

The Intention of the Cross, Examined

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The doctrine of the Atonement of Christ has seen some serious attention ever since it has first been contemplated. Controversies have sprung up since the dawn of the church age over whether Christ died for every single person or only the elect. The atonement is probably the most widely known and controversial point of what is known as the five points of Calvinism. I believe that of all the teachings of the Reformed faith it is the most misunderstood and misconstrued doctrine among those who disagree with it. The chief argument against the limited (*definite*) atonement is this: that this view limits the value of Christ's death and the power in his blood. I want to echo at the outset what the Reformers taught that Christ's death is indeed sufficient to save to the uttermost every person who ever lived, past, present, and future. But was this the intent of the Father? We will soon see that the scriptures may have something different to say. We will also see that it is not merely the Calvinist who limits the atonement, but those who oppose most certainly do as well. It is my intention to bring illumination to the proper understanding of this precious teaching.

Several aspects are to be considered here as we seek to unravel this apparent quasi-heresy that has been around for so long. In order to gain an accurate take on the issue we must answer certain questions that arise most frequently. Why would Christ die only for a handful of people instead of everyone? Does not that make God a respecter of persons? The answer is no because of a faulty view of human depravity. Furthermore, if God so loved the *world*, would anyone consider the fact that Christ died for a specific people and not everyone? This lies in the secret counsel of his will to which no one has access. The former question is a matter of emotions and sentiments focusing on human rights of equality, while the latter is a matter of false scriptural interpretation. Another question that must be answered is for the person who has never really considered this issue an important one. It goes like this: is not this a matter of mere preference? Does it really make a difference on which view we take in the grand scheme of things? I will answer this inquiry now by saying emphatically, yes! It may be the most important question yet because this and other Biblical doctrines make for a heart indicator on how we view God; a kind of sacred barometer that shows our willingness or reluctance to take up our cross. Charles Hodge has put it this way:

Although this may be said to be the running point between these great systems, which have divided the Church in all ages, yet that

point of necessity involved all the other matters of difference; namely, the nature of original sin; the motive of God in providing redemption; the nature and design of the work of Christ; and the nature of divine grace, or the work of the Holy Spirit.¹

Personal feelings run extremely high when discussing this and other doctrines of the Reformed faith. It is not a matter of which system of teaching is most agreeable with our feelings or which one seems to remove apparent difficulties with our understanding of fairness, it is that in which we find directly from the mouth of God in his Holy Scriptures. Scripture is replete with doctrines that seem to be on a surface unfair. The doctrine of original sin seems to be unfair. "You're telling me that I am sold under sin before I had the chance to make a decision to sin?" The fact that God chose Israel for an extended period of time to be his recipients of Grace seems to be unfair. "You mean God chose to redeem a specific people for centuries and darken the minds of the rest of the world?" All of these are suppose to be the objections from the heathen (whose heart is darkened). Nevertheless, what we find in the heart of the Christian is unfortunately a similar attitude.

Eliminating the subjective views on behalf of the skeptic is the first battle, now we must move to the heart of the issue, the *Scriptures*. Does not the Bible say that "Christ is the savior of all men?" Yes, it does (1st Tim 4:10). Does not it say that God "wants *all men* to be saved?" Yes, it also says that (2nd Peter 3:9). Then how are we to say that Christ dies for only specific people? Quite the paradox; or at least it seems. There are many reasons why we can't take these at face value. For one, all doesn't always mean all, despite what your Pastor may say week after week. Consider Matthew 10:22, surely the disciples were not hated by all men of all time; this wouldn't make any sense. This is why context (and more notably the *analogia fidei*) is so important. With respect to the above phrases, they have specific reference to a predominantly Jewish audience. By this, I mean, much of the language spoken by the Apostles were to show the Jewish people were not the only ones receiving the favor of God (cf. 1st John 2:2). This is why we find the references of God not being a respecter of persons qualified with saying, "*neither Jew nor Greek*" (Galatians 3:28) and so on.

