

The Design and Extent of Christ's Atonement

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INTRODUCTION

As recent publications indicate, the design and extent of Christ's atonement continues to provoke debate among evangelicals.¹ The debate may be conveniently divided between those who hold to a universal or general atonement, that is, that Christ died for all, and those who hold to a limited or particular atonement, that is, that Christ died only for the elect.² Taking into account the arguments on both sides of the debate, a combination that sees a universal atonement in terms of payment or provision and a particular redemption in terms of application appears to harmonize best with the biblical evidence.³

A UNIVERSAL PROVISION AND A PARTICULAR APPLICATION

Defining the atonement as involving both a universal payment or provision and a particular application goes beyond the familiar expression, "sufficient for all and efficient for the elect." What is meant by a "universal provision" is that Christ's death made an *actual* payment for the sins of *all* humanity. This says more than simply that his death was hypothetically sufficient for all, a view championed, among others, by Moses Amyrald.⁴ Putting it differently, God designed Christ's death specifically as a real payment for the sins of all mankind.

On the other hand, what is meant by a limited or particular application is that the *saving benefits* of the atonement are applied only to the elect. In other words, there is a sense in which Christ died for the elect in a way he did not die for the non-elect (cf. John 10:11, 15; Eph 5:25).⁵ In defense of a combination approach, I document from Scripture a multi-intentional view of God's purposes for the atonement. Following this, I respond to the arguments against a universal provision that proponents of a particular redemption offer.

¹See, for example, Carl R. Trueman, Grant R. Osborne, and John S. Hammett, *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: 3 Views*, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoberger (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 1–227.

²Among those arguing for a universal atonement, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 753–68; among those arguing for a limited atonement, see Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 691–702.

³Among others, see William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003), 690–760, esp. 739–60.

⁴*Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. "Amyraldism," by Millard Scherich, 37–38.

⁵Gary L. Schultz, Jr., "A Biblical and Theological Defense of a Multi-Intentional View of the Atonement" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 235–36.

Finally, I survey key passages that advocates on both sides of the debate list as supporting their position.

GOD'S PURPOSES IN THE ATONEMENT

God's purposes in the atonement must be understood as plural rather than singular. If there were only one purpose for the atonement—that of securing the salvation of the elect—then the atonement necessarily would be limited or particular. Christ died only for the elect. But the evidence from Scripture argues that God intended more than one purpose in the atonement. To restate the point, God designed the atonement with more than one purpose in mind.⁶ According to the biblical evidence, these purposes include the following.

- (1) The atonement provides the judicial basis for common grace.

In Matthew 5:44–45, the Lord states, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous” (all Scripture is from the NASB, 1995 ed., unless otherwise noted). See also Ps 145:9, 15–16; Acts 14:16–17.

God is absolutely holy and his holiness demands that sin be punished and that it be punished the moment that it occurs. Thus, God's withholding judgment and giving good gifts to the unrighteous, as in the verse above, must have a basis in the atonement. God cannot arbitrarily act against his nature in not judging sin. Thus, there is a sense in which the atonement temporarily placates God's wrath toward sin so that he can withhold his judgment of sin and act benevolently toward the unrighteous in the giving of common grace. In sum, God's justice in withholding judgment and giving good gifts to the unrighteous has its judicial basis in the atonement.

Those arguing for a limited atonement respond by saying that God can withhold his judgment against the non-elect in the present on the basis that he has decreed their judgment in the future. Furthermore, God gives good gifts to the unrighteous because he is a good God. Goodness is one of his attributes and giving good gifts to the unrighteous is simply an expression of his attribute.

Taking these responses in order, can God withhold his judgment of sin in the present because he has decreed judgment against sin in the future? True, God exists outside of time. And, the entire panorama of history is ever present before him. At the same time, God has created time and has chosen to act within time. That being the case, there must be a judicial basis for God's withholding judgment against sin at any point within time.

In addition, to say that God gives good gifts to the unrighteous because of his attribute of goodness fails to take into account God's other attributes. In other words, how God can express his goodness toward the unrighteous without violating his holiness or his justice?

⁶Similarly John S. Hammett, “Multiple-Intentions View of the Atonement,” in *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 143–94.

Again, God cannot arbitrarily choose to exercise one attribute and deny another. There must be a judicial basis for God to withhold his judgment against the unrighteous and, at the same time, give the unrighteous good gifts.

(2) The atonement provides for the universal offer of the gospel.

