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BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY

An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

Limited Atonement, part 16

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Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Limited Atonement (cont.)
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IV. MEANS BY WHICH THE ATONEMENT WAS ACCOMPLISHED: ACTS

- A. Oblation — The atonement was accomplished through the sacrifice of the person of God the Son. This oblation was intended only to redeem/save the elect. God intended to save the creation by saving mankind, and to save mankind by saving an elect remnant. The oblation atoned only for the people whom it was intended to redeem/save.**

"Surely our grief He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned to be with wicked men, yet with a rich man in His death; although He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth. But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the

transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" ([Isa 53:4-12](#)).

According to Jesus ([Luke 22:37](#)) and to Peter ([1 Peter 2:21-25](#)), Jesus ultimately fulfilled this prophecy through his death on the cross. The expectations created by this prophecy regarding the atonement were that the messiah would bear "our grief" and carry "our sorrows"; that he would be "pierced" for "our transgressions," crushed for "our iniquities," chastened for "our well-being," and scourged so that "we" may be "healed." All this was to occur because the Lord would cause the "iniquity of us all" to be imputed to the redeemer. Repeating these ideas, the prophecy adds that the messiah will die "for the transgression of my people," and for "many." This vocabulary indicates the substitutionary nature of the atonement — the messiah was to take the guilt that was due "us," and also the consequent punishment. He was to die in place of others.

Nowhere in this chapter did the prophet indicate that the messiah would die for anyone who was not of his people. As the surrounding chapters demonstrate, his people consisted of believing Israel and those Gentiles who would serve Israel's God and be incorporated into Israel (cf. [Isa 51:2-4](#); [52:2-10](#), [15](#); [66:20-24](#)). Isaiah did not assert that the messiah would die for everyone in the world. Instead, he claimed only that his people, who were "many" not "all," would be redeemed. Many others would fall under God's judgment and be destroyed (e.g. [Isa 66:15-18](#)).

The messiah's rendering of himself as a guilt offering appears to be the only condition upon which the "many" are justified, and his "scourging" appears as the only prerequisite for the people to be healed. This passage lists no conditions which the people themselves must meet before they can benefit from the messiah's death. There is no hint that anyone may somehow fail to be healed or justified if the messiah dies for him.

Putting all this together, this prophecy created the expectation that the messiah would redeem a remnant of individuals from the larger mass of humanity. It also created the expectations that he would justify them by atoning for their sin, and that this justifying atonement would not fail to save those whom it was intended to benefit (cf. [Rom 8:28-30](#)).

As already noted, Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy. Thus, his atonement justified or will justify all those for whom he died. Since everyone who is justified is also glorified and saved (cf. [Rom 8:28-30](#)), and since some people are not saved, it follows that the atonement was not intended to save every person ever, and that it did not save every person ever. Therefore, Christ died to save only a specific group of people, namely Israel (composed of both believing Israelites and converted Gentiles), and his death secured Israel's salvation. [See Appendix A for more information regarding the identity of Israel in the New Testament.]

"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](#)).

Christ came to save "his people" from their sins. There is no indication that he came to save anyone who was not of his people.

"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](#)).

Jesus, the Son of Man, came to give his life a ransom for many, clearly referring to his crucifixion and atonement. There is no indication that he came to atone for "every person ever," only that he came to atone for "many."

"And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And He took a cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins'" ([Matt 26:26-28](#)) [cf. [Mark 14:22-24](#)].

Jesus's blood was shed on behalf of many, not on behalf of "every person ever." The disciples, to whom Jesus spoke these words, did not understand Jesus to be referring to all mankind. Rather, they assumed his words referred only to Israel. For example, Peter and the rest of the Jewish believers later displayed surprise when the Gentiles were granted salvation:

"And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out

upon the Gentiles also" ([Acts 10:45](#));

and:

"If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?' And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" ([Acts 11:17-18](#)).

Since the apostles themselves were surprised at the salvation of the Gentiles, they could not previously have thought that Christ had atoned for the Gentiles. Thus, they initially understood Jesus words "shed on behalf of many" to refer to a limited group of people.

Once the disciples realized that Christ had atoned for Gentiles as well as Jews, they did not then begin to teach that Jesus had died for every person in the world. Rather, they maintained their belief that Jesus had atoned for a limited group of people, but adjusted their understanding of "Israel" to include believing Gentiles.[See Appendix A for more information regarding the identity of Israel in the New Testament.]

"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you, that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day'" ([John 6:35-40](#)).

The Father wills that everyone who believes in Christ receive eternal life and be raised up on the last day (i.e. be saved) . In response to the Father's will, Christ will raise up those who have been given to him. Thus, those who will be raised up on the last day are described as: 1) those who have been given to Christ by the Father; and 2) those who believe in Christ. This means that

those people given by the Father to Christ are the same group as those who believe, and that all of these will certainly be saved.

Therefore, the will of the Father regarding salvation was that a select group of individuals, namely believers, receive salvation. Since Christ came down from heaven to do the will of the Father, Christ came down from heaven to save the believers — that group of people who had already been given to him by the Father.

