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JESUS CHRIST THE PROPITIATION FOR THE WHOLE WORLD.

“And He is the propitiation for our sins ; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.”—1 JOHN ii. 2.

As a means of comforting Christians distressed by their continued lapses into sin, John, in the opening words of the second chapter of his first epistle, is led to assure them that “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, a Righteous One” ; and by way of showing how prevailing His advocacy is, to add, “And He is Himself a propitiation for our sins.” There he might well have stopped. But, without obvious necessity for his immediate purpose, he adds this great declaration : “And not for ours only, but also for the whole world.” That by these words the propitiation wrought by Christ, of which we have continual need, and on which we continually draw in our need, is exalted by ascribing to it, in some sense, a universal efficacy, is clear enough. But the commentators, first and last, have not found it easy to make plain to themselves the precise nature of the universalism assigned therein to our Lord’s propitiatory sacrifice.

Readers of old John Cotton’s practical notes on First John, for example, will not fail to observe that he moves with a certain embarrassment in his exposition of this universalism. He has a number of things, in themselves of value, to say about it ; but he appears to find most satisfaction in the suggestion that although Christ by His expiatory death has bought for His people some things—

and these the most important things—which He has not bought for all men, yet there are some most desirable things also which He has bought for all men. This, however, is certainly not what John says. It admits of no doubt that John means to say that the Christians whom he was addressing, and with whom he identifies himself—they and he alike—enjoy no privilege with reference to the propitiation of Christ, which is not enjoyed by them in common with “the whole world.” They—and he with them—are not to be disheartened by their sins, he says, because these sins have been expiated by the blood of Christ; by which have been expiated indeed, not their sins only but also those of “the whole world.” The “whole world” is not made in some general and subsidiary sense a beneficiary of Christ’s atoning death, but in this specific and highest sense—the expiation of its sins. Its sins have been as really and fully expiated as those of the Christians John was addressing, and as his own.

The most “modern” of modern expositors are as much at sea in the face of the universalism of this assertion as any of the older and presumably less instructed ones could be. Thus Otto Baumgarten simply declines to attempt its exposition. We do not know what John means, he says; we lack the necessary information to enable us to understand him. It may sound very fine to say that John teaches here that no shadow is cast on God’s holiness by the exhibition of partiality on His part for individuals; that he rebukes those who, in egotistic and sentimental religiosity, or in selfish anxiety for their own salvation, would draw apart from their fellows. But difficulties remain. Experience scarcely encourages us to think that all without exception are sharers in Christ’s salvation; it rather bears out our Lord’s declaration that the gate is narrow and the way straitened that leads to life and few there be that find it.

And John! Is not the whole world to him a *massa corrupta*—a “darkness” which does not “apprehend” “the light”? How we can harmonise the three passages—John i. 29, which speaks of taking away the sin of the world; John iii. 16, “God so loved the world”; and this, declaring that Christ has made propitiation for the sins of the world—with John’s sharp dualism of Light and Darkness, does not appear. Perhaps John is only repeating with thoughtless neglect of their inconsequence the elements of Paul’s doctrine of propitiation. Perhaps, mystical-speculative thinker that he is, he means to suggest that in Jesus’ purpose or general feeling His redemption was for the whole sinful world, but only those have found in Him an actual Redeemer or Intercessor to whom He has given power to become Children of the Light. Perhaps it is, on the other hand, the missionary instinct of the Church, which declares here that no limits are to be set to the spread of salvation over the whole world—in contrast to the Gnostic confinement of it to certain gifted individuals. We can form many conjectures; we can reach no assurance.

The search for John’s meaning naturally begins with an attempt to ascertain what he intends by “the world.” He sets it in contrast with an “our” by which primarily his readers and himself are designated: “And He is Himself a propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world.” John’s readers apparently are immediately certain Christian communities in Asia Minor; and it is possible to confine the “our” strictly to them. In that case it is not impossible to interpret “the whole world,” which is brought into contrast with the Christians specifically of Asia Minor, as referring to the whole body of Christians extended throughout the world. A certain measure of support for such an interpretation may be derived from such a passage as Colossians i. 6, where “the word of the

truth of the Gospel ” is spoken of as “in all the world,” or as Colossians i. 23, where the Gospel is said to have been “preached in all creation under heaven.” In these passages the world-wide Gospel seems to be contrasted with the heresies which were troubling the Colossian Christians and which are thus branded as a merely local phenomenon. In something of the same way, the world-wide extension of the people of God may be thought to be brought into contrast by John with the local churches he is addressing ; and his purpose may be supposed to be to remind these local churches that they have no monopoly of the Gospel. The propitiatory efficiency of Christ’s blood is not confined to the sins of the Asian Christians, but is broad enough to meet the needs of all in like case with them throughout the whole world. Christ is no local Saviour, and all, everywhere, who confess their sins will find Him their righteous advocate, whose expiatory blood cleanses them from every sin. On this interpretation we are brought to much the same point of view as that of Augustine and Bede, of Calvin and Beza, who understand by “the whole world” “the churches of the elect dispersed through the whole world” ; and by the declaration that Jesus Christ is “a propitiation for the whole world,” that in His blood all the sins of all believers throughout the world are expiated.

