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Love and Justice in the Atonement

by Murray McLeod-Boyle

LOVE AND JUSTICE are two subjects that are often viewed as being extreme opposites. This view can be seen in the Church today. Believing that you must choose either love or justice, the Church has generally settled for love. The question that arises for the Church is, if these two attributes are at odds, then which one did God choose to exercise in saving sinners? When this question is asked, however, we enter into a conundrum. We know that God is just and loving, so how is it that he can do away with one part of His Being?

Consequently we are forced to admit that in the atonement, both God's love and justice were satisfied. Therefore, in the following paragraphs we will seek to show that both love and justice are present in the doctrine of the atonement. Furthermore, we hope to demonstrate that the themes of love and justice are not arbitrary facets to this doctrine, but essential elements that can not be discarded.

For two reasons this is important for the Christian to grasp. First of all, any attempt to promulgate a view that excludes either of these aspects, or promotes one above the other, will result in a corrupt doctrine. In effect God will either be seen as vengeful and vindictive or a sentimental lover with no concern for justice. Secondly, the principles involved will help us to be more discerning in other areas of church life where these same attributes are involved.

Love and Justice: Is there a Conflict?

OF PRIORITY WE MUST ASK, "is there a tension between love and justice?" Initially it would seem so. The apparent tension that exists here is one which has caused a good deal of controversy over the doctrine of atonement. A study of the divergent views will show that most of them have come about through an attempt to ground the doctrine of the atonement in either love or justice.

At this point it is important to recognise that neither one can prevail over the other, or the doctrine of atonement will fail. Louis Berkhof recognises both the apparent tension that exists and the pitfalls that must be avoided, when he writes:

"Believing that you must either choose love or justice, the Church has generally settled for love. The question that arises for the Church is, if these two attributes are at odds, then which one did God choose to exercise in saving sinners?"

It is necessary to avoid all one-sidedness in this respect. If we represent the atonement as founded

only in the righteousness and justice of God, we fail to do justice to the love of God as a moving cause of atonement, and afford a pretext to those enemies of the satisfaction theory of the atonement who like to represent it as implying that God is a vindictive being, who is concerned only about His own honour. If, on the other hand, we consider the atonement purely an expression of the love of God, we fail to do justice to the righteousness and veracity of God, and we reduce the sufferings and death of Christ to an unexplained enigma. The fact that God gave up His only begotten Son to bitter sufferings and to a shameful death cannot be explained on the principle of His love only.¹

Here Berkhof outlines the situation with which we are confronted, and we meet face to face the *apparent* tension of love versus justice. The supposed tension that exists is more apparent than real, and is due primarily to faulty definitions. So often today, secular interpretations are incorporated into the Church's theology so that the truth is obscured. Measured by today's standards, love is little more than a rank emotion. Its meanings are manifold, and its content poor. However, if we take our definition of both love and justice from Scripture, there can be no misunderstanding. The Bible is clear on this issue. Nowhere does the

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (First British edition, London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 368.

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Bible hint that there is any conflict between the attributes of God. God, as we shall see later, is not divided. One of God's attributes cannot be in conflict with another, just as one person of the Trinity cannot contradict another. If God is divided, then how shall He stand?

This teaching thus forms the backbone of the Biblical view of the atonement. From this, it must be seen that any attempt to drive a wedge between love and justice is an apparatus of man based on a faulty understanding. An understanding which, rather than being based on revelation, is based upon humanism and is, therefore, without Scriptural warrant.

This then leads us to ask, if there is no tension then how do the two aspects of love and justice work together?

Sin

IN SEEKING AN ANSWER to this question we need to look at the plight of man as a sinful being in the eyes of a righteous God. Because of Adam's fall the harmony and fellowship that God and man enjoyed was completely ruptured. God, being in His very nature holy, found it repulsive to His innermost being to have anything to do with sin, yet He still desired fellowship with His fallen creatures.

Here, at this point, we encounter the two aspects under consideration. How could God show His love and at the same time satisfy His justice?

It is here that we also encounter our first opposition. Some deny the necessity of the atonement, and hold that God could have pardoned the sinner without receiving any satisfaction. The Bible teaches, however, that a righteous and holy God cannot simply overlook sin, but reacts against it.

To overlook sin may have been an option for God's love, but the fact that God had pronounced the sentence of death upon the sinner meant that God's righteous judgement would not be met. Therefore, simply overlooking sin was not an option that God had at his disposal.

