

Limited Atonement

By [Loraine Boettner](#)

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1. STATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

The question which we are to discuss under the subject of "Limited Atonement" is, Did Christ offer up Himself a sacrifice for the whole human race, for every individual without distinction or exception; or did His death have special reference to the elect? In other words, was the sacrifice of Christ merely intended to make the salvation of all men possible, or was it intended to render certain the salvation of those who had been given to Him by the Father? Arminians hold that Christ died for all men alike, while Calvinists hold that in the intention and secret plan of God Christ died for the elect only, and that His death had only an incidental reference to others in so far as they are partakers of common grace. The meaning might be brought out more clearly if we used the phrase "Limited Redemption" rather than "Limited Atonement." The Atonement is, of course, strictly an infinite transaction; the limitation comes in, theologically, in the application of the benefits of the atonement, that is in redemption. But since the phrase "Limited Atonement" has become well established in theological usage and its meaning is well known we shall continue to use it.

Concerning this doctrine the Westminster Confession says:

. . . Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed in Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ,

effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.¹

It will be seen at once that this doctrine necessarily follows from the doctrine of election. If from eternity God has planned to save one portion of the human race and not another, it seems to be a contradiction to say that His work has equal reference to both portions, or that He sent His Son to die for those whom He had predetermined not to save, as truly as, and in the same sense that He was sent to die for those whom He had chosen for salvation. These two doctrines must stand or fall together. We cannot logically accept one and reject the other. If God has elected some and not others to eternal life, then plainly the primary purpose of Christ's work was to redeem the elect.

2. THE INFINITE VALUE OF CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

This doctrine does not mean that any limit can be set to the value or power of the atonement which Christ made. The value of the atonement depends upon, and is measured by, the dignity of the person making it; and since Christ suffered as a Divine-human person the value of His suffering was infinite. The Scripture writers tell us plainly that the "Lord of glory" was crucified, I Cor. 2:8; that wicked men "killed the Prince of life," Acts 3:15; and that God "purchased" the Church "with His own blood," Acts 20:28. The atonement, therefore, was infinitely meritorious and might have saved every member of the human race had that been God's plan. It was limited only in the sense that it was intended for, and is applied to, particular persons; namely for those who are actually saved.

Some misunderstanding occasionally arises here because of a false assumption that Calvinists teach that Christ suffered so much for one soul, and so much for another, and that He would have suffered more if more were to have been saved. We believe, however, that even if many fewer of the human race were to have been pardoned and saved, an atonement of infinite value would have been necessary in order to have secured for them these blessings; and though many more, or even all men were to have been pardoned and saved, the sacrifice of Christ would have been amply sufficient as the ground or basis of their salvation. Just as it is necessary for the sun to give off as much heat if only one plant is to grow upon the earth as if the earth is to be covered with vegetation, so it was necessary for Christ to suffer as much if only one soul was to be saved as if a large number or even all mankind were to be saved. Since the sinner had offended against a Person of infinite dignity, and had been sentenced to suffer eternally, nothing but a sacrifice of infinite value could atone for him. No one assumes that since the sin of Adam was the ground for the condemnation of the race, he sinned so much for one man and so much for another and would have

¹ Ch. III, Sec. 6.

sinned more if there were to have been more sinners. Why then should they make the assumption in regard to the suffering of Christ?

3. THE ATONEMENT IS LIMITED IN PURPOSE AND APPLICATION

While the value of the atonement was sufficient to save all mankind, it was efficient to save only the elect. It is indifferently as well adapted to the salvation of one man as to that of another, thus making the salvation of every man objectively possible; yet because of subjective difficulties, arising on account of the sinner's own inability either to see or appreciate the things of God, only those are saved who are regenerated and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The reason why God does not apply this grace to all men has not been fully revealed.

When the atonement is made universal its Inherent value is destroyed. If it is applied to all men, and if some are lost, the conclusion is that it makes salvation objectively possible for all but that it does not actually save anybody. According to the Arminian theory the atonement has simply made it possible for all men to co-operate with divine grace and thus save themselves — if they will. But tell us of one cured of disease and yet dying of cancer, and the story will be equally luminous with that of one eased of sin and yet perishing through unbelief. The nature of the atonement settles its extent. If it merely made salvation possible, it applied to all men. If it effectively secured salvation, it had reference only to the elect. As Dr. Warfield says, "The things we have to choose between are an atonement of high value, or an atonement of wide extension. The two cannot go together." The work of Christ can be universalized only by evaporating its substance.

