

A Necessary Suffering?: John McLeod Campbell and the Passion of Christ

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Introduction

In 1856, John McLeod Campbell published his magnum opus, *The Nature of the Atonement*. The book offered a highly distinctive treatment of the doctrine of the atonement, and has proven to be one of the most influential in the history of the Reformed church, particularly in Scotland. The central tenets of his theory – the universal scope of the atonement and the importance of the assurance of faith – are now so broadly accepted that it is strange to think of them as ever having been considered dangerous and even heretical, as they clearly were at the time of his deposition from the ordained ministry of the Church of Scotland in May 1831. Nevertheless, another aspect of McLeod Campbell's theory – his treatment of the role of the suffering of Jesus Christ in the atonement – remains a subject of greater theological contention.

This paper considers the atonement in the theology of John McLeod Campbell with particular emphasis on this matter of the role of the suffering of Christ. It begins by offering a brief outline of his doctrine of the atonement, before moving to consider in detail the nature and purpose of the sufferings of Christ within it. The paper proceeds in a final section to consider potential weaknesses of McLeod Campbell's theory in this connection under three headings: the purpose of the sufferings of Christ, the cause of the cry of dereliction, and the logical ordering of the atonement.

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The Atonement in the Theology of John McLeod Campbell

In his work on the atonement, John McLeod Campbell determines to let the subject matter speak for itself: "... it is in the way of studying the atonement by its own light, and of meditation on what it is revealed



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to have been, that I propose to proceed in seeking positive conclusions as to its nature, its explatory virtue, and its adequacy to all the ends contemplated."¹

Out of this seeking, influenced by the experience of his own parish ministry, there emerges a theory that differs considerably from the penal substitution theory laid down by the Westminster Confession of Faith and accepted by the majority of the clergy of his day.

On the one hand, there remain certain continuities between the two theories: in both cases, God reveals not only "the evil of our condition as sinners" and "the measure of our own capacity of good", but also "the way in which the desire which arose in God, as the Father of spirits, to bridge over that gulf, has been accomplished" (37). There is similarly little room for disagreement when McLeod Campbell writes that "the essence and substance of the atonement" is "[T]he will of God which the Son of God came to do and did ... being ... the offering of the body of Christ once for all" (111).

On the other hand, there have also been fundamental shifts in material and emphasis. First, for McLeod Campbell, it is the revelation that God is a loving Father which characterises the human relationship with God, for "[T]he foundation of every counsel is our filial relation to God" (185). While God remains both Lawgiver and Judge, the relationship of humanity to God is not, as in certain theories of penal substitution, "a legal standing, however high or perfect, but a filial standing, ... which is given to us in Christ" (76), and it is to this "personal relation to God as the Father of our spirits that the atonement belongs" (34). Second, and consequently, McLeod Campbell believes that the atonement was not limited to an elect, but was universal, "having reference to all mankind" (35).² A limited atonement would ultimately present the justice of God as necessary, but the love and mercy and grace of God as arbitrary (73-74), rendering the work of Christ to be "no longer a revelation of the name of God, no longer a work revealing that God is love" (73). It would offer no real basis for the believer's assurance of faith or personal appropriation of Christ



(72). By contrast, the atonement was seen by McLeod Campbell to reveal the love of God, to which God's holiness and wrath were subordinate, and to offer the faithful believer a genuine assurance that "the Father will be well pleased in us" (140).

The theory of the atonement of McLeod Campbell has two diachronic aspects: "the one retrospective, referring to the evil from which that grace brings deliverance; the other prospective, referring to the good which it bestows" (37). The retrospective aspect of the atonement pertains to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and comprises two distinguishable acts of Christ. On the humanward side, Christ deals with humanity on the part of God, bearing perfect witness to the excellence and trustworthiness of God and the unchanging character of God's love (114). On the Godward side, Christ mediates with God on the part of humanity, satisfying divine justice by dealing with the divine condemnation of and wrath against human sin (117). The prospective aspect of the atonement similarly comprises two directions of activity. First, Christ reveals the heart of the Father to humanity so that "we may see how sin ... has made us as orphans, and understand that the grace of God ... restores to our orphan spirits their Father and to the Father of spirits His lost children" (139). Second, Christ intercedes with the Father on behalf of humanity, pleading His own merits that they might receive remission of sins and eternal life (141).

