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The Atonement in *The Light Princess*

Brian Roberts

After several centuries in which the substitutionary atonement was the prevailing view of the doctrine amongst Protestants, liberal theologians of the nineteenth century began to turn away from it. What chiefly came under attack from these theologians was the perceived immorality of a propitiation. Far from satisfying God's justice, the substitutionary atonement was, they felt, a grand demonstration of injustice. One man cannot be punished, they argued, in the place of another. For God to punish Christ, an innocent man, for sins that he himself did not commit was logically incoherent and immoral. Among the critics of this view of the atonement was George MacDonald. Speaking of the substitutionary atonement in his sermon "Justice," MacDonald says, "Most of us have been more or less trained in it, and not a few of us have thereby, thank God, learned what it is—an evil thing, to be cast out of intellect and heart" (*Unspoken Sermons* 236). The atonement, for MacDonald, was meant to inspire people to overcome their own sin, not to atone for it in their place. Christ's sacrifice, MacDonald says, was a "creative atonement, because it works the atonement in every heart" (*Unspoken Sermons* 234). Miho Yamaguchi, in her study of MacDonald's theory of the atonement, summarizes his view this way:

God and Jesus in one heart love His creatures infinitely so that they even took the suffering of the Cross to make sinful stubborn creatures see how much God loves them . . . The purpose of the Cross is, thus [for MacDonald], not to enable God to forgive us, but to enable us to know God's love, and then to love Him and love our fellow men. (30-38)

For MacDonald, then, the atonement is meant to both demonstrate love and to inspire love. This understanding of the doctrine shows up in *The Light Princess*, one of MacDonald's somewhat overlooked fairy tales. Several articles have been published about this work, but none have connected the central sacrifice in the story to MacDonald's liberal theology of the atonement.

The Light Princess is about a princess who has no gravity in both senses of the word. She is unable to stay on the ground and unable to fall in love, because her ceaselessly lighthearted temperament won't allow it. Whenever the princess is in water, however, her gravity is restored. As she

swims, her personality becomes more sedate and serious, and her body is able to stay on the ground. “The passion of her life,” we’re told, “was to get into the water, and she was always the better behaved and the more beautiful the more she had of it” (18). The court philosophers, who have been working on the problem of her lack of gravity, reason that if this water can temporarily restore her gravity, deeper water could restore it permanently. That is to say, if the princess could ever be made to cry, her gravity would be restored. But this proves quite difficult. The “most touching oracle of woe” is unable to move her to anything but laughter, and “an awful whipping” from her father fails to elicit tears (20-21). The narrative then switches to another character, “the son of a king, who lived a thousand miles” away and who sets out to find “the daughter of a queen” to marry (21). He finds the princess swimming and soon falls in love with her. They both swim together nightly, and the princess enjoys his company, but she is still unable to love him in return:

When the prince, who had really fallen in love when he fell in the lake, began to talk to her about love, she always turned her head towards him and laughed. After a while she began to look puzzled, as if she were trying to understand what he meant, but could not – revealing a notion that he meant something. (30)

Much to the dismay of the princess, the lake begins to drain, growing shallower day by day. This is due to the evil witch Makemnoit who can’t bear to see the young princess, whom she had previously cursed, so happy as she plays in it. The lake eventually is drained completely, leaving behind a plate of gold with these words, foreshadowing the theme of atonement: “Death alone from death can save. / Love is death, and so is brave – / Love can fill the deepest grave. / Love loves on beneath the wave” (35). The reverse side of the plate explains the necessity of a human sacrifice: “The body of a living man could alone staunch the flow. The man must give himself of his own will; and the lake must take his life as it filled” (35). Someone must willingly die to restore water to the lake that the princess loves. The prince decides to offer himself as the sacrifice, so that the lake will be restored and, with it, the princess’s joy.

The prince character is undoubtedly a Christ figure, come from the kingdom of his father to win the love of a princess who is unable to love him in return because of a curse. This is similar to Christ, who is often referred to in Scripture as “the bridegroom,” and the Church as the bride (Mark 2:20). Also, of course, is the similarity between Christ, who died for the church, and the prince who sacrifices himself for the princess. Christ “loved the

church,” said St. Paul, “and gave himself for it,” just as the prince loves the princess and gave himself for her (Ephesians 5:25). A few lines from the song that the prince sings as the water begins to rise around him echo the traditional view of Christ’s descent into hell: “Lady, keep the world’s delight; / Keep the waters in thy sight. / Love hath made me strong to go, / For thy sake, to realms below” (40). The prince’s last meal, which he asks for as the water rises around him, is reminiscent of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: “‘Give me a glass of wine and a biscuit . . .’ said the prince, very humbly” (41). Of course, the prince isn’t dying for the sins of the princess or in any sort of substitutionary way. Keeping with MacDonald’s view of the atonement, the prince’s sacrifice works chiefly as a demonstration of love, and this sacrifice is the means by which the princess finally begins to feel something. As she watches him drown, the princess’s hard heart is broken:

The water rose and rose. It touched his chin. It touched his lower lip. It touched between his lips. He shut them hard to keep it out. The princess began to feel strange. It touched his upper lip. He breathed through his nostrils. The princess looked wild. It covered his nostrils. Her eyes look scared, and shone strange in the moonlight. His head fell back; the water closed over it . . . The princess gave a shriek, and sprang into the lake. (42)

She drags him from the water, caring more for the prince than for her lake. The princess is said to love for the first time, and this, again, is very much in line with MacDonald’s view of the atonement. The prince’s sacrifice taught the princess how to love. After pulling the prince from the water, the princess takes him to the castle. When the prince revives, MacDonald puns on the word “sun,” subtly evoking the resurrection of the Son: “At last, when they had all but given it up, just as the sun rose, the prince opened his eyes” (44). The princess cries for the first time, and it is the prince’s sacrifice that helped to spur on this moment of spiritual growth.

MacDonald, following many liberal Christians of the nineteenth century, rejected the substitutionary view of the atonement, and preferred to think of the atonement as an act whereby God demonstrated his love, and an act which enables the sinner to love to a greater degree in return. This is shown in *The Light Princess* by the prince’s sacrifice, which both shows his great love for the princess and enables her to finally begin to love.

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