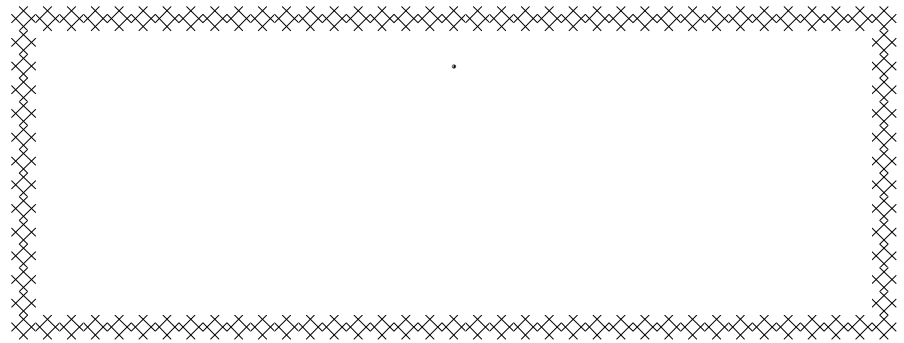
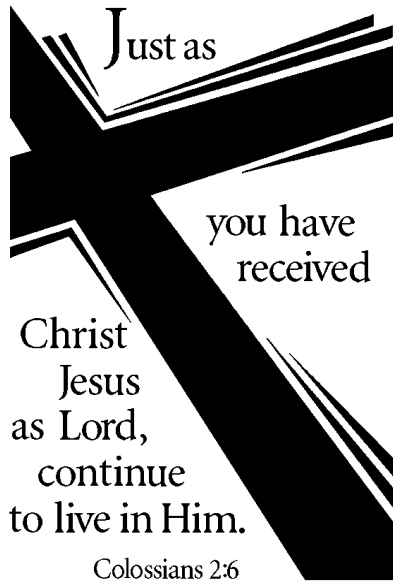


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MERRY CHRISTMAS!

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In this little issue, and Lord willing, every issue, our *only* purpose is to honor Jesus Christ.

The Doctrines of Grace ~ 5

Their Third Point—Limited Atonement (1)

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I. Limited Atonement Defined. The Biblical doctrine of the *atonement* deals with the work of God the Son in the salvation of the people predestined and chosen to salvation by God the Father. The adjective, *Limited*, denotes that the atoning work of Christ was for benefit of only the Father's elect, not for all mankind.

The doctrine of Limited Atonement is set forth in Ephesians 1:4-7. The people predestined by the Father to be His adopted children were chosen by Him in eternity past, and in His only begotten Son to be holy and righteous (vv. 4-6; cp. 2 Thess. 2:13). But the *election* of this people was not their *salvation*. Rather, election only marked out who would be saved. The salvation of God's elect was worked through the atoning work of their Savior, Jesus Christ, during His Incarnation in redeeming them, and obtaining their forgiveness (v. 7).

Theologians of the 17th Century referred to this doctrine as the *Satisfaction of Christ*. This term is still thought by many to more accurately and adequately express what Christ did in the work of salvation, especially as the Second Adam (Rom. 5:12 ff). The First Adam broke the covenant of works into which he had entered with God (Gen. 2:15-17) and, thereby, brought the penalty of death upon himself, and the whole human race, whom he represented. But Christ, the Second Adam, fulfilled all the requirements of that broken covenant, and thereby obtained the salvation of all God's elect, whom He represented.

Indeed, all who are in Christ obtain, through His satisfaction, more than they ever lost in Adam's transgression (Rom. 5:20)—“where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” All in Adam died, but all in Christ receive divine grace (v. 15). All in Adam received the judgment resulting in condemnation to death, but all in Christ receive the grace resulting in justification of life (vv. 16, 18). All in Adam are under the reign of death, but all in Christ reign in life (v. 17) and under the reign of grace through righteousness to eternal life (v. 21). All in Adam were made sinners by his disobedience; but all in Christ are made righteous by His obedience (v. 19).

The obedience of Christ resulting in satisfaction and atonement is two-fold. First, in His *prescriptive* or *active* obedience. Christ, throughout His life, and also in His death completely and perfectly obeyed every precept of God's law (1 Peter 2:22)—

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“He committed no sin.” He, therefore, could confess, at the end of His life, to His Father, “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do” (John 17:4). Second, in His *penal* or *passive* obedience, Christ, throughout His life, and especially in His death, obediently bore all the sanctions imposed by God’s law against His people because of their transgressions (Isa. 53:4-7)—“... He was wounded for our transgressions...Yet He opened not His mouth...” He, therefore, could shout in victory in His dying breath, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He had satisfied all that God required of Him as the Substitute of His elect, and therefore obtained atonement for them.

