

Appendix 3 - Eternal Security

A centuries old controversy has been raging between two opposing views on the subject of the eternal security of a believer. These views have become known as the Calvinist and Armenian views and a quick search on the Internet will reveal how heated and at times acrimonious the debate has been. In this appendix, I want to walk with you through the main scriptures and issues along with a brief history of their interpretation and offer some thoughts on a way forward .

As we will see, the origins of the debate are in problems of behaviour and practice in the life of the church, and the response was the formulation of theological theories to provide a foundation for remedial teaching. However, such is man's lust for mastering every mystery, that the church has ended up divided over theories that attempt to make sense of the Almighty. I liken the situation to that of archaeologists who come across a large collection of dinosaur bones. They do not have the body, but without a body the bones do not make sense. So they start piecing the bones together in various ways. One group make a bird with tail that's far too long and another group make a lizard with a huge beak. Each argue that their solution is correct, but neither have enough information to be completely sure. That is what the bible is like. It is not a systematic theology, it is a collection of stories about people and incidents from long ago from which we try to construct a *body* that makes sense of all the parts. I'm sure it is a good and helpful thing to attempt, but I think we should show more humility when we can't quite finish the puzzle. Can we not say that the front end most certainly looks like a bird and the tail end most certainly looks like a lizard, but we are not sure how the two ends connect.

Theories of the atonement

The meaning of the word Atonement.

"Atonement" quite literally means "*at-one-ment*." The word comes from the Middle English phrase "*at oon*," which means "*at one*." It is the theological term for the work of Christ by which sinners are reconciled to God.

The Hebrew word "kaphar" literally means to cover (e.g. the ark with bitumen); but figuratively to expiate, to placate or appease. In the sense of atonement: to cleanse, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, reconcile.

The Greek verb "hilaskomai" and noun "hilasterion" come from the word "hileos" which means cheerful. These words speak of the restoration of a previously alienated, wrathful relationship to a cheerful, friendly relationship.

The Greek word Katallage, literally meaning exchange is translated *atonement* in Rom 5:11, and *reconciled* in Rom 11:15, 2 Cor 5:18-19.

The Greek words focus on the result of atonement whereas the Hebrew word focuses on the means of atonement.

The scriptures offer a variety of images and understandings of the atonement of Christ and a reduction in our understanding and preaching to a single theory restricts our effectiveness in ministry and mission. The church councils have understood this and never attempted to formulate a statement explaining the atonement.

Forgiveness, victory over Satan and reconciliation are all aspects of atonement but address very different needs. Furthermore, the most prominent theory in evangelistic preaching is penal substitution, but this theory is portrayed in the media and often delivered from the pulpit in a very legalistic form, popularised by Charles Hodges in the 19th century (see below). Confidence is rapidly being lost in this portrayal of the cross as the place where God's wrath against sinners was poured out upon Christ. We need to recover a biblical perspective on each of the theories and hold

them all together as painting a picture of the extraordinary breadth and depth of the accomplishment of Christ upon the cross.

Historical Background

Early Universalism

The belief that all of humanity is saved through the work of Christ is called universalism. It has been a popular belief amongst liberals for centuries, but it is by no means a modern invention. Some see significant support for such a view in Paul's letters and it is thought that the early Christian community around Damascus taught the universal salvation of mankind. Various significant theologians, including Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the 3rd century, Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century, and Isaac the Syrian in the 7th century, expressed universalist positions in early Christianity. Indeed, four of the six theological schools of thought in ancient Christendom supported universalism, and only one supported eternal damnation.¹

Origen

From the days of Isaiah the idea of substitutionary atonement had been accepted – that God would provide a suffering servant/son who would restore us to God. The debate through the centuries has been about the precise explanation for how the death of Jesus has accomplished this.

Throughout Christian history various models or explanations of the atonement have been recognised, but in different periods one model has tended to dominate.

The Early Church understood Christ's death principally as a ransom, following Jesus' declaration of His purpose 'to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45). This ransom was understood to have been paid to Satan, to whom mankind had given themselves through the fall. Origen wrote, "To whom did he give his life as a ransom for many? Assuredly not to God, could it then be to the Evil One? For he was holding fast until the ransom should be given him, even the life of Jesus; being deceived with the idea that he could have dominion over it, and not seeing that he could not bear the torture in retaining it."²

This model of the atonement is known as "Christ the Conqueror". The cross is where the ransom was paid, but the resurrection is where victory was evidenced. This is the image of atonement expressed in C S Lewis' "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe."

Augustine

In the early church dissention arose over the salvation of those who denied their faith under persecution. They were usually excommunicated and considered to have forfeited their salvation, but many protested. However, widespread persecution ended with the legalisation of the faith by Constantine (313 AD) and spiritual decline followed. In the year 386 Augustine was saved at the age of 32. He was a professor of rhetoric and thought deeply about his conversion. He was convinced that we were, of ourselves, incapable of moral good, and that salvation was entirely the work of God over-ruling our rebellious hearts and bringing us irresistibly to salvation. He taught that we inherited, not just the propensity to sin, but sin itself, from Adam. Consequently, he said, a new-born baby is condemned for Adam's sin. He taught that some are pre-destined to salvation and

¹ The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, vol. 12, p. 96. "In the West this doctrine had fewer adherents and was never accepted by the Church at large. In the first five or six centuries of Christianity there were six theological schools, of which four (Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, and Edessa, or Nisibis) were Universalist; one (Ephesus) accepted conditional mortality; one (Carthage or Rome) taught endless punishment of the wicked."

