

THE TRUE ATONEMENT AND THE FALSE ATONEMENT

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I remember the time when anything about the atonement or the cross was boring to me. What was interesting was spectacular fulfillments of the prophecies. I was interested in what I thought was uniquely “Adventist.” Something about Christ’s sacrifice reminded me of the Sunday-keeping Evangelical Church. I wanted “present truth,” and that was news about the Sunday Law, or some new disaster predicted in Daniel or Revelation. Hymns about the cross were also boring. A set of studies about the atonement? Dry as dust. Over my head.

All this has changed. There has been a discovery into the meaning of *agape*. With the discovery came also an intimate acquaintance with the agent of the Gift of Prophecy, Ellen G. White. She was forced to contemplate the same “boredom” manifested by the ordained ministers of her day who failed to resonate with presentations of the cross. The ministers thought this “Cross” stuff was “Salvation Army-ism” brought into the Adventist Church to take our minds off the real truth for the day—the Sunday Law and impending persecution. Life was about to get interesting, and this “message of Christ’s righteousness” was distracting. Long out-of-reach Ellen White statements finally came to light for me that bared her soul and made the entire issue become flesh-and-blood, heart-warming reality.

There are cosmic developments involved here in this “latter rain” truth.

“The preaching of the cross [was] foolishness” to me! The reason? I was spiritually dead. Anything spiritually real is boring if you’re dead. “What happened at the cross?” Some brief answers:

(1) Christ was bringing “rebels” back to be friends with God, for He “cannot take rebels into His kingdom” “Christ died that the transgressor of the law of God might be brought back to His loyalty, that He might keep the commandments of God, and His law as the apple of His eye, and live. God cannot take rebels into His kingdom; therefore He makes obedience to His requirements a special requirement.” (Ellen White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 112). The most momentous happening of all eternity! It was a work that required far greater power than the original creation. Scientists, paleontologists, geologists, who study creation—step back; something is happening on that cross far greater than what happened on the original six days: rebels’ hearts are being melted and won!

(2) God revealed the four grand dimensions of His love (*agape*), which when “beheld,” “constrains” or motivates the self-loving, lukewarm, worldly church member’s heart. Now he wants to “cast contempt on all [his] pride” and “henceforth” he will sense this constant drawing of that love. Now he finds it impossible to live for self, but now he must live for the One who . . . how shall we say it? We say He “died for us, in our stead,” a stereotyped phrase that comes automatically, a heavenly Insurance Policy coverage we can come to take for granted. What

we yearn for is a deep appreciation for the truth. “What happened at the cross?” Exhaust your dictionaries, your encyclopedias, your philosophies: Christ has died the second death of the human race. He gulped down all the horror of the world’s hell, in Himself. That leaves you bored, cold, unmoved?

When you ponder it, you don’t wonder that our lukewarmness is the greatest problem God has had to interact with in His 6000 years of experience dealing with sinners. “What great and wonderful effects have come from the crucifixion of Christ! . . . All who would be saved must themselves have an interest in the crucified One” (Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 18, p. 73). That “interest” I long did not have. Now it overwhelms everything.

There are people around the world who cry out to God the prayer of the hymn—“While on others Thou art calling, do not pass [me] by.” Anyone who wants to be set free from the frightful clutch of the world’s deadening grip can pray a prayer that God has guaranteed to answer: “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

The Holy Spirit may be making His last appeals worldwide. Where can He find someone whose heart responds to what it cost Christ to save us? This final work is being done from the great center in the Most Holy Apartment, on this final heavenly Day of Atonement. Fasting is not to change God to make Him more willing to save us from our love of the world; but it may clear our own minds and hearts to be able to appreciate what’s happening in the heavenly reality of today. The real news is not

what’s happening in the Middle East, but what’s going on in that inner apartment of the heavenly sanctuary.

In a real sense, we in our current history are re-living the days before Christ’s cross, in Jerusalem. The Jews at that time didn’t know that the Kingdom of God was sweeping over them unawares (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). When we at last appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), we may face one great question: “Have you been crucified with Christ?” Only then do we appreciate His crucifixion!

The sacrifices of the heathen were always to placate the wrath of the angered gods. Quite common among the pagans in the Middle East as well as North, Central and South America. Note their pyramids and altars.

No matter how many gods they worshiped, every civilized pagan nation has had a tradition, more or less vague and fanciful perhaps,—a tradition forgotten by the multitude, it may be, and only cherished by the elite, the educated few, and yet a tradition still,—that there is one God back of all these gods, who made them, and who made all things. Why did they not worship him?—Because they did not believe that he cared for them. They thought him so great and so far away that the human soul was beneath his notice, that the crushing out of all the race of man would be no more to him than the crushing of a worm to us.

