

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY

An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

Limited Atonement, part 18

by Ra McLaughlin

OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

There are a variety of views of the atonement within Christianity. The Reformed position of limited atonement competes with the currently more popular doctrine of general ransom, and with the liberal doctrine of universalism. The easiest way to distinguish these views is by their differing doctrines of imputation and application. "Imputation" refers to Christ's obtaining of the benefits of the atonement at the Cross, while "application" refers to the Holy Spirit's work of applying these benefits to believers.

Limited Atonement is the doctrine that by the imputation Jesus obtained the benefits of the atonement only for the elect, and that the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of the atonement only to the elect. All those for whom Christ atoned must be saved, namely the elect.

Universalism is the doctrine that by the imputation Jesus obtained the benefits of the atonement for every member of mankind, and that the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of the atonement to every member of mankind. All of those for whom Christ atoned must be saved, namely the entire human race.

General Ransom is the doctrine that by the imputation Jesus obtained the benefits of the atonement for every member of mankind, and that the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of the atonement only to the elect. Only some of those for whom Christ atoned are saved, namely the elect.

Because universalism is not an Evangelical Christian position, it will not be considered here. General ransom, however, is by far the predominant Evangelical view, and as such its objections to limited atonement deserve attention.

In treating this topic, it is important to define terms carefully. For the purposes of this discussion, "availability" refers to the God-given opportunity to accept or reject the gospel. "Possibility" refers to the actual potential for salvation based on Christ's impetration. Those to whom the gospel is "available" are those who have the opportunity to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. Those for whom the gospel is "possible" are those for whom Christ impetrated.

Many arguments have been advanced in support of the general ransom theory. They can, generally speaking, be summarized in the following two arguments:

1. Salvation is available to each individual. Since salvation is available to each individual, it must be possible for each individual to be saved. The impetration must have obtained the benefits of the atonement for all individuals in order to make it possible for each individual to be saved.

This argument is often prefaced with one or more of the following arguments, in theory if not always in explicit language:

- a. The gospel is to be offered to every member of mankind, therefore every member of mankind must be able to respond positively to it. If every member of mankind is able to respond positively to the gospel, salvation must be available to every member of mankind.
- b. God designed salvation so as to accomplish his desire to save every member of mankind. Since God desires that every member of mankind be saved, salvation must be available to every member of mankind.
- c. God loves every member of mankind. Because he loves every member of mankind, he desires that every person ever be saved. (This argument generally leads into argument "b" above.)

Certainly these arguments can be phrased in such ways as to eliminate one or more links in these summaries. Of course, each of these arguments also appeals to Scripture to support its various premises and steps.

2. The Bible directly states that the atonement is general in nature.

Some passages frequently used to substantiate these arguments are:

- a. "The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" ([John 1:29](#)).
- b. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him" ([John 3:16-17](#)).
- c. "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" ([Rom 5:18](#)).
- d. "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation" ([2 Cor 5:14-19](#)).
- e. "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time" ([1 Tim 2:3-6](#)).
- f. "For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers" ([1 Tim 4:10](#)).
- g. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" ([Tit 2:11](#)).
- h. "But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for every one" ([Heb 2:9](#)).

- i. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves" ([2 Pet 2:1](#)).
- j. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" ([2 Pet 3:9](#)).
- k. "Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" ([1 John 2:1-2](#)).

Of course, many other passages are also presented in favor of the general ransom argument, but these listed are typical and most common, and are perhaps the most apparently supportive of the general ransom theory. The refutations of the general ransom arguments based on the foregoing texts will, hopefully, apply equally well to those texts not treated here.

ANSWERING THE OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

The first arguments listed above (1a-c) contain many initial assertions or premises, and various conclusions based on those assertions. Some of these arguments have false premises. Being built on false foundations, they yield false or untrustworthy conclusions. Some have true premises, but the arguments drawn from the premises are faulty, again making their conclusions false or untrustworthy. In all cases, the conclusion that the imputation obtained the benefits of the atonement for every member of mankind is false.

1. **Salvation is available to each individual. Since salvation is available to each individual, it must be possible for each individual to be saved. The imputation must have obtained the benefits of the atonement for all individuals in order to make it possible for each individual to be saved.**

Preliminarily, it should be noted that all of the prefaces to this argument ultimately depend on this argument. If this argument fails, so do all arguments which depend upon it (i.e. "a-c" above).

This argument itself contains the following steps:

1. Assumption/Assertion: Salvation is available to each individual.
2. Inference: Salvation is possible for each individual.
3. Assumption/Assertion: Impetration precedes possible salvation.
4. Inference: Christ impetrated for each individual.

Salvation is available to each individual:

The argument itself depends upon the premise: "salvation is available to all men."