² Gustav Aulen (transl. by A. G. Herber) *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Macmillan: New York, 1977)

that even after conversion we are incapable of good apart from the effective working of the grace of God in our lives.

Pelagius

As noted above, the removal of religious persecution under Constantine led to a good deal of compromise in the church and in many places the morals of the church were no better than those of the heathen. A British monk called Pelagius visited Rome around 400AD (aged 46) and was horrified at the lax behaviour in the churches. His response was to teach that forgiveness at baptism was only for past sins, not for future sin and insisted that we must live in obedience to God. His teaching became widely spread, leading to many, including Constantine, delaying their baptism until their deathbed to avoid having unforgiven sin! Pelagius denied inherited sin. Pelagius and Augustine quickly became embroiled in debate and controversy, each over-reacting to the teaching of the other - Pelagius eventually denying even the inherited propensity to sin. Augustine called the Council of Carthage in 418 to refute Pelagius' teaching and he was excommunicated. Since then, the western church has, in the main, denied universalism, teaching that only those who put their trust in Jesus Christ are saved.

Anselm

Since the excommunication of Pelagius, the principal area of discussion around the doctrine of salvation has concerned the understanding of atonement and the interaction between predestination and free will.

For 1000 years the principal theory of the atonement was "Christ the Conqueror", that the cross and resurrection was the resolution of the conflict between Satan and God, by way of an act of complete trust and obedience and by paying the ransom due to regain the kingdom lost in the fall.

A shift in emphasis came about through the teaching of Anselm. He was born in 1033 in Burgundy and entered monastic life at Bec in Normandy in 1060, becoming prior three years later. In 1092, Anselm became arch-bishop of Canterbury. He wrote a number of weighty tomes including *The Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man).³

In this volume, Anselm claimed that the debt of honour due to our sin creates an imbalance in the moral universe; it could not be satisfied by God simply ignoring it. God's mercy inclined Him to forgiveness, but His justice required recompense. He argued that:

1. Satisfaction for man's sin is necessary on account of God's honour and justice.
2. The affront of sin on an infinite God is itself infinite and as such, only the infinite God can give satisfaction.
3. Only a human being can make recompense for human sin against God, but no fallen human being can do this.
4. The merit of the voluntary death of Jesus, the God-man, is infinite, and so gives the necessary satisfaction, even redeeming the sins of those who killed Christ.

This formulation shifted the perception of the atonement from its previously perceived notion of conflict between Satan (the god of this world) and Christ (the King of kings) and turned it into a conflict between God's justice and His mercy. Christ is seen as God paying the *honour* due on our behalf, without which we would have to suffer punishment.

Thomas Aquinas

200 years later, Thomas Aquinas developed Anselm's ideas, developing the notion of *penalty substitution*. He argued that Christ did not simply restore God's honour, but actually paid the penalty of death that was the moral consequence of man's sin. However, he took pains to stress that

³ Anselm *Cur Deus homo*, D. Nutt (London, 1885)

this was not a specific *penal* substitution of the penalty due to us for our specific sins, since punishment can only be meted out to the guilty. But he argued that payment may be given voluntarily. He claimed that Christ was not *punished* as our substitute, but voluntarily suffered to pay generously for our sin. Christ made a *voluntary* substitution of His suffering in exchange for the total suffering due to mankind. Christ's death gave to God more than was required to compensate for the offence of the whole human race.⁴

Aquinas accepted Augustine's view of predestination and set out to show how this operates alongside free will. He argued that God had created the laws by which every cause produces its effect. With perfect foreknowledge, God knows how every free agent will act in every conceivable circumstance. This allows Him to predestine some to faith, through appropriate causes, without overruling free will. He acts like a parent with a child, influencing them to make the appropriate choices.

In the development of his theory of the atonement, Aquinas introduced the idea of penance as our response to and means of appropriating the benefit of Christ's atonement.⁵ In time this opened the way to abuse in the Catholic church with the selling of indulgences and so on. Salvation became seen as being obtained by works.

Luther

A thousand years later, around 1520, a theologian-monk called Luther was studying Hebrews, Romans, and Galatians and realised that salvation was by faith, not works. His studies led him to believe that it was entirely by God's initiative that men are brought to salvation. He emphasised that we are justified by grace, apart from works of the law. He understood the atonement not as the satisfaction of the requirements of the law, but the gracious means by which God could forgive our sin and restore our relationship with Himself. In Christ's death we died to the Law and in His resurrection we rise to new life.

He believed in universal atonement and predestination, but refused to argue how both can be true. He said, "A dispute about predestination should be avoided entirely."⁶ He was excommunicated for challenging the Church's sale of indulgences in 1521 and the Reformation began.

Calvin

Around 1530, in his early 20's, Calvin, a Catholic, was dramatically saved and became a protestant. As a lawyer, he also set his considerable mental skills to consider the process of salvation. He wrote commentaries on most books of the bible which were highly regarded by a Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius, whose name is associated with Calvin's in the controversy over eternal security. But it was principally for his reformation of church government that he was known in his own day.

Calvin developed and formalised many doctrines we are familiar with today, such as predestination,⁷ penal substitution (Christ takes the punishment deserved by the elect), and limited atonement (Christ only atoned for the sins of the elect).⁸

⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, "Whether anyone is punished for another's sin?"

