

## **Agorazo in 2 Peter 2:1**

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by [Jim Ellis](#)

I was stimulated to do a little study on the meaning of the Greek word *agorazo* (translated *bought*) in 2 Peter 2:1 by a chapter in Tom Wells recent book, *A Price for a People*.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of Wells book is to review and comment on some issues regarding the nature and extent of Christ's atonement, a subject certainly worth the effort in this day and age. In the process he explains and defends the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement as a truly biblical doctrine. He does a fine job of this and I highly recommend the book to those who are interested or may have trouble with this particular doctrine. It is one of the more readable treatments of the subject.

Anyway, in the process of his discussion he addresses some of the problem texts and naturally comes to 2 Peter 2:1 which admittedly has been somewhat of an enigma for many of us who hold to a limited atonement. There he notes how the word *agorazo* is misused by some theologians, especially those who use 2 Peter 2:1 to argue against limited atonement.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the interpretation of this verse, they apparently give *agorazo* a depreciated meaning in order to support their case for a universal atonement as opposed to a limited atonement. Before we go on, however, let's pause for a moment to recall the verse. It reads,

But false teachers also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought (*agorazo*) them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Pet. 2:1.

The argument of those who hold to a universal atonement goes something like this: "It cannot be avoided that Peter is here saying, in words unmistakably clear, Christ paid the ransom price even for those who deny Him."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, they say, Christ died for the non-elect (those who never believe) just as He died for the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wells, *A Price for a People*, Banner of Truth, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, Regular Baptist Press, p. 77.

elect (those who believe and are saved). They claim that this verse provides proof that Christ "died for" those who are never saved, therefore making the atonement universal. Consequently, this is used to argue against the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement, whereby Christ is said to have died a substitutionary, atoning death only for those who are actually and finally saved.

A sure understanding of exactly what is meant in 2 Pet. 2:1 may be beyond the scope of this article, but I think there is clear evidence that it cannot mean what the universal redemptionists claim regarding the extent of the atonement.

With that in mind, I would like to look specifically at the definition of the word *agorazo*, review its New Testament usage, and comment on what I believe to be some significant aspects of its meaning. Then we will briefly look at some examples of the misuse of *agorazo* to hopefully see the fallacy involved in the universalist's argument from 2 Peter 2:1. And finally, we will try to take a fresh look at the verse in light of our discussion and see if we can get a better handle on its potential meaning.

### Definition of the word

*Agorazo* means to buy, to purchase, or to acquire ownership by payment of a price. This is a common word in the Greek, yet it is also one of the great words in Scripture used to describe our redemption by Christ. Therefore, we would do well to make sure that we correctly understand its use in the New Testament. Specific references for the meaning of this Greek word are presented below:

Moulton<sup>4</sup> - (a) to acquire by a ransom or price paid, (b) to redeem.

Vine<sup>5</sup> - (a) to buy as in a market-place, (b) figuratively, of Christ having bought men, making them his property at the price of His blood. Note that Vine sees redeem as too strong for *agorazo* and reserves that thought for its compound form, *exagorazo*.

Thayer<sup>6</sup> - (a) originally, it meant to frequent the market-place, (b) primarily it means to buy or obtain for a price, (c) figuratively, Christ is said to have purchased his disciples, i.e. made them his private property.

For completeness, let us also look at the meaning of the English word from Webster,<sup>7</sup> where buy is said to mean (a) to get by paying money or some equivalent, or (b) to get as by an exchange. This is in complete agreement with

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<sup>4</sup> H. K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary*, p. 194.

the meaning of our Greek word. You will note that the buyer gets whatever is bought, thus the idea of acquiring or gaining possession is present in both the Greek and English words.

### **New Testament usage**

This word is used 30 times in the New Testament. The New American Standard Bible translates it as buy 25 times, purchase 4 times, and spend 1 time. Of the thirty occurrences, twenty-four are in a common or secular sense such as buying a field (Matt. 13:44) or buying food (Luke 9:13). On six occasions, however, it is used of people in a spiritual or theological sense with God or Christ as the purchaser. These are:

- 1 Cor. 6:20 - you have been bought with a price
- 1 Cor. 7:23 - you were bought with a price
- 2 Pet. 2:1 - denying the Master who bought them
- Rev. 5:9 - Thou . . . didst purchase. . . men from every tribe, tongue and people
- Rev. 14:3 - who had been purchased from the earth
- Rev. 14:4 - These have been purchased from among men

