

The Doctrine of the Atonement^[1]

by

J. Gresham Machen

THE priestly work of Christ, or at least that part of it in which He offered Himself up as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, is commonly called the atonement, and the doctrine which sets it forth is commonly called the doctrine of the atonement. That doctrine is at the very heart of what is taught in the Word of God.

Before we present that doctrine, we ought to observe that the term by which it is ordinarily designated is not altogether free from objection.

When I say that the term ‘atonement’ is open to objection, I am not referring to the fact that it occurs only once in the King James Version of the New Testament, and is therefore, so far as New Testament usage is concerned, not a common Biblical term. A good many other terms which are rare in the Bible are nevertheless admirable terms when one comes to summarize Biblical teaching. As a matter of fact this term is rather common in the Old Testament (though it occurs only that once in the New Testament), but that fact would not be necessary to commend it if it were satisfactory in other ways. Even if it were not common in either Testament it still might be exactly the term for us to use to designate by one word what the Bible teaches in a number of words.

The real objection to it is of an entirely different kind. It is a twofold objection. The word *atonement* in the first place, is ambiguous, and in the second place, it is not broad enough.

The one place where the word occurs in the King James Version of the New Testament is Romans 5:11, where Paul says:

And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

Here the word is used to translate a Greek word meaning ‘reconciliation.’ This usage seems to be very close to the etymological meaning of the word, for it does seem to be true that the English word ‘atonement’ means ‘atonement.’ It is, therefore, according to its derivation, a natural word to

designate the state of reconciliation between two parties formerly at variance. In the Old Testament, on the other hand, where the word occurs in the King James Version not once, but forty or fifty times, it has a different meaning; it has the meaning of ‘propitiation.’ Thus we read in Leviticus 1:4, regarding a man who brings a bullock to be killed as a burnt offering:

And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.

So also the word occurs some eight times in the King James Version in the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus, where the provisions of the law are set forth regarding the great day of atonement. Take, for example, the following verses in that chapter:

And Aaron shall offer his bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and make an atonement for himself, and for his house (Lev. 16:6).

Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people, and bring his blood within the veil, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat:

And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins: and so shall he do for the tabernacle of the congregation, that remaineth among them in the midst of their uncleanness (Lev. 16:15f.).

In these passages the meaning of the word is clear. God has been offended because of the sins of the people or of individuals among His people. The priest kills the animal which is brought as a sacrifice. God is thereby propitiated, and those who have offended God are forgiven.

I am not now asking whether those Old Testament sacrifices brought forgiveness in themselves, or merely as prophecies of a greater sacrifice to come; I am not now considering the significant limitations which the Old Testament law attributes to their efficacy. We shall try to deal with those matters in some subsequent talk. All that I am here interested in is the use of the word ‘atonement’ in the English Bible. All that I am saying is that that word in the Old Testament clearly conveys the notion of something that is done to satisfy God in order that the sins of men may be forgiven and their

communion with God restored.

Somewhat akin to this Old Testament use of the word 'atonement' is the use of it in our everyday parlance where religion is not at all in view. Thus we often say that someone in his youth was guilty of a grievous fault but has fully 'atoned' for it or made full 'atonement' for it by a long and useful life. We mean by that that the person in question has — if we may use a colloquial phrase — 'made up for' his youthful indiscretion by his subsequent life of usefulness and rectitude. Mind you, I am not at all saying that a man can really 'make up for' or 'atone for' a youthful sin by a subsequent life of usefulness and rectitude; but I am just saying that that indicates the way in which the English word is used. In our ordinary usage the word certainly conveys the idea of something like compensation for some wrong that has been done.

It certainly conveys that notion also in those Old Testament passages. Of course that is not the only notion that it conveys in those passages. There the use of the word is very much more specific. The compensation which is indicated by the word is a compensation rendered to God, and it is a compensation that has become necessary because of an offense committed against God. Still, the notion of compensation or satisfaction is clearly in the word. God is offended because of sin; satisfaction is made to Him in some way by the sacrifice; and so His favor is restored.

Thus in the English Bible the word 'atonement' is used in two rather distinct senses. In its one occurrence in the New Testament it designates the particular means by which such reconciliation is effected — namely, the sacrifice which God is pleased to accept in order that man may again be received into favor.

Now of these two uses of the word it is unquestionably the Old Testament use which is followed when we speak of the 'doctrine of the atonement.' We mean by the word, when we thus use it in theology, not the reconciliation between God and man, not the 'at-onement' between God and man, but specifically the means by which that reconciliation is effected — namely, the death of Christ as something that was necessary in order that sinful man might be received into communion with God.

I do not see any great objection to the use of the word in that way — provided only that we are perfectly clear that we are using it in that way. Certainly it has acquired too firm a place in Christian theology and has

gathered around it too many precious associations for us to think, now, of trying to dislodge it.

