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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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# LIMITED ATONEMENT AND THE FREE OFFER OF THE GOSPEL IN HUGH MARTIN'S *THE ATONEMENT*

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Is it possible to believe in both a limited atonement and a free offer of the gospel? Classic Reformed thought has believed such views not only compatible, but necessary, despite claims of inconsistency and confusion from opponents. The debate continues to rage today. Heavyweights from both sides have offered their thoughts on the topic, but there is one Christian thinker who deserves more attention. Hugh Martin deals with the subject of limited atonement and the free offer the gospel in pages 8-11 of his book, *The Atonement*, and specifically as it pertains to the covenant of grace. Martin shows that the free offer of the gospel can take place precisely because of the covenant of grace, within which definite atonement operates. In the following paper, the connection between Reformed soteriology and the free offer of the gospel will be examined through the lens of Martin's work in *The Atonement*. It will be demonstrated that limited atonement and the free offer of the gospel are not only necessary but consistent when viewed through the perspective of the covenant of grace.

## ATONEMENT AND THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Because Martin's discussion of the free offer of the gospel is imbedded in a wider discussion regarding the atonement and the covenant of grace, it will be helpful to lay out his argument that leads up to the topic we will be dealing with. Chapter one of Martin's *The Atonement* (and really, the entirety of the book) is polemical in nature. Martin is dealing with certain objections against the covenant of grace. He lays down at the outset 'that the doctrine of the atonement ought to be discussed and defended as inside the doctrine of the covenant of grace.'<sup>1</sup> Martin calls this 'a proposition of transcendent importance.'<sup>2</sup> He rightly acknowledges that the doctrine of the covenant of grace is a wider category than the doctrine of the atonement.

Martin then goes into a relevant and interesting detour about the impropriety of discussing scriptural doctrines outside of the broader categories to which said doctrines belong. This is also one of the strategies of this paper. Confusion regarding the free offer of the gospel is oftentimes a result of dislocating it from the wider category of covenant theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Martin, *The Atonement* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Martin calls this 'an unnecessary danger' because it robs the doctrine 'of the protection which the higher category affords.'<sup>3</sup> As an example, Martin points to objections to 'expiatory sacrifice.'<sup>4</sup> Is it unjust that the innocent should suffer so that the guilty escapes? Detached from the broader category of the covenant of grace and union with Christ, absolutely. But then again, such detached speculation is philosophy, not theology.<sup>5</sup> It is merely abstract thought, as opposed to what the scriptural doctrines show.

Martin's second example relates to man's total inability to will any spiritual good on his own. It has been objected that such a condition would be incompatible with responsibility.<sup>6</sup> However, when viewed from the perspective of man's 'covenant oneness' with Adam, the difficulty is resolved. Man's inability is the result of his fallen condition, yet he is guilty of his condition because of his covenant oneness with Adam. Our inability to do good is a penal infliction imposed upon man for previous guilt—namely, Adam's first sin. Man is to be considered collectively, as one and the same man, just like in Christ we are now 'virtually one and indivisible' with Christ, and hence no longer under condemnation.<sup>7</sup> Such a view also dispels the difficulty regarding expiatory sacrifice.

No one considered as innocent suffers, and no one continuing guilty escapes. Righteousness and peace are seen to kiss each other, and justice goes before him to set us in the way of his steps. The objection, in this light, we have said, disappears.<sup>8</sup>

As we will see Martin do when it comes to the free offer of the gospel, he flips the argument on its head, showing that it is the denial of an expiatory atonement which is unjust. Those who acknowledge the historical facts of Christ's sinlessness and death yet deny the doctrine of satisfaction of sin are arguing for a death that would be unfair. If Christ's death benefits sinners, and yet does not pardon them of their sins, 'then sinners, still considered as guilty, do escape by means of it.'<sup>9</sup> The innocent Christ suffers and the guilty escape the punishment of their sins. On the contrary, 'the doctrine of the covenant, and of the covenant oneness of Christ and his people, enables us not merely to rebut but to retort the objection.'<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

will be Martin's approach when it comes to the free offer of the gospel, and it will be just as effective for correcting the assumption that the free offer is not compatible with limited atonement.

