

## **"Limited Atonement"**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

A very unhealthy notion that plagues the fundamentalist church is the idea that Christ laid down his life for each and every individual; that he went to the cross to save all men without exception. Such a view is not consistent with Biblical Christianity. Sometimes a person will acknowledge the total depravity of man, unconditional election of God the Father, prevenient grace of the Spirit and yet deny the particular redemption of Christ; such a position is known as "fourpoint Calvinism" and is as inconsistent as it is unorthodox.

If it be said that before creation the Father singled out in election those whom He destined to save and that the Spirit's activity of bringing men to repentance and faith is operative (to that extent) only in the lives of God's elect and yet that Christ offered up His life for the purpose of saving every single individual, then the unity of the Trinity has been forsaken. For in such a case Christ clearly sets out to accomplish what God the Father and Spirit do not intend to do; Christ here would be out of harmony with the will and purpose of the other two persons of the Trinity. Hence anyone who expounds "four-point Calvinism" has inadvertently destroyed the doctrine of the Trinity (by dissolving its unity) and is logically committed to a polytheistic position.

It should also be noted that the doctrine of particular redemption is necessary to the orthodox view of Christ's substitutionary atonement; the only alternatives to it are universal salvation or salvation by works (both are unbiblical). If Christ atoned for the sins of all men then all men will be saved, for a righteous God cannot condemn a man twice; if the man's sins have been atoned, he cannot be sent to Hell on the basis of them. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that Christ through his sacrifice made a full and actual (no potential) redemption; "who gave himself to us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a peculiar (chosen) people" (Titus 2:14); "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21); "he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking ... his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

It is clear that Christ presented an actual and not potential redemption on the cross; the gospel is good news, not good advice, it tells us what has been accomplished, not what might come about. Upon the cross Christ cried out "It is finished"; nothing was left to be done, for full atonement had been made. Hence, if Christ (as it is suggested) died for every man, all men shall be saved without exception; yet scripture clearly does not teach universal salvation. And if (contrary to scripture) it is responded that Christ's redemption is only potential, to be made actual when the sinner believes, then salvation is said to depend finally on something the sinner does. And that is tantamount to salvation by works (as well as being based on an erroneous view of Christ's atonement).

Isaiah prophesied that Christ would "see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied"; yet if Christ went to the cross with the intention of saving every individual, he certainly has been defeated and cannot be satisfied. But our Lord is not defeated; all power has been given to him in heaven and earth. His sufferings do accomplish what he intends, for the salvation he provides is not abstract and universal, it is particular and personal. Christ died for his people, the elect (Matthew 1:21). "All that the Father gives me will come to me ... for I came down from heaven to ... do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:37, 38); "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (not the goats) ... I know my own ... and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:11, 14-18); "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish (John 10:24-29); "glorify the son ... since thou hast given him power over all flesh, so that he might give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. I (have) accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:1-4); "feed the church of the Lord which he obtained for himself with his own blood" (Acts 20:28); Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25-27); "who gave himself ... to purify for himself a chosen people of his own" (Titus 2:14).

Those holding to the indefinite atonement of Christ will often appeal to scriptural passages which speak of salvation in terms of "the world," or "all men," "all nations, etc." However, in most instances these words were used by the N.T. writers to emphatically correct the mistaken Jewish notion that full salvation was not for the Gentiles. These expressions are intended to show that Christ died for all men without distinction (not all men without exception). If the referent of "world" in 2 Cor. 5:19 ("God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself") were taken to be every single individual, then that verse teaches that Christ's work was to the effect of reconciling every man to God (i.e. universal salvation) -- which is clearly unscriptural. The general evangelistic call goes out to all men in our preaching, while it is only the elect who are moved by the Holy spirit to respond with repentance and faith to that redemption accomplished for them by Christ.

If redemption were indefinite and potential, then none would be saved. For man, who is dead in sin and unable to receive the things of the Spirit of God (cf. Eph. 2:1; I Cor. 2:14), would never be able to appropriate that potential redemption for himself. No man is able to come to Christ except that Father draw him (John 6:44). The sinner drinks iniquity like water and does not seek God (Job 15:16; Rom. 3:11), so he can no more choose to come to Christ and gain for himself the benefits of the atonement than a leopard can change his spots (Jer. 13:23). Praise be to God who did not make only partial atonement for the sins of his people, who did not allow the salvation of His elect to be thwarted by leaving it up to them to respond, who fully saved us by having His Son actually obtain salvation for His sheep!

Particular redemption is the only triune, monotheistic, substitutionary, personal, effectual, and biblical (hence, orthodox) doctrine of Christ's atonement; all else (including fundamentalism's redemption for every individual) are doctrines pleasing to men but unsatisfactory in their Theology, anthropology, and soteriology. Sola Scriptura!