

“The Good News”  
Romans 3:21-26  
October 7, 2007  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Please note that about 50 pages of additional notes are attached to the end of this sermon.

Today, you are going to hear a message that has been preached in this church many times before.

It may not be in the same words, but it is the same message.

And in truth even some of the words will be the same.

The message today is the “gospel,” the good news!

For most of the first three chapters of his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul gave very bad news.

Basically the bad news is that there is a holy and just God who is incapable of tolerating sin and we are sinners.

In chapter 1 Paul writes that even those who have never heard of Christ, those who have no access to the Bible, are condemned by a holy God because they have refused the truth about God they do have - truth that comes from their own consciences and from what God has created.

Then in Chapter 2 Paul writes that a holy God condemns even the Jewish people, who have had access to more truth, because they too have refused the truth they have about God.

And then in chapter 3:9-20, Paul summarizes all he had written thus far by pointing out in repeated terms that no one can stand before a holy God.

Why? Because God is righteous and we are unrighteous.

God is holy and we are unholy.

God is sinless and we are sinners.

Chapter 3:10 “There is no one righteous, not even one.”

No one has the righteousness necessary to stand before the holy God.

When God judges people at the end of time – everyone, without Christ, will be found to have sinned and fallen short of the glory, the righteousness, the holiness, which is the standard of perfection of God.

No one will measure up!

I've told this story before, even as recently as in our course called "Basics," but it bears repeating:

At the close of WWI tens of thousands of soldiers were stationed in Europe waiting for orders that would allow them to go home.

Conditions were relaxed and the men were taking every opportunity to see as much of Europe as possible before they left.

Near a village about a hundred miles from Paris was a group of American soldiers - about 40 of them with a lieutenant in charge.

The Lieutenant received permission to take a two-day leave and turned over leadership to his sergeant.

While the Lieutenant was gone a motorcycle messenger brought news that General Pershing was seeking 2700 men who would march in victory parades in London, Paris, Brussels and Rome.

That possibility excited most of the men. What a way to see Europe.

But there were two conditions to qualify:

1. You had to have a clean record - no courts marshal.  
None of the men had been even indicted. They all qualified.
2. You had to be at least a certain height - and the regulation height was given in metric measure.

The sergeant and another soldier looked at each other as they read the orders and then they asked each other, "Do you know how tall that is?" "No, how about you?" "No, but at least I'm taller than you."

When the news spread through the camp about the possibility of being in the victory parades the same discussion broke out everywhere, "How tall do you have to be" "At least I'm taller than you."

And there they were standing back to back all over the camp and soon every man knew his height relative to every other man.

And there was a tall man named Slim telling a shorter man named Shorty how he'd send him a postcard from Rome and how he'd greet all the English girls for those too short to make the trip.

These men did what comes naturally, because they didn't know the true standard, they set up an artificial standard and compared themselves to themselves.

But the Lieutenant came back and when he saw the orders he, knowing some French, went into the village to get a meter stick.

With it he made a mark on the wall and made the men stand up to it to see who qualified.

No longer could they measure themselves against themselves

Now they had an unchangeable standard.

Some didn't even try, knowing they were too short.

But to everyone's surprise not even Slim, standing as tall as he could, could measure up to the mark.

Not one of those soldiers qualified for General Pershing's parade army.

Though there was a relative difference between Slim and Shorty they both failed to measure up. (story paraphrased from Barnhouse Romans Vol 2 p72ff)

Bishop Moule wrote: "The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of God's glory; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp but you are just as little able to touch the stars as they." (Moule in Stott p 109)

That's the bad news.

But look at Romans 3:21 "**But now** a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known..."

The late English preacher, D. Martin Lloyd-Jones called the first two words of this verse the most wonderful words in the Bible: “But now!”

We were condemned - “but now”.

We were under the wrath of God - “but now”.

We were helpless and without hope -

“But **now** a righteousness from God has been revealed”

The thing we most need, righteousness, has been made available!

What we are going to see from the Bible in the next few minutes are possibly the most important words in the Bible and the very foundation of the Christian faith.

If all of Christianity were boiled down to its essence, this would be it.

This is the "Good news" the "Gospel"

Learn these six verses and you will know the Gospel

We are going to study this passage by answering five questions:

1. What is “the righteousness of God?”
2. What does this righteousness from God do for us?
3. Where does it come from?
4. How is it possible for us to have this righteousness?
5. And how does it become ours?

Romans 3:21-26

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.<sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.<sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished--<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

**And so we start with what this “righteousness from God” is.**

Have you ever gone to a place that charges an entrance fee and discovered that you didn't have any money?

The next thing you notice is they don't take Visa or MasterCard.  
And then you fish around in your wallet and find an old Mexican five-peso bill - Sorry you have the wrong currency.

The "currency" of heaven is righteousness.  
Access to a holy God requires holiness.

God the Son, became a human being and lived a perfect life.  
He obeyed the will of God in every detail.

God the Son was perfectly righteous and he offers that righteousness, God's righteousness, to us.

1 Corinthians 1:30 "Christ has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

The "righteousness from God" is God's own holiness - God's moral perfection.

**Now the 2<sup>nd</sup> question: what does this "righteousness from God" do for us?**

V24 gives the answer. By it we "are justified".

If you are following the text carefully even as I speak, and I hope you are, you will notice that I skipped right over V23.

Actually I didn't skip over it – I illustrated it in the story of "Slim and Shorty."

Verse 23 is like a parenthetical statement - reminding us of the major point Paul has emphasized in chapters 1 & 2 -

Everyone stands condemned before God -

There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles or the religious and the heathen - all have sinned and fall short of the glory, the holy standard of God.

**So again, what does the “righteousness from God” do for us?**  
 Again, the answer is that **by it we are justified.**

**How** that happens we will look at in a minute but for now we see that God’s righteousness, God’s holiness, justifies us.

But what does it mean to be justified?

**There are at least two aspects to being justified: When God justifies us, he takes something away and he gives something.**

First of all he takes something away.

In chapters 1 & 2 God said that because of our sin we are condemned - guilty and sentenced to the wrath of God.

To be justified means to be declared free of the guilt and consequences of sin.

Romans 4:7-8 “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

The guilt is removed.

That is why the term "justified" is sometimes cleverly defined as "Just as if I'd never sinned"

To be justified means that we stand acquitted before God.

But to be justified is **not just** to have our guiltiness taken away.

God doesn’t just put us back in some neutral position with him so that we can try again to get it right.

To be justified **also means we are given something.**

In 2 Corinthians 5:21 the Bible says, “God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, **so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**”

Just as our sins with their guilt and penalty are removed, are no longer charged against us, so now marvelously Christ’s righteousness, Christ’s moral perfection is credited to us.

Theologian Charles Hodge wrote, "There is probably no passage in the Scriptures in which the doctrine of justification is more concisely or clearly stated than [this]. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in his righteousness... (But keep in mind) Christ bearing our sins did not make him morally a sinner... nor does Christ's righteousness become subjectively ours, it is not the moral quality of our souls... (But it is still true) Our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, so that (his death) was a satisfaction of justice; and his righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God. (Charles Hodge from Hodge's commentary on 2 Corinthians (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust), pp. 150-151)

So again I say to be justified means both something taken away and something given:

Someone wrote, "The voice that gives forgiveness will say: 'You may go; you have been relieved of the penalty which your sins deserve.' But the same voice also says 'you may come; you are welcome to all my love and my presence' because you stand before me credited with the righteousness of Jesus. (In Stott P110 - paraphrased)

May we never become inured, accustomed, unmoved by the significance of this act of God in justifying us.

When the "righteousness from God" is given to you, you are justified, declared by God to be "not guilty" - no longer under the wrath of God

**AND** you are declared "righteous" - the goodness, holiness and righteousness of God have been credited to you so you may come into the very presence of a holy God.

There's a marvelous word picture of this in the OT.

**Zechariah 3:1-5** "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD... Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by."

When God justifies us he does two things:

He takes away our guilt and he credits us with the righteousness, the perfect obedience, of Jesus.

But I must move on -

### 3. Where does this “righteousness” come from?

Now the obvious answer it is “it comes from God”.

But I am getting at something deeper.

Look at V24 again “and are justified freely by his (God’s) grace”

The word “freely” is the adverbial form of the word “gift” – we are justified as a gift.

This righteousness from God comes not as a reward or payment but solely because of God’s choice.

In Ephesians chapter 1 we are told that the basis of the gift is God’s choice based on something in him **not based on anything in us.**

Ephesians 1:5,7,9 In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, **in accordance with his pleasure and will...**<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, **in accordance with the riches of God’s grace...**<sup>9</sup> And he made known to us the mystery of his will **according to his good pleasure...**”

That same concept is repeated back in Romans 3:24 when Paul writes we are justified freely by God’s GRACE.

“Grace” is God’s joyful, delighted, favor toward us - God’s totally free, unmerited by us, choice of us.

The source of our salvation is pure grace.

Paul has been especially intent on nailing this idea down tightly.

We are not made right with God by our efforts because our efforts fall short of the glory of God as I pointed out last week

In light of this clear teaching from the Bible it is distressing to hear so many people, even in the church, still want to add something to grace.

They insist on stating something they have done that would give God **cause** to grant his grace.

I try. I want to do right. I have always believed in God. I will do better.

No, it is either all of grace or it is not of grace at all.

Listen to this from the largest Christian religion in our country:

They wrote that Martin Luther had come to the mistaken idea that human nature was so ruined by Adam's sin that humans were powerless to do anything that would earn God's favor. In place of any works, Luther would substitute faith - a blind confidence that Christ's good works were enough for mankind's salvation. He said Christians need only believe that Christ had saved them. (Pamphlet 39 Catholic Information Service)

Luther is wrong they claim.

That religion goes on to say (and I quote) "it is necessary to make reparation for our sins. This means that we must somehow try to make up for the disorder in our lives and the harm we have done to others by our sin." ((Pamphlet "To Sin is to Die" Knights of Columbus) (pamphlet 91 Knights of Columbus).

Again, "No. No, a thousand times no" - The bible says: "By grace we are saved through faith, not of works..."

Paul said it so clearly in Romans 3:20 "no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law."

Our "righteousness from God" is by grace - and grace alone.

#### **4. But now fourthly, how is this possible?**

How can the "righteousness from God" be given to us?

How can God justify us freely?

Where is justice if God simply acquits the guilty?

All through the Bible God says an innocent person must be declared innocent and a guilty person guilty - to do other than that is to pervert justice and make a mockery of God!

So how can God do what he says others must not do?

A number of years ago an organization promoting atheism published a pamphlet in which they had rather sinister portrait sketches of several of the principle people of the Bible.

Under each picture was the name of the person being referred to and a description of the person.

- Under Abraham was the word “coward” for being willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife Sarah to save his own hide.
- Under Jacob’s name were the words “liar and cheat”.
- Under Moses’ name was “hypocrite” - the man who killed another said “thou shalt not kill”.
- Under David’s name were “adulterer and murderer”.

The thing that is noteworthy about all these charges is that they are absolutely true.

And when the Atheist asks how a good and just God could forgive such evil actions, they are asking an excellent question.

So how can God declare us not guilty?

How can God justify us who are guilty of everything from blasphemy to murder to immorality to selfishness, and of any and all of the evil things we do to God and each other.

The answer is found in verse 24 with added explanation in verse 25.

Verse 24 says we are justified freely by his grace, THROUGH the REDEMPTION that came by Jesus Christ.

**Redemption** simply means to set free through the paying of a price.

In our culture we can redeem an item we have placed in “hock” at a “hock shop” or “Pawn Shop”

The pawnshop owner will keep the item we have placed there until we bring the specified price and “redeem” it.

In a similar fashion we are “in hock” because of our sin.

We are slaves to sin and its consequence - the wrath of God.

But God comes and redeems us, buys us out of the situation we are in.

Now that becomes clearer to us when we put the next verse with it and see exactly what it is that God does.

3:25 “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.”

(The NASB reads, “God displayed him publicly as a propitiation”)

Now quite obviously here, Paul is describing what happened when Christ was crucified.

These words “sacrifice of atonement” or “propitiation” come from one Greek word, so what does it mean?

If I offend you and you are justly angry with me because of my offense, we will be “at odds” with one another unless justice is done.

Unless the offense is atoned for, satisfied, made up for, righteous anger is still appropriate.

But when I sincerely confess my wrong and make whatever reparation is possible; when justice is done, you forgive me, lay down your anger, and we are reconciled.

Under the OT, at God’s direction, the Jewish priests would offer certain kinds of sacrifices to make atonement for the sins of the people.

By offering the sacrifice the people could avert the wrath of God against them for their sin.

By their sacrifice of atonement God would become propitious, favorably disposed, toward the people - he would be a friend rather than an enemy.

Now Paul has already made it clear in Romans 1 & 2 that God has every right to be intensely angry with us.

We are under his wrath because of our sin.

Not because God is picky and holds a grudge but because he is holy.

But what we see in today’s verses is that because of his grace God has chosen to give himself as a sacrifice for our sin.

- Notice **who** takes the initiative to bring about reconciliation – not us but God.
- Notice **who** offers the sacrifice, not us but God.

God presents himself, in the person of his Son Jesus, as a sacrifice of atonement – “propitiation” – a “wrath-quencher” as J.I. Packer calls it. (“Penal Substitution Revisited”)

God chose to direct **against himself** the full fury of his wrath that was to have been directed at us.

Jesus was not a victim, not of the Romans, the Jews or even of you and me.

He was not a martyr for a cause.

Jesus died because, he, God, **gave** his life – he was the self-offered sacrifice to atone for the sins of his people.

Jesus, himself, said it this way in John 10:17-18, “**I lay down my life**-only to take it up again. **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.**”

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:6, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, **who gave himself** as a ransom...”

Who killed Jesus? God did!

Today there are professing Evangelicals like Steve Chalke and Brian McLaren who are suggesting that this understanding of Christ’s death is something akin to “cosmic child abuse” – the Father abusing his Son. (Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003], pp. 182-183; Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 105)

But J.I. Packer responds correctly:

“Since (the death of Christ) was planned by the holy Three in their eternal solidarity of mutual love, and since the Father’s central purpose in it all was and is to glorify and exalt the Son as Saviour and Head of a new humanity, smartypants notions like ‘divine child abuse’, as a comment on the cross, are supremely silly, and as irrelevant and wrong as they could possibly be.” “Penal Substitution Revisited” By J. I. Packer

[http://reformation21.org/Upcoming\\_Issues/Paker\\_on\\_Penal\\_Substitution/343/](http://reformation21.org/Upcoming_Issues/Paker_on_Penal_Substitution/343/)

No, Jesus was not the victim of God the Father.

John Stott said it this way: "God gave himself to save us from

himself." (Stott p115)

Now why did God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) have to do this?  
Why couldn't God just **declare** us "forgiven", "justified"?

A couple of years ago TIME magazine ran a cover story entitled,  
"Why Did Jesus Have to Die?"

The article describes six men having a Bible study in a living room in Geneva, Illinois.

They were imagining Christ's death and discussing why it had to happen.

One of the men, David Gray asks, "What if God's plan were that Jesus comes to earth and he does these teachings and he talks nice. You know, 'Love your enemy...' And then he is taken away and not killed. Why in God's plan did he have to suffer like this?"

The other members of the men's Bible study contemplated the question.

