

The Doctrine of the Vicarious Atonement examined and found wanting.

I wonder whether, for a moment, you can picture in your mind a school class-room? It so happens that the son of the teacher, a man, is a pupil in the class; but for the moment he - that is, the teacher - is called out of the room. During his absence, and as it is not altogether to be wondered at, things become unruly. A spirit of mischief making and even ugly vandalism takes over, although the teacher's son keeps out of it. And, when he returns, things are in a real mess. You and I would feel that the whole class should be taken to task. But no, the teacher singles out his own innocent son and punishes him heavily and severely for the uproar which took place and the damage which was caused. It seems unjust, doesn't it? There had to be some sort of restitution; something to bring teacher and pupils together again. But rather than punish the whole class, whom he loved, the teacher decided that his own son would carry the punishment for them all.

Before dismissing this analogy, (for this is what it is) for its patent absurdity and unfairness, it is important to realise that this is to all intents and purposes, the way in which the reason for Christ's coming into the world has been understood and taught to people.

Through its sinfulness and rejection of Him, the human race had separated itself from God. Indeed, the human race had brought upon itself the punishment of death. And such a punishment would have to be exacted before reconciliation between God and the human race could take place. It is at this point that Jesus Christ enters the picture. He, it is said, took upon Himself the punishment which had been exacted. In no way responsible himself for the situation which had developed, yet He came, or was sent, into the world, to suffer the punishment which was our due. He took our place. A world-famous evangelist once graphically, put it this way. The human race had been, so to speak, strapped in the electric chair, waiting for the final, fatal, button. But before execution Christ stepped in and took our place.

In a Christian Christmas message published in a suburban newspaper some years ago, a minister of the Church asked the question, "Why did God intervene in human history?" And part of his answer reads as follows. "There was none other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gates of Heaven and let us in. . . As our representative Christ died in our room and in our stead. . .

At Calvary Christ exchanged places with us, not only 'bearing our sins in His own body on the tree', but giving to all who acknowledge Him as Lord and Saviour his righteousness. And it is this imputed righteousness and nothing else which will be our passport into Heaven". ([The Central Coast "Advocate", December 13, 1978, page 20](#)).

It may seem, and for some people, will seem the height of audacity that this belief in the vicarious atonement of Jesus should be questioned, let alone challenged. It would probably be impossible to calculate the number of books which have been written on the subject or to list the variations and refinements of this theory down through the centuries. But - and in the teachings given through Emanuel Swedenborg - challenged it is. "Who, that has any enlightened reason", he wrote, "does not see in such an idea inconsistencies, which are contrary to the very Divine Essence? as, for example, that God, who is Love Itself and Mercy Itself, could, out of anger and consequent vengefulness, damn men and devote them to hell? also, that He should be willingly to be moved to compassion by the damnation being laid on His Son, and by the sight of His suffering upon the cross, and of His blood?.... ([Doctrine of Faith paragraph 45](#)).

We have an idea which has come down to us from Old Testament times that God is capable of anger and vengeance; that He will not, or cannot forgive freely; and that He must be placated in some way after sin has been committed. (Sacrifices were carried out all in the name of 'placating' a stern and even volatile God). It sounds crude, in a way. And yet it is so. Indeed, it is this concept of God - a stern God demanding obedience to high standards and ideals - which is the starting point of the theory of the vicarious atonement we are talking about. Although it was necessary and appropriate for God to speak of Himself in such terms in Old Testament times, the truth, however, is that he is not like this at all. Such is the testimony of the teaching we find in Swedenborg's theological writings. God is Love Itself. God is Mercy Itself. God is not like you or I; we so often demanding restitution, or forgiving others only on the basis that they fulfil certain conditions or satisfy certain requirements. Whether people are able to take advantage of His forgiveness is one thing, but **God forgives freely**. Insofar as we see His qualities reflected in the life and attitudes of Jesus, we know that He reached out with compassion to the sinner and that He sought, and seeks, to lead forward out of sinfulness. He doesn't exact penalties of us. And to talk of Him as if He does makes Him sound like some father of the bygone, Victorian, era, whose honour, or name, or standing, if injured, had to be made up for in some way.

The idea has been around for just so long that in the wake of some sin or act of disobedience it is necessary to appease the just anger, or "wrath", of God, or to satisfy His honour, or righteousness, in some way. Like we've seen, there are variations on the theme, but basically this idea runs throughout them all.

Not only is God Love Itself and Mercy Itself, but out of love and mercy towards the human race, then threatened with destruction by the forces of evil from hell, He Himself descended into the world. He did not send another. There are not two Gods, but one. And that one God, Jehovah, Himself descended, clothing and covering over His Divinity with infirm human nature, and a physical body, taken from Mary. It was by means of that infirm human nature that He could, as Jesus, come face to face with evil and overcome its power. Throughout His life in this world Jesus was constantly assaulted by evils from hell, but He rejected all that they wanted Him to do. All the fallen inclinations He had derived from coming to Earth, He overcame and put away from Him. And, by doing so, He made it possible for the Divine Life which, from the beginning, had been inmosty within Him, to descend more and more into His consciousness and life. While on earth and for much of time, God and Jesus had seemed to be two. At the end they became completely one ... One God in one Person. Risen and glorified as He then was, Jesus could say to the disciples, "All power has been given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18). And, when He appeared to the aged apostle, John, on the isle of Patmos, He described Himself as "the Alpha and the Omega. . . the Almighty". (Revelation 1:8). He wanted John to know, and He wants us to know, that He, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, the only God of heaven and earth.

God Himself came into the world, we would repeat, to overcome the power of evil from hell. His purpose was to restore free-will which was then on the point of being lost. And, by successfully doing this, He re-opened the possibilities of our salvation. The responsibility, therefore, still rests with us. The ball, as some would say, is in our court. It's up to us to take advantage of the opportunity and possibility which He restored. Here was a time when people were at the point of being, unwittingly carried forward by forces they could not master into evils of every kind. As a result of what God did on earth we now have a choice. Those forces which would carry us forward into evil are counter-balanced by other impulses and influences so that we have the opportunity to weigh up the matter and make a conscious decision as to which we will favour.

It is not, please note, that God wipes away our sins or pretends they aren't there. And, in saying that He freely and unhesitatingly forgives, it doesn't mean that we are forgiven, as it were, "full stop". . . no questions asked and no further action required of us. Sins, although forgiven, are only ever removed from our lives through sincere self-examination and repentance. And, in the absence of such self-examination and repentance, those sins remain and are part of us. There is no doubt that our sins do separate us from God. But no one else can bring about a reconciliation. It's up to us. If we are going to move back into a closer working relationship with God, or be "reconciled" to Him, then it will only be on the basis of such self-examination and repentance just spoken of.

"I do not know" wrote Swedenborg "how anyone can think from God, and with God, that he is rejected of God, and that therefore by the will of the Father, the Son became accursed and was thereby made a propitiatory and a throne of grace. Besides, justice is a Divine attribute, but not vindictive justice, and still less is it in one for the sake of another. If it is not justice, neither is it according to Divine order, for one to be saved for the sake of another by another. Nor can God be reconciled by any other means than by the repentance of man himself".
(Apocalypse Explained 805:3).

In the first epistle of John, chapter 3, verse 8, it is stated that the reason for Christ's coming into the world was "to destroy the works of the devil". The one God of heaven and earth descended into the world to throw back the forces of evil and to restore free-will. We said earlier, the ball is in our court. If we would be reconciled to God it will be by means of our own heart-felt self-examination and repentance and not through the substitution, or reconciling work of another.

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