



## For Whom Did Christ Die?

**Tom Wells**

Ask the average Christian the question in the title of this article and you're likely to get one of two reactions. Some will give you a quizzical look, as much as to say, "All right, what's the catch? Everyone knows the answer to that question." Others will say simply, "Christ died for everyone who ever lived." A small number of people will smell heresy and point an accusing finger. "Aha!" they will cry, "You're a Calvinist!" Without another word they may convey a further disheartening message: you ought to blush with shame and slink back into whatever hole it was that you crawled out of.

Let's take a further look at this last reaction. A frequent complaint against Reformed or Calvinistic people goes something like this: "Your view of the Atonement is not the result of Scripture but of logic. In fact, you are rationalists!" Those are harsh words indeed, but necessary, if true.

When I hear that I am a rationalist I am reminded of something Carl F. H. Henry said in another connection: "Let those who want to defend irrationalism do it with whatever weapons they can find!"

Abandon logic altogether and you must abandon all reasoned discourse. There is no discussion that does not appeal to reason from beginning to end. We have no choice. If we want to graduate from "Mama" and "Dada" we have to think in a rational way.

But to be fair, the objections really amount to this: I have a logical grid that I impress upon Scripture and it affects how I read it. Or, the lens through which I look at Scripture distorts it. I do not come objectively to the Word of God. Is that really true? If it is true, is it serious?

To begin with, I must plead guilty to not being objective. It's widely recognized in our country that objectivity, however desirable it may or may not be, is not the state of any of us. We all bring a great deal of baggage to every question we seek to answer. My object or and I have this in common. What we must both do is to admit this and to keep it firmly in mind as we carry on our discussion, seeking to minimize its negative impact on us.

But there is more to be said.

Let's think together about how we learn what Scripture teaches. When we come to a text that we've never carefully considered before, how shall we approach it? Sooner or later we will have to look at it in the light of all that we already know from Scripture. Of course this is virtually instinctive with us; we seldom think about what we are doing, we just do it.

To illustrate how this works, imagine that you are in a culture where Christ is not widely known and you are a relatively new Christian who has read only the four Gospels. Suppose someone tells you, "There's a verse of Scripture in Paul's letters that says quite literally that Jesus had seven arms." How will you react?

You will find this difficult to believe for several reasons. The reason that interests us here is this: You have read the Gospels and have seen the reactions of men and women to the Lord Jesus. Some reacted well and others reacted violently, but none of the adverse reactions seemed to arise from His physical appearance. It is a nonissue in the Gospels. That is unthinkable if Jesus really had seven arms.

You will immediately see what happened: The *baggage* that you brought to this supposed verse was good baggage—the knowledge of Scripture that you already had. Your previous knowledge was *imposed* on the newly alleged verse. That was the lens through which you looked at it. In doing that you acted correctly. There was a danger in doing it; perhaps you misunderstood the adverse reactions of Jesus' critics. Maybe they did arise to some degree from Jesus' appearance. Maybe you needed Paul's *verse* to tell you that. In this hypothetical case, however, you were dead right since there is no such verse.

This demonstrates how we come to all Scripture. We bring our previous knowledge with us. What often happens is that the new Scripture is read in the light of the old, shading our understanding of the new verse, but also to a small degree correcting all that we have already held. But again, we may be hardly conscious of the process. Only if a large number of verses changes our perspective appreciably will we be aware that something important is happening.

Most of us who became Christians when we were young came to Scripture with the assumption that Christ died for every person who ever lived. That is what modern evangelicalism had tended to say to us. In fact, that was the grid that we impressed on Scripture; that was the lens through which we saw it. It seemed to us inevitable that any verse that touched the Atonement contained that idea either explicitly or implicitly. It was beyond question. Somewhere along the way, however, some of us changed our minds. And we thought we did it under the impact of Scripture.

Let me share with you two points that Scripture makes repeatedly that seem to demand that Christ died only for those who are actually saved. This doctrine, by the way, is often called *limited Atonement*, but I prefer to call it *particular Redemption*, emphasizing the idea that Christ died for *particular* men and women. It may surprise you to know that the first mission organization involved in the modern missionary movement was called The Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathens. William Carey and those associated with him in that great effort believed that Christ died for particular people.