One suggested: "God's plan probably has to be more dramatic?"

"Right," says another, briefly imagining God's thinking. "'You folks don't get it. We've have got to make something dramatic here.'"

And a third man says, "One word I would add to this discussion, obedience. [Jesus] was totally obedient." April 12, 2004 TIME Magazine Cover Story

The Bible answers their speculation:

Romans 3:26 "He did it (what? God in Christ died) to demonstrate (God's) justice at the present time, so as **to be just and the one who justifies** those who have faith in Jesus."

**God is just and he must act in accordance with his nature.**

If God overlooked sin he would cease to be God.

God must punish sin.

The problem is that God loves us, and we are destined for wrath and eternal destruction.

We were helpless; we couldn't make up for our own sin.

And so God used the only way possible to justify us, to acquit us, **and still remain a just God who punishes sin** - he poured out his just wrath on himself - “for God so loved the world that he gave his only unique Son...”

And so God remains “just” (he dealt fully with our sin).  
AND He justifies us.

Why would he do it? He would because he loves us.  
Why does he love us? He loves us because of His unmerited grace.

Hymn writers of the past have captured well this heart of the Gospel.

Phillip Bliss:

“Man of Sorrows!” what a name-for the Son of God, who came ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in **my** place condemned He stood, sealed my pardon with His blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Guilty, vile and helpless we - spotless Lamb of God He was.  
Full atonement! Can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Charles Wesley:

No Condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown **thro’ Christ**  
my own.

5. Lastly this morning, we ask the question:

**“How does God’s righteousness become ours?”**

How does this “righteousness from God” that I so desperately need in order to stand in the presence of a holy God, become mine?

Most of you know the answer but I want you to see that Paul pours that answer all over these words of his:

V22 “This righteousness...comes **through faith** in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

V25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement **through faith**”

V26 (the very end) “the one who justifies **those who have faith** in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is placing your trust in him and what he did on the cross **as your way to God**.

Faith in Jesus means placing no confidence whatsoever in you, your goodness, your efforts or your standing in the church or community **BUT** instead placing full confidence **ONLY** in Jesus and what he did.

Faith in Jesus is acknowledging that **apart** from Jesus you have no hope - none whatsoever!

Faith in Jesus is acknowledging that **with** Jesus you have complete hope - the assurance of life with God now and forever.

Faith in Jesus is not faith in your faith:

One theologian wrote: "God justifies the believer not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of the worthiness of the one who is believed - Christ." (paraphrased from Stott p118)

Faith's only function is to receive the grace offered by God.

We are justified; we receive the “righteousness from God,” by grace alone through faith alone.

I wish to close by having you hear Paul again from later in his letter:

Romans 10:9-11 “If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

I ask you, have you, from your very heart, placed your trust in Jesus

alone for your salvation?

And have you declared with your own mouth your allegiance to him as Lord?

## Other Sources

**Pages 17-25 – The Atonement as Penal Substitution - Articles by J.I. Packer, D.A. Carson, et al.**

**See also:**

“Justification by Faith” by Charles Spurgeon

<http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0126.htm>

*The Atonement* by John Murray

**Pages 25-30, Alternate views of the Atonement and Al Mohler’s response.**

**Pages 31, The Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness to Believers by John Piper.**

See also: “Counted Righteous in Christ –Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?”

By John Piper February 1, 2003 [Read this book online \(663KB PDF\)](#).

REVIEW by Dr. Wayne Grudem: "Does Christ's life-long record of perfect obedience to God get 'credited' to your account when you trust in Christ and are 'justified' by God? This has been the historic Protestant understanding of the 'imputation of Christ's righteousness,' but John Piper warns that we are in danger of losing this doctrine today, because of attacks by scholars within the evangelical camp. In response, Piper shows, in careful treatment of passage after passage, which the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers is clearly the teaching of the Bible, and if we abandon this doctrine we will also lose justification by faith alone. I am thankful to God for John Piper's defense of this crucial doctrine."

**Particular Redemption (limited atonement)**

Article by J.I. Packer **pages 42-65**

Article by John Hendryx **pages 66-72**

**Other articles noted on page 72**

### Penal Substitution Revisited

[http://reformation21.org/Upcoming\\_Issues/Paker\\_on\\_Penal\\_Substitution/343/](http://reformation21.org/Upcoming_Issues/Paker_on_Penal_Substitution/343/)

By J. I. Packer

[Jim Packer's latest response to recent criticisms of penal substitution. It appeared in *NB News*, the British Christian Union News magazine produced by UCCF: The Christian Unions. [www.uccf.org.uk](http://www.uccf.org.uk) ]

Throughout my 63 years as an evangelical believer, the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross of Christ has been a

flashpoint of controversy and division among Protestants. It was so before my time, in the bitter parting of ways between conservative and liberal evangelicals in the Church of England, and between the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now UCCF) and SCM in the student world. It remains so, as liberalism keeps reinventing itself and luring evangelicals away from their heritage. Since one's belief about the atonement is bound up with one's belief about the character of God, the terms of the gospel and the Christian's inner life, the intensity of the debate is understandable. If one view is right, others are more or less wrong, and the definition of Christianity itself comes to be at stake.

An evangelical theologian, dying, cabled a colleague: 'I am so thankful for the active obedience (righteousness) of Christ. No hope without it.' As I grow old, I want to tell everyone who will listen: 'I am so thankful for the penal substitutionary death of Christ. No hope without it.' That is where I come from now as I attempt this brief vindication of the best part of the best news that the world has ever heard.

It is impossible to focus the atonement properly until the biblical mode of Trinitarian and incarnational thought about Jesus Christ is embraced. The Trinitarian principle is that the three distinct persons within the divine unity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, always work inseparably together, as in creation, so in providence and in every aspect of the work of redemption. The incarnational principle is that when the Son took to himself all the powers and capacities for experience that belong to human nature, and began to live through his human body, mind and identity, his sense of being the Father's Son was unaffected, and he knew and did his Father's will, aided by the Spirit, at all times. It was with his own will and his own love mirroring the Father's, therefore, that he took the place of human sinners exposed to divine judgment and laid down his life as a sacrifice for them, entering fully into the state and experience of death that was due to them. Then he rose from death to reign by the Father's appointment in the kingdom of God. From his throne he sent the Spirit to induce faith in himself and in the saving work he had done, to communicate forgiveness and pardon, justification and adoption, to the penitent, and to unite all believers to himself to share his risen life in foretaste of the full life of heaven that is to come.

Since all this was planned by the holy Three in their eternal solidarity of mutual love, and since the Father's central purpose in it all was and is to glorify and exalt the Son as Saviour and Head of a new humanity, smarty-pants notions like 'divine child abuse', as a comment on the cross, are supremely silly, and as irrelevant and wrong as they could possibly be.

As in all the Creator's interacting with the created order, there is here an element of transcendent mystery, comparable to fog in the distance hanging around a landscape, which the rising sun has effectively cleared for our view. What is stated above is clearly revealed in God's own witness to himself in the Bible, and so must be given the status of non-negotiable fact.

Again, the atonement cannot be focused properly where the biblical view of God's justice as one facet of his holiness, and of human willfulness as the root of our racial, communal and personal sinfulness and guilt, is not grasped. Justice, as Aristotle said long ago, is essentially giving everyone their due, and whatever more God's justice (righteousness) means in the Bible, it certainly starts here, with retribution for wrongdoing. We see this as early as Genesis 3, and as late as Revelation 22:18-19, and consistently in between. God's mercy to guilty sinners is framed by his holy hostility (wrath) against their sins.

Human nature is radically twisted into an instinctive yet deliberate and ineradicable habit of God-defying or God-denying self-service, so that God's requirement of perfect love to himself and others is permanently beyond our reach, and falling short of God's standard marks our lives every day. What is due to us from God is condemnation and rejection.

The built-in function of the human mind that we call conscience tells everyone, uncomfortably, that when we have misbehaved we ought to suffer for it, and to that extent conscience is truly the voice of God. Both Testaments, then, confirm that judicial retribution from God awaits those whose sins are not covered by a substitutionary sacrifice: in the Old Testament, the sacrifice of an animal; in the New Testament, the sacrifice of Christ. He, the holy Son of God in sinless human flesh, has endured what Calvin called 'the pains of a

condemned and lost person' so that we, trusting him as our Saviour and Lord, might receive pardon for the past and a new life in him and with him for the present and future. Tellingly, Paul, having announced 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation (i.e. wrath-quencher) by his blood, to be received by faith', goes on to say: 'This was...to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be *just and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Romans 3:2-26, my emphasis). *Just* justification-*justified* justification - through the doing of justice in penal substitution, is integral to the message of the gospel.

Penal substitution, therefore, will not be focused properly till it is recognized that God's redemptive love must not be conceived - misconceived, rather - as somehow triumphing and displacing God's retributive justice, as if the Creator-Judge simply decided to let bygones be bygones. The measure of God's holy love for us is that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' and that 'he...did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all' (Romans 5:8, 8:32). Evidently there was no alternative to paying that price if we were to be saved, so the Son, at the Father's behest 'through the eternal Spirit' (Hebrews 9:14), paid it. Thus God 'set aside...the record of debt that stood against us...nailing it to the cross' (Colossians 2:14). Had we been among the watchers at Calvary, we should have seen, nailed to the cross, Pilate's notice of Jesus' alleged crime. But if, by faith, we look back to Calvary from where we now are, what we see is the list of our own unpaid debts of obedience to God, for which Christ paid the penalty in our place. Paul, having himself learned to do this, testified: 'the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). This text starts to show us how faith in Christ our penal substitute should be shaping our lives today; which will be my final point for reflection. Thirty years ago I wrote an analysis of insights basic to personal religion that faith in Christ as one's penal substitute yields. Since I cannot improve on it, I cite it as it stands.

(1) God, in Denney's phrase, 'condones nothing', but judges all sin as it deserves, which Scripture affirms, and my conscience confirms, to be right.

(2) My sins merit ultimate penal suffering and rejection from God's presence (conscience also affirms this), and nothing I do can blot them out.

- (3) The penalty due to me for my sins, whatever it was, was paid for me by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in his death on the cross.
- (4) Because this is so, I through faith in him am made 'the righteousness of God in him', i.e. I am justified; pardon, acceptance and sonship (to God) become mine.
- (5) Christ's death for me is my sole ground of hope before God. 'If he fulfilled not justice, I must; if he underwent not wrath, I must to eternity' (John Owen).
- (6) My faith in Christ is God's own gift to me, given in virtue of Christ's death for me: i.e. the cross procured it.
- (7) Christ's death for me guarantees my preservation to glory.
- (8) Christ's death for me is the measure and pledge of the love of the Father and Son to me.
- (9) Christ's death for me calls and constrains me to trust, to worship, to love and to serve.
- (Cited from *Tyndale Bulletin* 25. 1974, pp42-43)

A lawyer, having completed his argument, may declare that here he rests his case. I, having surveyed the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Christ afresh, now reaffirm that here I rest my hope. So, I believe, will all truly faithful believers.

In recent years, great strides in biblical theology and contemporary canonical exegesis have brought new precision to our grasp of the Bible's overall story of how God's plan to bless Israel, and through Israel the world, came to its climax in and through Christ. But I do not see how it can be denied that each New Testament book, whatever other job it may be doing, has in view, one way or another, Luther's primary question: 'How may a weak, perverse and guilty sinner find a gracious God?'; nor can it be denied that real Christianity only really starts when that discovery is made. And to the extent that modern developments, by filling our horizon with the great meta-narrative, distract us from pursuing Luther's question in personal terms, they hinder as well as help in our appreciation of the gospel.

The Church is and will always be at its healthiest when every Christian can line up with every other Christian to sing P. P. Bliss's simple words, which really say it all:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude  
In my place condemned he stood,  
Sealed my pardon with his blood-  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

## Why Is the Doctrine of Penal Substitution Again Coming Under Attack?

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/articleprint.php?a=45>

by: D. A. Carson

A book could usefully be written on this subject. To keep things brief, I shall list a handful of developments that have contributed to this sad state of affairs.

(1) In recent years it has become popular to sketch the Bible's story-line something like this: Ever since the fall, God has been active to reverse the effects of sin. He takes action to limit sin's damage; he calls out a new nation, the Israelites, to mediate his teaching and his grace to others; he promises that one day he will come as the promised Davidic king to overthrow sin and death and all their wretched effects. This is what Jesus does: he conquers death, inaugurates the kingdom of righteousness, and calls his followers to live out that righteousness now in prospect of the consummation still to come.

Much of this description of the Bible's story-line, of course, is true. Yet it is so painfully reductionistic that it introduces a major distortion. It collapses human rebellion, God's wrath, and assorted disasters into one construct, namely, the degradation of human life, while depersonalizing the wrath of God. It thus fails to wrestle with the fact that from the beginning, sin is an offense against God. God himself pronounces the sentence of death (Gen 2-3). This is scarcely surprising, since God is the source of all life, so if his image-bearers spit in his face and insist on going their own way and becoming their own gods, they cut themselves off from their Maker, from the One who gives life. What is there, then, but death? Moreover, when we sin in any way, God himself is invariably the most offended party (Ps 51). The God the Bible portrays as resolved to intervene and save is also the God portrayed as full of wrath because of our sustained idolatry. As much as he intervenes to save us, he stands over against us as Judge, an offended Judge with fearsome jealousy.

Nor is this a matter of Old Testament theology alone. When Jesus announced the imminence of the dawning of the kingdom, like John the Baptist he cried, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). Repentance is necessary, because the coming of the King promises judgment as well as blessing. The sermon on the mount, which encourages Jesus' disciples to turn the other cheek, repeatedly warns them to flee the condemnation to the gehenna of fire. The sermon warns the hearers not to follow the broad road that leads to destruction, and pictures Jesus pronouncing final judgment with the words, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (7:23). The parables are replete with warnings of final judgment; a significant percentage of them demonstrate the essential divisiveness of the dawning of the kingdom. Images of hell--outer darkness, furnace of fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, undying worms, eternal fire--are too ghastly to contemplate long. After Jesus' resurrection, when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he aims to convince his hearers that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that his death and resurrection are the fulfillment of Scripture, and that God "has

made this Jesus, whom you crucified [he tells them], both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). That is every bit as much threat as promise: the hearers are “cut to the heart” and cry, “What shall we do?” (2:37). That is what elicits Peter’s “Repent and believe” (3:38). When Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household, the climax of his moving address is that in fulfillment of Scripture God appointed Jesus “as judge of the living and the dead”--and thus not of Jews only. Those who believe in him receive “forgiveness of sins through his name”: transparently, that is what is essential if we are to face the judge and emerge unscathed. When he preaches to the Athenian pagan intellectuals, Paul, as we all know, fills in some of the great truths that constitute the matrix in which alone Jesus makes sense: monotheism, creation, who human beings are, God’s aseity and providential sovereignty, the wretchedness and danger of idolatry. Before he is interrupted, however, Paul gets to the place in his argument where he insists that God has set a day “when he will judge the world with justice”--and his appointed judge is Jesus, whose authoritative status is established by his resurrection from the dead. When Felix invites the apostle to speak “about faith in Christ Jesus” (Acts 24:24), Paul, we are told, discourses “on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (24:15): apparently such themes are an irreducible part of faithful gospel preaching. Small wonder, then, that Felix was terrified (24:25). The Letter to the Romans, which many rightly take to be, at very least, a core summary of the apostle’s understanding of the gospel, finds Paul insisting that judgment takes place “on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Rom 2:16). Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that Jesus “rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10). This Jesus will be “revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7-10). We await “a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ”--and what this Savior saves us from (the context of Philippians 3:19-20 shows) is the destiny of destruction. “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph 2:3), for we gratified “the cravings of our sinful nature . . . following its desires and thoughts” (2:3)--but now we have been saved by grace through faith, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph 2:8-10). This grace thus saves us both from sins and from their otherwise inevitable result, the wrath to come. Jesus himself is our peace (Eph 2; Acts 10:36). “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18). But God presented Christ as a propitiation in his blood” (3:25), and now “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (5:1-2).

