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THE ATONEMENT: A REPLY.

The fact that so many have contributed to the Discussion on the former paper dealing with the subject of the Atonement is in itself an indication that present-day thought is being concentrated on the relationship between the work of the Incarnate Christ and the Salvation of the world. And the number of books published in recent years that treat of this topic is a further proof that this question possesses an interest and suggests problems of difficulty at this present time. There is, therefore, some justification for a supplementary paper in which points raised in the Discussion can be more fully treated.

At the outset, it must again be asked, Is it possible, and is it wise to attempt to formulate any doctrine of the Atonement? Is it not better to be content with accepting the fact, and to acquiesce in its complete transcendence? From the moral and intellectual difficulties which seem to him to beset one aspect of the problem of sin, Dean Ovenden finds refuge in the recognition of the transcendence of the Atonement. But this method of dealing with the subject is wholly unsatisfactory. There are no doubt, countless facts in past history which we are perfectly willing to accept without making any attempt to interpret them. We do not need to interpret them, because they lie outside the sphere of our experience. The facts are external to ourselves, they do not touch us. But a fact which has a profound bearing both upon thought and action—a fact which concerns the most potent relationships of life, this fact we are compelled to interpret. We may readily admit that our interpretation can only be partial, that there are some aspects of the fact which of necessity lie beyond our ken, but in so far as the fact touches ourselves we are bound to ask 'Why' and 'How.' A doctrine of the Atonement rightly viewed is an interpretation of the fact of the Atonement as affecting the purpose of God for man and the attitude of man towards God. Without such an interpretation the fact remains external, inoperative. "A right understanding of the Cross is far from being a matter of indifference. The Cross will certainly be to us what we believe it to mean, and the truer our conception of its meaning, the more effective will be its

power."¹ Further, it is admitted on all hands that in our own day many members of the Christian Church practically ignore the Atonement. They ignore it because they find themselves unable to accept the interpretation of the fact which they were formerly taught. If the thought of its transcendence to any extent enters into their mind it is only in this sense that they forthwith dismiss the whole subject as incomprehensible. "We must," says Mr. Temple, "have an intelligible scheme of salvation; we must have it, because precisely those people who most need the saving force are unable to receive it unless it is to some degree intelligible."

If then it is desirable to endeavour to interpret the fact of the Atonement, on what principle should the interpretation be founded? Archdeacon Sherlock objects to the method adopted in the former paper, which he describes as "too easy a way of obviating difficulties." It is mainly the treatment of two New Testament passages that calls forth this criticism, namely, the addition of the words "unto remission of sins" in the record of the institution of the Eucharist in the first Gospel, and the statement by St. Paul in Romans iii 24f. as to the purpose of our Lord's death. The former passage, the Archdeacon says, is regarded "merely as a gloss that has crept into the text": the latter as a passage in which St. Paul "may not have fully entered into our Lord's teaching or got rid of the effect of his Jewish education." If Archdeacon Sherlock refers again to the paper he will find that this is scarcely a correct representation of what is stated in it. The theory that the words quoted from the first Gospel are a gloss is put forward hypothetically, "the words *may* be one of the editorial comments of which there are many in the Gospel." It is, no doubt, an easy matter to frame an interpretation of the fact of the Atonement if passages in the New Testament which seem to be opposed to the interpretation are summarily dismissed as glosses. But in the case of the passage under consideration the structure of the first Gospel must be taken into account. It is held by those who have in recent years studied the Gospel most closely, that it has been edited more than once, and that each editor has contributed to it something of his own. Nearly thirty years ago, when the

¹ R. L. Walker, *The Gospel of Reconciliation*, p. 9.

² William Temple, *The Faith and Modern Thought*, p. 116.

modern method of New Testament criticism had scarcely been inaugurated, I received from Dr. Salmon a lesson in the critical study of the Gospels. He said,

"Read the record of the passion in the Gospel according to St. Mark, and you will note that the whole narrative bears the mark of historic accuracy. Read then the same record in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, and you will find that whereas practically the entire Marcan narrative is reproduced, there are certain additions which bear the semblance of being drawn from later and less trustworthy sources."

