

The Atonement...



CONTEMPLATING
CHRIST'S GREAT
REDEMPITIVE WORK

The Atonement: Its Design Matthew 1:21

Last Monday morning as I was reading the sports page (*Star-Telegram*, 12/29/03) I came across a series of quotes from 2003. One was a humorous, tongue-in-cheek remark by safety Mike Adams after his team, the University of Delaware, defeated Colgate 40-0 in the NCAA Division I-AA football final. Of the game he said, "It's going to be talked about for hundreds and thousands of years." With that whimsical exaggeration, young Mike Adams put the game in which he had just played in proper perspective.

Proper perspective has been one of our goals in this series on the Atonement. To that end I have reminded you of A. W. Tozer's proposition that "the man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems." When Tozer says this he is making a profound statement as to the effect of sound and rich theology upon the day-to-day life of the Christian. He is saying that when the reality of the Majesty in the heavens breaks into your soul the significance of the everyday things can, at last, be properly evaluated. He is saying that all of life - every aspect, every dimension, every compartment, every endeavor, every relationship, every challenge, every difficulty - all of life takes on a different meaning when life is appraised in light of the stunning and

awesome significance of the fact that the very Son of God suffered and died in your place. In other words, when life is appraised in light of the stunning and awesome significance of the atonement.

Atonement is defined as Christ's satisfying divine justice by His sufferings and death in the place of sinners. This morning we will consider the *design* of the Atonement. Design is most often thought of as an arrangement of elements or details in a product or a work of art. Our new building, for example, is being constructed according to a particular design. But design can also refer to one's purpose or intention. We may say that a young man has "designs" on a particular young lady who has captured his heart. In other words, it is his purpose or intention to marry her. A design is a scheme in which means to an end are laid down. It is a plan for accomplishing something.

We often speak of the "*plan* of salvation" don't we? A plan suggests that God has an object or an end in view and that He has chosen the means by which that end is to be accomplished? If the means was the cross of Christ, what *was* the divine purpose or intention of God? What was it that was actually accomplished on the cross?

Exploring such a question is no dry, academic, intramural theological exercise. Indeed, the question is at the very core of our faith. It may be helpful for me to communicate this is by way of testimony. I grew up in a theological tradition that strongly suggested that Christ's sufferings and death *opened up the possibility of salvation for all men*. Whether or not any particular sinner was saved was entirely dependent upon that sinner's personal decision; his personal appropriation of the work of Christ.

In the summer of 1981 I passionately and enthusiastically embraced the Reformed theology of salvation known as the Doctrines of Grace or the Five Points of Calvinism. These articles are often summarized by the acronym TULIP. The “L” in TULIP stands for Limited Atonement. This article deals with the design of Christ’s atonement. Essentially the doctrine of a limited atonement states that Christ died to actually accomplish salvation for a particular people – His sheep, His Church, His people, those whom the Father had given Him, the elect of God. While many, including myself, relish the Doctrines of Grace, others view them as a horrible and offensive set of propositions. Still others who are sincerely open to the idea of the sovereignty of God in salvation sometimes hesitate at the point of a limited atonement. Now let me say at the outset that Arminians and Calvinists alike put limits on the atonement.

Years ago I saw the movie *Crocodile Dundee* – a flick about a guide and crocodile hunter in the Australian outback with a reputation akin to that of Paul Bunyan. He was asked by a reporter if he thought the Aborigines had a legitimate claim to the land. Dundee pointed to some ancient mountains in the distance and said this: “Those mountains have been here a million years and they’ll still be here a million years after we’re gone. So arguing about who owns them is like two fleas arguing over who owns the dog they’re on.”

Arguing over who limits the atonement is equally fruitless. Lorraine Boettner puts it like this: “Let there be no misunderstanding at this point. The Arminian limits the atonement as certainly as does the Calvinist. The Calvinist limits the extent of it in that he says it does not apply to all persons ... while the Arminian limits the power of it, for he says that in itself it does not actually save anybody

... [And here's a great mental image to help you understand the issue] For the Calvinist [the Atonement] is like a narrow bridge that goes all the way across the stream; for the Arminian it is like a great wide bridge that goes only half-way across. As a matter of fact, the Arminian places more severe limitations on the work of Christ than does the Calvinist" (*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p.153).