Time and space fail to allow reflection on how the sacrifice of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is what alone enables us to escape the terror of those who fall into the hands of the living God, who is a consuming fire, or on how the Apocalypse presents the Lamb as the slaughtered sacrifice, even while warning of the danger of falling under the wrath of the Lamb.

This nexus of themes--God, sin, wrath, death, judgment--is what stands behind the simple words of, say, 1 Corinthians 15:3: as a matter of first importance, Paul tells us, "Christ died for our sins." Parallel texts instantly leap to mind: "[Christ] was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom 4:25). "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6). The Lord Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4). "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 3:18). Or, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:2, "By this gospel you are saved." To be saved from our sins is to be saved not only from their chaining power but from their consequences--and the consequences are profoundly bound up with God's solemn sentence, with God's holy wrath. Once you see this, you cannot fail to see that whatever else the cross does, it must rightly set aside God's sentence, it must rightly set aside God's wrath, or it achieves nothing.

(2) Some popular slogans that have been deployed to belittle the doctrine of penal substitution betray painful misconceptions of what the Bible says about our Triune God. The best known of these appalling slogans, of course, is that penal substitution is a form of "cosmic child abuse." This conjures up a wretched picture of a vengeful God taking it out on his Son, who had no choice in the matter. Instead of invoking the Triune God of the Bible, this image implicitly pictures interactions between two separable Gods, the Father and the Son. But this is a painful caricature of what the Bible actually says. In fact, I do not know of any serious treatment of the doctrine of penal substitution, undertaken by orthodox believers, that does not carefully avoid falling into such traps.

Consider Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us." This verse is coherent only if Christ himself is God. The cross is not Christ's idea alone, conjured up to satisfy his bad-tempered Father. The Triune God, our Creator and our Judge, could have, in perfect justice, consigned us all to the pit. Instead, the Father so loved us as to send his Son, himself God, to bear our sins in his own body on the tree. Moreover, the Bible speaks of this mission not only in its bearing on us lost sinners, but also in its reflection of inner-Trinitarian commitments: by this mission the Father determines that all will honor the Son, even as they honor the Father (see John 5:16-30): where does this insistence fit into crass language about cosmic child abuse?

(3) In recent years there has been a lot of chatter about various "models" of the atonement that have appeared in the history of the church: the penal substitution model, the Christus Victor model, the exemplary model, and so forth. The impression is frequently given that today's Christians are free to pick and choose among these so-called "models." But for any Christian committed to the final authority of Scripture, this approach is methodologically flawed. It allows historical theology to trump Scripture. Surely the right question to ask is this: Which, if any, of these so-called "models" is exegetically warranted by the Bible itself? For instance, are there passages in which biblical writers insist that Christ in his death triumphed over the powers of darkness? Are there passages in which Christ's self-sacrifice becomes a moral model for his followers? Are there passages in which Christ's death is said to be a propitiation for our sins, i.e. a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God? If the answer is "Yes" to these three options--and there

are still more options I have not mentioned here--then choosing only one of them is being unfaithful to Scripture, for it is too limiting. Christians are not at liberty to pick and choose which of the Bible's teachings are to be treasured.

(4) There is another question that must be asked when people talk about “models” of the atonement. Assuming we can show that several of them are warranted by Scripture itself, the question to ask is this: How, then, do these “models” cohere? Are they merely discrete pearls on a string? Or is there logic and intelligibility to them, established by Scripture itself?

One recent work that loves to emphasize the Christus Victor “model”--Christ by his death is victor over sin and death--somewhat begrudgingly concedes that penal substitution is found in a few texts, not least Romans 8:3. But this work expends no effort to show how these two views of the atonement should be integrated. In other words, the work in question denigrates penal substitution as a sort of minor voice, puffs the preferred “model” of Christus Victor, and attempts no integration. But I think it can be shown (though it would take a very long chapter to do it) that if one begins with the centrality of penal substitution, which is, as we have seen, grounded on a deep understanding of how sin is an offense against God, it is very easy to see how all the other so-called “models” of the atonement are related to it. The way Christ triumphs over sin and death is by becoming a curse for us, by satisfying the just demands of his heavenly Father, thereby silencing the accuser, and rising in triumph in resurrection splendor because sin has done its worst and been defeated by the One who bore its penalty. Moreover, in the light of such immeasurable love, there are inevitably exemplary moral commitments that Christ's followers must undertake. In other words, it is easy to show how various biblical emphases regarding the atonement cohere if one begins with penal substitution. It is very difficult to establish the coherence if one begins anywhere else.

(5) At least some of the current work on the atonement that is proving so scathing of penal substitution reflects discouraging ignorance of earlier theological study and reflection. Few interact any more with standard works by J. I. Packer, John Stott, and others--let alone classic works produced by earlier generations. But a new generation is rising, forcing readers to take note that historic Christian confessionalism will not roll over and play dead. I heartily commend the recent book by Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach,

### **THEORIES OF THE ATONEMENT:**

**Current arguments against the idea of Christ taking our punishment (penal substitution theory of the atonement) and for**

**the idea of Christ merely as example (moral influence theory of the atonement):**

"Particularly appalling is the traditional view that God is responsible for Jesus' suffering and sacrifice on the cross. This depiction of "divine" or "cosmic child abuse," as some have named it, wrongly exalts suffering and paves the way for parental mistreatment. God condones and even requires suffering as essential to salvation" Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore in *Let the Children Come : Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective (Families and Faith Series)*page 38

Here Chalke suggests that the traditional view of the atonement is cosmic child abuse and then he argues for a different theory: "The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement: 'God is love'. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil." (Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003], pp. 182-183)

"But God sent Jesus into the world to model for us a way of living in the rhythm of God's music of love..." (147)

"The early church (felt that Jesus) took the empire's instrument of torture and transformed it into God's symbol of the repudiation of violence – encoding a creed that love, not violence, is the most powerful force in the universe." (153)

"Traditional readings (of the Bible), which assume Jesus has come primarily to solve the timeless problem of original sin so we can go up to a timeless heaven "by and by" after we die, do indeed account for some of Jesus' words and actions, but not with the intensity and resonance of this reading (210) *The secret message of Jesus* by Brian McLaren

How can punishing an innocent person make things better? "That sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?" 105

McLaren's theory of what happened on the cross he calls, "powerful

weakness.” (McLaren, 105)

It works like this: by becoming vulnerable on the cross, by accepting suffering from everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than visiting suffering on everyone, Jesus is showing God’s loving heart, which wants forgiveness, not revenge, for everyone. Jesus shows us the wisdom of God’s kingdom is sacrifice, not violence. It’s about accepting suffering and transforming it into reconciliation, not avenging suffering through retaliation.” (McLaren, 105) (Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*)

One reviewer of Chalke’s work suggested of Chalke’s theory: **In other words, the cross is nothing more than Jesus identifying with our suffering, sharing in the pathos of it. It is difficult to see how this helps us anymore than my injecting myself with the HIV virus would improve the lot of a friend who has AIDS.”** (Sach and Ovey in D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 186)

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## **Has the Message of Jesus Been Lost?**

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

Has the message of Jesus been lost? That is the claim made by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann in their now-controversial book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Chalke is a well-known figure among British evangelicals. He founded the Oasis Trust and Faithworks and established his reputation through his broadcast ministry and publishing. Mann is his researcher and collaborator. Together, they have produced a book that has ignited a firestorm in Great Britain that is almost certain to spread to the United States. Put simply, these authors claim that evangelicals have misunderstood, misconstrued, and misrepresented the meaning of the cross and the doctrine of atonement.

The authors begin with a lament, suggesting that Christianity has lost its identity in postmodern society. "What once profoundly shaped communities and changed lives has today been sidelined in society. The radical message of Jesus is now seen as nothing more than an ancient myth containing little, if any, historical truth or contemporary relevancy. Misleading potted versions of the story of Jesus have been filtered down to us through bland civic religion, caricatured snippets from the mouth of Ned Flanders, Homer Simpson's nerdy Christian neighbour, and the sickly sweet, saccharine-flavoured version of Christmas presented to us by retailers and the media each October through December." This is not a pretty picture.

Chalke, who has become the major focus of this controversy, suggests that Christian belief "for many people seems increasingly like a huge jigsaw puzzle." In his words, "We feel we have been handed loads of jumbled-up pieces and we just can't work out how they all fit together. The one thing we lack is what we need most—the lid with the picture on it. Without that big picture, all we have are the random pieces of 'theology' that we have managed to pick up along the way. And we are often at a loss to see much, if any, relevancy or relationship of the separate pieces to one another."

Most of us can sympathize with Chalke's lament about the disconnected state of postmodern Christianity. So much of what passes for evangelicalism in this age of confusion is actually an assortment of truth claims, habits, doctrines, and practices that lack any coherent focus or overarching understanding.

Appropriately, Chalke points to God's love, preeminently demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, as the proper focus and "picture" that should frame our theology. Unfortunately, Chalke's understanding of God's love sets him at odds with any biblical notion of God's wrath and righteousness. Specifically, Chalke suggests that a focus upon God's wrath is profoundly unhelpful in this culture, and notions of hell, punishment, and judgment are simply out of step. He cites Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," as a particularly unfortunate message. "Preaching like Edwards' has been all too representative of the portrayal of the gospel by the Church over the last few hundred years, and, by implication, of any popular understanding of the message of Jesus," he argues. Edwards, you will remember, described the predicament of the sinner as similar to a spider who is held over the fire. Just as that spider faces sure destruction by fire, if he is not rescued, a sinner faces sure and certain judgment and punishment, if he or she is not redeemed. This kind of message is described by Chalke as "ferocious rhetoric" which is gladly "a thing of the past." Nevertheless, he claims that the "residue of such portrayals of the gospel" still do much damage around the world. "People still believe that the Christian God is a God of power, law, judgement, hell-fire and damnation." Where did Jonathan Edwards possibly get such an idea?

Chalke's simplistic and unfair caricature of Jonathan Edwards serves as a signal of what is to come. The Bible is very clear about God's holiness, and does not flinch from warning of His wrath poured out upon sin, and upon sinners. At the same time, God's love is demonstrated in that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8] In other words, the Bible presents God's love as a *holy* love—a redeeming love that is demonstrated in the atoning sacrifice accomplished by Jesus Christ. The very point of Jonathan Edwards' sermon was to warn sinners of the wrath to come, and to implore them to turn to Christ in faith.

Later in the book, Chalke and Mann critique what they call "the myth of redemptive violence." This notion is drawn from postmodern theologian Walter Wink, who calls for a radical reinterpretation of the cross and its meaning. Chalke has adopted a similar program, rejecting the doctrine of penal substitution and adopting what amounts to a moral influence theory of the atonement.

According to Chalke and Mann, the cross simply serves as a profound demonstration of the love of God. On the cross, Christ "absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our relationship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it."

The doctrine of penal substitution--the understanding that, on the cross, Christ died in our place, bearing the penalty for our sin--is described as "a form of cosmic child abuse." In their words: "The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse--a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed." They go further to suggest that "such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love'."

The penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement--the doctrine that has stood at the very center of evangelical faith--is rejected as based on a misunderstanding of the cross, described as a "twisted version of events" that is "morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith."

Lest their point be missed, the authors go further: "If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetuated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil." Look at that statement closely. This audacious claim, so in keeping with postmodern sensibilities, directly rejects clear biblical passages that speak of God's wrath poured out upon sin, of the necessity of Christ's atonement, and of Christ's atonement as propitiation which demonstrates God to be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." [Romans 3:26]

As Chalke and Mann see it, "the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love."

There is little new here. After all, the moral influence theory of the atonement is hardly a recent development. Nevertheless, this understanding of the cross not only falls far short of the biblical testimony, it requires a direct and unqualified rejection of the apostolic preaching.

Last year, Steve Chalke emerged as a figure of controversy among British evangelicals, and *The Lost Message of Jesus* stood at the center of that controversy. The Evangelical Alliance, the established coalition of evangelicals in Great Britain, publicly criticized the book, charging that Chalke "has tended to avoid, rather than seriously address, the key biblical texts typically cited in defence of the penal substitutionary view." Reaching out to Chalke in hopes of reconciliation, the Evangelical Alliance released a statement that called him to reconsider his position. "We trust that instead of dismissing penal substitution out of hand as a false teaching tantamount to 'cosmic child abuse,' Steve will recognize its significant place in the range of atonement theories to which Evangelicals have characteristically subscribed."

Some openly called for Chalke to be expelled from the Evangelical Alliance. The group's *Basis of Faith* does not use the specific terms "penal," "penalty," or "punishment" in its

text, but the Executive Council of the Evangelical Alliance, in adopting the *Basis of Faith*, "took it as entailing and implying penal substitution." As the statement continued, "We believe that its affirmations of universal human sin and guilt, divine wrath and condemnation, and the substitutionary, sacrificial and redemptive nature of Christ's death, together comprise the key elements in the doctrine of penal substitution."

Chalke later released a statement explaining that his book "isn't specifically [a] discussion of the atonement." Instead, he argued that his work is about "Christ's graciousness." Furthermore, Chalke claimed to have "no desire to become involved in a technical debate about how the cross works."

Regrettably, his book puts him right in the middle of a "technical debate" about the cross. Chalke did not merely argue evangelicals should emphasize the love of God demonstrated in Christ's death on the cross, he explicitly condemned the historic evangelical understanding of the cross, based solidly in the Bible, as "divine child abuse."

His explanation only added fuel to the fire. "The theological problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and foremost concerned with retribution flowing from his wrath against sinners," Chalke insists. "The only way for his anger to be placated is in receiving recompense from those who have wronged him; and although his great love motivates him to send his Son, his wrath remains the driving force behind the need for the cross."

The claim that a penal understanding of the cross represents "divine child abuse" has been asserted by feminists and liberal theologians in the past. Now, Chalke presses his argument even further.

"In *The Lost Message of Jesus* I claim that penal substitution is tantamount to 'child abuse--a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.' Though the sheer bluntness of this imagery (not original to me of course) might shock some, in truth, it is only a stark 'unmasking' of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology. And the simple truth is that if God does not relate to his only Son as a perfect Father, neither can we relate to him as such."

The audacity of this statement is almost breathtaking. Rather than pointing to the cross as the love of God demonstrated in his provision of the very sacrifice he has demanded, Chalke caricatures a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement and adds insult to injury. Furthermore, he explicitly argues that a God who would require the sacrifice of His only Son is not a "perfect Father," and cannot be trusted.

