

Chapter 3

SECOND HEAD OF DOCTRINE

CHRIST'S DEATH

AND

MAN'S

REDEMPTION

THROUGH IT

Since God has decreed to elect a certain number of persons and to reject others this also affects the work of Christ. Those chosen by the Father and given to the Son had to be redeemed for salvation. Therefore the Son of God took upon Himself our human nature that He might act as our legal substitute.

Limited Atonement

Atonement means to make amends, to place two parties in the right relationship. Christ died to make atonement for our sins and to grant us communion with the Father. Contrary to the teachings of Jews, Muslims and pagans, the Christian church has always maintained that only "*...the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7). The apostles preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14,15, "*For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised*".

We should be clear on what we mean by the term "limited" atonement. The Arminians limit and restrict Christ's work of atonement so that little or nothing is accomplished without the will of man. If man does not choose for God, atonement is powerless. Christ's work really only gives the possibility of salvation.¹

Some people prefer to use the term "definite atonement" or "particular redemption" because limited atonement seems to imply a lack in the sufficiency of Christ's work. We need not abandon the phrase "limited atonement" as long as we remember atonement is unlimited in its power but limited to a specific number of people.² Jesus Christ did not die for every individual in the world but for those chosen and called by the Father. Atonement is not for everyone under the sun but for everyone under the Son. Although the sin in Adam includes every member of the human race the redemption of Jesus Christ does not. Atonement is applied to a definite number of persons.

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Opposition to this doctrine by the Socinians

By returning to the Word of God the churches of the Great Reformation retrieved and recovered a correct understanding of particular redemption and atonement. Nevertheless, this teaching was severely criticized and rejected by the Socinians. They rejected the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. They taught that Jesus was a good man and a role model showing us how we should get our life straight with God. They believed man has a free will to choose good or evil.³ Article 4 of the "Rejection of Errors" mentions the teachings of the Socinians because the Arminians agreed with them in many respects.

The Socinians could be considered the forerunners of liberal theology.⁴ For example, Dr. H. Wiersinga (a Dutch theologian) wrote a dissertation in the 1970's rejecting the need for substitutionary atonement. According to him, the Lord does not want reconciliation through satisfaction but reconciliation through change. God sent Christ to the world to convey this message. The Jews, however, did not understand Jesus' mission and reacted violently, nailing Him to the cross.⁵

Atonement and Christ's work as our example

Even though the notion that Christ was nothing more than an example is to be rejected, we should not "throw out the baby with the bath water". Christians are to follow the example given to them by their Saviour. Christ's work of atonement is a model of patience (1 Peter 2:21ff), humility (Matthew 11:29), love (2 Corinthians 8:9; Ephesians 5:25) and obedience (Hebrews 5:8).⁶

Opposition to this doctrine by the Arminians

The Arminians objected to the doctrine of redemption and atonement as summarized and confessed in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. According to them "Christ's saving work was designed to make possible the salvation of all men on the condition

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that they believe, but that Christ's death in itself did not actually secure or guarantee salvation for anyone."⁷

In evangelical circles, where the infallibility of scripture is upheld and the lordship of Jesus Christ is acknowledged, the doctrine of atonement is often taught from an Arminian slant and persuasion. Many evangelicals believe God loves all the people of the world. Jesus Christ made it possible for all to be saved by dying a provisional, substitutionary death for the sins of the world. Before Christ's atonement can be applied, individuals must decide, by their free will, whether they will "accept Jesus as their personal Saviour" or "give their heart to Jesus."

When we say that Christ opened to us the possibility of reconciliation and atonement we in fact proclaim ourselves to be our own saviours. Our ability to believe becomes the decisive and deciding factor. Moreover, we should realize that rejection of limited atonement is not an isolated or trivial matter. The name and the glory of God is at stake. For if we say Christ died for all people and that God loves everyone, then in the same breath we are challenging the simplicity, immutability and power of God.⁸

ARTICLE 1: THE PUNISHMENT WHICH GOD'S JUSTICE REQUIRES

God is not only supremely merciful but also supremely just. And as He Himself has revealed in His Word, His justice requires that our sins, committed against His infinite majesty, should be punished not only in this age but also in the age to come, both in body and soul. We cannot escape these punishments unless satisfaction is made to the justice of God.

