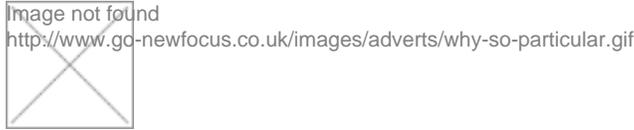


Why So Particular ?

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To be described as being particular about things is not always a compliment. In fact it is sometimes used as a polite put down as much as to say, 'He's very fussy', or 'She's hard to please'.

This is often the impression given when some Christians, usually Baptists, describe themselves as 'Strict and Particular'. One can imagine someone new to the phrase wincing slightly at the expression. The picture of an austere old aunt or a disciplinarian teacher might spring to mind. Hair combed, laces tied and sitting quietly. Overly strict and very particular.

Strict

Of course the real meaning of the term is quite different and has more to do with the historical development of theology in certain churches.

Congregations who practise strict communion place some kind of restriction upon who is allowed to join in church fellowship and participate at the Lord's Table. Criteria differ from church to church but in essence all true churches ought to be sensitive about who receives the Lord's supper and thoughtful about who may share in what is, in essence, a remembrance meal for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Particular

Similarly, 'particular' has a meaning not immediately obvious in current usage. While those who are Particular might often appear 'hard to please' when it comes to church matters or theology (and other things too) the real meaning of the word has to do with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary. 'Particular' has reference to the nature and extent of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, rather than the fastidiousness of an individual believer.

Redemption redefined

Recently some professing Christians have sought to redefine the meaning and purpose of the death of Jesus Christ. They have claimed that Jesus' death on the cross was nothing to do with redemption or atonement, themes

which have historically been central to the church's understanding of the crucifixion. They prefer to talk of Jesus' death as a sacrificial example or a divine gesture to demonstrate how much God loves us and the lengths to which He is prepared to go to secure our affection in return. Some even say the death of Jesus was an unforeseen mistake, that Jesus did not intend to die and the resurrection allowed God to take a different course and try another approach. It has been disappointing to observe how supposedly evangelical organisations, who ought to have answered these attacks on the atonement promptly and accurately, in the event struggled to produce a coherent response.

Atoning blood

The Bible will not permit these interpretations to stand without a proper emphasis upon the redemptive nature of Christ's death and the atoning power of His shed blood. Passages such as Isaiah 53 speak of Christ's death being an offering for sin and God's righteous servant justifying many by bearing their iniquities. This chimes beautifully with New Testament passages such as John 10 where Jesus is described as laying down His life for the sheep, and Acts 20:28 where it is clear that Christ has purchased His church with His own blood. Furthermore, Paul shows the unity of purpose within the Godhead for this great transaction when he states in Romans 8:32 that the Father delivered Christ up for sinners and in Ephesians 5:25 that Christ willingly gave Himself for His people.

The death of the Lord Jesus redeemed or 'bought back' His people sold, as they were, into slavery to sin. He paid the price of redemption to God's justice, and atoned for those whom He redeemed thereby restoring them to peace with the offended God, justifying them by His own perfect righteousness.

Substitutionary atonement

And this is where 'particular' comes in. The death of the Lord Jesus must be seen as substitutionary if we are to do justice to Biblical language. Christ died for sinners. The Crucifixion was not simply the death of one man, justly or unjustly, at the hands of Roman soldiers 2000 years ago. Christ died as a representative for others, He suffered in their place and instead of them. As both the offeror and the sacrifice offered our Lord gave His life for the sins of others. And God the Father accepted the blood of His Son in payment for the sins of others. Their sins were placed on Christ's shoulders and God the Father punished God the Son, their Substitute, instead of them. In this way Christ fulfilled all the Old Testament priestly typology of the sacrificial lamb and the offering for sin.

Naming particular people

Who are these 'others' for whom Christ died? Did He represent all mankind or was He a substitute only for some? Was His death for all men

in general or only for some men in particular? The Bible is not silent on this, as we have seen above. Jesus said, 'I lay down my life for the sheep' John 10:15 and later in the same passage distinguishes between those who are His sheep and those who are not. He identifies the sheep, describing them as those who are known of Him, hear His voice, and follow Him (vv. 26-28).

We therefore hold that Christ's atonement was a definite, substitutionary atonement for specific individuals and was limited in its extent to a certain number of men and women for whom the redemption price of blood was paid. This limited number, variously called God's sheep, His little ones, the church of God, the chosen, and the elect of God are the 'particular' individuals for whom Christ died.

