

CHAPTER II.

Definitions and Statement of the Issue.

THE standard which distinguishes between righteousness and sin is the preceptive will of a holy God. This legislative prerogative belongs to him by right of his moral perfections, omniscience and righteous ownership of us as our Maker, Preserver, and Redeemer. Our righteousness is our intelligent and hearty compliance with that will. Our sin is our conscious and spontaneous discrepancy therefrom. (1 John iii. 4: *ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία*, original.) The badness or evilness expressed in any sin (and usually increased by it) is the attribute or subjective quality of the sinning agent. "Potential guilt" is the ill-desert, or merit of punishment, attaching to the transgressor by reason of his sin. This concept is not identical with that judgment and sentiment of disapprobation which sin awakens in the conscience, though it springs immediately out of it. Where we judge that an agent has sinned, we also judge that he has made himself worthy of penalty; that his sin deserves suffering, and this is a necessary and universal part of the moral intuition whose rise he occasions in us. Such is potential guilt.

Actual guilt (*reatus*) is *obligatio ad poenam ex peccato*, the debt of penalty to law arising out of transgression. It is the penal enactment of the lawgiver which ascertains and fixes this guilt. Hence, under a lawgiver who was less than omniscient and all perfect, there might be sin, evil attribute and potential guilt, while yet the actual guilt was absent, because the penal statute defining it did not exist. It thus appears that while evilness or sinfulness is an attribute, actual guilt (*reatus*) is not an attribute but a relation. It is a personal relation between a sinning agent and the sovereign will which legislates the penal statute. Now, when the Scriptures and theology speak of penal imputation or substitution, it is this relation only which is transferred or counted over from the sinning person to his substitute. We do not dream of a similar transfer of personal acts, or of the personal attributes expressed in such acts.

Now let none exclaim that these are the mere subtleties of abstraction. They are the most practical distinctions. They are recognized, and must be recognized, in the civil and criminal laws of men as much as in the government of God. Readers must observe that in sacred Scripture the word "sin" is often used by metonymy where the concept intended is that of actual guilt. Thus a prophet exclaims (Jer. l. 20): "In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the iniquity of Israel

shall be sought for, and there shall be none." The exact meaning of the word "iniquity" here must be actual guilt, else we should make the prophet contradict himself utterly by first charging on Israel very great sins, and then declaring that no sins of theirs existed, which is, moreover, a statement impossible to be true of any of Adam's race. In a multitude of places, God's mercy is said to "remit sins" (*ἀφεσις*). But actual guilt is what is meant. For God's act of forgiveness only removes our actual guilt from us; not sinfulness, as is proved by our own subsequent, most hearty confessions of unworthiness and sinfulness whenever God really forgives us. Or let us add another instance, since this distinction is so vital and so much overlooked. A thief steals a horse of a neighboring benefactor, sells him beyond recovery, and loses the money at the gaming table. These acts of the thief give expression to much meanness or vileness of character. The market price of the horse was one hundred dollars. These acts have inflicted upon the good neighbor a pecuniary loss (*damnum*) of that amount. They have also laid the thief under the penal obligation of five years or more in the penitentiary, as fixed by statute law. The good man, learning that the thief and his family are still suffering destitution, exclaims: "Oh! I freely forgive the fellow." What he means is that he, at the prompting of charity, remits to the

thief his *damnum*, his lost hundred dollars, and suppresses the anger at first naturally and properly felt. The good man dreams of no such folly as that he can remove from the thief his attribute of vileness or release him from his legal debt of penal servitude; he knows he has neither the power nor the right. The distinction between potential and actual guilt is found, perfectly real and solid, in numerous secular cases; as where the cunning manipulators of business corporations so juggle with the property of creditors and fellow-stockholders as to inflict on them what is mere theft in the sight of God. But the sapient American legislatures, while recklessly creating such corporations, have forgotten to enact any statutes fixing the legal penalties for these jugglers. Hence these men go unwhipped of justice, although the judges of the courts may be thoroughly alert and righteous. Abundant potential guilt is there, but for want of statute law the debt of actual guilt does not exist.

The distinction between sinfulness as an attribute and as a penal obligation often receives more practical concrete application. Here is a treasurer who has given an official bond upon which a friend goes security. The treasurer commits the felony of embezzlement, and by flight escapes the clutches of the law. Thereupon the Commonwealth forces the security to pay the official bond;

that is to say, it exacts from him the legal obligation which is made his by imputation. And this exaction is, to the good man, a heavy penalty, a mulct, inflicting, perhaps, much suffering on him and his family. Does anybody dream that a shadow of the embezzler's meanness or sinfulness is transferred to, or infused into this generous friend, who suffers for another's crime? Not at all. All honor the unfortunate man for the generous friendly help which prompted him to go security, and for the honesty with which he makes good society's loss. Yet the Commonwealth acts with perfect justice in exacting the money from him. Here is the clearest distinction between actual guilt and sinfulness; nobody is so stupid as to pretend not to see it. Let the vital proposition be repeated, that, in the penal substitution of Christ, it is the actual guilt of sinners as above defined, and nothing else, which is transferred from them to him. And the whole question between us and the objectors is this: *May the sovereign Judge righteously provide for such a substitution, when the free consent of the substitute is given, and all the other conditions are provided by God for good results?* This issue is cardinal. As the church of all ages has understood the Scriptures, the whole plan of gospel redemption rests upon this substitution of Christ as its corner-stone. He who overthrows the corner-stone overthrows