And because this God was so far away, they went on inserting gods and demigods, and kings and priests between him and the human heart, till no

sorrowing, suffering soul would ever think or dare to reach up the trembling hand of faith for the soothing, sympathetic touch of him who was truly and really divine. To such a world as this Jesus came to reveal the true God, and the God he revealed was Emanuel, God with us; and to such a people as this Paul taught the sublime truth that God is "not far from every one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being; . . . for we are also his offspring."

The same thing that Satan accomplished in paganism he has also accomplished in the papacy. To papists, God is the stern, the distant judge, incapable of human sympathy or love, and Christ the mediator and intercessor, whose duty it is, if possible, to touch the heart of God with a feeling of our needs, and arouse his compassion. But even Christ is not touched with the feelings of all our infirmities; so he must be approached through the mediation of the Virgin, his mother, and of canonized saint, and living pope, and bishop and priest. Thus again God is placed far away, and the beautiful and living fact of his love is denied. He is no more "our Father," who takes delight in giving good gifts to his children.

Every pagan religion has its sacrifice, and this sacrifice is derived from the true Sacrifice by which the world is to be redeemed, through degeneracy from the true type of that sacrifice which God gave to man at the gate of the forfeited Eden. But Satan has brought it around so that the pagan sacrifice means just the opposite of the true. The meaning of the true sacrifice is this: "God so loved the world

that he gave his only begotten Son." Every sacrifice truly offered was a revelation, an expression of that great sacrifice by which God was to give the pledge to all his intelligent creatures of all worlds that he so loved them that, if need be, he would give his life to redeem them. But the pagan sacrifice speaks of a god of wrath and anger, whose wrath must in some way be appeased, perchance by the blood of a lamb, or it may be only by the blood of a fair maid, or innocent child, or some other human victim. When he smells the freshly flowing blood, they believe his vengeance will be satisfied, he will be propitiated.

What shall we say of the false idea of the atonement, held even by many in the popular Protestant churches of today, and expressed in a late confession of faith in these words, "Christ died to reconcile the Father unto us"? This is not the place to enter into a discussion of that theme; suffice it to say that it is the pagan idea of sacrifice applied to Christianity. God, they think, was angry; he must pour forth his wrath upon some one. If upon man, it would eternally damn him, as he deserved; but this would interfere with God's plan and purpose in creating the worlds, so this must not be. And yet God must not be cheated of his vengeance; for this reason he pours it forth upon Christ, that man may go free. So when Christ died, he was slain really by the wrath and anger of the Father.

This is paganism. The true idea of the atonement makes God and Christ equal in their love, and one in their purpose of saving humanity. "God was in

Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.” 2 Cor. 5:19. The life of Christ was not the price paid to the father for our pardon; but the life was the price which the Father paid to so manifest his loving power as to bring us to that repentant attitude of mind where he could pardon us freely. The contrast between the true and the false ideas is tersely stated by the prophet in these words: “Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” Isaiah 53:4. Thus Satan has transformed the truth of God’s love into a lie, and even infused this lie into the very doctrine of the atonement of Christ.

“And he is the *propitiation* for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). “He is himself a sacrifice to atone for our sins” (REB).

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the *propitiation* for our sins” (1 John 4:10). “He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins” (REB).

“Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation [propitiation] for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2:17).

“Whom God hath set forth to be a *propitiation* through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God” (Romans 3:25). “Whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by His blood” (NRSV).

Since propitiation means the “turning away of the wrath of God by an offering,” its use in these passages entails a definite view of God’s wrath, the purpose and effect of Christ’s death. . . .”¹ “Among the heathen, propitiation was thought of as an activity whereby the worshipper was able himself to provide that which would induce a change of mind in the deity. In plain language he bribed his god to be favorable to him. . . . The Bible writers have nothing to do with pagan conceptions of a capricious and vindictive deity, inflicting arbitrary punishments on offending worshippers, who must then bribe him back to a good mood by the appropriate offerings.”²

Mrs. White supported the view that man was reconciled to God by the death of Christ, not God reconciled to man. The Father loved us:

But this great sacrifice was not made in order to create in the Father’s heart a love for man, not to make Him willing to save. No, no! . . . The Father loves us, not because of the great propitiation, but He provided the propitiation because He loves us. (SC 15.)

It cannot be denied that Mrs. White (and the Bible writers) consistently represented the death of Christ as being a revelation of God’s love to man, an attempt to reconcile him to God. “The atonement of Christ was not made in order to induce God to love those whom He otherwise hated; it was not made to produce a love that was not in existence; but it was

¹ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3, John*, p. 253.

² Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 129, 193.

made as a manifestation of the love that was already in God's heart . . . We are not to entertain the idea that God loves us because Christ has died for us . . . The death of Christ was expedient in order that mercy might reach us with its full pardoning power, and at the same time that justice might be satisfied in the righteous substitute" (*Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1895.)

