



The Witness's Conclusion

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (John 1:6-9)

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God. Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples; And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! (John 1:29-36)

Apart from John's personal conclusions regarding the meaning of his testimony, we cannot complete the account of his testimony. What did John believe about the implications of the Incarnation? Why did the Incarnation occur? What was God's intent in the Incarnation? I believe that John 1:29-36 records John's conclusions and answers to these questions.

Andrew Fuller apparently introduced the rather illogical idea into Baptist theological culture that Jesus' death was "sufficient for all of humanity; efficient for the elect only." It appears that his intent was to hold to both election and free will (specifically, man's active free will in regeneration) at the same time. Supposedly this idea relieved some of the tension between the two concepts. I see no relief whatever in Fuller's alternative, and I see a rather significant contradiction in it. How can we know anything about the extent of the atonement apart from Scripture? What does Scripture say about the question? Did Jesus die for all of humanity in some mystical and prospective sense? Or did He die for the elect, the sheep? (John 10:11 should settle the question, though many other passages corroborate the point.) It appears that Fuller's intent was to relieve the tension between the various passages that on first glance suggest a universal atonement (John 3:16 is frequently cited.) and the passages such as John 10:11 that indicate a specific people in the scope of Jesus' atoning death. If we accept the superficial interpretations of both groups of

passages and wrestle with the question of the extent of Jesus' death, does the Fuller paradigm resolve the tension? I do not believe it relieves any of the tension. In order to preserve harmony within the Trinity (Father electing, Son redeeming, and Holy Spirit regenerating) the extent and the efficiency of the atonement must be equal. The efficiency of Jesus' death was defined by the Father's election, not by an extra-Biblical philosophical distinction between sufficiency and efficiency. In fact the artificial insertion of a disparity between the sufficiency of the atonement and its efficiency almost imposes a degree of duplicity onto the character of God. If it be true and the companion doctrine of a general "offer of salvation" in the gospel be valid, then we have God "sincerely" offering salvation to all of humanity, at least all who hear the gospel, and His divine intent that only the elect respond "savingly." If salvation is a true gift of God and not a general, propositional offer, the tension disappears. Based on this perspective, I believe that Fuller's idea, though quite popular today in many theological circles, fails its primary objective.

Let's examine John 1:29 in light of this background and see if it clarifies the question.

1. "Behold the Lamb of God..." Given the fact that John was a Levite, the son of a Jewish priest, he would have gained extensive personal instruction regarding the significance of the Jewish sacrificial system

and especially the significance of the various sin offerings that were periodically made by the priests on behalf of the Jewish people.

2. Even more enlightening to our question is John's conclusion regarding his assessment that Jesus "...taketh away the sin of the world." This passage is cited almost as frequently as John 3:16 in favor of a general atonement, the name of the doctrine that holds that Jesus died *potentially* for all humanity. The passage simply says too much for that doctrinal concept. First of all, there is nothing in this lesson regarding a potential benefit from the death of Christ. The passage unequivocally states a fact, a conclusion, "...that taketh away the sin of the world." It does not state that He would make it possible for the sin of the world to be taken away, finally conditioned on other factors or conditions to be completed by those who potentially would be saved. *The passage draws a specific conclusion. He takes away the sin of the world!*
3. If Jesus as God Incarnate, the Lamb of God indeed accomplished His assignment, when He completed His work, there could be no sin remaining in the "world" for which He offered Himself in substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

Two rules can be observed to ensure that we arrive at the correct interpretation of a given passage. The first rule questions if our interpretation sufficiently states the conclusions of the lesson. The second rule questions if our interpretation overstates the conclusions of the lesson. If we embrace an interpretation that compromises either conclusion, we have specific evidence that we have not arrived at a correct interpretation of the passage. Advocates of the "sufficient but not efficient" view of the atonement will attempt in various ways to harmonize their view with this passage. However, at the end of the day they must deal with the glaring contradiction that their conclusion imposes onto the passage. If Jesus, the "Lamb of God," truly took away the sin of the world, the only logical and consistent conclusion we can reach from the passage is universalism, that all of humanity were embraced in the atonement, their sins were removed, and they therefore stand before God in atoned sinlessness. Only a diabolical and unjust deity would send them to hell without any residual sin!

If we conclude that Jesus died potentially for the sins of all humanity, we must grapple with the obvious absence in the passage of any indication of mere potentiality in the intent of Jesus' death. Did He take away the sins for

which He died, or didn't He? If He took them away, how can we then conclude that their sins remain to justify their eventual condemnation?

Often advocates of this theological view will say that Jesus died for all sin except for the sin of not believing in Jesus, so every person who will ever be born comes into the world with every sin they shall ever commit wholly covered by the atonement with one exception, the sin of not believing in Jesus. If this concept be true, why did John not qualify his statement in John 1:29 to state that Jesus as God's Lamb took away all the sins of the world with one exception? By this exception, this view fails to harmonize with the text, as well as many others.

Unfortunately in the polarizing debate of theology, many terms invade the dialogue that fail the Biblical concepts they intend to promote. In this case, the term "limited atonement" gained wide acceptance as contrasted with "unlimited atonement" for the opposite view. However, both theological views actually impose limits on the extent of the atonement. The "unlimited atonement" view excludes one sin from coverage in the death of Christ. Advocates of this view clearly define not believing in Jesus as a sin, with great zeal they state their belief that Jesus took away the "sin of the world," and they apparently fail to see the glaring inconsistency between their views and the various passages that they typically cite to support their view.

The "limited atonement" view by definition limits the atonement to the elect only. One view limits the atonement based on the divine intent. The other view equally limits it based on human failure to cooperate with God's intent. Both views in fact limit the atonement. Perhaps "particular" atonement would be a more appropriate term. Jesus died for a particular people, His elect (Matthew 1:21).

What is the logical and Biblical conclusion of this passage and the many other passages that deal with the death of Christ? Jesus' death "took away" all the sins of all for whom He died. This interpretation offers the simplest and most straightforward view of the passage. The passage does not say that He would take away the sin of the world "if..." It states the outcome of the atonement as a concise fact, not as a mere potential, nor as a fuzzy "sufficient-efficient" paradigm that leaves the conclusion of His atonement up to the actions of humanity. As we examine other contexts, we shall examine this truth in greater detail. We shall also examine the fallacy of human cooperation in the essential work of regeneration. The two errant views go hand in hand.

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