

The “Whole World” in I John 2:2

A reader asks if the Arminian and Amyraldian doctrine of universal atonement is taught in I John 2:2: “And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Here are two simple arguments from the context which prove that I John 2:2’s reference to the “whole world” cannot refer to absolutely everybody, including the reprobate.

First, the word “propitiation” (2:2) refers to the turning away of God’s wrath by its being borne by Christ the substitute. If the Lord Jesus really bore God’s wrath for everybody, then nobody can go to hell, for their punishment has already been borne for them by Him. But the reprobate wicked do perish everlastingly, therefore Christ is not the propitiation for the sins of everyone.

Second, Christ is our “advocate with the Father” (2:1). But surely He is a perfect advocate who wins all His cases and never loses even one case! His intercession with the Father is completely successful and always attains its end! This is exactly what Scripture teaches (John 11:41-42; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). As Francis Turretin (1623-1687) puts it, “It is gratuitously supposed that a universal intercession can be granted. For as he is always heard by the Father (John 11:42), if he would intercede for all, all would be actually saved” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 464)!

Note that I John 2:1-2 inextricably links Christ’s atonement and His intercession: “we have an *advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the *propitiation* for our sins.” When Christ enters the presence of the Father to plead for His people, He does so on the basis of His accomplished redemption (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25-28; 9:24-26).

These two things (atonement and intercession) are the two aspects of His priestly office, for a priest offers a sacrifice to God and prays to Him on the basis of the sacrifice. But Christ does not intercede for everybody, as He Himself expressly declared, “I pray not for the world” (John 17:9). This is also evident for, if the Lord did, all would be saved, for God always answers His prayers, as Christ Himself averred, “Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always” (John 11:41-42). Since Christ does not pray for everybody, He is not the propitiation for everybody.

Listen to the argument of John Owen (1616-1683): “These two acts of his priesthood are not to be separated; it belongs to the same mediator for sin to sacrifice and pray. Our assurance that he is our advocate is grounded on his being a propitiation for our sins. He is an ‘advocate’ for every one for whose sins his blood was a ‘propitiation,’ I
(continued on p. 4)

John ii. 1, 2. But Christ does not intercede and pray for all, as himself often witnesseth, John xvii.; he ‘maketh intercession’ only for them who ‘come unto God by him,’ Heb. vii. 25. He is not a mediator of them that perish, no more than an advocate of them that fail in their suits” (*A Display of Arminianism*, p. 91).

Also, what sense would it make for I John to tell its readers that Christ bore the wrath of God against everybody (2:2) and is an advocate to intercede for everybody (2:1), only to refer a few chapters later to the unpardonable sin (5:16-17). If *we* are not to pray for those who have committed the unpardonable sin, why would *Christ* pray for those who have committed it? He surely knows who they are! Moreover, as we have seen, Christ’s prayers are always answered (John 11:41-42), so clearly He does not pray for them.

In short, the “whole world” in I John 2:2 does not refer to everybody head for head (cf. Rom. 1:8; Col. 1:6; I John 5:19; Rev. 12:9). It refers here to the “whole world” especially of Jews and Gentiles (John 11:51-52), but also the world of every kindred, tribe, tongue, etc., of both young and old, rich and poor, male and female, etc.

John Calvin (1509-1564) said this in his commentary on I John 2:2: “Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretence extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation ... the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word *all* or *whole*, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world.”

Regarding Calvin’s understanding of I John 2:1-2, Jonathan Rainbow writes, “That settles it. So John’s words, ‘the whole world,’ mean ‘the whole church,’ ‘the faithful,’ and ‘the children of God.’ Like [Martin] Bucer [1491-1551], Calvin bypassed the subtleties of the scholastics and returned to the straightforward particularism of Augustine [354-430] and Gottschalk [c. 808-c. 867]” (*The Will of God and the Cross*, p. 134).

Likewise, A. W. Pink (1886-1952) states, “... when John added, ‘And not for ours only, but also for the whole world,’ he signified that Christ was the propitiation for the sins of Gentile believers too, for, as previously shown, ‘the world’ is a term contrasted from Israel. This interpretation is unequivocally established by a careful comparison of I John 2:2 with John 11:51, 52” (*The Sovereignty of God*, p. 259).