Since this lesson was given much has been done which emphasizes the position which Dr. Salmon then suggested. An interpreter is fully justified in claiming that words added in the first Gospel to a Marcan narrative *may* be an editorial comment. But, as I stated in the former paper, the words in question, if they are a correct reproduction of what our Lord said, do not conflict with what I contend is the general drift of His teaching as to the purpose of His redemptive work. The question as to the meaning of "the remission of sins" will be considered later on.

The interpretation of the passage in the Epistle to the Romans and its bearing upon the doctrine of the Atonement involves a further question of primary importance, viz.: What is the relative value of the Gospels and of the Epistles in points that concern the work of Christ on behalf of man? Are these two sections of the New Testament to be regarded as two co-ordinate authorities, or is the authority of the Epistles subsidiary to that of the Gospels? Archdeacon Sherlock classes together both sources of information. "The Gospels," he writes, "and the teaching of the Apostles are, at any rate, tolerably good sources of information." And Canon Carleton asks:

"Are not the Epistles which, to take the lowest view of them, present us with what is practically a *contemporanea expositio* of the teaching of Christ, more likely to be a true expression of that teaching than an interpretation of it only put forward in modern times?"

He immediately before this claims that "the Epistles confessedly support the traditional doctrine." But in the first place, there is no doctrine of the Atonement which can claim to have tradition exclusively on its side. And further, the verdict of the Epistles is by no means confessedly in favour of the view which Dr. Carleton supports. Even if it were so, the point must again be

pressed as to the attitude of the Apostles towards the Jewish sacrifices and the ritual of the Law during the period that intervened between the Ascension and the destruction of Jerusalem. It is important to notice in this connexion the counsel given to St. Paul by the leaders of the Church at Jerusalem and his acquiescence in that counsel.¹ It is impossible not to recognize that his Rabbinical training affected St. Paul's method of quoting and of interpreting the Old Testament.² Is it not obvious that the same influence operated in other matters, specially when he was addressing himself principally to a Jewish audience? This consideration leads on to a point on which special stress must be laid. The passages in the Epistles which seem to favour what Dr. Carleton calls "the traditional doctrine" of the Atonement are found in one group of St. Paul's epistles, a group very largely controversial, and in which he meets his Jewish opponents on their own ground and in accordance with their own method. If the group of epistles which comes next in point of date (Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians) is compared with the earlier group (Galatians, Corinthians, Romans), a marked change both in method and argument can be easily discerned. It is important to bear this in mind when estimating the weight that ought to be assigned to the testimony of the Epistles. The relative value of each group of epistles is by no means always recognized. In a recent exposition of the teaching of St. Paul on the Atonement it is contended that there are three essential elements in his interpretation of the great fact. These are—1. The necessity for a manifestation of the righteousness of God in view of sin. 2. That sin is doomed to death. 3. That Christ was made sin for us, or died for our sins.³ With much that Mr. Walker says in reference to these elements in Pauline teaching we are in perfect agreement. There are, however, two criticisms which must be urged against his method of treating the subject. In the first place, he relies almost exclusively on the testimony of the controversial group of epistles, and secondly, he does not give sufficient weight to the fact that, even in his subtle interpretation of the first of the three theses, the conception of the death of our Lord as

¹ Acts **xxi.** 20-26.

² See specially Gal. **iii.** 16, **iv.** 21-25.

³ *The Gospel of Reconciliation*, p. 12.

a manifestation of the righteousness of God is alien from the whole scope of our Lord's own teaching. Ethically, no doubt, the Cross was a crowning manifestation of that perfect righteousness which was content to suffer the worst penalty that human ingenuity could devise rather than bend even in the slightest from absolute loyalty to the highest law. In this aspect of his interpretation we are in full accord with Mr. Walker. But when he speaks of a judicial manifestation of God's righteousness (although he uses the words in a very different sense from that which has frequently been assigned to them), we look in vain for any indication of such a thought in the recorded teaching of our Lord.

It has been very frequently maintained that 'the traditional doctrine' of the Atonement takes account of the justice of God, whereas other interpretations of the great fact ignore this trait in His character. It is well to ask, before accepting this statement, what do we mean by the Justice of God?

