

CHAPTER 10

PARTICULAR ATONEMENT AND THE ORDER OF DECREES

Cf. John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Vol. 10 of his *Works*; reprinted from 1852 ed.); A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (1875); Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (1875); B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (reprinted); John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (1955); R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (1959); Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement* (1987), esp. pp. 64-90, 138-145.

Definition

WCF 8:5; Canons of Dort, 2nd Head, Art. 3 [sufficient for whole world], 8 [purposed only for the elect] (Schaff *Creeds of Christendom* 3:586-87)

Christ's atonement was intended primarily to fulfill the terms of the covenant of grace (or covenant of redemption), and thereby secure the salvation of the elect.

This definition can be clarified further as follows:

- 1) Christ did not die for all human beings equally.
- 2) Christ did not die merely to make salvation possible for all.
- 3) Christ died to save his people, to make salvation certain for the elect.

Cf. Calvin, at 1 John 2:2, "Christ died sufficiently for all, but efficiently only for the elect." (Calvin asserts the truth of the statement, but does not think it the best interpretation of that particular verse)

Cf. A. A. Hodge *Outlines* 417:

Christ died

Incidentally, to make salvation possible for all, and to provide opportunities for many

Specifically, to obtain salvation for the elect, the basic reason

Three Positions Concerning the Extent of the Atonement

- 1) Arminian. Christ died for all people equally.
- 2) Calvinistic. Christ died for the elect.
- 3) Amyraldian. Christ died hypothetically for all people, but God elected only some. Amyraldianism could be called “four-point Calvinism.” (Moses Amyraut, 1596-1664, French Protestant pastor)

Scriptural Support for the Particular (“Limited”) Atonement

Passages which teach particular atonement under the covenant of grace

John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

John 10:14-15, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Acts 20:28, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Eph 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

See also these notes, Ch. 7, section “Biblical Defense of the Covenant of Redemption.”

Passages which apparently limit the extent of the atonement

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

Matt 26:28, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Heb 9:28, “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

But note usage in Rom 5:15, “many died” = all; the context must determine the meaning in each usage of a term.

Rom 5:15, “But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!”

Passages which describe the saving power of the atonement, compared with passages which deny these benefits to the non-elect.

Rom 8:33-34, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

1 Cor 15:3-4, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Eph 1:4-7, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”

Compare passages which deny these same benefits to the non-elect:

Matt 7:23, “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Matt 25:41, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”

John 10:26, “But you do not believe because you are not my sheep.” Cf. John 10:11, 15,

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . just as the Father knows me and I know the Father –and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Rom 1:24-32, “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

Belief in the particular atonement stems naturally from the covenant of grace, and the Calvinistic system in general. It is the foundation of the other “points” of Calvinism.

Passages used against this doctrine

[Cf. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* [abridged ed.] 2:ch. 10, pp. 107-117]

Passages which apply fruits of atonement to all or to the (whole) world

- Note the chart in John Owen, *Death of Death* 192 (*Works* 10:304)

Terms that are applied universally

[Cf. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* 2:61-65]

Redemption

1 Tim 2:6, “who gave himself as a ransom for all men”

2 Pet 2:1, “false teachers . . . even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them”

Propitiation

1 John 2:2, “He is the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (not in 4:10)

Reconciliation

2 Cor 5:19, “God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men’s (Greek, ASV, ‘their’) sins against them.”

Col 1:20, “through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven”

(Note that proponents of universal atonement usually employ only these previous three terms in their argument. However, to be consistent, we note the following terms which sometimes may appear to be used also in a universal sense.)

Substitution

John 6:51, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Heb 2:9, “by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”

Salvation

1 Tim 4:10, “the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe”

Titus 2:11, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” (ASV, “the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men”). The Greek uses an adjective modifying “grace,” σωτήριος *soterios*, “bringing salvation.” The phrase “to all men” can modify either “salvation” or “appeared.” It is closer to the noun “salvation.”

Answer

1. Obviously, not everyone is saved. These verses should be interpreted with that fact in mind. The Arminian interpretation of them could prove too much.

