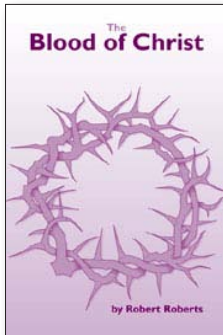


The atonement explained

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The Blood of Christ: the Divine Scheme of Reconciliation or Atonement as Originally Promulgated by the Apostles in the First Century.

Robert Roberts (1895).

The Christadelphian, Birmingham.

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THE SUBJECT of the atonement and issues surrounding the sacrifice of Jesus Christ are a constant polemic within our Brotherhood, and many pages of Christadelphian magazines have been and are occupied with controversial, and sometimes heated, discussions of the topic. Brethren have written books setting out their definitive understanding of the atonement, usually causing further argument. It seems to the reviewer that the booklet *The Blood of Christ*, written by Brother Robert Roberts about 115 years ago, has outlasted all others in its simplicity, balance, mastery of Scripture and brevity. Now seems a timely opportunity to remind ourselves of, and perhaps induct a new generation of brothers and sisters into, this fine publication.

Brother Roberts begins his Scriptural analysis by taking three phrases, “the blood of Christ”, “the offering of the body of Christ” and “the death of Christ”, and listing the passages where they occur. He then shows that the expressions are synonymous and that they relate to the power of the sacrifice of Christ. Neither the “blood”, the “body” or the “death” in themselves had the power to atone for sin. They were all vital parts of the whole Divine scheme of reconciliation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point in his booklet there is an important digression, which is entitled “Christ himself benefited by his own death”. This teaching is, as far as the reviewer knows, unique to the Truth. It has never been encountered in the teaching of other denominations. It is a logical consequence

of the fact that our Lord shared our nature and needed to be saved from that nature by his own atoning sacrifice.

God’s righteousness declared

Brother Roberts proceeds by considering sacrifices, from the time of Abel to the Mosaic Law, showing that “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). He then goes to that key verse in Romans 3:25 to show how the sacrifice of Christ achieved what the sacrifice of animals could not. Quoting from page 11:

“Verse 25, ‘Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness, that He might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus’. If we ponder this, we shall find that it yields a complete explanation. First of all, it places forgiveness in the foreground, ‘through God’s forbearance’, which is at variance with the substitutionary idea. The substitutionary idea blots out forgiveness by suggesting that the debt in the case is paid by another. It is not so. God does forgive: this is the most prominent feature in the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. ‘Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins’. ‘Be baptized for the remission of sins’. ‘God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.’”

That the declaration of the righteousness of God is paramount in the scheme of salvation is borne out by the fact the phrase is repeated in Romans 3:25,26, but the essential point is that the forbearance (forgiveness) of God is linked to His righteousness being seen in the death and resurrection of the Lord. Sin had to be condemned in order that God could justly forgive our sins.

The sacrifice that saves

At this stage in his argument Brother Roberts looks at the three possible ways God could have remedied the introduction of sin and its consequences by Adam’s transgression. He could have

exterminated the whole human species—but that would have been to admit failure. He could have tolerated sin and let sinful man continue for ever to occupy the earth—consigning man to eternal misery. The third way, which He has adopted in Jesus, is to enforce the law against sin and at the same time leave the door open for mercy to be extended to repentant, faithful and obedient sinners. The birth, death and resurrection of Christ show us this third, middle, way. He concludes this part in these words:

“He was born that he might die, as the first necessity in the case; for thus was the righteousness of God to be declared, and sin condemned in its own flesh as the foundation of all the goodness to come afterwards . . . Not only had sin to be condemned, but the resurrection had to come in harmony with the law that made death the wages of sin . . . and this resurrection was not merely to be a restoration of life, but the providing of an Administrator of the glorious results achieved—one who should be the mediator between God and man, the dispenser of the forgiveness and salvation of God through him, and the Judge also of who should be fit to receive these great gifts. All these aims required that the sacrificial victim should be a perfectly righteous man, as well as the possessor of the nature to be sacrificially condemned . . .”

By the grace of God

Brother Roberts deals next with the paradox that our Saviour was both Son of God and Son of man. His writing is rich in Scriptural quotation and allusion, and again we can do no better than to quote the concluding words in this section:

“[God’s] plan required that the sufferer, whilst in the channel of death so far as nature was concerned, should himself not be a sinner . . . the man produced through Mary combined the two essential qualifications for a sacrifice; he was the very nature condemned in Eden, and therefore 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?”

“Heaven’s etiquette” and “The place of forgiveness” are next written on in the same robust and wise style, followed by “The Divine side of Christ”, where many quotations are made from the Gospel of John. “The gracious act of God” deals with a

subject that is aired frequently today. Some say that the grace of God does not have much place in the writings of our early brethren, but this is not so:

“It is the grace of God then,—the act of God—that we see in the introduction of Christ upon the scene to open a way for mercy conformably with wisdom and justice. This required that he should appear in the nature of Abraham and David, which was sinful nature. How then, some say, was he, with sinful flesh, to be sinless? God’s relation to the matter is the answer. God did it. The weak flesh could not do it. Jesus was God manifest in the flesh . . .” (p. 24).

Yielding to God’s will

It might seem also to some that Brother Roberts passes over the greatness of the sacrifice of Christ, in his total yielding to the will of his Father, and in his great faith and perseverance. The next section of his booklet, however, shows this not to be the case. Entitled “Sin in the flesh”, it is written with great understanding and appreciation of the trials and struggles of the Lord Jesus:

“It has to be said that never man thought as this man, or loved as this man or felt as this man. He was a special man altogether, though as to nature the same . . .” (p. 28).

The final sections of *The Blood of Christ* include “Importance of understanding”, “Effect on character” and “The final triumph”. This last sees all the worthies of old in the Kingdom, their minds fixed on the central figure of the Kingdom, and saying: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood: blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sits upon the throne and to the Lamb for ever”. Brother Roberts’ concluding words are:

“It is beautiful to look forward to; soothing and inspiring and encouraging and purifying. ‘The redeemed of the LORD shall come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be on their heads’; the joy everlasting, because pure, and based upon divine righteousness, which God Himself has given to us; first through Moses, and then through Christ, who shall at last be pointed to as having taken away the sin of the world, and all its evil consequences” (p. 31).

This booklet covers the breadth of this subject, which is at the very centre of all the beliefs of Christadelphians. It is so easy to focus too narrowly on some facets of the atonement and exclude others, leading to an unbalanced view of

the whole, and ultimately to error. This booklet achieves Scriptural synthesis, breadth, brevity and simplicity, all required when writing on this vital

subject. This short but powerful publication is commended to all, and especially to those young in the Truth.