

Who Limits the Atonement

by

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Those of us who believe in the sovereignty of God are often said to “limit” the atonement of Christ. In fact many preachers of our persuasion freely use the term “Limited Atonement.” As with any Bible doctrine, this teaching must be able to stand the close examination of Bible students who are honestly seeking God’s will. It must be able to stand, or else be junked!

First, let us examine the words used in the phrase “Limited Atonement.” The word “limited” is defined by Webster as meaning “bounded; confined within limits, capable of acting only within certain boundaries or restrictions.”^[1] Atonement means “In theology, the expiation of sin made by the obedience and personal sufferings of Christ; more specifically, the crucifixion,” again according to Webster.^[2] In the Bible, it means expiation or payment for sin. This includes redemption, which is the act of freeing, or the state of being freed by payment of a ransom or price. In the Old Testament the key meaning is “covering;” and in the New Testament case it is “reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11). It means Christ’s blood paying the price for our sins, or the satisfaction of the law’s demands. A number of other words could be considered including placate, appease, cleanse, forgive, and be merciful, all with their shades of meaning. It is beyond our scope to study them all in this writing.

Sacrifice

In the Old Testament, the atonement was made through the animal sacrifices. There were continual sacrifices, but once a year on the great Day of Atonement the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, never without blood, to atone for the sins of the people. This special sacrifice, as we learn in Hebrews, only *covered* the sins of the people. It typified the great *future* sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So it only temporarily made atonement (lit. *at-one-ment*), with God for the people. Although the Greek scholar, W.E. Vine, didn’t like breaking the English word down this way, many feel it is a good illustration for the common man. Sinners that were once alienated from God are now “at one with Him.” Old Testament atonement was limited in three ways.

(1) By its nature — it was temporary.

(2) By its design. It only covered the sins of God's covenant people, the Jews (including proselyte Jews).

(3) By its effectiveness — it only covered the sin — never to take it away once for all.

“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sin” (Hebrews 10:4). Yes, it anticipated the great final sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

So we can readily see that the Old Testament atonement was limited though it did what it was designed to do. It pointed to the *better sacrifice*, the perfect way of redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ. Both the Old Testament Hebrew (*sebach*) and the New Testament Greek (*thusia*) basically mean “a slaughter” (*Strong's Concordance*). As a lamb in the Old Testament was led to the slaughter (sacrifice), so was Christ in the New Testament, as the perfect sacrifice which all the others pointed to; and His was never to be repeated. “But this man [Christ], after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12).

Reconciliation

Let's look at more regarding New Testament atonement. The word atonement is found once in the KJV New Testament in Romans 5:11, and as I stated, it means reconciliation. It is translated that way in most modern English Bibles, and is shown as an alternate in the KJV Oxford, and Cambridge Reference Bibles, among others. Reconciliation is found in its various forms fourteen times in the New Testament. It is not used doctrinally each of these times, but in Romans 5 (KJV) it is used with the word “atonement” in the same passages.

The word “reconciliation” used here in Romans 5 is a Greek word which means “to change thoroughly” (*Young's Analytical Concordance*). This regards a change in relation to the enemy of God becoming His friend. This involves repentance, that is; agreeing with the holy God in His verdict against you that finds you guilty. God leads men to repentance, but He will not repent for them! (See Romans 2:4). He has wrought a change in us, but God doesn't change toward us, we must change toward Him, the immutable God. Then because we are changed, He is in the right relationship with us. In II

Corinthians 5:20 the apostle says “be ye reconciled to God”. This action must be taken by the awakened sinner on the grounds of Christ’s sacrifice.

So reconciliation, no one would deny, is limited to those who repent and believe the Gospel. However, this somewhat detracts us from our main subject of consideration. Atonement in its theological sense *involves* reconciliation, but only after the sacrifice has been made. So a better word to describe this doctrine is perhaps in order.

Redemption

We shall consider redemption. Limited atonement is often called “particular redemption,” which is the term I prefer when considering the doctrine.

Redemption as a New Testament term is the Greek word “*Apolutrosis*” which means “a loosing away.” A good example of its use is Eph. 1:7. “In whom we have redemption through His blood.” In other words, we are loosed by His blood. We are loosed from the righteous condemnation of God’s law which has judged us guilty. “For the law of the spirit of Life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom. 8:2). Redemption often speaks of that final day of redemption when the purchased possession will be redeemed (Eph 1:14) or set free from the earthly habitation.

No one should deny that redemption in its final state is particular. Only those who are in Christ will be called up to be with Him. (I Thessalonians 4:16-18)

He saves His sheep, His elect, His chosen, but we are not saved by election and predestination, we are saved by the sacrifice of Christ!

