

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE 5

Limited Atonement (Part 2)

We have seen that sin requires a substitutionary sacrifice for forgiveness. Sin must be paid for. God must be atoned (appeased) and his wrath and justice satisfied. Jesus is the one who pays that price with his own blood. His sacrifice results from the love and mercy of God in grace to unworthy sinners. But who did Christ die for? Did he die for everyone? Can the love of God and the blood of Christ be upon people in Hell because Christ died for them? Can God fail in anything he does (ie die for sinners who then go to Hell)? These are the questions raised by this subject.

Definition:

Jesus, as God's son, gave his life as a sacrifice to redeem only those who were given to him by his Father in the eternal covenant. These are the elect.

Options on the extent of the atonement

1. Universalism

Christ died for everyone and all are saved.

Examples: Karl Barth, William Barclay, C.H. Dodd.

2. Unlimited or General Atonement

- Christ died for everyone, salvation is secured for the whole human race because God loves everyone.
- This is not affected by the lack of faith in individuals. Christ's death is even for those who do not believe.
- Those who believe receive the benefits of Christ's salvation.
- Those who do not believe are lost.

Example: Arminianism (e.g. Methodism), Lutheranism

3. Limited or Definite Atonement (or Particular Redemption)

- Christ's death was efficient for every elect person.
- Christ did not die for the lost who are sinners.

Examples: Augustine, The Reformers, The Puritans, The 39 Articles (Anglican), Calvinism, The Baptist Confession of Faith, Presbyterian confessions of faith (including the Westminster Confession and Catechisms).

(Some like Peter Lombard, taught that Christ's death was sufficient for all (ie its scope was infinite) but only efficient for some, the elect (ie its application).

4. The Mediate Position: Amyraldianism (Hypothetical Universalism/Redemption)

- Proposed by Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) and colleagues at the Saumur Academy in France. (See Appendix)
- Favoured by some Reformed theologians (H. Heppel, R. Baxter, S. Hopkins, A. H. Strong, L. S. Chafer). It was stringently resisted by the great reformed theologians (C. Hodge, W.G.T. Shedd, B.B. Warfield, A. A. Hodge, A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck etc). It was condemned in the Swiss Formula Consensus Helvetica of 1675.
- Amyraut tried to soften the edges of orthodox Reformed theology to relieve difficulties with the Roman Catholics and particularly the Lutherans. He thought that it would also reconcile scriptures speaking of God's compassion for sinners with passages which taught that God was angry with reprobates.
- It explained double predestination by softening the harsher aspects. Grace is made universal in the provision of salvation, but is particular in the application, selective in reality. This provides the basis for a hypothetical universal predestination and opens the door to Arminianism despite the fact that Amyraut condemned it. It is a weakened form of Reformed theology which is popular today. Amyraut desired to maintain the standards of the Synod of Dort but show that God loved everyone. The result was heresy which spawned a number of other evils. It demeans Christ's work in that it opens a possibility of salvation instead of Christ actually saving individuals (like Arminianism).

In other words, God loves everyone and appoints all men to be saved, but they must repent and believe. No one is excluded, there are no reprobates as such. Jesus died to make this possible. However, man cannot and will not believe without assistance, so God gives the Holy Spirit to some only (the elect). The inconsistency is obvious.

Limited Atonement

The key issue is: does Christ save all those he intends to save, all those he desires to have eternal life? Again, the question of the character and attributes of God is at stake. Is it possible for God to desire something and not achieve it? Of course not! The God of the Bible is omnipotent, all powerful; he knows the end from the beginning. It is impossible that this God should desire something and then fail to implement it (Eccles 3:14).

But what of Christ's death? As well as demeaning the personality of God, how can we slight the death of Christ? Jesus' sacrifice is the most important event in the universe. It caused angels to shudder and interrupted the praise of God in heaven by causing silence for 'half an hour' (Rev 8:1). Let's be clear, on the cross God died for a rebellious and sinful creation. The death of Christ is an awesome matter.

Now how can that death be wasted? How can the blood of Christ, the most precious object in the Cosmos, be wasted? If you believe in unlimited atonement then this is the outcome: Christ died for people who were not saved. If God loves everyone, and provides the blood of Christ for everyone (as some say) then God's love and Christ's blood will be present in Hell upon the sinners who refused to believe the Gospel. This is an appalling thing to conceive.