However, there is another word which would in itself have been much better, and it is really a great pity that it has not come into more general use in this connection. That is the word ‘satisfaction.’ If we only had acquired the habit of saying that Christ made full satisfaction to God for man that would have conveyed a more adequate account of Christ’s priestly work as our Redeemer than the word ‘atonement’ can convey. It designates what the word ‘atonement’ — rightly understood — designates, and it also designates something more. We shall see what that something more is in a subsequent talk.

But it is time now for us to enter definitely into our great subject. Men were estranged from God by sin; Christ as their great high priest has brought them back into communion with God. How has He done so? That is the question with which we shall be dealing in a number of the talks that now follow.

This afternoon all that I can do is to try to state the Scripture doctrine in bare summary (or begin to state it), leaving it to subsequent talks to show how that Scripture doctrine is actually taught in the Scriptures, to defend it against objections, and to distinguish it clearly from various unscriptural theories.

What then in bare outline does the Bible teach about the ‘atonement’? What does it teach — to use a better term — about the satisfaction which Christ presented to God in order that sinful man might be received into God’s favor?

I cannot possibly answer this question even in bare summary unless I call your attention to the Biblical doctrine of sin with which we dealt last winter. You cannot possibly understand what the Bible says about salvation unless you understand what the Bible says about the thing from which we are saved.

If then we ask what is the Biblical doctrine of sin, we observe, in the first place, that according to the Bible all men are sinners.

Well, then, that being so, it becomes important to ask what this sin is which has affected all mankind. Is it just an excusable imperfection; is it something that can be transcended as a man can transcend the immaturity of his youthful years? Or, supposing it to be more than imperfection, supposing it to be something like a definite stain, is it a stain that can easily be removed as writing is erased from a slate?

The Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the answer to these questions. Sin, it tells us, is disobedience to the law of God, and the law of God is entirely irrevocable.

Why is the law of God irrevocable? The Bible makes that plain. Because it is rooted in the nature of God! God is righteous and that is the reason why His law is righteous. Can He then revoke His law or allow it to be disregarded? Well, there is of course no external compulsion upon Him to prevent Him from doing these things. There is none who can say to Him, ‘What doest thou?’ In that sense He can do all things. But the point is, He cannot revoke His law and still remain God. He cannot, without Himself becoming unrighteous, make His law either forbid righteousness or condone unrighteousness. When the law of God says, ‘The soul that sinneth it shall die,’ that awful penalty of death is, indeed, imposed by God’s will; but God’s will is determined by God’s nature, and God’s nature being unchangeably holy the penalty must run its course. God would be untrue to Himself, in other words, if sin were not punished; and that God should be untrue to Himself is the most impossible thing that can possibly be conceived.

Under that majestic law of God man was placed in the estate wherein he was created. Man was placed in a probation, which theologians call the covenant of works. If he obeyed the law during a certain limited period, his probation was to be over; he would be given eternal life without any further possibility of loss. If, on the other hand, he disobeyed the law, he would have death — physical death and eternal death in hell.

Man entered into that probation with every advantage. He was created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He was created not merely neutral with respect to goodness; he was created positively good. Yet he fell. He failed to make his goodness an assured and eternal goodness; he failed to progress from the goodness of innocency to the confirmed goodness which would have been the reward for standing the test. He transgressed the commandment of God, and so came under the awful curse of the law.

Under that curse came all mankind. That covenant of works had been made with the first man, Adam, not only for himself but for his posterity. He had stood, in that probation, in a representative capacity; he had stood — to use a better terminology — as the federal head of the race, having been made the federal head of the race by divine appointment. If he had successfully met the

test, all mankind descended from him would have been born in a state of confirmed righteousness and blessedness, without any possibility of falling into sin or of losing eternal life. But as a matter of fact Adam did not successfully meet the test. He transgressed the commandment of God, and since he was the federal head, the divinely appointed representative of the race, all mankind sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression.

Thus all mankind, descended from Adam by ordinary generation, are themselves under the dreadful penalty of the law of God. They are under that penalty at birth, before they have done anything either good or bad. Part of that penalty is the want of the righteousness with which man was created, and a dreadful corruption which is called original sin. Proceeding from that corruption when men grow to years of discretion come individual acts of transgression.

Can the penalty of sin resting upon all mankind be remitted? Plainly not, if God is to remain God. That penalty of sin was ordained in the law of God, and the law of God was no mere arbitrary and changeable arrangement but an expression of the nature of God Himself. If the penalty of sin were remitted, God would become unrighteous, and that God will not become unrighteous is the most certain thing that can possibly be conceived.

How then can sinful men be saved? In one way only. Only if a substitute is provided who shall pay for them the just penalty of God's law.

The Bible teaches that such a substitute has as a matter of fact been provided. The substitute is Jesus Christ. The law's demands of penalty must be satisfied. There is no escaping that. But Jesus Christ satisfied those demands for us when He died instead of us on the cross.

