
Christ's Atonement: Its Purpose and Extent, Part I

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Abstract

Intimately entwined within the question as to the extent of Christ's death on the Cross is the discussion concerning what this event actually achieved. In other words, what was its purpose? The author proves, by means of logic and a proper exegesis of the relevant passages, that Jesus died for every individual, yet that does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that all will be saved.

Introduction

In any study of the extent of Christ's atoning work, one will quickly come to realize that in order to study the question correctly, one must come to terms with the issue of the purpose of the atonement. This, in turn, involves some understanding of a number of other crucial elements of theology (*e.g.* the Decrees, God's love, *etc.*). A proper understanding of the Biblical teaching on the purpose and extent of the atonement, and of the views of those limited redemptionists with whom we differ, depends, to a large extent upon our understanding of how the text of Scripture is approached. In my role as a teacher of theological students I have more than once encountered real misunderstanding and confusion, especially among some dispensationalists, of how the Reformed (5-Point) and Dispensational positions differ. In order to present an argument for the thesis that Christ's death made all men "savable," I shall be interfacing with the work of several teachers of the view called "Limited (or Definite) Atonement"¹ throughout this paper.

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 88

The Necessity of Atonement

¹ Throughout this study I shall be using the terms "Limited Atonement," "Particular Redemption," and "Definite Atonement"¹ interchangeably.

A Pre-Planned Rescue

We know why the atonement was necessary. The Scriptures confront us with the doleful truth that mankind is a fallen creature, under the thrall of sin (*Rom. 5:21*), and that Adam's sin plunged the whole earth into a cursed estate (*Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12f*). It is not hard to conclude that if we are to have any hope of escaping God's judgment on our sin, help must come from outside. The "Good News" is the truth that help has to come -from the Judge Himself (*Rom. 3:26*).

It would be a mistake to suppose that mankind's need for a Savior caught God by surprise. God, in His foreknowledge, knew that man would fall. That is why we read such statements as these in the New Testament: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation ... But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: *Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world...*" (*1 Pet. 1:18-20*. See also *Rev. 13:8; Gal. 4:4-5*). From *Revelation 17:8* we are told that the names of the saints have been recorded "in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world." (*cf. Eph. 1:4*).

The reason God planned to rescue us from the consequences of sin was because of His nature as God. We must realize that God did not *have* to save us. That He did is owing to the exercise of His sovereignty, informed, as we may say, by His attributes. Yet, predetermined as it was, the fact of our salvation does not mean that those who have never, or, will never come to salvation, are ostracized from the claims of the Gospel. And it certainly does not mean that the "non-elect" are not sincerely beckoned by God to come to the salvation that is in His Son. The Gospel is not insincerely offered to the multitudes. It is true that if we had no information to the contrary, and were left to the ingenuity of our own logic, we might conclude that since Christ died for the elect, then the non-elect were never atoned for, and are, in fact, the objects of God's unending hatred.

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 89

It would then be natural to conclude that God has no interest in the salvation of the masses.² But the Bible provides us with no such warrant, and those who insist upon sticking with their system

notwithstanding, must attempt to bamboozle the other saints who take the inspired text at face value, and who are by such means led to believe that Christ did not die for the elect only.

The Old Testament Sacrifice at Yom Kippur as a Type of Christ's Perfect Sacrifice

From the New Testament we discover that the transgressions of the Old Testament saints were forgiven in prospect of the Cross. Sins were forgiven on account of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice. The Book of Hebrews tells us that the Old Testament sacrifices could not take away sin (Heb. 10:1-4), but that they pointed to the final sacrifice of the Lamb of God that could and did remit sin (Heb. 10:9-14). Perhaps, then, it would be of help if we took a brief look at the principle Old Testament sacrifice, the Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On this one day in the year the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies with sacrificial blood, offered on behalf of "all the people." It was also on this day that the scapegoat (*azal* - "to lead away") was led into the wilderness and released, bearing the people's sins. However, it needs to be stressed that God required the people to "afflict themselves" on this day, as a show of genuine repentance. From this we can see that the actual sacrificial and substitutionary blood was sufficient for the whole congregation of Israel; - *the blood was shed for all the people.*

But the efficacy of the blood lay contingent upon the response of those who would humble themselves for their sin. Walter Kaiser writes: "[O]n the great day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), "all" the sins of "all"

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 90

Israel of "all" who had truly repented ("afflicted their souls" [Lev. 16:16, 21, 29, 31] were forgiven."²

² This is the position of Herman Hoeksema and David Engelsma. Engelsma believes, "The apostle Paul... did not believe, nor did he ever preach, that God loved all men, was gracious to all men, and desired the salvation of all men, i.e., he did not believe or teach the well-meant offer of the gospel" - David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism And The Call Of The Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 53.

