

An Invitation to Mystery and Truth: Sin, the Cross and the Separation Myth

In our gospel proclamation, we are apt to explain sin as a condition which separates us from God. This phrase, “sin separates”, is habitually tossed around by those of us who want to emphasize how sin makes us ineligible for a relationship with a holy and pure God. I would like to take a hard look at our use of the phrase “sin separates us from God”, questioning its Biblical foundation and looking at its disastrous effects on discipleship.

It is at the cross where Jesus Christ most emphatically embraces us, forgives us, and purifies us, reconciling us to God. Or is it? Unfortunately we have preached about Christ’s cross in a way that relegates it to being a bridge to the holy God. The bridge is in place, providing the possibility of our deciding to cross over from the “man” side to the “God side”. Again, in this scenario, the cross procures only a possibility of our redemption. This is actually a sneaky kind of relativism, i.e. the cross only applies to me when I say it does, and not before! The emphasis here is on one’s personal decision, not on the cross at all.

Yet man is not the center of the universe. As Colossians 1 so beautifully describes, it is Jesus Christ in whom all things exist and hold together; he is the Creator and Redeemer of the cosmos. Because of the person of Christ, the cross is much more than an anemic potential passageway to God. “Christ,” says J.I. Packer, “is a Redeemer who really does redeem.” Continues Packer, “...the Bible sees the Cross as revealing God’s power to save, not His impotence. Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation...The Cross secured the full salvation of all for whom Christ died.”

It is this kind of boldness which is often missing from our proclamation. Seen this way, the gospel is not only an invitation but a declaration of the truth. We belong to Christ by virtue of creation and redemption. We are not our own; we have been bought with a price. This is the truth not because *we* say it is (humanistic relativism), but just because it is!

It is at this point that we must consider Packer’s robust theology of the cross in relation to the scope of the atonement. By the atonement I am referring to the saving at-one-ment effected between God and man by the God-man, Jesus Christ. If the reality is that “the Cross secured the full salvation of all for whom Christ died,” then in Packer’s mind Christ could not have died for all, for that would be universalism. This is the *logical* framework from within which many respectable *modern* theologians work and write. As the thinking goes, when one rightfully adheres to a robust theology of the cross, the scope of the atonement must be limited. The choices are simply either limited atonement or universalism.

I emphasized *logical* and *modern* above because I think one of the exciting things about this post-modern age is the desire to probe past logical formulations, to look *through*

what appear to be mutually exclusive options, to appreciate mystery. The question is: Can we hold on to the full truth of the cross and still say Christ died for all? Or to say it another way, is it possible to apply the potency of the cross to all people, with the real reconciliation and atonement it effected, without being a universalist?

Has our fear of universalism caused us to short-change scriptures like the following?
(all quoted from the NASB, emphasis mine)

Colossians 1:15 – 20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of *all* creation. For by Him *all* things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – *all* things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before *all* things, and in Him *all* things hold together....For it was the Father's good pleasure for *all* the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile *all* things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 18-19

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for *all*, therefore *all* died; and He died for *all*, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf....Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

1 Timothy 2:4-6

[God] desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for *all*.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for *all* to come to repentance.

Romans 5:18

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to *all* men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to *all* men.

1 Corinthians 15:22

For as in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ *all* will be made alive.

1 Timothy 4:10

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of *all* men, especially of believers.

1 John 2:2

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole *world*.

Romans 11:32

For God has shut up *all* in disobedience so that He may show mercy to *all*.

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the *world*, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the *world* might be saved through Him.

John 12: 32,47

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men to Myself; If anyone hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge them; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the *world*.

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ died for sins once for *all*, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

Romans 3:23-24

for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Titus 2:11

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all* men

I must confess to being somewhat of a Biblical literalist when it comes to believing that “all” simply means “all” and “world” means “world” in the selections above. It is not surprising that those who advocate limited atonement will often interpret “all” as meaning all types or all kinds of people – Jew and Gentile, etc. Sometimes the context seemingly supports this view, only to have the stilts pulled out by the rules of Greek grammar: when the word for “all”(in the plural) is used without the article it refers to a totality. What is said of the totality is to be considered true of each of the component parts individually.... “All in the plural without the article can have various meanings but, seldom, if ever, means all classes, all types or all kinds” (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; Eerdmans, 1967). In adherence to this rule, no serious Bible translation of these verses has “all” translated as “all kinds.”

The verses above are often cited to support universalism, and a person who starts and ends with them can blindly fall into the same logical trap as the proponent of limited atonement. He is so keen to declare the irresistible love of Jesus that he is prone to conveniently overlook Jesus’ own warnings about Hell. We must consider the full counsel of the Word which declares that while all men have been embraced and forgiven

by God, even within that embrace it is possible for men to reject the Saviour, refusing to embrace the one who has embraced them.

