

Digital Resources Theology

An “Accomplished” Redemption

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About the author: William James Grier (1902-1983) was born in Co. Donegal, Ireland. He attended Queen’s University Belfast and later Princeton Theological Seminary, where he studied theology under Gresham Machen and Geerhardus Vos. On his return to Ireland, Grier was among the founders of the Evangelical Bookshop in Belfast in 1926 and of what became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1927. For many years, he edited the Church’s magazine and pastored the Stranmillis congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Summary: the words of John Owen – sufficiency for all – to save “his own people” – **Proof of the doctrine;** from the doctrine of election – from Scripture – from the nature of Christ’s death – from the intercession of Christ – from the analogy between Adam and Christ – **Objections to the doctrine;** contrary to the justice of God – contrary to the goodness of God – contrary to free agency – contrary to universalist passages – discourages soul-winning efforts – not an incentive to holiness – conclusion.

An “Accomplished” Redemption

The great Puritan, Dr John Owen, onetime Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, refers to the extent of redemption in this way

“The Father imposed His wrath due to, and the Son underwent the punishment for, either (i) all the sins of all men; (ii) all the sins of some men; or (iii) some of the sins of all men. In which case, it may be said that: (a) if the last case is true, all men have some sins to answer for, and therefore none are saved; (b) if the second case is true, then Christ, in their stead, suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth; (c) but if the first case is true, why are not all men free from punishment due to their sins? You answer because of unbelief. I ask, is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If it is not, why should men be punished for it? If it is, then Christ suffered the punishment due to it; if not, He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins.”

Summary in point form. Christ died for ...

- (i) **all the sins of all men**, and if this is true, why are all men not freed from the punishment for their sins?
- (ii) **all the sins of some men**, and if this is true, then Christ, in their stead, suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world.
- (iii) **some of the sins of all men**, and if this is true, all men have some sins to answer for, and therefore none are saved.

Sometimes this view is called “limited redemption” (also called “*limited atonement*”), but the term is not very suitable, since Christ died for an innumerable multitude. Therefore, we prefer to speak of an “accomplished” redemption.

We affirm that the entire world benefits from the death of Christ. Undoubtedly, even now, there are those in hell who have experienced some of his blessings—the blessings of common grace, as opposed to those of saving grace. Redemption can be described as twofold: each moment's relief from the punishment deserved for transgressing God's law, and every single benefit granted to the ungodly is a result of Christ's redemption. The whole world is temporarily redeemed from the full execution of God's wrath. Christ's sheep are eternally redeemed from it through His sacrifice. Therefore, he is the "Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10).

We also affirm that Christ's satisfaction is sufficient for all, being of infinite value, and is adapted to the needs of all. John Owen observes:

To the honour of Jesus Christ, we affirm that such and so great was the dignity and worth of His blood-shedding, of such a precious value, and of such infinite fulness and sufficiency was this oblation of Himself, that it was in every way able and perfectly sufficient to redeem, justify, reconcile, and save all the sinners of the world, to satisfy the justice of God for all the sins of mankind, and to bring each one of them to everlasting glory. This fulness and sufficiency of the merit of the death of Christ is a foundation for the general proclamation of the Gospel to every creature; because the way of salvation which it declares is wide enough for all to walk in... If there were a thousand worlds, the Gospel of Christ might on this ground be preached to them all, there being enough in Christ for the salvation of them all, if only they will derive virtue from Him by touching Him in faith.

The question under discussion is, what was the purpose of Christ's coming? Was it to save all people or to save all "his people"

We concur with Professor A. A. Hodge that he came with *the purpose of actually saving those whom he does actually save*; that he did not die in the same sense for the son of perdition, Judas, as for Peter; but that he stood in the stead of his elect.

Proof of the Doctrine

First, from the Doctrine of Election. The Bible portrays man as dead in trespasses and sins—not sick, but dead. He might as well attempt to lift himself by his own shoelaces as try to save himself. So, what hope remains for him? The door of hope is opened in the answer to Question 20 of the Shorter Catechism: *“God having, out of His mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a Covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.”*

From all eternity, God gave to his Son a people, an innumerable company, for whom the Son undertook to meet all their obligations and save them. Some five times in John 17, Christ refers to *“those given him by the Father.”* In Ephesians, we read that he *“chose us in him before the foundation of the world, ... In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will”* (Ephesians 1:4-5).

