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WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR CHRIST'S DEATH?

Another question that will help us answer the issue is “who was responsible for the death of Christ? This was the recent question surrounding Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion”. The question had been raised at Vatican II and there has always been an attempt to shift the guilt from one group to another. Was it the Romans or was it the Jews? For some reason people can’t read the Bible. The Bible assigns responsibility to three realms—the divine, the angelic, and the human. Both OT and NT assign responsibility to God (e.g., Isa. 53:6 *The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all* and John 10:18 *No one has taken it [My life] away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again*). Satan is also held responsible for Christ’s death as disclosed in the *protoevangelium* (i.e., “first good news”) of Genesis 3:15. It was said of Satan that he would bruise the Seed of the Woman on the heel. The Seed of the Woman is Christ of course and to bruise one on the heel is not a mortal wound. It was a diabolic attempt to destroy the Savior. Finally, mankind is also held responsible for the death of Christ. Just because God designed the crucifixion to be a part of His plan and just because Satan was instrumental in that plan does not mean that mankind was not also responsible for crucifying Christ. Acts 4:27-28 says, *“For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”* (Also see Acts 2:23 and Rev. 13:8). Since the Scriptures also teach that Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6) then it follows that it was the sin of the entire human race that made necessary Christ’s death, not just the sin of the elect. The Scriptures never make a distinction between elect sinners and non-elect sinners. If you make a distinction between God’s elect and the non-elect before salvation you are making a major theological mistake.

So, there are two sides to the cross, there is the sinful demonic/human side which put the sinless Christ to death. But there is the divine side also. This putting to death of the sinless

one by sinners did not catch God off guard. True Christ was put to death by a most hideous and wicked crime, the most wicked crime ever committed, yet God “*delivered [Christ] over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of*” Himself (Acts 2:23). And only God could turn that wicked act into a glorious, triumphant, by grace through faith salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). So, we’ve determined that Christ was sinless, we’ve determined that His death was substitutionary, we saw that three realms were responsible for the death of Christ—the divine, the angelic, and mankind. So, in order to advance beyond where we are now, we have to ask another question, “Why did Christ die? Was it to *obtain* salvation for all men (Arminianism)? Was it to *secure* the salvation of the elect (Strict Calvinism)? Or was it to *make available* salvation for all men (Moderate Calvinism)?

WHY DID CHRIST DIE?

Everybody agrees that not all will be saved (except the radical anti-biblical Universalists). The answer to the question, “For whom did Christ die?” can only be given by understanding God’s intent in the death of His Son. Boettner put it this way, “The nature of the atonement settles its extent.” Too often this is not always understood. Too often people think the choice is between Calvinism and Arminianism. For example, one might say that if you reject limited atonement then you are an Arminian or if you accept limited atonement then you are a Calvinist. This is simply not true. There are far more serious differences between the two theologies. It seems far better to say that one believes this tenet or that tenet because he finds agreement with it in the Bible than to imply that he accepts the entire theological structure of either Arminianism or Calvinism. Many individuals accept 3 or 4 of the 5 points of Calvinism, many reject Limited Atonement. These people are what we call Moderate Calvinists. The charge is often made by Calvinists that there is no such thing as a 3 or 4-Point Calvinist; that, if you don’t hold to all 5 points you are an Arminian. This is an absurd charge. There are far more important issues involved to make that determination. In light of this, there are actually 3 ways to look at the nature of the atonement. When we discover the biblical nature of the atonement, we will know who Christ died for, that is, the extent of the atonement

HISTORY OF THE CONTROVERSY

Now I want to give you the development of the controversy by looking at a little Church History. Over the years it’s my prayer that you will get a better understanding of the cross. We can’t do it all today because this is difficult stuff. I’ve always marveled at the fact that the gospel of the cross is so *simple* a child can understand it and yet so *complex* that we

could spend the rest of eternity dwelling on the ins and outs of the gospel and its implications. Historically, the development of the doctrine of the atonement can be looked at in four stages.