In recent weeks, the controversy has been reignited as the Evangelical Alliance announced the adoption of a new *Basis of Faith* which comes far closer to stipulating a penal substitutionary understanding of the cross. The new wording asserts belief in "The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God."

In its recent statement, the Evangelical Alliance also announced a symposium to be hosted by the London School of Theology in 2006, intended to clear the air and focus on the most important issues at stake in the controversy.

Evangelicals in the United States should watch this controversy with both interest and concern. Attacks upon the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement are hardly new--in fact they are to be found among some who would claim to be evangelicals in the United States. Evangelical identity is at stake in this controversy. But, far beyond that, the Gospel is at stake.

## **The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness to Believers:**

*What God Requires, Christ Provides*

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By John Piper with Justin Taylor January 1, 2004

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*The gospel that Paul defended in Galatians is under serious attack today, in part by some who insist that they are evangelical Protestants. In the September/October issue of Modern Reformation magazine (which we encourage you to buy and read), Piper spells out more fully exactly what God's good news in Christ is. He argues that what God requires regarding human law-keeping, Christ provides, through becoming our substitute in two senses.*

If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Gal. 2:21)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written

in the Book of the Law, and do them." ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. (Gal. 3:10, 13) Historically, Protestants have believed that the Bible teaches that our salvation depends on what Christ has accomplished for our pardon and our perfection. **We accept by faith his substitution for us in two senses: in his final suffering and death, he was condemned and cursed so that we may be pardoned (see Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:3); and in his whole life of righteousness culminating in his death, he learned obedience so that we may be saved (see Heb. 5:8-9). His death crowns his atoning sufferings that propitiate God's wrath against us (see Rom. 3:24-25; 5:6-9), but it also crowns his life of perfect righteousness—God's righteousness—that is then imputed to us who believe (see 2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:21-22; 4:6, 11; 5:18-19).**

God provided in Christ what God demanded from us in the law. But today this good news that Christ is not only our pardon but also our perfection is under serious attack. Here I hope to show not only that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is biblical but why we should defend it.

### The Problem of the Law

Three times in Galatians 2:16, Paul tells us that no one can be justified—no one can be made right with God—by "works of the law." In context, this phrase refers most naturally to deeds done to obey Moses' law. (Note the parallels between "the Book of the Law" and "works of the law" in Gal. 3:10, and between "the law" in Rom. 3:19, 20 and "works of the law" in Rom. 3:20. In both Gal. 3:10 and Rom. 3:19-20, the term "law" refers to the Mosaic law; so the phrase "works of the law" naturally picks up that meaning.)

In its narrow, short-term design, the law that God gave to the Israelites through Moses demanded perfect obedience of the Pentateuch's more than 600 commandments in order for the Israelites to receive eternal life (see Lev. 18:5; Deut. 32:45-47; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:10, 12). In this way, it upheld an absolute standard of childlike, humble, God-reliant, God-exalting perfect obedience that is in fact due from all of us—and thus provided the moral backdrop without which the Pentateuch's sin-atoning provisions (and ultimately Christ's sacrifice) would be unintelligible.

Yet the Israelites were uniformly sinful and hostile to God (see Exod. 33:1-3; Acts 7:51). They did not—and indeed could not (see Rom. 8:7)—submit to him. Consequently, the law's effect on sinful

Israel, when she was confronted with its hundreds of commandments, was awareness of latent sin (see Rom. 7:7), increased sin through deliberate violation of God's holy, righteous, and good commandment (see Rom. 7:12-13), and the multiplication of transgressions (see Rom. 5:20; 4:15). All of this was part of God's design for the law: "[The law] was added for the sake of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19); "The law came in so that the transgression would increase" (Rom. 5:20). The law cannot give life (see Gal. 3:21); rather it kills by multiplying sin (see Rom. 7:5, 8-13). The law's deadly design and effects are sufficient to warrant Paul's statement in Galatians 3:12—"The law is not of faith"—especially in view of what he says eleven verses later: "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law . . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian" (vv. 23, 25). This does not mean that there was no faith before Christ (see Rom. 4) but, rather, that there was no faith explicitly in Christ before Christ came. The law's function, in the long view, is to prepare God's people for Christ's work, even as its short-term function is to imprison its recipients in sin (see Gal. 3:22-23). The narrow, short-term aim of the law is to kill those who come in contact with it because it is primarily "commandments" (see Rom. 13:8-9; Eph. 2:15) that require perfect obedience but that cannot themselves produce this obedience independently of the Spirit who "gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

#### What God Requires, Christ Provides

Justification cannot come through the law (see Gal. 2:21; Acts 13:38-39). Each of us—every single human being (see Rom. 3:10-12, 19-20)—has failed to do what God's law requires of us (Gal. 3:10; 6:13; cf. James 2:10). *But to understand what God requires, we must see what Christ provides.* In his mercy, God has provided his Son as a twofold substitute for us. Both facets of Christ's substitution are crucial for our becoming right with God. These facets are grounded in the twin facts that (1) we have failed to keep God's law perfectly, and so we should die; but (2) Jesus did not fail—he alone has kept God's law perfectly (see Heb. 4:15)—and so he should not have died. Yet in his mercy God has provided in Christ a great substitution—a "blessed exchange"—according to which Jesus can stand in for us with God, offering his perfect righteousness in place of our failure and his own life's blood in place of ours. When we receive the mercy God offers us in Christ by faith (see Acts 16:31; 1 Tim. 1:15-16; 1

Pet. 1:8-9), his perfection is imputed—or credited or reckoned—to us and our sinful failure is imputed—or credited or reckoned—to him. And thus Jesus' undeserved death pays for our sin (see Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Rev. 5:9); and God's demand for us to be perfectly righteous is satisfied by the imputation or crediting of Christ's perfect righteousness to us. "If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21). But "God has done what the law ... could not do" (Rom. 8:3).

2 Corinthians 5:21 is one of Scripture's most powerful affirmations of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the account of those who believe in him: "For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There is a great deal that can be said about this verse but, when all is said and done, perhaps Charles Hodge has summed up its import best:

There is probably no passage in the Scriptures in which the doctrine of justification is more concisely or clearly stated than [this]. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in his righteousness... **Christ bearing our sins did not make him morally a sinner... nor does Christ's righteousness become subjectively ours, it is not the moral quality of our souls... Our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, so that they were a satisfaction of justice; and his righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God. All of this then means, as Hodge goes on to say, that "our pardon is an act of justice"—an act based on Jesus having borne our sins (see 1 Pet. 2:24)—and yet it "is not mere pardon, but justification alone"—that is, our forevermore standing as righteous before God because we are clothed with Christ's perfection—"that gives us peace with God."**

### This Doctrine Is Under Attack

Today, this precious doctrine that Christ's perfect keeping of the law is imputed to those who have faith in him is under attack in unexpected places. I have recently written a book, entitled, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?*, that attempts to explain and defend it exegetically. But why would a pressured pastor with a family to care for, a flock to shepherd, weekly messages to prepare, a love for biblical counseling, a burden for racial justice, a commitment to see abortion

become unthinkable, a zeal for world evangelization, a focus on local church planting, and a life goal of spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ, devote time and energy to the controversy over the imputation of Christ's righteousness? And why should you—pastor, elder, schoolteacher, engineer, accountant, firefighter, computer programmer, and homemaker—take the time to work through an issue like this? **In the rest of this article, I will explain why I have taken up this issue.** My reasons are personal, but in fact they apply to all who wish to glorify Christ, contend for the faith, and edify the saints.

### For the Sake of My Family: Marriage

I have a family to care for. My marriage must survive and thrive for the good of our children and the glory of Christ. God designed marriage to display the holy mercy of Christ and the happy submission of his church (see Eph. 5:21-25). Here the doctrine of justification by faith and the imputed righteousness of Christ can be a great marriage saver and sweetener.

Marriage seems almost impossible at times because both partners feel so self-justified in their expectations that are not being fulfilled. There is a horrible emotional dead end in the words, "But it's just plain wrong for you to act that way," followed by "That's your perfectionistic perspective" or "Do you think you do everything right?" or by hopeless, resigned silence. The cycle of self-justified self-pity and anger can seem unbreakable.

But what if one or both partners becomes overwhelmed with the truth of justification by faith alone—and especially with the truth that in Christ Jesus God credits me, for Christ's sake, as fulfilling all of his expectations? What happens if this doctrine so masters our souls that we begin to bend it from the vertical to the horizontal and apply it to our marriages? In our own imperfect efforts in this regard, there have been breakthroughs that seemed at times impossible. It is possible, for Christ's sake, simply to say, "I will no longer think merely in terms of whether my expectations are met in practice. I will, for Christ's sake, regard you the way God regards me—complete and accepted in Christ—and thus to be helped and blessed and nurtured and cherished, even if, in practice, you fail." I know my wife treats me this way. And surely this is part of what Paul calls for when he says that we should forgive "one another, as God in Christ forgave you"

(Eph. 4:32). There is more healing for marriage in the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness than many of us have begun to discover.

### For the Sake of My Family: Children

Then there are our children. Four sons are grown and out of our house but not out of our lives. Every week there are major personal, relational, vocational, and theological issues to deal with. In every case, the fundamental question is, what are the great biblical truths that can give stability and guidance here? Listening and loving are crucial. But if they lack biblical *substance*, my counsel is hollow. Touchy-feely affirmation will not cut it. Too much is at stake. These young men want rock under their feet.

My daughter Talitha is six years old. Recently she decided that we as a family would read through Romans together. She is just learning to read and I was putting my finger on each word. At the beginning of chapter five she stopped me in mid-sentence and asked, "What does 'justified' mean?" What do you say to a six year old? Do you say, "There are more important things to think about so just trust Jesus and be a good girl?" Or do you say that it is very complex, and even adults are not able to understand it fully, so wait to deal with it when you are older? Or do you say that it simply means that Jesus died in our place so that all our sins might be forgiven? What I did was to tell a story, made up on the spot, about two accused criminals, one who actually did the bad thing, and the other who did not. The one who didn't do anything bad is shown, by all those who saw the crime, to be innocent. So the judge "justifies" him—he tells him he is a law-abiding person and so can go free. But the other accused criminal, who really did a bad thing, is shown to be guilty, because all the people who saw the crime saw him do it. But, then, guess what? The judge "justifies" him, too! He says, "I regard you as a law-abiding citizen with full rights in our country" (and not just as a forgiven criminal who may not be trusted or fully free in the country). Here Talitha looked at me, puzzled.

She couldn't put her finger on the problem, but she sensed that something was wrong. So I said, "That's a problem isn't it? How can a person who really did break the law and do something bad be told by the judge that he is a law keeper, a righteous person, with full rights to the freedoms of the country and that he doesn't have to go to jail or be punished?" She shook her head. Then I went back to

Romans 4:5 and showed her that God "justifies the ungodly." Her brow furrowed. I told her that she has sinned and I have sinned and we are all like this second criminal. And when God "justifies" us he knows we are sinners who are ungodly and law breakers. And I asked her, "What did God do so that it's right for him say to us sinners: you are not guilty; you are law keepers in my eyes; you are righteous; and you are free to enjoy all that this country has to offer?"

She knew it had something to do with Jesus and his coming and dying in our place. That much she has learned. But what more did I—or would you—tell her now? How we answer that question depends on whether we believe in the imputation of Christ's righteousness. If we do, then we will tell her that Jesus was the perfect law keeper and never sinned, but did everything the judge and his country expected of him. We will tell her that when Jesus lived and died, he was not only a punishment bearer but also a law keeper. We will say that, if she will trust Jesus, then God the Judge will let Jesus' punishment and Jesus' righteousness count for hers—Jesus will have been punished for her and he will have obeyed the law for her. So when God "justifies" her—says that she is forgiven and righteous, even though she was not punished and did not keep the law—he does it because of Jesus. Jesus is her righteousness and Jesus is her punishment. Trusting Jesus makes Jesus so much her Lord and Savior that he is her perfection as well as her pardon. Thousands of Christian families never have conversations like this. Not at six or sixteen. We do not have to look far, then, to explain the church's weakness and the fun-oriented superficiality of many youth ministries and the stunning drop-out rate after high school. But how will parents teach their children if the weekly message they get from the pulpit is that doctrine is unimportant? So, yes, I have a family to care for. And because I do, I must understand the central doctrines of my faith—and understand them so well that they can be translated to fit children of any age. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "It ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people."

#### And There Are Weekly Messages to Prepare

This also explains why this issue matters to me when I have weekly messages to prepare and a flock to shepherd. My messages need to be saturated with biblical truth—brimming with radical relevance for the hard things in life—and they must help my people to be able to preach the gospel to themselves and their children day

and night—the full, rich, biblical gospel, as it unfolds in the New Testament, and not as it is quickly and simply summed up in a pamphlet. My people need to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (see 2 Pet. 3:18) so that they have strong roots for radical living, sweet comfort in troubled times, and serious answers for their children.

### Justification and Biblical Counseling

I love biblical counseling. There is so much brokenness and so much sin that seems intransigently woven together with forms of failing family life and distorted personal perspectives. This does not yield to quick remedies. After several decades of watching the mental health care system at work, I am less hopeful about the effectiveness of even Christian psychotherapy than I used to be. No one strategy of helping people possesses a corner on all wisdom. But more than ever I believe that the essential foundation of all healing and all Christ-exalting wholeness is a soul-penetrating grasp of the glorious truth of justification by faith, distinct from and yet grounding the battle for healthy, loving relationships. Good counseling patiently builds the "whole counsel" of God (Acts 20:27) into the heads and hearts of sinful and wounded people. At its center is Christ our righteousness.

### Justification and a Passion for Evangelism

Why devote time to defending the imputation of Christ's righteousness when there are so many unreached groups and millions of individuals who have never heard the gospel? I mention two things.

First, over the past twenty years of leading a missions-mobilizing church it has become increasingly clear that "teacher-based" church planting and not just "friendship-based" church planting is crucial among people with no Christian history. In other words, doctrinal instruction is utterly crucial in planting the church. This is unsurprising, since embedded in the Great Commission is the command to *teach* new disciples to observe all that Christ has commanded us (see Matt. 28:20), and since Paul planted the church in Ephesus by *reasoning daily* for two years in the hall of Tyrannus, "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Doing missions without deep doctrinal transfer through patient teaching will not only wreck on the vast reefs of ignorance, but will, at best, produce weak and ever-dependent churches.

Therefore, pastors who care about building, sending, and going churches must give themselves to building sending bases that breed doctrinally deep people who are not emotionally dependent on fads but who know how to feed themselves on Christ-centered truth.

Second, Paul develops the doctrine of justification in Galatians and Romans in ways that show its absolutely universal relevance. It crosses every culture. It is not a tribal concept. In Galatians he writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal. 3:13-14). Christ's obedience is universal in its scope and significance. It is not just for Abraham's posterity but also for Adam's posterity—in other words, for everyone. This is also the point of comparing Adam to Christ in Romans 5:12-19.

