's punishment as retributive—and how could, in any case, the Sinless One have been made the subject of retributive punishment?—must be regarded as untrue, because in absolute contradiction to any worthy conception of God. And this conclusion remains untouched, whether the retribution is regarded as exacted by God in revenge for a personal wrong done to Himself, or, so to speak, necessitated by an eternal law of righteousness.

And, before leaving Dr. Dale's book, we may note that the retributive notion is really at the root of the monstrous idea that the sufferings of our blessed Lord were equivalent in amount to those due from the whole of sinful mankind. This is, of course, a piece of pure mythology, unwarranted by any scriptural authority. But this theological nightmare represents the culmination of the immoral and irrational theory of retributive punishment.

3. We will now deal with the greatest contribution to the doctrine of the Atonement which has been made in recent years in the Anglican Church, the work of Dr. Moberly on *Atonement and Personality*. This book is indeed a monument of learning, of theological genius, of dialectical skill. Any attempt to deal with the doctrine of the Atonement must take this noble work into account.

I am, however, in the unfortunate position of being unable to accept some of Dr. Moberly's main contentions.

But before passing to the task of criticism, we must notice an aspect of Christian truth on which Dr. Moberly lays very great stress, and, by so doing, has made a contribution to Anglican theology of permanent and quite extraordinary value. I refer to his insistence on the connexion between the death of the Lord and the gift of the Holy Spirit, between Calvary and Pentecost. The Atoning work of Christ consists not in His death alone, but in that death followed by the Resurrection and Ascension and Descent of the Holy Ghost. The work of the Spirit is the consummation in the individual of the Atonement wrought by Christ. Without that presence of the Spirit of Christ in us, the work of Christ for us

must ever remain outside us, and, as far as we personally are concerned, inoperative and ineffectual. No theory of the Atonement is complete, and therefore true, which disconnects the Death of Christ from the bestowal of the Spirit of Christ.

But I cannot accept one of the leading thoughts of the book—in fact, in a sense, the very centre of Dr. Moberly's teaching. I mean the view of our blessed Lord as the Ideal Penitent. I say that this is practically the central point in the book, for it is Dr. Moberly's answer to the question, Why did Christ die? He teaches that upon the cross our blessed Lord offered up to the Father, as summing up in His own Person the whole of humanity, the sacrifice of perfect penitence. For what would be the attitude of the ideally perfect penitent? Essentially, it would be his complete self-identification with the Divine punishment, or the penalty allotted to sin. This punishment, joyfully accepted as the means of discipline and purification, would cease to be a punishment, and would become, in fact, itself penitence.

Now this central thought of Dr. Moberly's book appears to be open to two grave objections—

(a) On the philosophical side, Dr. Moberly appears to regard the general or abstract term, humanity, as having a real and substantive existence, somehow embodied in our blessed Lord. In short, this teaching appears to conflict with any adequate conception of personality.

(b) On the theological side, we ask in what conceivable sense can our Lord be described as a penitent—even as the ideally perfect penitent? The wonderful dialectical subtlety of Dr. Moberly's argument must not blind us to the existence here of a radical confusion of thought. Penitence in us implies the sense of having oneself sinned. This personal conviction of sin is not an accident, so to speak, of penitence. It is a part of the definition of penitence. Take that away, and penitence altogether ceases to be. Now, without doubt, Christ's sympathy with the sinner was really beyond all our powers of imagining. Equally without doubt He in a real sense identified Himself with the race He had come to save, and bore the painful consequences of human transgression. But there we must stop. It is admitted on all hands, that personal conviction of sin had no place in the inner experience of Christ. Then, where is

the sense or meaning of applying the title of penitent to our blessed Lord when the essential condition of penitence was absent from His consciousness? I contend that in this respect Dr. Moberly and those who think with him (for this particular view seems to have gained a certain currency now) have been guilty of the logical fallacy of using the same term to describe two entirely different things, and then building up an elaborate theory on this hopeless confusion. It is needless to say that there is not the slightest trace or hint of such a view in the Bible. We read of 'atonement,' of 'reconciliation,' of 'propitiation.' We are told that the Son through (the) Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God. St. Paul even goes so far as to say that God 'made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin.' But where can we find in the Scriptures the faintest allusion to the penitence of Christ? And is it likely that if this is the very essence of the Atonement, as Dr. Moberly makes it out to be, the inspired writers should be either entirely ignorant or wilfully silent in regard to such a fundamental truth?

I contend that however great stress we lay (and we could hardly lay too great a stress) on Christ's sympathy with the sinner, or His self-identification with our race, to apply to Him the terms 'penitent,' 'penitence,' involves a confounding of two entirely distinct things, is without warrant in Scripture, is based on an unphilosophical view of personality, and evacuates the terms in question of all meaning and reality.