⁵ Aquinas defined penance as contrition of heart, confession with the mouth, satisfaction by works, and the priest's absolution. This was the means by which sins committed after baptism are forgiven. See "Merit" in the Catholic Encyclopaedia at www.newadvent.org

⁶ Ewald Plass *What Luther Says*

⁷ Calvin believed in the preordination of everything. He said, "it is evident that all things come to pass rather by ordination and decree."

⁸ Calvin *On The Eternal Predestination of God* p165–66

His problem with Aquinas' theory of the atonement was its association with penance, which by Calvin's time was an area of teaching and practice requiring serious reform. Calvin's solution was to develop the theory of *penal substitution*, which Aquinas specifically rejected. He taught that Jesus took the actual penalty for our specific sins. He answered Aquinas' objection that a penalty can only be paid by the guilty, by claiming that in our union with Christ, He became guilty in our place.

This was a development of Luther's teaching of salvation by faith where justification is made apart from the law, since Calvin (a lawyer) seeks to explain how the law is fully satisfied in the atonement. Indeed, it is not the Law of Moses Calvin has in mind, but the legal ideas of his day. In his view, sin must be paid for if justice is to be done.

The idea of penal substitution comes mainly from Romans 1-6 and especially from Paul's summary in Romans 3:9-20. All have sinned in Adam (Rom 5:16,18), the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:24) and God's wrath (Jn 3:36, Thess 1:5-9). Through baptism, we died in Christ, satisfying the requirement for death as the penalty for our sin (Rom 6:5, 8:3-4).

1. Sin is a violation of covenantal law, incurring God's judgement (Rom 1:18).
2. Human sinners are judged guilty by God and deserving of death (Rom 6:23).
3. God shows His love by sending Jesus to take our punishment (Isa 53, 2Cor 5:21, Gal 3:10, Heb 10:1-4, 1Pet 3:18).
4. By His death and resurrection Jesus frees us from our punishment and offers us life (Rom 4:25).

Penal substitution is clearly taught in the scriptures, but Calvin interpreted this in a legal/philosophical way resulting in a number of unbiblical deductions, rather than in the context of God fulfilling His promise to Abraham – to bring blessing to the world through Abraham's offspring.

However, for penal substitution to make sense, God had to know the detail of every sin that would be committed in the future by all those who would ever be saved. All these were then specifically paid for in Jesus' suffering. This is made possible by the doctrines of predestination and foreknowledge. But it also led Calvin to conclude that Jesus did not need to suffer for the sins of the damned – indeed, to have done so would mean that there was a double penalty for their sins: the suffering of Christ and then their own suffering in Hell. Hence the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement.⁹

Just as Anselm's theory shifted the area of conflict from that between God and Satan to between the mercy and justice of God, so Calvin's theory brought about a shift in the *direction* of the payment for sin. In Anselm's and Aquinas' theories the emphasis is on the price being paid *by* God. But in Calvin's theory, God's wrath is appeased and His demands satisfied by the payment for sin being made *to* God.

Arminius

Arminius was only 4 when Calvin died. He studied under Calvin's successor, Beza and in 1605 began to teach against predestination and unconditional election. He taught that God's foreknowledge allowed him to know who would repent, believe and persevere, and that these people he *predestined* to be saved. He believed that God's grace could be resisted both before and after salvation. He said that a *true believer* could not totally fall away from faith and perish. But he defined a true believer as one who goes on believing to the end!

⁹ Many writers claim that limited atonement was a later development to Calvin's thought and that Calvin himself believed in universal atonement, but in his "Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement" Dr. Roger Nicole proves conclusively that Calvin believed in limited atonement.

Synods, Confessions and Articles

In 1618, the Synod of Dort, counteracted the Armenians by formulating the 5 points of Calvinism, remembered in English by the acronym TULIP.

Total depravity

Unconditional election

Limited atonement

Irresistible grace

Perseverance of the saints.

We will examine these five foundational doctrines of salvation, which the Armenians deny, below. This setting in stone of the Calvinist teachings put an end to any hope of unifying the Lutherans and Calvinists, who were divided more over church practice than doctrine, but the Lutherans would not sign up to these five doctrines.

In 1646 the Westminster Confession, based on the Dort formulation, was drawn up in an attempt to unite the English & Scottish churches. The Scots adopted it, but not the English, who drew up their own more moderate statement called the Thirty-nine articles.

Hugo Grotius

Meanwhile, another lawyer, Hugo Grotius,¹⁰ modified Aquinas' ideas on penalty substitution, in a theory which became known as the *governmental theory*.

He argued that If free pardon is to be extended to penitent sinners, some great measure must be substituted for the punishment of sinners that will uphold the moral government of God at least equally as well as the pronounced consequences would have done. The atonement is this governmental provision for the forgiveness of sins. In this theory, sin is not punished, but morality is preserved through demonstrating the seriousness of sin. Thus Christ's sufferings were instead of the penalty, not the penalty itself, releasing us from God's wrath against our sin.

This theory emphasises the *propitiation*¹¹ of God through the suffering of Christ, by which Jesus satisfies the wrath of God and conciliates Him so that He is no longer offended by our sin and demanding that we pay the penalty for it.

In this theory the atonement allows for, but does not in itself include, forgiveness. The way is cleared so that those who turn in faith may receive forgiveness. Furthermore, it applies to the church as whole, not to individuals. Faithful membership of the universal church brings its benefit, but it is lost if a person loses their faith.

