

Limited Atonement

Introduction

1. The doctrine of limited atonement (perhaps better called particular or definite redemption) is one of the five points of Calvinism that some people just can't embrace, though they believe the other four. They called themselves "4-point Calvinists".
2. We believe that particular redemption flows logically from total depravity and unconditional election. In other words, if the first two are true, this one also has to be true. But, the case for it is not simply based on logical deduction, but on the testimony of scripture.
3. Why do some people resist this doctrine? They have a hard time squaring it with Biblical texts which indicate "Jesus died for the whole world".

Three options

When we examine the biblical data, we have three ways to answer the question, "For whom did Christ die?"

1. Christ died to save all men without exception. (all the sins of all people: universalism)
2. Christ died to save no one in particular. (some of the sins of all people: Arminianism)
3. Christ died to save a certain number, namely, the elect. (all the sins of some men: Calvinism)

The Issue

The issue is, for whom did Christ die? For whose sins did Christ pay His blood on the cross? This is determining the **scope** of the atonement, or its **extent**.

A. Is it: He died intending to save all men, but they aren't saved because they refuse Christ; in other words, Jesus died to make salvation possible for all, but efficient for none.

B. Or is it: Christ died to save those the Father gave Him, those who believe in Him, the elect. He secured the definite salvation of all of His people. What Jesus did (died for sinners) and accomplished (the redemption of the elect) are one and the same thing.

Qualification

Christ is not limited in His power to save. He saves to the uttermost. His death is **sufficient** for all of the world to be saved (i.e., it is infinitely meritorious) but according to the Father's plan is **efficient** (or efficacious) for the elect.

Better than saying, "Christ's death makes salvation possible for all people" (as if they have the ability to accept it of their own free will) we ought more accurately maintain: "Christ's death is sufficient for any person to rest upon for their salvation."

Both theologies limit the atonement in some way:

The Calvinist limits the **extent** of the atonement: it applied effectually only to the elect.

The Arminian limits to **power** of the atonement: it actually saves no one.

Finding the Meaning

The thrust of this doctrine depends on reconciling passages which indicate Jesus died for a **limited** group (the many, His own, etc.) and those indicating He died for the **whole world**.

A. Passages seemingly **limiting** the scope of the atonement:

John 6:37-40

Christ dies for: the many (Mt.20:28; 26:28; Heb.9:28; 13:20; Is. 53:11)

His people (Mt.1:21)

His sheep (John 10:15, 26; 6:37-40)

His friends (John 15:13)

His church (Acts 20:28)

His bride (Eph.5:25)

His own: (John 17:6,9)

Summary: God's love is particular: Amos 3:2; Rom.8:29; 5:8; 1 John 4:10

This in no way requires us to deny God has a general love for all His creatures, subsumed under the concept of "common grace". He sends rain on the just and the unjust. He opens His hand to satisfy the needs of all. Why? He's loving, He can't help it!

But this is a different love from His *hesed*, covenantal love for His own people, a love He decidedly does not have for His enemies.

B. Passages seemingly **not limiting** the atonement:

1. "whosoever" (John 3:16)

Doesn't that imply that anyone can believe? Not necessarily.

No one comes but those who are drawn (John 6:44,65; 1:12-13)

Why say it then? These are the conditions seen from a human point of view.

We are all commanded to repent and believe. (Acts 17:30) It is clear that both faith and repentance are gifts of grace: Acts 11:18; 5:31.

2. "all the world" (1 John 2:2)

We must use the "analogy of scripture", that principle of interpretation which says we need to interpret any single passage in light of all the passages.

Do these passages intend to indicate that Jesus actually saved everyone in the world when He died? This would be universalism, which the Bible clearly does not teach. It indicates there are many who perish apart from Christ, even one of the disciples (Judas). But if He died for their sins, how can God judge them when they die, if Christ has already propitiated their sins?

When Jesus says in John 12:32, “I will draw all men to myself”, He has to mean something other than universalism, for in fact not all men are drawn to Jesus. Millions are born and die and never hear His name.

Jesus doesn't mean *I will draw all men without exception*, but rather, *all men without distinction*.

The stress in the New Testament on *all men* is simply an attempt to get into the mindset of the first disciples (who were largely Jews who believed they were the chosen and the Gentiles were scum) that God is saving through Christ **both Jews and** Gentiles. The gospel is for **all** peoples, **all** nations. Christ came to save all men without distinction: any kind of person can be saved! (versus all men without exception).

A fair question

So why do evangelism? This question could be asked after each of the first three points of Calvinism. The answer:

1. God commands it. That in itself is enough of a reason. (Mt.28:19-20)
2. The proclamation of the gospel is the God-appointed means for the God-appointed end of saving His people.
3. God gives us the enormous privilege of co-laboring with Him in His vineyard (they are ripe for harvest!) to bring His own to Himself. Since we don't know who they are (nor do we need to), we simply share the good news as His ambassadors and let the Spirit do the converting. (2 Cor.5:20)
4. The spoken word is the medium the Spirit uses to create faith in the hearts of the elect (Rom.10:17)