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The Atonement and the Modern Mind

James Derney

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THE ATONEMENT

AND

THE MODERN MIND

BY

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WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE DEATH OF CHRIST STUDIES IN THEOLOGY THE EPISTLES
TO THE THESSALONIANS THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CO-
RINTHIANS GOSPEL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

LONDON

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PREFACE

The three chapters which follow have already appeared in *The Expositor*, and may be regarded as a supplement to the writer's work on *The Death of Christ: its place and interpretation in the New Testament*. It was no part of his intention in that study to ask or to answer all the questions raised by New Testament teaching on the subject; but, partly from reviews of *The Death of Christ*, and still more from a considerable private correspondence to which the book gave rise, he became convinced that something further should be attempted to commend the truth to the mind and conscience of the time. The difficulties and misunderstandings connected with it spring, as far as they can be considered intellectual, mainly from two sources. Either the mind is preoccupied with a conception of the world which, whether men are conscious of it or not, forecloses all the questions which are raised by any doctrine of atonement, and makes them unmeaning; or it labours under some misconception as to what the New Testament actually teaches. Broadly speaking, the first of these conditions is considered in the first two chapters, and the second in the last. The title—*The Atonement and the Modern Mind*—might seem to promise a treatise, or even an elaborate system of theology; but though it would cover a work of vastly larger scope than the present, it is not inappropriate to any attempt, however humble, to help the mind in which we all live and move to reach a sympathetic comprehension of the central truth in the Christian religion. The purpose of the writer is evangelic, whatever may be said of his method; it is to commend the Atonement to the human mind, as that mind has been determined by the influences and experiences of modern times, and to win the mind for the truth of the Atonement.

With the exception of a few paragraphs, these pages were delivered as lectures to a summer school of Theology which met in Aberdeen, in June of this year. The school was organised by a committee of the Association of Former Students of the United Free Church

College, Glasgow; and the writer, as a member and former President of the Association, desires to take the liberty of inscribing his work to his fellow-students.

GLASGOW, *September* 1903.

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CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY DEFINITION OF THE SUBJECT

It will be admitted by most Christians that if the Atonement, quite apart from precise definitions of it, is anything to the mind, it is everything. It is the most profound of all truths, and the most recreative. It determines more than anything else our conceptions of God, of man, of history, and even of nature; it determines them, for we must bring them all in some way into accord with it. It is the inspiration of all thought, the impulse and the law of all action, the key, in the last resort, to all suffering. Whether we call it a fact or a truth, a power or a doctrine, it is that in which the *differentia* of Christianity, its peculiar and exclusive character, is specifically shown; it is the focus of revelation, the point at which we see deepest into the truth of God, and come most completely under its power. For those who recognise it at all it is Christianity in brief; it concentrates in itself, as in a germ of infinite potency, all that the wisdom, power and love of God mean in relation to sinful men.

Accordingly, when we speak of the Atonement and the modern mind, we are really speaking of the modern mind and the Christian religion. The relation between these two magnitudes may vary. The modern mind is no more than a modification of the human mind as it exists in all ages, and the relation of the modern mind to the Atonement is one phase—it may be a specially interesting or a specially well-defined phase—of the perennial relation of the mind of man to the truth of God. There is always an affinity between the two, for God made man in His own image, and the mind can only rest in truth; but there is always at the same time an antipathy, for man is somehow estranged from God, and resents Divine intrusion into his life. This is the situation at all times, and therefore in modern times; we only need to remark that when the Atonement is in question, the situation, so to speak, becomes acute. All the elements in it define themselves more sharply. If there is sympathy between the mind and the truth, it is a profound sympathy, which will carry the mind far; if there are lines of approach, through which the truth

can find access to the mind, they are lines laid deep in the nature of things and of men, and the access which the truth finds by them is one from which it will not easily be dislodged. On the other hand, if it is antagonism which is roused in the mind by the Atonement, it is an antagonism which feels that everything is at stake. The Atonement is a reality of such a sort that it can make no compromise. The man who fights it knows that he is fighting for his life, and puts all his strength into the battle. To surrender is literally to give up himself, to cease to be the man he is, and to become another man. For the modern mind, therefore, as for the ancient, the attraction and the repulsion of Christianity are concentrated at the same point; the cross of Christ is man's only glory, or it is his final stumbling-block.

