THE LOGIC OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

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John McLeod Campbell's book *The Nature of the Atonement* (1856, 4th Edition, 1873) contains a vigorous attack upon the doctrine of limited atonement. According to the Reformed Churches, that doctrine is central to a proper understanding of the biblical view of the atonement. It states that while Christ's atonement was, objectively considered, of sufficient worth to redeem the whole human race, (indeed, human races of an untold number), nevertheless Christ intended, in accordance with the will of his Father, to die for a definite number of people, and fully carried through that intention. The biblical basis of such a view was not only the explicit teaching of Scripture in such places as John 6:37 and John 10:15, but also a number of more general considerations to do with the nature of Christ's satisfaction for sin, divine election, and the harmony and unity of the divine purposes.

It has never been part of the doctrine of limited atonement to state that such and such a proportion or percentage of humanity was atoned for at Calvary. Rather it has cut short such questionings by citing the biblical words about the innumerable company of the redeemed, and the danger of speculating about and attempting to pry into what has not been revealed. It has added that all those who are objects of Christ's atoning work shall, in the words of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* be called 'out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ' (X.1.).

In this brief article consideration will be given to two objections that McLeod Campbell had to limited atonement. They both arise from the attributes or character of God. These objections could reasonably be left to lie in oblivion were it not for the fact that they have recently been dusted off and endorsed by Professor J. B. Torrance in the course of his critique of the Calvinistic theology of the *Westminster Confession.* Professor Torrance has this to say:

> The doctrine of the Covenant of Works (whose conditions Christ fulfils for the elect) implies that God is a contract-God, and denies that God is related to all men in Love (Agape). John Owen and Jonathan Edwards took this to its logical conclusion that Justice is the essential attribute by which God is related to all as Judge, but the love of God is arbitrary! But what doctrine of God is that? It is a concept of God dervied from 'reason', 'the light of nature' and Western notions of 'natural law' and 'the law of contract' and read back into the Bible. But it is not the biblical view that God is Love (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in his innermost Being, and that his Being is manifested in all his activities, in

Creation, Providence as well as Redemption.[1]

Professor Torrance states this view again

> Jonathan Edwards in New England took this (the priority of law over grace) to its theological conclusion in teaching that Justice is the essential attribute of God, but the Love of God is arbitrary. God is related to all men as contracting sovereign and judge, but only to some men in grace. This may be the logical corollory of federal Calvinism but it is not true of the New Testament.[2]

And more recently

> It is precisely this kind of Aristotelian logic which led the later Calvinists like John Owen to formulate a doctrine of 'limited atonement'. The argument is that if Christ died for all men, and all are not saved, then Christ died in vain — and *a priori,* because God always infallibly achieves his purposes, this is unthinkable. Where does this same argument lead us when we apply it to the doctrine of God, as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards did? On these grounds they argued that justice is the essential attribute of God, but his love is arbitrary. In his classical defence of the doctrine of a limited atonement, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ,* in Book IV John Owen examines the many texts in which the word 'all' appears, saying that Christ died 'for all' and argues that 'all' means "all the elect'. For example, when he turns to John 3:16, he says 'By the "world", we understand the elect of God only . . . . .' (p. 209). What then about 'God so loved . . . . .'? Owen argues that if God loves all, and all are not saved then he loves them in vain. *Therefore he does not love all!* If he did, this would imply imperfection in God. 'Nothing that includes any imperfection is to be assigned to Almighty God. In terms of this 'logic' he argues *love is not God's nature.*[3]

Although McLeod Campbell is not mentioned in these extracts it is nevertheless clear that Professor Torrance is endorsing his position. For McLeod Campbell wrote, in the course of his chapter criticising the views of Edwards and Owen

> The conception of the nature of the atonement on which the system of Owen and Edwards proceeds; and the reasonings in relation to the Divine Attributes by which they attempt to lay a deep foundation for is in the reality of what God is, present this — I may surely say — startling — result, that, while they set forth justice as a necessary attribute of the divine nature, so that God must deal with *all men* according to its requirements, they represent mercy and love as not necessary, but arbitrary, and what, therefore, may find their expression in the history of *only some* men. For according to their system justice alone is

1. 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology', in *The Westminster Confessions in the Church Today* ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh, 1982) p. 48.
2. 'Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland — some basic concepts in the development of "Federal Theology" ' in *Calvinus Reformator* (Potchefstroom, South Africa, 1982) p. 273.
3. 'The Incarnation and "Limited Atonement" ', *The Evangelical Quarterly,* Vol. LV, No. 2, April 1983, pp. 84-5.

