

*THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.*

XVI. THE MORE EXCELLENT MINISTRY (*concluded*).

IN the foregoing train of reflection we have been, as it were, feeling our way to the sense of this remarkable phrase, and not, I trust, without gaining some light on the place it occupies in our author's system of thought. In proceeding to make some further observations upon it I begin by remarking that it may be assumed that the words *διὰ πνεύματος αἰωνίου* serve an important purpose in the argument, do really tend to throw light on the transcendent worth of Christ's sacrifice by explaining its peculiar nature. No interpretation can be accepted which reduces the expression to a mere expletive that might be omitted without being missed. On first thoughts, indeed, it may appear as if its introduction only produced difficulty, and as if the sense would have been clearer had the sentence run, "Who offered Himself without spot to God." We wonder, in fact, that among the varieties of readings found in ancient texts and versions one does not occur containing such an omission, and that they are limited to the omission of *αἰωνίου* and the substitution for it of *ἀγίου*, yielding the mutilated idea "through a spirit," and the commonplace idea "through the Holy Spirit." But whatever difficulty the added phrase may create, so long as we remain in ignorance as to the function it performs, we may be quite sure that such a writer as the thoughtful, philosophic author of our epistle uses it with a weighty meaning, and with a meaning that forms an important contribution to the argument, and indeed crowns his doctrine as to the nature and value of Christ's sacrifice. And in absence of any other instances of its use, our best guide is to try and discover for ourselves what links of thought are still wanting, what questions regarding Christ's sacrifice remain to be answered.

Now one question at least arises naturally out of the foregoing argument, and urgently demands an answer. Why should the sacrifice of Christ possess a value out of all proportion to that of legal victims? To the blood of goats and bulls is assigned an extremely limited virtue; why should unlimited virtue be ascribed to the blood of Christ? The kernel of the reply given by the writer to this momentous question is contained in the word *spirit*. It stands in antithesis, not merely to the blood of bulls and goats, but to blood in general (the blood of Christ included). The expression "the blood of Christ" refers to His sacrifice in terms of *parallelism* with Levitical sacrifices; the expression "spirit" belongs to the category of *contrast*. It lifts the sacrifice Christ offered in Himself into a higher region, altogether different from that of blood,—the region of mind, will, conscious purpose. The sense in which it is used here may be partly illustrated by a passage in the writings of our author's contemporary Philo. Philo in one place speaks of man as having two souls: the blood, the soul of the man as a whole; the Divine spirit, the soul of his higher nature:<sup>1</sup> in the former part of his doctrine following the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, that "the life or soul of all flesh is the blood."<sup>2</sup> We may conceive our author as consciously or unconsciously re-echoing the sentiment, and saying: "Yes, the blood, according to the Scriptures, is the soul of a living animal, and in the blood of the slain victim its soul or life was presented as an offering to

<sup>1</sup> Ἐπειδὴν γὰρ ψυχὴ διχῶς λέγεται, ἥτε ὅλη καὶ ἡγεμονικὸν αὐτῆς μέρος, ὃ κυρίως εἰπεῖν ψυχὴ ψυχῆς ἐστὶ, καθάπερ ὀφθαλμὸς ὅτε κύκλος σύμπας, καὶ τὸ κυριώτατον μέρος τὸ ᾧ βλέπομεν, ἔδοξε τῷ νομοθέτῃ διπλὴν εἶναι καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν τῆς ψυχῆς· αἷμα μὲν τὸ τῆς ὅλης, τοῦ δὲ ἡγεμονικωτάτου πνεῦμα θεῖον: "Since soul is spoken of in two senses, the whole soul and the ruling part of it, which to speak truly is the soul of the soul, as the eye is both the whole ball, and the principal part by which we see; it seemed to the legislator (Moses) that the essence of the soul is double: blood of the whole, and the Divine spirit of the ruling part" (*Quis Res. Div. xi.*).

<sup>2</sup> Lev. xvii. 14.

