

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Limited Atonement: Frankenstein Theology

Understanding Limited Atonement (Part 1)

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Many Americans find social profiling objectionable, and not without good reason. Like the Hindu caste system, our class structure in the West has a history of grouping people together based on income, race, religion, or gender irrespective of who they are, what they believe, or with whom they associate. Simply submerge a person into the eclectic stream of Western culture and, before long, they'll emerge from its waters with a proverbial watermark tattooed on them, courtesy of social stratification.

Among our young people, especially, is a growing outcry against labels. To arbitrarily stereotype a teenager as a jock, a brain, a skater, a rocker, or a gang-banger without firsthand knowledge of their back-story is prejudicial, we're told. And teens are not alone in their protests. Many adults, too, share this same acrimony. They lament that society pigeonholes them as a blue-collar laborer or a white-collar professional; a Republican or a Democrat; a conservative or a liberal; a Soccer-Mom or a Working Mother; or as lower-class, middle-class, and upper-class citizens. But if the recent rise of the Log Cabin Republicans, Blue-Dog Democrats, and political independents tell us anything, it's that an increasing number of people in America jockey against type.

But in the Christian Church only the opposite is true. We tend to thrive on labels. We have a tag, in fact, for just about every type of spiritual persuasion found under our cathedral ceilings. For example, the terms "Premillennialist," "Post-Millennialist," "Amillennialist," and "Dispensationalist" have been with us now for the better part of a century, each of which conveniently imparts a person's eschatological bent. Labels such as "Charismatic" and "Cessationist" are also widespread and speak to a person's views on the *charismata*, or spiritual phenomena. Moreover, titles such as "Baptist," "Episcopalian," "Lutheran," and "Methodist"—just to name a few—go back centuries and are ecclesiastical boundary markers. To wear any one of these labels is to essentially identify with a particular eschatology, theology, or ecclesiology. And many Christians wear them proudly.

That Christians are quick to pin labels on other Christians is, to some degree, a matter of expediency. After all, it's much easier to quantify someone's theology with a *single word* than it is to invest the time fleshing out the details. Rightly or wrongly, religious labels offer a high-level summary about a person and their viewpoints without requiring much homework. For this reason the use of labels, politically incorrect though they may be, are likely to be with us for a long time to come—both inside and outside the Church.

Without a doubt two of the more provocative labels to achieve notoriety in the Christian Church are *Calvinist* and *Arminian*. More than any other, these labels tend to spark a firestorm of controversy. Simply mention them by name, or espouse either position in debate, and watch how passionate, if not contentious, many evangelicals become. Like greased lightning, cordial conversations can turn electrifying and cool tempers overheated when these labels are brandished at large. And with the recent resurgence of Reformed Theology in the West,¹ these labels are once again *en vogue* and remind us that they still pack a hefty punch.

But there is also a third rather nebulous category to contend with concerning this debate. Far too often I have heard Christians, particularly those who vacillate on thorny theological matters, classify themselves as *Calminians*—a pithy title meant to suggest a person who espouses an amalgamation of Calvinistic and Arminian beliefs. These particular Christians reject the “Calvinist” or “Arminian” label outright, but instead choose to wear a mishmash of the two.

The impetus behind this third label is harmony. Calminians find merit in both Calvinism and Arminianism but regard the debate as too subjective and divisive to warrant dogmatism. Not unlike John Cassian in the fifth century, they believe that by finding a middle ground, they can bring a peaceable end to a theological war. On the surface, this seems noble because it attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable differences between Calvin (and the Reformers) and Arminius (and the Remonstrants). But in their quest for unity, Calminians defang Reformed Theology of its intended bite and declaw Arminianism of its scratch. They cannibalize both systems to such a degree that we are left with a hybrid theology that is largely innocuous.

In a nutshell, Calminians believe that it is acceptable to hold fast to both Calvinism and Arminianism, at least in part, without negating the other entirely. Such thinking affords these Christians the romantic freedom to court both theologies without ever having to wed either. It celebrates the best of both worlds, so to speak. By placing one foot in each camp Calminians sleep soundly at night, having put to rest once and for all this longstanding debate in their minds. But how they go about it is both pedestrian and problematical.