Those who are well-versed in the Heidelberg Catechism recognize in the wording of this article language similar to Lord's Days 4 and 5. Our fathers at Dort were not proposing or advocating a new doctrine.

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Moreover, notice how already then it was considered sufficient to cite the Catechism as the norm for Reformed doctrine without furnishing it with Scripture references.⁹

Atonement is necessary because God is simple

Atonement is necessary because God is one, simple, spiritual being (Belgic Confession Article 1). This is why the Canons, following the Catechism, say "God is not only supremely merciful but also supremely just."

What does it mean that God is simple? Human language cannot adequately express in one word or phrase everything about the Lord's simplicity. Let it suffice to say it does not imply that He is easy to figure out; rather it depicts the unity of His attributes. God is love but He is also wrath. He is just and merciful at the same time. We may not exalt one characteristic of God above the other or play the one against the other. Although the Lord is merciful and compassionate He remains just, faithful and true to His Word.¹⁰

The Lord revealed the unity of His attributes when He declared to Moses, "*The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation*" (Exodus 34:6,7).

The justice of God

In the covenant God established with Adam and Eve in Paradise, the LORD demanded perfect obedience and love. Our first parents were to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. After the fall into sin God's covenant obligations do not change. This is His justice.

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Is God right and fair in demanding perfect love of sinful human beings? Why does He not drop His demand? The Lord knows that we are sinners but He does not change in His purpose and plan. Therefore He maintains the strict requirements of His law. He cannot ask less of humanity today than He did before the fall. Rather than thinking God is unfair we must praise Him for upholding His part of the covenant agreement. He is the same as He was by being true to His word, His work, and His own person.

God's punishment

The Lord does not treat sin differently after it happens. He does not turn a blind eye to it. Sin displeases Him. God will not let the violation of His law go unpunished. "*Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them*" (Galatians 3:10). The Lord is angered by our original (sin in Adam) as well as our actual (daily) sins. His justice "requires that our sins, committed against His infinite majesty, should be punished not only in this age but also in the age to come both in body and soul".

The punishment of God "in this age" is visible in ways and areas we do not always recognize. The execution of His wrath is manifest in that He gives people up to their own selfish ways. The killing of unborn babies and the philosophy which promotes gay rights should not shock or surprise us. Corruption in government, pornography, false prophecy and apostasy reveal the wrath of God (Romans 1).

The immorality of this world deserves to be punished. Nevertheless, our failure to acknowledge the promises of God's covenant is equal to or perhaps worse than abortion or government corruption. The covenant wrath of the Lord will blaze against our unbelief.

Attempts have been made to soften the severity of God's punishment. But listen to what the author of Hebrews has to say, "*...it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement*" (9:27). Others argue that there will be a universal pardon on the last

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day. But read the warning of Christ in Matthew 25:41,46, "*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life*". Still others try to soften the punishment of God by claiming only believers will have a conscious existence once they die and that the ungodly will be annihilated. John 5:28,29 does not allow for such a teaching. Christ says, "*Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgement*".

ARTICLE 2: THE SATISFACTION MADE BY CHRIST

We ourselves, however, cannot make this satisfaction and cannot free ourselves from God's wrath. God, therefore, in His infinite mercy has given His only-begotten Son as our Surety. For us or in our place He was made sin and a curse on the cross so that He might make satisfaction on our behalf.

Article 1 concluded: we cannot escape punishment unless satisfaction (payment) is made to the justice of God. Reconciliation and atonement must come about through satisfaction. What sort of payment are we to make to be restored into God's favour? No one should think we are concerned with a financial matter -- as if payment for sin could be made with money. We are ransomed from our futile ways "*...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Peter 1:18,19).

Neither can sufficient payment be made through any religious experience or personal piety. Christ admonishes His followers: "*Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*" (Luke 13:24). We have to go through the

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narrow door of Christ's righteousness. Any works of ours will not do.¹¹

We could not make sufficient payment for our sins even if we offered our own life. *"Truly no man can ransom himself, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of his life is costly, and can never suffice, that he should continue to live on for ever, and never see the Pit"* (Psalm 49:7-9). The Lord does not grab us by the scruff of the neck and demand, "Pay what you owe!" We are not being pushed or forced into anything nor do we earn anything when we give what is asked of us.