STAGE 1: ANSELM AND THE REFORMERS

Up until the 11th century the prevailing view of the atonement was the Ransom Theory. The ransom theory taught that Christ death was a ransom-price paid to Satan so that Satan's claims on man could be released. But then came Anselm. Anselm was the famed Archbishop of Canterbury. He lived in the 11th and 12th centuries and wrote what many consider the most important Christian work outside of the New Testament. The book is titled *Cur Deus Homo*, "Why the God Man". The book is a dialogue between Anselm and a disciple named Boso. This is like the dream debate, to debate a guy named Boso. In this work Anselm sought to give the reason for God becoming man. He found the answer in the cross. Anselm argued four basic points:

1. That man's ultimate duty was to live in conformity with God's character
2. Man failed by sinning in Adam and therefore is obligated to God to repay the debt owed to God.
3. God provided the God-man to repay the debt in place of the sinner. "The sinners substitute must be God in order to present a worthy sacrifice, and the substitute must be man in order to restore Adam's fallen race since this was man's obligation."ⁱ
4. The God-man could restore Adam's fallen race because He was not obligated to repay God. Since His death was not deserved, it was a voluntary death, and the infinite injustice of nailing Him to the cross therefore earns infinite merit.

Nothing was due to the devil but everything was due to God's *honor*. God could not arbitrarily forgive man because to do so would violate His *honor* and God would cease to be God. Therefore, Anselm argued that God's *honor* must be restored before there can be forgiveness. God then must provide the satisfaction. Man should, but cannot; God need not, but does. "But as God himself must make the satisfaction, and man ought to make it, the satisfaction must be made by one who is both God and man, that is, the God-man."ⁱⁱⁱ This was the essence of Anselm's argument. A Propitiator had to be man because man was obligated to God, but He must also be God so that His sacrifice would be of infinite value and cover all of mankind's sin. So, Anselm was the first to teach (apart from the Scriptures) that the key to the atonement was its Substitutionary character. The weakness of Anselm's argument was that it grounded the necessity of the atonement in God's *honor* rather than in God's *justice*.

400 years later the Reformers cry was “God is propitiated!” The Reformers advanced Anselm’s view in a more comprehensive and complete way. They clarified by saying the atonement was necessary because of God’s *justice*, not God’s *honor*. In terms of the extent of the atonement Luther clearly held to a form of Unlimited Atonement. His comment on 1 John 2:2 says, “It is a patent fact that thou art a part of the whole world; so that thine heart cannot deceive itself, and think, the Lord died for Peter and Paul, but not for me.” There is no consensus among scholars as to Calvin’s views. Some say he was Limited (e.g., Roger Nicole, *John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement*, Westminster Theological Journal 47:2 (Fall 1985) and others Unlimited (Ron Rhodes, *The Extent of the Atonement: Limited Atonement Versus Unlimited Atonement (Part One)*, Chafer Theological Seminary Journal, 1996). Statements by Calvin go both ways but some seem to teach unlimited atonement. For example, On John 1:29 “**Jesus takes away the sin of the world**” Calvin says, “He uses the word sin in the singular number for any kind of iniquity; as if I had said that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ. And when he says the sin of the world, he extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race.”ⁱⁱⁱ If it be argued that by the words “the whole human race, is meant only *a part of the world*, such as *the world of the elect*, then let Calvin speak to this. Commenting on Matthew 26:28 “**...This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins**” Calvin writes, “Under the name of many he designates not a part of the world only, but the whole human race.”^{iv} Calvin uses the phrase “whole human race” to refer to every individual and not a *part* of the world in any sense. However, b/c of other statements by Calvin that support limited atonement we find a lack of uniformity and clarity (from their writings at least) defining precisely where the original Reformers stood on the extent of the atonement. However, in Stage 2 things would quickly sharpen and eventually key in on this point.

STAGE 2: THE ARMINIAN REMONSTRANCE (1610)

In 1610, the year after Jacobus Arminius died his followers outlined their opposition to the *Belgic Confession of Faith* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* which stressed what later became known as the 5 Points of Calvinism. (It might be noted that Luther and Calvin had passed away more than 50 years before this all took place.) Their opposition to these documents was structured into five articles called “The Remonstrance”. The five basic points emphasized,