The majority of Calminians I meet, although intellectually deft and well-meaning, invariably betray their shortsightedness when pressed at length. As one evangelical explained to me, “I believe in Total Depravity, as taught in Calvinism, but I also believe in the Arminian teaching of Universal Atonement.” He then proudly concluded, “I guess you could call me a Calminian.” Another seasoned Christian once boasted in my ear, “I accept only three of the five points of Calvinism and two of the five points of Arminianism.” She ended her harangue with the bashful admission, “I suppose I have two dogs in the fight.”

By holding a syncretistic position, these individuals are representative of a growing class of evangelicals who flaunt a Frankenstein theology. They fraternize with other beliefs—keeping what they like and surgically removing what they don’t—until a theological monster emerges. And in so doing, Calminians prove to be doctrinal mutts rather than pure breeds. But as both the studied Arminian and the devout Calvinist will attest, any attempt to crossbreed Arminianism with Calvinism is ineffective. It is tantamount to crossbreeding a dog and a cat; they are mutually exclusive articles with incompatible DNA.

Notwithstanding its inconsistencies, Calvinianism remains an attractive prospect for those who are scandalized by God's sovereignty. It neutralizes their anxiety over predestination, placates their discomfort concerning free-will, and satisfies their uncertainty around election. In effect, these evangelicals prefer the titillating goose bumps that Arminianism offers when it says that unregenerate men are morally free and that Christ loves everyone uniformly and died for all men equally. But they also want the majesty and confidence offered by Calvinism that says God sovereignly controls all things, including the eternal security of the redeemed. Calvinianism, so it seems, is the perfect opium for the theologically schizophrenic. But the reality is, when fleshed out to its logical conclusions, it is not only untenable but is intellectually, philosophically, and theologically incongruent.

Those who retreat to the safety net of a middle ground do so at the cost of their credibility, for both Calvinism and Arminianism are each built upon their sequential five points which stand in stark contrast to one another. Thus, to acquiesce on one point in either system is to crash its entire system. Stated differently, Calvinism and Arminianism are systematic theologies comprised of five interconnected links that make up their respective chains. To remove one link from either chain is to break it altogether. To compromise on one point for the sake of theological balance with the other, as Calvinians do, is not only to un-systematize both but is to become discombobulated and incoherent in one's thinking. This truth cannot be overemphasized.

For instance, one cannot accept the Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity and still believe, as Arminians do, that election is conditioned upon the foreseen faith and free-will choice of a spiritually dead sinner. How an unregenerate man whose self-will is enslaved to sin can make such an *un-enslaved* decision to accept Christ we are not told. The only alternative is to cheapen the extent of man's innate depravity and his deadness, and to discount altogether his inability to incline himself toward the things of God. And this is exactly what Calvinians do. But as we have seen, morally enslaved and spiritually dead sinners do not have the freedom or cognizance to "choose election" any more than a physical slave or a literal corpse has the ability to command his own destiny. By insisting that a totally depraved sinner is "alive enough" and is "willingly able enough" to become elect, in spite of his state of reprobation, is to manifestly align with Arminianism.

On this crucial point Calvinianism breaks rank with Reformed Theology. It leaves in its path a wake of destruction that, like Arminianism, glories in the autonomy of man, denies God's sovereign freedom in election, and cheapens the Bible's teaching on the depravity and reprobation of sinful man. In short, the Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity outright negates the Arminian doctrine of Conditional Election, and vice versa. The two cannot be reconciled nor coexist in one system (unless, of course, they are redefined at the start).

Likewise, one cannot accept the Arminian doctrine of Universal Atonement—that Christ made *propitiation* (satisfaction) and *expiation* (cleansing) for the sins of *all* men by his shed blood on the cross—and still hold equally to the Calvinist position that only "a few" are elected for salvation. The two positions are contradictory. To *atone* for all mankind's sins is to invariably *save* all sinners. But how all the sins of the world can be "paid" for on the cross—to include the sin of unbelief—while still maintaining that only the Elect are saved and the majority of the world is hell-bound for their unbelief (which

supposedly was atoned for) we are once again not told. Such a paradoxical view, which is a favorite of Calvinians, is irreconcilable and exposes their woeful misunderstanding of the atonement.

As will be explained in greater detail in essays that follow, to atone for sin means to redeem someone from the consequences of sin. Therefore to have one's sins atoned for is to be fully pardoned, not partially paroled. And to be fully exonerated, to the Bible's way of thinking, is to unavoidably enter the gateway that leads to salvation. Thus, to side with Arminians, as Calvinians do, and teach that Christ's atonement redeems *all men* without passion or prejudice, but still maintain allegiance to Calvinism's assertion that only an elect few are saved, is to believe in a blatant contradiction.