Charles Hodge

The American scholar, Charles Hodge preached the penal substitution theory of the atonement in very legalistic tones, whereby a righteous God is angry with sinners and demands justice. His wrath can only be appeased through the punishment of his Son. Christ's death satisfied the demands of God's law and justice against the sinner.

It is a very simple explanation which is easily grasped, but it does not do justice to the way the scriptures present the self-sacrifice of Christ, not to the breadth of images used to portray the atonement.

Steve Chalke comments:

¹⁰ Grotius became an advocate to The Hague in 1599. He was a governmental lawyer and laid down the foundations of International Law.

¹¹ The appeasement or satisfying of God's righteous wrath against sin.

“If we follow Hodge’s understanding of the atonement it is Jesus’ death, no more no less, that becomes our ‘good news’. This reductionist approach shrinks or ‘down grades’ the whole gospel to a single sentence: ‘God is no longer angry with us because Jesus died in our place.’ Indeed, that is exactly why evangelistic presentations based on penal substitution often don’t even bother to mention the resurrection, because for them it serves no direct purpose in the story of our salvation.”¹²

Since then...

Since then great and godly men have disagreed over the five points of Calvinism. Wesley and Moody were Armenian, Whitfield and Edwards Calvinist! Today, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Vineyard and some charismatic and *faith* churches tend to be Armenian, whilst the evangelicals and many *new churches*¹³ tend to be Calvinist.

Steve Chalke

More recently, in this age of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the idea of penal substitution has come under severe criticism. The punishment of the innocent and the acquittal of the guilty is regarded as the perfect example of injustice.¹⁴ The phrase, “cosmic child abuse” has been coined to attack the doctrine of penal substitution. This is pushing many people back towards the “Christ the Conqueror” theory.

Steve Chalke has become famous for rejecting the theory of penal substitution.

In *Christianity* magazine he wrote,

“In The Lost Message of Jesus I claim that penal substitution is tantamount to ‘child abuse – a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.’ Though the sheer bluntness of this imagery (not original to me of course) might shock some, in truth, it is only a stark ‘unmasking’ of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology.”¹⁵

In an article called “Redeeming the Cross” Steve Chalke writes:

“The theological problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and foremost concerned with retribution flowing from his wrath against sinners. The only way for his anger to be placated is in receiving recompense from those who have wronged him; and although his great love motivates him to send his Son, his wrath remains the driving force behind the need for the cross.”

He sees in Jesus’ teaching and example a rejection of wrath and retribution:

“It is interesting to note that in Jesus’ own explanation of his Father’s relationship with mankind, the prodigal son, the father is not presented as angry or vengeful or as seeking justice and retribution – instead he simply runs to greet his wayward child, showers him with gifts and welcomes him home. The father in the story is wronged, but chooses to forgive in order to restore a broken relationship – there is no theme of retribution. Instead, the story is one of outstanding grace, of scandalous love and mercy – how different it would read if penal substitution was the model of atonement offered ... Then we come to Jesus’ teachings on anger (Matt 5:22) and retaliation (Matt 5:38ff). Is it not strange for Jesus (God incarnate) on the one hand to say ‘do not return evil for evil’ while still looking for retribution himself? Similarly wouldn’t it be inconsistent for God to warn us not to be angry with each other and yet burn with wrath himself, or tell us to ‘love our enemies’ when he obviously couldn’t quite bring himself to do the same without demanding massive appeasement? If these things are true, what does it mean to ‘be

¹² “Redeeming the Cross” Steve Chalke.

¹³ Non-denominational charismatic churches started since the 1960’s.

¹⁴ This accusation is ungrounded in the case of Christ’s atonement, where God, in Jesus, reconciled sinners to Himself by His own voluntary and loving act of offering Himself for our justification.

¹⁵ *Christianity* magazine ‘Cross Purposes’, September 2004, pp. 44–48

perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48)? If it is true that Jesus is 'the Word of God' then how can his message be inconsistent with his nature? If the cross has anything to do with penal substitution then Jesus teaching becomes a divine case of 'do as I say, not as I do'. I, for one, believe that God practices what he preaches!"

N T Wright

The basic weakness in the development of most theories of the atonement is that they tend to have been worked out within the framework of the human legal or ethical systems of the day. If we are to form a true picture of the atonement we must return to the biblical context, understanding it from a biblical world view. This is an exercise in which N T Wright has made significant contributions.¹⁶ He points us back to Isaiah 53 where he claims we see penal substitutionary death in its proper Jewish context.

He was wounded *for our transgressions* and bruised *for our iniquities*; upon him was *the punishment that brought us peace* and *with his stripes we are healed*. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned every one to his own way; And YHWH *has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. (Isaiah 53:5-6.)

He writes,

"It is with the Servant, and the theology of the whole of Isaiah 40-55, that we find the explanation for the otherwise bizarre idea of one person standing in for the many. It makes the sense it makes within the biblical world, the Old Testament world, within which the creator God, faced with a world in rebellion, chose Israel - Abraham and his family - as the means of putting everything right, and, when Israel itself had rebelled, promised to set that right as well and so to complete the purpose of putting humans right and thus setting the whole created order back the right way up. And the long-promised way by which this purpose would be achieved was, as hints and guesses in the Psalms and prophets indicate, that Israel's representative, the anointed king, would be the one through whom this would be accomplished. Like David facing Goliath, he would stand alone to do for his people what they could not do for themselves. It is because Jesus, as Israel's representative Messiah, was therefore the representative of the whole human race, that he could appropriately become its substitute. That is how Paul's logic works. 'One died for all, therefore all died,' he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5.14; and thus, seven verses later, 'God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin,' he concluded seven verses later, 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (5.21). And it is within that argument that we find the still deeper truth, which is again rooted in the dark hints and guesses of the Old Testament: that the Messiah through whom all this would be accomplished would be the very embodiment of YHWH himself. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19)."

