

The Case for Unlimited Atonement

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A PERSONAL TESTIMONY:

After high school I attended Baptist Bible Seminary in Johnson City, NY. I enrolled in the five-year Th.B. program, which was primarily designed to be a thorough program for pastors and missionaries.

This school (now Clarks Summit University of Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania) was thoroughly fundamental and the education there was second to none. I had planned to attend for only one year because of my interest in mechanical engineering and drafting, an interest developed during my three years at the Technical High School in Springfield, Massachusetts. My high school teacher had a designing business in nearby Agawam, developing the M-1 rifle for the Springfield armory (established by President Abraham Lincoln). He was able to secure a scholarship for me to attend the University of Massachusetts or another, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, instead. He asked me to work for him after completing my education.

I knew I wanted some further grounding in the Bible and theology (David Nettleton had been my pastor from the day that I arrived in the USA in 1953). So I asked my high school teacher to let me study Bible and theology for one year. He readily agreed.

I recall returning home for the first Thanksgiving, and during a testimony meeting at the midweek service, I shared how good it was to be back home but that I couldn't wait to get back to school. I knew that not the study of mechanics, but the study of God's Word was God's direction in my life.

One of my professors (who has been my friend now for 58 years) was Dr. Robert Lightner. His clarity of presentation and alliterated outlines greatly impressed me. He had come from (and later returned to) Dallas Theological Seminary. He authored numerous theological volumes. I believe at the time at which I had him as a professor, he was contemplating writing his book, *The Death that Christ Died*. I recall that in class he was very firm about the fact that Christ died not just for the elect but for all men. I vividly remember his ominous statement: "if you espouse limited atonement—that Christ died for only the elect—you will never graduate from this school!"

In fact I did subscribe to the five points of Calvinism, including limited atonement. I had studied Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* and the theologies of Hodge and Shedd. I knew all the arguments for particular redemption and they made sense to me.

And thus I approached my final oral exam with some trepidation. Would I graduate or not? I'd finished my classes with a rather acceptable grade point average. My thesis on *The Time of Christ's Death and Resurrection* was accepted. And thus I went into the senior oral exam. Wendell Kempton, Dr. W. W. Barndollar and two other faculty members were there. Dr. Kempton (later president of ABWE) asked about the atonement. Did I have a verse for the substitutionary atonement? Indeed I did. I cited Matthew 20:28, **Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many** (parallel passage Mark 10:45). Christ gave His life a ransom "in the place

(*anti*) for many.” Dr. Kempton wanted to know if the many was a reference to just the elect or the whole world. I answered that I believed that it referred to the elect only. Whereupon, needless to say, an interesting discussion followed. My examination committee saw that I had done my homework. I was not in a combative mood. The exchanges were very irenic. I knew all the Calvinistic explanations for the universal passages that God loved all men and that Christ died for everyone.

Well, I distinctly remember gracious Dr. Barndollar saying to me, “Brother Manfred, we respect your responses but I would ask you that when you read the Bible, you do so with an open mind and I believe that you will come to realize that Christ gave Himself as a substitute for everyone.” Whew! I passed the oral and graduated from the school. I subsequently did doctoral work at the University of Erlangen and earned my Th.M. and Th.D. at Dallas Theological Seminary.

I did what Dr. Barndollar recommended, and before long came to see clearly that the Scriptures did not teach a limited atonement but the fact that Christ tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9) I only wish my interrogators had given me one or both of the irrefutable passages which convinced me of Christ’s limited atonement. Before considering these two passages, it would be well to differentiate once more between the two major views, Calvinism and Arminianism.

1A. THE CONTROVERSY BETWEEN CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM:

Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian who taught at the University of Leyden and advocated a position contrary to the doctrinal stand of the school. Incredibly, he called upon the Dutch government to outlaw the Calvinists, though he had joined the school, pledging to support that position. After his death, in 1618-1619 in the town of Dordt, the Netherlands, a council was called and the Arminians presented their five points, whereupon the Calvinists issued their five points.

1b. The five points of Arminianism:

1c. Partial depravity:

Humanity is depraved but still able to seek God. We are fallen and tainted by sin but not to the extent that we cannot choose to come to God and accept His salvation with the help of prevenient grace of God.

2c. Conditional election:

God only chooses those whom He knows will choose to believe. No one is predetermined for either heaven or hell.

3c. Unlimited atonement:

Christ died for everyone, even those that are not chosen and will not believe. Jesus’ death was for all humanity and anyone can be saved by belief in Him.