First, the Bible teaches that Christ died to pay the penalty of sin. This is the heart of the Reformed view. You may ask: "Don't all Christians believe that?" No, they do not. As an example, let me quote J. K. Grider of Nazarene Theological Seminary. In an article on Arminianism in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grider writes:

... many Arminians whose theology is not very precise say that Christ paid the penalty for our sins.... Arminians teach that what Christ did He did for every person; therefore what He did could not have been to pay the penalty, since no one would then ever go into eternal perdition.

Why did Grider say this? Because he understood the truth that was centuries earlier propounded by John Owen and others: (1) If Christ paid the penalty for every sin of every man then no man can ever suffer everlasting punishment for his own sins. Their penalty has been completely borne. (2) If Christ paid the penalty for some sins of every man, then every man will have to suffer everlasting punishment for his own unpaid-for sins. (3) If

Christ paid the penalty for all the sins of some men only, then only some men will be saved. (The salvation of some men only is, of course, the fact, as most of us agree.)

If we describe Christ's death in terms of paying the penalty for sins then we will have to agree that Christ died only for those who are actually saved. That becomes clear when we look at the definition of *penalty*. According to *Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary*, a *penalty* is "The legal punishment for having committed a crime or having violated a law." The *Oxford Universal Dictionary* defines a penalty as "A punishment imposed for breach of law, rule, or contract." The two elements common to both these definitions are: (1) the presence of broken law, and (2) punishment. In simplest terms *penalty* is *punishment*.

Where does the Scripture teach that Christ paid the penalty for the sins of men? Let's start with Galatians 3:10 and 13:

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree."

Here Paul says first that the curse of the law of God rests on those who break the Law. The curse here is the penalty for sin. Paul's second point is that Christ bore that curse for *us*. Therefore Christ bore the penalty of *our* sin (whomever *us and our* may represent). In commenting on verse 13 Bishop Lightfoot says: "The victim is regarded as bearing the sins of those for whom atonement is made. The curse is transferred from them to it." Sin and punishment (or penalty), go hand in hand here. But it is not *we* who suffer the penalty, it is Christ on our behalf.

Let's also look at 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Here Paul says that Christ became *sin* for us. In keeping with the meaning of a Hebrew synonym some scholars would translate this as a *sin offering on our behalf*, but most reject this understanding because the word *sin* occurs twice in rapid succession. In the one case when the text speaks of Christ as One "who knew no sin," *sin offering* cannot be the meaning. In some sense, then, Christ became *sin*.

As far as the grammar is concerned, Paul may mean one of two things. He may be telling us that Jesus became sinful and as a consequence we become godly. That would be grammatically possible, but in the light of all else in the New Testament, we know that Paul would never mean that.

No doubt the contrast is not intended to describe moral states, but legal ones: Jesus bore our punishment and we receive His reward. In fact, this is the understanding of most evangelical commentators except those who adopt the meaning *sin offering*. Here again *sin* and punishment go hand in hand. Christ bore our punishment and we receive His right-standing with God. This verse does not tell us about two new moral conditions that He and we experience, but it describes our standing before the law of God. He was condemned so that we could be justified or declared right with God.

There is a second teaching of Scripture, closely related, that also demands that Christ died only for those who are finally saved. The Scripture teaches that Christ was the substitute for

those for whom He died, dying in their room or place or stead. If one person dies in the stead of another, then that second person cannot die.

Let me illustrate: Suppose Bill Jones appears to be drowning and Joe Smith jumps into the lake to save him. Here are some possible results: (1) Both manage to save themselves. (2) Both drown. (3) Joe saves himself and Bill. (4) Joe saves Bill but drowns in the process.