All these, he assures us, shall come to him (John 6:37). *“This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day”* (John 6:39). In other words, he is surety, in accordance with the will of his Father, for the salvation of those “given” people for whom he died.

Second, from Scripture Passages. Many scriptures indicate that Christ's death had special reference to the salvation of His people.

- “He sent redemption to his people” (Psalm 111:9).
- Christ himself said: *“I lay down my life for the sheep”* (John 10:15).
- It was the Church of God, which he *“obtained with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28).
- *“You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:21).
- To the unbelieving Jews, he said: *“but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep”* (John 10:26).
- Of others who had not yet come to him, he could say: *“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them*

also" (John 10:16).

Third, from the Nature of Christ's Death, as a substitutionary sacrifice and a complete satisfaction for sins.

If pardon and reconciliation were bought for all men on Calvary, then hell would be empty. The debts being paid, its bankrupt-prison-houses could not claim their prey. For "*payment God's justice cannot twice demand, first at my bleeding Surety's hand and then again at mine*" – Augustus Toplady (1740-1778).

Some argue that Christ's death does not actually "save sinners," as the Bible so repeatedly and emphatically states, but simply places them in a condition where they can be saved. In this view, it is up to individuals to decide who will be saved and who will be lost; some resist and are lost, some believe and are saved.

Then conceivably all might have resisted, and the Saviour's death would have been utterly in vain, and his sore travail without fruit. But the outcome of our salvation was not left in dust and ashes. Salvation is of the Lord, through and through. The Father promised the Son in eternity past that he should have a portion with the great and divide the spoil with the strong (Isaiah 53:12).

Another common belief is that the Father gave Christ to die for all men equally, but that not everyone is saved because the Spirit is given only to certain individuals. The Scriptures, however, teach us that there is a close link between Christ's work and the gift of the Spirit: "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law ... so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith*" (Galatians 3:13-14).

Christ purchased the gift of the Spirit for his people and provided everything necessary for their salvation; otherwise, no one would be saved. Only those who believe in a definite redemption can truly sing.

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more.*

William Cowper (1731-1800)

To say that anyone he came to purchase, paying the ransom with

his blood, will be lost, is to cast dishonour on the wonder-working power of the precious blood.

Fourth, from the Intercession of Christ. The priests of old interceded for the person or persons on whose behalf they offered sacrifice. Christ fulfils these types. He, too, offered a sacrifice, and he, too, now intercedes for all for whom he offered himself a sacrifice. But he now intercedes for his own – “*I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me*” (John 17:9). So, the analogy is only made perfect when we say that Christ died for his own.

Fifth, from the Analogy between Adam and Christ. Adam was the representative or federal head of the race. When he sinned, we sinned in him and fell with him. His sin was imputed to us, and the sentence of condemnation for his sin did indeed come upon all represented by him. Similarly, Christ was the representative of His people. All he did was reckoned to us as if we had done it, and what he did for us as our representative is secured in entail for all those he represented (Romans 5:12-19).

Charles Hodge states it as follows:

“As all in Adam died, so all in Christ are made alive. Such is the nature of the union in both cases that the sin of the one rendered certain and just the death of all united to Adam, and the righteousness of the other rendered certain and just the salvation of all who are in him. The sin of Adam did not make the condemnation of all men merely possible; it was the ground of their actual condemnation. So, the righteousness of Christ did not make the salvation of men merely possible; it secured the actual salvation of those for whom He wrought ... As the act of Adam, the head and representative of his race, was fruitful of evil consequences, not to man only but to the earth and all that it contains; so the work of Christ is fruitful of good consequences to others than those for whom He acted. But this does not justify anyone in saying that Adam acted as much the representative of the brute creation as of his posterity; neither does it justify the assertion that Christ died for all mankind in the same sense that he died for his own people!”

Objections to the Doctrine

First, Contrary to the Justice of God. What is contrary to his justice? Certainly not that he treats unbelievers as they ought to be treated. No, you say, but in choosing some and rendering their salvation secure and thereby passing over others, does that not indicate partiality in God? The Apostle Paul answered that objection in Romans 9:14-24. Any believer in God—any theist—has the same charge to answer: Is not God partial who makes one rich and another poor, who gives to one land the Bible and the light of truth, and withholds these from another?

