

THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY AND THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

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ABSTRACT. This article considers the post-Reformation debates over the extent of the Atonement. It traces the origins of these debates from the articles of the Arminian Remonstrance of 1610 through the declarations of the supporters of the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. The debate is then considered in relation to an English Baptist context, and specifically the exegetical dispute over the meaning of the word 'all' in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 and Romans 3:23-4. Three options are examined and the various difficulties in arbitrating between these various interpretations. Recognising these difficulties, the article goes on to explore the relationship between scriptural exegesis and theology with reference to the formulation of the ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century. It argues that while theology should always attempt to be consistent with the exegetical data on occasion it proves inconclusive, as in the case of the debate over the extent of the atonement. In such cases the role of theology becomes one of mediation as it seeks a way of reading the texts of Scripture that allows them to be heard without contradicting each other. Again, this is illustrated from the fourth century and the Christology of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Returning to the question of atonement with this understanding of the task of theology the article seeks to propose a way to reconcile the biblical texts which speak of the atonement as both universal and limited.

KEY WORDS: atonement, metaphor, remonstrants, Dort, Westminster

My topic is the extent of the atonement. [This paper was originally given in a seminar at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague in 2015. I am grateful for the invitation to speak there, and for interaction afterwards which helped my thinking on several points.] A position was declared orthodox at the Synod of Dort and defended vigorously by Baptist theologians (amongst others of course) afterwards. That position held that the objects of the eternal election of God, the objects of the passion of the incarnate Son, and the objects of the vivifying and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are identical. From all eternity, God intended that a particular number of the human race be saved; the death of Jesus Christ was a sacrifice intended and offered for the same particular group of human beings;

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the Spirit sovereignly gives life and faith to that same group, and sanctifies them to make them fit for heaven.

The first and third clause of this construction are fairly unremarkable in theological history: the particularity of election and the restriction of the vivifying and sanctifying work of the Spirit to the saints are not undisputed, but are commonly-held positions, at least historically. The second clause, asserting the restriction of the intent, not just the effect, of the sacrifice of Christ, is more unusual in history, and extremely controversial. Sustained controversy on the point began with the Remonstrance which led to Dort, although it is possible to identify supporters or hints of the idea of limited atonement prior to the debates over the Remonstrance. In at least one case—the ninth-century debate between Gottschalk and Hincmar—it would seem that precisely the same question was asked, and that the relevant distinctions were made. (Gottschalk is clear on the question of limited atonement in several places, for instance: ‘I say that he did not shed [his] blood nor was in any way crucified for them [the reprobate]’ p. 67 or ‘God did not suffer for the baptised reprobate’ cited in Genke 2010: 67 and 131. This view was condemned at the Council of Quiercy in 853, which taught—in language still preserved in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that ‘[t]here is not, never has been, and never will be a single human being for whom Christ did not suffer’. *Catechism* §605). As with much Carolingian theology, however, that debate was rapidly lost to history, and only very recently recovered. Theodore Beza was rather cornered into debating the issue at the Montbéliard Colloquy of 1586, and affirmed limited atonement—he argued ‘[e]t certe nobis intolerabilis vox vestra visa est, Christum esse mortuum pro damnatis’ (Andreae 1586: 514). But this has the character of a logical result he was forced to admit, not a teaching he took a stand on.

When Dirck Coornhert criticised—amongst several other doctrines—predestination, Beza’s sometime student, Arminius, was put forward by the Amsterdam consistory as their champion. Arminius, however, as he preached through Romans, made it clear that he had deviated significantly from his teacher’s position, and failed rather badly to champion that which he had been sent to defend. When he was appointed to a university position at Leiden in 1603, Gomarus objected strongly, and controversy ensued. Arminius severely criticised the supralapsarianism of his teacher Beza—and of Gomarus—but did not highlight the issue of limited atonement as crucial to the question in his writings.

The issue was raised to prominence after Arminius’ death in 1609, in confessional documents prepared by one of his followers in Amsterdam, Johannes Wtenbogaert. He produced the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*, signed by forty-four pastors in 1610. (Stephen Strehle suggests, and Lee Gatiss accepts, that the Five Articles are constructed in conscious response

to Hincmar's five-point summary of Gottschalk's position; this however seems to me to be unlikely. The points are made in a different order, and not all the same points are covered; beyond the coincidence of number, and the fact that a broadly similar theme is under consideration, there is no obvious connection. Strehle 1989: 2; Gatiss 2012: 76, n. 83). The second article elevated the question of the extent of the atonement to a central theological issue. It read in part: 'Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer...' (English translation taken from Schaff 1984, III, 546; the original Dutch and the Latin can be found in the same place).

The *Counter-Remonstrance* of 1611 inevitably responded to the point, but did so rather moderately; its fourth article asserted that the Father delivered Christ to death in order to save the elect, which is an assertion of limited atonement, although not one that is incapable of being read in another sense. The *Counter-Remonstrance* then went on to describe Christ's passion as sufficient for the sins of the whole world, but efficient only for the elect, a distinction going back to Peter Lombard, which Beza had rejected as ambiguous, barbarously phrased, and so inadequate to the question (1588: 2:217 and 221; also Blacketer 2013: 135-6 for a summary of Beza's arguments). Wtenbogaert answered the *Counter-Remonstrance* in a further publication in 1612, his *Bericht en Opening Van de Proceduren*.

There were several strands to the debate between the two parties; predestination was only one, and my theme, limited atonement, a relatively minor part of that (For the history of this period see Van Deursen 1998). The Remonstrants stood for state control over the church and a latitudinarian approach to orthodoxy and these issues, more than the soteriological points of the *Remonstrance*, rapidly emerged as their key demand. Wtenbogaert was instrumental in the nomination of Conrad Vorstius as Arminius's successor at Leiden, an appointment which brought questions of orthodoxy and tolerance into very sharp focus, as Vorstius was widely accused of holding some extremely heterodox views (Shriver 1970), particularly concerning the doctrine of God. [The way Frederick Shriver tells the story through the lens of the involvement of the British crown, is helpful in highlighting the extent to which Erastianism and latitudinarianism had become drivers of the debates. On the latter theme, see also Voogt 2009.] (There is little doubt that he denied divine simplicity and drastically modified traditional teaching concerning divine eternity; his account of omnipresence was also criticised. Further, he taught that all God's dealings with creation are arbitrary, so the satisfaction made by Christ is not strictly a response to the demands of divine justice, but an act/gift the Father accepts in

lieu of what is owed by humanity). The States General succeeded, apparently against the will of the university, in having Vorstius removed from the chair, which then went to another Remonstrant theologian, Simon Episcopius.

Hugo Grotius wrote the edict of 1614 by which the States General sought to impose this solution; the opposition of the Counter-Remonstrants was as much, probably more, to the ideas that ecclesial disputes could be settled by government edict, and to the basic willingness to set aside certain theological points as unimportant, as to the specifics of the theological position advanced. The theological issues resurfaced in 1617, in large part because both sides began seeking the support of other national Reformed churches. As the title suggests, Caspar Barlaeus wrote his *Epistola ecclesiarum* for precisely this purpose, reacting to an earlier similar appeal by the Counter-Remonstrants (Barlaeus 1617). The basic Remonstrant position remained a plea for tolerance, however, coupled with a suggestion that in patristic times, and in the early years of the Reformation, differences in understanding of predestination were no bar to unity. That said, the theological points of the original Remonstrance were repeated and rehearsed, including the claim that it is dogmatically necessary to assert that Christ died for all people. In the Second Remonstrance of 1617, limited atonement was asserted to contradict the very doctrinal standards (*i.e.*, the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism) that the Counter-Remonstrants professed to hold so dear (Rohls 2005: 35).

These appeals to other churches perhaps served to elevate the National Synod, when it was finally called, to a degree of prominence that it would not otherwise have had. Twenty-three international representatives were amongst the eighty-four members of the Synod of Dort, convened by the States General in 1618. (Political events in Holland had led to the overthrow and imprisonment of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who had been the leading figure in the States General, and a strong supporter of the Remonstrants. Grotius was deposed from his political office and arrested at the same time). The synod was convened as a Counter-Remonstrant body, which summoned representatives of the Remonstrants to appear before it to be tried. Calvinist orthodoxy was assumed, and the Arminian position was to be expounded and explored, and then judged as to whether it was compatible with orthodoxy or not.

That said, there was not unanimity amongst the orthodox, and the practice of each delegation preparing position papers on each of the points allows us to trace the differences in emphasis or doctrine and to see the extent to which they affected the final published Canons. (The various statements can be found in the *Acta Synodi Nationalis*). The Synod chose to structure its deliberations according to the five points of the 1610 Remonstrance,

and so created for itself considerable pressure to elevate the question of the extent of the atonement to a major point; the Canons, however, demonstrate that this pressure was largely resisted. There are nine positive articles concerning the death of Christ, and human redemption; Article 1 asserts the necessity of satisfaction, on the basis of divine justice and human sinfulness. Article 2 denies the possibility of our making satisfaction adequately ourselves and identifies the gracious gift of Christ as our only satisfaction. Articles 3-4 assert the infinite value and worth of the sacrifice made by Christ, which is based on both his human holiness and his deity. Articles 5-7 assert the 'whomsoever' of the gospel, and demand its indiscriminate public declaration, noting that those who perish do so because of their failure to believe, not because of any lack in Christ's sacrifice, and that those who are saved are saved by grace alone, not by any merit of their own. Article 8, admittedly the longest, is the only one that makes any specific reference to the extent of the atonement; Article 9 asserts the inevitable final triumph of the divine plan of salvation.

Article 8 lines up the divine plan of the Father, the atoning sacrifice of the Son, and the vivifying and sanctifying work of the Spirit, and asserts that the object of all three is the same: the elect. When we turn to the errors rejected, the idea of a universal atonement is not in fact denied; rather, a series of ways of asserting the universality of the atonement are rejected: the idea of an indefinite atonement, that might have applied to no-one (had no-one in fact chosen repentance and faith) (error 1), and various forms of the idea of an atonement that merely creates the possibility of salvation (errors 2, 5, and 6).

All that said, it was not long before the particularity of redemption had become *the* defining feature of Calvinistic orthodoxy, at least amongst the English free churches. The British Baptist tradition was from the beginning split into Calvinistic and Arminian streams, which very rapidly—certainly by 1670, probably earlier—called themselves 'General' and 'Particular', locating their core difference, and their public denominational identity in the dispute over the extent of the atonement. They were committed, of course, to the authority of the Bible, and each side could cite texts of Scripture that, read in plain sense, apparently supported its position.

I am working on a longer piece tracing some of these debates in detail; for now, let me highlight once characteristic exegetical dispute, addressing claims that the word 'all' does not mean 'all people', but something like 'people from every class'. Dan Taylor, an eighteenth-century Baptist Arminian controversialist offered an exegetical argument, focused on 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 ('For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him

which died for them, and rose again'. KJV). Taylor invited his readers to read this text neutrally, abstracted from any argument—would we not read 'all' as 'every human person without exception'? The answer, it seems to me, is certainly in the affirmative; the result, however, is that Taylor is forced to insert a qualification in the second clause to avoid embracing universalism. As he puts it, '...he died for all, that they who *live* who are recovered from the state of spiritual death to spiritual life. The distributive *they who*, most clearly intends that part of the *all* in its literal and extensive sense...' (Taylor 1787: 78).

The problem of the text is the same of that of Romans 3:23-4: Paul seemingly parallels the 'all' who have sinned with the 'all' for whom Christ died, so that 'all' will be saved. The interpreter has three options: to assert universal salvation, which however is denied in terms repeatedly in Scripture; to claim that (at least) the second 'all' in fact means 'some'; or to introduce an unstated condition in the third 'all'. The second route is adopted by proponents of limited atonement; the third by Arminians like Taylor. There is, I suggest, no unproblematic way to read the text. Partisans from every position have to qualify the natural reading in one direction or another in order to preserve logical consistency. Taylor might be right to propose that his qualification is less forced than any other but, I insist, there is no reading that is unqualified.

From all of this, it should be clear that both particular atonement and universal atonement can claim some *prima facie* exegetical and theological support. Calvinists and Arminians alike were engaged in a polemical discussion in which they try to emphasise the strength of their own exegetical arguments and downplay or neutralise the strength of their opponents' arguments. The debates I have sketched do not resolve because there is no decisive argument on any side. If one emphasises certain texts, then the argument looks powerful on one side; if one emphasises certain other texts, then the argument looks powerful on the other.

Exegesis and Theology

I do not say this in order to criticise—indeed, I have little but praise for the shape of the arguments I have sketched; the early modern Reformed controversialists were generally committed to the authority of Scripture, and to testing their doctrinal positions by careful and responsible exegesis—would that this were always true of contemporary academic theologians! That said, I suspect there is a potential criticism, in exactly the same area: the argument did not reach a conclusion, I suggest, because the various partisans on each side were not serious enough about facing up to the exegetical proposals of their opponents.

A serious commitment to the authority of Scripture should almost always leave us at least somewhat uncertain about our theological commitments. Scripture does not invite or permit easy systematisation on, I suggest, almost any issue. Where we have reached a settled view on certain doctrines, it has been through a painful and difficult process of re-shaping our habitual ways of thought in order to find new ways of thinking that allow us to be more open to a broader swathe of the teaching of Scripture. To illustrate what I mean here, let me look briefly at the fourth-century development of the ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity (What follows is essentially a sketch of arguments I make at length in my *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life*).

By the middle of the fourth century, both those who taught the full deity of the Son and the Son's equality with the Father, and those who taught the lesser deity of the Son, and the Son's subordination to the Father, had their standard sets of Biblical texts to which they appealed; they both had responses to the favourite texts of their opponents, and so a somewhat sterile exegetical debate, not unlike the one that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries over limited atonement, had developed.

Of course, historiography of the fourth century is well developed, and we know how the answer to such sterile debates was formulated: essentially, a sequence of pro-Nicene theologians proposed intellectual positions that, if accepted, enabled the seemingly anti-Nicene texts to be read well. To take a very simple example, well worked through, but developed carefully by Hilary of Poitiers, a proto-Christological distinction was proposed, noticing that certain texts spoke of the incarnate Son in terms of his eternal glory—speaking of him 'in the form of God' was the language of the day—whereas other texts spoke of him in terms of his existence as a human being amongst other human beings—in the form of a servant'. This allowed a text such as 'the Father is greater than I' to be read as speaking truth without compromising the Nicene doctrine of the full equality of the Father and the Son.

Now, my purpose here is not to defend these Nicene developments in exegesis nor to propose exegetical solutions to certain lasting conundrums; rather, I offer these moves as examples of how, responsibly, theology should relate to exegesis. As a theologian, I take it that theology should be responsible to exegesis: it is our task to propose systematic understandings of various topics that are consistent with the exegetical data. When we overhear debates on the exegetical data concerning the extent of the atonement, however, we saw a series of impasses: apparently-required exegetical deductions from one set of texts stand in seeming contradiction to apparently-required exegetical deductions from another set of texts. How is the theologian to negotiate this?

The academic faculties were not divided in the fourth century, and so theologians and exegetes were generally the same people, but there is nonetheless an answer to be found in their deliberations. Occasionally, the task of theology was to offer a demonstration of the coherence of certain positions derived from exegesis that seemed incoherent; more often, however, the task of theology was to propose a set of alternative understandings of concepts that made the apparent incoherence dissolve. So the form of God / form of a servant distinction could be deployed on any text which appeared to claim the subordination of the Son to the Father: as a human being, the incarnate Son is of course subordinate to the Father; as the second Person of the Trinity, there is, and can be, no subordination.

Much more complex positions were also in play: the core development of what was to become the received orthodox doctrine began when Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa developed a careful account of the unknowability of God in response to Eunomius. Our language about God, they suggested, is always partial, incomplete, analogical—a grasping after an inexpressible truth, that can never be adequately captured in human words. This account was necessary, because Eunomius had proposed some arguments about the nature of deity which, if they were found convincing, made it necessary to accept the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. Since Jesus called God ‘Father’, and the Scriptures call God, creator, he proposed, then the essence of what it is to be divine is to be one who originates without having any origin. God makes other things to be but has His own origin in nothing. Now, of course, the Son has His origin in the Father, so on this logic the Son cannot truly be God.

How can we respond to this? Basil’s argument is essentially that when we say things like ‘without beginning’ of God, we speak truly, but inexactly. God has no origin in anything beyond Himself, but the fact that the Son and Spirit have their origin in the Father does not disqualify them from being ranked with the Father in the Trinity. So Basil develops an account of how theological language works which allows him to take seriously both the texts speaking of God’s lack of any beginning or origin which Eunomius cited, and the texts speaking of the equality of the Son with the Father. Basil’s account is better than Eunomius’s because it allows more texts of Scripture to be taken totally seriously. This account of how words apply to the divine becomes a way of reading texts of Scripture that allows them to be heard without contradicting each other.

Again, near the core of the settlement worked out by Gregory of Nazianzus in the East and Augustine in the West is the proposal that a relation can subsist in an eternal spiritual substance and create real distinction without any denial of ontological simplicity. At this point we are at a very high level of theological abstraction; can this point be proved exegetically? Absolutely

not; neither Augustine or Gregory even try. Both suggest, however, that the only way we can finally adequately read all the texts concerning God's life in the Scriptures is by holding to this point, and so it should be held.

The developed doctrine of the Trinity, asserting the uniqueness of God's essence, the existence of three divine hypostases, the application of any claim about God to the divine essence, save only the relations of origin, and so on—the developed doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a series of increasingly formal and abstract exegetical rules like this, telling us how to read Biblical texts in ways which allow every text to be heard with due seriousness. As such, the doctrine of the Trinity was not, I suggest, something derived from exegesis, so much as something that was proposed to make exegesis work. And this, I suggest, is the interesting task of theology. The work of the theologian is not to systematise exegetical claims, or at least that is only a very minor part of it; rather the task of theology is to construct plausible accounts of what must be true for every exegetical claim to be true.

Back to the Atonement

Armed with this understanding of the work of theology, let me return to the seemingly-intractable question of the extent of the atonement: Against the protestations of the Remonstrants, the Synod of Dort insisted that the atonement is limited in its effect—and in its intent—to those God had eternally elected to salvation, whose election will be revealed when they come to, and persist in, faith in Christ and so join the church; the Remonstrants, by contrast, held to the idea that the atonement is universal in its effect, albeit only potentially so: no human person is excluded from participation in the salvation won by Christ, if only they will appropriate it through faith. When the question of the extent of the atonement is posed, these are generally the two positions held to be in play; it is however clear from theological history that the question of the extent of the atonement has more possible solutions than just these two. Within the tradition of Dort, debate continued on whether the elect were limited to the visible church or a wider group (the debate often turned on the question of the salvation of children dying before baptism or any opportunity to discover faith, for instance, the Westminster Confession of Faith states that 'Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how He pleases: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word', X.3).

We can go further: consider the, admittedly rather eccentric, cosmological and soteriological scheme of Origen of Alexandria. Suggesting that both human beings and demons are intelligences fallen from the first perfect spiritual creation, and that through the coming of the one perfect unfallen intelligence, the Logos, into this material world, all such falls could be reversed, Origen held to an *apokastasis*, a final reconciliation of all intelligent

beings—not excluding, when the question was put and pressed, the devil itself—through the work of Christ (*De Prin.* I.VI.2).

This is fairly broad; we can go further still however. In the context of urgent debates over environmental concerns in our own day, we might wonder whether even Origen's account remains too limited: Romans 8, and the apocalyptic promise of a new/renewed earth, alike invite us to imagine that the atonement worked by Christ extends beyond the realm of intelligent creatures to encompass, at least potentially, all of creation.

I suggest, therefore, that there are at least five potential accounts of the extent of the atonement:

1. Christ's work affects only members of the visible church;
2. Christ's work affects only the elect, which group is nonetheless wider than the visible church in some way;
3. Christ's work affects all humanity;
4. Christ's work affects all intelligent (or spiritual, or ensouled) beings;
5. Christ's work affects the whole of creation.

(I suppose that some might want to expand this list in various ways; there is, for instance, no mention of ethnic Israel—other than perhaps implicitly in 2—and this could be seen to be a serious lack, particularly in the light of certain recent trends in New Testament studies. My point is not to be exhaustive, but to illustrate the problem I intend to raise. Nothing in the later argument of this essay depends on this list being complete or perfect, so long as some such list, indicating at least two differing accounts of the extent of the effect of the atonement, could be drawn up.)

Nonetheless, let me explore the possibility of each of these positions a little further. All I have done so far is to suggest that these are logically possible cases with some purchase in the tradition; is there any exegetical reason to suppose that the various other positions are worthy of consideration? I am not here trying to argue exclusively for one position or another but pausing at the level of *prima facie* exegetical plausibility: there is considerable space between 'I can adduce Scriptures which, in isolation, can be plausibly held to teach this position' and 'I can demonstrate that this position is a better interpretation than any other of the Scriptures taken as a whole body of teaching'. We need to come to a convincing end, and so to something resembling the second position here; however, as I hope to show as we go on, there is value in pausing at the former, more modest, claim, and seeing what we can establish on this basis.

Standard Calvinistic defences of particular redemption offer ample evidence for the first position, that Christ died only for the church; the second, that Christ died for the elect only, but there are some who are elect who are

never visible members of the church, is not dissimilar; it requires only a plausible suggestion that there are some who are elect, but who are not members of the visible church. It seems to me that we might find at least three candidate-groups: ethnic Israel; elect infants; and so-called 'virtuous pagans'. In each case, it is not difficult to suggest some level of exegetical plausibility: the continuity of the Mosaic covenant; David's assertion that he will go to be with his dead child; the life of Job.

Again, my point here is not to argue that this is true—I am not defending an inclusivist account of salvation—rather I am suggesting that there are texts in Scripture, that, read in isolation, might invite us to imagine and consider the truth of the point, even if we are also very aware of texts which point strongly in the opposite direction.

The Arminian exegetes pointed adequately to texts that invited us to imagine what they called a 'universal' extent of the atonement; what of the two points in my system which imagine a broader extent of salvation than even this 'universal' scheme? Origen argued that salvation extended to all spiritual or ensouled or intelligent beings, not excluding malevolent spirits; given Origen's expertise as an exegete, it is no surprise that there is some Biblical basis for this. Texts that assert 'Christ will be all in all' or that picture every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth bowing, and every tongue confessing the Lordship of Christ, will serve. Again, of course there are texts which equally clearly affirm a final separation, but my intention here is not to defend the position, merely to claim that it has at least some plausible Biblical basis.

My final position, which opened the scope of salvation out to the rocks, mountains, trees, and other plants and inanimate creatures, has an obvious emotional attraction. It is not hard to think of beautiful wildernesses—or indeed beautiful gardens, or a favourite pet—that some of us might feel the new creation would be less perfect without. Is there any Scriptural warrant for such imaginings, however? One obvious place to look is the anticipations of the renewal of 'all creation' in Romans 8.

I am not claiming that any of these positions are right, merely that in every case there is some sort of Biblical case that could be made. Controversialists on all sides of the early modern debate assumed that these five positions were mutually exclusive, and so that one had to defend one as correct and find ways of explaining away the apparent Biblical support for the others. My problem with that is rather simple: I don't want to be in the position of explaining away any text of the Bible. If something is just bad exegesis, it must be rejected, but a degree of exegetical plausibility is enough to make me want, out of respect for the authority of Holy Scripture, to pause and take a position very seriously.

I have suggested that the proper task of the systematic theologian is to imagine new conceptualities, new ways of envisaging the way things are, that allow us to take seriously wider and wider circles of the Biblical witness. If this is the case, then the body of Biblical data we have just glanced over would seem an area ripe for systematic investigation. Can we find a way of not having to choose between limited atonement and universal atonement, but instead affirming that they are both right, and that the Scriptures they each point to so powerfully can all be read in plain sense? It happens that there is a recent development in atonement theology which I propose might help us here, although it has not to the best of my knowledge been applied to this question before.

Metaphors for the Atonement

Colin Gunton looked at three accounts of atonement: theories that focus on justice; sacrificial pictures; and *Christus victor* type theories (1988). As his subtitle suggests, Gunton used the concept of metaphor to explore his three accounts of atonement. He argued that we should not dismiss metaphors as being uninteresting or unreal: they are useful ways to make language work, and—the crucial point—to begin to describe things for which we otherwise lack any words or conceptuality. A metaphor conveys something of that which is unknown, or indescribable, by proposing an in exact, but nonetheless helpful and meaningful, comparison with something known.

The point of thinking about different atonement theories as metaphors is that we stop having to choose between them. The question is not, is the right way to think about the work of Christ penal substitution or *Christus victor*? Instead both of these, and several other metaphors, all help us grasp better the truth of the indescribable event of the atonement (I have argued this point at more length in my *The Wondrous Cross*).

There are several advantages to thinking like this about the atonement. The most important is that it helps us to make better sense of the Biblical data. Scripture seems to pile up different pictures of atonement in remarkably haphazard ways—take a classic passage in Romans 3:24-5, where Paul writes: ‘they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith...’ (NRSV). ‘Justified’ is a word that belongs in the law court; it speaks of the one accused of a crime, now, released because declared not guilty. ‘Redemption’, by contrast, belongs in the slave market; the word recalls the manumission price to buy his or her freedom. ‘Sacrifice of atonement’ is temple language, recalling the animals ritually slaughtered to cover over the sins of the covenant people. Paul grabs hold of three very different images and piles them up next to each other.

A second advantage of thinking like this is the way it helps us make sense of historical data. Whilst various partisans for various perspectives claim to

find a golden thread running through the history of Christian atonement doctrine in one direction or another, more sober historiography has to acknowledge that it is not there: different accounts of the atonement come to prominence at different times, and sometimes in different places, and we cannot claim that any one theory has any discernible historical precedence. If we are concerned to find the one true doctrine of the atonement, this will disappoint us; on a many metaphors account, it need not concern us at all.

More than such explanatory advantages, though, I think that an account like this takes more seriously the wonder and the glory of the work of Christ. If we insist that the death of Christ really is a sacrifice, say, we reduce it to one sacrifice amongst many others—perhaps it is the preeminent one, but, still, it is just one member of a class. The same will be true for every other atonement theory if we take it to be a true and complete account. Surely it is better to believe that what God has done in Christ is so far beyond and before every other human reality that we can never reduce it in our understanding like this. It is a unique event, of endless and inexhaustible power and significance; to deny this by claiming we can give an adequate account is surely dishonouring.

Metaphors for the Atonement and the Extent of the Atonement

There may be good reasons for accepting this account of atonement doctrine, but does it help us with our problem concerning the extent of the atonement? I think it might, although the first move is to complicate things even further. If we reflect on the different metaphors, we see both that they imply different extents to the act of atonement, and that they imply different mechanisms to achieve those extents.

So, we might go through our five potential extents of the atonement and find at least one plausible atonement metaphor that seems to support each. Atonement limited only to the visible church is supported by a moral example-type theory; atonement limited to the elect is supported by certain versions of penal substitution and by ransom-type theories; atonement made for the whole human race is supported by another sort of penal substitution or by some of the recapitulation-type theories based on the incarnation; atonement made for all spiritual creatures might be supported by some version of a *Christus victor* type theory; salvation for the whole of creation, another version of recapitulation or *Christus victor*.

So, differing atonement metaphors enable us to embrace different limits to the extent of the act of atonement, but this still leaves a problem: how does this work? Salvation, atonement, is fundamentally about the question of whether people are born once, or born again; dead in trespasses and sins, or alive in Christ; slaves to sin, or daughters and sons of the Father—to

say they are within the scope of redemption on one account, but outside on another, is not plausible given this fundamental binary reality of human life.

I can see a possible answer to this point: although the outcome is necessarily binary, there might be many conditions that need to be fulfilled for a person to pass from death to life. We might begin to list some: the penalty due for her sins needs to be paid; she needs to be ransomed from the power of death; the work of the devil in her life needs to be defeated; she needs to be given a new nature; her will needs to be turned from evil to good—we could go on. It is at least possible to imagine the situation where some, but not all, of these conditions are met in her life; she is not unaffected by Christ's work of atonement, but nor is she in the place where she is born again and saved.

Now, I sketched the various extents of the atonement above as a series of concentric circles, in which case there would be an argument for limiting the word 'atonement' to the innermost circle, and all this talk of varying extents is interesting but irrelevant. There are two ways to respond to this point. First, I return to the driving force of this development, and the Biblical data: if it is the case that the Bible invites and encourages us to speak of the atonement as both universal and limited, then this sort of construction gives us a way of doing that; even if it makes little difference to our practice, if we can speak in ways that are more faithful to the Biblical revelation, less reliant on evasion or special pleading in the face of this or that text, then that is surely already an advance.

Second, what might it mean to speak of people who potentially had somehow been affected by Christ's work of atonement and yet not saved? An interesting possible answer is available in the work of a number of British evangelical theologians in the nineteenth century. James Ott, T. R. Birks, and others proposed a view whereby all people were affected by the death of Christ, but not all were saved. The experience of those condemned to eternal punishment is different from what it would have been had Christ not lived and died. The sufferings of the damned, they proposed, might be changed for the better by what Christ has done (I was introduced to this idea, termed 'reconciliationism', by my former doctoral student, Shawn Bawulski). Their arguments varied, and some were more convincing than others. The most interesting, perhaps, was the line that, seeing how Christ suffered, the lost would come to a true appreciation of the horror of their own sin and so would accept, almost welcome, their punishment as just, deserved, appropriate, and necessary.

However, it is worked out here, these theologians proposed that the future destiny of all people is somehow affected by Christ's work of atonement, the lost as well as the saved. If we can imagine that this thesis might be correct—and to extend it beyond people, to the whole created order—

then we can begin to picture how this multiple extents of the atonement picture I have tried to sketch here might work. All of reality is transformed in different ways by Christ's work—only some are saved, but none are left unchanged. I want to leave this position at that level of abstraction, because I have yet to work out the details in ways that I find fully convincing, and I offer the theory as a general possibility, not about a particular development of it. On any account like this, however, the extent of the atonement can be held to be both universal and limited, cosmic and particular. This seems to me to be an advance in terms of fidelity to the sweep of biblical witness.

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