

# The Governmental Theory

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This is the view that Christ suffered for us so that the Holy Father could forgive us and still govern us justly. The seeds of this theory are in the teachings of James Arminius, but it was first taught as an Atonement view by one of his students, Hugo Grotius. Late last century it was explicated quite thoroughly by Methodism's John Miley in his *Atonement in Christ*.

The theory will be discussed first by showing what it cannot incorporate into itself, and then by discussing what it can and does consist of.

1. *What it cannot incorporate.* The Governmental theory can not incorporate into itself the main elements of two major Atonement theories: the payment of a debt (Satisfaction) and Christ's being punished (Punishment).

Whereas Calvinists teach boldly that Christ paid the penalty for us-that He took our punishment-and believe their view to be biblical, it is altogether opposed to the teaching of Scripture. Neither the Hebrew Old Testament nor the Greek New Testament ever teach this view. The NIV, translated by Calvinists in the main, renders the Hebrew *musar* in Isa. 53:5 with "punishment," which is unusual. The KJV, even though translated by 54 Calvinists, does not once use any form of the English word for "punishment" to describe what happened to Christ. Always the word is "suffering" or certain synonyms of that word. Scripture teaches that Christ suffered for us, not that He was punished for us. Three versions state 28 times that Christ suffered for us: the KAVA [1] , the NASB [2], and the NIV [3] ; and the RSV says it 27 times. [4]

The reason Scripture teaches that Christ suffered for us in stead of being punished is in part, as mentioned earlier, because He was sinless and therefore guiltless. It is in part also because God the Father really does forgive us----whereas, if He punished Christ instead of us, He could not then have forgiven us. In Christ's substitutionary punishment, justice would have been satisfied, precluding forgiveness. One cannot both punish and for give, surely.

The other aspect of Atonement theory that the Governmental theory cannot incorporate into itself is that Christ's death paid a debt for us. Even as one cannot punish and then also forgive, one cannot accept payment for a debt and still forgive the debt. Scripture indeed says, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). This no doubt means that we are bought with the price of Christ's suffering, not the price of a debt being paid for us. Neither a human being nor God, surely, can accept payment for a debt and still forgive the debt. And forgiveness, sheer forgiveness, is unique to Christianity, of all the religions, and must be protected.

2. What it can incorporate. It can incorporate into itself all the various teachings of Scripture and the numerous understandings promoted in the other major Atonement theories.

For one thing, it can incorporate into itself Peter Forsyth's emphasis on how the holiness of God figures in the Atonement.

One of the contributions of Forsyth, in his great book on the Atonement titled *The Work of Christ*, is that God himself made the "offering." Forsyth says, "The real objective element in atonement is not that something was offered to God, but that God made the offering." [5] He similarly says, "God made the atonement." [6] This is a profound understanding.

Forsyth also says that the Atonement was "something actually done, and not merely said or shown, by God, something really done from the depth of God who is the action of the World." [7] This understanding, which emphasizes what is concretely historical and actual, in distinction from what is merely ideational and ethereal, or conceptual, can be and should be incorporated into the Governmental theory.

A kindred emphasis in Forsyth, which should also be incorporated into the Governmental theory of the Atonement, is that it is not quite that "Christ and His death reconciled God to man" [8] but that in Christ's death we have "God reconciling himself." [9] He means to say that there was no "third party" who got God and us reconciled, but that God himself did it.

Forsyth also viewed the Atonement as something done for the race, somewhat as Olin Alfred Curtis did in *The Christian Faith*-and this racial concept can also be incorporated into the Governmental theory. Forsyth says, "The first charge upon Christ and His Cross was the reconciliation of the race, and of its individuals by implication." [10] Surely Paul had something like this in mind when he speaks of the racial significance of both Adam and Christ in Rom. 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15.

Perhaps the single most basic aspect of Forsyth's Atonement view is his emphasis on God's holiness. Indeed, that emphasis is part and parcel of these other matters just discussed. Forsyth says, "What is meant by the holiness of God is the holy God." [11] He is thus saying that holiness is more than an attribute but is basically what God is, a position taken earlier, in the chapter on

God's existence and nature. Because of this, for Forsyth, God had to bring judgment upon sin by Christ's atoning death before being able to forgive sin. Sin defied God as the Holy One, and we would not even respect a God who simply told us that our sins were being overlooked. In the Atonement, the holy God himself became an offering for the whole race, judging sin, making it possible for Him to forgive sin without sin being appraised in a light manner. This is similar to the Governmental theory concept of John Miley and others, but even more profound. Forsyth says that Jesus had to go to the Cross because God could not otherwise forgive us and still be the Holy One.

The Governmental theory can incorporate into itself the emphasis on Christ's ransoming us as in the classical Ransom theory of the Atonement. Christ did indeed ransom us from Satan, as Scripture teaches.

