

**THE DEATH OF CHRIST WAS A
PROPITIATORY SACRIFICE AND A
VICARIOUS ATONEMENT FOR THE
SINS OF MANKIND. A THEOLOGICAL
ESSAY READ IN THE DIVINITY SCHOOL,
OXFORD, JUNE 25, 1835**

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A

THEOLOGICAL ESSAY

READ

IN THE DIVINITY SCHOOL, OXFORD,

JUNE 25, 1835.

BY

JOHN COWLEY FISHER, B.A.

OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE.



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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following Essay, intended for private circulation only, has been reprinted in the exact form in which it was originally read in the Divinity School at Oxford. It is, perhaps, too obvious to need remark, that the handling of the subject of which it treats, necessarily imperfect even at the time when it was written, owing to the limits then prescribed to the length of all University Prize compositions at Oxford, must be much more inadequate and imperfect now, when the literature connected with this question has become so much more extensive and voluminous. The utmost, therefore, that the writer can hope for by the reproduction of this Essay at the present time is, that the attention of those few friends who may deem it worthy of perusal may be recalled, once more, to the earnest and prayerful study of a subject, which must ever be one of profound interest to the enlightened Christian student—a subject which has been said, with truth, to constitute “the *real centre* of the theological system;” and which was certainly regarded as one of special importance for the time, by the two chief expounders of scientific Theology at Oxford, at the period above referred to.

Oxford, August 31, 1877.

The Death of Christ was a Propitiatory Sacrifice and a Vicarious Atonement for the Sins of Mankind.

IT is the remark of a distinguished philosopher, when speaking of the mode in which knowledge may be most readily acquired and most usefully applied, that "it would be very convenient, in the several parts that are to be known and studied, to consider what proofs the matter in hand is capable of, and not to expect other kinds of evidence than the nature of the thing will bear^a." To the neglect of this salutary caution must be attributed the fact, that so many enquirers after truth have been unsuccessful in their pursuit, and been doomed to live the victims of a hopeless scepticism. The remark applies with peculiar force to the revealed plan of human redemption by the Atonement of Christ, against which the charge of obscurity has so often been brought. But such obscurity, whatever difficulty it may occasion in obtaining a just knowledge of this doctrine as an article of the Christian's faith, detracts nothing from its credibility as a revelation from God. A degree of mystery is implied in the very term Revelation, which, if it is to be limited by the powers of human reason, must exclude those very subjects for which, reason being

^a Locke's Essay on Study. See Life by Lord King, vol. i. p. 198.

insufficient, revelation is required: and such is peculiarly the character of the doctrine in question, which necessarily involves so much of the incomprehensible nature of the Deity. Arranged by the contrivance of infinite Wisdom, and executed by the energy of Omnipotence, Redemption could not have been that stupendous transaction which glorified God while it conferred salvation on the sinner, had the inspired account brought it within the narrow compass of human understanding. The unbeliever, then, will do well to pause ere he reject altogether a scheme, which professes to have the Almighty for its author, and the eternal happiness of man for its object, merely because he cannot trace with logical precision the connection between the Cross of Christ and the salvation of the soul.

This view is confirmed by the analogy of nature; for, had the statements of Scripture concerning the plan of man's redemption been so simple as to preclude the necessity of diligent enquiry, this would have been contrary to all the notions we have derived from experience of God's usual course of dealing with His creatures. The path of human life is surrounded with difficulty, and the understanding as well as the heart is liable to the temptations of error. In moral philosophy and natural religion, no less than in the doctrines of Revelation, are many things hard to be comprehended; and the reason plainly is, that the discipline of the understanding and of faith, by perplexity and doubt, was intended to form an important part of our probation in this world.

The same reasoning, from analogy, furnishes a satisfactory reply to *all* the objections which have been urged against the doctrine of vicarious Atonement by Christ; inasmuch as they will apply with equal force to the acknowledged course of God's government in the world, and to every system of natural religion. If a dispensation of Providence, which professes to relate to us as beings destined for another world, be analogous to that which relates to us merely as inhabitants of the present, and if the principle of both appear to be the same, we may conclude that both proceed from one and the same Author; and, if the parts objected to in the former be similar to what is actually experienced under the latter, the objections, being inconclusive in one case because contradicted by fact, must be inconclusive also in the other^b.

Now it appears that, in the natural world, the Almighty works not by mere independent acts of sovereign authority, but by a connected system of comprehensive beneficence. The ultimate object of every dispensation of His Providence, and the means whereby that object is effected, are mutually dependent upon each other; and the combination of both is essential to the perfection of the whole plan. The continuation of the human species might have been effected without the intervention of human agency: but God has rather chosen to accomplish it by means which operate most extensively for the benefit of society, call forth the best feelings of the heart, and thus give a value other-

^b See Butler's Analogy, part ii. chap. 8.

wise unknown to the blessing of existence. Now the very same wisdom, and perfection of design, is manifested in the remedy provided for sin by the vicarious Atonement of the Divine Mediator. Had the gift of salvation been bestowed upon mankind, merely by proclaiming at once a full pardon to all upon repentance; the benefit conferred by such an unconditional remission of guilt, though undoubtedly great, would have fallen far short of that which is now provided. It is the *disease* of sin which constitutes its chief punishment. Pardon, while this disease remained, would have been little better than a name; and mercy therefore, to be complete and effectual, must be communicated in such a way as to heal the disease, as well as to remove its painful consequences. This is just what the scheme of the Atonement is calculated to effect. God Himself, in human nature, suffers the penalty due to guilt at the same time that He declares its forgiveness; and, by so doing, exhibits the intrinsic evil of sin in such a light, as must lead to the abhorrence of it; and also presents such a lovely view of His own character, as to make it the most inviting object both of imitation and of gratitude. Thus the *same* doctrine which speaks peace to the conscience produces likewise the deepest penitence, and furnishes the most powerful incentive and the purest motive to a holy obedience: so that not only is man's title to heaven restored, but it is restored in that very way which is best adapted to give him the full capacity of enjoying it, by implanting in his breast the moral likeness of his

Creator and Redeemer. What, then, becomes of those unphilosophical objections to this doctrine, which are founded upon a mistaken view of the Divine immutability? The Deist affirms, that it either is agreeable to the will of God to grant salvation on repentance, and then He *will* grant it without a mediator; or it is not agreeable to His will, and then a mediator can be of no avail, unless we admit the mutability of Divine decrees^c. But the conclusion supposed to be involved in this alternative is by no means necessary. The fallacy arises from supposing, that the Divine decrees must in all cases be absolute: in other words, that God ordains an end, without regard to the means whereby it is to be accomplished. But this is not the case in the economy of the natural world; and it would be inconsistent with that harmony which characterises all the operations of unerring wisdom, that it should be so in any of its dispensations.

It has also been imagined, that repentance for the past, and amendment for the future, are of themselves sufficient to avert the penalty of sin, and restore us to the Divine favour. Experience, however, proves that such is not the fact as far as regards the present life, in which the consequences of transgression frequently continue long after the cause itself has been withdrawn. Repentance the most sincere, and resolutions of amendment the most determined, will not restore to the drunkard or the sensualist the health, reputation, or fortune

^c See Magee on the Scripture Doctrines of Atonement and Sacrifice, vol. i. p. 10.