I have used the word 'satisfied' advisedly. It is very important for us to observe that when Jesus died upon the cross He made a full satisfaction for our sins; He paid the penalty which the law pronounces upon our sin, not in part but in full.

In saying that, there are several misunderstandings which need to be guarded against in the most careful possible way. Only by distinguishing the Scripture doctrine carefully from several distortions of it can we understand clearly what the Scripture doctrine is.

I want to point out, therefore, several things that we do not mean when we

say that Christ paid the penalty of our sin by dying instead of us on the cross.

In the *first place*, we do not mean that when Christ took our place He became Himself a sinner. Of course He did not become a sinner. Never was His glorious righteousness and goodness more wonderfully seen than when He bore the curse of God's law upon the cross. He was not deserving of that curse. Far from it! He was deserving of all praise.

What we mean, therefore, when we say that Christ bore our guilt is not that He became guilty, but that He paid the penalty that we so richly deserved.

In the *second place*, we do not mean that Christ's sufferings were the same as the sufferings that we should have endured if we had paid the penalty of our own sins. Obviously they were not the same. Part of the sufferings that we should have endured would have been the dreadful suffering of remorse. Christ did not endure that suffering, for He had done no wrong. Moreover, our sufferings would have endured to all eternity, whereas Christ's sufferings on the cross endured but a few hours. Plainly then His sufferings were not the same as ours would have been.

In the *third place*, however, an opposite error must also be warded off. If Christ's sufferings were not the same as ours, it is also quite untrue to say that He paid only a part of the penalty that was due to us because of our sin. Some theologians have fallen into that error. When man incurred the penalty of the law, they have said, God was pleased to take some other and lesser thing — namely, the sufferings of Christ on the cross — instead of exacting the full penalty. Thus, according to these theologians, the demands of the law were not really satisfied by the death of Christ, but God was simply pleased, in arbitrary fashion, to accept something less than full satisfaction.

That is a very serious error indeed. Instead of falling into it we shall, if we are true to the Scriptures, insist that Christ on the cross paid the full and just penalty for our sin.

The error arose because of a confusion between the payment of a debt and the payment of a penalty. In the case of a debt it does not make any difference who pays; all that is essential is that the creditor shall receive what is owed him. What is essential is that just the same thing shall be paid as that which stood in the bond.

But in the case of the payment of a penalty it does make a difference who

pays. The law demanded that we should suffer eternal death because of our sin. Christ paid the penalty of the law in our stead. But for Him to suffer was not the same as for us to suffer. He is God, and not merely man. Therefore if He had suffered to all eternity as we should have suffered, that would not have been to pay the just penalty of the sin, but it would have been an unjust exaction of vastly more. In other words, we must get rid of merely quantitative notions in thinking of the sufferings of Christ. What He suffered on the cross was what the law of God truly demanded not of any person but of such a person as Himself when He became our substitute in paying the penalty of sin. He did therefore make full and not merely partial satisfaction for the claims of the law against us.

Finally, it is very important to observe that the Bible's teaching about the cross of Christ does not mean that God waited for someone else to pay the penalty of sin before He would forgive the sinner. So unbelievers constantly represent it, but that representation is radically wrong. No, God Himself paid the penalty of sin — God Himself in the Person of God the Son, who loved us and gave Himself for us, God Himself in the person of God the Father who so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son, God the Holy Spirit who applies to us the benefits of Christ's death. God's the cost and ours the marvelous gain! Who shall measure the depths of the love of God which was extended to us sinners when the Lord Jesus took our place and died in our stead upon the accursed tree?

The Active Obedience of Christ

by

J. Gresham Machen

LAST Sunday afternoon, in outlining the Biblical teaching about the work of Christ in satisfying for us the claims of God's law, I said nothing about one very important part of that work. I pointed out that Christ by His death in our stead on the cross paid the just penalty of our sin, but I said nothing of another thing that He did for us. I said nothing about what Christ did for us by His active obedience to God's law. It is very important that we should fill out that part of the outline before we go one step further.

Suppose Christ had done for us merely what we said last Sunday afternoon that He did. Suppose He had merely paid the just penalty of the law that was resting upon us for our sin, and had done nothing more than that; where would we then be? Well, I think we can say — if indeed it is legitimate to separate one part of the work of Christ even in thought from the rest — that if Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and had done nothing more we should be at best back in the situation in which Adam found himself when God placed him under the covenant of works.

That covenant of works was a probation. If Adam kept the law of God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. If he disobeyed he was to have death. Well, he disobeyed, and the penalty of death was inflicted upon him and his posterity. Then Christ by His death on the cross paid that penalty for those whom God had chosen.

