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# ‘FOR ALL, FOR ALL MY SAVIOUR DIED’

I. Howard Marshall

The most substantial examination of some of the theological issues raised by the work of Clark Pinnock to come from an author in the UK is the detailed critique of his understanding of the scope of salvation by Daniel Strange.[1] Pinnock holds that God’s saving purpose is universal in the sense that the offer of salvation is open in principle to all humankind. Strange is concerned primarily with Pinnock’s further proposal that the reception of salvation may be a possibility for people who have not heard of Christ.[2] Basically, Strange thinks that Pinnock is directed towards his inclusivism because he is driven by a ‘universality axiom consisting of God’s universal salvific will, Christ’s universal provision in the atonement, universal accessibility to salvation, and the *Heilsoptimismus*’.[3] If this axiom is invalid, the tension that creates Pinnock’s inclusivism is eliminated. Therefore, Strange sees it as his task to question the validity of this axiom.

In doing so he upholds the concept of a limited atonement, according to which God’s saving purpose was never intended to encompass more than a limited, pre-chosen group of people; Christ died only for the sins of this group (the so-called ‘elect’)[4] and not for all

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1D. Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised. An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

2To eliminate all possible misunderstanding, I emphasise that the openness of God’s offer of salvation to all is *not* the same thing as the view that God will ultimately save all people, and it does not even imply it, although, of course, it is a necessary presupposition for those who take such a position. Pinnock is not a universalist. Nor is the writer of this paper. See R. Parry and C. Partridge (ed.), *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), ch. 4. To avoid confusion in what follows I use Strange’s own term ‘universality’ to refer the doctrine of provision of salvation for all people in the atonement wrought by Christ.

3*Op. cit.*, 265.

4I shall use the term ‘pre-chosen’ to refer to the hypothetical limited group whom God purposes to save according to the defenders of limited atonement. I do so in order to avoid any possible misuse of the biblical term ‘elect’ in this sense.

mankind, and his act of penal substitution must be understood as efficacious for those for whom he was a substitute, so that God's purpose cannot be pronounced a failure in respect of anybody for whom Christ died.

Strange recognises that he is also criticising the position of evangelicals who would not necessarily share the inclusivist position. He attacks not only the inclusivism of Pinnock but also the doctrine of the universal availability of salvation that is held both by Pinnock and also by many other scholars, evangelists and Christians generally. His critique, therefore, is explicitly directed not just against Pinnock but against all non-Reformed evangelicalism. By this latter term he refers specifically to those who do not accept the kind of theology contained in the Five Points of Dort with their specific reference to limited atonement. It is the universality of salvation which is at issue.[5] In what follows I shall focus on this specific point.[6]

## A hermeneutical circle

Strange holds that the interpretation of certain key passages of Scripture is dependent upon the theological framework that is basic for the interpreter. Early on in the book he claims that the interpretation of such a text as 1 Timothy 2:4 'depends on, and is itself evidence of, whether one holds to the doctrine of unlimited atonement (God desires to save all men) or limited atonement (God desires to save only the elect)'.[7] When he takes up this specific topic in ch. 9, the biblical material is briefly discussed in a single footnote. Here he notes that expressions like 'all men' could refer to 'all without exception' or 'all without distinction',

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5*Op. cit.*, 139f. Strange's position also includes a commitment to biblical infallibility, and this is said to presuppose a view of divine sovereignty and human freedom that would not be accepted by Pinnock or presumably by non-Reformed evangelicals. It must suffice to say that, however they may explain it, non-Reformed evangelicals are equally committed to the evangelical position on Scripture.

6The essay is thus relevant to the views of a wider group of evangelicals than simply Clark Pinnock. Nevertheless, I hope that its effect may be to win a more sympathetic hearing for a theologian who has publicly stated that a book of mine was one of the influences that led him to question some aspects of the classical Reformed position and attempt to frame a doctrine of God that does better justice to the biblical evidence.

and cites D.A.Carson in favour of the view that in Titus 2:11 the grace of God has appeared to all men, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, without distinction (cf. Tit. 2:10), and not necessarily to all without exception. Similarly, passages referring to 'the world' 'do not mean every individual, rather they are referring to the cosmic side of the atonement and the renewal of creation'.[8]

Such a brief dismissal of the biblical evidence is quite inappropriate in an evangelical critique of a theological position.[9] It must be properly examined, or else the critic will fall under the suspicion of ignoring the Bible in the interests of a pre-conceived theological position. Strange's position is that the texts are ambiguous, and the interpretation given of them will depend on the interpreter's theological framework.

It may be, however, that the exegesis is reasonably firmly based and that one side or the other is avoiding the plain meaning and the general purport of Scripture.

The issue of principle here is important. There is a general recognition among evangelical Christians that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. Not only is Scripture itself the primary context within which individual texts must be understood, but texts are to be understood within the broad theological framework that comes out of Scripture as a whole. A hermeneutical circle exists, in which the meaning of the whole is dependent upon the meaning of the parts, and the meaning of the parts is to be ascertained in the light of the whole. Strange's point is that, if texts are ambiguous, then the meaning that is agreeable to what the interpreter takes to be the general theological framework deduced from Scripture as a whole is to be preferred. Thus the person who finds that there is a series of texts which compel the Calvinist interpretation that Christ died for a limited number of people will understand ambiguous texts accordingly; texts which appear to support universal atonement must be given an interpretation which is congenial to this theological framework. They are

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7*Op. cit.*, 29 n. 83.

8*Op. cit.*, 279 n.33.

9In his defence it must be said that he is entitled to forego the exegesis in a book that is dealing with many other issues, since he can reasonably plead that others have done the groundwork.

assumed to be ‘ambiguous’, and the deciding factor in interpretation is the theological framework adopted by the interpreter.

But this is an over-simplification. If there are texts which appear not to fit in to the ‘broad theological framework’ of Scripture, they may be dealt with in different ways. (a). The interpreter may admit that there appears to be no way of reconciling them with the framework as s/he understands it, but since the framework is thought to be absolutely certain, then the problem texts are put on one side and effectively ignored until a fresh interpretation of them can be found. (b). The texts may be given an interpretation which, it is fair to say, would not be thought plausible if one was not trying to fit them into this general scheme of understanding, but is perhaps just remotely possible. (c). The texts may be recognised to be a part of Scripture that must contribute to the establishment of the theological framework, and the interpreter may therefore be led to reconsider what the framework really is.[10] (d). The interpreter may be unable to produce a harmonistic reading of the evidence and is forced to admit that there are tensions in Scripture which must be allowed to remain; to that extent the interpretation of Scripture must remain somewhat open-ended.[11]

Strange fails to ask: (a). Are the texts that are cited in favour of the non-Calvinist view really ambiguous, or might some of them be much more plausibly interpreted otherwise? (b). Are the texts cited in favour of limited atonement (and related theologoumena) unambiguous in what they imply or might it be that they are ambiguous or indeed better interpreted in another way?

