

The Relation between the Incarnation and the Atonement

REV. A. JOHN LANGDON, M.A., LL.B., B.D.

'Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus : who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men ; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name.'¹

'Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith
Sacrifices and offering thou wouldest not,
But a body didst thou prepare for me ;
In whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin
thou hadst no pleasure :
Then said I, Lo I come
(In the roll of the book it is written of me)
To do thy will, O God.

... Then hath he said, Lo I am come to do thy will. He taketh away the first that he may establish the second. By which will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.'²

In the New Testament we do not find the Incarnation or the Atonement as isolated themes, but they are linked together and found with other themes, especially those of resurrection and exaltation. The passage above from Philippians illustrates this point well, showing that the Incarnation and the Atonement are elements in the process of the descent of the Son of God, and the ascent of Son of Man/Son of God. Likewise in the passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews, with its quotation from Psalm 40,³ we see the Incarnation and Atonement grounded in the eternal purpose of God. This passage points back to what God was doing

¹ A.V. Phil. 2:5-9.

² A.V. Heb. 10:5-7, 9-10.

³ vv. 6-8.

in and through Israel, as well as pointing forward to the radical fulfilment of the Incarnation in the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. In the Gospels, similarly, we see the themes linked together in the drama of the Incarnate life, its development and Christ's full identification with men culminating in His death upon the Cross, and His final justification by resurrection and exaltation.

From the foregoing, and when we look at the Bible as a whole, we see clearly revealed, therefore, that God's redemptive purpose for man is one. That Incarnation and Atonement are indissolubly bound together as are the Old and New Covenants. The Old tells us of One who is to come and of a New Kingdom; the New triumphantly proclaims the Christ who has come bringing the Kingdom in Himself. The movement of the grace of God throughout the Bible is to one end—the renewing of the bond of fellowship between Him and man which was broken at the fall.

In the Old Testament we see that Israel was elected by God to be His instrument for the redemption of mankind, but the picture the Old Testament gives us of Israel and the Israelites is that of a people who resisted their own election so that it became hidden and ineffective. The Israelites, therefore, because they were the object of God's grace, were continually being judged, and punished because of their withdrawal from God's grace. Yet throughout this period, which might be called the pre-history of the Incarnation, though as I have indicated it was also a movement of the Incarnation and Atonement, God was preparing a way for Himself so that He could manifest His trust, and fulfil the mission of Israel when the time was fulfilled. This happened in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's son, in whom Israel's mission was revealed in its entirety, fulfilled and accomplished. Accomplished in and through the Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, and yet from above. Accomplished by the Word who became Jewish flesh for He could become no other.⁴

In the New Testament we see Israel's rejection of Him who was the hope of Israel, but when we turn back to the Old Testament we see this as a confirmation of Israel's previous history. Israel had sat in the face of God before she spat in Christ's face as she deliberately handed him over to the heathen Pilate to be killed upon the Cross. Yet it would appear that the tradition of Israel gave no adequate preparation for the Incarnation as such, in the unique sense in which it did happen—the union of God and man in Jesus Christ. Nor for his unique vicarious rôle. The closest approach we can find in the Old Testament to a divine saviour is the idea of the Messiah who would be a man chosen of God, but not of a divine incarnation. Thus in the Psalms, for example, the emphasis is on that of representation and adoption rather than incarnation. Again, although the idea of a vicarious relation was not completely unknown to Israel as evidenced by the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, and Abraham's intercession for

⁴ cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, E.T., IV/1, p. 166.

Sodom (Gen. 18:23 ff.), yet this concept was of limited scope being restricted to men acting on behalf of men. That God should in His own person realize His purpose for men was not grasped, and Israel as a whole was unprepared for a Saviour who came, 'humbling himself to be the brother of man, to take His place with the Transgressor, to judge him by judging Himself and dying in his place.'⁵ Throughout the Old Testament the tendency of Israel's thought, for many good reasons it may be said, was to emphasize the distinction of God from man and nature. God acted in and through man and nature, but neither contained God.

Therefore, although the Incarnation is but one element in God's redemptive purpose, yet it is a vital 'moment' in that process which shows both the continuity of the New Covenant with the Old, and also its uniqueness over against the latter. For in the Incarnation we see a bridge thrown across the gulf which separated God from man in the person of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation therefore, which reached its fulfilment in the Atonement and Resurrection, gave to sinful men a new and living way to God.