God by the officiating priest. But in connexion with the sacrifice of Christ, we must think of the higher human soul, the Divine spirit. It was as a spirit He offered Himself, as a self-conscious, free, moral personality; and His offering was a spirit revealed through a never-to-be-forgotten act of self-surrender, not the literal blood shed on Calvary, which in itself possessed no more intrinsic value than the blood of Levitical victims."

Thus interpreted, the term "spirit" unfolds the implicit significance of "Himself," and gives us the *rationale* of all real value in sacrifice. It can have no value, we learn therefrom, unless mind, spirit be revealed in it. Death, blood, in its own place, may have theological significance, but not apart from spirit. This is the new truth which by a wide gulf separates Levitical from Christian sacrifice. It has been doubted whether the writer had any such truth in view: whether, that is, he meant to teach anything in advance of Leviticalism on the question, What determines the value of sacrifice? It has been argued that with the Levitical sacrifices before him he did not feel any need for seeking after a new principle, his idea being just that blood atoned, and that the higher efficacy of Christ's blood lay in its being the blood of *Christ*. Had the Epistle to the Hebrews been a purely practical homiletic writing, I could have imagined this to be the writer's state of mind. In such a writing it would not be necessary to raise the question of the *rationale* of value, and the expression, "the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin," could and would have been used without explanatory comment. But the author of an apologetic writing, if he really understands the Christian religion which he undertakes to defend as against those who fail to see its superiority to Levitical institutions, will have something more to say. It is not enough for him to say, "Blood atones." We understand what that means in reference to Levitical sacrifices: blood was sprinkled on

the altar and the mercy-seat, and so made places and persons ritually holy. Was Christ's blood literally sprinkled on the holy things in the "true" tabernacle? is it sprinkled literally on human consciences? If not, we are forced to ask what "blood" in New Testament dialect means, and wherein the cleansing virtue really lies. In the phrase, "through an eternal spirit," I see the evidence that the writer of our epistle felt the pressure of the question, and knew how to answer it.

It goes without saying that the idea of spirit is essentially ethical in its import. Voluntariness and beneficent intention enter into the very substance of Christ's sacrifice. Only a frigid exegesis could suggest that the voluntariness of that sacrifice lies outside Christ's priestly action. It is in virtue of its moral contents that Christ is the ideal Priest, and that His sacrifice is the ideal sacrifice. But for the holy, beneficent will revealed therein, Christ's offering of Himself, instead of being a sacrifice "of nobler name" than those offered by Levitical priests, would be a reversion to the lowest type exhibited in human sacrifices. It passes at a bound from the lowest to the highest type by the introduction of the moral elements of free will and holy, gracious purpose. Sacrifice and priesthood are perfected when priest and victim are one, and when the sacrifice is the revelation of spirit. This is the doctrine of our epistle taught in this famous text, for which we are indebted to the writer's clear, spiritual insight; for it came to him thence, not from reflection either on the Melchisedec or on the Aaronic type of priesthood. These he used as the vehicle of his thoughts for apologetic purposes, but they were not the fountain of his own inspiration.

Another remark still may be added. In the light of the foregoing discussion we can see the vital significance of the *death* of Christ in connexion with His priestly work. The tendency of recent commentators, following in the wake of

Bähr, has been to throw the death into the shade, and make the stress lie on the subsequent transaction, the entrance of Christ into heaven "through His own blood." In connexion with this view much is made of the fact that in the case of most sacrifices under the Levitical system the victim was not slain by the priest, but apparently by the offerer,<sup>1</sup> the chief exception being the sacrifices offered on the day of annual atonement. Such was the fact, so far as we know; but in connexion with the highest ideal sacrifice the case is otherwise. The least priestly act of the Levitical system becomes here the most important, the humble, non-sacerdotal first step the essence of the whole matter. Through the death of the Victim His spirit finds its culminating expression, and it is that spirit which constitutes the acceptableness of His sacrifice in the sight of God; as Paul also understood when he said, "Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour."<sup>2</sup> The death of Christ is indeed the cardinal fact, whatever theory we adopt as to the nature of the atone-

