

"Cross-Examination: Particular Redemption"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Each month the "Cross-Examination" column presents a summary statement of a Reformed and Reconstructionist conviction in theology or ethics, and then offers brief answers to common questions, objections or confusions which people have about that belief. Send issues or questions you would like addressed by Dr. Bahnsen to the editor.

We Believe

Scripture teaches us that when Christ laid down His life as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, He did so in order to atone for the sins of His people. He died particularly for those chosen by His Father from before the creation of the world, rather than universally for each and every person who lives. Thus the scope of Christ's redeeming work is limited to the elect (the saved) -- even though the power and efficacy of His redemption are unlimited, and its influence benefits all mankind.

The angel instructed Joseph that Jesus "shall save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Paul wrote that Christ gave Himself to redeem "a people for His own possession" (Titus 2:14). Specifically, it was "the church of God" that He obtained with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Thus Paul teaches us that "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

In Jesus' own words: "I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep..., and I lay down My life for the sheep.; they shall never perish" (John 10:14-15, 27-28). This specifically excludes, then, those who will be separated out from the flock on the day of judgment, as the goats are separated from the sheep (Matthew 25:31-32) -- excludes those to whom Jesus will say "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23).

Prior to His arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, acknowledging that the Father had granted Him as Son authority "in order that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him." Jesus went on to say, "I am not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they are Yours" (John 17:2, 9).

Examination

Question: But this means that you are limiting the atonement. Wouldn't it sound better, and shouldn't we say that Christ's atoning work was "unlimited"?

Answer: Everybody who recognizes that there will be people who are not saved on the day of judgment must admit that the atonement is "limited" in some fashion.

One either limits the effect of Christ's redeeming sacrifice, or one limits the scope of that sacrifice. If we say that Christ died for each and every person in the world (unlimited scope), yet not everyone is saved, then we of necessity have limited the effect of Christ's work. It does not actually save some for whom He died, but only makes salvation possible for all. This is a "limited" atonement. It is like a very wide bridge, but one which does not take us completely from one side to the other.

On the other hand, by saying that the effect of Christ's redeeming sacrifice is unlimited -- that is, that it actually accomplishes the salvation of all those for whom it was intended -- we will necessarily limit the scope of that redeeming work. Christ is then said to have died for those who are actually saved, rather than for those who spurn and reject Him. This makes the bridge of salvation narrower, but it is a bridge which takes us completely from one side to the other.

So it is all a matter of how one chooses to "limit" the atonement.

Question: But doesn't the Bible say that Jesus died to make salvation possible for everybody?

Answer: No, the Bible never speaks of salvation as something merely possible or hypothetical. In the Bible, to redeem someone means to definitely accomplish their deliverance -- not just potentially or partially, but actually and fully, to save them.

Notice the way the word of God speaks of the work of redemption performed by Christ. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). The curse has actually been removed because the work of Christ upon the cross was a substitutionary atonement for sin. Paul does not say that Christ made it possible for the curse of God to be removed. He declared that Christ removed it. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). This work of redemption was fully accomplished prior to our believing on Christ for salvation. The Savior declared from the cross "It is finished." Paul thus wrote that while we were yet enemies of God, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son (Romans 5:10). Reconciliation was actually accomplished at the cross. It did not await our adding anything to the work of Christ -- not even our faith.

The Bible decisively teaches in Hebrews 9:12 that the atoning work of Christ was a matter of securing redemption, rather than simply making redemption possible. "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." Christ accomplished our redemption. He actually delivered us from the curse of sin.

Question: Isn't it true that, according to the Bible, Christ died "for all" -- for "the world"?

Answer: When we speak of Christ dying "for" someone, we are referring to the "substitutionary" atonement. We mean that Christ died in the place of the sinner, bearing his penalty for him. Since the price of sin has been actually paid by the Savior, those for whom He laid down His life cannot hereafter be punished for their sins. The punishment has already been borne by their Substitute. "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18)

Therefore, if Christ actually died "for" each and every person who lives, then the penalty of their sins has been laid upon the Savior as their Substitute -- and nobody may be justly sent to hell for those sins anymore. Those who teach that Jesus died for every single individual must eventually give up either the substitutionary nature of the atonement, the doctrine of everlasting punishment, or the justice of God.

Because the Bible is the word of God and cannot, then, contradict itself, it is not an option for us to interpret those passages which say that Christ died for "all" (or for the "world") as meaning that He died for all without exception. They must rather mean that He died for all without distinction - - that is, He died for "all kinds" of men. Indeed, this is an important Biblical truth found in many places. Christ died for Jews and Gentiles alike. He died for men and women, from all tribes and tongues and nations. His saving work was for the entire world.

Further Investigation

You can personally profit and grow spiritually by studying more about the doctrine that Christ died particularly for His elect people. The atonement is the heart of our faith.

Let me recommend the series "Particular Redemption," four taped messages which are available from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95603. (Send \$16, plus \$1.50 for postage)

A seminary level discussion of the same subject, entitled "The Extent of the Atonement" (a critique of evangelical Arminianism and Amyraldianism) is also available for \$12 plus postage.