"In the sense of treating all men equally, God is certainly just; He is no respecter of persons. But so far as justice means the infliction of pain on those who do wrong, without any intention to benefit them thereby, it is no virtue. Retributive justice is always either non-moral or immoral; a man has moral evil in him and you add physical evil; what is the good of doing that? Of course if the pain or physical evil has the effect of curing the moral evil its infliction is justifiable; but the notion that wickedness *ought* somehow to be balanced by pain seems to me wholly without foundation."¹

The thought expressed in these words is an indication of an altered conception of the true character of perfect moral government. "Moral government," Bishop Butler says,

"consists . . . in rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked, in rendering to men according to their actions considered as good or evil. And the perfection of moral government consists in doing this, with regard to all intelligent creatures, in an exact proportion to their personal merits or demerits."²

We should now hardly accept this as a description of ideal human government. The perfection of government according to our present ideas, consists in promoting the highest interests of the community at large and of each individual member of it. And in our

¹ *The Faith and Modern Thought*, p. 140.

² *Analogy*, Part I., chap. iii.

conception of God's government this thought is lifted up to its supreme and perfect realization. If, therefore, it should be contended that the obvious and natural interpretation of the words of St. Paul in Romans iii. 24, is that he regarded the death of our Lord as a vindication of what has been termed "the retributive justice of God," our reply is that if so the statement is not to be regarded as of co-ordinate authority with the teaching of Christ, especially in consideration of the fact that it occurs in a controversial epistle in which Jewish positions are combated on Jewish methods; and that under all circumstances there must be an appeal from the teaching even of an Apostle to the Revealer of the Father, to Him who alone could say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."¹

Dr. Carleton however thinks that the appeal is confirmatory: that in the teaching of our Lord the forgiveness of sin is regarded as one result of His atoning work. Here the whole question between us lies in this, what is forgiveness? The answer appears at first sight very simple. It is only when an attempt is made to formulate it that the difficulty of the exact conception becomes apparent. Of it we may truly say, "*Si non rogas intelligo.*" Forgiveness does not consist in the remission of penalty. On the one hand penalty may be remitted where forgiveness cannot properly be said to exist. When a king ascends the throne, criminals frequently have their sentences remitted or curtailed. There are also in civil government other circumstances in which motives of policy may lead to a remission of penalty. And in family life considerations of health may sometimes require that punishment should not be inflicted even for some serious offence. But in none of these cases does the act of indemnity correspond with our conception of forgiveness. On the other hand, forgiveness is constantly granted while the penalty remains. And in the dealings of God with man, we may confidently affirm that what may be called an external penalty (*i.e.*, a penalty other than the sin itself) is sometimes remitted where God cannot truly forgive,² and that He continually forgives where He does not remit. Most of the mistaken conceptions as to the purpose of the Atonement have issued from the belief that the supreme object

¹ St. John xiv. 6.

² A possible illustration may be found in the narrative in St. John v. 1-15.

was to procure a remission of penalty. And the desire for a remission of penalty arose from losing sight of the fact that God never punishes except with the object of benefiting His erring children, that it is "for chastening (discipline) that we endure."¹ The "penalty" of sin, which the atoning work of Christ removes, is the sin itself with its deadening, paralysing effect upon the will and the conscience of the sinner. And it is through the gift of divine Life that this result is brought to pass.

But if forgiveness cannot be said to consist in the remission of penalty, then what is forgiveness? It is an attitude of mind on the part of the person against whom the offence has been committed towards the offender, which is the outcome of love, faith, and hope. Forgiveness is essentially personal: it is the individual who sins, rather than the sin, that is forgiven. Love is the prompting cause of forgiveness. Joined with love, or rather involved in the love, there is faith in the sinner that he intends to do better in the future than in the past, and the confident hope that the expectation will be realized. "Love believeth all things, hopeth all things." The forgiveness of God is the offspring of His love, a love which brings Him into a sympathetic relationship with us in our weakness and our temptations, in the constant, inevitable conflict between the flesh and the spirit. God has moreover, as an integral element in His love, a boundless faith in every human being, faith that goodness is somewhere to be found in all, and that in all good will eventually triumph over evil. This is God's sure and certain hope; this is the centre of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As the Revealer of the Father our Lord in His Incarnate Life manifested the Love of God: the all-embracing Faith of God: the Hope of God which endures through countless disappointments and never knows despair.²

This revelation is the revelation of God's forgiveness. Dr. Carleton objects that in the former paper "the argument is based entirely on our Lord's parables of forgiveness, and simply on their silence as to a Mediator." He adds, "An argument from silence is usually unsatisfactory, and especially so in the case of parables, which from their nature can hardly be regarded as

¹ Hebrews xii. 7.