However, this premise is false. Yes, the gospel is to be offered to all men everywhere, and God does command all men everywhere to repent, but it does not logically follow that salvation is actually available to all men. Further, there is no sufficient proof text to support this notion. In fact, we find a rather explicit refutation of the idea in Romans:

"'Whoever will call upon the name of the LORD will be saved.' How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" ([Rom 10:13-14](#)).

Here Paul argued for the necessity of preachers and missionaries by explaining that unless a person hears the gospel, that person cannot be saved. Salvation is not available to those people who never hear the gospel, and in point of fact there really are people who never hear the gospel. Salvation is not available to those who never hear the gospel.

Of course, some respond to this argument by suggesting that God judges people on the basis of what they would have done, hypothetically, if they had heard the gospel. Others postulate a post-mortem offer of the gospel to such individuals. As the doctrine of total depravity demonstrates, however, no one can respond positively to the gospel, so the first of these responses is moot. The second response suggests a post-mortem offer of the gospel, which Hebrews rather expressly denies as a possibility: "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" ([Heb 9:27](#)).

In any event, both these responses undercut Paul's point. If God offers salvation post-mortem to all who do not hear it during life, or if he judges people on the hypothetical basis of what they would have done had they heard the gospel, then Paul is wrong when he says that people cannot be saved unless the church sends out missionaries and preachers to proclaim the gospel to the unsaved world. Paul did not expect his question, "How shall they

hear without a preacher?" to invoke either the response, "God will tell them when they die." By the same token, he did not expect his question, "How shall they believe in him whom they have not heard?" to invoke the response, "They don't need to believe; they only need to be willing to believe." Rather, Paul expected his rhetorical questions to elicit the response, "They will not be able to, of course." For Paul's argument to work, it must be true that people cannot be saved on the basis that they would have believed if they had heard the gospel, or on the basis that they may believe it post-mortem.

Rather than send out missionaries, one who believes in post-mortem salvation should probably argue that it is far better not to preach the gospel at all. If people hear the gospel only post-mortem, they hear it from the most persuasive preacher (such as God himself) in a setting (before the judgment throne of God?) in which it would be nearly impossible for them to reject it.

Salvation is possible for each individual:

Since the basis ("salvation is available to each individual") for this inference is false, this inference cannot be allowed to stand as presented. However, it may be possible to reformulate the argument as follows:

1. Assumption/Assertion: Salvation is possible for each individual.
2. Assumption/Assertion: Impetration precedes possible salvation.
3. Inference: Christ impetrated for each individual.

If the statement "salvation is possible for each individual" is assumed or asserted rather than inferred, it does not matter that the statement "salvation is available to each individual" is false. One might accomplish this reformulation in a number of ways.

First, one might argue that salvation is possible for all those to whom the gospel is available. This would create an argument stating that Christ atoned for all who hear the gospel in order to make their salvation possible. It might then be argued that since Christ impetrated on behalf of some people who are never saved, therefore he impetrated on behalf of all people who are never saved.

Second, one might speak of the hypothetical availability of the gospel to all individuals (i.e. any given individual might hear the gospel). Hypothetical availability might require actual

possibility (e.g., "Since it is possible for anyone to hear the gospel, it is also possible for anyone to be saved").

Third, one might simply determine that Scripture teaches the universal possibility of salvation.

Salvation is possible for all those to whom the gospel is available.

The first argument above is a stronger attack against limited atonement than it is a proof of general ransom. If it can be established that Christ died for some who are never saved, then limited atonement is false. However, even if that can be established, it does not logically follow that Christ died for all who are never saved. The possibility would still exist that he died only for some who are never saved, and not for others. We might call this position "extended atonement." Since Evangelicals do not commonly hold to this position, it will not be treated here.

As an attack against limited atonement, the first argument above deserves attention. It will not do simply to assert that fallen men cannot possibly receive the gospel, for that would be equivocating. "Possibility" in that sense refers to man's ability to receive the gospel, not to Christ's atonement.

Frequently, the challenge issued by this argument arises in the context of the genuine offer of the gospel: Can God genuinely offer salvation to people for whom Christ has not atoned? The answer of the general ransom position is "no," leading to the conclusion that Christ atoned for all who hear the gospel offer. The correct answer, though, is "yes."

In part, this disagreement stems from the different ways that the gospel is frequently presented by those who hold to general ransom and those who hold to limited atonement. The former typically include in their gospel presentations such ideas as: "Christ died for you"; and "You have the ability to receive the gospel." It is true that these cannot be genuine statements to those for whom Christ did not die and who lack the ability to respond positively to the gospel (per total depravity). However, these ideas are not offers of salvation. Rather, they are statements intended to show God's good faith in the matter and the reality of the attainability of salvation.