Only one of these cases illustrates substitution. Which is it? It's the last one, the one in which Joe Smith dies in the place of Bill Jones. Does the Bible teach that Christ *substituted* for sinners? Consider the following points:

First, the idea of bearing a penalty for another implies substitution when the price paid is a person. If Christ bore my penalty and as a consequence I go free, then Christ has substituted Himself for me. You can see that easily in the two passages we looked at above. In the first case, Galatians 3:10 and 13, the curse should have fallen on us, but it fell on Christ. That's substitution. In the second passage, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Christ took my guilt and I received His righteousness. That, too, is substitution.

Substitution is also taught by Jesus as He speaks in John 10:11-15:

I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as My Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

This is a part of a longer extended figure that the Lord Jesus gave us on Himself as the Good Shepherd. Substitution is clearly in view in this discourse. When the hired hand (*hireling* is too strong) sees that he will have to suffer and perhaps die to spare the sheep suffering and death, he flees. He will not substitute his own life for the life of the sheep. But the Good Shepherd will (and in the application does).

This passage teaches particular redemption in another way as well. The Good Shepherd dies for His own sheep. That is clear in two ways: First, the parable is about sheep drawn from a larger group in one or more sheepfolds (vv. 1-4, 16). Second, the one who dies is "the *owner* of the sheep" (v. 12). This argument is not conclusive by itself, but in connection with substitution it bears out the particular nature of Christ's death.

We find the fact of substitution in Romans 3:24-26:

[Believers are] justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Here Paul shows how Christ took the wrath of God in the place of men. Look first at the word Propitiation. A Propitiation is an appeasement, something that turns away the wrath of another. So Christ's death turned away God's wrath. But how did it do that? By having the wrath which belonged to us fall on Him.

We know this because we are in the legal (forensic) realm here, according to Paul. Propitiation showed God's justice. But how does God show His justice in dealing with sin? By punishing it. By punishing Christ, God showed Himself to be *just* and also opened a way to *justify* sinners (26). If what Christ did at the cross enables God to save men *justly*, then we are in the realm of law and penalty. Here again, penalty and substitution meet. And if Christ has substituted Himself for me, then justice demands that I go free. Substitution is meaningful only where one dies and the other lives because of his death.

Let's look at one last verse that teaches substitution, Matthew 20:28. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." This brief verse indicates substitution in two ways.

First, the little phrase, "for many," contains the Greek preposition, *anti*, that means "in the place of" or "in the stead of." The standard New Testament Greek lexicon says it is used "in order to indicate that one person or thing is, or is to be, replaced by another."<sup>1</sup> So Jesus here predicts that He will substitute Himself "for many."

Second, the idea of a ransom, when the ransom price is another human being, is clearly another case of substitution. If a slave is being held for ransom and another slave is handed over to effect his freedom, there is substitution. If a criminal had been sentenced to death and another man becomes his ransom, bringing about his freedom, that too is a case of substitution. In Matthew 20:28 and the parallel passage, Mark 10:45, Jesus sets Himself forward as the substitute for sinners. And if He substitutes Himself for sinners, they go free. He could, then, have died only for those actually saved.

What is the effect of thinking carefully on these two ideas of penalty and substitution in the New Testament in connection with the death of Christ? They lead us to see that Christ purchased His people, His *particular* people, out of the larger mass of mankind. Does the New Testament teach that truth anywhere? Yes, it does. As far as the fact of a purchase having taken place, we may look at such texts as Acts 20:28 and 1 Corinthians 6:20, and indeed, all the places Christ is said to have redeemed us, for a redemption and a purchase are the same thing.

And was that purchase from the larger mass of mankind? Listen to the singers in Revelation 5:9: "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.'" The purchase was a purchase out of the various people groups of earth; it was not a purchase of all of them.

Let me come finally to the chief objections to what I have written about the particularity of Christ's death. We do not know our own position until we know what can be said against it.

First in order, I think, is the feeling that something precious has been denied to those who reject Jesus Christ if Christ did not die for them. But when one asks, "What advantage does the death of Christ give to those who are lost?" there seems to be no biblical answer. Many Christians<sup>2</sup> can only reply that the death of Christ becomes for the Christ-rejecter a ground of condemnation. That, of course, is no advantage at all.

