

**Extent of the Atonement:
Outline of The Issue, Positions, Key Texts,
and Key Theological Arguments**

Bruce A. Ware
Professor of Christian Theology
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

I. The Issue Regarding the Extent of the Atonement

A. What the issue is not:

1. Sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. All agree that if God wanted to save all people or provide salvation for all people, the value of Christ's payment for sin was sufficient (because of its infinite value) for the sin of the world. In brief, his death is sufficient for all.
2. Efficacy of Christ's atoning death. All agree that only those who truly and savingly believe in Christ, only the elect (either way of saying this is fine) have the Christ's payment for sin applied to their lives. In brief, his death is efficacious only for the elect.
3. Offer of salvation through presentation of the gospel. All agree that all are to be recipients of the gospel offer. In brief, the gospel is for all people.

B. What the issue is: what is the intention of God in offering his Son as an atoning sacrifice?

1. Is his intention to save people by his Son's death? (in which case limited atonement is required to avoid universalism!).
2. Or is his intention to provide a payment for any and all people, which payment is only effective at the point they savingly believe? (in which case, the extent of the atonement is unlimited in scope, yet universalism here is precluded because saving faith is required to become a recipient of the payment Christ has made.)

II. Positions on the Issue

A. Limited Atonement View (Five Point Calvinist Position)

1. Statement of the Position

Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving people from their sin, but since not all are in fact saved, it requires then that he died for and hence saved a certain people, viz., those whom the Father had given to him, viz., the elect.

2. Key texts

- a. John 6:37-40 – All the Father gives the Son *will* come and he will not lose any but will raise them up on the last day
- b. John 10:11, 15 – Christ laid down his life for his own sheep
- c. Acts 20:28 – the church of God which Christ purchased with his own blood
- d. Romans 8:31-39 – Christ was delivered up for “us all”, which clearly is the elect
- e. 2 Cor. 5:15 – He died for “all” that *they who live . . .*, likely indicating that the “all” for whom he died is the same group as those who believe
- f. Eph. 5:25 – Christ loved the Church and gave himself *for her*
- g. Titus 2:14 – Christ gave himself *for us*, to redeem *us* from every lawless deed

3. Key Theological Arguments

- a. Efficacy argument. Scripture clearly teaches Christ came to *save* his own (Eph. 5:25; Tit. 2:14), not merely provide a payment that may or may not succeed in saving people.
- b. Sovereignty argument. If Christ died for all, and by this paid for the sins of all, then, because God is sovereign and his will cannot be thwarted, all would be saved. Since all are not saved, it must be the case that Christ died for those who are saved, viz., the elect.
- c. Ethical argument. It would be ethically wrong for God to hold people accountable for paying for their own sin through their eternal punishment if Christ has already paid fully for their sin.
- d. Comprehensive payment argument. If Christ paid for all the sin of all people, then he paid for their sin of unbelief (among other sins). If their sin of unbelief is paid for, then God cannot hold them accountable for their unbelief. But he does, so only the sin of the elect is paid for in Christ's death.

B. Unlimited Atonement View (Classic Arminian Position)

1. Statement of the Position

Christ died for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people making it possible for any and all to be saved. God loves all and wants all to be saved. In his love for all, he sent Christ to make the payment for the sin of all. Belief in Christ is necessary, however, to receive the benefits of Christ's death and be saved. The gospel must be preached to all, and, upon hearing the gospel, any can come because Christ died for the sins of all people in the world.

2. Key Texts

- a. 1 Tim. 4:10 – God is the Savior of all men, *especially of believers*. So, there is a sense in which Christ is savior of unbelievers (i.e., he died for their sin, though they reject his payment on their behalf), yet a special sense in which he is savior of believers (by faith, they receive Christ's payment for their own sin).
- b. 2 Peter 2:1 – refers clearly to unregenerate people as “denying the Master who bought (aor. act. prtc. of *agoradzo*, “to redeem”) them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”
- c. 1 John 2:2; 4:14 – Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only, but also for the “whole world;” and he is “savior of the world.” Notice that “world” occurs 28 times in 1 John, 26 of which are used either in a comprehensive sense (e.g., 2:17; 3:17; 4:1, 9) or more narrowly as the world of the unsaved (e.g., 2:15-16; 3:1, 13; 5:19). This makes doubtful that 2:2 and 4:14 refer to a world of the elect.
- d. 1 Tim. 2:6 – Christ gave himself a ransom (*antilutron*, “a payment” or “ransom”) for *all*.
- e. 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19 – One died for *all*. He died *for all* that they who live This indicates that while Christ died for all, only some will live through him. In some sense, the whole world is reconciled through Christ.
- f. John 3:16; Romans 5:6-8 – indicate God's love for the entire world and that Christ came to save sinners generally.
- g. 1 Tim 2:4 and 2 Pet 3:9 show that God wants all to be saved.

