

Erroneous Theories of the Atonement

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There have been several theories of the Atonement developed; some by God fearing upright men and others by servants of Satan himself. This writer shall attempt, by God's grace, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to briefly discuss nine of these proposed theories.

The Moral Influence Theory

The first of these theories is commonly known as The Moral Influence Theory. This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance. Thus, the Atonement is not directed "towards God with the purpose of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action." Christ's suffering and death was that of a mere martyr. Inspired by this example we, too, are supposed to be made willing to take up our crosses daily in the service of some good cause to mankind, and thus work out our own salvation. The Atonement this theory teaches is only an influence to persuade and move us to walk in the same paths that Christ walked. It is our walking in these paths which saves us and not the Christ of the cross. Christ is thus not our Savior, but only a friend.

The Refutation

The Bible indeed teaches that God is love (1 John 4:8), but this does not mean that love is God. Love is one of many attributes of God, but there are others. The being of God is best described in John 4:24, "God is Spirit." If God were love and nothing but love, there would have been no need for an Atonement. But, the fact is, that love is only one of many attributes of God; He is also a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), and Christ said, "I am the way, the Truth and the Life." Certainly then He did not mean that He was a living tangible entity which was called "truth," or "way," or "life," and neither does He mean that He is "love." No, love is not God, but only the very essence of His being.

Further, to ascribe one attribute as superior over another is to create an imbalanced God. God is perfectly balanced in His attributes. He is no more Love than He is Holy; no more Holy than He is Just, and no more Just than He is Righteous. For one to declare God to be love, and only love, or to say that the dominating characteristic of God is love, is to be guilty of presenting God with a warped nature.

The love of God can be viewed from two different perspectives, that of God's love of benevolence, and that of God's love of acquiescence. The love of benevolence is toward all mankind. As it is written, "...for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). The love of benevolence is toward all mankind in general. The love of acquiescence, however, is a special love of delight which is manifest towards God's children only. "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 8:44). Those whom the Father draws to Christ are those in whom God delights, for He gives unto them eternal life. Surely God does not love Judas Iscariot who "went to his own place;" surely He does not love the multitudes who are at this very moment weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth in a burning hell, where they will forever more be the objects of God's wrath and anger! If this, my friend, is love, it is a most peculiar way of demonstrating it.

The truth is that God demands punishment of sin. His divine justice must be satisfied, His holiness must be vindicated, and His law must be honored. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered the exact degree of torment that every child of God would have experienced in hell for all eternity, worlds without end. Christ was more than an example, more than a mere martyr; He is salvation and there is no way to escape the judgment of God except through Him; "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

This theory completely denies the spiritual condition of man (Ephesians 2:1; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:9-23), the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:30; 5:18; 8:58; Revelation 1:8, 11), and "necessitates a curtailment or surrender of every other characteristic doctrine of Christianity-inspiration, sin, the deity of Christ, justification, regeneration and eternal retribution."

The Governmental Theory

The second of the theories which this writer will discuss is known as the Governmental theory. It affirms that "because of His absolute sovereignty, God is able to relax, at will, the demands of the law and to forgive men freely without any expiation or sacrifice for sin." According to this theory the primary purpose of the crucifixion was to impress upon men the horror of sin. Christ was to furnish an example of what happened as the result of sin, and to remind men that sin would not go unpunished. The primary object of the punishment of Christ is to instill devotion in men toward their government. Christ did not suffer the exact penalty demanded of God, but something far less. God, however, in His sovereignty, can and did accept the sacrifice as sufficient whether it actually was or not.

The Refutation

First of all, this theory represents God as unjust because it teaches that He punished an innocent person-merely to impress others. Secondly, if what this theory assumes is true, that is, that God can accept a much lesser sacrifice than that which sin demands, then the blood of animals could have been used to remove sin; therefore, the blood of the Son of God was in reality no more meritorious than the blood of bulls and goats, but was

efficacious only because God chose to accept it. Thirdly, this theory presents a light view of sin and its effects upon mankind in that it teaches that man possesses the power in and of himself to change his moral nature. All he needs in order to accomplish this is to surround himself with good influences.

The faulty reasoning of such a theory can be better understood when one considers the individual who conceived it. It was proposed by Hugo Grotius, a Dutch theologian and jurist of the 17th century. It was Mr. Grotius' opinion that God be regarded as the moral Governor of the universe "who must act not according to His emotions or desires, but according to the best interest of all those under His authority."

The Mystical Theory

According to those who hold the Mystical theory, the entire human race is a sort of organism. Mankind is collectively one and is joined together as the cells of protoplasm combine to form a human body. What Christ actually did when incarnated was to infuse His deity into humanity, thus giving humanity the thing needed to counteract and overcome the death and impending corruption which were introduced into the human race through Adam. Men who are saved by faith become partakers of this purified humanity. According to some who assert the mystical theory, fallen humanity was gradually restored by Jesus Christ until, at His death, humanity was again in perfect fellowship with God as it was before the fall in Eden. It is the teaching of this theory that ultimately the entire human race will be restored unto God. Although the Mystical theory has been in existence since the early Greek fathers, it has never claimed many adherents.

The Refutation

This theory errs in several points. First, in that it asserts that the sufferings of Christ and His ultimate death are not essential to His redemptive work. Secondly, because it affirms that all men since Christ will be saved, it leaves unexplained the redemption of the Old Testament saints. This explains why some who adhere to this theory teach that there was no salvation before the time of Christ, and therefore the patriarchs perished. Thirdly, the theory lacks scriptural warrant in proving that Christ became incarnate in order to infuse deity into humanity. The Bible makes no such declaration.

