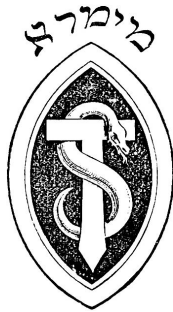


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# ON THE ATONEMENT.

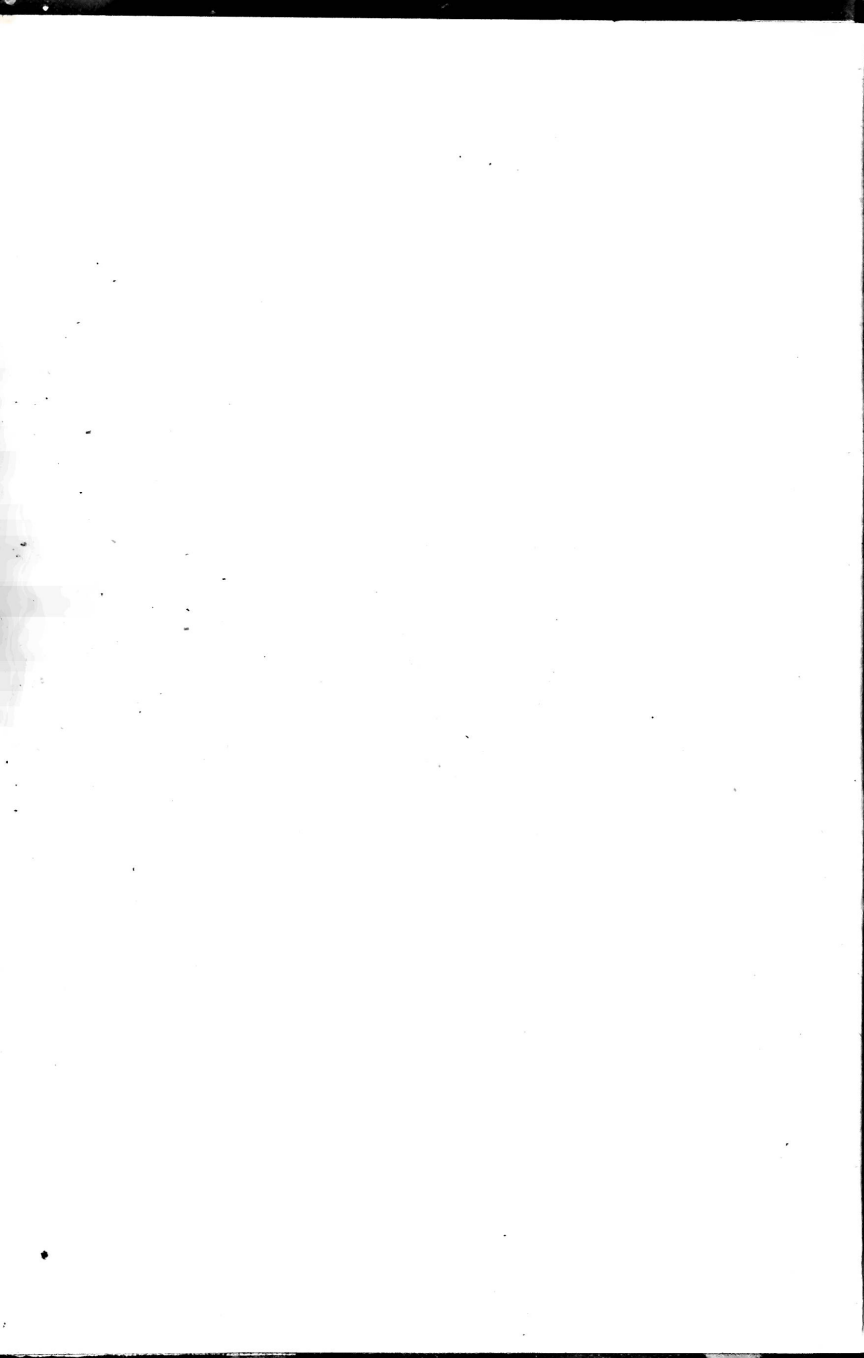
BY

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## ON THE ATONEMENT.

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THE Atonement may be regarded as the central doctrine of Christianity, the very *raison d'être* of the Christian faith. Take this away, and there would remain indeed a faith and a morality, but both would have lost their distinctive features : it would be a faith without its centre, and a morality without its foundation. Christianity would be unrecognisable without its angry God, its dying Saviour, its covenant signed with "the blood of the Lamb;" the blotting out of the atonement would deprive millions of all hope towards God, and would cast them from satisfaction into anxiety, from comfort into despair. The warmest feelings of Christendom cluster round the Crucifix, and he, the crucified one, is adored with passionate devotion, not as martyr for truth, not as witness for God, not as faithful to death, but as the substitute for his worshippers, as he who bears in their stead the wrath of God, and the punishment due to sin. The Christian is taught to see in the bleeding Christ the victim slain in his own place ; he himself should be hanging on that cross, agonised and dying ; those nail-pierced hands ought to be his ; the anguish on that face should be furrowed on his own ; the weight of suffering resting on that bowed head should be crushing himself into the dust. In the simplest meaning of the words, Christ is the sinner's substitute, and on him the sin of the world is laid : as Luther expressed it, he "is the greatest and only sinner;" literally "made sin" for

mankind, and expiating the guilt which, in very deed, was transferred from man to him.