Wright points out that the passages which are so often taken as describing the problem of sin in legal terms are actually in the context of restoring the promises given to Abraham to God's people who have rejected Him.

It isn't that God happens to have a petulant thing about petty rules. He is the wise and loving creator who cannot abide his creation being despoiled. On the cross he drew the full force not only of that despoiling, but of his own proper, judicial, punitive rejection of it, on to himself. That is what the New Testament says. That is what Jesus himself, I have argued elsewhere, believed what was going on.¹⁷

I hope you can see from this brief historical overview of the main theories¹⁸ of atonement that the Calvinist theory of limited atonement and penal substitution is only one of several theories, and is indeed the youngest theory. Furthermore, we may ask if these theories are necessarily exclusive;

¹⁶ See N T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (SPCK, 2006)

¹⁷ The Cross and the Caricatures", N T Write. Article, Easter 2007.

¹⁸ There is another significant theory, *The Moral Theory*, also dating from the early centuries, that Jesus' death was set forth as an example to follow. It is hardly found outside the liberal wing of the church.

could it be that the death of Christ accomplished several or all of the aspects of atonement embodied in these theories?

Packer is surely right when he says simply that “Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgement for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory”¹⁹

We should also take full note of Wright’s observation that “ when Jesus himself wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal. Of course, the earliest exponent of that meal (Paul, in 1 Corinthians) insists that it matters quite a lot that you understand what you are about as you come to share in it; but still it is the meal, not the understanding, that is the primary vehicle of meaning.”²⁰

The five points of Calvinism

We turn now to briefly explore the five points of Calvinism, looking at the main scriptures and logic upon which they are founded and disputed.

Total depravity

The doctrine of *total depravity* states that since the fall, mankind has been enslaved to sin and, apart from the initiative of God’s grace, is utterly unable to choose to follow God or choose to accept the offer of salvation. However, it does *not* assert that man is incapable of doing any good. The question disputed between the Armenians and Calvinists is what this grace does. The Armenians say God *enables* fallen men to make a free choice that they would otherwise not consider. The Calvinists say that God *causes* fallen men to choose salvation.

The foundation of the doctrine is original sin, which few Christian’s these days would deny.²¹ *Total depravity* is a logical extension of this, based on scriptures such as these:

“The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” (Gen 6:5)

“No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (Joh 6:44)

“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” (Joh 8:34)

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ ...we were by nature objects of wrath.” (Eph 2:1-3 NIV)

These scriptures certainly suggest that men cannot chose salvation without God’s gracious intervention, but Calvinists go further, denying free will in the choice to accept salvation. The logic that leads to this conclusion is outlined below under “Unconditional election”.

My question is, “What are the *natural* rather than *logical* conclusions that the scriptures and experience lead us to?” In reading the scriptures, one cannot avoid coming the conclusion that God considers men to have a choice about following Him, and that ultimate judgement is based upon that choice. Consider the lesson of the potter and the clay:

¹⁹ Packer, "What did the cross achieve?" p88

²⁰ N T Wright.

²¹ Though not all agree on its degree. Calvinists say we inherit actual sin and its guilt from Adam. Arminians say we inherit only the propensity to sin. They say a baby is not guilty until it sins for itself. Augustine was the father of the belief that we are born guilty.

“... if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” (Jer 18:8)

This has no meaning if evil people cannot freely choose to repent. Their choice may have to be aided by God, whether through punishment, prophetic warning or even the sovereign softening of men’s hearts. But if one says that only hearts that God *irresistibly* aids can turn to God, one makes a mockery of scripture. Does not the very cross of Christ proclaim God’s jealousy in guarding the freedom of men to choose good or evil. The cross is not so compelling as to override men’s choice, but rather it preserves it. But a day is coming when every knee shall bow, a day when the heavens will flee away, when man’s will is so overawed by indescribable power and glory that, effectively, free will is overruled. When 6-foot tall fallen man is openly presented with the majesty of God who plays with galaxies, his will is bound to submit! This is irresistible, but the cross is not.

What of the notion that men cannot ever choose to pursue God apart from His enabling grace? If there is sufficient *universal* grace to enable men to make a moral choice worthy of judgement, then we must modify our statement of total depravity to allow for this. What is the point of arguing about a state of depravity that does not actually exist? Surely, the scriptures teach that mankind *does* have sufficient revelation to make a moral choice worthy of judgement. The fact that without that grace we are hopelessly blind is immaterial. God has ensured that His glory is sufficiently revealed to lift mankind out of a state of total depravity. The scriptures that suggest an inability for fallen men to seek God must be read in the context of the whole of scripture.²²

Likewise our ‘logical’ conclusions must be weighed against human experience. Missionary work around the world has discovered that many tribes possess a deep knowledge of their loss of relationship with God and a longing for restoration.²³ The fact that this has come by the grace of God does not *illustrate* total depravity but rather suggests we should modify it.