The Middle Theory

Commonly called the Middle theory because it generally follows the "Socinian" theory. It teaches that God may forgive and pardon sin apart from punishment of that sin; that is, He requires no satisfaction, or Atonement. The Middle theory implies that there are persons who have never sinned. These persons will receive pardon upon the basis of repentance only, but they will never receive full pardon. However, what they do receive is sufficient to allow them to escape eternal damnation.

The Refutation

The Middle theory of the Atonement does not explain sufficiently why Christ suffered such severe punishment upon the cross. If God requires no Atonement, then why did Christ suffer? As such, this theory not only presents a warped view of the divine character of Christ, but it does not explain scripture which refers to the work of Christ. If there are persons who have never sinned, how shall they repent and what shall they repent of? In order for repentance to be true repentance, one must turn from sin and to Christ. However, if an individual has never sinned he cannot repent for he has nothing to repent of.

The Socinian Theory

This theory affirms that God is pure benevolence, that His exercising His wrath in justice is incompatible with His character, and that a sinner may be forgiven upon repentance. The work which Christ wrought only made pardon known to man, but did not actually secure it. The pardon of sinners was already prepared in God's benevolent nature, all Christ did was to make it known. The sacrifices in the Old Testament were suitable only to a barbarous age and did not typify the Atonement of Christ by any stretch of the imagination. God, because of sympathy for the weakness of the people, permitted such sacrifices.

The Refutation

This theory, needless to say, is not in harmony with the Bible's description of the nature of sin and is at variance with the teachings of scripture concerning Christ's reward pending the completion of His meritorious work. Instead of Christ's active and passive obedience being the ground and price paid for the sinner's salvation, the Socinian theory asserts that Christ's life and death were only examples to us of the manner in which we should live and submit to God. Finally, the Bible definitely teaches that the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices were types and illustrations of the things to come (Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:17).

The Ethical Theory

According to advocates of this theory, Christ is a universal mediator, who is touched with sympathy for the sick, weary, guilty and hopeless. In the work of the Atonement, there is no imputation or transfer of sin to Christ, neither is His righteousness imputed to all born-again believers. What does happen, is that the race approaches God representatively suffering for sin and repenting through Christ. While man cannot repent in and of himself, still the Atonement of Jesus Christ has no value apart from repentance. In order for God to be just, He must reveal Himself to every sinner. According to the Ethical theory, "The Gospel is preached to a nation, not when within certain geographical boundaries it has been proclaimed at scattered points, but only when in reality all

individuals of all the nations have known it." Each one who is saved must receive salvation through the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel.

The Refutation

A clarification of terms is in order. A mediator is not one who reveals another, but one who intervenes between two persons to bring them into agreement. The Bible declares, "By His stripes we are healed," but this theory sets forth nothing in the sufferings of Christ from which God can justly pardon and accept the sinner. If our sins are not imputed to Christ nor His righteousness to us, then is Christ dead in vain (Galatians 2:21).

This theory errs in that it presents repentance as an effective cause and not as a consequence of the Atonement. Therefore, it sets forth salvation as partly by grace and partly by works. The Ethical Theory is also faulty in that it fails to answer the question of how infants receive salvation, because it holds that regeneration never occurs except through "the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel."

The Arminian Theory

Christ died so that God could offer salvation to all upon the ground of evangelical obedience; perfect legal obedience is not necessary. The Atonement itself was general in its nature without any application of it on God's part. Any individual may accept or reject faith and obedience, thus accepting or rejecting salvation as offered by God by a simple act of volition.

The Refutation

This theory, like many others, fails to provide a satisfaction or appeasement to divine justice and law. It also presents the possibility of failure in that some for whom Christ died may ultimately end up in hell. Scripture is totally against such claims as Christ said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... I give unto them eternal life, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand; My Father which gave them me is greater than all; no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 6:37; 10:27-29). Such scriptures as these plainly teach that the Atonement was not to secure the means of salvation, but to procure salvation itself.

The Lutheran Theory

This theory differs basically in one aspect from the generally accepted "Satisfaction" view of the Atonement. Namely, in that it teaches such was the value of Christ's sacrifice that God could offer salvation to all that believe in His Son.

The Refutation

The Lutheran theory rejects the doctrine of election thus omitting a part of the truth. Even though salvation is not election, election is included in God's all wise and sovereign purpose, "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate ... Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Romans 8:29,33).

The question for those who proclaim the Lutheran theory is not "did Christ die for only those who truly believe?", but "Who shall believe?" According to scripture, those whom God foreknew were predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). It is impossible for one to become like Christ without truly believing in Him as Lord and Savior. Those who believe are those whom God foreknew (Romans 8:29-30).

The General Theory

This theory teaches that Christ died for sinners in general and not for a particular people determined before hand by God. It further teaches that the works of the Atonement and Redemption are not united in one and the same work, but are two separate works. In other words, God chose to reconcile the entire world through the Atonement, but He has selected from the world those who shall be redeemed.

The Refutation

If the entire world has been reconciled through the Atonement, then there are no grounds upon which this reconciliation can be destroyed, for scripture declares, "I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it that men should fear before Him" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Whatever God has reconciled shall remain reconciled, and nothing can be changed or altered concerning it.

This theory of the Atonement is incompatible with those scriptures which teach that Christ's death was confined to the elect (John 10:11, 15, 26-28).