

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY
An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation
Limited Atonement, part 19

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OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT (cont.)

2) The Bible directly states that the atonement is general in nature.

This is an irrefutable argument, if it is true. However, the Bible never makes any statement which, read in its proper context, directly teaches that the atonement is general in nature.

Many passages are often offered as proof that the Bible directly supports the foregoing general redemption arguments. The most common are answered here:

- 1. “The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29).**

This verse contains two terms of significance to the argument at hand: “world” and “takes away.” Each will be treated separately.

World

The word of contention in this verse is “world,” translated from the Greek word *kosmos*. Literally, *kosmos* means “the whole order of things” or “the creation.” The English language has directly assimilated this word, which appears in dictionaries as “cosmos.” The general ransom argument holds that in this verse *kosmos* means “every human being” (some forms of this argument assert that it has reference only to those living after the crucifixion). The limited atonement position tends to take *kosmos* in this context to mean “Jews and Gentiles,” and understand this in the sense of a remnant. Other forms of the limited atonement position understand *kosmos* in this verse to refer to the elect, while others understand it to refer to the creation itself.

The first thing that should be apparent is that neither the general ransom position nor most limited atonement positions interpret this word literally.

This verse directly supports the general ransom doctrine only if *kosmos* is interpreted to mean “every human being.” In fact, *kosmos* appears numerous times within the Gospel of John, and is often, perhaps usually, used figuratively, so that this approach is not without merit.

Because this verse quotes John the Baptist, the “Lamb of God” is most likely a special name for an apocalyptic figure, namely for the messiah. The traditional Jewish understanding of the messiah was that he was to save Israel, and that the nations would be included in salvation only insofar as they submitted themselves to Israel’s God. In fact, as Paul taught in Romans 11:13-24, the nations are saved only by being included in Israel through union with Christ. Even the Baptist himself said that the purpose of his own ministry was to manifest the messiah to Israel (John 1:31), not to the world at large. Given this historical backdrop, when John the Baptist actually spoke these words, *kosmos* was most likely to be understood in one of two ways:

- 1) “Jews and Gentiles” — In order to recognize that a remnant of Gentiles as well as of Jews was to be included in God’s covenant, John may well have used the word “world” instead of the word “Israel.” This would have been entirely in keeping with the Old Testament view of the restoration of the kingdom of Israel as a time when God would subdue the nations and bring a remnant of Gentiles into his holy people.
- 2) “The entirety of Israel” — John may have been referring to Jesus as the messiah of all Israelites. Israelites included naturally born Israelites (both native to Israel and foreign born; many Jews lived in other countries at this point in history), as well as Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. [See also Appendix A.]

Support for this interpretation comes from the fact that it appears to have been the apostle’s own understanding of Jesus’s teachings. After spending three years as Jesus’ students, the apostles understood that Jesus would die and did die only for Israel. Regardless of what meaning modern interpreters give to the word “world,” the people who originally heard that Christ was to die for the “world” understood this to mean that he would die for Israel.

While it may be true that the apostles frequently misunderstood what they were taught during Jesus’s earthly ministry, this cannot be effectively argued about them after the Holy Spirit came upon them on Pentecost and gave them power to be Christ’s witnesses (Acts

1:5-8; 2:4). After this point, the apostles became great thinkers and speakers, particularly Peter.

Thus, it is highly significant that Peter himself, after being filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, required a three-fold vision from God and a divine rebuke (Acts 10:11-16), as well as the witness of the Holy Spirit poured out on Gentiles (Acts 11:44-48), before he came to the realization that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews:

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ‘Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?’ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:44-48).

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’ And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:15-18).

Prior to this conversion of Gentiles, not only did Peter think that the gospel was only for the Jews, but the church was under the same impression. Since the church was under this impression, it must have been the universal understanding of the apostles and the rest of the teachers that Christ came only for the Jews. Had they believed that Christ atoned for the sins of every human being, the apostles and church would not have been surprised by the fact that God decided to save the Gentiles.

During their time with Christ, the apostles evidently became used to using terms like *kosmos* to refer to a limited group of people such as

Israel, and would have seen no reason to alter their vocabulary. Thus, they reasonably would have continued to refer to the new Israel, namely the church, as the “world.”

