

—The Atonement of Christ, Lesson 5—

The Extent of the Atonement

- I. Was the death of Christ designed to render certain the salvation of particular individuals, or was it designed merely to render possible the salvation of all men? These divergent views are labeled as Calvinism and Arminianism.
 - A. First, it should be understood that the atonement, owed to no sinner, is God's personal property and that He is sovereign in the disposal of it. Given Christ's infinite sacrifice, no limit can be set to its value. God may save as many or as few as He pleases, but that He doesn't save all is evident from Scripture.
 - B. The Scriptures teach that Christ died specifically for His people and nowhere do they teach that He died for all men universally.
 1. Those for whom He died are specifically designated in ways that distinguish them from "all mankind", Mt 1.21; Isa 53.8; Jn 10.15, 26; Acts 20.28; Eph 5.25; Isa 53.12; Heb 9.28; Jn 17.9; Mt 20.28 (remember that a ransom automatically frees those for whom it was made).
- II. The Sovereignty of God
 - A. It is taught by Arminians that God is trying/hoping/desires to save all men by the death of Christ, but that He can't because man is too obstinate in his sinful ways. This notion that God has ever striven to accomplish the salvation of all men and has failed in the face of the will of man, is contradicted by the strong emphasis that the Scriptures place on the sovereignty of God, Dan 4.35; Jer 32.17; Isa 14.24, 27; 46.9-11; Gen 18.14; Job 42.2; Ps 115.3; Mt 28.18; Eph 1.11, 22.
 - B. Since the atonement is worked out by God Himself, we may rest assured that it's fully adequate to accomplish the purpose for which it was intended, Isa 46.10. That any particular person fails to be saved by it can be for no other reason than that he was not included in the plan of redemption. For if pardon had been purchased for all, then of necessity, all would have been saved since universal redemption/ransom *means* universal salvation.
 - C. The Arminian idea which assumes that the serious intentions of God may in some cases be defeated, and that man, who's not only a creature, but a sinful creature, can exercise veto power over the plans of the Almighty, is in striking contrast with the biblical idea of His immeasurable greatness and exaltation by which He is removed from all the weakness of humanity.
 - D. The Scriptures teach that from all eternity the Father gave the Son a people for whom the Son on His part met the requirements of justice at the appointed time, Eph 1.4-5. Arminians either deny election altogether or condition it upon God's foreknowledge of man's free will choice of Christ.
- III. The Universalistic Passages
 - A. There are a considerable number of Scripture references which are often quoted to prove that Christ died for all men alike. But when interpreted rightly in light of their context, none of them teaches universal redemption, cf. Col 1.26, 28; Heb 2.9-10.
 - B. The biblical use of "all" or "all men" is not meant of all men individually (as the Arminian supposes) but of all men indiscriminately, both Jews and Gentiles, cf. Jn 3.16. Consider the many places in which "all" and "every" are used in a limited sense, Mt 10.22; 21.26; Lk 2.1-3; 3.15; 6.26; Jn 11.48; Acts 2.45; Acts 26.4; 2Cor 3.2; Mt 12.31. A doctrine of universal redemption cannot be based on the Bible's use of "all" or "every" or "all men".
 - C. The Bible nowhere either directly asserts or implies that Christ died in the place of all men or with the purpose of saving all men.
- IV. The Westminster Confession
 - A. WCF III.6 does not mean that any poor sinner who desires salvation is rejected. All those who sincerely desire salvation will certainly be found among the redeemed because none except the regenerate ever has this desire in the first place, Jn 6.44-45.
 1. Concerning those in the unregenerate state, the Scriptures declare their utter blindness, inability, and unwillingness to seek God, 1Cor 2.14; Rom 3.10-18; 1Cor 1.18; Jn 3.19.

2. Concerning the regenerate we read, Eph 2.1; 2Cor 5.17; Jn 5.24; Mt 5.6. The unconditional promises of Rev 21.6 and 22.17 are to “him that wills”. It does not detract in the least from these promises when we give God the glory of regeneration and say that “he that wills” to take the water of life freely has been made willing by a divine operation. The promise is true all the same and God remains sovereign in the dispensing of His grace, Ezk 36.25-27; 1Jn 4.19.

V. The Atonement Unlimited in Value and Power

- A. When we speak of the atonement as “limited” we do not mean that any limit can be set to its value or power. Its value is determined by the dignity of the Person making it and since Christ suffered as a Divine-human Person, the value is infinite. It’s sufficient for the salvation of the entire race and might have saved every member of the race if that had been God’s plan. But it’s efficient only for those to whom it’s applied by the Holy Spirit, even all those for whom it was intended and offered, Jn 6.37.
- B. The Gospel is nevertheless to be offered to all men with the assurance that it is exactly adapted to their needs and that God has decreed that all who place their faith in Christ shall be saved. No man is lost because of any deficiency in the objective atonement, or because God has arbitrarily placed a barrier in his way, but only because of the subjective difficulties of his own evil disposition and his freely exercised wicked will which prevent his believing and accepting the atonement by a surrender to the righteousness of God by faith, Lk 14.16-18, 21-24; Rom 10.3.
- C. Thus while Calvinists limit the saving extent of the atonement, Arminians limit its power to actually save. Calvinists limit the atonement quantitatively while Arminians limit it qualitatively. For Calvinists, the atonement is of high value while for the Arminians it’s of wide extension. But making it universal in its value, knowing that many are still lost, destroys its value. According to the Arminian construction the atonement doesn’t actually save anyone but only makes salvation possible if they’ll accept it. In such a system salvation can’t avoid being *by grace plus works*. The work of Christ can’t be universal without destroying its substance and making it of no real effect.

VI. General Benefits Received Through Common Grace

- A. All mankind do receive many important blessings because of the work of Christ. Just consider how fallen man fares compared to the fallen angels. Thus God has not left Himself without witness, Acts 14.17; Mt 5.45; Rev 20.1-3. These are the blessings of common grace. Though designed primarily for the elect, they are shared by all mankind.
- B. And since this world is not the place of final rewards and punishments, but the place of discipline, testing, and development for the Lord’s elect, these common blessings are oftentimes enjoyed in greater abundance by the non-elect than the elect. But in themselves, they’re insufficient to bring a single soul to salvation.
- C. There is, in this way, a sense in which Christ died for all men, i.e., for the *benefit* of all men. But He died for the *salvation* of the elect only.
- D. Thus in the final analysis, between these two views of the atonement, the Calvinistic position is consistent with Scripture while the Arminian position is contradicted by Scripture. We acknowledge the Arminian view to be a Christian view, but we believe that it’s not in full harmony with Scripture and that it’s a compromise toward naturalism and self-salvation.