Israel, therefore, were a people elected by God for the salvation of all, but who rejected it except for one member of that nation—Jesus Christ—so that He became the one elected for the salvation of all mankind. The Incarnation therefore happened not simply to express truth about God, but to deal with sin—to enter in and overcome the contradiction of man. It meant laying hold of man in his low estate⁶ so that he might be taken up into the fellowship of God by the atoning action of Jesus Christ. This is important, for when men see the suffering caused by sin and Man's estrangement from God there arises a temptation to think of the Incarnation as happening to deal with this suffering, but it is vital to grasp firmly the truth that Incarnation took place to deal with sin, the heart of the matter, and not suffering. For it was not suffering that truly characterized the situation into which Jesus Christ entered when the 'Word became flesh', but sin and liability to temptation. It is also important to remember that we must not regard the apparent continuity of the life of Christ—pre-existent, earthly, and exalted—as natural and inevitable. For in His earthly life there was always the 'possibility' of a break, for it was existence under the conditions of temptation. Showing that God was willing to go to the utmost for us, for Jesus Christ, like us, was open to temptation, being 'at all points tempted like as we are.'⁷

In the Incarnation we see God's infinite love seeking out the humanity that had turned its back on Him and disobeyed Him. We see in the Incarnate life of Jesus how He judges that sin, condemns it, but bears Himself the punishment that condemnation brings and brings man into personal relationship with God the

⁵ cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, E.T., IV/1, p. 157.

⁶ Heb. 2:16.

⁷ Heb. 4:15.

Father again. This was possible because, 'God was in Christ' reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.'⁸ For God utters his righteous and eternal 'No' to sin, and then it takes on the objective character of guilt, and a situation ensues in which man cannot get himself out of the impasse caused by his disobedience and sin. In this desperate situation only God can take man's place and deal with his sins completely and finally-once-and-for-all. But God has to really enter into the human situation and a decisive event happen. Not, it seems to me, in the way that Professor Bultmann looks at it, 'By Christ there has been created nothing more than the possibility of which does, of course, become an assured actuality in those that believe.'⁹ But as K. Barth sees it, which seems to be Biblical and in keeping with our experience: 'Why did the Son of God become man, one of us, our brother, our fellow in the human situation? The answer is: In order to judge the World. But in the light of what God has actually done we must add at once: In order to judge it in the exercise of His Kingly freedom to show His grace in the execution of His judgment, to pronounce us free in passing sentence, to free us by imprisoning us, to ground our life on our death, to redeem and save us by our destruction. That is how God has actually judged in Jesus Christ. And that is why He humbled Himself. That is why He went into the far country as the Obedient Son of the Father. That is why He did not abandon us, but came amongst us as our brother. That is why the Father sent Him. That was the eternal will of God and its fulfilment in time—the execution of this strange judgment. If this strange judgment had not taken place there would be only a lost world and lost men.'¹⁰

Pondering on these facts we realize that the Chalcedonian formula which states that in the one Person of Christ we have two distinct natures, the divine and the human, is fundamental as a theological starting point of any attempt to understand Christ's atonement in terms of the Incarnation. For the atoning act of Christ only becomes meaningful for us as human beings if the man of Christ was integral, and in the Divine act of atonement it is Jesus as Man who is reconciling us to God, the One for the Many.

Dr. Barth makes this point concisely and clearly in the following words. Commenting on John 1:14, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth,' he writes, 'If we put the accent on flesh we make it a statement about God. We say—and in itself this constitutes the whole of what is said—that without ceasing to be true God, in the full possession and exercise of His true Deity, God went into the far country by becoming man in His second Person or mode of being as the

⁸ 2 Cor. 5:19.

⁹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, E.T., Vol. I, p. 252.

¹⁰ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, E.T., IV/1, p. 222.

Son—the far country not only of human creatureliness, but also of human corruption and perdition. But if we put the accent on “Word” we make it a statement about man. We say—and again this constitutes the whole of what is said—that without ceasing to be man, but assumed and accepted in his creatureliness and corruption by the Son of God, man—this one Son of Man—returned home to where he belonged, to His place as true man to fellowship with God, to relationship with His fellows to the ordering of His inward and outward existence, to the fullness of His time for which He was made, to the presence and enjoyment of the salvation for which he was destined.”¹¹

Calvin, earlier, also saw that we could only understand Christ’s atonement in terms of the Incarnation. Holding that we are nothing in ourselves, but something only in Christ, Calvin worked out Biblically the vital chain that linked men to Christ. Like Drs. Barth and Brunner, Calvin saw that the dreadful tyranny of sin has both an objective character in God’s holy repudiation of it, and a subjective aspect in man’s consequent guilt. Therefore a reconciling Mediator must be such that he makes possible a re-union wholly from the side of God and wholly from the side of man. Hence this Mediator must be Incarnate. He must be both true God and true man.

