

The Atonement of Christ, part 1

Introduction

In this short series covering two chapters in the Institutes, we will review Calvin's teaching regarding the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The outline is shown below. In order to maintain the emphasis on the doctrine of the atonement (and the class schedule) certain sections are omitted. I currently expect the schedule for this subject to expand to three classes.

Book II, Chapter XVI – *How Christ Has Fulfilled the Function of Redeemer to Acquire Salvation for Us. Here, Also, His Death and Resurrection Are Discussed, as Well as His Ascent Into Heaven*

- A. Alienated by sin from God, who yet loved us, we are reconciled by Christ, 1-4
- B. The effects of the obedience and death of Christ, 5-7
- C. Explanation of the doctrine of the descent into hell, 8-12
- F. Concluding remarks, containing sections titled: 18] The Judge is the Redeemer! and,
19] Christ alone in all the clauses of the Creed

Book II, Chapter XVII – *Christ Rightly and Properly Said to Have Merited God's Grace and Salvation for Us [6 sections]*

Book II, Chapter XVI – *How Christ Has Fulfilled the Function of Redeemer to Acquire Salvation for Us. Here, Also, His Death and Resurrection Are Discussed, as Well as His Ascent Into Heaven*

A. Alienated by sin from God, who yet loved us, we are reconciled by Christ, 1-4

1. The Redeemer

Point: Christ is the central focus of saving religion

What we have said so far concerning Christ must be referred to this one objective: condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we should seek righteousness, liberation, life, and salvation in him, as we are taught by that well-known saying of Peter: "There is no other name under heaven given to men in which we must be saved" [Acts 4:12].

Support: The name "Jesus" was bestowed upon him not without reason or by chance, or by the decision of men, but it was brought from heaven by an angel, the proclaimer of the supreme decree. The reason for it is added: he was sent to "save the people from their sins" [Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31].

Point: The need for perseverance in maintaining focus on Christ

... Accordingly, the moment we turn away even slightly from him, our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishes away. As a result, all those who do not repose [rest] in him[,] voluntarily deprive themselves of all grace. ...

Support: But here we must earnestly ponder how he accomplishes salvation for us. This we must do

[1] not only to be persuaded that he [Christ] is its author, but

[2] to gain a sufficient and stable support for our faith,

[3] rejecting whatever could draw us away in one direction or another [, because, as Calvin has said, if we lose our “fix” on Christ, our salvation will fade away].

Calvin’s emphasis is to not allow anything, not even anything within the boundaries of religion, to take one’s eyes off the central focus of it all, which is Christ. This is not an idle warning, even to our own selves in our own church.

Experiential Warning:

No one can descend into himself and seriously consider what he is without feeling God’s wrath and hostility toward him. Accordingly, he must anxiously seek ways and means to appease God -- and this demands a satisfaction. No common assurance is required, for God’s wrath and curse always lie upon sinners until they are absolved of guilt. Since he is a righteous Judge, he does not allow his law to be broken without punishment, but is equipped to avenge it.

Calvin makes it clear that the atonement that Christ provides is a “satisfaction” to God for his wrath against us -- a sense of wrath so powerful that extraordinary assurance is required to dissolve it. The reference to the need for a satisfaction of God’s anger is coupled with a personal, subjective feeling that this is required. Calvin knows that his view of the atonement has its enemies, and he goes so far as to say not only that the Word of God teaches the “satisfaction theory” of the atonement, but that a conscientious introspection into our own sinful hearts also demands it. Mere theological wrangling cannot escape or suppress this conviction.¹

2. The awareness of God’s wrath makes us thankful for his loving act in Christ.

Calvin’s purpose in this section is to show the importance of having a proper conception of God’s wrath. This makes us more grateful for his love expressed toward us in Christ, and also helps us understand the nature of the atonement which he has provided.

Some of the objections to Calvin’s teaching stem from a perceived contradiction between wrath and love. Calvin addresses this first.

Calvin: *Reconciles the simultaneous presence of love and wrath toward us in God*

But, before we go any farther, we must see in passing how fitting it was that God, who anticipates us by his mercy, should have been our enemy until he was reconciled to us through Christ. For how could he have given[,] in his only-begotten Son[,] a singular

¹ Subjective conviction about certain things plays a large part in Calvin’s theology. This appears to be one of them.

pledge of his love to us if he had not already embraced us with his free favor? Since, therefore, some sort of contradiction arises here, I shall dispose of this difficulty.

What Calvin is speaking of by using the word “contradiction” is this: How could God supposedly love us and hate us at the same time? If he loved us, why do we need a propitiation? If he hated us, why would he sacrifice his own Son for us? How does this love-hate relationship work? Note: There were in Calvin’s day, and are now, those who use this “contradiction” between the love and hate of God toward sinners to deny that Christ had to take our punishment. God could just forgive, they say, truly without any need for penal substitution by his Son. For them, the death of Christ means something else.

