

ARTICLE V.

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT—WHY IT IS
NECESSARILY VICARIOUS.

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It is our duty reverently to accept the atonement as it is given to us in the word of God; and if it be involved in mystery, if it be beyond human comprehension, if it be apparently inconsistent with our ideas of justice, and opposed to our processes of reasoning, still to receive it as the power of God, and the *wisdom* of God, for our salvation; yet it is none the less our duty reverently to seek to understand its nature from the revelation we have of it in the Bible, and to determine whether we can reconcile it with our ideas of justice, and with reason ; and if not, wherein it is irreconcilable ?

There is no truth more clearly and emphatically taught in the word of God, than that the atonement is essentially *vicarious* ; that Jesus Christ, innocent and sinless, was *substituted* for us, guilty and sin-cursed; that the punishment of our sins was inflicted upon him; and that through this infliction upon a perfectly sinless being, the door of mercy was thrown open, and salvation offered to all men; yea, more, that *in no other way* could the sins of fallen man be forgiven, and his salvation be secured. “Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.” Why was this necessary ? How could the voluntary suffering of an innocent being atone for the sins of the guilty creature? Where is the connexion between the two ? Does not the guilty still remain unpunished ?

This train of inquiry shows us that if we would understand the nature of the atonement, we must understand the nature of the punishment which the violated law demanded.

God’s law being righteous, and man being created holy, if in the exercise of his free agency, he voluntarily determine to break this righteous law, all will agree that he should be punished for its infraction. We, therefore, have no difficulty in yielding a

ready assent to the justice of inflicting punishment upon the sinner.

But what is punishment? It is of two kinds: the imposed and the endured; or, to express it somewhat differently, the inflicted, and the consequential.*

In the physical world a violated natural law is followed by an injurious consequence. The stomach is organised for the reception of food. You insert poison, you violate its law of health; the result is, the destruction of its organs. This is simply cause and effect. Precisely so in the moral world. Disobedience of God's commands is antagonism to God's holiness; antagonism to his holiness is sin; sin is evil; evil is unhappiness. This is consequential ; it is the effect from the cause. It inheres in the nature of things. It is a law precisely as cause and effect is a law in the physical world. This "consequence" is punishment, because being unholiness, it is unhappiness; unhappiness is suffering; and hence we say that one element in punishment must always be that which is consequential. This unhappiness of the moral agent is the consequence of his disobedience; so long as the disobedience—the cause—exists, so long will the unhappiness—the effect—likewise exist. Everlasting punishment in hell, must result as a consequence from the everlasting disobedience of the soul. Until the cause is removed the effect must exist, and must exist just as long as the cause exists. This

*The author has thus expressed the distinction made by our old divines between the penalty of sin as to its *essence*, and as to its *accidents* or *adjuncts* ; or, as others have expressed it, between rewards and punishments as they are *extraordinary* and *positive*, or *ordinary* and *natural*. The wrath, curse, and dereliction of God belong to the essence of punishment, and proceed from the direct and *positive* act of the Lawgiver in vindication of his violated law. This must be borne either by the offender or his sponsor. In the case of the real criminal there is the accident or adjunct of remorse of conscience and despair, which if Christ be rejected must be eternal. It is the result of sin to every transgressor. It can not be otherwise, the Creator being just and holy. This the innocent sponsor can never feel, however much he may otherwise suffer the penalty due the sinner.—EDS. S. P. R.

would answer the objection to eternal punishment, if nothing more was involved in it.

But this “consequence” is not all of punishment. There remains another element of punishment—that which is inflicted. This is totally distinct from the other. It may begin and terminate without having any effect upon the “consequential” element. Let us take a practical illustration. A man commits the crime of forgery. Ten years’ imprisonment is inflicted. He serves the term. This kind of punishment has begun and ended. He is none the less morally guilty of the crime; he is none the less a *forger*, when released, than he was when he entered the prison walls. The punishment which is consequential still remains.

Man broke God’s holy law and became a sinner. Why could not God forgive him and restore him to his former state? God is omnipotent. Forgiveness is one of his darling attributes. Let us seek for the elucidation of this point by recurring again to human government. Suppose the chief executive of the state, in assuming the gubernatorial office, should issue a proclamation, stating that inasmuch as many crimes would be committed in the state in the future—as such was the history of all states—he therefore publicly declared that all persons who should thereafter commit the crimes of murder, rape, arson, burglary, theft, or any other crimes known to the law, need only send up a petition to his excellency, expressing their repentance for the crime, and he would at once pardon them. Here would be the exercise of the divine attribute of forgiveness; and should we not say he was a most humane, a most righteous governor?

