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THE MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY OF THE
ATONEMENT.

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The Cross of Calvary has always been the central figure of Christianity. Without it, no matter how ethical or moral its teachings, no matter how admirable its external forms, Christianity is robbed of its power ^{and} ~~of~~ life; with it, no matter how crudely conceived, Christianity has become the only religion able to establish a satisfying relationship between God and man. Regardless of how absurd or incomprehensible it may appear, a power emanates from the Cross of Jesus Christ which is able to regenerate human life where everything else fails. In every century of the Christian era the followers of Christ have maintained that by his suffering and death, in some mysterious way, a remedy has been provided for human sin. Whatever theorizing we may do about it, the fact still remains unshaken that nothing less than the Cross is able to bless and save men to the highest degree. The fact of the Atonement, then, is the all-important thing, a theory is non-essential. It is well, too, that such is the case as anyone who will accept the fact can realize all the benefits of the

Atonement, while an acceptable theory as to how these benefits were conditioned upon the work of Christ is not always at hand. As a result the great mass of Christians hold fast to the fact and care little about a theory. A satisfactory theory of the Atonement, therefore, is a matter to be settled by the theologian and has little practical value for life.

It is the purpose of this paper, however, to discover if possible the most satisfactory theory of the Atonement. Naturally we would turn to the Bible expecting to find it stated clearly there. And we do find that the means of being forgiven and justified in the sight of God is the main subject of both the Old and the New Testaments, but no consistent theory is there. The Bible emphasizes the practical side entirely. It urges men to accept the means of justification and states what the means are. Since no theory is stated in the Bible it has been necessary for the theologians to work out one for themselves. Although there has not been unanimity in this work, the opinions have centered about two main theories. The one which we shall here call the theory of substitution seems to be based chiefly upon a literal interpretation of Scripture, the other, which for

lack of a better name we call the moral influence theory, is based upon rational considerations and a literal interpretation of texts. There can be no question about the truth of the theory of substitution or the objective aspect, if we accept literally such statements as follow. "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." "While we were yet weak in due season Christ died for the ungodly." "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." "Herein is love, that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sin." If we take these statements on the strength of what they say, it is clear that the teaching of the New Testament is that of substitution, that Jesus Christ gave his life a ransom for many, that the suffering and death of Christ is accepted by God as a penalty for our sins, and that only through the death of the innocent are we to be forgiven. No other conclusion is possible. Yet such a conception as this is impossible to those who have any respect for God.

It is entirely foreign to our idea of God as a God of justice. We cannot at the same time hold to the theory of substitution and the belief that God is just. It is out of harmony at least with our human idea of justice to believe that the innocent can be punished for the guilty. No earthly father would think of punishing one son for the guilt of another. In a strict system of justice everyone is responsible for himself and must answer for his own sins. Our moral sense is shocked and insulted when we are asked to believe that a just God would accept the suffering of the innocent as a penalty for the guilty. Those who support this theory may claim that it was God himself in the person of Christ who became our propitiation. But by what strange logical manipulation can anyone convince himself that a sense of justice will be satisfied when the innocent suffer for the guilty, even when the innocent one is the one to be propitiated? Such a method would be equivalent to this: A father knows his son has sinned. He says to himself, I will forgive my son but I am just and penalty must be paid therefore, I will inflict the penalty upon myself. This is a silly make-shift. Thus the theory of substitution, even the substitution of God himself for the guilty sinner, is contrary to reason. And, finally,

it is difficult to understand in a strict system of justice how the punishment of but one innocent person can adequately atone for the guilt of countless millions.

