

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY

An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

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Limited Atonement, part 17

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

V. MEANS BY WHICH ATONEMENT WAS ACCOMPLISHED: ACTS (cont).

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. Intercession includes both the atonement and the eternal session wherein Christ continually pleads the benefits of the atonement on behalf of the redeemed.

1. Intercession is made for a limited number of people, namely the elect.

“As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:11-12).

Christ ultimately fulfills this prophecy (Luke 22:37), not only in his death, but also in his resurrection, ascension, eternal session, and rule as king. He intercedes for “many,” indicating that he does so for a large number, but not indicating that he does so for the totality of mankind. In this context, the “many” are “my people” (Isa. 53:8), namely Israel. In the New Testament, his people are shown to be believers, both Jew and Gentile (e.g. Rom. 9:24-33). Thus, this passage indicates that Christ intercedes for believers. It does not suggest that he intercedes for anyone outside that group. [See Appendix A for more information regarding the identity of Israel in the New Testament.]

“These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee, even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast

given Him, He may give eternal life. And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent. I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was. I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me, and they have kept Thy word. Now they have come to know that everything Thou hast given Me is from Thee; for the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them, and truly understood that I came forth from Thee, and they believed that Thou didst send Me. I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine; and all things that are Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. And I am no more in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to Thee, Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are. . . I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. . . Sanctify them in truth . . . And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word. . . Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:1-11,15,17,19-20,24).

The Son was given authority over mankind for the express purpose of giving eternal life to “all” those whom the Father had given him, namely believers. Interestingly, this eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ. It is a continuing, intimate knowledge of and about him. Because such knowledge about God is part of the gospel itself, one cannot know or believe the gospel prior to receiving eternal life. Rather, it must be the case that Jesus gives believers knowledge of himself and of his Father, as well as eternal life at the same time. This idea is commonly expressed by the phrase “regeneration precedes faith.” That is, being born again by the Holy Spirit (when eternal life begins) is a prerequisite for knowing and trusting the gospel. As Jesus says in this prayer, eternal life (and thus faith in the gospel) is something that he gives only to those who have already been given to him by the Father.

In this intercessory prayer, Christ petitioned God on behalf of all those who had been given to him, both current and future believers, and specifically declined to intercede on behalf of the rest of the world. In fact, he was rather particular about identifying the exact portions of

the world's present and future populations for whom he offered this intercession: believers only.

Some other very telling portions of this prayer are the actual petitions of the intercession. When Christ specifically declined to pray for unbelievers, he declined to ask the Father to "keep them from the evil one," and he declined to ask the Father to "sanctify them in the truth." This prayer was offered just before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

Why would Christ have refused to intercede for anyone but those who would believe if in a few short hours he planned to die on behalf of everyone in the world? Recalling Romans 8:32, why would Christ be willing to die for a person for whom he was not willing to pray? The answer is that he would not. As this prayer implies, Christ died only for those who would believe, the elect, just as in his prayer he interceded only for them. He did not die for those for whom he was unwilling to pray.

Consider verse 19 of the passage at hand in which Christ stated, "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." Christ sanctified himself by obeying the Father, by his incarnation, by his preaching of the kingdom and the gospel, and by his death, burial and resurrection. He did this for the sake of believers, not for the sake of unbelievers. Thus, he prayed that the Father would sanctify believers, those whom the Father had given to Christ. He did not pray that the Father would sanctify anyone else. In verse 19, Christ directly stated the thought that runs through the whole prayer: he was dying only for those who had already been given to him, those who did or would believe.

Also, Christ expressed his desire that those who had been given to him be with him in glory. He left the rest of the human race unmentioned. This reflects the fact that Christ desired the salvation and presence of only of those whom the Father had given to him, and not of everyone in the world.

"For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying 'I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise.' And again, 'I will put My trust in Him.' And again, 'Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me.' Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the

devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:11-17).

Having been made merciful and faithful by his incarnation and death, Christ can now serve as a perfect high priest, representing the people of God before God himself. Since the role of the high priest in the Old Testament was to intercede for the people before God, and since these priests prefigured Christ, it follows that Christ intercedes on behalf of and gives help to the people of God, the children of Abraham. In fact, this is largely the argument of Hebrews 6-10. Since a high priest does not intercede on behalf of those over whom he is not high priest, Christ does not intercede on behalf of those who are not of the people of God.

The words “children,” “brethren,” “congregation” (i.e. the church), and “descendant of Abraham” all refer to the ones “given” to Christ by the Father (cf. John 6:35-40; 10:25-30). Christ became incarnate in order to intercede as a faithful and merciful high priest for the children who already belonged to him (“since then the children share in flesh and blood”). He did not become incarnate in order to intercede for all mankind. As the rest of Hebrews indicates, the descendants of Abraham are “those who draw near to God through [Christ]” (Heb. 7:25). This indicates that Christ did not intend to intercede for all mankind, but only for those who are ultimately saved.

2. Intercession is made for everyone for whom the oblation was made.

“As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:11-12).

According to this prophecy and Luke 22:37, Christ justified “the many” by bearing their “sins” or “iniquity.” This refers to his atoning death on their behalf. As the last sentence indicates, the “many” are also the “transgressors” for whom Christ intercedes. The intercession appears to be linked so strongly to the bearing of sins that the two,

though not precisely one and the same, are inseparably joined. Thus, the people whose sins Christ bears and the people for whom he intercedes appear to be one and the same group in this prophecy. He intercedes for all for whom he atoned, namely for “my people” (Isa. 53:8) as distinct from the rest of the world.

“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. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:29-34).

The “us all” to whom Paul refers are Paul himself and his readers (who are “elect” and “predestined”), and by association the rest of the elect. He argues that since Christ died for “us,” Christ must also intercede for “us.” Christ’s ongoing intercession for the elect is proven by the fact that Christ died on their behalf. As Paul points out, it would be inconceivable that Christ would die on someone’s behalf and yet not continue intercede on that person’s behalf. Rather, God will not withhold any blessing from those for whom Christ died, including Christ’s continual intercession. Therefore, Christ must make continual intercession on behalf of all those for whom he died. As identified in this passage, those individuals for whom Christ intercedes are the elect.

“But He, on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (Heb. 7:24-28).

Christ makes continual intercession for those who draw near to God through him (i.e. believers), not for those who do not (i.e.

unbelievers). He intercedes as part of his job as high priest, which means that he is only the high priest of believers, not of mankind in general. Since Christ offered the atonement (“offered up himself”) in the course of his role as high priest, it follows that he atoned only for those over whom he was high priest. Since he was high priest only over those “those who draw near to God through him,” he must have atoned only for believers, those for whom he also intercedes.