

For Whom Did Christ Die?

Introduction

Over the centuries a great theological argument has been waged over the question of for whom did Christ die. The theological issue involved is the extent of Christ's atonement to mankind. Two positions exist, known as limited or definite atonement and unlimited atonement. Those who hold to unlimited atonement maintain Christ died for the sins of every human being. Those who hold to limited atonement teach Christ died for the sins of believers only. To determine which view is right we must go to the text: the Bible.

The Old Testament View of Christ's Death

Introduction

The Old Testament is commonly agreed by Jews and Christians to be composed of the books of Genesis through Malachi. Jews call this the Tanach. Christians start what is known as the New Testament with Matthew. The Old Testament means the Old Covenant. Technically, the Old Covenant began in Exodus with the giving of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20). Throughout His three years of earthly ministry, Jesus operated under this covenant. This means the gospels are Old Testament. They snap together with Malachi as neatly as two legos. Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant in the upper room just before His death (Matthew 26.26-28; Luke 22.20). This covenant, however, has yet to be realized in its prophetic fullness (Jeremiah 31.31-34; Ezekiel 36.22-32). The record of the book of Acts is that the apostles continued to operate under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. The New Covenant's fulfillment awaits establishment of the Messiah's kingdom upon the earth.^{[1](#)}

Why is this important? The Old Testament, which includes the gospels, had specific teachings with regard to the death of

the Messiah. Paul wrote in Romans 15.4, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" and again in 1 Corinthians 10.11 in speaking of Israel, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." To understand the question before us, "for whom did Christ die?" requires an examination of what Old Testament Scriptures taught about Christ's death.²

The Old Testament Texts

How did the Old Testament present the death of Christ? For whom would He die according to the prophets? In the Tanach are passages that indicated the Messiah would suffer and reign. Many passages spoke of His reign and kingdom. These passages provided details about the nature of His government and rule. His suffering and death, however, was shrouded in secrecy (cf. Daniel 9.26). Only one passage dealt with the Messiah's death with regard to sin. Consider the following passage from Isaiah:

¹ Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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 (Isaiah 53.1-6).*³

Isaiah wrote to Jews. As such, the personal pronouns in the above passage referred to Jews (cf. verse 3, “we did not esteem Him,” verse 4, “our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried,” verse 5, “pierced through for our transgressions,” “crushed for our iniquities,” “chastening for our well-being,” by His scourging we are healed, verse 6, “all of us,” “each of us,” “the iniquity of us all”). Gentiles were *not* in view. This is true for the entire Old Testament after God called Abraham. From that time forward, the only path of Gentile blessing was through the covenant program that God established with Israel. Given this background and context, this was the program Jesus came to confirm in His earthly ministry (Romans 15.8).

The Levitical Sacrifices

The Old Testament provided pictures or types of the reality that was to come with Christ. One picture or type was conveyed through the Levitical sacrifices. God instituted these sacrifices under the Mosaic Law to teach the Jews about covering (□□□□□□) of sins. Since the Levitical sacrifices involved the death of animals, the Jews learned that sin required death (cf. Romans 6.23). Blood had to be shed. This had been revealed as early as Genesis 3.21 when God made clothing for Adam and Eve from the hides of animals. In the Mosaic Law, God reiterated this truth:

“the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement” (Leviticus 17.11 cf. Hebrews 9.22).

Once a sacrifice was offered, we find a familiar phrase with respect to a sinning Jew, "So the priest shall make atonement (cover) on his behalf for his sin which he has committed, and it will be forgiven him" (cf. Leviticus 4.20, 26, 31, 35, 5.6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 6.7, etc.). In addition to personal animal sacrifices, God instituted an annual, national Day of Atonement (יום כיפור יום הכיפורים). On this day, a covering of sins was made for the priests and for the entire nation (Leviticus 16).

