

When God Will Be Satisfied

From the series: The Fundamentals a Century Later

Text: Psalm 51; Luke 23:32-38

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We continue this morning to consider “The Fundamentals a Century Later.” It was the years 1910 to 1915 when a group of conservative scholars wrote essays in defense of the core doctrines of the Christian faith. They did this because there was a rising tide of liberal theology which, in the first quarter of the century, was spoken of as modernism, and that theological understanding was increasing its influence as the years went by. The conservative dimension of the church felt under siege and, therefore, in a careful and responsible way, conservative scholars wrote essays which explained and defended what they felt was the core of the Christian tradition.

The liberal theological movement was making great headway in those years because it was able to accept the increasing knowledge of the world as it came to expression through the natural sciences, and liberal theology had as its hallmark its refusal of any external authority. The orthodox community had an external authority; it had a book, in the case of the Protestant communion from which we stem; it had the institution of the church in the case of the Roman Catholic tradition, along with the scriptures; and in the Eastern Orthodox tradition there was not only the scriptural witness but the grand tradition of the church in its liturgical expression. But in whatever form or confessional family, there was an external authority that created the parameters in which the Christian faith could be understood.

Now the critical moment, and it wasn’t just a moment, but a movement over a period of time, was the breaking down of those parameters. The determination of the liberal theological movement was to accept the data from the sciences, just as it had come to accept the world as it was, and to judge every truth claim, theological or otherwise, on the basis of human reason and experience. If you take away the external authority, then you are faced with making critical judgments over against the data that is presented to you. The issue was a question of authority. Does the authority lie in a book or an institution? Or is the authority finally in the person who, through reason and experience, judges the religious truth claims as he or she judges every other claim?

The issue of authority was absolutely fundamental and these conservative scholars understood that, and therefore, their first cardinal point was the inerrant and infallible word of God. It was an issue of authority, and if you have a prescribed authority, then you are in trouble when the whole world-view begins to change. That is what happened. That is why liberalism was gaining and why the orthodox party felt on the defensive.

Unfortunately, in those essays called *The Fundamentals*, written between 1910 and 1915, what the orthodox party did was to affirm the faith once again, but in terms of the old world-view that was passing away. Their essays flew in the face of what the sciences were saying about the reality of which we are a part. And so, we have that unfortunate history of the conflict between science and religion.

It was an issue of authority, and the orthodox party, being hemmed in by its authority, expressed that faith over again in terms of an old world-view that was falling apart. As we discussed last week, that view was a view of a supernatural realm, the realm of God the Creator, and a natural realm, the creation. Sometimes we speak colloquially of a three-decker universe: heaven above, hell below, earth in the middle. And in that old world-view, the earth, the human experience, was caught in a cosmic conflict between light and darkness, between good and evil, between God and Satan. That cosmic conflict was the consequence of human sin. Last week when we looked at the creation story and the disobedience of Adam and Eve, what has come to be called the Fall, we saw that whole natural realm was spoken of as fallen. There was disobedience and therefore estrangement and alienation, and as a result God in the heavenly realm had to decide what to do about the situation. Would God leave creation in that state which it had earned through its disobedience, having fallen to a state of judgment and condemnation? Or would God find some way, in spite of human disobedience, to rescue, to redeem, to save humankind from its fall?

The solution to God's dilemma was the virgin birth. Why a virgin birth? Well, there was no hope from our side, for we had forfeited life. We had no life to offer to God. So God would have to come and join us in our humanity. That's the whole Christmas story; that's the incarnation. But if God was going to join us in our humanity, how could God avoid being tainted by that original sin which went in an unbroken chain down through the generations? Just a normal human birth comes out wrong.

The solution? The virgin birth, which was the second of the five cardinal points of *The Fundamentals*. Through the conception of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, God the eternal son could join humanity untainted by human sin and estrangement. He could be born without sin and he could live sinlessly. God the Son in human nature could offer himself on behalf of the world.

That's what you learned in Sunday School, isn't it? That is the old story. In that offering of himself, Jesus took upon himself our sin and guilt, removing it from

us so that we could be forgiven by God. As one theologian stated it, “Jesus took the rap for us.” Or, as the old communion liturgy of the Reformed Church has it, “He was forsaken of God that we never need be forsaken.” That’s right at the heart of the traditional Christian understanding of salvation.

What’s going on here? Well, the virgin-born, sinless Son of God, living without sin, living righteously and faithfully, can offer up his life. As he takes on himself the sin of the world, he dies, even though he did not deserve to die. His dying, then, removes from us the sentence of death. He dies in our place; he substitutes for us. As St. Paul expressed it, “God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made in the righteousness of God in him.”

And so, we have come to speak about the substitutionary atonement. That’s the third point of *The Fundamentals*, the substitutionary atonement. Christ is our substitute. And when we speak of atonement, we think of the death of Christ; Christ paying the price for our sin and guilt, and so forth. We don’t often stop to look at the word itself, but if we would break it apart, atonement is at-one-ment. That is literally how it is spelled, at-one-ment. And so it speaks about the reconciliation of two alienated parties. It brings together those who were separated through human sin and guilt. There is communion again between God and the human family. That is the traditional understanding of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

You can understand what was being addressed there, for the great concern was the justice of God. How could God forgive freely and still remain just? That is a philosophical problem. I can make it very simple if I say, for example, “John, you owe me \$100.” You acknowledge that you owe me \$100. But you refuse to pay me, and so we go before the judge. I make my claim, and you admit your debt. The judge looks at us and says, “Well, Dick, you’re right, he owes you the money. John, you are wrong in not repaying the debt, but, ah shucks, let’s forget it.” Well, John would like that kind of a judge, wouldn’t he? But, I wouldn’t.