## The case for limited atonement

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10There may be cases where there is no clear evidence that a specific writer or document in Scripture works within a postulated theological framework based on other scriptural writings. In such a case it is open to question whether it is methodologically correct to assume this framework for this writer. Thus the kind of framework that might be deduced from the Gospel of John might not fit the Synoptic Gospels. In such cases harmony must be sought at a deeper level of understanding.

11The same strategies arise in relating the actual statements in the Bible to a doctrine of infallibility.

For the sake of simplicity I shall focus on the statement of the arguments for limited atonement given by L. Berkhof.[12] His thesis is that 'the atonement not only made eternal salvation possible for the sinner, but actually secured it'. He stresses that the exact point at issue is not whether Christ's work was sufficient for all people, which it is agreed to be, but rather that 'Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only'. He offers the following two-part 'proof'.

First, there are supporting statements.

(a). God's designs are always efficacious and cannot be frustrated. If Christ did die for all and bear their sins, then this would issue in universalism (which for Berkhof is clearly contradicted in Scripture).

(b). In fact Scripture limits those for whom Christ died to 'his sheep', 'his church', 'his people', 'the elect'.

(c). A distinction between the universality of the atonement and the limitation in its application is not possible because the purchase and the actual bestowal of salvation are inseparably connected. Christ's sacrifice and continuing intercession are two aspects of one work. But since his intercession is only for 'those whom thou hast given me' (John 17:9), so also is his sacrifice.

(d). Even if salvation is said to be conditional on human repentance and faith, these things are in fact God's own gift and do not depend on the will of man.

Second, the objections to limited atonement can all be refuted:

(a). Christ is said to have died for the world. But the term 'world' does not always include all people.

(b). Similarly, references to Christ dying for all men should not be interpreted in a universal sense. Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:14; and Hebrews 2:9f.

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12L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 392-9; see also W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 594-603; P. Helm, 'The logic of Limited Atonement', *SBET* 3:2 (Autumn 1985), 47-54; R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 225-47.

refer only to those who are in Christ. Titus 2:11 refers to all classes of men. 1 Timothy 2:4-6; Hebrews 2:9 and 2 Peter 3:9 all refer to the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles (but not all of each category!).

(c). Some passages are said to imply the loss of those for whom Christ died. However, Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11 speak of a natural result which, however, God will not allow to happen. 2 Peter 2:1 and Hebrews 10:29 are taken to refer to nominal believers.

(d). The counter-argument that a *bona fide* offer of the gospel to those whom God does not intend to save anyway is not possible can be refuted.

## God as the universal Saviour

'Universal statements' are particularly conspicuous in the Pastoral Epistles. These letters form a group[13] and therefore it is fair to claim that together they form the immediate context within which their individual statements must be understood. Let me set out my conclusions based on detailed discussion elsewhere, but taking into account any significant subsequent contributions to the exegesis of the texts.[14] There are three 'universal' passages:[15]

> This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants *all* people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who

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13For the purposes of this article it is immaterial whether they come directly from Paul or are the work of another writer mediating Paul's legacy to a subsequent audience; I shall refer to their author by the name by which he refers to himself as 'Paul'.

14Here I summarise material previously published: see I.H. Marshall, 'Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles', in C.H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, The Will of Man. A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 51-69; I.H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999). See now G. Wieland, 'The Theology of Salvation in the Pastoral Epistles', unpublished Ph.D thesis, Aberdeen, 2003.

15Translations are from TNIV which avoids gender-specific language. I assume that nobody will dispute that both men and women are included in these and other texts.

gave himself as a ransom for *all* people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time (1 Tim. 2:3-6).

We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of *all* people, and especially of those who believe (1 Tim. 4:10).

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to *all* people (Tit. 2:11).

(1). In every case the terms 'save', 'Saviour' and 'salvation' are used in their normal theological sense to refer to spiritual salvation. This is so even in 1 Timothy 4:10, where some scholars have defended the view that God is here the general benefactor of all people in this world and especially so of believers (presumably in that he confers eternal life upon them), and that what we have here is a warning against venerating human beings as gods and saviours.[16] This view can be confidently rejected since it imports a sense of 'saviour' which is unlikely after the clear previous use in 1 Timothy 2:3-6 and indeed throughout the Pastoral Epistles;[17] it also requires that the term be understood very awkwardly in two different senses with the two nouns that are dependent upon it, in a this-worldly non-spiritual sense with the former and in an eschatological spiritual sense with the latter. While a contrast with the use of the title for earthly rulers may be implicit, nothing suggests that here the author is suggesting that the saving activity of his God is of the same kind as theirs.

2. When Paul says that God 'wants' all to be saved (*thelō*; 1 Tim. 2:4), this verb cannot be given a weak sense, such that this is merely what God would wish or desire; God

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16W.D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 256f., following S.M. Baugh, '"Savior of All People": 1 Tim. 4:10 in Context', *WJT* 54 (1992), 331-40.

17Cf. 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 1:3, 4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6.

here wills or wishes the salvation of all, just as elsewhere in these letters he is said to be the saviour of all.[18]

We may conveniently include here the statement in 2 Peter that God does not want anyone to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). The context is the judgment and destruction of the ungodly, which God does not want anyone to undergo, although it is recognised that some will not repent. According to M. Green, whereas Calvin posits '"a secret decree of God by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin", the plain meaning is that, although God wants all men to be saved, and although He has made provision for all to be accepted, some will exercise their God-given free will to exclude God'.[19] R. Bauckham holds that the reference here is to Christians, but that 'the *principle*... can be validly extended... to God's desire that all people should repent'.[20] It is more likely that the writer is applying to his readers a broader principle that God wants all people to repent (cf. Acts 17:30) and this applies in particular to the readers. The alternative is to follow Calvin and postulate a 'secret decree' that cuts across this desire, but this is a highly questionable procedure: how does Calvin, or anybody else, know what God has secretly decreed, and what grounds are there for thinking that he has a secret will that over-rules what he has openly declared?

3. 'All' cannot be scaled down to refer simply to 'many'. I mention this unlikely interpretation because 1 Timothy 2:6 is based on Mark 10:45 where the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for 'many', and somebody interested in defending a limited saving purpose by God might be tempted to argue that Mark 10:45 has priority in interpretation. But this latter passage in turn is based on Isaiah 53:11-12, and here it is clear that the use of

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18So rightly Mounce, *op. cit.*, 85f., who recognises that the Calvinist interpretation cannot be gained here by mistranslation of the verb.

19M. Green, *2 Peter and Jude* (London: Tyndale, 1968), 136.