I do not accept the usual Calvinist statement of total depravity. We must preserve the biblically illustrated moral freedom of a man to respond to God’s grace. This touches on the doctrine of limited atonement, which we will examine shortly. God sent Jesus to die for the whole world, all of whom he desires to be saved.²⁴ He draws all men to himself and grants them sufficient grace to make a choice for which they will be judged.²⁵ This is Paul’s assertion in the first three chapters of Romans.²⁶

“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance?” (Ro 2:4 NIV)

Paul clearly teaches that God’s grace leads people to repentance, but they can still resist.

Unconditional election

The bible talks about the saints being *appointed*, *chosen* and *predestined* and describes them as the *elect*.

“And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” (Mt 24:31)

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you...” (Joh 15:16)

²² For example, Rom 3:11f says, “There is no-one who seeks God... not even one.” But this is a quote from Isaiah, which is a statement of God’s exasperation with Israel, God’s chosen people. It is most definitely not a statement about the total depravity of mankind, yet it is so often quotes as such.

²³ See for example Don Richardson “Eternity in Their Hearts” and Bruce Olson “Brucho”.

²⁴ Jn 3:16 “God so loved the world” and 1Tim 2:4 “He wills that all men shall be saved.”

²⁵ Joh 12:32 “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

²⁶ See Rom 1:18ff and 2:1-4

“... all who were appointed for eternal life believed.” (Ac 13:48)

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” (Ro 8:29-30)

“For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.” (Ro 9:15-16)

“What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath— prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory...?” (Ro 9:22-24)

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—” (Eph 1:4-5)

“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,” (Eph 1:11)

“from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (2Th 2:13)

“who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,” (2Ti 1:9)

These scriptures are compelling and clearly refer to the preparation of individuals before creation for salvation because of His will, not because of anything we would subsequently do. But on the basis of 1Pet 1:2 “...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” some have tried to argue that God elected in foreknowledge of our response of faith (denied by 2 Tim 1:9). Others that God predestined a people, the church, not the individuals who would comprise it (denied by Acts 13:48 and Rom 9:15). Still others, that God prepared the destiny for believers, not the believers themselves (denied by all the above).

Whatever trouble we may have in marrying the two doctrines of free will and predestination, we cannot escape that both are vigorously taught in the New Testament.

The Calvinist doctrine of *unconditional election* asserts that before God created the world he chose to save some people according to his own purposes and without any conditions related to those persons. Those who are elected receive mercy whilst everyone else receives justice. This doctrine is the foundation for the other four points of Calvinism. The logical argument is as follows:

It is the illumination of our hearts by truth that persuades a sinner to repent. This is not coercion, it is illumination. This gracious act, predetermined by God, shows us the truth and persuades us to put our faith in Christ. It is irresistible in the same way that some people find chocolate irresistible. It is its goodness that guarantees our response of faith, not God’s meddling with our rational choices.

However, there is the question of the degree of illumination that God grants. Some get a blinding visitation of Christ on the road, whilst others get a slowly developing realisation of growing faith and yet others see nothing more than the stars of the Milky Way.²⁷ Election requires *sufficient* illumination to ensure a response of faith, and therefore it is effectively irresistible. Conversely, there must be an insufficient illumination for those not elected. This leads to the conclusion that salvation *effectively* requires God’s irresistible grace and *effectively* removes free will in the matter of saving faith.

²⁷ Rom 1:20

Put briefly, if men are elected, they must one day be saved and therefore cannot resist God's will. Nothing they do before or after coming to faith can thwart God's election to salvation, since God's sovereign will must be accomplished. This distilled logic leads directly to the conclusion that election must be unconditional, that both saving grace and persevering grace must be irresistible, and that free will in the matter of saving and persevering faith must be curtailed.²⁸ It is a short step from here to the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity. Furthermore, since only the elect are saved, Christ did not need to die for the unsaved. This, along with some other considerations, leads to the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement, where Christ is said to have paid for the sins of the elect only.

Because of the way that the five points of Calvinism all derive from predestination by a seemingly compelling logical argument, it is often said that all points must stand or fall together. Yet, since the Synod of Dort in 1618, there have been many who ascribe to some but not all of the points. Logical deduction from scripture does not make a conclusion biblical or true. The use and interpretation of the source texts may be faulty, the logic may be faulty and the conclusions may be faulty. Furthermore, all logical arguments work with a model of reality.²⁹ If the model is faulty, the logical path will not correlate with reality. In the case of Calvinism, the model is based on philosophical deductions made by Augustine (original sin and predestination) and Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas (penal substitution) among others. As good and as widely accepted as these models might be, they are not themselves directly biblical doctrines, and they are not universally accepted by godly orthodox saints and theologians.

We should not accept a human logical conclusion that denies biblical assertions. I can accept that my powers of logical thought are limited and that God asks me to believe His word rather than my "logical" conclusions. I accept moral free-will (aided by God's grace) and predestination to salvation. If I cannot understand how they co-exist I must live with that. For me, I am persuaded of predestination and irresistible grace, but struggle with the rejection of free will.

The scope of atonement – limited or universal?

Calvin argued that for penal substitution to make sense, God had to know the detail of every sin that would be committed in the future by all those who would ever be saved. All these were then specifically paid for in Jesus' suffering. This is made possible by the doctrines of predestination (determining who would be saved) and foreknowledge (knowing what sins they would commit). But it also led Calvin to conclude that Jesus did not need to suffer for the sins of the damned – indeed, to have done so would mean that there was a double penalty for their sins: the suffering of Christ and then their own suffering in Hell.³⁰ Hence the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement whereby Christ atoned only for the sins of the elect.³¹

Our understanding of the scope of the atonement has an effect on our assurance of salvation and on our evangelism and determines the significance of saving faith.