<sup>1</sup> Philo in the *Life of Moses* speaks of the victims as slain by the priests. The Septuagint leaves the point vague, using the expression "they shall slay" (*σφάζουσι*), *vide* Lev. i. 5, iv. 29. Assuming that the victims, in cases of private or individual sacrifices, were slain by the offerers, we get a threefold gradation in the discharge of priestly functions. All that belonged to a sacrifice, presentation, laying on of hands, slaying, blood manipulation, burning on the altar, was priestly, but in different degrees. Some acts (the first three) were competent to lay offerers, who shared in the general priesthood of Israel, the "kingdom of priests." Other acts connected with ordinary sacrifices, without the tabernacle and within the first division, were competent to the general body of priests in the professional sense. The offices connected with the annual atonement were reserved for the high priest alone, *the priest par excellence*, as in the solemn service in which he exclusively officiated the whole Levitical system culminated. This gradation was a mark of imperfection and helped to increase the sense of distance from God. The people's part, though rudimentary, was very important. The pathos of the Levitical system came out in the acts which they might perform.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. v. 2. Pfleiderer, regarding this epistle as non-Pauline, finds in the text cited a different view of the atonement from that of Paul. *Vide Urchristenthum.*

ment: whether, *e.g.*, we regard the victim in a sacrifice as a substitute for the offerer, bearing the penalty of his sin, or, with Bähr and others, as the symbol of his own self-devotion, the blood presented to God representing a pure life and pledging the offerer to a life of self-consecration. On either view applied to Christ His death was of vital significance; obviously so if He bore the penalty of our sin, not less obviously if His death was but the consummation of a life of self-sacrifice, wherein He is the pattern to all His followers.

On the epithet "eternal" attached to "spirit" it is not necessary further to enlarge. As the term "spirit" guarantees the *real* worth of Christ's offering as opposed to the putative value of Levitical sacrifices, so the term "eternal" vindicates for it *absolute* worth. It lifts that offering above all limiting conditions of space and time, so that viewed *sub specie æternitatis* it may, as to its efficacy, be located at will at any point of time, and either in earth or in heaven. "Eternal" expresses the speculative element in the writer's system of thought, as "spirit" expresses the ethical.<sup>1</sup>

At the close of this discussion I must once more point out how much the interpretation of this epistle is biassed by the assumption that the priesthood of Christ was a

<sup>1</sup> Among other interpretations of the expression, διὰ πνεύματος αἰωνίου, the most favoured by recent writers is that which makes it substantially identical in import with πάντοτε ζῶν in chap. vii. 25. So Bleek, and more recently Davidson and Edwards. On this view, the purpose of the expression is to explain how Christ could offer Himself in death, and yet *survive the operation*, so as to be able to offer Himself again to God in heaven. "Spirit" is taken, not in an ethical, but in an ontological or metaphysical sense. On this interpretation I remark, *first*, that the eternal duration of Christ's person is sufficiently recognised in chap. vii. 16, 25; and *second*, that what the connexion of thought in chap. ix. requires to be emphasized and accounted for is, not the "eternal personality" of Christ, but the real and absolute worth of His sacrifice. Rendall takes spirit in the ethical sense: "In the eternal spirit of redeeming love the Son had from the beginning planned this offering of Himself for man's redemption."

