

THE CASE FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT

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Introduction:

It is with special joy that I accept this invitation to present a brief paper sketching the case for definite atonement. A professor of Systematic Theology in an interdenominational conservative school must naturally feel constrained to afford a fair representation not only to his own convictions but to the various views to which some evangelicals are committed. Under those circumstances I seldom have occasion to make a direct plea for particular redemption. At this time, however, the case for universal atonement is in the hands of two scholars who hold to it and set it forth in two papers appearing in the present issue of B.E.S.T. With zest, therefore do I undertake the task to express and vindicate the doctrine of definite atonement.

I. Precise Point at Issue

In order to dispel misunderstanding frequently prevailing in spite of clear and emphatic statements (which inexplicably remain unheeded), it may be wise at the outset to specify precisely what is in view here.

The doctrine is not concerned with the intrinsic value of the sacrifice of Christ. It is freely granted by all parties to the controversy, and specifically by the Reformed, that the death of our Lord, by virtue of His divine nature, is of infinite worth and therefore amply sufficient to redeem all mankind, all angels and the whole world, even a thousand worlds besides, if He had so intended. Rather the point at issue here concerns the chief purpose of the Father in sending the Son and the chief intention of Christ in laying down His life in sacrifice.

The Reformed as well as others admit, yea are eager to acknowledge, that there are certain blessings short of salvation, which are the fruits of the work of Christ, which may terminate upon any and all men, and which do in fact benefit substantially some who will never attain unto salvation. The point which is here in view, however, is whether salvation itself, involving all its integral elements, reconciliation, forgiveness, justification, sanctification, glorification, etc., has been actually secured and purchased by Christ for all men, or for the elect only.

It should be well understood that among evangelicals there is no major contention as to whether all will in fact be saved. With deep sorrow at the thought of the destiny of the lost, all parties here in presence confess that the Scripture makes it patently plain that ultimately some men will be saved and others will be lost. Thus it is important to emphasize at the outset that even those who assert a universal intent for the death of Christ do not go so far as to say that all men will in fact attain unto salvation.

The point at issue here is simply this, whether the Father is sending the Son and the Son in offering Himself did intend to provide salvation for all men and every man, or whether they intended to secure the salvation of all those and those only who will in fact be redeemed. The Reformed position unapologetically asserts the latter.

This may be an appropriate time to advert briefly to the terminology used on this topic. It has been customary, at times even in circles committed to the Reformed faith, to speak of "limited" atonement. This, it should be urged, is a misnomer, for the paramount question is really not one of "limit" or "limitation". It has been remarked with truth that all evangelicals assert some limit here:

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. We say, then, we will just go back to the old statement—Christ did not die so as beyond a doubt to secure the salvation of anybody, did he? You must say "No;" you are obliged to say so, for you believe that even after a man has been pardoned, he may yet fall from grace, and perish. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as to infallibly 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, must be 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."¹

The terms "definite atonement" or "particular redemption" are much better suited, and we should discipline ourselves to use them exclusively. Let us now state some of the arguments which militate in favor of

1. Charles Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption." Sermon 181 in *New Park Street Pulpit*. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964. IV, 135. It is surely worthy of note that this emphatic endorsement of definite atonement comes from a man as notable in evangelistic activity as was Spurgeon. This ought to temper the objection frequently raised that this view cuts the nerve of evangelistic and missionary zeal.

definite atonement and proceed thereafter to consider objections frequently raised against it.

II. Arguments for definite atonement.

1. The Scripture emphasizes the definite relation of the mission of Christ, and specifically of His death to those whom He actually redeems. Christ gave Himself for His people (Mt. 1:21), for His friends (John 15:13), for His sheep (John 10:15), for his church (Eph. 5:23-26, Acts 20:28), for many (Mt. 20:28; 26:28; Mk. 10:45), for us (Tit. 2:14), for me (Gal. 2:20). These expressions need not be construed as exclusive of others not explicitly mentioned—(this is quite manifest in the case of Gal. 2:20)—but the specific reference in all these passages certainly indicates that the relationship of the work of Christ to those who are saved is different from that which it bears to those who are lost.

2. The Scripture teaches that the definite purpose of the Father in sending the Son and of the Son in coming into this world was to “gather into one the children of God who were scattered,” (John 11:52), to save those “who were given to Him,” (John 6:38, 39), to redeem “us from every iniquity,” (Tit. 2:14). These and similar passages make it plain that the redemptive purpose is specifically oriented toward those who are in fact redeemed.