In addition, there is more than one place in the Bible that we find generalizations with respect to salvation. The above verses are also good examples of this. But we must consider the following: *what if the Bible spoke of a particularization that appears to determine and qualifies the generalization(s)?* Well, I believe it does. One of the first issues in identifying the problem is found in the assertion that indefinite propositions are in fact universals. Examples of these are found in several uses of "*all men*" and "*the world*" passages.

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952, orig. 1871), p. 330.

It is now my intention to briefly address a few passages of Scripture that speak to the heart of the issue of Christ's work and the intention behind it. The four passages I want to examine that will deal directly with the nature of the design of Christ's work on the Cross are: John 6:64-65; 8:47; 10:26; 17:9; Romans 8:28-30.

John 6:64-65, But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. And he was saying, For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.

The background of this passage is a scene that is most familiar to us. It is Jesus speaking to those who have followed him after he fed the five thousand. His followers wanted to make him king and he withdrew from them only to show up again to them a short time later. At this point, the people began seeking him again, when they find him they asked how and when he got there. This leads Jesus into an exposition of why they sought him in the first place. He begins revealing his divine character by explaining to those people that they only followed him for the food. The people became distressed and began mocking him. It is told to us in Matthew 13:11, by the words of Jesus himself that he speaks about spiritual things, that is in parables, so that those who are really of his sheep fold will in fact hear his words and follow him; and those who are not born of the Spirit, as it were, will show they are not one of his. Hence, seeing they will not perceive. In the preceding verses that lead up to this proclamation in verses 64-65 we find Jesus telling those who began to scoff at his authority: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. However, I said to you that you have seen me, and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:35-37, NASB). What we have here is a direct correlation with that which is more fully developed later in John's Gospel in chapter 10. He purposely indicates the reason they do not believe. He says that the reason they do not believe is because they were not given to him by the Father. Notice, first Jesus tells some of his followers that they are following him for the wrong reasons. Then he tells them specifically why this is so. Is this so hard to see? Actually, at first it is. And it is clarified in the scriptures themselves. Just before verse 64, some of his disciples begin to grumble at those remarks Jesus makes. "Therefore many of his disciples, when they heard this said, this is a difficult statement; who can listen to it? But Jesus, conscious that his disciples grumbled at this, said to them, .Does this cause you to stumble?" (John 6:60-61). It is no coincidence that when this doctrine is taught rightly, we find the very same remarks coming from the disciples of Jesus today.

John 8:47, He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.

Here we have Jesus arguing, as he always did, with the Jewish leaders of his day over the authenticity of his ministry, namely, that he was the Messiah. The Pharisees were quick to condemn Jesus and catch him in a trap, so of course they had to be the first to speak up regarding any statement Jesus made in reference to himself. Well, here is one of the incidences when they in fact do just that. Earlier in verse 12, Jesus makes an all too familiar statement that he is “The light of the world.” Jesus goes on to make more and more indications about his divinity to the Jews to which they keep responding according to the flesh. He spoke frequently of his relationship to the Father in that his witness is true because the Father validates it; a reference to the Old Testament principal that a testimony is validated by “two or three witnesses” (Deuteronomy 19:15). With all of this “father” talk, the Jews then go on to make reference to *their* father, Abraham. Jesus then turns the argument back on them by stating that his “word has no place in them” and proceeds to enlighten them that there are not children of Abraham, but they are in fact children of the devil (John 8:44). Jesus goes even further to point out to them once again why they are not children of Abraham; or children of the promise, better known as “sons of God” (John 8:47).