expressed in the history of all men, that is to say, in the history of the non-elect, in their endurance of punishment; in the history of the elect, in Christ's enduring it for them. Mercy and love are expressed in the history of the elect alone. Surely, not to enter into the question of the absolute distinctness of the Divine Attributes, or their central and essential unity, if any one attribute might be expected to shine full-orbed in a revelation which testifies that 'God is love', that attribute is love.[4]

The substance of this charge is that in their formulations of the doctrine of limited atonement Edwards and Owen do not do justice to the biblical emphasis upon the centrality of the love of God. In particular, while they make justice a necessary attribute of God, love is made arbitrary, and so not central and essential to the divine character. God judges all men according to his justice, either in themselves or, if they are among the number of the elect, in their substitute, Christ. God's love and mercy, on the other hand (leaving aside the question of common grace) are known only by the elect, in their conversion, sanctification and glorification in Christ. God's justice is general, 'necessary', while his love and mercy are particular, 'arbitrary'. In this way, it is claimed, the Calvinistic presentation of the atonement cannot do justice to the biblical idea of the love of God according to which 'God is love in his innermost being'.

However, it is a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the atonement to suppose that according to it God deals with all men in justice but with only some in mercy. For according to the doctrine of limited atonement the elect do not experience God's justice as it concerns them, for it is satisfied by the atonement of Christ for them. All are liable to punishment for their sin, but only some are punished since the elect are 'punished' in Christ their substitute. So it is not that some experience both love and justice while some experience justice only. It is rather, according to the doctrine, that some experience love, some justice, neither both and each one or the other. The inequality is thus symmetrical, and the incidence of divine love and justice does not provide the least reason for supposing that those who hold this view hold that justice is essential to God while love is arbitrary, nor the slightest reason for thinking that they are committed to such a view.

So the problem is not that of explaining how all men can experience God's justice and only some his love and mercy. Nor is it the problem of explaining how God is able to waive his justice and show mercy in the case of some and not of others. Nevertheless, even allowing for this misunderstanding of the nature of divine justice and mercy a problem over the fact that some experience God's love in Christ and others do not remains to be explained. How can God consistently with his character accept Christ's satisfaction for some and not for others? And here, it seems, we hit our heads against the ceiling. The only satisfactory answers to such a question are those provided by Paul, 'Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why has thou made me thus?' (Rom. 9:20) and by Christ,

4. *The Nature of the Atonement* (4th edition, 1873), p. 54.

'Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight' (Matt. 11:26). Why has God chosen as he has? Because he is God and that is his choice.

We shall now try on behalf of Owen and Edwards to rebut the claims of McLeod Campbell and Professor Torrance with two arguments. The first has to do with the nature of mercy. The second will attempt to show that the argument of McLeod Campbell and Professor Torrance, if applied consistently, would lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* of their position.

First, the nature of mercy. Granted that there cannot be mercy without need, how can it be that there is mercy for some of the needy and not for others? I take this to be a question not about the morality of what God is alleged by Owen and Edwards to do, but about the logical possibility of his doing such. If it were only a matter of God's morality, then as we have noted it would be satisfactory to meet the point in terms of Paul's unanswerable questions in Romans 9. But how is the logical objection to be met?

McLeod Campbell's contention involves a misunderstanding of the logic of mercy understood as 'undeserved love'. What is essential to such love is that it could, consistently with all else that God is, be withheld by him. If God cannot but exercise mercy as he cannot but exercise justice, then its character *as mercy* vanishes. If God has to exercise mercy as he has to exercise justice then such 'mercy' would not be mercy. For the character of mercy is such that each person who receives it is bound to say 'I have no right to what I have received. It would have been perfectly consistent with God's justice had I not received it'. And so in this respect the logical character of mercy is vastly different from that of justice. A justice that could be unilaterally waived would not *be* justice, and mercy which could not be unilaterally waived would not be mercy. As John Owen puts it:

To prove mercy to be an essential property of God, it is sufficient that he exercised it towards any . . . . . God is bound to exercise mercy to none, but (that) he cannot but exercise his justice towards sinners (provided he be inclined to be just), if he would preserve his natural right and dominion over his creatures, and the holiness and purity of his nature uninjured and entire.[5]

An employee who thought that because his employer owed him wages he also owed him a gift as well would reveal that he had not properly understood what a gift is.

> It is made evident in Christ the Son, how and by what means God, infinitely merciful and infinitely just, — acting on the principles of strict justice with some, and of mere grace with others, but in exercising both the one and the other, both justice and mercy, in and through the Mediator, the one, indeed, in his own proper person, and the other towards those for whom he was surety, — hath declared himself.[6]

Could God have had mercy on all? Perhaps he could. Certainly there is nothing in the idea of supreme justice alone, or of infinite mercy alone, which precludes this. It cannot be validly inferred from the fact that God

5. *Works* ed. W. H. Goold X.581.

is supremely just or infinitely merciful that God could not have had saving mercy on all. But nor does the possession of these attributes entail that God should have mercy upon all.