Let there be no misunderstanding at this point. The Arminian limits the atonement as certainly as does the Calvinist. The Calvinist limits the extent of it in that he says it does not apply to all persons (although as has already been shown, he believes that it is efficacious for the salvation of the large proportion of the human race); while the Arminian limits the power of it, for he says that in itself it does not actually save anybody. The Calvinist limits it quantitatively, but not qualitatively; the Arminian limits it qualitatively, but not quantitatively. For the Calvinist it is like a narrow bridge which goes all the way across the stream; for the Arminian it is like a great wide bridge which goes only half-way across. As a matter of fact, the Arminian places more severe limitations on the work of Christ than does the Calvinist.

4. CHRIST'S WORK AS A PERFECT FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

If the benefits of the atonement are universal and unlimited, it must have been what the Arminians represent it to have been — merely a sacrifice to blot out the curse which rested upon the race through the fall in Adam, a mere substitute for

the execution of the law which God in His sovereignty saw fit to accept in lieu of what the sinner was bound to render, and not a perfect satisfaction which fulfilled the demands of justice. It would mean that God no longer demands perfect obedience as He did of Adam, but that He now offers salvation on lower terms. God, then, would remove legal obstacles and would accept such faith and evangelical obedience as the person with a graciously restored ability could render if he chose, the Holy Spirit of course aiding in a general way. Thus grace would be extended in that God offers an easier way of salvation — He accepts fifty cents on the dollar, so to speak, since the crippled sinner can pay no more.

On the other hand Calvinists hold that the law of perfect obedience which was originally given to Adam was permanent, that God has never done anything which would convey the impression that the law was too rigid in its requirements, or too severe in its penalty, or that it stood in need either of abrogation or of derogation. Divine justice demands that the sinner shall be punished, either in himself or in his substitute. We hold that Christ acted in a strictly substitutionary way for His people, that He made a full satisfaction for their sins, thus blotting out the curse from Adam and all their temporal sins; and that by His sinless life He perfectly kept for them the law which Adam had broken, thus earning for His people the reward of eternal life. We believe that the requirement for salvation now as originally is perfect obedience, that the merits of Christ are imputed to His people as the only basis of their salvation, and that they enter heaven clothed only with the cloak of His perfect righteousness and utterly destitute of any merit properly their own. Thus grace, pure grace, is extended not in lowering the requirements for salvation but in the substitution of Christ for His people. He took their place before the law and did for them what they could not do for themselves. This Calvinistic principle is fitted in every way to impress upon us the absolute perfection and unchangeable obligation of the law which was originally given to Adam. It is not relaxed or set aside, but is fittingly honored so that its excellence is shown. In behalf of those who are saved, for whom Christ acted, and in behalf of those who are subjected to everlasting punishment, the law in its majesty is enforced and executed.

If the Arminian theory were true it would follow that millions of those for whom Christ died are finally lost, and that salvation is thus never applied to many of those for whom it was earned. What benefits, for instance, can we point to in the lives of the heathens and say that they have received them from the atonement? It would also follow that God's plans many times have been thwarted and defeated by His creatures and that while He may do according to His will in the armies of heaven, He does not do so among the inhabitants of the earth.

“The sin of Adam,” says Charles Hodge, “did not make the condemnation of all men merely possible; it was the ground of their actual condemnation. So the righteousness of Christ did not make the salvation of men merely possible, it secured the actual salvation of those for whom He wrought.”

The great Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon said:

If Christ has died for you, you can never be lost. God will not punish twice for one thing. If God punished Christ for your sins He will not punish you. `Payment God's justice cannot twice demand; first, at the bleeding Saviour's hand, and then again at mine.' How can God be just if he punished Christ, the substitute, and then man himself afterwards?

5. A RANSOM

Christ is said to have been a ransom for his people — “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many,” Matt. 20:28. Notice, this verse does not say that He gave His life a ransom for all, but for many. The nature of a ransom is such that when paid and accepted it automatically frees the persons for whom it was intended. Otherwise it would not be a true ransom. Justice demands that those for whom it is paid shall be freed from any further obligation. If the suffering and death of Christ was a ransom for all men rather than for the elect only, then the merits of His work must be communicated to all alike and the penalty of eternal punishment cannot be justly inflicted on any. God would be unjust if He demanded this extreme penalty twice over, first from the substitute and then from the persons themselves. The conclusion then is that the atonement of Christ does not extend to all men but that it is limited to those for whom He stood surety; that is, to those who compose His true Church.

