**‘Limited’ atonement and the universal proclamation of the gospel**

Text: Luke 24:47

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 49:5-7; Luke 24:36-49

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 232, 266, 138, ‘The power of the cross’, 533

**Series:** Canons of Dort #6 (Art 2:5-7)

**Theme:** The connection between the Scriptural doctrine of limited atonement and the universal proclamation of the gospel.

**Proposition:** The gospel should be proclaimed to everyone.

**Introduction**

Have you heard the story of the church building with no front doors? It just had a very small gate around the back which was almost completely obscured by a thick hedge. The gate then opened onto a narrow path in a garden enclosed by a high wall that connected the gate to the rear door of the church building. Nobody would find that gate (and then the path and the rear door) unless they were led there by someone who already knew where it was. The purpose of this fictitous story is that it illustrates a view held by some Christians that the elect will find their own way into both the church and God’s kingdom because God will sovereignly show them the way without the need for anyone else being involved.

You can see that we don’t hold to this view because we do have a number of large very visible front doors on our church building! We do have these front doors, but we don’t have a sign out the front saying ‘Jesus died for you’. This is because we do not believe in this church that Jesus died for every single human being. We believe in the doctrine of Limited Atonement, the subject of the second head of doctrine in the Canons of Dort. This is the ‘L’ of TULIP. Particular Redemption or Definite Atonement are much clearer terms than Limited Atonement because “limited” could be misunderstood to imply deficiency in Christ’s saving work

The Canons of Dort are very careful to explain that there is no lack of value in Christ’s atoning death. ‘Limited atonement’ does **not** mean that there was insufficient capacity in Christ’s work to save more people than only God’s elect. Limited atonement does **not** mean that Christ was only able to save some because there wasn’t ‘enough sacrifice to go around’; not enough ‘satisfaction for everyone’s debt’. The value of Christ’s death is infinite – without limit - because not only is He a perfect man and also the only begotten Son of God, He also bore ‘*the wrath and curse of God which we by our sins had deserved*’ (Cof D Art 2:4).

As we saw in the last sermon, the doctrine of limited, definite or particular atonement is a necessary consequence of the Biblical doctrine of election. So if Christ only died for the elect, none of whom can be lost, does the doctrine of limited atonement mean that the gospel should only be preached to the elect? Should we remove our front doors and have a tiny obscure entrance that only those whom God Himself leads to be saved can come into this church building and hear the good news of salvation? Is the indiscriminate gospel invitation really a bogus sham to all except for the elect because the non-elect have no ability to respond to God’s call because they are spiritually dead? It is this question that the Canons of Dort Articles 2.5-7 answer. We’ll consider this topic from our text in Luke 24:47 under three headings:

1. The free offer of the gospel
2. The rejection of the gospel
3. The acceptance of the gospel
4. **The free offer of the gospel**

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and they saw and touched the reality of His body that had been raised from the dead. He enabled them to understand that everything written about Him in the Old Testament revelation of God had already or would yet be fulfilled in Him. He explained God’s plan for the transmission of the gospel message, saying: ‘*that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*’ (Luke 24:47). Gospel proclamation requires a call to repentance and faith as the means of entrance into the individual experience of salvation (e.g. [Acts 16:30–31](https://www.esv.org/acts%2016%3A30%E2%80%9331/); [Rom. 10:9–10](https://www.esv.org/Rom.%2010%3A9%E2%80%9310/); [Eph. 1:13](https://www.esv.org/Eph.%201%3A13/)). That is why I aim to have a call to come to Christ in repentance and faith in all the sermons that I preach. Listen out for the ‘gospel call’ in this sermon!