The theory of substitution, also, destroys the conception that God is love. A God of love would be willing to overlook, forgive and forget, the past sins of a child as soon as that child would indicate that it was sorry for its sins and show a desire to be obedient to its father and try to live a better life. According to this theory, however, the kind, heavenly Father, the God of love, disappears and a despotic tyrant, demanding a penalty for every offense, takes his place. There is no forgiveness for Christ, by a strange system of justice, pays for all sins. From this it follows that God has no further claim upon humanity, and we are carried into universal forgiveness where all men are justified by the death of Jesus Christ and God has no right to demand a second payment. Thus, Jesus Christ becomes the messenger of infinite love and God an uncompromising despot. Furthermore, forgiveness of a person because someone else has paid the penalty is unrighteous. It is impossible for a righteous person to forgive

one who has done him an injury unless the offender shows an attitude of penitence and a present state of character worthy of forgiveness. If a criminal does not regret his crime and does not show a desire nor make an effort to refrain from crime, he is not worthy of forgiveness. One who forgives such a criminal is himself guilty of crime. And so we find that God could not be moral or righteous if he promiscuously forgives all because of the death of Christ without any regard for the attitude and character of those offending. Hence, although the theory of substitution seems to be implied by a literal acceptance of Scripture, it is inconsistent with the conception of God as a God of justice, love and righteousness, and must give place to a theory which accords with our view of God as a perfect moral being.

God as a loving Father and as a perfect moral being, desires above everything else the obedience, love and faith of his children. But they disobey him, they blaspheme his name, and put their trust in almost every other thing. They sin, their sins cannot be forgiven by a righteous God unless they repent and show a purpose to right the wrong. To be forgiven means to be received again into the relationship occupied before the offense. In order to occupy the same rela-

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relationship one must manifest the same traits of character. The problem with God, therefore, is how to bring sinful men back to a relationship of love, obedience and faith. The problem is to bring such an influence to bear upon men that will transform their character and make them. "The essential moral fact in this matter is that if God is to forgive unrighteous men, some way must be found of making them righteous." From what source is to come the influence that will move men to live righteous lives and will be an incentive to them to transform their characters into the likeness of the divine image? God has answered this question by raising up the Cross of Jesus Christ, which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. This power comes from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the revelation that God is a moral being of righteousness and love. When men contemplate the life and death of Jesus Christ, the beauty of his holiness, the infinite depths of his love, they are inspired to become like him. God's great heart of love was wrung by anguish when he beheld the misery of his children due to sin and ignorance. He himself, therefore, came into our midst as a man, he was despised and rejected of men, he endured outrage and violence,

and finally the death of the Cross that he might point out a more excellent way, the way of joy, peace and life-everlasting. All this he did, all that an infinite God could do, because of his love for his children.

The Cross is the picture of a loving father stretching forth his arms of tenderness and sympathy to a wayward son, calling him back from a life of wretchedness and sin to a life of peace and righteousness. "It was infinite love going forth to seek and to save the lost." When men get this vision of God every noble emotion is stirred within them. It calls forth a desire and a determination to turn from the way of sin to the way of righteousness. It establishes man's love, obedience and faith in God. It creates in man the spirit of filial obedience and devotion, and hence it implies immediate forgiveness on the part of God.

Someone may ask here, what necessity or value there is in the death of Christ. Does not his life reveal adequately all the characteristics of God? We answer that the death of Christ indicates that God has left nothing undone that would be of value in manifesting his love. He has gone to the extreme

for "greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends." The death is a fitting culmination to a life of sacrifice.

The Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement seems to satisfy all the demands of reason and is in perfect harmony with our highest ideas of God. The Atonement, then, is not the payment of a debt to God by man, it is God's supreme call to man urging him to righteous living. "No theory of the Atonement can be correct which represents the object of the Atonement by man upon God. It is, on the contrary, God's method of exerting an influence upon man. The object of the Atonement is the purification of man, not the appeasement of God. The theory of substitution is the outgrowth of the conception that God is ~~like~~^a God of wrath. The Moral Influence Theory is the result of the belief that God is a God of love. The life and death of Jesus Christ did not change the wrath of God to the love of God, but it changed man's conception of God from that of a despot to that of a loving father. And it is this fact that God is love that leads men to transform their lives. It is the influence from this conception that redeems and saves humanity.