

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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EXCURSUS: CALVINISM VS. ARMINIANISM (Part XI)

On Monday, April 28th, Pastor Jeremiah Wright had the following exchange with the moderator at the National Press Club:

MODERATOR: “Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but through me.’ Do you believe this? And do you think Islam is a way to salvation?”

WRIGHT: “Jesus also said, ‘Other sheep have I who are not of this fold.’”

“Wright’s response clearly implies that Muslims are among the ‘other sheep’ to which Jesus refers in John 10:16. This text is also made the cornerstone of Mormonism. They claim that Jesus came to America after his resurrection. As one of their apologists boldly claims, ‘No one except Latter-day Saints makes the claim that the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 applies to the Book of Mormon. Moreover, no one except Latter-day Saints believes that John 10:16 has anything to do with the prophecy of Ezekiel or of Christ’s visit to the New World.’¹ But, unlike the Mormon appeal to this text, Wright affirms that people who do not have conscious faith in Christ can nevertheless have the hope of salvation – an inclusivist position that argues there are many paths to God. Denny Burke, professor of NT at Criswell College in Dallas, TX wrote an op.ed. piece that addressed the import of Wright’s statement. There are two questions that need be addressed: (1) Did Jesus intend to include non-believers in the group called ‘other sheep?’ (2) What difference does it make? Let’s take a look. In context, ‘other sheep’ cannot be credibly understood as including anyone but genuine believers in Jesus Christ. The first half of John 10 is dominated by a metaphor that Jesus uses to describe His relationship to his people. Jesus is the ‘shepherd,’ and His people are called ‘sheep.’ Jesus describes His sheep as having a number of characteristics. Sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd, and they follow Him (10:3-4). Sheep do not listen to ‘strangers,’ but only to the voice of their own shepherd (10:5, 8). Sheep find salvation only by coming to their shepherd (10:9). The metaphor cashes out as follows. Jesus is the shepherd, and His people are the sheep. Jesus lays down His life for his people, and the only way that they can be saved is through Jesus. The people whom Jesus saves listen only to Jesus. They do not listen to the ‘thieves and robbers’ who have come to destroy them (10:10). Thus only people who come to Jesus by faith are able to be saved. When Jesus says that he has ‘other sheep who are not of this fold,’ it’s likely that he is referring to Gentiles who would later come to faith in Christ. The sheep that are following Him at that point in the narrative are Jews, but Jesus aims to have followers from among the Gentiles as well. Whoever the ‘other sheep’ are understood to be, they nevertheless have the characteristics of ‘sheep.’ They listen to and follow Christ, and they are saved only by Him. To say that “other sheep” refers to unbelievers (or followers of Islam in Reverend Wright’s case) simply runs roughshod over the plain meaning of the passage. What difference does all this make? The media has been discussing how Reverend Wright’s remarks affect the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama. Frankly, I am not at all concerned with that question here. Eternity is at stake in Wright’s remarks, and that transcends any political campaign. Here’s the real import of what Wright said. Many people who hear Jeremiah Wright are likely to get the impression that Jesus is one of many paths that people might take to get to God. Jesus never taught any such thing. In fact, he always challenged His hearers with a stark choice. ‘No one can serve two masters’ for either he will hate the one and love the

