

The Atonement

by Dean Harvey

Whatever theory of the atonement I hold, it needs to be Biblical, and it needs to exalt God's character, His justice, mercy and love. Paul says in God's behalf (II Cor. 5:20) "...we are ambassadors, as though God were entreating through us; we **beg** you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." The atonement is also about who God is, because we will become like the god we worship.

I was taught a mixture of Calvinism and I have always believed in person responsibility, that I was responsible for my own sins, that I could believe and repent, and even obey the plain commands of scripture. I was taught that I had inherited a sinful nature from Adam from which originated all personal sins, and that God had either elected me from all eternity, or I was non-elect. I held to the Arminian position that He elected me, individually, by name, on the basis of His foreknowledge. I therefore was taught that Jesus paid for all my sins which were part of His foreknowledge. One day I was teaching a class in my last church, and asked this question: "How many of you have ever been tempted to commit a sin, and thought, 'I shouldn't do this, but Jesus paid for it, so I might as well go ahead and enjoy it.?" Half the class (18 of 35), including me, raised their hands. My response was a new understanding for me, "Any understanding of the atonement which makes it easier to sin than not to sin, cannot be why Jesus went to the cross."

One of the primary themes of the Bible is the atonement, the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, in order to provide the basis upon which God may grant forgiveness to sinners. Having sinned, we placed ourselves forever under the condemnation of the law of God, and the penalty which says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." (ed. note - Ez. 18:4) The letter of God's law allows no exceptions.

On what basis, then, may God grant forgiveness, and pardon a sinner without repealing His law, making it of no effect? God is not free to arbitrarily put aside the penalty incurred by any sinner. Therefore if God is to grant forgiveness, He must do it through a provision which completely satisfies the purpose of His law, upholding its precepts in the eyes of all, continuing to discourage any disobedience, yet allowing the penalty to be set aside.

What is the true nature of the atonement? What is its extent? Upon what conditions may it safely be applied to the case of an individual in granting pardon? Did the atonement alone secure the salvation of any individual regardless of his response? Scripture states that Christ died for sinners, was made sin (a sin-offering), died, the just for the unjust, bore our sins, etc. It is possible for one to exercise faith in the atonement on the simple basis of God's statement that it is sufficient for his forgiveness, without understanding **how** the atonement made his forgiveness possible. That is certainly how it worked in my

case. Even though the Bible does not give us a theory of atonement, I wish to explain what I believe the atonement must be.

According to modern Calvinism, as I understand it, the nature of the atonement is like a financial transaction in which the exact penalty for sin has been paid. It holds that when Christ suffered on the cross, He was actually punished for our sins, bearing in His body the exact punishment that was due to the sinners He died to save. Therefore God the Father was internally satisfied exactly as He would have been had all been punished for their own sins, and the elect are pronounced just according to the law, their debt being paid exactly, or "to the penny." Jesus purchased the elect for or from the Father, satisfying His wrath, and paying what was due. Thus the sinner for whom Christ died **must** be saved, for if he was punished eternally in hell the penalty would be paid twice. This would, of course, make God unjust.

If this is the nature of the atonement for the Calvinist, the extent becomes clear. Christ did not die for every man, but only for the elect, those who from the beginning God chose to save unconditionally. How could He have died for the whole world? We know from clear statements of scripture that not all will be saved, that in fact the major part of mankind is being lost. Yet, if Christ died for them and paid their penalty as well, then how could God be just in sending them to hell? Conversely, the doctrine of universalism would be true if Christ paid for the sins of all men. Thus for the Calvinist, the atonement was limited to the elect, to those who will be saved.

The above being true, salvation must be unconditional. God does not grant pardon because the sinner repents, but the sinner repents because Christ has paid his penalty and applies this to him irresistibly. In fact, the sinner is not pardoned at all, but rather is saved on the basis of justice. I see no mercy in the transaction at all. One consequence of this understanding of the atonement is that further disobedience in the life of the believer can in no way endanger his justification before God. He is justified once for all and can never again come under condemnation. There would not be the possibility of apostasy. His past, present, and future sins are "forgiven" now and forever. This, of course, has antinomian implications. However, a Calvinist cannot allow this conclusions, and will usually claim that gross sins in a professing Christian's life simply prove that he was never truly saved, and therefore possibly not of the elect. The purely logical conclusion of unconditional atonement is that sin **is** excusable, any amount of sin. To warn a believer about his sins is inconsistent. For him to feel condemned when he sins is inconsistent. He is justified eternally by Christ's death, period. Therefore salvation is all of God. (I believe that if salvation were all of God, everybody would be saved, because God loves everyone and Jesus provided an atonement for everyone.)