The Sufferings of Christ in the Atonement Doctrine of John McLeod Campbell

With this overview of McLeod Campbell's doctrine of the atonement in place, it is now time to turn to the place of the *sufferings of Christ* within this theory. In writing against the penal substitution theory of the atonement, the key issue for John McLeod Campbell is stated thus: "... was it the pain as pain, and as a penal infliction, or was it the pain as a condition and form of holiness and love under the pressure of our sin and its consequent misery, that is presented to our faith as the essence of the sacrifice and its atoning virtue?" (107).



This section examines how McLeod Campbell construes the sufferings of Christ under the latter category, and proceeds under two headings: first, the nature of the sufferings of Christ; and second, the role of these sufferings in the atonement.

The Nature of the Sufferings of Christ

For McLeod Campbell, the intensity of the sufferings of Christ are "according to the perfection of the divine mind in the sufferer, and the capacity of suffering which is in suffering flesh" (120). This lifelong sacrifice results from Christ's witnessing in the flesh to the unchanging love of God, for in doing so, the pressure of the sin of humanity and the enmity of humanity to God are brought to bear on His spirit (114). In this suffering, He sees sin and sinners with the eyes of God and feels the resultant burden in the heart of God (107).

In the last days of the life of Christ, God lets the power of evil have its course (190), and subjects Christ "to the trial of the hour and power of darkness" (207). The consequent sufferings of Christ involve the "patient endurance of all the full and perfected development of the enmity which the faithfulness of the previous testimony for the Father's name had awakened" (183). This manifestation of a perfect sympathy with the Father's righteous condemnation of sin is ultimately perfected in His suffering and death (115-116), which are "necessary to the perfection of His witness-bearing for the Father" (116). Throughout, Christ manifests the power, the courage, and the forgiveness of love (198), in an unbroken continuity of relationship with God (192).

It is thus impossible, for McLeod Campbell, to regard the sufferings of Christ as penal, for there is a need to distinguish "... penal sufferings endured in meeting a demand of divine justice, and sufferings which are themselves the expression of the divine mind regarding our sins, and a manifestation by the Son of what our sins are to the Father's heart." (116)

It is this latter concept which is relevant here: the sufferings of Christ are not a form of punishment, but reveal the agony of the holiness and



love of God in the face of the evil of sin and the misery of sinners (107). McLeod Campbell thus distinguishes carefully between "an atoning sacrifice for sin and the enduring as a substitute the punishment due to sin" (107).

The Purpose of the Sufferings of Christ

McLeod Campbell writes that it is the divine mind in humanity, present in Christ, "which did suffer sufferings of a nature and virtue to purge our sins" (121). It was, for him, "the spiritual essence and nature of the sufferings of Christ, and not that these sufferings were penal, which constituted their value as entering into the atonement" (108). Thus far, however, the only reason for the crucifixion of Christ seems to be that of perfectly *revealing* the love of God.

There is here another dimension to the suffering of Christ, however, for McLeod Campbell notes that there is on the cross "a perfect confession of our sins ... a perfect Amen in humanity to the judgment of God on the sin of man" (118). Christ can offer a perfect confession on behalf of humanity, because He is "in our nature and our true brother" (120). In this act, the divine righteousness of Christ as human in His confession of human sin meets the divine righteousness of God in His condemnation of human sin, and the righteousness of the offended justice of God is satisfied (122). In his death, therefore, Christ honours both "the sentence of the law ... [and] the mind of God which that sentence expressed" (216). The sufferings of Christ on the cross are the perfecting of the work of redemption of God, not only as the perfecting of the witnessing of Christ to God, but also as the perfecting of the confession of humanity before God (158).

