
For God so loved the World

by Christopher Bennett

The universalistic side of Calvinistic soteriology, especially as taught by the theologians of old Princeton

My theme is not only a matter of fascinating theology but it is also highly relevant to our evangelism. Indeed it is likely that the greater success in evangelism that certain forms of Arminianism have enjoyed, in contrast with Calvinism of late, stems in part from the failure of some Calvinists to believe the universalistic side of their soteriology.

One might get the impression these days that Arminians believe that God loves everyone and Christ died for everyone and the Holy Spirit calls everyone through the gospel, whereas Calvinists believe that God loves the elect, and Christ died only for them, and only they are called. Perhaps on the matter of calling and “the free offer of the gospel” there would be some recognition of a universal offer, though the direct involvement of the Spirit in this would not be made much of. The recent publication by the Banner of Truth Trust of the second volume of the history of Princeton Seminary, coupled with my acquisition of vol. 2 of BB Warfield’s *Selected Shorter Writings*, has brought home to me more than previously how people like Charles Hodge, AA Hodge and Warfield conceived of Calvinism, and also how right they must be.

Let us start with a taste of the universalistic side of salvation, from the pens of Princeton theologians. AA Hodge says that Christ’s death is not only of infinite intrinsic value in the eyes of the law, but is also applicable to the exact legal relations of every lost sinner in the world. “In this sense, if you please, Christ did make the salvation of all men indifferently possible, *a parte Dei*.”¹ Warfield says, “It has been, is, and ever will be, the glory of Calvinism that it does not oppose to the one-sided universalism of Arminianism an equally one-sided particularism; but knows how to do full justice to all the elements of the gospel revelation, and how to combine a true particularism and a true universalism in harmonious relations.”² Earlier in the article³ he makes it clear that he believes that God loves all mankind, that he has given his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world and that he is ready to bestow saving grace on all who seek it. And Charles Hodge says,

...Augustinians do not deny that Christ died for all men. What they deny is that He died equally, and with the same design, for all men. He died for all, that He might arrest the immediate execution of the penalty of the law upon the whole of our apostate race; that He might secure for men the innumerable blessings attending their state on earth, which, in one important sense, is a state of probation; and that He might lay the foundation for the offer of pardon and reconciliation with God, on condition of faith and repentance.⁴

The love of God

To come now to particulars, first of all, these men are saying that God loves the elect in a special way, with sovereign determination to save, and yet there is a genuine

love of God for all and a desire for all to be saved. Warfield clearly teaches this in the quotation above, and Charles Hodge says it in his sermon on John 3:16 in *Princeton Sermons*.⁵

The Biblical foundation for this is in Ezek. 18:32 and 33:11, in Ps. 145:9, and in Jesus telling us to be like our Father in heaven and to love our enemies. These are some of the clearest and most undeniable statements of it in Scripture. Once we have accepted it, we see it everywhere – and why not in 1 Tim. 2:4? Certainly we see the truth again when Jesus wept over Jerusalem – remembering that he *is* the image of the invisible God.

The way of explaining the meaning of this love for all, which does not go over into a determination to save is in terms of God's love for his creatures (in a way analogous to human *emotional* love), which is modified in what it *does* by other considerations, such as his love for his own name and his determination to glorify his own justice and power: see Rom. 9:21-2. RL Dabney's article, "God's indiscriminate proposals of mercy, as related to his power, wisdom and sincerity" in vol. 1 of his *Discussions*, though somewhat over-philosophical and speculative, is highly recommended for further reading on this. At one point he sums up much of the burden of his article by saying

...God does have compassion for the reprobate, but not express volition to save them, because his infinite wisdom regulates his whole will and guides and harmonizes (not suppresses) all its active principles.⁶

In case exception is taken to the idea of some kind of emotions in the heart of God, it may be worth pointing out – since I am trying to show how old Princeton agreed with CH Spurgeon in walking the knife-edge between Arminianism and various forms of overly high Calvinism – that Warfield disagreed with the idea of the impassibility of God, at least with some forms of it. In his sermon on Phil. 2:5-8 he says,

Men tell us that God is, by the very necessity of His nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducements from without; that He dwells in holy calm and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human sufferings or human sorrows for ever, ... Let us bless our God that it is not true. God can feel; God does love.⁷

So the idea of God having affections and longing for the salvation of some he does not elect to save is not meaningless, because his love is not just a matter of determining good and doing it but also of something genuinely analogous to human emotion. This is not the same as saying that he is moved emotionally by our plight *without* any prior decision on his part to allow himself to be moved by us, or without himself actually planning the very events that will move him – that would be to deny his transcendent glory and is no doubt one of the concerns that drives some people to favour the idea, mistaken in my view, of impassibility.

