

MODERN THEORIES OF THE ATONEMENT¹

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We may as well confess at the outset that there is no such thing as a modern theory of the Atonement, in the sense in which there is a modern theory, say, of the Incarnation—the kenosis theory to wit, which is a brand-new conception, never dreamed of until the nineteenth century was well on its course, and likely, we may hope, to pass out of notice with that century. All the theories of the Atonement now current readily arrange themselves under the old categories, and have their prototypes running back more or less remotely into the depths of Church history.

The fact is, the views men take of the atonement are largely determined by their fundamental feelings of need—by what men most long to be saved from. And from the beginning three well-marked types of thought on this subject have been traceable, corresponding to three fundamental needs of human nature as it unfolds itself in this world of limitation. Men are oppressed by the ignorance, or by the misery, or by the sin in which they feel themselves sunk; and, looking to Christ to deliver them from the evil under which they particularly labor, they are apt to conceive His work as consisting predominantly in revelation of divine knowledge, or in the inauguration of a reign of happiness, or in deliverance from the curse of sin.

In the early Church, the intellectualistic tendency allied itself with the class of phenomena which we call Gnosticism. The longing for peace and happiness that was the natural result of the crying social evils of the time, found its most remarkable expression in what we know as Chiliasm. That no such party-name suggests itself to describe the manifestation given to the longing to be delivered from the curse of sin, does not mean that this longing was less prominent or less poignant: but precisely the contrary. The other views were sloughed off as heresies, and each received its appropriate designation as such: this was the fundamental point of sight of the Church itself, and as such found expression in numberless ways, some of which, no doubt, were sufficiently bizarre—as, for example, the somewhat widespread representation of the atonement as centering in the surrender of Jesus as a ransom to Satan.

Our modern Church, you will not need me to tell you, is very much like the early Church in all this. All three of these tendencies find as full representation in present-day thought as in any age of the Church's life. Perhaps at no other period was Christ so frequently or so passionately set forth as merely a social Saviour. Certainly at no other period has His work been so prevalently summed up in mere revelation. While now, as ever, the hope of Christians at large continues to be set upon Him specifically as the Redeemer from sin.

The forms in which these fundamental types of thinking are clothed in our modern days, differ, as a matter of course, greatly from those they assumed in the first age. This difference is largely the result of the history of thought through the intervening centuries.

¹ An address delivered at the "Religious Conference," held in the Theological Seminary, Princeton, on October 13, 1902. Reprinted from *The Princeton Theological Review*, i. 1903, pp. 81-92.

The assimilation of the doctrines of revelation by the Church was a gradual process; and it was also an orderly process—the several doctrines emerging in the Christian consciousness for formal discussion and scientific statement in a natural sequence. In this process the doctrine of the atonement did not come up for formulation until the eleventh century, when Anselm gave it its first really fruitful treatment, and laid down for all time the general lines on which the atonement must be conceived, if it is thought of as a work of deliverance from the penalty of sin. The influence of Anselm's discussion is not only traceable, but has been determining in all subsequent thought down to to-day. The doctrine of satisfaction set forth by him has not been permitted, however, to make its way unopposed. Its extreme opposite - the general conception that the atoning work of Christ finds its essence in revelation and had its prime effect, therefore, in deliverance from error—was advocated in Anselm's own day by perhaps the acutest reasoner of all the schoolmen, Peter Abelard. The intermediate view which was apparently invented five centuries later by the great Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius, loves to think of itself as running back, in germ at least, to nearly as early a date. In the thousand years of conflict which has raged among these generic conceptions each has taken on protean shapes, and a multitude of mixed or mediating hypotheses have been constructed. But, broadly speaking, the theories that have divided the suffrages of men easily take places under one or other of these three types.

There is a fourth general conception, to be sure, which would need to be brought into view were we studying exhaustive enumeration. This is the mystical idea which looks upon the work of Christ as summed up in the incarnation; and upon the saving process as consisting in an unobserved leavening of mankind by the inworking of a vital germ then planted in the mass. But though there never was an age in which this idea failed entirely of representation, it bears a certain aristocratic character which has commended it ordinarily only to the few, however fit: and it probably never was very widely held except during the brief period when the immense genius of Schleiermacher so overshadowed the Church that it could hardly think at all save in the formulas taught by him. Broadly speaking, the field has been held practically by the three theories which are commonly designated by the names of Anselm, Grotius, and Abelard; and age has differed from age only in the changing expression given these theories and the relative dominance of one or another of them.

