

## The Extent of the Atonement and the Gospel Offer

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(Our Scottish divines, though Calvinists of unquestioned orthodoxy, have all along held the doctrine of the free offer of the gospel while holding that Christ died only for those who were given Him by the Father. We find this teaching in the sermons of the most honoured of the Scottish preachers such as Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph Erskine, Robert Murray MacCheyne, Dr. John Macdonald and Dr. John Kennedy, etc. This is the doctrine taught in our Confession of Faith. It is to be clearly distinguished from the Arminian view that the free offer of the gospel is a corollary of the doctrine of a universal atonement. Dr. Cunningham in the following extract brings out certain points that are worthy of consideration.)

By far the most important and plausible of the scriptural arguments in support of it (a universal atonement), and the only one we mean to notice, is the alleged necessity of a universal atonement, or of Christ's having died for all men, as the only consistent ground or basis on which the offers and invitations of the gospel can be addressed indiscriminately to all men. We fully admit the general fact upon which the argument is based, namely, that in Scripture, men, without distinction and exception, have salvation, and all that leads to it, offered or tendered to them, that they are invited to come to Christ and to receive pardon, and assured that all who accept the offer, and comply with the invitation, shall receive everything necessary for their eternal welfare. We fully admit that God in the Bible does all this, and authorises and requires us to do the same in dealing with our fellowmen. Very few Calvinists have ever disputed the propriety and the obligation of addressing to men indiscriminately, without distinction or exception, the offers and invitations of gospel mercy; and the few who have fallen into error upon this subject have usually based their refusal to offer to men indiscriminately pardon and acceptance, and to invite any or all to come to Christ that they might receive these blessings, upon the views they entertained, not about a limitation of the atonement, *but about the entire depravity of human nature, man's inability to repent and believe*. This topic of the consistency of a limited atonement with the unlimited offers and invitations of, gospel mercy, or of the alleged necessity of a universal atonement as the only ground or basis on which such offers and invitations can rest, has been very fully discussed. We can only suggest a few hints in regard to it.

There are obviously two questions that may be entertained upon this subject: *First*, Is an unlimited atonement necessary in order to warrant ministers of the gospel, or any who may be seeking to lead others to the saving knowledge of the truth, to offer to men, without exception, pardon and acceptance, and to invite them to come to Christ? And, *secondly*, Is an unlimited atonement necessary in order to warrant God in addressing, and in authorising and requiring us to address, such universal offers and invitations to our fellow-men? The neglect of keeping these two questions distinct has sometimes introduced error and confusion into the discussion of this subject.

It is the *first* question with which we have more immediately to do, as it affects a duty which we are called upon to discharge; while the *second* is evidently, from its very nature, one of those secret things which belong unto the Lord. It is very evident that our conduct, in preaching the gospel, and in addressing our fellow-men with a view to their salvation, should not be regulated by any inferences of our own about the nature, extent, and sufficiency of the provision actually made for saving them, but solely by the directions and instructions which God has given us, by precept or example, to guide us in this matter, unless, indeed, we venture to act upon the principle of refusing to obey God's commands, until we fully understand all the grounds and reasons of them. God has commanded the gospel to be preached to every creature; He has required us to proclaim to our fellow-men, of whatever character and in all varieties of circumstances, the glad tidings of great joy, to hold out to them in His name, pardon and acceptance through the blood of atonement, to invite them to come to Christ, and to receive him, and to accompany all this with the assurance that "whosoever cometh to Him, He will not cast out." God's revealed will is the only rule, and ought to be held to be the sufficient warrant for all that we do in this matter, in deciding what is our duty, in making known to our fellow-men what are their privileges and obligations, and in setting before them reasons and motives for improving the one and discharging the other. And though this revelation does not warrant us in telling them that Christ died for all and each of the human race, a mode of preaching the gospel never adopted by our Lord · and His Apostles, yet it does authorise and enable us to lay before men views and considerations, facts and arguments, which, in right reason, should warrant and persuade all to whom they are addressed, to lay hold of the hope set before them, to turn into the stronghold as prisoners of hope.