On the other hand we have those who claim that the penal theory of the atonement "places a gulf between God and Christ, representing God as the stern Judge who insisted on the execution of justice, and Christ as the pitiful Saviour who interposed and satisfied His legal demand and appeased His righteous wrath. They are not one either in their attitudes or in the parts which they play."²

This concept fails because it seeks to drive a wedge between the persons of the Trinity. It shows a one-sided emphasis upon Christ as Saviour rather than the Triune God. As Berkhof points out, this misconception comes about when people "speak and sing as if Christ, and not the triune God, were exclusively the author of their salvation."³ Furthermore, this theory upholds God's justice, but does not take into account God's compassion and love.

Hence, this issue is of primary importance. As we have seen, when people come to devising an answer to the question of sin, they are tempted to side with love or justice. What the above positions clearly demonstrate, is that this method is invalid.

Therefore, we must devise an answer that does not divide the Trinity or pit one of God's attributes against another.

Love

THE POSITION OF LOVE in the doctrine of atonement must be seen as *the motivation* for giving a propitiation. "According to Scripture

A Mission that Motivates Teens

By Rodney Marshall

"Three, two, one, we have lift off of teen shuttle." "Houston, this is teen shuttle. We have a problem." "Teen shuttle, this is mission control, Houston. What seems to be the problem?" "I know I'm in a space craft. In this great adventure, I must be headed somewhere. But where am I going?" "Teen shuttle, we've planned this mission for years. We've trained and prepared you. You are the best-qualified astronaut we have, but you don't know where you are going? You don't know your mission?" "No sir I don't. Just where am I going? How do I find my mission in life?"

This quandary probably fits someone you know. It may even fit one of your own teens. You've willingly toiled long to provide quality Christian education. You've concerned yourself with character, and academic content. You anticipate completion of graduation expectancies, and yet your teen may not have a sense of calling. Mission control, God, created and designed each teen for a purpose. He has a mission, career, or vocation. Our responsibility as parents and educators includes helping each teen find and fulfill this God given calling.

All over the world I have spoken with parents and educators about the need to instill a sense of calling in youth. While team preaching with my teenage son graduate, at the European Student Leadership convention in England, I found students hungry for meaning and purpose in life. The same need emerges from Manila to Maine. Many of us share a passion to help youths find their true mission in life. God calls some to church ministry as pastors and evangelists. The calling of most will lead them to godly impact in the broader society through education, law, public policy, medicine, technology, management, entrepreneurship, the arts, various trades, and so on. Each calling or career is equally noble when performed before the face of God. How can a youth find his mission in life? How can you help your teen find the career prepared for him? Start by teaching him that God designed a mission to motivate, master, and move him.

God motivates teens with a sense of mission.

2. Berkhof, *Theology*, 372.
3. Berkhof, *Theology*, 372.

the moving cause of the atonement is found in the good pleasure of God to save sinners by a substitutionary atonement."²

At this point any attempt to divide the work of the Trinity is pointless. The efforts of those who try to show Christ as love and God as wrath must be refuted. It is to be underscored in the clearest terms that "the Father made the sacrifice of His Son, and the Son willingly offered Himself. *There is no schism ... between the father and the son.*"³

Likewise, the love of God as the moving cause in the atonement must

"We need to refute those who see no place for God's wrath. Such views . . . need to be shown as totally incompatible with Scripture."

be grasped. We are by nature children of wrath. It is an inescapable fact. "When man fell away from God, he as such owed God reparation. But he could atone for his sin only by suffering eternally the penalty affixed to transgression. This is what God might have required in strict justice, and would have required, *if He had not been actuated by love and compassion for the sinner.*"⁴

A.A. Hodge, in his book, *Outlines of Theology*, in discussing the topic of Christ's satisfaction, fully upholds the fact that God's love was the cause and not the result of the atonement. He says, "it was not a mere example of punishment ... (nor) a mere exhibition of love" but rather "its motive was the ineffable love of God for the elect." He goes on further and adds, "it was the effect not the cause of God's love. It satisfied his justice and rendered the exercise of his love consistent with his righteousness."

Furthermore, we must see that "God's love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners. It is not a vague, diffused good-will towards everyone in general and nobody in particular; rather, as being a function of omniscient almightiness, its nature is to particularise both its objects and its effects. God's purpose of love,

formed before creation, involved, first, the choice and selection of those whom He would bless and, second, the appointment of the benefits to be given them and the means whereby these benefits would be procured and enjoyed."

Thus, God's love is established as the moving cause and motivation throughout the process of atonement.

