

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

1 John 2:1-2 – My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

Last lesson, we took up the second petal, Unconditional Election. That God chose particular individuals to believe and then supplied them with faith, is not stated in the text. The election every text describes is a choice made in Christ, ἐν αὐτῷ *en autō* (Ephesians 1:4): Christ is the Chosen One, the church is chosen in Him, and a person enters that chosen people the only way the letters allow, by hearing the message of truth and believing it (Ephesians 1:13).

We read each text literally in its normal sense, in its grammar, and in its historical and cultural setting, asking first who wrote it, to whom, when, and why. We move from the text toward conclusions and revise the conclusions when the text resists them. We hold ourselves to what the text states and to the author's intent, and we do not grant a doctrine standing because a system requires it "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.6).

The third petal, Limited Atonement, is unlike the two before it. Total Depravity argued from texts about man, and Unconditional Election from texts about God's choice. Limited Atonement rests very little on any text that states it and almost entirely on the other petals. If the dead cannot believe until they are regenerated, and if God alone decides who is regenerated, then Christ can only have died to save the ones God had already chosen, for a death meant to save all would leave part of its purchase unclaimed. So, the doctrine is reasoned down from the system before it is read out of Scripture. That is the first thing to see about it, and it shapes how the lesson proceeds. We clarify what is and is not being asked, state the doctrine in its own words, take up the particular texts they press and the one anchor text that answers them, meet the double payment argument that carries most of the weight, and answer the argument from Christ's intercession. At the end, as before, we do not merely refute; we gather a positive doctrine of the atonement from the whole of Scripture.

I. INTRODUCTION – KEY DISTINCTIONS

Before we read the texts, four distinctions keep the discussion honest. None settles the question; each clears ground the argument will need.

1. Extent and Application. The one question that must not be blurred is whether "for whom Christ died" means "for whom He made provision" or "in whom the provision was applied." These come apart everywhere in Scripture. A provision can be made and not received; a table can be spread and a guest refuse to come. Limited Atonement answers the question by making the two identical: the ones Christ died for are exactly the ones who are saved, no wider. Hold the two apart until the texts join them, and much of the argument loses its grip.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

2. Sufficiency and Efficiency. The old formula runs that the death of Christ is sufficient for all and efficient for the elect. In its plain sense that is something we can affirm: the sacrifice is of infinite worth, able to cover every sinner who ever lived, and it actually saves those who believe. But consistent Calvinism does not rest in the bare formula. It presses further and locates the intent of the atonement in the elect alone, so that Christ did not merely happen to save the elect by a death offered for all, but that He was never sent to atone for anyone else. The sufficiency is then emptied of its offer. Keep the distinction between a sufficiency that is genuinely for all and a sufficiency that is only theoretical, because the argument will trade on the word "sufficient."

3. Provision and Payment. Scripture pictures the cross in more than one way, and the pictures must not be flattened into one. It is a purchase, a redemption, a ransom; it is also a propitiation, a penal satisfaction, a sacrifice offered and a sacrifice received. When the death is treated strictly as a commercial payment, so many sins cancelled by so many coins, the debt is discharged the moment it is paid, whether the debtor knows it or not. When it is treated as penal satisfaction received through union with Christ by faith, the provision stands complete and is applied when it is believed. Which picture governs decides the whole question of extent, and Scripture itself, as we will see, applies the payment when it is received. "Died for" translates ὑπέρ *hyper*, on behalf of, for the benefit of; it names the One for whose sake the death was offered.

4. Limiting Power and Limiting Scope. The doctrine is often pressed with a slogan: "everyone limits the atonement." Either you limit its power, they say, so that Christ died for all but saves no one until faith is added, or you limit its scope, so that Christ died for some and saves all of them. The choice is offered as though there were no third option. There is. The atonement can be unlimited in the provision it makes and particular in the application it secures, so that nothing in its power is lost and nothing in its scope is fenced. That the slogan hides this option is the reason to name it here and hold it open.

II. LIMITED ATONEMENT - DEFINITION

We answer what they teach, not a caricature, and let the confessions and a living teacher speak first. The Canons of Dort fix the two halves of the doctrine.