Well and good. But if that were all that Christ did for us, do you not see that we should be back in just the situation in which Adam was before he sinned? The penalty of his sinning would have been removed from us because it had all been paid by Christ. But for the future the attainment of eternal life would have been dependent upon our perfect obedience to the law of God. We should simply have been back in the probation again.

Moreover, we should have been back in that probation in a very much less hopeful way than that in which Adam was originally placed in it. Everything was in Adam's favor when he was placed in the probation. He had been created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He had been created

positively good. Yet despite all that, he fell. How much more likely would we be to fall — nay, how certain to fall — if all that Christ had done for us were merely to remove from us the guilt of past sin, leaving it then to our own efforts to win the reward which God has pronounced upon perfect obedience!

But I really must decline to speculate any further about what might have been if Christ had done something less for us than that which He has actually done. As a matter of fact, He has not merely paid the penalty of Adam's first sin, and the penalty of the sins which we individually have committed, but also He has positively merited for us eternal life. He was, in other words, our representative both in penalty paying and in probation keeping. He paid the penalty of sin for us, and He stood the probation for us.

That is the reason why those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ are in a far more blessed condition than was Adam before he fell. Adam before he fell was righteous in the sight of God, but he was still under the possibility of becoming unrighteous. Those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ not only are righteous in the sight of God but they are beyond the possibility of becoming unrighteous. In their case, the probation is over. It is not over because they have stood it successfully. It is not over because they have themselves earned the reward of assured blessedness which God promised on condition of perfect obedience. But it is over because Christ has stood it for them; it is over because Christ has merited for them the reward by His perfect obedience to God's law.

I think I can make the matter plain if I imagine a dialogue between the law of God and a sinful man saved by grace.

‘Man,’ says the law of God, ‘have you obeyed my commands?’

‘No,’ says the sinner saved by grace. ‘I have disobeyed them, not only in the person of my representative Adam in his first sin, but also in that I myself have sinned in thought, word and deed.’

‘Well, then, sinner,’ says the law of God, ‘have you paid the penalty which I pronounced upon disobedience?’

‘No,’ says the sinner, ‘I have not paid the penalty myself; but Christ has paid it for me. He was my representative when He died there on the cross. Hence, so far as the penalty is concerned, I am clear.’

‘Well, then, sinner,’ says the law of God, ‘how about the conditions

which God has pronounced for the attainment of assured blessedness? Have you stood the test? Have you merited eternal life by perfect obedience during the period of probation?’

‘No,’ says the sinner, ‘I have not merited eternal life by my own perfect obedience. God knows and my own conscience knows that even after I became a Christian I have sinned in thought, word and deed. But although I have not merited eternal life by any obedience of my own, Christ has merited it for me by His perfect obedience. He was not for Himself subject to the law. No obedience was required of Him for Himself, since He was Lord of all. That obedience, then, which He rendered to the law when He was on earth was rendered by Him as my representative. I have no righteousness of my own, but clad in Christ’s perfect righteousness, imputed to me and received by faith alone, I can glory in the fact that so far as I am concerned the probation has been kept and as God is true there awaits me the glorious reward which Christ thus earned for me.’

Such, put in bald, simple form, is the dialogue between every Christian and the law of God. How gloriously complete is the salvation wrought for us by Christ! Christ paid the penalty, and He merited the reward. Those are the two great things that He has done for us.

Theologians are accustomed to distinguish those two parts of the saving work of Christ by calling one of them His *passive obedience* and the other of them His *active obedience*. By His passive obedience — that is, by suffering in our stead — He paid the penalty for us; by His active obedience — that is, by doing what the law of God required — He has merited for us the reward.

I like that terminology well enough. I think it does set forth as well as can be done in human language the two aspects of Christ’s work. And yet a danger lurks in it if it leads us to think that one of the two parts of Christ’s work can be separated from the other.

How shall we distinguish Christ’s active obedience from His passive obedience? Shall we say that He accomplished His active obedience by His life and accomplished His passive obedience by His death? No, that will not do at all. During every moment of His life upon earth Christ was engaged in His passive obedience. It was all for Him humiliation, was it not? It was all suffering. It was all part of His payment of the penalty of sin. On the other

hand, we cannot say that His death was passive obedience and not active obedience. On the contrary, His death was the crown of His active obedience. It was the crown of that obedience to the law of God by which He merited eternal life for those whom He came to save.

Do you not see, then, what the true state of the case is? Christ's active obedience and His passive obedience are not two divisions of His work, some of the events of His earthly life being His active obedience and other events of His life being His passive obedience; but every event of His life was both active obedience and passive obedience. Every event of His life was a part of His payment of the penalty of sin, and every event of His life was a part of that glorious keeping of the law of God by which He earned for His people the reward of eternal life. The two aspects of His work, in other words, are inextricably intertwined. Neither was performed apart from the other. Together they constitute the wonderful, full salvation which was wrought for us by Christ our Redeemer.