I wish at the outset, for the sake of justice and candour, to acknowledge frankly the good which has been drawn forth by the preaching of the Cross. This good has been, however, the indirect rather than the direct result of a belief in the Atonement. The doctrine, in itself, has nothing elevating about it, but the teaching closely connected with the doctrine has its ennobling and purifying side. All the enthusiasm aroused in the human breast by the thought of one who sacrificed himself to save his brethren, all the consequent longing to emulate that love by sacrificing all for Jesus and for those for whom he died, all the moral gain caused by the contemplation of a sublime self-devotion, all these are the fruits of the nobler side of the Atonement. That the sinless should stoop to the sinful, that holiness should embrace the guilty in order to raise them to its own level, has struck a chord in men's bosoms which has responded to the touch by a harmonious melody of gratitude to the divine and sinless sufferer, and loving labour for suffering and sinful man. The Cross has been at once the apotheosis and the source of self-sacrificing love. "Love ye one another *as* I have loved you: not in word but in deed, with a deep self-sacrificing love:" such is the lesson which, according to one of the most orthodox Anglican divines, "Christ preaches to us from His Cross." In believing in the Atonement, man's heart has, as usual, been better than his head; he has passed over the dark side of the idea, and has seized on the divine truth that the strong should gladly devote themselves to shield the weak, that labour, even unto death, is the right of humanity from every son of man. It is often said that no doctrine long retains its hold on men's hearts which is not founded on some great truth; this divine idea of self-sacrifice has been the truth contained in the doctrine of the Atonement, which has made it so dear to many



loving and noble souls, and which has hidden its "multitude of sins"—sins against love and against justice, against God and against man. Love and self-sacrifice have floated the great error over the storms of centuries, and these cords still bind to it many hearts of which love and self-sacrifice are the glory and the crown.

This said, in candid homage to the good which has drawn its inspiration from Jesus crucified, we turn to the examination of the doctrine itself: if we find that it is as dishonouring to God as it is injurious to man, a crime against justice, a blasphemy against love, we must forget all the sentiments which cluster round it, and reject it utterly. It is well to speak respectfully of that which is dear to any religious soul, and to avoid jarring harshly on the strings of religious feeling, even though the soul be misled and the feeling be mis-directed; but a time comes when false charity is cruelty, and tenderness to error is treason to truth. For long men who know its emptiness pass by in silence the shrine consecrated by human hopes and fears, by love and worship, and the "times of this ignorance God (in the bold figure of Paul) also winks at;" but when "the fulness of the time is come," God sends forth some true son of his to dash the idol to the ground, and to trample it into dust. We need not be afraid that the good wrought by the lessons derived from the Atonement in time past will disappear with the doctrine itself; the mark of the Cross is too deeply ploughed into humanity ever to be erased, and those who no longer call themselves by the name of Christ are not the most backward scholars in the school of love and sacrifice.

The history of this doctrine has been a curious one. In the New Testament the atonement is, as its name implies, a simply making at one God and man: *how* this is done is but vaguely hinted at, and in order to deduce the modern doctrine from the bible, we must

import into the books of the New Testament all the ideas derived from theological disputations. Words used in all simplicity by the ancient writers must have attached to them the definite polemical meaning they hold in the quarrels of theologians, before they can be strained into supporting a substitutionary atonement. The idea, however, of "ransom" is connected with the work of Jesus, and the question arose, "to whom is this ransom paid?" They who lived in those first centuries of Christianity were still too much within the illumination of the tender halo thrown by Jesus round the Father's name, to dream for a moment that their redeemer had ransomed them from the beloved hands of God. No, the ransom was paid to the devil, whose thrall they believed mankind to be, and Jesus, by sacrificing himself, had purchased them from the devil and made them sons of God. It is not worth while to enter on the quaint details of this scheme, how the devil thought he had conquered and could hold Jesus captive, and was tricked by finding that his imagined gain could not be retained by him, and so on. Those who wish to become acquainted with this ingenious device can study it in the pages of the Christian fathers: it has at least one advantage over the modern plan, namely, that we are not so shocked at hearing of pain and suffering as acceptable to the supposed incarnate evil, as at hearing of them being offered as a sacrifice to the supreme good. As the teaching of Jesus lost its power, and became more and more polluted by the cruel thoughts of savage and bigoted men, the doctrine of the atonement gradually changed its character. Men thought the Almighty to be such a one as themselves, and being fierce and unforgiving and revengeful, they projected their own shadows on to the clouds which surrounded the Deity, and then, like the shepherd who meets his own form reflected and magnified on the mountain mist, they recoiled before the image they themselves had made.