When the assumptions on which this view of the passage is founded are scrutinised, however, they cannot be said particularly to commend themselves. John is certainly addressing a specific body of readers, and no doubt has them quite distinctively in mind when he speaks to them in the tender words, “My little children, I am writing this to you, that ye sin not.” . . . But the affirmations he makes do not seem to be affirmations applicable only to them, or to be intended to be understood as spoken only of them. This is already apparent from his identifying himself with

them in these affirmations. “*We* have an Advocate,” he says; “He is a propitiation for *our* sins, and not for *ours* only. . . .” If it is not impossible that he means only “you and I,” “for your and my,” with the strictest confinement of the “you” and “your” to those he was immediately addressing, it is nevertheless very unlikely that this is the case. He appears, on the contrary, to be reminding them of universal Christian privileges, in which they and he shared precisely for the reason that they were universally Christian. In that case the “we” and “our” refer to the whole Christian community—“we Christians” have “our, namely Christians’” sins; and “the whole world” is brought in some way into contrast with the Christian body as a whole. The strength of the assertion of universality in the contrasted phrase—“but also for *the whole* world”—falls in with this appearance. Why should the Apostle with such emphasis—why should he at all—assure his readers that the privileges they enjoyed as Christians—in common with him because they were both Christians—were also enjoyed by all other Christians,—by all other Christians throughout the whole world? Would it not be a matter of course, scarcely calling for such explicit assertion, that other Christians like themselves enjoyed the benefits of the expiatory death of their Lord? That was precisely what it was to be a Christian.

It is not surprising accordingly that the greater number of the commentators agree that the “we” of our passage is the whole body of believers, with which “the whole world” is set in contrast. That carries with it, of course, that in some sense our Lord is declared to have made propitiation not only for the sins of believers, thought of by John as actually such, but also for mankind at large. If we do not attempt the impossible feat of emptying the conception of “propitiation” of its content, this means that in some

sense what is called a "universal atonement" is taught in this passage. The expiatory efficiency of Christ's blood extends to the entire race of mankind. It may seem, then, the simplest thing just to recognise that John here represents Christ as by His atoning death expiating all the sins of all mankind—all of them without exception. This is the line of exposition which is taken, for instance, by Bernhard Weiss. "Precisely this passage shows plainly," he writes, "that the whole body of the world's sin is covered in the sight of God, that is to say expiated, by the death of Christ."

That this method of expounding the passage is not so simple, however, as it might at first sight appear, is already made clear enough by the remainder of the sentence in which Weiss gives expression to it. It runs: "What brings unbelievers to death is no longer their sin (expiated in the death of Christ), but their rejection of the divinely appointed mediator of salvation." From this it appears that the expiation of the sins of the world does not save the world. There still remain those who perish: and those who perish, as John contemplated them looking out from the bosom of the little flock of the Church, constituted the immensely greater part of mankind spread out to his view, in one word just "the world" of which he is in the act of declaring that its sins are expiated in the blood of Christ. John speaks of this expiation as a great benefit brought to the world by Christ, or, to put it in its true light, as *the* great benefit, in comparison with which no other benefit deserves consideration. Yet it would puzzle us to point out of what benefit it is to the world. The world, to all appearance, remains precisely as it was before. It is very clear that the world was not conceived by John as a redeemed world. We are not to love it, nor the things in it. We are rather to renounce it, as an inimical power. Nay, John

declares roundly that the whole world—this whole world which we are invited to think of as having had all its sins expiated by the blood of Christ—“lieth in the evil one.” It is difficult to understand how a world all whose sins have been, and are continually as they emerge being—for that is the force of the representation—washed away in the blood of Christ, can still be lying in the evil one; that is to say, as A. Plummer expounds this declaration, still “remains in the power” of the evil one, “has not passed over, as Christians have done, out of death into life; but abides in the evil one, who is its ruler, as the Christian abides in Christ.” What we are asked to believe is nothing less than that the John who places the world and Christian in directly contrary relations to Christ, nevertheless in our present passage places them in precisely the same relation to Christ. Nor is it easy to understand what can be meant by saying that men, all whose sins, as they occasionally emerge (“and He *is*,” not *was*, “a propitiation”) are covered from the sight of God by the death of Christ, nevertheless perish; and that because of rejection of the divinely appointed mediator of salvation. Is not the rejection of Jesus as our propitiation a sin? And if it is a sin, is it not like other sins, covered by the death of Christ? If this great sin is excepted from the expiatory efficacy of Christ’s blood, why did not John tell us so, instead of declaring without qualification that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world? And surely it would be very odd if the sin of rejection of the Redeemer were the only condemning sin, in a world the vast majority of the dwellers in which have never heard of this Redeemer, and nevertheless perish. On what ground do they perish, all their sins having been expiated?