What I wish to do in these papers is so to present the facts as to mediate, if possible, between the mind of our time and the Atonement—so to exhibit the specific truth of Christianity as to bring out its affinity for what is deepest in the nature of man and in human experience—so to appreciate the modern mind itself, and the influences which have given it its constitution and temper, as to discredit what is false in it, and enlist on the side of the Atonement that which is profound and true. And if any one is disposed to marvel at the ambition or the conceit of such a programme, I would ask him to consider if it is not the programme prescribed to every Christian, or at least to every Christian minister, who would do the work of an evangelist. To commend the eternal truth of God, as it is finally revealed in the Atonement, to the mind in which men around us live and move and have their being, is no doubt a difficult and perilous task; but if we approach it in a right spirit, it need not tempt us to any presumption; it cannot tempt us, as long as we feel that it is our duty. *'Who is sufficient for these things! . . . Our sufficiency is of God.'*

The Christian religion is a historical religion, and whatever we say about it must rest upon historical ground. We cannot define it from within, by reference merely to our individual experience. Of course it is equally impossible to define it apart from experience; the point is that such experience itself must be historically derived; it must come through something outside of our individual selves. What is true of the Christian religion as a whole is pre-eminently true of the Atonement in which it is concentrated. The experience

which it brings to us, and the truth which we teach on the basis of it, are historically mediated. They rest ultimately on that testimony to Christ which we find in the Scriptures and especially in the New Testament. No one can tell what the Atonement is except on this basis. No one can consciously approach it—no one can be influenced by it to the full extent to which it is capable of influencing human nature—except through this medium. We may hold that just because it is Divine, it must be eternally true, omnipresent in its gracious power; but even granting this, it is not known as an abstract or eternal somewhat; it is historically, and not otherwise than historically, revealed. It is achieved by Christ, and the testimony to Christ, on the strength of which we accept it, is in the last resort the testimony of Scripture.

In saying so, I do not mean that the Atonement is merely a problem of exegesis, or that we have simply to accept as authoritative the conclusions of scholars as to the meaning of New Testament texts. The modern mind here is ready with a radical objection. The writers of the New Testament, it argues, were men like ourselves; they had personal limitations and historical limitations; their forms of thought were those of a particular age and upbringing; the doctrines they preached may have had a relative validity, but we cannot benumb our minds to accept them without question. The intelligence which has learned to be a law to itself, criticising, rejecting, appropriating, assimilating, cannot deny its nature and suspend its functions when it opens the New Testament. It cannot make itself the slave of men, not even though the men are Peter and Paul and John; no, not even though it were the Son of Man Himself. It resents dictation, not wilfully nor wantonly, but because it must; and it resents it all the more when it claims to be inspired. If, therefore, the Atonement can only be received by those who are prepared from the threshold to acknowledge the inspiration and the consequent authority of Scripture, it can never be received by modern men at all.

This line of remark is familiar inside the Church as well as outside. Often it is expressed in the demand for a historical as opposed to a dogmatic interpretation of the New Testament, a historical interpretation being one to which we can sit freely, because the result to which it leads us is the mind of a time which we have survived

and presumably transcended; a dogmatic interpretation, on the other hand, being one which claims to reach an abiding truth, and therefore to have a present authority. A more popular and inconsistent expression of the same mood may be found among those who say petulant things about the rabbinising of Paul, but profess the utmost devotion to the words of Jesus. Even in a day of overdone distinctions, one might point out that interpretations are not properly to be classified as historical or dogmatic, but as true or false. If they are false, it does not matter whether they are called dogmatic or historical; and if they are true, they may quite well be both. But this by the way. For my own part, I prefer the objection in its most radical form, and indeed find nothing in it to which any Christian, however sincere or profound his reverence for the Bible, should hesitate to assent. Once the mind has come to know itself, there can be no such thing for it as blank authority. It cannot believe things—the things by which it has to live—simply on the word of Paul or John. It is not irreverent, it is simply the recognition of a fact, if we add that it can just as little believe them simply on the word of Jesus.[1] This is not the sin of the mind, but the nature and essence of mind, the being which it owes to God. If we are to speak of authority at all in this connection, the authority must be conceived as belonging not to the speaker but to that which he says, not to the witness but to the truth. Truth, in short, is the only thing which has authority for the mind, and the only way in which truth finally evinces its authority is by taking possession of the mind for itself. It may be that any given truth can only be reached by testimony—that is, can only come to us by some historical channel; but if it is a truth of eternal import, if it is part of a revelation of God the reception of which is eternal life, then its authority lies in itself and in its power to win the mind, and not in any witness however trustworthy.

