

"The Sacrificial Idea in Paul's Doctrine of the Atonement"
The Bible Student 6:97-103, 151-158. [1902]

Not all writers on Paulinism admit that the idea of sacrifice occupies a prominent place in the apostle's teaching on the atonement. According to Weiss the references to this representation are, at least in the four great epistles, purely incidental, whilst in the other epistles Ephesians 5:2 is the only passage in which the death of Christ is directly viewed as a sacrifice. Pfleiderer also denies that the idea of sacrifice to any appreciable extent determined Paul's doctrinal thinking on the subject. Weiss even endeavors to explain why it is that the apostle does not employ the sacrificial conception in unfolding the significance of the Savior's death. Sacrifices being permitted in the Old Testament as a means of atonement for "sins of error" only and not for "sins with a high hand," Paul's sense of sin was too profound to allow of his finding in the supreme transaction of the cross something in which sin was not dealt with in its most serious aspect. To this it may be answered that such a view ought to have prevented the apostle from employing the sacrificial representation at all in speaking of the atonement, which, as we shall see, is by no means the case. It would also seem to follow that Peter and John, who speak of the death of Christ as a sacrifice, thereby betray their less profound sense of sin, an opinion to which we may well hesitate to give our assent in view of what we know of their teaching on the subject.

Ritschl differs from Weiss and Pfleiderer on the point in question. According to him the idea of sacrifice broadly underlies all the passages which deal with the saving significance of the death of Christ. And yet in the conclusions which he draws as to the interpretation Paul attached to the Savior's sacrifice Ritschl stands at a much further remove from the traditional church doctrine than either Pfleiderer or Weiss. One might think that a consistent carrying through of the principle of sacrifice in the exposition of the apostle's statements could not fail to keep in touch with the church doctrine. But Ritschl reaches diametrically opposite conclusions, because he has adopted a peculiar interpretation of the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice, from which the element of vicarious penal infliction of death is entirely eliminated. From this preconceived point of view he examines the Pauline statements and understands them accordingly. Of the few passages, such as Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21, in which the idea of substitution is too explicitly asserted to admit of subsumption under the idea of sacrifice, he tries to minimize the importance by characterizing them as secondary and relative modes of representation to which the apostle gave no controlling influence in shaping his main doctrine.

We find, therefore, that on the one hand the fact of the prominence of the sacrificial idea in Paul's epistles is denied, and that on the other hand, where the fact is acknowledged, the significance that has been by the church attached to the fact is explained away. As regards the former point, it must be acknowledged that the passages in which Paul formulates the sacrificial meaning of Christ's saving work in so many words are few in number. But this need not surprise us. It is equally true of the coordinated conceptions of reconciliation and redemption, and yet here no careful student of the apostle would draw the inference that these do not stand in the center of his teaching. It has been observed, we believe by Weiss himself, that on the whole Paul elaborates with greater fullness of detail the subjective application of Christ's work than the objective soteriological impetration of redemption, so that the number of passages bearing on the former far exceeds that of the passages dealing with the latter. This observation ought to make us cautious in measuring the importance of

the sacrificial idea in Paul's mind by the scarcity of explicit sacrificial language in his writings.

