

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE
ATONEMENT IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

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I. The Problem

The conflict concerning the nature and extent of the atonement arose in Christian theology because of attempts to reconcile rationally apparently conflicting statements in the Holy Scriptures on the atonement and election. Briefly put, passages relating to the atonement are universal in scope including all men and those relating to election apply only to a limited number. Basically there have been three approaches to this tension between a universal atonement and a limited election. One approach is to understand the atonement in light of the election. Since obviously there are many who are not eventually saved, the atonement offered by Christ really applied not to them but only to those who are finally saved, i.e., the elect. This is the Calvinistic or Reformed view. The second approach understands the election in light of the atonement. This view credits each individual with the ability to make a choice of his own free will to believe in Christ. Since Christ died for all men and since man is responsible for his own damnation, therefore he at least cooperates with the Holy Spirit in coming to faith. This is the Arminian or synergistic view, also widely held in Methodism. The third view is that of classical Lutheran theology. This position as set down in the Formula of Concord (1580) does not attempt to resolve what the Holy Scriptures state concerning atonement and election. For Lutheran theology the atonement is universal and the election is limited to certain individuals chosen by God in Christ without any respect to any work or merit on their part. Concerning the atonement, the Formula of Concord states:¹

... we must in every way hold firmly and sturdily to this, that, as the preaching of repentance, so also the promise of the Gospel is *universalis*, that is, it pertains to all men, Luke 24:47. For this reason Christ has commanded 'that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations.' 'For God loved the world and gave His Son,' John 3:16. Christ bore the sins of the world, John 1:29, gave His flesh for the life of the world, John 6:51; His blood is 'the propitiation for the sins of the whole world,' 1 John 1:7; 2:2. Christ says: 'Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,' Matt. 11:28. 'God hath concluded them all in unbelief that He might have mercy upon all,' Rom. 11:32. 'The Lord is not willing that

1. *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 1071ff.

any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,' 2 Pet. 3:9. . . . And this call of God, which is made through the preaching of the Word, we should not regard as jugglery, but know that thereby God reveals His will, that in those whom He thus calls He will work through the Word, that they may be enlightened, converted, and saved.

Concerning the election it states:²

The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto; and upon this (divine predestination) our salvation is so founded 'that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it,' Matt. 16:18, as is written John 10:28: 'Neither shall any man pluck My sheep out of My hand.' And again, Acts 13:48: 'And as many as were ordained to eternal life, believed.'

This tension between universal atonement and the reality that there are many who are eternally lost has been called the *crux theologorum*,³ a cross which the theologian must carry. Each attempt to reconcile rationally the unlimited atonement and the limited election leads to a denial of one or the other. The Holy Scriptures do not permit us to teach that Christ died for the elect only and that the lost were not included in the gracious will of God for all men. The same Scripture also does not permit us to teach that man contributes anything to his salvation. Election was made in the eternal counsels of God and is not dependent on human choice or confirmation, even though election always results in a willing and in a certain sense, free choice. Conversion follows election and is totally dependent on it. Thus the distinctive mark of Lutheran theology is that it holds to a universal atonement and a limited election.⁴ This view is herewith set forth in the following three parts, on nature, extent and tension.

II.

The Atonement Centers on Christ's Sacrificial Act on the Cross. (Nature)

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1065.
3. Cf. Frank Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House 1951), p. 32.
4. Not all Lutheran bodies in the United States have accepted the classical Lutheran position as set forth in the Book of Concord in regard to election. The Missouri Synod held to a limited election and most of the groups now merged into the American Lutheran Church understood election as God's giving every man a chance to be elected. The doctrine of election provided the greatest obstacle to Lutheran unity in the last century. An excellent summary of this debate and the issues can be found in Fred W. Meuser, *The Formation of the American Lutheran Church* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1958), pp. 62-71. The Missouri Synod was accused of Calvinism and in turn saw traces of Arminianism in its opponents.

