

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
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THE GREAT WORK OF CHRIST

The late I. Howard Marshall was a very accomplished New Testament scholar who taught for many years at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Marshall was an Evangelical Methodist, and this theological identity is often reflected in his exegesis. This is not something particular to Marshall. Exegesis never takes place in a vacuum. My former professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, Sr., addressed this in a chapter entitled *Romans 5:12 – An Exercise In Exegesis and Theology*, where he wrote:

“[This divorce of theology from exegesis is frequently represented as primarily an impoverishment of theology, which, of course, it is. But it is sometimes forgotten that contemporary exegesis as well has lost its grip on systematics, with dire results for interpretation. We are quite willing to grant that theology cannot really be done well without exegesis, but we are not as willing, it seems to me, to grant that exegesis cannot be done well without systematic theology.] Exegesis, armed with the original text and modern critical tools and methodology, too frequently sees itself as autonomously self-sufficient, pouring out its arid and superficial grammatical, syntactical, and critical comments, while the deeper meaning of the texts in the light of the broader problems at issue is lost to it. In the introduction to his commentary on 1 John, Principal Candlish spoke of his desire to ‘bring out the full mind of the apostle’ upon the truths embodied in the letter, and then added, in words surely applicable to the study of all the biblical literature: ‘For I am deeply convinced after years of thought about it, that it can be studied aright exegetically, only when it is studied theologically.’ William Manson, late Professor of New Testament at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, used to refer to this type of exegesis, the type that kept exegesis and theology in holy bonds of matrimony, as ‘depth exegesis.’ It might just as well be called ‘*depth theology*.’”¹

Back to Marshall and his handling of our text. He correctly noted that the text highlights two important points:

“The first is that Jesus is both the advocate and the atoning sacrifice. What he pleads on behalf of sinners is what he himself has done on their behalf. It is this that constitutes him a righteous advocate for them. The second thing is that the language of advocacy and sacrifice appears to place Jesus over against God as if God had to be persuaded by a third party to forgive us. It is an inherent weakness in the picture which is employed here that it is in danger of presenting God as an unwilling judge from whom forgiveness has to be wrested by the advocate for sinners. But this would be a false conclusion to draw. Already in 1:9 John has emphasized that it is God himself who is faithful and just and forgives our sins, and in 4:9f, he adds his powerful voice to the New Testament chorus which declares that it was God the Father who gave Jesus his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. It is God himself who provides the means of our forgiveness and pays the cost of it. The

language of advocacy is thus ultimately inadequate to express the paradox of the offended God who himself pardons our offenses by giving his own Son to be our Savior. Nor is that the full extent of the wonder. With one of his typical afterthoughts John adds that the efficacy of this sacrifice is not confined to the sins of his particular groups of readers. It reaches out to all mankind. The universal provision implies that all men have need of it. There is no way to fellowship with God except as our sins are forgiven by virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus. At the same time John rules out the thought that the death of Jesus is of limited efficacy; the possibility of forgiveness is cosmic and universal.”²

Here is where Marshall’s Methodist (Arminian) theology intrudes upon the text. The context, as Marshall well knew, is key in understanding any text. Look closely at the passage: “MY LITTLE CHILDREN [*refers to the true believers to whom John is currently writing*], that YE [*the true believers again*] sin not. And if any man sin, WE [*both John and the true believers unto whom He is writing*] have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for OUR [*i.e. for John’s and for the true believers’ to whom he is currently writing*] sins: and not for OURS [*John’s and the true believers’ to whom he is currently writing*] only, but also for the sins of the WHOLE WORLD.” Gk. *peri holou tou kosmou*. Is John saying what Marshall is implying, that the expression “concerning the whole world” means *every single person who ever lived in the world*? Is that how we are to understand John when he writes in 1 John 5:18-19, “We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the *whole* world lies in *the power of the evil one*.” Now, concerning “every single person ever born into the world,” cf. also Mark 14:9, did they all hear the Gospel? Did every single person ever born into the world hear the story of the woman with the ointment in Mark 14? Was the Gospel preached, or the account of the woman told, *by/through/amongst* every single living person? Clearly, the answer is . . . No.

I. THE MEANING OF WORLD. Now what about 1 John 5:18-19? Does the expression *whole world* here mean every single person born into the world after John wrote these words? Does in fact every single person born into the world *lieth* in wickedness? Everyone indeed starts off lying in wickedness. However, when we are converted, we no longer do so – but how can we prove this? That word *lieth* (Gk. *keitai*) means *to be laid up [unto]; to be laid down [as in immobile in the location or state of being at issue]; to be made [to be]; to be set; to be appointed; to be established; or to be destined [unto]*. Is the whole world, including born again believers, in the grip of wickedness; laid down by God in wickedness; appointed to wickedness; or destined to wickedness? Surely the context does not allow for such a dismal, disheartening, and erroneous interpretation. Therefore, the word “world” does not mean *everyone* born into the world in these, and many other, texts of Scripture. Rarely is world, or even whole world, used in the sense of every single person ever born into this world. Consider also: *Romans 1:8*, which states, “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout [Gk. en, which also means in, by, amongst, with, or through] the **WHOLE WORLD**.*” Does anyone believe that *Romans 1:8* should be interpreted as “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of by, amongst, with, or through every single person born into this world.*” Likewise, in *John 12:19* we read, “So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘See this is getting us nowhere. Look how the *whole world* has gone after him!’” It is obvious that this did not include the Pharisees! A consistent hermeneutic, and an accurate exegesis, will not allow for such a misguided interpretation – so why try to force such a one on 1 John 2:1-2 seeing that there is no warrant, right, or reason to do so (other than to promote error). Marshall’s view (the Arminian one) does an injustice not only to this particular text but to the meaning of the cross work of Christ.