But the question may be raised whether the passages which contain the idea of sacrifice more or less explicitly are actually so few in number as Weiss and others would have us believe. First of all we have the classical passage, Romans 3:25, 26. Next the words quoted by the apostle from the institution of the Supper, in which the blood of Christ is represented as sacrificial blood inaugurating the new covenant, in contrast with the blood of sacrifice sprinkled by Moses on the altar and people on the occasion of ratifying the Sinaitic covenant (1 Cor. 11:25). Further, in 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul compares Christ to the ancient passover and in this comparison explicitly affirms the sacrificial character of both type and antitype. Again, we have the statement in Ephesians 5:2, that Christ gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for an odor of a sweet smell. But, besides all these, there are several instances in which Paul ascribes a saving significance to the blood of Christ. According to Romans 5:7 we are justified by His blood; according to Ephesians 1:7 we have our redemption through His blood; according to Colossians 1:20 God has made peace through the blood of His cross and thereby reconciled all things to Himself; according to Ephesians 2:13 those that were once far off have been made nigh in the blood of Christ. It is scarcely possible to believe that in this association between the blood of Christ and His saving activity no reference should be intended to the ritual of sacrifice in which the blood plays so prominent a part. It has been asserted indeed by Weiss that the effusion of blood figures in these statements simply as the sign of a violent death, so that wherever the blood is mentioned this must be understood as ascribing the saving character of Christ's death to its violent nature and not to its sacrificial import. This seems to us untenable for three reasons. In the first place, Romans 3:25 and 1 Corinthians 11:25 show that Paul actually associated the blood of Christ with the idea of sacrificial propitiation. Secondly, elsewhere in the New Testament this association is so plain on the surface as to be recognized by everybody. If Peter and John conceive of the blood of Christ as sacrificial blood, it would be strange if the same or similar expressions, when occurring in Paul, possessed nothing of this association. And, thirdly, if the reference to the blood of Christ were to be understood from the point of view of the violent character of His death, this would be out of harmony with the apostle's general mode of viewing the death of Christ. Where the violent character of the death is made prominent, emphasis is placed upon its having been inflicted by others, so that Christ appears as sustaining to it a passive rather than an active attitude. But Paul usually emphasizes the very opposite, viz., that Christ voluntarily took upon Himself this death, that it was the culminating act of His obedience, a representation obviously much more in harmony with the sacrificial idea than with that of the blood as the exponent of a violent death.

In regard to the other point, it is important to observe that the apostle must be allowed to explain to us his own theory of sacrifice. Ritschl's method of bringing to his interpretation of the Pauline statements a preconceived theory, even though it be obtained from a study of the Old Testament facts, is apt to lead to erroneous conclusions. In the abstract it is, of course, true that the Old Testament theory of sacrifice and that of the apostle must be in entire harmony, and that if we possessed an absolutely correct understanding of the former, we would be not only justified in construing the latter accordingly, but obliged to do so. This is true in the abstract, but in the concrete case before us the situation is quite a different one. The Old Testament itself nowhere presents us with what could be fairly called a theory of sacrifice. It describes the sacrificial system, here and there hints at its leading principles, but in the main leaves it to the New Testament to illumine the facts by means of what can be properly called a doctrine of sacrifice. This the New Testament does both by the ideal

exhibition of the principle of sacrifice in the work of Christ and by the interpretation given thereof in the teachings of our Lord and of the apostolic writers. What Ritschl actually does, therefore, is to bring to the exegesis of Paul not the indubitable Old Testament truth, but his own individual appreciation of certain Old Testament facts, and it needs no special argument to show that this is an exegetically unfair and unsafe procedure.