The atonement, always a part of God's eternal will, took historical shape in the life and death of Jesus Christ. As St. Paul states: "But when the fulness of time had come God sent forth His Son made of woman, made under the law to redeem those who were under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons."⁵ The essential act of the atonement takes place within God Himself and may be called an objective act since its validity is in no way dependent on man. "God was in Christ *reconciling the world unto Himself*, not imputing their trespasses unto them."⁶ Hypothetically, it could be stated that even if no man ever came to faith, still Christ by His death would have nevertheless redeemed the entire world.

The atonement and hence therefore grace itself receive power to forgive the sins of all men from the God-Man Jesus Christ, who offered up the sacrifice. As the doctrine of grace is based on the atonement, so the atonement in turn is based on both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. For all men He is both representative and substitute placing himself willingly under the wrath of God.⁷ He is the spotless Lamb without blemish who performs His work for and among the lost sheep who have abandoned the Father's fold.⁸ In the work of the atonement Christ is the Brother of all men.⁹

While the humanity of Christ qualifies Him to be our representative and permits Him to die in our place, the deity of Christ gives His suffering and death an intrinsic worth totally satisfying God's wrath. On this point even the famous Reformed theologian, L. Berkhof, agrees with Lutheran theology.¹⁰ By the atonement all, not just a part, of God's wrath is satisfied. The wrath of God, caused by the sin of each man since Adam, is more than equalized by Christ's sacrifice.¹¹ Because of Christ's work there is grace and mercy more than sufficient to cover all the world's sin. There is more forgiveness than there is sin.¹² "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." A limited atonement predicates God with an injustice, since Christ with an infinite work of merit has fully and completely satisfied all of God's wrath over sin. Only a capricious God would automatically beforehand exclude certain people from salvation,

5. Galatians 4:4f.
6. 2 Corinthians 5:19.
7. Isaiah 53:6.
8. John 1:29b, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."
9. Romans 8:29.
10. *Systematic Theology* (Fourth Revised and Enlarged Edition; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 381. "In view of the infinite value of the person who undertook to pay the price and to bear the curse, they satisfied the justice of God essentially and intrinsically."
11. This thought is alluded to in the famous hymn by Count von Zinzendorf and made available in English by John Wesley, "Jesus, The Blood and Righteousness."

Lord, I believe were sinners more
Than sands upon the ocean shore,
Thou hast for a ransom paid,
For all a full atonement made.
12. Romans 5:20b.

even though they would be entitled to it through Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice.

III.

The Extent and Scope of the Atonement (Extent)

The infinite merit earned by the God-Man Jesus Christ makes it possible, so to speak, for a just God to be gracious to all men. The universal quality of grace is a concomitant of the infinite worth of Christ's sacrifice and is well attested in the Holy Scriptures.

There are those passages which speak of God's love for the world and His desire to save it. Foremost is of course John 3:16f.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.

The same thought is reiterated by the Apostle John in his first epistle. "And He (Christ) is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also the sins of the whole world."¹³ Here it is obvious that John views Himself along with all Christians and all other men, without exception, as being part of the whole world (ὅλος κόσμος) for whom Christ is the propitiation (ἰλασμός).

St. Paul speaks in a similar vein when he writes, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself not imputing their trespasses unto them." The apparent and also the essential meaning of the word 'world' (κόσμος) in these passages is 'all men.'¹⁴ Any arguments limiting the word 'world' do not fit these crucial passages. Thus for example, 'world' can mean those opposing Christ;¹⁵ the Roman Empire at the birth of Christ;¹⁶ or the universe, both animate and inanimate, human and brute.¹⁷ But such meanings would hardly fit John 3:16. As is obvious from the Johannine passages quoted above, the word "world" applies to people, since they alone have the ability to believe.

A second class of passages closely related to those which speak about 'world' (κόσμος) are those which refer to 'all' (πάντες) men." The most prominent of this type are Pauline. "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men"¹⁸ "(God) will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth."¹⁹ Paul in Romans looks

13. 1 John 2:2.

14. Cf. Hermann Sasse, "κοσμέω," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. Herausgegeben von Gerhard Kittel. (Suttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1957), III, 867-898. Sasse identifies the 'world' as humanity, the fallen creation, and the place where God carries out the plan of salvation.

