

THE EXTENT OF CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

A Paper

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss the significance and extent of the atoning work of Christ; and to answer the question of for whom did Christ pay a penalty? There are three prevailing views in answer to the aforementioned question; none, everyone, or some. The first is an unorthodox view and holds to the idea that Christ did not die for anyone's sins.¹ The latter two ideas are orthodox and fall into two categories. One view asserts that Christ paid a penalty for all mankind, including those who are condemned; while the latter, the Calvinistic view, asserts that Christ *exclusively* paid the price for those who were chosen by God since the foundation of the world. I will focus on the Calvinistic viewpoint and contrast that with scripture, and provide my viewpoint to each.

The beginning of the paper will focus on the definition of atonement and its meaning in the Old Testament, as well as its meaning and usage, or absence in the New Testament; followed by key doctrines and passages along with a discussion of each. I will summarize and conclude by making application of the truths discovered in scripture.

The definition and nature of the atonement.

The definition of atonement is important, but equally important according to Calvinist's and others is its purpose, as it helps us determine to whom the atonement was applied. The Calvinist, Lorraine Boettner, correctly asserts that "the nature of the atonement settles its extent."² Similarly, Robert Lightner states "The biblical extent of the atonement is settled by answering the question of the Father's purpose in the death of His Son."³ Thus, if we can settle

¹ These include the Ransom, Recapitulation, Commercial, Moral influence, Example, Accident, Governmental, and Mystical theories all have the same problem; Christ didn't die for anyone. (See *The Other Side of Calvinism*. p. 414-415)

² Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961), 152.

³Robert Lightner, *Sin the Savior, and Salvation*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991), 124.

the nature and purpose of the atonement it will help in our interpretation and understanding of various passages and who it applies to, the elect only or both elect and non-elect.

The term atonement is first and foremost an Old Testament concept. Many will find it surprising that atonement is not found in the New Testament.⁴ The word atonement, or *kaphar* in Hebrew, literally means to cover over by legal rights.⁵ This concept of a covering or atonement goes back to Genesis *prior* to the Law of Moses. After Adam and Eve sinned and realized their nakedness they made a feeble attempt at covering themselves to hide their shame.⁶ God performed the first sacrifice in order to provide a more adequate covering for them⁷ which, in a symbolic sense, was a temporary covering for their sin and a foreshadowing of the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Thus the sacrificial system was started and required by God for the purpose of covering over sin; as it is stated in Hebrews 9:22 that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sins.”

During the dispensation of Law, Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement. This annual event was most holy to the Jews, and it was the day the high priest could enter the holy of holies and make a sacrifice to atone, or cover over, the sins for himself and his family, and for the nation of Israel. There was no payment; it was only a temporary covering as it was repeated annually.⁸ This is a significant point that the writer of Hebrews contrasts between the sacrifices and Christ; as it says Christ was the one sacrifice for all time. “but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God”⁹

⁴ Sans Romans 5:11, an unfortunate translation.

⁵ Strong's concordance 3722

⁶ See Genesis 3:7

⁷ See Genesis 3:21

⁸ See Hebrews 10:1-3

⁹ Hebrews 10:12 – Incidentally, sitting down was something the priests could never do because their work was never finished.

Leviticus describes how the high priest would sacrifice a bull and two goats. Lots were cast for the goats and one was chosen for the LORD and the other chosen as the scapegoat. The goat sacrificed was a covering for the sins of the people whereas, the scapegoat was released into the wilderness as a symbol to *represent* the removal of sin. This was a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Christ.

It becomes clear then that atonement does not mean payment, nor does it mean removal of sin, and this is evidenced in Hebrews 10:4; “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The sacrifices were never meant to satisfy the debt we owed God, they couldn’t; all they could provide were ‘promissory notes’ which would later be paid by Christ. With the Old Testament concept in mind it should come as no surprise then that the term is not found in the New Testament, it’s simply because Christ did not cover over our sins, He paid for them.¹⁰ Often times it’s not what scripture says, but what it doesn’t say that’s important.

However, the term atonement, theologically speaking, is unfortunately used to represent all that Christ did on the cross. There’s no good reason for this, especially considering what atonement means in light of the Old Testament. Lewis Chaffer agrees:

And from the fact that the term in question does not belong in the New Testament vocabulary and from the fact that it is employed in the Old Testament to represent one idea wholly foreign to and superseded in the New Testament, no word related to Christ’s death is more inapt as a reference to that which He really wrought for men of the present age.¹¹

It’s a wonder then why the term is used at all or how it came to represent, in a theological sense, all that Christ did on the cross.

Nevertheless, it is the term used to mean “that God has reconciled sinners to Himself through the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ.”¹² This includes concepts like propitiation, sacrifice,

¹⁰ 1 John 2:2; 4:10 etc.

