The Wrath of God in Relation to the Atonement

by

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If we are wrong in our doctrine of God, we are wrong all along the line. We shall be in error in every doctrine of the Faith if we hold an erroneous doctrine of God. So our doctrine of God will relate powerfully to our doctrine of the Atonement. If, for example, we do not believe that God is a God of wrath as well as a God of love, and that his essential holiness means the inevitable punishment of sin, then we shall not believe in the substitutionary and vicarious nature of Christ's death on the Cross. That is why the doctrine of God's holy wrath borne by his Son at Calvary is repugnant to the liberal theologian. He has an erroneous view of God.

The Bible makes it clear that the unforgiven sinner stands under God's curse and that 'the wrath of God abideth (or rests) on him' (*John* 3:36). 'When it is stated that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us' (*Gal.* 3:13), not only is it implied that we were 'the children of wrath' (*Eph.* 2:3), and under God's curse, but also it is implied that when Christ was made a curse for us he was the object of divine wrath. On the Cross Christ bore the full penal sanction of the law of God which was our due. Our punishment was transferred to him. The curse which he endured consisted especially in his experience of being forsaken by God. There was an awareness in his human nature of a complete withdrawal of God, and that is the essential element of damnation and eternal death: that is hell.

It was not that the Father hated his Son on the Cross. There was no *emotional* anger on the Father's part. He never ceased to love the Son in whom he was well pleased. There was, however, a judicial suffering caused by God. God's wrath in this context should be seen not as a divine *emotion,* but as a divine *act,* a point that is stressed by Shedd in his masterly treatment of the subject. Calvin makes the same point:

> 'Yet we do not suggest that God was ever inimical or angry toward him. How could he be angry toward his beloved Son, 'in whom his heart reposed'? (cf. *Matt.* 3:17). How could Christ by his intercession

> appease the Father towards others, if he were himself hateful to God? (*Institutes* 2:16:11).

God never loved his Son more than when he was suffering for the sins of his people on the Cross. To some this may seem somewhat esoteric and scholastic, but really it is intended to avoid grave misunderstanding about God's attitude when he caused the sufferings of our Saviour.

It is clear from Scripture that Christ's atoning death was substitutionary or vicarious and that by it he satisfied the holiness of God and so rendered him propitious or favourably disposed to his people. John Murray says that 'propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure' (*Redemption: Accomplished and Applied,* p. 36). The apostle Paul speaks of 'Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood' (*Rom.* 3:24f.). Many, following C. H. Dodd, replace 'propitiation' by 'expiation', a much weaker word. The word translated 'propitiation' has to do with the averting of divine wrath. Leon Morris comments: 'If there is "a righteous anger" of God, and the New Testament is clear that there is, then it cannot be ignored in the process of forgiveness' (*The Cross in the New Testament,* p. 349). Propitiation, then, a turning away of God's wrath, lies at the heart of Christ's redemptive work. Well does John Murray say: 'Grace indeed reigns but a grace reigning apart from righteousness is not only not actual; it is inconceivable' (*Redemption,* p. 20).

When James Denney avers that the Atonement 'is a homage paid by Christ to the moral order of the world established and upheld by God; a homage essential to the work of reconciliation . . .' (*Doctrine of Reconciliation,* p. 235), he betrays a radical flaw in his understanding of substitution. The Atonement was infinitely more than and qualitatively different from a 'homage' paid to God's righteousness. If that is all that is meant by substitution, then the term is being used in a much lowered sense. Christ's sufferings, on this view, were an example of what sin deserved, an exhibition of God's displeasure with sin. It is really the old governmental or rectoral theory of Grotius (1583-1645) which sees no enduring of the penalty of the Law and reduces the Cross to little more than a symbol. It is not surprising, then, that Denney openly rejects the doctrine of the Atonement as held by Luther, Calvin and John Owen (*Reconciliation,* p. 263 and p. 49).

Naturally, the idea of averting the wrath of God by a substitutionary suffering is repugnant to liberal theologians. Carl Henry quotes H. H. Titus:

> To many it seems immoral to picture God as . . . one who needs to be appeased by the blood of a victim. We cannot think . . . of atonement as the propitiation of an angry monarch God. We feel a moral revulsion at the thought of sinners in the hands of a wrathful God . . . Many conceptions which are set forth in terms as blood atonement, expiation, ransom, substitution, satisfaction . . . and the like, have not only lost much of their meaning, but they offend the enlightened moral sense of today. (*What is a Mature Morality?* pp. 146f; Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics,* p. 364f).

Thus man would make God in his own image!

Certainly this aspect of the Cross has been caricatured and misrepresented as when it is suggested that Christ had to placate an angry God in order to change him into a loving God. A recognition of the love of God is crucial at this point. 'God commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (*Rom.* '5:8). The Cross of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the love of God. God 'spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all . . .' (*Rom.* 8:32). The costliness of the sacrifice matches the greatness of the love. There is no conflict between God's wrath and God's compassion; they exist simultaneously. There is this difference, however; God's wrath against sin is inevitable, whereas his mercy is optional and depends entirely on his sovereign pleasure. As a holy God he must punish sin; but he is not obliged to propitiate his own wrath.

In mercy he determined to do this and he has done so by the Cross of Jesus Christ. There is no conflict, then, between God's holy wrath and God's holy love. John Murray puts it neatly: 'It is one thing to say that the wrathful God is made loving. That would be entirely false. It is another thing to say that the wrathful God is loving. That is profoundly true' (*ibid* p. 37). '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). Thus the apostle Paul, with the Cross in view, could say: 'We shall be saved from wrath through him' (*Rom.* '5:9). We are saved from the wrath to come, the wrath that will be 'dispensed to the ungodly at the day of judgment' (*Redemption,* Murray).

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