

## Limited Atonement

*By Greg L. Bahnsen*

If man is not radically depraved, then he would have some (slim, but real) hope of finding out the way of salvation in his own wisdom – without the foolishness of preaching (cf. I Cor. 1:21). The unqualified need for evangelism (Rom. 10:14) would then be at least mitigated. So also, a scriptural understanding of unconditional election compels one to evangelize, for God does not (as the pagan deities of confusion) determine the end (a sinner's salvation) without the means to that end (hearing the gospel and trusting Christ). Furthermore, without our assurance of the efficacious grace of the Spirit, there would be no practical need to call sinners to repentance and faith, for those who are dead in trespasses and sin do not have the ability to respond to the gospel call (John 3:3-8; 5:21, 24; Ezek. 36:26). Without the Spirit's sovereignty, the evangelist would be no more successful than a salesman in a graveyard.

Therefore, these Reformed distinctives (radical depravity, unconditional election, efficacious grace) are conducive, rather than a hindrance, to evangelism.

How about that point, limited atonement? You may be inclined to insist that *it* is surely an obstacle to widespread evangelistic proclamation, but if you are, might you have a false picture of the doctrine of Christ's particular atonement? Have you thought through the implications of its denial (i.e., universal atonement)? Upon reflection, we see that the definite, particular atonement has a very *positive* influence upon our evangelism. Indeed, the particular atonement is the absolute prerequisite of our proclaiming the good news from God about personal salvation.

1. It is the prerequisite of our proclaiming the good news from God about personal salvation. That is, the definite of particular atonement determines whether there is any need for evangelism at all. Consider the nature of the atonement as taught in God's word.

The Bible knows no other kind of atonement but a *substitutionary* atonement; it is a ransom payment in exchange for the sinner's life and freedom. Christ was delivered for our offenses (Rom. 4:25) and gave Himself for our sins (Gal. 1:4); that means that He died for the *ungodly* (Rom. 5:6) – those who are in bondage to sin (John 8:34) and dead in trespasses (Eph. 2:1). Christ gave Himself in order to *redeem* us from this iniquity and purify us unto good works (Titus 2:14). He went to the cross as a lamb without blemish (I Pet. 1:18-19), being the substitutionary sacrifice in the place of sinners (Eph. 5:2). As our passover sacrifice (I Cor. 5:7), Christ redeemed us by His blood (I Pet. 1:19). Apart from the shedding of blood there is no remission (Heb. 9:22), and thus Christ entered the holy place and through His blood "*obtained* eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12). By this redemption, He secured *forgiveness* for

our sin (Col. 1:14), *freedom* from the power of Satanic bondage (Heb. 2:14-15), and newness of *life* (Rom. 6:4). The Savior has *paid* the price which actually *obtains* our *full* redemption; how great a salvation! Anything less than this would not be *biblical atonement*.

With this background in mind, it should be evident that if the atonement is *universal*, then *every* single man is in fact *redeemed*. None can be lost. Jesus, knowing His own, laid down His life for the sheep (John 10:14-15), and thereby gives them eternal life so that they shall never perish or be snatched from His hand (John 10:27-29). Those for whom Christ died are *actually* redeemed, not just potentially redeemed; eternal life has been *secured* for the objects of Christ's atoning love. Thus if Christ laid down His life for every single individual, then every person shall be eternally saved – *nothing* being able to snatch them from Christ's hand. Of course, that means that even the man who dies cursing God is saved; his response to the gospel call was not really needed in order for him to escape God's wrath. Since the atonement is substitutionary and secures its effect, then even the *unbeliever* for whom Christ (allegedly) died would have to be saved – or else injustice is attributed to God for double indemnity (taking penal recourse for a man's sins twice), but if *unbelievers* shall be saved, there is no need to evangelize them at all! Only the doctrine of *particular* atonement requires the *proclaiming* of the good news, for that doctrine teaches that *only believers* shall be saved (John 3:36). The extent of the atonement is restricted to those who will have saving faith in Christ, those to whom He gives eternal life, those whom He calls His "sheep." Proclamation is God's appointed way of gathering in all His elect, all those for whom Christ gave His life as a substitutionary ransom. However, if the atonement applies to every man, then proclamation is not required; since even unbelievers are under the Passover blood of Christ, God will pass over them in judgment even though they have heard and rejected, or never heard at all, the gospel message.

2. The particular atonement is the prerequisite of our proclaiming the *good* news from God about personal salvation. The person who brings tidings of universal atonement brings *bad news*. How so? Well, . . . he teaches *both* that Christ died for every man *and* that not every man shall be saved and that is bad news. It tells us that the work of Christ does *not* fully secure and guarantee the salvation of those for whom He died. Christ's atoning death *does not save*, if viewed in this fashion. It may be necessary to salvation, and it may take you a long way toward salvation, but it is not (by the evangelist's own admission) *sufficient* for salvation. If Christ's atonement does not bring one *completely* to salvation, then it must be *completed* by man. The ground of one's salvation is not restricted to Christ's gracious work but now must encompass the contribution of the sinner – namely, his own work of faith. Here, faith is included in the *basis* for salvation rather than being seen as the *instrument* of God's saving grace, but making man's activity a contribution to his salvation is bad news. First, it undermines the wholly gracious nature of salvation. It turns faith into a work accomplished by man in order to make up what is lacking in Christ's atonement. Instead the Bible presents faith (as every other blessing) as a result of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension; it is, not man's work, the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). The universalist says that the cross plus your faith save you; the particularist says that the work of Christ on the cross *results in* your saving faith. It makes all the difference in the world whether man's faith is added to the atonement or flows from the atonement; it is just the difference between grace and self-salvation. Secondly, a universal atonement is bad news because it would prevent all men from being saved – since no man can bring himself to faith (John 3:3, 19 with I Cor. 1:18, 2:14). If you call men

to finish their salvation by actualizing Christ's potential atonement by their own faith, you ask them to do what they are unable to do; thus the atonement ends up applying to nobody. A universal atonement either deprives us of *gracious* salvation or makes salvation *impossible*; we no longer see "the praise of the glory of His grace wherein He has made us accepted in the beloved, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of *His grace*" (Eph. 1:6-7).