### Truth-Treasuring Church Planting

If I want to see local churches planted from our church and others, why invest so much time and energy in defending and explaining this doctrine? Because there are enough churches being planted by means of music, drama, creative scheduling, sprightly narrative, and marketing savvy. And there are too few that are God-centered, truth-treasuring, Bible-saturated, Christ-exalting, cross-focused, Spirit-dependent, prayer-soaked, soul-winning, and justice-pursuing, that have a wartime mindset that makes them ready to lay down their lives for the salvation of nations and neighborhoods. A blood-earnest joy sustains churches like these—and it comes only by embracing Christ crucified as our righteousness. As William Wilberforce said, "If we would... rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did, we must learn like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14), 'who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.'" (1 Cor. 1:30)

### The Truth That Makes the Church Sing

Of course, the question of whether we should believe in the doctrine of Christ's imputed righteousness must finally be answered exegetically from biblical texts and not because of its practical value or historical precedent. That is what the major part of *Counted Righteous in Christ* attempts. But we would be myopic not to notice that abandoning this doctrine would massively revise Protestant

theology and Christian worship. It would eliminate a great theme from our worship of Christ in song. Recognizing this at least clarifies the issue and shows its magnitude, even if it cannot settle it.

The imputed righteousness of Christ has inspired much joyful worship over the centuries and informed many hymns and worship songs. It has cut across Calvinist/Arminian, Lutheran/Reformed, and Baptist/Presbyterian divides. For example,

"And Can It Be" (Charles Wesley)  
 No condemnation now I dread;  
 Jesus and all in him, is mine!  
 Alive in him, my living head,  
*And clothed in righteousness divine,*  
 Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
 And claim the crown through Christ my own.

"The Solid Rock" (Edward Mote)  
 When he shall come with trumpet sound,  
 O may I then in him be found,  
*Dressed in his righteousness alone,*  
 Faultless to stand before the throne.

"We Trust in You, Our Shield" (Edith Cherry)  
 We trust in you, O Captain of salvation--  
 In your dear name, all other names above:  
*Jesus our righteousness, our sure foundation,*  
 Our prince of glory and our king of love.

"O Mystery of Love Divine" (Thomas Gill)  
 Our load of sin and misery  
 Didst thou, the Sinless, bear?  
*Thy spotless robe of purity*  
*Do we the sinners wear?*

"Thy Works Not Mine O Christ" (Isaac Watts)  
*Thy righteousness, O Christ,*  
*Alone can cover me:*  
 No righteousness avails  
 Save that which is of thee.  
 Let Christ Receive All His Glory!

My overarching life goal is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. More specifically, the older I get the more I want my life to count in the long term for the glory of Christ. In America, there is an almost universal bondage to the mindset that we can only feel loved when we are made much of. Yet the truth is that we are loved most deeply when we are helped to be free of that bondage so that we find our joy in treasuring Christ and making much of him. I long to see our joy—and the joy of the nations—rooted in God's wonderful work of freeing us to make much of Christ forever. This was Paul's passion: "It is my eager expectation and hope that... now as always Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).

This is my passion, and I pray it will be my passion until I die, which means that I am jealous for Christ to get all the glory he deserves in the work of justification. I am consequently concerned that recent challenges to this doctrine rob him of a great part of his glory by denying that he has become for us not only our pardon but our perfection, that he is not only our redemption from sin but our righteousness, and that he not only bears the punishment for our disobedience but also performs and provides our perfect obedience. Current challenges to justification obscure (not to put it too harshly) half of Christ's glory in the work of justification by denying the imputation of Christ's righteousness and claiming that the Bible does not teach this great doctrine. Recognizing this, Francis Turretin wrote that imputation "tends to the greater glory of Christ and to our richer consolation, which they obscure and lessen not a little who detract from the price of our salvation a part of his most perfect righteousness and obedience and thus rend his seamless tunic." Jonathan Edwards echoed this: "To suppose that all Christ does is only to make atonement for us by suffering, is to make him our Savior but in part. It is to rob him of half his glory as Savior."

I do not believe for a moment that any of those who represent the challenge I am opposing aim to dishonor Christ. I believe they love him and want to honor him and his Word. But I believe the mistake they are making will have the opposite effect. The doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ bestows on Jesus Christ the fullest honor that he deserves. He should be honored not only as the one who died to pardon us, and not only as the one who sovereignly

works faith and obedience in us, but as the one who provided a perfect righteousness for us as the ground of our full acceptance and endorsement by God. I pray that these "newer" ways of understanding justification that deny the reality of the imputation of divine righteousness to sinners by faith alone will not flourish and thus that the fullest glory of Christ and the fullest pastoral helps for our souls will not be dimmed.

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Piper's quotation of Charles Hodge comes from Hodge's commentary on 2 Corinthians (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), pp. 150-151. His quotation from William Wilberforce is from Wilberforce's *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 66. His quotation from Francis Turretin is found in *Turretin's Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1993), Vol. 2, p. 452; and the quotation from Jonathan Edwards is found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 683.

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## Unlimited vs. Limited Atonement

It is vital for someone to understand that, unless you are a Universalist you believe in a limited atonement because you don't believe everyone goes to heaven. **The question then becomes not "Is the atonement limited?" but "How is the atonement limited?"**

Is the atonement limited by the free will of man or the free will of God? The answer is found in the definition of "atonement." If Christ atoned for the sins of everyone, then everyone goes to heaven. For that is the meaning of "atonement." (from [www.gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org).)

### **Verses apparently supporting unlimited atonement:**

John 1:29b "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!  
Notice, that if "world" here means every individual, this would mean universalism. For if Christ takes away the sins of every individual in the world, then everybody would be saved (for their sins would be gone).

1 Timothy 2:5-6 "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>1Ti 2:6</sup> who gave himself as a ransom for all men AND 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>2Co 5:15</sup> And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Like the word "world," "all" doesn't always mean "every individual without exception," but "some people from all groups." It means "both Jews and Gentiles" but not "every Jew and every Gentile." Read Mark 1:5. Does "all" in this verse mean every individual in the world?

1 Timothy 2:6 Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for all classes and groups of people.

Hebrews 2:9 "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

If we do use the word all to mean "every individual without exception," we mean "every individual within a certain group." For example, if I say to our Bible study group "is everybody here?" I do not mean "every individual to ever walk the face of the earth." I mean everybody who is in our group. Hebrews 2:9 "Every" means "every believer."

1 John 2:2 "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

(For definition of "whole world" see Revelation 13:3; 12:9; Romans 1:8) *He prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad* (John 11:51-52). "Whole world" (1 John 2:2) therefore means "the children of God who are scattered" throughout the world (John 11:52-53).

If Jesus died for the sins of unbelievers in the same way that he died for the sins of believers then what are unbelievers in hell for?

If you say “unbelief,” then you are saying that Jesus died for all sins except the sin of unbelief. But the Bible says that sinners in hell pay for many sins. See Colossians 3:5-6 and other passages.

### **Verses supporting Limited Atonement – Definite Atonement – Particular Atonement**

Acts 20:28 “Be shepherds of **the church** of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Matthew 20:28 “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as **a ransom for many.**”

John 15:13 “Greater love has no one than this, that he **lay down his life for his friends.**

John 17:6, 9 “I have revealed you to those **whom you gave me out of the world.** They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.  
<sup>9</sup> I pray for them. I am **not praying for the world**, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.

John 10:14-16 ““I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— <sup>Jn 10:15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and **I lay down my life for the sheep.** <sup>Jn 10:16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Ephesians 5:25-26 “just as Christ **loved the church** and gave himself up for her..”

Hebrews 9:28 “so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins **of many people;**

“If you say to me, then, that at the cross Christ only accomplished for me what he accomplished for those who will suffer hell for their sins, then you strip the death of Jesus of its actual effective accomplishment on my behalf, and leave me with what?—an atonement that has lost its precious assuring power that my sins were really covered and the curse was really lifted and the wrath of God was really removed. That's a high price to pay in order to say that Christ tasted death for everyone in the same way. (John Piper in sermon: “For whom did Jesus Taste Death.”)

# INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

<http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Salvation/introessay.html>

to John Owen's  
The Death Of Death in the Death of Christ

*By J.I. Packer*

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## I.

The Death of Death in the Death of Christ is a polemical work, designed to show, among other things, that the doctrine of universal redemption is unscriptural and destructive of the gospel. There are many, therefore, to whom it is not likely to be of interest. Those who see no need for doctrinal exactness and have no time for theological debates which show up divisions between so-called Evangelicals may well regret its appearance. Some may find the very sound of Owen's thesis so shocking that they will refuse to read his book at all; so passionate a thing is prejudice, and so proud are we of our theological shibboleths. But it is hoped that this reprint will find itself readers of a different spirit. There are signs today of a new upsurge of interest in the theology of the Bible: a new readiness to test traditions, to search the Scriptures and to think through the faith. It is to those who share this readiness that Owen's treatise is offered, in the belief that it will help us in one of the most urgent tasks facing Evangelical Christendom today—the recovery of the gospel.

This last remark may cause some raising of eyebrows, but it seems to be warranted by the facts.

There is no doubt that Evangelicalism today is in a state of perplexity and unsettlement. In such matters as the practice of evangelism, the teaching of holiness, the building up of local church life, the pastor's dealing with souls and the exercise of discipline, there is evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with things as they are and of equally widespread uncertainty as to the road ahead. This is a complex phenomenon, to which many factors have contributed; but, if we go to the root of the matter, we shall find that these perplexities are all ultimately due to our having lost our grip on the biblical gospel. Without realizing it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar enough in points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in past days proved itself so mighty. The new gospel conspicuously fails to produce deep reverence, deep repentance, deep humility, a spirit of worship, a concern for the

church. Why? We would suggest that the reason lies in its own character and content. It fails to make men God-centered in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be "helpful" to man—to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction—and too little concerned to glorify God. The old gospel was "helpful," too—more so, indeed, than is the new—but (so to speak) incidentally, for its first concern was always to give glory to God. It was always and essentially a proclamation of Divine sovereignty in mercy and judgment, a summons to bow down and worship the mighty Lord on Whom man depends for all good, both in nature and in grace. Its center of reference was unambiguously God. But in the new gospel the center of reference is man. This is just to say that the old gospel was religious in a way that the new gospel is not. Whereas the chief aim of the old was to teach men to worship God, the concern of the new seems limited to making them feel better. The subject of the old gospel was God and His ways with men; the subject of the new is man and the help God gives him. There is a world of difference. The whole perspective and emphasis of gospel preaching has changed.

From this change of interest has sprung a change of content, for the new gospel has in effect reformulated the biblical message in the supposed interests of "helpfulness." Accordingly, the themes of man's natural inability to believe, of God's free election being the ultimate cause of salvation, and of Christ dying specifically for His sheep, are not preached. These doctrines, it would be said, are not "helpful"; they would drive sinners to despair, by suggesting to them that it is not in their own power to be saved through Christ. (The possibility that such despair might be salutary is not considered; it is taken for granted that it cannot be, because it is so shattering to our self-esteem). However this may be (and we shall say more about it later), the result of these omissions is that part of the biblical gospel is now preached as if it were the whole of that gospel; and a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth. Thus, we appeal to men as if they all had the ability to receive Christ at any time; we speak of His redeeming work as if He had done no more by dying than make it possible for us to save ourselves by believing; we speak of God's love as if it were no more than a general willingness to receive any who will turn and trust; and we depict the Father and the Son, not as sovereignly active in drawing sinners to themselves, but as waiting in quiet impotence "at the door of our hearts" for us to let them in. It is undeniable that this is how we preach; perhaps this is what we really believe. But it needs to be said with emphasis that this set of twisted half-truths is something other than the biblical gospel. The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that such preaching has become almost standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter. To recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to

bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most pressing present need. And it is at this point that Owen's treatise on redemption can give us help.

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## II.

"But wait a minute," says someone, "it's all very well to talk like this about the gospel; but surely what Owen is doing is defending limited atonement—one of the five points of Calvinism? When you speak of recovering the gospel, don't you mean that you just want us all to become Calvinists?"

These questions are worth considering, for they will no doubt occur to many. At the same time, however, they are questions that reflect a great deal of prejudice and ignorance. "Defending limited atonement"—as if this was all that a Reformed theologian expounding the heart of the gospel could ever really want to do! "You just want us all to become Calvinists"—as if Reformed theologians had no interest beyond recruiting for their party, and as if becoming a Calvinist was the last stage of theological depravity, and had nothing to do with the gospel at all. Before we answer these questions directly, we must try to remove the prejudices which underlie them by making clear what Calvinism really is; and therefore we would ask the reader to take note of the following facts, historical and theological, about Calvinism in general and the "five points" in particular.

First, it should be observed that the "five points of Calvinism," so called, are simply the Calvinistic answer to a five-point manifesto (the Remonstrance) put out by certain "Belgic semi-Pelagians [1]" in the early seventeenth century. The theology which it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible human act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal. Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions: (1.) Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor (2.) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it. (3.) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe. (4.) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe. (5.) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost. Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.

The Synod of Dort was convened in 1618 to pronounce on this theology, and the "five points of Calvinism" represent its counter-affirmations. They stem from a very different principle--biblical principle that "salvation is of the Lord"; [2] and they may be summarized thus: (1.) Fallen man in his natural state lacks all power to believe the gospel, just as he lacks all power to believe the law, despite all external inducements that may be extended to him. (2.) God's election is a free, sovereign, unconditional choice of sinners, as sinners, to be redeemed by Christ, given faith and brought to glory. (3.) The redeeming work of Christ had as its end and goal the salvation of the elect. (4.) The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men to faith never fails to achieve its object. (5.) Believers are kept in faith and grace by the unconquerable power of God till they come to glory. These five points are conveniently denoted by the mnemonic TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Preservation of the saints.

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God Who saves; the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself. One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind--election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit--as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it. Plainly, these differences are important, and the permanent value of the "five points," as a summary of Calvinism, is that they make clear the points at which, and the extent to which, these two conceptions are at variance.

However, it would not be correct simply to equate Calvinism with the "five points." Five points of our own will make this clear.

In the **first place**, Calvinism is something much broader than the "five points" indicate. Calvinism is a whole world-view, stemming from a clear vision of God as the whole world's Maker and King. Calvinism is the consistent endeavour to acknowledge the Creator as the Lord, working all things after the counsel of His will. Calvinism is a theocentric way of thinking about all life under the direction and control of God's own Word.

Calvinism, in other words, is the theology of the Bible viewed from the perspective of the Bible--the God-centered outlook which sees the Creator as the source, and means, and end, of everything that is, both in nature and in grace. Calvinism is thus theism (belief in God as the ground of all things), religion (dependence on God as the giver of all things), and evangelicalism (trust in God through Christ for all things), all in their purest and most highly developed form. And Calvinism is a unified philosophy of history which sees the whole diversity of processes and events that take place in God's world as no more, and no less, than the outworking of His great preordained plan for His creatures and His church. The five points assert no more than that God is sovereign in saving the individual, but Calvinism, as such, is concerned with the much broader assertion that He is sovereign everywhere.

Then, in the **second place**, the "five points" present Calvinistic soteriology in a negative and polemical form, whereas Calvinism in itself is essentially expository, pastoral and constructive. It can define its position in terms of Scripture without any reference to Arminianism, and it does not need to be forever fighting real or imaginary Arminians in order to keep itself alive. Calvinism has no interest in negatives, as such; when Calvinists fight, they fight for positive Evangelical values. The negative cast of the "five points" is misleading chiefly with regard to the third (limited atonement, or particular redemption), which is often read with stress on the adjective and taken as indicating that Calvinists have a special interest in confining the limits of divine mercy. But in fact the purpose of this phraseology, as we shall see, is to safeguard the central affirmation of the gospel--that Christ is a Redeemer Who really does redeem. Similarly, the denials of an election that is conditional and of grace that is resistible, are intended to safeguard the positive truth that it is God Who saves. The real negations are those of Arminianism, which denies that election, redemption and calling are saving acts of God. Calvinism negates these negations in order to assert the positive content of the gospel, for the positive purpose of strengthening faith and building up the church.