You see in that simple little story, this is the profound philosophical, metaphysical problem that the substitutionary atonement is dealing with. The great concern of that traditional Christian doctrinal system was preserving the justice and honor of God. How could God be just, and yet justify the sinner? This was right at the heart and core of Christian understanding. It was the traditional understanding of the death of Christ, that he died on behalf of sinners, in the sinner’s place, in order to open up the possibility of forgiveness by a God who would remain just because he got, as it were, his pound of flesh from Jesus. That is so deeply written into the fabric of our being that I hear it over and over and over again from adults and from children: Jesus came to die for our sins. That is really at the heart and core of the whole Christian revelation.

Interestingly, in the tenth century a great theologian of the church by the name of Anselm felt that the whole cosmic struggle idea with spirits and angels and

demons and the conflict between God and Satan was quite unworthy of a tenth-century “modern” understanding. Anselm was a part of a culture that we know of as the Age of Feudalism when the castle was on the hill and the lord of the castle had serfs. The serf served as a slave to the castle and the castle gave protection to the serf.

Anselm said, let’s understand this whole drama this way: The lord of the castle is God, who has infinite honor, and the lowly serf has offended that honor. The lord of the manor, in all of his dignity, cannot allow that kind of affront, and so he must punish the serf. In the same way, the Lord of the universe, the infinite God, has been affronted by our human transgression and rebellion, and therefore, we forfeit our life. But although we deserve it, God is not willing to damn us. An infinite God can only be satisfied by an infinite sacrifice, and so only a God-Man could make that infinite sacrifice that would get the record clear and enable God to open God’s arms to us in at-one-ment, in reconciliation. It is in the New Testament and in the tradition of the church, and it probably is the most fundamental understanding of what we have just participated in here at the Lord’s Supper.

How about looking at that a century later? Is that the way you understand it still? Is that meaningful for you still? If it is, beautiful. I think all of us come to this table bringing our own understanding, bringing our own experiences, bringing our own personal needs. So, as we come to this table, we all, I am sure, are receiving the blessing and the peace of God through means of our understanding and our own personal experience in the present. Let me say, however, that the difficulty with this traditional doctrine is that it can be a kind of objective transaction out there beyond us which we tune into by our faith, but not always the personal, transformative experience that one would hope for.

Anselm was concerned about the honor of God. How can the honor and the justice of God be satisfied? I used this in the title of the sermon today, “When God Will Be Satisfied.” The traditional answer is when the perfect offering of Jesus is received on behalf of the penitent one. Then God forgives, but doesn’t compromise his justice; then God is satisfied. The demands of justice are satisfied. The demands of the honor and dignity of God are satisfied, fulfilled, as it were.

But when is God satisfied? When do you come to an awareness that God is satisfied?

Let me suggest there are other strains in the scripture. How about that beautiful Psalm 51? I don’t know whether David wrote it or not, but it is purported to be a psalm of David written as a great prayer of confession and plea for forgiveness when he was confronted by the prophet in the face of his sins of murder and adultery. David pleads for the mercy of God on the basis of God’s steadfast love. And then he says, “Ah, you desire truth in the inward parts. Create in me a clean

heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy holy spirit from me. O God, if it was a matter of sacrifices, I can bring you all kinds of burnt offerings and sacrifices, but the sacrifice that you desire, or the offering that satisfies you is the offering of a broken and a contrite heart. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise or turn away.”

There is no talk there about the problem God has. There is no talk there about God’s justice being compromised. What satisfies God here is an open and honest and authentic human spirit in full awareness before the presence of God, naked in the presence of that Eternal One, honest in the presence of that which is holy and sacred and good and true and beautiful, and the recognition of how far short we fall in even our own noblest visions and values. And then I see Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Luke, on the cross, crucified because of the sin of the world, saying, “Father, forgive them. Silly people, they don’t know what they’re doing.” Not “Father, take my life in place of their lives.” Rather, “They are taking my life, and in my last breath I say, ‘Forgive them,’” because their merciful and loving God will never allow the alienation and the estrangement of his children to prevail.

About a year ago, a few of us were in St. Petersburg, Russia, and went to the Hermitage, perhaps one of the greatest art galleries of the world. I was eager to go there because there is this huge canvas, Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal*. The Prodigal is kneeling. You see his back, but you see the father with his hands at his back, the old gray-bearded man who has welcomed the Prodigal home. The Prodigal had a well-rehearsed story. He had the words to bring to the father, and the father wouldn’t hear of them, and weeping, embraced the son. That was a story Jesus told and the story Jesus embodied. That Jesus who so lived breaks my heart. The way he lived is emulated so little in my life and in the lives of us all.

What is the real problem in this cosmic journey of ours? Is it somehow or other a God who is muscle-bound by some theory of justice? Or is it the need for a transformed consciousness that is effected through a life that we believe was the embodiment of God, a truly human existence? We have come to this table, and as I have given you permission to come as you will and to experience that which you are able to experience, I must say to you, I come and take bread and cup, not because Jesus died for me, but because he lived for me. And if I could live as he lived, then God would be satisfied.

References:

The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth, eds. A.C. Dixon, R.A. Torrey, Vols. 1-12. The Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1910-1915.