

Foreword

This booklet is distributed by a group of believers who acknowledge gratefully their indebtedness to the works of John Thomas, Wm. Laing, Grattan Guinness, Wm. Richmond, Edward Turney, Andrew Wilson and others, for various phases of truth. Having cast off the shackles of creeds and sectarianism they are united upon a simple scriptural basis, acknowledging in baptism the true redemptive purposes of the Saviour's death, they await His return to establish the Kingdom of God.

In view of the uninformed antagonism towards the views advanced in this booklet, the author was prepared to debate them publicly with anyone who accepts the Scriptures as the only authority.

A challenge to formal debate was made publicly in the Midland Institute. Birmingham, on Sunday, December 17th, 1944, after a lecture on "Sin and Atonement," in which it was stated that Christ had to die for Himself because of His sinful flesh - the lecturer declined.

The author's challenge was however later accepted and a debate with W.F.Barling took place at Netherton Ecclesia on the 7th May 1949 in which the errors of Christadelphian teaching were revealed and countered with truth.

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THE QUESTION CHRISTADELPHIANS CANNOT ANSWER

**A letter to D. J. Rowley, author of the pamphlet,
"Christ Crucified," published by the G.P.S.**

Dear David,

I have been reading your pamphlet on the Atonement and having had a talk with you on the subject some years ago I am sending you a few comments. You may recall that I never made a secret of the fact that in my view plain speaking is a lost art amongst Christadelphians, but I shall do you the honour of supposing that you prefer candour to dissimulation even when it hurts and ask in return only that you credit me with a sincere wish to serve the Truth. Believing that you as a Christadelphian are mistaken upon this vital doctrine, I should be worse than an enemy if I failed to press upon you with all my power the urgency of revising your ideas.

The title selected is intended not as a reproach but as a plain statement of fact, and I shall prove it both positively and negatively as I proceed; for the moment I will simply say that it is remarkable that the Sacrifice of Christ, which all admit to be the most important fact of the Gospel, forms so small a part of Christadelphian preaching. I had hardly realised how small until recently in conversation with a lady who has been attending lectures for two years. I asked what she thought of their explanation of the Atonement, and received the reply "I have never really heard more than a casual reference made to it" - in two years mind!

I am glad to see you make no reference to Sinful Flesh nor to the necessity for Jesus to die on His own account. Dare I hope it is because you have realised that these theories are untenable and have renounced them, or is it merely, as with many brethren, that you think them non-essential? In either case, have you considered your position in regard to the Statement of Faith, which specifies them as part of “the whole counsel of God,” and can you now conscientiously support it?

You will agree that it is an odd way to begin a treatise on any given subject by confessing as you do on page 2 that you cannot explain it. At any rate you are honest, and I refrain from the obvious comment, recognising that no one holding your views could have done any better because the unscriptural doctrines to which you are committed make it an impossible task.

Several writers in past years have made attempts to produce an acceptable exposition of the subject without too glaringly exposing their perplexity, and some like yourself frankly confess they cannot solve the problem, while others, in no better case, try to conceal their embarrassment with masses of verbiage and texts. An example of the former is J.J.Hadley in “The Nature and Sacrifice of Christ?” recently reprinted and presumably intended as a reply to our work on the subject. *(See End note 1). In his 50 odd pages he succeeded no better than you in throwing light on the subject, and any careful reader will find plenty of obvious contradictions and illogic which give the game away; but on page 34 he says “It appears to us that God has not formally explained His reasons for the choice of this way rather than any other,” and later “there are points which appear obscure even to the best informed.” One can only wonder then what he expected to accomplish by his effort. An example of the latter is R.Roberts; his line was that it needed “a prolonged spiritual education” in order to understand the question, and he implied that while he knew all about it, the average nit-wit like you and me should scarce presume to think about it at all. Nevertheless at some points even he became conscious of making a somewhat extravagant draft upon credulity, and in “The Blood of Christ” on page 25 he makes this amazing statement “The answer of wisdom is, that we must simply believe... what if our understanding be baffled?... a childlike faith is alone acceptable in the matter.” This is the identical argument with which the Mother of Harlots puts over her mysteries; is it not strange that Christadelphians only descend to it in regard to this question of the Sacrifice of Christ? On any other point they can give a reason for their faith; any other question they can answer and prove from Scripture. Only this question finds them mute and helpless; only this doctrine must be accepted though it can neither be explained nor proved. It makes one think!!