**Thirdly**, the very act of setting out Calvinistic soteriology in the form of five distinct points (a number due, as we saw, merely to the fact that there were five Arminian points for the Synod of Dort to answer) tends to obscure the organic character of Calvinistic thought on this subject. For the five points, though separately stated, are really inseparable. They hang together; you cannot reject one without rejecting them all, at least in the sense in which the Synod meant them. For to Calvinism there is really only one point to be made in the field of soteriology the point that God saves sinners. God--the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and

Son by renewing. Saves--does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners--men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot. God saves sinners--and 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-peddling the sinner's inability so as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with his Saviour. This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the "five points" are concerned to establish and Arminianism, in all its forms to deny: namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to Whom be glory for ever; amen.

This leads to our **fourth remark**, which is this: the five-point formula obscures the depth of the difference between Calvinist and Arminian soteriology. There seems no doubt that it seriously misleads many here. In the formula, the stress falls on the adjectives, and this naturally gives the impression that in regard to the three great saving acts of God the debate concerns the adjectives merely—that both sides agree as to what election, redemption, and the gift of internal grace are, and differ only as to the position of man in relation to them: whether the first is conditional upon faith being foreseen or not; whether the second intends the salvation of every man or not; whether the third always proves invincible or not. But this is a complete misconception. The change of adjective in each case involves changing the meaning of the noun. An election that is conditional, a redemption that is universal, an internal grace that is resistible, is not the same kind of election, redemption, internal grace, as Calvinism asserts. The real issue concerns, not the appropriateness of adjectives, but the definition of nouns. Both sides saw this clearly when the controversy first began, and it is important that we should see it too, for otherwise we cannot discuss the Calvinist–Arminian debate to any purpose at all. It is worth setting out the different definitions side by side.

(i.) God's act of election was defined by the Arminians as a resolve to receive to sonship and glory a duly qualified class of people—believers in Christ. [3] This becomes a resolve to receive individual persons only in virtue of God's foreseeing the contingent fact that they will of their own accord believe. There is nothing in the decree of election to ensure that the class of believers will ever have any members; God does not determine to make any man believe. But Calvinists define election as a choice of particular undeserving persons to be saved from sin and brought to glory, and to that end to be redeemed by the death of Christ and given faith by the Spirit's effectual calling. Where the Arminian says: "I owe my election

to my faith," the Calvinist says: "I owe my faith to my election." Clearly, these two concepts of election are very far apart.

(ii.) Christ's work of redemption was defined by the Arminians as the removing of an obstacle (the unsatisfied claims of justice) which stood in the way of God's offering pardon to sinners, as He desired to do, on condition that they believe. Redemption according to Arminianism, secured for God a right to make this offer, but did not of itself ensure that anyone would ever accept it; for faith, being a work of man's own, is not a gift that comes to him from Calvary. Christ's death created an opportunity for the exercise of saving faith, but that is all it did. Calvinists, however, define redemption as Christ's actual substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners, through which God was reconciled to them, their liability to punishment was forever destroyed, and a title to eternal life was secured for them. In consequence of this, they now have in God's sight a right to the gift of faith, as the means of entry into the enjoyment of their inheritance. Calvary, in other words, not merely made possible the salvation of those for whom Christ died; it ensured that they would be brought to faith and their salvation made actual. The Cross saves. 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 spirit blessing, faith included, back to the great transaction between God and His Son carried through on Calvary's hill. Clearly, these two concepts of redemption are quite at variance.

(iii.) The Spirit's gift of internal grace was defined by the Arminians as "moral suasion," the bare bestowal of an understanding of God's truth. This, they granted—indeed, insisted—does not of itself ensure that anyone will ever make the response of faith. But Calvinists define this gift as not merely an enlightening, but also a regenerating work of God in men, "taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace." [4] Grace proves irresistible just because it destroys the disposition to resist. Where the Arminian therefore, will be content to say: "I decided for Christ," "I made up my mind to be a Christian," the Calvinist will wish to speak of his conversion in more theological fashion, to make plain whose work it really was:

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;

I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;  
 My chains fell off; my heart was free:  
 I rose, went forth, and followed thee." [5]

Clearly, these two notions of internal grace are sharply opposed to each other.

Now, the Calvinist contends that the Arminian idea of election, redemption and calling as acts of God which do not save cuts at the very heart of their biblical meaning; that to say in the Arminian sense that God elects believers, and Christ died for all men, and the Spirit quickens those who receive the word, is really to say that in the biblical sense God elects nobody, and Christ died for nobody, and the Spirit quickens nobody. The matter at issue in this controversy, therefore, is the meaning to be given to these biblical terms, and to some others which are also soteriologically significant, such as the love of God, the covenant of grace, and the verb "save" itself, with its synonyms. Arminians gloss them all in terms of the principle that salvation does not directly depend on any decree or act of God, but on man's independent activity in believing. Calvinists maintain that this principle is itself unscriptural and irreligious, and that such glossing demonstrably perverts the sense of Scripture and undermines the gospel at every point where it is practiced. This, and nothing less than this, is what the Arminian controversy is about.

There is a **fifth way** in which the five-point formula is deficient. Its very form (a series of denials of Arminian assertions) lends color to the impression that Calvinism is a modification of Arminianism; that Arminianism; has a certain primacy in order of nature, and developed Calvinism is an offshoot from it. Even when one shows this to be false as a matter of history, the suspicion remains in many minds that it is a true account of the relation of the two views themselves. For it is widely supposed that Arminianism; (which, as we now see, corresponds pretty closely to the new gospel of our own day) is the result of reading the Scripture in a "natural," unbiased unsophisticated way, and that Calvinism is an unnatural growth, the product less of the texts themselves than of unhallowed logic working on the texts, wresting their plain sense and upsetting their balance by forcing them into a systematic framework which they do not themselves provide. Whatever may have been true of individual Calvinists, as a generalization about Calvinism nothing could be further from the truth than this. Certainly, Arminianism; is "natural" in one sense, in that it represents a characteristic perversion of biblical teaching by the fallen mind of man, who even in salvation cannot bear to renounce the delusion of being master of his fate and captain of his soul. This perversion appeared before in the Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism of the Patristic period and the later Scholasticism, and has recurred since the seventeenth century both in Roman theology and, among Protestants,

in various types of rationalistic liberalism and modern Evangelical teaching; and no doubt it will always be with us. As long as the fallen human mind is what it is, the Arminian way of thinking will continue to be a natural type of mistake. But it is not natural in any other sense. In fact, it is Calvinism that understands the Scriptures in their natural, one would have thought, inescapable meaning; Calvinism that keeps to what they actually say; Calvinism that insists on taking seriously the biblical assertions that God saves, and that He saves those whom He has chosen to save, and that He saves them by grace without works, so that no man may boast, and that Christ is given to them as a perfect Saviour, and that their whole salvation flows to them from the Cross, and that the work of redeeming them was finished on the Cross. It is Calvinism that gives due honour to the Cross. When the Calvinist sings:

"There is a green hill far away,  
 Without a city wall,  
 Where the dear Lord was crucified,  
*Who died to save us all;*  
*He died that we might be forgiven,*  
*He died to make us good;*  
*That we might go at last to Heaven,*  
*Saved by His precious blood."*

he means it. He will not gloss the italicised statements by saying that God's saving purpose in the death of His Son was a mere ineffectual wish, depending for its fulfillment on man's willingness to believe, so that for all God could do Christ might have died and none been saved at all. He insists that the Bible sees the Cross as revealing God's power to save, not His impotence. Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for His own chosen people. His precious blood really does "save us all"; the intended effects of His self-offering do in fact follow, just because the Cross was what it was. Its saving power does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it. The Cross secured the full salvation of all for whom Christ died. "God forbid," therefore, "that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." [6]

Now the real nature of Calvinistic soteriology becomes plain. It is no artificial oddity, nor a product of over-bold logic. Its central confession, that God saves sinners, that Christ redeemed us by His blood, is the witness both of the Bible and of the believing heart. The Calvinist is the Christian who confesses before men in his theology just what he believes in his heart before God when he prays. He thinks and speaks at all times of the sovereign grace of God in the way that every Christian does when he pleads for the souls of others, or when he obeys the impulse of worship

which rises unbidden within him, prompting him to deny himself all praise and to give all the glory of his salvation to his Saviour. Calvinism is the natural theology written on the heart of the new man in Christ, whereas Arminianism is an intellectual sin of infirmity, natural only in the sense in which all such sins are natural, even to the regenerate. Calvinistic thinking is the Christian being himself on the intellectual level; Arminian thinking is the Christian failing to be himself through the weakness of the flesh. Calvinism is what the Christian church has always held and taught when its mind has not been distracted by controversy and false traditions from attending to what Scripture actually says; that is the significance of the Patristic testimonies to the teaching of the "five points," which can be quoted in abundance. (Owen appends a few on redemption; a much larger collection may be seen in John Gill's *The Cause of God and Truth*.) So that really it is most misleading to call this soteriology "Calvinism" at all, for it is not a peculiarity of John Calvin and the divines of Dort, but a part of the revealed truth of God and the catholic Christian faith. "Calvinism is one of the "odious names" by which down the centuries prejudice has been raised against it. But the thing itself is just the biblical gospel.[7]

In the light of these facts, we can now give a direct answer to the questions with which we began.

"Surely all that Owen is doing is defending limited atonement?" Not really. He is doing much more than that. Strictly speaking, the aim of Owen's book is not defensive at all, but constructive. It is a biblical and theological enquiry; its purpose is simply to make clear what Scripture actually teaches about the central subject of the gospel—the achievement of the Saviour. As its title proclaims, it is "a treatise of the redemption and reconciliation that is in the blood of Christ: with the merit thereof, and the satisfaction wrought thereby." The question which Owen, like the Dort divines before him, is really concerned to answer is just this: what is the gospel? All agree that it is a proclamation of Christ as Redeemer, but there is a dispute as to the nature and extent of His redeeming work: well, what saith the Scripture? What aim and accomplishment does the Bible assign to the work of Christ? This is what Owen is concerned to elucidate. It is true that he tackles the subject in a directly controversial way, and shapes his book as a polemic against the "spreading persuasion . . . of a general ransom, to be paid by Christ for all; that He dies to redeem all and everyone".[8] But his work is a systematic expository treatise, not a mere episodic wrangle. Owen treats the controversy as providing the occasion for a full display of the relevant biblical teaching in its own proper order and connection. As in Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the polemics themselves are incidental and of secondary interest; their chief value lies in the way that the author uses them to further his own design and carry forward his own argument.

That argument is essentially very simple. Owen sees that the question which has occasioned his writing—the extent of the atonement—involves the further question of its nature, since if it was offered to save some who will finally perish, then it cannot have been a transaction securing the actual salvation of all for whom it was designed. But, says Owen, this is precisely the kind of transaction that the Bible says it was. The first two books of his treatise are a massive demonstration of the fact that according to Scripture the Redeemer's death actually saves His people, as it was meant to do. The third book consists of a series of sixteen arguments against the hypothesis of universal redemption, all aimed to show, on the one hand, that Scripture speaks of Christ's redeeming work as effective, which precludes its having been intended for any who perish, and, on the other, that if its intended extent had been universal, then either all will be saved (which Scripture denies, and the advocates of the "general ransom" do not affirm), or else the Father and the Son have failed to do what they set out to do—"which to assert," says Owen, "seems to us blasphemously injurious to the wisdom, power and perfection of God, as likewise derogatory to the worth and value of the death of Christ."**[9]**

Owen's arguments ring a series of changes on this dilemma. Finally, in the fourth book, Owen shows with great cogency that the three classes of texts alleged to prove that Christ died for persons who will not be saved (those saying that He died for "the world," for "all," and those thought to envisage the perishing of those for whom He died), cannot on sound principles of exegesis be held to teach any such thing; and, further, that the theological inferences by which universal redemption is supposed to be established are really quite fallacious. The true evangelical evaluation of the claim that Christ died for every man, even those who perish, comes through at point after point in Owen's book. So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and Him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of "saving" grace, so-called ("saving" is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain. Lastly, so far from affording faith additional encouragement, it destroys the Scriptural ground of assurance altogether, for it denies that the knowledge that Christ died for me (or did or does anything else for me) is a sufficient ground for inferring my eternal salvation; my salvation, on this view, depends not on what Christ did for me, but on what I subsequently do for myself. Thus, this view takes from God's love and Christ's redemption the glory that Scripture gives them, and introduces the anti-scriptural principle of self-salvation at the point where the Bible explicitly says: "not of works, lest any man should boast."**[10]** You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement. It has lost its saving power; it leaves us to save ourselves. The doctrine of the general ransom must accordingly be rejected, as Owen rejects it, as a

grievous mistake. By contrast, however, the doctrine which Owen sets out, as he himself shows, is both biblical and God-honoring. It exalts Christ, for it teaches Christians to glory in His Cross alone, and to draw their hope and assurance only from the death and intercession of their Saviour. It is, in other words, genuinely Evangelical. It is, indeed, the gospel of God and the catholic faith.

It is safe to say that no comparable exposition of the work of redemption as planned and executed by the Triune Jehovah has ever been done since Owen published his. None has been needed. Discussing this work, Andrew Thomson notes how Owen "makes you feel when he has reached the end of his subject, that he has also exhausted it." [11] That is demonstrably the case here. His interpretation of the texts is sure; his power of theological construction is superb; nothing that needs discussing is omitted, and (so far as the writer can discover) no arguments for or against his position have been used since his day which he has not himself noted and dealt with. One searches his book in vain for the leaps and flights of logic by which Reformed theologians are supposed to establish their positions; all that one finds is solid, painstaking exegesis and a careful following through of biblical ways of thinking. Owen's work is a constructive, broad-based biblical analysis of the heart of the gospel, and must be taken seriously as such. It may not be written off as a piece of special pleading for a traditional shibboleth, for nobody has a right to dismiss the doctrine of the limitedness of atonement as a monstrosity of Calvinistic logic until he has refuted Owen's proof that it is part of the uniform biblical presentation of redemption, clearly taught in plain text after plain text. And nobody has done that yet.

"You talked about recovering the gospel," said our questioner: "don't you mean that you just want us all to become Calvinists?"

This question presumably concerns, not the word, but the thing. Whether we call ourselves Calvinists hardly matters; what matters is that we should understand the gospel biblically. But that, we think, does in fact mean understanding it as historic Calvinism does. The alternative is to misunderstand and distort it. We said earlier that modern Evangelicalism, by and large, has ceased to preach the gospel in the old way, and we frankly admit that the new gospel, insofar as it deviates from the old, seems to us a distortion of the biblical message. And we can now see what has gone wrong. Our theological currency has been debased. Our minds have been conditioned to think of the Cross as a redemption which does less than redeem, and of Christ as a Saviour who does less than save, and of God's love as a weak affection which cannot keep anyone from hell without help, and of faith as the human help which God needs for this purpose. As a result, we are no longer free either to believe the biblical gospel or to preach it. We cannot believe it, because our thoughts are

caught in the toils of synergism. We are haunted by the Arminian idea that if faith and unbelief are to be responsible acts, they must be independent acts; hence we are not free to believe that we are saved entirely by divine grace through a faith which is itself God's gift and flows to us from Calvary. Instead, we involve ourselves in a bewildering kind of double-think about salvation, telling ourselves one moment that it all depends on God and next moment that it all depends on us. The resultant mental muddle deprives God of much of the glory that we should give Him as author and finisher of salvation, and ourselves of much of the comfort we might draw from knowing that God is for us.