3. The Scriptural language concerning the work of Jesus Christ does indicate more than a general intention which would await the fulfillment of additional conditions before effectuation could be achieved. Specifically the Scripture represents Christ’s work as redemption (Eph. 1:7; Rom. 3:24; I Pet. 1:18, 19; Matt. 20:28, etc.): this implies that the people in view are actually redeemed. The Scripture speaks of propitiation (I John 2:2, 4:10; Rom. 3:24, Heb. 2:17): this term implies that God is actually appeased and that He does not deal any further in terms of His righteous anger with those who are under the benefit of propitiation. The Scripture speaks of reconciliation (Col. 1:21, 22; Rom. 5:10; II Cor. 5:18-20, etc.): this term implies that those who were estranged are actually brought back into a relationship of friendship and fellowship. What kind of redemption would this be where the redeemed are still under the power of the enemy? What kind of propitiation, where God still deals in wrath? What kind of reconciliation where estrangement continues to exist and is even sealed for eternity? These three terms, severally and jointly, bear witness to the fact that the Scripture views the work of Christ as bringing about the effectuation of salvation.

4. The question must be raised whether the purpose of the work of Christ is to effect divine reconciliation and human redemption, or merely to render God reconcilable and man salvable. If the former, definite atonement follows as indicated above under 3; if the latter, a human ingredient is to be superadded to the work of Christ. It is this human ingredient which determines the difference between the saved and the lost, and the conclusion follows that the work of Christ by itself

actually saves no one. This would appear derogatory to Christ and repugnant to Scripture. A conditional imprecation is really no imprecation at all.

5. Saving faith, being the gift of God (Acts 13:48; 18:27; Phil. 1:29, etc.), is granted to man as a fruit of the saving work of Christ. If this work is universal in its scope, it is difficult to see why faith is not conferred upon all men. Yet it is patently plain that all men do not believe, and the conclusion follows that the work of Christ, as well as its fruition in faith, is designed for the redeemed.

6. Particular redemption is an inevitable implicate of a recognition of the penal substitutionary nature of the atonement. Now this vicarious nature is a common tenet of the evangelical faith. And if we want to avoid the shoals of outright universalism, definiteness involves that the work of Christ was intended to terminate redemptively upon a part only of mankind, variously named His people, His Church, His body, His sheep, the elect. In this view the remainder of mankind is related to Christ differently, both as to the divine intention and as to the actual implementation of salvation.

If we do hold that Christ died substitutionally for all mankind bearing the divine penalty for the sins of all men, it would appear that at the day of judgment there will remain nothing to be punished, and consequently all men should be saved. But in fact all men will not be saved, and except for the elect whose sin will be forgiven in view of the work of Christ, men will have to answer to divine justice for their deeds (Mt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; Col. 3:25; Rev. 20:12, etc.). Here the classic formulation of John Owen may well be quoted:

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. . . . If the second, that is it which we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room 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.²

7. The intercession of Christ appears explicitly restricted to the saved in John 17:9, where Christ prays "not for the world but for those whom

2. John Owen, *The Death of Death*. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959. Pp. 61, 62 or *Works*, ed. Goold, X, 173, 174.

Thou hast given me; for they are Thine." As Du Moulin remarked, "Would He have refused prayers for those for whom He shed His blood?" Consistency demands that the priestly work of Christ be viewed as harmonious and that oblation and intercession be co-extensive. They are in any case frequently conjoined (Is. 53:12; Rom. 8:34; I John 2:1, 2).

8. At the time of our Lord's death on the cross, the eternal destiny of many reprobates had already been sealed in death (for instance that of some sinners at the times of the Flood and of the ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.). Can we suppose that our Lord died with the intent of bearing the sins of those who were then and there in Hell? If not, He did not die for all.

If we reflect furthermore, that the knowledge of our Lord, as to His divine nature, is not subject to any limitation by virtue of time, the same reasoning would apply to all reprobates, past, present, and future. In as much as the question in view relates to the eternal design both of the Father and of the Son in the death of Christ, this argument, grounded in the Divine omniscience, appears to have validity and can in no wise be called into question in terms of possible limitations of the human knowledge of Christ.

9. One should not be slow in acknowledging that the advocates of universal redemption mean to exalt the greatness of God's love by viewing its scope as inclusive of every member of the race. Yet, in this design they appear to fail in two respects.

First, even in their view, Christ's love is not unlimited, since it does not embrace fallen angels (Heb. 2:16). Thus all creatures in need of redemption are not encompassed in any case.