²⁸ Calvin and many others have gone much further, e.g. "The occurrence of all events is determined with unalterable certainty. Foreknowledge foreknows them as certain. Foreordination determines them, secures their certainty. Providence effects it. God effectually controls the acts of free agents. They are fixed from all eternity!" (Dr. Hodge Vol. II, p. 300).

²⁹ See for instance Packer's discussion of theological models in, "What did the cross achieve?"

³⁰ Calvin *On The Eternal Predestination of God* p165–66

³¹ Many writers claim that limited atonement was a later development to Calvin's thought and that Calvin himself believed in universal atonement, but in his "Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement" Dr. Roger Nicole proves conclusively that Calvin believed in limited atonement.

Evangelism

If Christ's atonement was effective for all, then we can confidently preach to all, urging them to faith and assuring them of God's forgiveness. But if only some are atoned for, then such preaching is impossible. We must instead urge people to seek God in the hope that they may be one of the elect for whom Christ has atoned, and commiserate with the utter hopelessness of the rest. Neither can we preach that God loves a person for whom Christ may not have atoned. Universal atonement allows a person to know God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ before they repent and believe. Limited atonement requires a person to repent and believe before they can have any hope of Christ's atonement being effective for them.

Assurance

Likewise, if we have put our faith in Christ's atonement, then can we be assured of our salvation? If Christ died for all, then yes! The cross and resurrection gives us the assurance that our sins are indeed atoned for. But if the atonement was only effective for the elect, then it is not to the cross we must look for assurance, but to our own election. How can I put my faith in Christ, if I do not know if He atoned for me?

Saving faith

The NT writers insist that salvation is by faith, just as it was Abraham's faith which was counted to him as righteousness. Peter preached that his hearers should repent and believe that they might be saved. In other words, the atonement was NOT effective in saving people all by itself. In addition to the atonement, faith is required on behalf of the believer in order to receive its benefit. But limited atonement makes no room for *our* faith bringing us into salvation. Instead, those who believe in limited atonement argue that the atonement *produces* saving faith in the elect.

Scriptures claimed to teach Limited Atonement

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep." (Joh 10:14-15)
³²

"Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Ac 20:28)

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25)

"Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (Joh 15:13)

"Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." (Heb 9:28)

See also Matt 1:21, 15:24, Mk 10:45, Jn 17:9, Gal 3:13

Scriptures claimed to teach Universal Atonement

"John saw Jesus ... and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Joh 1:29)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Joh 3:16)

"Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." (Ro 5:18)

"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2Co 5:14-15)

³² Limited atonement is claimed in an argument based on John 10 thus: Jesus lays down His life for His sheep (v15), He loses none of His sheep (v28), not all are saved (Matt 7:14), therefore Jesus did not die for everyone.

“... who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1Ti 2:4)

“... God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe.” (1Ti 4:10)

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” (Tit 2:11)

“But we see Jesus ... now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Heb 2:9)

“They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” (2Pe 2:1)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1Jo 2:2)

You will have to judge for yourself how much questions about the theories and scope of atonement matter to you.³³ But I feel that limited atonement and strict penal substitution push logic too far in the interpretation of scripture. For the moment, my vote is with universal atonement and penalty (not penal) substitution with victory and ransom thrown in for good measure.

Models of atonement

In the scriptures, the sacrifices for sin were said to atone for sin. The meaning of the word is “make a covering for sin”. The shed blood somehow dealt with the problem of sin by covering it. There is no picture here of punishment. The animal was not punished by death in the place of the sinner, but for some reason the blood of the slain animal was effective in covering the sin.

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isa 53:5)

“For Christ died for sins once [for all time], the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,” (1Pe 3:18)

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” (Ro 3:23-26)

Hebrews presents us with more than one model of atonement. “Christ the victor” is seen at Heb 2:14-15 where we are told he has destroyed the devil and set us free from bondage.³⁴ Christ the atoning sacrifice is powerfully presented throughout the letter. Through His death He made purification for our sin and provides freedom of access to God. The mechanism is not explained beyond that of purification by blood as required by the Law of Moses. But there is no hint of punishment in the Hebrews imagery.

The biblical view of sacrifice is always that of God Himself providing a means for removing the stain of sin and restoring relationship. In Christ’s sacrifice, God provides for himself the eternally effective sacrifice. Punishment as a means of restoring justice is not a part of the biblical worldview. Indeed, punishment can never resolve the injustice of sin; it cannot undo the sinful deed. The best that punishment can be is an offering to appease the anger of the offended party.

The idea of penal substitution comes mainly from Romans 1-6 and especially from Paul’s summary in Romans 3:9-20. All have sinned in Adam (Rom 5:16,18), the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:24) and God’s wrath (Jn 3:36, 2 Thess 1:5-9). But these must be understood in their context of God fulfilling His promise to Abraham.

³³ A good discussion of some of the problems with the limited atonement theory can be found in Eaton’s book, “A Theology of Encouragement”

³⁴ Note that there is no suggestion of ransom payment to the devil, but rather his defeat and destruction.

It is wrong to view judgement of sin as merely a matter of law. It is the personal response of God to personal sin against Him (Jer 2:13).

See Jn 18-19, 1 Cor 2, Col 2.