What we are owing

Payment is a fundamental law of God's covenant. Through satisfaction both parties give what the other has a right to claim. Even within the Triune God the one person "satisfies" the other. The Father pays what He owes to the Son and the Spirit, and the Spirit to the Father and the Son, and the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Therefore when the Son is sent into the world His delight is to do the will of His heavenly Father. As the obedient Son, He carries the burden of our sins and restores us to the Father's favour.

The Lord pays what He vowed by giving Himself to us freely and fully. He opens His heart to us in love. In the covenant we promise to reciprocate this love. Yet, ever since the fall into sin we fail to do our part. Our debt is: failure to honour, praise, glorify, love and obey the Lord.

From the moment human history began love and obedience has been a demand of God's justice. This demand is upheld after the fall since God stays the same. The duty to "pay" remains, but sin has made our task burdensome. For besides the demand to love there is a mountain of sin and guilt which needs to be covered. Now we also need to pay the penalty for our sins. God's wrath must be appeased before we can be restored into His favour.

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Satisfaction and the mercy of God

Not only is the Lord just He is also supremely merciful. Page by page the Bible uncovers how deep the Lord's mercy is. "Mercy" should not be perceived as going easy on sin. God's mercy is His willingness to open a way for us so that His justice can be satisfied. Believers may pray for and plead on the mercy of God because He has provided them with a way to escape His wrath. The way has been opened through the shedding of blood.

The need for and provision of a substitute

We cannot make payment for our sins through the shedding of our own blood. We need and are provided with a substitute. A substitute is one who takes the place of another. Thus we speak of *substitutionary atonement*. This doctrine is clearly taught in Romans 5:6-8, "*While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man -- though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*" and in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*".

During the Old Dispensation a ceremony was carried out on the Day of Atonement which drove home the need for substitutionary atonement. The high priest was to take two goats; one to be sacrificed as a sin offering and the other to be sent out into the wilderness to Azazel. The blood used for the sin offering was sprinkled upon the mercy seat and on the horns of the altar. Thereby the priest made atonement for himself, his family and the whole assembly of the people of Israel. Then he would take hold of the live goat and confess all the sins of the people of Israel over it. The goat was sent off into the wilderness bearing the iniquity of the people (Leviticus 16). The goats themselves did not make payment and atonement for sin but were shadows of the Light.

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The flow of blood of Old Testament offerings cried out for the Redeemer. All the sacrifices underlined the need for atonement. The sins of the people had to be covered in the sight of heaven. Atonement through sacrifice was a gift and a demand of God.¹²

But who would make amends and pay for sin? God turned to Himself and His own being to discover such a Saviour. Only in Himself could He find the perfect guarantee that satisfaction be made for all our sins. The Lord reconciled us to Himself by Himself. The blood of the Son of God was poured out for the complete forgiveness and remission of all our sins.

As our substitute Christ takes our curse upon Himself

As His people's substitute Christ kept the law in every part and detail. The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper states beautifully the marvellous meaning of substitutionary atonement:

From the beginning of His incarnation to the end of His life on earth, He bore for us the wrath of God, under which we should have perished eternally. By His perfect obedience He has fulfilled for us all the righteousness of God's law. He did so especially when the weight of our sins and the wrath of God pressed out of Him the bloody sweat in the garden of Gethsemane. There He was bound that He might free us from our sins. He suffered countless insults that we might never be put to shame. He was innocently condemned to death that we might be acquitted at the judgment seat of God. He even let His blessed body be nailed to the cross that He might cancel the bond which stood against us because of our sins. By all this He has taken our curse upon Himself that He might fill us with His blessing. On the cross He humbled Himself, in body and soul, to the very deepest shame and anguish of hell.¹³

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Christ fulfilled the law perfectly throughout His earthly ministry but especially at Calvary. On the cross He became sin for us and was treated as one who was cursed by God. "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree' -- that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith*" (Galatians 3:13,14). Jesus suffered the isolation of being forsaken by the Father. Since He suffered hell on the cross He had no need to go to the place hell.¹⁴

By the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ those who are grafted into Him by true faith are not only freed from the debt of sin but are enabled to pay their vows to the Lord in the presence of His people. They can live a life of sanctification.

