

CALVINISM AND PREACHING (3) 'LIMITED' ATONEMENT

Ronald VanOverloop

The following article is the third in a series on the Doctrines of Grace and first appeared in The Standard Bearer, July 1993, and is here reproduced with permission.

The only way to do the work of evangelism and missions is by proclaiming a 'limited' atonement! "But," it is objected, "how can mission work be effective if you cannot say that Christ died for all?" "How can one press the claim of the Gospel upon an individual if it cannot be said to that person that Jesus died for him?"

For centuries these rhetorical questions have been stated as charges against the Reformed faith, as objections which are supposed to show the fallacy of this faith. A girl in my congregation recently was bluntly told, "You don't believe in missions, or in witnessing." The Reformed fathers faced and answered these same objections. Those in whom the faith of our fathers is living still must also answer these objections.

A son of the Reformation, Francis Turretin, wrote the following words in the late 1600s. Notice how biblical his presentation is:

The mission and death of Christ are restricted to a *limited number* - to His people, His sheep, His friends, His body - and nowhere extended to all men severally and collectively. Thus Christ is called "Jesus" because He shall save *His people* from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He is called the Saviour of *His body* (Ephesians 5:23). The Good Shepherd lays down His life for "*the sheep*" (John 10:15) and for "*His friends*" (John 15:13). He is said to die "that He might gather together in one *the children of God* that were scattered abroad" (John 11:52). It is said that Christ "hath purchased *the church* with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

If Christ died for everyone of Adam's posterity, why should the Scriptures so often restrict the object of His death to a few? How could it, with propriety, be said absolutely that Christ is the Saviour of *His people* and of *His body*, if He is the Saviour of others also?

The Reformers and the Reformed faith contend that only a

'limited' atonement is definite and sure, that only the proclamation of a 'limited' atonement makes the preaching the power of God unto salvation. The only way to do the work of evangelism and missions is by proclaiming a 'limited' atonement!

* * * * *

Did Jesus offer up Himself a sacrifice as an atonement for the whole human race, that is, for every individual without distinction, or was His sacrifice of Himself with special reference to a definite number of humans? Was His sacrifice intended to make salvation possible for all men, or was it intended to make salvation certain for those who had been given to Him by the Father? Did He die for all men, or did He die for the elect only?

By the way, do not overlook the fact that everyone 'limits' the atonement. One either limits its extent or its power. The Calvinist believes that the extent is limited, for it does not apply to all individuals. The Arminian believes that the atonement is limited in its power, for in itself it does not actually save anyone, since it needs the consent of each person if he is to be saved. When the atonement of Christ's death is made universal, then its inherent value is destroyed. If even one of those for whom Jesus died is lost, then salvation is not certain for anyone. If salvation is made objectively possible for all, then the atonement did not actually save anyone.

The best approach – no, the only approach – to the question of the extent of the atonement, is from the viewpoint of the atonement itself. So often the discussion immediately goes to and stays on the first word, the adjective: limited, definite or universal. But first we should consider the other word, the noun. You will know which adjective to use when you know what atonement is and what the Bible says about atonement.

Atonement is a satisfaction for a debt. The atonement spoken of in Scripture is the full payment of the debt of sin. Atonement means, *first*, that all men are fallen in Adam and therefore deserve eternal death. The atonement is made necessary by the fact that all men as sinners must be punished according to the demands of divine justice.

Let us learn from the way in which the Reformed fathers answered the universal atonement of the Arminians in the "Second Head of Doctrine" of the Canons of Dordrecht. They began their defence of limited or definite atonement by declaring the biblical truth of the atonement and man's need for it:

ARTICLE 1: God is not only supremely merciful, but also supremely just. And his justice requires that our sins committed against his infinite majesty should be punished, not only with temporal, but with eternal punishment, both in body and soul; which we cannot escape, unless satisfaction be made to the justice of God.

Atonement means, *secondly*, that a substitute was provided to take the place of sinners. God made His own Son to be the Substitute:

ARTICLE 2: Since therefore we are unable to make that satisfaction in our own persons, or to deliver ourselves from the wrath of God, he hath been pleased in his infinite mercy to give his only begotten Son, for our surety, who was made sin, and became a curse for us and in our stead, that he might make satisfaction to divine justice on our behalf.

Concerning this substitutionary atonement made by God's Son, consider two thoughts. First, there is no injustice in the fact that Christ died for some and not for others. No one deserves from Christ a chance to be saved, for all are fallen and deserve only hell. It is only out of abounding grace that Christ died for any at all. And second, so perfect and so complete is His substitution that though all who will go to heaven are completely destitute of any merit of their own, they do go to heaven; and they do so only on the basis of their Substitute. "The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin: and is of infinite worth and value" (Canons of Dordrecht, II:3).

