

Indivisible? A theological consideration of the Trinity and Particular Redemption

WITHIN REFORMED, EVANGELICAL CIRCLES, few issues are more likely to divide otherwise-like-minded theologians than the extent of the atonement. The question of whether Christ died for all people – elect and non-elect – in the same way is often the last remaining point of disagreement among ‘great ones’ who see eye-to-eye on almost every other substantial theological issue. Of course, nowhere is the debate surrounding this issue more clearly witnessed than in the ongoing controversy about whether Calvin himself was really a ‘5-point Calvinist’.¹

In this environment, broaching the debate between ‘unlimited atonement’ and ‘particular redemption’ is fraught with potential danger.² This is not just because either view necessitates standing against giants of the faith; there is also the risk that the whole topic be approached as a mere exercise in intellectual curiosity – a ‘theological oddity’, the last remaining fight between reformed evangelicals, division for division’s sake.

Anyone wishing to approach the subject therefore requires humility, prudence and acceptance of a certain degree of mystery. Scripture itself makes relatively little of this specific issue, and it ought not to become a test of orthodoxy. However, to say this subject is a mystery does not mean we abandon our attempts to probe this mystery. Moreover, evangelical theology must never shrink back from careful theological thought about the nature of Christ’s atoning death. On the contrary, few subjects – if any – are more important.

¹ That is, did Calvin really believe the ‘L’ in ‘TULIP’? For examples of those who claim Calvin held an unlimited atonement view, see Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume 3: Sin and Salvation* (4 vols.; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002-2003), chapter 12; Robert Doyle, ‘Atonement Lecture Notes’ on Federal Calvinism (2007), 3, where it is claimed that the doctrine of limited atonement was ‘a doctrine or conclusion unknown to Calvin’. For examples of those who claim Calvin held a particular redemption view, see Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 283ff.; Raymond A. Blacketer, ‘Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective’ in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 313-316.

² Rather than adopting the label ‘limited atonement’ – which is rejected by many advocates of the position – we will use the more widely accepted label ‘particular redemption’ to describe this view. Alternately, the designation ‘definite atonement’ is generally accepted by advocates of this position. cf. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 84.

The goal of this paper is to wade gently into the debate with a consideration of one issue: namely, the doctrine of the Trinity. More specifically, our aim will be to show how the theological maxim that ‘the external works of the Trinity are indivisible’ leads us towards the conclusion that ‘particular redemption’ makes best sense of the biblical material.

Of course, myriad issues on both sides of the debate deserve consideration – not to mention the array of key biblical texts which should be foundational for any sustained discussion. Space prevents us from undertaking such discussion here.

However, given ‘the astonishing way in which the doctrine of the Trinity ... has returned to the very centre of Christian theological thought’ recently,³ surprisingly little reflection on its connection with the extent of the atonement has taken place. It is therefore appropriate that we focus our attention solely on the Trinity, hoping that it may shed some valuable light on the issue at hand.

Clarifications: The Extent of the Atonement and Penal Substitution

Before turning to our main argument, it is important to provide some clarifications and definitions. Too often, disagreement over this subject is driven by misunderstandings, and by failure to speak with clarity and precision.⁴

Firstly, then, the issue is *not* the value of Christ’s atoning death. No sensible reformed theologian argues that Christ’s death was limited in this sense. Indeed, his suffering and death were so immense and infinite ‘that it would be amply sufficient to atone for the sins of all the people of all ages in the whole world and in a thousand worlds besides, if these existed.’⁵

³ Gerald Bray, ‘The Trinity: Where do we go from here?’ in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (ed. A. T. B. McGowan; Leicester: IVP, 2006), 20.

⁴ We are reminded of the opening words of J. C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (Moscow: Charles Nolan, 2000): “It may be laid down as a rule, with tolerable confidence, that the absence of accurate definitions is the very life of religious controversy. If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die. Scores of excited disputants would discover that they do not really differ, and that their disputes have arisen from their own neglect of the great duty of explaining the meaning of words.”

⁵ Roger Nicole, *Our Sovereign Savior: The Essence of the Reformed Faith* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 58.

