



Hermeneutics: The Impact of Limited Atonement on Protestant Theology; the Intractable Problems Caused by Assurance Confirmed through Works

47. These “differences” accumulated during the 55 years between Calvin’s death in 1564 and the Canons of the Synod of Dort in 1619. These Canons spelled out the theology that has become known as five-point Calvinism but it was the expression of half a century of poor scholarship, rampant eisegesis, and personal opinions that have led to the most convoluted accumulation of contradictions ever assembled in Protestant history.
48. The result of the Synod of Dort is a theology that asserts that God sovereignly selected a predetermined few in eternity past for salvation. Having done so, He then created man with the full knowledge that the fall would occur. He allegedly permitted the fall with the clear knowledge that the nonelect would remain eternally condemned.

The Impact of Limited Atonement

1. Due to the influence of Theodore Bèza and William Perkins in England, the doctrine of limited atonement found its way into the Westminster Confession, produced by the Westminster Assembly between 1643 and 1649.
2. According to the confession, the doctrine of the eternal decree (predestination) is that “some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 10:633.)
3. This confession is the foundation of Presbyterian theology but it has found its way into every category of American Christendom. Its impact can be derived from the vocabulary of those who subscribe to the Westminster Confession as pointed out by:

Dillow, Joseph C. *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 2d ed. (Hayesville: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1993), 267-269:

The theology of Westminster completely reversed the doctrine of Calvin. Calvin often used such synonyms for faith as **persuasion, assurance, knowledge, apprehension, perception, or conviction**. The Westminster theology used terms like **accepting, receiving, assenting, resting, yielding, answering, and embracing**—all active words. Saving faith is **not only** believing that God’s word is true, **but** it is “yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God.

In regard to assurance, they clearly stated that “assurance of grace and salvation, **not being of the essence of faith**, true believers may wait long before they obtain it. Calvin asserted that the “least drop of faith” firmly assures. “But holding out Christ as the ground of assurance as a direct act seems **not to have been regarded as an option** by the Westminster divines” (Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 203). (p. 267)

Believers can lose their assurance because it is **based upon their performance**, how one’s **conscience feels** about one’s performance as he reflects upon his recent behavior. Our good works do not need to be perfect **only sincere** [Westminster Confession, 18:4]. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that perseverance and sanctification are **not based upon a response to God’s love** but upon one’s **intense desire to insure his salvation**. The end result is that **salvation is a payment for sanctification**. (p. 268)

Conclusion. It was Theodore Bèza, with his doctrine of limited atonement, who made the quest for assurance based upon works a necessity. Since Christ did not die for all men, it would not be proper to direct men to Christ for assurance, as Calvin taught, because Christ may not have died for that particular man. Therefore, according to Bèza, assurance must be based on works. (p. 269)



4. Oddly, the salvation Bèza preached was more like that of Rome than of the Bible:

Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 272-73:

The Puritan view of faith, like that of many modern Experimental Predestinarians (i.e., hyper-Calvinists), is virtually the same as Rome's. By adding words like "submission" and "obedience" to the concept, they have aligned themselves with their opponents.

The Council of Trent (called by the Catholic Church to settle disputes brought about by Protestantism met in three stages between 1545 and 1563) declared (in Session 6, canon 12), "If anyone should say that justifying faith is nothing else than trust in the divine compassion which forgives sins for Christ's sake, or that we are justified alone by such trust, let him be accursed." (p. 272)

Experimental Predestinarians have totally departed from John Calvin in their formulations of the meaning of faith. What is being argued here is a definition of faith found at the very core of the Reformation (arguments) against Rome. How surprising to see some evangelicals today at odds with their theological forebears whom they mistakenly understand themselves to represent! (pp. 272-73)

5. The term "Experimental Predestinarians" was coined by R. T. Kendall in *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* and refers to the syllogism we reviewed in the last paragraph:

Major premise: All who have the effects (good works) have faith.
 Minor premise: But I have the effects (good works).
 Conclusion: Therefore I have (saving) faith. (See Kendall, p. 33)

This method of confirming one's salvation is defined by Kendall as "experimental" because the hypothesis "I have saving faith" is tested by the experiment of performing "good works." If the individual approves of his "good works" as effectual for salvation then he deduces that his experiment was successful and concludes that he is saved.

