

**The Extent of the Atonement: A Challenge to the
Traditional Definite and Unlimited Views of the Atonement**

by

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Introduction

Did Christ die for all people, or only for the elect? This continues to be a hotly debated question, and one of great interest to many Christians. Throughout church history there has not been a single doctrine that has come to be held as the orthodox view, that has not been wrought out of controversy. In and through intellectual sparring and wrestling with biblical texts, theologians aim to be precise and clear as to what they find to be the most convincing arguments from Scripture. This can be said of those who hold to a *universal atonement* view, and of those who belong to the *definite atonement* or *particular redemption* view, more commonly called *limited atonement*. I prefer definite atonement or particular redemption over limited atonement, because unless one is a universalist (believing that all will be saved), everyone limits the atonement in some way to particular individuals. Now, my aim in this brief article is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of these two prominent views, but rather to pose some challenges to both views, and place before the reader the framework for what I believe to be a third option in the debate. It is a hybrid view which I call a *Calvinist unlimited atonement* position. Therefore, in what follows, I will discuss what this debate is and is not about, sketch the two prominent views, and offer my own view for examination.

What the Debate Is and *Is Not* About

This may seem an odd place to start, however, many have been confused by what exactly is being hashed out regarding this doctrine. There are essentially three things the issue of the extent of the atonement is not about: sufficiency, efficacy, and offer.

The issue regarding the extent of the atonement is not over the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. People on both sides of the issue agree that, had it been God's purpose to save everyone in the world, Jesus' death on the cross is sufficient to pay for all sin. Where they differ

is whether God actually did that, but not over whether he could have. Christ's payment is sufficient. Both sides agree that his death was sufficient for all. Secondly, the dispute is not over the efficacy of the atoning death of Christ. There is universal agreement, that only those who believe in Christ will be saved and only those who do not believe in Christ will not be saved. Third, the offer of salvation is not an issue. All agree, save the miniscule hyper-Calvinists tribe, that everyone should be extended the offer of salvation. The hyper-Calvinist view on the extent of the atonement is a minority view that does not represent most Calvinists or even John Calvin himself. Those in the reformed tradition (with which I identify), have a very strong conviction that the gospel message needs to be proclaimed and preached to all people.

What is this dispute about then if it is not about the efficacy, sufficiency, or offer of salvation? The issue is, what did God the Father intend in offering his Son as an atoning sacrifice? How one answers this question, is where the two major views of definite and universal atonement come in. I think most would agree that the Father's intention was to save people by his son's death. The difference is whether the atoning sacrifice that Christ made makes salvation a mere possibility for all, or certainly secures the salvation of some, namely the elect. In other words, for whom did Christ die? *The elect* (definite atonement). For whom did Christ die? *The world* (universal atonement). Below, these two views will be explored a bit more starting with definite atonement.

The Major Views

Definite Atonement (Design as Limit)

Simply put, this is what proponents of the definite atonement position advocate: Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving people. Since all are not saved, it requires

that he died for and hence saved certain people; the elect (Ware). Stated another way, Christ's death paid the full propitiatory price for the elect. While it has effect on the non-elect (common grace), its primary intent is to actually and certainly save those whom God has chosen (Breshears). We now go back to our question, for whom did Christ die? The definite atonement position says for the elect, because Jesus' death saves. Why must his death be only for the elect though? Because, they are the only ones who will be saved. Early in the Calvinist-Arminian debate on this issue, the fear on the Calvinist side was if Christ's death saves and there is no election or it is universal in its scope, then you have universalism. Early Calvinists believed that the atonement saves, therefore, if you say the atonement is for all people, all are saved.

There is much to be said and commended in this view and how those who hold to it seek to ground their arguments in biblical texts. Defenders of definite atonement argue from Scripture, for this view, on the basis that: (1) Jesus died for particular persons (*people* Matt. 1:21; *friends* Jn. 15:13; *sheep* Jn 10:15; the *church* Eph. 5:23-26; Acts 20:28; *us* Tit. 2:14; *me* Gal. 2:20) (2) Christ's work on the cross actually redeems, reconciles, and propitiates (*purpose not effect*, Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Heb. 9:12; Rom. 5:10-11; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Col. 1:22; Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 2:2) (3) Christ's intercession and redemptive purpose are definite (Jn. 6:38-39; 11:52; 17:9; 20-21). Those who hold a view of definite atonement say, based on these texts, that those for whom God's wrath is actually propitiated cannot be condemned. If Christ truly died for all, all would be saved. If Christ's death only made God and humans reconcilable, and humans must add something (i.e. faith), then Christ's work is not finished on the cross.