1. Free Will of man due to sufficient grace
2. Election based on foreseen faith/Conditional Election

3. Unlimited Atonement
4. Sufficient grace resistible
5. Scriptures not clear on loss of salvation*

For sake of clarity, we will spend most of our time dealing only with Arminian Unlimited Atonement. We've already looked at the basic five points of "The Remonstrance" but it would shine some light on their view if we were to read their statement on the design of the atonement. It reads, in Article II, "Jesus Christ the Savior 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;". The key word is the word *obtained*. What the Arminian's are saying is not that Christ's death *provided* salvation for all but that it *obtained* salvation for all. This explains why Arminian's believe that each member of the human race has been given sufficient grace to be saved (Article IV). What sufficient grace means is that God has given each man grace or favor so that he is enabled to believe, if he will. What this all means is that "on the basis of Christ's death, and because He *obtained* forgiveness of sins for all, every man now has a degree of grace sufficient to generate faith and repentance if the man yields to it."^v Looked at another way, this means that the one who does not believe only fails to believe because he determines whether the grace he possesses will or will not save. In other words, the Arminian believes that salvation is by sufficient grace + human works. Man cooperates with God in salvation. This strikes at the very heart of Total Depravity as described in Scripture. The Scriptures state that all unsaved men are "**lost**" (Luke 19:10), "**condemned**" (John 3:18), under the "**wrath of God**" (Eph. 2:1, 2), are "**enemies**" of God (Rom. 5:10), and possess a heart that is "**desperately wicked**" (Jer. 17:9). It doesn't sound to me like the Scriptures support the idea that God has imparted a sufficient amount of grace to each man so that all men can believe, if they will. In the very least it flies in the face of Total Depravity of man as presented in the Scriptures. Salvation is by grace but not by the supplying of sufficient grace to the individual enabling him to cooperate with God in salvation. This takes too much away from God in the plan of salvation. "It would seem then that while the Arminian acknowledges the scriptural teaching of man's lost condition, he softens that teaching by his doctrine of sufficient grace."^{vi}

In reality, then, the Arminian rejects the truth that man is born totally incapable of doing anything to merit favor with God or to even move toward God, and, instead, affirms that man was given a measure of grace which makes him acceptable to God if man will only add his part and accept God. This means that an individual's decision to believe or not to

believe is quite unrelated to the *elective purposes* of God or the *drawing ministry* of the Holy Spirit. This reveals the weakness of the Arminian answer.

Just 8 years later Calvinists around Europe had a meeting of their own to respond to the five articles of “The Remonstrance”. This was called the Synod of Dort.

STAGE 3: THE CALVINIST SYNOD OF DORDT (1618-19)

What these Calvinists saw when they looked at “The Remonstrance” was the dangers of humanism and liberal theology creeping into the church. *Sufficient Grace* nullified *Total Depravity* and gave to men the ability to cooperate in salvation. This took too much from God in the plan of salvation. To be quite frank these Strict Calvinists were right. What they sought to do was to put a lid on this form of humanism before it infected the whole Protestant Church. Looking back historically we can see that they failed. The five points of Arminianism are basically the most prevalent doctrine in the church; Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Anglican, Pentecostalism, Free Will Baptist, and most charismatic and holiness believers. It is very difficult to stamp out humanism in men’s thinking.

So, in order to head this thing off, these Calvinists called a Synod at Dort. Arminians were there to present their arguments but they were quickly rejected by the Calvinists who were in the majority. In the process, the Calvinists formulated five articles of their own to combat against the Arminian Remonstrant’s. Their formulation is commonly known by the acronym TULIP.^{vii}

1. Total Depravity/Total Inability
2. Unconditional Election
3. Limited Atonement
4. Irresistible Grace
5. Perseverance of the Saints

Again, the main point we are looking at is only Limited Atonement or what many call Particular Redemption. However, the major thing to note about this controversy is that the Synod of Dort was *a response to a system*. They wanted to put a lid on Arminian humanism. It was not an attempt to simply express biblical doctrine. *It was a system attacking another system*. The tendency is to overstate one’s case when one is deeply offended by another person or idea.