Calvin shows clearly that Atonement as a High Priestly action is linked firmly with the Incarnation and goes on to draw out from his study of Christ’s priestly ministry as found in Pauline Epistles the truth that ‘in Christ’ means the same as ‘Christ for us.’ Therefore to say with Hebrews that we have in Christ a High Priest touched with the feeling of our infirmities, is similar to saying with Paul, ‘But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’¹² Arising out of this, Calvin pointed out, is a secondary meaning which is contingent upon the first, but the true understanding of the first depends upon the existence of the second, namely ‘Christ in us’ or faith. These must be held closely together as this faith, which is given to the believer by virtue of what Christ has done for him, enables him to participate and identify himself with the once-for-all deed.

Calvin shows how in order to understand that in Christ we died, were judged, rose again, and ascended into heaven, we must look at and ponder on the office of Christ as High Priest and the Old Testament understanding of the High Priest as Mediator. In Israel when the High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat in intercession, he was considered to be the representative of the people and therefore the whole of Israel entered with him. He was considered the one person who could step beyond the veil into the presence of God on behalf of the people of Israel. This was a liturgical function, which, when conceived in the

¹¹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, E.T., IV/2, pp. 20-21.

¹² Rom. 5:8.

right way, was a response to the covenant Word of God. However, the history of the priesthood in Israel is one where the sacrificial ceremony became exalted in its own right and ceased to be a responsive witness to the covenant Word of God. This is to be seen especially in the post-exilic Torah when a stiff and very formal legalism set in, which not only continued the separation between the Word and the atoning sacrifice, but provided a shelter against God's righteousness behind which sinful man could hide.

It was into these particular historical circumstances in Israel that the Son of God was born and became one with us and the true High Priest; breaking through this sin-laden legalism and as our Mediator standing before the mercy seat, the One for the many, and returning to us with the words, 'peace be unto you.' For in that Jesus was born of a woman under the law, the eternal truth and righteousness of God-in-Christ broke through the curse and bondage of the law, and restored the unity between God's Word and the liturgical sacrifices, for they were offered in the person of God's Son—the Word made flesh. As the true High Priest he performed a once-for-all sacrifice.

Thus the Incarnate Christ is our High Priest and in His priestly work the transgressions of sinners are not imputed against them for Christ was one with them in and through His Incarnation. Yet, although Incarnation is by its very nature Atonement, it was necessary for man to see what God in Christ was doing, and yet, as we have seen, this, because of man's estrangement from God and his sin and guilt, was not possible. So that in the movement of grace another 'moment' occurs, that of Atonement. God-in-Christ does what man could not do himself, and took upon Himself as God-man the consequences of sin. The union of Incarnation and Atonement therefore constitutes a substitutionary act which opened up the way for man out of his impasse—through the Incarnation, in which God became one with us and declared His solidarity with us; through the Atonement in which Christ entered into the very heart of man's estrangement and stood in the breach man had made between him and God. This breach was so great that as Dr. Mackintosh puts it, 'By His Gospel of forgiveness the Father implicitly declares to us not only that sin rests under His condemnation, but that nothing achievable by the sinner can ever make it good. It is something so real and dark that only three modes of Divine treatment are possible—to judge it, to bear it in sacrificial love, to forgive it freely.'¹³ That is what Christ did for us, substituting Himself for us so that we are reconciled and justified only by and through the blood of Christ, so that we have no rights in ourselves for these were done away with by Christ substituting Himself on the Cross for us. It is Christ's perfect obedience and faithfulness on the cross that worked out our propitiation delivering us from our bondage to sin; and that was made possible by His perfect identification with us at the Incarnation; but also because His humanity was with His

¹³ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, p. 120.

Divinity. For it was God who was historically in Christ that made atonement possible for man could not do it.

I come now to my final point which Professor Emil Brunner deals with effectively in *The Mediator* and which has special import for India, that of the importance of the Incarnation and Atonement as witnessed to in the New Testament actually happening in history. Professor Brunner shows that God being in Christ is only fully relevant if Christ historically 'was', although he makes it abundantly clear that the Incarnation and Atonement are far more than the events to which a secular historian can point to. As Professor Brunner puts it, 'That God comes, that He comes to us, means that He Himself really and actually meets us as we are. This is why He comes down to our level, that He may really meet with us. *Nostra assumpt* . . . That it is God who really meets us, and that He really meets with us means the same thing. He meets us at the point where we become "real", that is, where we stand before Him naked, stripped of all illusions and coverings or masks, with nothing to shield us from His gaze.'¹⁴ This did happen and is happening in History, it is no mere possibility, and because it did happen reconciliation was accomplished for us, and ultimately, as we meditate upon this, our only true response is to fall down on our knees and worship Him who lived, died and was raised up again on our behalf.

¹⁴ P. 452.