The Day of Atonement was for *all* Israel, the entire nation. The goat offered as a sin offering was for *all* the people. The scapegoat released into the wilderness was for *all* the people. The sin offering was propitiation and the scapegoat expiation. Was the Day of Atonement effective in covering the nation's sins? The answer is yes and no. It was effective from God's view for the ceremony fulfilled His typological requirement. The animal blood "covered" (כָּסָה) sin in type (Hebrews 10.4) until the Redeemer would come to remove (rather than just covering) sin by His sacrifice. For Jesus to fulfill the type of a sacrifice as a sin offering and as a scapegoat, His work had to be for all the people, not just some. Thus, Jesus' work of propitiation and expiation as revealed in Leviticus on the Day of Atonement required that His work concerned all.

The Jews had no understanding their sacrifices were types. For them, animal sacrifices were *realities*—just as in Plato's cave, the observers thought the shadows were reality. God had not revealed how He was going to deal ultimately with sin. Were the sacrifices effective for individual Jews? Yes, *if* the individual exercised faith. If a person *believed* God covered his sins by the sacrifice, it became effective for the individual. If he did not, it wasn't effective. Thus, the writer of Hebrews wrote,

² *For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them,*

because it was not united by faith in those who heard. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, "AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world" (Hebrews 4.2-3).

Again, he wrote,

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11.6).

Therefore, covering sin by animal sacrifices was effective from God's point of view since He instituted it and knew the animal sacrifices portrayed the death of Christ. It was effective for a person if two conditions were met: 1) *if the individual brought a sacrifice and 2) if the person believed God covered his sin.* Therefore, *both* faith and works were required for salvation.

The Death of Christ in the Gospels

As noted above, the Old Testament revealed that only Jews were in view with regard to Christ's death. What about the gospels? I have found no one who has considered the question of the extent of the atonement as presented in the Old Testament and in the gospels. The prophetic declaration in the gospels was Jesus would "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1.21). This fit with Isaiah's words. But *how* this salvation would be accomplished was unknown. We notice two important points regarding the Gospels that agree with Isaiah. The first is that the extent of the atonement included *Jews only*. The second is that *all* Jews were in view. This is consistent with God's institution of the Day of Atonement. The Old Testament or Gospels make no mention of Christ's work on the behalf of Gentiles. Again, while the atonement was limited to Jews, it covered *all* Jews. Concerning the salvific work of Christ,

Matthew wrote:

²¹ *"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."* ²² *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:* ²³ *"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,"* which translated means, *"GOD WITH US"* (Matthew 1.21-23).

Who are "His people" of the angel's declaration in verse 21? They were Jews. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, of the royal line of the house of David. The wise men had inquired, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews" (Matthew 2.2)?

Luke wrote of the kingly aspect of Jesus' birth. The angel declared that God would give Him David's throne and rule over Jacob forever. Notice Luke made no mention of Gentiles.

³⁰ *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God."* ³¹ *"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."* ³² *"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; "* ³³ *and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end"* (Luke 1.30-33).

The angel told Mary that Jesus would reign over the house of Jacob. Who was Jacob? Jacob was Israel (the name God gave him after Jacob wrestled with Him, Genesis 32.27-28). Mary responded to this announcement in what has become known as the "Magnificat" and spoke of the salvific aspect of the Messiah's birth:

⁴⁶ *And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, "* ⁴⁷ *and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior....*

⁵⁴ "He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, ⁵⁵ as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever" (Luke 1.46-47, 54-55).

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, responded to the miraculous happenings surrounding Jesus' prophesied birth and the birth of his own son, John the Baptist, by recounting the divine promises of salvation from Gentile oppression and from sin:

⁶⁷ And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant—⁷⁰ as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—⁷¹ Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, and FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; ⁷² To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath which He swore to Abraham our father, ⁷⁴ to grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. ⁷⁶ "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; ⁷⁷ To give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, ⁷⁹ TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1.67-79).

In verses 69-76, Zechariah spoke of the salvation of Israel

from her enemies. This prophecy agreed with the Old Testament prophecies going back as far as Moses (Deuteronomy 28.1, 7, 13). Verses 77-79 prophesied the Messiah's granting Israel the forgiveness of their sins. Notice carefully that *Jews alone* were the subject here.

