

Grace Changes Everything

Part 5 – Limited Atonement

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
- John 10:11

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



“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”
- Revelation 5:9-10

Limited Atonement (or, better, *Definite Atonement* or *Particular Redemption*), for many, is the most unappealing of the Doctrines of Grace. There are at least two reasons for this. First, who wants to limit the atonement? It sounds as if Calvinists are being stingy with the greatest act of mercy in the history of the universe. Second, it flies in the face of what most of us have been taught all our lives: that Jesus died for every single sinner without distinction. But is this what the Bible actually teaches concerning the death of Christ?

The question that we must grapple with when seeking to understand the doctrine of the atonement is, “What did Jesus accomplish on the cross?”

Defining our Terms:

- Atonement – “Satisfaction made.” Biblically, atonement refers to the effect of Jesus’ death whereby he satisfied God’s just demand that sin be punished. By his substitutionary death Jesus made peace between God and those for whom he died.
- Universal Atonement (according to Arminianism) – Jesus death made atonement possible therefore the believer makes Christ’s atonement effective by their act of faith.
- Universal Atonement (according to Christian inclusivists) – Jesus death made atonement for all of humanity, therefore all humanity will be saved.
- Limited Atonement – Jesus died to atone for the sins of God’s elect, therefore securing the salvation of the elect.

The doctrine of the atonement forces the question: “What exactly happened on the cross?” Did Jesus die to make the removal of sin’s curse a possibility? Or did Jesus actually remove the curse of sin?

Both Calvinists and Arminians “limit” the atonement. That is, we all believe that the atoning work of Christ is limited in some respect. Either the atonement is limited in *scope* or it is limited in *effectiveness*. The Reformed (or, Calvinist) understanding of Christ’s atonement is that it is limited in its scope, or its intended recipients. This is why *Definite Atonement* or *Particular Redemption* are a better way to name this understanding of atonement. Christ’s atoning death covered the sins of a particular people, thus making the atonement truly substitutionary.

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Those who hold to the Arminian understanding, limit the atonement in terms of effectiveness or what Christ's death actually accomplished. They hold that since Christ's was intended for every person who has ever lived, then atonement was not actually accomplished but only made a possibility. So Christ's death did not actually atone for a single sinner but rather made it possible for sinners to be saved. The atoning work of Christ, then, is made effective not on the cross but in the sinners act of believing.

"This death of God's Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world." – *Canons of Dort*, 2.3

Michael Horton writes:

If Jesus died for every person, but not every person is saved, his death did not actually save anybody. Thus the work of Christ is limited in its power. If, however, the atonement, though sufficient for each and every person, was made on behalf of the chosen people, the church, that atonement is limited in its scope or purpose. If Christ died for people who will be in hell, his efforts cannot accurately be called a "saving work."¹

- Michael Horton from Putting Amazing Back Into Grace (107)

Substitutionary Atonement

Substitution is at the heart of atonement. The entire sacrificial system under the old covenant was based upon the necessity of a substitute. In the giving of the scape goat, the priest would lay his hands upon a sacrificial goat (symbolically imputing the sins of Israel to the beast) which would then be released into the wilderness thus carrying away the sins of God's people. The sacrifice offered yearly on the Day of Atonement was made by the High Priest for the sins of Israel. All of these sacrifices were types pointing to the perfect sacrifice which was to come in the Lord Jesus. What is more, the sacrifices offered under the older covenant were made for God's covenant people. Those sacrifices were not made on behalf of those who were outside the covenant promises of God.

- Romans 3:21-26 – Christ's death vindicated the righteousness of God by satisfying God's justice.
- Galatians 3:13 – "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."
- Hebrews 9:12 – "He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."
- 1 Peter 2:24 – "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

One cannot be a consistent Arminian and hold to substitutionary atonement. If Jesus was truly our substitute on the cross then it was on the cross where he paid for our sins. If that is the case then in the Arminian system, a sinner can be sent to hell even though Jesus died as his substitute. It is inconceivable to hold that position and believe what the Scripture teach concerning the nature of Christ's substitutionary death.

Jesus laid down his life for His sheep.