#### MARTIN AND DR. RALPH WARDLAW

He concludes his foundational argument by looking at a theory propounded by Dr. Ralph Wardlaw (1779-1853), who 'held the notion of a universal, unlimited, or indefinite atonement, undertaken literally for all men, and accomplishing as much for every human being as for any.'<sup>11</sup> Wardlaw's great-grandfather was Ebenezer Erskine, but Wardlaw himself would be ordained in a Congregational church, wherein he became an internationally known figure for his letters and hymns. He also held to the doctrines of election and the necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> But belief in the doctrines of election, the necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and an unlimited atonement puts Dr. Wardlaw into a quagmire. Although Wardlaw's view could perhaps still qualify as a covenant of grace, 'it is a covenant conditioning not Christ's work, but merely the Spirit's.'<sup>13</sup> The Scriptures show, on the contrary, that the covenant of grace is a covenant with Christ, 'concerning Christ's own work.'<sup>14</sup>

Martin notes that such a view of the covenant of grace limits the application and results of the atonement (and hence of the covenant), not enlarges it.<sup>15</sup> This is important for our purposes here. He means by this that Dr. Wardlaw may say the atonement is indefinite or unlimited, undertaken for all men, but he then vastly restricts it or limits it when it comes to its actual application. Thus, he unwittingly shrinks the covenant of grace:

To introduce a covenant of grace, as an instrument for the limitation of grace, is at once an insult to the human understanding and a travesty of the divine wisdom. In any such view of its action and intent, it must assuredly cease to be called a covenant of grace.<sup>16</sup>

Not stopping there, Martin describes such a view as 'a covenant of reasonless, arbitrary, and capricious judgment.'<sup>17</sup> Thus, any objection to a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

limited atonement on the grounds that it is unfair or limiting in its application of grace is unwarranted, since the opposite is actually the case. An atonement that provides full and certain pardon to sinners is gracious, regardless of the amount of people who receive it. But is it really gracious to think the atonement is for everyone, although not everyone will receive a full and certain pardon as a result of it? This is what Martin calls 'an insult to the human understanding.'<sup>18</sup>

But what does the above have to do with our current subject? Martin himself tells us:

A correct application of the doctrine of the covenant is, in like manner, eminently serviceable in refuting the argument for an indefinite atonement based on the alleged necessity of providing a foundation for a universal gospel call.<sup>19</sup>

Martin is here addressing the age-old question regarding Reformed soteriology and evangelism/missions. If there are an exact number of people who are going to be saved, or as the *Westminster Confession* puts it, if the number of men and angels predestined to salvation 'is so certain, and definite, that it cannot be either increased, or diminished,'<sup>20</sup> then can Christians in good faith and confidence actually 'go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'?

Martin observes that the command of God to evangelize is sufficient warrant for doing so. God uses means, namely gospel proclamation, to gather in his elect. The history of the church is saturated with evangelistic men who held to the doctrine of limited atonement. Thus, to dismiss limited atonement based on the argument that it quenches evangelistic zeal is a clear example of a strawman fallacy.

#### THE COVENANT OF GRACE AND A UNIVERSAL GOSPEL CALL

We now come to the main thrust of Martin's examination of the gospel call and the covenant of grace. Martin goes to the extent of claiming that any difficulty people may have between a limited atonement and a universal gospel call 'should be allayed, if not indeed removed, by observing the relation in which the gospel call stands to the covenant of grace.'<sup>21</sup> He refers to this relationship as 'very intimate.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.4.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, *The Atonement*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Martin begins by explaining that 'the gospel call comes forth from the covenant, and summons sinners into it.'<sup>23</sup> This is somewhat self-explanatory, but he clarifies it thus: 'It is a voice from within the covenant, addressed to those that are without, with the view of bringing them within.'<sup>24</sup> First off, we need to ask what does he mean by 'a voice,' and second, what does he mean by 'within the covenant'? He helps us with this question by immediately referring to a place in Scripture. First, as for the voice, he quotes Isaiah 55:5, 'Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not.' This is none other than the voice of God, and Martin seems to imply that 'voice' here is synonymous with 'call.' Hence, the gospel call is from God, and as Martin points out, it is 'addressed to those that are without,' namely outside of the covenant.

That leads us to our second question. What does Martin mean by this voice calling 'from within the covenant'? Martin here points us to the second half of Isaiah 55:5: 'And nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.' Notice that in this verse people are running to Israel because of God, and specifically, because God has done wonders for them. Martin declares that it is because such a voice speaks from within the covenant that success for such a call is guaranteed.<sup>25</sup> Conceptually speaking, we are to understand the voice calling within the covenant as springing from 'the covenant intercommunion of the Father and the Son,' and because of such communication the gospel call from within 'shall be given, and that when given it shall not be without success.'<sup>26</sup>

Martin here is alluding to the fact that because there is a covenant of grace, there are people who belong to that covenant, even though they may be outside of the covenant at present, meaning temporally and in experience. This is directly related to limited atonement. Christ's work on the cross was definite. It was done for specific individuals. Such individuals will come into the covenant because Christ has died for them. But how are such individuals brought into it? By the gospel call. This is why the gospel call and the covenant go together. 'It is therefore a sure source of inevitable error to overlook the relations between the call and the covenant.'<sup>27</sup>

But what about those who are not included in Christ's atoning death? What about the non-elect? They are outside the covenant, similar to the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

elect who have not yet been called into it. In this sense, at least from a temporal/linear perspective, the non-elect and the elect (who have not-yet-been saved in time) are in the same category. Both are under the wrath of God. Both are dead in their trespasses and sins. Here we come to the crux of the issue: God knows who *will be* and who *will not be* saved through the call of the gospel. Hence, is it necessary or even proper to say that God gives a universal gospel call to elect and non-elect alike?