Thus the purpose of I John 2:1-2 is to comfort the penitent believer with the perfect sufficiency of the high priestly work of Jesus Christ, both as our “propitiation” and “advocate,” for each and every one of God’s children in the “whole world,” Jews and Gentiles, near and far, etc. Instead of denying that we sin (1:8, 10), we confess our sins to receive cleansing (1:9) through Christ our propitiation and advocate (2:1-2), so that we have communion with the Father through His Son (1:3), know His light (1:5), fellowship with one another (1:7) and receive God’s joy (1:4)!

Rev. Stewart

Our Old Man and New Man (1)

I shall have to summarize the questions asked in this issue of the *News*, for the questioner sent in more material than we have room for in this article. The issue involves the New Testament concepts of our “old man” and our “new man.” The questions ask for these terms to be identified and the concepts explained.

The questioner especially refers to two texts: (1) “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24); (2) “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:9-11).

The texts seem to convey the idea that in the life of the Christian this work of God is completed (Col. 3:9-10) and yet the believer is admonished to put off the old man and put on the new man (Eph. 4:22-24).

The questioner further says, “This leads to a wider question concerning the nature and extent of the change that has taken place in the believer. What is the believer’s relationship to the old man and the old nature?” He then points out that II Corinthians 5:17 speaks of the believer as a “new creature.” He reminds us that Ephesians 2:3 teaches that we “were by nature children of wrath.” Are we to infer from this that when we were quickened we were given a new nature? If so, where do the struggles of Romans 7 come from?

The questioner ends with saying, “I recognize these are fundamental questions but the answers sometimes given are anything but clear.” To this, I will definitely add a loud “Amen.”

At the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) in Scotland, held in 2014, Prof. Engelsma and I discussed these questions at some length in speeches dealing with the biblical doctrine of sanctification.

I understand these lectures will be published in book form next year by the BRF and will be available at the BRF Conference in 2016 and from the bookstore of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church, DV.

I will attempt, first of all, to define the important terms.

The Christian is a most unusual person. Some have even suggested that he is a spiritual schizophrenic. This is really not far from the truth. By nature, the Christian is indeed a child of wrath, and dead in trespasses and sins. In that sense, he is no different from anyone else in the world. Sin is, after all, not merely doing something wrong but it is a deadly disease of the entire nature of man. The sinner is incapable of doing any good. He is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

Let it be understood that the nature of a man is his entire physical and psychical

make-up. That is, a man’s nature is his body and soul, while his soul consists of his mind and his will (his emotions are a part of his will). Total depravity means that his entire nature is corrupted and incapable of doing anything good (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 3).

The Scriptures teach us that the elect child of God is regenerated. Regeneration is that work of God through the Spirit of Christ that creates a new heart in man. That new heart is living in union with Christ. The life it possesses is everlasting and heavenly life, even fellowship with God through Christ.

Without going into detail, we may define the heart as the moral and ethical centre of man’s nature (Prov. 4:23). It is that part of a man that shapes the entire nature of man spiritually and morally. If his heart is pure, the whole man is pure. If his heart is depraved, the whole man and all his deeds are wicked.

Thus the heart of man is a man’s entire nature in principle. It is a microcosm of the entire nature of man. The heart is to the entire man what an acorn is to an oak tree and what a corn kernel is to a mature stalk of corn.

The entire oak tree is in that small acorn. Nothing new is ever added. An acorn can never become anything else but an oak tree, and an oak tree always begins with an acorn. But for an acorn to become a towering oak tree takes time, a lot of time.

One important difference makes my figure of an oak tree limited. The regenerated heart of an elect becomes the new man that every saint will be when he goes to heaven and Christ comes again to make all His people like He is, in all His glory and blessedness. But this happens only as God, through the means of grace, causes that new man gradually to become what he will be. The change that makes a depraved sinner a perfected saint, higher in glory than an angel, comes through death when our souls are glorified, and it comes in the resurrection of the body when our bodies are glorified through the resurrection.

The “old man” is the old depraved nature, which we carry with us till we die. The “new man” is the regenerated heart and our entire nature insofar as the heart influences it. Those who were at the 2014 BRF Conference may remember the diagrams I drew on the white board to illustrate this.

That definition and description of terms is sufficient for this issue of the *News*, but there is more to say. Please save this issue so that you are able to refer to it when we pick up, God willing, the subject in the next issue.

Prof. Hanko

A box set of 12 CDs or DVDs of the 2014 BRF Conference entitled “Be Ye Holy: The Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification” is available for £12 (inc. P&P) from the CPRC Bookstore.

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