4c. Resistible Grace:

God’s call to be saved can be resisted and/or rejected.

5c. Conditional salvation:
Christians can lose their salvation if they actively reject the Holy Spirit's influence in their life. The maintenance of salvation is required of a Christian to retain it.

2b. The five points of Calvinism:

1c. **T**otal depravity:
Every facet of every person everywhere has been marked by sin.

2c. **U**nconditional Election:
God chooses those to be saved based solely on His will.

3c. **L**imited Atonement:
Christ died only for those who are elect.

4c. **I**rresistible Grace:
The elect cannot resist God's call to salvation.

5c. **P**erseverance of the Saints:
The elect cannot lose their salvation.

3b. Modified Arminianism:

A number of Arminians reject the last point, that of conditional salvation, and believe in the eternal security of the believer.

4b. Modified Calvinism:

Modified Calvinism, also known as four-point Calvinism, accepts the fact of Christ's universal death, that He gave His life a ransom for every person.

Modified Calvinism finds the other four points of Arminianism to be unbiblical, to varying degrees. Some have called Arminianism by the term **DAISY**. Some jokster suggested the view as being: **He loves me . . . He loves me not . . . He loves me . . .**

Diminished depravity:

Humanity is depraved, but God uses prevenient grace to restore man's ability to respond to him. In fact, the Bible speaks of the total sinfulness of man. Every aspect of his being has been affected by sin.

Abrogated election:

God bases His election on foreknowledge, who freely choose Him. This conditional election based on God's foreknowledge of human action underemphasizes the sovereignty of God (Rom. 8:28-30).

Impersonal atonement:

Christ died for everyone. This point is accepted by the modified Calvinists.

Sedentary grace:

God calls everyone to salvation but many freely reject it. Conditional salvation makes salvation a reward for work rather than a gift of grace (Eph. 2:8-10).

Yieldable justification:

The saved can fall from grace and lose their salvation. In fact, John 10:28 and 1 Peter 1:5 clearly indicate Christ's promise and the Father's power to keep the believer secure for all eternity.

2A. THE PROOFTEXTS FOR UNLIMITED ATONEMENT:

1b. First proof text: (which convinced me)

Isaiah 53:6 **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

Those who espouse limited atonement such as theologian John Gill, who preceded Charles Haddon Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, says "All we like sheep have gone astray, . . . here the prophet represents all the elect of God, whether Jews or Gentiles; whom He compares to 'sheep,' not for their good qualities but for their foolishness and stupidity."

Advocates of limited atonement frequently challenge moderate Calvinists to show them a single verse in which the word "all" must definitely mean every person on earth. This challenge can easily be met with this verse. Thomas W. Jenkin, in an old volume on the atonement, has a statement worth quoting:

The word "ALL" has often been most candidly and dishonestly tortured and wrested, to mean a generality of kinds and degrees, and not a universality of the mass of the human race. Prophecy, however, supplies us with one text at least, that has bid stubborn defiance to all theological tortures. It is Isa. 53:6, "ALL we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned EVERY ONE to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Some of the advocates of particular atonement have challenged their opponents to present one single text in which the word "all" means indisputably every individual of the human race. Here it is. The word "all" in the last part of the sentence means the "all" mentioned in the first part; and both mean the "every one," in the middle portion of the verse. If you apply to the word "all" in the first sentence, the tortuous criticisms which are generally employed on the "all" in the last sentence, you offend equally against sound interpretation, theological fairness, and logical deduction (*Extent of the Atonement*, Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1833, 196).

As someone has rightly observed, the redemption in this verse is as universal as the sin.

2b. Second proof text: (which convinced me)

2 Peter 2:1 **But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.**

This verse is just as emphatic and clear as Isaiah 53:6, that Christ paid the penalty for everyone's sins. Here in this passage reference is to false teachers, who are obviously unsaved ("damnation" verse 3) who were bought by the Lord. The penalty for their sins has been paid though they are destined for eternal damnation.

Ellicott, in his *Commentary for English Readers*, (Bible Hub.com/commentaires-secondpeter2:1) notes correctly:

Even denying the Lord that bought them.—Better, denying even the master that *bought them*. . .the phrase is remarkable as coming from one who himself denied his Master. Would a forger have ventured to make St. Peter write thus?

This text is conclusive against Calvinistic doctrines of partial redemption; the apostle declares that these impious false teachers were redeemed by Jesus Christ.