Calvin: The Spirit usually speaks in this way in the Scriptures: “God was men’s enemy until they were reconciled to grace by the death of Christ” [Rom 5:10]. “They were under a curse until their iniquity was atoned for by his sacrifice.” [Gal 3:10, 13]. “They were estranged from God until through his body they were reconciled.” [Col 1:21-2].

Explains: Expressions of this sort have been accommodated to our capacity that we may better understand how miserable and ruinous our condition is apart from Christ. For if it had not been clearly stated that the wrath and vengeance of God and eternal death rested upon us, we would scarcely have recognized how miserable we would have been without God’s mercy, and we would have underestimated the benefit of liberation.

Therefore, Calvin concludes that we all need a healthy dose of the fear of God’s wrath for our sins, were we not protected by the blood of Christ.

Calvin: For example, suppose someone is told: “If God hated you while you were still a sinner, and cast you off, as you deserved, a terrible destruction would have awaited you. But because he kept you in grace voluntarily, and of his own free favor, and did not allow you to be estranged from him, he thus delivered you from that peril.” This man then will surely experience and feel something of what he owes to God’s mercy.

On the other hand, suppose he learns, as Scripture teaches, that he was

estranged from God through sin,
 an heir of wrath,
 subject to the curse of eternal death,
 excluded from all hope of salvation,
 beyond every blessing of God,
 the slave of Satan,
 captive under the yoke of sin,
 destined finally for a dreadful destruction
 and already involved in it;

and that at this point

Christ interceded as his advocate,
 took upon himself and suffered the punishment that, from
 God's righteous judgment, threatened all sinners;²
 that he purged with his blood those evils
 which had rendered sinners hateful to God;³
 that by this expiation he made satisfaction and sacrifice duly to God the Father;
 that as intercessor he has appeased God's wrath;
 that on this foundation rests the peace of God with men;
 that by this bond his benevolence is maintained toward them.

Will the man not then be even more moved by all these things which so vividly portray the greatness of the calamity from which he has been rescued?

To sum up: since our hearts cannot, in God's mercy, either seize upon life ardently enough or accept it with the gratefulness we owe, unless our minds are first struck and overwhelmed by fear of God's wrath and by dread of eternal death, we are taught by Scripture

[1] to perceive that apart from Christ, God is, so to speak, hostile to us, and his hand is armed for our destruction; [and]

[2] to embrace his benevolence and fatherly love in Christ alone.

Calvin has said this before. Outside Christ, God appears to be our enemy, though he is a worker of grace, because the threat of eternal punishment lies upon those who break his law. We need to remember what his attitude toward us would be, in the end, if Christ were not our Savior. But, in Christ, God shows himself to be entirely satisfied with us, because of the work of Christ in enduring our punishment.

3. God's wrath against unrighteousness; his love precedes our reconciliation in Christ.

Calvin now continues with a slightly different idea. In the previous section, he was at pains to describe how God could appear to love us and hate us at the same time, and he attributed this to God's motive to strike us with fear at future eternal judgment, in order to cause us to see and appreciate the deliverance that Christ provides, through God's love.

In this section he approaches the question of God's love and hate of sinners to be based on a distinction within each sinner:

Calvin: Although this statement is tempered to our feeble comprehension, it is not said falsely. For God, who is the highest righteousness, cannot love the unrighteousness that he sees in us all. All of us, therefore, have in ourselves something deserving of God's hatred. With regard to

² That is, he took away the sentence of judgment against us.

³ That is, that he took away the filth of the corruption that led to the sentence of judgment against us.

our corrupt nature and the wicked life that follows it, all of us surely displease God, are guilty in his sight, and are born to the damnation of hell. But because the Lord wills not to lose what is his in us, out of his own kindness he still finds something to love. However, much we may be sinners by our own fault, we nevertheless remain his creatures. However much we have brought death upon ourselves, yet he has created us unto life. Thus he is moved by pure and freely given love of us to receive us into grace. Since there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness, so long as we remain sinners he cannot receive us completely. Therefore, to take away all cause for enmity and to reconcile us utterly to himself, he wipes out all evil in us by the expiation set forth in the death of Christ; that we, who were previously unclean and impure, may show ourselves righteous and holy in his sight. Therefore, by his love God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ. Indeed, “because he first loved us” [1 John 4:19], he afterward reconciles us to himself. But until Christ succors us by his death, the unrighteousness that deserves God’s indignation remains in us, and is accursed and condemned before him. Hence, we can be fully and firmly joined with God only when Christ joins us with him. If, then, we would be assured that God is pleased with and kindly disposed toward us, we must fix our eyes and minds on Christ alone. For actually, through him alone we escape the imputation of our sins to us -- an imputation bringing with it the wrath of God.

So, in the end, even while extolling the grace of God poured forth toward sinners, Calvin is careful to make clear that this grace is only savingly received by those whose trust lies in Christ alone. Note: Even though Calvin does not fight adversaries in any obvious sense in these paragraphs, he has enemies, because there are always those who deny that the grace of God is only received savingly through conscious trust in Christ alone.⁴

4. The work of atonement springs from God’s love; not the other way around

Calvin, in teaching that God’s love for sinners precedes the giving of the sacrifice of his Son for them, quotes an extended passage from Augustine, part of which I show here:

“ ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us’ [Rom 5:8]. Therefore, he loved us even when we practiced enmity toward him and committed wickedness. Thus in a marvelous and divine way he loved us even when he hated us. For he hated us for what we were that he had not made; yet because our wickedness had not entirely consumed his handiwork, he knew how, at the same time, to hate in each one of us what we had made, and to love what he had made.”

