

Doctrine of the Atonement

The Extent of the Atonement

1. The Doctrine of the Atonement addresses the question, “For whom did Christ die?”
2. Two prominent positions are advocated.
 - Arminianism. Christ died for all sins of all men.
 - Calvinism. Christ died for all sins of the elect.
3. Sometimes, confusion is created about what is meant in the acrostic, TULIP, when speaking about “limited atonement.”
4. The main idea of the letter “L” is to speak about a definite atonement, meaning Christ died in order to definitely secure the salvation of those whom God will save.
5. The question is not about the value of the atonement of Christ. Reformed theology believes that the value of Christ’s sacrificial work was perfect. Jesus could not have done more than He did to effect the redemption of mankind.
6. It is often said that the atonement of Christ was sufficient for all, but efficient for some.
7. What this statement advocates, is that while the atonement is limited to those for whom it is effective, the death of Christ covered all the sins of all men.
8. Unfortunately, to say that the atonement of Christ was sufficient for all, but efficient for some, is merely to define the difference between particularism, and universalism.
9. Universalism is the theory that Jesus not only died for all the sins of all people, and the effect of the atonement was to redeem everybody. Universalism teaches that all people are saved.
10. In contrast to Universalism, Particularism says that some are saved, but not all. A conservative Arminian, and a devout Calvinist would agree on Particularism, meaning only some are saved.
11. With agreement that the death of Christ has universal value, and the death of Christ only saves some, the question comes down to this. “Why are only some saved?” “How does that particular salvation relate to the work of Christ at Calvary?”
12. One possible answer is to look at the Cross and say, “Jesus came to potentially secure salvation for everybody.” It is believed that the design of God, the intent of God in sending Christ into the world, was to make it possible for every human being to be saved.

13. To say that the death of Christ is sufficient for all, but efficient for some is to embrace what amounts to a Hypothetical Universalism.

If the Hypothetical Universalism position is true, then it is possible for all human beings to be saved, because all human beings have the opportunity to be saved, and their sins have been atoned for, because Christ was sent to save everybody.

To say that salvation is based on an atonement that is sufficient for all, but efficient for some, is to present salvation in potential, and conditional terms.

The condition is a person's response. That is what will determine whether or not the atonement is efficient. The cross is only effective for those who will believe in it. Unless a person believes in Christ, all of His atoning work, all of His living, all of His dying will be to no avail to that person.

The atonement then, is not an absolute atonement, but a conditional atonement. It is an atonement that makes Jesus say in essence, "Father, here is my sacrifice, apply it to those who meet the conditions."

This has to be said because, in and of itself, the atonement of Christ does not satisfy the justice of God for everybody's sins. This is proved by the fact that if the atonement did satisfy the justice of God, and then God sent someone to hell, He would be judging that person twice, once at the Cross, and then in hell.

If a person has already been justified by God, if a person's sins have already been paid for, how can God send a person to hell?

The conclusion is that the atonement is not sufficient in and of itself to save anyone. Something more is needed, and that is a person's response.

This is where the struggle is. Consider this exchange.

"If Christ satisfied the demand of God's law for me, if Christ paid for all of my sins, how can God punish me?"

"Because you failed to meet the condition. You failed to believe."

"My failure to meet the condition is a sin. But is not even that sin covered by the atonement of Christ, who died to pay for all sins, of all men?"

Suddenly, the position of the Hypothetical Universalist has shifted to say that Christ died for all sins, of all men, except for the sin of unbelief. The atonement is now limited.

In all of this, the issue becomes complicated, and murky.

14. The solution to the discussion is to remember that the real issue is not the sufficiency of the Cross, or even the efficiency of the Cross, but the design of the atonement.
15. To talk about the design of the atonement means first of all that something must be said about the Designer.
16. Who designed the atonement in the first place? The correct answer is God. The atonement is of divine design. In the Covenant of Grace, from eternity past, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, were in perfect agreement about Creation, and about Redemption.
17. The plan of salvation means that God is the Planner, God is the Designer. It is God who sent Christ into the world. But why?

Did God send Christ into the world as a God who does not know the beginning from the end?

Is God a God who is totally open to potentialities?

Is God a God who waits and watches to see how a person will respond to the offer of salvation? Is God's knowledge limited by contingent of choices?

Did God send Christ into the world to die, and then begin to pace up and down in heaven hoping that someone would take advantage of His great grace?

Does God not know if anyone is going to be effected by the sacrifice of His own dear Son?

18. The Bible does indicate that the work of Christ would be effective prior to His coming, and His death.
 - *Isaiah 53:11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.*
 - *John 6:39 And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.*
 - *John 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.*
19. Jesus made it plain that the work He was going to do at Calvary, He was doing it for the ones the Father had given to Him.
20. Jesus did not believe that going to Calvary was going to be an exercise in futility.
21. The problem with the Hypothetical Redemption position is that Jesus could die for everyone, theoretically, or He could die for no one, theoretically. It is theoretically possible that the cross would have been an exercise in futility.

22. This forces us to think about the character of God in terms of the atonement. If God is the Designer of the Atonement, then the purpose of the atonement must be realized, and that is Christ made a definite atonement for the sins of those whom the Father has given to Him. The salvation of the sheep is certain. Their sins are forgiven. They are justified in the sight of God.
- *John 10:15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.*
 - *John 10:17 Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.*
23. The ultimate plan of salvation does not depend on man, but upon God. Salvation is of the Lord.
24. The effect of the atonement is offered to the penitent. The effect of the atonement is offered to those who respond in faith.
25. It is true that a person must believe in order to receive the gifts of God, but even our faith is a gift of God.
- *Ephesians 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.*
26. Every person for whom Christ died is saved.
27. Jesus died for Jews and Gentiles in every tribe and nation. Jesus died for the whole body of the elect, chosen from the foundation of the world.
- *Ephesians 1:4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:*
28. Christ did not die in vain. Everything that Christ set out to accomplish, will be accomplished.