The expedient made use of by many commentators in their endeavour to escape from this maze of contradictions

is to distinguish between Christ as our "Advocate" and Christ as our "Propitiation," and to connect actual salvation with Him only in the former function. Thus Richard Rothe tells us that "the propitiation in Christ concerns the whole world," but "only those in Christ have an Advocate in Christ," with the intimation that it is Christ's Advocacy which "makes the efficacy of His propitiation effective before God." In this view the propitiation is conceived as merely laying a basis for actual forgiveness of sins, and is spoken of therefore rather as "sufficient" than efficacious—becoming efficacious only through the act of faith on the part of the believer by which he secures Christ as his Advocate. This is the view presented by B. F. Westcott also, according to whom Christ is advocate exclusively for Christians, while He is a propitiation for the whole world. His propitiatory death on earth was for all men; His advocacy in heaven is for those only who believe in Him. Here, there is a universal atonement taught, with a limited application, contingent on actual faith: "the efficacy of His work for the individual depends upon fellowship with Him."

It is obvious that such a view can be held only at the cost of emptying the conception of propitiation of its properly expiatory content, and shifting the really saving operation of Christ from His "atoning" death on earth to His "intercession" in heaven. Westcott carries this whole programme fully out, and by a special doctrine of "sacrifice," of "blood" and its efficacy, and of "the heavenly High Priesthood of Christ" systematises this point of view into a definite scheme of doctrine. No support is given this elaborate construction by John; and our present passage is enough to shatter the foundation on which it is built, in common with many other constructions sharing with it the general notion that the atonement is

to be conceived as universal while its application is particular, and that we may therefore speak of the sins of the whole world as expiated while believers only enjoy the benefits of this expiation. The "advocacy" of our Lord is indeed based here on His propitiation. But it is based on it not as if it bore merely an accidental relation to it, and might or might not, at will, follow on it; but as its natural and indeed necessary issue. John introduces the declaration that Christ is—not "was," the propitiation is as continuous in its effect as the advocacy—our propitiation, in order to support his reference of sinning Christians to Christ as their Advocate with the Father, and to give them confidence in the efficacy of His advocacy. The efficacy of the advocacy rests on that of the propitiation, not the efficacy of the propitiation on that of the advocacy. It was in the propitiatory death of Christ that John finds Christ's saving work: the advocacy is only its continuation—its unceasing presentation in heaven. The propitiation accordingly not merely lays a foundation for a saving operation, to follow or not follow as circumstances may determine. It itself saves. And this saving work is common to Christians and "the whole world." By it the sins of the one as of the other are expiated, that is to say, as Weiss wishes to express it in Old Testament forms of speech, are "covered in the sight of God." They no longer exist for God—and are not they blessed whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered, to whom the Lord will not reckon sin? It is idle to talk of expounding this passage until we are ready to recognise that according to its express assertion the "whole world" is saved. Its fundamental assumption is that all those for whose sins He is—"is," not "was"—the propitiation have in Him an Advocate with the Father, prevailingly presenting His "righteousness" to the Father and thereby securing their salvation.

This is, of course, universalism. And it is in determining the precise nature of the universalism that it is, that we arrive at last at John's real meaning. In declaring that Jesus Christ is a propitiation for the whole world, John certainly does not mean to assert that Christ has made expiation for all the sins of every individual man who has come or will come into being, from the beginning of the race in Adam to its end at the last day. Baumgarten-Crusius seems to stand almost alone in expressly emphasising the protensive aspect of the "world"; and he does it in order to avoid admitting that John means to present Christ as the Saviour of the whole world extensively considered. John means only, he says, that Christ is a Saviour with abiding power for the whole human era; all through the ages. He is mighty to save, though He saves only His own. It is much more common silently to assume that by "the whole world" John has in mind the whole race of mankind throughout the entire range of its existence in time: few have the hardihood openly to assert it. It is ordinarily taken for granted (Huther is one of the few who give it explicit expression) that "John was thinking directly of the 'world' as it existed in his time." Huther indeed adds the words: "without however limiting the idea to it," and thus suggests that John was thinking of the "world" protensively as well as extensively, without explicitly saying so. Clearly in any event it would be impossible to attribute to John teaching to the effect that Christ's expiatory work concerned only those who happened to be living in His own—or in John's—generation. This would yield a conception of the range of the propitiatory efficacy of our Lord's death which can be looked upon only as grotesque. Yet there is nothing in John's language to justify the attribution to him of a protensive conception of "the whole world" in the sense of the universalists. It seems quite clear that, by "the