This, in short, is how I understand the Calvinistic view of salvation, and most Calvinist authors I have read make no bones about the fact that their view is **the** evangelical, orthodox viewpoint. This viewpoint does logically follow from the Calvinistic perception of the decrees of God, election, and moral depravity. If man **cannot** believe and repent, then God has to choose him unconditionally. Therefore the atonement has to be the sole condition whereby God could be just in saving some. The penalty paid, God has to apply

this salvation irresistibly, for man can neither believe nor repent. He is constitutionally bound in sin. Since it is God's choice, not man's, and since the penalty of the elect man's past, present, and future sins has been paid, God could not leave the choice in man's hands, or He would not receive that which He paid for.

How does one reply to this understanding of the atonement? Is it biblically possible to have another view? I began with part of the above view, especially in regards to the payment idea, and to the idea that God had to be internally satisfied by the atonement before He could "forgive." I came to understand that we do not inherit Adam's sin and that we are able to believe and repent. I have always believed that Christ died for everyone, that we are responsible for turning away from a life of sin, and that final salvation was conditional.

I believe that, following Finney, the atonement has its ground in the love of God, that the atonement was designed out of God's heart of love and forgiveness. God's desire to forgive came before the atonement. God made beings in His own image, which I believe means that He created them with free wills. This involved a risk, because if one is really free, he can respond to any given situation in either obedience or disobedience.² So God designed a way of living which was in accordance with His character, and He called it the law. The law was to guide His created free beings in how to live in accordance with the character of the lawgiver. In order to enforce the law, He attached a penalty. The penalty is always a measure of the value assigned to a particular law by the lawgiver. Of course, the penalty is that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." (Ez. 18:4)

The bible teaches that God loves those He created. I believe that He created us for relationship, that He might share Himself with us, and that through us He might multiply the most valuable thing in the universe, His character. I believe that is what the word "godliness" means. "Ungodliness" or "sinfulness" is simply a description that the person is failing to be like God intended him to be.

But now God has a problem. the one He created has disobeyed, and has incurred the penalty of the law. But He loves that person, and wants to find a way to restore him to Himself without destroying His kingdom. So He designed the atonement, even before He created the first man, and put it into operation when it became necessary after the first sin. The problems God face were not personal, but *governmental*³ How could He show mercy to the sinner, without encouraging everyone to break the law and expect similar mercy? Mercy always weakens the law, as our justice system shows. This is demonstrated by King Darius' failure to find a legal way to save Daniel from the lions' den (Daniel 6). God's mercy has to be exercised in such a way that it does not violate His justice, nor the greatest good of all. How could God set aside the penalty of the law without leaving the impression that He somehow approved of sin and did not really love righteousness? If He left this impression He would destroy the authority of His law since the public would conclude that He was lenient, and did not mean what He had said. 4 He needed to do something that would demonstrate His justice, that He hated sin as much as when He had pronounced the penalty, and loved obedience because it was the way of duplicating His character in this world.

The penalty of the law was not an end in itself, but a means to an end. God gave the law, and then attached the penalty to show His idea of the value of the law. However, when a person broke the law and incurred the penalty, paying the penalty was not what God wanted. If a person paid the full penalty for breaking a single law by spending eternity in hell, would God be satisfied? Would the purpose of the law be accomplished? No! Revelation 14:10 shows me that God has wiped away all the tears from the eyes of all who will be saved, the Lamb will suffer for eternity over those who are lost, because it is such a waste. That for which He created them was not accomplished, and He is never separated from the consciousness of their suffering.

God became a man in the person of His Son, living a perfect life under His own law, dying a terrible public death for the sins of men, and declaring that only upon the condition of faith in this sacrifice may sinners be pardoned and their penalty set aside, a real forgiveness. The atonement was objectively necessary, not to pay for sins, or to satisfy some offended characteristic in God, but to make it possible for God to be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:26) Through this means, God has accomplished **more** than the infliction of the penalty would have accomplished, because there will now be less suffering in the universe, God's law and character will be safe from misunderstanding, and God can safely pardon the repentant sinner who puts his faith in this atonement. This is real forgiveness, not justice, and when a person sees Christ's death as the only basis for forgiveness, no question about God's character or love remains.