As one reads *Leviticus 16* it is clear that the offering up of the first goat (as opposed to the scapegoat - w. 7-8, 21-22), was "for all the people of the congregation" (w. 33-34), and not just for the favored few (cf. Heb. 7:27; 9:7). Keil and Delitzsch remark on this in their commentary:

If the general atonement made on this day was not to pass into a dead formal service, the people must necessarily enter in spirit into the signification of the act of expiation, prepare their souls for it with penitential feelings, and manifest this penitential state by abstinence from the ordinary enjoyments of life. To "afflict (bow, humble) *the soul*," by restraining the earthly appetites, which have their seat in the soul, is the early Mosaic expression for *fasting*.⁴

The chief items of interest to us are, 1) That the atonement was general; for all the people. 2) The atonement was substitutionary in nature. 3) The fasting of the people (which was mandatory - *Lev. 16:31*), was for the purpose of solemnizing the whole day. 4) So, although the blood of the sacrifice was shed on behalf of all the people, the efficacy of the blood was doubtless predicated upon the heart response of the individual.

The great annual sacrifice of Yom Kippur was a type of the Cross of Christ, and the sacrifice of Yom Kippur was for all the people, not for a restricted group within the nation. So far as this "day of covering" is concerned, the fact is that the atonement and its application were *not* coextensive.

Defining Our Terms

Moving on from the annual Old Testament Day of Atonement, it is necessary to examine some of the terms used in the Bible to describe atonement as such. These terms are essential to understand in order to gain a satisfactory understanding of the subject.

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 91

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 117.

⁴ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 2:405-406.

Atonement

We start with the word “atonement” itself. We use the word “atonement” in its more general sense to refer to the saving work of Christ. It is wise to continue to employ the term in this general way because that is its most common meaning today. The particular word is a translation of the Old Testament word *kephar*, which means “to cover.” However, the term takes on the appropriate sense of “ransom by means of a substitute.” The “covering” of sin by the blood of a sacrifice (Lev. 4:3; 8:20–28) in effect took the sin away, hence allowing for reconciliation. (The terms which follow describe the different related aspects of the atonement.⁵)

Reconciliation

Reconciliation describes the bringing together of parties who were once at variance with one another. In its New Testament usage, it refers to the sinner whose mind is at enmity with God (Rom. 8:8), and who must be brought into good relations with God if he is to avoid eternal ruin. Thus, the Gospel ministry is a ministry of reconciliation (*katallasso*, 2 Cor. 5:18–20). But note, it is *we* who need to be reconciled to God, not He to us.⁶ The death of God’s Son is the sacrificial means whereby sinners are brought to God (Rom. 5:10). Not only that, but God has also reconciled the rift between Jews and Gentiles by making them “one new man” in Christ (Eph. 2:14–18). The New Testament insists that Christ’s blood alone is the source of our reconciliation with God (Matt. 26:28; 1 John 1:7, 1 Peter 1:18–19; Heb. 9:14; Rev. 1:5; 7:14).

Remission

Remission describes the removal of guilt from the sinner by the work of Christ. In the Old Testament the forgiveness of sins was anticipated through faith in the sacrificial offerings. But “the blood of bulls and of

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 92

goats could never take away [i.e. remit] sin.” There-

⁵ Incidentally, the word “atonement” was coined by William Tyndale in his translation of 1525.

⁶ This is an important point as many Limited Atonement proponents believe that God must be reconciled to man. What transpires, then, is a purposive moving towards the elect, and the elect only.

fore full remission for repentant sinners was achieved forever at Calvary (see Acts 5:31; 10:43).

Expiation

This word is not normally found in English versions (though see the old RSV). The word means to remove or remit sins by payment of a penalty. As such, it is closely associated with remission and reconciliation. Thus, the guilt of sin is expiated (removed) by Christ’s payment for sin on the Cross.

Propitiation

This crucial term has been subjected to a great deal of attack over the past century or so. From scholars like R. C. H. Lenski, and, most notably, C. H. Dodd, the doctrine of propitiation has suffered strong objection. The reason for this isn’t hard to discover. To “propitiate” means to appease or avert the wrath of God, and that is conceived by some to be a problem. Dodd argued that pagans placated, that is, “propitiated” their false gods by their sacrifices.