This concludes the main exposition of the complex relationship between God’s love toward sinners, and the giving of God’s Son on their behalf, and the fact that God does also hate sinners, and, outside of Christ, will punish them finally and eternally. There are mysteries here, and also there are those who mock these mysteries in order to introduce confusion into Biblical faith. Calvin is trying to head off the influence of such ideas.

⁴ By using the word “conscious” I am speaking of the normative situation, and not excluding elect infants or those mentally deficient.

Note that Calvin does not try to simplify this subject by introducing predestination, as so many do, so that God would love certain sinners from eternity past (and never hate them), and would hate certain other sinners from eternity past (and never love them), and send Christ to die for the sinners he had always loved but never hated, but not for the sinners he had always hated but never loved.

Instead Calvin and Augustine seek to understand how God both loves and hates the self-same sinners at the same time; or, how God can appear to be an enemy while, in love, giving Christ for your sins; or, how God can appear to be your enemy outside Christ, or in the First Use of the Moral Law,⁵ while appearing, at exactly the same time, to be a friend, in Christ. All these aspects of truth just mentioned are taught in scripture, but they cannot be reduced to a rational philosophy, because God is God and we are not, and we cannot fully comprehend his ways. However, we must believe what has been revealed.

----- End of Class 8 -----

B. The effects of the obedience and death of Christ, 5-7

This new section is used to describe the means by which Christ redeemed us, namely, his obedience and death.

5. Christ has redeemed us through his obedience, which he practiced throughout his life

Now someone asks How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience.⁶ This is proved by Paul's testimony: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience we are made righteous" [Rom 5:19]. In another passage, to be sure, Paul extends the oasis of the pardon that frees us from the curse of the law to the whole life of Christ: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, subject to the law, to redeem those who were under the law" [Gal 4:4-5]. Thus in his very baptism, also, he asserted that he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father's commandment [Matt 3:15]. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us.

Yet to define the way of salvation more exactly, Scripture ascribes this as peculiar and proper to Christ's death. He declares that "he gave his life to redeem many" [Matt 20:28]. Paul teaches that "Christ died for our sins" [Rom 4:25]. John the Baptist proclaimed that he came "to take

⁵ The "first use" of the Moral Law (e.g., Ten Commandments) is that use of the Law, not wrapped in the gospel promises, which condemns sin in all degrees, threatening the curse and eternal destruction on any deviation from the will of God.

⁶ In other writers one may see a distinction made between the "active" and "passive" obedience of Christ. The active obedience customarily refers to his life activity in obedience to God's will, and the passive obedience is a reference to his death on the cross. Calvin does not use these words, though it is obvious that he makes the distinction, while giving pre-eminence to the value of his death. Calvin views all Christ's obedience as working together for reckoning us to be righteous before God. Calvin is not found saying, for instance, that the passive obedience forgives our sins, and the active obedience gives us positive righteousness.

away the sins of the world," for he was "the Lamb of God" [John 1:29]. In another passage Paul teaches that "we are freely justified through the redemption which is in Christ, because he was put forward as a reconciler in his blood" [Rom 3:24-5]. Likewise: "We are ... justified by his blood ... and reconciled ... through his death." [Rom 5:9-10] Again: "For our sake he who knew no sin was made sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." [2 Cor 5:21]. ... Yet the remainder of the obedience that he manifested in his life is not excluded. Paul embraces it all from beginning to end: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, ... and was obedient to the Father unto death, even death on a cross" [Phil 2:7-8]. And truly, even in death itself his willing obedience is the important thing because a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness. Therefore, when the Lord testified that he "laid down his life for his sheep" [John 10:15], he aptly added, "No one takes it from me" [John 10:18]. In this sense Isaiah says, "Like a sheep that before its shearer was dumb" [Isa 53:7; Acts 8:32]. And the Gospel history relates that he went forth and met the soldiers [John 18:4], and that before Pilate he did not defend himself, but stood to submit to judgment [Matt 27: 12, 14]. Not, indeed, without a struggle; for he had taken upon himself our weaknesses, and in this way the obedience that he had shown to his Father had to be tested! And here was no common evidence of his incomparable love toward us: to wrestle with terrible fear, and amid those cruel torments to cast off all concern for himself that he might provide for us. And we must hold fast to this: that no proper sacrifice to God could have been offered unless Christ, disregarding his own feelings, subjected and yielded himself wholly to his Father's will. ... But because trembling consciences find repose only in sacrifice and cleansing by which sins are expiated, we are duly directed thither; and for us the substance of life is set in the death of Christ.

Calvin will go into this in much more detail in our next class!