At the birth of Jesus, Luke related the angelic announcement of the Messiah to the shepherds. Again, note that the angels announced salvation of Jews only, "there has been born for you a Savior." The "you" were Jews:

⁸ In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2.8-11).

When Jesus was presented in the Temple, according to the requirement of the Mosaic Law, Simeon prophesied about the child. Luke wrote:

²¹ And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. ²² And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES

OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.” ²⁵ And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, ²⁸ then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, ²⁹ “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹ which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, and the glory of Your people Israel.” ³³ And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him (Luke 2.21-33).

In verse 25, Luke recorded Simeon awaited “the consolation of Israel.” This was Israel’s salvation from her enemies Zechariah (above) had prophesied. In verses 30-32, Simeon extended salvation beyond Israel, “For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, and the glory of Your people Israel.” The salvation of Gentiles would come THROUGH Israel in accordance with God’s covenant program and prophetic plan (cf. Psalm 2; Isaiah 42.1-6, 60.1-3; Zechariah 8.20-23). This was the basis of God’s declaration to Moses:

³ Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ⁴ ‘ You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own

possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel” (Exodus 19.3-6).

God’s plan for Israel was that every Jew would be a priest. They would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. A priest is a go-between, a representative. Under its covenantal relationship and blessings, Israel was to be God’s representative to Gentiles. This was God’s strategic plan of blessing Gentiles.

Jesus spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd towards Israel—never Gentiles.⁴ He taught the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. Who were the sheep? In the context of Jesus’ ministry and the Gospel accounts, we have the answer: the nation of Israel. Consider John’s account of Jesus as the Good Shepherd:

¹¹ *“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹² “He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ “He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. ¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵ even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd (John 10.11-16).*

John’s account of Jesus’ words agreed with the other gospel accounts of salvation to Jews. Again, Gentiles were not in

direct view of this salvation. What did Jesus mean by verse 16? Who were the *other* sheep He mentioned? The “other sheep” was a prophetic statement which identified a future generation of Jews, who will believe in Him—“they will hear My voice.” Paul referred to this group in Romans 11.25-29:

²⁵ For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.” ²⁷ “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.” ²⁸ From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

John revealed a fascinating conversation that had occurred among the Jewish leadership and their thinking about what to do about the “Jesus” problem. He wrote:

⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” ⁵¹ Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11.49-52).

Caiaphas plotted Jesus’ death as an expedient political action. Caiaphas’ intent was evil but God used Caiaphas’ will

to accomplish His will (cf. Genesis 50.20). To whom did John refer in his statement, “the children of God who are scattered abroad?” They were Jews of the Diaspora located in other nations (cf. Acts 2.5; 1 Peter 1.1-2; James 1.1). According to God’s prophetic promise, He will regather Jews from all nations back to their land to be one people (Ezekiel 34.12-14, 36.19-25, 37.16). They will be no longer Lo-ammi “not my people” (Hosea 1.8-11). God promised He would cleanse them: “they will be My people and I will be their God” (Deuteronomy 30.1-5; Ezekiel 37.15-23).

The Writer of Hebrews and Paul Confirmed Jesus Died for Jews

The writer of Hebrews (Paul) confirmed Christ died for the Jewish nation. He declared:

¹⁶ For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2.16-17; 3.1).

To whom did the writer refer when he wrote, “made like His brethren?” Again, the answer is the Jewish people. He made “propitiation for the sins of the people.” Who were the people? The phrase “the people” in Scripture always refers to the Jewish people. Thus, we see again that it was the Jews who were in view of Christ’s work on the cross according to God’s prophetic plan revealed in the Old Testament.

Paul wrote the Galatians:

⁴ But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4.4-5).