Secondly, the issue is *not* whether the gospel should be preached to all people. J.I. Packer – a staunch believer in particular redemption – is clear that the extent of the atonement has no impact on evangelism:

The gospel is not, 'believe that Christ died for everybody's sins, and therefore for yours,' any more than it is, 'believe that Christ died only for certain people's sins, and so perhaps not for yours.' The gospel is, 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for sins, and now offers you Himself as your Saviour.' This is the message which we are to take to the world. We have no business to ask them to put faith in any view of the extent of the atonement; our job is to point them to the living Christ, and summon them to trust in Him.⁶

Thirdly, the issue is *not* whether all people will be saved. Advocates of unlimited atonement, in its best form, take seriously the abundant biblical evidence that not all people will finally be saved. Unlimited atonement is not necessarily universalism.

Perhaps most importantly, the issue is *not* whether benefits or effects flow from Christ's death to all people – and, indeed, to all of creation. As noted above, all people may be indiscriminately called to the benefits of the gospel. Christ's coming brings an outpouring of common grace, not least through the creation of the church, and the risen Christ has all authority on heaven and earth (Matt 28:18). Indeed, the atonement has cosmic implications, seen perhaps most clearly in Colossians 1:20.⁷

However, we must remember that the penal, substitutionary element of Jesus' death is a – or perhaps *the* – central aspect of the atonement. One recent defence of penal substitution has aptly described this facet of the cross as standing 'at the very heart of the gospel'.⁸ Advocates of particular redemption rightly point out that, while

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), 69. cf. Nicole, *Standing Forth*, 331-343; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 246.

⁷ 'And through him to reconcile all things to him, whether things on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.' Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary; Colombia: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 56-7, demonstrates that this verse does not deny particular redemption (without addressing the issue specifically): "The reconciliation of the powers and principalities is in mind. They are one category whatever others are included. Yet these forces are shown as *submitting against their wills to a power they cannot resist*. They are reconciled *through subjugation* (cf. 1 Cor 15:28), and Christ's victory has reduced them to the position of 'weak and beggarly elements' (cf. Gal 4:9)." (emphasis added)

⁸ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the glory of penal substitution* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 21. While this claim lies beyond the immediate

Jesus' death has many universal implications, this central aspect of the atonement applies to the elect in a way that it does not apply to the non-elect. After all, what would it mean for Christ to bear the sin and punishment due to a person, if that person were then left to bear their own punishment?

The issue, then, is the *intent* or the *design* of the atonement. For whom did Christ die? It is our contention that Jesus died – in the penal, substitutionary sense – only for (ὕπὲρ) those whom God determined from eternity past to save.⁹ “[I]t is one thing to say that the non-elect are the recipients of many benefits that accrue from Christ’s death, [but] it is something entirely different to say that they are the partakers or were intended to be the partakers of the vicarious substitution which ‘died for’ properly connotes.”¹⁰

Having carefully defined the parameters of the discussion, we can now proceed to the substance of our argument. We will begin by analysing the unity of purpose in the Trinity, before considering the works of Father, Son and Spirit in the redemption of God’s people. We will then draw this analysis together with some conclusions about the extent of the atonement.

The Works of the Trinity: Indivisible

The theological principle that ‘the external works of the Trinity are indivisible’ (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*) first appeared in Augustine’s *On the Trinity* and has since been reiterated by many others, including Karl Barth.¹¹ The meaning of this principle is simple enough: while some of God’s ways and works must be seen as being effected by one person of the Trinity and not others, all three are still involved in some way in all that God does, such that all work together with unity of purpose.¹²

topic of the present study, it is a claim which would not go unchallenged in many evangelical circles today. However, for further discussion in support of this claim, see Garry J. Williams, ‘Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50/1 (2007): 71-86; D. Broughton Knox, *Collected Works Volume I: The Doctrine of God* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2000), 260: ‘Substitution in sin-bearing is the centre of the New Testament doctrine of the Atonement’.

⁹ cf. Rom 5:8; 8:32 (ὕπὲρ ἡμῶν).