20R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983), 314; cf. 321. The narrower context is that 'the Lord is patient with you', *sc*. the readers, and therefore there is a particular warning to any within the congregation who have been misled by the false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:9) and an indication of the Lord's concern lest any of them should perish (2 Pet. 3:11-18). But the wider context includes an extended reference to the scoffers and the ungodly (2 Pet. 3:3-7), and there is no suggestion that they, or anybody else, are excluded from the Lord's concern. I am tempted, therefore, to argue that the text itself is not limited to 'Christians'; but in any case the principle is of broad application.

'many' is not to make a contrast with 'all' but rather with 'one'; the point is that the action of a single person, the Servant of Yahweh, is effective for a vastly greater number. There are no grounds for thinking that 'all' means less than 'all'. This point is not unimportant, because if 1 Timothy 2:6 is to be understood against this background, then the grounds adduced by some scholars for taking it to mean 'all kinds of' people become all the less persuasive.[21]

4. 'All' cannot be understood to refer (only) to people who have already become believers. This would make nonsense of the texts which are concerned with people who need to believe in order to be saved.

5. The term 'all' is not to be understood as 'all [without exception] of the limited group whom God purposes to save', i.e. 'all the pre-chosen'. Nothing in the immediate contexts suggests such a limitation, and I am not aware of any commentator who has adopted it.

6. The term 'all' is not be narrowed down to mean 'all kinds of' or (as Strange puts it) 'all without distinction'. On this view the texts are affirming that God's offer of salvation is not confined to Jews (and therefore includes Gentiles as well; 1 Tim. 2:3-6; 4:10) or not confined to free people (and therefore includes slaves; Tit. 2:11). This is the only plausible alternative understanding of the term.[22] The presence of Judaising tendencies in the false teaching that is being opposed in the Pastoral Epistles may well have led to a stress on the fact that the gospel was for Gentiles, and not simply for Jews; the term 'all' would make this point. Recognition of this fact enables the defender of limited atonement to say that God wants to save people from all nations and classes in society but the text does not, or need not, imply that he wants to save all people within any of these categories.[23]

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21In Rom. 5:12-19 'all' and 'many' alternate without any distinction in reference.

22More precisely, the 'Jews and Gentiles' interpretation is applied in 1 Tim. 2 and the 'free people and slaves' interpretation in Tit. 2.

23It would be casuistic to argue that, since human individuals are each unique in some kind of way, 'all kinds of people' is ultimately synonymous with 'all people'. Such logic-chopping is inappropriate, but it does indicate that we should beware of rigid distinctions.

Paul's intention may be to include this point, but it does not justify the limited interpretation. In 1 Timothy 2:1-7, v. 1 calls for prayer for all people, including those in authority. Now in v. 2 'all in authority' surely means 'all without exception' rather than 'all the different types of people in authority', since no reason can be offered for limiting the prayers to some people in authority and not to others, especially when no criterion is given as to which rulers are or are not to be prayed for. But, if so, v. 1 cannot be limited to prayer for all types of people, especially when there is no criterion for knowing who is included or excluded. Moreover, at this point there is nothing to indicate that there is any special emphasis on Gentiles as well as Jews, although the persons in authority are more likely to be Gentiles. This makes it less than likely that v. 4, which gives the theological backup for the preceding command, is to be taken any less broadly. It would in fact be very odd, if not grotesque, if the statement had to be paraphrased to mean that God wants to save people from all categories but only some of them. Could any first-century reader in Ephesus have tumbled on this interpretation of what Paul really meant? And again in v. 6 it is hard to see any reason for such a translation, even if part of the intention is to ensure that Gentiles are included alongside Jews. Can we really imagine that, if a messenger brought the letter to its destination with instructions to clarify any difficult points (cf. Acts 15:27; Col. 4:7f.), he paused at this point and said, 'But of course you know that God does not want to save every individual person; it's only some Jews and some Gentiles that he wants to save'? It would be rhetorically disastrous to explain that God's grace is limited to 'some people from all categories, but not them all'.

There is the further problem that, if salvation is limited to a preordained group, then there is no point in praying for the non-ordained/reprobate, since nothing can change their fate. True, we do not know who are reprobate and who are in line for salvation, and therefore we don't know whose salvation to pray for, but we are going to have to pray some strange prayers, 'O God, I pray for the salvation of my brother-in-law, if he is one you have chosen for salvation, but if he is not, then I recognise that my prayer is not going to make any

difference.' Does anybody, even an upholder of limited atonement, really pray like that?[24] This view is implausible in 1 Timothy 2 because it would carry the implication that in v. 1 prayers are to be offered in general terms for both Jews and Gentiles, but only for some of them, namely those whom God has chosen to save and those rulers who are responsible for curbing persecution of believers.

To gain the 'limited' interpretation of Titus 2:10 it has to be argued that it refers to the different types of people mentioned in the earlier part of the chapter (older people and younger people, both male and female, and slaves), by providing a motivation for the Christian conduct that is expected of all of them. But why should this have needed stress? Did anybody think that any of these groups were possibily not included in God's saving plan? Rather, the point of vs. 11-14 is to indicate how the imperatives regarding Christian conduct are based on the purpose behind God's saving plan and work. There is a use of traditional language in this section, again based ultimately on Mark 10:45, and the universal reference may well have been associated with it.[25]

In 1 Timothy 4:10 there is no reason to think that the Jew/Gentile distinction is within the writer's horizon. There is rather a stress on the universality of God's function as Saviour, which then has to be qualified by recognising that the condition of faith has to be attached to it. The added phrase is best translated as 'namely, believers' and understood as making it plain that what is potential or available for all, actually becomes a reality for believers. To say that God is the Saviour of [some, namely those whom he has already chosen out of ] all kinds of people [e.g. Jews, Arabs, slaves, children], and then to further qualify it by limiting it to believers is not convincing.[26]

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24This would suggest that a belief in limited atonement does not in fact affect the evangelistic and prayerful activity of those who in theory hold to it.

25The verse does not say that God's grace has appeared to all people, but that God's grace that is salvific for all people, has appeared. See, more fully, W. L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 337f.

26Significantly, Mounce rejects such explanations in favour of the view that 'Saviour' is meant in a non-spiritual sense. See n. 18 above.

The purpose and effect of the phraseology in the Pastoral Epistles is not just to emphasise that Gentiles are included alongside Jews, but to magnify the grace of God who is concerned for all people and not just for some people. On the limited interpretation we have to do one or other of the following. We have to assume that readers would get the meaning 'God wants to save all kinds of people, but of course it must be understood that he doesn't actually want to save everybody. It's not just that there may/will be people who reject salvation, but that he wants to save only some rather than all'. Or we have to assume that this is the secret, unspoken thought of the writer. Such a limitation goes clean against the force of the actual statements and ends up by minimising the grace of God rather than maximising it.