The loving Father who sent his son to rescue his perishing children by sacrificing himself, fades away from the hearts of the Christian world, and there looms darkly in his place an awful form, the inexorable judge who exacts a debt man is too poor to pay, and who, in default of payment, casts the debtor into a hopeless prison, hopeless unless another pays to the uttermost farthing the fine demanded by the law. So, in this strange transformation-scene God actually takes the place of the devil, and the ransom once paid to redeem men from Satan, becomes the ransom paid to redeem men from God. It reminds one of the quarrels over the text which bids us "fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell," when we remain in doubt whom he is we are to fear, since half the Christian commentators assure us that it refers to our Father in heaven, while the other half asseverate that the devil is the individual we are to dread. The seal was set on the "redemption scheme" by Anselm in his great work, "*Cur Deus Homo*," and the doctrine which had been slowly growing into the theology of Christendom was thenceforward stamped with the signet of the church. Roman Catholics and Protestants, at the time of the Reformation, alike believed in the vicarious and substitutionary character of the atonement wrought by Christ. There is no dispute between them on this point. I prefer to allow the Christian divines to speak for themselves as to the character of the atonement: no one can accuse me of exaggerating their views if their views are given in their own words. Luther teaches that "Christ did truly and effectually feel for all mankind, the wrath of God, malediction and death." Flavel says that "to wrath, to the wrath of an infinite God without mixture, to the very torments of hell, was Christ delivered, and that by the hand of his own father." The Anglican homily preaches that "sin did pluck God out of heaven to make him feel the horrors and pains of death," and that man being a fire-

brand of hell and a bondsman of the devil, "was ransomed by "the death of his own only and well-beloved son;" the "heat of his wrath," "his burning wrath" could only be "pacified" by Jesus, "so pleasant was this sacrifice and oblation of his son's death." Edwards being logical, saw that there was a gross injustice in sin being twice punished, and in the pains of hell, the penalty of sin, being twice inflicted, first on Christ, the substitute of mankind, and then on the lost, a portion of mankind. So he, in common with most Calvinists, finds himself compelled to restrict the atonement to the elect, and declared that Christ bore the sins, not of the world, but of the chosen out of the world; he suffers "not for the world, but for them whom Thou hast given me." But Edwards adheres firmly to the belief in substitution, and rejects the universal atonement for the very reason that "to believe Christ died for all is the surest way of proving that he died for none in the sense Christians have hitherto believed." He declares that "Christ suffered the wrath of God for men's sins:" that "God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for" sin. Owen regards Christ's sufferings as "a full valuable compensation to the justice of God for all the sins" of the elect, and says that he underwent "that same punishment which . . . . they themselves were bound to undergo."

The doctrine of the Christian Church—in the widest sense of that much fought-over term—was then as follows, and I will state it in language which is studiously moderate, *as compared with the orthodox teaching* of the great Christian divines: if any one doubts this assertion let him study their writings for himself. I really dare not transfer some of their expressions to my own pages. God the Father having cursed mankind and condemned them to eternal damnation, because of Adam's disobedience in eating an apple—or some other fruit, for the species is only

preserved by tradition, and is not definitely settled by the inspired writings—and having further cursed each man for his own individual transgressions, man lay under the fierce wrath of God, unable to escape, and unable to pacify it, for he could not even atone for his own private sins, much less for his share of the guilt incurred by his forefather in paradise. Man's debt was hopelessly large, and he had "nothing to pay;" so all that remained to him was to suffer an eternity of torture, which sad fate he had merited by the crime of being born into an accursed world. The second person of the Trinity, moved to pity by the helpless and miserable state of mankind, interposed between the first person of the Trinity and the wretched sinners; he received into his own breast the fire-tipped arrows of divine wrath, and by suffering inconceivable tortures, equal in amount to an eternity of the torments of hell, he wrung from God's hands the pardon of mankind, or of a portion thereof. God, pacified by witnessing this awful agony of one who had from all eternity been "lying in his bosom" co-equal sharer of his Majesty and glory, and the object of his tenderest love, relents from his fierce wrath, and consents to accept the pain of Jesus as a substitute for the pain of mankind. In plain terms, then, God is represented as a Being so awfully cruel, so implacably revengeful, that pain *as* pain, and death *as* death, are what he demands as a propitiatory sacrifice, and with nothing less than extremest agony can his fierce claims on mankind be bought off. The due weight of suffering he must have, but it is a matter of indifference, whether it is undergone by Jesus or by mankind. Did not the old Fathers do well in making the awful ransom a matter between Jesus and the devil?

