

Dispensationalism and TULIP – Limited Atonement

This is the third article on the subject of whether a dispensationalist; one who advocates getting doctrines through exegesis using consistent plain-sense hermeneutics, can come to amicable terms with the 5 Points of Calvinism as they have been expounded in the Reformed Confessions and standard works on the subject. I know that some well read and solid men who are dispensational premillennialists in their eschatology do say their belief in TULIP comes about via the same interpretive base as their eschatology. These articles, while being open to correction, question that assumption.

I will add something else in here; and that is, I believe one reason for resistance to the full-scale development of a Dispensational Systematic Theology on its own terms is the belief that dispensationalism only impinges on ecclesiology and eschatology. I have alluded to this problem of self-definition elsewhere.

Paul Martin Henebury

Confessions and Proof-Texts

If we truly understand “limited atonement” we also understand the next point of TULIP, “Irresistible Grace.” Limited redemptionists argue that the NT strongly encourages us to conclude that Christ’s atonement really atoned for those, and only those, for whom it was made. Thus, it was an efficacious atonement. This is crucial to get because it dictates their approach. The atonement *effected* salvation for the elect, it did not merely make them savable. What this seems to logically entail is that *there can be no separation of the accomplishment of atonement from its application*. If one makes a separation between them clearly the accomplishment does not actually effect redemption, its application does.

This plunges 5 point Calvinists into a spot of bother since we must avoid teaching that believers were justified before they believed. I am not sure how that can be done without teaching that the application of the atonement, and not the atonement itself, is efficacious. But this takes us away from our present concern.

Here is the 1689 Baptist Confession to start us off:

Christ certainly and effectually applies and communicates eternal redemption to all those for whom He has obtained it. His work of intercession is on their behalf. - Chapter 8.8a.

This does not state that Christ’s death actually purchased the elect at the Cross (its accomplishment), but we shall see that this is the underlying assumption. We could give other reasons why Chapter 8 of this Confession violates dispensational tenets.

The Confession gives some “proof-texts” for its statement. Of the eleven passages given in support of this doctrine (Psa.110:1; Jn. 3:8; 6:37; 10:15, 16; 17:6, 9; Rom. 5:10; 8:9, 14; 1 Cor. 15:25-26; Eph. 1:8-9; 1 Jn. 5:20), the first three have nothing to do with the atonement, nevermind its extent. The John 10 passages do not specify Christ’s death as being *only* for His

sheep. The John 17 texts work okay for election but do not speak of the atonement. Romans 5:10 speaks to those who have been reconciled *by faith* and does not address the proposition one way or another. Ditto the other Romans passages and those that remain from 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and 1 John! Not an impressive showing!

Here is Dordt:

SECOND HEAD: ARTICLE 8. 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; that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them, free from every spot and blemish, to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever.

This is a lot to prove! Where does the Bible say that faith was *purchased* for the elect by Christ's death? We may think it is so, but to which passage/s are we to be pointed? Answer: "It's an inference." Okay, which text of Scripture says Christ's crosswork *itself* had "quickenings and saving efficacy"? Everyone acknowledges it is upon the *merits* of Christ's death that believers are quickened (regenerated) by the Holy Spirit and saved, but this transaction did not occur at Calvary (unless one wishes to teach that the majority of Christians were born-*again* and placed in Christ before they were born-*first!*). So where are we told that the Cross itself had this efficacy (and not the later application of its merit by the Holy Spirit)? Answer: "It's an inference."

Okay, so where in Scripture is it stated that Christ's atoning death was on behalf of "all those, and those only, who were eternally chosen to salvation"? It is a bold and precise proposition. Where, apart from general statements that Arminians can believe in (Christ died for "us", "the Church, "the sheep," "for me", etc.), is it taught that *only the elect* were atoned for when Jesus hung on the tree? Answer: "It's an inference." Is anyone seeing a pattern here? What biblical ground is there here for a dispensationalist to stand on and use his consistent plain-sense hermeneutics?

Whatever our Reformed brethren want to do with their interpretations is, from the standpoint of these articles, their own business. Their theology is far more deductive and their hermeneutics more theologically driven. But **the deductions of a Reformed theologian are not all open to a Dispensational theologian**: definite atonement being an example of this.