But again we have to ask whether there is anything in the broader context that suggests such a limitation. Does anything in the letters imply a purpose that is less than universal, and does it do so in a way that would dispose the readers to take the universal texts in a different sense than the obvious one?

The indications are clear that the writer did not expect everybody to be saved, unless they repented and believed (1 Tim. 1:19f.; 4:1; 5:8; 6:10, 21; 2 Tim. 2:17-19, 25-6; Tit. 1:16). But that does not imply that God does not want everybody to be saved.

There are, however, a couple of references to the 'elect' that might be thought to suggest such a limitation. Elsewhere I have shown that the normal use of this term in the New Testament is to refer to those who have actually become God's people rather than to people who have been chosen beforehand for salvation but have not yet been called and made their response.[27] It is in effect a self-reference by people who know that they now belong to God's chosen people. What of the two references in the Pastoral Epistles?[28]

In Titus 1:1 Paul's apostleship is related to the faith of God's elect. This could refer to the purpose of bringing those who are as yet unsaved to faith, or to the purpose of

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27I. H. Marshall, 'Election and Calling to Salvation in 1 and 2 Thessalonians', in R. F. Collins (ed.), *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 259-76.

281 Tim. 5:21 is irrelevant.

strengthening the faith of those who already believe, or the whole phrase may mean that Paul's apostleship is exercised in accordance with the faith held by God's people. In view of the uniform usage elsewhere of 'elect' to mean the people of God, i.e. Israel, Mounce agrees that it refers to 'Christians', 'those who have faith'.[29]

In 2 Timothy 2:10 Paul says that he endures everything because of the elect so that they may partake in salvation in Jesus Christ with eternal glory. This could presumably refer to Paul's missionary efforts to ensure that those destined for salvation (but not yet believers) become believers and persevere to entry to God's heavenly kingdom and glory.[30] More probably it refers to his efforts so that those who are now God's people persevere to the end. The immediate context with its promises and warnings in vv. 11-13 strongly favours this interpretation.[31] Since elsewhere in the New Testament, the term 'elect' never refers to potential people of God rather than actual people of God, and there is no reason here to take it in any other than its normal sense, we should do so here.

Needless to say, saving is the work of God our Saviour, and therefore we are not surprised by statements to this effect.[32] The proposition that salvation is bestowed by God (cf. Tit. 3:5) is not a matter of dispute; but it is not the same thing as a statement of limited atonement (unless it is insisted that the atonement and conversion are welded together as components of one action of God). The fact that faith and repentance may be thought of as gifts bestowed by God (1 Tim. 1:14) is of course no proof of limited atonement.

There is one reference to the premundane plan of God to save people not according to works but according to his purpose and grace given to us in Christ before eternal ages (2 Tim.

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29*Op. cit.*, 379. G. W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 282f., says that it refers to 'Christians' and then cites BAGD: 'those whom God has chosen... and drawn to himself', but seems to take this to include people who have yet to turn to God in faith. The evidence that he cites does not support this latter interpretation.

30So Knight, *op. cit.*, 399, interpreting in the light of Acts 13:48; 18:9f.

31Mounce, *op. cit.*, 514f., inclines to the same interpretation.

32Texts that refer to God's care of those who are saved to keep them from falling away (2 Tim. 2:19) do not imply any limitation of his saving purpose.

1:9). Here the ‘us’ are the people who actually form the church, ‘us believers’. How we can be said to have received grace before we existed is mysterious. We are to envisage a saving purpose of God that was formed at that point and was so certain to be fulfilled that it could be said to be given at that time. The question that then arises is whether grace was given to specific individuals at that time and only to a limited number. Certainly it would seem that God could be affirming his intention to give grace to ‘us’, the human race in need of salvation, at that time and then actualising it at a later date. But does that imply that he gave it only to a limited group and gave it in a way that was bound to lead to the salvation of all of them? This does not follow, unless one brings in the further axiom that whatever God desires to do he will necessarily accomplish.

Thus there is nothing in the Pastoral Epistles themselves to suggest a theological framework that requires us to understand their teaching in terms of limited atonement. In fact, imposition of this scheme leads to forced and improbable understandings of key texts. But if this is so, may we not have to recognise a different theological framework for the understanding of texts about the atonement?

## For whom did Christ die?

Statements about Christ dying (or equivalent terms) for certain people or groups of people, mostly employing the preposition *hyper*, are common in the New Testament. The majority of these are stated in terms of those who have been saved and form part of God’s people. There is one example of Paul saying that Christ died for him personally (Gal. 2:20); any individual believer is one for whom Christ died (Rom. 14:15). More often it is said that Christ died ‘for us’ (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:2; 1 Thes. 5:10; Tit. 2:14; 1 John 3:16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3 and Gal. 1:4 [our sins]), or for ‘all of us’ (Rom. 8:32). In a number of places Jesus says that he dies for ‘you’, meaning his disciples (Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:24) or a writer

may tell his Christian audience that Christ died for them (1 Pet. 2:21; cf. by implication 1 Cor. 1:13).

Other texts state that Christ died for 'the church' (Eph. 5:25) or for 'the sheep' (John 10:15) or for the people or nation (John 11:50, 51, 52; 18:14; cf. Heb. 2:17). In the latter group of texts there is a *double entendre* in that Caiaphas is thinking of Jesus being put to death for the good of the Jewish people as a whole (to avoid Roman reprisals if there were to be a messianic uprising), whereas John sees in this a prophecy of his death in a salvific manner.

Some texts affirm that Christ died for 'many' (Mark 10:45; 14:24; Matt. 20:28; 26:28; cf. Heb. 2:10; 9:28), but this term is replaced by 'you' in some parallels (Luke 22:19f.; 1 Cor. 11:24) or by 'all' (1 Tim. 2:6) or by 'us' (Tit. 2:14). The term 'all' also appears in 2 Cor. 5:14, 15a, 15b; Heb. 2:9.

Finally, a number of texts emphasise that Christ died for sinners, the ungodly (Rom. 5:6, 8; 1 Pet. 3:18).

What can we draw from these texts? The concept of dying for others (which was well-known in the ancient world[33]) is expressed using language based on Isaiah 53. The words of Jesus at the Last Supper are applied to the disciples present ('you'), and this application becomes widespread as preachers and writers addressing Christian believers remind them that Christ died for 'us (all)' or for 'you'.

Jesus came to the existing people of God, the Jews, in order to bring salvation to them. The Jews, despite being the people chosen by God, are sinful and need to have their sins removed (Luke 2:10; cf. Matt. 1:21). The offer is open to all, even though not all accept it. Therefore, Jesus dies for the people, i.e. the Jewish people as a whole (John 11:50-52); but at the same time it is recognised that the scope of his death extends to the world as a whole (John 1:29).