We can put it briefly by saying that Christ took our place with respect to the law of God. He paid for us the law's penalty, and He obeyed for us the law's commands. He saved us from hell, and He earned for us our entrance into heaven. All that we have, then, we owe unto Him. There is no blessing that we have in this world or the next for which we should not give Christ thanks.

As I say that, I am fully conscious of the inadequacy of my words. I have tried to summarize the teaching of the Bible about the saving work of Christ; yet how cold and dry seems any mere human summary — even if it were far better than mine — in comparison with the marvelous richness and warmth of the Bible itself. It is to the Bible itself that I am going to ask you to turn with me next Sunday afternoon. Having tried to summarize the Bible's teaching in order that we may take each part of the Bible in proper relation to other parts, I am going to ask you next Sunday to turn with me to the great texts themselves, in order that we may test our summary, and every human summary, by what God Himself has told us in His Word. Ah, when we do that, what refreshment it is to our souls! How infinitely superior is God's Word to all human attempts to summarize its teaching! Those attempts are necessary; we could not do without them; everyone who is really true to the Bible will engage in them. But it is the very words of the Bible that touch the heart, and everything that we — or for the matter of that even the great

theologians — say in summary of the Bible must be compared ever anew with the Bible itself.

This afternoon, however, just in order that next Sunday we may begin our searching of the Scriptures in the most intelligent possible way, I am going to ask you to glance with me at one or two of the different views that men have held regarding the cross of Christ.

I have already summarized for you the orthodox view. According to that view, Christ took our place on the cross, paying the penalty of that we deserved to pay. That view can be put in very simple language. We deserved eternal death because of sin; Jesus, because He loved us, took our place and died in our stead on the cross. Call that view repulsive if you will. It is indeed repulsive to the natural man. But do not call it difficult to understand. A little child can understand it, and can receive it to the salvation of his soul.

Rejecting that substitutionary view, many men have advanced other views. Many are the theories of the atonement. Yet I do think that their bewildering variety may be reduced to something like order if we observe that they fall into a very few general divisions.

Most common among them is the theory that Christ's death upon the cross had merely a moral effect upon man. Man is by nature a child of God, say the advocates of that view. But unfortunately he is not making full use of his high privilege. He has fallen into terrible degradation, and having fallen into terrible degradation he has become estranged from God. He no longer lives in that intimate relationship of son-ship with God in which he ought to live.

How shall this estrangement between man and God be removed; how shall man be brought back into fellowship with God? Why, say the advocates of the view of which we are now speaking, simply by inducing man to turn from his evil ways and make full use of his high privilege as a child of God. There is certainly no barrier on God's side; the only barrier lies in man's foolish and wicked heart. Once overcome that barrier and all will be well. Once touch man's stony heart so that he will come to see again that God is his Father, once lead him also to overcome any fear of God as though God were not always more ready to forgive than man is to be forgiven; and at once the true relationship between God and man can be restored and man can go forward joyously to the use, in holy living, of his high privilege as a child of the loving heavenly Father.

But how can man's heart be touched, that he may be led to return to his Father's house and live as befits a son of God? By the contemplation of the cross of Christ, say the advocates of the view that we are now presenting. Jesus Christ was truly a son of God. Indeed, He was a son of God in such a unique way that He may be called in some sort the Son of God. When therefore God gave Him to die upon the cross and when He willingly gave Himself to die, that was a wonderful manifestation of God's love for sinning, erring humanity. In the presence of that love all opposition in man's heart should be broken down. He should recognize at last the fact that God is indeed his Father, and recognizing that, he should make use of his high privilege of living the life that befits a child of God.

Such is the so-called 'moral-influence theory' of the atonement. It is held in a thousand different forms, and it is held by thousands of people who have not the slightest notion that they are holding it.

Some of those who have held it have tried to maintain with it something like a real belief in the deity of Christ. If Christ was really the eternal Son of God, then the gift of Him on the cross becomes all the greater evidence of the love of God. But the overwhelming majority of those who hold the moral-influence view of the atonement have given up all real belief in the deity of Christ. These persons hold simply that Jesus on the cross gave us a supreme example of self-sacrifice. By that example we are inspired to do likewise. We are inspired to sacrifice our lives, either in actual martyrdom in some holy cause or in sacrificial service. Sacrificing thus our lives, we discover that we have thereby attained a higher life than ever before. Thus the cross of Christ has been the pathway that leads us to moral heights.

Read most of the popular books on religion of the present day, and then tell me whether you do not think that that is at bottom what they mean. Some of them speak about the cross of Christ. Some of them say that Christ's sufferings were redemptive. But the trouble is they hold that the cross of Christ is not merely Christ's cross but our cross; and that while Christ's sufferings were redemptive our sufferings are redemptive too. All they really mean is that Christ on Calvary pointed out a way that we follow. He hallowed the pathway of self-sacrifice. We follow in that path and thus we obtain a higher life for our souls.

