

SPECIFIC POINTS OF DOCTRINE

Following are explanations and answers under various headings to questions and difficulties often raised.

HUMAN NATURE

We of the Nazarene Fellowship are reputed to believe in 'clean flesh' in contrast to those who believe in 'sinful flesh'. In fact both terms are misconceived. Flesh is simply the corruptible material of which we are formed and as such it can be neither sinful nor righteous. From the actions of the majority of men we may say, loosely, that they are sinful (but cf. John 15:22) but this is not because their flesh is full of sin. If we see men doing nothing but good we should say they are righteous, but their flesh is the same as that of a sinner; we may never have had the fortune to meet such a person but they do occur and there are plenty of examples in Scripture.

If there were any commandments of God which it was impossible for us to obey because of our nature, it might seem reasonable to deduce that our flesh or nature was sinful, but no, there is not one. Men can therefore reasonably be held guilty for not keeping them; they could not justly be held responsible for developing bad characters if they were born with sinful flesh. Men become defiled not by being born in sin but by the things which they allow to proceed out of their hearts. "Evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, blasphemies - these are the things which defile a man."

Jesus said we should know what people are by their fruits and he made abundantly evident the foolishness of laying the blame upon human nature – "Either make the tree good and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by his fruit." At least, He implies, be consistent. "A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth good things; and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things." (Matthew 12). When, denying the evidence of their own eyes and reason, the Pharisees attributed Jesus' good works to the Devil, He indicated that they were guilty not only of folly and wilful blindness but of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In our opinion Christadelphians are guilty to almost the same degree in their doctrine as expounded by writers like A.D.Norris when he writes on "Understanding the Bible," "When Jesus died upon the Cross... the devil hung there dead." This is still perhaps the most incredible example extant of a reckless premise carried to a fatal conclusion, but it serves well to prove how utterly and terribly wrong is the theory of sinful flesh which by a kind of logic leads to it.

SIN

What is it? Can it be in any sense literally in human flesh? Emphatically no. Sin is transgression of Law. Is then temptation sin? Again, no. For unless man had been created with lusts (which are not necessarily evil, though the word has come to have that connotation) or propensities capable of responding to temptation it would have been impossible for him to develop character. Does temptation prove that flesh is sinful? Certainly not, for temptations can be resisted. It simply proves that man has natural inclinations and needs, all of which can be satisfied either lawfully or unlawfully. But until law is transgressed there can be no sin (Romans 4:15). A statement by W.F.Barling in "Redemption in Christ Jesus" to the effect, "For Christadelphians this means that human flesh is wholly evil" is in our view most shameful and disgusting nonsense and only fit to be put alongside A.D.Norris's "devil on the Cross." It is simply amazing that a community can tolerate such teachings in its name.

SUFFERING FOR SIN

It is quite understandable that thoughtful people should reject the explanations of the death of Christ which involve the idea of vicarious punishment and that they should look for something which does not outrage our sense of natural justice. For centuries it was supposed by Christian apologists that

the wrath of God against sin and sinners had to be appeased by the suffering inflicted upon Jesus. Such a view is indefensible and horrible in the extreme and we do not hold it.

It is, however, very strange that although Christadelphians profess to reject this doctrine, which is what they understand as substitution, exactly that principle underlies their own theory of the Atonement. This is easily proved. The explanation given by Robert Roberts in "The Blood of Christ" expressly affirms that it was because of the pleasure God derived from the infliction of suffering upon His Son that He was willing to forgive us. Do you doubt this? Here are his actual words:-

"Wrong was not done when he was impaled upon the Cross. It pleased the Lord to bruise him. Would it please the Lord to do iniquity? Nay. Therefore it was right. But how could it be right unless he were the very condemned stock."

This is a culpable misuse of the phrase from Isaiah 53; no right-minded person could possibly imagine that the words, "Yet is pleased the Lord" can mean other than that this was God's will having in view the Salvation of Man which was to be accomplished. To suppose there is the minutest suggestion that the Father of our Lord Jesus derived pleasure from His sufferings is horrible in the extreme - it is an even worse example of what L.G.Sargent describes in his December issue as "one of those dreadful perversions of Scripture." How could there be a worse perversion of Scripture than the explanation of the sacrifice of Christ given by R.Roberts in these words, already quoted,

"It pleased God to require the ceremonial condemnation of this sin-nature in crucifixion in the person of a righteous possessor of it, as the basis of our forgiveness."