In his presentation of the atonement, McLeod Campbell frequently incorporates language and ideas that are also found in the theory of penal substitution, but transforms the way in which they are used. For example, he acknowledges that "Christ ... must be conceived of as dealing with the righteous wrath of God against sin" (117). However, while that wrath is present to and relevant for Christ, the atoning sacrifice that Christ offers in respect to it occurs in the form of a perfect



confession (118), rather than by way of imputation of human guilt and penal infliction for human sin (119-120). Furthermore, McLeod Campbell writes of Christ as "the propitiation for our sins as He is the way into the holiest" (154). His death as this propitiation is, however, seen as a moral and spiritual sacrifice for sin, a death neither as a substitute for humanity – "otherwise He alone would have died" – nor as a punishment – "for … death had to Him no sting" (217). Finally, McLeod Campbell can write that "[T]he Father's heart did demand an atoning sacrifice … [and] the shedding of blood in order to the remission of sins" (147). However, the underlying reason is spiritual and not penal: that "justice would be rendered to the fatherliness which had been sinned against" (147). It is no surprise that, confronted by this attempt to hold together the concepts and terminology of divine judgement and heavenly fatherhood, Eugene Bewkes refers to the "contortions of language occasioned."³

Ultimately, for McLeod Campbell, the true sufferings of Christ are "a moral and spiritual sacrifice, to which the [penal] sufferings were related only as involved in the fulness and perfection of the sacrifice" (191). This moral and spiritual atonement is "infinitely more adequate to the results accomplished, because infinitely more honouring to the law of God" (158).

A Critique of the Atonement Doctrine of John McLeod Campbell

The critique of McLeod Campbell's treatment of the doctrine of the atonement here will focus on three aspects: the purpose of the sufferings of Christ, the cry of desolation on the cross, and the logical ordering of the atonement.

The Purpose of the Sufferings of Christ

The fundamental question which arises in the context of McLeod Campbell's theory concerns the *purpose* served by the physical sufferings and the crucifixion of Christ. For it would appear that the physical sufferings are not intrinsically redemptive: rather they in some way offer a perfection of the already present manifestation of the





love of God for humanity and the already present perfect confession to God of the sin of humanity. However, this conceptualisation raises two problems. First, it suggests that the prior manifestation and confession of Christ were somehow less than perfect (116), and in need of some sort of 'development' through external circumstances. Second, if the sufferings of Christ are an expression of the fatherly divine mind regarding the sins of humanity (106), it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that the expression of the divine mind (or heart) in regard to sin is one which invokes pain and/or punishment. These problems remain even if one agrees that the spiritual and moral sufferings of Christ are greater and more important than any judicial or physical sufferings.

Thomas F. Torrance argues in McLeod Campbell's defence that the latter was engaged in a "recasting of the notion of the traditional notion of 'penal suffering';"4 that the latter "never hesitated to speak of the divine punishment of sin;"⁵ and that "[T]he penal element as infliction under the wrath of God ... was by no means rejected but discerned in a deeper dimension."6 McLeod Campbell certainly radically recasts the Calvinist doctrine which he inherited, and always acknowledges the link between sin and wrath (117), a link which, one must note, is inapplicable in direct form to Christ without some notion of the transference of sin. However, it would seem that the agony caused by the presence of sin in the face of holiness, which Christ experiences (107), is exactly what McLeod Campbell wishes to avoid describing in terms of punishment. For McLeod Campbell, Christ does indeed realise and confront the full wrath of God against sin, but not as the bearer or recipient of a punishment, for (in the absence of any imputation of creaturely sin) it cannot and does not come against Him personally. It seems therefore slightly misleading for Torrance to talk of the presence in McLeod Campbell's theory of the atonement of any direct penal dimension, let alone one of a "fuller and profounder kind."7 Trevor A. Hart is surely more correct to note simply that McLeod Campbell "reject[s] a penal interpretation of the Cross."8 To attempt to distinguish between a penal element which is here present and a concept of punishment which is here absent, as Torrance appears to do in a manner opposed to McLeod Campbell's own work,9 seems



to depend on rather arbitrary definitions of 'penal' and 'punishment'. It is perhaps neither semantically accurate nor finally convincing.