In Reformed Theology this open invitation to come to the Lord is called ‘the free offer of the gospel’. This means that the gospel is freely offered to all people, regardless of whether or not they are elect. It is freely offered to all kinds of people without distinction or discrimination. It is freely offered to everyone without any partiality based on their race, gender, age, social standing or vaccination status. The free offer of the gospel is revealed in the words of Christ when he speaks of ‘all nations’. The word nations (Greek ‘ethnos’ from which we derive our English term ‘ethnic’) means a multitude of people who together are united in kinship, culture or traditions. This word is often used to refer to non-Jews – Gentiles (e.g. Rom 11:13) but is also applied in the singular form to the Jewish nation (e.g. Luke 7:5). So Jesus revealed that the gospel is to be proclaimed to all the multitudes of people on the earth without exception.

Notice that He did not say ‘to all the elect’ or ‘to all those whom the Father has given me’ or ‘to all those who look like good candidates for being disciples of mine’. The ‘free offer of the gospel’ is summarised in Canons of Dort Article 2.5:

“*The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, 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*”.

Here is the perplexing and mysterious truth: God loves the world and calls everyone in the world to Christ outwardly through the Gospel, and yet God only loves the elect with a saving purpose and calls them only by His Spirit inwardly through the same Gospel (John 6:63–64; 10:3–5, 11, 14–18, 25–30; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:28–30; 2 Tim. 1:9). If we try to unravel this divine mystery using our human logic and try to come up with our own ideas that are contrary to God’s Word then we end up in error.

This is what happened with the Remonstrants, the followers of Jacobus Arminius. Their teaching, now called Arminianism, upholds the free offer of the gospel but denies that God has chosen to save only His elect from before the foundations of the world. Arminianism makes sense to the human mind, teaching that God wants to save everyone and offers the gospel freely, but because human beings have free will they can chose whether or not to accept the offer. They can exercise this choice because whilst they have been damaged by the effect of sin, they still have some spiritual vitality remaining with which to choose God. There are many churches in our city and nation who follow the teachings of Jacobus Arminius (although few would probably know who he was). These churches will likely have large front doors and may also put a sign out the front saying ‘Jesus died for you’.

There is a less common, but equally false, attempt to use human logic and come up with an ideas that is contrary to God’s Word. It is often called ‘hyper-Calvinism’. This is the belief that God saves the elect through His sovereign will with little or no use of the methods of bringing about salvation (such as evangelism, preaching, and prayer for the lost). Most churches or denominations that hold to hyper-Calvinistic theology are marked by fatalism, coldness, and a lack of assurance of faith. There is little emphasis upon God’s love for the lost and His own people but rather an unbiblical exclusive preoccupation with God’s sovereignty, His election of the saved, and His wrath for the lost. If these churches had hidden gates round the back of their buildings with no front door and no sign to indicate that they are a church that would be consistent with their theology.

The Canons of Dort uphold both the truth that Christ died only for the elect AND the truth that the church is called to proclaim the gospel to all peoples without discrimination. How individual people respond is the subject of our next two points, firstly

1. **The rejection of the gospel**

We know what has happened as a result of God’s will that the gospel be proclaimed in the name of Christ to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. For example the Apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel to King Agrippa who said ‘*In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?*’ (Acts 26:28). There’s no indication that Agrippa accepted the gospel, but his use of the term ‘Christian’, which was often a term of contempt in the 1st century AD (ref. 1 Pet 4:16), likely indicates his rejection of the good news of salvation in Christ.

Whilst some have accepted the gospel, many have rejected the same message over the past 2,000 years. All of us likely know individual people ourselves who have rejected the offer of the gospel. Why is this? Is there something lacking in the work of Christ that is not enough to save everyone? This question is answered by Canons of Dort Article 2.6: Why some do not 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*”.

Here is another part of the divine mystery of God’s sovereign election. Only those who are elect can be saved, not because Christ’s work is in any way insufficient or incomplete, but because they reject the gospel through their own fault. The Canons of Dort uphold the Scriptural truth that each person is responsible for their own response to the gospel. We see this revealed in the Bible in various places, for example of Judas Iscariot - Jesus said before he was kissed by the traitor: “*For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!*" (Luke 22:22). God’s sovereign decree that Jesus would be betrayed did not in any way remove the responsibility from Judas who would suffer God’s judgement for his wicked act.