The true Christ, the true lamb of God, could not atone for sin, for a righteous God could never be reconciled to sin. Neither could He ever forgive sin (we speak advisedly). He could forgive sinners by loosing them from their sins on condition of their broken hearted repentance, and aroused abhorrence of sin. Through the death of Christ He could break and win the hearts of sinners, and thus reconcile them to Himself. This, we assert without fear, to have been the true purpose of the death of Christ upon the Cross, so far as winning men's hearts is concerned.³ Confused and ineffective

³ This is not to deny that the death of Christ satisfied the demands of the law through a sacrifice—that is the legalistic frame work of the doctrine of the atonement, necessary and vitally true. But the law which demands the death of the sinner through justice must not be permitted to convey in the least an impression of a wrathful, offended blood-thirsty God who is personally entertaining animosity toward the ignorant sinner. This view is the prevailing view of the modern world, which is dark with misapprehension of God. The people who read our books and listen to our lectures have such a view. We, as Seventh-day Adventists workers, cannot preach the third angel's message in verity unless we give the unmistakable impression of the second angel's message "Babylon is fallen", in that her understanding of the

teaching of the atonement produces results very pleasing to Baal. A presentation of the atonement of Christ which is ineffective in reconciling honest hearts to God, in this modern day of deception, is practically a presentation of the false Christ. The only effect can be to induce in the hearts of the hearers histrionic feelings which are more akin to "weeping for Tammuz" (an ancient false Christ who suffered vicariously) than to a heart-broken love for the Lamb of God.

The term expiation is defined by Webster as follows:

The primary sense is probably to appease, to pacify, to allay resentment, which is the usual sense of atone in most languages which I have examined . . . To expiate guilt or crime is to perform some act which is supposed to purify the person guilty; or some act which is accepted by the offended party as satisfaction for the injury; that is, some act by which his wrath is appeased, and his forgiveness procured. (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*.)

Should people be given the impression that we accept the popular idea of expiation? Whether by implicit statements which are false, or tacit assumption of the idea, the whole tenor of the sinner in relationship to God can be given an erroneous color. Neither will it help to talk at length about the "love of God" if the idea of Christ's

atonement is erroneous at its very heart. The false Christ will not require that we blatantly proclaim the false view of the atonement; he will be well satisfied if we present a helpless, confused impression which permits the erroneous concept to be retained.

sufferings being expiatory is assumed. Modern Roman Catholicism is the stronghold of the idea of expiation, while their books and sermons speak appealingly of the “love that calls for you”, and the mercy of God, etc., to great length.

To speak of the expiatory sufferings of Christ conveys the idea that in some mysterious way sin was atoned for, and can therefore be forgiven. Such an idea is the very root and the strength of antinomianism. Human minds struggle in vain to grasp the meaning of the Cross, and are confused when sin is represented as atoned for at the Cross, or as a thing or entity which can be carried about from place to place. The truth is that sin can not be atoned for by the true Christ (though the false Christ would like to find an atonement for it, and represents that there is such); but that the sinner can be reconciled to God’s righteousness and delivered from the power of sin.

Christ has for sin atonement made, what a wonderful Saviour! (*Church Hymnal*, p. 529.)

“He tasted death for every man, and His blood, when offered before God in the sanctuary, on our behalf, is counted to be a price sufficiently great to atone for every sin.” (William H. Branson, *The Atonement in the Light of God’s Sanctuaries*, Pacific Press, 1935, p. 81.)

The idea that Christ’s sufferings were a “full satisfaction for sins” is perilously close to the idea of expiation. Though the idea of expiation can arouse awe and wonder, the human heart can not be won by representations of mysterious, inexplicable sufferings of a deity as “satisfaction” for its sins.

Human minds can only be confused by the representation of reconciliation of man to God as “a completed act on the part of God,” which we are to “accept.” How can an estranged person, who is wholly in the wrong, be reconciled by “accepting” an act of the other? Would not such “accepting” imply some compromise on the part of the wholly innocent party in the estrangement, which would be, in effect, a compromise of his total innocence? The estranged person who is wholly in the wrong, if he is honest, could be reconciled to the righteous one only by the revelation to himself of the truth of his entire guilt, exposed in contrast to the wholly unmerited love of the righteous one. If the honest, estranged person should be convicted by his conscience of murder of the wholly innocent one, a repentance and consequent reconciliation would take place as surely as he is honest. Such, precisely, is the nature of the true atonement. It was we who murdered the Son of God, thus displayed to ourselves the nature of our deep seated enmity against God. The apostles turned the world upside down when they convinced that world that they had crucified the true Christ.