When this point is pressed on Christians, and one urges the dishonour done to God by painting him in colours from which heart and soul recoil in shuddering horror, by ascribing to him a revengefulness and



pitiless cruelty in comparison with which the worst efforts of human malignity appear but childish mischief, they are quick to retort that we are caricaturing Christian doctrine; they will allow, when overwhelmed with evidence, that "strong language" has been used in past centuries, but will say that such views are not now held, and that they do not ascribe such harsh dealing to God the Father. Theists are therefore compelled to prove each step of their accusation, and to quote from Christian writers the words which embody the views they assail. Were I simply to state that Christians in these days ascribe to Almighty God a fierce wrath against the whole human race, that this wrath can only be soothed by suffering and death, that he vents this wrath on an innocent head, and that he is well pleased by the sight of the agony of his beloved Son, a shout of indignation would rise from a thousand lips, and I should be accused of exaggeration, of false witness, of blasphemy. So once more I write down the doctrine from Christian dictation, and, be it remembered, the sentences I quote are from published works, and are therefore the outcome of serious deliberation; they are not overdrawn pictures taken from the fervid eloquence of excited oratory, when the speaker may perhaps be carried further than he would, in cold blood, consent to.

Stroud makes Christ drink "the cup of the wrath of God." Jenkyn says, "he suffered as one disowned and reprobated and forsaken of God." Dwight considers that he endured God's "hatred and contempt." Bishop Jeune tells us that "after man had done his worst, worse remained for Christ to bear. He had fallen into his father's hands." Archbishop Thomson preaches that "the clouds of God's wrath gathered thick over the whole human race: they discharged themselves on Jesus only;" he "becomes a curse for us, and a vessel of wrath." Liddon echoes

the same sentiment : "the apostles teach that mankind are slaves, and that Christ on the Cross is paying their ransom. Christ crucified is voluntarily devoted and accursed : " he even speaks of "the precise amount of ignominy and pain needed for the redemption," and says that the "divine victim" paid more than was absolutely necessary.

These quotations seem sufficient to prove that the Christians of the present day are worthy followers of the elder believers. The theologians first quoted are indeed coarser in their expressions, and are less afraid of speaking out exactly what they believe, but there is no real difference of creed between the awful doctrine of Flavel and the polished dogma of Canon Liddon. The older and the modern Christians alike believe in the bitter wrath of God against "the whole human race." Both alike regard the atonement as so much pain tendered by Jesus to the Almighty Father in payment of a debt of pain owed to God by humanity. They alike represent God as only to be pacified by the sight of suffering. Man has insulted and injured God, and God must be revenged by inflicting suffering on the sinner in return. The "hatred and contempt" God launched at Jesus were due to the fact that Jesus was the sinner's substitute, and are therefore the feelings which animate the divine heart towards the sinner himself. God hates and despises the world. He would have "consumed it in a moment" in the fire of his burning wrath, had not Jesus, "his chosen, stood before him in the gap to turn away his wrathful indignation."

Now how far is all this consistent with justice? Is the wrath of God against humanity justified by the circumstances of the case so that we may be obliged to own that some sacrifice was due from sinful man to his Creator, to propitiate a justly incensed and holy God? I trow not. On this first count, the atonement is a fearful injustice. For God has allowed

men to be brought into the world with sinful inclinations, and to be surrounded with many temptations and much evil. He has made man imperfect, and the child is born into the world with an imperfect nature. It is radically unjust then that God should curse the work of His hands for being what He made them, and condemn them to endless misery for failing to do the impossible. Allowing that Christians are right in believing that Adam was sinless when he came from his Maker's hands, these remarks apply to every other living soul since born into the world; the Genesis myth will not extricate Christians from the difficulty. Christians are quite right and are justified by facts when they say that man is born into the world frail, imperfect, prone to sin and error; but who, we ask them, made men so? Does not their own Bible tell them that the "potter hath power over the clay," and, further, that "we are the clay and thou art the potter?" To curse men for being men, *i.e.*, imperfect moral beings, is the height of cruelty and injustice; to condemn the morally weak to hell for sin, *i.e.*, for failing in moral strength, is about as fair as sentencing a sick man to death because he cannot stand upright. Christians try and avoid the force of this by saying that men should rely on God's grace to uphold them, but they fail to see that this *very want of reliance* is part of man's natural weakness. The sick man might be blamed for falling because he did not lean on a stronger arm, but suppose he was too weak to grasp it? Further, few Christians believe that it is possible in practice, however possible in theory, to lead a perfect life; and as to "offend in one point is to be guilty of all," one failure is sufficient to send the generally righteous man to hell. Besides, they forget that infants are included under the curse, although *necessarily* incapable of grasping the idea either of sin or of God; all babies born into the world and dying before becoming capable of acting for themselves



would, we are taught, have been inevitably consigned to hell, had it not been for the atonement of Jesus. Some Christians actually believe that unbaptized babies are not admitted into heaven, and in a Roman Catholic book descriptive of hell, a poor little baby writhes and screams in a red-hot oven.