In Acts 17:30, Paul declares “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent.” The declaration “all *people* everywhere should repent” is a command for all who come under the hearing of the gospel to repent and believe. The commands to repent and to believe are used individually and collectively in Acts as the single, saving response to the gospel. Thus, repentance and belief/faith are presented in Scripture as two sides of a single coin and as the sole condition for salvation (cf. Acts 3:19; 11:17; 16:31; 20:21).⁷

While Paul could intentionally limit the expression “all” to mean “all the elect,” the context argues against this. Paul’s audience is composed primarily of Greek philosophers who have gathered at Mars Hill to hear Paul’s message. Furthermore, according to Luke’s account, a number among those hearing Paul come to reject his message (17:32). Since Paul’s command for all to repent (and believe) is addressed to this audience, “all” must have in view all who hear the gospel, elect and non-elect alike.⁸

At the same time, the message that must be believed for anyone to be saved is that Christ died for their sins, not just that he died for sins. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:3 that an essential part of the gospel is that “Christ died for *our* sins” (emphasis added).⁹ Thus, God’s command for all to repent and believe the gospel—that Christ died for their sins—means to believe that the gospel is true. Furthermore, God cannot command someone to believe as true that which is in fact not true. Therefore, there must be a sense in which Christ died for all. In short, Christ’s death provides for a universal offer of the gospel that includes the imperative for all who hear to repent and believe.

(3) The atonement adds to the guilt and punishment of the non-elect.

In John 3:18, John writes, “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” According to John’s statement, those who hear the gospel and do not believe are judged for their not believing. In other words, not believing the gospel is a sin that adds to the eternal condemnation and judgment of those who hear and reject the good news (cf. Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 2:1).¹⁰

⁷In support, see my discussion, “Water Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 (Fall 1999), 17–21.

⁸Similarly F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 340.

⁹Schultz, “A Biblical and Theological Defense of a Multi-Intentional View of the Atonement,” 168.

¹⁰D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 207. Carson states, “Already in need of a Saviour before God’s Son comes on his saving mission, this person compounds his or her guilt by not believing in the name of that Son.”

(4) The atonement becomes the basis for securing all the saving benefits for the elect.

In John 10:11, Jesus states, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” This is followed by Jesus’ promise in 10:27–28, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish.” Jesus links his giving his life for his sheep (John 10:11) with his giving his sheep eternal life (John 10:28). His sheep must refer to the elect in that they are those to whom he gives eternal life. Thus, there is a sense in which Jesus died for the elect—to give them eternal life—in a way he did not die for the non-elect (cf. 1 Tim 4:10).

It should be added that all of the purposes in God’s design for the atonement are realized exactly as God has designed them.

COUNTERING ARGUMENTS AGAINST A UNIVERSAL PROVISION

No Frustrated Purpose

Describing the design in this way counters a key argument against a universal atonement. The argument is stated to the effect that if God intended Christ’s death to pay for the sins of all and all are not saved, then God’s purpose for the atonement has been frustrated. Since God’s purposes can never fail, there can be no universal atonement. However, as argued above, God has several purposes in the atonement, all of which are fulfilled precisely as God has designed them. As mentioned, God designed the atonement to make an actual payment for all, but he did not design the atonement to secure the saving benefits for all. Therefore, there can be a universal atonement as defined above and, at the same time, no frustrated purpose in God’s design for the atonement, when only the elect are saved.

No Double Payment

Christ’s payment is both substitutionary—one in place of another—and vicarious—involving a third party. For that reason, the debt is not automatically removed as it would be if the debtor himself had paid. If the debtor himself pays, then that is called a pecuniary payment and the debt is automatically removed. That being the case, God has placed a condition on the application of the saving benefits. That condition is repentant faith—a condition God meets or provides for, but only with the elect (Eph 2:8–9; Phil 1:29). God’s granting faith to the elect underscores the fact that salvation is monergistic or a work of God alone. While the individual sinner must believe the gospel to be saved, that belief is prompted and enabled by God’s Spirit (Acts 16:14). In addition, God’s provision of faith reinforces the gracious nature of God’s saving activity toward the elect.

Placing a condition on the application of the atonement avoids the problem with double payment, another key argument against a universal atonement. The argument runs along this line, if Christ died for all and all are not saved, those who suffer in hell are making a second or double payment for their sins. In other words, if Christ died for all, including the non-elect, why does God require the non-elect to suffer in hell, in effect, demanding a second

payment for their sins? Since a just God would not require a double payment for sins, there can be no universal atonement.