Shortly after I had come to embrace the Doctrines of Grace, I accompanied Julia to some kind of trade show in Charlotte, North Carolina (October 22, 1982). I sat in a corner all day reading a book about the design of the atonement entitled *For Whom Did Christ Die*. I was already convinced from Scripture that all men were culpable; that all men including myself were truly dead in trespasses and sins; that we were helpless to save ourselves or contribute to our salvation in any way. The doctrine of a particular redemption never troubled me at all. As I read my soul did not recoil at the thought that this arrangement was unfair. The answers to the questions of who and how many are saved I recognized were hidden in the secret counsels of an eternal God and so I was never very inclined to get worked up over those matters. After all, *the Lord knows those who are His and no one will be able to snatch them from the Father's hand*. The doctrine of a particular redemption never troubled me at all. Indeed, I was actually thrilled by the idea. The thought that Christ's death actually accomplished salvation brought great comfort to my soul.

But to this idea of a particular redemption others object, "No, this cannot be! God designed the atonement to save all men and therefore all will be saved, if not in this life then through a future probation. Jezebel and Amy Carmichael, Adolf Hitler and Jonathan Edwards, Joseph Stalin and Jim Elliot will all

eventually enjoy the same eternal blessedness. After all is this not what the Bible teaches? **Romans 5:18**, *so then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to **all men**, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to **all men**. I **Corinthians 15:22**, for as in Adam **all** die, so also in Christ **all** shall be made alive. **Colossians 1:19-20**, for it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile **all things** to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross.*

To understand these verses as teaching universalism – that all men will be saved – requires that one deny the historical doctrines of original sin; the perfect justice of God; the substitutionary, vicarious sacrifice of Jesus; and the eternal punishment of the wicked of which the Bible has much to say (**Matthew 13:40-42, 48-50; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:44-48; Luke 12:4-5; John 3:36; II Thess. 1:8-9**).

Of a particular redemption it is objected, “No, this cannot be! God designed the atonement to make salvation possible for all men even though all are not saved. After all, pastor, doesn't the Bible teach that *the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, **not wishing** that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (II **Pet. 3:9**, unwilling)?* After all, pastor, doesn't the Bible say that *God has shut up **all** in disobedience that He might show mercy to **all** (Rom. 11:32, all); that Christ died for **all**, that they who live should not longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (II **Cor. 5:15**, all); that God desires **all** men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I **Tim. 2:4**, all); that we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of **all** men, especially of believers (I **Tim. 4:10**, all)?* After all, pastor, doesn't the Bible teach that *the Lamb of God ... takes away the sin of the **world**” (John 1:29, world); that God so loved the **world**, that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16, world);*

that God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (**II Cor. 5:19**, world); that He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole *world* (**I John 2:2**, world)? After all, pastor, doesn't the Bible teach that *whosoever* believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life (**John 3:16**, whosoever); that *whosoever* shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (**ROM. 10:13**, WHOSOEVER)?

God designed the atonement to make salvation possible for all men even though all are not saved. It would appear that the case is closed. But we must not jump to conclusions too fast. Should we so readily accept the suggestion that the accomplishment of redemption really does depend upon man's ability to believe; that man can make the choice of faith without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit; that Christ died for all sins but one – the sin of unbelief?

Yes, the Bible uses the word "unwilling." But does God's desire for men to repent mean that all men are *able* to repent? Does the sincere offer of the gospel to all men necessarily mean that all men have *ability* to embrace Christ? Does "I ought" necessarily mean "I can?" Yes, the Bible uses the word "all." But does *all* always mean every individual man, woman, and child in the world? We would suggest that all may mean all without exception *or* all without distinction. In Matthew 10:22 Jesus said, "And you will be hated by *all* on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved." Did He mean that the disciples would be hated by every man, woman, and child who had ever or would ever live or that they would be hated by all sorts of men. In **John 12:32** Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men to Myself." Did Jesus draw every man, woman, and child who has or ever will live to Himself or did He mean that all sorts of folks – rich and poor, men and women, black and

white, young and old, feeble and healthy - would be drawn to Him? Yes, the Bible uses the word "world." The question is does "world" always mean every individual who ever lived on planet earth? We understand "world" to mean the whole of the human race. The term has a global, comprehensive, collective sense. Let me give you an example. **John 11:9**, *Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world."* Yes, the Bible uses the word "whosoever." This hardly bears on the subject at all. "Whosoever" speaks to the universal and free offer of the gospel, a point of agreement among all evangelicals. "Everyone without exception who has called on the name of the Lord *has* been saved. Not one who has trusted in Christ has perished. There has never been a man who has *wanted* to come to Christ, who has found God's decree of election to be a barrier in the way" (Cheeseman, p. 63).

After all the theological arm-wrestling; after all the intramural debating one question remains: Was anyone saved at the cross? Did Christ really purchase our redemption or not? Is the debt actually paid or not? Is Christ's work contingent? Edwin Palmer hits the mark: "The question that needs a precise answer is this: Did He or didn't He? Did Christ actually make a substitutionary sacrifice for sins or didn't He? If He did, then it was not for all the world, for then all the world would be saved" (*The Five Points of Calvinism*, p.47).