The Reformers, it goes without saying, were enthusiastic preachers of the Anselmic conception—of course as corrected, developed, and enriched by their own deeper thought and truer insight. Their successors adjusted, expounded, and defended its details, until it stood forth in the seventeenth century dogmatics in practical completeness. During this whole period this conception held the field; the numerous controversies that arose about it were rather joined with the Socinian or the mystic than internal to the circle of recognized Church teachers. It was not until the rise of Rationalism that a widely spread defection became observable. Under this blight men could no longer believe in the substitutive expiation which is the heart of the Anselmic doctrine, and a blood-bought redemption went much out of fashion. The dainty Supranaturalists attained the height only of the Grotian view, and allowed only a "demonstrative" as distinguished from an "ontological" necessity for an atonement, and an "executive" as distinguished from a "judicial" effect to it. The great evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, swept away all that. It is probable that a half-century ago the doctrine of penal satisfaction had so strong a hold on the churches that not more than an academic interest attached to rival theories.

About that time a great change began to set in. I need only to mention such names as

those of Horace Bushnell, McLeod Campbell, Frederick Dennison Maurice, Albrecht Ritschl, to suggest the strength of the assault that was suddenly delivered against the central ideas of an expiatory atonement. The immediate effect was to call out an equally powerful defense. Our best treatises on the atonement come from this period; and Presbyterians in particular may well be proud of the part played by them in the crisis. But this defense only stemmed the tide: it did not succeed in rolling it back. The ultimate result has been that the revolt from the conceptions of satisfaction, propitiation, expiation, sacrifice, reinforced continually by tendencies adverse to evangelical doctrine peculiar to our times, has grown steadily more and more widespread, and in some quarters more and more extreme, until it has issued in an immense confusion on this central doctrine of the gospel. Voices are raised all about us proclaiming a "theory" of the atonement impossible, while many of those that essay a "theory" seem to be feeling their tortuous way very much in the dark. That, if I mistake not, is the real state of affairs in the modern Church.

I am not meaning to imply that the doctrine of substitutive atonement—which is, after all, the very heart of the gospel—has been lost from the consciousness of the Church. It has not been lost from the hearts of the Christian community. It is in its terms that the humble Christian everywhere still expresses the grounds of his hope of salvation. It is in its terms that the earnest evangelist everywhere still presses the claims of Christ upon the awakened hearer. It has not even been lost from the forum of theological discussion. It still commands powerful advocates wherever a vital Christianity enters academical circles: and, as a rule, the more profound the thinker, the more clear is the note he strikes in its proclamation and defense. But if we were to judge only by the popular literature of the day—a procedure happily not possible—the doctrine of a substitutive atonement has retired well into the background. Probably the majority of those who hold the public ear, whether as academical or as popular religious guides, have definitely broken with it, and are commending to their audiences something other and, as they no doubt believe, something very much better. A tone of speech has even grown up regarding it which is not only scornful but positively abusive. There are no epithets too harsh to be applied to it, no invectives too intense to be poured out on it. An honored bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church tells us that "the whole theory of substitutional punishment as a ground either of conditional or unconditional pardon is unethical, contradictory, and self-subversive."² He may rightly claim to be speaking in this sweeping sentence with marked discretion and unwonted charity. To do justice to the hateful theme requires, it seems, the tumid turmoil and rushing rant of Dr. Farrar's rhetoric. Surely if hard words broke bones, the doctrine of the substitutional sacrifice of the Son of God for the sin of man would long ago have been ground to powder.

What, then, are we offered instead of it? We have already intimated that it is confusion which reigns here: and in any event we cannot go into details. We may try, however, to set down in few words the general impression that the most recent literature of the subject makes.

