

# Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement

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Nov 8, 2006

## Hugo Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was a distinguished Dutch jurist and statesman, theologically Arminian, who undertook a rebuttal of the Socinian theory of the atonement. Grotius is often thought to have sought a *via media*, a middle way, between the penal substitutionary theory of the reformed and the view of Socinus. Grotius himself, however, believed that he was simply defending the historical doctrine of the church and never intended that his work be taken as an attempt to bring "balance" to the issue. His principal work is entitled: *Defensio Fidei Catholicae de Satisfactione Christi* ('Defense of the Catholic Faith on the Satisfaction of Christ').

[Due to his political beliefs, Grotius was arrested and imprisoned in 1618. With the help of his wife, he escaped in 1621 and fled to France where he was received and supported by Louis XIII. He tried unsuccessfully to resettle in Holland. He spent his later years in Paris as the ambassador for Queen Christina of Sweden. Grotius died during a shipwreck in August of 1645.]

We will examine the fundamental concepts in Grotius's theology.

### A. *His concept of Divine Law*

Law, according to Grotius, is a positive statute or enactment. "It is not," he says, "something inward in God, or in the Divine will and nature, but is only the effect of his will" (iii). Law is thus a product of God's will by which not even He is bound. He may change it or abrogate it entirely as he sees fit:

"All positive laws . . . are **relaxable** [emphasis mine]. Those who fear that if we concede this we do an injury to God, because we thereby represent him as mutable, are much deceived. For law is not something internal in God, or in the will itself of God, but it is a particular effect or product of his will. But that the effects or products of the Divine will are mutable is very certain. Moreover, in promulgating a positive law which he might wish to relax at some future time, God does not exhibit any fickleness of will. For God seriously indicated that he desired that his law should be valid and obligatory, while yet at the same time he reserved the right of relaxing it, if he saw fit, because this right pertains to a positive law from the very nature of the case, and cannot be abdicated by the Deity" (iii).

W. G. T. Shedd analyzes this statement:

"By this idea and definition of law, Grotius reduces everything back to the arbitrary and optional will of God, and thus differs from Anselm and the Reformers. According to them, the Divine will cannot be separated from the Divine nature, in this manner. God's law is not positive and arbitrary but natural and necessary, because it flows out of his essential being. The Divine will is the executive of the Divine essence. Law, therefore, is not the effect or figment of mere and isolated will, but of will in immutable harmony with truth and right. Both law and penalty, consequently, in the theory of the Reformers are the inevitable and inexorable efflux of the Divine Essence, and contain nothing of an optional or mutable nature. They can no more be "relaxed" or waived than the attributes of omnipotence or omniscience can be" (*Dogmatic Theology*, II:355).

### ***B. His Concept of Punishment***

As with law, the *penalty* that it carries is also a positive and not a natural or necessary component. It does not spring inevitably out of the nature of law nor from God's being, but is attached to the statute by a positive decision of God's will, which decision is mutable and optional. In other words, just as law is capable of being rescinded, so also the penal sanctions connected with it.

That all sin *deserves* punishment, Grotius would not deny. But it does not follow that all sin *must* be punished. Nothing, not even God's nature, necessitates the actual enactment of the penal sanctions of the law. God must disapprove of and condemn sin, but it does not follow that he must punish it. Why he must disapprove and condemn sin will shortly be explained.

### ***C. His Concept of God***

When we speak of God in relationship to the world, man, and sin, Grotius insists that we view him not as an offended party, i.e., as One whose character has been violated by the transgressions of his creature. Neither are we to view God as *creditor* (Anselm) to whom the sinner now owes the debt of satisfaction and obedience. Rather, ***we are to view God as the Supreme Moral Governor of the created order, who always acts in the interests of the common good.***

Grotius then proceeds to describe God's reaction against sin not in terms of retributive justice which arises from God's character, but in terms of ***rectoral justice as related to the interests of public law and order***, by whose maintenance alone the general good can be conserved.

### ***D. His Concept of Atonement***

From the preceding considerations, Grotius contends that it is entirely feasible for God to relax the claims of his law and save the sinner apart from any satisfaction or punishment.

Why, then, if there is nothing in the being or attributes of God that demands strict and exact infliction of punishment on the sinner, does not God dismiss the sinner from all obligation and save him by a mere act of will? In other words, why did Christ have to die at all?

Grotius argues that although God can remit the penalty of sin without satisfaction, as far as his own inner nature is concerned, he cannot do so in view of the welfare of the created order. God has created all things, in relation to which he now stands as Ruler and Governor. The necessities of such a moral order make it *unsafe* for him to exercise his power and right of remission of penalty. Notes Shedd, "on the ground, therefore, that the interests of the creature need it, and not on the ground that the attributes of the Creator require it, must there be an atonement in order to remission" (II:358).

The final cause of atonement, therefore, is *external to God*. The cause is what the interests of the universe require, not what the nature of God might demand. Christ's death is thus primarily a tribute to the sanctity of divine government. His death demonstrates that while God remits (or relaxes) the penalty, he detests sin and desires to deter its spread within the created order. A good governor cannot allow his subjects to sin with impunity, for to do so would encourage them to continue in sin. Thus Christ died as a *penal example* (but not a *penal substitute*), an exhibition of God's displeasure with sin designed to encourage us to forsake our evil ways. Cave explains:

"The concern of this theory is not the expiation of divine justice, but its manifestation; its interest is prospective, not retrospective" [in other words, the stress is on the prevention or deterrence of future sin, not the forgiveness of past sin] (*The Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, 177).