In your pamphlet you deal with the result of Adam’s disobedience, and on page 4 you write,

“Here we find the first indication of the mercy of God, in that the punishment was not immediately enforced.”

This is excellent, and having never seen a recognition of this important fact in Christadelphian writing before I take heart from it as evidence that everyone does not burn our literature unread. But while I am pleased you are able to agree with us thus far I am bound to raise an objection to your next deduction,

“If God’s justice had had full sway man would have been immediately destroyed from the earth.”

Do you think then that God’s justice did not have full sway; in other words that God was unjust - or not true to His word? This is a very serious position to take up, and one which I think on reflection you would not wish to sustain. You are perfectly correct in concluding that in strict justice Adam should have been destroyed there and then, in accordance with the prescribed penalty “In the day... thou shalt surely die,” but you are quite wrong in concluding that because he did not, justice did not have full sway. The trouble is that you have accepted the first stage of our reasoning, which truly shows how mercy intervened so that man was not immediately put to death, but you reject the next step which shows how this could be without any derogation of justice. Thus your failure to reason logically involves you in questioning God’s justice, which is bad; but it also prevents you understanding the real purpose of Christ’s sacrifice, which is worse.

Let us state the problem in your own words and see how simple the solution when we put the facts together.

“How could justice have full sway and man not be immediately destroyed from the earth?”

The answer is

‘By the provision of one who would meet in full the claim of the Law, by suffering on Adam’s behalf the death he had incurred.’

That provision was prefigured in Eden by the institution of sacrifice, and thus justice was upheld and mercy prevailed; as we read in Job, “Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom.” Some have objected to this on the score that it would not be just to punish an innocent man and let the guilty go free. I reply that this utterly misrepresents the truth for the following reasons:

1) God did not punish Jesus instead of Adam; Jesus undertook voluntarily to deliver His fellowman from the hands of the Law by suffering the penalty in his stead.

2) There is in the law of sacrifice an established principle whereby the innocent bore the penalty due to the guilty.

3) If you reject the idea of the guilty escaping, you hold that they are and must be punished, and if so, however you seek to evade the point by bringing in the resurrection, you are left with a theory which represents God as professing to forgive yet at the same time exacting the penalty.

Furthermore, your only alternative - that Christ being created mortal was under condemnation and therefore God required His death even though He was sinless, is even more unjust than your (mistaken) view of substitution. R.Roberts undoubtedly reached the limit of sophistry when he defined the Christadelphian doctrine in these words:

“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.”

I cannot conceive how an intelligent body of people can ever have countenanced the awful implications of this statement; no wonder he speaks of our understanding being baffled. No wonder the Atonement is an unfathomable mystery to all who follow him.

You come very near the truth when you say

“By his disobedience man was brought to a hopeless condition. He was separated from God, the source of all goodness.”

Was not this enough? It is more than sufficient to account for the need for redemption. Then what perverse spirit led you to add

“He experienced loss of moral power and at last death”?

There is not even the suggestion, much less evidence for any such loss of moral power, and surely it is obvious that if Adam could sin while in the “very good” condition in which he was created, where is the need to postulate any “loss of moral power” to account for the fact that other men sin? Conversely, since Jesus was of exactly the same human nature and yet lived a perfect life, does it not follow that there cannot be anything in men which makes it impossible for them to be sinless?