To obtain a just view of the situation, I think we ought to note, first of all, the wide prevalence among the sounder thinkers of the Grotian or Rectoral theory of the atonement—the theory, that is, that conceives the work of Christ not as supplying the ground on which God forgives sin, but only as supplying the ground on which He may safely forgive sins on the sole ground of His compassion. The theory of hypothetical universalism, according to

2 Bishop Foster, in his "Philosophy of Christian Experience": 1891, p. 113.

which Christ died as the proper substitute for all men on the condition, namely, that they should believe—whether in its Remonstrant or in its Amyraldian form—has in the conflict of theories long since been crushed out of existence—as, indeed, it well deserved to be. This having been shoved out of the way, the Grotian theory has come to be the orthodox Arminian view and is taught as such by the leading exponents of modern Arminian thought whether in Britain or America; and he who will read the powerful argumentation to that effect by the late Dr. John Miley, say, for example, will be compelled to agree that it is, indeed, the highest form of atonement-doctrine conformable to the Arminian system. But not only is it thus practically universal among the Wesleyan Arminians. It has become also, under the influence of such teachers as Drs. Wardlaw and Dale and Dr. Park, the mark also of orthodox Nonconformity in Great Britain and of orthodox Congregationalism in America. Nor has it failed to take a strong hold also of Scottish Presbyterianism: it is specifically advocated by such men of mark and leading as, for example, Dr. Marcus Dods. On the Continent of Europe it is equally widespread among the saner teachers: one notes without surprise, for example, that it was taught by the late Dr. Frederic Godet, though one notes with satisfaction that it was considerably modified upward by Dr. Godet, and that his colleague, Dr. Gretillat, was careful to correct it. In a word, wherever men have been unwilling to drop all semblance of an "objective" atonement, as the word now goes, they have taken refuge in this half-way house which Grotius has builded for them. I do not myself look upon this as a particularly healthful sign of the times. I do not myself think that, at bottom, there is in principle much to choose between the Grotian and the so-called "subjective" theories. It seems to me only an illusion to suppose that it preserves an "objective" atonement at all. But meanwhile it is adopted by many because they deem it "objective," and it so far bears witness to a remanent desire to preserve an "objective" atonement.

We are getting more closely down to the real characteristic of modern theories of the atonement when we note that there is a strong tendency observable all around us to rest the forgiveness of sins solely on repentance as its ground. In its last analysis, the Grotian theory itself reduces to this. The demonstration of God's righteousness, which is held by it to be the heart of Christ's work and particularly of His death, is supposed to have no other effect on God than to render it safe for Him to forgive sin. And this it does not as affecting Him, but as affecting men—namely, by awaking in them such a poignant sense of the evil of sin as to cause them to hate it soundly and to turn decisively away from it. This is just Repentance. We could desire no better illustration of this feature of the theory than is afforded by the statement of it by one of its most distinguished living advocates, Dr. Marcus Dods.³ The necessity of atonement, he tells us, lies in the "need of some such demonstration of God's righteousness as will make it possible and safe for Him to forgive the unrighteous" (p. 181). Whatever begets in the sinner true penitence and impels him toward the practice of righteousness will render it safe to forgive him. Hence Dr. Dods asserts that it is inconceivable that God should not forgive the penitent sinner, and that Christ's work is summed up in such an exhibition of God's righteousness and love as produces, on its apprehension, adequate repentance. "By being the source, then, of true and fruitful penitence, the death of Christ removes the radical subjective obstacle in the way of forgiveness" (p. 184). "The death of Christ, then, has made forgiveness possible, because it enables man to repent with an adequate penitence, and because it manifests righteousness and binds men to God" (p. 187). There is no hint here that man needs anything more to

3 In an essay in a volume called "The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought: A Theological Symposium" (London: James Clarke & Co., 1900). In this volume seventeen essays from as many writers are collected, and from it a very fair notion can be obtained of the ideas current in certain circles of our day.

enable him to repent than the presentation of motives calculated powerfully to induce him to repent. That is to say, there is no hint here of an adequate appreciation of the subjective effects of sin on the human heart, deadening it to the appeal of motives to right action however powerful, and requiring therefore an internal action of the Spirit of God upon it before it can repent: or of the purchase of such a gift of the Spirit by the sacrifice of Christ. As little is there any hint here of the existence of any sense of justice in God, forbidding Him to account the guilty righteous without satisfaction of guilt. All God requires for forgiveness is repentance: all the sinner needs for repentance is a moving inducement. It is all very simple; but we are afraid it does not go to the root of matters as presented either in Scripture or in the throes of our awakened heart.

