1911

The redemptive value of the incarnation

Entered May 11/11

THE REDEMPTIVE VALUE

of

THE INCARNATION.

Graduating Thesis

by

Samuel M. LePage, A.B.
(Ohio Wesleyan University '09)

Department of Systematic Theology.

approved
H.C.S.

THE REDEMPTIVE VALUE
of THE INCARNATION.

The treatment of the "Redemptive value of the Incarnation" is beset by many difficulties. These difficulties are due,as a rule,to the fact that most men have settled convictions on this subject. Their experience has led them to assume certain things,and they are loathe to give them up. These postulates become a part of their very life. Hence to rob them of these would be to unsettle them in mind if not to destroy their faith. We cannot,therefore, hope to give a treatment of this theme that will satisfy the populr mind. It is only to those who can,for the time, forget their own theories,that this treatment will appeal.

Then,too,this is a subject that has not been generally dealt with. Most of those who have written on topics akin to this have taken for granted the very thing which we wish to investigate. That there can be an incarnation no one has been disposed to doubt. And since there is incarnation in Jesus Christ,that incarnation could have been for no other purpose than to redeem the world. With this as a starting point many and various theorys of Atonement have been built. Our precedure will be slightly different from this. We propose to travel a rather unfamilliar and unbeaten path. After a thorough considera-

tion of just what redemption is,then it will be time to consider what part the incarnation of Christ or any incarnation can have in such a redemption. Then also it will be time to ask whether there can be an incarnation. If so,in what does it consist?

In order to have an adequate conception of redemption we must come to an understanding concerning sin. It has been on the conception of sin, which authors have held,that they have built up their theorys of atonement. Many,however,have not attempted a clear definition,they have taken it for granted. So it is necessary to judge from their idea of the work of Christ what they conceive sin to be.

One of the earliest conceptions of sin was that it is a lack or need. Among the Fathers,Origin was one of the first to advance formulate such a theory. Augustine had the same conception. With him God the only reality,-is the author of all things. Being the"summum bonum", He cannot be the author of sin. All,therefore,that is outside of God is transetory and ephemeral. Hence sin is"Not-being" or a negative quantity. All theory of grace are more or less allied with this conception. St.Paul,though he speaks of sin as the transgression of Gods love,yet thinks that a man is not complete till he is possessed with the spirit of Christ. So,in that sense,men are in need of something

they do not naturally possess. This"lack"or"need" is also viewed in another light. The sensual nature is a cumbrance. Hence we need either something to remove the same or something to counteract its effects. Accordingly sin is the direct offspring of these needs. The body and its natural demands are not in themselves evil,it is now assumed,yet they are the source of sin.

The trouble with such a view as this is that it introduces a duality. The theory of Origin is nothing more or less than the outgrowth of the old Manichaean idea that matter is evil. Even with the system of grace,in which it is assumed that something is added from without, we still have the dualism between matter and spirit. Hence sin is necessary so long as we are incumbered with matter. When the sensuous nature is viewed as being the cause we still have the same fundamental conception. The sensual is due to the flesh or matter,hence matter is evil. This not only destroys monism, but at the same time it makes null our basis for morality. We do not usually attribute sin to animals yet they have the same matter,the same sensuous nature;and we might add,the same need of grace. In order to have life at all,in the ordinary sense of that term,flesh and nature are necessary. These are not negative quantities but real conditions of existence. If they are the causes of sin we are forced to attribute sin to

God himself,who thus conditioned our existence.

Another theory of sin paralell to the one we just mentioned is that advanced by Leibnitz. In this "Creaturly limitation" is the cause of sin. This limitation may be viewed as a limitation of experience or a limitation of knowledge. In the former case the thought is that new experiences may bring new conditions of which we are ignorant. Hence we fall into sin before we are aware. In the latter case the lack of foresight is viewed as the cause of much evil. If we could only have a broad and comprehensive view of the world,so that we might know the real conditions and results of all things we would do away with sin. God must come down and reveal himself and give us light. Where we have that perfect revelation; when we thoroughly know what is the infinite good,then we will be far on our journey towards sinlessness.