Their greatest two arguments are efficacy and ethicality. This is prominent in the Reformed tradition. The argument goes like this: Scripture clearly teaches that Christ came to save *his* people not just provide something potential, but to actually save them. Therefore, one

should not think of the atonement in potential terms, but rather in actual terms. Concrete salvation because that is what Scripture says. John Owens appeals to ethics making the point in the *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. He asks in this work how it could be just of God to hold people accountable, namely the non-elect, the non-believer, for paying for eternal condemnation if that payment had been made for them? If Christ died for the sins of the world then the payment has been made. How then, could God justly require what appears to be a second payment? These are strong arguments birthed out of Scriptural convictions and theological arguments.

Unlimited Atonement (Unbelief as Limit)

To be clear, I am now presenting the Classic Arminian position, which is not my own, although mine looks something like it in certain respects as it also looks something like the definite atonement view in certain respects, a hybrid of sorts (see below). The Classic Arminian states that Christ's death *provided* the propitiatory price for the sin of every person. His intent was to make salvation possible for all by providing full payment for sin's penalty and its application is conditioned on personal trust in Christ (Breshears). Defenders of unlimited atonement argue from Scripture, for this view, on the basis that: (1) Christ died for all (1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9; 1 Jn. 2:2) (2) God wills all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9) (3) Jesus purchased damned people (2 Pet. 2:1) (4) All are invited to salvation (Matt. 28:18-20; Jn. 3:16; Acts 16:31) (5) There is a two-level application of atonement (1 Tim. 4:10).

The greatest argument of the Classic Arminian is universal divine love and desire. How could it be any other way, given the love of God for the world, that he would not provide a payment for everyone. God wants everyone to come, and he is not willing for anyone to perish. God wants all to come to repentance, then go into the world and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This being said, how could he not provide an atonement that would make it possible for anyone and everyone to come, if he loves the world in this way? It's easier to reconcile particular passages to the universal position than vice versa, says the classic Arminian.

Notice, the Arminian argument is based on texts. There is a reason why Arminianism has had a staying power. We must look long and hard at the best arguments of other positions, not the caricatured versions, the straw man arguments. I do not hold this view, but there is a lot about it from Scripture that does draw people to it.

My View: A Calvinist Unlimited Atonement (Election as limit)

I want to begin by saying this view is not widely held, but it is also not new to me. I was fortunate to have men like Todd Miles, Ryan Lister, and Gerry Breshears from *Western Seminary*, and Bruce Ware from *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, mentor me and cause me to be exposed to different theological systems and understandings of Christian doctrine. Their fingerprints are all over my theology. What follows are my own personal convictions about what Scripture teaches on this subject, however, I must give credit where it is due. The following content that makes up my argument comes from the many classes I had the pleasure of taking with these men. Their lectures, conversations, questions, and guidance, coupled with and several years of meditation and reflection, have compelled me to write what follows.

I think it appropriate to show my cards at this point. I consider myself to be a four-point Calvinist, because I do not hold to the view of definite atonement. The position statement of someone who holds my view looks like this: Christ's death *provided* the propitiatory price for the sin of every person. His intent was to make salvation possible for all by providing full payment for sin's penalty. Its application is conditioned on God's election of the person to salvation (Breshears). My aim is not to be different for differences' sake, but rather I am trying to account for all of Scripture. My goal is to be faithful to everything Scripture teaches about the atonement, and through years of study, I have found both traditional views to be lacking in certain regards. Consider this statement by Ware,