Jesus ministered under the Law of Moses. Paul stated, “so that He might redeem those who were under the Law.” Who lived under the Mosaic Law? Certainly not Gentiles. Jews alone were under the Law. According to Paul, Christ came to redeem the Jewish people. Notice the next part of the verse: “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Who is the “we” to whom Paul referred? The “we” are Gentiles. Paul was a Jew but he spoke from his office as “the apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11.13). On the authority of his office, he declared Jews were to be redeemed so Gentiles could be adopted as sons. The Old Testament plan was that God would redeem Israel and that they would be a channel of blessing to the Gentiles. This was the program Jesus had pronounced when he had commanded,

¹⁹ “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28.19-20).

The twelve disciples were commissioned as the leaders to preach Christ to Israel and then to the Gentiles. But they never fulfilled the latter part of their commission of preaching to Gentiles.

The Post-Resurrection Message

Most seem unaware that after Christ arose from the dead, Peter continued to address Jews only (Acts 2.14, 22, 36, 3.12, 26). The vast majority of Christians think after Jesus pronounced what has become popularly known as the “great commission” (Matthew 28.19-20), the apostles went and proclaimed the gospel to all—Jews and Gentiles alike. The Bible provides no evidence of this. Luke wrote the Twelve had no contact with Gentiles—much less that they proclaimed the gospel to them. They continued to focus their message on Israel. Luke wrote that the Twelve refused to leave

Jerusalem—even under great persecution (Acts 8.1). In the years that led up to the Council of Jerusalem (51 A.D.), they never went to Gentiles. Following this Council, the Twelve made a formal agreement with Paul (primarily to protect Paul's converts from meddling from the Jerusalem assembly): the Twelve would go to Jews and Paul would go to Gentiles (Galatians 2.7-9). Therefore, neither Jesus nor the Twelve ever had a ministry to Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-7).

When and how do we learn that Christ died for Gentiles and that the gospel was to go to them? Only *after* God saved Saul of Tarsus and commissioned him as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.16) do we learn about the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24) which would go to Gentiles. Only *after* God saved Paul do we learn Christ died for more than Jews. Only *through* Paul do we find a message of salvation for Gentiles and evangelism of Gentiles. These truths came from Paul, not from the Twelve.

We would be remiss if we failed to address a passage that (on the surface) seems not to fit with the above analysis. This is John 1.29, which reads,

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

What are we to make of John the Baptist's statement about Jesus taking away the sins of the world in light of the other gospel passages in which Israel alone was the benefactor of Jesus' salvation? John's thinking was consistent with what was recorded by the other gospel writers.⁵ John knew only of God's promise of a Messiah to Israel. The most John could have known was that Gentiles would be blessed through Israel, specifically, through the Messiah, as Simeon had stated (Luke 2.32). This was the program God had revealed through His covenants, prophets, and by the Lord Himself in His earthly ministry. Everything God had destined Israel to become was

based upon the nation accepting their Messiah. The first order of business was that they repent and accept Him as Messiah. When the Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah He would establish His kingdom. Only *then* would Jews evangelize Gentiles (Matthew 28.16-20, cf. Psalm 2; Isaiah 42.1-6, 60.1-3; Zechariah 8.20-23).

Conclusion to the Death of Christ in the Old Testament and Gospels

In the above examination of the Old Testament and the gospels we have seen that God had promised a Savior and salvation to Jews and that *through* them Gentiles would be saved (Isaiah 42.1-9, 49.5-7; 60.1-3; Zechariah 8.20-23). The gospels taught limited atonement— the salvation of Jews. Jesus had no ministry to Gentiles in His three-year earthly ministry. He only addressed two Gentiles, one of whom was by proxy.⁶ His ministry was consistent with teachings of the prophets. The salvation of Gentiles depended on upon having an association or relationship with the favored nation, Israel (Luke 2.32; Isaiah 60.3; 42.6, 9; John 4.22). This plan had begun when He called Abram of Ur of the Chaldees and made His covenant. The other Jewish covenants (Palestinian, Mosaic, Sabbatic, David, and New) sprang from the Abrahamic Covenant. According to God's prophetic plan, Israel was the central player and *all* blessing to Gentiles would come through Israel. *Therefore, the Old Testament and Gospels taught a limited atonement of Jews alone.* While the revelation of atonement was limited to Jews, it was for *all* Jews. The Old Testament or the Gospels gave no indication the Messiah would die for Gentiles.