This side of the atonement, this unjust demand on men for a righteousness they could not render, necessitating a sacrifice to propitiate God for non-compliance with his exaction, has had its due effect on men's minds, and has alienated their hearts from God. No wonder that men turned away from a God who, like a passionate but unskilful workman, dashes to pieces the instrument he has made because it fails in its purpose, and, instead of blaming his own want of skill, vents his anger on the helpless thing that is only what he made it. Most naturally, also, have men shrunk from the God who "avengeth and is furious" to the tender, pitiful, human Jesus, who loved sinners so deeply as to choose to suffer for their sakes. They could owe no gratitude to an Almighty Being who created them and cursed them, and only consented to allow them to be happy on condition that another paid for them the misery he demanded as his due; but what gratitude could be enough for him who rescued them from the fearful hands of the living God, at the cost of almost intolerable suffering to himself? Let us remember that Christ is said to suffer the very torments of hell, and that his worst sufferings were when "fallen into his father's hands," out of which he has rescued us, and then can we wonder that the crucified is adored with a very ecstasy of gratitude? Imagine what it is to be saved from the hands of him who inflicted an agony admitted to be unlimited, and who took advantage of an infinite capacity in order to inflict an infinite pain. It is well for the men before whose eyes this awful spectre has flitted that the fair humanity of Jesus gives them a refuge to fly to, else what but despair and

madness could have been the doom of those who, without Jesus, would have seen enthroned above the wailing universe naught but an infinite cruelty and an Almighty foe.

We see, then, that the necessity for an atonement makes the Eternal Father both unjust in his demands on men and cruel in his punishment of inevitable failure; but there is another injustice which is of the very essence of the atonement itself. This consists in the vicarious character of the sacrifice: a new element of injustice is introduced when we consider that the person sacrificed is not even the guilty party. If a man offends against law, justice requires that he should be punished: the punishment becomes unjust if it is excessive, as in the case we have been considering above; but it is equally unjust to allow him to go free without punishment. Christians are right in affirming that moral government would be at an end were man allowed to sin with impunity, and did an easy forgiveness succeed to each offence. They appeal to our instinctive sense of justice to approve the sentiment that punishment should follow sin: we acquiesce, and hope that we have now reached a firm standing-ground from which to proceed further in our investigation. But, no; they promptly outrage that same sense of justice which they have called as a witness on their side, by asking us to believe that its ends are attained provided that somebody or other is punished. When we reply that *this* is not justice, we are promptly bidden not to be presumptuous and argue from our human ideas of justice as to the course that ought to be pursued by the absolute justice of God. "Then why appeal to it at all?" we urge; "why talk of justice in the matter if we are totally unable to judge as to the rights and wrongs of the case?" At this point we are commonly overwhelmed with Paul's notable argument—"Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" But if Christians value the simplicity and straight-

forwardness of their own minds, they should not use words which convey a certain accepted meaning in this shuffling, double sense. When we speak of "justice," we speak of a certain well-understood quality, and we do not speak of a mysterious divine attribute, which has not only nothing in common with human justice, but which is in direct opposition to that which we understand by that name. Suppose a man condemned to death for murder: the judge is about to sentence him, when a bystander—as it chances, the judge's own son—interposes: "My Lord, the prisoner is guilty and deserves to be hanged; but if you will let him go, I will die in his place." The offer is accepted, the prisoner is set free, the judge's son is hanged in his stead. What is all this? Self-sacrifice (however mis-directed), love, enthusiasm—what you will; but certainly not *justice*—nay, the grossest injustice, a second murder, an ineffaceable stain on the ermine of the outraged law. I imagine that, in this supposed case, no Christian will be found to assert that justice was done; yet call the judge God, the prisoner mankind, the substitute Jesus, and the trial scene is exactly reproduced. Then, in the name of candour and common sense, why call that just in God which we see would be so unjust and immoral in man? This vicarious nature of the atonement also degrades the divine name, by making him utterly careless in the matter of punishment: all he is anxious for, according to this detestable theory, is that he should strike a blow *somewhere*. Like a child in a passion, he only feels the desire to hurt somebody, and strikes out vaguely and at random. There is no discrimination used; the thunderbolt is launched into a crowd; it falls on the head of the "sinless son," and crushes the innocent, while the sinner goes free. What matter? It has fallen somewhere, and the "burning fire of his wrath" is cooled. This is what men call the vindication of the justice of the Moral Governor of the universe: this is "the act of

God's awful holiness," which marks his hatred of sin, and his immovable determination to punish it. But when we reflect that this justice is consistent with letting off the guilty and punishing an innocent person, we feel dread misgivings steal into our minds. The justice of our Moral Governor has nothing in common with our justice—indeed, it violates all our notions of right and wrong. What if, as Mr Vance Smith suggests, this strange justice be consistent also with a double punishment of sin; and what if the Moral Governor should bethink himself that, having confused morality by an unjust—humanly speaking, of course—punishment, it would be well to set things straight again by punishing the guilty after all? We can never dare to feel safe in the hands of this unjust—humanly speaking—Moral Governor, or predicate from our instinctive notions of right and wrong what his requirements may be. One is lost in astonishment that men should believe such things of God, and not have manhood enough to rise up rebellious against such injustice—should, instead, crouch at his feet, and while trying to hide themselves from his wrath should force their trembling lips to murmur some incoherent acknowledgment of his mercy. Ah! they do not believe it; they assert it in words, but, thank God, it makes no impression on their hearts; and they would die a thousand deaths rather than imitate, in their dealings with their fellow-men, the fearful cruelty which the Church has taught them to call the justice of the Judge of all the earth.