The judgment I came to a number of years ago in studying this through was that the whole debate was skewed from the very beginning by the very way the question was framed. The question was framed in terms of: What was God's intention (notice the singular word) in providing His Son as a payment for sin? Was it to save the world; provide a payment for the whole world? Was it to save the elect? What was His intention? It strikes me that this issue can be resolved and all the texts accounted for by asking the question instead; what were God's

intentions (plural) in providing Christ? Doesn't it make sense that at least on the surface that there might have been more than one thing He had in mind? (Lecture)

So, the question becomes, "Does the text of Scripture provide us with different reasons and/or intentions that were accomplished by the atonement?" I think it does for several reasons: (1) Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of His own; that is the elect (2) He died for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people making it possible for all who believe to be saved (3) Christ died for the purpose of securing the bona fide offer of salvation to all people everywhere (4) Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation (5) Christ died for the purpose of reconciling all things to the Father (Ware).

Firstly, I do believe it to be true that Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own people; that is the elect. Notice the language used, though. I think that there are significant problems both theologically and biblically with making this point the way five-point Calvinists do. Namely, saying that it was God's intention (singular) in the atonement to save the elect. Really? What about the fact that every elect person who ever lives is born into this world not yet saved? What of unsaved elect persons. If Christ died for the sins of his people, then how are they still under the wrath of God, until they have been justified as Ephesians two implies,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:1-5;8-19)

If Jesus paid for sin, then how is God holding it against us? What is the solution? I think it is the doctrine of justification by faith. One of the issues that I have with the five-pointer position is that it principally undermines the necessity of one of the hallmarks of the Reformation; namely justification by faith in its articulation of the extent of the atonement (Ware). Saying that Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own people; that is the elect, accounts for the texts that Christ laid down his life for his sheep and

he died for the church as well. There is no doubt in my mind that when Jesus was hanging on that cross, he knew that it was for, in a very specific sense, his own whom the Father had given to him, and none of them would perish, and he would raise them on the last day (Jn. 6). God's people are saved by his death as they come to believe, and this is sure and certain. However, it was not the only thing that was being accomplished.

Secondly, Christ died for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people making it possible for all who believe to be saved (Ware). 1 John 2:2 says, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Aware of the arguments put forth by five-point Calvinists surrounding what the word "world" (*kosmos*) means in the Johannine literature, I have never been convinced that "world" in 1 John means "only the elect". Look in John at how "*kosmos*" is used. If you do a word study you will find it is used one of two ways. It is used as I do not love the world or things of the world (1 John 2:15), it is used like that; the evil of this world, the secular world. It is also used in the comprehensive sense of everybody in the world (1 Jn. 2:2 I would argue). If it is used to refer only to the elect, 1 John 2:2 would be the only possible place to assert such a claim. That strikes me as weak evidence to make that translation decision. I am not convinced of that argument. I think it really does mean the whole world.

Additionally, 2 Peter 2:1 says, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." The word "bought" is the word for redemption; *agorazo* (think rescued from slavery in Egypt; Exod. 1-15). It is clear that these are not saved people from the context. There is no question Peter is talking about unsaved people who are going to be judged and says of them they are denying the Master who redeemed them. This is the verse the Lord used to convince me that the definite atonement view was lacking, or incomplete. The second point here argues from 2 Peter 2:1 that there is a broader sense in which Christ paid the penalty for all.

Thirdly, Christ died for the purpose of securing the bona fide offer of salvation to all people everywhere (Ware). This is huge. When you go out, if you hold my view, you can genuinely say to people that Christ died for their sins. Now, if you hold the five-point Calvinist view, you cannot with integrity, say that sentence. You have to say something like, "Christ died

for sinners like you and me”. If we say that though, are we really offering people the Gospel? Biblically speaking, what is the offer of salvation? It seems to me, from Scripture that we are not offering the gospel as we should without a true bona fide offer to all people and grounded in the atonement itself (Jn. 3:16; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Jn. 2:2; Rom. 3:22).

Fourth, Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation (Ware). Some biblical texts talk about this, that Jesus’ death on the cross provides greater basis for condemning as people see, harden their hearts, and reject him (Jn. 3:18; Jn. 19:10; Mk. 16:16; Acts 17:30; Eph. 4:18; Rom. 1:18-2:11).