Hence in speaking of the Atonement, whether in preaching or in theologising, it is quite unnecessary to raise any question about the inspiration of Scripture, or to make any claim of 'authority' either for the Apostles or for the Lord. Belief in the inspiration of Scripture is neither the beginning of the Christian life nor the foundation of Christian theology; it is the last conclusion—a conclusion which becomes every day more sure—to which experience of the truth of Scripture leads. When we tell, therefore, what the Atonement is, we

are telling it not on the authority of any person or persons whatever, but on the authority of the truth in it by which it has won its place in our minds and hearts. We find this truth in the Christian Scriptures undoubtedly, and therefore we prize them; but the truth does not derive its authority from the Scriptures, or from those who penned them. On the contrary, the Scriptures are prized by the Church because through them the soul is brought into contact with this truth. No doubt this leaves it open to any one who does not see in Scripture what we see, or who is not convinced as we are of its truth, to accuse us here of subjectivity, of having no standard of truth but what appeals to us individually, but I could never feel the charge a serious one. It is like urging that a man does not see at all, or does not see truly, because he only sees with his own eyes. This is the only authentic kind of seeing yet known to mankind. We do not judge at all those who do not see what we do. We do not know what hinders them, or whether they are at all to blame for it; we do not know how soon the hindrance is going to be put out of the way. To-day, as at the beginning, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not. But that is the situation which calls for evangelists; not a situation in which the evangelist is called to renounce his experience and his vocation.

What, then, is the Atonement, as it is presented to us in the Scriptures, and vindicates for itself in our minds the character of truth, and indeed, as I have said already, the character of the ultimate truth of God?

The simplest expression that can be given to it in words is: Christ died for our sins. Taken by itself, this is too brief to be intelligible; it implies many things which need to be made explicit both about Christ's relation to us and about the relation of sin and death. But the important thing, to begin with, is not to define these relations, but to look through the words to the broad reality which is interpreted in them. What they tell us, and tell us on the basis of an incontrovertible experience, is that the forgiveness of sins is for the Christian mediated through the death of Christ. In one respect, therefore, there is nothing singular in the forgiveness of sins: it is in the same position as every other blessing of which the New Testament speaks. It is the presence of a Mediator, as Westcott says in one of his letters, which makes the Christian religion what it is; and

the forgiveness of sins is mediated to us through Christ, just as the knowledge of God as the Father is mediated, or the assurance of a life beyond death. But there is something *specific* about the mediation of forgiveness; the gift and the certainty of it come to us, not simply through Christ, but through the blood of His Cross. The sum of His relation to sin is that He died for it. God forgives, but this is the way in which His forgiveness comes. He forgives freely, but it is at this cost to Himself and to the Son of His love.