Certainly no one will contest that redemption is particular in requirement that only those who come to Christ and look to Him and His shed blood are actually redeemed. The Israelites in Numbers 21:8, 9 were required to “*look and live*” on that brazen serpent. But the argument is that anyone can live if he will look. But the problem is that a sinner is unable to look, unable to come, unless drawn (John 6:37), unwilling to come unless made willing (Psalm 110:3), even uncertain who God is, unless enlightened (Acts 17:23).

Propitiation

One more word we must consider is the word “propitiation” which is the sacrifice itself which secures the reconciliation and redemption, and even the justification and sanctification, and every other benefit of Christ’s death.

Propitiation (Grk.=*hilasmos*) is only used three times in the New Testament. Both times in the epistle of I John (2:2, 4:10). It means “*what appeases.*” One other time it is used as the place of propitiation (Grk.=*hilasterion*), (Rom. 3:25), and shows Christ to be the altar of sacrifice. For the last 100 years in the majority of evangelical churches, it has been taught that there is no need to appease or satisfy an angry God in regard to our sin. The “Smile, God loves you” philosophy has left us short of Biblical truth regarding God and sin. The point is, God is angry with the wicked every day! God does punish sin, and will punish sin either in us or our substitute. Just as the Passover lamb was a substitute for the first born of Israel in each home where the lamb was slain, so Christ, our Passover, was slain for us. (I Corinthians 5:7)

The anger of God against sin cannot be overlooked without a total warping of our theology. There would be no need for propitiation if God were not angry with sin. He must be satisfied. He cannot look upon sin. Since “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), the sinner must die or a substitute must die in his place. As John Murray says:

The question is: on whose behalf did Christ offer Himself as a sacrifice? On whose behalf did he propitiate the wrath of God? Whom did he reconcile to God in the body of His flesh through death? Whom did he redeem from the curse of the law, from the guilt and power of sin, from the enthralling power and bondage of Satan? In whose stead and on whose behalf was he obedient unto death, even the death of the cross? These are precisely the questions that have to be asked and frankly faced if the matter of the extent of the atonement is to be placed in proper focus.^[3]

This is exactly the question, on whose behalf? Many hold that the answer is given in our verse regarding propitiation in I John 2:2. “And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” I have had well-meaning brethren tell me that this verse means Christ died for all without exception. In light of many other scriptures it cannot mean that. If it did mean that, then we would have to face a universal atonement i.e., that all men at the last day would finally be saved. It would have to mean that because propitiation, a satisfaction, has then been made for all sinners everywhere and God would be unjust to demand two payments for the same sin.

But, the objection is given, “all men are not believers so therefore all men are not saved”. This is true, but atonement and propitiation, and reconciliation are not considering faith, but the blood being shed as a sacrifice. Of course, there must be faith in this shed blood. Only those who have it are saved. This in itself is a limiting of the atonement. It is limited to believers! Unbelievers cannot partake of this sacrifice. It is for the sheep. It is for the church. It is for the elect. He is the Saviour of the body.

Incidentally, another dear brother tried to tell me that the elect were *only* the physical Jews, but he disregards I Thessalonians 1:4, a verse which is certainly in a non-Jewish epistle.

The World

But, in close examination of I John 2:2 you can easily see that John is not saying “everyone in the whole world,” i.e. the entire inhabited earth, all of mankind, has been propitiated for. This would totally contradict the other scriptures that say “God is angry with the wicked every day.” (Psalm 7:11) and in John 17:9 Jesus said “I pray not for the world” — and even here in the epistle of First John — “The whole world lieth in wickedness,” (I John 5:19). “The world passeth away and the lust thereof” (I John 2:17). Are you saying that in each of these examples the world is atoned for, propitiation has been made; yet it will perish? Unthinkable! What we must come to grips with is that “world” is used in several ways in the Bible.

As Duane Edward Spencer points out:

Much of what we think about the atoning death of Christ will be tempered by what we understand the simple word “world” to mean. In the Gospel of John this word has significance in that it may have any one of seven different meanings

- (1) the classical sense, i.e., the orderly universe
- (2) the earth itself
- (3) the human inhabitants of earth by metonymy (i.e., figure of speech, cmw)
- (4) mankind under the Creator’s judgment alienated from His life, in the ethical sense
- (5) the public who were about Christ, Jews in particular

(6) the kingdom of evil forces, angelic as well as human, as related to the earth (i.e., the world system - cmw)

(7) and men out of every tribe and nation, but not all tribes and nations as a whole.^[4]

I believe Mr. Spencer's last definition most closely fits I John 2:2. John was simply saying not only our sins (Jewish Christians) but the sins of the whole world, people from every nation, kindred and tongue. (Rev. 5:6). This is the same thing that Jesus was saying to Nicodemus in John 3:16 when He said "for God so loved the world". He was addressing a ruler of the Jews, one whose understanding of God was limited to salvation for Jews only. Jesus was telling him it was a salvation for people of all nations.