But even if this reasoning is correct, and God could have exercised mercy upon all had he chosen to do so, it is important to see that this fact would make God's mercy on all as 'arbitrary' as his choice to exercise mercy only upon some.

It might be objected that if God could not have had saving mercy upon all, but had to have saving mercy upon only some, then those on whom he exercised mercy could have expected mercy had they known, and even more so if God *had* to exercise mercy upon certain particular individuals. But what makes mercy to be mercy in the case of those who are saved is the fact that it is undeserved. The fact that others similarly placed to themselves are not saved, is further evidence that the mercy received by the saved has come not as a result of merit or desert. So that even if God could not but save some particular, nameable individuals the description of that salvation as 'undeserved mercy' is not compromised.

In brief, if mercy is an act of the divine will, then it is equally 'arbitrary' whether that mercy is particular or universal. If on the other hand mercy is part of the divine nature, necessitated by who God is, whether that mercy is particular or universal its character as mercy is not compromised. For mercy is characterised by favour that is not undeserved, even though that undeserved favour is expected, or even guaranteed.

But is there an overriding objection to considering God's choice to be "arbitrary"? In an article already referred to Professor Torrance says

> (according to Owen) there is no 'natural affection and propensity in God to the good of his creatures'. 'By love is meant an act of his will (where we conceive his love to be seated . . . . .)' God's love is thus assigned to his *will* to save the elect only. It seems to me that this is a flagrant case where a kind of logic leads us to run in the face of the plain teaching of the Bible that God is agape (pure love) in his innermost being.[7]

Whatever the scope of divine love, in assigning that love to the will of God does not Owen make it essentially arbitrary or capricious? There is some misunderstanding here. When Owen said that love in God is not an affection, he means that love is not something that *happens* to God, or that disturbs him.

> Consider what is the eternal love of God. Is it an affection in his eternal nature, as love is in ours? It were no less than blasphemy once so to conceive. His pure and holy nature, wherein there is neither change or shadow of turning, is not subject to any such passion; it must be, then, an eternal act of his will, and that alone.[8]

So when Owen assigns God's love to his will and not to a supposed affection, he is making an important but rather technical theological

6. *Works* ed. W. H. Goold X.582.
7. 'The Incarnation and "Limited Atonement" ', p. 85.
8. *Works* ed. W. H. Goold, X.275.

distinction. Assigning God's love to his will does not mean that it is capricious or without reason, or an act of 'pure will' in the Scotist sense, but simply that the origin of God's love is not in time. It is not due to his reaction upon learning of human sin and misery, but it is 'an eternal act of his will', a determination of his will which is wholly in accord with his character. This emphasis is important for other reasons, but by itself it has no bearing at all upon the *scope* of divine love. God's love is, as Owen says, his 'purpose, good pleasure, a pure act of his will'.[9] To put the point in different words, according to Owen God is not moved to love by the plight of the creature, he determines to love by an eternal purpose. Furthermore, 'every eternal act of God's will is imminent in himself, not really distinguished from himself; whatever is so in God is God'.[10]

So far we have tried to show that it is a mistake to suppose that the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement carries with it the idea that justice is essential to God's character whereas love is arbitrary. Whether or not mercy is exercised upon all must involve the divine will, since to exercise mercy is to act. And so such an exercise is, in a technical sense, 'arbitrary' but it is not arbitrary in the sense of being capricious, irresponsible, or irrational.

But now let us leave this issue to one side and consider the logical argument which McLeod Campbell presents on its own merits. He appears to wish to maintain that

(1) Each of God's attributes e.g. his love and his justice, is necessary to God.

That is, each of God's attributes is possessed essentially by God; if God lacked any of these attributes he would not be God just as if I lacked the attribute of being a person I could not be me. Lurking behind (1) is the further claim that God is simple, that

(2) Each of God's individual essential[11] attributes is identical with each other of his individual essential attributes.

If God is simple then divine love *is* divine justice, divine justice *is* divine wisdom, and so on. While (1) does not require (2), clearly enough (2) requires (1), and McLeod Campbell seems to favour (2) even if he does not explicitly commit himself to it. In addition, as we have seen, he does commit himself to the following:

(3) The unequal exercise of distinct attributes can only be the result of arbitrariness.