This, it seems to me, is the simplest possible statement of what the New Testament means by the Atonement, and probably there are few who would dispute its correctness. But it is possible to argue that there is a deep cleft in the New Testament itself, and that the teaching of Jesus on the subject of forgiveness is completely at variance with that which we find in the Epistles, and which is implied in this description of the Atonement. Indeed there are many who do so argue. But to follow them would be to forget the place which Jesus has in His own teaching. Even if we grant that the main subject of that teaching is the Kingdom of God, it is as clear as anything can be that the Kingdom depends for its establishment on Jesus, or rather that in Him it is already established in principle; and that all participation in its blessings depends on some kind of relation to Him. All things have been delivered to Him by the Father, and it is by coming under obligation to Him, and by that alone, that men know the Father. It is by coming under obligation to Him that they know the pardoning love of the Father, as well as everything else that enters into Christian experience and constitutes the blessedness of life in the Kingdom of God. Nor is it open to any one to say that he knows this simply because Christ has told it. We are dealing here with things too great to be simply told. If they are ever to be known in their reality, they must be revealed by God, they must rise upon the mind of man experimentally, in their awful and glorious truth, in ways more wonderful than words. They can be spoken about afterwards, but hardly beforehand. They can be celebrated and preached – that is, declared as the speaker's experience, delivered as his testimony – but not simply told. It was enough if Jesus made His disciples feel, as surely He did make them feel, not only in every word He spoke, but more emphatically still in His whole attitude toward them, that He was Himself the Mediator of the new cove-

nant, and that all the blessings of the relation between God and man which we call Christianity were blessings due to Him. If men knew the Father, it was through Him. If they knew the Father's heart to the lost, it was through Him. Through Him, be it remembered, not merely through the words that He spoke. There was more in Christ than even His own wonderful words expressed, and all that He was and did and suffered, as well as what He said, entered into the convictions He inspired. But He knew this as well as His disciples, and for this very reason it is beside the mark to point to what He said, or rather to what He did not say, in confutation of their experience. For it is their experience—the experience that the forgiveness of sins was mediated to them through His cross—that is expressed in the doctrine of Atonement: He died for our sins.

The objection which is here in view is most frequently pointed by reference to the parable of the prodigal son. There is no Atonement here, we are told, no mediation of forgiveness at all. There is love on the one side and penitence on the other, and it is treason to the pure truth of this teaching to cloud and confuse it with the thoughts of men whose Master was over their heads often, but most of all here. Such a statement of the case is plausible, and judging from the frequency with which it occurs must to some minds be very convincing, but nothing could be more superficial, or more unjust both to Jesus and the apostles. A parable is a comparison, and there is a point of comparison in it on which everything turns. The more perfect the parable is, the more conspicuous and dominating will the point of comparison be. The parable of the prodigal illustrates this. It brings out, through a human parallel, with incomparable force and beauty, the one truth of the freeness of forgiveness. God waits to be gracious. His pardoning love rushes out to welcome the penitent. But no one who speaks of the Atonement ever dreams of questioning this. The Atonement is concerned with a different point—not the freeness of pardon, about which all are agreed, but the cost of it; not the spontaneity of God's love, which no one questions, but the necessity under which it lay to manifest itself in a particular way if God was to be true to Himself, and to win the heart of sinners for the holiness which they had offended. The Atonement is not the denial that God's love is free; it is that specific manifestation or demonstration of God's free love which is demanded by the situa-

tion of men. One can hardly help wondering whether those who tell us so confidently that there is no Atonement in the parable of the prodigal have ever noticed that there is no Christ in it either—no elder brother who goes out to seek and to save the lost son, and to give his life a ransom for him. Surely we are not to put the Good Shepherd out of the Christian religion. Yet if we leave Him His place, we cannot make the parable of the prodigal the measure of Christ's mind about the forgiveness of sins. One part of His teaching it certainly contains—one part of the truth about the relation of God the Father to His sinful children; but another part of the truth was present, though not on that occasion rendered in words, in the presence of the Speaker, when 'all the publicans and sinners drew near to Him for to hear Him.' The love of God to the sinful was apprehended in Christ Himself, and not in what He said as something apart from Himself; on the contrary, it was in the identity of the speaker and the word that the power of the word lay; God's love evinced itself to men as a reality in Him, in His presence in the world, and in His attitude to its sin; it so evinced itself, finally and supremely, in His death. It is not the idiosyncrasy of one apostle, it is the testimony of the Church, a testimony in keeping with the whole claim made by Christ in His teaching and life and death: '*in Him we have our redemption, through His blood, even the forgiveness of our trespasses.*' And this is what the Atonement means: it means the mediation of forgiveness through Christ, and specifically through His death. Forgiveness, in the Christian sense of the term, is only realised as we believe in the Atonement: in other words, as we come to feel the cost at which alone the love of God could assert itself as Divine and holy love in the souls of sinful men. We may say, if we please, that forgiveness is bestowed freely upon repentance; but we must add, if we would do justice to the Christian position, that repentance in its ultimate character is the fruit of the Atonement. Repentance is not possible apart from the apprehension of the mercy of God *in Christ*. It is the experience of the regenerate—*poenitentiam interpretor regenerationem*, as Calvin says—and it is the Atonement which regenerates.

