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THE ATONING SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

by Arthur W. Pink (1886-1953)

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It is unspeakably sad that the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ—the most wonderful event that has ever happened or will happen—should have been made the occasion of contention and controversy. That it has been so affords an awful example of human depravity. The more so, that throughout the centuries of this Christian era, some of the hottest theological battles have been waged over the vital truth of the atonement.

Speaking generally, only two views or interpretations of the cross have received much favor among the professed people of God: the one which affirmed that the atonement effected to make *certain* the salvation of all who believe; the other which supposed that atonement was made in order to make *possible* the salvation of all men. The former is the strict Calvinist view; the latter, the Arminian. Even here, the difference was not merely one of terms, but of truth over against error. The one is definite and explicit; the other indefinite and intangible. The one affirms an atonement which actually atones (i.e. fully satisfied God for those on whose behalf it was made); the other predicates an atonement which was a sorry failure, inasmuch as the majority of those on whose behalf it was supposed to be offered, perish notwithstanding. The logical and inevitable corollary of the one is a satisfied, because triumphant Savior; the other (if true) would lead, unavoidably, to a disappointed, because defeated Savior. The former interpretation was taught by such men as Wycliffe, Calvin, Latimer, Tyndale, John Bunyan,

Owens, Dodderidge, Jonathan Edwards, Toplady, Whitefield, Spurgeon, etc. The latter by men who, as theologians, were not worthy to unloose their shoes.

A New Theory

Of late, a new theory has been propounded to the Christian public, a theory which approximates perilously near that of the Universalists.¹ Erroneously based upon a few texts whose scope is confined to the people of God, the view which is now rapidly gaining favor in circles which is regarded as orthodox,² is to the effect that, at the cross, the sin question was fully and finally settled. We are told, and told by men who are looked up to by many as the champions of orthodoxy, that all the sins of all men were laid upon the crucified Christ. It is boldly affirmed that at the cross the Lamb of God did as much for those who would not believe, as He did for those who should believe on Him. It is dogmatically announced that the only grievance which God now has against any man, is his refusal to believe in the Savior. It is said that the single issue between God and the world, is not the sin question, but the Son question.

We have said that this theory of the atonement is a new one, and new it surely is. So far as the writer is aware, it was never propounded, at least in orthodox circles, till within the last two or three decades. It appears to be another product of this twentieth century, and like most if not all other of them, it is far inferior to what went before. Yet, strange to say, an appeal is made to the Holy Scriptures in support of it. But in one way we are thankful for this, inasmuch as the Word of God supplies us with an infallible rule by which we may measure it. We shall, therefore, examine this strange and novel theory in the light of Holy Writ, and doing this, it will not be difficult to show how thoroughly untenable and fallacious it is.

Problems with an Unlimited Atonement

1. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, then the sin of unbelief was too. That unbelief is a sin is clear from the fact that in 1 John 3:23 we read: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ." Refusal to believe in Christ is, therefore, an act of flagrant disobedience, rebellion against the Most High. But if all the sins of all men were laid upon Christ (as it is now asserted), then He also endured the penalty for the Christ-rejector's unbelief. If this be so, then Universalism is true. But it is not so. The very advocates of the view we are now refuting would not affirm it. And therein may be seen the inconsistency and untenableness of their teaching. For if unbelief is a sin and Christ did not suffer the penalty of it, then all sin was not laid upon Christ. Thus there are only two alternatives: a strictly limited atonement, availing only for believers; or an unlimited atonement which effectually secures the salvation of the entire human race.

2. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, how could He say, "The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men" (Mat 12:31)? Observe that Christ here used the future tense, "shall not be." Note, too, He did not merely say to the blaspheming Jews that He was then addressing, "shall not be forgiven unto *you*," but in order to take in all others who should be guilty of this sin, He said, "shall not be forgiven unto *men*." It is worse than idle to raise the cavil³ that the sin here spoken of was peculiar and exceptional, i.e., committed only by the Jews there addressed. The fact that this solemn utterance of Christ is found not only in Matthew, but in Mark, and also in Luke, the Gentile⁴ Gospel, disposes of it.

Without attempting to define here the precise nature of this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, it is sufficient now to point out that it is a sin quite distinct from unbelief. In Scripture "blasphemy" is always an act of the lips, not merely of the mind or the will. For our present purpose, it is enough to call attention to the undeniable fact that none other than the Savior Himself here tells us there is a sin (other than unbelief) "which shall not be forgiven unto men." This being so, then it is obviously a mistake, a serious error, to say that all sin was laid on Christ and atoned for.