Should we not, on the contrary, say, that such a course is sanctioning crime? that it encourages criminals? Must not the result be that crime would be increased to a fearful extent? Would not our sense of justice be shocked? Would we not say that so far from the government expressing its disapprobation of crime, and manifesting a purpose that crime should not be tolerated, we here had an invitation held out for its commission? We now see what is the true meaning and purpose of inflicted punishment. It is to give expression on the part of the government to *its want of tolerance* of crime. The gallows, the prison,

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the entire machinery for inflicting punishment,.. is but *the mode of giving forth this expression* on the part of the government. There is no element of revenge in it. All men condemn cruelty in punishment. If a man commits murder, the state which would punish him by pulling his limbs to pieces or roasting him alive, would be condemned by the whole civilised world. Why ? Because the crime of murder is not condemned by the world ? Not at all. But the infliction of pain upon the individual is not the *object* of punishment. The infliction of pain may be, and is, *the mode of attaining the object of punishment*, but is not the object of punishment. It is sometimes said that its object is to deter others by means of the example. But this is merely stating the above definition of inflicted punishment in a different manner. What is there in the example if it stand isolated? What is its effect upon others if it is never to be repeated ? It is because the *example* teaches the beholder that so it must be in every case; that the government *will not* tolerate crime at all, whenever and by whomsoever committed. This is the whole of it. When it has attained this object, when it has furnished this expression of intolerance on the part of the government, it has answered the purpose for which it was ordained; and the executive clemency can only be exercised in subordination to this expression. Consequently only isolated cases can be the subjects of pardon, while the many must be punished.

If a man murders your sleeping infant, you take his life to revenge its death; but all men, every where, strangers to you and it, would cry aloud for his life, not from the same motive which actuated you. It would be the universal expression of horror of the crime, and of a purpose that it could not be and should not be tolerated. And this would be so whether there were organised society or not. This sentiment in man, in his collective capacity, is what we call justice, or public justice, or the spirit of justice. It is but the reflex of the sentiment in God. This necessity for expression in human society is a moral principle, belonging to the moral government, inhering in it, fundamental and eternal.

It is impossible for God to hold out a free pardon to all sin-

ners, simply if they will ask his forgiveness and express sorrow for what they have done. It is tantamount to saying, "Go on and sin to your heart's content, then come to me, and I will forgive you."

Where would be the expression of hatred of sin? of the utter intolerance of sin? of the irreconcilable antagonism between holiness and sin? Surely, to sin would be a small matter. God cares not how much we sin; indeed, it is in effect to say, "Sin as much as you please and I will forgive you, if you will ask me, and express your sorrow for what you have done."

What would become of the dignity of the violated law? Where would be the fearful, awful antagonism between the pure and holy God, and the hideous deformity, sin? If God can be the justifier of the sinner, he must at the same time be just. The preservation of the integrity of his law must not be jeopardized in the pardon of the breaker of it. The object of the inflicted punishment upon the fallen human race was to furnish this expression. It was thus "to satisfy justice." It was to perpetuate the expression of intolerance of disobedience of the moral law on the part of the moral government. This is the meaning of justice, or the spirit of justice.

The consequential punishment was entirely different. It was the effect following the cause. It was the sense of guilt, remorse, despair—all the accumulated suffering and degradation which sin brings upon the soul.

If the purposes of the inflicted punishment could be attained, the consequential punishment might be removed. True repentance and earnest entreaty of God's forgiveness would reach his mercy, and the sinner could be pardoned. If the expression of intolerance of sin could be furnished and perpetuated, every barrier in the way of the forgiveness of the sin and the restoration of the sinner would be out of the way. The divine attribute of forgiveness could be exercised; the sinner could be pardoned.

But the punishment must be inflicted; there is no room for forgiveness, because it is impossible that it can be exercised and at the same time the inflicted punishment visited upon the sinner. Hence the door of mercy is closed.

Now God, in Christ Jesus, voluntarily endures the inflicted punishment, and thus furnishes the eternal expression of intolerance of sin on the part of the moral government. If the expression is furnished in this way as effectually as by inflicting the punishment upon the sinner, then is justice satisfied. God cannot forgive the sinner consistently with his holiness without at the same time giving expression to his intolerance of sin. He must inflict the punishment in order to give this expression; but he cannot inflict the punishment upon the sinner and also pardon him. Hence the sinner never can be forgiven unless this expression of intolerance can be given in some other way.

