

The Governmental Theory: An Expansion

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Hardly any area of Christian doctrine is more widely misunderstood among the holiness movement's clergy than the doctrine of the Atonement. I have had whole seminary classes raise their hands, signifying that they believe Christ paid the penalty for us. It is also widely understood that Christ's death paid the debt we owed to God. Also, it is sometimes thought that, in this area, we can use a smorgasbord of theories.

As I understand Scripture, though, it teaches what Arminians have called the governmental' theory, when that theory is expanded to make room for such matters as ransom and love and God's holiness (as emphasized by P.T. Forsyth).

The governmental theory of the Atonement is at its base the view that Christ suffered for us so that the holy God could forgive us and still govern us justly. The seeds of this theory are in the teachings of James Arminius (1560-1609); 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 treatment of what it can and does consist of.

What It Cannot Incorporate

The governmental theory can incorporate into itself everything that Scripture teaches about the Atonement. It can incorporate into itself, therefore, the salient aspects of several Atonement theories, such as the classical 'ransom' and 'moral influence' theories. These matters will be discussed presently.

At the same time, it is not so eclectic that it has any affinity for the main elements of two of the major Atonement theories: the payment of a debt in the 'satisfaction' theory; and Christ's being punished, as in the 'punishment' theory.

Whereas Calvinists boldly teach 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 as "punishment" (reading "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him"), whereas the KJV uses "chastisement." The KJV, also translated by Calvinists as a matter of fact, 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. The KJV states 27 times that Christ suffered for us. The NASB has the same number;

the NIV has 1 more. The RSV uses some form of the word "suffering" for what Christ did for us 26 times.

The reason why Scripture teaches that Christ suffered for us instead of being punished is, in part, because He was sinless and therefore guiltless. It is also in part 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 forgive; surely a parent could not.

The other aspect of the Atonement theory that the theory cannot incorporate into itself is the main aspect of Anselm's 'satisfaction' theory: 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 it. Roman Catholics teach, even make a sacrament of, the doctrine of penance. This is the doctrine that we do not receive sheer forgiveness, but that we must first do various disciplinary penances in order to receive forgiveness. So Anselm's satisfaction view suits Roman Catholic teaching but not Protestant doctrine. Protestants do not understand that Christ paid a debt for us. That is, we do not formally and ideally believe it, although the idea creeps into Protestant practice--as through the Elvina M. Hall hymn, "Jesus paid it all; All to Him I owe." We might even think of Christ's paying a debt for us because of the Scripture passage that reads, "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 by a debt being paid for us. And the hymn can be sung with a similar understanding. "Jesus paid it all" can mean that He paid the cost of suffering, and that we owe Him everything because He, the altogether sinless One, suffered on our behalf. Yet many Protestants no doubt interpret both the Pauline statement and the Elvina Hall hymn according to the Roman Catholic teaching that Christ's death paid the Father a debt on our behalf. But again, as with punishment, so with this teaching: neither a human being nor God can accept payment for and still forgive the same debt. And forgiveness, sheer forgiveness, is unique to Christianity of all the religions and must be protected.

It might seem to some people that there is scriptural basis for Christ's paying our debt in the Bible's saying that Christ gave His life as a "ransom" (e.g., Mark 10:45). But payment of a debt and ransom are different. This is partly because the debt was thought of as paid to God, whereas Christ's giving His life as a ransom redeems us, buys us back, from the slavery to Satan that sin had gotten us into. Thus Halford E. Luccock says that Christ's death as a ransom is "the price by which people have been delivered from bondage."

What It Can Incorporate

While the governmental theory cannot incorporate into itself the understanding that Christ paid the penalty for us, or that He paid a debt for us, it can indeed incorporate into itself all the various teachings of Scripture and numerous understandings promoted in the other major Atonement theories.

For one thing, it can incorporate into itself Peter Forsyth's emphasis on how God's holiness figures in the Atonement. The basic elements of P. T. Forsyth's understanding of the Atonement can be--and should be--incorporated into the governmental theory. One of Forsyth's contributions, in his great book on the Atonement, "The Work of Christ," is that in this deed, 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." He similarly says, "God made the atonement." 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." So God actually did something for us. Some interpreters have suggested that, since Forsyth was saying things like this in 1910, he might well have influenced Karl Barth's emphasis on the deeds that God actually did on our behalf. This understanding, which emphasizes what is concretely historical and actual, in distinction from what is merely ideational and ethereal, or conceptual, can 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," but that in that death we have "God reconciling himself." He means to say that there was no "third party" who reconciled God and man, but that God Himself did it.