II. THE MEANING OF PROPITIATION. “To propitiate,” says John Murray, “means to ‘placate,’ ‘pacify,’ ‘appease,’ ‘conciliate.’ And it is this idea that is applied to the atonement accomplished by Christ. Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the very purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure. Very simply stated, the doctrine of propitiation means that Christ propitiated the wrath of God and rendered God propitious to his people.” Murray goes on to properly define the implications involved. (1) To love and to be propitious are not convertible terms. It is false to suppose that the doctrine of propitiation regards propitiation as that which causes or constrains the divine love. (2) Propitiation is not turning of the wrath of God into love. . . . It is one thing to say that the wrathful God is made loving. That would be entirely false. It is another thing to say the wrathful God is loving. That is profoundly true. But it is also true that the wrath by which he is wrathful is propitiated through the cross. This propitiation is the fruit of the divine love. (3) Propitiation does not detract from the love and mercy of God; it rather enhances the marvel of his love. For it shows the cost that redemptive love entails.³

CONCLUSION: The position of Evangelicals like Marshall is one that is laden with enormous theological difficulties that subvert the teaching of large sections of Scripture. Propitiation is at the heart of penal substitution atonement. In the atonement, Christ underwent divine justice. It means that Christ acted on the behalf of others by becoming their liability to judgment, punishment, and retribution. Did Christ in fact do this for every single individual who ever lived? As B. B. Warfield long ago observed: “It is obvious that such a view can be held only at the cost of emptying the conception of propitiation of its properly expiatory content, and shifting the really saving operation of Christ from his ‘atoning’ death on earth to his ‘intercession’ in heaven. Westcott carries out this whole program fully, and by a special doctrine of ‘sacrifice,’ of ‘blood’ and its efficacy, and of ‘the heavenly High Priesthood of Christ’ systematizes this point of view into a definite scheme of doctrine. No support is given this elaborate construction by John; and our present passage is enough to shatter the foundation on which it is built, in common with many other constructions sharing with it the general notion that the atonement is to be conceived as universal while its application is particular, and that we may therefore speak of the sins of the whole world as expiated while believers only enjoy the benefits of this expiation. The ‘advocacy’ of our Lord is indeed based here on his propitiation. But it is based on it not as if it bore merely an accidental relation to it, and might or might not, at will, follow on it; but as its natural and indeed necessary issue. John introduces the declaration that Christ is – not ‘was,’ the propitiation is as continuous in its effect as the advocacy – our propitiation, in order to support his reference of sinning Christians to Christ as their Advocate with the Father, and to give them confidence in the efficacy of his advocacy. The efficacy of the advocacy rests on that of the propitiation, not the efficacy of the propitiation on that of the advocacy. It was in the propitiatory death of Christ that John finds Christ’s saving work: the advocacy is only its continuation – its unceasing presentation in heaven. The propitiation accordingly not merely lays a foundation for a saving operation, to follow or not follow as circumstances may determine. It itself saves. And this saving work is common to Christians and ‘the whole world.’ By it the sins of the one as of the other are expiated, that is to say, as Weiss wishes to express it in Old Testament forms of speech, are ‘covered in the sight of God.’ They no longer exist for God – and are not they blessed whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered, to whom the Lord will not reckon sin? It is idle to talk of expounding this passage until we are ready to recognize that according to its express assertion the ‘whole world’ is saved. Its fundamental assumption is that all those for whose sins he is – ‘is,’ not ‘was’ – the propitiation have in him an Advocate with the Father, prevailingly presenting his ‘righteousness to the Father and thereby securing their salvation. This is, of course, universalism. And it is in determining the precise nature of the universalism that it is, that we arrive at last at John’s real meaning. In declaring that Jesus Christ is a propitiation for the whole world, John certainly does not mean to

assert that Christ has made expiation for all the sins of every individual man who has come or will come into being, from the beginning of the race in Adam to its end at the last day. Baumgarten-Crusius seems to stand almost alone in expressly emphasizing the protensive aspect of the 'world'; and he does it in order to avoid admitting that John means to present Christ as the Savior of the whole world extensively considered. John means only, he says, that Christ is a Savior with abiding power for the whole human era; all through the ages he is mighty to save, though he saves only his own."⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ This is found in *New Dimensions In New Testament Study*, eds. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Zondervan, 1974), p. 299.

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 119.

³ J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 829-31.

⁴ *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield I*, ed. J. E. Meefer (P&R, 1970), p. 173.