Christ's suffering and death is therefore *of necessity* vicarious. He suffers the punishment and accomplishes the same purpose as if the sinner suffered the punishment. If the same end is accomplished, it may be inflicted upon him instead of upon the sinner, and the demands of justice be met, if he is willing to endure it. It is the person alone who is substituted, not the punishment.

It must never be absent from the mind that it is God himself who is the substituted sufferer. It is his voluntary act. What higher expression of his eternal, unappeasable hatred of sin could he give, than by himself voluntarily condescending to meet all the terrible inflictions which his eternal justice demanded? Not *as* a sinner, but *for* the sinner. What a magnificent vindication of the holiness of his law, that rather than manifest the least leniency towards unholiness, or the slightest tolerance of any violation of righteousness, God himself with all his purity should voluntarily take upon himself all the inflicted punishment that the sinner must suffer, still himself sinless! How divine the love, how boundless the compassion, that would make him thus remove every barrier to the full pardon, the entire forgiveness of the sinner!

Now it is because it is the *inflicted*, and not the consequential, punishment which Christ suffered, that he who knew no sin is enabled to suffer it and remain sinless. He does not suffer the punishment which is consequential, the sense of guilt; but the imposed suffering, required, as we have seen, to vindicate the violated law.

All the machinery of human government for punishing has nothing to do with the sense of guilt on the part of the criminal. You hang men, you whip them, you imprison them, just the same—whether they suffer the pangs of remorse, or are as callous and dead to sensibility and the suffering attendant upon it as the prison wall or the gallows frame. So the sinless God may take upon himself the inflicted punishment and still be sinless, still be untouched by the consequential punishment of sin. There is no analogy between this substituted or vicarious atonement, and the often supposed case of the innocent man dying for the guilty, and for many reasons, only some of which can now be suggested. The innocent man has no right to give his life for his guilty friend; it does not belong to him; it not only belongs to God, but, in a certain sense, also to the human government. He holds it in trust. Jesus Christ said, “I have power to lay down my life, and to take it again.” No man can say this. Again—and here the analogy most essentially fails—the man is the *subject*. He does not represent the government. It is not the act of the government when his life is offered. It is his own officious interference. It is the voluntary act of the *individual*—the expression of the subject, and not of the government; it answers no purpose of punishment. Now it is manifest that the sinner can only seek forgiveness through the sufferings of Christ; the punishment must be inflicted or forgiveness is impossible. Out of Christ God is a consuming fire. The flaming sword of *justice* is all that meets the sinner’s gaze. “There is,” therefore, “no name given under heaven whereby we can be saved except Christ Jesus.” We must, of necessity, come to God through him. Coming through him, we approach a heavenly Father.

It was, as has already been said, the person who was substituted, and not the punishment. The punishment which Christ suffered was not an equivalent (as many will have it) for the punishment which the violated law required to be inflicted upon the breaker of it. It was the very punishment. He who knew no sin “bore our sins upon the tree.” The confusion of ideas as to the nature of punishment has led to this error; Christ, sinless,

could not suffer the very punishment the sinner must suffer, it will be urged, because the sinner's suffering involved the *guilt* of sin. But he did not suffer the punishment which was *consequential*, but that which was *inflicted*. He suffered "the *wrath* of God;" he was made "a curse for us," "the *chastisement* of our peace was *laid* upon him." It was "the *curse* of the LAW" that he redeemed us from.

What was the inflicted punishment? It was God's wrath; it was banishment from his presence and favor, pain and death. Did Christ suffer these upon the cross, or some equivalent for them? Let the anguish of that awful hour answer in the agonized cry of "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!*"

What was the consequential punishment? It was unholiness, guilt, remorse, despair. Christ knew them not. He was sinless. True, the mission of Christ was more than "to satisfy justice." It was to magnify the law, and vindicate its excellence by his perfect obedience to it: and this harmonizes with, and is indeed a part of, the stupendous design of his life and death, which was to portray the righteousness of the law, and, at the same time, show that its violation could not be tolerated. Yet the infinite grandeur of the atonement, the height and the depth of this wonderful exhibition of *love*, is in the voluntary endurance of the curse of sin for us by the sinless God himself.

The nature of the atonement we may understand; but who can comprehend the height and depth of the love of God which it manifested! It was this "satisfaction of divine justice" which "reconciled God to us," or placed us where we could be the recipients of his mercy; but it was the infinite love that prompted the sacrifice which "reconciles us to God," and brings us in adoration to the foot of the cross; it is this which draws us to Christ, makes us hate sin, fills our hearts with love to him, and causes us to plead his righteousness at the throne of mercy for our forgiveness.