



LIMITED ATONEMENT

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Substitution in sin-bearing is the centre of the New Testament doctrine of the Atonement, as well as the Old Testament adumbration of it. A realisation of this makes impossible the concept that Christ's redeeming work is continuing in Heaven now, or that we can join our obedience to His as part of the act of redemption.

On the other hand, there is a way of viewing Christ's satisfaction for sin which limits it in extent, so that Christ's atonement is not co-extensive with humanity, but is limited to those elect of God only.

However, that the work of Christ extends uniformly to the whole of humanity becomes clear when it is considered under the following heads:-

(a) The Incarnation. When Christ took man's nature in the womb of the blessed virgin, He took the nature which all men share, and not the nature of the elect only.

(b) Christ's Perfect Righteousness. When Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to the law of God, He fulfilled the obligation which rests on all men equally, and not an obligation which the elect alone have.

(c) Christ's Victory. When our Lord overcame all the wiles of the devil and bound the strong man, He overcame the common enemy of mankind, and not the enemy of the elect only. When the devil was cast out of heaven it was everybody's accuser who was cast out.

(d) Christ's Bearing of the Curse. When our Lord, through His death on the cross, became a curse, He bore the curse which God threatens against all breakers of His covenant, and not the curse which is particularly applicable to the elect.

From this it will be seen that the work of Christ viewed in itself, and apart from its application, is co-extensive with humanity, or, in the old phraseology, "Christ's work is sufficient for all". Thus William Cunningham wrote "The atonement, viewed by itself, is just vicarious suffering, of infinite worth and value, and, of course, intrinsically sufficient, to expiate the sins of all men", Cunningham Works, III 364. Traditional theology has never regarded the atonement as intrinsically sufficient to expiate the sins of any fallen angel: that is, Christ has died for all men in a way He has not died for any fallen angel, and thus we may give a straightforward exegesis to those scriptures which assert the universal extent of the atonement.

Thus from the point of view of the preacher, Christ has died for all his audience. All may accept the proffered salvation which Christ has provided. The preacher is not concerned with the intended application of the atonement, which at the point of time of the preaching still lies hidden in the counsel of God. Thus, from our point of view (i.e., the point of view of the preacher presenting the gospel), all have an equal interest in the death of Christ. Were it not so, (and not true that Christ had died for all men) it would not be possible to extend a universal offer; for the offer, if it is to be a true offer, must rest on true and adequate grounds, which cannot be less than the death of Christ for those to whom the offer is being made. Thus if the gospel is offered genuinely to all, it can only be offered because Christ died for all, and if for all, then the preacher is at liberty, and indeed obliged, to press home the offer, and to say to each sinner individually "Christ has died for you".

The extent of Christ's work is not limited per se, but only in the intentions and purposes of God, and consequently in the application of its benefits to those whom God had foreknown and predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son.

In intending to reconcile the elect only, the method God has chosen has been to make all men reconcilable. Both Calvinist and Arminian are right in what they affirm; but the Arminian is wrong in what he denies. The Arminian affirms that Christ made all men savable, and denies that He saves any. The Calvinist affirms that Christ saves the elect; but some Calvinists are inclined to speak as though the atonement in no wise affects the salvableness of any others. Cunningham states (Works III 347) "The intended destination of the atonement was to effect and secure the forgiveness and salvation of the elect only, ... God did not design or purpose, by sending His Son into the world, to save any but those who are saved".

This is correct; but Cunningham thinks that the doctrine of limited atonement follows, but this is a non sequitur. For the method by which the elect are saved is that they and the non-elected alike are made savable by Christ's death for mankind, if they will repent and believe, which God commands all to do. But only the elect do so, for only the elect receive the necessary grace, which grace to repent and believe was merited and purchased by Christ for His sheep; so that ultimately they are the only ones for whom Christ died.