Surely the true God is not to be pacified in the same way! And since Dodd was the Chairman of the RSV translation, he made sure that the word “expiation” replaced “propitiation” in verses like Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2; 4:10. Thanks to the scholarship of Leon Morris and others, “propitiation” has been shown to be an essential teaching in both testaments.⁷ In fact, Morton H. Smith has said:

To deny the propitiatory character of the sacrifice of Christ is to deny the essence of the atonement. For the atonement means that Christ bore our sins. ... How can we think of him carrying our sins, without bearing the judgment for those sins? Sin and judgment are inseparable in the Scriptures. Thus to bear the sin is to bear the judgment. ... The wages of sin is death, and he paid the wage.⁸

These passages from Paul and John teach that Christ did not simply remove our guilt (expiation), He actually bore the wrath of God which

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 93

⁷ See especially, Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956). Morris holds to Unlimited Atonement.

⁸ Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), Vol. 1, 386.

ought to be visited upon us (propitiation). Otherwise, God could not be “just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Nevertheless, although the propitiation has been made, the condition of its efficacy is individual trust. Paul brings this out very clearly in Romans 3:25 when he states concerning Christ, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation [*hilasterion*] through faith in His blood ...”

Notice how the propitiation who is Jesus Christ, is received “*through faith in His blood.*” This indicates that the propitiation is available but not applied until the person trusts Christ. This is how John employs the term in his First Epistle. In 1 John 2:2, Christ is called “the propitiation (*hilasmos*) for our sins: and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.” Again, in 1 John 4:10, [14] we read, “[God] sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (see also Heb. 2:17 where *hilasterion* is translated “reconciliation”). Millard Erickson sums up:

The numerous passages that speak of the wrath of God against sin are evidence that Christ’s death was necessarily propitiatory. We read of the wrath of God against sin in Romans 1:18; 2:5, 8; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4–5; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6; Colossians 3:6; and 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:16; 5:9. So then, Paul’s idea of the atoning death ... is not simply that it covers sin and cleanses from its corruption (expiation), but that the sacrifice also appeases a God who hates sin and is radically opposed to it (propitiation).⁹

Redemption

In the Old Testament, both men and unclean animals could be redeemed, that is, bought back by the payment of a price¹⁰ (cf. Exod.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), Second Edition, 811.

¹⁰ Those in the Limited Atonement camp try to make much from the fact that *agorazo* (lit., “to buy in the market-place”), is used in a soteric sense of *Christians* in five of its occurrences (1 Cor. 6:29; 7:23; Rev. 5:9; 14:3–4). Hence they refuse Peter to use it differently in 2 Peter 2:1. They also assert that the main meaning of *agorazo* is, “freedom ... by payment of a price.” In reply we would wish to point out that just because Paul and John restrict the term to Christians, does not bind Peter to the same narrow usage.

13:11–15; Num. 18:15ff). When applied to Christ’s work of atonement, the word signifies the ransom or purchase of sinners that His sacrifice accomplished (Matt. 20:28; Luke 24:21; 1 Peter 1:18; Rom. 3:24; 8:23; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:15; 2 Peter 2:1; Gal. 3:13; 4:5, etc.).

We should also take note of the fact that the ransom was Christ Himself (Rev. 1:5), and thus it was *substitutionary* in nature. Therefore we speak of the “vicarious”, that is, the substitutionary atonement of Christ.¹¹

The Intent Behind The Atonement

In this section our concern is not so much to prove outright that God intended the atoning work of Christ to cover the transgressions of all mankind. That will be attempted next when the Scriptures are examined which pertain to the extent of Christ’s work on the Cross. What will be done here is the consideration of what might be called the “logic of the atonement.” Limited Redemptionists (LR’s) place a lot of weight on arguments from logic (“If this,... then that”).

In fact, it would not be saying too much to state that the main force of their position is based, not principally on the exegesis of Scripture, but upon logical deductions. Instead of going straight to the texts, these brethren must first “set-up” a framework of logic whereby they can reinterpret the many problem texts they encounter (“So then, this cannot mean this,... It must mean that”). Below we shall reproduce the “set-up” arguments of the Limited Redemptionists themselves. This procedure will

Whether Christian or not, the point is that Christ bought sinners. In the second place, it is not true that the main thing intended by *agorazo* is freedom. According to D. H. Field, “In 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23 (cf. Rev. 14:3) the main point of emphasis is not freedom of the redeemed ..., but their new status as slaves of God, bought with a price to do his will. Hence the sheer effrontery of heretics who “deny the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1).” - in Colin Brown, Editor, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 1, 268.

¹¹ Because of the sustained attacks by 5-Point Calvinists upon the plain sense of those verses that refer to redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation, we shall have to consider their arguments further on.

the atonement was

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 95

intended by God to be limited to the elect only, or whether it also comprehended the non-elect.