What exactly does the Synod of Dordt say regarding the extent of the atonement? I'm taking you directly to the original source material, not second-hand literature. They say, "For this was the Sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation."^{viii} This statement has been taken by the followers of Calvinism to teach Limited Atonement. This statement obviously differs from the Arminian Remonstrance. Calvinists limit the atonement to the elect and view all natural men as totally depraved, unable to cooperate with God in anything. For example, Murray states, "The doctrine of the atonement must be radically revised if...it applies to those who finally perish as well as to those who are the heirs of eternal life...This we cannot do...If some of those for whom atonement was made and redemption wrought perish eternally, then the atonement is not itself efficacious...We shall have none of it. The doctrine of 'limited atonement' which we maintain is the doctrine which limits the atonement to those who are heirs of eternal life, to the elect. That limitation ensures its efficacy and conserves its essential character as efficient and effective redemption."^{ix} More simply stated, Charles Hodge says, "The righteousness of Christ did not make the salvation of men merely possible; it secured the actual salvation of those for whom He wrought."^x

Therefore, it should be clear that the Strict Calvinist says the divine design or intent of the atonement was not to provide salvation for all men but to secure salvation for the elect and that the cross has no provision to the non-elect whatsoever. They see the cross of Christ as applying its own benefits. There is no subsequent application, but the atoning work of Christ on the cross saves.

The weakness of this view is that Strict Calvinists limit the extent of the atonement to the elect simply because they believe it was designed solely to save and quite apart from any other purpose of God. Those who are Moderate Calvinists reject limited atonement because they believe that the atonement provided the basis for the *salvation* of those who believe (the elect), and a basis for the *condemnation* of those who refuse to believe (the non-elect). This the Strict Calvinist cannot do because to him the cross has no relation to the non-elect in any sense.

It is often thought that Strict Calvinists who hold to limited atonement limit the sufficiency or the value of Christ's atoning work. This they do not do. They explicitly claim that the death of Christ was *sufficient* for all men but *efficient* only for the elect. This statement is meant to satisfy those who argue against limited atonement by pointing to certain passages

that seem to teach unlimited atonement. But what do they really mean by sufficient for all but efficient for the elect? What they mean is that the blood of Christ was of infinite value and that no more could be required of the Father if He had intended to save all or more men than he actually intended. They do not mean that it was *actually provisional* for all, but that if the Father had intended to save all men or more men than He did (which He did not) then Christ's work would have been *sufficient* (i.e., Christ wouldn't have had to suffer any more than He did. It was not the amount of suffering that made Christ's work valuable, but the sinless nature of the person being God-man and the voluntary substitution of Himself for others) So, they are simply asserting the infinite value of Christ's death. They are not alone in that assertion. Everyone believes that the atonement was infinite in value. An Arminian, a Strict Calvinist, and a Moderate Calvinist could all make the statement: *sufficient* for all *efficient* for the elect. "It is really a play on words to say the death of Christ was *sufficient* for all but *efficient* only for those who believe if the sufficiency has already been prescribed in its extent by God."^{xi} (as the Calvinist has already done. He says the sufficiency is limited to the elect). All this does is obscure the real meaning of Limited Atonement. Another flawed statement often used by Strict Calvinists to relieve the challenges of objectors is the way they explain universal words like "world", "whosoever", and "every man". When these words are used in connection with the death of Christ, they say, "Christ died for all without distinction but not for all without exception." This again is an obscuring of their view. It relieves no tensions and is totally out of line with Biblical descriptions of the extent of the atonement. It is a fancy attempt to place restricted meanings on universal terms.

SUMMARY OF ARMINIAN AND CALVINIST VIEWS

The Arminian answer to the question of "Why did Christ die?" is answered by saying that Christ *obtained* salvation for all men and supplied sufficient grace to all men to believe if they will. The Calvinist answer to the question of "Why did Christ die?" is very different. They say that the cross of Christ *secured* salvation for the elect—the cross saves by applying itself to the elect. The cross therefore has no relationship to the non-elect.

Both schools stress only one aspect of the whole teaching of Scripture. They become unable to reconcile what they perceive as contradictions and thus interpret all the Scriptures in terms of one extreme or the other.

By the late 1620's a man named Moise Amyraut, seeing these problems, began writing a thesis precisely on this point.

