

# The Atonement as a Factor in Divine Government\*

By S. R. Fiske

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THE mission of Christ to this earth is impossible to define. We cannot affix limits to the divine purpose, measuring the exact scope of the lifework of Jesus of Nazareth, determining positively and negatively the results of his death. We sum it all up in the two words "redemption" and "salvation;" but to what extent human destiny is thus controlled is a problem whose solution baffles our powers. Had man remained sinless would we have known God in his triune nature? Would he have been as fully revealed to us as he has come to be in the incarnation of Christ and the dispensation of the Spirit? There are many questions that arise which we cannot answer, but enough is revealed for our guidance in the path of life

The Bible treats of the coming of Christ to this world wholly in connection with the fall of man, his loyalty to the divine government, and death under the law. Paul in writing to the Romans states the mission of Christ in these words: "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." To the Galatians he says, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, . . . that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." And to the Ephesians he affirms, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." But is the grace here spoken of God's act in the atonement? No! For the salvation is through faith, and the atonement was purely a divine act preceding our faith and in which we had no part. Did the death of Christ change our relations to the law? If so, in what respect? Did the Son of God die to render a satisfaction to the law? We answer this last question by saying that punishment never satisfies the law. Obedience, and obedience only, meets the end for which the law is prescribed. Penalty necessarily inheres in law, but of itself it does not fulfill the law, but is intended to operate as a restraint from acts the law forbids. The punishment of the criminal does not make the law whole; it does not wipe out the score, restoring the conditions existing previous to the commission of the crime. The law is vindicated but not satisfied. Punishment meets a demand of the law violated, but not the purpose of the law in its establishment.

If Christ had not come to this world, and all men had died because of disloyalty to the divine government, God would have been just, and the sacredness of the law would have been maintained, but the purpose for which the law was given would not have been realized. The law would have been a failure. The supreme Ruler under principles of equity could not do otherwise than inflict the penalty prescribed, but the penalty suffered is an eternal witness to sin-an object lesson to the whole universe that the law had failed to accomplish its purpose, that the end it sought to secure had not been reached.

If the punishment of the guilty does not secure the purpose of the law, but rather is inflicted because the purpose was disregarded, then certainly the death of Christ for man, "the just for the unjust," does not satisfy the law, does not restore that which was lost, does not make the broken whole. The law did call for the death of the sinner, and it calls

for the death of the sinner today as loudly as before the cross was planted on Calvary. And if the atonement was God's last act in our behalf eternal death would be a certainty from which there could be no rescue.

If the foregoing principles are valid the death of Christ in itself was not substitutional. He did die that, man might live, but he did not die in man's place. If he did die in man's place, then as a result man would be exempt from death, and universal salvation would be an accomplished fact. Can there be substitutional punishment, or, in other words, substitutional suffering of the innocent for the punishment of the guilty? If the purpose of the law is to secure the fulfillment of its requirements the penalty visited on an innocent party has no bearing on the disobedience of the guilty. After such suffering has been endured the law is not mended, nor is the guilt of transgression lessened. It is logically unthinkable that in the administration of law the innocent can take the place of the guilty in satisfying the demands of the law. If allowed, it is extra-judicial. If the substitutional theory falls to the ground there goes with it the collateral theory of equation of suffering, that the Son of man in his death endured in intensity and amount a degree of suffering equal to that from which the race was delivered by the sacrifice which he offered. Aside from the substitutional fallacy it would involve a definite amount of guilt on the part of the human race-in harmony with the doctrine of predestination, perhaps-and a fixed measure of penalty not subject to increase or decrease. Still further, this fails to take into the account the character of the offering made. But the whole theory is built upon a foundation which has no place in the divine government. Some of our hymnology teaches very faulty theology, as... Jesus paid it all, All the debt I owe

Our indebtedness is not canceled; our obligations are not lessened. The death of Christ did not wipe any stains from the soul, or obliterate guilt, or restore us to divine favor, or change our relation to the law that had been broken.

But we may ask, did Jesus die for us? Yes. Would we have been saved had he not died? No. Could God have saved us without the death of Christ? No. Did the atonement save us? No. How then are we saved? Purely as an act of grace, through the sovereign mercy of God. Because of the atonement the supreme Being extends pardon to the sinner. Can this be safely done? We must not forget that the divine government must be a government in which there are no elements of weakness; nothing can be allowed which will detract from its strength. It is conceded that the most dangerous prerogative a sovereign can exercise is the pardoning power. Law would in the highest sense be a terror to evildoers if every criminal should be arrested, convicted, and punished. The greatest weakness of human governments for practical restraint of evil grows out of the failure to bring the offender to justice. If all persons tempted to commit crime knew that there was no escape from righteous and adequate penalty for violation of the law of the State in the administration of justice crime would be reduced to a minimum. No sin, not even the slightest infraction of the divine law, can escape the eye of God; hence, on the principle of equity he can make his administration perfect. Justice cannot fail in his hands. When he says the sinner shall "surely die" it is the declaration of a truth that cannot be evaded. But this would be an administration of death, not working for obedience but bringing in

an eternal reign of suffering, as "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Thus it is either death or pardon; there is no other alternative.