Article 2 calls Christ our surety. This expression is taken from Hebrews 7:22 where Christ is named "*the surety of a better covenant*". One who is a surety is a guarantor. Our surety, Christ, assumes all the liabilities, debts, and obligations of His people. In Jesus Christ we have the guarantee and assurance that satisfaction for sin has been made. He loves us and gives Himself for us (Galatians 2:20).

ARTICLE 3: THE INFINITE VALUE OF CHRIST'S DEATH

This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.

Christ's death as sacrifice

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for our sins. Christ's sacrifice is elevated into a category all on its own. "Only" also has the connotation of "the expected, the ultimate". Jesus' sacrifice is the last and the greatest (Hebrews 9:12,26;10:14). Even though the sacrifices of the Old

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Testament were real they were imperfect. Christ made the perfect sacrifice through His death on the cross. "Perfect" describes the flawless fulfilment of the desired purpose and goal. Jesus did not "foul up" or "botch it" like we often do when we are asked to fulfil a task. Nothing needs to be added to what Christ did to make satisfaction and atonement for our sins.¹⁵ This is why He said, "*It is finished*" after experiencing the three hours of God-forsakenness.

Jesus Christ is the complete and the only sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was necessary to cover our original as well as our actual sins. The Arminians believed that through Christ's sacrifice "all men have been accepted into the state of reconciliation and into the grace of the covenant, so that no one is liable to condemnation on account of original sin, and no one shall be condemned because of it, but all are free from the guilt of original sin" (Chapter II, Rejection of Errors, Article 5). According to them Christ acquires salvation for all men but does not apply it. Salvation is obtained through the exercise of our free will.

The Synod of Dort condemned this view because it "brings back out of hell the Pelagian error" and "militates against Scripture, which teaches that we are by nature children of wrath". The moment we think we can make a contribution to our salvation we end up doing the exact opposite of what we are supposed to do. Instead of confessing Christ's name we deny Him. For Jesus is not the Saviour of a people who are almost righteous. He is not the gentle nudge helping us get over the hump of sin and evil.

Christ's priestly office

The one sacrifice of Christ's body was the execution of His priestly office. When He came in the flesh He was not of priestly origin or descent but of royal lineage. Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, which means, He was anointed not because of ancestry but because He was appointed directly by God Himself. "*So also Christ did not exalt Himself to be made a high priest, but was*

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appointed by Him who said to Him, 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee'; as He says also in another place, 'Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek'" (Hebrews 5:5,6).

Our whole salvation turns on the principle point that Jesus was ordained by God as a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 7:15). Salvation depends completely upon Christ's priestly work of reconciliation and atonement. John Calvin writes the following on this subject,

For as has been said, we or our prayers have no access to God unless Christ, as our High Priest, having washed away our sins, sanctifies us and obtains for us that grace from which the uncleanness of our transgressions and vices debars us. Thus we see that we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of His priesthood may reach us.¹⁶

Christ's priesthood is unique because He is the only one to be both priest and sacrifice for sin. He offered up His own body and shed His own blood in the complete forgiveness of all our sins.

Our Saviour did not carry His blood into the most holy place of an earthly tabernacle or temple. He caused *that* curtain to be torn down the middle because He was entering the heavenly tabernacle. "*He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption*" (Hebrews 9:12). Through the sacrifice of our High Priest the way to the living God is open forever.

Efficiency and Sufficiency of Christ's death

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was both efficient (it is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins) and sufficient (abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world).

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The Arminians levelled the charge that the Reformed position on atonement takes away from the significance of Christ's death. Wasn't the death of Christ sufficient to take away the sins of the whole human race? To bolster their position they appealed to such passages as 1 John 2:2, "*... and He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*" and John 4:42 "*...this is indeed the Saviour of the world*".

The Reformed churches did not deny or ignore the significance of these texts (see further Article 8). Nevertheless, references to Scripture do not necessarily guarantee faithfulness in doctrine and preaching. Satan uses the Bible as one of his weapons. Presenting himself as an angel of light he leads many astray.¹⁷

When speaking about the sufficiency of Christ's death, the Canons of Dort echo what is confessed in Lord's Day 15, "During all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end, Christ bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race". The wrath of God is against the sin of all mankind. Therefore to save some, Christ had to bear the penalty and punishment against all. The number of people who are actually saved does not change or affect the character, depth or extent of Christ's payment.

Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to cover all our sins. Although through weakness we fall and have to struggle against sin all our life long we may be comforted and assured that the sacrifice of our Saviour removes all our sins from us. No one may say "My sin is too great to be forgiven". No sin or weakness which still remains in us against our will can prevent us from receiving the grace of God. For "*...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool*" (Isaiah 1:18).

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ARTICLE 4: WHY HIS DEATH HAS INFINITE VALUE

This death is of such great value and worth because the person who submitted to it is not only a true and perfectly holy man, but also the only-begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for these qualifications were necessary for our Saviour. Further, this death is of such great value and worth because it was accompanied by a sense of the wrath and curse of God which we by our sins had deserved.

Article 3 spoke about the priceless value and worth of the death of the Son of God. Article 4 gives us the *reason why* no one can put a price tag on the significance and value of Christ's death. The Lord Jesus was able to do what He accomplished because of who He was, became and is.

According to the justice and mercy of God the one who makes payment for sin must have three qualifications. First He must be a true man, second He must be a perfectly holy man, third He must be the only begotten Son of God.

The first qualification: Christ must be true man

Already in New Testament times the Christian church had to counter the arguments of those who denied Jesus to be a true man. How could Jesus Christ be a man like us and at the same time be true God? They did not understand how such a thing could be possible. This heresy is called doceticism. Docetists claim that Jesus looked like a man, talked like a man but was not really a man. They compare Him to the angels who took on the form and likeness of human beings when they came to earth.

This false teaching was also present in the sixteenth century. For example Menno Simons, founder of the Mennonites, thought it was impossible for Christ to take upon Himself the flesh of Mary (our flesh) since this would mean that we would be robbed of the true

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Christ and be directed to an earthly sinful creature: a man born of Adam's impure and sinful flesh.¹⁸ Menno Simons went by the assumption that the incarnation is sinful in itself. Following a nature/grace dualism, he felt that our salvation would be partly man-made if Christ received His flesh from Mary.

The Bible, however, says "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14). He bore our human flesh and blood. As the author to the Hebrews states, "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely it is not with angels that He is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people*" (Hebrews 2:14-17).

To qualify as our mediator Christ had to be like us in every way. It was a divine must that He should partake of our human nature. Jesus, the one appointed to make satisfaction for sin, became a true man.

The second qualification: Christ must be a perfectly holy man

Not only does our Saviour and Mediator need to be a true man, He must also be completely exempt from sin. Jesus of Nazareth met this criterion as well. The law of God was written upon His heart.

Sin has touched everything in us and has a part in everything we do. The same cannot be said of Christ. No fault was ever found in Him. It was His delight to do the will of His heavenly Father. Peter says in his first letter, "*He committed no sin; no guile was found on His lips. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten; but He trusted to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*" (1 Peter 2:22-24).

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As the only atoning sacrifice for sin Christ was obedient in all things. He came to this world to fulfil all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He was obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). Through the obedience of Christ many are declared righteous (Romans 5:19).

The third qualification: Christ must be the begotten Son of God

Jesus must be true God in order to bear the burden of the Father's wrath against the sin of man. A human being cannot survive death and hell or overcome these powers.

False teachers have denied Christ the honour of being man but also of being God. "How can He be God?" they ask. "God cannot suffer and die, can He?" We must admit that we touch upon a doctrine that goes beyond the boundary of our human thinking and reasoning. This is the mystery of our religion (1 Timothy 3:16). We believe it because the Word of God teaches it. If Jesus was anything less than God the very foundation of our faith would be blown away; the prospect of a new heaven and earth would be a dream and nothing more.

Without a doubt we may believe Jesus Christ is true God because He bears divine names (John 1:1-3,14,18,27; 8:58; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; 1 John 5:20), has divine attributes (John 8:58; John 2:25; Revelation 22:12; Colossians 1:15), does divine works (creation: John 1:3; Colossians 1:16,17; Hebrews 1:3; redemption: John 5:21; Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 1:30), and is given divine honour and worship (Matthew 28:17-19; John 10:30; Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 1:1).

The irony of the Son of God becoming a man

What the Lord performed in the person and work of His Son is filled with irony. In the garden of Eden, man exalted himself and thought he could be like God. In contrast, the exalted Son of God "...*though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,*

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being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). Man wanted to be like God but now the Lord must become like us.

