

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

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## **Limited Atonement, part 5**

### **ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT**

#### **III. ACTUAL RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT**

**A. Reconciliation — The atonement reconciled sinners to God. This reconciliation, this ending of the enmity between God and fallen man, was not the changing of sinners to make God acceptable to them, but the changing of sinners to make them acceptable to God. This occurred only in light of the justification that it also achieved.**

“For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” ([Rom 5:6-10](#)).

Paul referred to four different time periods here. First, he spoke of the time of Christ’s death (when “we were still helpless” and “yet sinners”). Second, he spoke of the time of coming to faith (“while we were enemies”; compare [Rom 5:1](#)), which is not so much a time period as a single even in time hinging the first and third periods. Third, he spoke of Christian life on earth (“now,” “having been reconciled”). Fourth, he spoke of the future eternal state of believers (“we shall be saved from the wrath of God,” “we shall be saved by his life”). Throughout these four time periods, he spoke of only one group of people, namely believers (“us,” “we”).

During the first time period, Christ atoned for sin and obtained the benefits of the atonement for believers. During the second time period, God justified believers through Christ's blood, and thereby reconciled them to himself (compare [Rom 5:1](#): "having been justified by faith we have peace with God"). According to the terms of Paul's argument, God did this by applying to believers the atonement's benefit of justification. Because justification necessarily results in reconciliation, Christ's atonement obtained reconciliation.

Throughout this passage, Paul argued from the greater to the lesser. That is, he argued that if God had done the greater thing, he would not fail ("how much more") also to do the lesser thing. In the first such argument ([Rom 5:6-9](#)), the greater thing was Christ's dying for sinners (in the first time period). The lesser thing was God's providing eternal life to believers (in the fourth time period). This argument clearly implies that if Christ died for someone, that person cannot fail to be saved, though not apart from faith ("having been justified"; compare [Rom 5:1](#)). Thus, all from whom Christ died ("us") must be justified through faith, reconciled and saved. In this sense, Christ's atonement accomplished reconciliation because it made reconciliation certain for those for whom he died.

Finally, in the second argument from the greater to the lesser ([Rom 5:10](#)), the greater is reconciliation to God ("reconciled to God," in the second time period; and "having been reconciled," in the second/third time period), and the lesser is final salvation ("saved by his life"). This argument rides on the coattails of the first argument from the greater to the lesser. Effectively, it argues from two greater things: 1) Christ's death; and 2) the application of one of the atonement's benefits, reconciliation. Paul's basic point is that God has confirmed the truth of Paul's first argument by initiating the application of the benefits of the atonement, specifically by reconciling believers to God. If God has already done these two things (Christ's death, and believers' reconciliation to God), then certainly he will also bring believers to salvation. Thus, reconciliation to God is a benefit secured by the atonement.

"For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" ([Col 1:19-22](#)).

By his atonement Christ obtained the reconciliation of sinners to God. That is, his atonement was the means of reconciling sinners to God. Reconciliation is applied to sinners (“you”) when they are alienated and hostile in mind toward God. Those who are hostile in mind toward God do not at the same time joyfully and repentantly accept the gospel. Because those who are reconciled are hostile in mind toward God at the time of their reconciliation, this reconciliation cannot depend upon their acceptance of Christ and/or his work on their behalf.

**B. Justification — The atonement accomplished the justification, the declaring to be righteous, of those persons for whom Christ died. Justification took place only because the atonement satisfied God’s wrath toward the sinners for whom Christ died. The justification achieved by the atonement necessarily results in the redemption of those justified.**

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” ([Acts 20:28](#)).

Christ purchased the church by his blood, indicating that a sacrifice was required on behalf of the church because of its sin. By sacrificing himself, Christ took upon himself both the guilt and the punishment due the church for its sin. Because God allowed Christ to purchase the church in this manner, it follows that Christ’s death removed from the church the threat of God’s punishment. In order for the church to be free from this threat, it must be true that God no longer held it accountable for its sin, in other words, it must be true that God justified the church because of Christ’s atonement on its behalf.

Moreover, here Paul stated that Christ bought the church and made it his possession. Because the church belongs to Christ, and because Christ does nothing to forfeit it, the church can never cease to belong to Christ and therefore cannot fail to be saved.