The problem

Everyone who maintains a Biblical based faith believes that not everyone will be converted. This is simply a Biblical fact which is accepted by all true Christians. How then do we explain this? There is a limit on those being saved. Who controls this limit, God or man?

The Arminian criticises the Calvinist by deriding the term limited atonement. Though not the best term that could have been chosen, the intention was to show that Jesus' death was selective. He died for a specific group of people only. It is not limited in power but in scope. In the Arminian system, however, the power of God is what is limited. God exerts power to save men, only to be rejected by some. Jesus dies for all men only to have the value of his death wasted by some. It makes salvation only possible. It does not actually save anyone. That is a real curtailing of God's power. God's design and purpose is both unlimited, but also indefinite in this system.

If the value of every soul's sinfulness was placed on Christ and then he died for that universal value, then that portion of his suffering represented by those in Hell, was wasted. He died for nothing. But further, this portion of suffering would then be required twice: once by Jesus and once by the soul in Hell. This is unjust and cannot be true. Jesus could not die for people in Hell.

Arminianism leads logically to Universalism

- Atonement is satisfaction for sin, it restores the relationship between man and God by paying our debt of sin. If Christ did this for everyone, ie paid everyone's debt, then everyone must be saved!
- Jesus died as our substitute. If he did not die as the representative of the elect only, then he died vicariously for all men. Everyone must, therefore be saved!
- If the texts which speak of Jesus dying for the world are interpreted in an Arminian way, then everyone must be saved.
- If the verses teaching that Jesus died for all men are interpreted in an Arminian way, then all men must be converted - including all the people in the past whom God said died in condemnation (eg the Canaanite nations, Sodom etc) and also including those whom Jesus specifically condemned (eg Chorazin and Capernaum).
- Jesus' death is the only medication for sin. If this is applied in an unlimited fashion to all men, then all men must be cured of their sinfulness. If they are not cured, then Christ's blood is not an effective treatment!

The value of Christ's sacrifice

No one doubts that the value of Jesus' life is not minimised by the term limited atonement. Jesus' life's value is infinite and easily able to cover the cost of every human being. Limited atonement is not suggesting that Christ's sacrifice had only enough value to save a portion of the human race. No! It is simply that God, in his eternal purpose and good pleasure chose to apply the value of Jesus' sacrifice to a specific number of people.

The true scope of Jesus' death

In a word, Jesus died for his people.

- This redemption is actual and not potential. It certainly saves those it intends to save.
- The atonement was intended for the elect only.
- God's plan cannot be frustrated, he will have his people, chosen from eternity.
- Christ's intercession is the other half of his sacrificial offering; the extent of one must equal the other. Christ's intercession is clearly limited even by Christ himself (Jn 17:9). He could not have paid the price for everyone, but then only pray for some.
- Scripture clearly identifies the design of atonement and the application of it to men. The purpose of God in salvation was not to make it merely possible, but to actually redeem a people and provide a bride for Christ. (Matt 18:11; Rm 5:10; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:4, 3:13; Eph 1:7). The design was not conditional upon faith and repentance in man since both were purchased by Christ in his death and are applied by the Holy Spirit. This was necessary to make actual salvation a certainty for the people it was intended for (Rm 2:4; Gal 3:13-14; Eph 1:3-4, 2:8; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 3:5-6)

Scriptures

Jesus died for a limited specific number:

- *You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. (Matt 1:21)*
- *The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. (Jn 10:11,15)*
- *Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock ... which he obtained with the blood of his own son. (Acts 20:28)*
- *He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all ... God's elect. (Rm 8:32-35)*
- *Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it. (Eph 5:25-27)*
- *Redemption only includes those redeemed out of every tribe and nation (Rev 5:9).*

Jesus definitely saves all those he intends to save:

He shall see his seed. He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied. (Isa 53:10-11)

All that the Father gives me, will come to me ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. (Jn 6:37,39)

Father, I will that they also, whom thou has given me, be with me where I am. (Jn 17:24)

Behold, I, and the children which God has given me. (Heb 2:13, note that this scene takes place in the glory.) See also Heb 9:11-12, 10:14.

