

THE DEATH OF CHRIST

by Charles Watts

Charles Watts' examination of the death of Christ from a critical perspective, analyzing the historical and theological claims surrounding the crucifixion and its significance.

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1. The Death of Christ

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The Death of Christ (1896) by Charles Watts THE sermons preached on Good Friday last, as reported in the various newspapers, afforded strange and peculiar reading to the non-theological mind. The one theme dwelt upon in all the pulpits was the death of Christ with its complete and sublime scheme of redemption for fallen man." It was urged that Eve and Adam fell from a state of purity and perfection by an act of transgression in the Garden of Eden, and thereby involved the whole of the human family in sin and depravity. To remove the consequences of this alleged act of transgression, it was contended that the death of Christ was necessary in order to atone to God, against whom a sin had been committed. It was further urged that, through our "first parents" partaking of the forbidden fruit, God became estranged from his children, and that the sacrifice of his Son was required to reconcile the Father to his children. As it is put in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, "Christ was crucified to reconcile his Father to us. To be a sacrifice for sins of men" (Article 2). It is also stated in the Confession of Faith that Christ's death "purchased reconciliation " (chap. viii.). The Biblical authority, as accepted by orthodox believers, for this view of the death of Christ is as follows: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) he is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2); "the Son of man came to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28); "through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement" (Romans 5:11); "this is my blood of the New Testament which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28); "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:28); and "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Upon these and a few other texts in the New Testament orthodox Christians base their theory of the Atonement.

It may be interesting to note the conflicting character of the theories which professed Christians have held concerning the atonement, which is supposed to have been made through the death of Christ. The Augustinian school taught that mankind were doomed to hell through the fall of Adam, and that Christ's death canceled the sin committed, and thus saved them from being utterly lost. The Calvinists believe that God foresaw that Adam would fall, and that posterity would thereby be damned; and therefore he selected a few, who are termed the "elect," to be saved, while the many are deprived of this special provision for their salvation. It seems to us that if God possessed the foreknowledge here ascribed to him, and if he were all-powerful, it would have been more to his credit if he had included the entire human family among his "elect." The evangelical Christians suppose that the vicarious sufferings of Christ secures conditional pardon, the condition being the belief that Christ died as a substitute for sinners -- that is, that an avowed innocent person was made to suffer for those alleged to be guilty. The Universalists consider that no one is damned beyond his personal sin in this world. If an individual be ever so bad in the present life, all evil will depart at death, and he will be ushered into heaven pure and spotless, The Unitarians, rejecting all the above theories, contend that the object of Christ's life, rather than of his death, was to reconcile man to God, not God to man. Relying upon such statements in the Bible as "Every man shall die for his own sin," ("To punish the just is not good," they consider the popular view of the

Atonement fallacious. Such are a few of the conflicting notions held by the Christian sects as to the nature of the simple plan of salvation."

Some of the early Christian Fathers taught that the death of Christ was a satisfaction to the Devil. The Rev. Scott Porter, in his 'History of the Doctrine, of the Atonement, says: "The doctrine of satisfaction, when it was plainly broached, which was not till about two hundred years after the death of Christ, did not represent his blood as satisfying the claims of divine justice, but as a payment made to the Devil!" This was the doctrine advocated by the celebrated Origen, who wrote: "It was the Devil who held us in bondage: for to him we had been given over for our sins. Wherefore, he demanded the blood of Christ as the price of our redemption" (p. 19). St. Ambrose states "We were in pledge to a bad creditor for sin; but Christ came and offered his blood for us." Optatus says: "The souls of men were in the possession of the Devil till they were ransomed by the blood of Christ." According to St. Augustine, "the blood of Christ is given as a price that we might be delivered from the Devil's bonds." He regards the death of Christ, "not as a payment of a debt due to God, but as an act of justice to the Devil in discharge of his fair and lawful claims" (ibid).