While clearly asserting that the atonement was the reconciliation of man to God, there is confusion in giving the impression that the crucifixion of Christ was a “completed act on the part of God”. There lingers the idea of God punishing His Son, when in fact it was ourselves who punished Him:

The darkness of misapprehension of God is not effectively lifted in the reader’s mind. How can “all” be reconciled, and still their attitude remain

unchanged? There is no reconciliation unless the attitude is changed. It is the hidden, lurking idea of God punishing His own to satisfy His vengeance, which alone can account for the confusion.

Reconciliation is represented as a business transaction to be “accepted”, the idea being permitted that God punished His Son for us, and we are to “accept” Him as a substitute, and that God is now “satisfied”. The truth of the only effective atonement is obscured, which truth is that we crucified the Lord of glory ourselves, and that God permitted the awful deed to be done to manifest to us the nature of our hostility toward Him, that the revelation might conquer forever our rebellious hearts. Such a reconciliation is not “accepted”; it is experienced.

If sin was expiated by the sufferings of Christ, it is a natural consequence that sin should be regarded as an entity, as a thing which one does. There is in correspondence lessons on repentance and conversion, such a portrayal of sin. It is a confusing analysis. (See *20th Century Bible Course A*, Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence Course, etc.) There is no clear explanation, to grip the conscience, that sin is not what one does, but what one is; that sin lies in the existence of the uncrucified self.

Said my Guide, “There is much light yet to shine forth from the law of God and the gospel of righteousness. This message understood in its true character, and proclaimed in the spirit will lighten the earth with its glory.” (Ms. 15, 1888.)

Repentance is presented as a “thing to do”, an idea quite justifiable in the light of expiation, sin being a thing, etc., but unjustifiable in the true light of the Cross:

Two Things I Must Do . . . Repentance is the first of the two things we are to study in this lesson. (20th Century Bible Course A.)

Man’s part, that of turning away from sin, is represented as preceding sorrow for sin, which is God’s part of the bargain to bestow. This is just the reverse of the truth as taught in Steps to Christ. Note the 20th Century idea:

The first part of the word repent is re, meaning to turn back from. The second part, pent, is connected with the word penitent, which means “sorrow, or regret for what we have done.” Man’s part is to turn away from sin to God. God’s part is to give man true sorrow for sin . . .

The law of God points out what sin is. I have the responsibility to turn away from sin. The goodness of the Lord gives me sorrow for sin, and love for God and good. If I am willing to turn away from sin, or “willing to be made willing”, then God’s goodness will do for me what I cannot do for myself—make me truly sorry for my sins and my sinning. (*Ibid.*)

The next question mentions the thought that the preaching of Christ crucified “brings the greatest results in genuine sorrow for sins and true repentance,” but does not present to the conscience of the sinner the great truth of what that means. Thus the lesson reveals its futility, and hastens to add confusion in the following paragraph:

One man said, “repentance has not struck me yet.” He was looking for something sensational like a stroke of lightning, or some great emotional storm. What he needed to do was just his simple part—to turn away from sin to Christ. (*Ibid.*)

Thus the sinner’s attention is directed away from the Cross of Calvary, of which Inspiration says, “If there is anything in our world that should inspire enthusiasm, it is the cross of Calvary”, and is placed upon his own works—turning away from sin! The message of 1888 was intended to correct just such impotency as is evident in superficial presentation of repentance.

Conversion is represented likewise as a work; performed by the sinner:

The second thing I must do . . . be born again. . (*Ibid.*)

In another series of lessons, repentance is likewise represented as an act:

What essential step must be taken in order that the sinner may be saved?⁴ When the sinner sees his need, his first duty is to repent. (*Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence Course, Repentance.*)

⁴ The usual motive appealed to in human nature in our contemporary presentations of the gospel is the desire to be saved. Constantly the thought is reiterated, “If you wish to be saved, you must do this, that is a duty, etc.” Is it not true that the desire to be saved is based upon the fear of being lost? No one should be impressed with a desire to be lost, of course; but is it not an admission of the weakness of our preaching that we must repeatedly appeal to the desires of the spiritual self, instead of to the conscience? The Cross delivers from such helpless appeals.

While it is very true that repentance includes a turning away from sin, the point to be emphasized is that these presentations of it omit more than a mere mention of the means which God uses to lead sinners to repentance—a true, heart gripping presentation of Christ crucified. Thus the reader is left wistfully desiring to experience what he is told he needs, but not finding it, is left in his own work or act of repentance, which can be unfortunately similar to principle in Roman Catholic penance. The sinner is left with a helpless conviction of his conscience that his “looking to Christ” fails to grip his soul if he is a thoughtful, he will conclude that there must be something wrong with him, when in reality there is a missing vitamin or mineral in the teaching itself.