How Limited Redemptionists Argue From Logic

In every book teaching Limited Atonement this writer has seen, the proponent of the scheme has begun his work by appealing to the supposed illogic of the Unlimited Redemptionist (UR) position, and the logical and theological necessity of Christ only having died for the elect.¹² Here are their main arguments:

i. The atonement was part of the eternal redemptive plan of the Triune God. The Father sent the Son to die for those whom the Spirit would regenerate. For the Son to have died for any more than God intended to save would introduce incoherence into the divine plan of salvation.¹³

Response: This is only the case if one accepts the improvable schemes called supralapsarianism or infralapsarianism. In both these versions of the order of God's eternal plan, the decree to elect and save some individuals comes prior to the decree to actually provide for that salvation. If the alternative sublapsarian scheme is adopted, then God decreed the provision of the atonement before decreeing the election of certain people. That Christ died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 4:14) means that people cannot say to God on judgment day that no atonement was made for them.

We are not given any information on just why God chose to efficaciously call an elect group, but at least He provided grounds for the general call for all to believe, as well as grounds for condemnation for

¹² E. Y. Mullins charged particularists with working from a false premise (God's "mere will") and arriving at the false conclusion of Limited Atonement by employing "a rigid logic." He called this "a striking example of the abstract method."- Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, n.d.), 339. To put it another way, they come to conclusions prior to doing exegesis.

¹³ Gary D. Long, *Definite Atonement* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), 15, 49.

unbelief. This scheme seems more logical to many people, especially as

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 96

the general call loses all relevance if Christ did not die for all men. But as the lapsarian schemes cannot be substantiated, neither can the inferences made from them, and, therefore, this argument fails as a proof.

ii. "To say that Christ's sacrificial death, which is the highest expression of divine love to man, applies equally to all men, and then observe that a multitude of mankind has and is entering a Christless eternity certainly does not magnify God's love or His wisdom."¹⁴

Response: This confuses the atoning work with the application of the atonement. To pick up on the terminology of LR John Murray, "Just because the redemption is accomplished, it does not mean that it is applied." We are plainly told that Jesus "loved" the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:21), but the context (w. 22-25) provides us with little encouragement that he was elect. The Lord even called Judas "Friend" (Matt. 26:50)! And did He not teach us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-45)? Would He command us to do something which He Himself would not do? Also, if Christ's blood had infinite worth, then it hardly magnifies either "God's love or His wisdom" for Him to be so sparing in the use of it like LR's insist He was. Finally, this argument presupposes that regeneration precedes faith, which, we shall argue, is contrary both to Scripture and reason.

iii. Christ's atonement did not merely make men hypothetically savable, but actually *accomplished* the salvation of all those whom the Father gave him.¹⁵

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 97

¹⁴ Long, 9. In another place Long avers, "If the writer were asked: 'What is the strongest support for definite atonement?,' he would unhesitatingly answer, 'the eternity and immutability of God's special distinguishing love.'" - Ibid. 59. Note how Long's best support is drawn from inferential arguments from other doctrines instead of exegesis of actual passages.

¹⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, "Definite Atonement," - R. C. Sproul, Jr. (ed.), *After Darkness, Light: Distinctives of Reformed Theology* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 2003), 99-100. This book is a collection of "Essays in honor of R. C. Sproul."

Response: There is no logical necessity attached to this. We have already seen that LR's confuse the atonement with its application. What is more, to say that the atonement *actually* saves the elect is to make saving faith obsolete - since they were saved before they believed. It would also imply that none of the elect were ever "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12ff.), since they were in reality saved at Calvary before they were born. If it be objected that the elect were potentially saved at the Cross but not really saved until they believed, we would agree.¹⁶ But this would separate the atonement from its application, which would in turn mean that the atonement, in and of itself, did not actually save anyone, and so would destroy their argument.

iv. The implication is that a person must first be regenerated before they exercise faith in Christ. For unless this is so, faith is something we do, and so is our contribution to salvation.¹⁷

Response: If a person is regenerated prior to believing, then how can a person be justified by or through faith? Faith becomes, not the condition of receiving eternal life (John 1:12; 3:16, 36), but the *result* of

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 98
having already received it.¹⁸ Although the New Tes-

¹⁶ This seems to be Tom Wells' reasoning in his book, *A Price For A People* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 45-47. Referring to Romans 8:29-30, he writes, "Once the price of redemption was paid, the redemption was as good as done.... In a sense we were saved at the cross - there our salvation was made certain. In another sense we were saved when we believed - then our salvation became real to us." But Romans 8:29-30 refers to God's eternal plan, which is supra-temporal, and not to a specific historical event. Wells reads more into the passage than is there. Also, unless one is prepared to teach that we are *actually glorified now*, his illustration fails. Paul's use of the aorist tense in the passage should be seen from God's eternal perspective, not our historical one. Moreover, the argument ignores the fact that we were in the world, and "were by nature children of wrath, even as others." (Eph. 2:3). Nobody is actually saved until they receive Christ by faith (John 1:12; 3:36).