This point becomes even more clear in light of the fact that the New Testament presents many arguments redefining Israel as including Jews and Gentiles alike (see Appendix A), but none redefining the atonement’s effects as general rather than limited. If the early church and apostles had discovered at some point that the atonement was general as opposed to limited in scope, there certainly would be New Testament evidence of their attempts to correct their original misconception.

Thus, it is reasonable to interpret terms like *kosmos* and “all men” to refer to a limited group of people, and perhaps even preferable to do so.

Both these interpretations can be integrated harmoniously into a limited atonement system, but concurs with the general ransom theory.

Takes Away

The word translated as “takes away” is *airo*, the basic meaning of which is “to lift up from the ground.” A derivative meaning from this is “lift up with intent to carry,” and a further derivative meaning from this is “take away.” Given that the Jewish sacrificial system placed the blame for sin on the sacrificial lamb, which John here proclaimed Jesus to be, *airo* seems most appropriately applied to Jesus in the sense that he took upon himself the wrath of God due the “world” for its transgressions. That is, Jesus “lifted with the intent to carry” the burden of sin. If this is the correct interpretation of *airo*, and if correct interpretation of “world” is “every human being,” then one of the following (or some combination thereof) must be true:

- 1) The punishment for “all sins of every human being” has been laid upon Christ, and therefore every human being will ultimately be saved (universalism).
- 2) The punishment for “all sins of every human being” has been laid upon Christ, but God is still willing, on an individual basis, to punish people for their sins if they fail to fulfill the condition of faith in Christ (God is willing to mete out punishment for these sins twice: once on Christ; once on the individual).

- 3) The punishment for “some sins of every human being” has been laid upon Christ, while the punishment for others sins has not been laid on Christ. Typically, these other sins are thought to include blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and/or unbelief (often these are considered one and the same).

However, none of the foregoing possibilities can be reality. Therefore, it cannot be true that Jesus “lifted with intent to carry” the burden of sin for all human beings:

The punishment for “all sins of every human being” has been laid upon Christ.

The first possibility must be rejected because the Bible clearly teaches against universal salvation. Since some people will not be saved and will perish, it is not true that every human being will be saved.

The punishment for “all sins of every human being” has been laid upon Christ, but God is still willing, on an individual basis, to punish people for their sins if they fail to fulfill the condition of faith in Christ.

The second possibility must also be rejected. If the second possibility were true, then God would impute sin to man for which an adequate atonement had already been made. This is inconsistent with the sufficient nature of Christ’s atonement (as seen in the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Limited Atonement).

Further, second possibility requires that God the Father willingly and needlessly punished Christ for the sins of people who would never be saved. Since God is omniscient, he has always known that certain people will never be saved and will perish. God also has known that he will punish those people for their sins. According to the interpretation in question, God the Father subjected Christ to more divine wrath than justice required.

Additionally, this interpretation relies on a distinction between “taking away sin” and “taking away the imputation of sin.” That is, it argues that in the imputation Christ took away sin, but did not take away the actual blame of sin. This is evident from the argument that people are punished for sins for which Christ died. Such a distinction cannot exist in reality. On the cross, Christ did not actually take sin into his person, thereby becoming actually sinful — that would have resulted in a sinful God, which is impossible. Neither did God exact punishment on Christ even though he know Christ to be innocent — God does not condemn or destroy the innocent (cf. 1 Sam. 19:5; Ps. 94:21; Jer. 26:15). Rather, sin was imputed to Christ.

As the Old Testament sacrificial system demonstrates, atonement is substitutionary. One dies in place of another, but that substitution does not take place merely by whim or will. In Mosaic Law, the sinner lays his hands on the sacrificial animal (or on the Levites, who in turn lay their hands on the animal), and this laying on of hands indicates the transference of guilt from the sinner to the sacrifice. Only after the guilt has been so imputed or transferred is the sacrifice slain (symbolically in the case of the animals, foreshadowing the real imputation which took place in Christ). In the case of Christ, the sins of those for whom he died had to be imputed to him on the cross before he could be punished for those sins. God reckoned to Christ's account the sin of those for whom Christ substituted, and then punished Christ for that guilt. Therefore, to have one's sin "taken away" by Christ's sacrifice at the cross is to have one's own, personal sins imputed to Christ, and for Christ to be punished in one's place for those sins. Christ could not have died substitutionally for any individual unless that individual's sin had first been imputed to Christ, unless the guilt of the sin had been transferred from the individual to Christ. Once sin is imputed to Christ, it is no longer imputed to the individual. The removal of this guilt is, by definition, the removal of the imputation of sin. Therefore, to taken away sin is to take away the imputation of sin. Therefore, no one can be punished for sins for which Christ died.