6. THE DIVINE PURPOSE IN CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

If Christ's death was intended to save all men, then we must say that God was either unable or unwilling to carry out His plans. But since the work of God is always efficient, those for whom atonement was made and those who are actually saved must be the same people. Arminians suppose that the purposes of God are mutable, and that His purposes may fail. In saying that He sent His Son to redeem all men, but that after seeing that such a plan could not be carried out He “elected” those whom He foresaw would have faith and repent, they represent Him as willing what never takes place, as suspending His purposes and plans upon the volitions and actions of creatures who are totally dependent on Him. No rational being who has the wisdom and power to carry out his plans intends what he never accomplishes or adopts plans for an end which is never attained. Much less would God, whose wisdom and power are infinite, work in this manner. We may rest assured that if some men are lost God never purposed their salvation, and never devised and put into operation means designed to accomplish that end.

Jesus Himself limited the purpose of His death when He said, "I lay down my life for the sheep." If, therefore, He laid down His life for the sheep, the atoning character of His work was not universal. On another occasion He said to the Pharisees, "Ye are not my sheep;" and again, "Ye are of your father the Devil." Will anyone maintain that He laid down His life for these, seeing that He so pointedly excludes them? The angel which appeared to Joseph told him that Mary's son was to be called JESUS, because His mission in the world was to save His people from their sins. He then came not merely to make salvation possible but actually to save His people; and what He came to do we may confidently expect Him to have accomplished.

Since the work of God is never in vain, those who are chosen by the Father, those who are redeemed by the Son, and those who are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, — or in other words, election, redemption and sanctification, — must include the same persons. The Arminian doctrine of a universal atonement makes these unequal and thereby destroys the perfect harmony within the Trinity. Universal redemption means universal salvation.

Christ declared that the elect and the redeemed were the same people when in the intercessory prayer He said. "Thine they were, and thou gayest them to me," and "I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me; for they are thine: and all things that are mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them," John 17:6, 9, 10. And again, "I am the good shepherd; and I know my own, and mine own know me, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep," John 10:14, 15. The same teaching is found when we are told to "feed the Church of the Lord which He purchased with His own blood," Acts 20:28. We are told that "Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it," Eph. 5:25; and that He laid down His life for His friends, John 15:13. Christ died for such as were Paul and John, not for such as were Pharaoh and Judas, who were goats and not sheep. We cannot say that His death was intended for all unless we say that Pharaoh, Judas, etc., were of the sheep, friends, and Church of Christ.

Furthermore, when it is said that Christ gave His life for His Church, or for His people, we find it impossible to believe that He gave Himself as much for reprobates as for those whom He intended to save. Mankind is divided into two classes and what is distinctly affirmed of one is implicitly denied of the other. In each case something is said of those who belong to one group which is not true of those who belong to the other. When it is said that a man labors and sacrifices health and strength for his children, it is thereby denied that the motive which controls him is mere philanthropy, or that the design he has in view is the good of society. And when it is said that Christ died for His people it is denied that He died equally for all men.

7. THE EXCLUSION OF THE NON-ELECT

It was not, then, a general and indiscriminate love of which all men were equally the objects, but a peculiar, mysterious, infinite love for His elect, which caused God to send His Son into the world to suffer and die. Any theory which denies this great and precious truth, and which would explain away this love as merely indiscriminate benevolence or philanthropy which had all men for its objects, many of whom are allowed to perish, must be unScriptural. Christ died not for an unorderly mass, but for His people, His bride, His Church.

A farmer prizes his field. But no one supposes that he cares equally for every plant that grows there, for the "tares" as well as the "wheat." God's field is the world, Matt. 13:38, and he loves it with an exclusive eye to its "good seed," the children of the kingdom, and not the children of the wicked one. It is not the whole of mankind that is equally loved of God and promiscuously redeemed by Christ. God is not necessarily communicative of His goodness, as the sun of its light, or a tree of its cooling shade, which does not choose its objects, but serves all indifferently without variation or distinction. This would be to make God of no more understanding than the sun, which shines not where it pleases, but where it must. He is an understanding person, and has a sovereign right to choose His own objects.

In Genesis we read that God "put enmity" between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Now who were meant by the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent? On first thought we might suppose that the seed of the woman meant the entire human race descended from Eve. But in Gal. 3:16 Paul uses this term "seed," and applies it to Christ as an individual. "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." On further investigation we also find that the seed of the serpent means not literal descendants of the Devil, but those non-elect members of the human race, who partake of his sinful nature. Jesus said of His enemies, "Ye are of your father, the Devil; and the lusts of your father it is your will to do," John 8:44. Paul denounced Elymas the sorcerer as a son of the Devil and an enemy of all righteousness. Judas is even called a devil, John 6:70. So the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent are each a part of the human race. In other parts of the Scriptures we find that Christ and His people are "one," that He dwells in them and is united with them as the vine and the branches are united. And since at the very beginning God "put enmity" between these two groups, it is plain that He never loved all alike, nor intended to redeem all alike. Universal redemption and God's sentence on the serpent can never go together.