Other eminent Christian divines taught that it was not merely the man Jesus who died, but God himself. Osiander, a friend and fellow-laborer of Luther, maintained that Christ died and satisfied divine justice, not as man, but as God. Hooper, a venerable name in the Christian Church, states that he cares "for no knowledge in the world but this, that man hath sinned, and God hath suffered" (Porter's Lectures on the Atonement, p. 68). The same belief is expressed by Dr. Watts, who in his hymns exclaims: --

Well might the sun in darkness hide, And shut his glories in, When God, the mighty Maker, died
For man, the creature's, sin.

Behold a God descends and dies To save my soul from gaping hell.

Wesley also exclaims: --

Sinners, turn! why will ye die? God your Savior asks you why; God, who did your souls retrieve,
Died himself that ye might live. Is it not evident, from the diversity of opinions which is here shown to have existed (and much of that diversity still obtains) in the Christian world as to the character and meaning of the death of Christ, how perplexing any scheme must be that is based upon it? The fact is, apart from all sectarian and forced interpretations, it appears to us that the Bible plan of redemption through the death of Christ is simply this: About six thousand years ago an all-wise, all-powerful, and beneficent God made man and woman, and placed them in a position surrounded by temptations it was impossible for them to withstand. For instance, he implanted within them desires which, as God, he must have known would produce their downfall. He next caused a tree to bear fruit that was adapted to harmonies with the very desires which he had previously imparted to his children. God, all-good, then created a serpent of the worst possible kind, in order that it might be successful in tempting Eve to partake of the fruit. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of this fruit, under the penalty of death, knowing at the same time that they would eat of it, and that they would not die. The serpent is allowed to succeed in his plan of temptation, and then God curses the ground for yielding the tree which he himself had caused to grow; further, the Almighty Being dooms both man and woman to lives of pain and sorrow, and

assures them that their posterity shall feel the terrible effects of their having done what it was impossible, under the circumstances, for them to avoid. Although at first God pronounced his creative work to be "very good," it proved to be quite the opposite. So bad did the human family become that God determined to bring a flood upon the earth and wash every member, one household excepted, out of existence. This "water-cure" was not, however, sufficient to correct the "divine" errors, for the people grew worse than ever. God now decided upon another plan -- namely, to send his son -- who was as old as himself, and, therefore, not his son -- to die, but who was invested with immortality and could not die, to atone for sins that had never been committed by people who were not then born, and who could not, therefore, have been guilty of any sin. As a conclusion to the whole scheme, this all-merciful God prepared a hell, containing material fire of brimstone, to burn the immaterial souls of all persons who should fail to believe the truth, justice, and necessity of this jumble of cruelty and absurdity.

We now propose to show that this "sublime scheme of redemption" is not only illogical, but that it was unnecessary, supremely unjust, inconsistent, and has been an utter failure in achieving its avowed object. The Christian pretension, that the death of Christ provided a complete atonement for the alleged transgression in the Garden of Eden, is not supported by the details of the scheme as contained in the Bible, or by the exposition of it as given by eminent theological writers. The orthodox position is that the Godhead "Is composed of three persons of one substance, power, and duration. If this be so, and if an atonement was really necessary, it should have been threefold, inasmuch as the Son and the Holy Ghost, being a part of the Trinity, required to be satisfied equally with the Father; but we do not read of any sacrifice having been made to them. Besides, if the three persons were one in substance, etc., it is difficult to see how one part could be wrathful and another part merciful at the same time. The New Testament speaks of God's wrath, and such Christian writers as the pious Flavel, Wesley, and Dr. Watts state that it was from this wrath that the death of Christ was intended to save the human race. Flavel, who was an exponent of the evangelical school, writes: "To wrath -- to the wrath of an infinite God, without mixture -- to the very torments of hell, was Christ delivered; and that by the hand of his own Father. God stood upon full satisfaction, and would not remit one sin without it" (Works, folio edition, p. 10). Dr. Watts speaks of Jesus's blood turning God's "wrath to grace," and, Wesley writes "Jesus speaks and pleads his blood. He disarms the wrath of God."