Its not particular if it isn't definite

Sadly, today there are evangelicals who claim in their confessional standards to believe in particular redemption but who prefer from their pulpits and in their preaching to open up the scope of Christ's work to include everyone. Some teach that the particularity of grace is not in Christ's atoning work at all, but in God's electing purpose. Thus they can say, Christ's death is sufficient for all, covers all and avails for all while being efficient (or actually saving) only for the elect whom the Father has chosen to save. By this logic, but without scriptural warrant, they can offer Christ to all as a potential Saviour. They can say, 'Christ died for you in order to save you, if you will only believe.'

Others say that Christ's redemption was for all but the blessings and benefits of it are only applied to certain individuals by the Holy Spirit. These false teachers try to push a wedge between the united purpose of the Godhead by claiming that the extent of Christ's atoning work differs from the elective purpose of the Father and the quickening work of the Holy Spirit. Put another way, indefinite atonement is posited as a means of circumventing the implications of particular redemption even though it is inconsistent with the divine purpose of grace, and the particular application of atoning blood. With this we cannot agree.

A price paid

Christ's redemptive work must be considered particular as by it a transaction is accomplished in the divine economy of God. Christ's blood secured the transaction when the purchase price for sin was paid. In the atonement the debt is paid; the church is bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). Christ, with His own precious blood, has paid the ransom demanded by justice, and purchased the inheritance sold under sin (Matthew 20:28; 1 Peter 1:19). The church, thus redeemed, is His purchased possession (Ephesians 1:14). To teach a sufficiency for all in the death of Christ denies the efficacy of Christ's atonement and can have no proper place in faithful evangelical preaching.

Sin removed

Redemption must also be considered particular because substitution provides for the bearing and carrying away of sin by the substitute. God's justice demands payment for sin but His holiness also demands the removal of sin and the application of righteousness. Perhaps the most wonderful aspect of Christ's substitutionary atonement is His bearing the sins of His people in His own body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24). Here we see the punishment for our sin. Here God's mercy and justice find satisfaction in one glorious act. If the death of Christ was general and indefinite then the sins of all mankind must be both paid for and carried away, and there is no need for Hell, no final judgment and no accountability for sin.

Grace bestowed

Finally, if there is to be any assurance in Christ, any confidence in the efficacy of His work, redemption must be particular. If, as we are told, the death of Jesus Christ is sufficient for all and He paid the full price of sin for all mankind as completely as for one individual then we may justifiably conclude there is nothing inherent in the atonement itself to secure the sinner's salvation. If, supposing the whole world believe, Christ's blood is sufficient for the whole world's sins, and if, supposing they will but trust in Him, Christ's sin-bearing is sufficient for all mankind, then it is clear that for me, personally, any cleansing power in the blood is conditional upon my believing, and the carrying away of my sin contingent upon my faith. In short, there is no ground for hope, no enduring comfort and no intrinsic merit in our Saviour's blood and righteousness, unless and until it is made so by some additional input on the part of the sinner.

Yet that is not how Scripture speaks. The salvation of a sinner is always traced to the vicarious death of the Lord Jesus Christ which must therefore, be particular. The particular, electing purpose of God the Father does not pay the captive's ransom or free the sin-bound slave. Election is not salvation. Nor does the particular, regenerating power of God the Holy Spirit bear the sin of burdened souls, weary and heavy laden. Effectual calling is not salvation. It is Christ's blood and righteousness alone that cleanses men from sin and makes them fit for glory (1 John 1:7-9). Hence our Lord could say to Zacchaeus, 'this day is salvation come to this house'

and Isaiah declares, Surely, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ... the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:4, 5). Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

William Rushton in his little book, *Particular Redemption*, provides an apt conclusion:

A wealthy and philanthropic individual visits Algiers, and approaches a dungeon in which a wretched captive lies bound with chains and fetters, and strongly secured within walls, and doors, and bars. He pro-claims aloud to the captive, that he has brought gold sufficient for a ransom, on condition that the captive will liberate himself from his chains, burst open his prison-doors, and come forth. Alas! exclaims the wretched man, your kindness does not reach my case. Unless your gold can effect my deliverance, it can be of no service to me. The offer of it on such terms can do me no good. Now, although there is a great difference between spiritual and physical inability, yet one serves to illustrate the other. Man by nature is spiritually as unable to believe in Christ, as the Algerine captive is physically unable to break his chains and the prison doors; so that all this boasted sufficiency of the atonement is only an empty offer of salvation on certain terms and conditions; and such an atonement is much too weak to meet the desperate case of a lost sinner.

But how different is the salvation of God! By the blood of thy covenant, I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water¹ Jesus, by his death, hath paid the ransom, and made the captives his own. Therefore he has a legal right to their persons, and with his own right arm he brings them forth. It is his glory to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison-house.²

Particular? Oh, yes!

¹ Zechariah 11.

² Isaiah 42:6, 7.

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