One group of Christians, the Arminians, have a better answer if it were taught in Scripture. They say that the death of Christ has restored to all men the ability, lost in the fall, to turn to Christ in faith. But the Scripture does not teach this. If it did, it would make the natural man a mere hypothesis. Let me explain what I mean.

In such texts as Romans 8:7 and 1 Corinthians 2:14 we are taught the inability of the natural man. In Romans Paul tells us that the carnal mind, which is the only mind the natural man has, "is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so." Paul here is not speaking about some hypothetical man who no longer exists. He is speaking of natural men as they existed in his day. He says of them that they do not subject themselves to God's law. He says further that they do not because they cannot. Their hostility at God is so great that they cannot respond to the command, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31). They cannot respond positively when God now commands "all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

We find the same thing in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

Is Paul thinking here of some hypothetical man who now has had ability to understand spiritual things restored to him? No, it is plain that he is speaking of natural men as they existed when he wrote. What does he say of such men? First, they do not accept the things of the Spirit of God. Second, such things are foolishness to them. Third, they cannot understand them.

Someone may respond by saying, "Of course a natural man can't understand the deep things of God, but he can understand the Gospel and be saved." But a glance at the context will show that that misses Paul's point. It is the Gospel itself that is foolishness to the natural man. "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness" (1:18). "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1:21). "But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumblingblock, and to Gentiles foolishness" (1:23).

The conclusion is clear: Christ's death has not restored to all men the ability to believe. A death for all men, if that were what the Scripture taught, would be no advantage to the lost; it would be a liability, adding to their guilt.

A second objection to particular redemption turns on the universal words used in connection with the death of Christ, words like *all* and *world*. I have dealt with these words at great length in my book, *A Price for a People, the Meaning of Christ's Death*. Let me confine myself to a few remarks here.

To begin with, universal terms in every language with which I am familiar are almost always used with very wide imitations. We do not often notice this, simply because we have taken it for granted since we were children. In fact, you may be surprised at this, but you will easily see that it is so. I'll take my examples from Scripture. Here are verses that illustrate it from John 3: "Behold, (Jesus) is baptizing, and all are coming to Him" (3:26). "(Jesus) bears witness; and no man receives His witness" (3:32). "He who has received His witness has set his seal to *this*, that God is true" (3:33).

Note the apparent contradiction in this account of Jesus' ministry. In verse 26, *all* receive His witness and come to Him. In verse 32, *no man* does so. But verse 33 assumes that some do in fact receive His witness. What's going on here?

Even if you have read this account many times you have probably never noticed this. The reason is simple: you are fully used to reading universal terms in a limited way, and you do it without giving it a second thought. You understand that verse 26 means only that a large

number were coming to Christ, not literally *all*. In verse 32 you again grasp the idea: compared to the number of people who should have responded to Christ, *no man* means relatively few. And verse 33 confirms your understanding: some did, in fact, receive the witness of Christ. It never occurred to you to read *all* and *no man* as if they were true, universal assertions. You assumed the limitations on them and read on, without noticing what you were doing. You do that *all the time* (meaning *often!*).

Another example comes from Acts 2:17 where the AV reads, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Think about that: all flesh. The NASB has translated this *all mankind*, thus eliminating almost every kind of flesh there is, with one exception. That is quite a sweeping change, yet it is correct. The flesh of turkeys and giraffes is not in view; God pours His Spirit on men.

But even with the NASB's correction, eliminating most flesh, the alert reader eliminates still more. Is it true that God pours out His Spirit on all men (and women) without exception? No. So *all flesh* turns out to mean *some men and women*. In addition it implies a large number from many tribes and nations.

One last example comes from 1 Timothy 6:10 where the AV reads, "For the love of money is the root of all evil." Is this true? Can we trace every evil in the world up to love for money? To ask these questions is to answer them. The NASB translators made this read *all sorts of evil*. Is that better? Not literally, but it is if we impose our knowledge of idiomatic English on it. The English phrase, *all sorts of evil*, means *quite a few evils*. Again, the universal term is greatly reduced in our minds without any reflection on what we are doing.