¹ **Universalists** – those who believe that all men will be in heaven.

² **orthodox** – according with the historic doctrines of Scripture.

³ **cavil** – a futile objection raised in order to win an argument.

⁴ **Gentile** – in the Scriptures, any person not a Jew (signified for males by not receiving Jewish circumcision). Luke was a Gentile, not a Jew.

3. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, how could He possibly say to certain ones, “Ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins” (Joh 8:21)? Christ was here addressing the Pharisees. The time was only a short while before His death. He was speaking, therefore, of that which lay on the other side of His crucifixion and resurrection. This is seen from the fact that He first said, “I go my way, and ye shall seek me.” Most evidently He was referring to His return to the Father. And He expressly declared that after His departure from this world, these men would “seek” Him (but in vain), and they would die in their sins. Their death would be subsequent to His, and their death would be in sins. The striking thing is, that these awful words were uttered, on this same occasion, no less than three times. For in John 8:24 we read, “I said therefore unto you, That ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am, ye shall die in your sins.” Note, carefully “die,” not in your sin, but “in your sins.” Here, then, is another indubitable proof that Christ did not bear all the sins of all men.

4. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, why did the apostle Paul (under the Holy Spirit) write, “For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolator, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God? Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience” (Eph 5:5-6)? The “children of disobedience” (cf. Eph 2:2) is a name for unbelievers. It views them as rebels against God. The passage now before us tells us why “the wrath of God” shall come upon them—“because of these things;” it looks back to what had been specified in the previous verses. God’s wrath would yet descend upon them not only because of their rejection of Christ, but because they had been guilty of sins of immorality and covetousness.

It is remarkable that verse 6 begins with the words, “Let no man deceive you with vain words.” It certainly looks as though the Holy Spirit was here anticipating and repudiating this modern perversion of God’s truth. Men do now tell us that no wrath from God will ever fall on men because of the sins of immorality and covetousness. Men now tell us that God’s wrath for all sins came upon Christ. But when men tell us such things, none other than the Holy Spirit declares that they are “vain [empty] words.” They are empty words because there is no truth in them! Then let us not be deceived by them.

5. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, then Stephen wasted his dying breath when he prayed, “Lay not this sin to their charge” (Act 7:60). The sin referred to was their stoning of him, which was murder. But perhaps Stephen was not acquainted with this modern sophistry. Certainly he did not believe it. Had He believed that all sin had been “laid” on Christ, he would not have cried “lay not this sin to their charge,” i.e., let not them suffer the penalty of it.

6. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, what did the apostle mean when he said of the Jews, who forbade him to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, “to fill up their sins alway” (1Th 2:16)? If language has any meaning, these words of the apostle signify that the Jews were adding sins to sins. He did not say “to fill up their sin,” but, “to fill up their sins.” Clearly, there was no place in his theology for this strange invention of the twentieth century.

7. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, what did the apostle mean when he said, “Some men’s sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment” (1Ti 5:24)? One thing he meant was that no atonement had been made for them. Mark, again, he is speaking, not of sin, but “sins,” and these, he declared, are “going before to judgment.” Nothing could be plainer. These “sins” had not been “judged” at the cross, therefore, they must be judged in the Day of Judgment.

8. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, then why will a voice from heaven yet say to the godly Jews who shall be found in Babylon at the end time, “Come out of her, My people, that ye be not partaker of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities” (Rev 18:4-5)? Here is proof positive that the theory that we are now rebutting is not the theology of heaven. Here is proof positive that the “sins” of Babylon were not laid on Christ. Here is proof positive that Christ was not “bruised” for her “iniquities,” for God would not punish twice for the same sins.

9. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, then God would not have dealt in judicial wrath with Israel because of the sins of their forefathers. But He did do so; and He did so after the crucifixion of His Son. No less than Christ Himself is our authority for this: “Therefore also saith the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute: That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; From the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the alter and the temple: verily I say unto you, it shall be required of this generation” (Luk 11:49-51). This passage teaches plainly that the punishment for the accumulated sins of their forefathers

was to fall upon a single generation of the Jews. Christ confirmed this by saying, “It shall be required of this generation.” But if atonement was made for all sins at the cross, then all of this would have been cancelled (remitted). That it was not so cancelled we know from the authenticated fact that in A.D. 70⁵ this solemn threat was executed, and God did “require” this at the hands of the Jews then living.

10. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, then wherein lies the need for and wherein would be the propriety of the dead being “judged according to their works” (Rev 20:12)? If the only issue between God and the world is their attitude toward Christ; if the only ground of condemnation for men be the rejection of the divinely appointed Savior, then it would be meaningless, or worse, to arraign them for their works. The fact that Holy Writ does declare that the wicked shall yet be judged “according to their works” is incontestable evidence that they will have more to answer for, and will suffer for something more than their rejection of Christ.

11. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, how could there possibly be any degrees of punishment for the lost? If the only sin which God now imputes to the wicked be their rejection of Christ, then one common guilt would rest upon all, and consequently one common punishment would be their portion. That there will be degrees of punishment among the lost is clearly established by the following Scriptures: Matthew 11:22, “It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.” Mark 12:40, “These shall receive greater damnation.” Luke 12:47-48, “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” Hebrews 10:28-29, “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?”

12. If ALL the sins of ALL men were laid upon Christ, and the only sin which God now imputes to any is the refusal to receive His Son, then it inevitably follows that all the heathen who have lived since the crucifixion and have never heard of Christ, will certainly be saved. There is no other alternative possible. Not having heard of Christ, they cannot be charged of rejecting Him, and if all their other sins were atoned for (as we are asked to believe) then, necessarily, they must stand guiltless before God. But if this were true, then John 14:6 would be untrue, for there the recorded declaration of Christ is, “No man cometh unto the Father but by Me.”

Limited Atonement

Having shown that this latest theory of the atonement cannot be true—cannot because it manifestly clashes with the twelve Scriptures quoted above and with others that might be quoted—we shall now examine some passages which are appealed to in support of it.

1. Isaiah 53:6

“The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). Notice that this verse does not say: “The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquities of all,” which is what some men twist it to mean. No, instead of so saying, the “all” is definitely and carefully qualified thus: “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Who the “us” refers to is made plain in the next verse: “For the transgression of my people was he stricken” (Isa 53:8). If further proof be required that the “all” is limited, it is furnished by another statement in the same chapter, for in verse 12 we read: “And he bare the sin of many.” This restriction is meaningless if Christ bore the sin of everybody.

2. John 1:29

“Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” (Joh 1:29). Again we ask the reader to note carefully the exact wording of this sentence: it is not (as so often misquoted) “The Lamb of God which taketh the sins of the world,” but “the *sin* of the world.” The word sin is used in the New Testament in several ways. Sometimes the reference is to the sinful nature, as in Hebrews 4:15, 1 John 1:8, etc. Sometimes it is the sinful act which is in view, as in James 1:15, etc. At other times “sin” refers to the guilt or penalty of sin, as in Romans 3:9, 6:10; 2 Corinthians 5:21. It is in this last sense “sin” is used in John 1:29. The definite article (in the Greek and in the English) makes this clear. The Lamb of God which beareth away *the* guilt and consequent penalty, is the thought.

⁵ A.D. 70 – within 40 years of Christ’s resurrection, when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem, its Temple, and much of its people.

But now, what is meant by “taketh away the sin of the *world*”? Does it mean that the Lamb of God took away the guilt of the whole human race? If it does, then the whole human race will most certainly be saved—unpunished sin (and its defilement) is the only thing which would keep any man out of heaven. But if “the world” does not mean the whole human race, what does it refer to? We answer: It is a general, an indefinite expression, used, first, in contrast with Israel. “It is not ‘the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of Israel,’ but the sin of ‘the world’—of any kind of men” (Mr. F.W. Grant). The “world” here takes in believing sinners of the Gentiles, as well as believing Jews.

That “the world” is a general and indefinite expression, rather than a synonym for the whole human race, is clear from its meaning in other passages in John’s Gospel. For example, in John 7:4, “Show thyself to the world.” Did they mean, “Show thyself to the whole human race”? Surely not. Again, “Behold the world is gone after him” (Joh 12:19). Did they mean the whole human race had gone after Him? Of course not. “I come not to judge the world but to save the world” (Joh 12:47). Did Christ mean that He had come to save the whole human race? How could He, when multitudes were even then in hell!