The Lord God, who set the standards for our salvation, meets these standards in His Son. Through Jesus Christ payment for sin is made, the wrath of God is appeased and the favour of the Lord descends upon us.

ARTICLE 5: THE UNIVERSAL PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in His good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Promise proclaimed

The content of the gospel is the promise "whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have everlasting life". The Canons of Dort quote John 3:16 where the Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to Nicodemus. For a better understanding of that familiar verse we do well to read it in context. In John 3:14,15 Jesus alludes to Numbers 21:4-9, "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life*". Just as the people of Israel were to look to the bronze snake for healing and life we are to look to Christ crucified for deliverance from death. The preaching proclaims the good news of life and we receive it through faith.

Those who preach the gospel of forgiveness have to stay within the boundaries of what Scripture teaches regarding reconciliation,

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satisfaction and atonement for sins. The proclamation of God's promises must be accompanied by the stipulation of God's demands. A missionary or evangelist is not permitted to tell his audience, "Jesus Christ died for you". Jesus died for sinners. Everyone who believes in Him has the promise that his sins are forgiven and covered in the sight of heaven. "If the Bible says that Christ died for the elect, then an evangelist may not play God by stating that he knows everyone in his audience is elect and, therefore, that Christ died for them." ¹⁹

Universal proclamation

The promise of the gospel is to be announced and proclaimed universally, without discrimination, to all peoples. The work of Christ is not restricted to one nation or ethnic group but is ecumenical (spread throughout the whole inhabited world), catholic and universal. Therefore the gospel must be preached to every tribe, nation and people without distinction or discrimination. Our Lord Jesus commissioned His apostles to, "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15 see also Matthew 28:19,20). In this way the words of Psalm 22:27 are fulfilled, "*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before Him*".

The doctrine of limited atonement may not make the church negligent in her calling to preach the Word. The command to preach is, however, bound by God's sovereign good pleasure.

ARTICLE 6: WHY SOME DO NOT BELIEVE

ARTICLE 7: WHY OTHERS DO BELIEVE

That, however, many who have been called by the gospel neither repent nor believe in Christ but perish in unbelief does not happen because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross, but through their own fault.

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But to those who truly believe and by the death of Christ are freed from their sins and saved from perdition, this benefit comes only through God's grace, given to them from eternity in Christ. God owes this grace to no one.

The cause of unbelief

Many of those who hear the gospel do not repent of their sins. The cause of their unbelief does not lie in God but in themselves (cf. Chapter I Article 5). Neither does the cause of unbelief lie in the insufficiency or inadequacy of Christ's sacrifice. His redemptive work is like a fountain which never runs dry so that He can say "*If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink*" (John 7:37). Unbelief is man's own fault. Man remains responsible for his own actions. This is why Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews, "*How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?*" (John 5:44-47).

People sin not because God desires it but because of the evil in their own hearts and their defiance and rebellion against God. The Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked should turn from his ways and live (Ezekiel 33:11).²⁰

Faith is a gift

No person will seek God on his own. Faith is a fruit of Christ's satisfaction and a gift of God which He owes to no one. Two familiar passages of Scripture come to mind: Ephesians 2:8, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast*"; Philippians 1:29, "*For it has been granted to you that for the*

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sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake."

The Lord has the freedom to give the gift of His grace to whom He wills. According to the sovereign purpose and plan of the Lord all those who are elected will be granted faith and brought to salvation. Thus the fruit of Christ's suffering and death is not uncertain or left up in the air until the final day of judgment. The prophet Isaiah already spoke of the fruit of Christ's atoning work: "*Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief; when He makes Himself an offering for sin, He shall see His offspring, He shall prolong His days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand; He shall see the fruit of the travail of His soul and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and He shall bear their iniquities*" (53:10,11).

Children of God accept with a believing heart the benefits of Christ's work. They accept what they first received from the Lord. They react in faith to God's action. "*...What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

ARTICLE 8: THE EFFICACY OF THE DEATH OF CHRIST

For this was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect. It was His most gracious will and intent to give to them alone justifying faith and thereby to bring them unfailingly to salvation. This means: God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which He confirmed the new covenant) should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those, and those only, who from eternity were chosen to salvation and were given to Him by the Father. God further willed that Christ should give to them faith, which, together

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with other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He acquired for them by His death; that He should cleanse them by His blood from all sins, both original and actual, both those committed after faith and before faith; and that He should guard them faithfully to the end and at last present them to Himself in splendour without any spot or wrinkle.