Salvation Possible or Certain?

In reality it is the Arminian who limits the atonement because salvation is made to be a chance affair. "*Maybe*" someone will be saved as a result of Christ's death but there is no certainty because it is their belief that God only made salvation *possible* to all. In reality He paid the price, and made a propitiation for all human beings who are God's chosen, who will believe on Him through the preaching of the Gospel.

As John Murray said,

Whether the expression "limited atonement" is good or not, we must reckon with the fact that unless we believe in the final restoration of all men, we cannot have an unlimited atonement. If we universalize the extent, we limit the efficacy. If some of those for whom atonement was made and redemption wrought perish eternally, then the atonement is not itself efficacious. It is this alternative that the proponents of universal atonement must face. They have a '*limited*' atonement in respect of that which impinges upon its essential character. We shall have none of it. The doctrine of 'limited atonement' we maintain is the doctrine which limits the atonement to those who are heirs of eternal life, i.e., to the elect. That limitation insures its efficacy and conserves its essential character as efficient redemption." (emphasis mine - cmw)

^[5]

Limited on Both Sides

So, when we consider who really limits the atonement, we realize that there

is a limitation on both sides of the argument. The Arminian necessarily limits God to the whim of finite, fallen man. The Calvinistic view, which is the scriptural view, limits the atonement only in design making it a definite atonement. Perhaps no one has said it better than the Puritan John Owen (1616-1683). In a statement available in tract form titled “*For Whom Did Christ Die?*” he says,

The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either:

- (1) All the sins of all men.
- (2) All the sins of some men, or
- (3) Some of the sins of all men. In which case it may be said:
 - (a) That if the last be true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved.
 - (b) That if the second be true, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth.
 - (c) But if the first be the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins? You answer, Because of unbelief. I ask, is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins!^[6]

Atonement Limited or God is Limited

We must necessarily limit the atonement in effectiveness and also limit God Almighty if we say He designed to save all humanity, or that the blood of Christ was shed to save all humanity and yet all humanity would not be saved. It would mean God had failed! “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14)

We are also limiting the atonement in effectiveness to put in the hands of finite, sinful man its ultimate success or failure. The atonement would thus be limited by man’s “*decision.*”

Christ’s blood was shed sufficient to save all men. “Saviour of all men, specially (particularly) them that believe” — I Tim. 4:10 — effective to all it was designed for: believers!

Sufficiency of Christ's Blood

Again quoting from John Owen:

Sufficient we say, then, 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. The sufficiency of His sacrifice hath a two-fold rise: First, the dignity of the person that did offer and was offered. Secondly, the greatness of the pain He endured by which He was able to bear and did undergo the whole curse of the law and wrath of God due to sin. And this sets out the innate, real, true worth and value of the blood shedding of Jesus Christ. This is its own true internal perfection and sufficiency. 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, doth not arise from it, but merely depends on the intention and will of God. It was in itself of infinite value and sufficiency to have been made a price to have bought and purchased all and every man in the world. (emphasis mine - cmw)^[7]

Who limits the atonement? Almost every view limits it to some extent. All will not finally be saved. Who limits the atonement? Who made redemption particular? Who “saves His people from their sins”? (Matthew 1:21) Who “gave His life for the sheep”? (John 10:11) Who “purchased His church with His own blood”? (Acts 20:28) Who “hath chosen you from the beginning to salvation”? (II Thessalonians 2:13) Who said “all that the Father giveth me shall come to me”? (John 6:37) Look at these scriptures prayerfully and may the God of scripture show you that He always accomplishes His will. In time and eternity, He always does that which He has decreed. Who limits the atonement? Almighty God does!

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Webster's Universal Dictionary*, World Syndicate Publishers; Cleveland and New York, 1937 edition.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* - John Murray, Banner of Truth - Edinburgh; originally published 1955, Wm. B. Eerdmans Company, Grand Rapids, Mich. USA (P. 62).

[4] *Tulip - The Five Points of Calvinism in Light of Scripture* - Duane Edward Spencer, 1979, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI (p. 35, 36).

[5] *Op. cit.*, John Murray, p. 64, 65.

[6] "For Whom Did Christ Die?", John Owen, a tract available from Chapel Library, 2603 W. Wright St., Pensacola, FL 32505; telephone: (850) 438-6666.

[7] *Death of Christ*, John Owen, Vol.10 of Works, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, (p. 295, 296).

Also use was made of both *Young's* and *Strong's* concordances, and *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* in various online and print editions, none of which have a copyright.