That is the great central and all-pervading vice of most modern books that

deal with the cross. They make the cross of Christ merely an example of a general principle of self-sacrifice. And if they talk still of salvation, they tell us that we are saved by walking in the way of the cross. It is thus, according to this view, not Christ's cross but our cross that saves us. The way of the cross leads us to God. Christ may have a great influence in leading us to walk in that way of the cross, that way of self-sacrifice; but it is our walking in it and not Christ's walking in it which really saves us. Thus we are saved by our own efforts, not by Christ's blood after all. It is the same old notion that sinful man can save himself. It is that notion just decked out in new garments and making use of Christian terminology.

Such is the moral-influence theory of the atonement. In addition to it, we find what is sometimes called the governmental theory. What a strange, compromising, tortuous thing that governmental theory is, to be sure!

According to the governmental view, the death of Christ was not necessary in order that any eternal justice of God, rooted in the divine nature, might be satisfied. So far the governmental view goes with the advocates of the moral-influence theory. But, it holds, the death of Christ was necessary in order that good discipline might be maintained in the world. If sinners were allowed to get the notion that sin could go altogether unpunished, there would be no adequate deterrent from sin. Being thus undeterred from sin, men would go on sinning and the world would be thrown into confusion. But if the world were thus thrown into moral confusion that would not be for the best interests of the greatest number. Therefore God held up the death of Christ on the cross as an indication of how serious a thing sin is, so that men may be deterred from sinning and so order in the world may be preserved.

Having thus indicated — so the governmental theory runs — how serious a thing sin is, God proceeded to offer salvation to men on easier terms than those on which He had originally offered it. He had originally offered it on the basis of perfect obedience. Now He offered it on the basis of faith. He could safely offer it on those easier terms, and He could safely remit the penalty originally pronounced upon sin, because in the awful spectacle of the cross of Christ He had sufficiently indicated to men that sin is a serious offense and that if it is committed something or other has to be done about the matter in order that the good order of the universe may be conserved.

Such is the governmental theory. But do you not see that really at bottom it is

just a form of the moral-influence theory? Like the moral-influence theory, it holds that the only obstacle to fellowship between man and God is found in man's will. Like the moral-influence theory it denies that there is any eternal justice of God, rooted in His being, and it denies that the eternal justice of God demands the punishment of sin. Like the moral-influence theory it plays fast and loose with God's holiness, and like the moral-influence theory, we may add, it loses sight of the real depths of God's love. No man who holds the light view of sin that is involved in these man-made theories has the slightest notion of what it cost when the eternal Son of God took our place upon the accursed tree.

People sometimes say, indeed, that it makes little difference what theory of the atonement we may hold. Ah, my friends, it makes all the difference in the world. When you contemplate the cross of Christ, do you say merely, with modern theorists, 'What a noble example of self-sacrifice; I am going to attain favor with God by sacrificing myself as well as He.' Or do you say with the Bible, 'He loved me and gave Himself for me; He took my place; He bore my curse; He bought me with His own most precious blood.' That is the most momentous question that can come to any human soul. I want you all to turn with me next Sunday afternoon to the Word of God in order that we may answer that question aright.

The Bible and the Cross

by

J. Gresham Machen

HAVING observed last week what are the leading views that have been held regarding the cross of Christ, we turn now to the Bible in order to discover which of these views is right.

Did Jesus on the cross really take our place, paying the penalty of God's law which justly rested upon us? That is the orthodox or substitutionary view of the atonement.

Or did He merely exert a good moral influence upon us by His death, either by giving us an exhibition of the love of God or by inspiring us to sacrifice our lives for the welfare of others as He sacrificed Himself? That is the so-called moral-influence theory of the atonement.

Or did He by His death merely conserve the good discipline of the world by showing that, in the interests of the welfare of the greatest number, God cannot simply allow His law to be transgressed with complete impunity? That is the so-called governmental theory of the atonement.

We shall try to test these three views of the cross of Christ by comparing them with what the Bible actually says. But before we do so, there are two preliminary remarks that we ought to make.

Our first remark is that the three views of the atonement really reduce themselves to two. Both the moral-influence and the governmental view of the atonement really make the work of Christ terminate upon man, rather than upon God. They both proceed on the assumption that, in order that man shall be forgiven, nothing but man's repentance is required. They both of them deny, at least by implication, that there is such a thing as an eternal principle of justice, not based merely upon the interests of the creature but rooted in the nature of God — an eternal principle of justice demanding that sin shall be punished. They both of them favor the notion that the ethical attributes of God may be summed up in the one attribute — benevolence. They both of them tend to distort the great Scriptural assertion that 'God is love' into the very different assertion that God is nothing but love. They both of them tend to find the supreme end of the creation in the happiness or well-

being of the creature. They both of them fail utterly to attain to any high notion of the awful holiness of God.