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33M. Hengel, *The Atonement. The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 6-15.

Within this context it is natural for Jesus to say that he dies for those who are already his disciples and friends (John 15:13f.), but this does not cancel out the sayings where his death is also understood more widely to be for the people or the nation. The imagery of the shepherd must be treated with care. When Jesus picks up the motif of the good shepherd who is willing to die for the welfare of the sheep, the picture is of a shepherd risking his life against a wild animal attacking the sheep who already constitute his flock (John 10:12; cf. 1 Sam. 17:34-7). The actuality is rather different in that Jesus dies on account of sin and he receives his life back again. The parabolic material does no more than illustrate the principle of vicarious death. It would be unwise, therefore, to press the parable further and assert that Jesus dies only for his sheep, as if he acquired the flock by dying for them. Of course the sheep are given to him by the Father, but this says nothing about the scope of his death. To press the language and say that Jesus has prospective sheep, for whom he dies, surely goes beyond the horizon of the imagery. More probably, the thought is primarily of the Jewish people as the flock of God, continuance in which is dependent on coming to Christ; but there also other sheep not of this fold, for whom presumably he also lays down his life. The saying does not exclude the wider statements of scope found elsewhere in the same gospel. There is certainly a distinction made between 'my sheep' and his Jewish opponents who are not 'my sheep'. But it would be pressing the metaphor too hard to take from it that there is a boundary already fixed between Jesus' sheep and other sheep, particularly since Jesus is still encouraging people to believe in him (John 10:38).

When Jesus is said to have purchased the church by his blood (Acts 20:28) or to have loved the church and given himself for it (Eph. 5:25; here the church is equivalent to 'us' in Eph. 5:2), the metaphor is one of ransoming people (cf. Rev. 5:9f.), and is used confessionally by those who have benefited from what Christ has done. Here the love is for the prospective bride, and it is over-pressing the imagery to say that this means that Christ died only for a limited group of people who are destined to be the bride.

Acts 20:28 is a statement about the importance of caring for the church of God' whose value is seen in that he bought it with his own blood. The death of Jesus leads to the redemption of the church, but it is outside the horizon of the metaphor as it is used here to ask whether this implies that God has secretly decided who may enter the church and who is excluded from it.

Finally, in Romans 8:32-5 God gave up Jesus 'for us all', who are 'those whom God has chosen', but this is confessional language, spoken by those whom God has admitted to the elect. Again, nothing is said that implies that God has limited the scope of the death of Jesus to this group. In short, these passages suggest that God created a new community by the death of his Son and entry into it gives one a place among those for whom Christ died. The person who is in can confess 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me'; the community know that Christ died for our sins.[34]

In 2 Cor. 5:14f. Paul states that one died for all, so that those who live might do so no longer for themselves but for the one who died and was raised for them. Supporters of limited atonement urge that 'all' cannot mean 'all without exception' here, since that would imply universalism in that it states that 'all have died'.

We have here the same problem as in Rom. 5:18 where 'just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all' and in 1 Cor. 15:22 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ'. In both these texts it is surely the case that the first 'all' refers to all without exception' (cf. Rom. 3:23), and it would be extraordinary if the second 'all' meant anything else.[35] The second parts of both texts refer to the availability of life for all that becomes a reality for them

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34 On the use of 'many' see above. 'Many' is paraphrased as 'all' in 1 Timothy 2:6 and is used interchangeably with 'all' in Rom. 5. It refers to people in general in Isa. 53, and the context does not suggest that it is deliberately chosen to impose a restriction; it is the more appropriate term to use when making the contrast with the one person who dies.

35If we attempt to interpret these verses in conformity with a doctrine of limited atonement, the thrust of Paul's argument is lost, in that the free gift turns out not to be as great as the trespass. It is understandable how this passage is appealed to by defenders of universalism.

provided that they believe. If so, these texts are about the universal sufficiency of the death of Christ (a doctrine accepted by Berkhof on the basis of other texts). Consequently, we have examples where 'all' does mean 'all without exception' in statements relating to the availability of salvation. The significance of this is that we do not need to take statements about 'all' to refer to 'all apart from those not pre-chosen', and such an interpretation of them is in fact unjustified.

This indicates how we are to take the statements in 2 Cor. 5:14f. Since Christ died for all, it follows that human beings are intended to live for him and not for themselves. Likewise, in 2 Cor. 5:18-21 Paul is writing about a reconciliation of the world which has become a reality for those ('us') who believe. God truly no longer counts the world's trespasses against it, but this offer of reconciliation becomes a reality only for those who respond to it, and do not accept the grace of God in vain.[36]

We are thus encouraged to accept the natural sense of various statements. When Paul says that Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6, 8), he is no doubt thinking specifically of his readers because he wants to make the point that if Christ died for them while they were still weak, ungodly sinners, he will all the more deliver those who have been justified at the judgment. But there is no reason to qualify the absolute 'the ungodly' by saying that this means only the 'pre-chosen ungodly' who have or will believe. Statements that Christ died for 'us' do not carry the implication that he died for nobody else.

There are admittedly remarkably few evangelistic statements addressed to those who are not yet saved which state that Christ died for all or for 'you' addressed to those who are not yet saved. But this is readily explained by the fact that most New Testament teaching is addressed to those who are already believers and examples of evangelistic preaching are few. However, when Paul summarises the gospel that he proclaimed in Corinth as 'Christ died for

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36Berkhof notes Heb. 2:9 and takes 'taste death on behalf of all' it to refer only to all who are in Christ ('the 'many sons' in v. 10). But there is nothing that requires us to limit 'all' to 'all who will actually be saved', particularly in a letter which talks of the danger of repudiating the salvation offered to the world (Heb. 2:3). To paraphrase the statement as 'taste death for all who are predestined by God for salvation' is to import alien ideas into the text that are not justified by anything in the letter.

*our* sins' (1 Cor. 15:3), this is surely a case of the preacher including his unsaved audience with him in an inclusive statement. It most certainly is *not* a statement that he died only for the sins of those who are already believers. Similar statements elsewhere (1 Thes. 5:10) were doubtless part of the kerygma.[37]

It will not do to say that these statements have to do only with the 'sufficiency' or 'availability' (Grudem's term) of the death of Christ, since the language used is exactly the same as in those statements that refer to Christ's death for 'us' as believers. And how can the atonement be sufficient for all if it was limited to some?

## The use of 'world'

We must now take a closer look at the use of 'world'.[38] This motif is especially found in John and 1 John. Jesus came to bring salvation for the world (John 1:29; 3:16; 4:42; 6:33, 51; 12:46f.; 1 John 2:2; 4:14). The fact that the term does not always include all people does not settle the question of what it means in the crucial texts. It is a flexible term. It can refer to the world or universe in which people live or to the world and its people, with the accent on the latter. it can be used hyperbolically. It signifies primarily the world of human beings rather than inanimate nature.