the building. The system which he rears without this foundation may be named Christianity by him, but it will be another building, his own handiwork, not that of God—another gospel. This is proved by the history of doctrinal discussions. There is scarcely a leading head of divinity which is not changed or perverted as a logical consequence of this denial of penal substitution consistently carried out. It must change the description of God's attributes, excluding his distributive justice from the catalogue of his essential perfections, and putting in place of it the morals of expediency. It must vitiate our view of God's immutability. It must change and lower our conception of sin as an infinite evil, because it assails the impartial justice, holiness and unchangeableness of an infinite God. He who pronounces the imputation of guilt to Christ morally impossible for God, has, of course, rejected the doctrine of original sin; for that contains, as Paul teaches in Romans v., a parallel imputation. Next, the church doctrine of justification must be corrupted, for that is founded upon the counterpart imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers personally unworthy, which is just as bad as the other, if the objectors are right. The true office of faith must next be perverted; for the imputed ground of justification having been denied, there is nothing else to thrust into its place except the believer's faith.

The doctrine of adoption must be changed ; there is nothing left to purchase it except the believer's personal obedience after the merit of Christ's preceptive righteousness is discarded. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints becomes an ex-crescence and an absurdity in this creed ; for the title and *status* of the Christian as a child of grace cannot be more stable than its foundation, and the only foundation left is the believer's own obedience, which is incomplete and mutable. The whole doctrine of Satan and his angels, with their fall and eternal condemnation, must be rejected, since the theory asserts that the only penalties which the God of love can inflict must be remedial, whereas everlasting torments are not a remedy, but a destruction. Of course, this creed should reject eternal punishments of reprobate men, and teach universalism for the same reason. A proper belief in God's providence becomes impossible, because, if there was a special providence in Christ's sufferings and death, we should have God punishing Christ for other men's sins. How much now remains of the church theology? Did the limits of this treatise permit, the teachings of one or another of the objectors could be quoted, asserting each of these heretical inferences, and that logically from their denial of penal substitution. All of these errors are not charged upon all our opponents, for many of them are preserved from a

part by a fortunate logical inconsistency. These objections against imputation are mostly of Socinian origin; and consistently followed they will lead back to Socinianism.

The doctrine of substitution is taught by the Scriptures so expressly in both Testaments, by types and didactic propositions, and with such iteration, that it cannot be eliminated from the Bible system without a license of exegesis destructive of all faith in the inspiration of the Scriptures. Infidelity lies as the next remove from these disingenuous misconstructions. Let these three propositions be set side by side: Jesus was perfectly innocent; guilt cannot be imputed from a sinner to his substitute on any condition whatsoever; Jesus suffered the bitterest sorrows and death. Then there is but one way to reconcile them with each other; it must be asserted that God's providence does not direct what befalls even the best men, and that the evils of this life and the death of the body are not penal evils, but mere natural consequences, like the fading of the flower and the fall of the leaf. Such is theological result. Obviously, it assails God's word with the most express and insolent contradiction possible. It gives us practical atheism, that, namely, of the Greek Epicureans, for the god who exercises no providence over us in our most urgent circumstances is practically no god to us. And after an utter rejection

of Scripture, it blots out every premise by which natural theology proves that there is a moral government over mankind. Is there any deeper abyss of infidelity? Yet not only is the Socinian literature, but the pretended "advanced Christian thought" of our day, loaded with denials of the moral possibility of penal substitution, confidently uttered by men who do not foresee whither they are travelling. A generation ago Jenkyn, Beaman, and Barnes excluded this vital truth from their treatises on the atonement. So the New Haven theology had done, and its parent, Dr. Samuel Taylor, of Yale; so does Dr. Joseph Parker, the great light of the English Independents; so does Dr. Burney, lately the theological teacher of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, in a recent work, which, as we hear, his General Assembly fail to disclaim; so teach multitudes of pulpit leaders in nearly all the Protestant denominations. The customary tone of secular literature is marked by a fiery and disdainful rejection of the whole concept. And these writers think that nobody can believe it except stupid old fogies besotted in their bigotry. If Presbyterian pastors will probe the opinions of their own people they will find numbers of communicants who regard themselves as more cultivated and intellectual, discarding penal imputation as an insult to their moral intuitions. These facts show that an exhaustive and triumphant refutation

of objections and a final establishment of this vital doctrine are among the urgent needs of the day. If the innovators would but study the masterly demonstrations of the church theologians, of an Anselm, a Calvin, a Turretin, a Witsius, a Hill, a Hodge, a Shedd, they would not need further discussion. But the flippant and superficial spirit of our age disdains a thorough study of these masters; they are flippid aside by the words "antiquated," "Calvinistic."