3. Key Theological Arguments

- a. Universal divine love argument. If God truly loves all equally and impartially, and if he truly wants all to be saved, then it is inconceivable and impossible that he would offer Christ to pay for the sin of only some. Universal love of God requires a universal payment.
- b. Universal gospel offer argument. Since the offer of salvation is clearly to go to all people (e.g., Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8), there must be a payment made on behalf of those to whom the gospel offer is extended. If no payment has been made for the non-elect, then we cannot say to the non-elect that God offers salvation *to them*. But, since we do not know who the

elect and non-elect are, we therefore cannot rightly say with confidence to *anyone* that God offers salvation *to them*.

- c. Same arguments as C. 3. c. and d. below.

C. Un/limited Atonement or Multiple Intentions View (Four Point Calvinist Position)

1. Statement of the Position

God's intentions in the death of Christ are complex not simple, multiple not single: 1) Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own, his elect. 2) 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. 3) Christ died for the purpose of securing the *bone fide* offer of salvation to all people everywhere. 4) Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation for those who hear and reject the gospel that has been genuinely offered to them. 5) Christ died for the purpose of reconciling *all* things to the Father.

2. Key Texts (sets of texts match the five purposes outlined in the statement of the position)

- a. John 6:37-40 ; 10:11, 15; Acts 20:28; Romans 8:31-39; 2 Cor. 5:15; Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:14 – i.e., the same passages as used above, in A. 2. a. through g. The difference here is that these texts are not seen as describing the *only* sense in which Christ died for sin (i.e., for the sin of the elect). Christ *did* die for the sin of the elect in a very specific and intentional manner, in order to secure their sure and certain salvation, which salvation would be theirs through, but not apart from, saving faith.
- b. 1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:2; 4:14; 1 Tim 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19 – i.e., the same passages and explanations as argued above, in B. 2. a. through e.
- c. Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-47; John 6:35, 40; Rom. 10:13 – texts which stress the necessity of the proclamation of the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection on behalf of the world.
- d. John 3:18; 12:48 – texts which indicate that rejecting Christ is a further basis for judgment. They can only rightly be held accountable for rejecting what was offered them if a *real* offer had been made to them.
- e. Romans 8:20-23; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:9-10; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:19-20 – texts which indicate a far broader cosmic extent of the atoning work of Christ.

3. Key Theological Arguments

- a. Best of both sides argument. 1) The four point Calvinist view *rejects some of the Arminian argumentation for unlimited atonement*. For example, four point Calvinism will deny that the universal love of God or God's universal desire that all be saved demands unlimited atonement. Rather, as with five point Calvinism, this view will argue that there is a sense in which God does love all and want all saved, but Scripture also clearly affirms God's special love only for the elect (e.g., Isa. 43:3-4; Eph. 3-5; Rom 9:10-13) manifest in his elective purpose to choose, call and save only some (e.g., Eph. 1:3-5; Rom 8:29-30), to the glory of his name (Eph 1:6, 12, 14; Rom 9:22-24). 2) However, the four point Calvinist view also holds that God's elective purpose *does not entail limited atonement*, for such a limitation a) conflicts with the most natural and likely understandings of some of Scripture's teaching, b) conflicts with the scope of divine purposes Scripture indicates are accomplished by the atonement (see below), and c) is not needed to establish the certainty of God's saving of his elect (i.e., what limited atonement advocates care most about).
- b. Multiple intentions argument. Much of the debate over the issue of the extent of the atonement is owing to the fact that a *single* intention (rather than multiple intentions) was sought by both sides. As soon as one admits *multiple intentions* for the atonement, one then can account for the variety of biblical teaching. Any single intention view will have

difficulty reconciling its position with one or more strain of biblical teaching. These five arguments express reasons for seeing several purposes in Christ's atoning work and are reflective also of the five main categories of scriptural texts above.