It is sometimes argued that Christ died for “the church,” without reference to the people that would belong to the church. Using the metaphor of a boat, for example, it is said that Christ died for a boat called “the church,” but that he did not die specifically for any of its passengers. Rather, people may board the boat to obtain salvation, and perhaps even jump ship to lose salvation. This position is untenable because a church without people has no sins. If the church had no sins, Christ did not need to shed his blood to purchase it.

Since Christ shed his blood to purchase the church, the church must include the passengers (who are sinners) and not just the boat (the organization of the church).

“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](#)).

The atonement was designed to make God the justifier of those who have faith in Christ. God graciously gives justification as part of the redemption which is in Christ. Redemption also includes other aspects, such as glorification, eternal life, etc.

In the atonement, Christ died the death deserved by sinners. Since this death was a propitiation, it satisfied God’s wrath toward those sinners for whom he died. Thus, God passed over the sins with respect to the people who actually committed them, but not with respect to Christ (who suffered for these sins). Since he has passed over these sins with respect to the sinners, these sins will never be brought to bear in judgment against the sinners. There are no sins left for which these sinners can be punished. Since God cannot punish any of these individuals, and since there is no middle ground between punishment and blessing, they must end up being saved.

Further, this passage describes the application of redemption to individuals in terms of justification, upon the occasion of faith. Therefore, it must be that all these sinners will ultimately come to faith and be justified. Thus, Christ’s death ensures that everyone for whom he died must come to faith and be justified.

“For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” ([Rom 5:6-10](#)).

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"So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" ([Rom 5:18-19](#)).

Here Paul states that in the same way and as surely as Adam's sin necessarily resulted in the death of those whom Adam represented, Christ's death necessarily resulted in the justification of those whom Christ represented. This means either that every person ever will be justified (and saved; see [Rom 8:29-30](#)), or that the "all men" to whom this passage refers are "all of those about whom Paul is speaking." Charting the argument from [Romans 3:23](#) and following, it is apparent that the "all" are:



those who have been justified ([Rom 3:24](#));



who have faith in Christ Jesus ([Rom 3:26](#));



the circumcised who believe ([Rom 4:11](#)), and the circumcised who have faith ([Rom 4:12-13](#));



we (“our sake”) who will be reckoned righteous ([Rom 4:22-24](#)), for whom (“our transgressions,” “our justification”) Jesus was delivered and raised ([Rom 4:25](#));



“we” who have been justified and have peace with God through Jesus Christ by faith ([Rom 5:1](#));



“we” who have been justified by Christ’s blood and who shall be saved through him ([Rom 5:9](#));



“we” who have been reconciled to God ([Rom 5:10-11](#)).

In this context, when Paul said that Christ’s one act of righteousness (specifically his atonement) resulted in justification of life to “all men,” he knew that his audience would understand that “all men” referred to the same men of whom he had been speaking for the past three chapters

— those who were justified. (Compare Paul’s use of the phrase “all men” in reference to believers in [1 Cor 7:7](#).) Paul asserted that just as Adam’s sin necessarily resulted in death for these people, Christ’s death necessarily justified them.

“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations shall be blessed in you.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.’ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’ However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree’ — in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” ([Gal 3:8-14](#)).

The “blessing of Abraham” is the promise that all the nations will be justified ([Gal 3:8](#)). No one is justified by the Law before God ([Gal 3:11](#)). Instead, justification must come by means of faith ([Gal 3:9](#)). Faith, however, is simply the means by which people are justified ([Gal 3:14](#)). Justification itself was included in the redemption Jesus obtained at the Cross: “Christ redeemed us . . . having become a curse for us . . . in order that . . . the blessing of Abraham might come . . .” ([Gal 3:13-14](#)). Thus, justification is a benefit Christ obtained in the atonement, and which is applied to believers through faith.

Moreover, Paul said that Christ redeemed “us,” having a curse for “us” ([Gal 3:13](#)). It is best to understand the participle “having” as referring to the means by which Christ redeemed “us,” as the NRSV does: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” The alternative sometimes offered is that Christ first became a curse (the impetration), and then, “having” done that, he redeemed “us” upon the fulfillment of the condition of faith (the application). This interpretation is less appropriate for two reasons:

1) The phrase “having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree’” seems most naturally to explain *how* “Christ redeemed us.”