This, then, in the broadest sense, is the truth which we wish to commend to the modern mind: the truth that there is forgiveness with God, and that this forgiveness comes to us only through

Christ, and signally or specifically through His death. Unless it becomes true to us that *Christ died for our sins* we cannot appreciate forgiveness at its specifically Christian value. It cannot be for us that kind of reality, it cannot have for us that kind of inspiration, which it unquestionably is and has in the New Testament.

But what, we must now ask, is the modern mind to which this primary truth of Christianity has to be commended? Can we diagnose it in any general yet recognisable fashion, so as to find guidance in seeking access to it for the gospel of the Atonement? There may seem to be something presumptuous in the very idea, as though any one making the attempt assumed a superiority to the mind of his time, an exemption from its limitations and prejudices, a power to see over it and round about it. All such presumption is of course disclaimed here; but even while we disclaim it, the attempt to appreciate the mind of our time is forced upon us. Whoever has tried to preach the gospel, and to persuade men of truth as truth is in Jesus, and especially of the truth of God's forgiveness as it is in the death of Jesus for sin, knows that there is a state of mind which is somehow inaccessible to this truth, and to which the truth consequently appeals in vain. I do not speak of unambiguous moral antipathy to the ideas of forgiveness and atonement, although antipathy to these ideas in general, as distinct from any given presentation of them, cannot but have a moral character, just as a moral character always attaches to the refusal to acknowledge Christ or to become His debtor; but of something which, though vaguer and less determinate, puts the mind wrong, so to speak, with Christianity from the start. It is clear, for instance, in all that has been said about forgiveness, that certain relations are presupposed as subsisting between God and man, relations which make it possible for man to sin, and possible for God, not indeed to ignore his sin, but in the very act of recognising it as all that it is to forgive it, to liberate man from it, and to restore him to Himself and righteousness. Now if the latent presuppositions of the modern mind are to any extent inconsistent with such relations, there will be something to overcome before the conceptions of forgiveness or atonement can get a hearing. These conceptions have their place in a certain view of the world as a whole, and if the mind is preoccupied with a different view, it will have an instinctive consciousness that it cannot ac-

commodate them, and a disposition therefore to reject them *ab initio*. This is, in point of fact, the difficulty with which we have to deal. And let no one say that it is transparently absurd to suggest that we must get men to accept a true philosophy before we can begin to preach the gospel to them, as though that settled the matter or got over the difficulty. We have to take men as we find them; we have to preach the gospel to the mind which is around us; and if that mind is rooted in a view of the world which leaves no room for Christ and His work as Christian experience has realised them, then that view of the world must be appreciated by the evangelist, it must be undermined at its weak places, its inadequacy to interpret all that is present even in the mind which has accepted it—in other words, its inherent inconsistency—must be demonstrated; the attempt must be made to liberate the mind, so that it may be open to the impression of realities which under the conditions supposed it could only encounter with instinctive antipathy. It is necessary, therefore, at this point to advert to the various influences which have contributed to form the mind of our time, and to give it its instinctive bias in one direction or another. Powerful and legitimate as these influences have been, they have nevertheless been in various ways partial, and because of their very partiality they have, when they absorbed the mind, as new modes of thought are apt to do, prejudiced it against the consideration of other, possibly of deeper and more far-reaching, truths.

