

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

by Ra McLaughlin

Limited Atonement, part 6

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

III. ACTUAL RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT (continued)

- C. Sanctification — By the atonement, Christ purified a people unto himself. Sanctification has two main aspects: 1) setting apart as holy or dedicated unto God; and 2) purification. While the first aspect reflects a change in status, the second is a lifelong process. The atonement forms the basis on which the elect are set apart unto God, and guarantees that ultimately they will be purified. All those who are in covenant relationship with God may be described by the first aspect, while only the elect may be described by the second.**

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph. 1:3-4).

The English word groups “sanctification, sanctify, sanctified” and “holiness, make holy, holy” both translate the same Greek words: *hagiasmos, hagiazo, hagios*. Thus, that believers are chosen unto holiness means that they are chosen to be sanctified. This election unto sanctification is made with a view to one’s being in Christ, to being united to and redeemed by him. The elect were chosen unto sanctification in light of the fact that Christ was to make atonement for them. Therefore, the atonement is a basis for accomplishing the sanctification of the elect.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25-27).

One purpose of the atonement was the sanctification of the church. Christ had to give himself up for the church in order to sanctify the church, that is, he had to die. Therefore, sanctification depends on the merits of Christ’s atonement.

Paul states that Christ died in order to make the church holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle. While “blameless” might seem to indicate a lack of guilt, suggesting the idea of justification, in this case it translates the Greek word *amomos*, which does not denote “guilt,” but rather “spotlessness.” Thus, both terms, “holy” and “blameless,” should be understood as references to sanctification, particularly to the aspect of purification (compare the words “cleansed,” “washing,” “spot,” and “wrinkle”).

Further, the Greek phrasing which the English word “might” translates does not indicate the possibility that the church “might” be sanctified, but rather the purpose for which Christ died (compare the NRSV: “in order to make her holy”). Christ certainly will not present an impure, unholy church to himself as his bride. Thus, it must be true that the church will be perfectly and completely sanctified prior to being presented to Christ. This again indicates that the aspect of sanctification to which Paul here referred was purification. The fact that the church will be perfectly sanctified also demonstrates that Paul referred to the invisible church (true believers only; compare Eph. 4:13; 5:8), and not to the visible church (including believers and unbelievers). Christ’s intention will be fulfilled perfectly (i.e. the church will be purified). Therefore, his death perfectly secured the purification of those for whom he died.

“For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:13-14).

The blood of Christ sanctifies both flesh and conscience, not just flesh, and leads to the service of God. “The blood of Christ” refers to the atonement. The Mosaic sacrifices here referenced sanctified the people primarily not by setting them apart, but by cleansing them:

“And this shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls, and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30).

In the same way, but more powerfully and eternally, Christ’s blood sanctifies or purifies those for whom the atonement was offered. While this was not applied to all such people at the time of the atonement, it was certainly obtained and reserved for them, and will be applied to them in due course of time.

“We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And 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, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:10-14).

Jesus accomplished the sanctification of believers, once for all time, by his death. He obtained eternal cleansing for those for whom he died.

“Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate” (Heb. 13:12).

Jesus “suffered outside the gate,” that is, he was killed by the Romans in order to sanctify his people through his blood. Since the spilling of his blood is the source of sanctifying power, sanctification must have been secured at the cross. Where his blood was actually shed. In fact, this passage teaches that the purpose for the atonement was the sanctification of believers. If God’s purpose for the atonement was fulfilled, which it was, the atonement perfectly secured the sanctification of those on whose behalf it was offered, to be applied to them in due course of time by the Spirit.

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.

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:26-29).

Jesus alone is Abraham’s rightful heir. The covenant blessings were promised to him, not to those who would believe in him:

“Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ” (Gal. 3:16).

However, all who have saving faith are “in Christ Jesus,” so Christ shares his own status with them. Thus, just as Christ is the Son of God, all those who are in him share in his sonship. Obtaining a share in Christ’s sonship makes them children of God, adopted in Christ. As a result, all believers in Christ receive the blessings of the covenant as if they were Christ himself. This is why Paul wrote that all believers are “one in Christ Jesus.” Free male Jews received the greatest covenant blessings. All who are in Christ receive his status and are thereby counted as free male Jews, adopted as co-heirs to the greatest covenant blessings.

That this adoption was accomplished by the atonement is made clear earlier in the same chapter:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ — in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14).

Christ redeemed believers by hanging on a tree, or more specifically a cross, in the atonement. He did this in order to give them the blessings of Abraham, which come through adoption as children of God (Gal.

3:26,29). Thus, the atonement was necessary as the foundation for adoption as children of God.

“But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:4-6).

Christ came so that God could adopt those who were under the Law. The atonement was that action by which God redeemed his children, and it was intended to result in the adoption as sons of those for whom it was offered. Thus, the atonement was designed to make adoption possible, and to secure adoption for those who were under the Law. According to the context, those who were under the Law included both Jews and Gentiles:

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal. 3:21-23).

The atonement was not designed to adopt every Jew and Gentile, but only those who believed:

“But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22).

“In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us” (Ephesians 1:4-8).

Christians have been predestined to adoption “through Jesus Christ.” In the context of this statement, Paul spoke of redemption and forgiveness through Christ’s blood — a reference to his atoning work on the cross. This passage presents adoption as part of the total package of redemption and blessing that God’s gives graciously through Christ’s blood, shed at the atonement.