

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY: An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

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Limited Atonement, part 2

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

I. NEED FOR THE ATONEMENT

A. Atonement Necessary for Man

1. Fallen Man is Dead in Trespasses and Sins — Because of man's fallen state, he is dead and under condemnation.

[See section IB2 and all subsections thereof, and section IIIA under the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Total Depravity.]

2. Fallen Man is Unable to Approach God — In man's fallen state, he is unable to do anything to purify himself and therefore is unable to redeem himself. He must continue to be condemned.

[See section IIIB and all subsections thereof under the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Total Depravity.]

B. Atonement Necessary for God

1. God's Love for the Elect — Because God loved the elect, he desired that they should be saved.

[See section IIA and its subsections under the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Unconditional Election.]

2. God's Holiness — God's holy character demands that his standards not vary. His standard is that sin be punished by death. Satisfaction of this standard is necessary in order for the salvation of the elect.

“From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” ([Gen 2:17](#)).

In the first commandment ever given to man, God laid out the punishment of death for transgression of that law. All mankind is guilty of that first sin, and thereby deserves death. [See also section IB2 of the outline under the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Total Depravity.]

“Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die” ([Ezek 18:4](#)).

Here God states that anyone who sins, father or son, implicitly young or old, is liable unto death.

“For I, the Lord, do not change.” ([Mal 3:6](#)).

God is immutable in his decrees, character and covenants. In the context of this verse, the result of God's immutability is that his judgment against sinners does not change, and his love for his people does not change.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” ([Rom 3:23-26](#)).

Since all those who are justified have previously sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, all who are justified needed that justification in order to be acceptable before God. Apart from Christ's sacrifice, God would not have passed over the sins of those who are justified, and these people would have been ultimately accountable for their own sin. Christ was the “propitiation” for sin, that is, he satisfied the wrath of God toward the sinners for

whom he atoned. He did this by receiving to himself the guilt of and punishment due those who are justified. The punishment for sin was death, therefore Christ's death was necessary to satisfy God's wrath. Only because God's wrath toward these sins has been satisfied can Christians be justified and redeemed.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" ([Rom 6:23](#)).

God's justice requires that sin be punished by death. Eternal life can only be given to sinners in Christ Jesus because he substituted himself in place of the sinners for whom he died.

"Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" ([Jas 1:15](#)).

Sin results in death. This death is in contrast to the crown of life received by those who persevere ([Jas 1:12](#)), and thus refers to eternal death and condemnation. Of course, God is the one responsible for judging the wicked, so it is his standard that meets out death as the punishment of sin.

II. INTENDED RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT

A. Salvation for Sinners — God designed the atonement to save fallen mankind from condemnation and death.

"And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" ([Matt 1:21](#)).

The purpose of Christ's life on earth was to save people from the slavery to and the punishment of sin.

"Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" ([Matt 20:28](#)).

The purpose of Christ's incarnation was the atonement, the sacrifice of his life that he offered on the cross in order to ransom sinners from the bonds of death.

“And Jesus said to [Zaccheus], ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost’” ([Luke 19:9-10](#)).

While it is perfectly true that every person in the world is “lost” in the sense that he is sinful and perishing unless Christ saves him, this is not the sense in which Jesus used the word “lost” in the Gospel of Luke. Instead, he used “lost” to refer to things which were once in the possession of someone, but which had wandered off or been misplaced. For example, in chapter 15, Jesus told the parable of the “lost sheep,” the parable of the “lost coin,” and the parable of the prodigal son who was “lost and has been found” ([Luke 15:32](#)). Zaccheus was one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and Jesus sought and found him. Zaccheus had been perishing, but his “lostness” was due to his straying from the fold of the people of God, not to his perishing. Jesus came to save “that which was lost,” which meant he came to save those that belonged to him that had wandered off. Not everyone belongs to Christ, therefore not everyone is “lost” in Jesus’s usage of the word. The atonement was intended to save those given to Christ by the Father (compare [John 6:37-39](#)), and who have wandered away in sin and been condemned.

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd . . .’ The Jews . . . were saying to Him, ‘How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand’” ([John 10:11](#), [14-16](#), [24-28](#)).

Jesus came to lay down his life for his sheep, to give them eternal life so that they would never perish. His purpose was to save his sheep from the death that was due them. Those for whom he died hear his voice, follow him, know him, receive eternal life from him, will never perish, and will not be snatched out of his hand. Everyone for whom Christ died is one of Christ’s sheep and will be saved eternally.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” ([2 Cor 5:21](#)).

The purpose behind God’s imputation of sin to Christ on the cross was the salvation of believers from sin and the imputation of righteousness to believers.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen” ([Gal 1:3-5](#)).

Christ gave himself as an atonement for sin in order to deliver believers from the present evil age. The present evil age includes the corruption of the world in which believers live, the corruption to which the believers themselves are subjected, and the punishment of evil that would have fallen on believers had Christ not died in their place.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” ([Eph 5:25-27](#)).

Christ died in order to make the church righteous and holy. This indicates that he died in order to free those in the church from bondage to sin, and to secure them in covenant blessing with himself. It also indicates that he died in order to free his bride from the condemnation resulting from sin, so that the church might be with him instead of spending eternity in hell.

“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” ([1 Tim 1:15](#)).

Christ came to save sinners. He came to free them from sin, and to redeem them from its consequences.

“Christ Jesus . . . gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” ([Tit 2:13-14](#)).

Jesus died in order to redeem his people and set them free from the punishment due them for their lawless deeds, which result in death and condemnation. He also died to stop them from sinning, and to make them zealous for good deeds.

“And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” ([1 Pet 2:24-25](#)).

Jesus died on the cross, carrying the blame for the sins of those for whom he died. He did this in order to free those people from bondage to sin, so that they might be able to be righteous and not sin. He died so that his people would stop straying, and so that they would follow him. By his death those for whom he died are healed from the corruption of sin and its consequences.