If not universalism, what is this view I am presenting? It is not Calvinism, for while it carries a robust theology of the cross it does not insist with Packer that it is wrong for a gospel proclaimer to say “Christ died for you all” or even “God loves you all.” Also contrary to the Calvinistic system is our belief that God may allow some of his elect to mysteriously resist and grieve the Spirit whose job it is to align them with the truth already fully accomplished for them in Christ. We cannot understand why God would allow one to resist the Spirit any more than we can understand how he, as perfectly sovereign, can allow evil in the world. One cannot undo what Christ has accomplished, but he may deny the reality of it all the way to Hell. He would be, as C.S. Lewis states, “A rebel to the end.”

The biblical view of unlimited actual atonement we are advocating also rejects any form of Arminianism or co-redemption which elevates man’s decision to “belong-himself” to God. It must be emphasized in our proclamation that we belong to God before we believe. Arminianism includes choosing between two realities - being reconciled to God or separated from him. There is, however, only one reality, one truth. To repent and believe the gospel is not to choose a reality but to participate or not participate in the reality of the relationship with God established for us in Christ.

So what about this separation? Does it really exist? Not if you believe Jesus Christ is actually the Creator and Redeemer of all. God has given us a relationship with himself by his incarnation, atonement, resurrection and ascension. At the right hand of the Father the Son has poured out the Spirit on all flesh. As the unique mediator, one with God and one with man, Christ has brought us into the life of God. By the Spirit he permeates all of reality. In him we live and move and have our being. Immanuel was not a 33 year episode.

To set up an artificial separation in evangelism is to act like the cross never occurred. God doesn’t have a pure/impure problem. If he did, he would not have stayed faithful to a dirt-ball like Jacob or to his stiff-necked and rebellious people who had prostituted themselves. More directly, God would not have become one of us, taking on our sin. He would not have touched the leper and associated intimately with others who were “unclean.” Let us never forget that Christ was fully God while he did these things; the cross, death, even hell took place within the life of God.

Yes, we can be sure that God got his arms around the furthest out sinner. What mystery! – God becoming a real man; God crucified; God becoming God’s opposite; God identifying with a corpse! This is preposterous, illogical, foolishness.

Yet once we say God has a pure/impure problem we begin to divorce the Son from the Father, as if Christ became sin for us to protect God from impurity! In our logical way we have even allowed the pure/impure premise to dictate a separation between the Son and the Father at the cross. We forget that Jesus, even in his “My God, My God, why have

you forsaken me,” is just as fully God as he is fully man. Any view of God’s holiness that makes him aloof from sin and the human predicament belies an unsound doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ and Pentecost. In Christ we see the truth that God did not stay separate from sin, he swallowed it up.

If we hammer into kids’ heads the pure/impure problem in evangelism, what happens in discipleship? Do we think kids will go running to God when they fail? - probably the opposite. Are we setting kids up to see a disconnect between Jesus and God – as if Jesus took our sins so God would tolerate us? Surely kids will be left thinking, “Is God really like Jesus,” and “What does God really think of me.” If kids don’t know they belonged to God by virtue of Creation and Redemption before they believed, they will be plagued by the thoughts, “Is my grip on God tight enough?” “Was I old enough?” “Was I sincere enough?” “Were my motives pure enough?”

If sin = separation, will kids wonder if their sins have the power to separate them from God even after they have committed their lives to Him? This could happen especially if kids’ sins are more “repulsive” after their commitment than before: “If sin=separation is the primary attitude of God, but Jesus changed God’s mind about me, then how do I know God won’t change his mind back after I’ve done him wrong?....I guess I need to re-commit my life to him again to take care of this separation.” When we realize that God is a lot more committed to us than we could ever be to him, we find him taking our sin, as heinous as it is, and actually using it to bind us more closely to him than ever before. The forgiveness that washes over us causes us to erupt in praise and thanksgiving to our God!

Without the assurance of the safe arms of God around us, whether in evangelism or discipleship, there is no room to turn around– God’s kindness leads us to repentance. The beautiful truth of 1 John 1:9 is that true confession takes place *within* the faithful promise of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the key to sanctification is the same – you are forgiven, therefore repent. God has in Christ reconciled the world to himself, not counting men’s sins against them. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Jim Rayburn said Jesus Christ is all that we are all about. Here we are not standing on any “-ism”, but only on Jesus Christ, the Creator and Redeemer of all men. When Charles Spurgeon was asked by a church-goer, “Pastor, when were you saved?”, he replied, “I was saved 2,000 years ago on a hill called Calvary.” So let’s lean into the mystery of Christ, boldly refusing to be so afraid of universalism that we fall off the other end; we must not compromise the truth that every kid who gets off those busses this summer has been embraced by Jesus Christ. This is the truth for every kid we know, yet against universalism we can say with Karl Barth, “To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance.”

