

¹⁵ Kavanagh, Aidan, *On Liturgical Theology*. (Collegeville: Pueblo, 1984), 175-76.

**JOHN MCLEOD CAMPBELL
AND THE THEOLOGY OF ABSOLUTION**

Frances M. Henderson

'A theology of the atonement should move one to worship and prayer!'

James B. Torrance

"A wrong conception of justification by faith cannot fail to introduce wrong conceptions of prayer and worship."

Graham Redding

The parable of the Prodigal Son is, among other things, a story about atonement – about the reconciliation between a Father and his estranged son. A first, quick reading suggests that this reconciliation comes about because the son, who is the cause of the rift, repents of that separation and returns home. Meeting his repentant son on the way, the Father is overjoyed and swift to forgive: and therein we have the character of God.

However, a second, less cursory reading might provoke the reader to reflect that the Prodigal's repentance is scarcely worthy of the name. The story relates how he decides to return home only when he hits rock bottom; he is sorry more for himself than for what he has done; and he returns with dragging, reluctant feet. He clearly regrets the consequences of his sin for himself; but does he understand the nature of his sin in the first place? Does he know, or care, how he has broken his Father's heart? Does such a reluctant return to the Father truly merit the name of 'repentance'?

This is the pastoral problem that John McLeod Campbell encountered in Rhu, and which – human nature being what it is – we continue to encounter in our churches today. On a Sunday, the congregation confesses corporately their sins. But we might well ask: have the individuals in the congregation *truly* repented? Have they really understood the gravity of their sin, and how they have grieved the Father?

In his ministry, McLeod Campbell observed two dominant approaches to