Jesus tells the parable of the wedding feast to which a king calls those who had already been invited to attend, but they would not come. Some just paid no attention, others treated his servants shamefully and killed them (Matt 22:6). So the king sent his servants out to gather others ‘*as many as you can find, both good and bad*’ to come to the wedding feast. In the parable there is one man who has no wedding garment and who represents a group: those who are Christians **by name only** who are relying upon their own goodness, their own “clothing”, who think that their religious observances and moral behaviour make them good enough for entry into the Kingdom of God. They have heard the gospel invitation and think that merely hearing the Word is sufficient for them to enter the eternal glory of the presence of God.

Jesus sums up His parable with these concluding words: “*For many are called, but few are chosen*” (Matt 22:14). The parable reveals both the free offer of the gospel AND the sovereign election (choosing) of God. The Lord does not explain the mystery, He just tells the truth as it is. It is not surprising that there are revelations of God in the Bible that we cannot fully explain or understand. The Scriptures are ultimately authored by God not by man. His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

That is what you’d expect to be the difference between the Creator and the creatures made in His image. So when those we broadcast the free offer of the gospel to reject Christ it is not God who is at fault, but they themselves. In contrast, when those we broadcast the free offer of the gospel to accept Christ it is not because they have earned God favour as we’ll see in our third point.

1. **The acceptance of the gospel**

We know what has happened as a result of God’s will that the gospel be proclaimed in the name of Christ to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. Many have come to Christ! Within a few decades of the time when Jesus spoke to his gathered disciples after his resurrection, the gospel did go out to all the nations. This was in fulfilment of the prophesy that we heard earlier from Isaiah: A man would come who would be formed from the womb to restore God’s people to Him (Isa 49:5). This Servant would be the Light for the nations that Old Testament Israel had failed to be (Isa 49:6). Because of this Man, salvation would reach to the end of the earth.

And so it has! Here we are, brothers and sisters, in Christchurch – latitude 43 degrees south, 172 degrees east.(Jerusalem is 31 degrees north, 35 degrees east). We are literally at the ‘end of the earth’ from the perspective of geographical Israel from where Jesus spoke the words of our text.

All around the world over the past 2,000 years many have accepted the gospel. They have not been saved by being godlier than others, more zealous for Christ than others, or more deserving of God’s favour than others. All who have accepted the gospel, both before Christ came to this earth and since, have been saved by grace through faith, not as a result of works (Eph 2:8-9). The Canons of Dort Article 2.7 states:

“*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*”.

I am thankful that our church building has large, visible, front doors, that we have a sign out the front and an online presence through our website. I am thankful that we welcome whoever comes to gather here with us without discrimination. I am thankful that I am able to freely offer the gospel on behalf of the Lord as an ‘ambassador for Christ’. I am thankful that as a church we believe in the Biblical doctrine of divine election. I am thankful that we also believe in limited, that is particular, atonement, understanding that Christ died only for God’s elect. I am thankful that I am not called to understand all the mysteries of God, for I cannot. I, like you am called to believe, not to fully comprehend everything that God has revealed.

How about you? Are you thankful that we don’t expect others to find a small gate round the back of the building to get in because we’ve fallen into the error of hyper-Calvinism? Are you ready to proclaim the gospel freely to everyone you can in the week and weeks to come? Are you comforted that you are not responsible for other people’s response to the gospel message, just for your part in delivering it? Are you amazed that the Lord would trust us with the gospel, the good news about the power of the cross, placing this treasure in us who are like jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us? (2 Cor 4:7).

Which category of people do you fit into yourself? Those who have rejected the gospel or those who have accepted the gospel? Here is the truth: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).

So come to Christ in repentance and faith today (that was the gospel call!).

AMEN.