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A SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT.

BY THE REV. JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

(Concluded from our last.)

1. In tracing the history of this doctrine, we have seen that it divides itself into three distinct periods, in each of which a different idea has characterized the prevailing and orthodox theory. During the first and largest of these periods, this leading idea was of a conflict between good and evil, and the death of Christ was a ransom paid to the powers of darkness to redeem men from their dominion. During the second period, the main thought is of a debt which the sinner owes to God, which it is impossible for him to pay except by the aid of Christ. And in the third period, the notion which gives its character to the doctrine is that of a government, and a necessity which makes it impossible to forgive sin, except by such a display of the indignation of God, as will prevent the evil consequences which might otherwise occur. According to each theory, Christ dies to satisfy divine justice; but in the first, this justice has reference to the rights and lawful claims of the devil; in the second, to the rights and honour of God himself; in the third, to the order of the universe, and the claims of God's creatures. There is also a necessity for Christ's death according to each theory; but in the first, this necessity is founded on God's supposed relations to the supernatural world; in the second, on his relations to himself; in the third, on his relations to his creatures. Each of the theories implies a limitation of the Divine attributes. In the first, the Divine power is limited by the opposing power of evil, which is a dualistic view allied to Manicheism; in the second, the Divine goodness is limited by the demands of the Divine justice, which implies a conflict in the Divine mind; in the third, the Divine wisdom is limited by difficulties inherent in the government of free beings.

2. We have before remarked, that the direction taken by the theory of the atonement during each period seemed determined in some degree by the prevailing ideas of the time, and the tendency of the age. The first theory was warlike; the second, legal; the third, governmental. It was natural during those terrible centuries in which the church was exposed to so many forms of outward evil, that the theory of redemption should assume the form of a conflict with outward evil, and a victory over the Prince of darkness. It was an age in which persecutions tormented the Christian church, in which the Emperors of the world seemed to rival the Evil One in atrocious wickedness; in which the legions of the empire bound with their iron chain the whole earth in military subjection. Then came the dreadful inroads of the barbarians, the destructive famines, and awful pestilences, which were thought to have consumed in a few years half of the human race throughout the civilized world. What wonder that redemption from outward evil and sin should seem to be the chief work of Christ, and the passages of Scripture which indicate a conflict with evil be taken as the basis of the theory of redemption?

But when a thousand years had passed, these tumults had gone by. The barbarous nations having conquered every part of the Roman empire, had been converted to Christianity, and became fixed in their new homes. The tide of Mahomedan conquest, checked at the Pyrenees, had begun permanently to recede before the deeper life of Christendom. The conquerors of Rome, feeling their want of better institutions, accepted her splendid code of laws, and began to modify and apply them to their own needs. Hence the study of Roman Law sprang up suddenly in the twelfth century, and appeared in new glory. Thousands of students crowded the universities, attracted by the fame of great jurists. We read of

the celebrity of the University of Bologna, and of the Four Doctors. The civil and canon law were taught together at all the ecclesiastical establishments. Many distinguished scholastic theologians were also eminent as writers on civil law, and among them Lanfranc, the teacher of Anselm. Just at this time appeared the new theory of the atonement. Is it surprising that it should partake of the character of thought belonging to this time, and be founded, not on warlike, but legal ideas, on the rights of property and persons, on the notion of debt and payment, on a wrong done to God's honor by sin, for which a full recompense was to be demanded? Those passages of Scripture in which sin is spoken of as an injury inflicted on the Divine character, and the work of Christ as freeing us from the debt incurred by disobedience, were now made the basis of the doctrine.

With the Reformation came new ideas of human rights in civil as well as in ecclesiastical affairs. Reform in the church prepared the way for reform in politics, and men now began to ask for what purpose was government instituted, and what were the duties of the governor? The new theory of the atonement partook of this tendency also, and was founded upon ideas of government. Hugo Grotius laid the basis of this doctrine in the necessity imposed on God, as a ruler, to prevent mischief and preserve order in his government. And Hugo Grotius also was the founder of the modern international law, by his book on "The Laws of War and Peace," the object of which was to teach rulers to substitute a sense of justice toward the citizen and regard for the peace of society, for caprice and reckless ambition.