15. John 1:9f.

16. Luke 2:1.

17. Romans 1:20.

18. Titus 2:11.

19. 1 Timothy 2:4.

at the race of men as being under two heads. Through Adam all men are held accountable for sin²⁰ and through Christ are justified before God.²¹ Every man, including the infamous traitor Judas Iscariot, was justified in God's sight by Christ's atonement and only outright unbelief, a free act of volition, prevents a person from experiencing this justification subjectively through faith. The fact that some men are not saved does not negate a universal reconciliation obtained by Christ. Sometimes the word 'all' is used exclusively of Christians as for example in 1 Cor. 15:22. However here the reference is to the resurrection and not to the atonement. When the word 'all' is used in connection with the atonement it means exactly what it implies, each and every person from Adam to the last of his progeny. Consider these passages. "(Christ) gave himself a ransom for all" (ἀντίλυτρον ὑπὲρ πάντων).²² "(Jesus) by the grace of God should taste death for every man."²³ (ὑπὲρ παντός γεύσεται θανάτου). The apriori exclusion of even a few persons from the atonement and its results is contrary to 2 Pet. 3:9 where it states that God is "not willing that any should perish, but all should come to repentance." (μὴ βουλόμενος τινὰς ἀπολέσθαι ἀλλὰ πάντες εἰς μετάνοιαν χωρῆσαι). Only an unnatural interpretation of the word 'world' and 'all' in numerous passages could put any limitation on the scope and efficacy of the atonement.

A third group of passages, which overlap in part, some already discussed, speak of God's will as the source of salvation for all men and man's will as the source of his own damnation. Concerning God's will for the salvation of all there is 1 Timothy 2:4. "God will have all men saved." (ὅς πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι). Christ in speaking of the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem to be followed by its inhabitants' eternal damnation in hell mentions that even before His incarnation He desired that its inhabitants turn to Him. (ποσάκις ἠθέλησα ἐπισηναγαγεῖν τὰ τέκνα σου).²⁴ This was a theme already present in the Old Testament, "As I live saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked."²⁵ and is repeated by Peter, "The Lord is not willing that any should perish."²⁶ (μὴ βουλόμενος τινὰς ἀπολέσθαι). Pitted against those passages identifying God's will as the source of salvation are those identifying man's will as the source of damnation. The Jerusalemites are damned because they have wilfully resisted (οὐκ ἠθέλησατε) God's sincere attempts to include them among His own.²⁷ The Pharisees and scribes reject God's plan for their inclusion in the kingdom through John's Baptism (τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θεοῦ ἠθέτησαν εἰς ἑαυτούς).²⁸ Stephen's murder-

20. Romans 5:12.

21. Romans 5:18.

22. 1 Timothy 2:6.

23. Hebrews 2:9.

24. Matthew 23:37.

25. Ezekiel 33:11.

26. 2 Peter 3:9.

27. Matthew 23:27.

28. Luke 7:30.

ers and their ancestors have of themselves continually resisted the Holy Spirit.²⁹

The clear will of God as revealed in the Bible, *voluntas revelatus*, shows that He desires salvation for all men and the obstinate resisting of this will results in damnation. Though God's will to create and direct the course of history cannot be resisted, His gracious will of salvation *is and can be resisted*. From man's point of view, which is temporal, we have to look at God's will in two different aspects. God's antecedent will desires salvation for all men and consequently after the offer of salvation in the Gospel has been made, He gives salvation to believers while damnation is the lot of unbelievers. For believers, the will active at the beginning of the world desiring salvation for all people is the same will now revealed in the Gospel and is the only cause of their salvation. Why some are damned and others saved belongs to the hidden will of God, *voluntas absconditus*, and is not open to human scrutiny.³⁰

If we say that God does not desire the salvation of some, we have attempted to read the hidden will of God through history. But history is not a clear medium of God's will, especially when conclusions based on it run counter to the clearly revealed will of God in the Scripture. On the other hand we must avoid the other pitfall in stating that man's choice is the prime or even a secondary element in salvation and conversion. This is synergism and also runs counter to God's clearly revealed will that He alone is the cause of salvation. The hidden will of God must remain hidden and it is sheer folly to claim knowledge of it from experience and history when our conclusions are so diametrically opposed to the revealed will. It is far better to take the Bible at its word and to have unresolved rational problems than to resolve these tensions by contradicting one or another part of Scripture.