The Greek word for “world” in John 1:29 is “kosmos,” and in its application to humankind in the New Testament, we find there are two “worlds”—a world of believers and a world of unbelievers. In 2 Peter 2:5 this expression is used, “bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly.” Contrariwise, there is a world of the godly. This is the meaning of John 1:29, it was the sin (penalty) of the world of believers—Jewish believers and Gentile believers—that the Lamb of God took away. This is no novel interpretation of ours, but one so given by the Reformers and Puritans.

3. John 3:18

“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (Joh 3:18). That refusal to believe in the name of God’s Son is a ground of condemnation is not disputed. The question at issue is whether this is now the only ground of condemnation. John 3:18 does not say it is. Nor does any other passage. If it did, the Scriptures would contradict themselves, for as shown above, there are many passages which afford positive proof that God does reckon men guilty of other sins. The truth is, that man is “under condemnation” long before he ever hears of Christ: he is under condemnation from the hour of his birth. He is not only “shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin” (Psa 51:5), but he is also “estranged from the womb” (Psa 58:3). We not only inherit Adam’s depravity, but we are also “by nature the children [not merely of ‘corruption,’ but] of wrath” (Eph 2:3). The unregenerate are not only devoid of any spiritual nature, they are also “alienated from the life of God” (Eph 4:18).

4. 2 Corinthians 5:19

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2Co 5:19). This verse need not detain us very long. Like John 1:29, a right understanding of it turns upon apprehending the true meaning and scope of “the world.” The “world” which God reconciled by Christ was the world of believers. That unbelievers are not “reconciled” is clear from Ephesians 4:18 (and other Scriptures) which speaks of them being “alienated from the life of God.” Again, in Romans 5:10 we are told, “Much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” That is plain enough: those “reconciled” shall be saved! Further proof that the world here said to be reconciled does not take in the whole human race, is found in the fact that we are expressly told God does not impute “their trespasses unto them.” But He does “impute” trespasses unto the children of disobedience, as is clear from Ephesians 5:6, etc. Psalm 32:1 tells us that the man is “blessed” unto whom the Lord “imputeth not iniquity.” But the unbeliever is not “blessed,” but cursed.

5. 1 John 2:2

“And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1Jo 2:2). This is the passage which, apparently, most favors the view we are now rebutting, and yet if it be considered attentively it will be seen that it does so only in appearance, and not in reality. Below we offer a number of conclusive proofs to show that this verse does not teach that Christ has propitiated God on behalf of all the sins of all men.

In the *first* place, the fact that this verse opens with “and” necessarily links it with what has gone before. We, therefore, give a literal, word for word translation of 1 John 2:1 from Bagster’s Interlinear: “Little children my, these things I write to you, that ye may not sin: and if any one should sin, a Paraclete we have with the Father,

Jesus Christ [the] righteous.” It will thus be seen that the apostle John is here writing to and about the saints of God. His immediate purpose was two-fold: first to communicate a message that would keep God’s children from sinning; second, to supply comfort and assurance to those who might sin, and, in consequence, be cast down and fearful that the issue would prove fatal. He, therefore, makes known to them the provision which God has made for just such an emergency. This we find at the end of verse 1 and throughout verse 2. The ground of comfort is twofold: let the downcast and repentant believer (1Jo 1:9) be assured that, first, he has an “Advocate with the Father;” second, that this Advocate is “the propitiation for our sins.” Now believers only may take comfort from this, for they alone have an “Advocate,” for them alone is Christ the propitiation as is proven by linking the Propitiation (“and”) with “the Advocate”!

In the *second* place, if other passages in the New Testament, which speak of “propitiation” be compared with 1 John 2:2, it will be found that it is strictly limited in its scope. For example, in Romans 3:25 we read that God set forth Christ “a propitiation through faith in his blood.” If Christ is a propitiation “through faith,” then He is not a “propitiation” to those who have no faith! Again, we read, “To make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17, R.V.).

In the *third* place, who are meant when John says, “He is the propitiation for our sins”? We answer, Jewish believers. Part of the proof on which we base this assertion we now submit to the careful attention of the reader.

In Galatians 2:9 we are told that John, together with James and, Cephas, were apostles “unto the circumcision” (i.e. Israel). In keeping with this, the epistle of James is addressed to “the twelve tribes, which are scattered abroad” (1:1). So, the first epistle of Peter is addressed to “the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion” (1Pe 1:1, R.V.). And John also is writing to saved Israelites.

Evidences that John is writing to saved Jews are:

(a) In the opening verse he says of Christ, “Which we have seen with our eyes...and our hands have handled.” How impossible it would have been for the apostle Paul to have commenced any of his epistles to Gentile saints with such language!