All this is beautiful sentiment but it is rather devoid of meaning. The wise man is not always the saint. Often we find him a pretty thorough going reprobate. Christianity after all is not an intellectual process. The ignoramus in his sphere may be as good as the wise man in his. When we speak of creaturely limitations as the cause of sin we simply have the old problem in a new form. Flesh and matter are nothing but limitations. Hence matter must be evil. And we are back again in the old duality. Human

Life is not possible without these limitations. Hence we can say with Professor Sheldon;"if creaturely limitations of themselves necessitate the fact of sin,it must be concluded that continuous adherence to righteousness is but of the question for a finite agent."

The shorter catechism defines sin as the want of conformity unto,or transgression of the law of God. But when we ask what the law of God is immediately we begin to grope. If we regard Gods law as the Decalogue or any other formulated set of rules we preclude all thought of advancement. All conditions would have been foreseen and a law accordingly formulated. This is not,however,the manner in which laws are made. Transgressions produce laws. After sin has been committed a law is formulated against that particular sin, Experience always precludes rules of conduct. Since any two experiences are never exactly the same there is no safe ground for formulating rules concerning them. A law can never be anything but a general rule. If we say with Stearns that this law is the inherent principle of human conduct then we have Kants categorical imperative. And it must be admitted that there is truth in such a view.

The generally accepted modern view is that sin is some form of selfishness. Clarke in his Systematic Theology gives this the preference. Stephens would consider it

selfishness in the sense that it is a transgression against the divine love. Hermaun Schultz had the same in mind when he said:"sin is the opposition of the will of personality to the true purpose of God,with it that is revealed in Christ". In fact this view seems to be Biblical. Jesus conceived of sin as a form of selfishness. To him it was disharmony with God,unreason,absurdity. To John sin was the opposite of Gods love and light. Paul also,in the fin al analysis,conceived of sin as opposition to love.

But we must be on our guard even here. What is to determine selfishness? What is to determine opposition to Gods love? If there is to be a self if must have certain rights. Then if the self goes beyond these rights it becomes selfish. And how can it be determined when the self is beyond its bounds? This naturally calls for rules. So that in the end we are reduced again to the categorical imperative. So,then,the way in which the categorical imperative is conceived of determines the conception of sin Few have attempted a formal definition. The nearest approach to defining this term is to say that our experience with God is a transcendent experience. That is we are not able to subject it to the categories. It always means more than we can express in words. This mystical experience or categorical imperative is always with us, standing in its own right. Our problem is to give it expression in terms

of the relations in which we find ourselves. Sin,then,is the failure to gave this inner experience proper expression. AS our relations are constantly changing there can ~~not~~ be no fixed rules regarding conduct. Just as truth is always relative to conditions so is sin. It can not be determined by saying this is love and that is sin. What is love in this generation may be sin in the next,depending entirely on conditions. Just as the athlete is perfectly justified,when in training,in appearing with but a scant amount of clothing. But if he should persist in appearing on the street in a "running sit"he would be sinning against common decency. Our transcendent experience remains practically the same. Our relations,however,are changing. So constantly we must make a readjustment. Failing in this we sin.

Redemption,then,is the freeing of man from sin. No one has ever been disposed to doubt this. All the different theorys of atonement have not been due to difference in the conception of what redemption means,but to a difference in the conception of sin. It can readily been seen that if sin is due to a need or lack on mans part,then this need must be supplied. Augustine,if he had formulated a theory of atonement would have said,no doubt,that Christ was sent to supply this need. Men needed to be possessed with the spirit of Christ then sin would vanish. Just as

Paul thought of Christ dwelling in his body and thus prohibiting sin. If mankind is totally corrupt and humanity is conceived of after the fashion of the Realists, then in order to have redemption there must be some generic principle to enter in. Christ must be conceived of as He is by Erskine in his little book entitled the "Brazen Serpent"(Edinburgh 1831) or as W.P.Dubose, of the University of the South, thinks the New Testament teaches--that is He is a Second Adam entering in and regenerating the flesh. If man is living a life of sin because he is ignorant of the real conditions of life then in order to redeem him he must be supplied with the requisite knowledge. God must in some way reveal himself.

