

**LEROY FORLINES LECTURES
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“Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Theology of Salvation”**

LECTURE TWO: THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

Introduction

There are varieties within both Calvinism and Arminianism. The Arminianism I have presented in *Grace, Faith, Free Will* is what I call “Reformation Arminianism,” meaning the views of Arminius himself and of his original supporters (“Remonstrants”). The theology of Arminius was clearly a product of the Reformation and manifested the Reformation insistence on salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone.

The opening chapter of my book traces the historical background of Arminius’ disagreements with the Calvinism of his day. The rest of the book is divided into four parts: (1) Predestination and Election; (2) Atonement; (3) Salvation by Faith; and (4) Perseverance. In each part are three chapters; the first two provide a “systematic theology” treatment of the subject, respectively, of Calvinism and Arminianism; and the third presents “Biblical theology” in support of Reformation Arminianism.

In this lecture I will deal with part of what is covered in Part two: the theology of the atonement, and especially the **extent** of the atonement. The question is, For whom did Christ die? For the elect only, or for all?

The Nature of the Atonement

Before turning to that, I should mention briefly the *nature* of the atonement. Like most Calvinists, Reformation Arminians believe in the “penal satisfaction view” of the atonement. This is truly “vicarious” —substitutionary— atonement. Jesus actually suffered, on the cross, the penalty for our sins. He bore the wrath of God in our place. 2 Cor. 5:21 says, “He made Him to be sin for us.” He was punished, on the cross, for our sins though he had committed no sin of his own.

I mention this because there is one historical stream of Arminianism that teaches, instead, what is called the “governmental view” of the atonement, developed by one of Arminius’ subsequent followers named Hugo Grotius. Grotius said that Jesus died to uphold God’s righteous government of the world. In this view, the atonement is a testimony that sin requires forgiveness, not punishment; Jesus died because of our sins but not to endure the penalty of our sins. I recommend a chapter in Mr. Forlines’ book, *The Quest for Truth*, on this subject.

Reasons for Believing in Universal Atonement

Arminianism insists that Jesus died for every person in the history of the world: that God so loved the world, and not just the elect, that He gave His unique Son for the sins of the world. This is sometimes called unlimited atonement, universal atonement, or general atonement. (Calvinistic Baptists used to be called “particular Baptists,” while all Arminian Baptists used to be called “general Baptists.”)

1. Universal atonement matches Biblical statements that God wills the salvation of all, especially 2 Pet. 3:9 and 1 Tim. 2:4. It would be strange, indeed, if God truly willed or desired the salvation

of all but sent His Son to die only for the elect! It makes much better sense that God provided opportunity for all since he desires the salvation of all.

2. Universal atonement is logically required by passages that refer to the perishing of people for whom Christ died, especially 1 Cor. 8:11 and Rom. 14:15. Both of these deal with the same problem: by careless behavior one may threaten the spiritual well-being of a Christian brother or sister. And that raises the danger that one for whom Jesus died may finally perish. In that case, it is clear that he did not die only for the elect.

By the way, this is connected to the theology of apostasy. If a regenerate person actually can apostatize and be lost, then someone for whom Christ died can be lost. If Jesus did not die for the apostate, he could never have been saved in the first place!

3. Universal atonement matches the fact that Scripture offers salvation to all and requires us to preach the gospel to all.

That the Bible presents the offer as universal is clear in all the “whosoever will” passages, like Rev. 22:17 or Jn. 3:14,15; compare Jn. 12:32: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

That the Bible commands us to preach the gospel—to present this offer—to all is likewise clear in passages like Mk. 16:15. Romans 1:14-16 shows that Paul fully realized this as his obligation since “the gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.”

Calvinists don’t deny that the Bible offers salvation to all and that we are accountable to preach the gospel offer to all. But I think they have failed to be logically consistent here: salvation cannot be *truly* offered to any for whom Christ did not die. Suppose I said to a paralyzed child, “If you’ll just reach out your hand and take it, I’ll give you this candy.” That sounds to me more like mockery than an “offer”!

4. Universal atonement fits better with the fact that the unsaved are blamed, in the Bible, not just for their sins but for their rejection of Christ and of the salvation offered in Him by the gospel. Consider Jn. 3:18 or 1 Jn. 5:10,11, for examples. In the latter the point is that the one who does not believe has, in fact, rejected the testimony of God Himself, making Him a liar. What is that testimony? That He has given us eternal life in His Son. But if Jesus did not die for those who finally do not believe in Him, then God has not testified that He has provided eternal life for them and they have not rejected God’s testimony!

The Bible plainly blames sinners for rejecting the gospel. That must mean that the offer is genuine, that Jesus really did die for them.

5. Universal atonement best explains those Scriptures that speak of God’s provision as corresponding to human need. The best passage, here, is Rom. 3:22-25, where Paul speaks of the righteousness that is available, by faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. He backs this up with tight logic by saying:

- For there is no difference
- For all have sinned and keep falling short of the glory of God
- Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The phrase “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” modifies the same “all” that Paul says “have sinned.” All have sinned; all have access to justification on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ. The provision matches the need.

6. Finally (in the book I give nine arguments), the Bible plainly teaches that Jesus died for all and not just for a chosen number. Consider 1 Jn. 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9; Jn. 3:16-18; 2 Cor. 5:14, 19; Rom. 5:18; Tit. 2:11. As Dr. Vernon Grounds has said, tongue in cheek: “It takes exegetical ingenuity...to evacuate these verses of their obvious meaning.”

Calvinism’s Arguments

You should know some of the things that Calvinists say on the other side.

1. Calvinists point to verses that say that Jesus died for His people or for the church and interpret them to mean that He died *only* for the chosen people of God. These include Mt. 1:21; Jn. 15:13; Jn. 10:15; Eph. 5:23-26; Acts 20:28; Tit. 2:14; and others.

We believe *both* sets of verses: he died for us and he died for all. If he died for all, that includes us. Consider Gal. 2:20: Paul says that Jesus “loved me and gave himself for me.” Obviously this doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t give himself for anyone else. In the same way, verses that speak of Jesus’ dying for us, for the church, for God’s people, don’t mean that he didn’t die for anyone else.

2. Calvinists typically argue that “all”—in those passages that say that Jesus died for all—doesn’t really mean each and every person in the history of the world. Instead, they mean that God wills for the elect among all peoples and classes and ethnic groups in society be saved: God loves and saves the elect whether Jew or Gentile, whether in one nation or another, whether rich or poor, old or young. I think that such attempts fail to grapple seriously with those verses, and in conclusion I want to emphasize 1 Jn. 2:2.

1 John 2:2

This verse is one good example of the final reason, above, for universal atonement: “And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

What does John mean by “world”? He uses this word 23 times in this short letter, consistently indicating the very opposite of the people of God. Consider 2:15-17; 3:1, 13; 4:1-5; 5:4,5, 19. The people of God and “the world” are two different peoples, hostile to each other. Surely John uses “world” in 2:2 in the same way, and not as a reference to the rest of the elect in the world. The other places in this letter where “we” or “us” stands in comparison to “the world,” as here in 2:2, also make this clear. There are four such places: 3:1; 4:5,6; 5:4,5; and 5:19: “We are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one.” This seals the point beyond argument. “We” and “the world” are two different realms. But we must not be proud: Jesus died not only for us, but for those who hate us, not only for us but for those who are in the grip of the evil one. Not only for us, but for the wicked world that has rejected Him. And it is therefore *our* responsibility to tell that world that He died for them.