¹¹ Lewis Sperry Chaffer, *Systematic Theology, Vols. 7 & 8*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications) 26.

redemption, reconciliation, and expiation. If these concepts and the scripture from which they are derived are provisional, that is to say, if they provide a way for mankind to be reconciled back to God, then salvation is available to all mankind, hence the term ‘unlimited atonement.’ However, if they are salvific, that is to say, if they are what saves a person, then they could only apply to the elect a.k.a. ‘limited atonement’.¹³ As Charles Ryrie notes;

Did Christ purpose by coming into the world to make provision for the salvation of all people, realizing that the Father would mysteriously draw the elect to Himself and allow others to reject the provision made? Because some reject does not invalidate the provision or mean that the provision was not made for them.¹⁴

A full explanation of each concept goes beyond the scope of this paper, nevertheless, a brief look at them will help us understand what Christ did on the cross and shed light on to whom it extends.

Propitiation – 1 John 2:2

“and He Himself is the propitiation [satisfactory payment] for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)¹⁵ Propitiation means to appease or conciliate, in other words, it’s a ‘satisfactory payment’ and deals with the satisfaction of God towards Christ’s sacrifice. This presupposes that God did not approve of sin and required a payment. God was satisfied with the payment Christ made. Had Christ not arisen from the dead we would still be in our sins,¹⁶ whether one believes or not. This satisfaction *makes available to all* the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ. Because God is satisfied with the payment, He no longer requires anything from us, nor would anything suffice, other than faith in His Son. 1 John 2:2 makes no reference to propitiation resulting in salvation. It only makes the way for salvation possible; otherwise we would still owe God something when we believe.

¹² *Holman Illustrated bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003) 139.

¹³ Calvinist’s obfuscate the issue by using the terms Particular or Definite Redemption to ‘soften the blow’ as some Calvinist’s assert. Although it doesn’t matter what you call it, it’s still limited to the elect.

¹⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Chicago; Moody Press, 1999) 367.

¹⁵ See also 1 John 4:10

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:17

A Calvinist on the other hand, would agree with the above stated, but they would deny that the provision was made for everyone. Arthur Pink says:

When John says, “He is the propitiation for our sins” he can only mean for the sins of Jewish believers. When John added, “And not for ours only, but also for the whole world” he signified that Christ was the propitiation for the sins of the Gentile believers too, for , as previously shown, “the world” is a term contrasted from Israel.¹⁷

Most Calvinists would agree with Pink and agree that payment was made, but they restrict its usefulness to the elect only, thereby failing to make a distinction between the provision made and the acceptance of that provision. As for the world being the Gentile elect, I will address this later in the paper.

Sacrifice - Hebrews 10:10-12

“By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:10-12) As mentioned earlier, the sacrificial system was started by God prior to the Law, from Adam’s sacrifice to Noah and to Abraham; therefore, its usage wasn’t just relegated to the Jewish nation. The reason we no longer have to sacrifice animals in the dispensation of grace is because Christ was the final sacrifice. His work was completed as He is now seated; and atonement, in the biblical sense, is no longer required because of God’s satisfaction with the sacrifice. This is not something we could have done on our own as our sacrifice wouldn’t have been without blemish.¹⁸ So, in order to make a way available to all Christ had to be the sacrifice.

¹⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949) 257.

¹⁸ 1 Peter 1:19

The “we” in verse 10 is narrow in scope, referring to the Jews, but the “all” is broad in scope. The Calvinist would view this passage as applicable only to the elect, ignoring that distinction. But, had Christ not made a sacrifice for everyone, the debt of sin could not have been paid, and had it not been paid, the offer of forgiveness could not be made to everyone.

Redemption - Romans 3:23-24

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the *redemption* which is in Christ Jesus;” (Romans 3:23-24) To redeem means to purchase by paying a price. In the Roman culture, slaves were bought and sold and only a free man could purchase or redeem a slave. Christ is the one who is the free man and sets us free from the slave market of sin. The price He paid was through His blood.¹⁹

Christ bought us, paid for us, but is waiting for us to cash the check freely given. As before, when we place our faith in Christ, it is at that point the check is cashed. This is incredible news for the believer and unbeliever alike, but it can only be appropriated on the grounds of faith. However, if we assume that redemption is only applicable to the elect, then the offer could never be made to the condemned. In a tone that I found condescending, Calvinist Edwin Palmer notes on redemption that because Christ did not redeem Judas he was not saved. Although, in the next breath he correctly asserts that because he didn’t believe, he’s in hell. “Because Judas would not believe on Christ, he is in hell under the curse of the law. Christ did not die for him.”²⁰ So which is it? Is he in hell because Christ didn’t die for him or because he didn’t believe? It becomes clear that unless one makes that distinction between provision and appropriation, interpretive methodology becomes inconsistent at least and at worst is disregarded.