It is folly to claim, as Christians do, that this priestly-invented scheme of the Atonement manifests a spirit of divine forgiveness. Instead of being a forgiving plan, it is one of exaction and vengeance. According to the story, God demands and receives payment before he grants pardon; Christ exacts belief in himself as the condition of salvation; and he who sins against the Holy Ghost is never to be forgiven. Stockel admits that, "in a strict and proper sense, God does not forgive sin, for Christ hath given him full satisfaction. How, then, can it be justly said that God pardoneth sins and transgressions? Surely that debt can never be forgiven that is paid" (cited by Dr. Bruce, Sermons, 2nd edition, p. 354). From a rational point of view, the matter resolves itself into this: Christ either paid the "debt" or he did not. If he did pay it, that should settle the account, and we ought not to be bothered with it any further; whereas, if he did not pay the "debt," the whole scheme is a sham and a delusion. The absurdity of the orthodox view of the death of Christ is further manifested in the supposition that it was a part of the indivisible Godhead that died. This is theological conjecture run mad; for, if it were Christ alone who died and remained lifeless in the

grave for three days and three nights, he was not equal in internity with his father; while, on the other hand, if the whole of the deity expired, then we have the curious spectacle of a dying and a dead God, and the world for a time existing without any "divine" aid in its government. To say that it was only the manhood of Christ which suffered and died is but raising another difficulty in allying humanity with what is termed divinity; thus adding a fourth part to the Trinity, and thereby destroying the perfection of the whole, for where the human element is there can be no perfection. Moreover, according to the orthodox theory, a mere human death was not enough to redeem humanity from the effects of the sin committed against an infinite God. Of course, we do not admit that any such sin ever occurred, for the simple reason that, if a person is compelled to perform an act, it is no sin upon his part. And, as we have shown in a previous page, Adam and Eve acted as they did under compulsion. As to enmity existing between God and man as the result of partaking of the fruit, the question arises: Where did the enmity come from? Did God implant it in the minds of his children? If so, he was responsible for the consequences which followed. If, however, man acquired it independently of God, then he was not the creator of all things, as the Bible states he was -- even of evil. We are aware it is said that God gave man a free will; but this is only another theological error. There can be no freedom where circumstances impel in one direction, as, according to the account, they did in the Garden of Eden. Besides, we read that the plan was arranged "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:19-20). Not only is the theory that the world was redeemed through the death of Christ utterly absurd, but it came too late. If the Atonement were at all necessary, it should have been made immediately after Adam's alleged transgression, so as to have prevented a single generation from going to the grave with the curse of original sin unremoved. But, according to the Bible theory, God allowed four thousand years to elapse, and millions of his children to die, ere the Atonement was made. This, to say the least, was not either just or merciful upon the part of "the Great Father of all." If it be true that no one can be saved except through belief in Christ, then it may be fairly asked, What became of the numberless human beings who died prior to his birth? And, further, what will be the fate of those who are now living who have not heard, and probably never will hear, of the mission of Jesus of Nazareth? To say that the former were saved by anticipation, and that the latter will be excused on account of their lack of knowledge, is oddly to represent the scheme as being still more absurd, and altogether useless. If a portion of mankind could be saved without the Crucifixion, what necessity was there for Christ to have suffered at all? His sorrow, agony, and bloody sweat might all have been avoided, and many saints might have been spared the tortures of the stake and the rack. Surely, if for thousands of years people could go to heaven without the supposed advantages of the death of Christ, it was superfluous to introduce the "sign of the Cross" to secure an object which had already been achieved.

Besides, if the ignorance of the existence of this "atoning scheme" will exempt a person from "punishment hereafter," is it not cruel and futile to send missionaries to the heathens with the "glad tidings"? Let them not know of it, and there would be no danger of their being punished for rejecting it; but let them be informed of the scheme, and their happiness in another world becomes very doubtful. Considering the diversity of the perceptive powers, even among "heathens," we cannot reasonably suppose that all to whom the scheme is expounded will be able to receive it as true. Thus the salvation, which was secure in a blissful state of ignorance, is placed in jeopardy by missionary efforts. The truth is, that if the death of Christ were really necessary to redeem a "fallen race," it was unjust upon the part of God to permit so many centuries to pass before the people

had the alleged benefit of his atoning blood. If, on the other hand, the death of Christ was not required to restore a "lost race," then it was a reckless and an unnatural act for a father to give his son to a wild mob, to be executed amidst the exaltations of a disappointed and fanatical people.

