

The Saving Work of Christ, V

We continue our study of Christ's saving work. I will just mention some of these features. Christ saves in His offices of prophet, priest, and king. All three of those are given in Hebrews 1. His saving work involves His state of humiliation and exaltation, as we said under the person of Christ. Instead of just saying "His death is particular," let me present both sides of the matter in this excursive on the extent of the atonement. Millard Erickson, in his *Christian Theology* pages 825-835, very fairly sets forth arguments for both unlimited and limited atonement. He even uses fair terminology. "Particular atonement" or "definite atonement" is better than "limited atonement." Limited sounds like something is lacking in the work of Christ.

Millard Erickson is a Baptist theologian who calls himself a moderate Calvinist, which is a very fair description. He is a model of fairness, and on controversial issues I like to use him just for that reason. In these pages of *Christian Theology*, he sets forth arguments for particular atonement, then arguments for universal atonement, and he concludes correctly that most of the arguments are not very good. It is remarkable. He says those who argue for the Calvinist position of particular, definite, or limited atonement, turn to those passages where it says Christ died for His sheep in John 10, and for His church in Ephesians 5, and they thereby assume He did not die for the goats or for those who are not part of the church. I am going to set forth the arguments and then come back and critique some of them. Other times this particular atonement, this limitation of the intention and efficacy of the cross, is deduced from other doctrines. In John 17, Jesus says, "I do not pray for the world, but only for my people." Therefore since prayer is part of His priestly work, then His priestly work on the cross must be particular as well. Erickson rightly says that it is inferred from the very nature of the atonement. These are the ways Calvinists have argued.

The Atonement itself, by its very nature, involves a full payment for sin. Therefore, with this type of argument, it must be efficacious and thereby particular or limited. Otherwise everybody would be saved and that is not true. It has historically been linked with election. Erickson goes so far as to say that it has always, or usually has, been the case. If somebody teaches an Augustinian view of election—that election is based not upon foreseen human response but upon God's own unconditional grace—they often have a limited atonement view as well. Actually Erickson made a mistake on that argument, but let me go through these. Erickson shows correctly that it is not enough to prove Calvinism to show the passages where it says that Jesus died for His church, for His sheep, and the like. You have to show that He did not die for the others, because Erickson says, "Does not it make sense in a context in which Jesus is talking about His church or His sheep, that Jesus would say that He died for them?" He is exactly right. It does not prove that He only died for them.

You would need some exclusion within the passage to make it a good argument. The mere fact that He says He died for His people—"You will call his name Jesus," the angel told Joseph, "because he will save his people from their sins"—supports particular atonement, but it does not necessarily prove it. It is deduced from other doctrines. It is kind of a second-order proof. I mentioned earlier in this lesson that it is not wrong to do deduction, but we need to distinguish biblical data and basing things upon that from making deductions from other biblical data. So this is not illegitimate and it could be used as supporting evidence, but it is not sufficient in itself. If I only had an argument based upon deduction, I would not hold that belief as firmly as I would where I had primary biblical evidence. And in fact I would ask, are we supposed to make this deduction or is theology going beyond the Bible and asking questions of it that the Bible does not even answer? It is inferred from the nature of the atonement. A much stronger argument would be where the Bible itself presents the atonement as defective and therefore limited or

particular. That would be more powerful than this inference. This is another example of deduction. Can you show biblically that the nature of the atonement demands effectiveness? Then you are showing something, but if you are merely arguing theoretically, it may impress those who already believe it, but it may not persuade those who for other reasons of inference and deduction have reached some other conclusions. It has been linked historically with election. Erickson is a wonderful Christian man and especially adept in modern philosophy and theology, which are areas I am not strong in and in which I rely upon him. My Ph.D. is in historical theology. I think perhaps his is not. He uses secondary sources. Somewhere he got misled. It is not true that these things have always been linked. So it is not a good argument for Calvinism in any case. If I am right, even Calvin, who taught unconditional election, did not teach particular atonement. That is, it was a later development. His successor, Beza, taught it, but not Calvin himself. It seems to be an issue he did not even address. I am not saying he denied it, but he just did not seem to even think about it, at least I cannot find it in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Erickson canceled out most of those arguments as some are bad and some are weak. I have to agree, but he is a very fair man who presents argument for his own position and criticizes them soundly too.

Arguments for universal atonement or unlimited atonement include “the world” and “all” terminology. Christ died for all. Christ died for the world. This is a very common argument that is used. I will summarize them now and come back to criticize them in a moment. John 3:16, for example, says, “For God so loved the world.” At a couple of places, the Bible says, “Some for whom Christ died will perish.” Erickson points to Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11, which are passages that warn about somebody not causing a brother to stumble because he will destroy the one for whom Christ died.

