Excursus on the Atonement

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The primary purpose of this article is to demonstrate, in agreement with Patrick Donahue (see his letter in the January F&F) that Calvinism is, in fact, a *system* of doctrine, and that "the five points of Calvinism stand or fall together," and, secondly, to show, contrary to Patrick's assertion that "the Limited Atonement point is the easiest of the five to knock down," it is in fact the hardest, being, as it is, the very heart of the gospel.

We make no apologies that Calvinism is systematic in its presentation of the truth, for God is a God of order, and not of confusion; we should expect therefore that all the doctrines and precepts of His word would be logically connected, and without contradiction. The so-called five points of Calvinism were originally systematized in answer to another system of theology (the Arminian) formulated by the seventeenth century Remonstrance. I will return to a comparison of these two systems after considering, briefly, Patrick' s claim of the facility with which one is able to "knock down" the doctrine of limited atonement.

And it is here in Patrick 's letter that I meet with one of the most astounding statements I have ever read on this subject. He writes, "I have a list of nine *simple* passages that say Jesus died for the world or all men (not just the saved)." (Emphasis added). Simple? If only the myriad of Reformed theologians that God has graced His Church with had realized how simple these verses were, the debate on the extent of the atonement would have had ended centuries ago. The mightiest of God's saints from the time of Augustine on have wrestled with these texts, and have acknowledged them to be anything but simple. In fairness to Patrick, many have mistakenly quoted these verses in support of an unlimited atonement. I remember, as a new Christian, citing them myself against a fellow believer who was sharing the doctrines of grace with me. These texts were clear I thought; they say that Christ gave his life for all men, or for the world. It would be another ten years before I gave these verses a second look. I remember thinking at that time how could it be possible for Christ to be a savior for all men, and yet that all men should not be saved. This was difficult to process; that Christ should be a savior of men not saved, a redeemer of men not redeemed. But at that time in my life (whatever I might have professed to the contrary) I was still worshipping my lord god free-will, and that was the extent of my theological convictions. I believed that Jesus died for the sins of all men, and earnestly wanted to save all men, but he was not going to violate their free­will. Then I read John Owen. Owen presents the following dilemma, "God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved; for if God enter into judgment with us, though it were with all mankind for one sin, no flesh should be justified in his sight: 'If the Lord should mark iniquities who should stand?' Ps.130:3...If the second, that is it which we affirm, that Christ in their room and stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world. If the first, why, then, are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, 'Because of their unbelief; they will not believe.' But this unbelief, is it a sin or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died from partaking of the fruit of his death? If he did not, then did he not die for all their sins. Let them choose which part they will." It is clear, then, that the passages of scripture quoted by Patrick deserve a response.

Ephesians 5:25 reads "Husband s, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it." Patrick suggests that to say Christ died for the church is not the same as saying that he died *only* for the church. We affim1, on the contrary, that that is exactly what the restrictive language used implies. Christ' s love to His church is a peculiar, and special love; a love bestowed only on His bride. As Owen put it, "If Christ had a love to others so as to die for them, then is there in the exhortation a latitude left unto men, in conjugal affections, for other women besides their wives." True, the scriptures do not say that Christ died *only* for his sheep, and *only* for his church but, as John Gill writes, "Though this restrictive word is not expressed, it is evidently implied; for, if Christ laid down his life, and gave himself for every individual man, these peculiar and discriminating characters would be utterly unnecessary."

