

Issues in Reformed Theology

Limited Atonement

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The doctrine of election is central to Reformed Theology and while there are variations within those who identify themselves as Reformed in their faith, belief in the doctrine of election is necessarily what distinguishes them from other forms of Christian beliefs. Within those believing in the doctrine of election and predestination, the question of the extent of the atonement has been significantly divisive. This class will look at Christ's atonement for sins and look at the question "for whom did Christ die?"

1. Limited Atonement Defined

The doctrine of Limited Atonement teaches that Christ's atoning death is for only the elect, not for all people. Limited Atonement is sometimes referred to as "definitive atonement" or as "particular redemption." The opposing viewpoint is known as Unlimited Atonement, sometimes referred to as "general atonement."

In the words of Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof: "The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only. This is the equivalent of saying that He died for the purpose of saving only those to whom He actually applies the benefits of His redemptive work."

Reformed Theology grew from the teaching of John Calvin and his followers after the Reformation. It has become synonymous with "Five Point Calvinism." Those advocating Five Point Calvinism draw from the opposition to the five points put forth by the followers of Jacobus Arminius in The Remonstrance. Known as Arminians, these followers points of contention with some of the Reformers were: (1) God's enablement of all to freely believe in Christ; (2) God elected those to be saved based upon His foreknowledge of their exercise of faith in Christ; (3) Christ's redemption was made possible for all who choose to believe; (4) The Spirit's call to faith can be resisted by the sinner; and (5) Those who truly believe can lose their salvation if they fall away from their faith.

Calvin passed away decades before these five points were argued and Calvinists convened the Synod of Dort in the early 1600s to argue in favor of the opposite of Arminianism. The five points of Calvinism have come to be known by the acronym TULIP: (1) Total depravity; (2) Unconditional Election; (3) Limited Atonement; (4) Irresistible Grace; (5) Perseverance of the saints. The Scripture explicitly teaches each of these doctrines with the exception of Limited Atonement. Hence, those who hold to the sovereignty of God in election but deny the perspective of Limited Atonement are sometimes known as "Four Point Calvinists."

2. The significance of the doctrine of Limited Atonement

Those who favor Limited Atonement view this doctrine as very important. Within Reformed Thinking, the doctrine of Limited Atonement has become a test of seriousness regarding belief in the doctrine of election.

As John MacArthur asks in *Biblical Doctrine*, “If the Son of God has destroyed the power of sin and has purchased the redemption by which sinners may be freed from divine judgment, can there be any more important question to ask than, for who has he done this?” Also, J. I. Packer notes “For the five points, though separately stated, are inseparable. They hang together; you cannot reject one without rejecting them all”

Those who believe in Calvinism but deny Limited Atonement are too often called Arminians, guilty of the Amyraldian heresy, teaching hypothetical universalism, inconsistent universalism, or ineffectual atonement. It is those who believe in Limited Atonement who are the most insistent on the subject. This requires a defense by those who are more moderate Calvinists on why the doctrine of election and predestination is true even though Limited Atonement is not biblically supported.

3. Bible texts that are used to teach the doctrine of Limited Atonement

There are no texts in the Bible that teach the doctrine of Limited Atonement. Let me restate this for the point of emphasis, the Bible does not contain one single text that explicitly teaches the doctrine of Limited Atonement. This doctrine is built upon implication, arguments from reasoning and statements from history.

Nevertheless, below are several verses that are commonly offered to support Limited Atonement which describe Christ as specifically giving His life for a subset of people, who are considered to be the true believers:

- Matthew 1:21: “He will save His people from their sins”
- Matthew 20:28: “to give His life a ransom for many”
- Matthew 26:28: “this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many”
- John 10:11: “the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep”
- John 10:15: “I lay down My life for the sheep”
- John 15:13: “that one lay down his life for his friends”
- Acts 20:28: “shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”
- Ephesians 5:25: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her”
- Hebrews 9:28: “offered once to bear the sins of many”

While advocates of Limited Atonement believe these verses teach that Christ died for the elect, none of them teach that Christ died *only* for the elect. Those opposed to limited atonement certainly believe that Christ died for the sheep, his friends. Christ most certainly purchased the church of God with His own blood, giving Himself up for her. At issue is whether His death was for them alone. The strongest case one can make is that these verses taken alone only *imply* that Christ specifically died for the elect.