However, as argued above, guilt is expiated and God's wrath propitiated only when the payment is actually applied. This can be seen, for example, in Ephesians 2:3 with Paul's description of the (elect) readers prior to their conversion. Paul depicts the readers prior to their conversion as "children of wrath even as the rest (of lost humanity)." Although Christ's payment had already been made, God's wrath was not in the least propitiated toward the readers until the point at which the readers exercised repentant faith and were converted.

Furthermore, the salvation of the readers was not simply a matter of the passing of time. True, there was a specific time that God had decreed for their salvation. Yet, they were saved at the precise time God had decreed only by their meeting God's set condition. In other words, Paul argues that the salvation of the Ephesians, like the salvation of the elect elsewhere, was conditioned solely on their exercising repentant faith (Eph 2:8).

To restate the point, a payment (Christ's) has been made, but the judge (God) has placed a condition on the application of its saving benefits. As such, the non-elect never have its saving benefits applied and must pay for their own sins. Consequently, there is no double payment for the non-elect in the sense that God requires and applies two payments to expiate their sins and propitiate his wrath.

No Application of the Saving Benefits to the Non-elect

Parallel to the above is the argument that if Christ's death for the non-elect included a payment for the sin of unbelief, how is it that God is punishing the non-elect ultimately because they do not believe. Again, this argument fails to distinguish between provision and application. Christ's death provided a payment for the sins of all humanity, including the sin of unbelief. However, the application of Christ's payment is conditioned upon repentant faith. The non-elect never have Christ's payment applied to their sins, including the sin of unbelief, because they never repent and believe the gospel.

In sum, the atonement is both universal in terms of what has been provided through Christ's vicarious, substitutionary death and particular in terms of the application of the saving benefits to the elect.

PASSAGES USED TO SUPPORT LIMITED ATONEMENT

Two key passages are used by those who argue for a limited atonement to show that universal language involving Christ death can and, in fact, must be limited to the elect alone.

(1) John 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The argument by those holding to a limited atonement is that the "world" cannot refer to the non-elect in that Christ is said to take away or expiate their sins. Only the elect have their sins taken away. Hence, "world" in this verse must refer to "the world (of the

elect).” And, if that is the case here, then that is how universal language in atonement passage can be interpreted elsewhere.

In response, assuming for the sake of the argument the above interpretation of John 1:29, this does not jeopardize a universal provision in the atonement. Universal language such as “all” or “the world” used in atonement passages must be evaluated on a case by case basis. Just because one passage uses universal language that is limited to the elect does not mean that this must be the case elsewhere. As argued above with Acts 17:30, the context there argues for taking the expression “all” to include the elect and non-elect alike.

Having said that, the above interpretation of John 1:29 is not airtight. The expression “takes away” (ἀἵρων) has a semantic range or range of meanings. That range can have the sense of (a) “to take up and carry,” that is, “to bear” something, or it can have the sense of (b) “to carry off,” that is, “to remove” something.¹¹

If the first meaning is intended, the verse refers to Christ “bearing” or “paying” the penalty for sins. In this case, John describes what Christ has provided in his death, not its application. If the second meaning is intended, the verse refers to Christ “removing” or “expiating” sin’s penalty. In this case, John describes the application of Christ’s death, not its provision.

To restate the issue, the difference between the two meanings is the difference between (1) Christ making a payment for sins and (2) Christ actually removing or expiating the guilt and punishment of those sins. Which meaning John intended must be determined by the nearer and larger contexts. The point is that the verse can be interpreted in support of a universal provision. Jesus is the Lamb of God who bears the penalty for the sins of the world, where “world” refers to the elect and non-elect alike.

- (2) 2 Corinthians 5:14, “For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this: that one died for all, therefore all died.”

The argument by proponents of a limited atonement is that the expression “one died for all” cannot mean all in the sense of the elect and non-elect alike. The statement that follows describes the “all” in view as those who “died,” that is, as those who died with Christ. In that only the elect die with Christ—are united to Christ’s death (and resurrection) at conversion—the “all” in view must mean “all (the elect).”¹²

This interpretation, however, says too much. True, all the elect will at some point be united to Christ in his death (and resurrection). Yet, they are united to Christ at conversion, not before. Those championing a limited atonement respond by saying that “all died” means “all (the elect) died (in prospect),” conditioned upon their believing the

¹¹*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἀἵρω,” by J. Jeremias, 1:185–86.