This prepares us for evaluating the universal call of the gospel in all its breadth. As Martin has already showed us, too often the topic has been discussed from a narrow perspective, apart from its wider theological underpinnings. One way to demonstrate this is by asking the question: is the free offer of the gospel confined only to a particular view of atonement and the covenant of grace? Could someone with an Arminian soteriology hold to the same view of the free offer as someone with Reformed soteriology? Is the free offer of the gospel incompatible with either one of the above views? Or could both views hold to it, despite the major theological differences in other areas? Too often it is either assumed that both Reformed and non-Reformed soteriology can offer the gospel freely and consistently, or that Reformed soteriology cannot offer the gospel freely and still be consistent. So which is it?

#### A UNIVERSAL CALL FROM WITHOUT?

It will help us to define what Martin means by ‘universal call’ or the ‘free offer’ of the gospel. We find the answer imbedded in the discussions regarding the universal call and the covenant of grace. Martin observes that because sinners are outside the covenant, ‘this is all that is requisite to render them fit subjects for its gracious proposal and authoritative requirement.’<sup>28</sup> This is also what defines the universal call as such: ‘It is, of course, therefore, a universal call, because it is a call addressed to those that are without.’<sup>29</sup> Martin does not distinguish between a call to those who are without and yet elect and those who are without and non-elect. Everyone outside the covenant is in the same category, since that is what it means to be outside. This is why they are all—universally—‘fit subjects for its gracious proposal and authoritative requirement.’<sup>30</sup> This is also why it is fitting for God to make a gospel call that is universal.

Martin next asks if there is any inconsistency between a call to those outside the covenant that comes from within the covenant?<sup>31</sup> Or another

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

way to put it, 'Could it call sinners into the covenant if itself rested on grounds outside the covenant?'<sup>32</sup> This is a critical question, since this is exactly what those who hold to an unlimited atonement must espouse.

An indefinite or unlimited atonement cannot speak of a specific or particular covenant between Christ and the lost. It can speak of such in a generic, impersonal way. But to also claim there is an actual covenant between Christ and a specific people, though currently lost, is impossible. Thus, Martin makes the claim that such a view of the atonement necessarily means that the gospel call must come from outside the covenant. Hence, an indefinite atonement in actuality, 'has nothing to do with the gospel call; can impart to it no validity, no strength, no enlargement; can constitute for it no real basis or foundation.'<sup>33</sup>

A gospel call without the basis or foundation of a particular covenant between Christ and sinners is ultimately no gospel call at all. Why is this the case? Because what would sinners be called to if the gospel call itself comes from outside the covenant? A gospel call from outside the covenant can only call sinners to something outside the covenant, itself being outside of it. Christ's work however is covenantal. 'An indefinite atonement, therefore, as pleaded for by some in the interests of the freeness of the gospel call, is one of the most self-contradictory and self-negating devices that can be imagined.'<sup>34</sup>

If, however, on the indefinite scheme, there is no covenant to call sinners into, it becomes impossible to call them to anything at all. Only because there is a true atonement, not a hypothetical atonement, can there be such a call to sinners. This is as black and white as it gets. Martin's statement is demonstrably true.

## THE GOSPEL CALL OF MINISTERS AND OF CHRIST

When we speak of this free offer of the gospel or universal call, we have already noted that some who are called are 'elect' and others are not, even though both for a time are outside the covenant. Martin acknowledges this tension when he states we must remember 'that in the giving of the gospel call the preachers of the gospel are ambassadors, and ambassadors merely.'<sup>35</sup> The 'merely' part is important. Martin explains: 'We are ministers. We give the call ministerially. He who really calls is Christ.'<sup>36</sup> Here Martin has brought forth a very important distinction to keep in mind.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



As ministers, we do not know who the elect are. We do not know who the non-elect are. Hence, we preach the gospel to all creatures. ‘Sinners are not inside—not yet interested in—this blessed covenant or constitution; they are aliens from the blessed kingdom of which it is the charter. It is, therefore, in its essential nature obviously a universal call.’<sup>37</sup> But notice the phrasing Martin deploys: ‘Sinners are [...] not yet interested in.’ Martin rightly assumes that some sinners will be interested in ‘this blessed covenant.’<sup>38</sup> They will come in. But when this happens, it is not the minister who brings them in. The minister is the one who issues the call, and through the minister, Christ in His kingly office executes this office by making the call effectual for the elect.