Because the atoning work of Christ was performed as a Substitute, and vicariously, the doctrine of Limited Atonement is also identified as the doctrine of *Substitutionary and Vicarious Atonement*. A *substitute* is one appointed or accepted to act or to suffer in the place and stead of another. And the substitute’s actions or sufferings are *vicarious* (from Latin *vices*—“stead”) in the sense that they are discharged in the place and stead of the other. Accordingly, the prescriptive or active obedience of Christ was a vicarious obedience, and His penal or passive obedience was a vicarious suffering.

More particularly, the Divine Son of God became, also, the Son of man in order to assume the legal obligations of His people, and to make atonement for them by obeying God’s Law as their Substitute and vicariously (Gal. 4:4f). Their guilt was imputed to Him in the sense that it was charged to and punished in Him (Isa. 53:4-5a, 6, 8b). Having satisfied the justice of God against His people as their Substitute and vicariously, He secured the salvation of all for whom He died (Isa. 53:11, 5b). He expiated their sin by canceling its debt (Heb. 9:26), and propitiated God by removing His displeasure from them (2:17).

Some refer to the doctrine of Limited Atonement as *Particular Redemption*. This term denotes that the redeeming work of Christ was for a particular people—those for whom He was “the Mediator of the New Covenant.” And it denotes that this particular people was, by Him, actually redeemed—He “having obtained eternal redemption” for them (Heb. 9:11-15).

II. Limited Atonement Contrasted. The foremost view in contrast and opposition to the doctrine of Limited Atonement is identified, usually, as *unlimited atonement* (because it is not limited to any particular persons) and *general atonement* (because it is for all men in general). The three foremost groups espousing unlimited atonement are Universalists, Pelagians, and Arminians.

1. Universalists are consistent in their doctrine of unlimited atonement. They believe Christ died for all without exception, and all without exception, therefore, will be saved (despite texts such as Matthew 7:13). Universalism is the dominant view of theological liberals.

2. Pelagians and Arminians are inconsistent in their doctrine of unlimited atonement. (*Pelagianism* is named for Pelagius [c.354-c.418], a British ascetic who migrated to and taught in Rome. *Arminianism* is named for Jacobus Arminius [real name Jacob Harmensen or Hermansz (1560-1609)], a Dutchman who taught in the university in Leyden). Like Universalists, they aver Christ died for all without exception, thereby making it possible for everyone to be saved (*hypothetical* universalism). But they condition salvation upon faith (*conditional* universalism). They deny Christ’s death secured the salvation of *anyone* because it is not efficacious unless and until the sinner makes it so thorough an act of his freewill. And they believe many, if not most, for whom Christ died will perish (*inconsistent* universalism).

A foremost difference between these two groups is that Pelagians outright deny the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement. Pelagius did so on the mistaken belief that vicarious punishment is intrinsically immoral. Indeed, he denied every aspect of the Biblical doctrine of imputation—the imputation of Adam’s guilt to his race; the imputation of the guilt of God’s elect to Christ, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to His people. Pelagianism was virtually eliminated through the efforts of Augustine of Hippo (354-430). But it is found today among Campbellites (disciples of Alexander Campbell [1788-1866], a Scot who migrated to America in 1809). The Arminian claim to believe in Substitutionary Atonement is hollow, as it denies the Biblical doctrine (as set forth in Isaiah 53, and explained above).

Pelagians and Arminians often claim, “We do not, in any way, limit the atoning work of Jesus Christ.” Actually, both Holy Scriptures and the Pelagian/Arminian schools preach Limited Atonement, but with different limitations. Scriptures limit the *extent* of the Atonement, but not its *result*. That is, Scriptures teach the Atonement was limited to the elect, and that it forever secured the salvation of everyone for whom it was made. Pelagians and Arminians, on the other hand, limit the *result* of the Atonement, but not its *extent*. That is, Pelagians and Arminians teach Christ made atonement for everyone—including those already in Hades (as in Luke 16:19ff), but secured the salvation of no one!

We may illustrate these differences by imagining a bridge of salvation from earth to heaven across the abyss of hell, and built by the atoning work and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Holy Scriptures declare this bridge is limited in its *width*, but not in its *length*. It is wide enough to accommodate only those who will believe in Christ, but it stretches all the way across the abyss to Glory, and guarantees the salvation of all who traverse it. Pelagians and Arminians, on the other hand, declare this bridge is limited in its *length*, but not in its *width*. It is wide enough for all humanity, but it does not reach all the way to Glory, and must be completed by those who would traverse it.

All these erroneous views of Christ’s atonement have this in common: **they deny the satisfaction of Christ!** Universalists deny the *extent* of Christ’s satisfaction. Pelagians and Arminians deny *both the extent and the application* of Christ’s satisfaction.

(To be continued, Lord willing, next month.)

Tell someone today how much you love Jesus Christ.