Moreover, if it were desirable upon the part of God to send his son to save the world from eternal perdition, why was it that, when he did arrive, so many nations were kept in ignorance of his mission? Even the Jews, God's chosen people, had no knowledge that an incarnate deity was to expire on the Cross. If the regeneration of the world had been the object of Christ, would it not have been better, instead of ascending to heaven, for him to have remained on earth, teaching practical truths, and showing by his own personal example how the world could be rescued from that moral and intellectual darkness and despair to which it had been reduced by the influence of a degrading theology? The orthodox idea of the object of Christ's death involves the committal of a gross act of injustice upon the part of God in making the declared innocent suffer for the avowed guilty. Justice has been defined to "consist in rendering to everyone according to his moral deserts; good if he be good, and evil if evil -- for the purpose of promoting goodness and discouraging guilt." If this be a recognized standard of right in human affairs, surely it should not be ignored in dealing with "divine" actions. Suppose, therefore, that Christ was "without sin," as stated in the New Testament (Hebrews 4:15), was it not unjust to punish him for the wrong-doing of others? Let us take the case of an earthly father, who had, say, seven children, six of whom were thoroughly bad, and the seventh as good as human nature could possibly be. Now, would it be considered just upon the part of that father to punish the one good child for the misdeeds of the six bad ones? Such conduct would ensure for its perpetrator a general and an emphatic condemnation. If a judge were knowingly to sentence to death an innocent man as a substitute for a criminal, the act would provoke universal detestation, and the judge's judicial position would in all probability be forfeited. No Christian would think it just to imprison and torture priests to-day simply because their predecessors, under the influence of fanaticism, defiled portions of the earth with human slaughter. Is it consistent for Christians to ascribe an act to their God which good men would refuse to perform? We think not.

Besides, the alleged redeeming feature in the death of Christ manifests cruelty to the human race in asserting that, although its members had no control over the acts of Eve and Adam, still, in consequence of what they did, we are all "born in sin and shapened in iniquity." Upon what principle of justice can such merciless treatment be defended? According to this orthodox notion, the moment we enter life, in our infantile helplessness and childish innocence, we are thought to be deserving of the wrath of God. Even if it were true that sin was committed in the Garden of Eden, will that justify wrong being done to us? Are we on that account to be rendered liable to be doomed to eternal torment? If so, a God who could either arrange or permit such cruel injustice will never be recognized by Secularists as a kind and loving father. We know that the Bible, on more than one occasion, represents its God as punishing the innocent for the guilty. For instance, we read that he is "a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children" (Exodus 20:5); that he cut off seventy thousand men in Israel by a pestilence, on account of the sin of David in numbering the people (2 Samuel 24:15); and that he deprived an innocent child of life to show his displeasure of a crime committed by this "man after God's own heart" (2 Samuel 12:14). It is such actions as these, which, contrary to all true standards of right, are performed by the Christian Deity, that impel us to prefer Atheism to the belief in a being who could inflict such wrongs upon

the human family.

