

The Extent of Christ's Atonement

Terry L. Wilder

*Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri 64118*

In this article Terry Wilder briefly considers whether Christ died only for the elect, i.e. believers, or for all of humanity. He reviews the arguments usually given for each viewpoint and decides which, in his opinion, has the best biblical support. From the start, Wilder is careful to emphasize that this issue is not a matter of orthodoxy and heresy but rather one of interpretation. Further, he underscores that the Southern Baptist Faith & Message 2000 allows room for both viewpoints.

Introduction

The extent of Christ's death is a subject that theologians and others have discussed for many years. Discussion of this topic shows no sign of letting up anytime soon. Theological students still talk about it. The matter was also discussed to some degree in 2006 by Paige Patterson and Al Mohler at the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting held in Greensboro, North Carolina. This short essay is my contribution to the conversation.¹

Two viewpoints need to be considered when answering the question, "For whom did Christ die?" First, the idea that Jesus died for certain people is called "limited atonement." Second, the view that Christ died for all people is known as "unlimited atonement." The decision made between these two points of view is *not* a matter of orthodoxy and heresy, but it does represent a difference in interpretation. And, the SBC's *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* allows for both points of view. Despite this difference of opinion in interpretation, advancing the gospel together in love and unity must be paramount for Southern Baptists.

¹ I am indebted to my former professor, William E. Bell, Jr., now retired, but formerly Senior Professor of Religion at Dallas Baptist University. With some modification, much of this article greatly reflects and is based on notes I gathered in class from his excellent teaching on this subject. Any errors, however, should be counted as mine.

Christ Died For Certain People (Limited Atonement)

Let us first consider the idea that Jesus died for certain people. Limited atonement says that Jesus Christ died *only* for the “elect,” i.e. only for those whom God chose for himself out of the entire company of people before the foundation of the world.

The basis for this view rests in two things, essentially. First, the logical argument concerning “double jeopardy” is used. Double jeopardy is trying a person twice for the same crime, or bringing the same charges against two different people, even though one or the other would obviously be innocent. And, in our laws today—and this has been true in Western jurisprudence for centuries—a man is not to be brought into double jeopardy. In other words, if he has once been acquitted of a crime, he is never to be tried again for that same crime.

The argument goes like this: If Jesus Christ died for the sins of all people, then the sins of all people are paid for, and one has already been judged for those sins. Therefore, if God would bring an unbeliever into judgment because of his sins, even though Christ has already died for those sins, God would, in effect, be putting that unbeliever in a position of double jeopardy. He would be charging him with crimes already judged upon another man, upon Christ Jesus. Therefore, the argument goes, since in our own laws we forbid this sort of thing, surely we would not expect that God would do something which even we in our own laws would not permit. Surely God would not be so unjust and unrighteous as to try a person for a crime if he had already reaped judgment for that crime by the death of Jesus Christ. So, you essentially have the argument of double jeopardy. That is, if the unbeliever's sins are already paid for in the death of Christ, then God would be unjust if he would visit judgment upon the unbeliever himself because he would then in effect be exacting double punishment for a single crime—sin.

Secondly, the position of limited atonement, or particular redemption, fits into the overall concept of “divine election” as understood by the thoroughgoing Calvinist and represented by the acronym TULIP.² An essential, rational, and consistent part of the calvinistic system is to say that if God chose in eternity past only certain people to be saved then he would then cause the Son to die for those people. And therefore, there would be no point, apparently, in his dying for the non-elect because God never intended to save them in the first place. And thus, why extend the benefits of the death of Christ to the non-elect, when, as a matter of fact, God has no intention of saving the non-elect? So, as a part of the

² TULIP represents (T)otal depravity, (U)nconditional election, (L)imited atonement, (I)rresistible grace, and (P)erseverance of the saints.

calvinistic system of TULIP, limited atonement is a consistent and absolutely reasonable assumption as part of the overall system. And this idea, essentially, together with the idea of double jeopardy, is the reason why the thoroughgoing Calvinist essentially believes in the idea of particular redemption or limited atonement. Even the staunchest Calvinist would likely admit that no specific Scripture says plainly, in so many words, that Christ died only for the elect, but rather, they think that this is the strong, overall theological inference from the whole system of the sovereignty of God and the divine, unconditional election of man.

Christ Died For All People (Unlimited Atonement)

Let us now consider the idea that Christ died for everyone. Unlimited atonement is the belief that Christ died for *all* people, even though all people will not be saved. One might ask, "How could God allow Christ to die for people who would never be saved?" Admittedly, we are not given a specific answer in Scripture, but those who hold to this view might reason that perhaps it is in order that when a person stands before the Great White Throne Judgment of God he could never say, "Of course I wasn't saved because Christ didn't die for me." Now that is hypothetical, of course, but one might bring up that argument.

How would the unlimited atonement school of thought answer the double jeopardy argument of particular redemption or limited atonement? Their answer would be something like this: Just because you have a reasonable analogy does not mean that you can establish a biblical doctrine on it. As a matter of fact, you can bring up a very reasonable analogy for unlimited atonement also. For example, take the polio vaccine which has been available for many years. The vaccine is nearly 100% effective and available to every man, woman, and child in this country. If you cannot afford it, you can go to a public health clinic and get it for nothing. And yet, polio has surprisingly not yet been totally stamped out in this country because there are people who still do not get the vaccine. The fact that the vaccine is available, effective, and without charge, if necessary, to every human being in this land does not automatically stamp out the disease. You still have to take the vaccine. So, this side would say, even so with the death of Christ. The death of Christ is available to all people. It potentially covers all people, but it does not automatically save all people. It must be appropriated by each individual. As one theologian has said, "The death of Christ renders all men *savable*, but it does not automatically forgive them; it does not automatically save them."

