

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Thinking and Speaking Biblically About the Death of Christ, Part 1:

Thinking Biblically

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The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century rightly claimed that justification comes through faith *alone*, in the person and work of Christ alone—not through works of righteousness done by the individual. Their claim, however, was not well received by the professing Christian leaders of the time, men who held that in addition to faith, there remained other requirements for final salvation. They held that various forms of religious activity, such as baptism, confession, participation in the mass, etc., were also necessary for entrance into heaven. They even taught that individual suffering for sins, after death in a place called “Purgatory,” would be necessary for most people. In short, they held that Christ’s death on the cross was not enough, in and of itself, to finally secure salvation for anyone. This deception prevails throughout much of the world today in the official doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

The serious errors in Roman Catholic theology stem from Rome’s commitment to the idea that the Bible is not the final authority. Roman Catholic doctrines and practices are not determined by the principle of “sola Scriptura” (Scripture alone). In fact, Rome argues doggedly *against* this principle. Instead, the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church are the product of Rome’s official and “infallible” interpretations of the Bible, *plus* the “infallible” declarations of the Pope, *plus* established church traditions. Despite the fact that these “infallible” determiners of truth have directly contradicted both the Bible and each other many times over the years, Rome continues to insist upon their reliability.

As one example of the way the official doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church contradict Scripture, consider the mass. Participation in the mass (believed to be an actual re-sacrificing of Christ) is thought to be essential for entrance into heaven and is repeated many thousands of times each day around the world. But in the doctrine of the mass, the sufficiency of Christ’s death as the single and perfectly effective atoning sacrifice for sin, as the Bible describes His finished work, is clearly denied (see John 19:30; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12, 28; 10:10, 12, 14).

As serious as Rome’s errors are, it is not only in Roman Catholic doctrine where the merits of Christ’s death are called into question. In many churches where the Bible is said to be the final authority, and where salvation is rightly said to be “by grace alone through faith alone,” both the *sufficiency* (having value equal to or greater than what is necessary)

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and *efficacy* (the actual and full accomplishment of the desired effect) of Christ's death are called into question in a different way.

Before entering into this discussion about the purpose, sufficiency, and efficacy of Christ's death, I must affirm the critical role of faith in salvation. Without this clarification, what I will say in the next few pages might be taken by some as a denial that faith is the essential response to God and His Word for those who are being saved. But faith *is* essential. It is the instrumental means God has ordained and employed for the application of justification to His elect.

Saving faith is rightly understood as both a divine gift *and* the activity of the human will. On the one hand, faith is God's gracious gift to His people. It is His means of applying the salvation He ordained for them in election and purchased for them in Christ. Apart from God's saving grace in the regeneration of His elect, they would remain spiritually dead, in love with their sin, and *unable* to believe, just as the rest of humanity (see John 3:3; 6:44, 65; Romans 8:6-7; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1-3; etc). But on the other hand, even though faith is the fruit of God's saving work, *God does not do the believing Himself*. He ordains, grants, sustains, and completes the salvation of His elect through faith (see 1 Peter 1:5). But from the perspective of the individual, each human being must personally *believe* if he is to be saved (see Romans 4:3; John 3:16; 5:24; Acts 4:12; 16:30-31). Far from denying this, I strongly affirm it to be true.

The biblical doctrines of faith and grace are inextricably linked. Faith can only be understood according to its biblical role when God's grace is understood in its fullness. When Paul told the Ephesians that they had been saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:5, 8), he was not telling them that God's grace was like a life-preserver offered to a drowning man. In other words, he was not describing grace as something that is merely offered to a world full of perishing people. He was not saying that the Ephesians had essentially saved themselves by choosing to grab hold of God's offered grace while everyone else refused. In fact, any definition of grace that does not portray God as saving whom He will save, apart from being motivated or assisted by any human decision or effort, denies the essential character of grace. Let me explain further:

When a person believes and is justified, *it is not his faith that saves him*. Faith itself cannot appease God's wrath. Only the blood of the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ, can accomplish that. Nor does a person's faith *prompt* God to save him. In His own timing, God grants to each one of His elect the ability and inclination to believe precisely because He has chosen to save them (see Philippians 1:29; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). As the title of John Murray's excellent and timeless theological work affirms, redemption is "accomplished and

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applied” by God.¹ And as Paul said in Romans 9:16, “it does not depend on the man who wills [meaning the one who desires to be a part of the group that God saves] or the man who runs [meaning the one who exerts religious effort], but on God who has mercy” (Scripture references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.).

Grace is rightly understood as God’s spontaneous and unmerited favor. In other words, nothing human prompts grace. Nothing human merits grace. Nothing human activates grace or makes it effective. And nothing human can ultimately resist grace. Grace is not an offer of salvation. Grace is salvation—determined, accomplished, and applied by God. So when Paul wrote, “By grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8), he was reminding the Ephesian Christians that God had determined to save them through election, accomplished their salvation through Christ, and applied salvation to them through the work of the Holy Spirit (by convicting them of sin, causing their regeneration, drawing them to repentance and faith, indwelling them, causing them to persevere, etc.). Their faith was not the reason God saved them. It was His way of applying the salvation He had graciously determined and accomplished for them.