But a proclamation of pardon for all past and future sins to anyone who should ask for it, simply as an act of administrative prerogative, would not only weaken God's government, but completely overthrow it. Removing all restraints, law would be practically annulled and right would lose its binding force. If the sinner is to be pardoned it is necessary that the law shall not become any the less rigid or binding in its application to every human being; it must not have any less terror in it. The thunders of Sinai must not be silenced or muffled. Nothing that is necessary to good government must be surrendered. Not a compromise, even parting with the lesser in order to secure the greater good. God's plan for the government of the race proposed to save man while yet the law should remain intact, as binding as at the first on every life, and without the setting aside of any of its penalties or the lessening of its terrors to the transgressor. What was done? In the Bible record we find that in order to reach and save man God became incarnate. Christ was born into this world as the babe of Bethlehem; as God manifest in the flesh he put himself under the law, kept it in every iota, thus proclaiming its justice and infinite importance, submitting even to death upon the cross, inflicted by wicked men because of his loyalty to truth and right and his devotion to a perfect law-abiding humanity. In the condescension thus manifested by the Son of God in bringing his life down to the plane of our being, and making common cause with us in the experience and trials of this world, enduring its hardships, fighting its temptations, dropping into the lowliest estate a human being could occupy, not even having where to lay his head-in the carrying out of his merciful purpose to save us from death is there not an endorsement of the law that places its sanctity and worth beyond all possible cavil on the part of any intelligence in this universe? And when we add to this endorsement the voluntary surrender of his life to establish conditions which would render salvation from death safe under the government he had established, can anyone entertain a doubt as to the estimate he places on the law which had been broken?

So marvelous are God's dealings with us in the atonement that we are told the angels desire to look into these things. And is not the atonement in the incarnation and death of Christ more than an endorsement of the law? Is it not a divine commentary on its office and eternal sanctity? Would our estimate of its exceeding value have been as vivid, our conceptions of its worth as full and impressive, had not the Son of man come to this world to introduce a new dispensation? We do not hesitate to assert that under the New Testament order legal restraints are certainly not less effective than under the Old Testament regime.

Now pardon is offered the sinner on certain conditions only, not simply for the asking of it even with intense desire; but when the soul realizes its guilt and pledges reformation, seeking a better life, then pardon is granted. It is death under the law on the one hand, or pardon with regeneration on the other. It is pardon with a new life, never pardon with the spirit in a state of enmity toward God. Thus the whole scheme is in the interest of reformation and obedience to the law. The problem is more than an administrative one-not less what is done in the sinner than what is done for him. Looking at the cross, he

realizes something of the awful turpitude of sin, he abhors his past life because of its guilt; and more than escape from penalty does he desire escape from the corruption of his nature; and in crying for mercy it is a cry for deliverance from all that is corrupt and evil within him. Is not God ready under all circumstances to make a soul pure if purity is sought? The atonement, therefore, in exalting the law and opening the eyes of men to see its reasonableness and sanctity, introduces into the divine government through the display of love in its most astonishing manifestation a force mightier than all other forces in winning the race to virtue and building up God's kingdom on the earth. There can be no government of law so effective as the government of grace. Law dominates the will; the grace of God in Jesus Christ dominates the will and head both, dominating the will not by external constraint, but through that central life of our being, the heart. As the government of a nation that has the hearts of the people is stronger than if upheld by bayonets, so God's kingdom now dwelling in human hearts is stronger than it could possibly be without Christ at the center of it all. The law is still our schoolmaster, but Christ is our Saviour. The end sought in the atonement is to be one mind with God-the nature of man brought into harmony with the divine Spirit.

The foregoing discussions can be summed up in the following questions and answers: Was Christ an atoning sacrifice? Yes; for without his incarnation and death there could have been no dispensation of grace.

Did Christ become the propitiation for our sins? Yes; his death was the result of our sins, making it possible for God to be just and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. Was Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the world? Yes; his life was an offering through which alone pardon could safely be offered.

In him is there reconciliation? Yes; reconciliation of man to God in spirit, in life.

The purpose was that we should be new creatures, the divine image being restored to us.

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