On its worth (Second Head, Article 3):

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

On its design (Second Head, Article 8):

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

The first article grants a worth sufficient for the whole world; the second withdraws the design to the elect alone, on whom alone the efficacy is meant to fall. The Westminster Confession states the restriction without softening (Chapter 3.6):

...they who are elected... are redeemed by Christ... Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

The load-bearing word is "only." Christ redeemed the elect, and none besides. In the modern pulpit, the same doctrine is taught as "particular redemption" or "definite atonement": the cross did not make salvation merely possible for everyone and actual for no one, but actually secured the salvation of a particular people, so that everyone for whom Christ died will certainly be saved. Sproul and MacArthur both press the point that a death intended to save all, yet leaving some unsaved, would be a defeated atonement, and that the cross cannot fail of its purpose (Ligonier Ministries; Grace to You). John Owen gave the argument its classic form in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, and it is his reasoning, not a bare proof text, on which the doctrine leans. Across the confessions and the living teachers, the claim is one: Christ died to save the elect, and only the elect, and His death infallibly secures everything it was designed to accomplish.

III. LIMITED ATONEMENT – ARGUMENTS AND BIBLICAL RESPONSES

We take the particular texts first, then the anchor that answers them, then the double payment argument that carries the real weight and last the argument from intercession. In each case we grant the doctrine its strongest form before we answer it.

1. The Particular Texts – For the Sheep, For the Church, For Many.

The Reformed Claim. Scripture describes the death of Christ again and again as a death for a definite people. He will "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The good shepherd "lays down His life for the sheep," and to those who will not believe He says, "you are not of My sheep" (John 10:11, 26). Christ "loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). God purchased the church "with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). He is "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), who "bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12). The objects are always particular, never "everyone," and definite objects, they argue, prove a definite extent.

Biblical Response. Christ does have a people, and He certainly lays down His life for them. This is the particular saving love that meets those who are in Christ, ἐν αὐτῷ *en autō*. What none of these texts states is the word the argument depends on. Not one of them says "only." "I lay down My life for the sheep" tells us for whom Christ certainly dies; it does not tell us for whom He does not. "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her" stands inside a marriage: a husband's love for his wife is real and particular, and it proves nothing about whether he loves anyone else. To move from "for the sheep" to "and for none but the sheep" is to add a term the text withholds. The particular texts state the certainty of the provision toward those who are His; they do not draw a fence around it.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

The "many" carries no more weight. When the Servant "bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12), and when Jesus gives His life "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), the "many" stands over against the one who dies, not over against "all." Paul settles the usage in a single passage, where "the many" and "all men" name the same reach: "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men... by the one Man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19). "Many" is the crowd the one death covers, not a number cut short of the world.

2. 1 John 2:2 – The Propitiation for the Whole World.

The Reformed Claim. The verse that most plainly resists the doctrine is met with a reading. "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). "The whole world," they say, does not mean every person; it means the elect scattered through the world, the elect of every nation and not the Jews only, or the world of believers as against the narrow circle John first addressed.

Biblical Response. The structure of the sentence will not bear it. John sets two things in deliberate contrast with the phrase οὐ μόνον... ἀλλὰ καὶ *ou monon... alla kai*, "not only... but also." He says the propitiation is for "our" sins, the sins of the believing community he is writing to, and then he widens the circle on purpose: not for ours only, but also for the whole world. The whole force of the construction is expansion, from the smaller group to the larger. Read "the whole world" as "the elect scattered abroad," and the expansion collapses, for John would be widening from the believers he addresses to the believers everywhere, which is the same group he just named, and the "not only... but also" says nothing. The reading empties the one word the sentence is built to stress.

The word itself resists it. κόσμος *kosmos*, "world," is a word John uses often. In his writings it is regularly the fallen, hostile world that lies under judgment and does not know God, the world into which the light came and which did not receive it, the world by which Christ's own are hated. That is not a cipher for the elect. When John writes that Christ is the propitiation for the whole world, and that God sent the Son "that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:17), and that the Lamb "takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), he uses the term in its normal sense: the whole race of sinners, for whom a real propitiation, ἱλασμός *hilasmos*, has been made.

And 1 John 2:2 does not stand alone. Scripture states the extent of the provision positively and repeatedly, not by inference but in plain words. God "so loved the world" and gave His Son for it (John 3:16). He "desires all men to be saved" and "gave Himself as a ransom for all," in a passage whose whole point is the width of the prayer the church is to pray, for kings and all who are in authority (1 Timothy 2:1–6). Christ tasted death "for everyone," ὑπὲρ πάντος *hyper pantos* (Hebrews 2:9). The grace of God "has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11). "One died for all," and in Christ God was "reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:14, 19). God is "the Savior of all men, especially of believers" (1

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

Timothy 4:10), where the word "especially," marks off a narrower group inside a wider one and so distinguishes in a single verse the provision made for all from the salvation applied to those who believe. The particular texts and these texts are not in conflict. The first name the application that is certain for Christ's own; the second name the provision that is genuinely for the world. Limited Atonement is the demand that the extent shrink to the size of the application.