The Atonement is not only doubly unjust, but it is perfectly futile. We are told that Christ took away the sin of the world; we have a right to ask, "how?" So far as we can judge, we bear our sins in our own bodies still, and the Atonement helps us not at all. Has he borne the physical consequences of sin, such as the loss of health caused by intemperance of all kinds? Not at all, this penalty remains, and, from the nature

of things, cannot be transferred. Has he borne the social consequences, shame, loss of credit, and so on? They remain still to hinder us as we strive to rise after our fall. Has he at least borne the pangs of remorse for us, the stings of conscience? By no means; the tears of sorrow are no less bitter, the prickings of repentance no less keen. Perhaps he has struck at the root of evil, and has put away sin itself out of a redeemed world? Alas! the wailing that goes up to heaven from a world oppressed with sin weeps out a sorrowfully emphatic, "no, this he has *not* done." What has he then borne for us? Nothing, save the phantom wrath of a phantom tyrant; all that is real exists the same as before. We turn away, then, from the offered Atonement with a feeling that would be impatience at such trifling, were it not all too sorrowful, and leave the Christians to impose on their imagined sacrifice, the imagined burden of the guilt of an accursed race.

Further, the Atonement is, from the nature of things, entirely impossible: we have seen how Christ fails to bear our sins in any intelligible sense, but can he, in any way, bear the "punishment" of sin? The idea that the punishment of sin can be transferred from one person to another is radically false, and arises from a wrong conception of the punishment consequent on sin, and from the ecclesiastical guilt, so to speak, thought to be incurred thereby. *The only true punishment of sin is the injury caused by it to our moral nature*: all the indirect punishments, we have seen, Christ has not taken away, and the true punishment can fall only on ourselves. For sin is nothing more than the transgression of law. All law, when broken, entails *of necessity* an appropriate penalty, and recoils, as it were, on the transgressor. A natural law, when broken, avenges itself by consequent suffering, and so does a spiritual law: the injury wrought by the latter is not less real, although less obvious. Physical sin



brings physical suffering; spiritual, moral, mental sin brings each its own appropriate punishment. "Sin" has become such a cant term that we lose sight, in using it, of its real simple meaning, a breaking of law. Imagine any sane man coming and saying, "My dear friend, if you like to put your hand into the fire I will bear the punishment of being burnt, and you shall not suffer." It is quite as absurd to imagine that if I sin Jesus can bear my consequent suffering. If a man lies habitually, for instance, he grows thoroughly untrue: let him repent ever so vigorously, he must bear the consequences of his past deeds, and fight his way back slowly to truthfulness of word and thought: no atonement, nothing in heaven or earth save his own labour, will restore to him the forfeited jewel of instinctive candour. Thus the "punishment" of untruthfulness is the loss of the power of being true, just as the punishment of putting the hand into the fire is the loss of the power of grasping. But in addition to this simple and most just and natural "retribution," theologians have invented certain arbitrary penalties as a punishment of sin, the wrath of God and hell fire. These imaginary penalties are discharged by an equally imaginary atonement, the natural punishment remaining as before; so after all we only reject the two sets of inventions which balance each other, and find ourselves just in the same position as they are, having gained infinitely in simplicity and naturalness. The punishment of sin is not an arbitrary penalty, but an inevitable sequence: Jesus may bear, if his worshippers will have it so, the theological fiction of the "*guilt* of sin," an idea derived from the ceremonial uncleanness of the Levitical law, but let him leave alone the solemn realities connected with the sacred and immutable laws of God.

Doubly unjust, useless, and impossible, it might be deemed a work of supererogation to argue yet further against the Atonement; but its hold on men's minds

is too firm to allow us to lay down a single weapon which can be turned against it. So, in addition to these defects, I remark that, viewed as a propitiatory sacrifice to Almighty God, it is thoroughly inadequate. If God, being righteous, as we believe Him to be, regarded man with anger because of man's sinfulness, what is obviously the required propitiation? Surely the removal of the cause of anger, *i.e.*, of sin itself, and the seeking by man of righteousness. The old Hebrew prophet saw this plainly, and his idea of atonement is the true one: "*wherewith* shall I come before the Lord," he is asked, with burnt-offerings or—choicer still—parental anguish over a first-born's corpse? "What doth the Lord require of thee," is the reproving answer, "but to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" But what is the propitiatory element in the Christian Atonement? let Canon Liddon answer: "the ignominy and pain *needed* for the redemption." Ignominy, agony, blood, death, these are what Christians offer up as an acceptable sacrifice to the Spirit of Love. But what have all these in common with the demands of the Eternal Righteousness, and how can pain atone for sin? they have no relation to each other; there is no appropriateness in the offered exchange. These terrible offerings are in keeping with the barbarous ideas of uncivilized nations, and we understand the feelings which prompt the savage to immolate tortured victims on the altars of his gloomy gods; they are appropriate sacrifices to the foes of mankind, who are to be bought off from injuring us by our offering them an equivalent pain to that they desire to inflict, but they are offensive when given to Him who is the Friend and Lover of Humanity. An Atonement which offers suffering as a propitiation can have nothing in common with God's will for man, and must be utterly beside the mark, perfectly inadequate. If we must have Atonement, let it at least consist of something which will suit the

Righteousness and Love of God, and be in keeping with his perfection ; let it not borrow the language of ancient savagery, and breathe of blood and dying victims, and tortured human frames, racked with pain.