The Gospel is to be universally proclaimed. How can we proclaim the Gospel to everyone if Christ only died for all? This is an argument from deduction, and it has more or less weight depending upon a number of facts. Limited atonement contradicts God's love for the world. It is sort of another deduction, although one could point to passages that say that God loves the world and say that is incompatible with particular or limited atonement. Erickson critiques these as well, even as the passages that say that Christ died for His people have to be evaluated in context and so do “the worlds” and “all” passages. Erickson admits in most of them the context of “the world” is not only the Jews, but Gentiles as well, that type of a thing. In general, these are not talking about each and every last individual. He admits it. He does end up with a few passages that incline him in this direction and I will get those on the table quickly. “Some for whom Christ died will perish,” said in the Romans and 1 Corinthians passages that we looked at, he admits is not very persuasive. It could be, for example, that the being destroyed or perishing could mean physical death which is spoken of in Scripture as a judgment, in 1 Corinthians 11 for example, and not necessarily perishing eternally.

These might count as some evidence but they are not enough to prove universal atonement. Likewise, the Gospel is to be universally proclaimed. George Whitfield believed that. Some say that limited atonement contradicts God's love for the world, but some of the greatest evangelists in history did not think so. So these two have some weight by virtue of deductions, but in themselves they would not really sway the jury in Erickson's estimation. I am summarizing. You ought to read his stuff if you are really interested in this. In the end, Erickson appeals to four passages. First is 1 Timothy 4:10. These passages appear to him conclusively to teach that Christ died to save every human being. I want to be really fair to him—he has very well summarized the arguments on both sides. For example, I cannot accuse him of holding back or ignoring the best Calvinist arguments. No, he has not done it. Am I admitting that there has not been good argumentation on either side? Yes, that is exactly what I am admitting. I think it is the case.

First Timothy 4:10, he says, “is a verse that just cannot be ignored.” I agree with him; it should not be ignored. It says, “We have put our hopes in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” He says, “Look at that, there are two different realms of salvation. There is a sense that Jesus is a Savior of all men, bigger circle, and in a sense, a subset of that, that He is the Savior of those who believe.” Erickson says that this is conclusive. Again, I have great respect for him but disagree with him. He misunderstands. In the Pastoral letters the word, “savior,” does not always refer to Jesus. If my study is right, when it does refer to Jesus it uses His name, and just an undifferentiated reference to savior refers to God the Father, not the Son. Let us just take a couple of little examples; you can trace the rest of them out yourself. In 1 Timothy 1:1 it says, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior”—does that mean Jesus? It does not, because the rest of the verse says, “And of Christ Jesus, our hope.” God our Savior means the Father.

Now granted, usually in the Bible when it says, “Savior,” it means Jesus. I am saying we need to be very sensitive to the way the pastorals work. They use the word “Savior” to refer to Jesus sometimes and to refer to the Father sometimes. We can determine which is which by the way they do it when they refer to Jesus. What I am trying to say is, when Paul in the Pastoral Epistles refers to Jesus, he uses His name. For example, 2 Timothy 4:10 says, “...the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus.” He does this because the bare word, “Savior,” refers to the Father and not to the Son.

So here is what I am saying: First Timothy 4:10 is a problem for Calvinism, but it does not even pertain to the atonement. It is not talking about the Son of God. Calvinism in the larger Calvinist/Arminian debate would have account for some sense in which God the Father is the Savior of all men and in a lesser, distinct sense—a subset of that—in which He is Savior of the world. But it does not even talk about the Son of God and His atonement, so it is irrelevant to the matter of particular atonement. It does not speak of Jesus, so it does not speak of the cross. It is a problem for Calvinism in a greater way, in a larger concern, but it is not even relevant here. For Millard Erickson or anybody else to prove unlimited atonement, they have got to have an atonement passage, which speaks of Jesus' cross.

I would say God, in this case the Father, is the Savior of all men in that in the book of Acts, He commands people everywhere to repent. He is the only Savior of humanity and He actually saves those who believe in Him. I am on the defensive now. I am not giving you my argument for particular atonement. I am giving you Erickson's best shot and I am trying to answer him. My response to his first passage of the four he bases his doctrine on in the end is that it is irrelevant to this matter. Since Erickson is a four-point Calvinist, this is as much a problem for him as it is for me, a five-point Calvinist, because it is a problem for the rest of his system. But it is not a problem for this part of my system and it does not count for points for this part of his system because it does not speak of the Son of God and His cross. First John 2:2 is better because it does speak of the cross. It says, “If anybody does sin”—thinking of believers—“we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice”—propitiation is the word used—“for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Surely this is a reference to Jesus. Yes, I admit it. Surely it is a reference to Jesus' atonement. Yes, its propitiation. There is no question about it. Surely it says, “He died for the sins of the whole world.” I admit it. Then case closed, right? It proves unlimited atonement. Not so fast. We do not want to make an assumption here. I can view “the whole world” in two different ways. I can speak of the whole world in a distributive sense or in a collective sense. That does not make people think as much as when I say that we could view the world as all people without exception—each and every last individual in the world. Distributive means counting them one at a time, each and every last person. We could view it, however, collectively, to mean all; it is another use of all, but all without distinction. Not only red people, but white people and black people and yellow people

and brown people and any other kind of people you have. And not only people who speak Chinese, but also people who speak Spanish and French.