First, there is the enormous development of physical science. This has engrossed human intelligence in our own times to an extent which can hardly be over-estimated. Far more mind has been employed in constructing the great fabric of knowledge, which we call science, than in any other pursuit of men. Far more mind has had its characteristic qualities and temper imparted to it by scientific study than by study in any other field. It is of science—which to all intents and purposes means physical science—of science and its methods and results that the modern mind is most confident, and speaks with the most natural and legitimate pride. Now science, even in this restricted sense, covers a great range of subjects; it may be physics in the narrowest meaning of the word, or chemistry, or biological science. The characteristic of our own age has been the development of the last, and in particular its extension to man. It is

impossible to dispute the legitimacy of this extension. Man has his place in nature; the phenomena of life have one of their signal illustrations in him, and he is as proper a subject of biological study as any other living being. But the intense preoccupation of much of the most vigorous intelligence of our time with the biological study of man is not without effects upon the mind itself, which we need to consider. It tends to produce a habit of mind to which certain assumptions are natural and inevitable, certain other assumptions incredible from the first. This habit of mind is in some ways favourable to the acceptance of the Atonement. For example, the biologist's invincible conviction of the unity of life, and of the certainty and power with which whatever touches it at one point touches it through and through, is in one way entirely favourable. Many of the most telling popular objections to the idea of Atonement rest on an atomic conception of personality—a conception according to which every human being is a closed system, incapable in the last resort of helping or being helped, of injuring or being injured, by another. This conception has been finally discredited by biology, and so far the evangelist must be grateful. The Atonement presupposes the unity of human life, and its solidarity; it presupposes a common and universal responsibility. I believe it presupposes also such a conception of the unity of man and nature as biology proceeds upon; and in all these respects its physical presuppositions, if we may so express ourselves, are present to the mind of to-day, thanks to biology, as they were not even so lately as a hundred years ago.

But this is not all that we have to consider. The mind has been influenced by the movement of physical and even of biological science, not only in a way which is favourable, but in ways which are prejudicial to the acceptance of the Atonement. Every physical science seems to have a boundless ambition; it wants to reduce everything to its own level, to explain everything in the terms and by the categories with which it itself works. The higher has always to fight for its life against the lower. The physicist would like to reduce chemistry to physics; the chemist has an ambition to simplify biology into chemistry; the biologist in turn looks with suspicion on anything in man which cannot be interpreted biologically. He would like to give, and is sometimes ready to offer, a biological explanation of self-consciousness, of freedom, of religion, morality, sin.

Now a biological explanation, when all is done, is a physical explanation, and a physical explanation of self-consciousness or the moral life is one in which the very essence of the thing to be explained is either ignored or explained away. Man's life is certainly rooted in nature, and therefore a proper subject for biological study; but unless it somehow transcended nature, and so demanded other than physical categories for its complete interpretation, there could not be any study or any science at all. If there were nothing but matter, as M. Naville has said, there would be no materialism; and if there were nothing but life, there would be no biology. Now it is in the higher region of human experience, to which all physical categories are unequal, that we encounter those realities to which the Atonement is related, and in relation to which it is real; and we must insist upon these *higher* realities, in their specific character, against a strong tendency in the scientifically trained modern mind, and still more in the general mind as influenced by it, to reduce them to the merely physical level.

Take, for instance, the consciousness of sin. Evidently the Atonement becomes incredible if the consciousness of sin is extinguished or explained away. There is nothing for the Atonement to do; there is nothing to relate it to; it is as unreal as a rock in the sky. But many minds at the present time, under the influence of current conceptions in biology, do explain it away. All life is one, they argue. It rises from the same spring, it runs the same course, it comes to the same end. The life of man is rooted in nature, and that which beats in my veins is an inheritance from an immeasurable past. It is absurd to speak of my responsibility for it, or of my guilt because it manifests itself in me, as it inevitably does, in such and such forms. There is no doubt that this mode of thought is widely prevalent, and that it is one of the most serious hindrances to the acceptance of the gospel, and especially of the Atonement. How are we to appreciate it? We must point out, I think, the consequence to which it leads. If a man denies that he is responsible for the nature which he has inherited—denies responsibility for it on the ground that it *is* inherited—it is a fair question to ask him for what he *does* accept responsibility. When he has divested himself of the inherited nature, what is left? The real meaning of such disowning of responsibility is that a man asserts that his life is a part of the physical phe-