~~The~~ Various theorys of the atonement have been built up when sin has been conceived of as in some way a transgression of law. The first theory to be formulated was that of Auslem, According to this theory Gods honor had been outraged. Satisfaction must in some way be made before man can be redeemed. The only one capable of making this satisfaction was the God-man, which is Jesus Christ. This theory was slightly modified by the Schoalastics till at the time of Luther and the Reformation it was said that sin is a transgression just as crime is a transgression of civil law. If man is to be delivered a penal satisfaction must be made. About the end of the sixteenth century

Grotius,under the influence of Socinus' criticism of the theory of Auslem,again modified this theory. God in order to maintain his justice must keep his law in tact. So Christ was punished as a penal example and thus justice was preserved. This theory with slight modifications has come down to us through such men as Jonathan Edwards,-more recently through Shedd,Dale,Hodge and Orr. A good example of this view is found in the Methodist Discipline:"Almighty God,Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,maker of all things judge of all men,we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness,which we from time to time,most grevious1y have committed by thought,word and deed,against thy Divine Majesty provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us".

As a result sin being conceived of as a transgression against the divine law of love,the modern ethical and subjective theorys have been formulated. These ethical theorys may be characterized as Prof.Stevens of Yale has characterized the theory of Prof.H.C.Sheldon,as thoroughly ethacized governmentalism. The thought is that God in order to maintain his place as the all loving Father must send His son into the world of sinful men. By so doing God is true to himself and men have an example of infinite love. The subjective theorys while they do not renounce an obligation on Gods part,place the emphasis on

the effect on men, Prof.Stevens explicitly says:"In whatever sense Christ was the Representative of God,so that in Him men see the Father,in whatever sense He was the interpreter and example of the divine feeling towards sin, in that sense and degree His suffering with and for men in their sins has its ground in the vicarious suffering of the eternal love."Yet the thought is not God-ward but man-ward. Mem are out of harmony with the divine will and love. Something must be done to bring them back, The view is ever forward to a goal that is to be reached. The Kingdom of God is to be established on this world. So as B.P.Bowne puts it,"The atonement seems intelligible,only in connection with a developing moral world,and would appear to be inadmissable in a completely developed moral order".

The modern subjective theorys had their rise in Schleirmacher. They have grown along with the thought of the divine immanence. Such men as Goethe, Bismark, Coleridge and Wordsworth have convinced theologians of the fact that God is in all activities of life. So like Clement of Alexandria they have come to regard the redemption of men as the education of the human race under the tuition of indwelling Deity. Salvation is not a physical process,but an ethical growth through union with God; Divine knowledge is no mere speculative insight into the origin

of things, but an ever growing perception of the true character og God as revealed in Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed or like leaven hid in three measures of meal.

What now is the objection to all these theorys of atonement. From the point of view the authors have had it must be admitted they are correct. And yet redemption is something different from atonement. Redemption is the saving men from sin. This is not affected by putting man or even some substitute in jail. Even ethical and subjective theorys are powerless unless they in some way deliver men. If a man is in the "ditch", in order to redeem him; he must be taken out of his present surroundings and made into an honest and respectable citizen. Even here the effects of the old life are not removed; But this cannot be expected. As the old song has it, "the bird with the broken pinion never soared so high again". All that can be hoped for is that such a one will be in a more harmonious relation to his surroundings. If this can be done by some respectable Christian gentleman expressing his love towards the man in the "ditch", by throwing himself in the mud also, then all well and good. But the main point ~~to get~~ is to get him out of his present conditions, whether by love, kind words, or by forcible ejection.

It may be objected that this would give but small

place to forgiveness of sins. If by forgiveness of sins is meant some future state of bliss of condemnation we are not concerned with such, Redemption applies more particularly to the present state. At least our basis of judgement is only in the present. If forgiveness of sins refers to some inner feeling, a consciousness of fellowship with God, then we reply that such feelings are not the prerequisites of coming out of sin, but they are invaribly the accompyment. The inner consciousness of union with God, ~~[illegible]~~ is always possible to men. Moreover Gods attitude never changes. He is our Father and we are his sons no matter what condition we may be in. The prodigal was no less the son of his father when he was feeding swine than when he was at home. All the father cared for was that the son might be restored to an appreciation of his love. He was not concerned as to the way in which this was brought about. Whether it was by a perfect sacrifice of an he catomb of unblemished beasts or whether it was the sight of the husks on which the swine fed, together with the remembrance of his former home and its good things, mattered little to the father after the son was once again safe at home.