This article gives us the key points of the doctrine of limited atonement. Christ's death is efficacious, that is, it will surely produce the desired results. The elect will be justified, redeemed and cleansed from those sins committed before and after faith.

Some find it much too exclusive to say only a *certain* number of people will be saved. Such thoughts are also found among adherents of the Reformed faith and were already present at the Synod of Dort. Martinius of Bremen wrote twenty-five theses in which he argued that Christ died for all.²¹

These sentiments did not die. During the seventeenth century, Moysse Amyraut, a teacher in the French school at Saumer, tried to combine unconditional election with *unlimited* atonement. According to him (and those who follow his teaching) Christ died for the salvation of all humanity but it is only applied to the elect on the condition of faith. Amyraut became the father of "four-point Calvinists" or "Amyraldians".²²

Those who teach unlimited or universal atonement will challenge you with Bible texts. Doesn't the Bible itself state that all mankind will be saved through Christ? Let me list a number of examples:

- John 1:29, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*".
- Romans 5:18, "*As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men.*"

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- 2 Corinthians 5:18,19, "*All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself...*"
- Titus 2:11, "*For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men...*".

We should not be thrown off by what appear to be strong and convincing arguments for universal atonement and reconciliation. Each passage must be read in context. Context is the air in which a text breathes.

The context of some of these verses is the point which was debated in the New Testament church, namely: "Was the gospel for both Jews and Gentiles"? The conclusion: Jesus died for all without distinction of race, colour, sex. Whether you are a Jew, Greek, Dutchman, Australian, American or Canadian has nothing to do with your eternal election.

The whole world is the scope of God's election. He did not die for one nation or race but to gather a people from every tribe and nation. In Christ, God is seeking His world and His entire creation. Christ's work of redemption is of infinite worth to the individual but it also extends over the whole world. The apostle Paul begins his letter to the Colossians singing the praises of Christ's universal significance. "*For in Him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross*" (Colossians 1:19,20).

Furthermore the "all" in the quoted passages can refer to everybody in the congregation. Titus 2:11 ought to be read in this manner. The statement "*for the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men...*" follows an appeal to the entire congregation to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly

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lives in this world. Christ was sent to earth to die for the sins of His people. Whatever age group you fall into, or whatever your status, you must serve the Lord: old and young, married and single, slaves and free. For the grace of God has come to all.

The Bible does not teach that all men are saved in Christ just as they perished through Adam. In fact it teaches the opposite. At the birth of Christ it was announced by the angel "...you shall call His name *Jesus*, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). On the night in which He was betrayed Christ took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to His disciples saying, "*Drink of it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:27,28).

Being restored to favour by the Lord our God and being set free from His wrath is not something which is automatically given to each and every person. We must have faith. Peter preached this message on the day of Pentecost. After he had spoken to the people about the saving work of Christ, "...they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:37,38).

But why doesn't God save all the people of the world? In response to this question Gordon Girod writes, "This is not the question men ought to ask. The fearful, awful, wonderful, marvellous question men ought to ask is this: Why does God save any? This is the question which ought rightly to cause our souls to tremble: Why does God save any?"²³

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ARTICLE 9: THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S COUNSEL

This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as her Saviour (who as bridegroom for His bride laid down His life for her on the cross) and celebrate His praises here and through all eternity.

The second chapter of the Canons of Dort ends with an article of assurance. God's counsel (His plan with man) will not be thwarted but accomplished. He will fulfil His purpose. Christ died for His people and He will see to it that the benefits of His atonement will be applied to them. We do not have to face the future in fear but with confidence. The church would be wiped off the globe if God's electing work was not being fulfilled or if it was dependent on man's decisions.

Christ gathers His congregation through the blood of the cross thereby bringing together the elect. According to God's counsel and by the working of the Holy Spirit, He works faith into the hearts of His elect and cleanses them from all sin and guilt.