The redemption that Christ earned for "his people" (Matt. 1:21)—which, by necessity, secures their salvation (Luke 19:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:3-4; 1 Tim. 1:15; Tit. 2:14)—includes all that is involved in bringing them into a right relationship with God. However, if Christ's atonement is universal, so then must be the salvation that accompanies it. And universal salvation is something the Bible strictly forbids (cf. John 3:18). The Arminian view of Universal Atonement, therefore, outright negates the Calvinist view of Unconditional Election, and vice versa. Again, unless these terms are redefined at the onset, they cannot be reconciled nor coexist in the same system.

I recognize that not everyone grasps the philosophical and theological intricacies behind Calvinianism or the collateral damage left in its backwash. These issues are highly complex. But suffice it to say that when the veneer of the debate is pulled back there are only two labels, not three, from which a person can choose. There is no middle ground. And without failure, when Calvinianism is weighed on the scale of neutrality it is ultimately found in the balance left wanting. It is anything but nonpartisan or middle-of-the-road.

When Calvinians are theologically and philosophically pressed at length, they almost always prove to be full-on Arminians. Dr. R.C. Sproul notes the following:

There are a host of folks who call themselves four-point Calvinist because they can't swallow the doctrine of limited atonement. ... When I have talked to people who call themselves four-point Calvinists and have had the opportunity to discuss it with them, I have discovered that they were no-point Calvinists. They thought they believed in total depravity, in unconditional election, in irresistible grace, and in the perseverance of the saints, but they didn't understand these points.²

Likewise, Dr. James White, the director of the apologetics ministry *Alpha and Omega Ministries* and a teaching elder at the Phoenix Reformed Baptist Church in Arizona, writes:

Upon examination the vast majority of those who call themselves "four point Calvinists" [i.e. Calvinians] are actually not Reformed at all, for their objections are to God's freedom in electing men to salvation and to the total inability of man in his sin.³

The options available to us are straightforward: Either a sinner has the freedom to choose Jesus Christ (Arminianism), or he has forfeited his freedom as a burden of Original Sin (Calvinism). Either a sinner is sick from sin and partially reprobate (Arminianism), or he is dead in sin and is depraved in totality (Calvinism). Either God elects a sinner based on what He foresees in him (Arminianism), or He elects him based solely on His sovereign decree (Calvinism). Either a sinner shares in the glory of his salvation by freely cooperating with God's grace prior to regeneration (Arminianism), or God *first* regenerates him without his cooperation in order to save him afterward (Calvinism). Either God woos or entices a sinner to Christ by outward grace on the gamble that it won't be resisted (Arminianism), or God tames the rebel will by inward grace while dragging the sinner irresistibly to Himself (Calvinism). Either a Christian's salvation is vulnerable, and can be lost by an act of the will (Arminianism), or it is eternally secure regardless of the extent of his past, present, or future rebellion (Calvinism). Lastly, either Christ made atonement *possible* for all sinners by his death on the cross (Arminianism), or Christ's atonement was *actual* and is applied only to select beneficiaries decided upon in advance (Calvinism).

Any attempt to philosophize our way out of these two sides or to suggest a third medium so as to avoid a theological headache is doubletalk. Neither Calvinism nor Arminianism allows for any hybrid between them. God is either wholly sovereign or not sovereign at all. Man is either entirely free or not free at all. Christ either made atonement or he did not. No such doctrines exist in the Bible that teach that God is "mostly sovereign" or man is "somewhat free" or Christ "potentially atoned" for all men. By definition these words—*sovereignty*, *freedom*, and *atonement*—are absolute. There is no middle ground. A Christian must pick one of only two sides.

