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Douglas White

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CHAPTER I

THE PRESENT POSITION

DIVINE forgiveness has always formed the central theme of religious thought, and must always so continue under man's existing condition of moral imperfection. It represents an instinctive need of man; springing from a sense that he is not what he ought to be, nor what God desires that he should be. It is not a specifically Christian conception, for the sense of need existed long before the Christian era. But Christianity did purport to offer and to provide a satisfaction of that need, which previous systems of religion had entirely failed to supply.

The desire for forgiveness is common to mankind; but the conceptions of forgiveness vary with the conceptions of God. Crude and unethical thoughts of God produce crude and unethical views of forgiveness. Always and everywhere these two things are necessarily interdependent. And if in the Christian church

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views have prevailed which are impossible for us now to accept, this is because the followers of Jesus have failed to imbibe the lofty and beautiful concept of God which he sought to impart. If we wish to reach a right understanding of the mind of Jesus on divine forgiveness, we can only succeed by setting ourselves to study his teaching about the nature of God.

The hindrance to right relations between man and God is two-fold; for not only do men feel a sense of moral degradation on their own side, but they are instinctively conscious of a divine antagonism; the need of moral recovery and that of personal reconciliation go hand in hand.

Christians in all ages have firmly believed that both the divine antagonism and the human degradation are done away by the sufferings of Christ; but their conceptions as to how this result is achieved have varied very widely, not only in the past but up to the present day. Thousands indeed have appropriated to themselves the benefits of the Christian religion, who have had the most primitive conceptions as to the manner in which these benefits

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become available, or as to the process of their assimilation; but at the present time the growing intelligence of a rising generation demands, more than ever before, some rational explanation of the doctrines which they are asked to believe; and to-day—I say it without hesitation—the current interpretations of the Christian doctrine of God’s forgiveness are such as to raise a wellnigh insuperable barrier against the adoption of a definitely Christian form of thought among men of average intelligence.

I do not suggest that out-and-out Calvinism is believed or taught by the clergy of the present day, still less that it is accepted by the laity. Yet it must be admitted that the mode of thought which produced Calvinism is still at work to-day; satisfaction theories are still dominant, though the form in which they are presented has been greatly modified. It may be doubted whether it has even occurred to the majority of present-day Christians that there can be any alternative.

The doctrine of penal substitution, introduced at the Reformation, has few supporters at present; but while there is a general desire to avoid this presentation, the usual tendency

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is to alter its form rather than its substance ; it is still assumed that some form of satisfaction to God was necessary which man was powerless to render. But what sort of satisfaction was required, or how it has been rendered, is left indeterminate. In the pulpit, indeed, there is a tendency to say as little as possible on the subject. Enough must be said, on the one hand, to show that belief in the doctrine of Atonement is still alive ; on the other, it is not desired to disturb the faith of the older members of congregations by setting forth a new explanation ; and, even in the case of the younger members, there is a fear of depriving their minds of one form of belief before another can be assimilated—a fear, as it were, of pruning the tree too early, and exposing it to the danger of frost. Both these fears are ill-founded ; it is, after all, not so easy to disturb the settled opinions of elderly people ; and as for the younger persons, they are already exposed to doubts and questionings of a more radical kind than their elders commonly suspect ; the pressing need is that these early misgivings should be frankly met and openly dealt with.

Yet, while timidity of innovation to some

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extent explains the lack of virile teaching in the modern pulpit, there is a much more potent cause; namely, that while the theory of penal substitution was from many points of view unsatisfactory, it was at least definite; and, as yet, no very definite theory has grown up to replace it. Modern thought on the subject has not yet crystallised; it has assumed no concise, pictorial form to the minds of the clergy themselves; and if the teacher's thought be misty and undefined, it is hardly likely to leave a sharp impression on the mind of the scholar.

To this it is commonly replied, "No cut-and-dried theory of the Atonement can be truly satisfactory; we are dealing with a mystery which the human mind cannot grasp in its entirety; it is like the sun to the human eye; we can see its effulgence only, we cannot discern its substance." Are we then to abstain from forming a big, comprehensive conception of God's attitude towards us? Has He given us the capacity of asking large and, as it seems to us, vital questions as regards our relations to Him, yet barred us at the start from ever answering them? Christian thought must be progressive, if it is to escape the risk of becoming obsolete.