The *second* question, as to the conduct of God in this matter, leads into much greater difficulties, but difficulties which we are not bound, as we have no ground to expect to be able, to solve. The position of our opponents is in substance this, that it was not possible for God, because not consistent with integrity and uprightness, to address such offers and invitations to men indiscriminately, unless an atonement, which is indispensable to salvation, had been presented and accepted on behalf of all men, of each individual of the human race. Now, this position bears very manifestly the character of unwarranted presumption, and assumes our capacity of fully comprehending and estimating the eternal purposes of the divine mind, the inmost grounds and reasons of the divine procedure. It cannot be proved, because there is really not any clear and certain medium of probation, that God, by offering to men indiscriminately, without distinction or exception, through Christ, pardon and acceptance, contradicts the doctrine which He has revealed to us in His own Word, as to a limitation, not in the intrinsic sufficiency, but in the intended destination of the atonement. And unless this can be clearly and conclusively proved, we are bound to believe that they are consistent with each other, though we may not be able to perceive and develop this consistency, and of course we reject the argument of our opponents as untenable. When we carefully analyse all that is really implied in what God says and does, or authorises and requires us to say and do in this matter, we can find much that is fitted to show positively that God does not, in offering pardon and acceptance to men indiscriminately, act inconsistently or deceptively, though it is not true that the atonement was universal. And it is easy to prove that He does no injustice to anyone; since all who believe what He has revealed to them, and who do what He has given them sufficient motives or reasons for doing, will certainly obtain salvation. And although difficulties will still remain in the matter, which cannot fully be solved, it is easy to show that they just resolve into the one grand difficulty of all religion, and of every system of theology, that, viz., of reconciling, or rather of developing, the consistency between the supremacy and sovereignty of God, and the free agency and responsibility of man. In arguing with Calvinistic universalists,<sup>1</sup> there is no great difficulty in showing that the principles on which they defend their Calvinistic views, upon other points, against Arminian objections, are equally available for defending the doctrine of a limited atonement against the

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<sup>1</sup> \* The Hypothetical Universalists of Saumur such as Cameron, Amyrald, etc.,

objection we are now considering; and that the distinctions which they attempt to establish between the two cases are either altogether unfounded, or, if they have some truth and reality in them (as, for instance, that founded on the difference between natural and moral inability, a distinction which seems to have been first fully developed by Cameron, and with a special view to this very point), do not go to the root of the matter, do not affect the substance of the case, and then leave the grand difficulty, though slightly altered in the position it occupies, and in the particular aspect in which it is presented, as strong and as formidable as ever.

Though the advocates of a universal atonement are accustomed to boast much of the support which, they allege, their doctrine derives from the scriptural statements about God's loving the world, Christ's dying for all; yet many of them are pretty well aware that they really have but little that is formidable to advance except the alleged inconsistency of the doctrine of a limited atonement with the unlimited or indiscriminate invitations and commands to come to Christ and to lay hold on Him, which God address to men in His word, and which He has authorised and required us to address to our 'fellowmen. The distinction between the ground and warrant of men's act and of God's act in this matter, not only suggests materials for answering the arguments of opponents, but it also tends to remove a certain measure of confusion, or misconception, sometimes exhibited upon this point by the defenders of the truth. Some of them are accustomed to say that the ground or warrant for the universal or unlimited offers of pardon, and commands to believe, is the infinite intrinsic sufficiency of Christ's atonement, which they generally hold, though denying its universal intended destination or efficiency; while others profess to rest the universal offers and commands upon the simple authority of God in His Word, making them Himself, and requiring us to proclaim them to others.

Now it is evident that these two things are not, as the language of some orthodox divines might lead us to suppose, contrasted with, or opposed to, each other. The sole ground or warrant for men's act, in offering pardon and salvation to their fellow-men, is the authority and command of God in His Word. We have no other warrant than this; we need no other; and we should seek or desire none; but on this ground alone should consider ourselves not only warranted, but bound to proclaim to our fellow-men, whatever be their country, character or condition, the good news of the kingdom, and to call upon them to come to Christ that they may be saved, the Bible affording us

sufficient, yea, abundant materials for convincing them that, in right reason, they ought to do this, and for assuring them that all who do, shall obtain eternal life. But this has manifestly nothing to do with the question as to the ground or warrant of God's act in making unlimited offers, and in authorising us to make them.

In regard to the allegation often made by orthodox divines that this act of God is warranted by, and is based upon, the infinite intrinsic sufficiency of Christ's atonement, we would only remark, for we cannot enter into the discussion, that we are not aware of any scripture evidence that these two things, namely, the universal intrinsic sufficiency and the unlimited offers, are connected in this way, that we have never been able to see how the assertion of this connection removed or solved the difficulty, or threw any additional light upon this subject, and that, therefore, we think it best while unhesitatingly doing ourselves, in our intercourse with our fellow-men, all that God's Word authorises and requires, to be contented with believing the general position, that God in this, as in everything else, has chosen the best and wisest means of accomplishing all that He really intended to effect; and to be satisfied, so far as the objection of opponents is concerned, with showing that it cannot be proved that there is any inconsistency or insincerity, that there is any injustice or deception, on God's part, in anything which He says or does in this matter, even though the intended destination of the atonement was to effect and secure the salvation of the elect only, even though He did not design or purpose, by sending His Son into the world, to save any but those who are saved. - Historical Theology, ii 344-348.