2. To apply these terms to the lost is to weaken these terms, which usually apply only to the saved. (cf. Chafer on the first three terms)

3. The terms *all* and *world* are often limited by context
 - Matt 3:5, “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.” More literal in KJV: “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan.” The Greek uses the term *πάσα pasa* (“all”) twice.
 - Matt 9:35, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.”
 - Luke 2:1, “Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world (*οἰκουμένη oikoumene*) should be enrolled.” (ASV)
 - John 1:9-10, “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.” (note 4 uses of “world,” *κόσμος kosmos*)
 - Acts 19:27, “So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship.” (NKJV)
 - Rom 1:8, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.” Again, literally, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world (*kosmos*).” (KJV)
 - Col 1:28, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”

4. Many passages could refer to the world in distinction from national Israel (Rom 11:15; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 2:2).
 - Rom 11:15, “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”
 - 2 Pet 2:1, “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” [John Gill takes this to refer to the nation of Israel and the Exodus]

- 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” [world of Gentiles; cf. John 10:16, “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”].
5. It also is possible that some of these verses may be speaking of the whole world in an eschatological sense.

Passages which present a universal gospel appeal

1. Passages used

John 3:16, “everyone who believes”

John 7:37, “anyone”

Matt 18:4, “whoever”

1 John 4:15, “whoever”

Rev 22:17, “he who wills”

2. Answer

[See John Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” in his *Collected Writings* 1:59-85. Another excellent response to this objection is made by Roger Nicole, “Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement,” *JETS* 38:3 (Sept. 1995) 403-412]

- The gospel offer is made in good faith to everyone; salvation is available if received by faith.
- But at the same time, no one is able to receive the offer unless effectually called by the Holy Spirit (regeneration), and this call comes as a result of the atonement.
- Calvinistic statements assert the universal offer of the gospel.

Dort 2:3, 5-6 (Schaff *Creeds* 3:586):

“Art. 2. The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.

“Art. 5. Moreover the promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.

“Art. 6. And, whereas many who are called by the gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief; this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross, but is wholly to be imputed to themselves.”

Cf. Declaratory Statement made by the Bible Presbyterian Church at its first Synod: “In adopting the Confession of Faith this General Synod declares: First: its firm and glad belief in the reality and universality of the offer of the Gospel to mankind. We believe that Christ’s atonement is sufficient for the sins of all, adapted to all, and is freely offered to all men in the Gospel. We believe that no man will be condemned except upon the ground of his sin.”

Cf. books such as R. B. Kuiper, *God-Centered Evangelism*; and *Reformed Evangelism, A Manual on Principles and Methods of Evangelism*, by a board of the Christian Reformed Church; cf. ministry of Asahel Nettleton.

- Note on John 3:16. Many take the expression “For God so loved the world” to indicate a universal atonement. However, the word “so” is not a particle emphasizing amount, but rather manner: οὕτως *houtos*, “in this way, thus, so.” Thus the verse says, “God in this manner loved the world, . . . that the believers may have eternal life.” God’s love is selective, benefiting in this case only the elect.

Relation of the atonement to the order of decrees

[Cf. Warfield chart, *Plan of Salvation*, p. 31]

Logical order

The “order of decrees” refers to the logical order by which God’s important decrees relating to the covenant of grace should be arranged; it does not refer necessarily to a temporal order, either in their conception or in their fulfillment.

By logical order, we mean the following: If A is a necessary prerequisite for B, but A does not require or imply B, then A is logically prior to B.

Example: A = take glass from shelf
 B = fill glass with water

B implies A.
A does not imply B.
Therefore, A is prior to B.

Four possibilities of relationship between A and B:

- 1) No relation between A and B
- 2) A implies B; B may or may not imply A
- 3) A is implied by B; A may or may not imply B
- 4) A implies and is implied by B; A and B are neither prior nor posterior, but are equivalent in order

Rule of thumb: If A be assumed, and one can stop before deciding on B (which is now made possible by A), then A is logically prior to B.