4. No account of modern ways of regarding the Atonement would be complete without a reference, however brief, to the doctrines of Ritschl, who is the founder of a school of thought which has spread with extraordinary rapidity in Germany, and is making its influence increasingly felt at home. This system has been described as a combination of agnosticism and pietism. For Ritschl holds on the one hand, that all our knowledge of God is given us in Christ, and in the community which He has founded. Through Christ and His Church God reveals Himself as Love. As in Christ this revelation is made in surpassing fulness, therefore we may properly speak of Christ as Divine. But this revelation is only valid subjectively, *i.e.* within the domain of religious experience. To ask how far these ideas are objectively true, how far they are valid apart

from the Christian consciousness, is to put a perfectly unmeaning, or rather useless, question. For we can know nothing except as it is within our own experience. Christ is Divine for the religious consciousness, but we cannot speak of His Divinity as a fact in the objective sense, nor draw any conclusions as to what He is in Himself or to the world. We cannot take a step beyond our subjective experience. Thus the religious philosophy of Ritschl is a curious blend of extreme agnosticism and fervent Christian feeling. His view of the Atonement is therefore purely subjective. The work of Christ, His life, His teaching, His death create in man a certain type of character which answers to the Divine purpose for him. In life, and in His fidelity even to death, our Lord manifests the perfection of the spirit of Sonship. And His atoning work is, by the manifestation of this filial spirit, to reproduce it in man. Thus man, by coming to the knowledge of God and of himself in Christ, at length realizes his proper end. The great obstacle to this realization is man's slavish fear of God, due to his sense of guilt. But the revelation of God in Christ, as the perfect will of love, removes this fear, and exhibits the sense of guilt as a delusion, and thus does away with the only obstacle to the attainment by man of the proper aim of his being, the realization of himself as the son of God.

Now I believe that in Ritschl's contention lies the secret of the Atonement. For, while his theory is indeed seriously defective, its central thesis is profoundly true, in spite of these defects. It need scarcely be pointed out, that the two most obvious defects of his theory, are his denial of the objective validity of the verdicts of the religious consciousness, and his explaining away the sense of personal guilt. If God is Love—and this must be the foundation of any true doctrine of the Atonement—then the Divine nature must be utterly and finally hostile to sin, which is the very opposite and negation of love.

We have thus, however rapidly and cursorily, passed in review four typical modern theories of the Atonement. We have considered (1) the revival by Archdeacon Wilson, Mr. Rashdall, and others of the theory of Aberlard; (2) the teaching of Dr. Dale, that our Lord was undergoing on the cross the punishment for human sins, necessitated by the eternal law of righteousness; (3) the view of Dr. Moberly, which regards Jesus Christ as the

Perfect Penitent ; (4) the religious philosophy of Ritschl.

In each and all of these, in spite of many noble truths which they contain, serious defects have come to light, which present our adopting any of them as complete and satisfactory explanations of the Atonement.

I venture to think that any view of this doctrine, in order at once to do justice to the statements of the Bible, and to commend itself to our moral sense, must develop certain leading principles which seem to form the constituent elements of the scriptural doctrine of the Atonement.

1. Our Lord's death upon the cross was the supreme manifestation of the love of God for man. This is, after all, the cardinal teaching of the Cross. And it is the great merit of the theories of Abelard and Ritschl that they have seized and given clear expression to this great truth. 'In this,' writes St. John, 'we have come to know (ἐγνωκαμεν) what love is, because He laid down His life for us.' The Divine Love is exhibited, once for all, in the completest sacrifice of self. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life.'

Just because of this the Cross reveals the depths and the shame of sin, as noontide brightness makes the shadows deeper and more distinct. For one and the same fact shows in startling juxtaposition the glory of the Divine Love and the hatefulness, the cruelty, the degradation of human sin—the very antithesis of love. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is, in a sense, the centre of the world's history, for it is the meeting-place of those tremendous moral forces, the struggle between which constitutes the chief interest of the long-drawn out drama of our race.

The Cross then is teaching. It is the revelation of God as Love ; and therefore of the true nature and final issues of selfishness or sin.

2. Our Lord upon the Cross reveals not God only, but also Man.

The supreme revelation of human life made by Jesus Christ is the sonship of man to God, with all that sonship involves of oneness of nature and moral obligation. The realization of sonship is obedience. And the Cross was the crowning manifestation of the obedience of the Son of man. 'He became obedient unto death, and that the death of the Cross.' St. Paul will not allow us to separate the death of Christ from His life. That life was the perfect response of man to the love of

the Father. And the death was but the completed response, the climax of the life. 'He became obedient unto death,' for human obedience can go no farther than the willing surrender of life.

Yet we must be careful not to use language implying that Christ laid down His life in obedience to an arbitrary decree. His death came to Him as the result of His unswerving faithfulness. He simply 'did the will of Him that sent Him,' and the issue of obedience, clearly foreseen, was death. Had He shrunk from uttermost obedience, had He listened for a moment to urgent clamorous appeals, or to affectionate and tender remonstrances, He would have won not the Cross but the Crown. But the whole moral meaning of the Crucifixion is just that He did choose to obey to the uttermost, without shrinking from what that obedience involved.

As the Son of God, Christ reveals on the Cross the Love of the Eternal, so that men, seeing the Father in the Son, may be won to the life of Sonship. As Son of man, He realizes on the Cross the ideal of humanity, in completest response to the love of the Father, in filial obedience, perfected and consummated in Death.