Lastly, I impeach the Atonement as injurious in several ways to human morality. It has been extolled as "meeting the needs of the awakened sinner" by soothing his fears of punishment with the gift of a substitute who has already suffered his sentence for him ; but nothing can be more pernicious than to console a sinner with the promise that he shall escape the punishment he has justly deserved. The atonement may meet the first superficial feelings of a man startled into the consciousness of his sinfulness, it may soothe the first vague fears and act as an opiate to the awakened conscience ; but it does *not* fulfil the cravings of a heart deeply yearning after righteousness ; it offers a legal justification to a soul which is longing for purity, it offers freedom from *punishment* to a soul longing for freedom from *sin*. The true penitent does not seek to be shielded from the consequences of his past errors : he accepts them meekly, bravely, humbly, learning through pain the lesson of future purity. An atonement which steps in between us and this fatherly discipline ordained by God, would be a curse and not a blessing ; it would rob us of our education and deprive us of a priceless instruction. The force of temptation is fearfully added to by the idea that repentance lays the righteous penalty of transgression on another head ; this doctrine gives a direct encouragement to sin, as even Paul perceived when he said, "shall we continue in sin that grace may abound ?" Some one has remarked, I think, that though Paul ejaculates, "God forbid," his fears were well founded and have been widely realised. To the atonement we owe the morbid sentiment which believes in the holy death of a ruffianly murderer, because, goaded by ungovernable terror, he has snatched at the offered



safety and been "washed in the blood of the lamb." To it we owe the unwholesome glorying in the pious sentiments of such an one, who ought to go out of this life sadly and silently, without a sickening parade of feelings of love towards the God whose laws, as long as he could, he has broken and despised. But the Christian teachers will extol the "saving grace" which has made the felon die with words of joyful assurance, meet only for the lips of one who crowns a saintly life with a peaceful death. The atonement has weakened that stern condemnation of sin which is the safe-guard of purity; it has softened down moral differences and placed the penitent above the saint; it has dulled the feeling of responsibility in the soul; it has taken away the help, such as it is, of fear of punishment for sin; it has confused man's sense of justice, outraged his feeling of right, blunted his conscience, and mis-directed his repentance. It has chilled his love to God by representing the universal father as a cruel tyrant and a remorseless and unjust judge. It has been the fruitful parent of all asceticism, for, since God was pacified by suffering once, he would of course be pleased with suffering at all times, and so men have logically ruined their bodies to save their souls, and crushed their feelings and lacerated their hearts to propitiate the awful form frowning behind the cross of Christ. To the atonement we owe it that God is served by fear instead of by love, that monasticism holds its head above the sweet sanctities of love and home, that religion is crowned with thorns and not with roses, that the *miserere* and not the *gloria* is the strain from earth to heaven. The atonement teaches men to crouch at the feet of God, instead of raising loving joyful faces to meet his radiant smile; it shuts out his sunshine from us and veils us in the night of an impenetrable dread. What is the sentiment with which Canon Liddon closes a sermon on the death of Christ; I quote it to show the slavish feeling

engendered by this doctrine in a very noble human soul: "In ourselves, indeed, there is nothing that should stay his (God's) arm or invite his mercy. But may he have respect to the acts and the sufferings of his sinless son? Only while contemplating the inestimable merits of the Redeemer can we dare to hope that our heavenly Father will overlook the countless provocations which he receives at the hands of the redeemed." Is this a wholesome sentiment either as regards our feelings towards God or our efforts towards holiness? Is it well to look to the purity of another as a makeweight for our personal shortcomings? All these injuries to morality done by the atonement are completed by the crowning one, that it offers to the sinner a veil of "imputed righteousness." Not only does it take from him his saving punishment, but it nullifies his strivings after holiness by offering him a righteousness which is not his own. It introduces into the solemn region of duty to God the legal fiction of a gift of holiness, which is imputed, not won. We are taught to believe that we can blind the eyes of God and satisfy him with a pretended purity. But that very one whose purity we seek to claim as ours, that fair blossom of humanity, Jesus of Nazareth, whose mission we so misconstrue, launched his anathema at whited sepulchres, pure without and foul within. What would he have said of the whitewash of "imputed righteousness?" Stern and sharp would have been his rebuke, methinks, to a device so untrue, and well-deserved would have been his thundered "woe" on a hypocrisy that would fain deceive God as well as man.

