

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT

“Nothing,” writes Peter Lewis, “is more precious to the Christian believer than a personal awareness of the love of God. Without His love His holiness would terrify us. His power would crush us, and His eternity (and ours) would be our greatest nightmare. But knowing that in Christ God has in love committed Himself to saving us from our sin and reconciling us to Himself forevermore brings us both peace and joy. In Christ, God’s power is our protection, His justice is our justification, and His eternity our glorious destiny. Indeed, in Christ the eternal God is our dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). However, the distortion of one feature can turn the greatest beauty into something ugly and unattractive. And it is a sad truth that the biblical doctrine of the divine love is commonly distorted into something bereft of holiness, shorn of power and robbed of grace. Divorced from the person and work of Christ, the idea of God’s love frequently becomes a religious commonplace, to be taken for granted rather than to be urgently sought and astonishingly found at Calvary.”¹ John Murray likewise underscores the Biblical understanding of the love of God: “It is necessary to underline this concept of sovereign love. Truly God is love. Love is not something adventitious; it is not something that God may choose to be or choose not to be. He *is* love, and that necessarily, inherently, and eternally. As God is spirit, as he is light, so he is love. Yet it belongs to the very essence of electing love to recognize that it is not inherently necessary to that love which God necessarily and eternally is that he should set such love as issues in redemption and adoption upon utterly undesirable and hell-deserving objects. It was of the free and sovereign good pleasure of his will, a good pleasure that emanated from the depths of his own goodness, that he chose a people to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. The reason resides wholly in himself and proceeds from determinations that are peculiarly his as the *I am that I am*. The atonement does not win or constrain the love of God. The love of God constrains to the atonement as the means of accomplishing love’s determinate purpose.”²

- I. ***THE REASON OR NECESSITY FOR THE ATONEMENT.*** The great medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), in his classic little book *Cur Deus Homo*, asked “For what necessity and for what reason did God, since He is omnipotent, take upon Himself the humiliation and weakness of human nature in order to its restoration?” William G. T. Shedd correctly noted that “Anselm begins and ends with the idea of an *absolute necessity* of the atonement.”³ There have been *two* proposals that have been advanced on the necessity of the Atonement.

1. ***Consequent Hypothetical Necessity.*** This says that, given that God decreed to save his elect, he could have done so in any way he chose. However, once he determined to do so by means of the atoning death of Christ, the death of the cross was a necessity. It is a necessity consequent not only to the decree to save but also to the decree to save by atonement, following it and dependent on it. It is hypothetical, since its necessity is not absolute but contingent on the decree that chose this means to redeem us. In short, God, having decreed to save us, could have chosen some other means to do so. However, having chosen this means, it was necessary for our salvation.
2. ***Consequent absolute necessity.*** This position asserts that, given that God decreed to save his elect, there was no other way he could do this in a manner compatible with his nature than by the death of his Son. Since God is righteous and just, he must bring about salvation in a form that is righteous and just. Of paramount importance is that the disobedience of Adam be overcome in a just way, by the obedience of a second Adam, the eternal Son (Rom. 3:25-26). The necessity of the atonement under this line of thought is consequent upon God's determining to save his people. Once he had decreed that, it was necessary that it be achieved by the atoning death of Christ on the cross. The atonement was necessary in an absolute sense, contingent on the foregoing decree to save. The necessity rests on God's nature, a free and sovereign outflow of who he is. This is no limitation on God, for he is not constrained by external necessity.⁴

Murray points out that, "The terms *absolute necessity* however, indicate that God, having elected some to everlasting life out of his mere good pleasure, was under the necessity of accomplishing this purpose through the sacrifice of his own Son, a necessity arising from the perfections of his own nature. In a word, while it was not inherently necessary for God to save, yet, since salvation had been purposed, it was necessary to secure this salvation through a satisfaction that could be rendered only through substitutionary sacrifice and blood-bought redemption. It might appear to be vainly speculative and presumptuous to press such an inquiry and to try to determine what is inherently necessary for God. Furthermore, it might appear to lie on the face of such a text as, *without the shedding of blood there is no remission* that the extent of revelation to us is simply that there is *de facto* no remission without blood-shedding and that it would be beyond the warrant of Scripture for us to say what is *de jure* indispensable for God."⁵

CONCLUSION: The late Leon Morris observed that it, "is not always noticed that if the cross is an expression of God's love it is also an expression of His righteousness. If there were nothing but His love to be considered, it would be difficult to see why the cross should be necessary at all (indeed, the logic of the position of some scholars seems to render it unnecessary). The cross is as eloquent of God's concern for moral law as it is of His love."⁶ H. D. McDonald adds, "Holiness is the law of God's love, while love is the principle of his holiness. Thus must God's way of redemption be an expression of his being as holy Love. It will have its ground in his essential nature. God would save man in holy love; he would redeem man in loving holiness. To ignore sin would be for God to deny his holiness; to repudiate the sinner would be for God to forego his love. The cross must then be at once God's act of holy judgment on man's sin and God's act of redeeming love for the sinner. Calvary is then the place where God's holiness and love meet for our salvation: his holiness in judgment on man's sin in the man Christ Jesus, and his love for man the sinner in Christ the Redeemer. Because God is holy, he must react to sin in judgment. Herein is the wrath of God. Because God is love he would reach the sinner in mercy. Herein is the grace of God. The cross has

to do with the holy God who is love and with the loving God who is holy. For God's love is holy, as the Holy One is love. Nothing else than the atonement can do justice to the holiness and love of God. Thus is the cross, in a deep and profound sense, not only the medium of the reconciliation of man with God; it is also, to declare it hesitatingly and nervously, the reconciliation within God himself of the tension between his holiness and his love. That inner *stress* in God occasioned by man's sin has its resolution in the atonement of the death of Christ. The atonement of the cross is, then, at once an act of God's holiness and his love. In the action of Calvary, Christ made satisfaction to the divine holiness by a loving obedience; and by a holy obedience did he make response to the Father's love. He did not himself experience sin, but he did experience God's holy wrath against sin by a real identification with man. And precisely because he endured in its fullest measure of God's holy wrath against sin did he reveal the forgiving love of God to the fullest extent. For no one can forgive in full who is unaware of the fullness of the offense and its fullest consequences. Thus for Christ to feel this double fullness is to accept the justice of the reaction to sin by the divine holiness. By reason of his life of perfect sympathy with man Christ has so felt what the holy God feels regarding sin that he in himself in love bore for man the actuality of the divine wrath. Thus did Christ take upon himself the full weight of God's judgment of sin, and in that very act revealed the fullness of God's forgiving love. In the atonement of the cross did God, whose wrath we deserve, tear something from his own holy heart of love and give it for our sake. For God is the matter of his own revealing: in Christ the *God-man*, God is the subject; and in Christ the *God-man*, man is the object of the atonement. In his death Christ endured God's wrath in love to forgive man's sin in holiness. In the atonement God's holiness is present in penal action and God's love is present in paternal grace. The cross is the place of a judgment on sin that God cannot withdraw and of a divine love for sinners that he will not withhold."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ P. Lewis, *The Glory of Christ* (Moody Press, 1997), p. 273.

² J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 10.

³ W. G. T. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine II* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1977), p. 274.

⁴ This is the analysis of Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 549.

⁵ Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁶ L. Morris, *The Cross in The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 154.

⁷ H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of The Death of Christ* (Baker, 1985), p. 344.