

The Meaningless Form: Owen's Position

Let me remind you, reader, of Owen's position: The atonement, though efficient only for the elect, and not provisional for all, is sufficient for all because of the worth of Christ's person. I repeat the extracts I quoted earlier: Christ's 'death, as Calvin and other expositors remind us, because it was eternal and because he is the Son of God, is sufficient for the whole world'. 'There was virtue and efficacy enough in [Christ's] oblation to satisfy offended justice for the sins of the whole world, yes, and of millions of worlds more; for his blood has infinite value, because of the infinite dignity and excellency of his person'.¹⁵⁷

These are not Amyraldians speaking. So what do their words mean? Let Owen be their spokesman; let him set out his stall. As so often with Owen, however, his reasoning takes some following; this time, more so. Indeed, I think he contradicts himself – or gets very close to it. And, when all the logical twists and turns of his argument have been negotiated, the result is, as I have already said, meaningless. Nevertheless, let me spell out his line of reasoning as clearly as I can.

Owen began by speaking of Christ's 'sacrifice of infinite worth, value and dignity', of such value that it was 'sufficient in itself for the redeeming of all and every man'. Indeed, that 'it was... the purpose and intention of God that his Son should offer a sacrifice of infinite worth, value and dignity, sufficient in itself for the redeeming of all and every man'. But then Owen added a qualifying clause: 'If it had pleased the Lord to employ it to [for] that purpose':

It was... the purpose and intention of God that his Son should offer a sacrifice of infinite worth, value and dignity, sufficient in itself for the redeeming of all and every man, *if it had pleased the Lord to employ it to [for] that purpose...* Sufficient... was the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of the whole world, and for the expiation of all the sins of all and every man in the world... It was in itself of infinite value and sufficiency to have been made a price to have bought and purchased all

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and every man in the world... The value and fitness of it to be made a price arises from its own internal sufficiency.¹⁵⁸

According to Owen, therefore, the death of Christ was, by God's design and intention, a sufficient price to redeem all men, and that because of its own innate sufficiency; Christ being of infinite worth, and his pain in suffering being so great, therefore his work was sufficient to redeem all.¹⁵⁹ But although God intended that Christ's death, because of its infinite value, should be sufficient for the redemption of all, God never intended that it should actually be a redemption for all; in itself it was, but God never designed it for that purpose.¹⁶⁰ Consequently, said Owen, the sufficiency-efficiency formula, 'that old distinction of the Schoolmen...¹⁶¹ is most true... for [Christ's blood] being a price for all or some does not arise [merely?]¹⁶² from its own sufficiency, worth or dignity, but from the intention of God and Christ using it to that purpose'. God intended that Christ's blood would be sufficient for the redemption of all; and it was. Moreover, it would have been a redemption for all – *if God had intended it to be* – but he did not:

Therefore, it is denied that the blood of Christ was a sufficient price and ransom for all and everyone, not because it was not sufficient, but because it was not [intended to be] a ransom [for all]. And so it easily appears what is to be owned in the distinction [that is, the formula]... If it intend no more but that the blood of our Saviour was of sufficient value for the redemption of all and everyone, and that Christ intended to lay down a price which should be sufficient for their redemption, [then the formula] is acknowledged as most true. But... that... 'to die for them', holds out the intention of our Saviour, in the laying down of the price, to have been their redemption... we deny.¹⁶³

Christ did not die for all! Certainly not! His work was by God's design in itself sufficient to have redeemed all, and it could have redeemed all – if God had intended to redeem all; but he did not. Consequently, Christ died only for the elect.

What, according to Owen, made the infinitely sufficient work of Christ an effective redemption for the elect? The will, the intention of God *in the redemption itself*. If God had intended it to redeem all, it would have been a redemption for all; but since he intended it for the elect only, it was a redemption for them only, not for all. Nevertheless, according to Owen, as God intended, it was sufficient

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for all, and would have redeemed all, if God had intended it as a redemption for all:

That it should be applied unto any, made a price for them, and become beneficial to them, according to the worth that is in it, is external to it, does not arise from it, but merely depends upon the intention and will of God... That it did formally become a price for any is solely to be ascribed to the purpose of God, intending their purchase and redemption by it. The intention of the offerer and acceptor... is that which gives the formality of a price unto it; this is external... Its being a price for all or some does not arise from its own sufficiency, worth or dignity, but from the intention of God and Christ using it to that purpose.¹⁶⁴

Again:

The value of any satisfaction in this business arises not from the innate worth of the things whereby it is made, but purely from God's free constitution of them to such an end... All their value arises merely from that appointment; they have so much as he ascribes to them, and no more.¹⁶⁵