3b. Additional proof texts for unlimited atonement:

Besides the strongest proof texts, Isa. 53:6 and 2 Peter 2:1, other texts clearly indicate that Christ's death is for all. The passages are simply too universal in scope than to be explained away by the limited redemptionists as referring to the elect only.

1c. Christ's death is universal

Heb. 2:9 **But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.**

2c. Christ's salvation is universal:

1 Tim. 4:10 **For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.**

3c. Christ's redemption is universal:

As has been mentioned above in **2 Peter 2:1**, Peter refers to false teachers who are headed for eternal damnation and yet are redeemed by their Master

4c. Christ's reconciliation is universal:

2 Cor. 5:19 **To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.**

History of Soteriology

GREEK
PHILOSOPHY



Antique Bust of Plato.



PAUL
CHURCH FATHERS

PELAGIUS



SEMI-PELAGIANISM
CASSIANUS

AUGUSTINE



RENAISSANCE
RATIONALISM



ROMAN
CATHOLICISM

REFORMATION
LUTHER, CALVIN



ARMINIANISM

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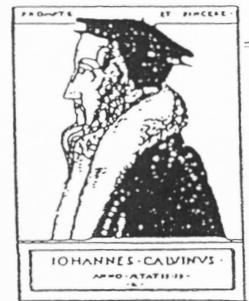
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THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT:

LIMITLESS
AND YET

1 Tim. 2:6

6 Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

SUBSTITUTION

Mt. 20:28

28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

2 Pet. 2:1

BUT there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

REDEMPTION

Acts 20:28

28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Heb. 2:9

9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

DEATH

Jn. 10:11

11 I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

Eph. 5:25

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

Is. 53:6

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

1 Tim. 4:10

10 For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

SALVATION

1 Tim. 4:10

10 For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.

LIMITED

1 Jn. 2:2

2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

PROPTIATION

1 Jn. 2:2

2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

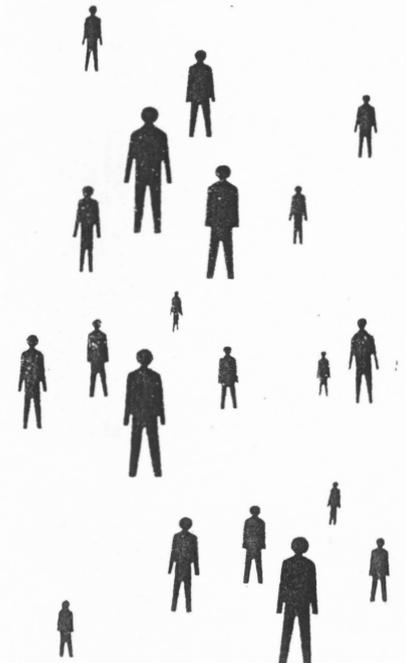
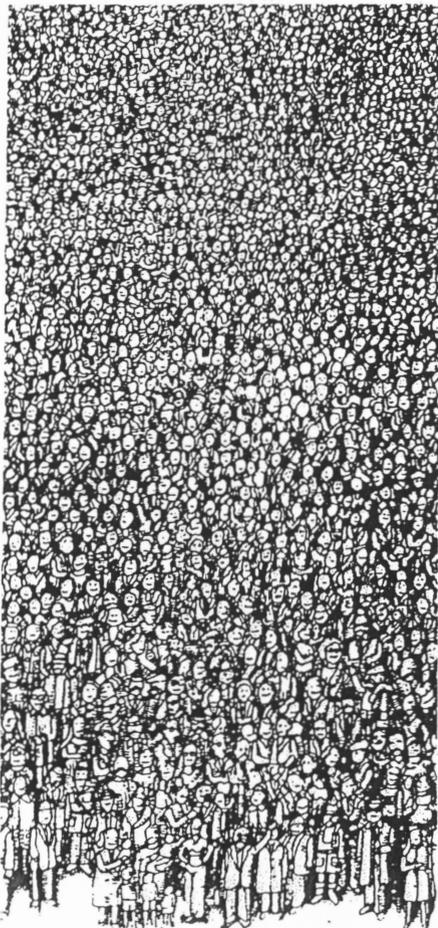
2 Cor. 5:19

19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

RECONCILIATION

2 Cor. 5:18

18 And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;



Passages above the aspects of the atonement deal with its universal extent, passages below with the particular aspect. Christ's death was sufficient for all and efficient for the elect.

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