The relation of election to man's estate of sin

This question defines the various "lapsarian" views, from "lapse," meaning the "fall" of man into sin. These views compare the relative logical order of the decrees for the fall and for election.

1. Supralapsarianism

The decree to elect precedes the decree to ordain the fall.

View of Beza, William Twiss (prolocutor of Westminster Assembly), Arthur Pink, Herman Hoeksema, Gordon Clark, Robert Reymond

Supralapsarian order of decrees:

- 1) Create mankind
- 2) Elect some to life, others to death
- 3) Ordain the fall
- 4) Redeem the elect
- 5) Send the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to the elect

Supralapsarianism views the end of God’s plan as its logical beginning. God chooses from “neutral” people, some to be glorified and some to be tormented; then he decides how to go about producing that result.

2. Infralapsarianism (or sublapsarianism)

Decree to elect follows the decree to ordain the fall.

Infralapsarian order of decrees:

- 1) Create mankind
- 2) Ordain the fall
- 3) Elect some to life; pass by others
- 4) Redeem the elect
- 5) Send the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to the elect

The infralapsarian view depends more on Scripture. Most passages picture God electing us, considered as sinful and needing salvation.

“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:19)

“So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.” (Rom 11:5-7)

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” (Eph 1:4)

“ . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” (1 Pet 1:2)

Concerning Eph 3:9-11, a passage supposed to support supralapsarianism, the *ἕνεκα* *hina* in v. 10 refers not to God’s reason for creating all things, but to verse 8, Paul’s preaching; see A. A. Hodge *Outlines* 233-34.

“ . . . and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Eph 3:9-11)

This position is that of most Reformed theologians, including the members of the Synod of Dort and the Westminster divines.

“Some . . . have violated all truth, equity, and charity, in wishing to persuade the public that the doctrine of the Reformed Churches concerning predestination, and the points annexed to it, by its own genius and necessary tendency, leads off the minds of men from all piety and religion; . . . that the same doctrine teaches that God, by a mere arbitrary act of his will, without the least respect or view to any sin, has predestinated the greatest part of the world to eternal damnation, and has created them for this very purpose; . . . and many other things of the same kind which the Reformed Churches not only do not acknowledge, but even detest with their whole soul.” (Conclusion of Canons of Dort, para. 2 [Schaff *Creeds* 3:596])

“The rest of mankind [the non-elect], God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.” (WCF 3:7)

Relation of election to redemption

1. The Amyraldian system

The Amyraldian view of “hypothetical redemption” differs from Calvinism in the order of decrees. In order to maintain a universal, unlimited atonement, at least hypothetically in the mind of God, this view changes the order of decrees so that God elects people who are already considered as redeemed. This view occasionally is called sublapsarianism (www.basictheology.com).

Amyraldian order of decrees:

- 1) Create mankind
- 2) Ordain (or permit) the fall
- 3) Send Christ as Redeemer of all

- 4) Elect some
- 5) Send Holy Spirit to apply salvation to the elect

Amyraut developed this system in an attempt to harmonize Reformed and Lutheran doctrine at this point, by allowing sovereign election, while at the same time maintaining a universal atonement (however, hypothetically universal).

2. The Calvinistic system

In contrast to Amyraldianism, Calvinism consistently applies redemption and election to the same people.

Cf. infralapsarian Calvinistic order of decrees:

- 1) Create mankind
- 2) Ordain the fall
- 3) Elect some
- 4) Send Christ to redeem the elect
- 5) Send the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to the elect

The Calvinistic understanding of redemption is better than the Amyraldian for two reasons:

- (1) It is logically better: redemption and election actually imply each other, assuming that Christ's atonement was the only way we could have been saved. Redemption and election belong together, and the decree for each should refer to the same people. Amyraldianism changes the essence of redemption and of the atonement itself, to separate it from election.
- (2) It is Scripturally better: Christ's death appears to have been originally intended to save his people (see above, "Scriptural Support for the Particular Atonement"). Redemption in Scripture nearly always is specifically related to the elect.