All men receive benefits from Christ's death. This is agreed. It should be further agreed that one of these benefits is salvableness - which no fallen angel has received. Thus it is true to say that Christ is a ransom for all, without limiting the word all, nor limiting the word ransom to that which is less than complete salvation. The word 'for' is capable of two levels of meaning. Just as there are explicitly two levels of meaning in "Saviour of all men, especially of those that believe", so there are two levels of meaning in "Christ died for all", and "Christ died for His sheep", and in "He is a Saviour of all", and "He saves His people".

In the phrase "Christ died for the elect", the word 'for' is ambiguous. If it is applied to intention and purpose it is true. Thus Scripture affirms that Christ came to save His people from their sins. But if it is applied to the extent of His atonement, it is not true; so that we are right in affirming with the Church of England Catechism, that "Christ redeemed me, and all mankind", and with the Synod of Dort that He efficaciously redeemed only the elect, (Dort 2.8). The adverb 'efficaciously' used by the Synod of Dort, preserves the two levels of redemption and salvation of which the Scriptures speak. The Westminster Confession drops the adverb and so confines the word 'redemption' exclusively to the elect. "Neither are any other redeemed by Christ ... but the elect only" (3.6).

To deny, as "limited atonement" does, the propriety of laying on the conscience of the unconverted their duties to repent and believe the gospel, by telling them "Christ died for you", is improperly restrictive of the scope of the atonement, as seen from the point of view of preacher and hearer.

Owen (The Death of Death. 1959. p.37) rejects the concept that the decree of redemption antecedes that of election, with the retort 'cui bono?' This appears to be his only argument. Palmer uses the same argument, "There would be no sense, no use, no purpose in sending Christ to die for those who he knew would never accept Christ", (Op. cit. p.37).

But this argument is a non sequitur. It also smacks of anthropocentrism (i.e. Arminianism). God is glorified even in those who are perishing. Even to these the gospel is a sweet savour of Christ unto God, though a savour of death unto death, (2 Cor. 2:15,16). This could not be so if in the mind of God those not being saved were quite outside the scope of Christ's redemption.

"Limited atonement" in its commonly accepted modern use amongst Calvinists is a textless doctrine. This is a fatal defect for any doctrine for which a place in Reformed theology is sought. The Bible certainly affirms that Christ laid down His life for His sheep, and

that He purchased His church with His own blood; but nowhere is the sentiment expressed negatively, i.e. that He died for His sheep only, or that redemption is to be spoken of the elect only; and in fact Biblical phraseology is opposed to such expression, e.g. 2 Peter 2:1, where it is affirmed that apostates were amongst those whom God had purchased. cf. also Rom. 14:15,20; 1 Cor. 8:11. Salvation and redemption are terms which properly belong to the elect, see, e.g., the New Song of the Living Creatures and the Elders before the Throne (Rev. 5:9). But in a secondary sense, salvation and redemption through the death of Christ is spoken of in Scripture as applying to all men. A recognition of this terminology will prevent a harsh classification of humanity into the salvable and the non-salvable, after the fashion of the Valentinians.

To summarise:

- (1) No purpose or intent of God ever fails.
- (2) The purpose of Christ's death was the salvation of the elect. This Christ's death effects.
- (3) It does not follow from these two points that the atonement (i.e. the work of Christ in discharging the penalty of the sin of mankind and fulfilling the obligations of the law) has reference to the elect only.
- (4) As the result of the atonement, all may be saved if they will repent and believe, so that they may be told "Christ has died for you, therefore accept the proffered salvation".