Before we defend our proposition that the only way to witness or to do the work of missions or evangelism is by proclaiming a definite atonement, consider the argument of the Puritan, John Owen:

God the Father in His judgment and wrath punished His only begotten Son at the cross for either:

1. *All* the sins of *all* men;
2. *All* the sins of *some* men; or
3. *Some* of the sins of *all* men.

It must be one of the three, therefore we see: If the *third* is true, all men still have some sins to answer for, and then *none* will be saved. If the *second* is true, then Christ suffered for all the sins of the elect in the whole world, and these are truly delivered by what Christ finished in His death on the cross. But if the *first* be the case, why are not all men freed from all their sins and saved from the punishment of hell?

My friends, there is no substitute for the time-honoured, God exalting truth of substitutionary atonement - that Christ our Lord *actually bore* the sins of those for whom He died specifically. He stood in the place of the "many" who would actually exper-

ience complete deliverance from all their sins! Read Isaiah 53:11; Matthew 20:28; Matthew 26:28; Mark 10:45; Hebrews 9:28; and John 10:11. My Lord Jesus Christ substituted for "sheep" given Him by the Father, and *not* for the devil's "goats"!

* * * * *

The impact that the truth of definite atonement has upon the work of evangelism and missions is immediate and great. The doctrine of limited atonement puts no restrictions on the proclamation of the Gospel. Some say it does. But this objection does not arise from Scripture. Nowhere in the Word of God can it be found that to be able to preach the Gospel to all nations one must have the message that Christ died for all the sins of all men.

The church must proclaim the promise of the Gospel that "whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish but have everlasting life" to "all nations and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel." Therefore, those who do not repent and believe in Christ are themselves to be blamed, and it is not "any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross" (Canons II:6.7).

As we strive to be obedient to the command to teach all nations, we are sure that the sovereign God is using us and our preaching as His means to apply to the consciousness of the elect the atoning sacrifice of His Son. We obey by going forth, preaching and teaching. We do not have to tell our audiences that Christ died for them. Such a statement cannot be found anywhere in Acts, the 'mission' book of the Bible. We do not find Christ and the apostles saying, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Neither did they say, "Jesus died for you."

We are commanded to preach, not worrying about which ones are those for whom Jesus died, not worrying about who are the elect and who are the reprobate. We preach His Gospel and God saves His people. We do not have to use the trick of telling everybody in our audience that they should not leave the begging Christ, who died for them, outside of their heart and life. As a minister of the Gospel I do not have to labour under the burden of the impossible, namely persuading people to do for themselves what Jesus left undone.

Of this Gospel we are not ashamed, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes (Romans 1:16). With the Bible we declare that all humans are sinners and that from their sinfulness and sins arise all their problems and difficulties,

which are a partial expression of the wrath of God (Romans 2:5-9; 3:23). We preach the biblical truth that no one is saved by works, that good deeds do not justify anyone in God's sight (Romans 3:20). We preach that out of free grace God was pleased to send His own Son, Jesus Christ, to be the perfect Substitute and Redeemer (Romans 3:24). Because the identity of those for whom Jesus is the Substitute is unknown, we proclaim to all the command to repent and believe the truth of the Bible concerning God's Son. We teach that God uses the instrumentality of faith in Christ's sacrifice to bring the consciousness of justification and salvation (Romans 3:24-25; 4:5). We preach that the ability to believe, to have faith, is a gift of God, and that it is no more a work than is circumcision (Romans 4:11,16). We preach the assurance of salvation and of peace with God to all who believe that salvation is only in Jesus (Romans 4:24-5:1). This is the Gospel Paul was inspired to preach. And this is the Gospel we strive to be faithful to preach. We rejoice to be able to preach the Gospel in such a way that men are called to a real and actual salvation. We preach an atonement full and free. We preach a powerful redemption.

On the contrary, the preaching which declares that Jesus died for all cheapens the Gospel and its proclamation. Such preaching cheapens the precious blood of the Son of God. Such preaching makes the value of His death to be little. It makes the Gospel and its preaching, not the power and wisdom of God unto salvation, but a possibility and a potentiality.

* * * * *

It is the personal experience of the power of the atonement that constrains us to preach the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the missionfield (2 Corinthians 5:14). The love of God, which freely gives to us forgiveness of all our sins and the consciousness of a perfect righteousness, constrains us to preach. That God reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation, provides us with more than enough motivation to present the Gospel in missions and evangelism. If it is merely a potential atonement until my faith takes hold of it, then I will be motivated; but the motivation would be fear, not love. It would be the fear of not being strong enough in my faith, not good enough in my works. It is the conviction that Christ's blood graciously atoned for all of the sins of wretched sinners that constrains us to go into all the world and to preach and witness to every creature.