¹⁷ Long, 40.

¹⁸ It will be objected that the order of salvation is logical and not chronological. But this is open to question. For if it were true, there could be no objection to placing faith before

tament teaches that faith must be exercised, it does not do anything itself other than receive. And nobody receives a gift and then brags about giving it to themselves. The inference is insubstantial.

v. This also means that saving faith is a gift of God subsequent (at least logically) to being born-again. It is incongruous to teach that faith is a gift and yet to affirm that Christ died to save all men without exception. If He died for all, then why is not faith given to all?

Response: If (iv) above is untrue, then this point becomes null and void. In addition, // "faith is a gift, it could be given by the Holy Spirit prior to regeneration. Cornelius in Acts 10 might be a case in point. On the question as to why the condition of salvation (*i.e.* faith) is not revealed to all, we reply that God has His reasons. Perhaps, among other things, God had in view all the infants who were unable to believe but who were, nonetheless, saved. Perhaps not. We are not forced into laying down dogma where the Bible is silent. The point is, passages such as Acts 10 teach us to use care in the application of our logic.

For another thing, Reformed writers do not abide by their premise that before regeneration the sinner is a spiritual corpse totally unable to turn to God. The respected Reformed theologian J. I. Packer serves as a good example:

And to the further question still: how am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things? [we answer]: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on His mercy; ask Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you,... Turn to Him and trust Him

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 99

regeneration, for there is nothing illogical about such an order. Acts 10 (the conversion of Cornelius) plainly shows that an individual can seek the true God (through the convicting agency of the Spirit) before being regenerated. Long, to his credit, admits that the *ordo salutis* may have a chronological aspect (Ibid., 54 n.6).

the best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you draw near to Him;¹⁹ watch pray, read and hear God's Word, worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you.²⁰

vi. The atonement and the intercessory ministry of Christ must be co-extensive, which is how Scripture represents them.²¹

Response: Did not Christ intercede for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34)?²² Are we expected

¹⁹ In line with his doctrine of Limited Atonement, Packer ought to have added that this expectation will be futile for anybody other than for one of the elect. If any individual Packer is speaking to is not one of the elect for whom alone Christ died, then urging such a person to "use the means of grace expectantly" is to do none other than to raise within him or her a false hope.

²⁰ J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay" to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 21. This is a typical statement by LR's. We feel like inquiring: "If it is not some kind of faith, then just what is it in unbelievers which enables them to follow Packer's exhortation?" Contrast James White's words concerning the will of the unregenerate: "... man is not capable of 'cooperating' anymore than a corpse is able to help in its own resurrection... Unregenerate man is fully capable of understanding the facts of the gospel: he is simply incapable, due to his corruption and enmity, to submit himself to that gospel. And he surely responds to God every day: negatively, in rebellion and self-serving sinfulness." - James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), 100, 101. (Emphasis his). Nearly all UR's will agree with White on much of the above. However, we are here dealing with the LR's claim that regeneration must come before faith (which White goes on to assert), and in the face of this teaching, it simply makes no sense at all to speak in the terms that Packer does.

²¹ "Most importantly, we have to see that the work of Christ on the cross is directly related to other elements of His divine work of redemption, especially to His work as Mediator and Intercessor." - James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom*, 235. See also Owen, who says, "He did not suffer for them, and then refuse to intercede for them," 64 (cf. 74-75).

²² Owen tries to escape this by making Christ's prayer His

to believe that they all came to

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 100

salvation? Is intercession to be confined solely to an actual sacrificial act? LR's must prove that it is for this argument to have any force. But if it is, then what is one to do with the LR's prize proof-text in John 17:9 ("I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours"), which was prayed before Christ's arrest? Besides, as Lightner points out, "Until the elect believe they do not enjoy the benefits that accrue from Christ's work in intercession. The extent and benefit of intercession is to the believer only."²³

vii. "[A] substitution which does not substitute is not a substitution. ... If the sins of those who die in unbelief were imputed to Christ as their substitute, why is their destiny eternal punishment?"²⁴

Response: A bone fide substitution may be offered without being accepted. Were not the children of Israel given the responsibility of applying the atoning blood of the Passover offering on the lintels and the side-posts of their own doors (Exod. 12:22-23)? God provided a substitute, but it was left up to the people to make proper use of it.²⁵ And we have seen that this was the case at the Day of Atonement. (See above)

viii. "Unless Christ recover what He comes to save (cf. Luke 19:10) He fails."²⁶

Response: True, but this ignores the context, where Zaccheus has just responded in faith to Christ. As Bock has said, "This passage again

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 101

stresses Jesus' initiative to seek the lost and to pro-

prayer, "as a private person." - *op. cit.*, 84. It is hard for us to think of a *prayer from the Savior on the Cross* (!) the prayer of "a private person."