Some Other Proof-Texts

When one studies the set of passages on this teaching provided at Monergism one notices something significant. Their citation of Isa. 53:8-11 conveniently ignores verse 6. We are to

presume that “my people” (v.8) is a reference to the elect who will be saved. Apart from this contradicting the OT meaning of the election of Israel as a nation of God-fearing and God-hating people, it should be apparent to any dispensationalist that this move is accomplished by *reading the NT doctrine back into the OT: an option clearly at variance with the very soul of dispensationalism*. But further, any familiarity with the early chapters of Isaiah (or Jeremiah) will speedily put the kibosh on this notion that “my people” = “my elect for salvation.” Plus, Hosea 4:6 says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..” This is hardly a ringing endorsement of the elect!

The two other quotations from the OT (Isa. 63:9 & Dan. 9:24!) will be seen through by any dispensationalist worth his or her mettle. They are ripped out of context to fit a contrived NT formulation.

What about the NT passages then? We know what’s coming: verses which speak of Christ giving His life as a ransom for “many” (Matt. 20:28; 26:28. Interpreted as “all” by Paul in 1 Tim. 2:6); Christ giving His life for “the sheep” (Jn. 10:11,15,26), or for “us” (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Tit. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:16 etc.). Not to be left out (although inexplicably absent from the Monergism list) is the verse which says Christ gave Himself for “the Church” (Eph. 5:25). No one disagrees with these verses as they stand. It is only once particular redemption is read in to them that eyes start winking.

Some texts in the list actually do not make any statement regarding the atonement (viz. in Rom. 5:15 the “gift” is salvation not the atonement; Heb. 2:16 is about the incarnation). An interesting reference is the quotation of John 11:51-52:

And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.

Caiaphas’s involuntary prophecy includes two elements: first that Jesus should die for the Jewish nation (no restrictive clause limiting it to the elect), and second, that He would also gather together in one the elect scattered abroad. One may want to say that the second clause qualifies who is meant by “nation” in the first, and that is legitimate. But what has been garnered? Has the proposition “Jesus only died for the elect” been substantiated? “I trow not!” In fact, not one of these texts makes any such claim! No Arminian, for example, would have a problem with saying Christ died for “us” or for “believers” or for “the Church.” To force these texts into a doctrine of *particular* redemption is to overplay ones hand.

More Proof-Texts

What then? Are there other texts which help? A good place to turn to would be Steele and Thomas’s *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*.

It might be argued that the proposition, “Christ died only for those who will be saved” could be supported as a **C3 Formulation** by texts combining to make it the best supported theological

option (as I would argue is the case with the pre-trib rapture). This is kind of what Steele & Thomas try to do in their book.

Unfortunately there are rather large logical gaps between the individual statements they make, the Scriptures they recruit to prop them up, and the final doctrine (limited atonement) they wish to prove. Let me give an example of what I mean:

They make the claim that, “Christ secured the gift of the Spirit which includes *regeneration and sanctification* and all that is involved in them.” (42).

The “regeneration” they are referring to is, of course, the sort which precedes faith (of which more ahead). We are to gather from this that the ensuing verses will leave us in no doubt about these important matters. So what do we get? Eph. 1:3-4 (we have every spiritual blessing in Christ); Phil. 1:29 (the best text [C3?] for proving faith is a gift. But it says nothing about regeneration or sanctification); Acts 5:31 (repentance is a gift); Tit. 2:14 (our redemption was unto good works); Tit. 3:5,6 (we were saved through regeneration); Eph. 5:25-26 (Christ’s death resulted in the sanctification of the Church); 1 Cor. 1:30 (Our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption come from Christ. No mention of the new birth); Heb. 9:14 (Christ’s blood can cleanse the sinner’s conscience leading to acceptable service); Heb. 13:12 (Christ’s suffering and rejection was for the sanctification of “the people”); 1 Jn. 1:7 (Christ’s blood can keep the believer in the light of fellowship with God).

I know there is more to these verses than my mere summaries tell, but where in any of them are we told that “Christ secured the gift of the Spirit which includes regeneration...[prior to faith]”? The verses (or some of them) do prove (directly – C1) that Christ secured our sanctification. But this scarcely amounts to a brick in the wall of limited atonement.

One has to wander through several pages of this type, with numerous passages vainly used to support minor tertiary propositions, which in turn set up secondary propositions, which are intended to lead us inexorably to the conclusion of the principal doctrine: particular redemption. But it is not until we reach secondary proposition “C” that we start ‘getting down to brass tacks.’ Then the authors move into apologetic mode, admitting that “Some passages speak of Christ’s dying for “all” men and of His death as saving the “world.” (46). But they qualify this by saying, “These expressions are intended to show that Christ died for all men without *distinction*...they are not intended to indicate that Christ died for all men without *exception*...” (emphasis theirs).

