

# **BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY: An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation**

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Limited Atonement, part 1

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT**

The Reformed doctrine of limited atonement states that Christ died in place of the elect, and only the elect, by taking the blame for their sin and the punishment due that sin. Christ accepted the legal responsibility for the sin of the people for whom he died, and Christ's death satisfied God's wrath toward the sinners for whom he died. As a result, God may not justly condemn anyone for whom Christ died. He may only justly condemn Christ, and Christ bore that condemnation at the cross. Christ's atonement secured the salvation of the elect so that they all must and will be saved. The word "limited" in this case refers to the fact that the atonement was designed to atone for the sins of a limited number of people, namely the elect. It most certainly does not refer to the atonement's power.

Limited atonement, also called particular redemption, is to be distinguished from the doctrine of general ransom. General ransom is the idea that Jesus atoned for the sin of every person in the world, but that his death did not necessarily secure the salvation of any person in particular. "General" denotes the idea that Christ atoned for every person without limitation. At the same time, this doctrine argues that Christ's atonement was of lesser effect than the doctrine of limited atonement asserts. Specifically, the general ransom doctrine holds that Christ's atonement did not secure the necessary salvation of any individual. Rather, it simply made salvation universally possible.

Both limited atonement and general ransom agree that Christ's atonement was of infinite value, and that it was therefore sufficient to save an unlimited number of people. Both doctrines also rightly distinguish between "impetration" and "application." "Impetration" is the obtaining of the benefits of the atonement, such as the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. The impetration was accomplished at the cross. "Application" is the application of these benefits to believers on an individual basis, such as the forgiveness and justification a person experiences when he repents and believes the gospel. Both limited atonement and general ransom agree that application is limited to those who believe, and both agree that the impetration was of infinite value. The two main points at issue are: 1) for whom was the impetration accomplished? and 2) was necessary application a benefit

included in the impetration? Less precisely but more colloquially: 1) for whom did Christ atone? and 2) must those for whom he atoned be saved?

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT**

Many different arguments in favor of limited atonement can be made. Such as:

1. It has always been God's plan to redeem creation through mankind, and to redeem mankind through a remnant. This remnant is the believing portion of the larger visible group of God's covenant or chosen people (identified as Israel in the Old Testament, and the church in the New Testament). In keeping with this plan, God designed the atonement to save those people he had determined beforehand to save: the remnant. Christ's atonement was acceptable to God, paid for the sins of the remnant, and secured the salvation of the remnant.
2. God is sovereign. Whatever he sovereignly wills and decrees necessarily happens. Since some people are not saved, God did not ordain all to salvation. Rather, God has elected some to salvation, and others he has destined for reprobation. God's will in election is not contrary to God's will for the atonement. Therefore, God did not decree that the reprobate bear their own guilt, and also decree that Christ should bear that same guilt needlessly.
3. God is sovereign. Whatever he sovereignly wills and decrees necessarily happens. God decreed that the atonement offered by Christ would actually save sinners, not just make their salvation possible. Therefore, the atonement offered by Christ actually secured the salvation of those for whom it was offered. Not all are saved, therefore atonement was not made for all.
4. The atonement actually secured the reconciliation of sinners to God. If sinners are reconciled to God, it is impossible that they might perish. If any perish, then not all were reconciled. Some sinners perish, therefore not all were reconciled. Since not all were reconciled to God, the atonement was not offered for all.
5. Christ mediates and intercedes for all for whom the atonement was offered. Christ only intercedes for the elect. Therefore, the atonement was only offered for the elect.

6. God's justice demands that no one for whom an adequate atonement has been offered may go to eternal damnation. Some go to eternal damnation. Therefore, an adequate atonement has not been offered for those who are ultimately damned.
7. Many scriptural references directly state that God's intention regarding the atonement, and the atonement's actual result, are limited to the salvation of the elect. No scripture, taken in its proper context, directly supports a view contrary to the doctrine of limited atonement.
8. Christ is the High Priest of the Church. According to the Old Testament, it is the high priest's job to intercede on behalf of those people over whom he is priest. This intercession includes offering sacrifices on behalf of the people and making intercession in the Holy Place with the sprinkled blood of sacrificial animals. The New Testament picture of Christ as high priest is that he offered the atonement (an act of intercession), and that he continues to intercede. As high priest, he must have performed the atonement and be interceding on behalf of only those people over whom he is high priest. Christ is high priest over only the Church/believers.
9. In Romans 5, Paul contrasts being "in Christ" with being "in Adam." These identifications are parallel in structure. That is, Christ's imputation of righteousness to believers takes place in a fashion paralleling Adam's prior imputation of guilt to these same people. Adam's disobedience directly, necessarily resulted in guilt and condemnation. In the same way, Christ's obedience directly, necessarily results in justification. According to Romans 5:1-11, those who have been justified have peace and reconciliation with God. It is impossible to be justified, at peace with God, and reconciled to God, while at the same time also being condemned. Some are condemned, therefore justification is not universal. Since all for whom Christ atoned are justified, he only atoned for those who are not condemned.