STAGE 4: MODERATE CALVINISM: AMYRAUT (1633-34)

Amyraut was a Calvinist of the Salmurian School of Theology who followed in the footsteps of his teacher John Cameron. What Amyraut noticed was that one of the five points of Calvinism didn't quite square with Scripture or with Calvin. He therefore wrote a thesis titled "**Brief Treatise on Predestination and its Dependent Principles**". (There is currently no English translation of this treatise but I am working on getting one, 2004). The point Amyraut had a problem with was the way Dordt expressed Limited Atonement. Amyraut believed that there were some passages in Scripture that seemed to express the extent of the atonement a little different. Amyraut answered this dilemma by saying that there were two wills of God on this matter; God's *universal will* which determined that the cross of Christ was for all men and God's *absolute will* which dictated that only some would enjoy the salvific benefits of the cross. So, Amyraut taught that the cross of Christ was *provisional* for all but *efficient* to salvation only for those who believe, that is, the elect. He considered his teachings to be most in line with John Calvin and quotes him numerous times in his writings.

SUMMARY

These are the four steps in the development of the doctrine of the atonement. *First*, Anselm hammered out that the Atonement was Substitutionary. The Reformers basically followed Anselm's substitutionary atonement and expressed it even more clearly. Statements of Luther favor Unlimited Atonement and statements of Calvin go both ways. *Second*, the followers of Arminius put together five articles called "The Remonstrance" as a response to some Calvinist teachings in 1610. Here they argued that Christ obtained salvation for all men and that sufficient grace was given to all men to cooperate with God in salvation, if they will. This took too much from God in the plan of salvation. *Third*, the Calvinists responded with five points of their own at the Synod of Dordt in 1619. This was also problematic because in their attacking another system they went overkill, teaching that the cross secured and applied its own benefits to the elect, so the cross had no relationship to the non-elect. *Finally*, Moise Amyraut, a Calvinist, seeing these two extremes, wrote his treatise to correct Limited Atonement as expressed by Dordt. He basically taught that the cross was *provisional* for all but efficient for the elect at the moment they believe. The cross was related to the non-elect as a means of condemnation because they refused to believe (John 3:17-18). We'll give the details of the Moderate Calvinist answer next week as we continue this study of the cross work of Christ. What really happened on the cross?

What you ought to realize by this historical development is that this is tough stuff. Working out doctrines is not an easy task. It took 1600 years for scholars to figure this thing out. And these are men that spend their whole lives studying the Scriptures. And if it wasn't easy for them, I can assure you it won't be easy for us, much less the dedication and study of God's word. So, don't take what you know and your salvation for granted. I want to help you wade through the details, but it is very difficult stuff. What happened at the cross is a very complex doctrine and we still have people arguing about this very thing ever since Amyraut's day.

1. **Arminian Unlimited Atonement** states that Christ died for all men *and is applied because* of man's choice.
2. **Calvinist Limited Atonement** states that Christ died for the elect *and is applied by the cross according to God's choice. The cross of Christ automatically applies itself to the elect.*
3. **Moderate Calvinists Unlimited Atonement** states that Christ died for all men *and is applied to the elect because of God's choice at the moment of belief. The cross of Christ automatically saves no one; instead, it is provisional for all and applied because of God's choice to those who believe.*

	ARMINIAN	CALVINIST	MOD. CALVINIST
CROSS	<i>All men</i>	<i>Elect</i>	<i>All men</i>
APPLIED BY	<i>Man's choice</i>	<i>God's choice</i>	<i>God's choice</i>

ⁱ Hannah, John, *Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement* (Bibliotheca Sacra 135:540 (Oct. 1978)), 336.
ⁱⁱ Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church: Vol. 5* (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson, 2002), 605.
ⁱⁱⁱ Rhodes, Ron, *The Extent of the Atonement: Limited Atonement Versus Unlimited Atonement (Part One)*, Chafer Theological Seminary Journal, 1996.
^{iv} Calvin, John, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), I, 123.
^v Lightner, Robert P., *The Death Christ Died*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 38.
^{vi} Lightner, Robert P., *The Death Christ Died*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 39.
^{vii} Actually, there were originally only 4 Points since points 3 and 4 (Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace) were placed under a single heading in the document, always designated as Main Point III/IV.
^{viii} Schaff, Philip, *Creeds of Christendom*, (New York: Harper and Son Publishers, 1919).
^{ix} John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), 73-74.
^x Cited by Lightner, Robert P., *The Death Christ Died* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 43.
^{xi} Lightner, Robert P., *The Death Christ Died* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 44.

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