Some people will never believe, so these people cannot have been given to Christ by the Father. Because they were not given to Christ by the Father, it is not the Father's will that Christ save them, and Christ did not come to save them. Since Christ came down to do the will of God, he would not have atoned for the sins of those people whom God did not will to save.

"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](#)).

Christ is the good shepherd who knows, is known by, and lays down his life for his sheep. All Christ's sheep, even those of other folds, will hear his voice, will join the flock, will follow Christ, will receive eternal life, and will never perish. In this metaphor, the sheep are those who believe. Christ specifically indicates that it is for the sheep (i.e. believers) that he lays down his life.

Not every person is one of Christ's sheep. Some are thieves; some are robbers. Specifically, the Jews whom Jesus answers in this passage are not of his sheep. Since the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and not

for the thieves, robbers, or any others, Christ did not lay down his life for these Jews, and he therefore did not lay down his life for every person ever.

Also, Christ successfully saves the sheep, who are those for whom he lays down his life, as indicated by his statement that he gives them eternal life and they shall never perish. This implies: 1) that Jesus saves all for whom he dies; 2) that he knows who these specific people are before he dies; and 3) that he intends to save only those whom he knows before hand as his sheep.

It is also worth noting in this regard that Jesus ensures that his sheep will come to faith — they do not become sheep because they believe, but believe because they are sheep. This is proven by the fact that Christ asserts that some do not believe because they are not his sheep. Further, Christ's sheep belonged to him before he died for them. It would be logically inconsistent to argue that they became his sheep because they first accepted his death on their behalf, and then to add that he died for them because they accepted him. Such an argument would create the following logical ordering of events:

1. Christ died for these people.
2. These people believed/accepted Christ's death.
3. These people became Christ's sheep and were saved.
4. Christ died for these people.

This would be a circular argument, and would invalidate the point that Jesus makes here: he died for those who were already his. The actual order as presented by Jesus is:

1. These people became Christ's sheep.
2. Christ died for these people.
3. These people believed in Christ and were saved.

"Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, 'What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.' But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the

whole nation should not perish,' Now this he did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" ([John 11:47-52](#)).

Christ was to die for the children of God who were scattered abroad as well as for those in the nation of Israel. John's interpretation of Caiaphas's prophecy is not that Christ will die for all nations in order that those who believe might be saved, but that Christ will die for all the children of God, whether they be in the nation of Israel or in another nation.

"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](#)).

A propitiation is a sacrifice that satisfies the root cause of God's anger so that he is no longer angry. In this case, God's anger was directed toward men because they had sinned. By receiving the imputed guilt for those sins and submitting himself to God's wrath, Christ satisfied God's wrath. For this reason, God's justice has been fulfilled toward those for whom Christ propitiated, so that God is able to show these people mercy and grace by justifying and saving them.

It is important to note that Paul spoke here of two different aspects of Christ's propitiation. First, he spoke of the benefits of the propitiation that Christ obtained at the Cross (i.e. the impetration). This can be seen in Paul's reference to the public display of Jesus. Second, Paul spoke of the application of these benefits to believers throughout the course of history. This can be seen in his statements regarding God who justifies believers at the present time.

The idea that the benefits of Christ's propitiation are applied only to believers is common to the limited atonement position and the general ransom position. The disagreement between these positions pertains to the scope of the impetration. Limited atonement is the position that Christ's propitiation

obtained benefits only for the elect (those who would believe). General ransom, in contrast, is the position that Christ's propitiation obtained benefits for every person.

With these distinctions in mind, it is important to recognize that Paul declared the actual death of Christ on the cross to be "a propitiation . . . through faith." Here Paul spoke directly of the impetration and not of the application, and he connected that impetration to faith. Although Paul's language is not precise enough in this text to reveal the exact nature of the relationship between faith and the impetration, it is at least evident that he did not consider faith irrelevant to the impetration (the general ransom position does not bring faith into the equation until the point of application). Rather, Paul strongly implied that the impetration was intended to purchase benefits for those who would later come to faith, and not intended to purchase benefits for those who would never come to faith.

"Therefore also it was reckoned to [Abraham] as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written, that 'It was reckoned to him,' but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, he who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" ([Rom 4:22-25](#)).

Christ was delivered up because of "our" transgressions, and was raised because of "our" justification. Paul has defined "our" in the immediate context as referring to those "who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." In so doing, Paul identifies God's motivation in the Crucifixion as the propitiation of believers' sins, and God's motivation in the resurrection as believers' justification. Thus, God's goals for the crucifixion were not the general ransom of all mankind and the conditional availability of salvation to all mankind. Rather, God's goals for the crucifixion were to atone for the actual sins of believers and to justify believers. God had no motivation to atone for the sins of or to justify those who would never believe. Assuming that God orchestrated the atonement according to his motivation and goals, he designed it to atone for the sins of believers only, and to justify believers only.

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and

whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" ([Rom 8:29-34](#)).