The only sense, then, in which redemption is the same for all time is that it it a release from the bonds of sin. As sin is always relative, and what is good for one age is

sin for the next,there can be no fixed process of redemption. The method of redemption must change as often as conditions. Moses and the prophets may well have been satisfied with the sacrifice of beasts. They may have felt that thereby their sins were forgiven and their hearts made right with God. But men today would feel that such things were totally inadequate. They would feel,just as the later prophets felt,that there must be something other than a mere external rite. In the middle ages,where there was much leisure,men felt that they were released from sin and redeemed when they renounced sensuality and secluded themselves in some convent. It is not our purpose here to question their method of redemption. It was adopted to the age. Many were really performing Gods will by so doing. But this method would be wholly inadequate in this age. A recluse would be an incumberance now,-Afit subject for a paupers home,-A thoroughly redeemed man today id the head of a family which he governs wisely and well. Redemption for us must take into consideration such things as; the problem of the unemployed,the tenement problem,public playgrounds for children,the saloon question, and a number of other similar questions. A perfect adjustment to all these things constitutes salvation from sin, redemption,sanctification and any other term we wish to apply to the process.

Now that we understand what redemption means, just what part does incarnation play in the process? How does the life of Christ help us in the interpretation of our transcendent experience with God in terms of the relations in which we find ourselves? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to know just what we mean by "incarnation".

For purposes of definition it is necessary to divide the world into the onletogical and the phenomenal. The various popular names for these philosophical terms are spirit and matter, God and the world etc. It is not thus implied that there is a duality, but rather that these are the conditions of our existence. If we should conceive of the great ocean as sending off at various times bubbles possessed with the power of self direction we should have something of a paralell. Although this illustration cannot be carried to far. The bubles in the sense that they are composed of water have an onlotogical or spiritual nature. If they are to maintain their free existence they must adjust themselves to their surroundings. Carelessness on the part of any would result disasterously. In this sense they have a phenomenal, a physical nature. Thus in so far as these free existent bubbles have the spirit of the calm and peaceful ocean, whose waves never transgress each others rights, they may be said to incarnate

their infinite progenitor.

From the nature of the case it is readily seen that exact knowledge of the ontological is never a certain quantity. We know that we are like Him just as the bubble is like the ocean, but as to exact emperical knowledge in terms of the phenomenal we are forever in the dark. In that sense Herbert Spencer was correct in saying that God is unknowable. Indeed Augustine must have come to the same conclusion before accepting the teachings of the Church for he says: "I had not believed else the church had compelled me". All that we hope for is an interpretation of that spark of the infinite which we have in terms of our relations. Anything that gives us this is a revelation,-an incarnation of the spirit of the infinite. After all it is this spirit which we need. Conditions are constantly changing. No two individuals have had exactly the same surroundings. Hence definite laws and acts would count for little. The love of one individual can never be emulated by another. Bowne expressed but little when he gave utterance to the sentence: "Love is poorly revealed in words, it demands deeds for its true revelation". Real revelation is only on the side of the ontological an can never be adequately ~~be~~ expressed by one individual for another neither in words nor deeds. "We must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling".

What then do we mean by the incarnation of Jesus

Christ? Bowne says:"being in the body means simply and only having a type of experience which is physically conditioned. What can this mean? The same author declares in his "Studies in Epistomology"that an object minus all its qualities is nothing. If then the word"physical"is used in the sense of human what have we more than a human experience? A being with all the qualities and limitations of a man cannot be according to the professors own definition anything more than man.Dubose,of the University of the South,contends that Christ developed just as an ordinary individual. His humanity was perfect in every respect. On the other hand he was divine. This to be sure forms a contradiction. But it is declared some contradictions are necessary. So we do not try to explain it any more than we attempt to explain how men can be free and yet God foreknow their further chances.

If Jesus was divine and God dwelt within Him,then what became of the"world-ground"during His earthly life? If he became at all human,the eternal throne of God must have b·en vacated for a time. Can it be after all,that we as finite are the"world-ground"and are the true sources of the infinite? Perhaps then it was only a part of the infinite that assumed the form of flesh. But how is a personality able to divide itself thus constituting two/independent beings? Even if a part of the infinite became

incarnate then the part which became incarnate must have had a previous existence. Shall we say then that we all have had a previous existence and go on with Plato and speculate concerning that previous experience? Was Christ then only a special manifestation of a certain activity of God? Even Bowne admits subordination of some sort. Augustine affirms the activity of the Father, Son and Spirit in Heaven during the earthly life of the Son. So he must have looked upon Jesus as simply a special agent of God. Harnack, although rather skeptical, on the whole inclines to this type of modalism. Moreover this is the only course left to us. Jesus was divine in so far as he revealed God. In so far as He gave perfect expression to the transcendent God in terms of the phenomenal he is the captain of our salvation. In so far as he perfectly adjusted Himself to His age and its problems, to that extent He is the crown of our humanity.