Irresistible grace

We turn now, very briefly, to the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace. This idea is intimately bound up with the doctrines of total depravity and especially unconditional election. We covered the main issues of irresistible grace in those discussions above. The main scriptures are:

“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” (Joh 12:32)³⁵

“And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” (Ro 8:30)

“No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. ... Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” (Joh 6:44-45)

Perseverance of the Saints

Finally, we come to the doctrine that, for most people, encapsulates the controversy between Calvinism and Armenians. Armenians believe that a saved person can lose their salvation by rejection of their faith, whereas Calvinists believe that a saved person will never *finally* reject their faith. Calvinists believe that since saved people are predestined, they cannot lose their eternal salvation. If they are truly predestined, they will, before they die, be truly saved and, even if they should backslide, they will die in a state of faith. The principal battle ground for the two sides are the passages of scripture that talk about the need for perseverance, faithfulness and godliness if we are to inherit eternal life. The passages that are most frequently argued over are found in the letter to the Hebrews.

I am not, here, going to review the scriptures over which the two sides debate, but I would like to make some closing observations.

First, referring back to my illustration in the introduction, I observe that the biblical authors seem quite happy to live with both ends of the dinosaur. They freely mix the sovereignty of God over the rain and the fall of the dice with the passionate appeal to men to do His will. They live happily with the security of knowing we are chosen before the foundation of the world and with the threat of having our names removed from the book of life. Many of the authors were extremely intelligent people who would have noticed the apparent contradictions, yet did not think it necessary to explain them or even to comment on them. I wonder who should be our example? The ancient prophets and apostles or medieval lawyers and modern theologians?

A Calvinist believes that he cannot lose his salvation, but he also believes that Christ did not die for everyone (is he one for whom Christ died?). He believes that sorrow for sin might not be true repentance, that even the most impressive faith may be false, that a possession of the Spirit might fall short of true regeneration, and that even Paul himself feared for his own salvation. As a consequence, a Calvinist who truly understands the five doctrines of Calvinism can never be sure of his own salvation. As a consequence, when the five doctrines are clearly taught, Calvinism often leads to morbid introspection.

I take comfort from the teaching about election, but I do not accept all the conclusions that Calvin and his successors come to. I do not have a “logical” theology; I do not know how the head joins to the tail. But strange as it may seem, I am not aware of any way in which this gap in my logic adversely affects my walk with Jesus! The Holy Spirit does not seem to have any difficulty witnessing to my spirit that I am a child of God. Neither does there seem to be a problem in coming

³⁵ Understood by Calvinists to mean “Men from every people, not just Jews”.

to conviction of sin and receiving the gift of repentance. My logical gap does not trip me up when I seek to let the love of God, which He has poured into my heart, be expressed in my relationships with others. It is a strange thing, but I seem to be able to cope with the unsearchable wisdom of God.

My second observation concerns the use that the biblical authors make of these contrasting truths. I never see unbelievers excused because they have not been predestined to salvation and neither do I see sin being treated as if it did not matter. What I do observe is a radical approach to dealing with the problem of sin in the church. The letters to the Corinthians are among the most striking examples. Paul is writing to a church where there were “many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged”.³⁶ However, he does not threaten them with losing their salvation, but says that God has “set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”³⁷ In his earlier letter, he writes to urge them to stop sleeping with prostitutes. He quotes their saying “Everything is permissible for me” without denying its truth. Instead, he reaffirms that they are a temple of the Holy Spirit and appeals to them to “honour God with your body.”³⁸ Yet when writing about himself, he says, “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”³⁹ Paul uses the whole armoury of encouragement and warning, exhortation and example, theological argument and emotional appeal, sarcasm and wit ... His longing and desire is for the saints to grow in godliness and faith until they reach the full stature of Christ. May we be motivated by his example and by the truth that God revealed to him.

Jesus' explanation of His death...

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.” After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Lu 22:14-20)

(See also 1 Cor 11:22-34)

The timing of Jesus' death is surprising. He did not die on the Day of Atonement as we might expect, which was the most important feast, signifying the forgiveness of sins. Instead, He died at Passover (which was the first feast of the religious year, in Spring, marking new beginnings, followed by firstfruits and the 7-day feast of unleavened bread). This surely very significant. In the meal which Jesus gave to the church to remember His work on the cross, He did not emphasise penal substitution, but deliverance (Passover) and covenant making. Jesus did not say, this is my blood of the atoning sacrifice, but this is my blood of the New Covenant. Furthermore, He points ahead to the consummation of His betrothal to His bride, the church, at the marriage feast of the Lamb. Perhaps we should consider how our remembrance of Christ's work on the cross reflects this Passover emphasis which Jesus' chose.

³⁶ 2 Cor 12:22

³⁷ 2 Cor 1:22

³⁸ 1 Cor 6:12-20

³⁹ 1 Cor 9:27

Christ has brought us into the promises God gave to Abraham.

“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” (Ac 3:25)

“The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Gal 3:8-9)

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal 3:29)

We are urged to have great confidence in the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ.

He says “(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (Heb 7:19). This is the New Covenant, in which “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Heb 8:12). “The gifts and sacrifices being offered under the Law were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper” (Heb 9:9). But now “the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanses our consciences from dead works, so that we may serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10), “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14).

“Therefore, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:22-23).

Scriptures

Believers may fall away

Heb 6:6, 10:26-31 – they were genuine believers

2 Pet 2:20-22

but they were not authentic!!

Heb 3:14

1Jn 2:19

See also Matt 24:13, Mk 3:29, Lk 9:62, 1Jn 5:16

and Jn 5:24; 6:37; 10:28-30; Rom 8:1; Heb 8:12

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