Patrick next cites those texts that on the surface seem to teach that the atonement is of an unlimited extent. Christ ransomed *all* (1 Timothy 2:5-6), *every man* (Hebrews 2:9), and *the whole world* (1 John 2:2). The entire strength of the argument taken from these verses lies in the ambiguity of the words *all* and *world* which are variously used in scripture and, in several hundred instances may be shown to have a limited sense. Some examples include Luke 2: 1, "A decree from Caesar Augustus, that *all the world* should be taxed," that is, that part of the world under his rule; l John 5:19, *"the whole world* lieth in wickedness," a number certainly not including God's own people. See also Joel 2:28 and Romans 1:8. It should be obvious that the universalism of the New Testament scripture is opposite, not to the particularism of divine grace, but to the exclusiveness of Jewish nationalism; understanding which will prevent the sort of mistake Patrick makes on 1 John 2:2 where he interprets the word *ours* as the *elect,* and the word *world* as every other man living. Keeping in mind that John was appointed an apostle to the Jews, Galatians 2:9, the verse makes more sense (keeping with the analogy of faith) to interpret John as protesting that Jesus did not die for the Jewish nation only, but for the Gentiles also. Owen makes another excellent point on this text concerning the purpose of John in writing these words, which was the consolation of believers. Writes Owen, "the aim of the apostle being to make out consolation to believers in their failings, he can speak of none but them only. And if he should extend that whereof he speaks, namely, -that Christ was a propitiation to all and every one,- I cannot conceive how this can possibly make anything to the end proposed, or the consolation of believers ; for what comfort can arise from hence to them, by telling them that Christ died for innumerable that shall be damned."

The next group of verses include Romans 14:15,23; 1 Corinthians 8:11; and 2 Peter 2:1,4,9. These texts seem to teach that some for whom Christ died may be lost. The difficulty with such texts lies in the ambiguity of such words as *destroy, bought,* and *perish.* Are the subjects of these texts genuinely born again, or merely those who are members of the visible church, and who ought, in charity, to be esteemed brethren? As Owen points out, "it is the perpetual course of the Scripture, to ascribe all those things to every one that is in the fellowship of the of the church which are proper to them only who are true spiritual members of the same; as to be *saints, elect, redeemed."*

We also need to read these verses in context, remembering that difficult verses generally have within the passage the key to their interpretation. Thus in Romans 14:15 the word *destroy* is explained in verse 21 as doing that by "which thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." The context of 1 Corinthians 8:11 renders an identical interpretation. 2 Peter 2: 1-9 has nothing to do with the atonement. The best commentators agree that the words *the Lord* in the original refer to the God the Father, and that the word *bought* has reference to temporal deliverance, having particular application, as the great Baptist commentator John Gill points out, to the redemption of the people of Israel out of Egypt. Deuteronomy 32:6 reads, "Do ye thus requite the *Lord,* O foolish people and unwise? Is not he thy *Father* that hath *bought* thee?"

The last two verses quoted by Patrick are, in his thinking, impossible to reconcile with the doctrine of limited atonement. The first is Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen." This actually is among the easier texts to resolve; *many* receive the outward call of the gospel; even all who come within the hearing of the preached word. A *few* of those also receive the inward call of the Spirit attending the preached word; this call opening the heart, as with Lydia and others enabling them to respond in faith. 1 Timothy 4:10 is similar to the 2 Peter 2 passage and refers to the providential preservation of men by God the Father. To assert that this text proves anything other than that is to ask more of this passage than it is able to give; it would be asking men to believe in a savior that does not save, a savior, indeed, who is not able to save.