This approach is radically different to Amyraut's.¹⁶⁶ God intended, Amyraut argued, not only that Christ's sacrifice should be sufficient for all, but that it should be a redemption for all conditional on their believing; Owen agreed that God intended Christ's sacrifice should be sufficient for all, but denied that God intended it to be a redemption for all. Amyraut argued that the effectiveness or otherwise of Christ's sacrifice to redeem arose as a result of God's electing decree in the application of the blood of Christ; Owen argued that the distinction arose in God's decree and intention in the sacrifice itself.¹⁶⁷

But the formula left both men free to talk about the sufficiency of Christ's redemption – even though they meant very different things by it! For Owen, God decreed to redeem his elect by the death of his Son. This is the only redemption – and that, efficacious¹⁶⁸ for the elect. For the non-elect, God in Christ has purchased no redemption. But although God has given Christ to redeem and pay the ransom for the elect only, even so, the infinite worth of Christ's person makes the value of his work infinite, and therefore sufficient for all, even though he has not died to save them all. It is sufficient for all, and would have redeemed all, if

God had decreed to redeem all. But he has not. 'That the atonement... has enough in it, we deny... not because the atonement has not enough in it for them, but because the atonement was not made for them'.¹⁶⁹

Although, in some senses better (though less logical)¹⁷⁰ than Amyraut's position, this approach is also mistaken. We have no biblical warrant to argue in this way. It is pure speculation; it cannot be found in Scripture, in name or concept.¹⁷¹ And whereas Amyraut's position is consistent, but wrong, the Owenite position – a scholastic device which takes us outside Scripture – adds nothing to the debate. Rather, it clouds it.

And worse.

Worse? Yes. As above, I ask again: What do these words mean? The answer is patent: *Nothing. They are meaningless.*¹⁷² As Clifford pointed out: 'Owen paid lip-service to the sufficiency-efficiency distinction', but his logic 'led him to deprive the universal sufficiency of all its value. For Owen', whatever his protestations, 'the atonement is only sufficient for those for whom it is efficient'.¹⁷³ Clifford was right! For all Owen's attempt to make a logically water-tight case, he ended up with fine-sounding words which, though they might dazzle, really amount to nothing. God, according to Owen, designed or decreed that Christ should offer a sacrifice sufficient for all men, if he wanted to use it to that end, but he did not design or decree to use it to that end or purpose. I say it again: This is meaningless.¹⁷⁴

What is more, the idea detracts from the biblical doctrine of the atonement. Christ's atonement was designed for the elect, and he accomplished a perfect redemption for them and no others. As for what Christ accomplished for the non-elect, as I have argued, Scripture is silent.¹⁷⁵ Of course, as I have noted, the work of Christ is of infinite worth, and of course he is an all-sufficient Saviour – a perfect Redeemer for all the elect, for all their sins, for ever. But this does not mean we can – or should – speculate about its 'sufficiency for all'. In fact, I repeat, however fine it sounds, the concept is, in the end, illogical and meaningless.¹⁷⁶

In closing this look at Owen's use of the sufficiency formula, I return to some words I have already used from Haldane:

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When we consider the dignity of the Redeemer's person, it may be asked: Was his atonement of infinite value? and if so: Why might not all mankind have been saved by it? We answer: Such was not the will of God; he had a special [specific] end in view, and this shall be fully accomplished. But does it, in the smallest degree, derogate from the glory of the Redeemer that his atonement extended no farther than the commission which he received when he became the Father's servant, and undertook to redeem all the children given him from death and to ransom them from the power of the grave?¹⁷⁷

The upshot? This:

Admitting that it was not God's *intention* to save all by the atonement, [as Owenites do, the sufficiency formula as used by them] gets rid of no difficulty.¹⁷⁸

So why do so many Calvinists who, while rejecting the idea that God designed and provided a universal atonement conditional on faith, thus avoiding the errors of Amyraldianism, nevertheless still hold to the formula, 'efficient for the elect, sufficient for all', as 'elucidated' by Owen? I suggest three reasons: *First*, it seems to provide an explanation of those texts which appear to speak of a universal atonement. *Secondly*, it is an attempt to justify God against the charge of 'insincerity' for offering salvation to all when he knows the atonement is only for some.¹⁷⁹ *Thirdly*, it appears to provide a logical basis upon which to make the free offer.

For my purpose in this book, the first reason is of no consequence. As I have said, those texts which appear to teach universal redemption, in my opinion do not. What is more, as I noted earlier, the 'sufficiency' argument weakens the atonement spoken of in those passages, and leaves bigger problems than it is thought to solve.¹⁸⁰

As for the second reason, this is a well-meant mistake,¹⁸¹ but a mistake all the same. And a serious one. I will return to it.

And the third reason – that the sufficiency formula seems to provide the biblical basis for the free offer¹⁸² – is wrong. It does not do the job.¹⁸³ Indeed, far from strengthening the free offer, it weakens it. And this, of course, is the crux of my book. It is time to get to grips with it.