

A FUNDAMENTAL BAPTIST ODYSSEY

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

My odyssey (journey) began in 1972. I was holding revival meetings in North Dakota. In preparing a message on John 3:16, questions began to form in my mind regarding the death of Christ—particularly about substitutionary atonement. I was trying to understand how the death of Christ could be both *substitutionary* in nature, *universal* in scope, and yet not affect salvation in every sinner. *Substitution* means “replacement”—a switch, one in place of another. If Christ’s sacrifice satisfied all the demands of justice, why would not every sinner be saved? What could God yet hold against him? I knew that the sinner had to *accept* Christ’s payment for his sins in order to be saved, but this condition merely raised more questions. A condition (acceptance) after the fact (Christ’s death) makes *substitution* impossible by its very nature.

My quest for an answer to this problem took several years. From 1979 through 1985, I had been traveling as a fundamental Baptist evangelist. My family and I moved to Denver from Indiana in 1982. This move took me out of the Midwest, resulting in fewer invitations for meetings. I was constrained to take secular employment, which took me out of the ministry for a time. While I chafed at this turn of events, I have come to see God’s providential hand in it. This was God’s time to bring me answers to my questions concerning the death of Christ. Let me briefly explain what I learned.

In the little booklet *Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?* Dr. Charles R. Smith of Grace Theological Seminary argues that substitutionary atonement is impossible for a conditional atonement. He writes, “The cross was not intended to save certain individuals; rather, it was intended to make all men savable” (p. 12). However, if Christ died for all men as a *substitutionary* atonement, then sinners could not be required to pay for their own sins in hell. Recognizing this problem, Smith cited Dr. Alva J. McClain’s position, which he calls “forensic equivalence.” He explained, “We are not to view this [Christ’s death] as involving an individual and separable penalty for each sin of each individual [the heart of substitutionary atonement]. . . . Exact equivalence of punishment was unnecessary and impossible. [How so?] . . . He did not pay *the* payment which we would otherwise be required to pay” (p. 13). In other words, Christ, the innocent “*Lamb of God*” suffered the wrath of God to an extent equal to whatever any guilty sinner would suffer. He did not atone for the specific sins of any particular sinner. Thus, it is not the death of Christ that saves anyone, because God saves the sinner only when he accepts Christ as his Savior. God forgives the sinner on the basis of his decision, not for anything Christ did on the cross because Christ did no more for the one who accepts Him than the one who rejects Him.

This explanation is the only possible explanation for a universal and conditional atonement. However, fundamental Baptists insist on declaring that they also believe in a *substitutionary* atonement. One cannot have it both ways without erroneously redefining the concept of substitution.

At first, I considered the terminology as mere Calvinistic baggage carried over from the old days. Perhaps the term *substitutionary atonement* should be discarded in favor of a better term to state our real beliefs. Although I did not at that time have Dr. Smith’s booklet (cited above), I searched diligently for someone who would make clear statements such as his. At the same time I kept asking myself, “Should not the Bible be our sole source of faith and doctrine? What does the Bible teach?” After a careful and diligent

search, I concluded that the Bible actually taught substitutionary atonement. As much as it grated on me, it was not substitutionary atonement that needed the ax, but conditional atonement. I was faced with the position which I so much (in ignorance) hated before—"particular redemption," the intention of Christ to redeem only the elect.

When I accepted "particular redemption," I was amazed at how clear the issue was and how it opened so many other passages to my understanding. I also began to discover that our Baptist forefathers, for the most part, believed this truth. Charles Haddon Spurgeon certainly did. Why didn't fundamental Baptists believe it today? Even more curiously, why was there such hostility toward the position?

In 1990 I had the opportunity to return to the pastorate. I was excited and somewhat fearful. When I came to the church, I did not want to make my newfound understanding a hobbyhorse. I realized that since I had been ignorant of the truth and it had taken me several years of study to come to understanding, I could not expect the people to accept my position immediately. I concluded that if I simply preached the Bible, the people would also come to the truth for themselves in God's time. Besides, I had not, up to this time, read Calvinists themselves, and I did not want to align myself with a position that I might later regret. I determined that I must study the issue further. I had let the pulpit committee know of my position. (I have written documentation on that.) But the church was already fragmented and suffering from previous conflict. They needed a man to love them and nurture them back to spiritual health. That was my goal. It certainly was not forcing "Calvinism" on them.