3. Thus we see that each age has developed that particular view of the doctrine which was suited to its circumstances, and to its prevailing tone of thought. We are not, however, to infer that these theories are merely arbitrary speculations, wholly destitute of reality and truth. Their error seems to lie in their one-sidedness. In their logical form they are all probably false, yet each may contain its heaven of truth. Thus the fantastic and mythical doctrine of a conflict with the devil, may be founded in reality. As long as the origin of evil remains unexplained, so long evil must appear to the intellect a hostile power contending with God. Only by self-sacrifice and willing endurance can we redeem ourselves and others from its slavery, and lead captivity captive. The sufferings of the good, and the death of martyrs, is the necessary price which must be paid in order to secure the progress of humanity. This price Christ paid on the cross, to redeem mankind from the power of evil. So also there is a truth in the idea of an atonement to be made to the Divine justice. The justice of God is his holiness as displayed in action. If God has a moral character, it must make him, not only by his will, but also by the very necessity of his holy nature, averse from sin. There is then, a law of the Divine nature, which seems necessarily to separate him from the sinner. God is separated from the sinner by the necessity of his nature, no less than the sinner from God by the voluntary act of disobedience. The work of Christ therefore was not only to remove the obstacle to reconciliation on the side of the sinner, but also that on the side of God. The first, he removes by making the sinner penitent; the second, by making him holy. When penitent, he is reconciled to God; when holy, God is reconciled to him. A similar truth may be detected in the theory of Grotius. But the error in all these systems is to make that a limitation of God's will, which is in reality a manifestation of his nature.

4. Nor are we to suppose that this succession of theories is merely a change from one error to another, merely a substitution of one defective statement in the place of another as defective. There has been not only change but progress. Through the whole history of the doctrine we see a steady advance of thought, and what each age has gained, that it retains. The doctrine beginning at first as a transaction in the super-

natural world, beyond the sphere of human experience, comes at last into the region of human ideas and relations. Beginning in a fantastic realm of images, and passing through a metaphysical world of abstractions, it enters at last the domain of spiritual experience. Its course is not yet ended, nor has it as yet taken its complete and perfect form, in which it can satisfy the demands both of the reason and of the religious nature. But it cannot go back to any of its previous forms. Their defects having been once fully seen, the possibility of their recovering their former influence is forever prevented. The course of this doctrine, like that of all theology, is forward, tending toward the time which shall see realized the harmonious union of reason and revelation, of faith and works, of the supernatural and the natural, of the spirit and the understanding, of the faith of the heart and the faith of the intellect.

NOTE.

The sketch of the history of the Atonement, contained in the foregoing tract, is confined to the three great forms which the doctrine has taken in the church, and does not undertake to treat of more recent developments. It may, however, be safely said, that the ancient and Orthodox form of the Government is now seldom received or taught by those who consider themselves the most Orthodox. The object of the death of Christ is now said to be, not the satisfaction of Divine Justice, but the exercise of a moral influence on the human mind. Christ did not die in order to appease the wrath of God, nor to pay the debt of obedience due to the Deity, but to manifest the evil of sin, and so to impress the human mind as to make it safe for God to pardon. He died then to reconcile man to God; not to reconcile God to man. Although the more Orthodox language is continually used, yet if we look through it, we see that this is the meaning really intended.

One or two instances will be given, in order to illustrate the truth of these remarks. These instances will be taken from books, the professed object of which is to teach the Orthodox theory of the Atonement, in opposition to the Unitarian theory.

Our first extract is from Archbishop M'Gee, and is taken from his large work on the Atonement. This book throughout is a violent polemic against Unitarianism, and the author evidently regards himself as highly Orthodox. But in his statement of the doctrine he virtually surrenders the Orthodox view, and makes the Atonement only a manifestation, or a declaratory act on the part of God.

"Had they (the objectors) more accurately examined the true import of the term in Scripture use, they would have seen that a sacrifice for sin, in Scripture language, implies solely this.—'a sacrifice wisely and graciously appointed by God, the moral Governor of the world, to expiate the guilt of sin, in such a manner as to avert the punishment of it from the offender.' To ask why God should have appointed this particular mode, or in what way it can avert the punishment of sin, is to take us back to the general point at issue with the Deist. With the Christian, who admits redemption under any modification, such matters cannot be a subject of inquiry."

"But even to our imperfect apprehension, some circumstances of natural connection and fitness may be pointed out. The whole may be considered as a sensible and striking representation of a punishment, which the sinner was conscious he deserved from God's justice: and then on the part of God, it becomes a public declaration of his holy displeasure against sin, and of his merciful compassion for the sinner: and on the part of the offender, when offered by him or for him, it implies a sincere confession of guilt, and a hearty desire of obtaining pardon: and upon the due performance of this service, the sinner is pardoned, and escapes the penalty of his transgression."