- Matthew 1:21 – "She will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for *he will save his people* from their sins."
- John 10:11 – "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
- John 10:14-18 – "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and *I lay down my life for the sheep*. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."
- John 10:26-30 – "...but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. *I give them eternal life*, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, *who has given them to me*, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

¹ Michael Horton, Putting Amazing Back into Grace (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) p. 107

Covenant Presbyterian Church
Adult Sunday School

- John 11:50-52 – “Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.’ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one *the children of God who are scattered abroad*.”
- John 17 – In this prayer Jesus prays not for the world but only for those whom the Father has given him. Jesus here highlights the fact that he has a special love for those who are his by the Father’s eternal decree. He prays for and lays down his life for the sheep whom the Father has given him.
- Ephesians 5:25-27 – “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her*, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, *so that he might present the church to himself* in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

Atonement and the Trinity

The salvation of God’s people is the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is inconceivable that the Father would will something that the Son would fail to accomplish or that the Spirit could not fully apply. To believe that Jesus only accomplished a potential atonement on the cross is to rip apart the Godhead. It pits the will of the Father against the ability of the Son. A general atonement assumes that 1) the Father sent His Son to die for no one in particular, or 2) the Father sent the Son to die in order to make salvation a mere potential.

- John 10:26-30 – “...but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. *My Father, who has given them to me*, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”
- Romans 3:24 – “...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, *whom God put forward* as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”
- Galatians 1:3-4 – “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, *according to the will of our God and Father*.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 – “All this is *from God*, who *through Christ* reconciled us *to himself* and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, *in Christ God* was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

“This death is of such great value and worth for the reason that the person who suffered it is – as was necessary to be our Savior – not only a true and perfectly holy man, but also the only begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” – *Canons of Dort 2.4*

“For it was the entirely free plan and vey gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son’s costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation.” – *Canons of Dort, 2.8*

Is it finished?

General atonement means that when Jesus cried out “It is finished,” it truly was not, for the effectiveness of atonement rests decisively in the hands of unbelievers. General atonement means that Christ died in vain. It means that many millions (billions?) for whom he died will go to hell. General atonement means that it was possible for Jesus to die and not a single person be saved. Now *that* is a limited atonement!

Contrary to this is the clear biblical witness that when Jesus died he did not merely provide a potential atonement. When Jesus died, he did so in the place of his people. He actually made atonement on the cross. We cannot complete or otherwise improve upon what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus died not simply to make atonement a potentiality. Jesus died to accomplish atonement. That is the meaning of his dying cry – “It is finished.”

- Luke 19:10 – “For the Son of Man came to seek *and save* the lost.” He did not merely make salvation a possibility. He came to save a particular people.

- Colossians 1:21-22 – “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, *he has now reconciled* in his body of flesh by his death, *in order to* present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Again, salvation was accomplished on the cross, not made a mere possibility.

But didn't Jesus die for the sins of the world?

“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Did John the Baptist declare that Jesus came to make atonement for every person who ever lived?

Remember the importance of context. How often is the word “all” intended to refer to the entire population of the world? Typically words like “all” and “everyone” are contingent on the context in which they are used. For instance, when you enter your home and say, “Is everyone home?” you mean the “everyone” to refer to a specific group, not the world’s population. You will find this same pattern in Scripture. The authors of the New Testament frequently use words like “all” and “everyone” to refer to their immediate audience or God’s covenant people.

Second, the words “world” and “all” used in connection to Christ’s atoning death were meant to correct the mistaken notion of many Jews that Jesus came to save only ethnic Israel. Such phrases as “the world,” “all men,” “all nations,” and “every creature,” were used specifically to counter that false claim. Jesus came to redeem a people from all the nations without ethnic or national distinction (Revelation 5:9-10). God promised to Abraham to make from him a nation that would be made up from people of every nation (Genesis 12, 15 & 17). This was not a promise to save every individual in the world but to save individuals from all the world. Christ was sent to redeem that particular people.

The use of words like “world” and “all” and “everyone” are not intended to advance the notion that Jesus died as a substitute for every individual who has ever lived. In that case we must become universalists. Rather, those words are employed to affirm God’s promise that his purpose in election included men and women from all the nations.

Definite Atonement in a Nutshell...

“Christ’s redeeming work was definite in *design* and accomplishment – that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners, and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else. The salvation which Christ earned for His people includes everything involved in bringing them into a right relationship with God, including the gifts of faith and repentance. Christ did not die simply to make it possible for God to pardon sinners. Neither does God leave it up to sinners to decide whether or not Christ’s work will be effective. On the contrary, all for whom Christ sacrificed Himself will be saved infallibly. Redemption, therefore, was designed to bring to pass God’s purpose of election.”²

“It was God’s will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father; that he should grant them faith (with, like the Holy Spirit’s other gifts, he acquired for them by his death); that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people without spot or wrinkle.” – *Canons of Dort*, 2.8

² Steele, Thomas, & Quinn, The Five Points of Calvinism (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004) p. 40