Now, it is curious to me that there is one other use in 1 John of almost the exact same expression. The word order is slightly different from 1 John 2:2. I am going to understand it. I admit this is a better argument than the first one and his argument has some weight. But I do think I can answer it, though you may not agree with me. I would take it as a reference to all without distinction, not necessarily to all without exception, although it is possible. I will compare it to 1 John 5:19, which certainly does not mean all without exception. "We know that we are the children of God and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." That does not mean every last individual. There the whole world is sort of like Jesus' prayer in John 17: "I do not pray for the world, I pray for the people you have given me." It almost means the unbelievers or something like that. It certainly does not mean each and every last individual. It means collectively those who are against Christ and outside of Christ. So granted the sample is too small. These are the only two places I could find in 1 John, I think in John's writing, where this exact expression is used. And I also do not want to fool anybody. The word order is slightly different, but that is just John's style anyway. He almost always varies his word order.

Erickson's argument has some weight, but I would not regard it as proving his case, however. Another one is Isaiah 53. He thinks this really is an excellent case. Erickson says, "Look, the people who are sinning and those for whom atonement is made are coextensive: 'We all like sheep have gone astray.' That means everybody. That means each and every last individual. 'We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way.' That leaves no exceptions and the Lord has laid on Him, Jesus, the iniquity of us all. The remedy is coextensive with the need," he argues. I think he is being insensitive to the historical context of Isaiah 53. The all is not all human beings, but all Israelites. Yes, there is a universalizing reference within the context. In 52:15, for example, "He will sprinkle many nations," is seen differently in its context of 53:6-8, for example: "He was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of my people, He was stricken." So I do not think it is a proof for universal atonement. It is a proof for Israelite atonement that the Messiah died for His people. There is a hint within the context—52:15, which acts as a unit with verse 53, that He died for the Gentiles too. That is brought to fuller light in the New Testament, but I do not see this as a great proof of particular atonement. His last proof passage is 2 Peter 2:1, and I will admit this is a tricky example. I am an honest man. I do not have a good answer to this one. I will give you my answer, but I do not think it is a good one. Second Peter 2:1 says, "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies even denying the Sovereign Lord who bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves."

Erickson rightly says, and he puts his finger right in my wound at this point: "Look, they deny the Sovereign Lord who bought them." I have been singularly unimpressed with Calvinist attempts to untie this knot and I refuse to manipulate "Sovereign Lord." It is not the normal word for Lord, but it does not refer to the devil. That just will not do. And different attempts to say "bought him" means something else than "redeemed"—I am just not convinced. In other words, I would rather admit I am in trouble than resort to forced explanations. You say, "Peterson, you are admitting you have a problem with this thing?" Yes. The other side has some problems, too. I will bring some of them up later. Everybody has problems on every viewpoint. There is no such thing as "no problems on review." This is the best I can do, and it is not very good, friends. The only problem is that the text does not say it, but we may be able to imply that this is their claim: that the Sovereign Lord bought them, when in fact He did not. Am I reading between the lines? Yes. Is this what the text says in a straightforward fashion? No. Does this count for points on Erickson's team? Yes, I admit it. I will wait for a better answer on that one. In the

meantime, I will go to bed tonight and sleep carefully, sleep soundly, Lord willing, in the arms of my Savior. His being my Savior does not depend upon my having all the answers. I never claimed to have. I applaud Erickson in his fairness, in his arguing. I want to write an article someday opposing him on this and maybe even getting him to respond. That would be fun. I think it would illuminate the issues. I do think I have, and I can say it without sounding too vain, better arguments that have traditionally been given. Next time, Lord willing, I will begin our class with them.

You may wonder if false teachers in this context should be lost. That would be an evaluation from distinctively Calvinist premises. They are definitely lost. I would say that they are hopeless. He writes them off damned, I think it is fair to say. Does this verse still count for universal atonement if they are not saved? Yes, do not evaluate your opponent's position based upon your definition. For them, Jesus died to save everyone and all that He dies to save are not saved. People must believe in order to be saved, which they must. You have Calvinist efficacy in the back of your mind. If He died to save people who are not saved, it looks to me like a lesson in effective atonement. I, in fact, agree with your premise based upon Scripture, but I will not invoke to rule his argument out of court, because it is not fair. His argument has to stand within his own system. Next time I will at least take some minutes and give you the best case I can present. In the meantime, may the Lord bless you.