Christ has redeemed (not potentially) from the curse of the law. (Gal 3:13)

Objections

The only possible question in the light of all this is how to explain the universalistic texts, ie those verses which seem to imply that salvation is for everyone.

Now we have looked at this in depth in other papers, and particularly mentioned them in the introduction to the Calvinistic v Arminian controversy. Without going into depth here, a few words are in order.

First, if the verses are explained universally, then the logical outcome is Universalism, ie

everyone must be saved. This is clearly not the case and proves more than the Arminian would want, neither is it Biblical, so these verses must have limitations.

The verses break down into groups based on the words: *world* and *all*.

A simple study with a good concordance will show clearly that *world* does not always mean all men but is used in various restrictive senses, and likewise, *all*, *all men* does not always mean everyone (e.g. check Lk 2:1; Jn 1:10, 7:4, 12:19, 14:22; Acts 11:28; Rm 1:8, 11:12-15). If *world* means everyone on earth in John 3:16-17 then there will be no one in Hell, all will be saved. It simply cannot mean everyone. The same applies to 1 Tim 2:4-6. There are various explanations: for instance the world of the elect (a purified race to inhabit the new world), all types of people not just Jews (this was hard for the early Jewish Christians to accept).

The main passages in question are:

world - Jn 1:29, 3:16-17, 6:33,51; Rm 11:12,15; 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Jn 2:2.

all - Rm 5:18; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:14; 1 Tim 2:4-6; Titus 2:11; Heb 2:9;
2 Pt 3:9

Students wishing to look at these more deeply can refer to good commentaries, good systematic theologies or my introductory paper in this series and the booklet *Does God Love Everyone*.

The offer of the Gospel

If the atonement provided by God is only intended for the elect, then it is clear that the Gospel message is also only applicable to the elect. There has been much dispute recently about the word *offer*. Is the offer of the Gospel open to all or only some?

Firstly, the word *offer* is unhelpful and not scriptural in the sense many people use it. The Gospel is not offered to all and sundry. It is not to be marketed. The Gospel contains commands to believe and repent. As such, the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all (Mk 16:15). Everyone is to hear the Gospel proclamation. Those that are elect will respond with faith and repentance which is given by God. Those that reject the Gospel truth seal their fate.

Our job as witnesses is to preach the truth of the Gospel to all, but this will never include an offer or a promise to every individual that the blessings of salvation are surely theirs. Only God knows who the elect are. Our job is to be fishers of men, to put out the net and catch the fish God gives us. Never should we tell everyone indiscriminately that God loves them, that salvation is theirs if they will only choose God, or that Jesus has died for them specifically. The promise is to all who believe, to all who receive, to all who repent, to all who confess Jesus as Lord. In other words, the blessing of the Gospel is to the elect, because these are the ones for whom Christ died.

APPENDIX 1

Overview of Amyraldianism

Basic theology

It views God's covenant as successive steps:

- a) Covenant of nature with Adam - involved obedience to divine law in natural world
- b) Covenant with Israel - Involved obedience to Mosaic law
- c) Covenant of grace - which required faith. This is in two parts:
 - a conditional covenant of universal grace - required fulfilment of the law as a condition of faith
 - an unconditional covenant of particular grace which is God's good pleasure, which creates faith in the elect. Since men will not believe by their own initiative, God chooses some (elect) for a special measure of his Spirit.

If we look at it on the basis of God's decrees we see:

- God motivated to redeem men by a general love to all men.
- God sent Jesus to make the salvation of all men possible.
- God makes a universal hypothetical decree to save all men if they believe.
- All men have a natural ability to repent and believe.
- However, this ability is counteracted by moral inability.
- So God gives efficacious grace to the elect only to secure their salvation.

Benefits

It opposes Arminianism and agrees with many key points of Calvinism.