In summary then, when God considers an individual sinner, he pities and loves and desires their salvation. However, his plan takes in other considerations, and so his electing love alights on some and not on all. There is a particularistic side *and* a universalistic side. Time and again the true Biblical view of things includes and combines what two opposing groups of Bible-believing Christians think: one group only accepts one side, the other only accepts the other. The great advantage of believing the universalistic side is that we end up feeling that God loves all the non-Christians

around and we have liberty to say it to them if and when we think it will help them to consider or believe the gospel. By not believing this, some Calvinists have often been outdone by Arminians in evangelistic enterprise, and we have only had ourselves to blame!

The work of Christ

Secondly, there is a universalistic side to the atoning work of Christ. Yes, he died for the elect, for the sheep, and his death saves us. But he is also “the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world”, John 1:29; and “he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world”, 1 John 2:2. For centuries some Calvinists have no doubt been feeling uncomfortable with verses like these; but there is no need to. Christ’s death is an infinitely valuable and powerful atonement for mankind. It was designed to save the elect but it is sufficiently mighty and suitable an event to save everyone. Even John Owen says, “It was, then, the purpose and intention of God that his Son should offer a sacrifice of infinite worth, value, and dignity, sufficient in itself for the redeeming of all and every man, if it pleased the Lord to employ it to that purpose;”⁸ And the Canons of Dort say that the death of the Son of God is “abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.”⁹

How can this be? Because it is not a financial sort of transaction – the Biblical concept of sin as a debt and of Christ paying our debts is a metaphor, not a literal description of what was happening on the cross. We get much nearer the heart of the atonement in the judicial concepts of Scripture. Christ *was* literally satisfying God’s justice with regard to our sins; he was metaphorically paying our debts. Who Christ was suffering for is not a matter of history, of exactly what happened at the cross, but a matter of God’s intention in sending him to suffer a legal equivalent of what we would have had to suffer. AA Hodge says, “If the work itself, therefore, be viewed separately from the intention with which it was undertaken, it plainly stands indifferently related to the case of each and every man that ever lived and sinned. It is not a pecuniary solution of debt, which, *ipso facto*, liberates upon the mere payment of the money. ... The relations of the Atonement as impersonal and general or as personal and definite do not spring from considerations of the degree, duration or kind of suffering or acts of vicarious obedience which Christ rendered, but solely from the purpose he had in rendering them.”¹⁰

Therefore we can say, when speaking to non-Christians “Christ died for you” or “for your sins”. This is not preacher’s licence, it is simply restating Biblical truth without adding the qualifications of an overly tidy and actually one-sided, mildly unbiblical theology. There *is* a universalistic side to Christ’s atoning work: let us not hide it.

The Spirit’s call

Thirdly, the Spirit calls the elect through the gospel, who are savingly brought into union with Christ by repentance and faith. But the Spirit also in some real way calls everyone who hears the message. We are accustomed to refer to this as “the free offer of the gospel” – and very precious it is to many in the modern Reformed movement.

The important thing to recognise here is that the word of command and of gracious offer in Scripture – for example in Rev. 22:17; Mat. 11:28-30; John 6:37; Isa. 55:1ff;

2 Cor. 5:20; and Acts 17:30 – is not a dead word, a mere letter, something God spoke long ago and is now merely words on a page that the Spirit *may* take up and use to speak to people now. That is mysticism or Quakerism or Barthianism or something as bad. Jesus said, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and are life”, John 6:63. The word of God is living and active. If we believe that Scripture is God’s word, then it is God speaking, the Spirit is involved *now*, whenever the word goes forth. JI Packer summarises John Owen’s teaching on the external testimony of the Spirit in the word by saying, “The grounds, then, on which we have faith in Scripture as the word of God are the Spirit’s external witness to its divine origin, which is given in and with it constantly;” “Scripture through the covenanted action of the Holy Spirit, constantly ‘shines’, in the sense of giving spiritual illumination and insight as to who and what one is in the sight of God, and who and what Jesus Christ is, both in himself and in relation to one’s own self, and finally, in the broadest and most inclusive sense, how one should live.”¹¹ So God himself is saying to *all* who read it, all who hear it, all to whom it is expounded, that they must come and submit to Jesus Christ, that God will wipe all their sins away, that the past will be forgotten and the Spirit and eternal life be given. This is the objective voice and call of God.