The church, as spoken about in this article, does not exclusively refer to the sum total of the elect. If this were so it would make little sense to say "there will always be a church of believers". Even though the church consists of believers this does not mean all the members are elect. The church is the instrument gathering the elect together. It must, therefore, serve Christ faithfully, love Him steadfastly and celebrate His praises. This can only be done when the preaching is pure, worship is regulated by Scripture and discipline is exercised according to the command of Christ.

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In this article we are directed to the promise Christ made while He was on earth, "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18). Satan may be strong and he may go around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour, but he does not have the power to destroy the work of God (1 Peter 5:8). The church "has existed from the beginning of the world and it will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal" (Belgic Confession, Article 27).

When the last of the elect have been brought to salvation Jesus Christ will come again upon the clouds of heaven. The Bride and the Bridegroom will be united completely. There will be one fold and one Shepherd. The praises begun here will be continued through all eternity.

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Questions

1. What is meant by limited atonement? Analyze the meaning of both "limited" and "atonement". (Introduction)
2. Is it correct to speak about atonement in terms of Christ being our example? Where did the Socinians go wrong? (Introduction)
3. What does it mean that God is simple? How does this tie in to Christ's atonement? (Article 1)
4. God punishes sin both in this age and in the age to come. What are some of the manifestations of God's punishment in this age? (Article 1)
5. What kind of payment do we owe the Lord? Can we satisfy God's justice? (Article 2)
6. What does it mean that Christ's sacrifice was the only and perfect sacrifice for sin? How was His sacrifice different from those performed by the Old Testament priests? (Article 3)
7. Why is it so essential that Jesus Christ be our high priest? Why is He a priest after the order of Melchizedek and not after the order of Aaron? (Article 3)
8. What is meant by the efficiency and sufficiency of Christ's atonement? (Article 3)
9. What did Menno Simons teach regarding Christ's incarnation? (Article 4)

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10. How can it be stated without a shadow of doubt that Jesus is true God? Look up those texts which indicate He has divine names, attributes, works, honour. (Article 4)
11. How is John 3:16 to be read within the context of John and within the context of Chapter II of the Canons of Dort? (Article 5)
12. Is man's unbelief caused by the insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice? (Article 6 & 7)
13. In this chapter the Canons talk about limited atonement. How then do we explain Titus 2:11? (Article 8)
14. Explain the statement, "The church is the instrument gathering the elect". (Article 9)

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Notes

1. W. H. Kooienga, "The L in Tulip - Limited Atonement" *Christian Renewal* Vol 14 No. 16, p.15.
2. E.H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1972) p.42.
3. E. Koop, *De Dordse Leerregels Dichterbij Gebracht* (Kampen, Vandenberg, 1983) p.86.
4. L. Doekes, "De Dordtse Leerregels" in *De Poortwake*, 1981.
5. H. Wiersinga, *De Verzoening in de Theologische Diskussie* (1972) pp. 183-203.
6. John Calvin linked the exemplary theme not to our justification but our sanctification. This subject is discussed in a book by Robert A Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (1983) pp. 77-82.
7. D. Steele and C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978) p.39.
8. see further G. Long, *Definite Atonement* (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1983) pp.8-11.
9. H. Hoeksema, *The Voice of our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing, 1980) p. 329.
10. G. Zomer in *The Bride's Treasure*, ed. J. Faber (Launceston, Geneva Press, 1979) p.57.
11. *De Dordse Leerregels Dichterbij Gebracht*, p.70.
12. J.VanGenderen and W.H. Velema, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen, Kok, 1992) p.471.

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13. "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" *Book of Praise*, p.597.
14. For a more detailed discussion on this point see: J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.8-12
15. J.G. Feenstra, *De Dordtsche Leerregelen* (Kampen, Kok, 1950) pp. 69-70.
16. *Institutes*, II.15.6
17. L. Doekes, "De Dordtse Leerregelen" in *De Poortwake*, 1981.
18. Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. L. Verduin (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1956) p. 792.
19. E. H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1972) p.53; see also J.G. Feenstra, *De Dordtsche Leerregelen*, p.76.
20. Girod G. *The Deeper Faith* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Publications, 1958) p.41.
21. W.R. Godfrey, *Tensions Within International Calvinism: The debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Ann Arbor, A Xerox Company, 1974) p.196-197.
22. For more information on this topic see the book by G. Long, *Definite Atonement*.
23. *The Deeper Faith*, p.42.