And so, on the assumption that arbitrariness in God is undesirable (and indeed logically impossible if divine simplicity is true, since freedom from arbitrariness in the exercise of any attribute must entail freedom from arbitrariness in the exercise of any other, since each attribute *is* the other) McLeod Campbell regards (4) as true:

(4) Any attribute necessary to God is necessarily exercised by God on

9. *Works* ed. W. H. Goold, X.276.
10. *Works* ed. W. H. Goold, X.275.
11. By an individual essential attribute or property is meant a property without which God could not be God and which God alone can have.

all creatures on whom it is logically possible to exercise it.[12]

Thus, if infinite love and infinite justice are essential attributes of God, it would follow from (4) that God's love is exercised on exactly the same number of people as his justice. If his justice is experienced by all then so must his love be.

So far so good. It is a fact about logic, however, that one cannot call a halt to an argument when one pleases. Adopting an argument is not like calling a taxi. And while the argument which we have traced so far may seem to carry conviction, and to carry unwelcome consequences for the doctrine of limited atonement, it can be shown that such an argument has unwelcome consequences for McLeod Campbell's own view.

The logical problem for McLeod Campbell's view is as follows. (4) entails that God's love and justice are to be exercised upon all. But it also entails (5):

(5) Any attribute necessary to God is necessarily exercised by God *equally* on all on whom it is logically possible to exercise it.

What (5) says is that not only if arbitrariness is to be avoided must the divine attributes be exercised on all, they must be exercised *equally* upon all. For if there is the least deviation then this signals inequality of treatment, and this in turn signals an unequal exercise of the divine attributes, and any such unequal exercise must be arbitrary.

It can be seen from this that the so-called 'scandal of particularity' is not only a so-called scandal about God's redemption of sinners, it is also a so-called scandal about his creation of the universe. Why is it that a God who is loving and wise, and necessarily loving and wise, should ordain a universe with manifest angularities? Why is it that some are strong, some weak, some male, some female, some healthy, some diseased, and so forth?

On McLeod Campbell's view God could not ordain such a universe, since for God to have created a universe in which one person was differently placed from another in some respect would have been for God's attributes to have been differentially exercised with respect to those two people, and according to McLeod Campbell such a state of affairs is an impossibility, because 'arbitrary'.

Faced with this consequence, it is possible to respond to it in one of two different ways. One way is to recognise the manifest angularities of the universe and, accepting (4), to conclude that the universe is not the creation of God. This consequence would obviously not be attractive to McLeod Campbell. The second way to respond would be to argue that since God exists and is the creator of the universe it must be possible to have such a universe consistently with the character that God is known to have, or believed to have. But if it is possible for there to be differentiations in the created universe that are consistent with the attributes of God then it is presumably possible for there to be differentiations with regard to God's redemptive purposes which are entirely consistent with the divine attributes. This alternative would also

12. This principle has universalistic implications, or at least (if it is held that the exercise of God's love can be decisively thwarted by his creatures) it has Arminian implications.

seem not to be an attractive one for McLeod Campbell. So neither alternative is attractive to him. But is there a third possibility?

So the argument of McLeod Campbell and Professor Torrance takes on the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. It carries the absurd consequence for any theist who takes the idea of divine creation seriously, that God could not have created a universe in which people were significantly different from each other, or in which anything was significantly different from anything else. Such a consequence is sufficient to show to us that something, somewhere has gone wrong in the argument. The natural suspect is (4) and what it appears to entail, (5).

It is open to someone to claim that while God can be arbitrary or particular with regard to, say, sex, hair-colour, and I.Q. he cannot be arbitrary or particular over any person's eternal salvation. But how would such a claim be argued? Does not any distinction between God's non-redemptive purposes, in which arbitrariness is permissible, and his redemptive purposes in which it is not permissible appear to be an arbitrary distinction?

One possible reaction to this argument is to dismiss it as logic-chopping. One might expect this to be the reaction of Professor Torrance for he has a distrust of what he calls 'Aristotelian logic', 'reason' and 'the light of nature'. But the price that is paid for such a dismissal is a very high one, too high for most of us. For if we dismiss this argument because it is an exercise in 'logic' then we dismiss all argument out of hand, including the argument of McLeod Campbell and Professor Torrance against limited atonement For it must not be forgotten that an argument that dismisses a theological view as the product of Aristotelian logic is still an argument, and if we throw out all argument we throw out that argument as well.

In this article we have tried, on behalf of theologians such as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards, to defend the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement against certain moral and logical objections which have had an appeal to certain writers in the past and which still have an appeal. We have argued that to suppose that the doctrine makes the action of God arbitrary in an objectionable sense is to misunderstand both the nature of divine mercy and the nature of the divine will. We have further argued that McLeod Campbell's claim that all divine attributes must be exercised by God on whom it is logically possible to exercise them proves too much and the claim reduces to absurdity. But it must be stressed that in attempting these tasks we have not tried to provide the biblical warrant for the doctrine of limited atonement any more than we have attempted to answer every objection that might be levelled at that doctrine.[13]

13. Thanks are due to Professor William Young for comments on an earlier version of this article.