For the notion that the Spirit works in some way in or upon those who are unsaved and even non-elect, AA Hodge refers readers to Acts 7:51 and Heb. 10:29.¹² The Lord Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit and ministering in his power, had direct dealings during his time in this world with multitudes who were not elect; there is no reason to think the Spirit does not touch and have some kind of dealings with many non-elect people to the end of the world, including especially dealings of a kind and loving nature, commending Christ, showing people their sins and need, summoning people to submit to God. And I have not even mentioned “common grace”, or the traditional Reformed understanding of Heb. 6:4-8, or the parable of the sower, all of which point to the Spirit doing things in some who are never brought to new birth by him.

We can therefore be bold and positive with people: we *know* that God is speaking to them, and we know what he is saying to them. We know he is telling them to repent and to trust Christ, and that he is offering life and pardon. And in our dealings with people we do not have to fret and fuss too much over whether some positive response of theirs is the work of the Spirit or not: it no doubt is, and only time will tell whether he is bringing them to new birth or not. It is *time* that will tell, not excessively close grilling and an investigation of the details of their experience.

We can be bold also because we know that the Spirit is offering Christ and new life in him to all, not just to those who have experienced a certain carefully defined sort of conviction of sin. We can see that in the appeal to those “who are weary and burdened” in Mat. 11:28 the Lord is not saying that those who do not perceive themselves to be weary cannot come; he is just using the fact that some *do* feel weary. The invitation is to all who want what he is offering (see Rev. 22:17); in other words it is completely open.

Conclusion

Now why do we not always find it easy to believe both the particularistic and universalistic sides of Calvinistic soteriology? The main reason must be that we cannot see exactly how these two aspects are congruous. Often we prefer to have a system of

truth in our minds in which we *can* see how everything fits together, even if some of it does not fit very well with Scripture! In other words we prefer to be consistent with ourselves and the rest of our thinking than to be consistent with Scripture.

Now if there were things about believing the two sides of Calvinistic theology, as outlined above, that were inherently irrational, then it may be fair enough to think, “We must have misunderstood Scripture, for God would not want us to believe what is irrational. He is a rational God.” That is right; we are meant to use our minds in interpreting Scripture. There is a sense in which God loves all and Christ died for all. It is difficult, however, for us to put our finger absolutely on the what that sense is. But this is not irrationality, it is mystery. And why should we not live with some mystery? We ought positively to expect this, if the Bible is true, for it is about God who is infinite, and about his wonderful ways of salvation which are past finding out.

The question then is: will we be rationalistic, trusting our own minds and systems. Or will we be humble, Biblical Christians, who think, who use their minds, but who are also ready at a number of points to say, “I do not understand this, but I accept it because I know God understands it and this is what he says”? If we do the latter in this area of the universalistic side of soteriology, I respectfully suggest that we would be better, when it comes to evangelistic enterprise, to be more like an Arminian than an overly high Calvinist.

References

- ¹ AA Hodge, *The Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Guardian Press reprint of 1867 ed.), p. 357, and see previous 2 pages).
- ² BB Warfield, “The 1903 Revision of the Confession of Faith” reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings* vol. 2, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company reprint, 1973), p. 402.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 377.
- ⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977 reprint), 2:558 (in British edition – in ch. 8, sec. 2).
- ⁵ Charles Hodge, *Princeton Sermons* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1958 reprint of 1879 ed.), pp.16-18.
- ⁶ RL Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1967 reprint of 1890 edition), p. 309. See also Iain Murray’s book, *Spurgeon and Hyper-Calvinism* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth) and Calvin’s comment on Ezek. 18:32.
- ⁷ BB Warfield, *The Saviour of the World* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth reprint), p. 261.
- ⁸ *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust reprint), 10:295.
- ⁹ Second Head of Doctrine, in *The Canons of Dort* (Christian Reformed Church transl., 1962), article 3.
- ¹⁰ AA Hodge, *The Atonement*, p. 369.
- ¹¹ JI Packer, *Among God’s Giants* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1991), pp. 122 and 119.
- ¹² AA Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1972 reprint of 1879 ed.), p. 449.

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