McLeod Campbell is surely right to recognise the importance in the atonement of the *identity* of the One who suffers and His relation to those for whose sins He suffers (105). However, when confronted with the question of what divine purpose within that redemption it serves to impose sufferings on Christ, he simply argues that "it has appeared to the divine wisdom necessary to subject His [Christ's] love and trust towards the Father ... to the trial of the hour and power of darkness" (207). He is less forthcoming, however, on what purpose it serves in this trial to enjoin physical suffering to manifest perfectly something (the perfect love of God) that has been true since the beginning of time, when that suffering of itself has no atoning value. In his enduring insistence that the sufferings and death of Christ are necessary to satisfy the Law, while simultaneously maintaining the primacy of the love of the Father, McLeod Campbell ultimately risks the Law becoming divorced from the Father.¹⁰ It is as if, as Leanne van Dyk notes, "the atonement and Christ's sufferings refer to quite different realities."11 McLeod Campbell wants to retain the significance of the cross, yet when his theory is deconstructed, he appears to be at a loss to suggest what role the physical sufferings play in it.

McLeod Campbell's spiritualisation of the whole concept of the blood of Christ is further evidence of this thesis, relating it as he does to the purging of the believer's conscience and away from the actual physical sufferings of Christ. He argues explicitly for a strictly moral and spiritual relation between the sacrifice of Christ and the worship in which it permits believers to participate (144). In the cross of McLeod Campbell, human sin is explated by the perfect repentance and confession of Christ (118), and it is through the death of Christ in the perfection of this act that the power of death and the holder of that power – the devil – are destroyed (193). However, in contrast to the biblical witness,¹² the physical aspect of sin as an enslaving evil is perhaps afforded insufficient attention. This results in a dangerously noetic emphasis to the atonement, precisely because it is *not* the case that sin is taken up in the flesh of Christ, overcome, and destroyed. As



Thomas Hywel Hughes suggests, merely to see sin from the point of view of God seems not to address sin as a power in the flesh and in the soul.¹³

It seems difficult therefore to avoid the conclusion that for McLeod Campbell, the physical sufferings on the cross are evidence of nothing more than that Jesus of Nazareth had a bad day in Jerusalem and that sufficient enmity toward Him existed to effect his torture and crucifixion. Both these possibilities are empirically true, but over and above any exemplary status, neither of these possibilities would seem to have any atoning value: nor, in the theory of McLeod Campbell, would the physical sufferings of Christ. It is thus no surprise that van Dyk concludes that in searching for justification for the sufferings of Christ, McLeod Campbell ultimately resorts to the "secret mysteries of the divine counsel."¹⁴

The Cry of Desolation on the Cross

The focus on the unbroken testimony which Christ manifested to the Father throughout his suffering is evidence of a strong Trinitarian focus in McLeod Campbell's doctrine of the atonement. In considering the cry of desolation from the cross – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46) – McLeod Campbell therefore appeals heuristically to the remaining verses of the underlying Psalm 22. He asserts that they illustrate and confirm "the Sufferer's unbroken trust – the clearing up of God's faithfulness and truth in the whole transaction" (202). There is thus no suggestion that Christ "tasted death under the Father's wrath" (203). Instead, in order that sinners also might trust in the Father and be saved, Christ "perfects His glorifying of the Father's Name, by being seen trusting in that Name alone when brought into the extremest need of a sure hold on God" (206). However, this interpretation of the cry of dereliction raises two important questions.