¹⁹ See 1 Peter 3:18-20, Revelation 5:9

²⁰ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977) 47.

In addition, are we to assume that “all” in verse 23 is the elect, and narrow in focus? This would seem consistent with the Calvinist interpretive method; but isn’t everyone a sinner, even the condemned? Almost all Calvinist’s would view “all” as everyone here, but what of other passages where they interpret “all” as only the elect? e.g. Romans 6:10 – “For the death that He died, He died to sin once for *all*; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.” The deciding factor seems to be, at least for the Calvinist, whether atonement or depravity is in view, not necessarily the context, as they allow their theological construct to determine their interpretation.

Reconciliation - 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

“Now all these things are from God, who *reconciled* us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of *reconciliation*, namely, that God was in Christ *reconciling the world* to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of *reconciliation*. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be *reconciled* to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

Reconciliation means to bring back together, “it’s a change in relationship from hostility to harmony between two parties”²¹ It is through Christ that harmony occurs and it is God that did the reconciling; it is God who was satisfied and able to not count their trespasses against them. Prior to that, enmity existed between God and man (see Eph. 2:15-16). A Calvinist wouldn’t disagree with this however, they would limit its scope, Palmer notes:

“Did Christ truly, actually, really reconcile Esau to the Father by His death (Rom. 5:10), or didn’t he? ...If Christ did reconcile Esau, if He did become a curse for Judas, if He actually endured the torments of hell for all men – in other words, if He died for all – then no one is lost. All are reconciled and redeemed. But to say that all men are redeemed is contradictory to the Bible.”²²

²¹ Ryrie, 336.

²² Palmer, 47.

In light of 2 Corinthians then, it begs the questions; why are we ambassadors who are given the ministry of reconciliation, and why did Christ reconcile the *world* to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them? This is in fact, consistent with the Bible that God did not count “their trespasses against them”, simply because of Christ’s propitiation for sins. Propitiation is the cause for reconciliation. Palmer fails to note the distinction between provision and appropriation. I would agree with him that all men aren’t redeemed until they place their faith in Christ; however the provision of redemption was made on their behalf already.

Expiation - John 1:29

“The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29) Expiation means substitute and is closely related to propitiation. It is the payment of a penalty or the suffering of punishment for another: a.k.a. substitution. It’s someone taking the place of another. The Holman Bible dictionary defines it as “the process by which sins are nullified or covered.”²³ As noted previously, Christ did not cover sins, he nullified them by paying the debt we owed. Christ became the substitute of the world, on their behalf.²⁴ But, was Christ the substitute for the non-elect? Palmer laments; “Did Christ actually make a substitutionary sacrifice for sins or didn’t He? If He did, then it was not for all the world, for then all the world would be saved.”²⁵ Of course, we would agree that the latter is absurd, but that’s the straw-man argument often put in place. Again, Christ did make a substitutionary sacrifice, He died on our behalf, but the benefits of Christ’s work on the cross can only be applied through faith.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See also Romans 5:8, 1 Peter 3:18, and 2 Cor. 5:21

²⁵ Palmer, 47.

Conclusions

As we've seen in all cases it comes down to how one views the nature of the parts. I contend that all of these concepts, as they relate to the doctrine of atonement are provisional in nature and yet appropriated upon faith in Christ; nowhere in any of scripture does it say that the doctrines of atonement saved mankind. But, one has to understand the provisional aspect in order to not draw that conclusion. What saves mankind is faith in Christ.²⁶ Lightner correctly states that "Salvation is impossible without the Cross and so is it impossible without faith."²⁷ The Calvinist on the other hand equates the theological view of atonement with salvation applied to the elect. It is also the reason they typically argue that a non-Calvinist believes in universal salvation. But taking into account the Old Testament concept of atonement it should be clear that the covering was for all because the sacrifice offered to God that covered the sins of the nation was applicable to the believing Jews as well as the non-believing Jews. This sets the precedent that the sacrifice was for all.

But these doctrines don't provide the full picture, as the terms "all," "everyone," and "world" are critical. Context determines the meaning, yet the Calvinists routinely redefine "world" to be limited in scope and only applicable to the elect. For example, Hoeksema claims that the word "world" in John 3:16 denotes "the sum total of the elect as an organic whole, the body of Christ, the church."²⁸ But this isn't based on the context; it's based on their well organized and intertwined theological construct that is T.U.L.I.P..

I don't know any theologian who doesn't realize that the terms above are used in different senses, that's not the point of contention. What is being disputed is whether or not the nouns and pronouns are synonymous with the elect. A brief look at 22 passages shows that

²⁶ John 6:47, 3:14-18, Acts 16:31

²⁷ Lightner, 125.