theological commonplace for the writer and his readers. Had it been so, it would have been quite superfluous to insist on so elementary a truth as that, in virtue of being an affair of mind and spirit, Christ's sacrifice possessed incomparably greater value than Levitical sacrifices. One would have expected rather a statement as to the precise significance of Christ's death, a theory of the atonement. Such a theory modern readers are chiefly interested in, and expect an expositor to bring out of the epistle. I am sorry that I am unable to gratify the natural wish, and can only offer as the result of inquiry what may appear a moral truism. My excuse must be the entirely different situation of the first readers, for whom the truism was the thing of vital importance, by no means self-evident, but needing to be insisted on. They were children who required instruction in the merest elements of the Christian doctrine of atonement, and nothing more is to be looked for in the epistle. That the only true priesthood is that in which priest and victim are one, and that the only real sacrifice is that which reveals and is offered through the spirit, is its contribution—of inestimable, not yet sufficiently estimated worth, however elementary. In what relations such a sacrifice stands to the moral order of the world, and to what extent and under what conditions it exerts its virtue, are questions left comparatively unanswered.

2. The *effect* of Christ's self-sacrifice is made to consist in purging the conscience from dead works. That "the blood of Christ" has, or must have, this effect is not proved. The writer is content to assert, and for the rest invites his readers to reflect, and appeals to their personal experience. The more the subject is thought on the clearer it becomes; and the appeal to experience is most legitimate, seeing it is within the region of conscience or consciousness that the effect takes place. That this is the case is implied rather than asserted; but the implied truth, that the real source

of disability to serve God is to be found, not in bodily defilement, but in "an evil conscience," is of cardinal importance, as forming one of the leading points of contrast between Christianity and Leviticalism.

Conscience being the sphere within which the blood of Christ exerts its cleansing power, its mode of action is correspondingly modified. The blood of Levitical victims and the ashes of the heifer were literally sprinkled, and the effect was immediate, *ex opere operato*. Christ's blood acts on the conscience through the mind interpreting its significance, and in proportion as it is thought on. It speaks to our reason and our heart, and the better we understand its language the more we feel its virtue. It has a minimum of virtue for those who, in their way of contemplating Christ's death, scarce rise above the Levitical point of view. "The blood of Jesus shed as a sin-offering, God's ordinance for salvation; I look to it, and believe, on God's word, that my sin is forgiven." This way of regarding Christ's death as a positive institution for procuring pardon, for which no account can be given save God's sovereign will, limits the range of benefit and lowers the quality of service. God's mind is not known. He is thought of perhaps as one who demands the blood of a victim in satisfaction to His justice. But there is no thought of satisfaction to His love, of His delight in His Son's love; no perception of the truth that the value of Christ's sacrifice is immensely greater for God and for man *propter magnitudinem charitatis*, as Aquinas expressed it, on account of the greatness of His love. It is difficult to serve such a God in the spirit of filial trust and devotion. When the spirit in which Christ offered Himself is taken into consideration, assurance of forgiveness is greatly strengthened. We then not merely believe that the sacrifice satisfies God, but understand in some measure why. We learn from the feelings it awakens in our own breasts that such an act of self-devotion must be well



pleasing to God, and we cannot doubt that our trusty Brother and High Priest is the beloved of His Father, and that we are accepted in Him.

Thus conscience is purged in the sense that we are assured of pardon, and are no more troubled by the sense of guilt. But the sense of guilt is not the only disability under which we labour. We are hindered from serving God at all, or effectively, by moral evil present in us even after we have believed in pardon, tempting us to doubt our standing and God's power to save, and to enter into the by-paths of legalism and self-salvation. Is there any reference to these serious disabilities in this text? If we think of the writer as a slave to Levitical forms of thought, and as dominated by the parallelism between the ancient sacrificial system and the Christian priesthood, we shall answer in the negative. In that case, we restrict the effect of Christ's sacrifice to the pardon of sin, and not of all sin, but only of sins within the covenant; the benefit being confined to those already in covenant relations, and consisting in being cleansed from sins of infirmity such as even God's people commit. I have consistently protested against this narrow interpretation of the epistle, which puts the writer practically on a level with his ill-instructed readers, and not much, if at all, in advance of the position held by the Judaistic party in the Church, and contended for an interpretation which makes the contrast everywhere prominent, and the parallelism subservient to apologetic purposes. In accordance with this view, I am inclined to take the term "purge," as I have already taken the term "sanctify," in a large sense, and to understand by the purifying of the conscience the removal of all disabilities whereby men are prevented from rendering an efficient, acceptable service unto God. I believe the writer of our epistle means to claim for Christ's sacrifice, viewed in the light of the spirit in which it was offered, the power to

deliver us from all manner of disabilities, to bestow on us "a plenteous redemption," to unloose all bonds which keep us from being in the highest, noblest sense God's servants.