3. This gives us the true meaning of sacrifice. It had long become obvious to the most spiritual minds in Israel, that God 'delighted not in burnt offerings,' that He could not 'be pleased with thousands of rams, and ten thousand rivers of oil.' That which gave to any sacrifice its value was the will and intention of the offerer, and not the material through which that will and intention found expression.

Sacrifice has become associated in our minds with ideas of suffering and death which do not properly belong to it. But in its origin, Professor Jevons maintains in his *Introduction to the History of Religion*, sacrifice was the means adopted by primitive man, not to appease, but to get into communion with his God. It meant, not death, but entrance into a higher and fuller life, by participation in the Divine nature. And in its essence, sacrifice is the glad response, in perfect self-surrender, of the free and rational being, to the Eternal Love which created it and sustains it in life. And the perfect obedience of the Son is the culmination of the long history of sacrifice, the Perfect Offering which reveals the meaning and glory of all sacrifice. All the sacrifices which have ever been offered, alike in heathen and Jewish

worship, have had moral meaning and moral value, just so far as they have exhibited some reflexion; however dim, of the Spirit of the Son of man, the response of filial obedience of man to God, of the Son to His Father. That which made the sacrifice of Christ acceptable, an 'offering of sweet savour,' was, as St. Bernard teaches us, 'not His death, but His willingness to die,' His obedience, of which the death upon the cross was the final and supreme expression.

4. The actual form of the sacrifice of Christ, the suffering and death which were in fact involved in it, though no part of its essence, was due to human sin. Our Lord realized on earth the perfect life of man, the life of filial obedience, and, in a world saturated with sin, the unfilial spirit of selfishness and disobedience, death was the inevitable issue of such a life. In a sinful world, one may say with reverence, Christ could not have fulfilled perfectly the Father's will, without submitting to the suffering and death which under such conditions this perfect fulfilment involved. We may say, indeed, that the Cross was an 'inseparable accident,' though not of the essence of the sacrifice. Its essence consisted in the obedience, the self-surrender, which did not count the cost, which shrunk from no pain, nay, not from death itself, in the 'doing of the will of Him that sent Him.'

5. And this sacrifice—the one only perfect and sufficient sacrifice, for it was the expression of perfect obedience—our Lord offered to the Father, not indeed instead of us, in the sense of absolving us from the necessity of obedience—but, in our name, as our Elder Brother, as the representative of the human race, in one word, as the Son of man. It was *ἀντὶ πολλῶν*, 'instead of,' as well as 'on behalf of' us, simply because we sinners, just by reason of our sin, were incapable of such an offering. He did what we could not do, and He did it as our Representative.

6. But more is needed to effect the "reconciliation" of man to God, his propitiation or the making of him acceptable in the sight of the All Holy. And this 'more,' by virtue of which the Death of Christ is a real Atonement or setting at one of God and man, is the communication to us of the very life of Jesus Christ. St. Paul dwells on the change of the status of the man who by baptism is incorporated into Christ's body. He is dead and risen with Christ. He is 'clothed upon'

with Christ. He 'has the spirit of Christ': he is (in this one phrase is summed up the theology of St. Paul) *ἐν Χριστῷ*. Henceforth the Spirit of Christ is alive and at work within him, henceforth he is 'a new creation' as slowly his own spirit is being transformed into the very likeness of Christ's own Spirit—the Spirit whereby the perfect humanity of the Incarnate Son of God was quickened and endowed with every spiritual gift. And the Spirit which he receives is the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Christ, so that, in a very real sense, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection become parts of his own inner life and experience. That which gave to the Cross its supreme moral value in the sight of God is already, though it be slowly and as yet in germ, making its appearance in him. Thus God can accept, can pardon the sinner who is 'in Christ,' because in very truth he is ceasing to be a sinner, and becoming more and more like Him 'who offered Himself without spot to God.' In the further steps of this spiritual process, the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen One so really becomes his own spirit that it can be said of him that 'he lives, yet no longer he, but Christ liveth in him.' The forces which were at work in the life of perfect filial obedience are at work also in him. The man who is thus 'in Christ' is necessarily reconciled to God, for he is in the closest union with the Son of His Love. God sees and accepts him 'in the Beloved,' for in him the barriers of sin and disobedience are ideally completely removed, and, in fact, in process of being removed.

This is what is meant by the Atonement, by the 'reconciliation' of man to God. Five times St. Paul, in reference to the work of Christ, uses the verb *καταλλάσσειν*, and in all five places he speaks of man being reconciled to God. The idea of God's being reconciled to man is an idea without any warrant in Scripture, reason, or conscience, an idea as unbiblical as it is misleading and untrue.

That man might be in fact, not by legal fiction, reconciled to God through a change in his moral nature wrought by union, through faith and sacramental means, with Him who died and rose again, that he might be really 'redeemed' from his sins, and not from any ulterior consequences of those sins, was the supreme object of the Life and Death, the Resurrection and Ascension of the Son of man, and of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.