No doubt the governmental theory disguises these tendencies more than the moral-influence theory does. It does show some recognition of the moral chaos which would result if men got the notion that the law of God could be transgressed with complete impunity.

But, after all, even the governmental theory denies that there is any real underlying necessity for the punishment of sin. Punishment, it holds, is merely remedial and deterrent. It is intended merely to prevent future sin, not to expiate past sin. So the tragedy on Calvary, according to the advocates of the governmental view, was intended by God merely to shock sinners out of their complacency; it was intended merely to show what terrible effects sin has so that sinners by observing those terrible effects might be led to stop sinning. The governmental view, therefore, like the moral-influence view, has at its center the notion that a moral effect exerted upon man was the sole purpose of the cross of Christ.

Very different is the substitutionary view. According to that view, not a mere moral effect upon man but the satisfaction of the eternal justice of God was the primary end for which Christ died. Hence the substitutionary view of the atonement stands sharply over against the other two. The other two belong in one category; the substitutionary view belongs in an entirely different category. That is the first remark that we desire to make before we begin to consider the Biblical teaching in detail.

That remark, however, would be decidedly misleading unless we went on to make a second remark. Our second remark is that the substitutionary view of the atonement, though it makes the work of Christ in dying upon the cross terminate primarily upon God, yet does at the same time most emphatically make it terminate also upon man. What a distortion of the substitutionary view it would be to say that Christ, when He died, did not die to produce a moral effect upon man!

Of course He died to produce a moral effect upon man! If He had not died, man would have continued to lead a life of sin; but as it is, those for whom He died cease to lead a life of sin and begin to lead a life of holiness. They do not lead that life of holiness perfectly in this world, but they will most certainly lead it in the world to come, and it was in order that they might lead

that life of holiness that Christ died for them. No man for whom Christ died continues to live in sin as he lived before. All who receive the benefits of the cross of Christ turn from sin unto righteousness. In holding that that is the case, the substitutionary view of the atonement is quite in accord with the moral-influence theory and with the governmental theory.

Well, then, is it correct to say that the moral-influence theory and the governmental theory are correct as far as they go and merely differ from the substitutionary view in being inadequate or incomplete?

No, I do not think that that is correct at all. You see, the heart and core of the moral-influence theory and the governmental theory is found in the denial that Christ on the cross took our place and paid the just penalty of our sins that we might be right with God. Denying that, the moral-influence theory and the exhibit the necessity of some deterrent against sin in the interests of an orderly world, or did He die on the cross in order to pay the penalty of our sin and make us right with the holy God?

Which of these three views is right? That is the question which we shall seek to answer by an examination of the Word of God.

At the beginning of the examination there is one fact which stares us in the face. It has sometimes been strangely neglected. It is the fact of the enormous emphasis which the Bible lays upon the death of Christ.

Have you ever stopped to consider how strange that emphasis is? In the case of other great men, it is the birth that is celebrated and not the death. Washington's birthday is celebrated by a grateful American people on the twenty-second day of February, but who remembers on what day of the year it was that Washington died? Who ever thought of making the day of his death into a national holiday?

Well, there are some men whose death might indeed be celebrated by a national holiday, but they are not good men like George Washington; they are, on the contrary, men whose taking off was a blessing to their people. It would be a small compliment to the father of his country if we celebrated with national rejoicing the day when he was taken from us. Instead of that, we celebrate his birth. Yet in the case of Jesus it is the death and not the birth that we chiefly commemorate in the Christian church.

I do not mean that it is wrong for us to commemorate the birth of Jesus. We

have just celebrated Christmas, and it is right for us so to do. Happy at this Christmas season through which we have just passed have been those to whom it has not been just a time of worldly festivity but a time of commemoration of the coming of our blessed Saviour into this world. Happy have been those men and women and little children who have heard, underlying all their Christmas joys, and have heard in simple and childlike faith, the sweet story that is told us in Matthew and Luke. Happy have been those celebrants of Christmas to whom the angels have brought again, in the reading of the Word of God, their good tidings of great joy.

Yes, I say, thank God for the Christmas season; thank God for the softening that it brings to stony hearts; thank God for the recognition that it brings for the little children whom Jesus took into His arms; thank God even for the strange, sweet sadness that it brings to us together with its joys, as we think of the loved ones who are gone. Yes, it is well that we should celebrate the Christmas season; and may God ever give us a childlike heart that we may celebrate it aright.

But after all, my friends, it is not Christmas that is the greatest anniversary in the Christian church. It is not the birth of Jesus that the church chiefly celebrates, but the death.

Did you know that long centuries went by in the history of the church before there is any record of the celebration of Christmas? Jesus was born in the days of Herod the King — that is, at some time before 4 B.C., when Herod died. Not till centuries later do we find evidence that the church celebrated any anniversary regarded as the anniversary of His birth.