Paul uses the ransom figure the only other time it is found in the New Testament in 1 Tim. 2:6, where he speaks of "the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom [*antilutron*] for all men." Here the preposition "for" translates the Greek *huper*, "on behalf of." Instead of His doing this for "the many" as in the Matthew and Mark statements, which might suggest a limited provision, Paul says it was done for "all," "indicating that the ransom was provisionally universal." [12]

Moreover, the Governmental theory incorporates into itself the emphasis on God's love, which is the main point in the Abelardian Moral Influence theory. John 3:16 excites us Christians commonly, where we all read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Christ's own love spelled out for us in drops of blood is also common to all Christians, for we all read, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all. . . And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). Christ's love, displayed so vividly on the Cross-when He did not need to die but did, when He could have called for more than 12 legions of angels to deliver Him from His enemies but did not-compels us to turn to the Father for forgiveness. The RSV, instead of "compels," translates "controls us." The Greek word there means "shuts us up to a given course," so that we can do hardly anything else but respond to such a Golgotha deed.

Moreover, the Governmental theory includes the vicarious aspect of the Atonement, the understanding that Christ did some thing on behalf of us. Here, the preposition is *huper*. It is used in Scripture numerous times of what Christ did. [13] It is translated "on behalf of," and it means that Christ's death was on behalf of us. This is the special basis for our understanding that there is a vicarious element in the Atonement. Not only was it something done as a substitute for something else, but also it was done vicariously for us or on our behalf, so that its benefit can be transferred to us.

The use of this word *huper* means that the worth of His substitutionary suffering can be transferred to our account if we repent and believe.

3. Some wide applications. Since Christ's suffering on behalf of everyone is provisionally redemptive, our present suffering on behalf of others is also provisionally redemptive. This might be the inmost kernel of truth of the Christian faith: that suffering is provisionally redemptive. And it is wide-scoped in its application. It means that our suffering for others can become a means of their turning to God to receive the benefits of Christ's suffering love on the Cross.

This is why Paul says, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Phil. 1:29-30). The word for "granted"

here is *echaristhe*, from *charidzomai*, meaning "to give . . . graciously as a favor." [14] It means that the Philippians had been gifted with the privilege of suffering on Christ's behalf.

Paul is clear about the redemptive value of our suffering when he says to the Colossians, "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (1:24). It might seem strange that something is lacking in Christ's suffering, which Paul says he makes up for through his own sufferings. Yet that is what he says. And what is lacking in Christ's "sufferings" (KJV) or "afflictions" (NIV) is that they were done a long time ago and a long way off. They are of infinite worth, of course, but there is a vast gap of space and time between His sufferings and the life situation of specific people today. But when we suffer for them, it commands their attention. The suffering of Christians can occasion a straying person's turning to the God of suffering love for the forgiveness He offers.

The Governmental theory is also substitutionary. According to this theory, what Christ did became a substitute for something else that would otherwise occur. There is a substitution of the guiltless Christ's suffering for the punishment that those who repent and believe would have received in eternal hell.

However adequately we understand the Atonement, Christ's crucifixion would not have achieved our redemption except for His resurrection-to which we now turn.

Grider, J. Kenneth, *A Wesleyan Holiness Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, ©1994)

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## ENDNOTES

1 These are: "suffer" (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:46; Acts 3:18; 26:23, Rom. 8:17); "suffered" (Luke 24:26; Acts 17:3; Heb. 2:18; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12; 1 Pet. 2:21, 23; 3:18; 4:1); "sufferings" (2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; Heb. 2:9, 10; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:1).

2 These are: "suffer" (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23; Rom. 8:17; Heb. 9:26); "suffered" (Heb. 2:18; 5:8; 13:12; 1 Pet. 2:21; 4:1); "suffering" (Acts 1:3; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:23); "sufferings" (2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:1).

3 These are: "suffer" (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23; Heb. 9:26); "suffered" (Heb. 2:9, 18; 5:8; 13:12; 1 Pet. 2:21, 23; 4:1); "suffering" (Acts 1:3, Heb. 2:10); "sufferings" (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:1).

4 These are: "suffer" (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Mark 8:31; 9:12, Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23; Rom. 8:17; Heb. 9:26); "suffered" (Heb. 2:18; 5:8; 13:12; 1 Pet. 2:21, 23; 4:1); "suffering" (Heb. 2:9, 10); "sufferings" (2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:1).

5 P. Y. Forsyth, *The Word of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1910), 99

6 Ibid

7 Ibid., 100

8 Ibid., 103

9 Ibid., Ibid.

10 Ibid., 99

11 Ibid., 131

12 W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Taps., NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 247

13 This is seen several times in the Gospels. Jesus spoke of His blood "poured out for [huper many]" (Mark 14:24); of His body "given for [huper] you" (Luke 22:19); and of His flesh given "for [huper] the life of the world" (John 6:51), He gives His life "for [huper] the sheep" (10:11) and "for [huper] his friends" (15:13). The apostle Paul frequently uses huper in relation to Christ's atonement. "Christ died for [huper) the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). "Christ died for [huper] us" (v. 8). "[God] did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for [huper] us" (8:32). See also 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:15, 21; Gal. 1:4; and Eph. 5:1-2. Likewise, the writer of Hebrews says, "But we see Jesus . . . now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for [huper] veryone" (2:9). And Peter says, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for [huper] the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). This plethora of the huper usage in the New Testament shows that Scripture frequently teaches that Christ did what He did on Calvary on our behalf.

14 William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 884