I am not alone in my analysis of Calvinianism, as any well-studied Arminian will also attest. In fact, a leading Arminian scholar and famed theologian, Roger Olson, Professor of Theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary and author of *Arminian Theology: Myths And Realities* agrees. In a recent posting on his blog, entitled *My Evangelical Arminian Theological Musings*, he is rather forthright on the matter. Olson writes:

There is no middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism with regard to the three crucial doctrines about which they differ: election (conditional or unconditional), atonement (limited or universal) and grace (resistible or irresistible). ... I argue that, whereas Calvinists and Arminians have much in common, there is no hybrid of them or middle ground between them.⁴

In the end, all five points of Calvinism cancel out the five points of Arminianism, and vice versa. They are contradictions in terms that cannot be mutually supported, either in part or in full. This makes Calvinianism not only unviable but overly simplistic in its attempt to mend fences. Owing to its intricacy, the Calvinism-Arminianism debate deserves much deeper consideration than a third-party label, and those who wear it, are willing to give.

Apart from their dignified effort to find a happy medium, we must consider why Calvinians believe a middle ground is even necessary in the first place. What exactly do

they demur most about Calvinism or Arminianism that prevents them from embracing either five-point system in total rather than just in part? What particular petal in T.U.L.I.P. do they find so objectionable that it warranted their defection from Reformed Theology centuries ago and launched a fringe movement? And what continues to stoke its fire today, even in spite of its well-known inconsistencies?

The answer to all of these questions is hardly surprising. If there are two words in the Reformed lexicon that makes the blood of Western evangelicals boil hot—to say nothing about the tempers of many evangelists and missionaries worldwide—it’s the Calvinist doctrine called Limited Atonement. At the root of virtually every denial of Calvinism is an omnipresent loathing for this doctrine.

The visceral response that Limited Atonement evokes from Calvinians goes well beyond the borders of our seminary classrooms and is found in virtually every sector of the Christian Church. Simply inquire of the layperson in the pew or the nominal skeptic on the street as to whether or not they believe the Bible teaches that Jesus died for everyone, including them, and they will generally answer in the affirmative. Suggest the contrary, however, and watch their eyebrows point in umbrage. So it is with Calvinians. If for no other reason, the theology of Calvinianism was brought to bear on the Christian Church primarily because of its opposition to Limited Atonement. It continues to be one of the most, if not *the* most, contested tenets of Calvinism (as well as the most underappreciated and misunderstood). Calvinians exist, really, because Limited Atonement refuses to go away.

By rejecting Limited Atonement and subscribing to other points of Calvinism, such as Total Depravity or Unconditional Election, Calvinian theology betrays its inconsistencies. Dr. Loraine Boettner, who was no small authority on the issue, said as much when he wrote:

It will be seen at once that this doctrine [of Limited Atonement] necessarily follows from the doctrine of election. If from eternity God has planned to save one portion of the human race and not another, it seems to be a contradiction to say that His work has equal reference to both portions, or that He sent His Son to die for those whom He had predetermined not to save, as truly as, and in the same sense that He was sent to die for those whom He had chosen for salvation. *These two doctrines must stand or fall together. We cannot logically accept one and reject the other. If God has elected some and not others to eternal life, then plainly the primary purpose of Christ’s work was to redeem the elect* (emphasis added).⁵

Because the vast majority of Christians in America likely classify themselves as Calvinians—that is, they are opponents of Limited Atonement but exponents of two or more points in T.U.L.I.P.—it is imperative that we first have a proper understanding of Christ’s atonement before launching a counter-assault. As a primer, therefore, we will not only devote considerable space to the work of Christ on the cross but will dedicate the next essay to the theological and philosophical quagmires inherent to the Arminian teaching of Universal Atonement. After laying the groundwork, we will then counter the Arminian view with an exposé on Limited Atonement.

In the meantime, it behooves us to remember that, in spite of the popularity that comes with protesting such an unpopular teaching, Limited Atonement has played an instrumental role throughout Church history. Moreover, it is far from a minority report. This particular doctrine has in fact been championed by some of the greatest minds the Church has ever received and, to that end, has been decisively endorsed by one Church council after another (see Appendix). That Christ died for his elect, and his elect *only*, is far from theological racism, as some Arminians and Calvinians dare to suggest. Rather, it is a breathtaking doctrine of grace.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ See Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*; (Crossway Books, 2008).

² R.C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007); pp. 140-142

³ Dave Hunt & James White, *Debating Calvinism*; (Multnomah Publishers, 2004); p. 178

⁴ www.patheos.com/community/rogereolson/2011/06/04/is-there-a-middle-ground-between-calvinism-and-arminianism

⁵ Loraine Boettner, *Limited Atonement*, as cited at http://www.the-highway.com/atonement_Boettner.html