We must gather the apostle's view through an independent study of his own words. In Romans 3:25 he says that God set forth Christ *λασθηριον* through faith in His blood. The first thing to observe is that these words are introduced to explain in what sense there is "redemption," *απολυτρωσις*, in Christ: "being justified freely by divine grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth, etc." Now this proves how closely Paul associated the two ideas of redemption and sacrifice. Sacrifice was to him the very essence of the redemptive transaction, the very basis of redemption as an accomplished result. As to the meaning of the statement itself, this depends largely on the rendering of the word *λασθηριον* and on the mutual construction of the various clauses. There are four views in regard to the rendering of *λασθηριον*. The first takes it as designating the mercy seat, the cover of the ark of the covenant. This is the only sense in which the word occurs in biblical Greek, where it is the usual translation for the Hebrew *כַּפֶּרֶת*, a consideration strongly commending the view in question. Others propose to retain for the word its original force as an adjective signifying "propitiatory." This may be done in two ways, either by supplying *θυμα* "sacrifice," so that the thought results, "God set forth Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice," or by construing *λασθηριον* as a predicative adjective with the preceding relative pronoun, which yields the rendering, "whom God set forth as a propitiatory person."¹ A fourth way of rendering the word is to turn the neuter adjective into a substantive usage by giving it the sense of "instrument of propitiation." Of these various proposals it seems to us that the first-mentioned deserves a decided preference, although it has not found the same favor with recent expositors it used to find in a somewhat earlier period. As already stated, it draws support from the Septuagint, and besides this from the only other New Testament passage in which *λασθηριον* occurs (Heb. 9:5). But what ought to weigh more than this is that the context itself suggests such a rendering. It will be observed that in the 23rd verse Paul describes the state of sin as one in which man falls short of the *δοξα του θεου*. We may expect from this that the opposite will be described as a state in which righteousness and the glory of God are together restored to man. Now this is precisely what the mercy seat under the Old Testament symbolized. It was the place where the application of blood in the most solemn exercise of the ritual of atonement took place; it was likewise the place where the divine glory manifested itself. Further, the verb *προεθετο* admirably suits this meaning. Of a sacrifice or an instrument of propitiation it is not so natural to say that it is publicly set forth, as it is to affirm this of the mercy seat. To be sure, under the old covenant the application of blood to the mercy seat on the day of atonement, and in general the presence of the glory of Jehovah on it, were withdrawn from public view, but this gives all the more point to the use of the verb *προεθετο*, inasmuch as it is thus made to convey the idea of a contrast between the hidden character of the supreme mystery of the old covenant and the open character of the fulfillment corresponding thereto in Christ. Still further the clause *εν τω αυτου αιματι*, no matter whether this be construed with the verb *προεθετο* or the noun *λασθηριον*, is obviously intended to call attention to something peculiar in the manner in which Christ is *λασθηριον*. He is this, or was set forth thus in His own blood. The Old Testament mercy seat was sprinkled with foreign blood; in Christ's case the blood was that of the living mercy seat himself. The thought that Christ was victim and mercy seat in one has nothing strange in it; an

equally bold combination occurs in the epistle to the Hebrews, and Paul by the emphatic phrase, “in his own blood,” has himself marked its peculiarity.

One objection frequently raised against the view just stated ought to be briefly noticed. It is said that Paul, in case he wished to refer to something like the mercy seat, of which only one example existed, ought to have placed the article before *λασθηριον*. But this objection seems to us to miss the very point of the apostle’s suggestive representation. The underlying thought is precisely this, that the idea of the mercy seat has been embodied in two successive forms, first in that of the Old Testament ritual, subsequently in Christ. To Paul’s manner of thinking, the mercy seat is not a *unicum* but, since its idea is embodied in both type and antitype, a generic conception.

The word *λασθηριον*, thus interpreted, bears witness to the fact that Paul regarded the sacrificial aspect of our Lord’s death not as a secondary or figurative mode of viewing it, but as pertaining to its very essence, as most literally expressing its central significance. That propitiatory rite and that propitiatory place in which all Old Testament sacrificial functions culminated find their higher, their ideal counterpart in the crucified Savior. In this respect also He is the end of the law, not because He does away with the idea of sacrifice as something antiquated and imperfect, but because He embodies this idea in its highest conceivable, its absolute form in Himself, and thus, while rendering all previous forms superfluous, secures to it in His own Person everlasting reality.

But the passage examined does not merely bring out the prominence accorded by Paul to the sacrificial conception of the atonement, it also throws light in several respects on what we may call the apostle’s philosophy of this sacrificial atonement. From this point of view we hope to examine it in a subsequent article.

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In a previous article the sacrificial import of the passage in Romans 3:25, 26 was pointed out by us. We must now inquire what light these words of the apostle shed on his philosophy of sacrifice in connection with the death of Christ. It will be observed that Paul bases the necessity of the propitiatory exhibition of Christ on the principle of the divine righteousness. God set Him forth as a *λασθηριον* “to show his righteousness.” This manifestation of divine righteousness was rendered necessary “because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime,” and this “passing over” had been possible only because it was done “with a view to the showing of his righteousness at this present season.”² Obviously then, there is in the sacrifice of Christ, before all other things, an exercise of the righteousness of God. The question arises, how is this to be understood? The most natural answer would seem to be that the apostle has in mind the retributive penal *δικαιοσυνη* of which he speaks elsewhere, that he views the Savior’s death as a penal infliction due to this righteousness, that he represents it as historically made necessary, because the long-suffering of God and His passing over of sin in the time before Christ had seemed to place in doubt the enforcement of this principle, whereas in reality such passing over had been possible only because God had constantly in view the future occasion on which in the sacrifice of Christ He would signally manifest and vindicate His righteousness. On this, at one time well-nigh common, view the essence of sacrificial propitiation would for the apostle consist in the exhibition of penal righteousness. Recently, however, with many writers, another interpretation has been substituted for this, according to which the conception of