(b) “Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning” (2:7). The “beginning” here referred to is the beginning of the public manifestation of Christ—in proof compare 1:1, 2:13, etc. Now these believers, the apostle tells us, had the “old commandment” from the beginning. This was true of Jewish believers, but it was not true of Gentile believers.

(c) “I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him from the beginning” (2:13). Here, again, it is evident that it is Jewish believers that are in view.

(d) “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us” (2:18-19). These brethren to whom John wrote had “heard” from Christ Himself that antichrist should come (see Mat 24). The “many antichrists” whom John declares “went out from us” were all Jews, for during the first century none but a Jew posed as the Messiah. Therefore, when he says “He is the propitiation for our sins,” he can only mean for the sins of Jewish believers.

In the *fourth* place, when John added, “And not for ours only, but also for the whole world,” he signified that Christ was the propitiation for the sins of the Gentile believers too, for, as previously shown, “the world” is a term contrasted from Israel. This interpretation is unequivocally established by a careful comparison of 1 John 2:2 with John 11:51-52, which is a strictly parallel passage: “And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.” Here Caiaphas, under inspiration, made known for whom Jesus should “die.” Notice now the correspondence of his prophecy with this declaration of John’s:

“He is the propitiation for our [believing Israelites] sins.”

“He prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation.”

“And not for ours only.”

“And not for that nation only.”

“But also for the whole world.” [That is, Gentile believers who are scattered throughout the earth.]

“He should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.”

In the *fifth* place, the above interpretation is confirmed by the fact that no other is consistent or intelligible. If the “whole world” signifies the whole human race, then the first clause and the “also” in the second clause are absolutely meaningless. If Christ be the propitiation for everybody, it would be idle tautology⁶ to say, first, He is the propitiation for our sins and also for everybody. There could be no “also” if He be the propitiation for the entire human family. Had the apostle meant to affirm that Christ is a universal propitiation, he had omitted the first clause of verse 2, and simply said, “He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.”

In the *sixth* place, our definition of “the whole world” is in perfect accord with other passages in the New Testament. For example: “Whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; which is come unto you, as it is in all the world” (Col 1:5-6). Does “all the world” here mean, absolutely and unqualifiedly, all mankind? Had all the human family heard the Gospel? No; the apostle’s obvious meaning is that the Gospel, instead of being confined to the land of Judea, had gone abroad, without restraint, into Gentile lands. So in Romans 1:8: “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.” The apostle is here referring to the faith of these Roman saints being spoken of in a way of commendation. But certainly all mankind did not so speak of their faith! It was the whole world of believers that he was referring to! In Revelation 12:9 we read of Satan “which deceiveth the whole world.” But again this expression cannot be understood as a universal one, for Matthew 24:24 tells us that Satan does not and cannot “deceive” God’s elect. Here it is “the whole world” of unbelievers.

In the *seventh* place, to insist that “the whole world” in 1 John 2:2 signifies the entire human race is to undermine the very foundations of our faith. If Christ be the propitiation for those that are lost equally as much as for those that are saved, then what assurance have we that believers too may not be lost? If Christ be the propitiation for those now in hell, what guarantee have I that I may not end in hell? The blood-shedding of the incarnate Son of God is the only thing which can keep any one out of hell, and if many for whom that precious blood made propitiation are now in the awful place of the damned, then may not that blood prove inefficacious for me! Away with such a God-dishonoring thought!

Conclusion

However men may quibble and wrest the Scriptures, one thing is certain: The atonement is no failure. God will not allow that precious and costly sacrifice to fail in accomplishing, completely, that which it was designed to effect. Not a drop of that holy blood was shed in vain. In the last great Day there shall stand forth no disappointed and defeated Savior, but One Who “shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied” (Isa 53:11).

These are not our words, but the infallible assertion of Him Who declares, “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Isa 46:10). Upon this impregnable rock we take our stand. Let others rest on the sands of human speculation and theorizing if they wish. But to God they will yet have to render an account. For our part we had rather be railed at as a narrow-minded, out-of-date hyper-Calvinist, than be found repudiating God’s truth by reading the divinely-efficacious atonement to a mere fiction. Was the sin question finally settled at the cross? For every believer, Yes. For unbelievers, No, as they shall yet find to their cost.



⁶ **tautology** – needless repetition of words with the same meaning.