The first is the exegetical question: how persuasive is McLeod Campbell's treatment of this verse? On the one hand, he has consistently referred to the strength of the bond between Father and Son: one sees



the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (36); the Son comes to do the Father's will (228); the Son shares the Father's grief over the sinfulness of humanity (120). It is clear how little McLeod Campbell would wish to separate Father and Son even on the cross, and how the risk of Nestorianism or tritheism in doing so would be a spectre on any theological horizon.¹⁵ On the other hand, to neglect the verse of despair and abandonment at the beginning of the psalm, in favour of prioritising the verses of consolation toward the end of the psalm, is a radical move. It fails adequately to perceive that, as George M. Tuttle observes, "[T]he cry does express a feeling of utter desolation, a sense of abandonment and an experience of defeat ... [which] is temporary but real."16 Moreover, as Hart recognises, it would seem possible to distinguish between an actual God-forsakenness and the incarnate Son's human experience of God-forsakenness.¹⁷ McLeod Campbell, with the best of intentions, appears to do less than justice to this paradigmatic example of the paradoxical and simultaneous presence and absence of God.

The second question concerns the pastoral validity of this exegesis: what comfort now can Christ offer the believer when God appears to the believer to be absent? If Christ never experienced in any way either the feeling of the profound absence of God or the feeling of sinful inadequacy before God, it is difficult to reflect what comfort could be offered to the concerned believer who felt distant from God. In a theological sense, arguing from pastoral practice to scriptural exegesis is entirely the wrong way around. Yet in another sense, this is a particularly valid line of questioning for McLeod Campbell, given the prioritising of the experience of the Christian believer which precipitated his own initial theological awakenings in the parish ministry.

The Ordering of the Atonement

It has been noted already that McLeod Campbell was keen to assert the primacy of the character of God as a Father. However, his overwhelming desire to stress this aspect of the divine-human relationship leads him to the brink of self-contradiction. On the one



hand, he writes that if God provides the means of atonement, "then forgiveness must precede atonement; and the atonement must be the form of the manifestation of the forgiving love of God, not its cause" (45). This would seem to reduce the cross to a mere illustration for the benefit of humanity. On the other hand, he posits the "moral and spiritual impossibility of our returning to the Father of our spirits, except on such a path as this which Christ has opened for us through the rent veil of His flesh" (147). This seems on the contrary to imply that the atonement is a necessary precursor to forgiveness.

In attempting to make sense of McLeod Campbell at this point, it is useful to consider briefly the context of the first chapter, in which he argues that forgiveness must precede atonement. His purpose there is to assess the ends contemplated in the atonement, and to demonstrate the proactive and pre-existent ability and desire of God to bridge the gulf between human potential and human sinfulness. "The first demand," McLeod Campbell argues, "which the gospel makes upon us in relation to the atonement is, that we believe that there is forgiveness with God" (44). He defines forgiveness, however, as a "love to an enemy surviving his enmity ... which ... can act towards him for his good" (45). This might suggest therefore that rather than forgiveness itself being present prior to the atonement, there is a *potential* for forgiveness which exists in the love of God prior to the atonement. Even if this sympathetic reading were true, it is clear that McLeod Campbell leaves himself open to grave misunderstanding at this point. It is therefore no surprise to find that Gerrish comments on "a certain reprehensible obstinacy in Campbell's refusal to surrender unfamiliar language even when he saw that it misled."18

At stake here is the ordering and necessity of the divine plan: McLeod Campbell argues that the scriptures portray "the love of God as the cause, and the atonement as the effect" (46), and acknowledges that redemption has been "the divine purpose from the beginning" (23). However, by arguing that forgiveness *precedes* atonement, rather than that the *desire* to forgive precedes the atonement, he risks rendering the atonement itself superfluous. There would be little need for the event of the cross of Christ, after all, if forgiveness were already to



have taken place. It is true that McLeod Campbell acknowledges the need for the atonement to satisfy the divine wrath that righteously condemns sin (117). However, his desire to privilege a filial conception of the atonement in *opposition* to (rather than as a *complementary* aspect to) a legal conception leads him here to the brink of apparent inconsistency.