Holding this view, I naturally sympathise with the interpretation of the expression "dead works" advocated by Bleek, according to which it signifies, not merely sinful works in general, but more specifically religious works done by men who serve God in a legal spirit, not in the filial spirit of trust and love. The epithet "dead" is appropriate under either interpretation, as describing the defiling influence of the works done, so that from the mere words the question cannot be decided. We must be guided in our decision by a regard to the connexion of thought and the religious condition of the first readers. Looked at from the former of these two points of view, we may assume that the phrase is employed to express the completeness and thoroughness with which Christ's blood cleanses the conscience. It is very well fitted to do that if it refer to works of religious legalism, because deliverance from the bondage of a legal spirit is the most difficult part and last instalment of redemption. The severest test of Christ's power to redeem is His ability to loose the bonds springing out of a legal religion, by which many are bound that have escaped the dominion of gross sinful habits. Nor is it a matter of small moment whether men be set free from these bonds or not; for though they do not prevent their victims from serving God after a fashion, they prevent them from rendering to the living God a service acceptable in spirit and intelligent in aim. Men under the dominion of a legal temper often think they do God service when they are simply obstructing His work in their time and thwarting His chosen instruments. In view of this fact, abundantly exemplified in the history of the Church, it becomes very apparent what cardinal im-

portance attaches to *redemption from legalism*. A man of prophetic spirit, in sympathy with Christ and Paul and reformers in every age in their judgment on religion of a legal type, could not fail to refer to Christ's power to deliver from its influence in a eulogium on His redeeming work. And such a reference was equally apposite in view of the religious state of the Hebrew Christians. For that they had not escaped the fetters of legalism is manifest from the simple fact that such an elaborate apologetic for Christianity *versus* Leviticalism was called for.

Complete redemption involves deliverance from the sense of guilt, from the power of moral evil, and from religious legalism. These combined cover at once all ethical and all religious interests, both "justification" and "sanctification" in the Pauline sense. All these benefits flow from Christ's sacrifice, *viewed in the light of the spirit through which it was offered*. We are now in a position to answer a question hinted at in one of the early papers of this series; *viz.* "Does the system of thought in this epistle provide for the union of the two kinds of sanctification? or do they stand side by side, external to each other? Are religious and ethical interests reconciled by a principle inherent in the system?"<sup>1</sup> I answer confidently in the affirmative, and I point to the great utterance, "through the eternal spirit," as the key to the solution of the problem. That word not only demonstrates the immeasurable superiority of Christ's sacrifice to those offered by Levitical priests, but brings unity and harmony into Christian experience. Intelligent appreciation of the spirit by which Christ offered Himself inspires that full, joyful trust in God that gives peace to the guilty conscience. But its effect does not stop there. The same appreciation inevitably becomes a power of moral impulse. The mind of Christ flows into us through the various channels of

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* THE EXPOSITOR for February, 1899, p. 85, note.

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admiration, sympathy, gratitude, and becomes our mind, the law of God written on the heart. And the law within emancipates from the law without, purges the conscience from the baleful influence of "dead works," that we may serve the Father in heaven in the free yet devoted spirit of faith and love. To say that the author of our epistle understood all this, and here has it in view, is only to say that he was an enlightened Christian; that he walked in the broad daylight of the Christian faith, not in the dim morning twilight of Judæo-Christian compromise; that if not a Paulinist, he was at least not less sensible than Paul to what extent the world was indebted to Jesus Christ.

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