

What is the Governmental Theory of the atonement?

The Governmental Theory was first codified by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), based upon Abelard's earlier *Moral Influence theory* of the atonement. Grotius sought to unify Reformed doctrine with Socinian teachings proposing that:

- Christ did not die as a substitute for man's sin, did not suffer divine wrath for sin, but suffered as a perfect example of a man who honoured the law.
- This death is inexplicably accepted by God to satisfy the law that sin demands death. Christ's death is accepted instead of man's death.
- As a result of the cross, God relaxed the rule that men should die for sin and the cross becomes a deterrent. The cause of the cross was God's sense of right and wrong, not the need to propitiate wrath. God's justice does not require all the demands of the law to be met, he can alter his requirements as he sees fit.
- An emphasis upon natural moral law as the governing feature of human actions known to the conscience, not as the manifestation of the revealed rule of God's perfect will for man.
- Salvation becomes understanding what to do, and doing it after seeing the cross; i.e. it centres upon man's inherent power.
- God controls the world by moral influence rather than predestination.
- Salvation occurs when men are encouraged to obey moral law rather than God decreeing the salvation of particular sinners.

Like many heresies, the origin is holding a superficial view of God's attributes and over-emphasising his love against his holiness. Thus a loving God must love everyone and provide everyone an equal opportunity to be saved by their own efforts. This thinking leads to Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism and Amyraldism. It also lies behind Grotius' thinking; a loving God wouldn't ask his only Son to die a horrible and sacrificial death for sinners. Out of love Jesus does it to set an example of self-sacrifice. It is uncivilised that God should forgive sins by making Christ a penal substitute. The antidote to these heresies is the clear word of scripture which utterly denies them. Of first importance is a Biblical view of God and his attributes. Thus we start with his perfect holiness, which is the attribute emphasised by scripture ('**Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord**', Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8; this triple declaration is not used of any other divine attribute). This leads to needing a deep understanding of what sin is and why it requires an extreme and infinite sacrifice.

The combination of Abelard's Moral Influence theory and Grotius' Governmental Theory is the Moral Government theology evidenced in heretics like Charles Finney where salvation becomes completely Pelagian; Christ is diminished, man is elevated. It also influenced Baptist Andrew Fuller. Both Finney and Fuller are influencing many evangelicals today.

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