A fourth class of passages are those which explicitly speak about Christ's dying for those who are eventually damned. These are perhaps the most conclusive in demonstrating a universal atonement. 1 Corinthians 8:11 speaks of the weak brother perishing for whom Christ died. Whether or not the offended weak brother in Corinth finally went to hell is not known, but the possibility cannot be denied. Regardless of this case, there have been countless weak brothers for whom Christ also died who did eventually perish eternally. Roman 14:14f. also speaks about a Christian ruining his weak brother. The strongest passage in this regard is 2 Pet. 2:1. The entire second chapter of this epistle speaks of false prophets and their hellish doom because they teach false doctrine

29. Acts 7:31.

30. This question is referred to in Lutheran theology by the Latin phrases, "Cur alii alii non?" and "Cur alii prae aliis?" Paraphrased this means, "Why are some chosen and others overlooked?" To this question there is no answer in the revealed word. Romans 11 in presenting the fall of the Jews and the inclusion of the Gentiles puts this entire question into the realm of divine mystery where mortal men are not permitted to enter. Cf. vv. 33-36.

and are immoral in their lives. Nevertheless they are said to have been bought by Christ (*τὸν ἀγοράσαντα αὐτοὺς δεσπότην*) though hell is their doom.

Finally we must consider those passages in which there is a universal and sincere invitation to salvation. The Great Commission, Matthew 28:18ff., demands that the Gospel be preached in all nations. The universal dimension of this passage is substantiated by Mark 16:16, which if not an original part of this Gospel, is at least the earliest commentary we have on the Great Commission. "Go ye therefore and make disciples out of all nations" in Matthew means according to Mark, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," i.e., every person.

From the universal dimension in the command to preach the Gospel comes the question of whether or not God sincerely means what He says. Is the preaching of the Gospel a sincere invitation for all men to come to salvation or is it only a formality intended only for the elect but not for some? To predicate God of insincerity or a deliberate act of deception is directly to undermine His truthfulness and veracity. "Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar."³¹ Evangelicals cannot on one hand stoutly defend the inerrancy of the Bible, even in the so-called non-religious matters, and then question God's sincerity in His expressed desire to save the entire world, a so-called religious matter. What a frightful discrepancy to uphold God's truthfulness in non-religious matters and then to doubt it in religious matters.

God's truthfulness demands that we accept His promises at face value. This demand upon us is even greater when the words are spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself.³²

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would (*ἠθέλησα*) I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not (*οὐκ ἠθέλησατε*).

If the Gospel is not intended for all people, the person hearing it cannot be certain whether or not it was intended for him. How can a person be sure that Christ died for him, if the Gospel promises, based on the atonement, are in reality only for the elect? Martin Luther thought that the reference to the God's love for the world in John 3:16 was a greater guarantee of his own salvation than if his name were included on the sacred pages. If the passage read that "God loved Martin Luther," he could never be sure that he was the "Martin Luther" referred to. Luther reasoned from John 3:16 that the Christian can safely and confidently conclude that God gave His Son for him personally. If God's Son died for the world i.e., humanity, then He died for me since I without a doubt

31. Romans 3:4.

32. Matthew 23:37.

am part of humanity. The certainty of faith and of our final glory is built on nothing less than Christ's death for all men as it is proclaimed in the Gospel intended for all men.