The widespread tendency to represent repentance as the atoning fact might seem, then, to be accountable from the extensive acceptance which has been given to the Rectoral theory of the atonement. Nevertheless much of it has had a very different origin and may be traced back rather to some such teaching as that, say, of Dr. McLeod Campbell. Dr. Campbell did not himself find the atoning fact in man's own repentance, but rather in our Lord's sympathetic repentance for man. He replaced the evangelical doctrine of substitution by a theory of sympathetic identification, and the evangelical doctrine of expiatory penalty-paying by a theory of sympathetic repentance. Christ so fully enters sympathetically into our case, was his idea, that He is able to offer to God an adequate repentance for our sins, and the Father says, It is enough! Man here is still held to need a Saviour, and Christ is presented as that Saviour, and is looked upon as performing for man what man cannot do for himself. But the gravitation of this theory is distinctly downward, and it has ever tended to find its lower level. There are, therefore, numerous transition theories prevalent—some of them very complicated, some of them very subtle—which connect it by a series of insensible stages with the proclamation of human repentance as the sole atonement required. As typical of these we may take the elaborate theory (which, like man himself, may be said to be fearfully and wonderfully made) set forth by the modern Andover divines. This finds the atoning fact in a combination of Christ's sympathetic repentance for man and man's own repentance under the impression made upon him by Christ's work on his behalf—not in the one without the other, but in the two in unison. A similar combination of the revolutionary repentance of man induced by Christ and the sympathetic repentance of Christ for man meets us also in recent German theorizing, as, for example, in the teaching of Hüring. It is sometimes clothed in "sacrificial" language and made to bear an appearance even of "substitution." It is just the repentance of Christ, however, which is misleadingly called His "sacrifice," and our sympathetic repentance with Him that is called our participation in His "sacrifice"; and it is carefully explained that though there was "a substitution on Calvary," it was not the substitution of a sinless Christ for a sinful race, but the substitution of humanity *plus* Christ for humanity *minus* Christ. All of which seems but a confusing way of saying that the atoning fact consists in the revolutionary repentance of man induced by the spectacle of Christ's sympathetic repentance for man.

The essential emphasis in all these transition theories falls obviously on man's own repentance rather than on Christ's. Accordingly the latter falls away easily and leaves us with human repentance only as the sole atoning fact—the entire reparation which God asks or can ask for sin. Nor do men hesitate to-day to proclaim this openly and boldly. Scores of voices are raised about us declaring it not only with clearness but with passion. Even those who still feel bound to attribute the reconciling of God somehow to the work of Christ are often careful to explain that they mean this ultimately only, and only because they attribute in one

way or other to the work of Christ the arousing of the repentance in man which is the immediate ground of forgiveness. Thus Dean Fremantle tells us that it is "repentance and faith" that "change for us the face of God." And then he adds, doubtless as a concession to ingrained, though outgrown, habits of thought: "If, then, the death of Christ, viewed as the culminating point of His life of love, is the destined means of repentance for the whole world, we may say, also, that it is the means of securing the mercy and favour of God, of procuring the forgiveness of sins."⁴ And Dr. (now Principal) Forsyth, whose fervid address on the atonement at a great Congregationalist gathering a few years ago quite took captive the hearts of the whole land, seems really to teach little more than this. Christ sympathetically enters into our condition, he tells us, and gives expression to an adequate sense of sin. We, perceiving the effect of this, His entrance into our sinful atmosphere, are smitten with horror of the judgment our sin has thus brought on Him. This horror begets in us an adequate repentance of sin: God accepts this repentance as enough; and forgives our sin. Thus forgiveness rests proximately only on our repentance as its ground: but our repentance is produced only by Christ's sufferings: and hence, Dr. Forsyth tells us, Christ's sufferings may be called the ultimate ground of forgiveness.⁵