Properly speaking, the offer of salvation is the idea: "Believe that Christ died for you and repent of your sins, and you will be saved." If one manifests true belief and repentance, then that person will be saved. This offer is true regardless of whether Christ died for all people or only for the elect, and regardless of who has the ability to believe and repent. The offer is true, therefore it is genuine. Those who hold to limited atonement do not include the idea "Christ died for you" or "You have the ability to respond positively to the gospel," but rather the idea "Christ died for all who believe." Those who hold to general ransom may find their version more compelling, but the offer is not more genuine. It is true in both systems.

As the limited atonement gospel shows, it is not necessary for salvation to be possible in order for its offer to be genuine. The limited atonement position maintains that if the gospel is genuinely offered, then those to whom it is offered really have the opportunity to receive or to reject it. The fact they their nature prevents them from receiving it does not invalidate the truth of the offer.

To this, the objection may be offered that opportunity cannot really exist without ability. As the doctrine of total depravity establishes, however, no fallen man has the ability to respond positively to the gospel. Thus, to argue that opportunity cannot exist without ability is to argue that no opportunity for salvation exists. Since some people actually are saved, it cannot be true that no opportunity of salvation exists. Therefore, opportunity can exist without ability.

The hypothetical availability of the gospel to all individuals requires the actual possibility of salvation for all individuals.

As demonstrated immediately above the availability of the gospel does not require the possibility of salvation. Therefore, the availability of salvation, hypothetical or otherwise, to all individuals does not require the possibility of salvation for all individuals.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here the argument that the universal proclamation of the gospel implies the universal possibility of salvation. The assumption is that God would not command the gospel to be preached to all men everywhere if it were not true that all men everywhere have the possibility of salvation.

Among other things, this assumption neglects the twofold purpose of the preaching of the gospel — God intends the gospel not only to convert, but also to harden. This point is demonstrated by such texts as:

"And the disciples came and said to [Jesus], 'Why do You speak to them in parables?' And He answered and said to them, 'To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; For the heart of this people has become dull, And with their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes Lest they should see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I should heal them"" ([Matt 13:10-15](#)).

Jesus made certain to couch his gospel in terms that would convert those to whom salvation had been granted, but would harden those to whom salvation had not been granted. Christ's impetration is not necessary on behalf of those whom the gospel is intended to harden rather than to save.

Scripture teaches the universal possibility of salvation.

If this point could be proven, it would settle the issue (since within the context of this discussion "possibility" exists only for those for whom Christ impetrated). The texts most commonly used to support this point are those treated below in the answer to the objection: "The Bible directly states that the atonement is general in nature." So, discussion of this issue will be reserved until then.

Impetration precedes possible salvation.

As "possible" has been defined for this argument, this statement is true (logically, not chronologically — Christ also died for Old Testament saints).

Christ impetrated for each individual.

This conclusion, however, is false. Recall the initial line of argumentation:

1. Assumption/Assertion: Salvation is available to each individual.
2. Inference: Salvation is possible for each individual.
3. Assumption/Assertion: Impetration precedes possible salvation.
4. Inference: Christ impetrated for each individual.

Recall also the reformulated line of argumentation:

1. Assumption/Assertion: Salvation is possible for each individual.
2. Assumption/Assertion: Impetration precedes possible salvation.
3. Inference: Christ impetrated for each individual.

Points 1 and 2 in the initial argument, and point 1 in the reformulated argument, are false. The inference "Christ impetrated for each individual" cannot be established logically without these points. Therefore, these logical arguments for general ransom fail.

Since this main argument fails, the common prefaces to the argument are somewhat irrelevant. Nevertheless, they are here addressed:

a. The gospel is to be offered to all men, therefore all men must be able to respond positively to it. If all men are able to respond positively to the gospel, salvation must be available to all men.

The premise of this argument is that "salvation is to be offered to all men," which is completely true. However, the conclusion drawn from this premise is illogical and false. As mentioned above, the genuine offer of the gospel does not imply a corresponding ability to respond positively to that gospel. The fact that fallen men are naturally unable to respond positively to the gospel has been explained in the sections on total depravity. Nevertheless, it is sometimes argued that even though all fallen men lack the natural ability to respond positively to the gospel, God graciously gives all men that ability. Jesus, however, refutes this notion:

"No one can come to Me, unless the father who sent Me draws him... But there are some of you who do not believe... For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father" ([John 6:44](#), [64-65](#)).

No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him, and there are some that the Father does not draw, specifically, those who do not believe. Therefore, God does not grant the ability to respond positively to the gospel to anyone who does not believe. The gospel is to be offered to everyone, but not everyone is able to respond.

b. God designed salvation so as to accomplish his desire to save man while respecting man's free will. Since God desires that all men be saved, salvation must be available to all men.