Now, the decision between these two points of view is not a matter of orthodoxy (as mentioned earlier), nor, frankly, of tremendous concern to me. For, even from the standpoint of unlimited atonement, those who do

not believe in Jesus Christ are obviously not going to be saved. And therefore, ultimately, in eternity, it will make very little difference whether Christ died for them or not because they did not appropriate his death, even if it was available to them. So, the ultimate end result is the same either way.

Nonetheless, I do think that the Bible teaches unlimited atonement. And I accept that position as being biblical and true because I think that this is the clear teaching of Scripture. I do not find it absolutely essential to the whole concept of salvation, but since the Bible seems to teach it rather clearly, then I subscribe to unlimited atonement.

Biblical Passages for Unlimited Atonement

What are some of the biblical passages which substantiate the belief that Christ died for all people?

1 John 2:1-2—" . . . if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he himself is the propitiation (i.e., a propitiatory sacrifice) for our sins; and not for our sins only, but also for those of the *whole world*." In this passage, it is very difficult to make the "whole world" mean the "whole world of the elect" or the "children of God throughout the world." Obviously, the "our" in this text refers to the elect, but the "whole world" includes even those beyond the elect. That is to say, John uses the phrase to refer to the whole of humanity.

John 3:16—"For God so loved the *world*, that *whosoever* believes in Him . . ." In this beloved verse John uses the term "world" again to refer to the world of humanity and the word "whosoever" to say that anyone may come to Christ in faith.

2 Corinthians 5:19—"God was in Christ reconciling the *world* unto Himself . . ." Now, those who believe in particular redemption or limited atonement would again say that this reference is to the "world of the elect." But again that seems to push it into a mold which hardly fits.

1 Timothy 2:6—"Christ gave himself as a ransom for *all*, the testimony given at the proper time." Earlier Paul says that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men (humanity), the man Christ Jesus" (2:5). Verse 6 then is a description or explanation of what Christ did as mediator: He "gave himself as a ransom for all." While there are places in Scripture where the word "all" can refer to "all kinds of people," this verse is plainly not one of them. Paul uses a literary device here to show

that “all people” have access to the salvation that this “one God” provides.

1 Timothy 4:10—“We trust in the living God, who is the Savior (or benefactor) of *all* men, *especially* of those that believe.” This verse is very important. God is the Savior of all men, but in a special sense, he is the Savior of those who believe. He is potentially the Savior of all, but he is particularly the Savior of them who believe.

Titus 2:11—“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to *all* men.” This verse is another of the many that emphasize the universality of access to God’s grace.

Hebrews 2:9—“We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor that He, by the grace of God, should taste death for *every man*.” Do the words “every man” apply only to the elect? I do not see how you can say that. He tasted death for *every* man.

2 Peter 3:9—“God is not willing that any should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance.” Now the point here is simply this: “How could God wish that all would come to repentance, if as a matter of fact, it would not make any difference if some did come to repentance because Christ did not die for them?” In order for God to say that he wants all men to come to repentance would imply that he has made provision for all men, if they should come to repentance.

2 Peter 2:1—This passage is perhaps the strongest one in all of the word of God on this particular topic. Here we have a verse that specifically states that Jesus Christ died for those who are eternally lost. Now, first of all, in the context of 2 Peter 2 the apostle is speaking here about apostasy. He is talking about false prophets. He is speaking about unbelievers. The latter point is abundantly clear, not only in 2 Peter 2, but also in the parallel passage in the book of Jude. Jude is parallel to 2 Peter 2. The material, in most cases, is almost identical. And yet, Jude says, particularly in verse 19 of his epistle, that these men of whom he speaks (and these are the same type of men of whom Peter speaks), these men were “natural men, not having the Spirit.” In other words, they are specifically declared to be unbelievers. But notice what Peter says in 2 Peter 2:1 about these unbelievers: “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you [he is talking about the false prophets back among Israel in days past], there shall also be false teachers among you, who privately, secretly, shall

bring in destructive heresies [then notice this], even denying the Lord that *bought* them.” The fact that the Lord *bought* them indicates that he died for them. In other words, he provided redemption for them. But they have refused and turned away from it. It is as though a man was given a pardon by the governor of the state, and instead of accepting it and walking out of the prison he refuses it and insists on his legal right to go to the gas chamber or the electric chair.³ So, here we have those apostates, these unbelievers, who, although the Sovereign Lord bought them in the sense that he died for them, they deny him, and thus, they bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Conclusion

These biblical passages and others to which we might refer plainly teach that Jesus Christ died for all people. Therefore, all people are savable. All men potentially can be saved. But only those who appropriate the death of Christ by faith will actually realize this salvation. And thus, I think that the analogy of the polio vaccine is more applicable here than the analogy of the law court and the double jeopardy. But remember that we do not prove doctrine nor formulate it by analogies, examples, types, parables, or even by a theological system. They may illustrate doctrine, but they do not formulate it. Therefore, we formulate illustrations and analogies to illustrate a doctrine which we already find clearly taught in the text of Scripture. We do not formulate an analogy and then use it to bolster our doctrine. In my opinion, that is perhaps what has been done in the case of limited atonement. Therefore, the Scripture seems to teach that Christ has died for all men (unlimited atonement), but only those who appropriate his death by faith will be saved.

³ In our country's history a few instances like the one that I have just described have actually occurred.