

“Rethinking the Cross; Understanding Atonement Theology: Moral Influence Theory.”
First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White
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Hear the Word of the Lord from 1 John 4:7-21 **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”** This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Here in these few short verses, we get a glimpse of what God is like... you probably picked up on it since John repeats one word more than 27 times here... LOVE. God is love. To know love is to know God. This is one of the central texts that scholars rely on when they talk about what it means that the cross of Christ atones for us, bringing us into right relationship with God. John tells us that God loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

This morning we're going to turn the gem, focusing of the cross from a new angle. Now please remember, that the sermons in this Lenten series DO NOT stand alone but are intended to be held together with all the others from Ash Wednesday all the way through to Resurrection Sunday. Please, please make every effort to turn the gem with us each week. If you miss a sermon, just head over to the website to catch up. This matters because, as Leanne Van Dyke reminds us, single atonement theories can't fully explain what happened on the cross. They simply seek to express in limited language and metaphor the complex reality of God's redemptive action. Each of them offer us a picture of truth and goodness to help us understand what it means that Jesus died for us. She writes, **"There was some kind of victory that took place, some kind of power shift in the universe, some kind of ransom paid, some kind of healing initiated, some ultimate kind of love displayed, some kind of dramatic rescue effected... and all because of a death on a cross. No theory can fully explain it. Rather, the range of atonement theories attempt to focus our attention, illuminate the truth, and point beyond themselves to God."**

Today our gem will focus on the cross through the **Moral Influence/Moral Exemplar Theory**. This atonement theory declares that Jesus' life and death on the cross serve as THE perfect model of self-sacrificial love. Want to know what love really looks like? Look at the cross. Wondering what true moral perfection really is? Look to the cross. In this theory, the cross does two things simultaneously: Jesus gives us a perfect example of persuasive love AND Jesus shows us how we ought to love one another. As we follow Jesus' example of self-sacrificial love and morality, we develop a transformed character; what we often call the process of becoming like Christ, or the process of sanctification. This theory argues that on the cross, God's love is revealed to atone for us and transform us.

Now this theory of atonement didn't come out of nowhere. In fact, some of the earliest writings in the post-Apostolic church point to the followers of Jesus understanding and articulating atonement in this very same way. You can find Moral Influence theory in the writings like the *Epistle of Diogenes*, the *Shepherd*

of Hermas, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, in the letters of Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome, and Athanasius of Alexandria. Here's how Clement of Rome put it in the 2nd century, **"For Christ left us a new testament: "I give you my love." What is the nature and extent of this love? For each of us he laid down his life, the life which was worth the whole universe, and he requires in return that we should do the same for each other."**
-Clement of Rome

Christ showed us perfect love in laying down his life... and we should do the same for each other. This is, in a nutshell, Moral Influence/Moral Exemplar theory. It is what we find in our reading of 1 John 4... God is love... a love that lays down his life... and love that casts out fear and punishment... a love that makes us alive in Christ and offers us divine union with God. A love that demands we love one another. N.T. Wright explains that **"the New Testament insists, in book after book, that when Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, something happened as a result of which the world is a different place. And the early Christians insisted that when people are caught up in the meaning of the cross, they become part of this difference."**

Now, the most articulate defender of the Moral Exemplar theory was the early church father, Peter Abelard (1079–1142), in response to Anselm of Canterbury's Satisfaction Theory of atonement, which had become quite popular in the early 12th century. We'll talk about Satisfaction Theory in a couple weeks, but it basically comes down to this: Jesus's death is understood to satisfy God's demand for justice. Christ makes satisfaction or reparations for humanity's sin by dying on the cross, balancing the scales of justice once and for all. Now, it's not that Abelard didn't agree that the death of Christ satisfied the demand for justice, he just believed that Satisfaction theory, ON ITS OWN, was NOT sufficient to explain God's character. Yes, God is just... but so much more than that, God chooses to reveal himself as love.

According to Abelard, **"Jesus died as the demonstration of God's love,"** a demonstration which transforms the hearts and minds of the sinful humanity,

turning them back to God. Because let's be clear here, it's not that God needed to be reconciled toward humanity... look throughout the New Testament, not once does it suggest that God needs to be reconciled back to us... no, it's that humanity needs to be reconciled back to God. Moral Influence theory argues that it is in coming to truly see how much God loves us—how much we are worth to God—that then helps us recognize our sinfulness, repent and surrender, and be reconciled back to God. Or as Paul put it, *“it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance.”* The cross is the demonstration of divine love that truly changes us.

In this way, Moral Influence theory focuses on changing people's perceptions and projections of God... rather than thinking of God as harsh, punitive, or offended by humanity, we are to remember that the character of God is first and foremost that of love. A love that shows us that evil and violence are conquered, NOT by inflicting more violence, but by disarming and conquering violence through self-sacrificial love. It is what Martin Luther King Jr was driving at when he said, **“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”** The cross is God driving out hate and darkness by the power of love.