On this point, some brethren who have evidently not taken the trouble to inform themselves of our actual views, say we teach that Jesus was different from other men. This is utterly false and the very reverse of the truth. Here are some more extracts from the pamphlet already quoted "The Blood of Christ" by R.Roberts;

"He was not a mere man – not a mere Jew - not mere flesh. He was the flesh of Abraham in a special form... Having the same inherent qualities tending to temptation and death, but qualified to overcome both by the superior power derived from his paternity... To say that Christ was a man partaking of our sinful nature does not mean he was the same sort of man as other men."

Will you accept this as evidence that Christadelphians teach that Jesus was different from other men? And will you accept my assurance here and now, and the evidence of this letter to you, that I and those associated with me both believe and teach that Jesus was the same as other men. We believe He was the same sort of man as other men, and we do not believe he was enabled to overcome temptation by any superior power derived from His paternity - if it were so there would be no truth in the statement that He was "tempted in all points like as we are" - it would be nonsense. We believe He overcame temptation by the exercise of the same powers as would enable any other man to overcome - if, like Jesus, he made it his meat and drink to do the will of God. The just principle upon which God holds sinners guilty is the fact that One who was made in all points like unto us His brethren was sinless.

You remind your readers

"that by death the Bible invariably means extinction, annihilation, etc,"

and I feel constrained to ask you if you have never read of anyone who was alive and existent and yet "dead in trespasses and sins," or of the "dead burying their dead"? I am not being fussy and I am not arguing for any kind of existence in death, and ultimately all death is the same non-existence, but we must not let fear of immortal soulism blind us to obvious facts.

a) Natural death, b) Figurative death, and c) Death as the penalty of sin, are different things and must be distinguished.

a) Natural death is a circumstance of our natural or corruptible condition which we share with all the animal creation. It is not a penalty, it is not an obstacle to salvation, nor does it necessarily claim all men. Seeing that man was made of dust, a living soul, of the earth, earthy, and there is no evidence of any subsequent change, we conclude that he was corruptible or capable of death, at his creation. We might perhaps argue that had he been obedient Adam may have been rewarded with eternal life without dying, but it is only an assumption, and even had he successfully passed through his first probation we cannot infer that God was under any obligation to reward him there and then, and not, as seems to be indicated by subsequent events, let him "fall on sleep" till the appointed time when all the sons of God would be glorified together.

b) Figurative death is the condemned position of living men and women who are alienated from God. Adam and Eve were in this position for the few hours between the commission of the first transgression and their typical redemption. It "passes upon" people when they are enlightened by the Word, which requires us to recognise that God regards us as included in Adam on the federal principle* (See End note 2); it can be "put off" by accepting Christ as our ransom and typically dying the death in baptism. One whose probation ends, either by natural death or the return of Christ, leaving them in this spiritually dead or condemned position, will have earned sin's wages, in other words:-

c) Death as a penalty, the execution or carrying into effect of the above in an inflicted or violent death; this is what Adam incurred and which, if he had suffered it, would have ended the human race there and then. He was delivered from it by the mercy and forbearance of God, and it was suffered in

Adam's stead by Jesus on the Cross. This is the death that salvation is concerned with, and those who knowingly and wilfully neglect the way of escape will themselves bear the penalty in the second death.

I now come to an examination of the theories of the Atonement which you outline on page 5 onward. You say the idea

“that in giving up His life Jesus paid a price to someone, raises many difficulties.”

You only specify one, however, and you go on to suggest that anyone who believes that ransom involves the idea of the payment of a debt, must believe in a personal devil. May I assure you that I do not believe in a personal devil, but I verily believe that Jesus ransomed, redeemed or purchased us with his blood from something. Your pamphlet would have been more complete if you had included amongst the theories you discuss, the one held by myself and those others of us who accept the bulk of Christadelphian teaching but disagree with their views on the nature of man and the Atonement, but since you have not thought fit to do so, allow me to outline it again.