### ***E. His Concept of Satisfaction***

Anselm and the reformers understood vicarious satisfaction to be the substitution of a strict equivalent for the penalty incurred by human sin. The sufferings and death of Christ are equal or adequate to the eternal penalty which all humans deserve. There is no relaxation of the claims of divine justice: the punishment which was deservedly ours was borne in full measure by Christ.

Grotius, on the other hand, while speaking of Christ being "punished" in our place, does not mean what the reformers meant. He simply means that Christ's afflictions were accepted by God in the place of our punishment. His sufferings were not equal in value or kind to what we would have received, but were "accounted" as such by God as he "relaxed" the claims of justice. This theory has been called the ***Acceptilation Theory*** of the atonement. This word refers to the action of a creditor who discharges his debtor without full or literal payment being made. He may cancel the debt entirely by declaring it paid or by receiving a partial payment in lieu of a full one. Thus God is conceived as forgiving humanity or eliminating their debt by receiving instead the payment offered by Christ in his sufferings. His death is not a strict equivalent to what man owed, but God *accepts* it as such. Stevens summarizes:

"Christ's death is the equivalent of our punishment only in the sense that by it the dignity of God's government is as effectively proclaimed and vindicated as it would have been by our punishment" (164).

#### ***F. Theological Heirs of the Grotian Theory of Atonement***

Grotius's theory was adopted with only slight modifications by the Arminian theologians of England such as Daniel Whitby (1638-1726), Samuel Clarke (1675-1728), and Richard Watson (1781-1833).

It gained a large following in America and in time became characteristic of the New England theology as represented by such men as Charles Chauncy (1705-1787; although he antedated the New England theology, being something of its source), Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790), Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (1745-1801), and Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840). Other advocates include Ralph Wardlaw, F. Godet, R. W. Dale, Alfred Cave, John Miley, Robert Shank (*Elect in the Son, Life in the Son*), and H. Orton Wiley (*Christian Theology*).

It would appear that both Socinus and Grotius, although moreso the former than the latter, have a defective view of the divine nature. Berkouwer writes:

"Surely man's sin is apparent in strange and diverse manifestations, within his daily living, in every cranny of his heart. But it is obvious that in all the multiformity of sin there is always a common trait: sin is always against God. Never can we get at the "essence of sin" as long as we ignore this relation of sin and God and regard our sin as a mere "phenomenon" in human living. This fact is apparent when sin is described as enmity and rebellion, disobedience and alienation *from God*" (*Sin*, 242).

#### ***Addendum:***

#### **The Governmental Theory in New England Theology**

The form which the Grotian theory assumed in New England has been called the "Edwardsean" school, unjustly traceable to the senior Edwards but rightly to his son. A summary is provided by E. Amasa Park in his *Introductory Essay*, a prefix to the volume he edited in Boston (1859) entitled *The Atonement*.

"(1) Our Lord suffered pains which were substituted for the penalty of the law, and may be called punishment in the more general sense of that word, but were not, strictly and literally, the penalty which the law had threatened.

(2) The sufferings of our Lord satisfied the general justice of God, but did not satisfy his distributive justice.

(3) The humiliation, pains, and death of our Redeemer were equivalent in meaning to the punishment threatened in the moral law, and thus they satisfied him who is determined to maintain the honor of this law, but they did not satisfy the demands of this law itself for our punishment.

(4) The active obedience, viewed as the holiness, of Christ was honorable to the law, but was not a work of supererogation, performed by our substitute, and then transferred and imputed to us, so as to satisfy the requisitions of the law for our own active obedience.

(5) The law and the distributive justice of God, although honored by the life and death of Christ, will yet eternally demand the punishment of every one who has sinned.

(6) The atonement rendered it consistent and desirable for God to save all who exercise evangelical faith, yet it did not render it obligatory on him, in distributive justice, to save them.

(7) The atonement was designed for the welfare of all men; to make the eternal salvation of all men possible; to remove all the obstacles which the honor of the law and of distributive justice presented against the salvation of the non-elect as well as the elect.

(8) The atonement does not constitute the reason why some men are regenerated, and others not, but this reason is found only in the sovereign, electing will of God. 'Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.'

(9) The atonement is useful on men's account, and in order to furnish new motives to holiness, but is necessary on God's account, and in order to enable Him, as a consistent Ruler, to pardon any, even the smallest sin, and therefore to bestow on sinners any, even the smallest favor" (x-xi).

It was common for advocates of the governmental theory to distinguish three types of justice:

*Commutative justice* - which has reference to property and the payment of debts

*Distributive justice* - which relates to the punishment of crimes and sins

*General, public, or rectoral justice* - by which is meant God's goodness in general, his regard for the good of the universe

It was only in the third sense that Christ satisfied the *justice* of God by his death. Jonathan Edwards, Jr. states:

"This is done by the death of Christ, which supports the authority of the law, and renders it consistent with the glory of God and the good of the whole universe, to pardon the sinner" (38).