In addition, Matthew 20:28, 26:28 and Hebrews 2:9 indicate that Christ gave His life for “many” which implies “not all.” However, the Bible actually uses the term “many” to mean “all” as is seen most clearly in Romans 5:15, “by the transgression of the one the many died,” and Romans 5:19, “through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” While the phrase “many” can hold a meaning of “not all,” it also is a figure of speech to mean all in a way that emphasizes the numerous nature of the subjects. Like with the usage of Romans 5:15 where sin brought death to many (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:14 “all died”), many is in contrast to not a few.

Certainly many verses specify Christ’s death for His people. These are part of an understanding of salvation, which rests upon Christ’s sacrifice for sin and defeat of death. But we ought not to make these verses say more than they actually say, particularly when there are many other verses that teach something else.

4. Bible texts that oppose the doctrine of Limited Atonement

a. General verses that teach that Christ died for the world

The New Testament, and John in particular, emphasizes the universal nature of Christ’s deliverance for sin.

- John 1:29: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”
- John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son”
- John 3:17: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.
- John 4:42: “we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”
- Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost”
- 1 John 4:14: “the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world”

Those in favor of Limited Atonement will argue that the “world” only means the all of the elect from the world, or all classes of men (Jew and Gentile). They will note that the Bible at times will mean world differently than everyone in the world.

There are times in the Bible when a group is referenced but means not every single one of a group. But when this occurs there is some indication of a limiting factor, wherein these verses there is no limitation detailed. However, when the word “world” is referenced the term must be understood in its context, not based on a theological presupposition. Indeed, there is no text in the Bible that uses the word “world” to refer to only the elect.

The phrase “this One is indeed the Savior of the world” in John 4:42 was spoken by Samaritans about Christ. Are we supposed to believe that when the Samaritans spoke this phrase to Jesus they were only thinking of the elect and not the world?

There is no reason to believe that the term “world” meant only the elect apart from an allegiance to a theological system. Even John Calvin wrote concerning John 1:29, “when he says the sin of the world, he extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race.” There is frankly good reason to doubt John Calvin ever believed in Limited Atonement as strict Calvinists teach it.

b. Romans 5:6: “Christ died for the ungodly”

Are we supposed to understand this to mean “the ungodly elect?”

c. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: “One died for all therefore all died”

Christ’s death for all is in the context of the ministry of reconciliation to unbelievers. He died for all and those who live are ambassadors of reconciliation. Thus the passage concludes with 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we *might* become the righteousness of God in Him.” Christ was made sin for even those who “might” become the righteousness of God in Him, which speaks to the essence of the potentiality of the offer of salvation (which is not inconsistent with predestination).

d. Hebrews 2:9: “that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone”

Greek scholar Henry Alford commented on the significance of the term “everyone” by noting: “If it be asked, why *pantos* (each) rather than *panton* (all), we may safely say that the singular brings out, far more strongly than the plural would, the applicability of Christ’s death to each individual man.”

e. 1 Timothy 2:6 “who gave Himself as a ransom for all”

This verse helps clarify Jesus’ words in Matthew 20:28 (“gave Himself as ransom for many”), which Paul would have been familiar with. This verse supports the contention that the “many” in Matthew 20:28 was not meaning “not all” but rather a very large number. The simple truth is that the Savior desires all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and gave Himself as a ransom for all.

f. Isaiah 53:6: “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

It is difficult to read this passage and not conclude that just as everyone sins and has gone astray, it also follows that everyone is also atoned for. The extent of the sin was the extent of what fell on Christ. Just as the sinfulness of man is universal, so that same sinfulness fell on Him.

g. Romans 5:18: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.”