The compound form of this word, *exagorazo*, is used four times in the New Testament, twice with a theological reference to people. The prefix *ex-* is seen as an intensification or strengthened form of the basic word *agorazo*; literally it means to buy up or buy out of. Hence, the NASB and other modern versions translate it as redeem, as shown below:

- Gal. 3:13 - Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law
- Gal. 4:5 - in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law

### **Comments on the meaning of the word**

It is clear that the word *agorazo* means to buy in the normal and full sense of the English word buy. The thing to notice is that this word, in Greek and English, means more than simply to put down or pay a price; it includes the idea of acquiring or obtaining ownership. In the normal sense, such as in buying a field (Matt. 13:44), the field, once bought, becomes the property of the buyer. There is no tentativeness or pending aspect to this. If the field has been bought, it belongs to the buyer. If it has not been acquired by the buyer, it has not been bought.

Neither can this word be depreciated to mean merely offer as in offering a price or making the price available. An offer may never be taken up. An offer may be rejected or refused. In such cases nothing is bought at all. The word buy includes

the idea that the transaction is consummated.<sup>8</sup> That is the very nature of the word.

This word was often used in the Greek of New Testament times to refer to the buying of a slave. It is noted also that purchasing the slave released him from his former bondage. Now a man may purchase a slave without necessarily releasing him from bondage. Indeed, he may purchase a slave for the purpose of keeping him in bondage to himself, the purchaser. However, what remained true was that the slave was always released from his previous master by such a transaction. Therefore, *agorazo* also carries with it the idea of release. There are times when the New Testament represents Christians as being in precisely that situation. We were bought out of slavery to sin and Satan, but we are now the slaves of Christ. We were redeemed by His blood, and therefore we belong to Him, we are His.

There are also instances of pagan usage where a slave raised the price for his own freedom. In such cases he could take the money to the temple priests and for a fee they would buy his freedom for him.<sup>8</sup> They would buy him from his master to become a servant of the god of the temple, or in essence a free man. Still, there was no buying without a release or freedom from the previous bondage; and in this case there was also a theoretical change in ownership, from the former master to the temple.

My point should be clear even if my reason for making it is not yet apparent. The word *agorazo* does not mean simply to put down a price, but actually to gain possession of something. This is clearly the meaning carried in all the other uses of this word in the New Testament, whether it is the secular use of the word or the theological or redemptive use of the word.

### ***Examples of misuse***

In some discussions of *agorazo*, this simple fact soon gets overlooked. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, says of *agorazo* in regard to buying slaves, "Its technical meaning implies only the purchase of the slave, but does not necessarily convey the thought of his release from slavery." And again, "There is then a redemption which pays the price, but does not of necessity release the slave."<sup>9</sup>

The first statement of Chafer's may be true, but not in the sense that he apparently means it. A man may certainly purchase a slave without releasing him from bondage. As discussed above, a slave may be purchased for the specific purpose of keeping him in bondage. This happened in slave markets all the time.

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<sup>8</sup> Wells, *Op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 192. As quoted by Wells, *Ibid.*, p. 134. Italics are Chafer's.

The fact is, however, that the slave was released from his former bondage and became the property of the new owner. He was always released from his previous master by such a purchase.

The second quotation from Chafer clearly suggests something different, and that is the payment of the price without acquiring ownership. If this is what he means, and I'm sure it is, he has simply departed from the meaning of the word. *agorazo* means to buy or to purchase, not simply put down a price.

Robert Lightner reflects the same shift in meaning in his discussion of redemption words, including *agorazo*. For example, he states, "Christ by His death redeemed or paid the price for sin."<sup>10</sup> Here Lightner too equates redemption with the bare payment of a price, which violates the meaning of redeem. But you see he must do so, for he, like Chafer, is bound by his theological view of the atonement to say that what Christ has done in His death, He has done for all men; and since all men are not actually acquired by Christ in a redemptive sense, he must reduce *agorazo* to mean merely the payment of the price.

This depreciated meaning is especially evident in Lightner's discussion of 2 Pet. 2:1. Regarding these false teachers, Lightner says, "The purchase price of redemption was paid by the Lord for even the false prophets and teachers, even though they quite obviously never accept it." And again, "these individuals, whoever they are, . . . endure eternal separation from God; yet they are the very ones for whom Christ paid the purchase price."<sup>11</sup>

Whatever 2 Pet. 2:1 means, it is evident that Lightner has changed the meaning of *agorazo*. He has given up the idea of buying with its attendant notion of acquiring ownership and has reduced the meaning to the putting down of a price.