The approach limited atonement presented herein will be more detailed, presenting a systematic argument substantiated at every point by biblical evidence. Not all points will be relevant to the debate between limited atonement and general ransom, but all will be relevant to a proper understanding of the atonement — the goal of this work being not only the refutation of error, but also the defense of the truth.

First, the atonement was necessary for both man and God. It was necessary for man because he was fallen, and in his fallen state he could neither approach God nor do anything that would restore him to a state in which he could approach God. Being so fallen, he was due God's wrath and condemned to eternal damnation. The atonement was necessary for man in order to satisfy God's justice and wrath toward man's sin, and in order to restore man to a state in which he could approach God. The atonement was necessary for God because

of his holiness and his love for the elect. God's love for the elect would not permit him to let the elect perish, but his holiness would neither allow man to approach him nor to escape his justice.

Second, God designed the atonement to meet both his needs and man's needs. He designed it to erase man's condemnation and to restore man to a state in which he could approach God. God also designed the atonement to satisfy his own holiness, thereby freeing him to satisfy his love toward the elect. The atonement was intended to accomplish these ends through the perfect renewal of God's covenant with his people. Grace, mercy, forgiveness, justification, and all other benefits of the atonement are blessings of God's covenant with his people. The atonement was the basis for a new covenant under Christ's representation, as the fulfillment and renewal of the old covenant administered under Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

Third, the atonement accomplished everything God designed it to accomplish. These results of the atonement include but are not limited to the following benefits for those for whom Christ died: reconciliation; justification; sanctification; adoption; glorification. All these benefits must accrue to those for whom Christ died (impetration), and must be realized in the lives of those for whom he died (application).

Fourth, the means by which the atonement was accomplished included the work of all three persons of the Trinity. The Father began by sending the Son, appointing him as covenant mediator and savior, furnishing him with the necessary abilities to perform the atonement, and covenanting with the Son to promise the Son success in his endeavors. At the cross, he also laid the guilt and punishment for the sins of the elect on the Son. The Son rendered full obedience to the Father's plan by becoming incarnate, performing the atonement, and interceding on behalf of those for whom he atoned. The Holy Spirit was also active in that he was the one who begot the incarnate Son upon Mary, the one through whose power Christ offered the atonement, and the one through whose power Christ was raised from the dead so that he might finish the work of atonement and intercession in heaven.

Fifth, the means by which the atonement was accomplished include(d) specific acts which require detailed investigation and explanation: oblation and intercession. "Oblation" is the act of rendering atonement, which Christ offered only on behalf of the elect. Christ's intercession, in turn, is that continual work by which he acts as mediator for those individuals who are redeemed/saved. Christ intercedes only for those for whom he offered the oblation, namely the elect.

## **OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT**

### I. NEED FOR THE ATONEMENT

#### A. Atonement Necessary for Man

1. Fallen Man is Dead in Trespasses and Sins — Because of man's fallen state, he is dead and under condemnation.
2. Fallen Man is Unable to Approach God — In man's fallen state, he is unable to do anything to purify himself and therefore is unable to redeem himself. He must continue to be condemned.

#### B. Atonement Necessary for God

1. God's Love for the Elect — Because God loved the elect, he desired that they should be saved.
2. God's Holiness — God's holy character demands that his standards not vary. His standard is that sin be punished by death. Satisfaction of this standard is necessary in order for the salvation of the elect.

### II. INTENDED RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT

#### A. Salvation for Sinners — God designed the atonement to save fallen mankind from condemnation and death.

#### B. Satisfaction of God's Wrath — The atonement was designed to satisfy God's wrath toward mankind so that God's justice could be met and man could be redeemed from condemnation.

