

The Active Obedience of Christ

J. Gresham Machen

LAST Sunday afternoon, in outlining the Biblical teaching about the work of Christ in satisfying for us the claims of God's law, I said nothing about one very important part of that work. I pointed out that Christ by His death in our stead on the cross paid the just penalty of our sin, but I said nothing of another thing that He did for us. I said nothing about what Christ did for us by His active obedience to God's law. It is very important that we should fill out that part of the outline before we go one step further.

Suppose Christ had done for us merely what we said last Sunday afternoon that He did. Suppose He had merely paid the just penalty of the law that was resting upon us for our sin, and had done nothing more than that; where would we then be? Well, I think we can say — if indeed it is legitimate to separate one part of the work of Christ even in thought from the rest — that if Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and had done nothing more we should be at best back in the situation in which Adam found himself when God placed him under the covenant of works.

That covenant of works was a probation. If Adam kept the law of God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. If he disobeyed he was to have death. Well, he disobeyed, and the penalty of death was inflicted upon him and his posterity. Then Christ by His death on the cross paid that penalty for those whom God had chosen.

Well and good. But if that were all that Christ did for us, do you not see that we should be back in just the situation in which Adam was before he sinned? The penalty of his sinning would have been removed from us because it had all been paid by Christ. But for the future the attainment of eternal life would have been dependent upon our perfect obedience to the law of God. We should simply have been back in the probation again.

Moreover, we should have been back in that probation in a very much less hopeful way than that in which Adam was originally placed in it. Everything was in Adam's favour when he was placed in the probation. He had been created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He had been created positively good. Yet despite all that, he fell. How much more likely would we be to fall — nay, how certain to fall — if all that Christ had done for us were merely to remove from us the guilt of past sin, leaving it then to our own efforts to win the reward which God has pronounced upon perfect obedience!

But I really must decline to speculate any further about what might have been if Christ had done something less for us than that which He has actually done. As a matter of fact, He has not merely paid the penalty of Adam's first sin, and the penalty of the sins which we individually have committed, but also He has positively merited for us eternal life. He was, in other words, our representative both in penalty paying and in probation keeping. He paid the penalty of sin for us, and He stood the probation for us.

That is the reason why those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ are in a far more blessed condition than was Adam before he fell. Adam before he fell was righteous in the sight of God, but he was still under the possibility of becoming unrighteous. Those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ not only are righteous in the sight of God but they are beyond the possibility of becoming unrighteous. In their case, the probation is over. It is not over because they have stood it successfully. It is not over because they have themselves earned the reward of assured blessedness which God promised on condition of perfect obedience. But it is over because Christ has stood it for them; it is over because Christ has merited for them the reward by His perfect obedience to God's law.

I think I can make the matter plain if I imagine a dialogue between the law of God and a sinful man saved by grace.

'Man,' says the law of God, 'have you obeyed my commands?'

'No,' says the sinner saved by grace. 'I have disobeyed them, not only in the person of my representative Adam in his first sin, but also in that I myself have sinned in thought, word and deed.'

'Well, then, sinner,' says the law of God, 'have you paid the penalty which I pronounced upon disobedience?'

'No,' says the sinner, 'I have not paid the penalty myself; but Christ has paid it for me. He was my representative when He died there on the cross. Hence, so far as the penalty is concerned, I am clear.'

'Well, then, sinner,' says the law of God, 'how about the conditions which God has pronounced for the attainment of assured blessedness? Have you stood the test? Have you merited eternal life by perfect obedience during the period of probation?'

'No,' says the sinner, 'I have not merited eternal life by my own perfect obedience. God knows and my own conscience knows that even after I became a Christian I have sinned in thought, word and deed. But although I have not merited eternal life by any obedience of my own, Christ has merited it for me by His perfect obedience. He was not for Himself subject to the law. No obedience was required of Him for Himself, since He was Lord of all. That obedience, then, which He rendered to the law when He was on earth was rendered by Him as my representative. I have no righteousness of my own, but clad in Christ's perfect righteousness, imputed to me and received by faith alone, I can glory in the fact that so far as I am concerned the probation has been kept and as God is true there awaits me the glorious reward which Christ thus earned for me.'

Such, put in bald, simple form, is the dialogue between every Christian and the law of God. How gloriously complete is the salvation wrought for us by Christ! Christ paid the penalty, and He merited the reward. Those are the two great things that He has done for us.

Theologians are accustomed to distinguish those two parts of the saving work of Christ by calling one of them His passive obedience and the other of them His active obedience. By His passive obedience — that is, by suffering in our stead — He paid the penalty for us; by His active obedience — that is, by doing what the law of God required — He has merited for us the reward.