² I am indebted in this paragraph to an excellent paper on "The Atonement considered as Forgiveness," by Rev. F. T. Boys-Smith in the *Expository Times* for October, 1903.

exhaustive in their teaching." But he forgets that each of the parables alluded to in the paper had as its primary purpose the revelation of God's free forgiveness. The parable of the unmerciful servant was occasioned by the question of St. Peter, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?"¹ The centre of the lesson of the parable is to be found in the words "Even as I." To introduce the idea of a mediator is to destroy the parallel, and to overthrow the very lesson which the parable was intended to enforce. The parables of the Two Debtors and of the Prodigal Son were designed likewise to reveal God's free and full pardon of the penitent sinner. Dr. Carleton thinks that the relationship of father and son in the parable of the Prodigal Son implies a mediator. But in the first place, that is not the relationship employed in the other two parables of forgiveness. And further, can it for one moment be supposed that the alleged implied thought would have suggested itself to those in whose hearing the parable was spoken? And above all, the revelation of the Fatherhood of God lay at the root of the teaching of Jesus Christ, but He never hints that aught had to be done in order to constitute and render possible this relationship between God and man.

The passages in the fourth Gospel in which promises are given of answers to prayer offered in the name of our Lord allude to one aspect of what was the fundamental thought of the former paper. As the result of the Incarnate work of Christ, we are made members of the Body of which He is the Head. His Life animates and inspires each of His living members. Prayers offered in His name are prayers which spring from our being "in Christ"; it is as though He, not we, offered them, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."²

But what is to be said of the texts in which our Lord connects with His own work the proclamation of "the remission of sins"? This proclamation, like the prayers of which we have just been speaking, was to be made "in His name."³ It was the result, in part of the new revelation of the Father, in part of the means, henceforth

¹ St. Matthew xviii. 21.

² Gal. ii. 20. On the interpretation of prayer in the name of Christ, see Bishop Westcott's notes on St. John xiv. 13, 14 and xvi. 23, 24.

³ St. Luke xxiv. 47.

provided, through which sin itself, with all its consequences, was ultimately to be utterly destroyed.

By the Prophets and Psalmists in Old Testament times had been proclaimed the forgiveness of sins. Some of their utterances cannot be surpassed as expressions of the fulness and freeness of God's pardoning mercy. It is to be noted that this message of God's forgiveness is not by any Old Testament prophet connected with the Jewish sacrificial system. Invariably the forgiveness is represented as the outcome of the character of God and as being independent of any condition save that of the penitence of the sinner. How then was the Gospel message of forgiveness an advance upon the earlier message of the Prophets? Not assuredly for the reason suggested by Mr. Walker:

"It was not the old announcement of pardon to the penitent merely, but a proclamation of a Gospel of divine grace to the nation and ultimately to the world, in order that God's reign might be really and permanently established in their hearts."¹

To make the difference between the prophetic and the Pauline proclamation of God's forgiveness to consist in the fact that the Prophets regarded penitence as the condition of pardon, whereas St. Paul regards pardon as the moving cause of penitence is either to lay down a distinction which has no real meaning, or else a distinction which is not borne out by the testimony of the New Testament. We must look elsewhere to find the true significance of the Gospel message of the remission of sins. The Prophets failed largely to convince men of God's forgiveness, because the men of their day had no true conception of the character of God: they thought of Him as Ruler, Judge, and LORD. It was because Christ revealed God, revealed Him as Father, that His message of God's free and full pardon had a new power. And it is this self-same revelation that begets the penitence through which the operative power of that attitude of mind which we term forgiveness is rendered possible. Archdeacon Sherlock thinks that in the former paper too little stress was laid on penitence. He says that the real problem "consists in the inherent difficulty of human repentance (in the true sense), without which pardon is impossible." But it is love alone which produces real penitence, and it is because the Cross is the crowning

¹ *The Gospel of Reconciliation*, p. 64.

manifestation of infinite love that *via crucis* is not only *via lucis*, but *via paenitentiae* also.