Strange's comment that 'passages referring to "the world" do not mean every individual, rather they are referring to the cosmic side of the atonement and the renewal of creation'[39] is quite eccentric and incapable of substantiation. John 3:16 is certainly not a statement about the cosmic aspect of the atonement and the renewal of creation. It is about God's love for humankind and the purpose of his love is specifically stated to be that

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37We cannot here address the problem as to why the vicarious character of Christ's death is not mentioned in the evangelistic speeches in Acts.

38See P. Woodbridge, '"The World" in the Fourth Gospel', in D. Peterson (ed.), *Witness to the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 1-31.

39*Op. cit*., 279, n. 33.

believers should not perish but have eternal life.[40] There is not a hint here of concern for anything other than the world of human beings. The long tradition that treats this text as an invitation to belief and salvation indicates how it is meant to be understood.

Moreover, the text does not make sense if the real (secret) significance of it is 'God loved the world in such a way that he gave his Son [to die for some of its members] so that whosoever believes may have eternal life' Such a paraphrase falls down in two respects. (a). It so qualifies the love of God for the world that a statement which appears to be expressing the magnitude of divine love is severely diminished in force. (b). It implies that you can't believe unless you are one of the limited group for whom Christ died.

Nor does the term 'world' itself really mean 'a limited group of people within the world'. Carson rightly points out that God can condemn the sins of people while he still loves them and weeps for all who stand under his condemnation and will not repent. 'He pronounces terrifying condemnation on the grounds of the world's sin, while still loving the world so much that the gift he gave to the world, the gift of his Son, remains the world's only hope'.[41] It is surely impossible to read this in such a way that the 'gift of his Son' is the hope of only some in the world, a limited number for whose sake Christ came. In such a case it is surely not possible for God to love the world for which he did not give his Son to die. We also again face the problem of God having an unfulfilled desire which Berkhof is presumably not prepared to allow.[42] Such paraphrases as 'God so loved [some people in] the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever [God has caused to] believe in him shall not perish' are wildly implausible. Jesus came in order to save the world, in order that the world might believe.[43]

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40Consequently, it cannot be treated merely as a statement of 'common grace' as opposed to 'saving grace'.

41D.A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 204-5. It is interesting that Carson cannot avoid saying 'so much', even though *houtōs* strictly means 'in such a way'.

42It is impossible for theologians of any school to avoid recognising that God has unfulfilled desires.

43 The redeemed community naturally speak of the way in which God loves 'us', recognising that their salvation is due to God's love for them (Rom. 5:8). It is inevitably believers who make confession of God's love

The point is confirmed by other references in John which tell us that Christ takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; cf. 6:51), that he is the light of the world and its saviour (8:12; 9:5; 4:42; 1 John 4:14), that he came to save the world (12:47) , and that he wants his followers to be one so that the world may believe (17:21). The natural sense of such statements is that Jesus offers salvation to anybody who hears the message throughout the world, although he knows well enough that not all will respond positively to his message. It is not possible to limit 'world' to mean 'all without distinction but not all without exception'; the plain sense of the sayings is that salvation is available for all and is offered to all and can be received by those who believe.

1 John 2:2 indicates that Christ died for our sins and the sins of the whole world. Although there has been a distinction in ch. 1 between 'we' and 'you' (1:5), this has disappeared by vs. 6-10 where the readers are included in the preacher's 'we', and this is manifestly the case in 2:1f. Therefore, it can be ruled out that 'we' are Jewish believers and the 'world' is the pre-chosen among the Gentiles. The added phrase is of enormous importance, because it shows that salvation is not limited to those who have already received it in this letter and that there is no concern for those outside the Christian community. Moreover, it emphasises that the *whole* world is in view. Commentators rightly recognise that the death of Jesus is 'sufficient to deal with the sins of the whole world, but that his sacrifice does not become effective until people believe in him'[44] This is the 'natural' meaning of the text and should be adopted unless there is reason to reject it.

## Problems for the upholders of universality

*The penalty for sin is exacted twice*

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and do so in terms of what they personally have experienced. It does not follow, however, that if a person does not belong to 'us' (actually or potentially), then God does not love that person.

Defenders of limited atonement argue that if Christ died for all, and then some people are condemned and suffer the penalty of their sins, this is unfair because it means that the penalty is paid twice for their sins, once by Christ and once by themselves.

The objection is based on the assumption that the bearing of condemnation by Christ is to be understood in the same way as in the case of a human situation; here if a friend of the guilty person bore the penalty due to him (e.g. by paying a fine on his behalf), then it would be unjust for the court to demand that the guilty person should also do so. I am not sure what would happen if the guilty person protested that he was not going to accept the action done on his behalf. Clearly the court would not accept two payments of the fine, but it could respect the guilty person's refusal of the friendly offer. But this aspect of the analogy cannot be pressed with respect to the death of Christ. Here a death takes place which has the potential to deliver all humankind from condemnation, but it does not actually do so unless the sinner is joined by faith to Christ and identified with him. The view then, that the death of Christ is sufficient for all people but does not become effective except for those who accept Christ as their substitute is sound enough. But to say that the death of Jesus is sufficient for all would normally mean that it is a death for all. In the case of the person who rejects Christ, his substitution in respect of them is repudiated.

*The fulfilment of God's purposes*

It is objected that, if Christ died for all, then God's purpose is not carried through because Christ's dying for people and the actual reception of salvation by them are two parts of one, indivisible purpose. But God cannot have purposes that are not fulfilled.

Even on the limited atonement view, however, it is admitted that God must be allowed to have desires that are not fulfilled. The expressions of his regret that people do not trust, love and obey him are clear evidence that his desires are not fulfilled. To get round this,

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44C. G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 75.

Berkhof has to postulate that what God 'really' wants and purposes is something different and hidden from our view. We have therefore to deal with a God who deceives humanity by saying that he desires the salvation of the wicked but has secretly determined to do nothing about it in the case of some of them by passing over them.

But it is not obvious on Berkhof's premises how it is possible for a perfect God to have unfulfilled desires. For Berkhof's God to have unfulfilled desires is surely a denial of his perfection. Moreover, the line between desires and purposes is a very fine one, and it is dubious whether one can solve the problem by making a distinction between unfulfilled purposes (not possible for God) and unfulfilled desires (possible for God).