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Again, we are told that it is more profitable for a Christian to contemplate, now from one aspect, now from another, the marvels of God's grace, than to form any theory by which it can be brought down to the level of our understanding; we reverence most that which is beyond our grasp. This is the plea of many a reverent and thoughtful soul; and yet I think that even this too may be wrong. Think: when did you begin to look with most wondering eyes at the glories of the star-lit sky, the sun, the moon, and all the host of heaven? Was it before or after you had made an attempt to understand and appreciate the workings of the solar system? Did a knowledge of the laws and relations of the heavenly bodies diminish your wonderment at God's creative power? The question, I think, admits of but one answer. The further our mind penetrates the mysteries of nature, the more wonderful they become; the more we come to know, the wider is the expanse of the unknown, and the greater the marvel of the partly known.

As with the material universe, so is it with our world of personalities, and so with our conceptions of God. As we understand Him

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better, and think of Him more truly, the greater by far will be our reverence for His sublimity, our trust in His faithfulness, and our adoration of His love. For myself, I confess, what I crave is a glimpse, a bird's-eye view, if you will, as from a distance, of the Divine System, not the less spiritual because intellectual : as we might see the city of London as a whole from high above it ; not that we do not wish to abide in the City—whether it be the city of London or the city of God—but that having seen it in its totality, though imperfectly, we might the better henceforth appreciate its details as portions of the whole. It is this very craving to grasp things as a whole, which has wrought the revolutions of science ; which has plucked observed facts from their dreary isolation of pigeon-holes, and placed them, like coloured pieces, in the beautiful harmony of Nature's picture ; which has taken men, and dates, and battles, and by the magic of a master-thought has turned them into history ; which has made the crust of the earth declare its own story, and coaxed their secrets from the stars.

All these things we know but in part ; each answer of nature leads on to further questions,

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which in turn draw their own response. So also must be our faith in the world which transcends material things—that to a vital question there must somewhere be an answer sufficient for us ; that when we knock at the door of knowledge, it will not remain closed to us for ever. Here also, as in other quests, our objective is Truth ; to find Truth, we must face our problem squarely, undeterred by any mistaken sense of reverence. If a conception be false, it were best unmasked. Truth will survive handling ; it may be buried out of sight for a time ; but it is alive, and will presently shoot up, green and fresh, from the soil which has hidden it. In such a spirit of frank but serious optimism, I invite my readers to enter with me into a short study of a great problem.

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CHAPTER II

LANDMARKS OF EARLIER THOUGHT

It is impossible, and unwise if it were possible, to embark on such a quest without a glance¹ at the various solutions of the problem which have been offered in the past. Men have not always thought as they think now. Theories quite different from that of penal substitution have been advanced, claiming scriptural support; and so large is the thought-range of the apostolic age, that even the most diverse and irreconcilable theories might seem to find some justification in one or other of the New Testament writings. All the great authors abound in figures of speech through which they seek to convey their thought; but their conceptions are wider than the figures which illustrate them. Each writer speaks in the terms of his own mental upbringing, so long as such terms seem

¹ Throughout this chapter my acknowledgements are due to H. N. Oxenham's *Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement*, and G. B. Stevens's *Christian Doctrine of Salvation*.

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adequate ; St Paul in terms of Jewish Law, the writer to the Hebrews in terms of the ritual of Hebrew sacrifice ; but each of them confessedly finds his own terminology inadequate. The Law is but the nursemaid who brings pupils to the school of Christ ; the sacrifices are not the real things but only a dim shadow of the reality. Christian thought indeed is like the daffodil ; its bud is at first enclosed in a flower-case ; but as the bud expands, the flower-case has done its protective work, and is thrown off. So with these writers ; their thought could not keep within the limits of its early expression ; as the one expanded, the other passed into obsolescence.

In thus suggesting that the writers of the apostolic age did not mean to tie themselves up to any theory of Atonement, I know that I am on debated ground ; but when once we leave the apostolic, and pass to the sub-apostolic age, the case is different. There certainly we find an entire absence of any definite theory ; and so things remained during the greater part of the second century. Not that the matter was absent from the mind of Christians of that period ; it was indeed the subject of devout meditation and beautiful utterance, as the Epistle to