This dogmatic declaration of Authorial intent is open to serious question when one analyzes texts like John 3:16-17, 36; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 2:9; and 2 Pet. 2:1 in their contexts. There is certainly no cause for 5 pointers to get all doctrinaire here! And for a dispensationalist there is considerable reason to throttle back on such assertions.

The proposition “Christ died only for His elect” or, “Christ died only for those who will be saved,” is not supported by any C1, C2 or C3 passage (if anyone can show me otherwise I would appreciate it). Recall, a C1 passage is a straightforward text which agrees with a proposition by directly stating it in so many words. Nor, as we have just said, is this teaching upheld by any C2 passages (a combination of usually C1 texts on related matters which strongly (even inevitably)

lead one to the conclusion summed up in the proposition). Nor is the doctrine supported by any C3 texts (indirect passages which, when taken together, produce good though defeasible evidence for the proposition). Or have I spoken too soon?

Jeffery, Ovey, & Sach, in their valuable book, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, believe the combination of 2 Corinthians 5:14 with Romans 6:1-14,

“is problematic for those who deny particular redemption. The former text teaches that all those for whom Christ died, died spiritually with him. The latter teaches that all who died with him will share in his resurrection life, which in Romans is concerned with salvation. Putting the two together, it is apparent that all for whom Christ died will enjoy salvation. Universal redemption would then imply that all will be saved, which is unbiblical.” (272-273).

If their contention is right dispensationalists had better jump on board. But let us take a closer look. 2 Cor. 5:14 says,

“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus; that if Christ died for all then all died”

And we throw in the next verse:

“and He died for all, that those who live, should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”

The context (e.g. v.10, “the judgment seat of Christ”; v.13b “if we are of sound mind, it is for you.”), makes it clear that Paul is addressing Christians. Verse 15 also makes it clear that Paul’s point here is that “those who live” (Christians to whom he is writing), “should live no longer for themselves.” He is referring to the saints’ sanctification. The text does not say that Christ only died for the saints. The correspondence between the “all” who Christ died for, and the “all” who died in Him is symmetrical because the Apostle has sanctification in mind, not justification. To paraphrase, it teaches that, “if Christ died for you [the saints at Corinth], then you died in Christ. Therefore you should no longer live for yourselves but for Christ; in whom you have been made alive.” Verses 17-18 bring this truth home even more. Paul doesn’t have unsaved people, be they elect or no, in view here!

But even if all humanity is in view here, there is still no necessary connection with the elect only, as a reading of the commentaries will demonstrate (e.g. P. E. Hughes). In a sense all humanity did die with Christ at Calvary, even though that death isn’t reckoned as substitutionary in judicial terms until the sinner believes. The connection with Romans 6 applies to my interpretation above, but is in need of qualification on this other interpretation (along the lines provided by Paul in Romans 3:21-5:11).

Thus, For Jeffery, Ovey & Sach to assert, “all those for whom Christ died, died spiritually with him” as a doctrine of the extent of the atonement is to ignore the context and to misapply the passage in question. Careful attention to the context removes this crucial plank of their

argument, rendering it fallacious. Calvin offers Romans 14:7-9 as a close parallel, not Romans 6.

Clear Counter-Texts

But it gets worse. Not only must a dispensationalist abandon plain-sense hermeneutics and opt for a theologically deductive hermeneutics to get limited atonement, he must use these same foreign hermeneutics to explain clear passages which, in their plain-sense, contradict this Reformed teaching. Take one example: 1 Timothy 4:10:

“For therefore we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, specially of those that believe.”

It appears here that the Apostle is saying that Christ died for all men everywhere, but in a particular way for those who believe. That would make Christ’s atonement universal though differentiated. That would also agree with a plain reading of 1 Timothy 2:4 & 6. What then can the 5 Pointer do? He can say that since God and not Christ is being spoken of here that *soter* ought to be translated as “Preserver” not “Savior.” (Grudem). That is to say, what is in Paul’s mind here is not what it appears at first blush: instead Paul is just saying God preserves people physically – especially believers! Presumably that is also Paul’s meaning in the first verse of the letter, where he writes, “by the commandment of God our Savior”?

No, that will not do. An agenda is showing! And this agenda (to force universal atonement verses into bearing other, less apparent meanings) is so embarrassingly evident in the TULIP interpretations of John 3:16, Heb. 10:29; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:14 and a number of other straightforward verses (some of which are given above), which make perfect sense without any meddling by “interested parties”, that no dispensationalist should have anything to do with such “hermeneutics of special pleading.”

I just cannot see how a dispensationalist can hold to particular redemption and not batter down their hermeneutical citadel.