Forsyth also viewed the Atonement as something done for the race, somewhat as Olin Alfred Curtis had done in his 'Christian Faith' of 1905. This racial concept can also surely 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." Surely Paul had something like this in mind when he spoke of the racial significance of both Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; I 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. Forsyth says, "What is meant by the holiness of God is the holy God." Holiness is more than an attribute. It is what God basically is. And it is because of this, for Forsyth, that God had to bring judgment upon sin by Christ's atoning death, before being able, as holy, to forgive sin. Sin defied God as the "Holy One." We would not even respect a God who told us that our sins were simply being overlooked. In the Atonement, the holy God himself became an offering for the whole race, judging sin, making it possible for He Himself to forgive sin without sin's being appraised lightly. This is similar to the governmental theory concept of John Miley and others. It is even more profound, though, than Miley's theory that Christ's death makes it possible for God to forgive the sinner and still maintain His governmental control over us, since we will see that sin is serious since Jesus had to die before it could be forgiven. Forsyth says that Jesus had to go to the Cross because God could not otherwise forgive us and still be the Holy One. Miley's view is Biblical, and Forsyth's is also Biblical. Forsyth's understanding is more profoundly Biblical and theological than Miley's, and it should be incorporated into the governmental theory.

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 us. Christ did indeed "give his life as a ransom for many," as we read in Matt. 20:28 and Mark 10:45 (also see Heb. 9:15). The Greek word for ransom is `lutron,' and it literally means "a means of loosing." Here the accompanying proposition is `anti,' meaning that Christ gave His life as a means of loosing us from Satan's bondage--"instead of" those who accept Him giving their own lives over to Satan's continuing bondage.

Paul uses the ransom figure the only other time it is found in the New Testament in 1 Tim. 2:5-6, 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 statement (which might conceivably suggest that it was done for the elect, but probably refers to the ones who accept the benefits), Paul here says it was done for "all," "indicating that the ransom was provisionally universal."

Moreover, the governmental theory incorporates into itself the emphasis on God's love that is the main point in the Abelardian `moral influence' theory. As long as we are not talking about an emphasis on God's love so extreme as to deprecate His holiness and man's sinfulness and other important Christian emphases, a governmental theorist may and should include an emphasis on God's love. John 3:16 excites 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 from five bleeding wounds 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 have 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 do it--compels us to turn to the Father for forgiveness. The RSV, instead of "compels," translates it with "controls us." The Greek word there means "shuts us up to a given course," so that we can hardly do anything else but respond to such a Golgotha deed.

Moreover, the governmental theory includes the vicarious aspect of the Atonement. That is, it includes the understanding that Christ did something "on behalf of" us. Here the preposition is `huper.' It is used in Scripture numerous times for what Christ did. 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.

It Has Wide Applications

Since Christ's suffering on everyone's behalf 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 its application is wide-scoped. It means that when we suffer for others, it 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." It means that the Philippians had been gifted with the privilege of suffering on Christ's behalf.

Paul is still more 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 afflictions is that they were done a long time ago and a long way off. They are of infinite worth, of course, but there is much space and time difference between His sufferings and the life situations of specific people today. But when we suffer for them, when we stand right up in front of people and suffer on their behalf, it commands their attention. When a mother suffers for an erring son, not sleeping until he gets home at night, praying for him, it commands his attention. When a Christian factory worker does his own work, plus that of a fellow worker, uncomplainingly after the worker has been too drunk on the weekend to return to the workplace, it commands the worker's attention and can become redemptive. When a Christian husband suffers through a wife's un-Christian practices and still cares for her as the prophet Hosea did, the suffering can be redemptive. Such instances of suffering can occasion a straying person's turning to the God of suffering love for the forgiveness that 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. In the punishment theory, His punishment is a substitution for the punishment the elect would have received in hell. In the satisfaction theory, Christ substituted the payment of a debt man owed to God by His meritorious death--earning points since He was sinless and therefore did not deserve it. But there is substitution also in the governmental theory--substitution of a different sort. Here there is a double-dimension substitution. There is substitution in the sense that something Christ did substituted for something that would have been required of the finally impenitent. But then, 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. Scripture speaks of some form of substitution. This is when Scripture uses the proposition `anti,' "instead of," as when we read, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for (anti) many" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45).

Surely then, we Atonement, in our preaching and teaching, are not to tell people that Christ paid the penalty for us or our debt. And surely we are to expand the theory of our tradition to include whatever is scriptural, particularly its teaching of the ransom figure, of God's love in it, and of God's holiness.

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