Secondly, while appearing to extend the range of divine love, these friends by the same token curtail its power, depth and effectiveness. We do worthily magnify the majesty of God, not if we represent His love as frustrated and defeated by the obduracy of the creature, but rather as finding its glorious fulfillment in a victorious overcoming of all obstacles, even those raised by man himself. As stated above, the choice here is not between limited and unlimited atonement, but between an effective atonement limited in breadth to the redeemed, and an universal atonement limited in depth to the point of ineffectuality.

10. To proffer a blessing contingent upon the fulfillment of an unrealizable condition is altogether futile. On the hypothetical-universalists' own showing, since no one has faith but those to whom it is efficaciously given by God, a universal redemption on condition of faith is not a blessing which issues in any concrete advantage to the non-elect. In this light the vaunted benevolence of God toward all mankind appears as nugatory.

11. To attempt to combine universal redemption with particular

salvation is to introduce an intolerable disjunction in the divine purpose. This disjunction is so serious as to threaten the very unity of God in the Trinitarian relationship: how could Christ intend to die for those whom the Father has not given Him, and whom the Holy Spirit will not regenerate? Unity and harmony in the Trinitarian articulation of the divine purpose demand a redemption which is precisely co-extensive with election on the one hand and effectual application on the other. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this consideration.

III. Brief considerations of Objections Raised against Definite Atonement

Obviously it will not be possible here to deal with these at any length but we shall merely sketch the lines of approach pursued.

1. The opponents of definite atonement quote biblical passages asserting a universal saving will of God (Ezk. 8:23; 33:11; I Tim. 2:4; II Pet. 3:9; John 3:16, etc.) These passages do not necessarily imply that God wills the salvation of each member of the race. They do show indeed the general benevolence of God, who takes special delight in the salvation of the sinner, but really prove no more. In II Peter 3:9, the word "us" may suggest that the reference is specific to those who, as Peter, are among the redeemed. In I Tim. 2:4 the words "all men" may mean, as Augustine and Calvin construed them, "all kinds of men," "men of all categories," including even rulers who seem to be such unlikely objects of divine grace. John 3:16 may well be construed to indicate the general worldward direction of the love of God, rather than to imply that every man in the world is uniformly the object of saving love. The passages here quoted do not singly or jointly produce conviction in relation to a universal design.

2. The opponents of definite atonement quote passages which are construed to teach that some for whom Christ died may perish: Rom. 14:15; I Cor. 8:11; Heb. 10:29; II Peter 2:1. In Romans 14:4 the context shows that those in view as "weaker brethren" will not in fact ultimately perish, but Paul reproves those who would be callous enough to be indifferent to the serious problems of conscience that their free use of Christian liberty would produce for those of weaker faith.

In Hebrews 10:29 and II Peter 2:1 the reference seems to be to what the apostates professed to have, rather than to what they had in fact: to argue from these Scriptures in favor of universal redemption appears out of keeping with the context, for the seriousness of this apostasy is due to the SPECIAL relationship which these men professed to Christ and the Holy Spirit. If it be claimed that the terms "bought" and "sanctified" refer to real benefits conferred rather than to external profession, great difficulties will arise with the doctrine of perseverance as well, which many hypothetical universalists are eager to maintain.

3. The opponents of definite atonement quote some Scriptures which are thought to imply that the work of Christ was designed for all men (Is. 53:6; Rom. 5:18, 8:32; II Cor. 5:14; I Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:11); for every-

one (Heb. 2:9); for the world (John 3:16, 4:42; I John 2:2). These terms need to be considered carefully in their context, however: each of them has a scope which is not necessarily co-extensive with the human race but which the context alone can reasonably determine. If I write "Let all keep this issue of the *Bulletin of E.T.S.*," it must be quite apparent that the word "all" relates to the members of the Society or at most the readers of the *Bulletin*, not the totality of mankind. Now several of the passages quoted appear in a context which emphasizes specific particularism, and this is bound to qualify the apparently universal statements.

Take Is. 53:6, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." The ones in view here are those who attain unto peace ("the chastisement of *our peace* was upon Him") and who are healed ("with His stripes we are healed"). We furthermore observe the following expressions: "The transgression of *my people*" (vs. 8), "He bore the sin of *many*" (vs. 12), He shall justify many and he shall bear their iniquities (vs. 11). To assume that Is. 53 teaches an indiscriminate universal redemption is to go counter to the express statements of the text.