²³ Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, Revised Edition, 1998), 102.

²⁴ Long, 33.

²⁵ Owen, *op. cit.*, 88, ties in John 1:29 with the Paschal lamb, which was offered for the people of Israel - a type (says Owen) of the elect. He does not see that such a connection disproves his attempt to make the sacrifice and the actual substitution one and the same (see also vi above).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

claim salvation for those who respond with faith.”²⁷ The truth is that no one who comes to Christ shall be lost (*John 6:37*). But Christ must see faith before He can save. Owen seems to forget that Zaccheus climbed a tree, so eager was he to see Christ. Many others did not believe on Him, though He warned them about their unbelief (cf. *Luke 13:1-5*). We see no argument here for Limited Atonement.

There are corollaries to these, but these are the kinds of arguments offered in support of a particular atonement. We believe they are founded upon unsubstantiated or false assumptions. In addition, there are a number of other objections worth listing:

i. If Christ did not atone for the sins of the non-elect, then it follows that He does not love them (granting any definition of love worthy of the name).²⁸

ii. If the atonement was limited, then surely the non-elect were fulfilling the will of God by not believing in Christ. How then, could they be held culpable for fulfilling God’s immutable will?

iii. Limited Redemptionists insist that even the elect’s sin of unbelief was covered by the atonement.²⁹ But if the unbelief of the elect was actually dealt with at the Cross, wouldn’t that mean that they need not believe on the Savior? Chafer put it very well: “... if Christ bore the sin

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 102

of unbelief along with other sins of the elect, then no elect sinner in his unregenerate estate is subject

²⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1523.

²⁸ It is true that some LR’s speak of God having a temporal love for the non-elect (see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 2002, 417-420). But it is difficult to take this seriously when back of it is an eternal plan of preterition. John Owen is more forthright: “We deny that all mankind are the object of that love of God which moved him to send his Son to die; God having ‘made some for the day of evil,’ *Prov. xvi. 4*; ‘hated them before they were born,’ *Rom. ix. 11, 13*; ‘before of old ordained them to condemnation,’ *Jude 4*; being ‘fitted to destruction,’ *Rom. ix. 22*; ‘made to be taken and destroyed,’ *2 Pet. 11.12*; ‘appointed to wrath,’ *1 Thess. v. 9*; to ‘go to their own place,’ *Acts i. 25*.” - *The Death of Death*, 115. Owen teaches double predestination further on in the book (133).

²⁹ Long, 33-34, 49-50. See also Owen, 62.

to any condemnation, nor does he require to be forgiven or justified in the sight of God.”³⁰

The Extent of the Atonement

Now we are ready to study the extent of the atonement, and the Bible passages used by both sides. We shall start this part of the discussion by reminding ourselves of what is taught by Five Point Calvinists.

Limited Atonement

The main thrust of adherents of this view, it seems to us, can be summed up in this statement: “Christ’s saving work was limited in that it was designed to save some and not others, but it was not limited in value for it was of infinite worth and would have secured salvation for everyone if this had been God’s intention.”³¹

From this quotation we may make the following deductions:

i) Christ came to save only a certain number of souls (the elect).

ii) Therefore, His Blood was shed only for the elect, not for the non-elect.

iii) Although Christ’s sacrifice was of infinite worth, God chose not to save all souls by it.

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 103

iv) His death secured salvation for the elect, it did not just make it possible. It was a “Definite Atonement.”

This fourth point needs elaboration for it is the very crux of their argument. Limited Redemptionists believe that the Cross is the *only* means whereby

³⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997 reprint in 4 volumes), 3:198. This being so, it is hard for those who hold to Definite Atonement to avoid the error of Eternal Justification, which contradicts the passages used by LR’s to prove their scheme.