"In Christ's agony we see what our sin costs God, and in his bearing before His enemies, we see how God regards us as we inflict the blow; 'when he was reviled, he reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not.' We cannot go on wounding One who accepts our blows like that; we are filled with fear, not the old craven fear of punishment, but the fear of wounding the tenderest of all hearts."¹

In estimating, moreover, the new power and meaning of the Gospel proclamation of the remission of sins, we must be careful not to separate Good Friday and Easter from Whit Sunday. It is in the ultimate destruction of sin by immanent divine Life that remission finds its true consummation.

And in this connexion it will be well to deal with the case suggested by Dean Ovenden, and with the subject generally of the Atonement in its relation to sin committed not only against God, but against our fellowmen. Many years ago, Dr. J. H. Jellett preached a sermon in Trinity College Chapel on the text, "My sin is ever before me." He dealt with a parallel case to that mentioned by the Dean, a case, alas! only too common, in which a man uses his manhood's strength to tempt into sin one of weaker nature than himself, the tempter afterwards repenting, but the victim of the temptation living and dying in sin. Dr. Salmon's verdict upon the case, when at the time it was referred to him, was: "If A leads B into sin, and afterwards A repents and B does not repent, A proves himself to be better than B." Probably such would have been his answer also to Dean Ovenden. But something more needs to be said, and in this respect also Canon Vere White's reply to the Dean must be supplemented, because the fact remains that but for A B might never have fallen into sin. In his sermon Dr. Jellett urged that in the Hereafter A would be permitted to seek out and lead back B, whom he had wronged. This suggests one line of thought in reference to all cases in which a man by his sin does a wrong to his neighbour which in this life he is unable to undo. It is quite conceivable that in course of time the wrong he has done may fade away from the culprit's memory, but surely one of his first experiences in the clearer light of the spirit world will be the full recognition of the wrong he did, the wrong of which our Lord said, "Woe

¹ *The Faith and Modern Thought*, p. 135.

to that man by whom the offence cometh."¹ And if, in the consciousness of the havoc he had wrought upon the destiny of one of his fellows, he was powerless to do anything on behalf of the victim of his sin, then indeed through all eternity a horror of great darkness must of necessity be round about him. But even Bishop Butler warns us not to suppose that "none can have the benefit of the general redemption, but such as have the advantage of being made acquainted with it in the present life."² And may we not add to this cautious admission the further assurance that the Author of the Great Redemption will not "see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied"³ until the great consummation has been reached when "God shall be all in all."⁴ Men in this life by sin not only offered against God, they also grievously injure their neighbours. Influence is a powerful weapon for evil as well as for good. Can we for one moment doubt that those who are the means of leading others astray, and who afterwards repent of their sin, are used by the Good Shepherd hereafter as well as here, in seeking those whom they themselves caused to wander until they are found and restored? It may be, it probably will be, a difficult and a painful work: but those who in that clearer light learn what sin is more fully than they ever knew it before will refuse nothing whereby they may undo the evil they did, and thereby have their own at-one-ment with God made perfect and complete. This at-one-ment means the absolute extinction of sin and all its effects: it means the perfecting of the divine Image in the redeemed of Jesus Christ. Archdeacon Sherlock points out the fundamental opposition between God and Satan as the fact in regard to sin that most impressed the early Christians as they thought about the sufferings of our Lord. This is perfectly true. Whether we regard evil as a personification or as embodied in an actual person, as it was this evil which compassed our Lord's death, so in its utter annihilation can His victory alone be made complete.

There have been, and in all probability there will continue to be, different interpretations of the fact of the Atonement. Those who differ can nevertheless agree that "the Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of

¹ St. Matthew xviii. 7.

² *Analogy*, Part II., chapter v.

³ Isaiah liii. 10.

⁴ 1 Cor. xv. 28.

the world"¹; and they can all unite in the prayer of the Church, "By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation, by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision, by thy Baptism, Fasting and Temptation, by thine Agony and bloody Sweat, by thy Cross and Passion, by thy precious Death and Burial, by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost, Good Lord, deliver us."

T. S. BERRY.

¹ 1 St. John iv. 14.