These considerations have carried so great a weight with the most enlightened and progressive minds among Christians themselves, that there has grown up a party in the Church, whose repudiation of an atonement of agony and death is as complete as even we could wish. They denounce with the utmost fervour

the hideous notion of a "bloody sacrifice," and are urgent in their representations of the dishonour done to God by ascribing to him "pleasure in the death of him that dieth," or satisfaction in the sight of pain. They point out that there is no virtue in blood to wash away sin, not even "in the blood of a God." Maurice eloquently pleads against the idea that the suffering of the "well-beloved Son" was in itself an acceptable sacrifice to the Almighty Father, and he sees the atoning element in the "holiness and graciousness of the Son." Writers of this school perceive that a moral and not a physical sacrifice can be the only acceptable offering to the Father of spirits, but the great objection lies against their theory also, that the atonement is still vicarious. Christ still suffers *for* man, in order to make men acceptable to God. It is perhaps scarcely fair to say this of the school as a whole, since the opinions of Broad Church divines differ widely from each other, ranging from the orthodox to the Socinian standing-point. Yet, roughly speaking, we may say that while they have given up the error of thinking that the death of Christ reconciles God to us, they yet believe that his death, in some mysterious manner, reconciles us to God. It is a matter of deep thankfulness that they give up the old cruel idea of propitiating God, and so prepare the way for a higher creed. Their more humane teaching reaches hearts which are as yet sealed against us, and they are the John Baptist of the Theistic Christ. We must still urge on them that an atonement at all is superfluous, that all the parade of reconciliation by means of *a* mediator is perfectly unnecessary as between God and his child, man; that the notion put forward that Christ realised the ideal of humanity and propitiated God by showing what a man *could* be, is objectionable in that it represents God as needing to be taught what were the capacities of his creatures, and is further untrue, because the powers of God in

man are not really the equivalent of the capabilities of a simple man. Broad Churchmen are still hampered by the difficulties surrounding a divine Christ, and are puzzled to find for him a place in their theology which is at once suitable to his dignity, and consistent with a reasonable belief. They feel obliged to acknowledge that some unusual benefit to the race must result from the incarnation and death of a God, and are swayed alternately by their reason, which places the crucifixion of Jesus in the roll of martyrs' deaths, and by their prejudices, which assign to it a position unique and unrivalled in the history of the race. There are, however, many signs that the deity of Jesus is, as an article of faith, tottering from its pedestal in the Broad Church school. The hold on it by such men as the Rev. J. S. Brooke is very slight, and his interpretation of the incarnation is regarded by orthodox divines with unmingled horror. Their *moral* atonement, in turn, is as the dawn before the sunrise, and we may hope that it will soon develop into the real truth: namely, that the dealings of Jesus with the Father were a purely private matter between his own soul and God, and that his value to mankind consists in his being one of the teachers of the race, one "with a genius for religion," one of the schoolmasters appointed to lead humanity to God.

The theory of M'Leod Campbell stands alone, and is highly interesting and ingenious—it is the more valuable and hopeful as coming from Scotland, the home of the dreariest belief as to the relations existing between man and God. He rejects the penal character of the atonement, and makes it consist, so to speak, in leading God and man to understand one another. He considers that Christ witnessed to men on behalf of God, and vindicated the father's heart by showing what he could be to the son who trusted in him. He witnessed to God on behalf of men—and this is the weakest point in the book, verging, as it

does, on substitution—showing in humanity a perfect sympathy with God's feelings towards sin, and offering to God for man a perfect repentance for human transgression. I purposely say "verging," because Campbell does not *intend* substitution; he represents this sorrow of Jesus as what he must inevitably feel at seeing his brother-men unconscious of their sin and danger, so no fiction is supposed as between God and Christ. But he considers that God, having seen the perfection of repentance in Jesus, accepts the repentance of man, imperfect as it is, because it is *in kind* the same as that of Jesus, and is the germ of that feeling of which his is the perfect flower; in this sense, and only in this sense, is the repentance of man accepted "for Christ's sake." He considers that men must share in the mind of Christ as towards God and towards sin in order to be benefited by the work of Christ, and that each man must thus actually take part in the work of atonement. The sufferings of Jesus he regards as necessary in order to test the reality of the life of sonship towards God, and brotherhood towards men, which he came to earth to exemplify. I trust I have done no injustice in this short summary to a very able and thoughtful book, which presents, perhaps, the only view of the atonement compatible with the love and the justice of God, and this only, of course, if the idea of *any* atonement can fairly be said to be consistent with justice. The merits of this view are practically that this work of Jesus is not an "atonement" in the theological sense at all. The defects of Campbell's book are inseparable from his creed, as he argues from a belief in the deity of Jesus, from an unconscious limitation of God's knowledge (as though God did not understand man till he was revealed to him by Jesus) and from a wrong conception of the punishment due to sin.

I said, at starting, that the atonement was the *raison d'être* of Christianity, and, in conclusion, I would

challenge all thoughtful men and women to say whether good cause has or has not been shown for rejecting this pillar "of the faith." The atonement has but to be studied in order to be rejected. The difficulty is to persuade people to *think* about their creed. Yet the question of this doctrine must be faced and answered. "I have too much faith in the common sense and justice of Englishmen when once awakened to face any question fairly, to doubt what that answer will be."

ANNIE BESANT.