¹²See, for example, Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 289–90.

gospel.¹³ But that opens the door for an unlimited atonement interpretation of the verse. Those supporting an unlimited atonement respond by saying that Paul meant, “all (the elect and non-elect alike) died (in prospect),” conditioned upon their believing the gospel.¹⁴

The unlimited atonement interpretation actually finds support in a parallel passage in Romans 5:18. There Paul declares “through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” Paul could be using the expression “all men” in this verse in two different senses. Clearly, when speaking of Adam’s transgression leading to the condemnation of “all men,” Paul means all men inclusively. But, when referring to the obedience of Christ leading to the justification of life to “all men,” Paul could mean “all (the elect) men” in that only the elect actually experience the justification of life.¹⁵

On the other hand, Paul could be using “all men” in this verse with the same meaning in both instances. Certainly when speaking of condemnation, “all men” means “all men” inclusively. The same can be said when Paul speaks of the “justification of life to all men, if “all men” means “all men (in prospect),” conditioned upon their believing the gospel.¹⁶ Paul seems to set up the condition in the preceding verse, “for if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more *those who receive* the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17, emphasis added).

Furthermore, giving different meanings to the same construction in the same verse as the limited atonement position does is certainly possible. Yet, because of hermeneutical concerns, giving different meanings to the same expression in the same verse should only be embraced as a last resort. Since the two uses of “all men” in Romans 5:18 can be given the same meaning, as with the unlimited atonement interpretation, this interpretation is preferred.

Returning to 1 Corinthians 5:14, the unlimited atonement interpretation, “all died (in prospect)” is also supported by Paul’s discussion in 5:15, the very next verse. Identifying the intent or goal of his statement in 5:14, Paul writes, “and he died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” Paul appears to distinguish the “all died” in 5:14 with the subset or smaller group “they who live” in 5:15.¹⁷ In short, the “all died” in 5:14 refers to all humanity,

¹³Similarly Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 289–90.

¹⁴Similarly George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 305–6.

¹⁵See, among others, Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 342–44.

¹⁶Similarly Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 601.

¹⁷Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 420–21.

those who died with Christ in prospect, conditioned upon their believing the gospel. In contrast, “so that they who live” in 5:15 refers to a smaller group, those who actually respond to the gospel in saving faith and receive eternal life.

PASSAGES USED TO SUPPORT A UNIVERSAL ATONEMENT

When given a straightforward grammatical-historical interpretation within the immediate and larger contexts, a number of passages support a universal provision involving an actual payment.

- (1) 1 Tim 2:6, “who gave Himself as a ransom for all.”
Paul calls for prayer for all men (2:1), including all who are in authority (2:2), because God desires all men to be saved (2:4) and, consistent with this, Christ died for all. God’s desire here refers to God’s moral will, not his decreed will.
- (2) 1 Tim 4:10, “who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.”
Paul distinguishes Christ’s role as Savior of all with his role as Savior of those who believe. The distinction is that Christ died for all. But, he applies the saving benefits only to believers.
- (3) Heb 2:9, “by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.”
The writer describes Christ as tasting or experiencing death for everyone. In the following verse, the writer narrows the scope of Christ’s death in terms of its goal. Christ’s goal is to bring “many sons” to glory as the author of their salvation.
- (4) Heb 10:29, “has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.”
The writer is describing the apostate who will experience God’s final judgment (10:27). The expression “sanctified” means that the apostate has been set apart for the prospect of salvation through the provision of Christ’s death, conditioned upon repentant faith.
- (5) 2 Pet 2:1, “denying the Master who bought them.”
Peter refers to false teachers whose destructive heresies will bring upon them God’s destructive judgment. The Master, Christ, “bought them” in the sense that he paid the penalty for their sins and made provision for their salvation. As a consequence of his paying the penalty for their sins, he has purchased their allegiance and has authority over them. Yet, these refuse to obey him and must suffer the eternal consequences.
- (6) 1 John 2:2, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*.”
John uses “propitiation” in the sense of a “propitiatory sacrifice” (NIV), a meaning found frequently in the OT. As such, John refers to what Christ has provided in the sacrifice of himself, not to what Christ has applied. That being the case, John is saying that Christ’s sacrifice has made a payment for the sins of the whole world, not just for the sins of the readers.

Furthermore, the expression “the whole world” is used on one other time by John, in 5:19. There it refers to the whole world of lost humanity being under the authority and power of Satan. For that reason, the expression “the whole world” in 5:19 necessarily includes the non-elect as part of the “world” under Satan’s control. In that John 2:2 is John’s only other use of the expression “the whole world,” it should be given the same meaning.