whole world," he means primarily the world extensively conceived. It is equally clear, however, that he means neither to confine the efficacy of Christ's blood to his own generation, nor to maintain that the entirety of contemporary humanity was saved. He knew of those not of his own time who were saved; he knew of children of the devil in his own day. There is a protensive element in his conception of the world. It is however of its protension in the future rather than in the past that he is thinking. He sees the world not only lying on every side of him in space, but very especially as stretching out before him in time. The contrast between it and the little flock of Christians includes thus a contrast of times.

The interpretation of our passage has suffered seriously from a mechanical treatment of its language. We must permit to John the flexibility customary among men in the handling of human speech. When he speaks of Christ as a propitiation "for the whole world," we cannot either confine his language rigidly to the world of his own day, or expand it with equal rigidity to the extremest limit of the possible connotation of the phrase. He is certainly intending to present Christ as a world-wide Saviour by whom nothing less than the world is saved; but it does not follow that he means to affirm that therefore no single man of all who ever live in the world is omitted. He is obviously thinking in the terms of the great phrase he is himself a little later to use, when he declares that the Father has sent the Son "as Saviour of the world." To him Jesus Christ is very expressly the Saviour of the whole world: He had come into the world to save not individuals merely, out of the world, but the world itself. It belongs therefore distinctly to His mission that He should take away the sin of the world. It is this great conception which John is reflecting in the phrase, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and

not for ours only but for the whole world." This must not be diluted into the notion that He came to offer salvation to the world, or to do His part toward the salvation of the world, or to lay such a basis for salvation that it is the world's fault if it is not saved. John's thinking does not run on such lines ; and what he actually says is something very different, namely that Jesus Christ is a propitiation for the whole world, that He has expiated the whole world's sins. He came into the world because of love of the world, in order that He might save the world, and He actually saves the world. Where the expositors have gone astray is in not perceiving that this salvation of the world was not conceived by John—any more than the salvation of the individual—as accomplishing itself all at once. Jesus came to save the world, and the world will through Him be saved ; at the end of the day He will have a saved world to present to His Father. John's mind is running forward to the completion of His saving work ; and he is speaking of his Lord from the point of view of this completed work. From that point of view He is the Saviour of the world.

Conceptions like those embodied in the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven lay at the back of John's mind. He perfectly understood that the Church as it was phenomenally present to his observation was but "a little flock." He as perfectly understood that it was after a while to cover the whole world. And therefore he proclaims Jesus the Saviour of the world and declares Him a propitiation for the whole world. He is a universalist ; he teaches the salvation of the whole world. But he is not an "each and every" universalist : he is an "eschatological" universalist. He teaches the salvation of the world through a process ; it may be—it has proved to be—a long process ; but it is a process which shall reach its goal. It is not then "our" sins only which Jesus has expiated—the sins of the "little

flock," now living within the range almost of John's physical vision. He has expiated also the sins of "the whole world"; and at the end, therefore, we shall see nothing less than a world saved by Him. The contrast between the "our" and "the world" in John's mind, therefore, is at bottom the contrast between the smallness of the beginnings and the greatness of the end of the Christian development. And what his declaration is, at its core, is thus only another of those numerous—prophecies, shall we say? or assertions?—which meet us throughout the Apostolic teaching, of the ultimate conquest of the world by Christ. Christ, he tells his "little flock," is the "propitiation for our sins"; in Him "we" have found a full salvation. But he is not willing to stop there. His glad eyes look out on a saved world. "And not for ours only," he adds, "but also for the whole world." We are a "little flock" now: to-morrow we shall be the world. We are but the beginnings: the salvation of the world is the end. And it is not this only, but that, that Christ has purchased with His precious blood. The light that is perceptible now only within the narrow limits of the "little flock" has in it a potency of illumination which no bounds can confine: it, "the real light," is "already shining"—and before it John sees "the darkness" already "passing away." It is not merely a world-wide Gospel with which he knows himself entrusted: it is a world-wide salvation which he is called to proclaim. For Jesus Christ is the Saviour not of a little flock merely, but of the world itself: and the end to which all things are working together is nothing other than a saved world. At the end of the day there will stand out in the sight of all a whole world, for the sins of which Christ's blood has made effective expiation, and for which He stands as Advocate before the Father.

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD.