

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 8

KEY TERMS: PROPITIATION, PART 3

The way these theologians can say that Christ died for the world is to impose another theological construct onto the Scriptures by claiming the presentation of the gospel to all people is true and should be done but only the elect can respond to a “special inward call” and be saved. “...the Father; before the foundation of the world, marked out those who were to be saved and gave them to the Son to be His people. At the appointed time, the Son came into the world and secured their redemption. But these two great acts—election and redemption—do not complete the work of salvation, because included in God’s plan for recovering lost sinners is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, by which the benefits of Christ’s obedience and death are applied to the elect. It is with this phase of salvation (its application by the Spirit) that the doctrine of irresistible or efficacious grace is concerned....this doctrine asserts that the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ. He inevitably applies salvation to every sinner whom He intends to save, and it is His intention to save all the elect.

The *gospel invitation* extends a call to salvation to every one who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. It promises salvation to all who repent and believe. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and nonelect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and are under its power. They are of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and turn to Christ for mercy. Consequently, the unregenerate will not respond to the gospel call to repentance and faith. No amount of external threatenings or promises will cause blind, deaf, dead, rebellious sinners to bow before Christ as Lord and to look to Him alone for salvation. Such an act of faith and submission is contrary to the lost man’s nature.

Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God’s elect to salvation, extends to them a *special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call, the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner, which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth; in the spiritual realm, he is given the seeing eye and the hearing ear. The Spirit creates within him a new heart or a new nature. This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life. His will is renewed through this process, so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice. Because he is given a new nature so that he loves righteousness, and because his mind is enlightened so that he understands and believes the biblical gospel, the renewed sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior. Thus, the once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward, supernatural call of the Spirit, who through regeneration makes him alive and creates faith and repentance within him.

Although the general outward call of the gospel can be, and often is, rejected, the special inward call of the Spirit never fails to result in the conversion of those to

whom it is made. This special call is not made to all sinners, but is issued to the elect only....The grace which the Holy Spirit extends to the elect cannot be thwarted or refused; it never fails to bring them to true faith in Christ" [David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, pp. 52-54].

Here are some of the Soteriological problems with this theology as these men have presented it.

1. Before the foundation of the world, God selected those who would believe and be saved.
2. Christ secured redemption on the cross only for the elect. This means Christ's death was only for those elect people. He did not die for the sins of the world as 1 John 2:2 clearly tells us.
3. The elect must respond to grace and be saved while the non-elect are unable to affirmatively respond. The non-elect must remain unsavable; Christ did not die for them. The unregenerate, non-elect will never come to faith because they were not selected for eternal life prior to the foundation of the world. Their counter argument against unlimited atonement is that those not saved were doomed in Adam anyway so they are just getting what they deserve while the elect are not deserving either but God chose them to experience His grace and be saved simply due to His sovereign choice. The problem is the Bible says everyone has a bona fide chance to be saved based on belief.
4. The preaching of the gospel message will not bring sinners to the point of belief. This contradicts Romans 10:17 which informs us "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." There is no qualification to this Scripture; everyone who hears may believe. Spiritually dead people are capable of responding to God as He draws them to Him and they can understand the gospel when they hear it.
5. The doctrine of total depravity is interpreted to mean that spiritually dead people can do nothing without first being regenerated or given the new birth and then they are divinely enabled to believe. The problem is that total depravity does not mean cessation. Spiritually dead people know God and they can respond to the light God provides them in and through His drawing ministry. These theologians disregard the revelation that unbelievers, without exception, know God (Rom. 1:18-19). "We are not justified by conversion; rather, conversion, or the new birth, is the gift of God given to those who are spiritually dead and, therefore, are unable to choose Christ. In the new birth, God grants the faith necessary to respond positively, and it is through this faith, not conversion itself, that one is accepted by God" [Michael Horton, "Union With Christ" in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, Michael Horton, ed., p. 109]. The only result of regeneration or the new birth is that the unbeliever is given the faith to believe which must be exercised and only then results in being accepted by God. What does "being accepted by God" mean as opposed to regeneration? Regeneration is the new birth and at that moment we are justified, that is, declared "not guilty" and accepted by God into the family of God and granted eternal life. Once we are regenerated, there is nothing left to do in terms of justification. We become acceptable to God in that very instant because we have

entered into spiritual life. In my mind, this doctrine is clearly saying that a person must be born again in order to have the faith given to him in order to be born again.

6. The term unregenerate is defined to mean non-elect rather than those who are not born again in general. The elect are unregenerate until they are saved but this apparently isn't the meaning they assign to the word.
7. The concept of a special inward call for the elect only is completely unsupported in Scripture. Everyone, without exception, is subject to the drawing ministry of God and the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit and everyone has the same opportunity to hear and believe the gospel message as the Word is preached. There is no special call given to the elect only. That doctrine is pure theological fiction totally made up apart from any biblical authority in order to justify their doctrine that the gospel should be preached to all people but only the elect can respond to it.
8. The idea that faith in the form of an inner transformation which is the new birth is the event that then allows a person to believe is unbiblical. Faith is not the gift of God; salvation is the gift of God and it is actuated by belief on our part. We believe which results in the new birth; we are not born again or regenerated or converted and then believe. Regeneration does not create faith; regeneration is the result of faith.
9. In this theology, there is no free choice to believe. If God regenerates a person prior to belief because that person cannot come to faith by hearing the gospel and exercising faith, then free choice is destroyed. The elect will be saved and the non-elect will be lost and that is due solely to God's sovereign choice. This is double predestination whereby the elect were chosen to be granted eternal life and the lost were chosen for the lake of fire. Some Reformed theologians deny this; they claim God only chose those who would be saved but it is illogical to say that, at least by default, the lost are not chosen for eternal damnation. There are some, but not many, honest Reformed theologians who will admit that their theology is, in fact, double predestination according to their definition of the word. R. C. Sproul claims this to be the position of the hyper-Calvinist. He ought to know; he is widely considered to be the Reformed theologian *par excellence*.

Some Calvinist theologians do realize this theology is untenable and they do reject it in favor of a more biblical understanding of propitiation. "These texts suggest that John often uses the term 'world' to refer to the entire human race without distinction. John recognizes often that not everyone believes, and hence he is not teaching that the sins of every single person in the world are actually removed by Jesus' death. Nor when he says that Jesus is the Savior of the world should we conclude that every single person in the world is saved by Jesus. What John emphasizes, rather, is that the whole world without distinction, both Jews and Gentiles, is the object of God's saving love in Christ" [Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*, pp. 92-93]. He is not correct when he says Jesus' death did not remove personal sins; He did do that (1 John 2:2). If he is implying that Jesus' death is not effective unless and until any particular individual believes, that is correct. To his credit, Schreiner recognizes that the common teaching in his theological system that the world is only the world of the elect and that "all" means only the elect from all tongues, tribes, and nations of the world is faulty and the offer is made to all the people of the world without qualification.

Since I just mentioned double predestination and that is a soteriological issue, it will be worthwhile to quote Sproul on the issue. I don't agree with the Reformed definition of "predestination" and I will define it later, but that is the term they use in this context so for now we will deal with as they define it. "Predestination is double. The only way to avoid the doctrine of double predestination is to either affirm that God predestinates everybody to election or that He predestinates no one either to election or reprobation. Since the Bible clearly teaches predestination to election and denies universal salvation, we must conclude that predestination is double. It includes both election and reprobation. Double predestination is unavoidable if we take Scripture seriously. What is crucial, however, is how double predestination is understood.

Some have viewed double predestination as a matter of equal causation, where God is equally responsible for causing the reprobate not to believe as He is for causing the elect to believe. We call this a *positive-positive* view of predestination.

The positive-positive view of predestination teaches that God positively and actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to work grace in their hearts and bring them to faith. Likewise, in the case of the reprobates, He works evil in the hearts of the reprobate and actively prevents them from coming to faith. This view has often been called 'hyper-Calvinism' because it goes beyond the view of Calvin, Luther, and the other Reformers.

The Reformed view of double predestination follows a *positive-negative* schema. In the case of the elect, God intervenes to positively and actively work grace in their souls and bring them to saving faith. He unilaterally regenerates the elect and insures their salvation. In the case of the reprobate He does not work evil in them or prevent them from coming to faith. Rather, He passes over them, leaving them to their own sinful devices. In this view there is no symmetry of divine action. God's activity is asymmetrical between the elect and the reprobate. There is, however, a kind of equal ultimacy. The reprobate, who are passed over by God, are ultimately doomed, and their damnation is as certain and sure as the ultimate salvation of the elect" [R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, pp. 165-166].

The great Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield taught double predestination. "Their segregation [the elect], of course, leaves others not elected, to whom none of their privileges are granted; from whom none of their services are expected; with whom their glorious destiny is not shared. This, too, is of God" [Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, p. 302].

Because this system is a theological construct imposed on the Scriptures, many contradictions arise within it. Sproul and Warfield disagree on the nature of double predestination. Grudem denies that doctrine altogether. In response to the charge that those not elect are doomed without recourse, he wrote, "The mistaken assumption underlying this objection is that a choice must be absolutely free (that is, not in any way caused by God) in order for it to be a genuine human choice....the Reformed position...certainly allows for genuine human volition or human will in choices that are made, and simply says that God is so wise and powerful that he *ordains* that we respond *willingly*" [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 680 and n. 14]. This is a serious case of double speak.

My point is that once we depart from literal hermeneutics in favor of theological systems, there is no real limit on the interpretations that can be imposed on the Bible. In turn, that can have a real detrimental effect on Soteriology. For example, when William Carey, the father of modern missions, brought up the subject of missions he was told by another pastor, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" [Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey*, p. 53]. Why would they have this attitude? Because they "saw little need for the promiscuous preaching of the gospel, since it was obviously useless to exhort unconverted sinners to do what they neither *could* do, nor indeed had any obligation to do!" [George, p. 54-55]. Theology has serious consequences for Soteriology!

One theologian misinterprets 1 John 2:2 to say this verse means that Jesus is the only Savior available to the whole world. He calls this "ethnic universalism" but it is actually the same thing I just read from Dr. Horton when he writes that salvation is not available to all men but to men of every nation, tribe, and tongue. What he does is he changes the meaning of the verse in order to conform to his theology.

"In still other 'all' texts, the reference may be to what we call 'ethnic' universalism, namely that Jesus died for people of all nations, tongues, races, and tribes. That may be the meaning in 1 Timothy 2:6 [which says, "...who gave Himself as a ransom for all..."], which mentions the nations in the first two verses of the chapter [That is not correct. Paul was simply asking for prayer for kings and those in authority.]. But I prefer to take this verse as meaning that the death of Christ warrants a free offer of the gospel to everybody, for he is the *only* Savior. That point is clearer in 1 John 2:2, for example, where the writer says that Jesus 'is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.' His point is that Jesus is the *only* Savior. There is none other in the whole wide world. So that if anyone, anywhere, say, in Thailand or Sri Lanka, is seeking a propitiation with God, he will find no other except in the blood of Jesus" [John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, p. 907]. Of course Jesus is the only Savior but that is not the point of these verses. The point of 1 Timothy 2:1-2 is to pray for kings and those in authority so that all men will be able to live a tranquil and quiet life. 1 Timothy 2:6 says exactly what it means; Christ gave Himself as a ransom for all men. There is nothing in the word "all" or in the context of the verse to suggest so called "ethnic universalism." The point of 1 John 2:2 is that Jesus paid the sin debt for all sins for all men for all time. There is nothing in that verse that limits it to the elect and that is the imaginary problem this theologian is attempting to solve. He knows what the verse says but he has to reinterpret it and change its thrust in order to make it conform to his theology. There are other verses that can be found to say that Jesus is the only Savior of the world but 1 John 2:2 isn't one of them. John 14:6 may be the most well-known example.

John 14:6 "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

It is an abuse of Scripture to make his case that Jesus is the only Savior using a verse that does not prove anything of the sort. If he was really interested in saying Jesus is the only Savior, John 14:6 makes that point very well. But that isn't his interest. His interest is in justi-

fying his theology that says only the elect chosen before the foundation of the world can come to faith. The end result is a doctrine that is simply made up and has no basis in Scripture.

This word, ἰλασμός, refers to “the means of putting away sin and establishing righteousness. God is never presented as changing His mind toward the sinner or the sin that estranged the sinner from Him. Man is never said to be able to appease God with any of his offerings, as in the heathen religions where man offered gifts in an attempt to accomplish this” [Zodhiates, s. v. “ἰλάσμος”, p. 770]. “If there had been no death of Christ, God would have been unable to justify the sinner. Apart from the death of Christ, the only manifestation of righteousness is the sinner’s condemnation in death. By virtue of Christ’s death, the divine justice and mercy have both found their perfect realization. In justice God has dealt with sin as sin must be treated, and at the same time in mercy he has acquitted the sinner of all guilt and delivered her or him from its doom. We may therefore conclude, even though the Scriptures nowhere use this terminology, that Christ in his death in a real sense of the word experienced the wrath of God in the place of the guilty sinner” [George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 473].

In the ancient Greek literature, there was an adjective form of this word group, ἰλεως, which had the sense of being gracious, kindly, and benevolent. Plato used this word to mean “‘to make the gods gracious [through sacrifices],’ i.e., ‘to propitiate, appease the gods.’ Such a meaning...is usually expressed with the vb. ἰλάσκομαι, also found in Homer, where it always refers to the act of appeasing the gods....The basic idea behind the religious use of ἰλάσκομαι in the Gk. world is the human effort to dispose in one’s own favor the awful and freq. calamitous power of the dead, the demons, and the gods, and to strengthen one’s own actions by the assistance of supernatural forces. This religious conception presupposes some elementary knowledge of the threat posed to human existence by the envy, punishment, wrath, and baseless anger of the all powerful gods.” [New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis, Moises Silva, rev. ed., s. v. “ἰλάσκομαι”].

In the Greek literature, the idea is that the person does something to propitiate the gods. In Christian theology, there is nothing we can do. As our sinless and therefore qualified representative, Jesus could do it and He did. He was the only One who could satisfy the perfect justice and holiness of God. “While the New Testament as well as the Old has as its background for Christ’s atoning work the wrath of God, this is in no way to be interpreted as turning God’s wrath into love. In pagan Greek thought, the gods often became angry with human beings, but their anger could be placated and the goodwill of the gods obtained by some propitiatory sacrifice. Even in the Old Testament, the idea of atonement as the propitiating of an angry deity and transmuting his anger into benevolence is not to be found” [George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 465]. In other words, God’s justice had to be satisfied and the point Ladd is making here is that God’s wrath is not turned into love for the whole world through propitiation. God’s wrath is no longer applicable to the believer through faith in Christ but His wrath remains to be poured out on an unbelieving world. Zodhiates says, “...it is not the nature of God that is changed from one of hatred to one of love toward

man, but it is the nature of man that is changed" [Zodhiates, s. v. "ἰλάσκομαι]. We become a new person in Christ and reconciled to God at the moment of belief.

The word ἰλεως is translated "merciful" in Hebrews 8:12. It could be understood more literally to be saying, "I will be gracious to their iniquities...". Grace and mercy seem to be components or attributes of the word group for propitiation.

Hebrews 8:12 ¹²"FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL [ἰλεως] TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE."

The word is also used as an idiom as in ἰλεως σοι which means "[May God be] gracious to you" but it was expressed in a negative sense such as "Far be it from you!" or "Never!" or "God forbid!" Peter used it when he rebuked the Lord for predicting His death on the cross. He was literally saying, "Be merciful to yourself, Lord!"

Matthew 16:22 ²²Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord [Ἰλεως σοι κύριε]! This shall never happen to You."

When I was defining "atonement," I mentioned that the word is not used in the New Testament with the exception of one use in the KJV and that was an incorrect translation; the correct translation should have been "reconciliation." I have since discovered that the word "atonement" is used in other versions in five verses but always in connection with the word group for propitiation. In Hebrews 2:17, the NIV translates ἰλάσκομαι as "atonement;" the NASB has it as "propitiation." In Hebrews 9:5, the NIV translates ἰλαστήριον as "atonement cover;" the NASB has it "mercy seat." In Romans 3:25, the NIV translates ἰλαστήριον as "sacrifice of atonement;" the NASB has it "propitiation." In 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, the NIV has ἰλασμός translated as "atoning sacrifice;" the NASB has it as "propitiation." The NET Bible uses atonement in Romans 3:25 but in the notes they suggest "propitiation" as an alternate interpretation. The NET Bible also uses "atoning sacrifice" in both verses in 1 John. This is the explanation they provide in their translation notes for 1 John 2:2: "A suitable English translation for this word (ἰλασμός, *hilasmos*) is a difficult and even controversial problem. 'Expiation,' 'propitiation,' and 'atonement' have all been suggested. L. Morris, in a study that has become central to discussions of this topic (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 140), sees as an integral part of the meaning of the word (as in other words in the ἰλάσκομαι [*hilaskomai*] group) the idea of *turning away the divine wrath*, suggesting that 'propitiation' is the closest English equivalent....the English word 'propitiation' is too technical to communicate to many modern readers, and a term like 'atoning sacrifice' (given by Webster's *New International Dictionary* as a definition of 'propitiation') is more appropriate here. Another term, 'satisfaction,' might also convey the idea, but 'satisfaction' in Roman Catholic theology is a technical term for the performance of the penance imposed by the priest on a penitent." In other words and in my opinion, the NET Bible has opted for making the Bible more understandable to the modern reader at the expense of the precise translation of

the word group. In their defense, they have translated the NET Bible specifically for placement on the internet so that any person with computer and internet access around the world can access the Bible even in places where it would otherwise be impossible to obtain a copy. I can understand their desire to make it as understandable as possible for people who may be operating with a native language other than English. I believe it is a good overall translation that serves its purpose well. I have suggested that the word "atonement" carries the idea of temporal restoration in the Old Testament; therefore, I don't think it is an appropriate word to use in the New Testament in place of "propitiation."