And when we come to preach the gospel, our false preconceptions make us say just the opposite of what we intend. We want (rightly) to proclaim Christ as Saviour; yet we end up saying that Christ, having made salvation possible, has left us to become our own saviours. It comes about in this way. We want to magnify the saving grace of God and the saving power of Christ. So we declare that God's redeeming love extends to every man, and that Christ has died to save every man, and we proclaim that the glory of divine mercy is to be measured by these facts. And then, in order to avoid universalism, we have to depreciate all that we were previously extolling, and to explain that, after all, nothing that God and Christ have done can save us unless we add something to it; the decisive factor which actually saves us is our own believing. What we say comes to this—that Christ saves us with our help; and what that means, when one thinks it out, is this—that we save ourselves with Christ's help. This is a hollow anticlimax. But if we start by affirming that God has a saving love for all, and Christ died a saving death for all, and yet balk at becoming universalists, there is nothing else that we can say. And let us be clear on what we have done when we have put the matter in this fashion. We have not exalted grace and the Cross; we have cheapened them. We have limited the atonement far more drastically than Calvinism does, for whereas Calvinism asserts Christ's death, as such, saves all whom it was meant to save, we have denied that Christ's death, as such, is sufficient to save any of them.**[12]** We have flattered impenitent sinners by assuring them that it is in their power to repent and believe, though God cannot make them do it. Perhaps we have also trivialized faith and repentance in order to make this assurance plausible ("it's very simple—just open your heart to the Lord...") Certainly, we have effectively denied God's sovereignty, and undermined the basic conviction of religion—that man is always in God's hands. In truth, we have lost a great deal. And it is, perhaps, no wonder that our preaching begets so little reverence and humility, and that our professed converts are so self-confident and so deficient in self-knowledge, and in the good works which Scripture regards as the fruit of true repentance.

It is from degenerate faith and preaching of this kind that Owen's book could set us free. If we listen to him, he will teach us both how to believe the Scripture gospel and how to preach it. For the first: he will lead us to bow down before a sovereign Saviour Who really saves, and to praise Him for a redeeming death which made it certain that all for whom He died will come to glory. It cannot be over-emphasized that we have not seen the full meaning of the Cross till we have seen it as the divines of Dort display it—as the center of the gospel, flanked on the one hand by total inability and unconditional election, and on the other by irresistible grace and final preservation. For the full meaning of the Cross only appears when the atonement is defined in terms of these four truths. Christ died to save a certain company of helpless sinners upon whom God had set His free saving love. Christ's death ensured the calling and keeping—the present and final salvation—of all whose sins He bore. That is what Calvary meant, and means. The Cross saved; the Cross saves. This is the heart of true Evangelical faith; as Cowper sang—

"Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood  
Shall never lose its power,  
Till all the ransomed church of God  
Be saved to sin no more."

This is the triumphant conviction which underlay the old gospel, as it does the whole New Testament. And this is what Owen will teach us unequivocally to believe.

Then, secondly, Owen could set us free, if we would hear him, to preach the biblical gospel. This assertion may sound paradoxical, for it is often imagined that those who will not preach that Christ died to save every man are left with no gospel at all. On the contrary, however, what they are left with is just the gospel of the New Testament. What does it mean to preach "the gospel of the grace of God"? Owen only touches on this briefly and incidentally,[13] but his comments are full of light. Preaching the gospel, he tells us, is not a matter of telling the congregation that God has set His love on each of them and Christ has died to save each of them, for these assertions, biblically understood, would imply that they will all infallibly be saved, and this cannot be known to be true. The knowledge of being the object of God's eternal love and Christ's redeeming death belongs to the individual's assurance,[14] which in the nature of the case cannot precede faith's saving exercise; it is to be inferred from the fact that one has believed, not proposed as a reason why one should believe. According to Scripture, preaching the gospel is entirely a matter of proclaiming to men, as truth from God which all are bound to believe and act on, the following four facts:

(1.) that all men are sinners, and cannot do anything to save themselves;

(2.) that Jesus Christ, God's Son, is a perfect Saviour for sinners, even the worst;

(3.) that the Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be sinners and put faith in Christ as Saviour shall be received into favour, and none cast out (which promise is "a certain infallible truth, grounded upon the superabundant sufficiency of the oblation of Christ in itself, for whomsoever (few or more) it be intended"[15]);

(4.) that God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man who hears the gospel "a serious full recumbency and rolling of the soul upon Christ in the promise of the gospel, as an all-sufficient Saviour, able to deliver and save to the utmost them that come to God by Him; ready, able and willing, through the preciousness of His blood and sufficiency of His ransom, to save every soul that shall freely give up themselves unto Him for that end."[16]

The preacher's task, in other words, is to display Christ: to explain man's need of Him, His sufficiency to save, and His offer of Himself in the promises as Saviour to all who truly turn to Him; and to show as fully and plainly as he can how these truths apply to the congregation before him. It is not for him to say, nor for his hearers to ask, for whom Christ died in particular. "There is none called on by the gospel once to enquire after the purpose and intention of God concerning the particular object of the death of Christ, every one being fully assured that His death shall be profitable to them that believe in Him and obey Him." After saving faith has been exercised, "it lies on a believer to assure his soul, according as he find the fruit of the death of Christ in him and towards him, of the good-will and eternal love of God to him in sending His Son to die for him in particular";[17] but not before. The task to which the gospel calls him is simply to exercise faith, which he is both warranted and obliged to do by God's command and promise.

Some comments on this conception of what preaching the gospel means are in order.

**First**, we should observe that the old gospel of Owen contains no less full and free an offer of salvation than its modern counterpart. It presents ample grounds of faith (the sufficiency of Christ, and the promise of God), and cogent motives to faith (the sinner's need, and the Creator's command, which is also the Redeemer's invitation). The new gospel gains nothing here by asserting universal redemption. The old gospel, certainly, has no room for the cheap sentimentalizing which turns God's free mercy to sinners into a constitutional soft-heartedness on His part which we can take for granted; nor will it countenance the degrading presentation of Christ as the baffled Saviour, balked in what He hoped to do by human

unbelief; nor will it indulge in maudlin appeals to the unconverted to let Christ save them out of pity for His disappointment. The pitiable Saviour and the pathetic God of modern pulpits are unknown to the old gospel. The old gospel tells men that they need God, but not that God needs them (a modern falsehood); it does not exhort them to pity Christ, but announces that Christ has pitied them, though pity was the last thing they deserved. It never loses sight of the Divine Majesty and sovereign power of the Christ Whom it proclaims, but rejects flatly all representations of Him which would obscure His free omnipotence. Does this mean, however, that the preacher of the old gospel is inhibited or confined in offering Christ to men and inviting them to receive Him? Not at all. In actual fact, just because he recognizes that Divine mercy is sovereign and free, he is in a position to make far more of the offer of Christ in his preaching than is the expositor of the new gospel; for this offer is itself a far more wonderful thing on his principles than it can ever be in the eyes of those who regard love to all sinners as a necessity of God's nature, and therefore a matter of course. To think that the holy Creator, who never needed man for His happiness and might justly have banished our fallen race for ever without mercy, should actually have chosen to redeem some of them! and that His own Son was willing to undergo death and descend into hell to save them! and that now from His Throne He should speak to ungodly men as He does in the words of the gospel, urging upon them the command to repent and believe in the form of a compassionate invitation to pity themselves and choose life! These thoughts are the focal points round which the preaching of the old gospel revolves. It is all wonderful, just because none of it can be taken for granted. But perhaps the most wonderful thing of all—the holiest spot in all the holy ground of gospel truth—is the free invitation which "the Lord Christ" (as Owen loves to call Him) issues repeatedly to guilty sinners to come to Him and find rest for their souls. It is the glory of these invitations that it is an omnipotent King Who gives them, just as it is a chief part of the glory of the enthroned Christ that He condescends still to utter them. And it is the glory of the gospel ministry that the preacher goes to men as Christ's ambassador, charged to deliver the King's invitation personally to every sinner present and to summon them all to turn and live. Owen himself enlarges on this in a passage addressed to the unconverted.

"Consider the infinite condescension and love of Christ, in His invitations and calls of you to come unto Him for life, deliverance, mercy, grace, peace and eternal salvation. Multitudes of these invitations and calls are recorded in the Scripture, and they are all of them filled up with those blessed encouragements which divine wisdom knows to be suited unto lost, convinced sinners . . . In the declaration and preaching of them, Jesus Christ yet stands before sinners, calling, inviting, encouraging them to come unto Him.

"This is somewhat of the word which He now speaks unto you: Why will ye die? why will ye perish? why will ye not have compassion on your own souls? Can your hearts endure, or can your hands be strong, in the day of wrath that is approaching?... Look unto Me, and be saved; come unto Me, and I will ease you of all sins, sorrows, fears, burdens, and give rest unto your souls. Come, I entreat you; lay aside all procrastinations, all delays; put Me off no more; eternity lies at the door... do not so hate Me as that you will rather perish than accept of deliverance by Me.

"These and the like things doth the Lord Christ continually declare, proclaim, plead and urge upon the souls of sinners . . He doth it in the preaching of the word, as if he were present with you, stood amongst you, and spake personally to every one of you . . . He hath appointed, the ministers of the gospel to appear before you, and to deal with you in His stead, avowing as His own the invitations which are given you in His name, 2 Cor. v.19,20."**[18]**

These invitations are universal; Christ addresses them to sinners as such, and every man, as he believes God to be true, is bound to treat them as God's words to him personally and to accept the universal assurance which accompanies them, that all who come to Christ will be received. Again, these invitations are real; Christ genuinely offers Himself to all who hear the gospel, and is in truth a perfect Saviour to all who trust Him. The question of the extent of the atonement does not arise in evangelistic preaching; the message to be delivered is simply this-that Christ Jesus, the sovereign Lord, Who died for sinners, now invites sinners freely to Himself. God commands all to repent and believe; Christ promises life and peace to all who do so. Furthermore, these invitations are marvelously gracious; men despise and reject them, and are never in any case worthy of them, and yet Christ still issues them. He need not, but He does. "Come unto Me . . . and I will give you rest" remains His word to the world, never cancelled, always to be preached. He Whose death has ensured the salvation of all His people is to be proclaimed everywhere as a perfect Saviour, and all men invited and urged to believe on Him, whoever they are, whatever they have been. Upon these three insights the evangelism of the old gospel is based.

It is a very ill-informed supposition that evangelistic preaching which proceeds on these principles must be anemic and half-hearted by comparison with what Arminians can do. Those who study the printed sermons of worthy expositors of the old gospel, such as Bunyan (whose preaching Owen himself much admired), or Whitefield, or Spurgeon, will find that in fact they hold forth the Saviour and summon sinners to Him with a fullness, warmth, intensity and moving force unmatched in Protestant pulpit literature. And it will be found on analysis that the very thing which gave their preaching its unique power to overwhelm their

audiences with broken-hearted joy at the riches of God's grace—and still gives it that power, let it be said, even with hard-boiled modern readers—was their insistence on the fact that grace is free. They knew that the dimensions of Divine love are not half understood till one realizes that God need not have chosen to save nor given His Son to die; nor need Christ have taken upon Him vicarious damnation to redeem men, nor need He invite sinners indiscriminately to Himself as He does; but that all God's gracious dealings spring entirely from His own free purpose. Knowing this, they stressed it, and it is this stress that sets their evangelistic preaching in a class by itself. Other Evangelicals, possessed of a more superficial and less adequate theology of grace, have laid the main emphasis in their gospel preaching on the sinner's need of forgiveness, or peace, or power, and of the way to get them by "deciding for Christ." It is not to be denied that their preaching has done good (for God will use His truth, even when imperfectly held and mixed with error), although this type of evangelism is always open to the criticism of being too man-centred and pietistic; but it has been left (necessarily) to Calvinists and those who, like the Wesleys, fall into Calvinistic ways of thought as soon as they begin a sermon to the unconverted, to preach the gospel in a way which highlights above everything else the free love, willing condescension, patient long-suffering and infinite kindness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, without doubt, this is the most Scriptural and edifying way to preach it; for gospel invitations to sinners never honour God and exalt Christ more, nor are more powerful to awaken and confirm faith, than when full weight is laid on the free omnipotence of the mercy from which they flow. It looks, indeed, as if the preachers of the old gospel are the only people whose position allows them to do justice to the revelation of Divine goodness in the free offer of Christ to sinners.

Then, in the **second** place, the old gospel safeguards values which the new gospel loses. We saw before that the new gospel, by asserting universal redemption and a universal Divine saving purpose, compels itself to cheapen grace and the Cross by denying that the Father and the Son are sovereign in salvation; for it assures us that, after God and Christ have done all that they can, or will, it depends finally on each man's own choice whether God's purpose to save him is realized or not. This position has two unhappy results. The first is that it compels us to misunderstand the significance of the gracious invitations of Christ in the gospel of which we have been speaking; for we now have to read them, not as expressions of the tender patience of a mighty sovereign, but as the pathetic pleadings of impotent desire; and so the enthroned Lord is suddenly metamorphosed into a weak, futile figure tapping forlornly at the door of the human heart, which He is powerless to open. This is a shameful dishonour to the Christ of the New Testament. The second implication is equally serious: for this view in effect denies our dependence on God when it comes to vital decisions, takes us out of His Hand, tells us that we are, after all, what sin

taught us to think we were—masters of our fate, captain of our souls—and so undermines the very foundation of man's religious relationship with his Maker. It can hardly be wondered at that the converts of the new gospel are so often both irreverent and irreligious, for such is the natural tendency of this teaching. The old gospel, however, speaks very differently and has a very different tendency. On the one hand, in expounding man's need of Christ, it stresses something which the new gospel effectively ignores—that sinners cannot obey the gospel, any more than the law, without renewal of heart. On the other hand, in declaring Christ's power to save, it proclaims Him as the author and chief agent of conversion, coming by His Spirit as the gospel goes forth to renew men's hearts and draw them to Himself. Accordingly, in applying the message, the old gospel, while stressing that faith is man's duty, stresses also that faith is not in man's power, but that God must give what He commands. It announces, not merely that men must come to Christ for salvation, but also that they cannot come unless Christ Himself draws them. Thus it labours to overthrow self-confidence, to convince sinners that their salvation is altogether out of their hands, and to shut them up to a self-despairing dependence on the glorious grace of a sovereign Saviour, not only for their righteousness but for their faith too.

