The Atonement, Discourses and treatises

Park Edwards Amasa
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A *(v)
THE RISE

OF THE

EDWARDEAN THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT:

AN

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY,

BY

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(vii)
INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

There is a theory, often designated "the Edwardean theory" of the Atonement. It has various other and equally indefinite names. It is called the New theory, the New England theory, the New School theory, the Hopkinsian theory, the Governmental theory, the Consistent theory, &c. It is called "Edwardean," partly from the fact that certain germs of it are found in the writings of the older Edwards, still more in the writings of his bosom friend, Hopkins, but chiefly from the fact that its more prominent advocates have been the so-called "successors of Edwards," and among them the more noted, perhaps, is his son, Dr. Jonathan Edwards. The defenders of this theory make no claim to have advanced any fundamental truths not previously advocated by evangelical divines; but they may be justly regarded as having reduced old truths to a new system,—a system more consistent than had been previously drawn out; and also as having expressed the truths of this system in a distinctive, and in an unusually perspicuous style. They never counted themselves to have attained absolute perfection of doctrinal belief or statement, but they have probably come nearer to the perfect standard than have any other class of uninspired men. Their doctrine of the atonement is essentially the same with that of the elder Calvinists, but their theory of the atonement is more harmonious with itself, and with other parts of the evangelical faith; and their mode of expressing this theory is more precise, unequivocal, scientific. In the substance they are Calvinistic; in the form, they are Edwardean; hence they have
been called Edwardean Calvinists. They are not in entire agreement among themselves; President Dwight harmonizes not altogether with Dr. Samuel Spring; not one of them is responsible for all the words of any other; indeed, it may be questioned whether any Edwardean is perfectly reconcilable with himself in every one of his expressions. Entire self-consistency, on so complicated a theme as the atonement, is a jewel too precious to be found very often. Still the Edwardean divines have approximated, more nearly than other independent thinkers, to a system which is harmonious with itself and with the inspired word. They coincide in the main principles of a theory which may be expressed in the following propositions:

First, our Lord suffered pains which were substituted for the penalty of the law, and may be called punishment in the more general sense of that word, but were not, strictly and literally, the penalty which the law had threatened.

Secondly, the sufferings of our Lord satisfied the general justice of God, but did not satisfy his distributive justice.

Thirdly, the humiliation, pains, and death of our Redeemer were equivalent in meaning to the punishment threatened in the moral law, and thus they satisfied Him who is determined to maintain the honor of this law, but they did not satisfy the demands of the law itself for our punishment.

Fourthly, the active obedience, viewed as the holiness, of Christ was honorable to the law, but was not a work of supererogation, performed by our Substitute, and then transferred and imputed to us, so as to satisfy the requisitions of the law for our own active obedience.

The last three statements are sometimes comprehended in the more general proposition, that the atonement was equal, in the meaning and the spirit of it, to the payment of our debts, but it was not literally the payment of either our debt of obedience or our debt of punishment, or any other debt which we owed to law or distributive justice. Therefore,

Fifthly, the law and the distributive justice of God, although honored by the life and death of Christ, will yet eternally demand the punishment of every one who has sinned.

Sixthly, the atonement rendered it consistent and desirable for God to