It did not take long, however, before a campaign was started against me. Anti-Calvinistic literature was anonymously mailed and passed around in the services. People began to leave the church, some over "Calvinism," not understanding it, but being convinced that it must be wrong. A few left because they did not want to get into another church dispute. Others offered to stay and support me if I would go the contemporary route with its lax standards, worldly music, paraphrased Bible versions, and warm fuzzy sermons. Others stayed with me, hungry for the Word of God. As for me, I wanted desperately to prove that I was wrong in my theological conclusions. I wanted to be able to stand in the pulpit, ask forgiveness for being wrong about Calvinism, and quietly leave the ministry. However, the more I studied, the more I was convinced of the truth of God's sovereignty in salvation.

At the same time, I saw how unpopular this position was. I was bewildered that many of my friends and acquaintances in the ministry were less than enthusiastic about discussing the issue. Whenever the subject came up, it was met with silence and a change of subject. I also was amazed at the ignorance of doctrine in pulpits and leadership. I was even more amazed at the gross misrepresentations of Calvinism and its history by many who should have known better.

While people dogmatically assert the sovereignty of God, they inconsistently *limit* His sovereignty in the area of salvation. Humans regard the right to freedom of choice so strongly that they will strip God of His sovereignty in order to have their say. "God has sovereignly chosen to limit His sovereignty in order to give sinners a choice," people insist without support of a single text of Scripture. Such statements must be challenged, but, sadly, there is *no* open forum. The system is closed, and if one insists on God's sovereignty in salvation, he is the one considered in error—and that without a hearing.

I also discovered, to my dismay, that young people coming out of fundamental *Baptist* colleges are ignorant of the fact that, with the exception of the general "free will" Baptists (whom very few claim as part of our Baptist

heritage), every Baptist confession of faith through the 1800s is Calvinistic. On the other hand, if a Baptist Bible college student openly took the Calvinistic position of his Baptist forefathers (for example, Charles Haddon Spurgeon), he would not be allowed to graduate. The pressure is such that many who do believe in these "despised" doctrines are forced to be closet Calvinists. If they were to express their views, they would be branded and shunned. Take the case of a solid, separated, godly, orthodox missionary who is denied support because of his views on the sovereignty of God's work of salvation.

This antagonism to Calvinism, however, is far more serious than mere disagreement over minor doctrinal issues. The roots of the disagreement reflect a very dangerous compromise. Zealous to stand against compromise, I fear fundamental Baptists have compromised the integrity of the doctrine of salvation. How? They have strayed from their original moorings and have allowed the doctrine of salvation to be corrupted by the Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney's "new methods" evangelism and by the Arminianism of John Wesley's depravity-destroying "prevenient grace"—the supposed grace which restores ability to all unregenerate sinners to freely choose Christ for salvation. According to this definition sinners are no longer *totally* depraved. The power of God is no longer needed in gospel work, and evangelism is the art of *selling* Christ. The better one is at persuading sinners, the more sales he makes. Emotional manipulation makes the gospel appealing to the godless. Human methodology is believed to produce "revival," and pride replaces "*fear and trembling*" in the preaching of the cross (1 Cor 2:1-5).

The issue boils down to this: does regeneration produce saving faith, or does having faith produce regeneration? Fundamental Baptists will insist that unregenerate, spiritually dead, God-hating sinners can of themselves savingly believe the gospel. This view allows sinners to contribute the *vital* part to their own salvation. The sinner holds the key that determines the success or frustration of Christ's cross work. Paul, on the other hand, insists salvation is all of grace "*that no flesh should glory in his presence*" (Eph 2:8-10; 1 Cor 1:29). Simple logic states that if a sinner can contribute *anything* to his salvation, whatever he contributes is the point on which he may boast. The Word, however, stresses, "*He that glories, let him glory in the Lord*" (1 Cor 1:31). Calvinism—*particular redemption*—removes all claims to glory from any of the redeemed. It is offensive to many for that very reason: it takes all the glory away from man and places it where it belongs—with God (Gal 5:11).

My journey is ongoing. I continue to grow and learn. The more I learn, the more I am convinced that Christ's sacrifice was in the behalf of specific individuals; His sheep (John 10:15), and His church (Acts 20:28). His death secured their salvation. He actually—not potentially—"*obtained eternal redemption for us*" (Heb 9:12, Rev 5:9). Believing on Christ is the evidence of that redemption.

Thankfully, there seems to be a revival of these "old doctrines." Perhaps the day will come when Calvinistic fundamental Baptists will again come into their own. My daily prayer is this: "*wilt you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you!*" (Psalm 85:6).