³¹ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 39. N.B. Later in this paper it will be necessary to show that the so-called “Four Point” Calvinists are not consistent when they retain the remaining definitions employed by the Five Point school. Five pointers are correct in saying that this is an untenable position both theologically and philosophically.

the elect are saved. Listen to R. C. Sproul's objection:

If faith is a condition for God's justice to be satisfied, then the atonement, in itself, is not sufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. In itself, the atonement is not "sufficient" for anyone. ... Full satisfaction is not rendered until... a person adds to the atonement his faith...³²

We have deliberately chosen this quote in order to demonstrate how an adroit Limited Redemptionist argues. Again, we will unpack his meaning:

- i. Only Christ's atonement satisfied God's justice and so actually *secures* salvation.
- ii. If one adds faith in order to receive that atonement, then obviously Christ's death was not enough. Faith must be added (*i.e.* the Cross + Faith). This makes faith a work.
- iii. Therefore, faith is *not* a condition for *receiving* the benefits of Christ's death.

If the logic of this position is followed, it is not easy to see how an LR can hold to justification *by* faith.³³ The fact that they do shows up a

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 104

problem with their theology at this point. Robert Lightner's comment is insightful: "The strict Calvinist position which insists that Christ's death of itself saved the elect makes faith, ... virtually unneces-

³² R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unlimited* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 166.

³³ Ferguson gives a good definition of justification. Justification "involves both a negative aspect (pardon for sins) and a positive aspect (being counted righteous by God)" A bit further on he writes that, "faith is the appropriate instrument of justification because in its very nature faith is *active in receiving* Christ, but noncontributory (in that sense 'passive' or, perhaps better, 'receptive') in relation to the justification we receive." - Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Sola Fide," in R. C. Sproul, Jr. (ed.), *After Darkness, Light: Distinctives of Reformed Theology* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 2003), 74, 83 (emphasis mine). The question arises, "If Christ is received by faith, how can it logically antecede regeneration? Surely the basis of regeneration is receiving Christ?" It seems absurd to say, as Ferguson does, that faith is the instrument of salvation. How can faith be the instrument of that which logically (or chronologically) precedes it? Regeneration causes faith according to LR's.

sary."³⁴ It needs to be emphasized that this position on saving faith, coupled with the belief that faith comes after regeneration, constitutes *the* assumption of all five-point Calvinists. Without it, their entire soteriology comes to pieces. Therefore, we shall be returning to the subject below.

Scriptures Most Often Used to Support Limited Atonement

Foremost among the passages enlisted in support of Limited Atonement are those passages where Christ is specifically said to die for His people, *etc.* They are: [Matthew 1:21](#); [20:28](#); [26:28](#); [Mark 10:45](#); [14:24](#); [John 10:11](#), [14-18](#); [15:13](#); [17:9](#); [Acts 20:28](#); [Romans 5:8-9](#); [8:32](#); [Galatians 1:3-4](#); [2:20](#); [Ephesians 5:25-26](#); [Titus 2:14](#); [Hebrews 7:25](#); [10:14](#); [1 Peter 2:24](#); [3:18](#), and others.

The common thread passing through all of these Scriptures is that Christ died for His elect (*e.g.* "us"; "His sheep"; the Church"; "many"). But it should not be missed that there is no text of Scripture that explicitly teaches Limited Atonement. The question is, are we to take these verses as implying that Jesus died *only* for "His Church," "His sheep," "us," "the elect"? There is no good reason to grant this assumption. We are convinced that to arrive at such an opinion one must bring to the text a pre-packaged theological system, and so a premeditated theological hermeneutic, with which to bend unwilling passages to fit the logic of Limited Atonement.

Before entering upon a critique of Limited Atonement we will outline the other position; that of Unlimited Atonement. This is the position held by moderate Calvinists and Arminians.

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 105

Unlimited Atonement

Those who hold to Unlimited Atonement³⁵ say

³⁴ Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991), 113.

³⁵ It ought to be unnecessary to say that just because something is believed by Arminians does not mean it is untrue. Although the present writer has little sympathy with Arminianism as a whole, he believes that they are correct in holding to Unlimited Atonement, though he differs with their reasons for believing it.

that Scripture clearly teaches that Christ died for all humanity: *Matthew 11:28; John 1:29; 3:16–17; Romans 5:6–8; 2 Corinthians 5:14, 19; 1 Timothy 1:15; 2:6; Titus 2:11; Hebrew 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2; 4:14; Revelation 22:17.*

The Bible plainly says that Christ died for “sinners,” “the lost,” “the ungodly,” “the world,” *etc.* Unless only the elect qualify as belonging to this group (which none would sanction, otherwise Christ need not have died for them), these verses ought to be taken to mean that Christ died for *all* lost sinners. After all, Adam plunged the whole of his posterity into sin and judgment (*Rom. 5:12, 18*).