δικαιοσυνη has in the passage before us a totally different meaning, has in fact nothing to do with the thought of penal recompense. This modern interpretation appears in a variety of forms with such writers as Ritschl, Cremer, Häring, and others. For our present purpose it is not necessary to examine these minor shades of difference. All the views referred to have this in common, that they make the righteousness of God here named bear a favorable meaning: it is defined as a form of grace or as a form of gracious procedure, whereby God imparts to man the benefits of salvation, not a righteousness held in balance by the divine love, not one of the two great factors entering into the redemptive process, but identical with love, and as such the sole principle from which the whole process flows. Attention is called to the fact that in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in the second part of the book of Isaiah, the righteousness of Jehovah appears as the principle of salvation, and it must be admitted that this is true and that Paul by using the term in this sense would have remained strictly within the limits of scriptural terminology, nay, that to a certain extent it would have been natural for him to borrow the conception from these Old Testament passages. It is further contended that the phrase η δικαιοσυνη αυτου in Romans 3:25, 26, as combined with the word ενδειξις points back to what we read in verse 21, δικαιοσυνη θεου πεφανερωται, that this in turn points back to the almost identical statement in 1:17, δικαιοσυνη θεου αποκαλυπτεται, and that in this last-named statement “the righteousness of God” must bear a favorable sense because it is contrasted with the “wrath of God” in the following verse. It ought to be observed that this modern exegesis involves not merely the change of the Pauline idea of God’s righteousness from an unfavorable to a favorable attribute, but that it involves also the surrender of the old Protestant exegesis of the phrase “righteousness of God” as denoting the objective righteousness imputed by God consisting in the merit of Christ. It is believed, at least by some, that not only in Romans 1:17; 3:21, 22, but also in such passages as Romans 10:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21 the conception of a favorable divine attribute or activity satisfies the exegetical requirements.

In considering this new interpretation we may first of all assure ourselves that it need involve no menace whatever to the great doctrines of vicarious atonement and justification on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Christ. The former of these doctrines is securely established on what the apostle teaches concerning the death of Christ as a reconciliation and redemption, a forensic transaction in general. As to the latter, even if all the passages which speak of δικαιοσυνη θεου should have to be interpreted in the manner now proposed,³ there would still always remain Philippians 3:9, where the apostle by using the fuller expression η εκ θεου δικαιοσυνη has removed all doubt in regard to the objective imputation character of the righteousness spoken of. We may, therefore, calmly and impartially examine the grounds on which the view in question is recommended to us. Of course, in one respect acceptance of the new exegesis would mean a loss to our apprehension of the Pauline theology. If the apostle in representing the divine righteousness as that in God which demanded the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sin, does not refer to a principle of justice, but to a principle of grace, then the passage in hand can no longer be said to throw any light on the theory of sacrifice underlying it. All it teaches us in this case will be the general truth, doubted by none, that the sacrifice of Christ manifested in some way the gracious love of God, but as to why the divine love had to be manifested in this peculiar way (i.e., by the crucifixion), it can furnish no answer.

The main considerations weighing against such severing of the vital connection between the ideas of penal righteousness and sacrifice in our passage may be briefly stated as follows: In the first place, it is

doubtful whether Paul in using the phrase “righteousness of God” has conscious reference to Isaiah or the Psalms. The underlying figure in these portions of the Old Testament is that of a controversy between Israel and her enemies, in regard to which Jehovah appears as the Judge. It is the part of His righteousness to justify Israel, i.e., so to interpose, that the right will appear to be on Israel’s side. The resultant righteousness of Israel consists in nothing else than that she will appear vindicated as over against her enemies. But neither in the Psalms nor in Isaiah does the divine righteousness in such connections figure as the principle which effects the forgiveness of sin. It is true the apostle might have spiritualized the entire conception by transferring it from the political to the moral sphere. But in such a case it would be strange that in Romans 8, where we meet with a representation somewhat approaching that of the second part of Isaiah and perhaps influenced by the latter (God in justification vindicates the sinner from all his accusing enemies), the phrase *δικαιοσύνη θεου* should not occur.