Objections

- It shows God decreeing contradictions. First God decrees to send Christ as a redemption for all because he loves everyone. Then, suddenly realising that this offer will be rejected, God decrees to elect some to salvation only.
- This in turn suggests that a decree of God can fail. God can never intend what will not be accomplished. If men are not saved, God did not intend that they should be saved (see Hodge).
- It does not represent Christ as purchasing the grace of effectual calling for his people. God is shown to confer this separate from, and subsequent to, Christ's redemption. Yet scripture reveals that this is given us in Christ (Eph 1:3; Phil 1:29; Heb 12:2).
- Foreknowledge precedes predestination (Rm 8:30). Christ is the means of accomplishing what is predestinated. Therefore, predestination must precede the gift of Christ. (Eph 1:4-5)
- The love of God shown in salvation is not a vague, generalised benevolence indiscriminately aimed at everyone; but is a specific, powerful, mysterious and infinite love in which God gives his son to procure a people.
- It ignores the case of the heathen completely; having no knowledge of Christ, they could not avail themselves of the supposed benefit of the hypothetical decree.

One of Amyraut's students (Pajon) took things further by suggesting that the Spirit's work in regeneration is only an illumination of the mind which changes the direction of the will.

Amyraldianism is, therefore, a doctrine which opens up a possibility of salvation, instead of Christ atoning for anyone particularly. Christ, therefore, did not die for a specific people, but God elected a specific people. It wants to show God desiring the salvation of all but runs into the problem that not all are actually saved so it limits redemption to a possibility only. This teaching is similar to much being taught today. Calvinists who wish to avoid the error of Arminianism generally, but feel that God must love everyone, fall into an Amyraldian type of doctrine. Some call themselves 'Four Point Calvinists' (ie they do not hold to Limited Atonement), yet do not realise that this is totally inconsistent and is the basis of Amyraldianism, rejected as heresy by our wiser forefathers. It is also surprising that very few systematic theologies even list Amyraldianism in their indices, presumably being of the view that this position is now irrelevant.

Analytically, it reverses the order of decrees by making Christ a saviour for everyone and then electing some, ie there is no limit to the atonement. Amyraldianism teaches that:

- a) God decrees to save all men in Christ on condition of faith
- b) Since no one will believe, God decrees to save some by giving special grace to believe

It can seem at first to be a small matter that redemption precedes election instead of election preceding redemption; but it is of great importance as we have seen. One is Biblical, the other is not.

We can summarise the various positions like this:

UNIVERSALISM	ARMINIAN METHODISM	LUTHERANISM	AMYRALDIANISM	CALVINISM
Permission of the fall	Permission of the fall: guilt, corruption, total inability	Permission of the fall guilt, corruption, total inability	Permission of the fall guilt, corruption, <u>moral</u> inability	Permission of the fall: guilt, corruption, total inability
Predestination of everyone to life	Christ atones for everyone	Christ atones for everyone	Christ makes salv. possible for all	Election of some to eternal life
Christ atones for all	Remission of original sin to all & gift of sufficient grace	Gift of means of grace to communicate saving grace	Election of some for the gift of moral ability	Christ redeems the elect
Holy Spirit applies atonement to all to life	Predestination for all those who improve sufficient grace	Predestination to life for who do not resist the means of grace	Gift of Holy Spirit to work moral ability in the elect	Gift of Holy Spirit to save the redeemed
Everyone saved	Sanctification of all who co-operate with sufficient grace	Sanctification through the means of grace	Sanctification by the Holy Spirit	Sanctification of all the redeemed

Adapted from Warfield.

Note:

Luther himself, and Melancthon in the early days (his follower), taught strict Augustinian doctrine (ie essential Calvinism). Later, Melancthon taught that men co-operate with God

in conversion. This was later rejected by the Form of Concord, but this document allowed for man to resist God's grace. Later Lutheran theologians rejected this document also. They now teach that the objects of election are those God foresaw would believe and persevere to the end. In this, the means of grace imbued with spiritual power assists the unbeliever to be saved, if he does not resist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The most complete work on this subject is still: *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by the Puritan, John Owen which was first published in 1648. The introductory essay in the Banner of Truth edition by Jim Packer is excellent and should be required reading by all Christians. When will it appear in print as a booklet?

Baker's Dict. of Theology; Baker

Concise Dict. of Evangelical Theology; Baker

New Dict. of Theology; IVP

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