The punishment for "some sins of every human being" has been laid upon Christ, while the punishment for others sins has not been laid on Christ.

The third argument recognizes that no distinction can exist between "taking away sin" and "taking away the imputation of sin." For this reason it argues that Jesus took away all sin except some critical sin, such as unbelief, for which the unbeliever must suffer himself. By this reasoning, sinners can still be sent to hell for their unbelief even though they cannot be sent there for their other sins (for which Christ has died). We might call this position "moderate universalism" because it teaches that Christ really did reduce the suffering of all humanity by reducing the sins for which God punishes them (punishment in hell is proportional to one's sin; cf. Matt. 10:15; 11:24). Nevertheless, this argument also fails.

First of all, the text makes no such distinction between sins. Instead, it refers to a general, unqualified lump called only "sin." Moreover, there is no historical or contextual basis from which to argue that John assumed some exclusion to this lump of sin, such as the sin of unbelief.

Second, regarding the sin of unbelief, it is worth nothing if Christ did not atone for this sin, then no one could ever be converted from unbelief — prior

unbelief would not be forgivable. While it is true that Christ did not atone for blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (which is not the same thing as unbelief, or even as final unbelief), this is not because he atoned for every sin but this one. Rather, it is because that sin can only be committed by the reprobate, by those who are not elect and will never be saved.

Third, the Bible teaches that unforgiven sinners will be punished not only for unbelief or blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, but for every other sin they commit as well: “every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment” (Matt. 12:36); and according to John’s vision of the future judgment, men will be judged “every one of them according to their deeds” (Rev. 20:13). No sin will be left out of the judgment; all sins will be included. If all sins of the reprobate will be included in their judgment, then Christ did not take away any of their sins. If Christ did not take away any of their sins, and they did anything besides fail to believe and/or blaspheme the Holy Spirit, then Christ did not atone for all sins except some select types.

The foregoing discussions all assume that Jesus intended to take away the sin of the world by bearing the weight or burden of that sin, namely the punishment due it. However, one might also argue that John 1:29 teaches that Jesus will entirely remove sin itself from the world. Since sin is obviously still active in the world (regardless of how we define “world”), this complete removal of sin could not have taken place at the crucifixion and cannot be limited to the impetration (i.e. it must be complete in application as well). One must then argue that this will happen in the future. If the “world” is “every human being” and “takes away” refers to the actual removal of sin itself, then one of the following interpretations must be true:

- 1) All sin ultimately will be removed from every human being, so that every human being will be made sinless and be saved (universalism).
- 2) All sin ultimately will be removed from every human being, and every human being thereby will be made sinless; but only those who believe the gospel will be saved.

Both these arguments must be rejected, as must the idea that “takes away” refers to the removal of sin itself.

Every human being will be made sinless and be saved.

Since the Bible clearly teaches that some people will perish (e.g. Matt. 25:41), this interpretation must be rejected.

Every human being will be made sinless, but only those who believe the gospel will be saved.

This argument requires that God condemn innocent, which is impossible, being contrary to God's nature (cf. 1 Sam. 19:5; Ps. 94:21; Jer. 26:15). Further, since hell exists as a place of torment where man is punished for his sins, there can be no purpose for anyone without sin ending up there. Moreover, a perfectly just God must embrace sinless people as "good," as perfectly fulfilling his covenant requirements, and on that basis God must bless these people according to the terms of his covenant. Such blessings include eternal life and salvation. Finally, the only way a good and pure being can be justly punished is by imputation of sin (as was the case with Christ). Since no person (other than Christ) receives imputed sin from anyone but himself and Adam (see Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Total Depravity), and since both his own sin and Adam's sin must have been taken away as part of the sins of the "world," there can be no sin imputed to a pure human, and no pure human can be punished eternally in hell.