Secondly, the contrast between “righteousness of God” and “wrath of God” in Romans 1:17, 18 is not decisive, because this contrast is just as strong on the view that *δικαιοσύνη* is here the objective imputed righteousness as when it is taken to mean the gracious interposition of God. That it must mean the latter the sense of *οργή* cannot prove, because *οργή* is not, properly speaking, a divine attribute or activity, but the wrath of God objectively embodied in judgment. Now, if for Romans 1:17 the sense of objective, imputed righteousness is maintained and from here carried over to 3:21, 22, as seems necessary on account of the similarity of expression, and if in close sequence (vss. 25, 26), the same phrase reappears as an attribute of God introduced in terms which plainly echo the two preceding passages, then we are almost compelled to think in the last-named case of retributive righteousness. For only between retributive and imputed righteousness a real connection exists such as will explain the use of the same phrase for two different things. On the other hand, there is no such connection between gracious righteousness in God and imputed righteousness, since the former is called righteousness for a totally different reason from that which gives its name to the latter. Hence Cremer’s view, who finds imputed righteousness in verses 21, 22, and gracious righteousness as an attribute of God in verses 25, 26, is very implausible.

Thirdly, in Romans 3:21, 22, the description of the righteousness of God manifested as being “through faith” favors the old interpretation. It is more natural to say of a human possession than of a divine activity that it is “through faith.”

Fourthly, in our passage itself the accompanying statements seem to show that the righteousness referred to must be penal and not gracious. For its display was rendered necessary by the previous passing over of sins in the long-suffering of God. It must therefore be the opposite of long-suffering, which gracious righteousness clearly is not. Ritschl has tried to evade the force of this argument by making the apostle say that the manifestation of a full forgiving righteousness was required because previous to Christ there had been only a partial and qualified passing over of sins. This might be a possible exegesis if the apostle had not added the words “in the long-suffering of God,” thus indicating that in the sacrifice of Christ there was something which once for all prevented that any misinterpretation should be put upon the long-suffering of God, in other words, that there was in it an exhibition of penal righteousness.⁴

In the apostle’s version of the words spoken by Jesus when instituting the Supper, to which we turn

next, the Lord's death appears as a covenant sacrifice: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Ritschl concludes from this that the death of Christ cannot have had for Paul any more definite associations than those of a transaction introducing the New Testament church into the communion of God to which the forgiveness of sin is attached. Of course, a covenant sacrifice is a sacrifice which introduces into covenant fellowship, but this general statement leaves entirely undetermined the manner in which such introduction is effected. Now it is said that the body of Christ is *ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν*, and elsewhere this *ὑπὲρ* stands to express the sacrificial surrender of Christ on behalf of believers. Consequently Paul must have conceived of it as a rite of atonement, as well as a rite of introduction to covenant fellowship, and the former will have to be understood as subservient to the latter: Christ's death introduces into the new covenant because it atones, not it atones because it introduces into the covenant, as Ritschl would have it. Again the phrase "in my blood" is significantly joined to "the new covenant," and elsewhere this phrase describes the new relation in which the believer stands to God as resting on a propitiatory basis. Therefore the same intermediate thought will have to be supplied here also.