The doctrine of 'limited substitution', which is used to defend "limited atonement", goes too far. Thus B.B. Warfield's "Plan of Salvation", p.95, in criticising Amyraldists, says that they alter the character of the atonement, and asks 'If sin is removed by Christ's substitution, what remains as a barrier to the salvation of sinners'" But this proves too much, by excluding the paradox (as Barth does on the other side of the paradox). For the elect are not saved at the moment that the substitutional atonement was made at Calvary, nor is their sin then removed from them. This takes place only on the application of the atonement to themselves in regeneration. Till then, the elect are children of wrath, as the rest (Eph. 2:3). If the doctrine of substitution is to be pressed to support limited atonement, then it means that God is unjust to hold the elect accountable for their sins before they have turned to Him in faith. An example of this erroneous use of the doctrine of substitution to establish limited atonement may be drawn from "The Five Points of Calvinism" by Edwin H. Palmer, of the faculty of Westminster Theology Seminary. Dr. Palmer wrote (p.40): "Finally, a conclusive argument is to be drawn from the nature of Christ's atonement. Is the atonement a substitution or not? It must be one or the other. Do we believe in the vicarious or substitutionary death of Christ or not? If so, then those for whom he died must be free from the penalty of the law because Christ satisfied the law. If Christ was the substitute for all men, then all men would be free from God's wrath and condemnation. For the atonement is objective. Christ paid for all. And if Christ paid for all, then all men are free. But of course even the Arminian will not assert that the unrepentant is free from the penalty of the law. Therefore he should admit that Christ did not die for the unrepentant. It is either -or. Christ's death was a substitute or not. And if it was an actual substitute, then the persons for whom it was made are free. But this obviously cannot apply to all men."

If Christ's substitution is conceived of in this pecuniary way, it would follow that all the saints are free from the wrath the moment the substitution is made and accepted. Otherwise God would be unjust.

The particularism, which is characteristic of Calvinism, ought not to be applied at the point of the making of the atonement, but at its application. If supralapsarianism is to be rejected, because "particularism, in the sense of discrimination belongs in the sphere of God's soteriological, not in that of His cosmical creation", so that

the decree of election belongs logically after the fall, as Warfield argues in "The Plan of Salvation", pp.88,89, then on the same argument the decree of election is logically after the decree of atonement, where also, in fact, it belongs in the working out of the application of salvation. That is to say, the atonement is general, its application particular. If the reply is made that Scripture affirms that Christ entered the world with the purpose to "save his people from their sins", it should also be noted that Scripture affirms God created His people with the purpose that they should be His glory and praise. But since the infralapsarian does not regard this latter as establishing that the decree of election was prior to that of creation, he should not regard the former as bearing on the question whether the decree of election is subsequent to that of atonement.

Finally, it should be noted that since limited atonement (as distinct from effective redemption) is not affirmed in the decrees of the Council of Dort, it cannot be regarded as an essential bulwark against Arminianism. It finds no support, but the contrary is contradicted in the writings of Calvin, e.g. on Hosea 13:14 Calvin commented: "God does not here simply promise salvation but shows that he is indeed ready to save ... the obstinacy of men rejects the grace which has been provided and which God willingly and abundantly offers". (my italics). Moreover, it lacks the positive Scriptural testimony which the other four points of "tulip" (let him that readeth understand!) are so rich in, so that it ought not to be placed on an equality beside them. Indeed, it appears to run counter to some plain verses in Scripture, such as "denying the Lord who bought them". and requires what appears to be an artificial exegesis of such phrases as 'God so loved the world', 'the Saviour of the world', 'the Saviour of all men'. It cuts away the basis of a genuine offer of the gospel to all the world, and blunts the point of evangelism in preventing the pressing home of the claims of Christ on the consciences of the hearer, by interdicting such phrases as "Christ died for you", "God so loved you...".

The object of the doctrine of limited atonement is to ensure the truth that Christ's death saves His people effectively, as against the Arminian doctrine of general redemption, which holds that by the atonement Christ redeems all men, without necessarily effecting the salvation of any. But while rightly stressing that the atonement saves those whom God intends it to save, we should not speak of the substitution of Christ on Calvary in such a way as to overthrow other Scriptural statements. Limited atonement as commonly propounded, introduces anti-scripture concepts into the doctrine of God's relation to the world, and may prove an Achilles' heel for the revival of Reformed theology.

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