It is not likely, therefore, that a preacher of the old gospel will be happy to express the application of it in the form of a demand to "decide for Christ," as the current phrase is. For, on the one hand, this phrase carries the wrong associations. It suggests voting a person into office—an act in which the candidate plays no part beyond offering himself for election, and everything then being settled by the voter's independent choice. But we do not vote God's Son into office as our Saviour, nor does He remain passive while preachers campaign on His behalf, whipping up support for His cause. We ought not to think of evangelism as a kind of electioneering. And then, on the other hand, this phrase obscures the very thing that is essential in repentance and faith—the denying of self in a personal approach to Christ. It is not at all obvious that deciding for Christ is the same as coming to Him and resting on Him and turning from sin and self-effort; it sounds like something much less, and is accordingly calculated to instill defective notions of what the gospel really requires of sinners. It is not a very apt phrase from any point of view.

To the question: what must I do to be saved? the old gospel replies: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. To the further question: what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? its reply is: it means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural enmity and rebellion against God for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Ghost. And to the

further question still: how am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things? it answers: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on His mercy; ask Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from Him. Turn to Him and trust Him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him; watch, pray, read and hear God's Word, worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you. The emphasis in this advice is on the need to call upon Christ directly, as the very first step.

**"let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness He requireth  
Is to feel your need of Him"—**

so do not postpone action till you think you are better, but honestly confess your badness and give yourself up here and now to the Christ Who alone can make you better; and wait on Him till His light rises in your soul, as Scripture promises that it shall do. Anything less than this direct dealing with Christ is disobedience of the gospel. Such is the exercise of spirit to which the old evangel summons its hearers. "I believe—help thou mine unbelief": this must become their cry.

And the old gospel is proclaimed in the sure confidence that the Christ of whom it testifies, the Christ who is the real speaker when the Scriptural invitations to trust Him are expounded and applied, is not passively waiting for man's decision as the word goes forth, but is omnipotently active, working with and through the word to bring His people to faith in Himself. The preaching of the new gospel is often described as the task of "bringing men to Christ"—as if only men move, while Christ stands still. But the task of preaching the old gospel could more properly be described as bringing Christ to men, for those who preach it know that as they do their work of setting Christ before men's eyes, the mighty Saviour Whom they proclaim is busy doing His work through their words, visiting sinners with salvation, awakening them to faith, drawing them in mercy to Himself.

It is this older gospel which Owen will teach us to preach: the gospel of the sovereign grace of God in Christ as the Author and Finisher of faith and salvation...

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[1.] Owen, Works (ea. Goold), x.6

[2.] John 2:9

[3.] Plus any others who, though they had not heard the gospel, lived up to the light they had--though this point need not concern us here.

[4.] Westminster Confession, x. 1.

[5.] Granted, it was Charles Wesley who wrote this; but it is one of the many passages in his hymns which make one ask, with "Rabbi" Duncan, 'Where's your Arminianism now, friend?'

[6.] Gal 6:14

[7.] C.H. Spurgeon was thus abundantly right when he declared: "I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what is nowadays called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism.; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel... unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah, nor do I think we can preach the gospel unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the Cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called." (Spurgeon's Autobiography," Vol.1, Ch. XVI, p.172.)

[8.] P. (47) inf.

[9.] Ibid.

[10.] Eph. ii. 9.

[11.] "Life of John Owen," p.38 (Works, ed. Goold, 1).

[12.] Compare this, from C.H. 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 limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You

say that Chnst 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, 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."

[13.] See pp. (199-204, 292-8) inf.

[14.] "What, I pray, is it according to Scripture, for a man to be assured that Christ died for him in particular? Is it not the very highest improvement of faith? Doth it not include a sense of the spiritual love of God shed abroad in our hearts? Is it not the top of the apostle's consolation Rom. viii. 34, and the bottom of all his joyful assurance, Gal. ii. 20?" (p.297 inf.).

[15.] P. (203) inf.

[16.] P. (295f) inf.

[17.] Loc. cit.

[18.] Works, I.422.

## Did Christ Die for all Men or Only His elect?

John Hendryx

<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/jhendryx03.html>

The following is a written response to a brother with the following question about limited atonement (that Christ died only for the elect):

*Could you please clarify the extent of the atonement, limited versus unlimited? Isn't limited atonement wrong and doesn't the Bible plainly teach unlimited atonement (that Christ died for the sins of all people in the world)?*

This is a very good question and has remained an issue between believers through many centuries.

Many people popularly call themselves "four-point" Calvinists because they find the idea of a limited atonement loathsome, or believe somehow that the Bible does not teach it. What is meant by a four-point Calvinist? It is generally understood to mean that an individual claims to believe in *total depravity, unconditional election,*

*irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints* but not limited atonement (dropping the "L" in limited atonement) in TULIP (TU-IP). What is interesting about this, however, is that everyone involved actually believes in a limited atonement since we can all agree that Christ did not actually redeem everyone who ever lived. There will be some who end up in the lake of fire according to both positions. The question, therefore, is not whether there is a "limit" to the extent of the atonement, but rather, what is the nature of the limit and who limits it? Is it limited by God's choice and design or by free human choices? Did God, from eternity, sovereignly determine to whom He would apply the benefits of the atonement, or did God leave it to man's will? This is why I generally like to call my position "particular redemption" rather than limited atonement since both sides ultimately limit the application of the atonement.

If you ask one of these brothers or sisters, "*for whom did Christ die?*" they will generally answer something like this: "the Bible plainly teaches that Christ's death and His work of redemption was not only sufficient for the entire world, but that He actually died for the sins of all the world." They will back their position with this verse from 1 John 2:2 - "*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*" ...as well as John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (And leave it there as if this settles the argument).

Unfortunately this view leaves an island of righteousness in man to be able to believe the Gospel without the aid of the regenerating grace, which Christ purchased on the cross. It follows that those who hold to a general atonement believe *the one sin for which Christ did not die is rejection of His person and work* (they will cite John 3:18,36). [*Some readers have claimed that I am setting up a straw man here but this is actually the position (word for word) currently being taught by such institutions as Dallas Theological Seminary. Anyone wishing to take issue with me here I have evidence of this and will gladly provide it upon request.*] So if, as they claim, that Christ did not die for our unbelief, then who did?

What many are, in fact, teaching is that Christ *did not* die for *ALL THE SINS* of the whole world, since they have excluded the sin of unbelief. In other words they claim that Christ died for our breaking of the 2nd through 10th commandments in the decalogue but not the first commandment. So, the obvious question to answer here is "who,

then, dies for our sin of unbelief?" Do we atone for it ourselves? Does God overlook our former unbelief because the sincerity of our newly found faith makes up for our previous unbelief? Does the atonement for sins of unbelief kick in only after we unlock the door by "accepting Jesus into our hearts?" It is my contention that Christ died for all our sins including the sin of unbelief. If you agree with me yet believe in a universal atonement then why are there still people in hell? If all men's unbelief has been paid for then then all sin has been forgiven - there is nothing left to forgive and we would then have universalism. But 1 John 3:23 teaches "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ." To disobey this command is a sin, and the greatest sin of all I might add. A question to ask yourself is did Christ pay for this sin or not?

It is not quite apparent to me why the text of John 3:16 should be an argument against limited atonement. The passage does not say Jesus died for everyone, but only that the Father gave his Son for ALL THOSE WHO WOULD BELIEVE. It says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES in HIM shall not perish but have eternal life." Right? Don't we all believe this? That is why the consistent biblical Calvinists, when presenting the gospel to unbelievers, simply teach that Christ died for "all who would believe", which is actually closer to the meaning of this text than the erroneous position that He died for all in a general kind of way, and yet for no individual in particular. Instead, we believe that the benefits of the atonement will apply only to who will be believers, so he did not die for any person who would remain steadfast in their unbelief. So I would argue that John 3:16 actually supports the definite atonement position better than the indefinite position. They are reading into the text that Christ's death only potentially will save someone if they believe without the help and grace of the cross to do so. So in actuality, Christ died for no one in particular this scheme. His affection was only cast forth in a general impersonal kind of way rather than actually coming for His people who He set his affection on from eternity.

In fact, this teaching comes full circle and devastates all of the other doctrines of grace. Although claiming to believe in Total Depravity, the teaching of the so-called four-point Calvinists is really that man still has the moral ability to turn to God on his own without regenerating grace (a grace purchased on the cross) effectively destroying total depravity, even though the Bible plainly teaches that no one seeks God unless first born again (1 John 5:1; John 6:37, 39,

44, 63-65; Rom 3:11. 1 Cor 2:14, John 1:13; John 3). That is to say, natural fallen man has the ability and desire (in some cases) to believe in Christ without regenerating grace. It is teaching a "conditional" election since it depends completely on God's foreknowledge of whether or not we will have faith, even though the Bible plainly teaches that election is not conditioned on something God sees in us and that faith is a divine gift (Eph 2:5-8). So in effect WE end up choosing God with our autonomous free will in this scheme, not the other way around. Those who deny limited atonement are also surreptitiously semi-pelagian in all the other doctrines of grace as well. Salvation becomes the work of man, rather than a monergistic divine work of grace. Some may argue that God's grace works together with man, but the problem with this is that it still leaves the final decision for salvation in the hands of man. Faith, apart from Christ's work on the cross, precedes saving grace in this view, contrary to everything the Bible teaches (ROM 9:16; John 1:13). God's grace would take us part of the way to salvation leaving man's will to make the final decision. So, according to those who claim that the atonement is unlimited (indefinite) there is no divine election in the final analysis, but only humans electing God even though we all know that it is God that chooses us (John 15:16). The biblical teaching is that God, before the foundation of the world in His eternal counsels, knew and determined to whom He would apply the benefits of the atonement? (2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:2; Eph 1:4,5)

"This is the will of Him who sent Me, *that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing*, but raise it up on the last day." John 6:39 (emphasis mine)

What does "*that of all He has given Me I lose nothing*" mean except that God, in His eternal councils had already determined who would be written in the book of life and that Jesus Christ came to earth in time to carry out their eternal redemption. Is Jesus' purpose not in sync with God the Fathers' and God the Holy Spirits'? God the Father elects certain individuals and the Holy Spirit regenerates them. Does the Son have a different redemptive agenda? No, the three Persons of the Trinity are always consistent with one another. If you believe in election, which you do unless you have torn out almost every page of your Bible, then you must believe that that Christ came to redeem His elect, and the Holy Spirit applied the benefits of the atonement only on those the Father had "given" Christ. It means that

He will infallibly bring His own into His eternal kingdom. I hear someone say "but that's not fair" ... does God owe you anything my friend? Is He your debtor? The only debt He owes you is His just wrath. His choosing of you is an act of His mercy, an act of His divine good pleasure (Eph 1:4,5).

Before we get to 1 John 2:2 lets familiarize ourselves with some other biblical texts on this crucial issue:

*First Take a look at these passages of Scripture:*

"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Revelation 5:9 (emphasis mine)  
*my comment:* did Christ redeem everybody by His blood in this passage? the entire world or a limited number? Doesn't it say that He purchased men FROM every tribe???

"...and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." Heb 9:12

*my comment:* was everybody's redemption eternal? through His blood He obtained eternal redemption - for whom? all men? then why aren't they all saved? If all men's redemption is eternal then we must become universalists.

"...who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." Titus 2:14

*My question:* IN this passage did Christ redeem all men from iniquity or just some? the second half of the verse also narrows the redemption to a particular people, not all people.

v.5 "...But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.... v. 8 He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? v.11... By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. v.12 ...Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors." Isaiah 53:5,8,11-12

*my comment:* Are the sins of the whole world "healed" by Christ's

scourging in this passage? If they are, then why isn't everyone saved? What meaning does healing have then if it is unlimited? Are the words "my people" referring to all mankind or the many whom He would justify that the Father had "given" Him? (see John 17:9) Since He "bore the sin of many" this certainly is not including the reprobate but a particular people purchased out of the world.

Now we come to the famous text that our "four-point" brothers put all their weight upon as teaching an unlimited atonement:

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." 1 John 2:2

At first glance I must admit that this appears to be a pretty good text to back up their argument but upon closer examination, it falls apart. The problem is that if the four-pointers read this verse the way they intend to then we must also conclude that the whole world's sins have already been atoned for (believers and unbelievers) and thus all will be saved (universalism). If Christ is a propitiation or atonement for all men's sins, paying for all sins ever committed, then why isn't everyone in the whole world saved???? So the verse actually proves to much. The verse simply means, (and there is no doubt this is what Paul meant), Christ did not die for every person without exception but every person without distinction. . All kinds of people everywhere, is what is meant. We see this elsewhere when the Scriptures say, Christ "purchased for God with [His] blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9). Many will argue that He didn't die for our unbelief, which I believe I thoroughly discredited in my argument above. John is speaking, rather, of sins for people *throughout the whole world*, not each and every person's sins. There are too many problems with saying that the text includes all men (believers and unbelievers) and, as I have shown, this leads to an unbiblical universalism. Saying Christ died for the sins of the whole world is similar in the use of language in many other passages in Scripture such as Mark 1:5 which says, "And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem." If you think the "all in this passage means every single person without exception, you have missed the point, it means large numbers of people; all persons without distinction, but not all persons without exception. Christ died for all of the sins of His elect, including their previous sin of unbelief. Belief in the Gospel does not make up for our previous sin of unbelief. Belief (faith) is the witness that God has already

wrought grace in our hearts, the inevitable response to His work of regeneration in our souls. (John 3:21) Christ clearly came to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11) and some people are not his sheep: "...*but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.*" (John 10:26) Jesus prayed for His own but he would not pray for those the Father had NOT given him: "I pray for them. *I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.*" Emphasis mine (John 17:9).

This teaching does have great practical value; specifically that our prayers for the lost will be effectual. As we go out to do missions, to reach the lost, we can have confidence that we go not in vain but that we carry with us the Word of God which has the power to raise the dead to life. We don't just go in the hope that maybe someone will be saved; or that Christ died for no one in particular. But rather that He died for a particular people to make them His own. If my hope was based solely on whether someone would respond to the Gospel message by their own free will then I would despair because no one would respond (ROM 3:11. 1 Cor 2:14)... but because God has an eternal plan, a bride he has chosen for His Son, I can rejoice in the knowledge that God's word proclaimed will effectually bring home those whom he delivers the inward call. (ROM 8:28-30)

Finally, remember that it is not a question of whether or not Christ's redemption was able to cleanse the sins of all men, as we know it clearly could have if this is what He so desired. The question is what does the Bible teach about the divine intent with regard to the atonement, which I hope this short paper has answered.

Soli Deo Gloria

John Hendryx

P.S. Historically many of the greatest minds the church has produced were 5 pointers, not four. Some of the more well known ones were Jonathan Edwards, C.H. Spurgeon, A.A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, John Owen, John Calvin, George Whitfield, Thomas Goodwin and more recently, J.I. Packer, R.C Sproul, John Piper, Iain Murray, Michael Horton, James Boice and John Murray

On the subject of Particular Redemption (Limited Atonement) also see:

2 Peter 2:1 and Universal Redemption (A MUST SEE)  
Simon Escobedo III

<http://aomin.org/2PE21.html>

The Nature of the Atonement Why and for Whom did Christ die? 

Phil Johnson

The Son of Man Came to Give His Life a Ransom for Many 

John Piper

To God be the Glory 

Wayne Mack - A Popular Exposition of the Biblical Doctrine of Particular Redemption

For Whom Did Christ Die? (2) 

C.H. Spurgeon

See also Lorraine Boettner at

<http://www.mbrem.com/calvinism/bchap12.htm>