2) If the phrase “having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree’” is understood instead to answer the question of *when* “Christ redeemed

us,” it becomes an irrelevant distraction from Paul’s argument. His argument is *how* believers are justified: by Christ through faith, not by works. Knowing when Christ obtained the justification believers receive by faith is not pertinent to this particular argument.

In teaching that Jesus “redeemed us” by his act of atonement, Paul collapsed into one the beneficiaries of the impetration and the application of the atonement. That is, he assumed that Jesus’ death was so effective that it ensured the application of redemption to those for whom the impetration had been performed. Thus, all for whom Christ atoned receive the benefits of the atonement, such as justification.

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” ([Heb 9:11-12](#)).

The reference to Christ’s blood, shed at the cross, indicates that the author spoke of the crucifixion and its benefits. Though he did not mention “justification” here, the context of the book (compare [Heb 7:25](#); [9:21](#); [10:18](#)) demonstrates his understanding of this idea and its relatedness to redemption (specifically, that justification is included in redemption). By demonstrating that the atonement accomplished the redemption of sinners, the author proves not only that it accomplished justification, but also that it accomplished everything else related to redemption (forgiveness of sins, glorification, etc.).

The passage indicates that at the cross Christ obtained eternal redemption. Christ did not redeem himself, because he did not need redemption. Still, redemption needs an object. Redemption may be an abstract concept without a particular redeemed object, but redemption cannot be manifested without an object. In this case, obtaining redemption was a careful way for the author to state both: 1) that Christ’s death actually redeemed specific objects; and 2) that the author had in mind the impetration and not the application of redemption.

Because redemption must have an object, when Christ obtained redemption he actually obtained it for specific people (compare Heb.



13:12: “the people”; [Heb 2:6](#)). He did not simply merit the right to redeem unspecified people, as if he had banked “redemption credits.” Under the Mosaic covenant, to which Christ’s ministry is here compared, the high priest offered a sacrifice on behalf of the people of Israel. As high priest ([Heb 2:17](#); [3:1](#); [4:14](#), [15](#); [5:5](#), [10](#); [6:20](#); [7:26](#), [28](#); [8:1](#); [9:11](#)), Christ offered himself as an acceptable and effective sacrifice on behalf of:



his brethren ([Heb 2:17](#))



the people ([Heb 2:17](#))



his house ([Heb 3:6](#))



the people of God ([Heb 4:9](#))



all those who obey him ([Heb 5:9](#))



the house of Israel ([Heb 8:8](#), [10](#))



the house of Judah ([Heb 8:8](#))



those who have been called ([Heb 9:15](#))



many ([Heb 9:28](#))



those who are sanctified ([Heb 10:14](#))



house of God ([Heb 10:21](#))

Through his cautions throughout the book, it is evident that the author agreed with the other New Testament authors and leaders that spiritual Israel differs substantially from national Israel (see Appendix). He did not deny that God's people included Gentiles (see reference to Timothy in [Heb 10:23](#)), but rather understood these Old Testament ([Heb 8:8](#), [10](#)) to be fulfilled in Christ in the New Testament church ([Heb 10:21](#); [13:10-14](#)), specifically in those who persevere until the end ([Heb 3:6](#), [14](#); [6:11](#); [10:28-39](#)).

“And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full on incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth’” ([Rev 5:9-10](#)).

That the lamb that was slain and purchased men with his blood indicates that this song references the atonement, with specific emphasis on its redemptive qualities. The joining of these concepts of oblation and redemption again stresses that redemption was accomplished at the cross.

Significantly, this verse specifies the limited effects of the atonement: Christ did not purchase all people in the world, but men “from” every people in the world. This indicates that some people were not purchased. It might be argued that the song refers first to the

impetration (“thou wast slain”), and then to the application (“and didst purchase”). If this were true, then the verse would not divulge the extent of the impetration. However, the poetic pattern of this passage strongly suggests that the phrase “diddst purchase” was intended to elucidate the phrase “thou wast slain,” such that the slaying accomplished the purchase. The second half of the song validates this reading, for its second phrase (“and they will reign”) also expands upon its first phrase (“thou hast made them to be a kingdom”), such that making them to be a kingdom ensures that they will reign.