Justice

THE FALL, as stated above, created a situation whereby God had been offended. He had prescribed death as the penalty for the transgression which had taken place. However, God was still desirous to have fellowship with man. He wanted to continue to show His love, but this could only be done in harmony with the satisfaction of His justice.

Firstly then we need to refute those who see no place for God's wrath. Such views as those held by Abelard and Dodd need to be shown as totally incompatible with Scripture.

"For example, C.H. Dodd says that, in the teaching of Jesus, anger as an attitude of God to men disappears, and His love becomes all embracing." This type of thinking does nothing to show God as just. For "unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin." Here in this statement we have the very crux of the matter. If God's wrath/justice are not present then sin could be overlooked, and Christ's death viewed simply as an unnecessary martyrdom.

However, the fact is that Christ's death was for a purpose and that purpose was to propitiate God, the offended divine Lawgiver.

It is at this point we see why Christ had to die. "God might have demanded a personal atonement of the sinner, but the latter would not have been able to render it." This is where Christ's vicarious atonement is required. God's justice needed to be satisfied and it was "at the cross that He

He designed them to accomplish a positive and worthwhile work in His overarching plan. The teen that finds a mission finds an assignment, charge, duty, task, aim, objective, goal, purpose or calling from God. This calling will unfold in a career, occupation, profession, vocation, forte, passion, or specialty, for which the teen develops a strong impulse or inclination. The teen motivated by a sense of his mission in life will embrace the work and overcome the challenges inherent in any significant accomplishment.

God wants to master each teen with a godly philosophy of mission.

Any touch of fatalism will result in a passive acceptance of some undiscoverable plan and a loss of motivation. Many teens wander in lethargic aimlessness, rooted in existentialism. Humanism places the teen at the center of the teen's life. Most teens struggle daily with this selfishness. Don't feed it! We need teens mastered by a mission to serve God with the understanding God has printed a calling into the depths of their beings. This kind of teen will seek to discover and fulfill His will. This teen will do good and transform civilization little by little and day by day. This kind of teen will do God's work and say with Paul at the end of his life, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course . . ." 2 Timothy 4:7.

God moves each teen by his mission to love God, love his neighbour, and fulfill his unique calling. Jesus quoted the great commandment to describe this first mission in life when he said; "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . ." Every teen is called to live hour by hour loving God rather than self or other contemporary false gods. Fulfillment of this mission provides the basis for the next. Each teen moved by God will do as Jesus said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Jesus went about doing good his entire earthly life. He provided the ultimate example by loving his neighbour to the death. Youth who simply do the maximum good their lives can produce will fulfill a major role in transforming this world. God will also move the teen to fulfill his unique calling. The creator designed him for a specific purpose. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Ephesians 2:10. Each teen has his specific work to accomplish. God designed him to use his God given talents, in God chosen settings, for the purposes God deems most important.

2. Berkhof, *Theology*, 367.

3. Berkhof, *Theology*, 372, emphasis added.

4. Berkhof, *Theology*, 375. Emphasis added.

(Christ) assumed our legal liability, and gave full satisfaction to the Upholder of the Moral law of the universe." Hodge adds further that "the guilt or just legal responsibility of our sins, were imputed to him, i.e., charged upon and punished in him. . . . he did not suffer the same sufferings either in kind, degree or duration, which would have been inflicted on them, but he did suffer precisely that suffering which divine justice demanded of his person standing in their stead."

Therefore we can take full assurance in the finished work of Christ as that which constituted the outlet by which the divine justice may be fully satisfied.

Conclusion

HAVING LOOKED AT LOVE and justice in the atonement, it should be apparent that there is no conflict between these two. On the contrary, there is only harmony. God, out of love, offered Himself up to be a satisfaction for His own justice in order that He may be propitiated. In love, God moved to bring about a restoration of the fallen relationship and in so doing paid the appropriate demand to the law in order to satisfy His justice.

In this there is no tension. Only the mystery of how great God is.

As the teen discovers his unique mission he will move into positive, godly Christian action. Much of this action should find effective expression as the teen develops in a God given careerpath.

"Mission control, I think I'm getting the idea. You designed and prepared me to accomplish a specific purpose with my life. Now, how can I discover and fulfill this mission? What do I do now?" "Next you need to learn biblical principles involved in the idea of finding and fulfilling a calling/career designed by God. Then we will match your God given personality, and vocational interests, skills and priorities with your calling/career. We will continue our pursuit of a mission that motivates!"

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