Only the need to defend the tragic misconception of God's purpose which he had developed could possibly have led Robert Roberts into making such a palpably mistaken application of Isaiah's heart-rending words. Similarly, only the need to defend the tradition built up could drive men like those quoted above into their equally mistaken but more blameworthy positions to-day. Within the lifetime of most who will read these words we have seen the wise of this world, scientists and technicians, develop devilish skills beyond what seems to be man's proper sphere. They did not anticipate that the results of atomic research would be to fill the world with fear, to poison our food and the very air we breathe, making possible weapons which probably will destroy the present order. People should beware of too great cleverness. These crackpot brains, technically so brilliant yet so utterly lacking in true wisdom, are paralleled in the Christadelphian world by those products of the same schools and universities whom we have mentioned. They have surpassed their predecessors and split the atom of their cosmos by proving, to their own satisfaction, that it was just and right for Jesus to be put to death; that the devil was in Him and therefore He had to be impaled upon the Cross for their own deliverance from sin. Can they possibly realise what they have in fact accomplished? Or the enormity of their crime? With satanic scholarship they have succeeded in poisoning with Sin the Bread of Life; they have defiled the blood of the Covenant, turned the truth of God into a lie and almost certainly robbed both themselves and those who trust them of Everlasting life.

AN OBJECTION

Some Christadelphian friends wrote to me recently saying that while they completely understood and accepted our view that it was because as God's Son, Jesus was legally free and therefore in a position to give His own life instead of the life of the world lost by sin, yet they felt there was some force in the objection that because He was a man He would ultimately have died anyway even if He had not been crucified and therefore, in that sense at least He had to die.

Our reply to this is that men do not necessarily die ultimately anyway. Most do, but there are several examples of men who have not died and there will be more. Enoch walked with God 365 years and was not, for God took him; Elijah, a man subject to like passions as we are, went up by a whirlwind into heaven; we do not know what happened to Melchizedec but it says he was without beginning of days nor end of life so presumably he did not die.

Who could deny that Jesus, the Son of God and without sin had a better title to translation than any of these? We are told that “when the time came that he should be received up (as Elijah was) he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Why? Because He knew that His mission would fail unless He sacrificed Himself. When He said “The hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified” it seems evident that He knew that He had successfully passed through His probation for life and was entitled to His personal reward. But He went on, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone.”

It would have been sad for the world if He had chosen to abide alone, but it would not have made Him a sinner for there is no law or commandment which obliges a man to lay down his life even for a good man, far less for a sinner! We cannot therefore deny that He had the right to choose; that His sacrifice was a voluntary offering of Himself and that had His courage failed He was entitled as of right to enter into life alone. We know the possibility occurred to Him for He prayed, “Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me” - that His soul revolted from the suffering He foresaw and His natural inclination – “My will” - was to avoid it. The spirit indeed willing but the flesh weak - not sinful or evil but in natural revolt against pain and death.

Jesus was corruptible, but it no more follows that He was ultimately destined to die than does the fact that we who are also corruptible mean that we are obliged to die – for if in the mercy of God we are indeed His children and the day of the Lord comes while we remain alive, we shall be changed in a moment to incorruptibility. So that death is not the only escape route from the bondage of corruption.

SUBSTITUTION

Because, as we have shown, some people have adopted a wrong conception of substitution we must not make the mistake of concluding that there is no true and unexceptionable way of understanding it - of going to the extreme of “ceremonial condemnation” or “ritual destruction.” Indeed, if anyone can read the single passage in which Jesus speaks of Himself as the Shepherd (John 10) and deny that He explicitly affirms that His sacrifice was the substitution of His death for our life he must be indeed a hardy adherent of a false theory.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep... Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”

These words of Jesus ought to have put to silence for ever those Christadelphians who dare to affirm that Jesus’ death was for Himself first, because He had sinful flesh and was under condemnation or that His own deliverance from the power of sin and the grave was conditional upon His dying upon the Cross.

The only explanation which meets the facts is the principle of ransom - that Jesus voluntarily chose to pay the sinner’s debt by the forfeiture of His own life. If, as L.G.Sargent stated in his reply to the Rev. M.C.Burrell, Jesus had ultimately to die on man’s behalf, i.e., that He had no choice because He had man’s nature, he is charging Jesus with misrepresentation because if that were so it was not a voluntary sacrifice - He should have said, “I lay down my life for myself.”

No one could be blamed for not at once realising how or in what sense He laid down His life for His sheep and no doubt many who have accepted His words in simple faith will be saved by their faith, but anyone who, for dread of the term substitution is so misguided as to declare that Jesus’ death was required for His own salvation is casting His words in Jesus’ teeth and deserves not to benefit from the sacrifice He made for them.

Let us be quite clear about it. The Christadelphian view is;-

- (1) that Jesus died for Himself - (Statement of Faith),
- (2) that wrong was not done when He was impaled upon the Cross - (R.Roberts),
- (3) that there was no violation of justice in His death - (W.F.Barling),
- (4) that Jesus was sin - (A.D. Norris),
- (5) that He had ultimately to die - (L.G.Sargent).

One short extract from the address of one who, were he alive to-day would have to be disfellowshipped as a heretic will suffice to answer these lying tongues:-

“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain... Ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of Life.” Acts 2:23.

Reader, think it over. Whose word will you accept? Compare what your leaders and teachers say with what Jesus Himself and His apostles say and then search your conscience for a true answer.

Ernest Brady.
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