Lastly, Christ died for the purpose of reconciling all things to the Father (Ware). Colossians 1:20 says, “and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” This is clearly atonement language. Again, I would ask how one accounts for this with an answer to the question; “for whom did Christ die?” The elect. How does one account for, “...he reconciled all things through the blood of his cross”? I think the issue can be solved by noting the intentions (plural) rather than the intention (singular) of the Godhead in the atonement (Ware).

Think about this for a moment, the concept of propitiation. What does it mean that Christ is our propitiation? Simply put, it means that he satisfied the wrath of the Father. Think now of redemption. It means that he bought us, (Exodus imagery here). What he died for he bought, so how can what he bought not be his possession? If God is truly propitiated, which I believe Scripture states clearly, how can he not be satisfied? On what basis then, could there be ongoing demands upon those for whom he has been propitiated?

Here is the solution to all these questions put forward by the four-point Calvinist. If it is true, as the five-point Calvinist states, that when Christ died for the sins of the elect, he propitiated the wrath of God and there is no wrath against them, since he redeemed them, owns them, has reconciled them, and they are no longer alienated from him, how do you account for an unsaved elect person? An unsaved elect person is still one upon whom the wrath of God is directed. That is plain in Scripture. The elect must believe or face the wrath of God. An unsaved elect person is someone who as Colossians 1:13 states, still needs to be transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, Jesus. The unsaved elect person, is transferred into the kingdom of the Son, meaning that before regeneration they were in the

dominion of darkness according to Paul (see also Romans 7 where the unregenerate are spoken of as slaves to sin and dominated by the flesh).

Scripturally speaking, whatever happens in the atonement, it also requires faith for a person to be saved. The salvation of people is not sufficiently accounted for by the objective death of Christ apart from subjective appropriation (Ware). Both are necessary components. Christ's payment is only effective as one savingly believes. This means that the death of Christ by itself is not going to save apart from faith. However, we must then ask the question, "How do people get faith?" It is at this point my Calvinism shines through. People receive faith, because God elects some to be the objects of his efficacious call upon their lives. He opens blind eyes, enlightens hearts to see the truth of the Gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ his son, and they savingly believe.

I ground the certainty of the salvation of the elect in God's unconditional election as worked through the cross (which includes atonement), the efficacious calling, and regeneration by the Spirit. I do not see the atonement the same way definite atonement or five-point Calvinists see it, because they see the atonement as being the ground of their full salvation. I think it is bigger than that. It is the atonement, election, and regeneration. It is the Trinity working in unison to accomplish salvation. The Father elects, the Son dies, and the Spirit regenerates. I wholeheartedly affirm that it is only the elect who are saved. What is election and who are the elect, though? Election is God's sovereign, free choice (Ps. 115:3; Matt. 20:12-15; Rom. 9:20-21) of certain individuals to eternal life according to his own purposes apart from any abilities, merits, conditions, or actions related to those persons (Jn. 10:26; Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:3-11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10). He has, out of his abundant goodness, love, and grace, chosen the elect from all eternity (Eph. 1:5-8; 2 Tim. 1:9), apart from their foreknown faith, and he saves from sin all who come to him through faith in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16, 6:44, 14:6, 17:3, Acts 4:12; Rom. 5:8).

I affirm also that we are to proclaim boldly to all people that Christ died for their sins. Why? Because, though it is true that the depravity of mankind renders them incapable of coming to God (Rom. 3:10-18, 8:7; 1 Cor. 2:14) on their own, apart from His drawing (Jn. 6:37, 44, 64-65) and redeeming grace, we are ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). We are called to proclaim

the gospel message to the world. This is the primary means by which God draws those who are his to himself (Matt. 28:16-20; Rom. 10:5-17; Acts 8:29-38; Tit. 1:1-4).

Conclusion

I am aware that this is a huge subject and that I hold a minority view when it comes to the extent of the atonement. I respect the wrestling with texts that both Classic Arminians and five-point Calvinists have done regarding this important topic. I however, from Scripture as I understand it currently, come to a different conclusion, a hybrid view. Whatever view you hold, seek not to use truth with a sledge hammer attached to it. Jesus was full of grace and truth. When it comes to the extent of the atonement, be gracious. Be bold, be firm in your convictions, but be humble. May God grant you an insatiable desire for his word.

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