Interestingly, mistaken views of both grace and faith creep in when well-meaning people promote an expanded view of God’s saving intent in sending Christ. The Bible teaches that Jesus came with the specific intent to save His people (see Matthew 1:21). It was the sins of His people that He bore on the cross (see Acts 20:28; Romans 8:32-33; Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 2:24). This biblical truth has been labeled as “limited atonement” (also called “definite atonement” or “particular redemption”). In contrast to the biblical view, however, many Christians believe and teach that Jesus came with the universal purpose of trying to save everyone. Known as “universal atonement,” this is the view that when Jesus died, He paid the debt for all the sins of all men in His attempt to save every one of them. (Note: “Universal atonement” should not be confused with “universalism,” the heretical belief that no one will perish, but that all men will actually be saved.)

Many advocates of universal atonement vigorously insist that the doctrine of limited atonement degrades the character of God and devalues Christ’s saving work on the cross. Ironically, however, the degrading and devaluing is done (unintentionally, of course) by those who see God’s saving intent and the extent of Christ’s atonement as universal. In John Murray’s *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (the book I mentioned earlier), Murray offers the following summation of what I believe to be the biggest problem with the doctrine of universal atonement as well as an appropriate response to those who would react in horror at the thought of anyone “limiting” the atonement:

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1955).

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It is very easy to raise prejudice against a doctrine by attaching to it an opprobrious and misunderstood epithet. Whether the expression “limited atonement” is good or not we must reckon with the fact that unless we believe in the final restoration of all men [referring to the false doctrine of universalism] we cannot have an unlimited atonement. If we universalize the extent we limit the efficacy. If some of those for whom atonement was made and redemption wrought perish eternally, then the atonement itself is not efficacious. It is this alternative that the proponents of universal atonement must face. They have a “limited” atonement, and limited in respect of that which impinges upon its essential character. We shall have none of it. The doctrine of “limited atonement” which we maintain, is the doctrine which limits the atonement to those who are heirs of eternal life, the elect. That limitation insures its efficacy and conserves its essential character as efficient and effective redemption²(emphasis and bracketed comment mine).

Those who believe in a universal atonement must admit that according to their belief, Jesus Christ did not actually save *anybody* when He died. In other words, He did not die as a *substitute* for His people. He merely offered Himself as a *potential* substitute for all men, and in the process, made all men *saveable*. Though widely held in evangelical churches, this doctrine bears a striking resemblance to Roman Catholic theology in that it implies that Christ’s death, in and of itself, was neither sufficient nor efficacious apart from human effort or response. Like Roman Catholic theologians, universal atonement advocates must admit that according to their view, God did all He could (or all He was willing to do) through Christ, but He left the rest up to men.

Evangelical proponents of universal atonement will deny that their doctrine devalues Christ’s sacrifice in any way. But such devaluation can be easily demonstrated by asking a short series of questions:

I would ask, “Did Jesus bear all the sins of all men on the cross?” If your answer is, “Yes,” then I would ask, “Are all men saved?” If you believe the Bible, you would certainly admit that they are not. If you are a proponent of the doctrine of universal atonement, you might even answer, “No, many people for whom Christ died are now suffering in hell.” I would continue by asking, “What would have been necessary, *in addition to Christ’s death on the cross*, to actually save those who are now in hell—people who Christ

² Ibid., 64.

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supposedly *wanted* to save and *did all He could* to save—people whom He made *savable* by His death, yet who nevertheless perished?" Your answer would undoubtedly be, "Faith."

According to this way of thinking, Christ's death, though intended for the salvation of these people, and potentially saving for them, actually accomplished nothing on their behalf. Their exercise of faith would have been necessary *in addition* to Christ's death. Although Jesus wanted to save them and died trying to save them, He did not save them. And He did not save them only because He *could not* save them apart from their cooperation.

The doctrine of universal atonement, advanced by many well-meaning people, renders Christ's atoning sacrifice *incomplete* and *ineffective* apart from the cooperation of the human will. Though popular today, this doctrine was not acceptable to many of the greatest evangelists, missionaries, and theologians in the history of the church. For example, consider Charles Spurgeon's comments about the doctrine of universal atonement. It is noteworthy, I might add, that these words were preached publicly, to Christians as well as unconverted people. Spurgeon declared:

*[Many theologians] believe in an atonement made for everybody; but then their atonement is just this: They believe that Judas was atoned for just as much as Peter; they believe that the damned in hell were as much an object of Jesus Christ's satisfaction as the saved in heaven; and though they do not say it in proper words, yet they must mean it, for it is a fair inference, that in the case of multitudes, Christ died in vain. For He died for them all, they say, and yet so ineffectual was His dying for them, that though He died for them they are damned afterward. Now, such an atonement I despise—I reject it. ... I would rather believe a limited atonement that is efficacious for all men for whom it was intended, than a universal atonement that is not efficacious for anybody, except the will of men be joined with it."*³

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³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons*, Vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 218-219.