My beloved, Christ's death actually accomplished salvation. James White says, "Therefore, we are not talking about presenting some terrible limitation on the work of Christ when we speak of *limited atonement*. In fact, we are actually presenting a far greater view of the work of Christ on Calvary when we say that Christ's death actually accomplishes something in reality rather than only in

theory. The atonement, we believe, was a real, actual, substitutionary one, not a possible, theoretical one that is dependent for its efficacy upon the actions of man ... Jesus Christ died in behalf of those that the Father had, from eternity, decreed to save. There is absolute unity between the Father and the Son in saving God's people. The Father decrees their salvation, the Son dies in their place, and the Spirit sanctifies them and conforms them to the image of Christ. This is the consistent testimony of Scripture."

Charles Spurgeon put it this way: "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, must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved."

Most of us have seen the game show *The Price Is Right*. The show ends with the final two contestants competing for their respective "showcases." Each contestant is shown a display of prizes - merchandise, automobiles, vacation trips, and so on. After describing the showcase the announcer says, "All this can be yours, *if* the price is right." In other words, all of this wonderful stuff is your potentially. It exists for you only in possibility. All of this wonderful stuff is yours contingently. You may take possession only upon your correct estimate of its cost. Similarly, to say that the sufferings and death of Christ only made salvation possible is to say that expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption - all that was accomplished on the cross - are only yours potentially. They are yours contingently. Everything awaits your decision.

Where does the real emphasis lie? Is the Biblical accent on our *appropriation* of the work of Christ or on the Holy Spirit's *application* of it to us? Beloved, our

salvation was completely, finally, truly *accomplished* at the cross. Christ, not potentially, but actually accomplished expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption for His people at the cross. It was not contingent but certain. And in time and space the Holy Spirit graciously and sovereignly applies what was accomplished by Christ to each one. On May 15, 1973 this sinner was granted the new birth; given the gifts of faith and repentance; ushered into the actual experience and enjoyment of all that Christ had accomplished for me on the cross.

Listen to John Murray. "The question is: On whose behalf did Christ offer himself as a sacrifice? On whose behalf did he propitiate the wrath of God? Whom did he reconcile to God? Who did he redeem from the curse of the law, from the guilt and power of sin, and from the enthralling power and bondage of Satan? In whose stead and on whose behalf was he obedient unto death, even the death of the cross? These are precisely the questions that have to be asked and frankly faced if the matter of the extent of the atonement is to be placed in proper focus ... What exactly does the expression "died for" mean? When Paul says that *Christ died for us* (**I Thess. 5:10**) or that Christ *died for our sins* (**I Cor. 15:3**) ... He is thinking of the stupendous truth that God loved *him* and gave himself up for *him* (**Gal. 2:20**), that Christ died in *his* room and stead, and that therefore we have redemption through the blood of Christ."

"What does redemption mean? It does not mean redeemability, that we are placed in a redeemable position. It means that Christ purchased and procured redemption. This is the triumphant note of the New Testament ... Christ did not come to put men in a redeemable position but to redeem to himself a people. We come to the same conclusion when we properly analyze the meaning of

expiation, propitiation, and reconciliation. Christ did not come to make sins removable. He came to remove sin and guilt. **Hebrews 1:3** says, *when He had made purification of sin, he sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high.* Christ did not come to make God reconcilable. He reconciled us to God by his own blood.”

“The very nature of Christ’s mission and accomplishment is involved in this question. Did Christ come to make the salvation of all men possible, to remove obstacles that stood in the way of salvation, and merely to make provision for salvation? Or did he come to save his people? Did he come to put all men in a salvable state? Or did he come to secure the salvation of all those who are ordained to eternal life? Did he come to make men redeemable? Or did he come effectively and infallibly to redeem” (pp. 62-63)?

I believe with all my heart that Christ’s death actually accomplished salvation. This thought both thrills and comforts my soul. I am reminded of Newton’s hymn, *Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder*:

*He has washed us with his blood, he has brought us nigh to God.
He has washed us with his blood, he presents our souls to God.
He who washed us with his blood, soon will bring us home to God.
He who washed us with his blood, has secured our way to God.
You have washed us with your blood; you are worthy Lamb of God.*

I sing those words with a definite atonement in view. I sing those words with the conviction that the blood of Christ actually secured my salvation. “Because the will of God is always accomplished. What he is pleased to purpose will surely come to pass. So, as it was the purpose of Christ’s coming to save sinners,

that is exactly what was achieved; and, by the cross, sinners are saved by being washed in the blood of Christ which was shed for them" (Cheeseman, p.80).