

For God So Loved the World

by

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Every Christian believes in limited atonement. That may sound ludicrous to my Arminian friends because it has long been assumed that only Calvinists hold to the dreaded “L” in TULIP. But if the death of Jesus Christ is recognized as an actual atonement (and not merely a potential one), then the question of limitation cannot be escaped, unless you believe the lie of universalism.

It is the recognition that Christ’s death actually atoned for sins that governs our interpretation of those wonderful texts that speak of the great breadth of His saving work. For example, John writes that Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The choice here is not between Calvinism and Arminianism. It is between Calvinism and universalism. If “world” means “each and every person who ever lived or will live” then everyone will be saved because of the objective nature of propitiation. No sin would be left unpaid for — including the sin of unbelief.

No one who takes seriously the Bible’s teachings on hell and judgment would ever affirm universalism, which means that John uses “world” here to mean something other than each and every person who will ever live (as he often does; see John 14:19; 16:8; 18:20; 1 John 2:15,). John’s concern is to assert that Jesus is the only Savior the world has. His death redeems people not just from among the Jews or Americans or from any one group, but from among the whole world.

Calvinism protects from the heresy of universalism on the one hand and the error of reducing the objective nature of the atonement on the other. The Calvinist recognizes that the death of Jesus saves everyone for whom it was designed. In other words, the atonement is viewed as limited in its scope and purpose. All for whom Christ died will be saved.

Arminianism, however, cannot successfully guard against such mistakes. The Arminian claims that the death of Jesus was designed to save each and every person in history without actually doing so. As such, the atonement did not save everyone for whom it was intended. In other words, the Arminian view,

while claiming that the atonement is unlimited in its extent, is forced to conclude that it is limited in its efficacy. It failed to accomplish its universal purpose.

The difference between these two views is like the difference between a narrow bridge that extends all the way across a valley and a wider one that only goes halfway. Who cares how broad it is if it does not get you to the other side?

This difference is what made Charles Spurgeon argue that Arminianism, much more than Calvinism, limits the atonement of Christ. The Arminian says, “‘Christ has died that any man may be saved if’ — and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ’s death; we say, ‘No, my dear sire, it is you that do it.’ We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it” (Spurgeon’s Sermons, vol. 4, p. 228).

Well, what is “our” view of the atonement that Spurgeon so passionately defended? Specifically, it is the understanding that Jesus actually redeemed everyone He intended to redeem when He shed His blood on the cross. Just as the high priest under the old covenant wore the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on his breastplate when he performed his sacrificial service, so our great High Priest under the new covenant had the names of His people inscribed on His heart as He offered up Himself as a sacrifice for their sins.

In John 10, Jesus clearly announces the particular focus of His atoning death. He calls Himself the “Good Shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Shortly after this, He describes His sheep as those who have been given to Him by His Father. Furthermore, He bluntly declares to some unbelieving Israelites, “you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep” (John 10:26–29 NKJV).

Our Lord’s high priestly prayer in John 17 shows the same kind of limited scope. As He braces for His sacrificial death for His people, He prays specifically — indeed, exclusively — for them. They are the ones whom the

Father had given Him out of the world (v. 6). Consequently, His priestly intercession was limited to them: “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (v. 9). It is inconceivable that Jesus would fail to pray for those for whom He was about to die as a substitutionary sacrifice. The ones for whom He prayed are the same ones for whom He died.

The doctrine of limited atonement, or particular redemption, does not suggest any inadequacy in the death of Christ. Because of who it is that suffered, the death of Jesus is of infinite worth. The Canons of Dort go to great lengths to establish this point and declare plainly that “the death of the Son of God ... is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world” (2.3).

The limitation in the atonement stems from the intention and purpose of God in sending Jesus to the cross. Christ’s redemptive work was designed to be a particular atonement for His own people — those whom the Father had given Him. His death was intended to save the elect.

Jesus teaches that His whole redemptive ministry was carried out in fulfillment of a divinely prearranged plan. This is what He means in John 6:38–39: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

Theologians refer to this arrangement as the covenant of redemption in which, before history began, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit pledged to bring about the salvation of fallen people. Out of sheer mercy and grace, the Father chose individuals to be saved (Rom. 9:11–13; Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13). These chosen ones He gave to His Son (John 6:37, 39; 17:6, 9, 24) who committed Himself to accomplish their salvation through His incarnate, redemptive mission (Mark 10:45; John 10:11). In keeping with this divine agenda, the Spirit is sent into the world by the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 16:5–15) to apply the work of Christ to those whom the Father gave the Son and for whom the Son died.

This view of the atonement guarantees the success of evangelism. God has a people who will be saved infallibly through the preaching of the Gospel. He has chosen them. Christ has died for them. And the Spirit will regenerate

them through the message of salvation. This truth kept Paul going in the face of discouragement at Corinth (Acts 18:9–10), and it will keep us going on in our evangelistic efforts today — not only locally, but globally (Rev. 5:9).

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