The crucial fact is that there is evil in the universe, and there is no way that God can so work it into his purposes and desires that things are entirely as he would have them be. Otherwise, evil would be entirely overcome, or we would have to say that God accepted evil as part of his purpose (which would be extraordinary given the force of his condemnations of it in Scripture!).[45] But once it is recognised that God can have desires and purposes which are not fulfilled, then the binding of atonement and actual salvation to one another need no longer be presupposed.[46]

*The inseparability of atonement and reception of salvation*

However, we must also question whether there is an inseparable connection between the purchase and the bestowal of salvation. There is no doubt that God provides: (a). the atonement, on the basis of which salvation is possible; and (b). the 'means of grace' through which salvation becomes a reality for the individual. That is not in dispute, and it means that

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45Cf. the treatment by D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), 212-14, which recognises that there is no entirely satisfactory solution.

46There is also a distinction between the saving purpose of God, that people should be holy, and the actual results. The effects of conversion in terms of ethical life can be very varied in that Christians continue to fall into sin and fail to do good. It would seem that again God has desires or purposes which are not immediately fulfilled.

salvation is from start to finish the work of God. But to recognise these two provisions is not the same thing as to say that they are one and the same, and that you cannot have the one without the other.[47] We noted that Berkhof claims to find support for the close link between atonement and the application of its effects in that the sacrificial work of Christ and his intercession are two sides of one and the same work; since the latter is limited to those actually saved, so is the former. He cites John 17:9 where Jesus prays not for the world but for those whom the Father has given to him. However, this overlooks John 17:20, where Jesus says that his prayer is not for them alone but for those who believe in him through their message, and his prayer is that they may be one so that the world may believe that God has sent him. That is surely prayer for the world.[48]

The preaching of the gospel assumes a distinction between what God has done in Christ and the need for people to respond to it, with the recognition that the response may be negative. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, but this is followed by his ambassadors putting an offer before people that they are called upon to accept so that they may in fact be reconciled to God. Nowhere does Paul's language imply that the bearing of sin is purely for those whom he knows will respond positively. We lack any statements that say that Christ died only for some of humankind; here in fact he was reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses against 'them,' i.e. the people who comprise the 'world'.

Berkhof further argues that 'the atonement secures the fulfilment of the conditions that must be met, in order to obtain salvation'. But the texts he cites do not prove his point.[49]

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47Berkhof cites Mat. 18:11 (not in modern critical texts); Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Eph. 1:7. Without going into details, I would argue that none of these texts demonstrate that because Christ purchased salvation, it is inevitable that it is accepted and fully realised.

48In the New Testament prayer and intercession tend to be for believers and are concerned with their perseverance in the Christian life. It seems that the metaphor of intercession is restricted to activity affecting only those already saved. Nevertheless, the powerful language used by Paul with respect to prayer for unsaved Israelites (Rom. 10:1; cf. 9:1-3) shows clearly that prayer was offered for the unsaved.

49The texts cited (Rom. 2:4; Gal. 3:13f.; Eph. 1:3f.; 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 3:5f.) do not link God's actions in the bestowal of salvation to the specific act of atonement.

To say that God provides the means of acceptance, namely faith and the gift of the Spirit, does not require that God, having given Christ for the sins of the world, should act to save every individual.

Finally, there is the problem of texts which might suggest that some for whom Christ died may not eventually attain to salvation. The reference in Romans 14:15 to the possible destruction of the brother for whom Christ died is taken by Berkhof to refer to a possibility that God will not allow to happen.[50] Whether that is so or not, Paul was clearly capable of using such language to make his point, and he could not have done so if he believed that Christ's death for somebody infallibly led to their salvation. Berkhof states that 2 Peter 2:1 and Hebrews 10:29 refer to nominal non-elect believers who claimed (falsely) that Christ had bought them. This may be the case, but it is based on the assumption that the pre-chosen cannot fall away and hence is a circular argument.

The same general point is also developed by Letham who argues that it would be inconsistent for God to provide atonement for all and the means of grace only for some. This, however, is not self-evident. On any understanding of the matter there is a gap between what God wishes to happen and what is achieved. The statements of his love for the world and of his desire that none should perish stand alongside the fact that some do perish. This is parallel to his provision of salvation for all and the fact that it is not received by everybody.

*The slippery slope to universalism*

Berkhof claims that universality of provision logically leads to universal acceptance of salvation. Christ has removed the guilt of all people, therefore none can be lost. But this is to impute to those who differ from him the same mistake that he makes, namely that anybody for whom Christ dies is infallibly brought to final salvation, and this is simply not true if we

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50Berkhof appeals to Rom. 14:4 in support of God's protection of the individual concerned; but that text is about the irrelevance of human judgments on other Christians because God will uphold them; it is not about the fact that they may be tempted into sin and destruction. The point is made just as strongly in 1 Cor. 8:11.

recognise that there is a distinction between provision and completion. Here Berkhof is arguing in a circle.

In fact the danger of universalism argument can be applied to both schools of thought and is therefore not an argument that Calvinists can use against Arminians.

For the Arminians there is the puzzle why if God has provided salvation for all, he does not do more to ensure that all receive it. The Arminian reply is to appeal to the mystery of human sin and rebellion which remains an enigma.

For upholders of limited atonement there is the question why God has determined to set the limits so tightly and left out so many people. It is understandable that opponents of limited atonement find that the picture of God that emerges from the notion of a limited atonement is that of a not very attractive God whose decisions border on capriciousness. His character as a God of love has been made secondary to his right to do whatever he pleases. But if he is a God of love, must not that love be characteristic of all that he decides and does?

*Justice and mercy*

Here a point should be taken up that is made by various scholars including particularly Helm and Letham. This is the argument that there is a difference in the 'logic' of justice and mercy. 'Justice, by nature, cannot be offset but must be applied by all. On the other hand, mercy is a free gift, unexpected and undeserved, and by its very essence cannot be required as an obligation but instead is exercised sovereignly by whoever dispenses it. We speak of the prerogative of mercy but of the necessity of justice.'[51]

This argument, that God is not under obligation to show mercy to all and is therefore perfectly just in condemning some while showing mercy to others, is frequently used, but it is flawed.

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51Letham, *op. cit.*, 238.

First, justice and mercy cannot be rigidly separated from one another. We expect mercy to be exercised in a just manner. In the human context the prerogative of mercy is generally used when there are over-riding circumstances which justify not exacting a penalty or ameliorating it; thus a pregnant woman might be sentenced to a shorter term of imprisonment than another criminal. Or an amnesty might be announced in the belief that this will be a more effective way of removing large numbers of illegal weapons from circulation than attempting to detect and punish the holders. There may be some contingent degree of unfairness (e.g. for people who failed to meet the deadline for the amnesty), but this does not affect the principle which is that generally the exercise of mercy is done for good cause; the pity shown is justified and not arbitrary. Therefore, the idea that God may arbitrarily exercise mercy to some and not to others must be rejected as unjust. A judge who treats one pregnant woman with mercy but shows none to another one in similar circumstances would not be tolerated.