- 1) Limited scope purpose. Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own, his sheep, his church, his elect, which salvation they would surely receive as they are efficaciously called and irresistibly drawn to place their faith in him and his accomplished atonement on their behalf (e.g., John 10:11, 15; Eph. 5:25). Scripture clearly presents Christ as dying for his own, and this must be accounted for. Surely Christ knew that while his death would be in some sense for all, in a particular and intentional sense he died to save those given him by the Father. He knew his death would be efficacious in the elect.
- 2) Limitless scope purpose. 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 (e.g., 1 Tim 4:10; 1 John 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:14-15). Belief in Christ is necessary, however, to receive the benefits of Christ's death and be saved, and only the elect are called efficaciously and so believe in Christ and so are saved. Scripture just as surely speaks of a breadth of Christ's atoning work that extends to the whole world. The real issue here is what reading of these texts best accounts for what they say. The limited atonement position appears here to strain the natural and intended meaning of texts.
- 3) Bone fide offer purpose. Christ died for the purpose of securing the *bone fide* offer of salvation to all people everywhere. Since we are commanded to preach the gospel to all people (e.g., Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8), the unlimited atoning sacrifice of Christ renders this offer of salvation fully and uncompromisingly genuine (e.g., John 6:35, 40; Rom 10:13).
- 4) Just condemnation purpose. Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation for those who hear and reject the gospel that has been genuinely offered to them. Christ's death for the sins of those who reject him and are condemned (e.g., 2 Pet 2:1) insures that their judgment for rejecting Christ (which is only part of the full basis for their judgment) is just, because they reject a real gift that is really, freely and graciously offered to them (John 3:18b).
- 5) Cosmic triumph purpose. Christ died for the purpose of reconciling *all* things to the Father. Were Christ to die for the sin of the elect only (or for any partial amount of the totality of sin), this would leave sin that stands outside of his atoning work and hence outside of his victorious triumph over sin. Since sin is not only a penalty that must be paid (which payment is only efficacious by faith) but also a power that rebels against God's rightful authority and reign, sin's penalty must be paid (for the elect to be saved) but its power must be defeated that *all might be conquered and laid at the feet of the Father* (Romans 8:20-23; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Col. 1:19-20). Colossians 1:20 is especially important because it shows two things clearly: 1) the universal scope of the reconciliation wrought by Christ ("all things," "things in earth and things in heaven"), and 2) that this reconciliation is accomplished by the atoning death of Christ ("through the blood of his cross"). That this does not entail universalism is clear because in the very context Paul warns that these believers will one day be holy and blameless only *if* they continue in the faith (1:23). So, the reconciliation of Col. 1:20 is one in which the rebellion is over, yet God's conquered foes do not share in his glory. In this sense, all those in hell stand reconciled to God, i.e., they are no longer rebels and their sinful disregard for God has been crushed and is ended.

- c. Part-to-whole argument. Yes, some passages say Christ died for his own, his sheep, his church, but no passage says he died *only* for the elect. His death can be for all people while only those who believe are actually saved by his death. His death for his own, then, is part of the larger whole in which he died also for the world.
- d. Necessity of saving faith argument. If, as limited atonement proponents say, Christ died actually and certainly to *save* people (i.e., the elect) and not merely make their salvation possible, then it follows that nothing else is needed for the elect to be saved. They *are* saved because of the full, perfect and finished work of Christ which actually and certainly *saved* the elect. But is it not true that the elect are born into this world under the condemnation of God, dead in their sin, and facing the impending wrath of God (e.g., Eph. 2:1-3)? Is not saving faith required *for the elect to be saved*? If so, how can it be said of the death of Christ *in itself* that by his death *alone* he saved those for whom he died? As long as one believes that all people (including the elect) are born into this world with the sin of Adam so that until anyone savingly believes in Christ he or she remains *unsaved* and under God's wrath, then we cannot speak correctly of Christ's death as actually and certainly *saving* the elect. No, even here, the payment made by his death on behalf of the elect renders their salvation *possible* while that salvation becomes *actual* only upon their exercising saving faith. If Christ's death, then, is a payment for sin that makes *possible* the salvation of people, which salvation *actually* occurs only when they savingly believe, then there is no problem saying Christ's death paid the penalty of the sin of *all* the people in the whole world, because until any believes, he or she is not saved.