

The “Personable-ness” of the Gospel

When Paul reflects on the love God manifested in the death of Christ he does so in extremely personal terms. Christ “loved *me* and gave himself for *me*” (Gal. 2:20.). Yet, in the very next verse he insists that Christ’s death only has value if it graciously saves sinners apart from any work of their own will.

In the Old Testament, the priest would confess over the scapegoat all the iniquities of the children of Israel. The goat would be sent into the wilderness symbolizing the fact that he had been cut off from the land for that peoples’ sins (Lev. 16). In the same way, Christ owned our sins when he was cut off from the pleasure of his Father. Likewise, the high priest of Israel wore the names of the twelve tribes when he offered sacrifices. Jesus, the Great High Priest, held the names of His people in His heart as he offered himself.

At the end of the day, every Christian believes in limited atonement. Everyone has to admit that Christ’s death was effective only for a definite number of people, otherwise Hell would be unpopulated. This does not mean that heaven be lightly populated (Rev. 7:9-17). But it does mean that Christ did not die for all.

The best route to take when considering this matter is let the Bible speak for itself. We must choose from an atonement of great value and effectiveness, or a broad atonement which makes no guarantees. Either God has built a broad bridge spanning part of the way to heaven or a narrow one all the way there. Praise God for that narrow bridge which is the mediator, Jesus Christ (Matt. 7:13)!



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PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic, Christianity
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THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM (3)

LIMITED ATONEMENT

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

The first two articles in this series on the Canons of Dort (CoD, popularly known as the Five Points of Calvinism) focused on the historical context, and the first head of doctrine (unconditional election), respectively.

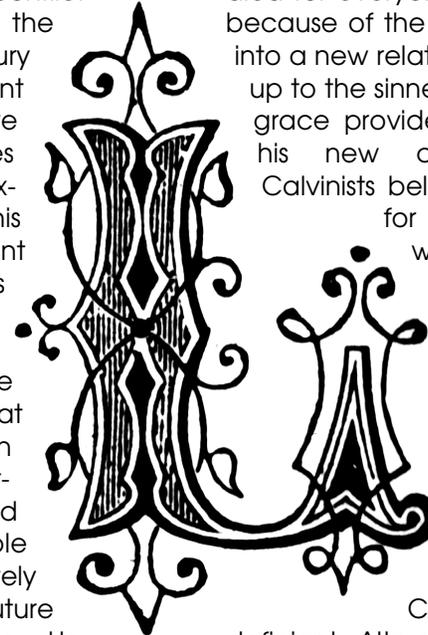
The theological conflict in the Netherlands in the early 17th century produced a statement of faith relating to five disputed doctrines which remains extremely useful to this day. The first point concerned God’s election. In contrast to the Arminian party, the Calvinists insisted that Scripture teaches an unconditional election. That is, God chooses some people to salvation completely irrespective of their future faith and obedience. Un-

derstanding this view of election is essential to grasping the second point, which is often the most difficult doctrine for “would-be” Calvinists. The idea of a “limited atonement”

has given rise to so-called, “four-point Calvinists.”

The disagreement has to do with the answer to the question, “For whom did Christ die?” Arminians and “four-point Calvinists” insist that Christ died for everyone. They believe that because of the cross, all men come into a new relationship with God. It is up to the sinner to use the universal grace provided by God to meet his new condition of faith. Calvinists believe that Christ died for the elect. His death was designed to, and actually did, atone for a limited number of people.

Of course, the tremendous liability with the phrase “limited atonement” is that it sounds so negative; it makes Christ’s death seem deficient. Alternate phrases such as “definite atonement” or “particular redemption” help convey the central issue: Christ died for those whom he actually saves. And the issue is a significant one.



The Issues at Stake

First, universal atonement reflects a faulty view of God's priority in salvation. Like each of the other points, the doctrine of limited atonement sees God as the true author and finisher of our salvation (Heb. 12:2). Universal atonement suggests that God's intention to save is trumped by man's willingness to be covered by Christ's blood which was, as the theory goes, shed for all.

Second, universal atonement vitiates the power of Christ's death. Did Christ's death actually accomplish salvation for particular people? Or, did it only make salvation possible? If the latter were true, Christ's death would lack the power to "close the deal."

Third, universal atonement nullifies the purposes of God. The blood of Christ could not have been shed for everyone if God truly had chosen a people *in Christ* before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

Fourth, universal atonement sabotages the intimacy of Christ's work on the cross. Can I say that Christ died for me? Or must I settle for saying that Christ died for people like me, some of whom will never be saved?