¹⁰ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1955), 68.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Vol. I, Part 1 (trans. G. T. Thomson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 453. The English translation of the Latin expression is based on Letham, *Work of Christ*, 237.

¹² This is also referred to as the principle of ‘inseparable operation’; cf. Jeffery et al., *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 129-132.

John Owen further explains this principle by stating that ‘the several persons of the Holy Trinity’ must be seen as ‘the joint author of the whole work’ of redemption.¹³ “The agent in, and chief author of, this great work of our redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are of the Deity are undivided and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed.”¹⁴

Nowhere in Scripture is this more clearly seen than in John’s Gospel, as the Son reveals the closest possible relationship with the Father. Not only are they ‘in’ one another, but the ‘works’ of the Son are the works of the Father.¹⁵ The Spirit, too, is intimately involved in the triune life and work of God by making the Son known – not speaking on his own authority, but speaking what he hears.¹⁶ Throughout the New Testament, the connection is so close that the Spirit is often spoken of as the Spirit of God or of Christ.¹⁷

So, while affirming that the three persons do not perform the same action in the same way, they never act independently of each other, and are always united in will and purpose. As Augustine explained, the Father’s actions are *not without* the Son, and the Son’s actions are *not without* the Father.¹⁸

What, then, are the works of the Trinity in relation to redemption?

The Father and the Spirit in redemption

The doctrine of election is one of the defining markers of mainstream reformed theology. The clear testimony of Scripture is that God elects some people to salvation, while ‘passing over’ others. Passages such as Deuteronomy 7:7-8, John 6:37-44, Acts 13:48, Ephesians 1:4-5, Romans 8:29-30 and Romans 9:1-29 bear clear testimony to this reality. Carson refers to this as ‘God’s particular, effective, selecting

¹³ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1959), 51.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵ cf. John 5:19, 36; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 14:10-12; 16:15; 17:4, 21-23.

¹⁶ cf. John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13-14.

¹⁷ Note especially Rom 8:9, where the Spirit is, within just a few words, both πνεῦμα θεοῦ and πνεῦμα Χριστοῦ. Elsewhere in the NT, ‘Spirit of God’: Matt 12:28; Rom 8:11, 14; 15:19; 1 Cor 2:11, 14; 6:11; 7:40; 12:3; 2 Cor 3:3; Eph 4:30; Phil 3:3; 1 Pet 4:14; 1 John 4:2. ‘Spirit of Jesus / Christ’: Acts 16:7; Gal 4:6; Phil 1:19; 1 Pet 1:11. cf. ‘Spirit of the Lord’: Acts 5:9; 8:39; 2 Cor 3:17.

¹⁸ Cited in Jeffery et al, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*, 284.

love toward his elect'.¹⁹ So, without denying that God has a loving stance towards the whole world, we must affirm that the Father (Eph 1:4-5) chose some for salvation in eternity past.²⁰

Likewise, the notion that the Spirit applies redemption to the elect only has found widespread support within reformed circles. It is the Spirit who regenerates God's people, making possible the response of faith which unites believers to Christ. Calvin speaks of faith as 'the principle work of the Holy Spirit'.²¹ "[T]he Spirit is not only the initiator of faith, but increases it by degrees until by it he leads us to the Kingdom of Heaven."²² There can be no doubt that 'us' here refers only to God's people, the elect, rather than all people, given that many persist in unbelief and ultimately perish.

Similarly for John Owen, the Holy Spirit is how God confers all gifts to his chosen people. "There is no good communicated unto us from God, but it is bestowed on us or wrought in us by the Holy Ghost.... Nor is there any good in us towards God, any faith, love, duty, obedience, but what is effectually wrought in us by him, by him alone."²³ Like election, this idea is found consistently throughout the New Testament.²⁴

Hence, both Father and Spirit demonstrate a specific love for and action towards the elect within God's overall redemptive plans. If we have devoted little space to proving these points, it is because both are so clearly attested throughout Scripture, and both have traditionally been widely accepted within reformed theology.

The Son in redemption

If our theological analysis thus far is correct, the implications for the extent of the atonement become obvious. On the one hand, if unlimited atonement is correct, then the Father elects *some*, the Spirit regenerates *some*, but the Son dies for *all*. If this is

¹⁹ Carson, *Love of God*, 19.