It is sufficiently plain that the function served by the sufferings and death of Christ in this construction is somewhat remote. Accordingly they quite readily fall away altogether. It seems quite natural that they should do so with those whose doctrinal inheritance comes from Horace Bushnell, say, or from the Socinian theorizing of the school of Ritschl. We feel no surprise to learn, for example, that with Harnack the sufferings and death of Christ play no appreciable part. With him the whole atoning act seems to consist in the removal of a false conception of God from the minds of men. Men, because sinners, are prone to look upon God as a wrathful judge. He is, on the contrary, just Love. How can the sinner's misjudgment be corrected? By the impression made upon him by the life of Jesus, keyed to the conception of the Divine Fatherhood. With all this we are familiar enough. But we are hardly prepared for the extremities of language which some permit themselves in giving expression to it. "The whole difficulty," a recent writer of this class declares, "is not in inducing or enabling God to pardon, but in moving men to abhor sin and to want pardon." Even this difficulty, however, we are assured is removable: and what is needed for its removal is only proper instruction. "Christianity," cries our writer, "was a revelation, not a creation." Even this false antithesis does not, however, satisfy him. He rises beyond it to the acme of his passion. "Would there have been no Gospel," he rhetorically demands—as if none could venture to say him nay - "would there have been no Gospel had not Christ died?"⁶ Thus "the blood of Christ" on which the Scriptures hang the whole atoning fact is thought no longer to be needed: the gospel of Paul, which consisted not in Christ *simpliciter* but specifically in "Christ as crucified," is scouted. We are able to get along now without these things.

To such a pass have we been brought by the prevailing gospel of the indiscriminate love of God. For it is here that we place our finger on the root of the whole modern assault upon the doctrine of an expiatory atonement. In the attempt to give effect to the conception of indiscriminate and undiscriminating love as the basal fact of religion, the entire Biblical teaching as to atonement has been ruthlessly torn up. If God is love and nothing but love, what possible need can there be of an atonement? Certainly such a God cannot need propitiating. Is not He the All-Father? Is He not yearning for His children with an

4 "The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought," as cited: pp. 168 f.

5 Ibid., pp. 61 ff.

6 Mr. Bernard J. Snell, in "The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought": pp. 265, 267.

unconditioned and unconditioning eagerness which excludes all thought of "obstacles to forgiveness"? What does He want but—just His children? Our modern theorizers are never weary of ringing the changes on this single fundamental idea. God does not require to be moved to forgiveness; or to be enabled to pardon; or even to be enabled to pardon safely. He raises no question of whether He can pardon, or whether it would be safe for Him to pardon. Such is not the way of love. Love is bold enough to sweep all such chilling questions impatiently out of its path. The whole difficulty is to induce men to permit themselves to be pardoned. God is continually reaching longing arms out of heaven toward men: oh, if men would only let themselves be gathered unto the Father's eager heart! It is absurd, we are told—nay, wicked—blasphemous with awful blasphemy—to speak of propitiating such a God as this, of reconciling Him, of making satisfaction to Him. Love needs no satisfying, reconciling, propitiating; nay, will have nothing to do with such things. Of its very nature it flows out unbought, unpropitiated, instinctively and unconditionally, to its object. And God is Love!

Well, certainly, God is Love. And we praise Him that we have better authority for telling our souls this glorious truth than the passionate assertion of these somewhat crass theorizers. God is Love! But it does not in the least follow that He is nothing but love. God *is* Love: but Love is not God and the formula "Love" must therefore ever be inadequate to express God. It may well be—to us sinners, lost in our sin and misery but for it, it must be—the crowning revelation of Christianity that God is love. But it is not from the Christian revelation that we have learned to think of God as nothing but love. That God is the Father of all men in a true and important sense, we should not doubt. But this term "All-Father"—it is not from the lips of Hebrew prophet or Christian apostle that we have caught it. And the indiscriminate benevolencism which has taken captive so much of the religious thinking of our time is a conception not native to Christianity, but of distinctly heathen quality. As one reads the pages of popular religious literature, teeming as it is with ill-considered assertions of the general Fatherhood of God, he has an odd feeling of transportation back into the atmosphere of, say, the decadent heathenism of the fourth and fifth centuries, when the gods were dying, and there was left to those who would fain cling to the old ways little beyond a somewhat saddened sense of the *benignitas numinis*. The *benignitas numinis*! How studded the pages of those genial old heathen are with the expression; how suffused their repressed life is with the conviction that the kind Deity that dwells above will surely not be hard on men toiling here below! How shocked they are at the stern righteousness of the Christian's God, who loomed before their startled eyes as He looms before those of the modern poet in no other light than as "the hard God that dwelt in Jerusalem"! Surely the Great Divinity is too broadly good to mark the peccadillos of poor puny man; surely they are the objects of His compassionate amusement rather than of His fierce reprobation. Like Omar Khayyam's pot, they were convinced, before all things, of their Maker that "He's a good fellow and 'twill all be well."