Just as the one transgression in Adam condemned all, the one act of righteousness in Christ’s sacrifice resulted in justification for all. The “all” is the same for both groups and is inclusive of everyone, not only the elect. Regarding Romans 5:18, John Calvin wrote, “though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God’s benignity indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive Him.”

h. 1 Timothy 4:10, “we have fixed our hope on the loving God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.”

There is a clear distinction made between “all men” and “believers.” There is no way to understand the “all men” in this verse as only believers. God is the Savior of all men and is the Savior in a particular way for believers for they incorporate the benefits of salvation through faith. This verse shows the potentiality of God’s salvation in Christ’s atonement for all sin, along with the particular salvation that was obtained by believers.

i. 1 John 2:2: “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”

The distinction made between “ours” and the whole world is clearly extending Christ’s atonement beyond simply the elect. Those who object to this contrast and this conclusion argue that “ours” refers only to the Jewish people and “the whole world” refers to all types of Gentiles. But the immediate context of the word before verse two says “if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous,” showing in inclusivity of all who have Christ, not Jewish believers only. Also, the only other use of the phrase “the whole world” in John’s writings is found in 1 John 5:19, which clearly includes everyone, not just the elect.

j. 2 Peter 2:1: “there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”

Christ even paid the price of redemption for false teachers destined for destruction. This verse explicitly states that those for whom Christ died include the non-elect, even the false teachers. Some claim the word “bought” is ambiguous but Paul used the same word to refer to Christ’s work on the cross for the sin of man in 1 Corinthians 6:20.

As weighty as each statement of the universal nature of Christ’s death are, the volume of compelling verses that teach that Christ died for both the elect and the non-elect is impossible to argue against. The plain meaning of these verses that explicitly state that Christ’s death was for everyone, including the lost, is inescapable. The doctrine of Unlimited Atonement is not resting upon one or two isolated Bible texts but is spread throughout the New Testament.

5. Arguments used to support Limited Atonement

In the face of such biblical evidence, the primary defense of Limited Atonement comes in the form of reasoning in the attempt to make sense of how Christ can die for all men and yet not all are saved. This is where Reformed Theologians demonstrate a greater emphasis on logic and human understanding, along with an allegiance to the historic works of their Reformed tradition. Several arguments are put forward to attempt to explain why Unlimited Atonement is an illogical and untenable concept:

a. To say that Christ died for everyone makes His atonement ineffective for some.

This argument is that the atonement is “efficacious” or is necessarily producing its intended result. Then it is shown the result of the atonement is to actually deliver people (Isaiah 53:5; Matthew 21:1; 1 Peter 2:24). The idea of Christ’s death being for people destined for hell is rejected as failing to accomplish the intent of the atonement since the atonement is necessarily connected to salvation.

However, while there is no doubt that all of the elect will be delivered by the death of Christ but this does not mean that the death of Christ must deliver all people. God’s purpose in the atonement to deliver people from sin certainly occurs but we must not assume God cannot have other purposes in Christ’s death for all men. There can be greater meaningfulness in Christ’s death in addition to the saving benefit enjoyed by His people.

b. If Christ died for all people then it would be unfair to condemn people for sins paid for.

This argument rests upon the concept that no court of law would require a payment to be made twice for the same crime. Logically then either the death of Christ did not pay for their sin or they would not be condemned.

However, this argument of a double payment ignores the condition of receiving Christ’s forgiveness in the atonement. The payment for the sins of the unsaved is not applied apart from the conditions being met, namely belief in Christ. The death of Christ thus atones for the sin of the world but they will justly suffer the penalty of sin by rejecting Christ and His offer. Deliverance is not contingent upon only the atonement itself but also upon the reception of it through faith.

c. Christ’s death is meaningless for those He knew would never receive His provision.

Using the same thinking, one would question why God even created the unsaved at all. God created the unsaved for His glory. Likewise the fallen angels were created even though they did not enjoy their standing. The Scriptures are filled with people who continue in evil in spite of God’s blessing. God’s gracious love is for a purpose regardless of the receptivity of the individual. While God’s intent for Christ’s death is certainly the deliverance of men, it need not be limited to that deliverance for God has a purpose in His judgment (cf. John 9:39).

d. Historical writers and confessions teach Limited Atonement

Typically the writings of those defending Limited Atonement are replete with quotations from Reformers, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Synod of Dort (1618-19), Puritans, etc. It gives the appearance that Limited Atonement was a common position during and after the Reformation outside of Arminianism.

