

THE PARADOX OF CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

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- I. THE ISSUES: Although many more issues could be listed, the following represent some of the essential questions raised in the debate over the extent of Christ's atonement.
 - A. Is an "every person" offer of Christ's atonement inconsistent with its limited reception?
 - B. Does the sufficiency of the atonement necessarily have to equal its efficacy (ability to produce an effect)?
 - C. Did Christ die to make all men saveable or did He die to only save the elect?
 - D. Is the atonement best described as "limited" or "unlimited"?; or is there a more accurate term?
 - E. Is it more essential to ask, "For whom did Christ die?" or "Why did Christ die?"

- II. THE OPTIONS: Answers to the above questions will depend upon which one of the following theological paradigms best describes the nature of salvation as taught in Scripture.
 - A. Man determinatively chooses to receive or reject the salvation offer of God which Christ secured with an all sufficient atonement.
 - B. God unconditionally elected some to salvation and provided a particular atonement which was limited in its extent only to secure the elect's redemption.
 - C. God unconditionally elected some to salvation that He secured with an all sufficient atonement which also had a non-redemptive value to all mankind.

III. FOUNDATIONAL THOUGHTS: The following, framing principles will help to confine our discussion to the primary considerations related to the atonement.

- A. We must resist the urge to embrace one particular theological system (Calvinism, Arminianism, etc.). Rather, we must grapple adequately with all the biblical data and arrive at a reasonable conclusion.
- B. Human logic alone will not decide the issue.
- C. The words "limited" and "unlimited" can be very misleading when used without explanation. Much of the controversy over the nature of Christ's atonement can be generated over semantic confusions.
- D. Simplistic explanations (it must be either/or) have distorted the issue and do not reasonably take into consideration all of the biblical data.
- E. Whatever the outcome of our investigation might be, it is asserted here that universalism, i.e., that everyone will eventually be saved, is utter heresy never taught in Scripture (cf. Rev. 20:11-15; John 5:29; Dan. 12:2).
- F. The early church knew nothing of this debate before the fourth century. Until then, they taught God's unconditional election and a universal proclamation of God's saving grace without any sense of contradiction or incompatibility.

IV. OUR STARTING POINT: The following foundational truths are the necessary starting point if we ever hope to build some solid thinking concerning Christ's atonement. Unless we agree here, it will be fruitless to continue the discussion past this point.

- A. God's inerrant Word contains paradoxes which sometime elude full human understanding and explanation. These paradoxes, however, do not tarnish the unblemished character of Scripture nor make the teaching of Scripture any less true.
 - 1. The paradox of prayer - Why pray if God has already sovereignly determined the outcome of all things (cf. Luke 18:1 with Isaiah 46:10)?

2. The paradox of Christ's death - Did God kill Christ (Acts 2:23), or the Jews (Acts 2:23), or the Romans (Acts 2:23), or humanity in general by virtue of their sin and need of a savior (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:2)?
3. The paradox of world rule - Is the world ruled by men (Acts 4:26-27) or by God (Acts 4:28)?
4. The paradox of the Christian life - Who rules my Christian life, Christ or me (Gal. 2:20)?
5. The paradox of Scripture - Did God write the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16) or human writers (Rom. 16:22), or the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21)?
6. The paradox of evangelism - Can all come to Christ (Matt. 11:28) or just those whom the Son chooses (Matt. 11:27)?
7. The paradox of salvation - Am I saved (Rom. 10:13), or being saved (1 Cor. 1:18) or just nearer to the time of my salvation (Rom. 13:11)?

B. Not only does God's Word contain paradoxes, but it also unmistakably teaches unconditional election unto salvation. This is to say that human beings are not determinatively responsible for their own salvation, but rather God is. The following biblical texts evidence the truthfulness of this assertion.

1. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).
2. "For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself" (Acts 2:39).
3. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).
4. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren: and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30).

5. "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles" (Romans 9:19-24).
 6. "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,... also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:4-5, 11).
 7. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4-5).
 8. "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).
 9. "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13).
 10. "...who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Timothy 1:9).
- C. The above clear fact introduces another paradox--Does God determine our salvation or do we (Rom. 10:13)? While it is unquestionably true that we participate in the salvation process (John 1:12 - "As many as received Him"), our involvement is secondary and subordinate to God's sovereign choice and act of regeneration (Titus 3:5-6). However, the lesser exercise of our human responsibility is concurrent with the greater exercise of God's sovereign will.

1. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).
2. "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God'" (John 3:5).
3. "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. And He was saying, 'For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father'" (John 6:44, 65).
4. "And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14).
5. "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

D. We come finally to the paradox of Christ's atonement. How can a "whosoever gospel" be consistent with the truth of unconditional election? How can an atonement with unlimited potential ultimately be efficacious only for the elect? How can particular redemption be reconciled with Christ being the Savior of all men?

V. **THE BIBLICAL FACTS: We must consider all that Scripture teaches, not just those texts which support our predetermined theology**, as an essential step to reach a meaningful conclusion.

A. Many Scriptures teach an atonement that has a broader implication, in some sense, than just to the elect. The following texts are representative.

1. "Whosoever" passages:
 - a. "...that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:15-16).
 - b. "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).
 - c. "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (1 John 4:15).