I like that terminology well enough. I think it does set forth as well as can be done in human language the two aspects of Christ's work. And yet a danger lurks in it if it leads us to think that one of the two parts of Christ's work can be separated from the other.

How shall we distinguish Christ's active obedience from His passive obedience? Shall we say that He accomplished His active obedience by His life and accomplished His passive obedience by His death? No, that will not do at all. During every moment of His life upon earth Christ was engaged in His passive obedience. It was all for Him humiliation, was it not? It was all suffering. It was all part of His payment of the penalty of sin. On the other hand, we cannot say that His death was passive obedience and not active obedience. On the contrary, His death was the crown of His active obedience. It was the crown of that obedience to the law of God by which He merited eternal life for those whom He came to save.

Do you not see, then, what the true state of the case is? Christ's active obedience and His passive obedience are not two divisions of His work, some of the events of His earthly life being His active obedience and other events of His life being His passive obedience; but every event of His life was both active obedience and passive obedience. Every event of His life was a part of His payment of the penalty of sin, and every event of His life was a part of that glorious keeping of the law of God by which He earned for His people the reward of eternal life. The two aspects of His work, in other words, are inextricably intertwined. Neither was performed apart from the other. Together they constitute the wonderful, full salvation which was wrought for us by Christ our Redeemer.

We can put it briefly by saying that Christ took our place with respect to the law of God. He paid for us the law's penalty, and He obeyed for us the law's commands. He saved us from hell, and He earned for us our entrance into heaven. All that we have, then, we owe unto Him. There is no blessing that we have in this world or the next for which we should not give Christ thanks.

As I say that, I am fully conscious of the inadequacy of my words. I have tried to summarise the teaching of the Bible about the saving work of Christ; yet how cold and dry seems any mere human summary — even if it were far better than mine — in comparison with the marvellous richness and warmth of the Bible itself. It is to the Bible itself that I am going to ask you to turn with me next Sunday afternoon. Having tried to summarise the Bible's teaching in order that we may take each part of the Bible in proper relation to other parts, I am going to ask you next Sunday to turn with me to the great texts themselves, in order that we may test our summary, and every human summary, by what God Himself has told us in His Word. Ah, when we do that, what refreshment it is to our souls! How infinitely superior is God's Word to all human attempts to summarise

its teaching! Those attempts are necessary; we could not do without them; everyone who is really true to the Bible will engage in them. But it is the very words of the Bible that touch the heart, and everything that we — or for the matter of that even the great theologians — say in summary of the Bible must be compared ever anew with the Bible itself.

This afternoon, however, just in order that next Sunday we may begin our searching of the Scriptures in the most intelligent possible way, I am going to ask you to glance with me at one or two of the different views that men have held regarding the cross of Christ.

I have already summarised for you the orthodox view. According to that view, Christ took our place on the cross, paying the penalty of sin that we deserved to pay. That view can be put in very simple language. We deserved eternal death because of sin; Jesus, because He loved us, took our place and died in our stead on the cross. Call that view repulsive if you will. It is indeed repulsive to the natural man. But do not call it difficult to understand. A little child can understand it, and can receive it to the salvation of his soul.

Rejecting that substitutionary view, many men have advanced other views. Many are the theories of the atonement. Yet I do think that their bewildering variety may be reduced to something like order if we observe that they fall into a very few general divisions.

Most common among them is the theory that Christ's death upon the cross had merely a moral effect upon man. Man is by nature a child of God, say the advocates of that view. But unfortunately he is not making full use of his high privilege. He has fallen into terrible degradation, and having fallen into terrible degradation he has become estranged from God. He no longer lives in that intimate relationship of sonship with God in which he ought to live.

How shall this estrangement between man and God be removed; how shall man be brought back into fellowship with God? Why, say the advocates of the view of which we are now speaking, simply by inducing man to turn from his evil ways and make full use of his high privilege as a child of God. There is certainly no barrier on God's side; the only barrier lies in man's foolish and wicked heart. Once overcome that barrier and all will be well. Once touch man's stony heart so that he will come to see again that God is his Father, once lead him also to overcome any fear of God as though God were not always more ready to forgive than man is to be forgiven; and at once the true relationship between God and man can be restored and man can go forward joyously to the use, in holy living, of his high privilege as a child of the loving heavenly Father.

But how can man's heart be touched, that he may be led to return to his Father's house and live as befits a son of God? By the contemplation of the cross of Christ, say the advocates of the view that we are now presenting. Jesus Christ was truly a son of God. Indeed, He was a son of God in such a unique way that He may be called in some sort the Son of God. When therefore God gave Him to die upon the cross and when He willingly gave Himself to die, that was a wonderful manifestation of God's love for sinning, erring

humanity. In the presence of that love all opposition in man's heart should be broken down. He should recognise at last the fact that God is indeed his Father, and recognising that, he should make use of his high privilege of living the life that befits a child of God.