The working of the mind, typified by the serpent, led to man disobeying God and learning by experience the distinction between right and wrong, typified by the tree of knowledge, and thus incurring the penalty of death. The whole transaction is epitomized as a selling of himself into bondage; whereas he had been a son living in harmony and communion with his Creator, typified again by his having access to the tree of life, in choosing to follow his own will he made himself the servant of another and was expelled from God's presence. That that other is simply the personification of anything or person which opposes the will of God and is non-existent as a personality, does not make it any the less a real power and the bondage of those in its service less of an actuality. It is the moral and legal aspect that is important, and too much concentration upon what must obviously be types and figures has led people into error. Strangely, on page 7 you write

“We cannot suggest any other person (than God) to whom the ransom or price might be paid, so we are driven to consider whether the question we are asking is sensible”.

I cannot feel that you have been entirely honest in your approach here, since just over the page you quote Hebrews 2:14-17, and you deliberately omit the very four words which would have answered your question - which is perfectly sensible. There would, of course, be no sense in the idea of God paying Himself - and that too with Jesus who was His own property - but I don't know who holds such a foolish view; it is no more than a scarecrow you put up in order to knock down.

I thoroughly agree the object of the Atonement was not that God's wrath towards guilty men could be turned aside by the death of an innocent man, but this is actually what your view amounts to as proved by R.Roberts' statement on page 4. The need was for reconciliation to God, but nothing man could do himself could bring it about; it had to be done for him, by the payment on his behalf of the debt due to that other master, sin. The doctrine of Diabolos is not as simple as some, but since it is scriptural we are not justified in treating references to the Devil as though they were as imaginary as the Old Man himself. And since a recognition of the way in which that which is in opposition to God, the Adversary or Accuser is personified, is essential to an understanding of His purpose, it is sheer perversity to ignore it and then complain that we cannot solve the problem of which it is the missing factor. I suspect that you are not entirely frank in your professed inability to see the point because in your Union Essay on Romans 7 you recognise the distinction between those in bondage and free men in Christ, writing

“as slaves of sin they know that its only wages is death, but as slaves of God the immediate result is sanctification,”

and you quote “Ye cannot serve two masters.” If you had applied this thought to your study of the Atonement you might not have dismissed so readily the idea of ransom being a reality, in spite of Dr. Headlam.

You speak of these legal theories as inadequate to account for the work of Christ in the redemptive scheme, and when I found the section on page 10 headed "How man is saved" I expected to find some constructive reasoning, but, like your predecessors, you do not give even the shadow of a reason why the death of Jesus was necessary for salvation; all you can do is to persistently reject the obvious one, reiterated by Scripture, that it was the payment of the debt incurred by Adam and still owing.

Stripped of the trimmings, all you offer us is that because Jesus lived a perfect life and was faithful unto death, He overcame sin in Himself and therefore God raised Him; that

"Redemption from sin is obtained through faith that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ we see the power of God at work."

But how or why or where the power of God is at work we are not to know; in fact, as you said on page 4, it is presumptuous to suppose it possible to know! A faith indeed! It was hardly necessary to state that you do not mean "mere intellectual assent" for in truth there is nothing there for the intellect to take hold of - it is a simple statement of fact and in no sense an explanation.

It is really staggering that after 10 pages you blandly tell us

"We are aware that there still remains the question - why was the death of Jesus necessary?"

Had you forgotten that this was the question you set out so blithely to answer? It certainly appears that for all the help you can give us it is likely to remain a profound mystery. And after closing your eyes to the fact that until redeemed God regards us as being held in bondage to sin and liable to receive sin's wages; and having done away with the meaning of the words ransom and redemption, it is really no marvel that you conclude

"Ultimately, however much we may reason and quote we cannot prove that man could not have been saved apart from the cross."

In all Christian charitableness the least one can say of this statement is that it is a shameful depreciation of our Lord's sacrifice and I am deeply sorry to see such a conclusion expressed. The Gospel Proclamation Society has no reason for satisfaction in the distribution of this pamphlet, and it is to be hoped that some effort will be made to limit the harm it is likely to do to true faith. If you can conceive of man being saved apart from the Cross, what must be your conception of the character of God who allowed His own Son to suffer an awful death to encompass it, if by some different arrangement all the pain and anguish could have been avoided? Surely, for the justification of the Almighty in His wisdom and love we ought to have realised beyond the reach of any kind of doubt, that in all the realm of knowledge, human OR divine, there was NO OTHER WAY.