In Rom. 8:32 ("He delivered him up for us all") a similar situation is in view. The "us all" mentioned are those who "also freely receive all things." They are God's elect (vs. 33) who are justified, (vs. 33) whom nothing can separate from the love of God (vss. 35-39). It would be very difficult in fact to find in all of the Bible a more strongly particularistic context than Rom. 8:28-39. To interpret Rom. 8:32 as applying to mankind at large is to fly in the face of this Scripture.

In II Cor. 5:14 the statement "One died for all" is immediately followed by the clause "therefore all died," which Paul develops by showing that those for whom He died do now live regenerate lives unto their Savior. Thus this passage cannot but by a strained application be referred to the generality of mankind, but must concern those who are viewed as saved, regenerated (vs. 17) and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (vss. 18-19). In this same place we encounter the word "world" with a scope restricted by the context: indeed, the statement "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" is illumined by the comment "not reckoning unto them their trespasses." The world that is reconciled is identical with the group to whom trespasses are not imputed: but these are only the redeemed, and not mankind at large.

The construction of Titus 2:11 is in doubt. The words "to all men" may indeed indicate to whom salvation has been brought: "Grace bringing salvation to all men"; but they may just as well indicate to whom salvific grace "hath appeared." In any case, the reference of the context emphasizes not the world at large but the redeemed, as is amply abundant from the development in vss. 12-14. It is even specifically stated here that Christ gave Himself for those who are purified as a special people for His own possession (14).

In Heb. 2:9 we read that Christ tasted "death for every one." (The

King James version and others supply here the word "man," which is not in the original). The context indicates that the "every ones" for whom our Lord tasted death are also those who are brought as sons into the glory, who are sanctified (vs. 11) who are called His brethren and His children (13), who are delivered from their bondage (vs. 15), who are at the benefit of propitiation with respect to their sins (vs. 17). Once again the context makes it plain that "every one" in view here is among the redeemed.

I John 2:2 however, yet remains. The passages previously considered should surely have taught us to be on our guard about entertaining the view that the words "all," "world," etc. must automatically receive a sweeping application to the whole of mankind. Even though the thought is made plain both by affirmation "those of the whole world," and by negation "not for ours only," the question may well be raised as to whether this implies a complete universality of propitiation. It may be possible to hold that the apostle John had in view not only a small group, perhaps of Jewish Christians, to whom He was addressing his letter, but the universality of the redeemed elected out of every nation and category. Then again he may have meant to indicate that the work of Christ is not confined to one generation but is perennial in its efficacy. Still further it may be held that John's statement was intended to emphasize the exclusiveness of Christ's work as a means of salvation; there is no Savior or propitiation in all the world other than Christ.³ We should feel the more inclined to have recourse to some such explanation since in the very same context John speaks of the intercession of Christ, which, as we have seen above II, 7, is particular. Furthermore, the term propitiation, as also noted above, is so strong in implying the actual attainment of salvation that the choice here does not appear to be between definite atonement and hypothetical universalism, but rather between definite atonement and universal salvation. Fortunately from this latter part of the alternative even our worthy opponents recoil, but they should not be permitted to forget that the universalistic passages they advance, including I John 2:2, are so sweeping in their assertions that if it be granted that this scope applies indeed to the totality of mankind, then outright universal salvation ensues. If the texts prove anything at all, they prove too much.

4. The critics of definite atonement often urge that this doctrine inevitably undermines the sincere offer of grace to all men. How, they ask, can an honest invitation to salvation be addressed to people for whom no provision has been made by God in Christ? This objection is frequently thought to have great weight, but it appears to rest on the premise that a co-extensive provision is necessary for a sincere offer of any kind. This premise is palpably false even at the lowly level of many

3. These suggestions are very helpfully presented in more ample form in John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955. Pp. 82-84.

of our offers. For instance, most advertisers who offer some objects on the pages of a newspaper do not feel that honesty in any way demands of them to have a stock co-extensive with the circulation figures of the newspaper. If this be true even at the humble level of our finite lives, on what basis shall we presume to say that a co-extensive provision is necessary for a divine offer? Really the only requisite for a sincere invitation is that if the conditions stated in the offer be fulfilled that which is preferred be actually granted. But this is precisely what the supporters of definite atonement are asserting. Jesus said "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37), yet, "No man can come to me except the Father...draw him." (John 6:44, cf. 65). Many strong believers in particular redemption have been enthusiastic and winsome proclaimers of the indiscriminate offer of grace to all men without distinction and without exception. Indeed they are the ones who have a real and complete salvation to offer, not something which must be supplemented by the human consent in order to be at all effective. Emphatically they should be foremost in missionary and evangelistic zeal: gratitude for salvation received in Christ cannot permit them to become resigned to anything less.

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