The premises of this argument are that "man has free will," that "God designed salvation so as to accomplish his desire to save man, while respecting man's free will," and that "God desires that all men be saved." There is no Biblical foundation for any of these assumptions, and no text which states or demonstrates these doctrines. That man's will is helplessly bound to sin in this regard has been proven in the section regarding total depravity. That God has not orchestrated salvation in this manner can be proven by the extensive foregoing arguments outlining the doctrine of limited atonement. Lastly, that God does not desire that every person ever be saved is proven by such texts as [John 6:44](#), [64-65](#) quoted in response to preface argument "b," and [Matthew 13:10-15](#) quoted in response to the main argument. [John 6:44](#), [64-65](#) indicates that the Father declines to draw some people to Christ, and [Matthew 13:10-15](#) God's will that the gospel harden some people rather than convert them.

c. God designed salvation so as to accomplish his desire to save man while respecting man's free will. Since God desires that all men be saved, salvation must be available to all men.

One premise here assumed is that "God loves every person ever." Another is that "The nature of this love includes God's desire to save everyone he loves." Depending on how one defines "love," one or the other premise is false. No biblical definition of God's love can satisfy both premises. God's universal love

is not intense enough to desire the salvation of all men in such a way as to send his Son to die for them. God's love for the elect is that intense, but is not extended to all mankind.

The Bible teaches that God does have a universal love for all mankind, but it also teaches that he has an even greater love for his covenant people, and an even greater love than that for the elect. God's actions and words in the Bible demonstrate that his love for his covenant people is greater than his love for mankind at large, but less than his love for the elect. God shows greater and lesser degrees of kindness, mercy, grace, care, concern, protection, compassion, etc. to these different groups of people.

Of course, seeing these three types of love depends on seeing a flexible definition of the word "love" that understands it to mean different things in different contexts. In the case of the world at large, it is true in one sense that God hates them (e.g. [Ps 5:5](#)), but it is also true in another sense that he loves them just as he instructs us to do (e.g. [Matt 5:43-45](#)). This love is not great enough to cause him to elect them to salvation, but it is sufficient to cause him to show them patience and kindness.

For his covenant people (Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament), God's love exceeds his love for mankind at large. To them, he is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth ([Exod 34:6](#)). Nevertheless, he is still willing to send them to hell if they are wicked: "Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" ([Exod 34:7](#)).

God's love for the elect exceeds the prior types of love in that it motivates him to secure their salvation (see the arguments in favor of all doctrines in this book). His love for the elect is in fact the love the Father has for Christ ([Rom 8:39](#)) — because the elect are in Christ, the Father loves them with the same love with which he loves Christ. Moreover, the love God has for the elect is a perfect love that prevents him from punishing them:

"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love" ([1 John 4:18](#)).

God's love for the elect gives them no reason to fear. If they feared, it would be because they could be punished. The fact that the elect ought not to fear indicates that they cannot be punished. Since those who are not elect inevitably are punished, God does love them in the same way that he loves the elect.

The question logically arises here: "Doesn't God desire the salvation even of the non-elect?" The answer is: "Yes, in a sense." God desires their salvation insofar as he hates to see his creation spoiled, and insofar as he would be much more pleased if all people would obey him. Nevertheless, he also desires their condemnation in hell. They are, as Paul called them, "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" ([Rom 9:22](#)). His desire for the salvation was not great enough to inspire him to send his Son on their behalf. As John explained:

"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](#)).

This is a very powerful verse. It indicates that God's electing love is evident in Christ's sacrifice. In response, Christians are to treat each other the same way that Christ treated them — they are to lay down their lives for one another. This verse is also significant in what it does not require. Specifically, it does not require Christians to lay down their lives for unbelievers. If Christians are to die for believers because Christ died for believers, then that obligation would extend to all men if Christ had died for all men. The Bible, however, does not lay this obligation on Christians. The most reasonable conclusion to draw from this is that Christ did not lay down his life for the non-elect.

Inevitably, some will insist on a single definition of love which applies equally to elect and non-elect. Although the Bible does not support such a definition, it is not too much effort to address the question from this perspective. Of course, if there is only one definition of love, it must be a biblical definition. The Bible offers a definition of love in [1 Corinthians 13](#); traditionally known as the "love chapter." According to [1 Corinthians 13:5](#), love "does not take into account a

wrong suffered." Of course, by this definition, God cannot love anyone whose sins result in God's damning that person to hell. After all, hell is where God punishes people for this sins. Certainly such punishment requires God to take into account the wrongs these people have done to him both in rebelling against him and in rejecting his Son. God does punish some people in hell, therefore God does not love all mankind with a single kind of love compatible with the definition of love found in [1 Corinthians 13](#).