6. The end result is confusion about salvation, a false belief that human good confirms one's assurance, and a general lack of confidence about one's eternal future. Since good works are required to prove one's salvation it was not long before good works became a part of one's salvation. You may believe in Christ if you wish but the validity of that faith is put on hold until proof can be ascertained by the subjective analysis of your works.
7. This view of salvation and assurance is frighteningly close to the doctrine of salvation professed by the Catholic Church and which we analyzed in *Clanking Chains-311*. The Catholic Web site, "New Advent" contains pertinent information through the link:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13407a.htm>:
8. Hyper-Calvinists have developed a similar system of salvation which only varies in nuance but not in substance from the Catholic view. One of the major proof passages referenced is 2 Peter 1:10-11 which was studied in detail in the 2002 Shreveport Bible Conference, *Desperate Assurance*.
9. We also demonstrated through exegesis that Ephesians 2:8-9 is incorrectly translated by hyper-Calvinists and this erroneous translation contributes to their confusion. This is covered in *Clanking Chains 313-316*.
10. The impact of hyper-Calvinism in America was further amplified in a speech delivered by Dr. Zane C. Hodges at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1989. We studied this speech in detail. In his address, Dr. Hodges quoted liberally the writings of Dr. R. T. Kendall and Dr. M. Charles Bell who wrote on English and Scottish Calvinism respectively.



11. In his closing remarks, Hodges's references to Bell lead to several principles that demonstrate the impact of hyper-Calvinism on Protestant Christianity:

Hodges, Zane C. "Lordship Salvation." (Deerfield: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1989). Sound cassette:

Bell argues that the Federal theologians [in Scotland] got away from John Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance just as assuredly as the Perkins tradition did in England. The result was that they landed themselves in a quagmire when they came to assurance and salvation and they created for themselves all kinds of pastoral problems for which they had no solution.

Both Kendall and Bell are coming out of a different strand of evangelical thought than I do. Their background, and in some respects their theology, diverges from my own. And yet in this very crucial area we are agreed. And we are agreed that the theology we propound is fundamentally the theology of John Calvin, however much of that theology may have been lost and distorted in subsequent centuries.

This is what Bell says in his book:

Bell, M. Charles. *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*. (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), 200:

... the federalist scheme ("limited atonement" and supralapsarianism) means that one cannot proclaim the love of God in Christ for all, but rather must first preach law in order to convince an individual of his sin and to bring him to repentance and belief in Christ.

NOTE: What Bell is saying is this:

- If only a predetermined elect are saved, then pastors cannot honestly proclaim that the love of God through Christ is available to all men.
- Yet, in order to "call out" the elect the pastor must first preach that all have sinned.
- Having done this some may be convicted of their sin and seek salvation in Christ.
- But of those who believe in Christ, only the predetermined elect may be saved.
- The federalist's usual approach for bringing sinners to repentance is to impose the fear of judgment, a point taken up next by Bell when he writes:

Fear of hell and judgment of God is used to bring the sinner to faith. Yet such an (order) is a refutation of the way of Christ, who sought to urge sinners to faith with the good news that God loves the world and, because of this love, he sent his only Son so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.

Whenever God's love and forgiveness are made conditional upon one's repentance, a host of pastoral problems are sure to arise. Perhaps the most serious problem is the pastor's own attitudes. **It is not uncommon for pastors to withhold not only God's love and forgiveness, but their own acceptance and approval until they are convinced of a person's sincere and sorrowful repentance.**

NOTE: The highlighted sentence brings the issue of "limited atonement" to critical point. The entire thesis breaks down when God's love and forgiveness are withheld contingent upon repentance rather than simple faith in Christ.