Superficial thought, however, will still maintain that Gods ability to fill time and space with inanimate worlds and His ability to fill our own world with pleasure contrivances only shows power, skill and benevolence. Sending prophets and teachers would only cause our love and sympathy to go out to them and not to God. God would only appear as a beneficent rich man scattering gifts and presents. But when He sends a son that represents something

of value to Him. Hence our love would then go out to God. All this is beautiful sentiment, but when considered seriously impossible consequences follow. To begin with it sounds very much like full fledged duality, materialism is also very prominent in such thinking. If God can give one order of gifts without much cost, and he has yet another order of gifts more precious to Him, then He must have a dual substance as his disposal. Moreover to the man who believes in immortality the sending of a Son into the flesh would not appear to be such a great sacrifice. The absence would only be temporal. Then, too, the Son would need such an order of experience in order to complete his education. Boussete of the University of Göttingen has therefore remarked that "we no longer hold the belief that Jesus was absolutely different from ourselves-He heaven born and we earth born. He is simply the most perfect being in the progress of development".

What then is the redemptive value of incarnation? How are men saved from weakness, meanness, and sin by it? Men are always great imitators, much of the parrot nature in ours. Consequently we need some one to go ahead and blaze the trail. In this age of automobiles and flying-machines we need men to incorporate the divine spirit. Perhaps the time will never come when the power that draws us to the highest will be equally distributed among man-

kind. There will always be a crying need for leaders. A guide post is always a welcome sight to the weary traveler. But as we are all traveling ~~and~~ diferent ways these guide posts can only be of a general use. The problems of men differ, the one from the other. The surroundings are never the same for any two. Every one must in some measure have the spirit for himself else he will become entirely lost in the intricasies of life. It can not be confined to any particular age or any particular school. Relegion is always larger than creed. Schleiermacher says: "Jesus never made His school equivalent to His religion. His person was to be accepted in account of his idea and not his idea in account of his person."

It may be objected that this refers only to a general incarnation. And yet it had been said that even Jesus never maintained He was the only mediator-the only one in whom His idea actualized itself. But what is the particular redemptive value found in the incarnation of Jesus Christ the Son of God? Was He of redemptive value to His own age alone or is He of redemptive value to all ages as well? He redeemed His age in so far as He went beyond the prophets. In so far as he showed a better spirit for the times then they had He was their superior. If His spirit of meekness was better for those particular surroundings than the sterner attitude of the prophets why then

He was their better and was nearer God than they. If one spirit will serve for all ages; if in the various complexities of life,and in the various problems and surroundings that confront us the spirit which Jesus showed is the one forever the most general,forever the most God-like,abd forever the best for giving expression to our transcendent experience in terms of our surroundings,then Jesus is the Captain of our salvation and has redemptive value for all ages and all times. It is the spirit that quickeneth. As Horace Bushwell says:"if He is not the law and the spring of the new spirit of life,He is nothing to us". As many as are lead by the spirit of God they are the sons of God. Incarnation means the spirit of God within and redemption is the giving perfect expression to that spirit. The one supplements the other.

In closing we cannot do better than to quote the words of Schleiermacher:"When in the mutual deleneations of His life I contemplate the sacred image of Him,who has been the author of the noblest that there has yet been in religion,it is not the purity of his moral teaching,which but expressed what all men who have come to the consciousness of their spiritual nature,have with Him in common, and which,neither from its expression or its begining:can have greater value,that I admire;and it is not the individuality of His character,the close union of His high pow-

er with touching gentleness,for every noble,simple spirit must in a special situation display some traces of a great character. All these things are merely human. But the truly divine element is the glorious clearness to which the great idea He came to exhibit attained in His soul. This idea was,that all that is finite requires a higher mediation to be in accord with the Deity,and that for man under the power of the finite and particular,and too ready to imagine the divine itself in this form,salvation is only to be found in redemption".

FINIS