2. "World" and "All" passages
 - a. "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).
 - b. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
 - c. "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this that one died for all, therefore all died" (2 Corinthians 5:14).
 - d. "...namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself..." (2 Cor. 5:19a).
 - e. "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).
 - f. "And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14).
 3. Explicit statements
 - a. "...who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth...who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:4, 6).
 - b. "For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers" (1 Timothy 4:10).
 - c. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as 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" (2 Peter 2:1).
- B. However, other Scriptures teach about an atonement that is limited to the elect only.
1. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).
 2. "...Even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep" (John 10:15).

3. "...who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians 1:4).
4. "...and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (Ephesians 5:2).
5. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

C. That a potential paradox exists becomes obvious since both sides of the issue are supported by Scripture. Any clarifying solution which does not reasonably incorporate all of the above Scriptures into its expression will be inadequate.

VI. A PROPOSED EXPLANATION: Only one of the three options considered above (II A, B, C) accounts for all that the Bible teaches about the atonement.

- A. Understand first that the purpose of the atonement will dictate its extent not vice versa. It is asserted that the only purpose which accounts for all of the data is that God loved the world (John 3:16). Therefore, in the mind of God, before creation, the following sequence of events occurred:
1. Man fell.
 2. God's love for mankind provided a Savior for all.
 3. God sovereignly elected some unto salvation.

Thus, the better question to ask is not, "For whom did Christ die?" but rather, "Why did Christ die?" To look at all of the data any other way is to arrive at a nonsensical and contradictory solution. We insist that the lesser (God sovereignly elected some unto salvation) must be understood in the light of the greater (God's love for mankind provided a Savior for all).

B. Next, two of the three options proposed at the beginning (II.) are inconsistent with Scripture in view of the data presented here.

1. "Man determinatively chooses to receive or reject the salvation of God which Christ secured with an all sufficient atonement."

While logically possible, the unbiblical nature of the first condition makes the conclusion unacceptable. God did not elect those whom He knew would believe, but rather chose those who, because of their election, would believe.

2. "God unconditionally elected some to salvation and provided a particular atonement only to secure their redemption."

While unconditional election is biblically taught, the latter condition ("only to secure their redemption") is an incomplete expression of all that Scripture teaches. Therefore, while it appears to be logical, it is not fully biblical because it does not include the most comprehensive biblical expression of the atonement. It does not account for the Scriptures that teach Christ somehow died for the world.

- A. Please understand that, in one sense, everyone (whether Arminian or Calvinist) believes in a limited atonement. For some it is limited by man's will, while for others by God's will. We must ask, "Which alternative is biblical?"
- D. Thus the proposed biblical solution which initially challenges human logic--"God unconditionally elected some to salvation that Christ secured with an all-sufficient atonement which also had a non-redemptive value to all mankind"--is nonetheless thoroughly biblical because it accounts for all of the scriptural data in a non-conflicting way.
- E. We conclude then, the Bible teaches that the atonement is limited in some senses, and in other ways unlimited.
 1. Limited aspects
 - a. It does not extend to angels or animals.
 - b. It is not efficaciously applied to all humans by God's choice.
 2. Unlimited aspects
 - a. It focuses upon the whole human race in its suitability.
 - b. Its message is extended to all humans in its proclamation.
 - c. Its sufficiency is unlimited in value.
 - d. It makes all men accountable in terms of eternal responsibility.
 - e. It makes common grace available in non-eternal ways to all mankind (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17).
 - f. It benefits all of the elect in its redemptive, eternal efficacy.

VII. THE OLD TESTAMENT PARALLEL: By looking back to the Old Testament "Day of Atonement," we find a limited/unlimited atonement also. This consistency corroborates the unity of Scripture, the continuity of redemption and the validity of our conclusion with regard to a limited/unlimited atonement.

- A. Since the Old Testament sacrifices look forward to and picture the one final sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it would be helpful to understand the extent of Christ's atonement in the Old Testament practice of the atonement.
- B. After a careful examination of Leviticus 16 (particularly verses 17, 21, and 34), it becomes evident that the high priest offered the atonement sacrifice on behalf of himself and then the entire nation, even though not all of the nation was redeemed. Thus, for the following year God's wrath would be appeased so that He mercifully withheld their deserved judgment.
- C. We can conclude, therefore, that the atonement in the Old Testament not only anticipated the redeeming sacrifice of Christ for those Old Testament saints who had placed their faith in God for salvation, but it also brought temporal common grace to those for whom the sacrifice was offered. This grace was non-eternal and non-salvific in nature towards the non-elect.
- D. Put another way, God's common grace to the whole world (as illustrated by the O.T. Day of Atonement) was secured by Christ's atonement for only the duration of their earthly lives (Hebrews 9:27). However, God's redeeming grace only to the elect was secured by Christ's atonement for an eternal salvation. Paul could then write, "For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers" (1 Timothy 4:10).
- E. Thus, we believe that what is found didactically in the New Testament is also pictured perfectly in the Old. Christ's atonement is unlimited in a non-saving sense for all of sinful humanity, but is limited in its redemptive efficacy only to those whom God particularly and unconditionally elected unto eternal salvation.

Cf. John Feinberg – "Salvation in the OT."