Second, Contrary to the Goodness of God. Is it contrary to the goodness of God that he saves an innumerable multitude of sinners? That he saves any is an act of amazing grace. Surely he has the right to condemn impenitent sinners. Everyone admits, or should admit, that some are saved and some are lost. The great God permits this to happen. We assert that what he permits to happen is right for Him to purpose to happen.

Third, Contrary to Free Agency. The objector regards us as holding the view that God breaks in on, and does violence to, the human will, because we assert that he renders certain the salvation of some. We hold with all our hearts to free agency, but we also hold that God can and does control the acts of free agents. The writers of Scripture were free men, each using his own style, but God so controlled them that they wrote down his mind and will without any errors.

Joseph's brethren were free agents when they sold him into Egypt, but God's hand was controlling even in their actions. So, Joseph told them: *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:20). And when wicked men crucified Christ, they were free agents and truly guilty, but they were doing what was predetermined to be done. So, actions can be free and yet fixed.

To say that God persuades and enables men to accept Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospel does not undermine free will.

Fourth, Contrary to Universalist Passages. There are passages of Scripture which might appear at first glance to indicate that Christ died for all men equally and in the same sense.

For example, in 1 John 2:2, we read that Christ is *“the propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world.”* The Bible-believer welcomes that truth and rejoices in it. It assures him that Christ's satisfaction is of infinite value, suitable for all and sufficient for all. No one who comes will be cast out. No man ever perishes for want of a propitiation.

It is also stated that *“he might taste death for everyone”* (Hebrews 2:9) – whether Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, self-righteous or publican and sinner. No race or colour, tribe or tongue is barred. He died for all without distinction, but, I hasten to add, not for all without exception. The Epistle to the Hebrews immediately proceeds to tell us that the purpose of his coming was to bring *“many sons to glory”* (2:10).

Those who advocate for universal redemption should exercise caution regarding the proof-texts they cite. For example, they sometimes quote, *“One died for all, then were all dead.”* But this proves too much. If *“all”* in the first clause means *“all men,”* then in the second clause it also means *“all men”* and implies that the entire world has died and risen with Christ in a universal salvation! *“All”* in this case must be interpreted according to the context to mean *“all Christians”* (in both clauses).

Fifth, Discourages Soul-Winning Efforts. We are told that it would make us careless about the salvation of our fellowmen if we were certain that Christ had secured the salvation of those who should be saved. By the same reasoning, since our lifespan is limited and the hour of our departure fixed, why should we eat in the meantime?

When Paul's work in Corinth seemed to produce little fruit, did it discourage him or make him careless to be told by God: *Speak and hold not thy peace, for I have much people in this city?* The effort was still new, but here is encouragement – there are *“many people”* to be won, and Paul is the *“chosen vessel”* to bring the good tidings of salvation to many of them. So, he is encouraged to be busy in proclaiming the Gospel.

Sixth, Not an Incentive to Holiness. It will make a man careless about holy living, says the objector, if he knows that Christ has become surety for him and his salvation. If any man is careless, we

reply, it suggests that he is “none of His.” If a man is a true Christian, the wonderful special love of Christ for him will constrain him to live henceforth unto Him who for our sakes died and rose again.

Conclusion.

This doctrine brings joy and comfort to the believer. It echoes a note of warm and tender individualism – “He loved me and gave Himself for me.” He thought of men while hanging on the cruel tree; indeed, even of me, amidst the countless number of His sheep. How could this be, you ask?

It could be because it was the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. The devil may come and tempt us as he tempted Luther, reminding us that we are very great sinners. Luther's reply was: “I knew that long ago. Tell me something new. Christ has taken my sins on himself and forgiven them long ago. Now grind your teeth!” “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?”

Finally, this doctrine exalts the Most High and places man in humble dependence at his feet, beholden solely to his mercy. It describes a God whose judgments are beyond understanding and whose ways are unfathomable. Many professing Christians consider this God difficult to know. We can assure them that he is infinitely worth knowing. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).