However, most Reformers, while believing in predestination, did not hold to Limited Atonement. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and nearly every other Reformer of the first two generations of the Reformation who write on the atonement do so from a general, not limited, perspective (outside of Theodore Beza). John Calvin wrote statements supporting unlimited atonement, although some debate this. Even the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism (1563) says, “He bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the whole human race.”

For the first 1,500 years of the church almost no one advocated Limited Atonement (Augustine is the lone possible exception). The doctrine of Limited Atonement has been quite the minority viewpoint within Christian doctrine throughout history.

e. The denial of Limited Atonement is necessarily universalism

The misunderstanding of Limited Atonement leads to the unwarranted charge that those advocating Unlimited Atonement are universalists. Seeing the atonement as exclusively bringing salvation to the elect fails to observe that there is a difference between the sacrifice of Christ for debt of sin and the penal, judicial satisfaction for the sinner in justification. Romans 4:25 shows this distinction, “He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (cf. Romans 5:8-9 also). The sacrifice for the sins of all does not necessarily lead to the justification for all as these are not the same thing.

A good illustration of how God’s gracious work on the part of man can be not applied effectively to some of those it was provided for is found in the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (Numbers 21:6-9; John 3:14-15). Those who refused to look would die even as God provided a remedy for them. Jesus uses this example as a basis for saying, “*whoever* believes may in Him have eternal life” in John 3:16.

The argument from reason works against Reformed Theology for they have a significant problem with the offer of salvation to the world as in Acts 17:30, “God is now declaring to men than all everywhere should repent.” How can the salvation be offered to people if Christ has not indeed died for them? While they may not have the ability to respond, it remains a legitimate offer of salvation based upon Christ’s work on their behalf. Limited Atonement results in a logical inability to truly offer salvation to the unsaved since there is no ability to know whether they are elect. The gospel becomes reduced to an offer to all types of elect people, both Jew and Gentile and the pronouncement of “the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men” (Titus 1:11) may not actually apply to each person according to Reformed Theology.

6. The effect of Limited Atonement upon the explanation of the Gospel

The advocates of Limited Atonement do not believe that Christ died for everyone and many are reluctant to tell people who may not be elect that the death of Christ was indeed for them.

Reformed counselor Jay Adams: “As a reformed Christian, the writer believes that counselors must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ himself who are His elect for whom He died.”

Also, if John 3:16 is restricted to the elect, could we ever say to people generally that God loves them and sent His only begotten Son? For example, what should we tell young children when we cannot be confident of their state of salvation?

If Limited Atonement is taken to its logical extent, we could not say the words of Paul to the Athenians in Acts 17:30, “God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent” without meaning that this is all types of elect men.

Fortunately, most advocates of Limited Atonement refrain from such overt opposition to such statements related to the gospel ministry. They may never say to an unbeliever “Christ died for you” but they may not rebuke those who do. Nevertheless, it is difficult enough understanding the teaching of the Scripture regarding the doctrine of election without the baggage of Limited Atonement.

7. Conclusion

The doctrine of election and predestination is taught clearly, and abundantly, in the New Testament. This represents the core of Calvinism but we ought to adhere to the teaching of God’s word, not to a theological system. On the basis of the Scripture, we can reject the teaching of Limited Atonement as reflected in the development of Reformed Theology in the centuries following John Calvin.

The desire by Reformed theologians to argue according to human understanding while reconstructing the straightforward meaning of so many New Testament passages on the extent of the atonement demonstrates a lack of commitment to the Scripture as their final authority. While this charge would be vehemently denounced, the question remains of why such emphasis on man’s reasoning in order to make sense of God’s thoughts.

There is no inherent contradiction in the death of Christ for all and the predetermined election of Christ to save some. Both are true and we ought to embrace truth of the Scripture without reservation.