²⁸ Vance, 434.

thirteen are broad in scope; that is, those nouns and pronouns used indicate in their natural sense, the entire world, elect and non-elect. Five passages actually make a clear distinction between those who are in view contextually and the whole world; and four could be said to have a narrow focus, although in each of those the abiding truth is easily applicable to all based on the other twenty-one passages.

Verse	Noun/Pronoun	Broad/Narrow	Distinction made between elect and non-elect
Isaiah 53:6	we/us/all	B	no
Isaiah 53:5	our/we	B	no
Matt. 20:28	many	B	no
Luke 19:10	lost	B	no
John 1:29	world	B	no
John 3:16	world	B	no
John 3:17	world	B	no
John 4:42	world	B	no
Rom. 5:6	ungodly	B	no
Rom. 5:11	we	B	no
1 Tim. 2:5	men	B	no
1 Tim. 2:6	all	B	no
Heb. 2:9	everyone	B	no
1 Peter 3:18	all/unjust	B/N	yes
2 Cor. 5:19	world/their/them/our/we	B/N	yes
1 Tim. 1:15	sinners/I/all	B/N	yes
1 Tim. 4:10	all men	B/N	yes
1 John 2:2	world	B/N	yes
Rom. 5:8	us/we	N	no
Gal. 3:13	us	N	no
Gal. 4:4	those/we	N	no
1 John 4:10	we/us	N	no

The fact that a distinction is made in five of the verses clearly indicates that Christ's work on the cross is provisional to all. In addition the word "world", *kosmos*, always refers to mankind, everyone; never does it refer to the elect. Even Herman Hoeksema admits that "when our Lord announces Himself as the light of the world it is evident that He speaks of the world of men, of the entire human race."²⁹ The term is used in John eighty times, in all of Paul's epistles sixty-nine times, John's epistles twenty-three times. Anytime it's used, the word "world" is almost always viewed negatively by God. "Do not love the world nor the things of the world." (1 John

²⁹ Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 2007) 435.

2:15) “Satan is the prince of this world” (John 12:31), “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) etc. The reason this is important is that everyone can fall into this category, not just the elect. And thus, it sets the precedent for world in John 3:16 to be everyone. Unfortunately, the Calvinist interprets the passages that have a broad usage of the term in light of the narrow ones; while I see the narrow passages as a subset of the broad.

To summarize, Christ’s work on the cross according to scripture was a payment for the debt owed, whereby God was reconciling man back to Himself. This does not mean man was eternally saved; it simply means mankind’s debt has been paid. Atonement, neither in its technical sense or its theological sense, ever saved mankind. The former was a temporary covering that did not save. The latter does not save either, because one needs more than just a payment, but forgiveness of sin in order to be saved;³⁰ and that only comes by faith in Christ. Dr. Walvoord notes:

The fact that Christ died does not save men, but it provides a sufficient ground upon which God in full harmony with His holiness is free to save even the chief of sinners. ...The fact that all this is already finished constitutes a message which the sinner is asked to believe as the testimony of God.”³¹

With that understanding then, for the sinner to be saved, he or she must recognize that a satisfactory payment has been made on their behalf. That is to believe on Christ.³² If Christ only paid for the sins of mankind and faith is the means by which we obtain salvation then Christ’s work on the cross can extend to everyone, elect and non-elect. If however, one says that atonement is salvation, that Christ’s work on the cross saved mankind, it can only save the elect.

³⁰ “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 10:43)

³¹ Lewis Sperry Chaffer & John Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979) 185.

³² John 6:47, John 3:14-18, Acts 16:31

Application

But why does it matter, isn't this a grey area? We are to take the gospel to the "lost." This is not a mystery if one holds to payment for all and it is a legitimate statement to say that "Christ died for your sins." If one holds to limited atonement, it is illegitimate to say that "Christ died for your sins," because maybe He did, maybe He didn't. For why would God die only for the "elect" and tell us to preach the gospel to the world? John Piper and others recognize this and say that it's to glorify God.³³ I don't disagree, but that's not it's only purpose nor is it a mystery. The mystery is really the tension between God's sovereignty and man's free will.

An aspect to the good news of Christ is that He did die for everyone; it's the purest expression of love, grace, and mercy that I can think of. This is nonsense to the Calvinist and they view it as heresy. We are told to watch for hollow and deceptive philosophies;³⁴ limited atonement, I would argue, certainly falls in that category and the results of which are not unlike what Adam did when responding to God in the garden, "it's your fault you gave me this woman," he passed the buck. Limited atonement inherently places the onus on God for people going to hell and removes all personal accountability.

Many pastors and theologians place the concept of limited or unlimited atonement as a "grey" area, something we shouldn't argue about. I contend that Christ's substitutionary payment on the cross is of utmost importance and limited atonement is another attack on the gospel and the person and work of Christ, and importantly, on Christ's love for all mankind.

"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

³³ See John Piper's book, *Desiring God*.

³⁴ Colossians 2:8

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