#### C. Covenant Renewal — Grace, mercy, forgiveness, justification, and all other benefits of the atonement are blessings of God's covenant with his people. The atonement was the basis for a new covenant under Christ's representation, as the fulfillment and renewal of the old covenant administered under Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

### III. ACTUAL RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT

- A. Reconciliation — The atonement reconciled sinners to God. This reconciliation, this ending of the enmity between God and fallen man, was not the changing of sinners to make God acceptable to them, but the changing of sinners to make them acceptable to God. This occurred only in light of the justification that it also achieved.
- B. Justification — The atonement itself actually accomplished the justification, the declaring to be righteous, of those persons for whom Christ died. This justification took place only because the atonement satisfied God's wrath toward the sinners for whom Christ died. The justification achieved by the atonement resulted in the redemption of those justified.
- C. Sanctification — By the atonement, Christ purified a people unto himself. This means two things: 1) that he actually cleansed them from their sin, resulting in their justification and redemption; and 2) that he secured for them a guarantee that they would be carried through the sanctification and purification process to the end.
- D. Adoption — Christ's atonement, through the redemption it provided, also secured our adoption as children of God. Because of the adoption that it secured, God in time and space saves his children by giving them his Spirit.
- E. Glorification — The atonement secured future glorification for those who were called under the new covenant.
- F. Fulfillment of All Intended Results — God is sovereign, and promised to fulfill all the covenant blessings, among which are the intended results of the atonement. Because God's purpose in this cannot and could not be thwarted, the atonement accomplished everything that God intended it to accomplish.

### IV. MEANS BY WHICH ATONEMENT WAS ACCOMPLISHED: AGENTS

- A. God the Father
  - 1. Sent God the Son — God the Father sent God the Son into the world to accomplish the atonement that he purposed beforehand.
    - a. Father made Son Christ/mediator/savior — The Father made the Son the mediator between the elect, who are sinful beings, and

God, who punishes sinful beings. The act of mediation is the interposing of Christ between God and the elect in order to reconcile the two parties. Christ's act of mediation includes both his atonement and priesthood, and results in the salvation of the elect.

- i. The Father purposed the mediation to be made by the Son, including the Son's continued action as high priest of the people of God, and the Son's continued intercession on their behalf.
  - ii. The Father inaugurated Jesus the Son as the Christ/mediator.
    - a) The Father proclaimed Jesus as the Christ/mediator.
    - b) The Father sent his Spirit visibly upon Christ
    - c) The Father crowned Christ with glory, honor and authority.
  - iii. The Father promised to apply the benefits purchased by the mediator to those people on behalf of whom he mediated.
- b. Father Furnished Son with Ability — The Father provided the Son with the necessary ability to accomplish the atonement.
- i. The Son had a natural perfection as deity — The Father sent a savior who was not merely man, but also God. By sending his Son as the savior, he provided a savior with all the perfection natural to the Godhead.
  - ii. The Son had a communicated fulness from the Father — The Father communicated a fulness of perfection and ability to redeem to the Son in his incarnate state.
- c. The Father covenanted with the Son — God the Father entered a covenant with God the Son concerning the work of

redemption. Within this covenant, the Father promised the Son success in his endeavors.

2. Laid Punishment on the Son — God the Father laid the punishment due the people for their sins on God the Son.
- B. God the Son — All acts regarding the atonement which were performed by God the Son were performed in obedience to the will of God the Father.
1. Incarnation — The Son took on flesh and blood in order to redeem the children of God through the atonement.
  2. Oblation — The Son performed the oblation, the act of making the sacrifice/atonement, which the Father had purposed.
  3. Intercession — It was and is the work of the Son to intercede on behalf of the elect, those for whom he died.
- C. God the Holy Spirit — The work of God the Holy Spirit was necessary to the atonement because it was through the Holy Spirit that the Son came into the world, offered the oblation, and rose from the dead.
1. Incarnation — It was the Holy Spirit that came upon Mary and begot Jesus.
  2. Oblation — It was through the Holy Spirit that the Son offered the oblation.
  3. Resurrection — The Resurrection is attributed to the power of “God,” the Son claims the power as his own, and several verses potentially support that it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Since God is triune, and since Jesus operated “through the eternal Spirit,” it is right to attribute the Resurrection to the power of the Holy Spirit.

## V. MEANS BY WHICH ATONEMENT WAS ACCOMPLISHED: ACTS

- A. Oblation — The atonement was accomplished through the sacrifice of God the Son. This oblation was intended only to redeem/save the elect. God intended to save the creation by saving mankind, and to save mankind by saving an elect remnant. The oblation atoned only for the people whom it was intended to redeem/save.



- B. Intercession — The intercession made by God the Son is that continual work by which he acts as mediator for those individuals who are redeemed/saved.
1. Intercession made for a limited number of people, namely the elect.
  2. Intercession made for everyone for whom oblation made — God the Son intercedes for all those individuals for whom he atones, for whom the oblation is made. In fact, the oblation is itself an act of intercession.