Well, then, if that is so with regard to the commemoration of Jesus' birth, how is it with regard to the commemoration of His death? Was the commemoration of that also so long postponed? Well, listen to what is said on that subject by the Apostle Paul. 'For as often as ye eat this bread,' he says, 'and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.' That was written only about twenty-five years after the death of Christ and after the founding of the church in Jerusalem. Even in those early days the death of Christ was commemorated by the church in the most solemn service in which it engaged — namely, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Indeed that commemoration of the death of Christ was definitely provided for by Jesus Himself. 'This cup is the New Testament in my blood,' said Jesus:

‘this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.’ In those words of institution of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus carefully provided that His church should commemorate His death.

Thus the Bible makes no definite provision for the commemoration of the birth of Jesus, but provides in the most definite and solemn way for the commemoration of His death.

What is the reason for that contrast, which at first sight might seem to be very strange? I think the answer is fairly clear. The birth of Jesus was important not in itself but because it made possible His death. Jesus came into this world to die, and it is to His death that the sinner turns when He seeks salvation for his soul. Truly the familiar hymn is right when it says about the cross of Christ:

*All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

The whole Bible centers in the story of the death of Christ. The Old Testament looks forward to it; the New Testament looks back upon it; and the truly Biblical preacher of the gospel says always with Paul: ‘I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified.’

I ask you, then, which of the theories of the atonement suits this supreme emphasis which the Bible puts upon the cross.

Does the moral-influence theory suit it? I think not, my friends. If Jesus died on the cross merely to give us a good example of self-sacrifice or merely to exhibit, without underlying necessity, the love of God, then the Bible does seem strangely overwrought in the way in which it speaks of the death of Christ. Then indeed all the talk in the Bible about the blood of Christ and the blood of the sacrificial victims that were prophecies of Him becomes just about as distasteful as so many modern men hold it to be. Some very much greater significance must be attributed to the death of Christ than a mere hallowing of some universal law of self-sacrifice or a mere pedagogic exhibition of God’s love, if we are to explain the way in which the Bible makes everything to center in the event that took place on Calvary.

The case is not essentially different when we consider the governmental theory. It is true, the governmental theory does seek, as over against the moral-influence theory, to do justice to the emphasis which the Bible places

just on the death of Christ. It regards the tragic horror of the cross not as merely incidental to the meaning of what Christ did but as essential to it. It regards that tragic horror as being the thing that shocks sinners out of their complacency and makes them recognize the seriousness of sin. Hence it seeks to show why just the death of Christ and not some other exhibition of self-sacrificing love was necessary.

But, after all, what a short way such considerations go towards explaining the Biblical emphasis on the cross of Christ! The truth is that there is just one real explanation of such emphasis. It is found in the fact that Christ on the cross did something absolutely necessary if we sinners are to be forgiven by a righteous God. Once recognize the enormous barrier which sin sets up between the offender and his God, once recognize the fact that that barrier is rooted not merely in the sinner's mind but in the eternal justice of God, and then once recognize that the cross, as the full payment of the penalty of sin, has broken down the barrier and made the sinner right with God — once recognize these things and then only will you understand the strange pre-eminence which the Bible attributes to the cross of Christ.

Thus even the mere prominence of the death of Christ in the Bible, to say nothing of what the Bible says about the death of Christ in detail, is a mighty argument against all minimizing theories of the significance of the death of Christ and a mighty argument in favor of the view that Christ on the cross really died in our stead, paying the dread penalty of our sin, that He might present us, saved by grace, before the throne.

In presenting what the Bible says in detail about the death of Christ, I want to speak first of all of those passages where Christ's death upon the cross is represented as a ransom, then about those passages where it is spoken of as a sacrifice, then about those passages where, without the use of either of these representations, its substitutionary or representative character is plainly brought out.

The first passage that we shall speak of, next Sunday afternoon, is that great passage in the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to Mark where our Lord says that the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.

On this last Sunday of the old year, I just want to say to you who have been listening in on these Sunday afternoons how much encouraged I have been by your interest and by your Christian fellowship. I trust that you have had a

very joyous Christmas and I trust that the new year which is so soon to begin may be to you a very blessed year under the mercy of God.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] The three articles contained in this series were actually addresses which Gresham Machen broadcast on the radio to the popular audience on the three consecutive Sundays before his death on January 1, 1937.

Author

John Gresham Machen was one of the most colorful and controversial figures of his time, and it is doubtful that in the ecclesiastical world of the twenties and thirties any religious teacher was more constantly in the limelight. Machen was a scholar, Professor at Princeton and Westminster Seminaries, church leader, apologist for biblical Christianity, and one of the most eloquent defenders of the faith in the twentieth century. He went home to be with the Lord on January 1, 1937.