Here we have the turning point, Jesus is telling those who argue with him why they cannot hear or believe him. This is what leads us to the verse stated above. He is merely repeating what he said earlier in chapter 6. However, the preceding verse is much more astonishing than his last few statements. He asks those who are condemning him to prove that he was in fact a sinner. Yes, that is right, Jesus asks a rhetorical question that only has one answer, he is God! Only God is without sin. He then culminates the discourse by saying that the reason they do not hear him is because they are not *of* God. This amazing statement is precisely another way of stating what he said in John chapter 3 and in chapter 6, that only those who are “born from above” (John 3:3) will enter the kingdom of God. Only those given to the Son “will come to the Son” (John 6:44). And unless it is “given to you,” (John 6:65) you cannot come to the Son. All of these statements are interrelated and woven from the same fabric of truth. Jesus died for a specific people and those for whom he died are the ones who hear his voice and ultimately come to him.

John 10:26, But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep.

The passage above is one of the most prominent statements in the entire Bible with respect to this issue. Once again, we find a proclamation made by Jesus that digs a little deeper to the root of a certain issue where we may find difficulty in understanding.

Jesus again finds himself engaged in an argument with the Pharisees over his divinity. It involves his statement concerning that he is the Good Shepherd and his sheep hear and follow him. In verse 3, Jesus says that he calls his sheep out by name, which would lead us to believe that he knows for whom he died.

Reason being, he goes on to state that he “*lays his life down for the sheep*” (John 10:11). This leads us up to the following verse spoken to those who are in opposition with him. “But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep” (John 10:26). Notice that the reason they do not believe is because they are not his sheep. Do not miss the impact of this verse, it is not spoken backwards; Jesus means exactly what he says. If we piece this entire discourse together and catch the real implication behind the meaning, we find that the chief reason they don’t believe is that because he did not die for them. Robert Reymond appropriately comments:

Rather than saying that men are not his sheep because they do not believe in him, Jesus says that they do not believe in him because they are not his sheep. In other words, the Father must have elected them and summoned them first, that is, they must first be his sheep, before they can come to him, that is, believe in him. Then, concerning those who are his sheep by virtue of the Father’s election and effectual summons, Jesus declares: My sheep [the “my” is emphatic in the Greek] hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. (10:27); that is, as their Shepherd, he knows them, and as his sheep, they hear and follow him *as a matter of course*. And of those who are his sheep, Jesus says that they shall *never* perish, and that *no one*, will or can snatch them out of his and his Father’s hands. Here Jesus affirms the saint’s eternal security in terms of that precious Shepherd sheep relationship which eternally prevails between him and his own.²

From this observation by Reymond it’s clear what Jesus is saying. There appears to be no other way to interpret this verse in light of this context. Jesus states that the reason they do not believe is grounded in the eternal purpose of God, namely, they were not chosen; hence they *do not* believe.

John 17:9, I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.

Of all the passages in the Bible that say anything about the doctrine of definite atonement, this is the loudest. Here Jesus is exercising his role as High Priest on behalf of his people. He begins the chapter by praying for himself, once again making a self proclamation of his deity. Then he goes on to pray for his disciples. The connection is this: just as the Father and the Son are one, so the Son and his sheep ought to be in the same unity. But the context does not just reveal to us that Jesus is praying for his immediate disciples, that is, those who are following him in his earthly ministry; rather we find Jesus speaking of all those who will believe in him at one point or another (see verse 20). Remaining on the

² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 783.

same theme we find in chapters 3, 6, 8, and 10, we discover another peculiar, a behind the scenes look of sorts. It is almost as if John is seeking to tear the curtain away for a moment into the secret will of the Father, a kind of God's eye view. Notice that the attention given by Jesus is not to the world, which is to be taken as every single individual. Instead, he focuses primarily on only those given to him by the Father. He speaks in a similar language to that of chapter 6 by saying that men are given to him. The chief reason for mentioning this is to remain consistent with what is taught elsewhere, namely, election precedes faith. John Calvin notes in his commentary on this:

Now, Christ expressly declares that they who *are given to him* belong to *the Father*; and it is certain that they are *given* so as to believe, and that faith flows from this act of *giving*. If the origin of faith is this act of giving, and if election comes before it in order and time, what remains but that we acknowledge that those whom God wishes to be saved out of the world are elected by free grace?³