You quote the text "For as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Try for only a moment to forget your present belief that it was natural death that came by sin; the last clause should assist you in this, since natural death comes upon innocent babies who cannot possibly have sinned. What was the first death that occurred after the transgression; was it not the death of the animals with whose skins Adam and Eve were covered? Was not this a violent sacrificial death? And is it not a reasonable deduction that these animals suffered the death due to the sinners? Can you see the possibility of this being the death that came into the world by sin? And even consider the next recorded death - was not this a violent inflicted death which occurred as a result of sin, the innocent died at the hand of the guilty? "because his own works were evil and his brother's righteous." But the blood of Jesus "speaketh better things than that of Abel." No son of Adam, even though his works were righteous, could redeem even himself let alone the world, since all are included under the first sin; neither could the death of animals

meet the claims of Justice - because it was a man that had disobeyed and thus a human life that was forfeit - it could only serve as a type, object lesson or focus for faith.

When He provided the covering in Eden, God made what we may term a token payment; but sometime, somewhere, by someone, the bond had to be met and the full price paid, in order that Law and justice might be upheld. And when John invites us to "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" - what do you want more? How simply and perfectly the facts fit the requirements:-

- 1) It was a violent death that was incurred; it was a violent death which Jesus suffered.
- 2) Jesus received His life from God, not from Adam, and thus was free from the bondage which includes all other men.
- 3) He had to be related to the race which He was to redeem, which is why He was the son of Mary.
- 4) He had to be identical in nature with all humanity in order to prove that obedience is possible.
- 5) By perfect obedience He retained His right to the life He received and was thus in a position to give that which belonged to Him - His life - as the ransom price for His brother Adam, who in parallel circumstances, lost his right to life by sin.

To sum up the objections to your theory - or what little positive opinion you have on the subject - from the standpoint of the three parties involved. It means that God, having reduced man to an incapacity for obedience, punishes him for the inevitable result and at the same time expects us to discover a display of mercy and justice. This would require better mental eyesight than most sane people possess. Your belief that Jesus was able to overcome because He was given special power denied to other men, divests Him of all honour and makes His triumph no more than a kind of miracle-play; while His death, instead of the offering of a perfect unblemished life in place of the sinner's, in fulfilment of all the types, becomes no more than the representative punishment of an innocent criminal. How on earth could the guilty ransom the guilty - or even the destruction of a physically defiled nature contribute to the redemption of other physically defiled natures? In regard to man; if we cannot understand the Atonement, or answer the question why the death of Christ was necessary, how can we possibly expect to appreciate the Love which we are told is thereby manifested or understand the purpose of which it is the crux?

Many brethren and sisters acknowledge the force and simplicity of our reasoning and are hoping that in course of time the obnoxious theories will be expunged from the Statements of Faith, and that the brotherhood will then be able to unite on a simple scriptural basis. If there appeared any prospect of such a development, one might feel justified in quietly waiting, but even so, for the individual the question would then arise "Unto what then were ye baptised?" and who can face with equanimity the possibility of having been baptised into a false Christ? But experience of the bitter hatred and opposition with which our Gospel is met by those in authority leads us to feel little hope of any such modification, and there seems to be no alternative to making a definite decision.

We are faced with the historic question: -
"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

Ernest Brady

Notes

1. (See page 3). An answer entitled “From Eden to Gethsemane” by the late A.L. Wilson, which we consider to be a masterpiece of logic and pithy exposition can be supplied free.

2. (See page 7). The paramount importance of this principle is seen in the Epistle to the Romans. If God were to regard us as individuals and guilty on account of our own sins, every man would need an individual saviour - on the principle of a life for a life. Only on the federal principle could one sacrifice redeem a multitude.

*“He that hath my word,
let him speak it faithfully.
What is the chaff to the wheat?”*

Jeremiah 23:28