Many theologians would follow Abelard, building upon this train of thought—folks like Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Stanley Hauerwas, John Yoder, Karl Barth, and Elenore Stump. And they would draw our attention to the many, many biblical texts beyond 1 John 4 that speak of the cross as this demonstration of perfect love and call to discipleship.

- **“Greater love has no one than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends.” -Jesus, John 15:13**
- **“But God proves his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” -Romans 5:8**
- **“By this we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” -1 John 3:16**

- **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.” -Jesus, John 10:14-15**
- **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” -Galatians 2:20**
- **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” -Jesus, John 13:34-35**

Now, I imagine that for nearly all of us, this particular atonement theory really resonates. It is at once compelling and challenging. All of us have likely looked upon the cross at one point or another and been captured by a love that is so much bigger than we can imagine. And at the same time, there are some very good critiques for Moral Influence theory, particularly as a stand-alone theory of atonement:

1. Some wonder that if this theory is really true, then what are we to say about all the people who lived before Christ came upon the earth and died on the cross? They didn't have Jesus to show them this 'demonstration of love' so what does this mean for them? How are they atoned by this perfect example they never had?
2. Others are quick to point out that this theory is obviously very true and absolutely right... but they wonder HOW exactly does this model of God's love forgive us for our sins? Even if correct, the theory just can't stand alone; it's just too simple, too mysterious. There are many scholars who argue it isn't really a proper atonement theory... since atonement theories need to specifically address *how* the cross saves humanity. What is it that atones for our sins? What exactly reconciles us back to God? Now, Moral Influence theologians would argue that it is the transformative experience of coming to recognize God's love that

atones, but other theologians would argue that this is too simple an explanation.

It was out of these two main critiques that theologians like Karl Barth and Eleonore Stump built onto Moral Influence theory by talking about what is called **“Absolute Revelation.”** It can basically be distilled down to this: what humanity needs to be saved is not simply a forgiveness of sins, is not simply a reconciliation with God, it’s not simply freedom over the devil/evil/powers, it’s not simply freedom over our own flesh... that’s all good and all important... but if God does not actually fully give God’s self to us, fully reveal God to us so that we can come to know and love this God... then Barth would argue, we can’t *really* be saved.

Barth continually points out that having your sins forgiven and being liberated from sin and death are simply the means to one great end; namely being in relationship with God. So, Barth would ask us, “what is the point of having your sins forgiven? So what? What does that then lead you to?” The end goal is ALWAYS union with the God that has forgiven our sins... the whole point of salvation is loving union with our God. As the Westminster Catechism declares, **“Mankind’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”** The point is not sin-management... the point is divine union; the point is to KNOW God. So, for Barth, he’d say that the precise moment, when we come to KNOW who God is, happens on the cross.

Eleonore Stump writes about this very well. She uses the analogy of a couple engaged to be married. They’re in love and both eager to get married, but unfortunately there are all these issues that get in the way of their wedding. They can’t get a license in time, they don’t qualify for a loan to get a house because the bride’s credit is bad, there are issues with the family that prevent the wedding date they want, they can’t afford the reception. BUT then the groom goes out of his way, and he gets the license taken care of, and he finds the funds they need to buy a house, he takes care of all the credit and legal problems, and he figures out how to pay for the wedding. But let’s say the groom does all of this, gets rid of all

the obstacles, to make it possible for them to finally get married, but then he doesn't actually show up for the wedding.

Eleonore Stump says that this is how many theologians think about atonement and salvation... they think about, talk about, and point out how God removes all the barriers that get in the way of our intimacy with God but then they fail to point to the place where God is intimate with us. Stump would say that the cross is the place where God shows up to marry his bride. God reveals himself in perfect love. If we don't point to that, then what is the good in removing all the obstacles? If we aren't captured by the love of God revealed in Christ, if we aren't drawn into loving union with this God, then what is the point of having our sins forgiven?

The cross is the Absolute Revelation of God to humanity. This is how God chose to be revealed, SO THAT we would know who God is and what God is like. And the cross... it doesn't just reconcile us to God, it also reconciles us to one another as we follow the example of Christ to love one another with that same self-sacrificing love. Like 1 John reminds us, "anyone who loves God must love his brother and sister."

And so, how do we do that? How do we, as followers of Christ, imitate this self-sacrificial love? We chose to live what Christians often call a "**cruciform life.**" We don't avoid the cross, but instead model our whole lives by it. We throw open our arms to the pain and suffering of others, we vulnerably serve and love those in need (seeking nothing in return), we reach across the aisle in kindness to those we don't agree with and even those we consider our enemies, we get comfortable with grief and sorrow, we stand in solidarity with those who are bullied and marginalized and oppressed, we choose loving kindness over being right, we extend an invitation of love to any and all who are desperate for God's embrace. We live like this (arms spread out wide). It is hard? Yes. But is it possible? Because of the cross of Christ, it is. We love because he first loved us. Amen.