The Bible considers God as being generally compassionate to all men. In this case, however, Jesus makes his priestly activity specific, and limited so to speak, in that he prays only for those who the Father has given to him. "This verse strongly supports the doctrine of definite atonement, for it would be absurd for Jesus to die and take away the sins of those for whom he refused to pray."⁴ We must in some way seek to construct what is contained the Word of God as systematic by its very nature. That is to say, that if we ascribe the attributes of God to Jesus and the Trinity as a whole, namely perfection, then what Jesus does and says must, by inference, remain consistent. For Jesus to pray for some, as this text indicates, and then turn around and say that he must in some way pray for everybody because he died for all, remains a gross inconsistency. The death of Christ is directly connected with his intercession. John Owen writes"

Now, unless we will blasphemously ascribe want of wisdom, power, perfection, and sufficiency in working unto the agent, or affirm that the death and intercession of Christ were not suitable and proportioned for the attaining the end proposed by it to be effected, we must grant that the end of these is one and the same. Whatsoever the blessed Trinity intended by them, that was effected; and whatsoever we find in the issue ascribed unto therein, that by them the blessed Trinity intended. So that we shall have no cause to consider these apart, unless it be sometimes to argue from the one to the other; .as, where we find any thing ascribed to

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Bible Commentaries: John, Part II* (Forgotten Books). p. 145-146.

⁴ Richard L, Jr. Pratt, ed., *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI). p. 1738.

the death of Christ, as the fruit thereof, we may conclude that that God intended to effect by it; and so also on the contrary.⁵

Romans 8:29-30, For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he predestined, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

This passage refers to what is known in theology as the *Golden Chain of Redemption*, for obvious reasons. The force of what Paul is saying is all too clear. The one who is “predestined” is done so for the purpose of being conformed to the image of Christ. No one will debate this, not even the Arminian. However, is this all that is in view here? I would assert that this is not what Paul definitively remarks on. Rather, he shows how those who have been predestined are the recipients of verse 28, which proves that all things work together for those who love God. Following verse 28, Paul then grammatically moves into reverse in terms of time. He qualifies what he means when he says all things work together for those who are called by taking us into eternity to the work of God. This verse can be otherwise considered this way: *Because God has chosen certain people from all eternity past to salvation in his Son, and they will in fact be conformed to the image of Christ in and through his providential care, it then can be stated that all things work together for those who have been chosen.* See what is further qualified in verse 30. The one who is predestined is then “called.” A direct correlation to what Jesus asserted in John 6 that the Father draws us. In addition, those who are called are also “justified.” It must be pointed out here that the one called is also justified; again, we have a direct connection to Jesus affirmation of the inward call by the Father. Finally, the one who has been predestined, called, and justified is then “glorified.” Do you see why they call it the chain of redemption? Paul is clearly showing that those for whom the Father intended to save are “kept” in such a way so that “no one can snatch them out of his hand” (John 10:28). And it is precisely that which God does when the entirety of his revealed word is considered.

In conclusion, I want to add that the issues that have been discussed and the texts that have been measured are only a briefing to what this doctrine truly entails. I have purposely left out the examination of the “all” and “world” references for the following reason. Since these verses are now in full view, perhaps a different conclusion may be drawn from the other texts that seem to be contrary to these, lest we find God speaking with a bifurcated tongue. All of the remaining points of Calvinism do not stand-alone; each one of them hinges upon the other. If one of them is found to be faulty, then all of them will follow the same conclusion. The Amyraldians sought to achieve this with minimal success by

⁵ John Owen, *E4's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Logos electronic ed.).

declaring God could chose to save all then change his mind later; a total rejection of God's omniscience to be sure. My prayer is that the one who studies to show himself approved by God will submit to the teachings of the Bible as they are revealed to him and seek to please him by growing in the knowledge of grace for the purpose of knowing him, and the power of his resurrection.

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