Such is the so-called 'moral-influence theory' of the atonement. It is held in a thousand different forms, and it is held by thousands of people who have not the slightest notion that they are holding it.

Some of those who have held it have tried to maintain with it something like a real belief in the deity of Christ. If Christ was really the eternal Son of God, then the gift of Him on the cross becomes all the greater evidence of the love of God. But the overwhelming majority of those who hold the moral-influence view of the atonement have given up all real belief in the deity of Christ. These persons hold simply that Jesus on the cross gave us a supreme example of self-sacrifice. By that example we are inspired to do likewise. We are inspired to sacrifice our lives, either in actual martyrdom in some holy cause or in sacrificial service. Sacrificing thus our lives, we discover that we have thereby attained a higher life than ever before. Thus the cross of Christ has been the pathway that leads us to moral heights.

Read most of the popular books on religion of the present day, and then tell me whether you do not think that that is at bottom what they mean. Some of them speak about the cross of Christ. Some of them say that Christ's sufferings were redemptive. But the trouble is they hold that the cross of Christ is not merely Christ's cross but our cross; and that while Christ's sufferings were redemptive our sufferings are redemptive too. All they really mean is that Christ on Calvary pointed out a way that we follow. He hallowed the pathway of self-sacrifice. We follow in that path and thus we obtain a higher life for our souls.

That is the great central and all-pervading vice of most modern books that deal with the cross. They make the cross of Christ merely an example of a general principle of self-sacrifice. And if they talk still of salvation, they tell us that we are saved by walking in the way of the cross. It is thus, according to this view, not Christ's cross but our cross that saves us. The way of the cross leads us to God. Christ may have a great influence in leading us to walk in that way of the cross, that way of self-sacrifice; but it is our walking in it and not Christ's walking in it which really saves us. Thus we are saved by our own efforts, not by Christ's blood after all. It is the same old notion that sinful man can save himself. It is that notion just decked out in new garments and making use of Christian terminology.

Such is the moral-influence theory of the atonement. In addition to it, we find what is sometimes called the governmental theory. What a strange, compromising, tortuous thing that governmental theory is, to be sure!

According to the governmental view, the death of Christ was not necessary in order that any eternal justice of God, rooted in the divine nature, might be satisfied. So far the governmental view goes with the advocates of the moral-influence theory. But, it holds,

the death of Christ was necessary in order that good discipline might be maintained in the world. If sinners were allowed to get the notion that sin could go altogether unpunished, there would be no adequate deterrent from sin. Being thus undeterred from sin, men would go on sinning and the world would be thrown into confusion. But if the world were thus thrown into moral confusion that would not be for the best interests of the greatest number. Therefore God held up the death of Christ on the cross as an indication of how serious a thing sin is, so that men may be deterred from sinning and so order in the world may be preserved.

Having thus indicated — so the governmental theory runs — how serious a thing sin is, God proceeded to offer salvation to men on easier terms than those on which He had originally offered it. He had originally offered it on the basis of perfect obedience. Now He offered it on the basis of faith. He could safely offer it on those easier terms, and He could safely remit the penalty originally pronounced upon sin, because in the awful spectacle of the cross of Christ He had sufficiently indicated to men that sin is a serious offence and that if it is committed something or other has to be done about the matter in order that the good order of the universe may be conserved.

Such is the governmental theory. But do you not see that really at bottom it is just a form of the moral-influence theory? Like the moral-influence theory, it holds that the only obstacle to fellowship between man and God is found in man's will. Like the moral-influence theory it denies that there is any eternal justice of God, rooted in His being, and it denies that the eternal justice of God demands the punishment of sin. Like the moral-influence theory it plays fast and loose with God's holiness, and like the moral-influence theory, we may add, it loses sight of the real depths of God's love. No man who holds the light view of sin that is involved in these man-made theories has the slightest notion of what it cost when the eternal Son of God took our place upon the accursed tree.

People sometimes say, indeed, that it makes little difference what theory of the atonement we may hold. Ah, my friends, it makes all the difference in the world. When you contemplate the cross of Christ, do you say merely, with modern theorists, 'What a noble example of self-sacrifice; I am going to attain favour with God by sacrificing myself as well as He.' Or do you say with the Bible, 'He loved me and gave Himself for me; He took my place; He bore my curse; He bought me with His own most precious blood.' That is the most momentous question that can come to any human soul. I want you all to turn with me next Sunday afternoon to the Word of God in order that we may answer that question aright.