"This we shall find agreeable to the nature of a sacrifice for sin, as laid down in the Old Testament. Now is there anything in this degrading to the honour of God, or in the smallest degree inconsistent with the dictates of natural reason? And in this view, what is there in the death of Christ, as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind, that may not, in a certain degree, be embraced by our natural notions? For according to the explanation just given, is it not a declaration to the whole world of the greatness of their sins, and of the proportionate mercy and compassion of God, who had ordained this method, whereby, in a manner consistent with his other attributes, his fallen creatures might again be taken into his favour, on

their making themselves parties in this great sacrifice; that is, on their complying with those conditions, which, on the received notions of sacrifice, would render them parties in this; namely, an adequate conviction of guilt, a proportionate sense of God's love, and a firm determination with an humble faith in the sufficiency of this sacrifice, to endeavour after a life of amendment in obedience! Thus much falls within the reach of our comprehension on this mysterious subject. Whether in the expanded range of God's moral government some other end may not be held in view, in the death of his only begotten Son, it is not far as to inquire; nor does it concern us to know. What God has been pleased to reveal, it is alone our duty to believe."—M'Gee on Atonement, page 50, Appleton's edition.

On examining this statement, it is apparent that—

1. M'Gee gives up the necessity of Atonement. He calls it an appointment; that is, something which results from the choice of the divine will not the necessity of God's nature. He even goes farther, and denies that we have any right to entertain the inquiries which alone can show it to be necessary. "Why God has appointed this mode, or in what way it can avert the punishment of sin," he says, "cannot be a subject of inquiry" with the Christian.

2. M'Gee makes the atoning sacrifice a mere declaratory act on the part of God. It is merely teaching. God expresses by it his displeasure against sin, and his compassion for the sinner. It is designed then to act on the human mind alone. It has nothing to do in relation to God. It is to remove a difficulty existing in the human mind, not one which exists in the divine mind.

3. M'Gee asserts that this view is the only view we have a right to take of the Atonement. No other end but that of a declaration, he says, has been revealed. The Orthodox view, therefore, which makes the death of Christ not a mere declaration of God's feelings, but the actual payment of a sinner's transgression,—this, M'Gee maintains, is not revealed, and it is not our duty to believe it. "It is not for us to inquire, nor does it in any way concern us to know."

Our next reference is to the views of the Atonement expressed by that popular and excellent writer, Jacob Abbott, in his book called "The Corner Stone."

Mr. Abbott illustrates his view of the nature of the Atonement by a story of some school-boys, one of whom has thrown away his companion's cap into the snow. The master perceives that the boy is penitent, and accordingly forgives him. But, says Mr. Abbott, if the matter were left here, it "would bring down the standard of justice and kindness among the boys." The master accordingly goes out into the cold and snow himself, to find the lost cap, and brings it back with him. And when the boys saw him returning, "there was not one whose heart was not full of affection and gratitude toward the teacher, and of displeasure at the sin."

"Such a case," adds Mr. Abbott, "is analogous in many respects to the measures God has adopted to make the forgiveness of human guilt safe." He indeed adds, in another place, that no human transaction can be entirely analogous to the great plan of redeeming man from sin and misery by the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. Yet as the only view which he presents of the nature of the Atonement has reference exclusively to its influence on the human mind, we may take it for granted that this is with him the essential feature of the transaction.

But how far this is from the Orthodox view of satisfaction! It is the theory of Grotius, not of Anselm. The death of Christ is not a debt paid to God, but an influence exerted on the world to maintain the dignity of the law.

Another example of the way in which modern Orthodoxy departs from the ancient theory of Atonement may be found in a book, which has been widely circulated among the Orthodox in this country, called "The Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation."

The author of this book contends, that man can only be made to love another being by seeing that being making self-denial and enduring sorrow for his sake. The object of the death of Christ was to awaken this affectionate gratitude in the human heart toward Christ and God. As our object is not to criticise this work, we pass by the enormous psychological error of declaring that love can be produced only by the sight of self-denial in a benefactor. We merely call attention to the fact, that here, as in the other instances referred to, the object of the death of Christ is to remove a difficulty in the human mind, not one in the divine mind. Its necessity arises from the laws of human nature, not from the laws of the divine nature. The death of Christ is necessary, because men cannot other-