IV. Atonement and Election (Tension)

The doctrine of grace, both earned by and revealed in Christ's atonement for all men, is undergirded through God's election. The final benefit of the atonement is that through the preaching of the Gospel, some believe, are saved, and finally enter into glory. Those who turn to Christ and accept by faith His atonement do it with a will freed from sin by the Holy Spirit's working through both word and sacrament. A person does not choose Jesus Christ as he chooses the type of house he is going to live in.³³ The choice is not man's, but the Holy Spirit's. The Spirit grips a man, who is depraved and is an enemy of God as any other, and makes him a willing child of God. When the elect child of God comes to faith, the atonement offered by Christ is achieving its purpose. The doctrine of election as an individual act of God's grace in the life of the individual believer is the reaffirmation of that same grace instrumental in the Father's offering up the Son for the sins of the whole world. The certainty of the Christian's election to salvation is based on the universal atonement as declared in the Gospel and not on the secret counsels of God.

Lutheranism, while teaching an election to salvation, in no way teaches or recognizes as Biblical an election to perdition regardless of how rational or logical it might seem. Salvation depends upon God's election in Jesus Christ. Those who are damned have been included in the Father's love, but they have stubbornly and continually rejected it. Passages traditionally quoted to support an election to damnation really speak to other issues. For example, Matthew 11:25, 1 Pet. 2:8, and Rom. 9:13-18 speaks about hardening and a punishment. Jude 4 speaks merely of God's foreknowledge. Romans 11:7 is crucial as it speaks of an election to salvation and a hardening as punishment, but it does not speak of election to damnation.³⁴

33. This point is very clearly discussed in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, one of his most significant writings near the start of the Reformation.

34. The Lutheran Confessions in commenting on Romans 9 very carefully point out that God is in no way the cause of evil or the damnation of some. The Formula of Concord states: "Hence the Apostle distinguishes with especial care the work of God, who alone makes vessels of honor, and the work of the devil and of man, who by the instigation of the devil, and not of God, has made himself a vessel of dishonor. For thus it is written, Rom. 9:22f.: 'God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory.' Here, then, the Apostle clearly says that God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath, but does not say he made them vessels of wrath; for if this had been His will, He would not have required any great long-suffering for it. The fault, however, that they are fitted for destruction belongs to the devil and to men themselves, and not to God." *Concordia Triglotta, ob. cit.*, p. 1089. The late Dr. Franz Pieper makes the astute observation that in this section of Romans the vessels of wrath are followed by passive verbs and the vessels of glory are objects of active verbs of which God is the subject. The preparation for glory and damnation do not have the same author. Pieper, *ob. cit.*, III, 497.

Lutherans in speaking of an election to salvation mean an election on God's part and not merely God's foreknowledge, whereby God knows all things. God does not elect *because* He knows about certain meritorious qualities in men. This would be omniscience not election. While God elects a person to eternal life through faith in Christ and never without it, this election is not based on our faith but solely in Christ's death. The proper order is set down clearly by St. Paul in Romans 8:28-30.³⁵

For we know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose. For those whom God had already chosen he had also set apart to share the likeness of his Son, so that the Son should be the first among many brothers. And so God called those whom he had set apart; not only did he call them, but he also made them right with himself; not only did he put them right with himself, but he also shared his glory with them.

V. Conclusion

Lutheran theology in being faithful to the Scripture holds to both a universal atonement and a limited election. This doctrine, as the Trinity and many others, is a mystery which Lutheran theology does not attempt to explain. Strictly speaking the concepts of a universal atonement and a limited election are not self-contradictory. A universal atonement and an election to perdition would be, but the latter concept is firmly condemned by Lutheran theology as un-Biblical.

If Lutheranism seems to strike a mediating path, and to some an unsatisfactory one at that, between those who hold to a universal atonement, eg., the Methodists, and those who hold to a limited election, eg., the Calvinists, it does so not to be conciliatory, but to be faithful to the Scripture. She disagrees with those who teach that a man of his own free will chooses Christ and with those who teach an election to perdition. This tension, as mentioned above, between universal atonement and election, is the called the *crux theologorum* for the Lutheran theologian, but it is a cross that he tries to bear faithfully under God's word. His unanswered theological problems he commits confidently to God's wisdom.

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35. The Pauline order is election, faith with justification, and finally glory.