And that point brings us to a consideration and contrast of these two systems of doctrine; and the one fact that needs to be foremost in our view is that the article of the atonement *in both systems* is a limited atonement. The choice is **not** between a limited and an unlimited atonement; it is rather between an atonement that is limited in extent, and one that is limited in power and efficacy. The reformed view of the atonement is one that is for the church, the people of God, and so is limited in extent. All others represent the atonement as unlimited in extent, yet with the admission that not all are saved. The one, then, is limited in extent, but unlimited in power; the other is unlimited in extent but limited in power. As one writer put it, the Calvinistic atonement is like a narrow bridge that goes all the way over the stream; all other atonements are like a very wide bridge, but only going half way over the stream. Where, I ask, is the advantage of the wide atonement if it doesn't actually save? Some may reply that with an unlimited atonement all men at least have an opportunity to be saved, provided they meet certain conditions such as faith, baptism, and good works. Our answer is to remind all such that the bible unambiguously declares that men are dead in sin and are unable to do the least thing towards their salvation; therefore, if any are saved, God must act. We proclaim what has been called the evangelical principle, namely that *God saves sinners.* J.I. Packer, in his introductory essay to Owen's *Death of Death* wrote, "For Calvinism there is really only *one* point to be made in the field of soteriology: the point that God saves sinners...the force of this confession may not be weakened by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man and making the decisive part man's own, or by soft-pedaling the sinner's inability so as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with his Savior." According to Calvinism the cross actually saves. Packer continues, "Where the Arminian will only say: 'I could not have gained my salvation without Calvary,' the Calvinist will say: 'Christ gained my salvation for me at Calvary.' The former makes the cross the *sine qua non* of salvation, the latter sees it as the actual procuring cause of salvation, and traces the source of every spiritual blessing, faith included, back to the great transaction between God and His Son carried through on Calvary's hill." Note that Packer especially mentions faith. It is at this point that the two belief systems are set in clearest contrast. The Arminian believes he owes his election to his faith. The Calvinist believes he owes his faith to his election, as the scripture says, "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed," Acts 13:48.

The Calvinist represents the atonement as God's way of accomplishing His purpose in the salvation of men. All other theories of the atonement of necessity represent Him as unable to do according to His will. Consider,- God has perfect foreknowledge, "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world," Acts 15:18. Yet the unlimited theory of the atonement represents God as acting foolishly as it were, as earnestly striving to do what He foreknows He will not be able to accomplish. Indeed, its claim is that Christ's atonement was for all men, even including those who lived and died prior to His advent; men who were already dead and suffering the penalty due them.

Certain it is that the scheme of limited or particular atonement magnifies the grace of God more than that of a universal or general atonement. Gill observes, "surely that scheme of redemption which provides for the certain salvation of some, which some are a number that no man can number, more magnifies the grace of God, than that scheme that provides a precarious, uncertain salvation for all, giving only a mere possibility of it, with a probability that all of them may perish; leaving multitudes of them without so much as the means of salvation, and entirely without the Spirit of God to apply it to them, putting them only in a salvable state, so that they may be saved if they will; which, if it be effected, must depreciate the grace of God and sufferings of Christ, and exalt the power and free-will of man." This really is the upshot of the whole business; the free-will of men must be preserved, and upheld. And it is the universal scheme of the atonement that enables this. Here is the dilemma that must be answered by all those who hold to universalism (it is a question I have asked before in these pages) how is it that God alone saves, and that all He does toward that end He does for all alike, and yet not all men are saved? The only two possible answers are either God determines, or man determines; universalism ultimately transfers the decisive factor in salvation from God to man; what Warfield calls the "wreck of the evangelical principle." Scripture certainly declares that God determines; He is the potter, we are the clay. Scripture also demonstrates that God does not do equally for all men. Consider the account of Paul's conversion; a great light and voice from heaven; surely God is able to change a man' s will, yet He does not vouchsafe this miracle to all. But by the Spirit's work of regeneration He accomplishes His purpose in all His elect.

It is evident then, that the verses cited by Patrick can fit either scheme of the atonement. The question is which model best fits the biblical data. What model best answers the Old Testament typology, best represent the inner working of the Trinity with the Father electing, the Son redeeming, and the Spirit applying the benefits of the atonement, best displays and exalts the attributes of God, and most exalts the free grace of God in man's salvation. The particular atonement, the one that is limited in extent as taught in the Puritan-Reformed tradition, and known to us as Calvinism is the only model that can boast the above features. "It is a nickname," wrote Charles Spurgeon, "to call it Calvinism, Calvinism is the gospel and nothing more. "I can do no better in closing than to give a final quote from Spurgeon:

" We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, 'no, certainly not.' We ask them the next question - Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer 'no.' They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say, 'No. Christ has died that any man may be saved if' - and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now who is it that limit's the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ's death; we say, 'No, my dear sir, it is you that do it.' We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it."