

Christ on the Cross, part 8
Unlimited Limited Atonement

“He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 John 2:2

Thus far in our study of the atonement we have examined how God has saved us from separation from Himself and eternal death (penal substitution); Satan, demons, sin, and the world (Christus Victor); slavery to the curse of the law and sin (redemption); painful eternal suffering (new covenant sacrifice); unrighteousness (imputed righteousness); condemnation, religion, and morality (justification); and the wrath of God (propitiation). With such tremendous benefits given through Jesus’ death on the cross at stake, the question of whom Jesus died for has been hotly debated throughout church history.

Universalism contradicts the clear teachings of Scripture on human sinfulness (e.g., Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Rom. 3:23; 1 John 1:8) and hell (e.g., Dan. 12:2; Matt. 5:29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:23; 25:46). False Pelagianism also denies human sinfulness. Pelagianism is named after the ascetic monk Pelagius who lived in the fifth century and taught that people begin their life morally good, like Adam, and through the decision of their own will could live a holy life that would obligate God to take them to heaven upon death. Pelagius was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Carthage in 418, thanks in part to his opponent Augustine, who taught the doctrines of human sinfulness and salvation by grace alone.

This leaves three remaining options for Christians regarding the question of whom Jesus died for. Before examining them and stating the position of the elders at Mars Hill, it deserves mentioning that we do welcome faithful Christians of differing opinions on this matter; we accept it as a point of distinction but do not want it to become a point of division.

First, some Christians (e.g., Nazarene, Assemblies of God, Foursquare, Calvary Chapel, Methodist, Christian Church) believe that Jesus died for the sins of all people. This position is commonly referred to as Arminianism (after James Arminius), Wesleyanism (after John Wesley), or Unlimited Atonement. They appeal to those Scriptures which speak of Jesus dying for all people (2 Cor. 5:14-15; 1 Tim. 2:1-6; 4:10; Titus 2:11), the whole world (John 1:29; 3:16-17; 1 John 2:2; 4:14; Rev. 5:9), everyone (Isa. 53:6; Heb. 2:9), and not wanting anyone to perish (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). Arminians then teach that **to be saved, all someone needs to do is simply choose Jesus**. But critics point out that if Jesus died to forgive everyone, then everyone would be saved, which is the heresy of universalism. Additionally, they state that no one will ever choose Jesus because sinners are spiritually dead (1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1), hostile to God (Rom. 8:7), never seek God (Rom. 3:11), cannot find God (Luke 19:10), do not choose God, and are only saved when God chooses them (John 15:16) and draws them (John 6:44, 65).

Second, some Christians (e.g., Presbyterians, Reformed Baptists, some Independent Bible churches) believe that Jesus dies only for the sins of the elect. This position is commonly referred to as Calvinism (after John Calvin), Reformed Theology, or Limited Atonement. They commonly appeal to those Scriptures which speak of Jesus dying, not for all people, but only for some people (Matt. 1:21; 20:28;

26:28; Rom. 5:12-19), His sheep (John 10:11, 15, 26-27), His church (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25), the elect (Rom. 8:32-35), His people (Matt. 1:21), His friends (John 15:3), and all Christians (2 Cor. 5:15; Titus 2:14).

At first glance, Unlimited and Limited Atonement are in opposition. But that dilemma is resolved by noting two things. First, the two categories are not mutually exclusive; since Jesus died for the sins of everyone that means that He also died for the sins of the elect. Second, Jesus' death for all people does not accomplish the same thing as His death for the elect. This point is complicated, but is in fact taught in Scripture (1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Peter 2:1).

Simply, by dying for everyone, Jesus purchased everyone as His possession and He then applies His forgiveness to the elect by grace and applies His wrath to the non-elect. Objectively, Jesus' death was sufficient to save anyone, and, subjectively, only efficient to save those who repent of their sin and trust in Him. This position is called Unlimited Limited Atonement or Modified Calvinism.

Therefore, Modified Calvinists like the Mars Hill elders do not believe anything different than Arminians; we simply believe what they believe and more. Lastly, perhaps the Old Testament sacrificial system provides the best illustration of this both/and position. The High Priest would offer a sacrifice for the sins of the whole nation on the Day of Atonement; this is, in effect, unlimited atonement. Then, each worshipper would repent of their own sins as demonstrated by the giving of their own sacrifices for their sins; this is, in effect, limited atonement.

For further reading: Young, nitpicking, theologically geeky, Calvinist crazy-makers who are like a rock in my shoe would benefit from reading *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology* from Calvin to Consensus, by G. Michael Thomas.

All People

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

1 Timothy 2:1-6 Pray for All People

2:1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man [1] Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

1 Timothy 4:10

10 For to this end we toil and strive, [2] because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Titus 2:11

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,

The World

John 1:29 Behold, the Lamb of God

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

John 3:16-17 For God So Loved the World

16 "For God so loved the world, [1] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

1 John 2:2

2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:14

14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

Revelation 5:9

9 And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

EVERYONE

Isaiah 53:6

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Hebrews 2:9

9 But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

God does not anyone to perish

1 Timothy 2:4

4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9

9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, [1] not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

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Some People

Matthew 1:21

21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 20:28

28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 26:28

28 for this is my blood of the [1] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Romans 5:12-19 Death in Adam, Life in Christ

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— 13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. 16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as one trespass [2] led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness [3] leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

His sheep

John 10:11

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

John 10:15

15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

John 10:26-27

26 but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

His Church

Acts 20:28

28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, [1] which he obtained with his own blood. [2]

Ephesians 5:25

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

His Elect

Romans 8:32-35

32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [1] 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

Ephesians 1:5

he predestined us[1] for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

Ephesians 1:11

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,

His People

Matthew 1:21

21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

His Friends

John 15:13

13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

All Christians

2 Corinthians 5:15

15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Titus 2:14

14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.