The query cannot help rising to the surface of our minds whether our modern indiscriminate benevolencism goes much deeper than this. Does all this one-sided proclamation of the universal Fatherhood of God import much more than the heathen *benignitas numinis*? When we take those blessed words, "God is Love," upon our lips, are we sure we mean to express much more than that we do not wish to believe that God will hold man to any real account for his sin? Are we, in a word, in these modern days, so much soaring upward toward a more adequate apprehension of the transcendent truth that God is love, as passionately protesting against being ourselves branded and dealt with as wrath-deserving sinners? Assuredly it is impossible to put anything like their real content into these great words, "God is Love," save as they are thrown out against the background of those other

conceptions of equal loftiness, "God is Light," "God is Righteousness," "God is Holiness," "God is a consuming fire." The love of God cannot be apprehended in its length and breadth and height and depth—all of which pass knowledge—save as it is apprehended as the love of a God who turns from the sight of sin with inexpressible abhorrence, and burns against it with unquenchable indignation. The infinitude of His love would be illustrated not by His lavishing of His favor on sinners without requiring an expiation of sin, but by His—through such holiness and through such righteousness as cannot but cry out with infinite abhorrence and indignation—still loving sinners so greatly that He provides a satisfaction for their sin adequate to these tremendous demands. It is the distinguishing characteristic of Christianity, after all, not that it preaches a God of love, but that it preaches a God of conscience.

A somewhat flippant critic, contemplating the religion of Israel, has told us, as expressive of his admiration for what he found there, that "an honest God is the noblest work of man."⁷ There is a profound truth lurking in the remark. Only it appears that the work were too noble for man; and probably man has never compassed it. A benevolent God, yes: men have framed a benevolent God for themselves. But a thoroughly honest God, perhaps never. That has been left for the revelation of God Himself to give us. And this is the really distinguishing characteristic of the God of revelation: He is a thoroughly honest, a thoroughly conscientious God - a God who deals honestly with Himself and us, who deals conscientiously with Himself and us. And a thoroughly conscientious God, we may be sure, is not a God who can deal with sinners as if they were not sinners. In this fact lies, perhaps, the deepest ground of the necessity of an expiatory atonement.

And it is in this fact also that there lies the deepest ground of the increasing failure of the modern world to appreciate the necessity of an expiatory atonement. Conscientiousness commends itself only to awakened conscience; and in much of recent theologizing conscience does not seem especially active. Nothing, indeed, is more startling in the structure of recent theories of atonement, than the apparently vanishing sense of sin that underlies them. Surely, it is only where the sense of guilt of sin has grown grievously faint, that men can suppose repentance to be all that is needed to purge it. Surely it is only where the sense of the power of sin has profoundly decayed, that men can fancy that they can at will cast it off from them in a "revolutionary repentance." Surely it is only where the sense of the heinousness of sin has practically passed away, that man can imagine that the holy and just God can deal with it lightly. If we have not much to be saved from, why, certainly, a very little atonement will suffice for our needs. It is, after all, only the sinner that requires a Saviour. But if we are sinners, and in proportion as we know ourselves to be sinners, and appreciate what it means to be sinners, we will cry out for that Saviour who only after He was perfected by suffering could become the Author of eternal salvation.

7 Cf. Mr. Edward Day's "The Social Life of the Hebrews," 1901, p. 207. He is quoting apparently the late Mr. Ingersoll.