

Question & Answer

Daniel Kleyn

Question:

Only the elect are saved. But does article 3 of the Canons of Dordt, Head II mean that Christ's death and suffering paid for the sins of all the people in the world? If it does, then why are not all people saved? If it does not, then what was the necessity in Christ suffering sufficiently to expiate their sins, since this did nothing for their salvation?

*Brian Bosveld

Answer:

Before answering this question, perhaps it would be useful to state what Head II, Article 3 of the Canons of Dordt says.

“The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.”

As we can see from reading this article, our questioner raises an important point, for at face value the article seems to indicate that Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world. However, this is not the teaching of Scripture, nor do the Canons of Dordt teach this concerning the suffering of Christ.

In order to understand the statement made in the Canons of Dordt, it will be useful to understand why this specific article was written and included. As we well know, the Reformed faith, in the doctrine of particular (or limited) atonement, has always maintained that Christ suffered only for the elect, not for the sins of all people in the world. The Arminians believe in the doctrine of general atonement. This disagreement, which originated in the 1800's, spawned the writing of the Canons.

In Head II, Article 3 of the Canons of Dordt, the Reformed were answering the accusation of the Arminians that the doctrine of limited atonement makes God a limited and stingy God. The Arminians accused the Reformed of denying the infinite value of Christ's death and suffering. In response to this, the writers of the Canons affirmed that the death of the Son of God “is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate (i.e. to pay the penalty of) the sins of the whole world.”

But what did they mean by this statement? Did they mean, as our questioner asks, that Christ's suffering and death “paid for the sins of all the people in the world?”

No. Christ's suffering and death was not for all men. Christ suffered and died for the elect alone. Scripture clearly teaches this truth. And Head II, Article 8 of the Canons of Dordt also beautifully expresses this truth, as follows: “It was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross . . . should effectually redeem . . . all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation.”

Rather, the statement in the Canons means that if we consider Christ's death by itself, it would have been sufficient to expiate the sins of the entire human race. Christ's death and suffering was so great that it would have been sufficient to save all men, if that was God's eternal good pleasure.

We must be careful to take special notice of the wording of the Canons. They state that Christ's death "would have been sufficient," not that it "was sufficient." Christ did not actually suffer and die for all men.

We may better understand the infinite worth of Christ's sacrifice by taking note of the following. Sin was against God's infinite majesty, and therefore the infinite wrath of God for sin had to be satisfied. This could only be satisfied by Christ's sacrifice being of infinite worth.

For a more detailed explanation of this article, please refer to H. C. Hoeksema's exposition of the Canons of Dordt, The Voice of Our Fathers.

*Brian Bosveld is a member of the Southern Presbyterian Church, in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

Originally Published in:
Vol. 52 No. 9 November 1993