Conclusion

The theory of the atonement presented by John McLeod Campbell in *The Nature of the Atonement* has many strengths. Its corrective stand against the legalistic impulses of nineteenth-century Calvinism, its strong emphasis on the love of the Father and of the Son – for each other and for humanity as a whole, its evangelical desire for the full participation of the believer in the benefits of the atoning work of Christ: all these features are to be welcomed. As James C. Goodloe has observed, "Campbell effected a remarkable reworking of his Reformed heritage."¹⁹

However, this paper has attempted to offer some insight into the weaknesses of McLeod Campbell's theory apparent in his treatment of the passion of Christ. It has suggested that neither the sufferings of Christ nor the cry of dereliction from the Cross are sufficiently or adequately explained, and that the logical ordering at the heart of the theory might itself jeopardise its consistency. As John Macquarrie commented:

Is there, on Campbell's view of the atonement, any necessity for the death of Christ? I do not clearly see that there is. ... 'Light' is one of the most frequently recurring words in Campbell's writing, but whether he deals adequately with darkness and death is open to question.²⁰

None of this is to desire to return uncritically to the particular Calvinist doctrine of penal substitution that McLeod Campbell opposed: rather it is to recognise that there may actually remain a penal element in the atonement, which, while not the dominant feature is nonetheless



an important soteriological element in the divine plan of redemption. There must remain a degree both of mystery and of incompleteness in any theory of the atonement: perhaps, however, McLeod Campbell has a slight excess of both.

- ¹ John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, Second Edition, with a new introduction by James B. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1996), 108. Further references to this volume in this paper are given directly, in brackets after the relevant citation.
- ² While this theological difference from the contemporaneous view led to his demittal from the ministry of the Kirk, it was for McLeod Campbell in this text "no part of my immediate purpose to discuss" (35), and he explicitly chose *not* to enter the debate on the scriptural foundations of limited (or unlimited) atonement in his book (71).
- ³ Eugene Garrett Bewkes, *Legacy of a Christian Mind* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1937), 206.
- ⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, Scottish Theology From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 301.
- ⁵ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 302.
- ⁶ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 301-302 (where the line appears italicised).
- ⁷ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 308-309.
- ⁸ Trevor A. Hart, "Anselm of Canterbury and John McLeod Campbell: where opposites meet?" in *Evangelical Quarterly* 62.4 (1990), 332.
- ⁹ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 308-309. First, McLeod Campbell writes, as one example of many, "I have already urged the impossibility of regarding as *penal* the sorrows of holy love endured" (116). Second, McLeod Campbell equates the (to him, erroneous) concepts of Christ's "penal suffering" and God "inflicting a punishment" (107).
- ¹⁰ Daniel P. Thimell unwittingly acknowledges this problem when he writes that "while Christ dies in order to fulfil the righteous requirements of the law, God's primary concern is not that the



law be satisfied but that his fatherly heart be satisfied," in "The Theology of John McLeod Campbell," in *Christ in our Place*, eds. Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), 185. Is it then the fatherly heart of God which requires the death of Christ on the cross? Or are the righteous requirements of the Law external to the Father?

- ¹¹ Leanne van Dyk, *The Desire of Divine Love* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 103.
- ¹² The paradigmatic passage for this would probably be Romans 7.7-25.
- ¹³ Thomas Hywel Hughes, *The Atonement* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 145-146.
- ¹⁴ van Dyk, *Desire of Divine Love*, 108.
- ¹⁵ It is therefore all the more strange to read Michael Jinkins and Stephen Breck Reid argue that McLeod Campbell's theological intention is *in any way* that "we should hear this cry of dereliction as a genuine cry of Godforsakenness, in all its terror and radicality," in "John McLeod Campbell on Christ's Cry of Dereliction," in *EQ* 70:2 (1998), 142. McLeod Campbell himself writes that there is "no place even for that negative wrath … [which has] been set forth as a hiding of the Father's face" (203). If the Father does not hide His face, where then is the forsakenness?
- ¹⁶ George M. Tuttle, So Rich A Soil (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1986), 123.
- ¹⁷ Hart, "Anselm of Canterbury and John McLeod Campbell", 330-331 n.63.
- ¹⁸ B.A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 78.
- ¹⁹ James C. Goodloe, "John McLeod Campbell: Redeeming the Past by Reproducing the Atonement," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45.2 (1992), 208.
- ²⁰ John Macquarrie, "John McLeod Campbell 1800-72," in *Expository Times* 83 (1972), 268.