other, or he will hold to one and despise the other' (Matthew 6:24). Jesus would brook no rivals, and He only made salvation available to those who would 'honor the son' (John 5:23). The Jeremiah Wrights of the world mislead people into thinking that Jesus Christ is one path among many that people might take to get to God. Jesus taught just the opposite. There is only one path that leads people to salvation, and it's Jesus. 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me' (John 14:6). To miss that path means forfeiting eternal life. The stakes couldn't get any higher than that."² Burke is correct. Wright's distortion of Christianity in effect makes the Cross of Christ meaningless. As politically incorrect as it may be – God's grace does *not* extend to anyone outside of the mediatorial work of Christ (Titus 2:11; 3:4). The centrality of the Cross, in Wright's view, makes the death of Christ totally unnecessary. But Wright is not alone in his views. There are similar views being advanced by professing Evangelicals like John Sanders, one of the leading advocates for "Open View Theism," argues that the atonement extends even to those who are ignorant of Jesus and the cross.³ His fellow Open View Theist, Clark Pinnock also argues for a wideness in God's mercy that extends to the followers of other religions.⁴ In both cases, the authors work from a decidedly Arminian understanding of the design and scope of the Atonement. In this scheme the Atonement is viewed as merely being *provisional* in the sense that God has provided a universal atonement and this, they claim, means that everyone benefits from the Cross of Christ. Appeal is made to the biblical passages that highlight the apparent universal value of the work of Christ, such as John 12:32 ("draw all men"), 2 Corinthians 5:19 ("reconciling the world"), Titus 2:11 ("the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men"). Hebrews 2:9 ("He might taste death for everyone"), and I John 2:2 ("for those [sins] of the whole world"). Such texts, claim the universalist, speak of Christ dying for all mankind. If Christ died for all, and his death effectively paid for the sins of everyone, then all eventually will be saved. What does I John 2:2 mean?

I. THREE MISCONCEPTIONS

A. THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION.

A number of English translations (KJV, NEB, NIV) have the verse saying, "And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only but also for *the sins* of the whole world. The problem is that the words *the sins* before the expression of the *whole world* are NOT in the Greek text. George Smeaton in his classic work on the Atonement, rightly observed, "The supplementary words, *for the sins of*, inserted in the authorized version are an unwarrantable addition, from which the translators should have been preserved, both by the structure and by the repetition of the Greek preposition. To apprehend the meaning, it must be remembered that the sinner as well as the sin is represented in Scripture as the object of the propitiation, and that it was wide enough to take in the whole world. These words have been much canvassed, and often unwarrantably adduced, in the discussions bearing on the extent of the atonement. What was the apostle's primary object? To comfort dejected Christians on the recurrence of sin in their experience. And he reminds them that they can appeal to Christ's intercession, which has its basis in His propitiation. The words plainly allude to the atonement as offered and applied – that is, to the actual expiation, which does not go beyond the number of believing recipients. It is a perversion of the language when this is made to teach the dogma of universal propitiation; or that the Atonement was equally offered for all, whether they receive it or not, whether they acknowledge its adaptation to their case or not. The passage does not teach that Christ's propitiation has removed the divine anger in such a sense from all and every man. Nothing betokens that the apostle had others in his eye than believers out of every tribe and nation. What, then, does he mean when he calls it a propitiation for the whole world? He intimates that it was not for him and for those to whom he wrote alone, but for the redeemed of every period, place, and people – that is, prospectively and retrospectively. The apostle connects the intercession and

propitiation in such a way as to show that Christ's work is applicable to all the redeemed who then lived, or had ever lived, or should ever live, wherever found in the nations of the earth, and in whatever age. This is the point of the distinction; it is not the distinction elsewhere expressed between Jew and Gentile."⁵

B. THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION.

The second error is committed when the assumption is made that the little preposition *for* in "for our sins" and "for the whole world" both carry the idea of that Jesus suffered substitutionally for all men universally. Kuyper long ago wrote, "In the Greek there are two little words that express the meaning of our preposition 'for.' The one, *hyper*, means 'for' in the sense of 'in the place of,' while the other, *peri*, simply signified 'applying to, relative to,' even as we would say, for example, 'That is a good salve *for* the wound' without ever thinking it means a substitution for the wound. We only mean that the salve is appropriate to the wound, is good as concerns that wound. In this way one can say Jesus is a redeemer for our sins in order to indicate either that he died substitutionally as a sacrifice for us, or merely that *He is a redemption exactly as we had need of with regard to our sins*. And because the apostle in the disputed text does not use the Greek preposition *hyper* (in the place of) but uses *peri* (with a view to, or appropriate to), we must positively deny anyone the right to deduce from this passage that the sacrifice of Christ would have been intended 'in the place of' the sins of the whole world. One can deceive the people with the translated version of the text, but it will not work for a moment with the original language. Suppose for a moment (although we deny this) that the concluding words actually should mean 'the sins of all men who are in the world.' Then there would be nothing else expressed here by the Holy Spirit, according to strict logic and precise grammar, than that the Christ is himself the sum and substance of all redemption, not only in regard to our sins, but also in relation to all men. It would mean nothing else than this: the redemption that is in Christ is the only conceivable one also for the unbelieving world."⁶ Likewise, the word "world" cannot be forced to mean everyone, everywhere throughout human history. Again, listen to Kuyper., "In John's gospel, 'the world' (or *kosmos*) surely means the organized life that in this dispensation became the instrument of Satan against God. Just listen to the following remarks about the world found in I John: 'The whole world lieth in wickedness' (5:19); that 'world' must be subdued and defeated (5:5); this the church can accomplish only by 'faith,' which enters into her by means of something proceeding from God to earth (5:4); the Mediator is sent 'into the world' from without (4:9); only that Son, who was sent of God, can still save that organization, that mechanism, that inner structure of the world, by casting out the evil (4:14); but as 'world,' the world and all that is in it exists in opposition to God so that we may not love her, but must hate her (2:15); the world's motivational principle is found in 'the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life' (2:16); and therefore the world as such must pass away (2:17); believers stand opposed to the world, for in them is the Spirit of God, and in the world, the spirit of the devil (4:4); for that reason, the world knoweth not the children of God (3:1); it must hate the brethren (3:13); the church of Christ is of a different language, a different communion, and a different life, and it is the new world that is coming; the world that exists now is the church of the evil one (4:5). How is it then possible that the universalists still want to view it as a settled matter that 'the whole world' in I John 2:2 must suddenly mean 'all as yet unconverted individuals' when it never means this elsewhere in Scripture, and when, in John's letter itself, the use of the word 'world' is exclusively used in a way that directly militates against their conception?"⁷

C. THE PROBLEM OF INCOHERENCE

Advocates of universal atonement jump to the conclusion that John is using the word *propitiation* to imply that the sins of everyone who has ever lived have their sins covered by the Atonement. But if that were the actual case then unbelievers would never have to fear the Wrath of God because they really are the beneficiaries of the Atonement. But this is not the Biblical picture. “The need for propitiation” as Stott comments, “is constituted neither by God’s wrath in isolation, nor by man’s sin in isolation, but by both together. Sin is ‘lawlessness’ (I Jn. iii. 4), a defiant disregard for the law of God which deserves the judgment of God. It is this divine judgment upon human rebellion which makes the barrier to fellowship with God; and there can be no expiation of man’s sin without a propitiation of God’s wrath. God’s holy antagonism to sin must somehow be turned away if sin is to be forgiven and the sinner restored.”⁸

CONCLUSION: The immediate context of our text is conclusive proof that any notion of universal atonement is quite foreign to the Apostle’s design. John is seeking to address pastorally the ongoing problem of Christians dealing with personal sin. Thus he underscores the Son’s unique qualification as Priest and Mediator: (1) His righteous character, (2) His propitiatory death and (3) His heavenly advocacy. Each depends on the others. He could not be our advocate in heaven today if He had not died to be the propitiation for our sins; and His propitiation would not have been effective if in His life and character He had not been Jesus Christ the righteous.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. The Mormon website F.A.R.M.S. <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/display.php?table=jbms&id=66>.

² D. Burke, “Wright’s most dangerous Comment,” *Baptist Press: News With a Christian Perspective* (Apr. 29, 2008).

³ J. Sanders in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on The Destiny of The Unevangelized*, eds. G. Fackre, R. Nash & J. Sanders (IVP, 1995) p. 36.

⁴ C. Pinnock in *Who Will Be Saved? Defending The Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation & Evangelism*, eds. P. House & G. Thornbury (Crossway, 2000) pp. 119-127.

⁵ G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (rpt. Alpha publication, 1979) p. 459.

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Particular Grace: A Defense of God’s Sovereignty in Salvation* (rpt. Reformed Free Publishing, 2007) p. 26.

⁷ Kuyper, p. 29.

⁸ J. R., W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans 1964) p. 87.