²⁰ For a full treatment of the doctrine of election, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.xxi-xxiv, 920-987.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes* III.i.4, 541.

²² Calvin, *Institutes* III.ii.34, 581.

²³ John Owen, *Pneumatologia* in *The Works of John Owen – Volume 3* (ed. William H. Goold; 16 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967; repr., London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53), 157.

²⁴ eg: John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; 14:17; 16:13; Rom 8:9, 15; Eph 1:13-14.

true, there appears to be a substantial division within the Godhead – not in some peripheral matter (as though that would make such division more palatable!), but at the very heart of the plan of redemption, which culminated in the self-offering of the Son as a sacrifice for sin. Such a conclusion would seem to be directly at odds with the biblical presentation of the purposeful, unified nature of the triune God, as expressed in Augustine’s famous maxim.

Robert Letham is particularly scathing towards the view that proposes such a division in the Godhead, describing it as ‘by far the most serious problem with provisional atonement’.²⁵

It threatens to tear apart the Holy Trinity. It introduces disorder into the doctrine of God. The Father and the Holy Spirit have different goals from the Son. The tendency is towards tritheism, and the unity of the Godhead is undermined.... Where is the firmness and reliability of his purpose? What assurance can be had from a God who decides first one thing, then another?²⁶

Roger Nicole concurs, arguing that unlimited atonement ‘does terrible damage to the unity of the counsel of God’.²⁷ “It is to separate the Father and the Holy Spirit from the Son, when the very essence of God is that there is one purpose in which they are united.”²⁸

On the other hand, if the Father predestines only *some* people for redemption, and the Spirit applies redemption to only *some* people – and if ‘the external works of the Trinity are indivisible’ – then it seems entirely reasonable to conclude that Christ died for only *some* people.

In this scheme, those the Father planned to save are the same people for whom Christ came to die, and the Spirit will apply redemption to those same people. All three share a unity of will and purpose, and work indivisibly to achieve this purpose. Put another way, the intent, the provision and the application of the atonement are

²⁵ Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 237. ‘Provisional atonement’ is Letham’s label for ‘unlimited atonement’.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 237-8.

²⁷ Nicole, *Our Sovereign Savior*, 65.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 65.

all focused on God's elect. Indeed, Letham concludes that 'the doctrine of the Trinity ... requires effective atonement.'²⁹

Some (cautious) conclusions

In approaching the extent of the atonement from a trinitarian perspective, we do not pretend to have solved the dilemma or answered all possible objections. "Despite its faddishness at the moment, trinitarian doctrine is not the great panacea which will solve every theological problem."³⁰ Careful exegetical and systematic studies on a range of topics are required to do justice to this topic, and to the breadth of opinions held by men and women of good faith. Moreover, any conclusions must be offered with a clear sense of epistemic humility, with willingness to be corrected by the Scriptures as appropriate, and with awareness that Scripture itself makes relatively little of the issue.

However, evangelical theology must also be defined by rigorous theological thinking at every point – even on difficult issues. While humility is vital, so is a willingness to affirm that God's truth can be apprehended, no matter how difficult.

Hence we conclude with the following suggestion: the doctrine of the Trinity provides compelling evidence that 'particular redemption' is the best way to understand and describe the Scriptural presentation of Christ's atoning death. While only one argument out of many, it is an argument that takes us to the heart of God's character and redemptive plans. It seeks to take seriously the unique roles of each person of the Trinity, while maintaining that the three person work together in unbroken unity of purpose. Without propose that Christ's death has no impact on all people, we suggest that Jesus Christ, in the eternal plans and intentions of God, died for the elect in a way in which he did not die for others. Amid the quagmire of competing opinions on the extent of the atonement, this argument brings an important yet often-overlooked perspective to the discussion.

²⁹ Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 237. 'Effective atonement' is Letham's label for 'particular redemption'.

³⁰ Mark D. Thompson, 'From the Trinity to the cross', *Reformed Theological Review* 63/1 (2004): 28.

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