According to this text, because God went so far as to send his own Son to die as an atonement for sin, it is impossible that God will withhold any blessing (including justification and glorification) from the people for whom Christ died. The very fact that the atonement took place proves that all those Christ died for will eventually be justified and glorified (i.e. they will be saved).

If Christ atoned for every person ever, then every person ever will be saved. Paul, however, did not say that Christ atoned for the sins of every person ever. Instead, he asserted that Christ died for "us," "the elect" whom God foreknew and predestined. Since those for whom Christ died must be saved, and since only the elect are saved, then Christ died only for the elect.

Also, in the series of rhetorical questions which Paul asked, he linked the ideas that God is for "us" and will not withhold anything from "us" to the idea that "the elect" can never have a charge brought against them. In asking these questions, Paul presupposed that "us" and "the elect" were one and the same group, and implied that Christ died only for the elect, and not for the non-elect.

"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 for the church in order to purify the church so that he might present the church to himself. The purpose of the atonement was to secure a holy, blameless, spotless church, that is, a church composed entirely of saved members. This church must therefore be the invisible church composed of all true believers, not the visible church which includes both believers and unbelievers.

Christ's purpose was to purify and save those for whom he died. If Christ died for every person ever and not just for the invisible church, then Christ's purposes regarding the unsaved have failed. Since it cannot be true that Christ failed to accomplish his purpose regarding the atonement, it also cannot be true that Christ atoned for the sins of anyone who is not ultimately saved. [See also section IIB of the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Unconditional Election and section IIIF of the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Limited Atonement.]

"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](#)).

Christ's purpose in giving himself was not just to make salvation possible, and not just to redeem and purify some of those for whom he died. Rather, he gave himself in order to redeem and purify all those for whom he died ("us"). He died in order to make these people his own possession, and to make them zealous for good works.

"For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying 'I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise.' And again, 'I will put My trust in Him.' And again, 'Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me.' Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" ([Heb 2:11-17](#)).

In this passage, the "children" are the "brethren," the "congregation" (i.e. the church), the ones "given" to Christ by the Father (cf. [John 6:35-40](#) and [John 10:25-30](#)). Christ took on flesh and blood not because mankind in general was of flesh and blood, but because the children who already belonged to him were of flesh and blood. Further, he took on flesh and blood so that he might die for these children who already belonged to him. His purpose both in the

Incarnation and in the Crucifixion was to save only those who already belonged to him, namely the descendants of Abraham. "The descendants of Abraham" does not refer to mankind at large, but only to a subsection of mankind.

The rest of Hebrews indicates that the descendants of Abraham are "those who draw near to God through [Christ]" ([Heb 7:25](#)). This indicates that Christ did not intend to die for all mankind, but only for those who are ultimately saved. Further, Christ became the "high priest" of "the children," indicating that they are worshipers of the true God, and as their high priest he makes propitiation for their sins. Since the high priest only makes propitiation for the sins of the people over whom he is high priest, it must be true that Christ only made propitiation for the sins of those people who are worshipers of the true God and who are ultimately saved.

It cannot be that these children were determined to belong to Christ on the basis that God foresaw their future belief in Christ. This would assume that Christ's decision to die for them was based on their belief that he did die for them, and would create the following circular logic:

1. Christ died for the children.
2. The children believed in Christ.
3. God foresaw the children's belief.
4. God gave the children to Christ.
5. Christ became incarnate in order to save the children.
6. Christ died for the children.

"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. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a

death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" ([Heb 9:11-15](#)).

Christ entered the more perfect tabernacle "having obtained eternal redemption." He did not merely make eternal redemption possible, but he absolutely secured it for those people over whom he was high priest, namely believers. He did not die for the redemption of transgressions in order that everyone might receive the promise of salvation. Instead, he died for sin in order that "those who have been called" (i.e. believers) might receive that blessing. In a later segment of this argument, the text makes clear that Christ has been made the high priest of believers, of "the house of God," and not of mankind at large:

"Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" ([Heb 10:19-22](#)).

"So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" ([Heb 9:28](#)).

Christ was offered for the sins of many, which, though indicating a large number, does not indicate "all" in the sense of "every person ever." Further, the "many" for whom he died appear to be those who eagerly await him, which would limit the "many" to those who believe. Thus, this verse implies that Christ was offered for the sins of believers only, for the sins of "those who eagerly await Him."

"We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" ([1 John 3:16](#)).

John argues that Christians ought to lay down their lives for other Christians because Christ laid down his life for the other Christians. He does not argue that Christians ought to lay down their lives for anyone and everyone, irrespective of faith, on the grounds that this is also what Christ did. This

indicates John's belief that Christ laid down his life for the brethren, but not for others.

"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](#)).

Here, the heavenly song seems to indicate that Christ purchased men by the act of his death (i.e. by the impetration), not by the later application of his blood to them as they came to faith. Those so purchased include men "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Christ purchased men "from" these groups; he did not purchase the entirety of all the groups, indicating the limited scope of the impetration.