To proclaim a universal, non-efficacious, atonement is to fail to bring men the "gospel," the *good* news. J. I. Packer has correctly analyzed the conflict between the particular and the universal atonement:

The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself . . . One regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it (Introduction to Owen's *The Death of Death*, p. 4).

Consequently, Spurgeon was doubtless right in saying, "nor do I think we can unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross" (*Autobiography*, vol. 1, p. 172).

1. Moreover, the particular atonement is the prerequisite of our proclaiming the good *news* from God about personal salvation. If Christ is a Redeemer who does not really, actually, fully, assuredly redeem, then the evangelist cannot bring factual *news* of an accomplished salvation but only a longing hope. The gospel is not news, it becomes moral advice. If Christ is frustrated in His (alleged) attempt to save all men, then perhaps He shall be frustrated in trying to save believers as well. Perhaps His atoning death does *not* deliver us from sin's bondage and death after all. The universalist does not bring news, factual tidings, an assured report of what is the case; he brings nothing more than wishful hopes about a blank check. However, from a biblical perspective the gospel is good *news*; it tells us of our accomplished salvation. Upon the cross, Christ declared "It is *finished*." When He made His soul an offering for sin and bore the iniquities of many, He saw of the travail of His soul and was satisfied (Isa. 53:11). He is a redeemer who fully redeems; He is not frustrated in His endeavor. This *news* of Christ's successful work gave Paul the comfort that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31-39). Here's something solid in which you can have assured confidence.
2. The particular atonement is the prerequisite of proclaiming the good news *from God* about personal salvation. The unbeliever has no reason to put confidence in the opinions and speculations of men. Only God's own word can bring us to a knowledge of the truth about His plan of salvation. Thus to proclaim Gospel tidings is to proclaim what the Bible teaches about salvation. Therein we read that Christ laid down His life for the *sheep* who would follow Him (John 10:14-16, 27-29), not the reprobate goats who will be separated from the sheep on the day of judgment (Matt. 25:31-33, 41). Christ intercedes, not for the world, but only for those who

have been given to Him by the Father (John 17:9); His intercession is effective (e.g., John 11:41-42) and to the uttermost saves those for whom He intercedes (Heb. 7:25). Thus Christ loved and gave His life for *the church* (Eph. 5:25); with His blood He purchased the church (Acts 20:28). Christ laid down His life for His friends, those who do what he commands (John 15:13-14). So the bible teaches about salvation that the extent of the atonement is restricted – to the sheep, the elect, the church, the friends of Christ. If we are to bring tidings from God, they must be tidings from God, they must be tidings of a *particular* atonement; the son of man came to give His life a *ransom for many* (Matt. 20:28), but not for all.

3. Finally, the particular atonement is the prerequisite of our proclaiming the good news from God about *personal salvation*. The view which holds that the atonement is universal in scope and is merely potential with respect to its saving effect is a view which depersonalizes the atonement. Christ, in dying for everybody in general, went to the cross for nobody in particular: not for you, me or any individual person. This view does not see that Christ went to the cross with His people in view, with the individuals whom He loves by name in mind. His work was no more intended for me than for the man who despises Christ. Such an atonement would be no more distinctive or personal than the giveaway gift from the gas station. It is not a gift marked out for me; it is for just anybody who picks it up on his own. However, the Bible says that the Good shepherd calls His sheep *by name* (John 10:3). He gives to them a new name (Rev. 2:17), and their names shall never be blotted out from the book of life (Rev. 3:5). The name of our Savior is Jesus, for He saves *His people* from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Christian salvation is *personal* salvation; it rests upon the work of Christ which He accomplished with the names of His elect in mind. Paul can accurately say “He gave Himself up *for me*” (Gal. 2:20); such a declaration is not overspecified. Thus J. Gresham Machen observed:

It is surprising that they regard the doctrine of a universal atonement as being a comforting doctrine. In reality it is a very gloomy doctrine indeed. . . . But a universal atonement without a universal salvation is a cold, gloomy doctrine indeed. To say that Christ died for all men alike and that then not all men are saved, to say that Christ died for humanity simply in the mass, and that the choice of those who out of that mass are saved depends upon the greater receptivity of some as compared to others – that is a doctrine that takes from the gospel much of its sweetness and its joy. From the cold universalism of that Arminian creed we turn ever again with a new thankfulness to the warm and tender individualism of our Reformed Faith, which we believe to be in accord with God’s holy word. Thank God we can say every one, as we contemplate Christ upon the cross, not just: “He died for the mass of humanity, and how glad I am that I am amid that mass,” but “He loved me and gave Himself for me, my name was written from all eternity upon His heart, and when He hung and suffered there on the Cross he thought of me, even me, as one for whom in His grace He was willing to die (*God Transcendent and Other Sermons*, p. 136).

Therefore, we must conclude that evangelism is only possible if one affirms the particular atonement (limited to the elect). This doctrine is the absolute prerequisite of our *proclaiming* the *good news* from *God* about *personal* salvation. No evangelist can improve upon this scriptural gospel. Certainly a universal atonement could give men no better warrant for faith in the Savior than the invitations, commands, and promises of God’s reliable word. Such warrants for faith have substance seeing that Christ actually *accomplished* the redemption of His elect people through His *substitutionary* death. This good news is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).