There is also a parallel to be noticed between the high priest of ancient Israel and Christ who is our high priest; for the former, we are told, was a type of the latter. On the great day of atonement the high priest offered sacrifices for the sins of the twelve tribes of Israel. He interceded for them and for them only. Likewise, Christ prayed not for the world but for His people. The intercession of the high priest secured for the Israelites blessings from which all other peoples were excluded; and the intercession of Christ, which also is limited but of a much higher order,

shall certainly be efficacious in the highest sense, for Him the Father hears always.

Furthermore, it is not necessary that God's mercy shall extend to all men without exception before it can be truly and properly called infinite; for all men taken together would not constitute a multitude strictly and properly infinite. The Scriptures plainly tell us that the Devil and the fallen angels are left outside of His benevolent purposes. But His mercy is infinite in that it rescues the great multitude of His elect from indescribable and eternal sin and misery to indescribable and eternal blessedness.

While the Arminians hold that Christ died equally for all men and that He obtained sufficient grace to enable all men to repent, believe, and persevere, if they will only co-operate with it, they also hold that those who refuse to co-operate shall on that account and through all eternity be punished far more severely than if Christ had never died for them at all. We see that so far in the history of the human race the large proportion of the adult population have failed to co-operate and have thus been allowed to bring upon themselves greater misery than if Christ had never come. Surely a view which permits God's work of redemption to issue in such failure, and which sheds so little glory on the atonement of Christ, cannot be true. Vastly more of God's love and mercy for His people is seen in the Calvinistic doctrines of unconditional election and limited atonement than is seen in the Arminian doctrine of conditional election and unlimited atonement.

8. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The argument from the foreknowledge of God is of itself sufficient to prove this doctrine. Is not God's mind infinite? Are not His perceptions perfect? Who can believe that He, like a feeble mortal, would "shoot at the convoy without perceiving the individual birds?" Since He knew beforehand who they were that would be saved — and the more evangelical Arminians admit that God does have exact foreknowledge of all events — He would not have sent Christ intending to save those who he positively foreknew would be lost. For, as Calvin remarks, "Where would have been the consistency of God's calling to Himself such as He knows will never come?" If a man knows that in an adjoining room there are ten oranges, seven of which are good and three of which are rotten, he does not go into the room expecting to get ten good ones. Or if it is foreknown that out of a group of fifty men to whom invitations to a banquet might be sent a certain ten will not come, the host does not send out invitations expecting those ten as well as the others to accept. They do but deceive themselves who, admitting God's foreknowledge, say that Christ died for all men; for what is that but to attribute folly to Him whose ways are perfect? To represent God as earnestly striving to do what He knows He will not do is to represent Him as

acting foolishly.

9. CERTAIN BENEFITS WHICH EXTEND TO MANKIND IN GENERAL

In conclusion let it be said that Calvinists do not deny that mankind in general receive some important benefits from Christ's atonement. Calvinists admit that it arrests the penalty which would have been inflicted upon the whole race because of Adam's sin; that it forms a basis for the preaching of the Gospel and thus introduces many uplifting moral influences into the world and restrains many evil influences. Paul could say to the heathen people of Lystra that God "left not Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness," Acts 14:17. God makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Many temporal blessings are thus secured for all men, although these fall short of being sufficient to insure salvation.

Cunningham has stated the belief of Calvinists very clearly in the following paragraph: —

It is not denied by the advocates of particular redemption, or of a limited atonement, that mankind in general, even those who ultimately perish, do derive some advantages or benefits from Christ's death; and no position they hold requires them to deny this. They believe that important benefits have accrued to the whole human race from the death of Christ, and that in these benefits those who are finally impenitent and unbelieving partake. What they deny is, that Christ intended to procure, or did procure, for all men these blessings which are the proper and peculiar fruits of His death, in its specific character as an atonement, — that He procured or purchased redemption — that is, pardon and reconciliation — for all men. Many blessings flow to mankind at large from the death of Christ, collaterally and incidentally, in consequence of the relation in which men, viewed collectively, stand to each other. All these benefits were of course foreseen by God, when He resolved to send His Son into the world; they were contemplated or designed by Him, as what men should receive and enjoy. They are to be regarded and received as bestowed by Him, and as thus unfolding His glory, indicating His character, and actually accomplishing His purposes; and they are to be viewed as coming to men through the channel of Christ's mediation, — of His suffering and death.²

There is, then, a certain sense in which Christ died for all men, and we do not reply to the Arminian tenet with an unqualified negative. But what we do maintain is that the death of Christ had special reference to the elect in that it was

² *Historical Theology*, II, p. 333.

effectual for their salvation, and that the effects which are produced in others are only incidental to this one great purpose.

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