3. The Double Payment Argument.

The Reformed Claim. The doctrine's real strength is not a proof text but an argument, given its classic form by John Owen. God is just, and He will not exact the penalty for one sin twice over, once from Christ and again from the sinner in hell. From this comes the trilemma. Christ died either for all the sins of all men, or for all the sins of some men, or for some of the sins of all men. If for some of the sins of all men, all are lost, for the unpaid remainder condemns them. If for all the sins of all men, none can be lost, for nothing is left to charge them with, and even the sin of unbelief was paid for and so cannot damn. Since some are lost, the only option left is that Christ died for all the sins of some men, the elect. Bound to this is the axiom of double payment: God cannot in justice punish the sin He has already punished in His Son, so if Christ bore the reprobate's sins, the reprobate cannot justly perish.

Biblical Response. The argument has a premise everyone should grant and a premise the text never supplies. Grant the first: the justice of God is real, and He does not exact the penalty for one sin twice over. The second premise is the hidden one. It assumes that when Christ bore a man's sins, that man's account was discharged then and there, at the cross, automatically. Take that assumption away and the whole structure falls, because Scripture itself refuses to close the account until the sinner believes.

Consider the people to whom Ephesians is written. They are in fact believers and have all the benefits of God. Yet their former condition is stated without softening: they "were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Ephesians 2:3). Before they believed, they stood under wrath on the same footing as everyone else. If bearing sin at the cross automatically barred the wrath of God, no one for whom Christ died could ever be a child of wrath, not for a single day. The penalty Christ bore was therefore not yet applied to them until they believed.

Justification happens at a point in time, and that point is faith. It is "by faith" that a man has peace with God (Romans 5:1), and the believer is one "having now been justified by His blood" (Romans 5:9). The one who has not believed "has been judged already," and "the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:18, 36). This is said of the very persons the gospel calls to believe. Their sin stands charged against them until faith, whatever provision has been made for it.

Their own confession dates it the same way. The Westminster standard does not locate the elect's justification at the cross. It grants that God decreed to justify the elect, and that Christ

THE GOSPEL LESSON 16

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 4

TULIP – Limited Atonement

in the fullness of time died for their sins, and then insists that they are still not justified until the Spirit in due time actually applies Christ to them (WCF 11.4). A gap of time is set, by the confession's own words, between Christ dying for a man's sins and that man being justified, and in that gap the elect person's sins have been borne by Christ and are still charged to the sinner. That gap undoes the double payment argument. If the sins Christ bore can remain charged to an elect man until he believes, then bearing a man's sins does not, by itself, bar his condemnation. The one load-bearing premise is denied by the confession that most wants the conclusion.

Underneath, the argument forces a single choice: either the cross saves automatically everyone it touches, or it touches only those it saves. Scripture teaches neither. The cross is a provision of infinite sufficiency made for the world, applied to those in Christ, and left unreceived by those who do not believe.

4. The Intercession Argument.

The Reformed Claim. A further argument joins the atonement to Christ's priestly prayer. In the upper room He says, "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me" (John 17:9), and Paul names the risen Christ as the one who "intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34). The priest who offers the sacrifice and the priest who pleads it are one, they argue, and He pleads only for those the Father gave Him; so, the sacrifice itself must have been offered for them alone.

Biblical Response. The prayer of John 17 is a prayer for the men then given, the eleven He is about to leave in the world. It is not a decree fixing the boundaries of the atonement, and the chapter itself will not let it be read as one. A few sentences later the same prayer reaches past them: "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20), and its aim is stated as "that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21). Nowhere does the text say that the reach of the sacrifice and the reach of a given prayer are one measure. The claim that they must be is supplied by the system, not by John.

IV. BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

Christ offered one sacrifice for sins of infinite worth, a real provision made for the whole world and sincerely offered to every man; and that provision becomes salvation at the moment of faith, applied with certainty to everyone who is in Christ, the Chosen One, and left unreceived by those who will not believe.

From the beginning the sacrifice is a lamb, one life given for another: the ram in Isaac's place (Genesis 22:13), the Passover lamb whose blood is applied to the house that will be spared (Exodus 12:7, 13), the Servant who "bore the sin of many" and was "pierced through for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5, 12). John points to the fulfillment and states its reach in one breath: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).