Finally, universal atonement creates problems in our practice of evangelism. Should we tell people, "Christ died for you. He has paid for your sins. He has made you right with God. Now all you have to do is believe it?" Is that really the message of the gospel?

The Power of Christ's Death

To understand the power of Christ's death, what it actually accomplished, we need to comprehend the great need of sinners. All men

are by nature children of wrath (Eph. 2:3; Rejection of Errors (R.E.) 2.5). God's justice requires that we must suffer eternal punishment for our sins unless his justice is satisfied on our behalf (CoD 2.1). We need a mediator. Like Judah on behalf of Benjamin (Gen. 44:32, 33), mediators stand in for particular people. God sent his Son to satisfy his justice on behalf of his sons and daughters (CoD 2.2).

In response to the charge that limited atonement itself limits the power of Jesus' death, the *Canons* maintain that his sacrifice is of infinite value because he is perfect God and perfect man (CoD 2.4). Being of infinite value, the death of the Son of God is *sufficient* to take away the sins of the whole world (CoD 2.3). But, in God's wisdom, it is *efficient* to cover the sins of the elect. Nonetheless, considering the perfection of Christ's sacrifice, those who perish in unbelief have only themselves to blame (CoD 2.6). On the other hand, those who believe and are delivered from destruction are indebted entirely to God's grace in Christ (CoD 2.7).

In the Calvinist view, every drop of Christ's blood actually purchased sinners from destruction. It would be foolish to go the grocery store and buy four bunches of bananas but only take two bunches home. Sadly, this is analogous to the Arminian view of the atonement.

The Purposes of God in Christ's Death

Arminianism inadvertently champions the purposes of man. If Christ's death makes people only savable, their full salvation must result from an act of their will. But it "is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16; R.E. 1.6).

God's Purpose is to be a Full Savior
Christ did not die to make sinners savable but to actually save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15; R.E. 1). God's eternal purpose is to apply the benefits of the life and death of his Son to the elect, giving them faith, forgiveness of sins, perseverance, and glorification (CoD 2.8; R.E. 2.3).

Christ knew those for whom he was dying. Christ laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15,27; R.E. 1). He prayed for them in particular. "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours" (John 17:9). Here he is praying for his disciples. A few verses later he prays the same thing for all those who will believe in him (vv. 20,24). Those who would later believe in him have been eternally given to him! For good reason, as he reflected on the cross, Christ saw his mission as accomplished. Christ reported to his Father, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4). His work was not simply to live well or to die on the cross but to save sinners.

God Expresses His Purposes Covenantally
The covenant promise of God is that he will be a God to his people and they will be his (Heb. 8:10). How can God's people keep this covenant and realize its blessings? Not by their own obedience, but by having a mediator keep it for them as surety (Heb. 7:22; R.E. 2.4). The people with whom God had decreed to eternally covenant, "receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15) because Christ lived and died to fulfill the terms upon which the distribution of the inheritance depended. God explains that a testament (or will) is in force only when the testator

dies (Heb. 9:16-18). God's people are eternally written in his will. When the incarnate Son of God died, he sealed that will with his blood, securing an unshakable inheritance for his brothers.

Likewise, the foundation of the church is laid in the blood of Christ (CoD 2.9). God purchased his church by his own blood (Acts 20:28). If God had not appointed Christ to die for a definite people, then it is inconceivable that the church could have endured as it has.

The Preaching of the Gospel

One abiding caricature of Calvinistic witnessing is a necessary lack of personal application. If Christ died for a limited number of people then we cannot say, "Christ died for you, now believe it and be saved." But that's okay because that's not how the evangelists in Scripture talk. They, rather, explain that Jesus died to become the salvation of repentant sinners. They then call their audience to repent of their sins and be saved (Cf. Acts 2:38-39).

A second distortion of limited atonement is that it obviates evangelism all together. If Christ hasn't died for the person to whom I might share the gospel, then why should I bother witnessing to him at all? Of course, such reckless reasoning overlooks the fact that we don't know who has been chosen. We simply have the command of Christ to witness. The good news is that if Christ *has* died for the person to whom I witness then he will be saved! God's command, therefore, to repent and believe and his gospel promise of new life in Christ must be preached as broadly as possible (CoD 2.5).