This is somewhat surprising since elsewhere Lightner quotes with approval John Walvoord's statement that, "Christ's death constituted an act of purchase in which the sinner is removed from his former bondage to sin by payment of the ransom price."<sup>12</sup> If this is true, and it is, then "Christ's death is something far more glorious than the payment of a price that may leave millions still in bondage to sin. Christ's death is emancipation. That shows beyond doubt that His atonement was only for those who actually come to experience liberty."<sup>13</sup>

### Regarding 2 Peter 2:1

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<sup>10</sup> Lightner, *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> Walvoord, as quoted by Lightner, *Ibid.*, p. 78. Italics mine.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

In light of our discussion and the full meaning of *agorazo*, it may be worth pausing to see if we might gain some insight into the interpretation of this verse. As we have seen, those who maintain a universal atonement want to make buy mean put down a price, but that's not what it means. Therefore this verse cannot mean that Christ died for those whom He will never make His own. Once we understand this, we ought to be able to consider, a little more sympathetically, some other possible interpretations of this verse.

According to the meaning of *agorazo*, we must take this verse to say that God or Christ acquired some men who proved false. How, or in what sense, has Christ acquired these men? Has He acquired them by actually redeeming them by His blood, that is, by delivering them from bondage to sin? That is obviously not the case here. These men will go into eternity unredeemed and separated from God.

In the verses where *agorazo* is obviously used in a redemptive context, it is clear that the redemption is restricted to believers and that an actual redemption is in view, not merely the putting down of a price. Here in 2 Pet. 2:1 it is admitted by most scholars that these false teachers are unsaved men destined for destruction. They cannot have been bought in the sense of being redeemed by the blood of Christ.

The question then remains, In what sense has Christ bought, or rather acquired, these false teachers? Wells suggests that possible options include Christ acquiring them by virtue of their association with the church and their profession of faith. It is clear that they claim to be Christians teaching the truth of God. They are members, if you will, of the church. However, their very teaching somehow denies or betrays the gospel of God's grace. Christ being the Head and sovereign Lord or owner of the church may be said to have acquired them by the fact that outwardly they are part of the church.

Or, they may have been bought in the sense that their association with the church provided an escape from the corruption of the world, as specifically suggested in 2 Pet. 2:20.<sup>14</sup> There we read, "For if they (the false teachers) have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they again are entangled in them and are overcome, the last state being worse for them than the first." There is a real sense in which they have been sanctified, set apart from the world, by Christ through the church of which they profess to be a part.

Other possible interpretations of this verse are presented by Gary Long who agrees with the need to retain the full meaning of *agorazo*. Long also points out that Peter intentionally alludes to Deuteronomy 32:6 when he refers to the false teachers as "denying the Master who bought them." You can easily see the parallel, for there we read, Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise

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<sup>14</sup> Gary D. Long, *Definite Atonement*, Presbyterian and Reformed, pp. 67-78.

people? Is not He your Father who has bought you? He has made you and established you. Deut. 32:6.

If this is a valid allusion, then the final phrase of Deut. 32:6 may shed light on the understanding of bought in our 2 Peter passage. Can he possibly mean bought in the sense of made and established? I think the context demands a serious look at Deuteronomy 32, especially since Peter has just compared these false teachers to the "false prophets that also arose among the people" and apparently alludes to Deut. 32:5 in verse 13 of the same chapter.

This also seems to be consistent with the fact that Peter refers to the one denied as Master (Greek: *despotes*) not Lord as we might expect if spiritual redemption by the blood of Christ were in view. This word emphasizes God (or Christ) as sovereign ruler over the earth and the one who creates and establishes all things, a thought consistent with the allusion to Deut. 32:6. In fact, if Deut. 32:6 is in Peter's mind, then Master here is more likely a reference to God the Father than to Christ. It is an assumption on the part of most commentators that Master refers to Christ. It is also an assumption that bought refers to His death on the cross. The context must be fairly evaluated. I'm not sure it has been in most of the works I've seen.

***In conclusion***, I do not pretend to have solved the problem of 2 Peter 2:1. In fact, I may only have raised more questions in the readers mind. However, one thing should be perfectly clear. Whatever else 2 Peter 2:1 may mean, its interpretation must include God or Christ acquiring these people. It is not enough to say He paid the price for them. Without the element of acquisition or ownership, any understanding of this verse is false.

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