Attempts have been made to palliate these "divine acts" by asserting that in the course of nature the innocent have to suffer for the guilty, as in the case of drunkards and debauchees, who transmit disease and debility to their offspring. But two wrongs cannot make one right; besides, if God was the author of Nature, could he not have so arranged her operations that this evil of transmission would have been avoided? The two cases, however are not analogous, inasmuch as the children referred to do not suffer for, but through, the vices of their parents; and, moreover, in such suffering there is no punishment intended; it is a consequence, not a penalty. The children of criminal parents are not blamed, but are rather pitied, for being innocent victim, of others. This was not the case, according to orthodox teaching, with Christ, who was punished for the sins of others. The theory that the death of Christ was an atonement to God for actual sins committed is so glaringly inconsistent that it is really marvelous how it can be regarded as true by sensible men and women. It is stated that the death of Christ was ordained before the foundation of the world, and, at the same time, we are informed that man was created perfect and immortal. If it were ordained that Christ should die for the redemption of the world, the transgressions of Eve and Adam were Only a part of God's plan, and certainly did not deserve any curse, but rather merited a blessing. As we have already pointed out, there was no free-will in the case, for it was originally arranged that but one course had to be followed -- namely, the one that led to the sacrifice of Christ. If Adam and Eve had adopted any other course, God's plans would have been thwarted, for we read in the fourth Gospel that Christ knew from the beginning that he would be betrayed; and this betrayal was the first act in the tragedy of the cross. Now, if the death of Christ were preordained, so also was the "Fall of Man," for the one depends upon the other, as the Bible says: "For as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive." Assuming this to be true, man could not have been created perfect but the very fact of his "falling," or giving way to temptation, was a proof of his imperfection. The truth is, the Bible story of the fall of man is a phase of an ancient myth; and, as Dr. Kalisch observes, it is "no exclusive feature of the Hebrews." Professor Jowett considered the account, as given in the Bible, "a grand Hebrew poem." Similar stories were current among the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Persians. The Hindoos had a "tree of life," which was said to be guarded by spirits, and contained a juice that was thought to impart immortality to those who partook of it. It is time that the belief in this fiction of the Fall as being a reality should cease. The lesson of history and experience is that the career of man has been one of ascent, not descent of progression, not retrogression.

Further inconsistencies in this scheme of redemption through the death of Christ are the allegation that he came to save the whole world, and his reported conduct while on earth. If universal salvation were the object of his mission, it proved a decided failure. But Christ did not attempt to achieve such a result, for he stated himself that he came to the Jews, and to the Jews alone; and even among them his labors were not crowned with success. Following Christ to the close of his career, we behold the culmination of inconsistency in the manner in which he acted in the garden of Gethsemane. Here was a man who had preached upon the utility of a faith which, it was said, not only afforded consolation through life, but was capable of robbing death of its terrors; yet when the hour of death approached, when the period had arrived for him to prove to the world the efficacy of this faith, he was tortured with doubt and racked with fear. In that scene, which was not only to rivet the attention of an amazed multitude, but was also to consecrate a life of divinity -- a

scene which was not only to be the great climax to the scheme of redemption, but was to afford an example that should remain as a lasting monument of greatness to a wondering people; at this moment, when it was expected that the hopes of his followers were about to be sealed, when he should have maintained his position with unsurpassed bravery he was weak and vacillating, and in bitter despair he prayed that the cup might pass from him. Where can we recognize consistency and heroism in the death of Christ? Is it in the conduct of one who came to die for man, yet, when about to fulfil his destiny, implored to be allowed to escape the death? Is it in teaching that Christ came as a voluntary sacrifice, yet had to be betrayed by man? Is it in a Father of reputed love and kindness inflicting unnecessary torture upon his sensitive son? Is it in the statement that Christ, by asking, could obtain an answer to any request made to his father; yet his fervent supplications were unheeded, and his dying prayers were unanswered? Finally, is it in the act of a God who, having allowed his son to be placed upon a felon's cross, permits him to yield up a sorrowful life, after uttering unavailing reproaches in those memorable words: My God! my God! why hast thou forsaken me?" In conclusion, let us remember that from the Christian's standpoint the object of the death of Christ has not been attained. That object was to make a complete satisfaction for all sin, and to remove such sin from the world. But these objects have not been attained, for mankind has still to secure its own exemption from the supposed effects of sin; and, further, sin still surrounds us. If Christ, by his death, paid the debt that is said to have been incurred through sin entering into the world, why should man be required to make a second payment? As to the boasted victories of the cross, where are they? We have still misery, pain, folly, ignorance, crime, and injustice in the world. The erection of the cross has not frightened the miscreant nor appalled the tyrant. The voice from the height of Calvary has not destroyed error nor cemented truth; neither has the death of Christ produced that condition of society in which it is impossible for man to be depraved and poor. If, as we are told, the Savior has come, it may be fairly asked, "Whence comes salvation?"

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