This leads us to our next point. We know the minister does not possess the power to save souls, but Christ does. And specifically, Christ has made effective the covenant of grace, which means that not only do we have a place to call sinners to, we also have a guarantee that such sinners who come have a real, definitive, and personal covenant of grace that has been made for them by God, through the work of redemption. But does this satisfy the question as it pertains to the covenant of grace and the free offer of the gospel? If Christ knows who the elect are, and knows who will be drawn into the covenant of grace, are we correct in saying that Christ offers a universal gospel call as well? Or does His call only go to the elect?

## THE MARROW CONTROVERSY

To help answer this question, we will consider one of the most notorious controversies in the history of the Scottish Reformed church: ‘The Marrow Controversy.’<sup>39</sup> This debate took place nearly one hundred and fifty years before Hugh Martin would take up the subject, but as will be obvious, the subject was far from exhausted by the time it got to him. In Erskine’s fifth ‘obscured truth,’ written in response to the Act 1720 which repudiated certain doctrines that Erskine and others had considered orthodox, Erskine declares that the act had obscured the following truth:

that there is a deed of gift or grant made by the Father to all the hearers of the gospel, affording warrant to ministers to offer Christ unto all, and a warrant unto all to receive him, which yet does not lead us into the Arminian camp.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Much of this section has been articulated by Stephen G. Myers, *Scottish Federalism and Covenantalism in Transition: The Theology of Ebenezer Erskine* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Myers, *Scottish Federalism*, p. 101.

Notice Erskine declares that the 'deed of gift or grant' is made 'by the Father to all the hearers of the gospel.' Thus, both Erskine and Martin are saying that the call of the gospel is universally made by God, through the person of the minister. It is not only made by the minister, even when it is preached to the non-elect. However, for Erskine, there is a difference between the Word of God, which offers the call of salvation to all men, and the heart of God, which is only for the elect, as determined in the council of peace before the foundation of the world.<sup>41</sup> Although this does not help clarify the tension between God's revealed will and God's hidden will, it does offer a way for the free offer of the gospel to be compatible with belief in election.

Sinners were called to view the promise as it was in the Word of God, wherein that promise was extended to all men in common. When the promise was offered from this perspective, it was able to be grasped by the hand of faith, whereby it was taken into possession and applied for the actual salvation of the sinner in question.<sup>42</sup>

More importantly for us, Erskine's claims in the Marrow Controversy help clarify Martin's own position. Martin is concerned that a universal atonement makes the gospel call proceed on grounds broader than the actual covenant. Thus, there will be a contradiction that takes place as the universal call becomes actualized in a particular peoples' salvation. The call itself has no 'intrinsic worth,' because there is no covenant between Christ and His people to guarantee that such an offer is efficacious.

On the other hand, For Erskine and Martin, the call of the gospel must be a call 'to the covenant, and to all its free grace and sure and saving blessings.'<sup>43</sup> The covenant of grace is to be offered indiscriminately to all persons as something that one could come into from without. 'For Erskine, the gospel offer was the proclamation of the Covenant of Grace to a homogeneous group that, in its proclamation, created eternal distinctions between the elect and the reprobate.'<sup>44</sup> The proclamation of the gospel encountered man 'indefinitely and moved inexorably to eternal definiteness.'<sup>45</sup> The call of the gospel comes from within that covenant of grace to a people who are outside the covenant. This contrasts with those holding to a view of atonement that is unlimited or universal, in which case there can be no covenant of grace that has any 'intrinsic worth,' since

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, *The Atonement*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Myers, *Scottish Federalism*, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

it is dependent upon the actions and decisions of man, not what Christ has done to save a people for Himself. The covenant of grace itself would be indefinite, impersonal, and abstract.

## CONCLUSION

Although Martin has not resolved the perennial question (even confusion) regarding limited atonement and the free offer of the gospel, he has demonstrated that such an offer is incomprehensible unless there is a particular redemption within the framework of a covenant of grace. In this way, Martin has advanced the debate up the field, clarifying why such a universal call is compatible with Reformed theology.

Martin has also landed on something often overlooked by debates regarding the atonement, especially on the Reformed side. The implications of an unlimited atonement are devastatingly pessimistic, not merely because it makes Christ's work on the cross uncertain or dependent upon the free will of man, but because it cuts off any certainty that people will actually be saved when we make a universal gospel call. On the contrary, because of a definite atonement, Martin emphasizes that not only is the gospel call given, but that 'when given it shall not be without success.'<sup>46</sup> As a result, 'And nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.'

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<sup>46</sup> Martin, *The Atonement*, p. 10.