And we treat the word *world* the same way. Hendriksen in his commentary on John 1:9 distinguishes six groups or entities called *the world*. His list is not exhaustive. But let's look at the texts where some difficulty is felt.

If we have been raised to think *world* in John 3:16 means every person who ever lived, we will take it that way. But there are other possibilities. *World* here may signify both Jews and Gentiles. In the context Jesus has talked to Nicodemus, a man who probably held firmly to the common view that God loved the Jews but not the Gentiles. John attacks this idea elsewhere in his gospel.

Or perhaps John 3:16 means that God loves mankind on the mass, a mass that He created. If a man says, "I love Englishmen," no one understands him to mean each and every Englishman, but Englishmen generally. Alternately, B. B. Warfield held that the word *world* is used qualitatively here, not quantitatively. That would mean that God loved that which was at enmity with Himself—another common use of *world*—however many actual people He might include.

First John 2:2 reads, "He Himself is the Propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Again there are several possibilities. John, being a Jew, might mean "not only for the sins of those of us who are Jewish, but for Gentiles as well." It seems to me more likely, however, that he means to assert that there is no other Propitiation. Anyone who will be saved—however many or few—will be saved by that Propitiation and no other. Still others think he may mean, "He is the Propitiation for the sins of those of us who believe, and for the sins of all who will ever believe."

In the case of controversial passages, how we understand universal terms depends very much on how those who taught us understood them. Had you been taught that "God so

loved the world" means that God loved both Jews and Gentiles, that is how you would understand it.

What does that prove? *Prove* may be too strong a word, but it strongly suggests that we must get our doctrine of the Atonement from the words that describe it in Scripture and not from the universal terms that describe those who benefit from it. <sup>3</sup>

Words like Redemption, Reconciliation and Propitiation, when applied to the death of Christ, show that His death was for His people and not for every person who ever lived. Does that seem threatening? It need not. What we all must remember is that everyone who puts His trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be saved. No one will ever believe, only to find that there is no Atonement for him or her.

The death of Christ is as broad as the category of *believer*. Beyond that it would do no good anyway. If Christ died for those who will never believe, His death would not help them in any fashion. It would only add to their condemnation. But Christ died for all who would ever believe. They, and no others, receive the benefit of the death He died for them.

### **About the Author**

Rev. Tom Wells is pastor of King's Chapel, West Chester, Ohio. He preaches widely as a conference minister and is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He is author of a number of titles including *A Price for a People*, a very useful study of the doctrine of definite atonement as outlined in the above article.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, adapted by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich from the fifth edition of Walter Bauer's Greek-German lexicon. In what appears to be an effort to reduce the meaning of *anti* to *in behalf of*, they have the strange statement, "Gen. 44:33 shows how the mng. [meaning] *in place of* can develop into *in behalf of...*" This, of course, would not require *substitution*. But anyone who reads Genesis 44:33 will see there as plain a case of *substitution* as can possibly be imagined. It records the offer of Judah to become a slave in the place of his brother, Benjamin. In the words of the NASB, "Please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers." In other words, he offered to substitute himself for the boy.

<sup>2</sup> The Christians who can say no more than this are those who are called "Four-Point Calvinists" and those called "Semi-Pelagians." It is beyond the scope of this study to go into these terms in any detail. Briefly, Four-Point Calvinists believe most of the Calvinistic system including unconditional Election and effectual (irresistible) grace, but they deny the particularity of Christ's death. Semi-Pelagians believe that, after the fall, man retained the ability to turn to God. Calvinists deny this.

<sup>3</sup> Some members of the early church found in the word *world* a reference to the new humanity that God is forming in Christ. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 150-80 A. D.) speaks of our Lord as the one who suffered for the whole world of those being saved. Christ has a world of His own, in this understanding, that He is bringing to Himself. Origen, who died about 254 A. D., after citing the words, "God was in Christ reconciling the world" (2 Cor. 5:19), says, "Of the world of the church this is written." He also cites John 1:29 as

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illustrating the same truth. *The sin of the world* is for him the sin of the church. For more illustrations of this use from the early church, consult my *A Price for a People*, pp. 125–26.