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## **The Bible's View of the Atonement**

J. Gresham Machen

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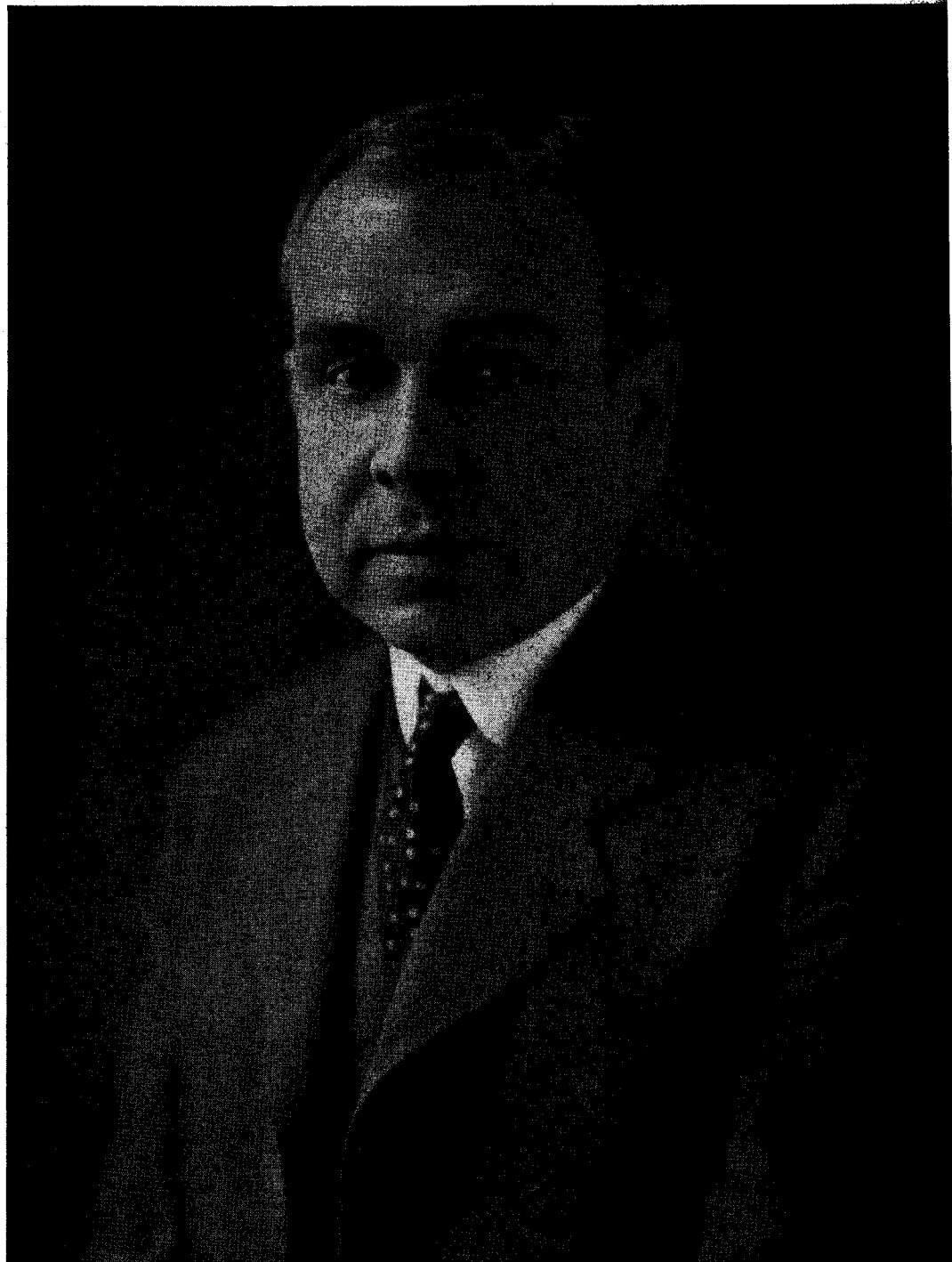
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# The Bible's View of the Atonement

SERMON

By the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the twelfth and last sermon in the series of radio addresses broadcast on the Westminster Seminary Hour during the fall of 1936. It was delivered by Dr. Machen on December 27, 1936, just five days before his death. The manuscript of this sermon was not found with the others of that series, and hence could not be included in the sermons published by THE PRESBYTERIAN GUARDIAN during 1940. It was discovered only a few weeks ago, and is here presented, with real thanksgiving and joy, to our readers on this the eighth anniversary of Dr. Machen's death.)

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 centre 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 governmental theory are, if the substitutionary view is right, not merely inadequate but also false.

Moreover, the moral influence theory and the governmental theory are not even right in what they affirm, to say nothing of their being right in what they deny. They are indeed right in holding that Christ died to bring about a moral change in men, but they are wrong in thinking that that moral change can be brought about if the moral influence theory or the governmental theory is true. They are wrong in not observing clearly that fallen man, dead in trespasses and sins, can never be made to live a holy life merely by the introduction of new motives or new incentives to goodness, but only by the new birth which is the work of the Spirit of God. They are wrong in not observing that that new birth, which is the necessary prerequisite for any living of a holy life by fallen man, is part of the benefit purchased by Christ when He died on the Cross to make sinners right with God by His payment, for them, of the penalty of sin.

I do not mean that all of the advocates of the moral influence theory or the governmental theory of the atonement deny the necessity of the new birth, but I do mean that the denial of it is part of the logical implications of their views. If Christ died on the Cross merely to bring to bear a good moral influence upon men, then it does look as though a good moral influence is all that men really need; and if a good moral influence is all that they need, then it does look as though Jesus was wrong when He said, "Ye must be born again."

Moreover, how feeble is the moral influence exerted by the Cross if the Cross of Christ is only what the advocates of the moral influence theory suppose it to be! If Jesus' death on Calvary was merely a sort of exhibition of the love of God, not necessary in itself but merely necessary in order that our hearts may be touched and we may be moved to salutary tears, then, the moment we find out that that was all it was, it seems to me our tears of repentance are apt to be dried up. It is as though we had sat in some playhouse witnessing some heart-moving tragedy, entering into the struggles of the characters on the stage, imagining that it was all real. But then the curtain has fallen, and out we go into

the work-a-day real world again, half ashamed of the tears that we have shed over what was after all a play. The Cross of Christ might exert some moral influence upon us when we thought that it was intended for something far profounder than the exertion of a moral influence upon us. But the moment we discover that after all it was but an exhibition and that Christ after all did not really do anything upon the Cross that was absolutely necessary for our soul's salvation, then even that moral influence tends to disappear.

The true moral influence of the Cross of Christ really comes, in other words, only when we see that the moral influence theory regarding it is false; it comes only when we see that on the Cross Christ truly bore the penalty of our sins and buried it forever in the depths of the sea. He loves little to whom little is forgiven. If the sin for which we are forgiven is merely the light, easily forgiven thing that the advocates of the moral influence theory of the atonement think it is, then no great spring of gratitude will well up in our souls toward Him who has caused us to be forgiven; but if it is the profound and deadly thing that the advocates of the substitutionary view of the atonement think it is, then all our lives will be one song of gratitude to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us upon the accursed tree.

From every point of view, therefore, the question with which we are now dealing is the most momentous question that could possibly be conceived. Did Christ die on the Cross merely to influence us to holy and sacrificial living? Did He die on the Cross merely to 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 centres 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 toward 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 preëminence 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.



"In the modern world, it may turn out that the most intolerable thing for Christians is to be tolerated."

—T. S. ELIOT