Chafer defines this position so: “Men of this group [*i.e.* Moderate Calvinists] believe that Christ died actually and fully for all men.... They contend that the death of Christ of itself saves no man, but that it does render all men savable; that salvation is wrought of God alone, and at the time the individual believes.”³⁶

Crucial to the UR view is the belief that the benefits of the atonement are not efficient until an individual believes. Lightner adds: “It is our conviction that... Christ died to provide a basis of salvation for all men. To those who are elect, and who therefore believe in Christ, this provision secures for them their eternal salvation *when they believe*. For those who do not believe ... the provisions exist as a basis of condemnation.”³⁷

Once more, let us break down these assertions:

i. Christ’s death atoned for the sins of all men.³⁸

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 106

ii. Nevertheless, His atonement actually does not *save* anyone, it renders them savable potentially.

iii. The benefits of Christ’s death are only appropriated when one believes the Gospel.

iv. For those who refuse to believe, the fact that their sins were atoned for is the basis on which God can *justly* condemn them.

The New Testament expresses these truths in

³⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:184–185.

³⁷ Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation*, 112. (italics mine)

³⁸ Lest it be thought that Unlimited Redemption leads to the doctrine that all mankind will be saved because Christ died for them, it should be repeated that a person is saved “through faith” (*Eph. 2:8*), not independently of it.

the same way:

For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe (*1 Tim. 4:10*; cf. *1 John 2:2*)

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (*1 Tim. 2:3–6*; cf. *2 Peter 3:9*)

But to as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on his name (*John 1:12*; cf. *Acts 16:30–31*)

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (*John 3:17–18*; cf. *2 Peter 2:2*)

The testimony of the Bible is unequivocal. Christ’s atonement was for all mankind.

Redemption, Propitiation, Reconciliation: Do They Imply Definite Atonement?

A number of works by LR’s try to make the case that the doctrines of Redemption, Propitiation, and Reconciliation, imply, or even necessitate, a Definite Atonement. Both Gary Long³⁹ and Tom Wells expend much

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 107

paper on this. Although we have defined these and other terms above, we shall have to examine the main arguments of these writers before looking at the problems with their overall position.

Wells sums up the view of those who hold to Limited Atonement: “When I ask, ‘For whom did Christ die?’ I mean, ‘For whom was His death a

³⁹ James White thinks that Long’s arguments are compelling. See *The Potter’s Freedom*, 250, 282.

redemption and a reconciliation and a propitiation?”⁴⁰ Wells gives his reader two choices. If “Christ did atone for the sins of each and every man who ever lived,” it follows that:

“1. All men will be saved by Christ’s death, or

“2. Christ redeemed and reconciled and turned the wrath of God away from men who will nevertheless be lost forever. In other words, His redemption will not redeem them, His reconciliation will not reconcile them to God, and His propitiation will not turn God’s wrath away from men.”⁴¹

Option 1 would be true if the atonement actually secured the salvation of all men, which is not the case. Option 2 is true of those men who reject the atoning work of Christ and who will not believe on Him. LR’s cannot bring themselves to believe that Christ’s crosswork can clear away the judicial obstacles to salvation but not actually save unless a person believes. But the uniform teaching of the New Testament is that for a person to be saved, they must believe *first* (e.g. [John 1:12](#); [3:16–18](#), [36](#); [6:35](#), [40](#); [7:38–39](#); [11:25](#), etc). Do not the following verses make this certain?:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth ([Rom. 1:16](#))

CTJ 9:26 (March 2005) p. 108

But these were written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name ([John 20:31](#))

... whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins ([Acts 10:43](#))

Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood ... that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus ([Rom. 3:25–26](#))

... it pleased God by the foolishness of

preaching to save them that believe ([1 Cor. 1:21](#))

Limited Redemptionists would have us believe that redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation secured freedom, friendship, and the turning away of wrath for God’s elect (we might call this Option 3). But if faith is the condition of receiving the benefits of eternal life ([John 20:31](#)), remission of sins ([Acts 10:43](#)), propitiation ([Rom. 3:25–26](#); cf. [John 8:24](#)), and salvation ([Rom. 1:16](#); [1 Cor. 1:21](#)), how, we may ask, can faith *follow* these benefits, logically or otherwise? But that is exactly what has to happen for definite atonement to be true. That is why LR’s cannot admit that faith is a condition of salvation. In that case, we should like to know how Paul can implore the Corinthians to, “be ye reconciled to God” ([2 Cor. 5:20](#)), when the elect among them already were?

This article will continue in the next issue.

⁴⁰ Wells, *A Price For A People*, 48.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Wells goes on to exclaim on page 50, “Christ’s death did not ‘create opportunities,’ it established certainties.” The truth is that God’s Decree established certainties, while the Atonement is instrumental in the administering of the Decree to both the elect and the non-elect. That is why the atonement had to have the whole of humanity (elect and non-elect) as its referents.