For the Calvinist, there is grace in the fact that Christ came and died, but there is no grace in the pronouncement of the sinner as just. The fundamental error, as I see it, is in supposing that the punishment of sinners is equivalent to their having obeyed. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Punishment has nothing to do with making up for what has been lost through disobedience. One primary purpose of punishment is to uphold the authority of God's government, where the act of disobedience (sin) has placed this authority in question. The punishment does not pay for sin. It is not something the sinner or someone else could do to make right his wrong. It is something that God does to uphold His government, the influence of His law, and His reputation as just. What was lost through disobedience is lost forever and no amount of punishment could "satisfy" justice. Justice required that the greatest good (agape) be secured. Sin made this impossible. It seems to me that the Calvinist would have it that since, in his mind, Christ died for sins and paid the penalty, this places God in the position of owing salvation to the elect. But in what I think is the Biblical view, God is no more obligated to forgive after He has provided an atonement than He was before. But He can now consistently grant real forgiveness to sinners who meet the conditions, and are restored to a life of "the obedience of faith" (Romans 16:26) which will duplicate God's character in this world.

Scripture shows that the ground of salvation is the love of God. God desired a way to forgive sin and to pardon sinners. Christ did not have to overcome any unwillingness on the Father's part to save us. The atonement does not bring about any change in the Father, either in His person or His attitude. Nothing in us motivated the Father, it was all because He is rich in grace and mercy.

But the atonement is only one condition of our salvation. Another is repentance from sin, and another is faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, which I understand to include the commitment of faith to live so as not to break the heart of God again. Repentance does not mean only remorse, but willingly and freely condemning ourselves and justifying God. It means willingly turning from all known sin, and turning to "the obedience of faith" to God, up to our present light (Romans 8:3-4). This is loving God with all our heart, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. But even this is not enough, for future disobedience must come under condemnation, for the atonement is not the ground but a condition of our salvation. The atonement allows pardon, but not further disobedience.

The holiness required of the Christian is not complete conformity to all the letter of the law which would require absolute knowledge, but complete conformity of the spirit of the law, which is love. This entails doing nothing from selfish motives and therefore, obedience up to the present light.

The extent of the atonement is **sufficient** for all men, but **efficient** only for those who repent, believe and persevere. Scripture teaches that Christ died for all men (Heb. 2:9), the whole world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), and also that He died specifically for His sheep, His people, the elect. Since it is efficient for those who do believe, He did die for the elect, and for them only, in one sense. But since it is sufficient for all men, He also is said to have died for the whole world. Perhaps the most concise verse is 1 Tim 4:9-10, which says that God is "the savior of all men, especially of those who believe."

It does nothing to prove the contrary to say that Jesus died for "us," "the church," "the elect," "His sheep," etc. For all of "us," "members of the church," "the elect," and "His sheep," were once **not** His people, but "objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:3) and a part of "the ungodly" **for whom** Christ died (Rom 5:6). Since all of "us" were of the world, it proves nothing to say that Christ died for the church. He died to make those who would repent of their sins part of the church. since salvation is conditional He had to get us into Him if the atonement was to become ours efficiently. But it is sufficient for all men (John 3:16; 2 Pet. 3:9). All men would be saved if they would meet the conditions of repentance from sin and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Hallelujah

Endnotes

¹I wish to thank Kel Good of Calgary, Canada, who has written a wonderful book, as yet unpublished, in which he gave the basic material in this paper. I added to a personalized his work.

²*I am familiar with John Feinberg's argument to the contrary in Predestination and Free Will: Four views. I don't see how one could be a Calvinist, or Reformed, without holding to that view.*

³*One of the primary requirements of penalty (punishment) is that it **not** be personal. Consider the lady who recently killed the abuser of her son in a California courtroom. Most of our hearts were sympathetic to here, but she received 10 years in prison.*

Consider the lawful and moral restrictions on vigilantes. We are not to exact a penalty personally. If God does that, He is the only One in the universe who is legally allowed to do that, and in this case, He forbids us to follow His example. (ed. note: God may exercise such judgment because He is absolutely impartial and judges "righteously," not based upon feelings of vindictiveness or retribution, something impossible for any human being personally involved as the injured party.)

⁴This is exactly what has happened in the church. We have given people the idea that they can be forgiven of all sins, past, present and future, and then have wondered why, by and large, they don't live differently from before salvation. This is expressed most succinctly by my least favorite bumper sticker, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." What a slap in the face of every sinner. And why shouldn't he want to get in on the gravy, to sin without having to reap the consequences?

Revelation 14:10 (ASV) "he also shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb:"

Romans 8:3, 4 "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Hebrews 2:9 - "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone."

John 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Second Occurrence

1 John 2:2 - "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

1 Tim 4:9-10 - "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe."

Ephesians 2:3 - "...among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others."

Romans 5:6 - "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."

2 Peter 3:9 - "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

The Rev. Dean Harvey at Evangelical Education Ministries, 3625 Halsted Road, Rockford, Illinois 61101.