The next passage (1 Cor. 5:7) compares the death of Christ to still another form of Old Testament sacrifice, the Passover. Paul here represents the Christian state as the ethical counterpart to what the feast of unleavened bread was symbolically. But this Old Testament feast was introduced by the feast of Passover. Thus the thought emerges that the new state of ethical purity in which the Christian lives was also introduced by a passover sacrifice, and this Paul finds in the death of Christ. Obviously the connection between Christ's death and the Christian life of purity is not conceived of as merely chronological; it must be causal: in Christ's sacrifice lies the ground or reason why the Christian should be pure. Such at least is everywhere else the apostle's teaching. It is safe to say that in analogy with this he found some vital connection also between the feast of Passover and that of unleavened bread on the ground of which he explained their chronological conjunction. We are not told, however, in the present context what more precisely is the connection between Christ's sacrificial death and the believer's purity. Is it forensic or ethical? Has Christ by His sacrifice taken away our guilt, and through the removal of our guilt broken the power of sin, so that a state of purity becomes possible to us? Or must we so conceive of it that in some mystical way the sacrifice of Christ has directly set us free from the power and ethical impurity of sin? Or, is it merely a moral influence exerted by the cognizance of the death of Christ upon our consciousness which is adapted to render us pure? A hint as to the answer is contained, we believe, in 5:7, "Purge out the old leaven . . . even as ye are unleavened." In one sense the Corinthians must still purge themselves from all leaven, in another sense they are already unleavened. The former applies to their subjective condition, the latter to their objective state. And for both the reason is given in the immediately following statement: "For our passover also has been sacrificed, Christ." Consequently the death of Christ is here represented as a Passover sacrifice for two reasons: (1) Because it is the source of objective freedom from the impurity of the guilt of sin; (2) Because it is the source of subjective purity. The passage, therefore, teaches in harmony with Romans 3:25, 26 and 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25 that sacrifice serves the purpose of removing the guilt of sin.

In conclusion we must glance at the statement contained in Ephesians 5:1, 2, "Be ye therefore imitators of God, and beloved children; and walk in love, even as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for an odor of a sweet smell." This passage also speaks of the death of Christ, for which the verb *παράδιδοναι* elsewhere is Paul's standard term.

Christ gave Himself up in death for us. This act was the highest manifestation of His love towards us and is therefore held up as an example for the imitation of believers in their conduct towards one another. A further motive, however, for urging its imitation is derived from the fact that this act of Christ was supremely pleasing to God. Hence it is described in sacrificial terms not only, but in such sacrificial terms as strongly bring out this its character as something in which God takes delight; προσφορα is placed before θυσια (cf. for the usual sequence Heb. 10:5), and the phrase “for an odor of a sweet smell” is added, a phrase used by the law in connection with the whole burnt offering, in whose ritual the element of consecration was made prominent. The death of Christ, then, is here described as an act upon which the highest divine approval rested. In regard to the further significance of this act the passage gives no information. It is of great value, however, in so far as it emphasizes two principles: (1) that an important element in the efficacy of the Savior’s death consisted in the obedience with which it was rendered; (2) if there was in the atonement an exercise of the divine retributive righteousness terminating upon Christ, this does not exclude that from another point of view at the same time the Father’s supreme love went out towards Christ, and such for the very reason that He had exposed Himself to the penal consequences of the divine righteousness. Thus the two passages, Romans 3:25, 26 and Ephesians 5:1, 2, are seen to be mutually complementary in their representation of the attitude of God towards the atonement in its sacrificial aspect.

(Footnotes)

¹ This adjective use of the word is found in the Septuagint in two places (Ex. 25:17; 37:6), where the mercy seat is called ιλαστηριον επιθεμα, “propitiatory covering,” although some insist even here upon taking it as a noun, to which επιθεμα would then stand in apposition.

² We take the clause προς την ενδειξιν της δικαιοσυνης αυτου εν τω νυν καιρω as dependent on the noun παρσιυ. If it were a mere resumption of the preceding clause beginning with εις ενδειξιν, the change of preposition from εις to προς would be unaccounted for.

³ In reference to Romans 10:3, the new explanation is highly precarious, because the δικαιοσυνη θεου is the opposite of ιδια δικαιοσυνη; in 2 Corinthians 5:21, the contrast of God’s righteousness to our curse renders it in our view entirely impossible. Only Romans 1:17; 3:21, 22, 25, 26 admit of serious discussion.

⁴ The closing words of verse 26, often appealed to in this connection, can be made to suit either view, according as they are rendered: “that he might be righteous and (yet) justifying him that has faith in Jesus,” or “that he might be righteous and (consequently) justifying him that has faith in Jesus.”