Second, we must remind ourselves that there are presumably no limits set to the capacity of God's merciful provision. One can understand that in a human situation where there are limited resources (e.g. the availability of supplies of a life-saving drug) arbitrary choices may have to be made as to who receives them and who is denied them. But in the case of God there is surely no limit on his resources, and therefore there is no reason for him to be forced to make an arbitrary distribution of his mercy. If God can show mercy to some, he has the ability to show mercy to all.

Third, the biblical teaching about grace and mercy shows that it is motivated essentially by the need and plight and helplessness of the afflicted (Matt. 9:36; Mark 5:19; 10:47; Luke 6:35f.; 7:13; 10:33) and sinners (Luke 15:20; 2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Tim. 1:13; Heb. 2:17f.; cf. Jonah 3:10-4:3). God sees them in danger of perishing and therefore he feels pity for them and acts to save them. The mercy shown by God is not something arbitrary that arises purely from his own inscrutable purposes; on the contrary, it is aroused by his recognition of the need of helpless sinners. It is this that explains the gracious action of God

in giving his Son as Saviour and creating the church to be the ambassador of salvation and reconciliation (cf. Eph. 2:1-10).

But here we face the objection that according to Paul the mercy of God is selective in its application. Appeal is made to Rom. 9:6-24 where it appears that God's mercy is shown to some and not to others. Paul's overall point here is that God's promises do not fail simply because the chosen people have failed to follow the messiah. However, his primary point is to emphasise that mercy is God's prerogative and is not his response to human works (Rom. 9:11f.., 16); consequently, it cannot be claimed as of right or as something deserved by anybody but remains the act of God in his freedom (Rom. 9:15). This is illustrated by the choice of Jacob to be the father of the chosen people rather than his brother Esau; it did not depend on anything done by either to deserve favour from God. By the end of the section Paul is declaring that God's purpose in the light of Christ is to 'have mercy on them all' (Rom. 11:32), where the thought is primarily of both Jews and Gentiles, both of which as groups had been disobedient and fallen under judgment; the earlier distinctions between Isaac and Ishmael and between Jacob and Esau are overcome in the fulfilment of God's purposes. If Paul is working here with a distinction between the Jews, who were chosen as God's people and the Gentiles who were not chosen, he is saying that this is no longer a barrier to Gentiles receiving the mercy of God; and if there is a hardening in part of Israel at the present time, it is not permanent. Consequently, Paul's argument from past history that people cannot claim mercy on the basis of their works does not entail that his mercy is now selective and arbitrary. In fact the opposite is true; if the choice of Israel were in any sense to be seen as the arbitrary exclusion of the Gentiles, the redemption in Christ for Jews *and* Gentiles ends that completely. He anticipates a remarkable incoming of Gentiles and Jews to salvation.

To be sure, this does not solve all our problems. It does not explain why the gospel has not reached and does not reach all people, as if God was unable or unwilling to evangelise the world, despite his commanding the disciples to go into all the world and make

disciples of all nations; if it be objected that this does not refer to every individual person but only to nations, the point still stands that many nations have never heard the gospel.

It is impossible to produce a theodicy that answers all our questions. Letham himself has to invoke this point when he tries to explain the relation between the particularity and the universality of the atonement. This means that we cannot dismiss either the limited atonement or universality understandings on the grounds that either of them leaves us with questions. Rather, the purpose of this article is to insist that we must do justice to the teaching of Scripture and not produce a doctrine of God which is out of harmony with scriptural teaching. The doctrine of limited atonement does not do justice to the biblical teaching; it requires a forced, unnatural reading of the texts. The doctrine of universality treats the texts in a better way, even though it does not solve all the problems.

## Preaching to the reprobate

Finally, there is the argument put forward by upholders of limited atonement that this doctrine is not incompatible with the *bona fide* preaching of the gospel to those who have no hope of being saved because Christ did not die for them. Berkhof argues in defence of it:

(a). The gospel offer is simply a promise of salvation to those who believe without revealing the secret will of God.

(b). Any offer is conditional on faith and repentance wrought by the Holy Spirit.

(c). The offer of salvation does not say that Christ has made atonement for all and God intends to save each one. It simply says that the atonement is sufficient for all people, describes the nature of the faith and repentance that are required, and promises that those who come with true repentance and faith will be saved.

(d). The preacher's task is not to harmonise God's secret will and his declarative will, but simply to preach the gospel indiscriminately.

(e). God may properly call the non-elect to do something that he delights in.

(f). The preaching of the gospel serves to remove every vestige of excuse from sinners whose sin then culminates in refusing to accept it.

These arguments are fallacious. The defender of limited atonement says that the death was only for the pre-chosen (and so not really for 'the world') but it could have sufficed for a larger number, whereas the defender of unlimited atonement says that the death was on behalf of all but becomes effective in deliverance from condemnation only for those who accept it. The defenders of limited atonement need to have a death which is sufficient for all so that those who reject Christ have really rejected something that was available to them. But once that is admitted, their view begins to look like playing with words. The latter interpretation has the clear advantage that it takes the texts in a straightforward manner.

But to say that the atonement is sufficient for all people but has not been made for all is meaningless. How can the atonement be sufficient for people for whom it has not been made? This is sheer unconvincing casuistry. Further, it contradicts Berkhof's own principle that the atonement and the application of salvation are two indissoluble parts of one purpose of God. For on his premises how can this God produce an atonement that is sufficient for all people without also providing gifts of effectual calling which are sufficient for all people?[52] Nor is it just for God to call the non-chosen to do what they cannot by definition do. So long as God has refused to extend to them the same grace as he does to the pre-chosen, they have the excuse that he has asked them to do what is impossible for them (since by definition they cannot repent unless God enables them).

The fact that Berkhof is reduced to such specious, unconvincing arguments shows up only too clearly the flaws in his basic position.

## Conclusion

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52This is an *argumentum ad hominem*, but a justifiable one, since the point is to show that Berkhof's position is self-contradictory on its own premises.

I have argued that the New Testament clearly teaches that the death of Christ was not limited in its scope, and that the texts that positively affirm this should be taken in their natural sense rather than having an unnatural sense imposed upon them in the interests of a dogmatic framework. It is the framework that requires revision rather than the clear teaching of Scripture. The New Testament does not teach that the death of Christ is limited in its scope to those pre-chosen for salvation. It follows that the attempt to undermine this part of the foundation of Clark Pinnock's theological explorations is not successful, and the issues that he raises cannot be so easily avoided or regarded as improper. At the same time, it is the case that one of the five points of Dort is shown to fail exegetically, and we should be content to recognise that there are some issues about salvation which are not to be solved by appeal to a secret decree of God that goes against his expressed love for the world and desire that none should perish but rather by a recognition that the mystery of evil is beyond our comprehension.[53]

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53I am grateful to Kent Brower for his comments on this article.