The Death of Christ in Pauline Texts

*No statement Paul made to believers that Christ died for them is helpful to make a case for limited atonement.*⁷ The reason is because Paul's audience was believers, not unbelievers. We expect him to write about God's atonement of believers. Thus,

if we discover passages from Paul or other writers who wrote to believers that declared Christ died for *more* than believers, then those who maintain a limited atonement position face a double-edged sword: both the Scriptures and logic are against them. This point will be examined in detail below. Paul's purpose in writing was to teach the significance and meaning of Christ's death to believers, not to unbelievers. Thus, we have passages such as the following:

⁶ *For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* ⁷ *For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.* ⁸ *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* ⁹ *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.* ¹⁰ *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 (Romans 5.6-10).*

¹⁴ *For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died;* ¹⁵ *and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.* ¹⁶ *Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.* ¹⁷ *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. . . .* ²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* ²¹ *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might*

become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5.14-17, 20-21).

¹⁵ It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am first. ¹⁶ Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1.15-16).

Problem Texts in Paul for Limited Atonement

If Christ died for believers alone, and Paul (and the other writers) wrote only to believers, several passages present problems for those who hold a limited atonement view. Consider the following:

³ This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. ⁷ For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. ⁸ Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension (1 Timothy 2.3-8).

Paul's argument in the above passage was to declare that God is the Savior of believers, "our Savior" (verse 3). But in the next verse, Paul declared God desired all men to be saved. It makes no sense for Paul to declare God's desire is for "all" to be saved if "all" means "all believers." Such argument

completely misses Paul's point. In verse 5, Paul declared there was one God and one mediator between God and man: Christ Jesus. If one is to argue consistently that Paul was speaking of believers only in verse 4, one must necessarily argue Christ is the mediator only of believers (verse 5). Those who maintain limited atonement would have the passage read, "one mediator also between God and some men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for some." This is entirely contrary to a normal reading of the passage. In verse 6, Paul wrote that Christ died for all. The "all" are those for whom He is a mediator. Does it make sense for Paul to write that it was God's desire that all *believers* be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? No, what makes sense is that Paul was writing believers that it is God's will that the *unbeliever* be saved. Paul's exhortation for prayer in verse 8 is a cooperative venture of human will and divine will for the salvation of all. Lest anyone doubt this sense, Paul confirmed the meaning of the above verse later in his letter when he wrote:

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 Timothy 4.10).

In this passage, Paul compared "we" and "they" with regard to salvation. Paul declared "we" (believers) "labor and strive," and "we" (believers) "have fixed", "our" (believers) "hope on the living God." In the latter part of the verse, "especially of believers" Paul noted the salvation of believers. In the earlier part of the verse "Savior of all men," he stated Christ was the Savior of all. This verse makes no sense if Paul meant Christ was the Savior of men meaning "all believers" and then declared, "especially of believers." If that was what he meant, the verse would read, "who is the Savior of all believers, especially of believers." Such rendering is nonsense. The only reasonable interpretation is that Christ died for every person and that believers have

appropriated Christ's work on their behalf. This fact is confirmed by the following verses:

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds. ¹⁵ These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you (Titus 2.11-15).

What else could Paul mean in verse 11 than that God's grace has appeared "bringing salvation to all men" except that Christ had died and risen from the dead for all men? Believers—those who have appropriated Christ's death and resurrection by faith—are those who look for "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us."

Lastly, let us examine one of Paul's greatest texts, a text we can rightly call the Church's "great commission" (as opposed to Matthew 28.16-20).⁸ We noted verses from this portion of Scripture above, but these verses apply particularly to the matter of Christ's death for all. The text reads,

¹⁸ Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ 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 Corinthians 5.18-19).

Paul again compared “us” (believers) with “them” (unbelievers). He declared God reconciled “us” to Himself through Christ and had given “us” the ministry of reconciliation (the preaching of the gospel). Paul then stated, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” The term “world” can only mean the entire human race. If not, the terms “their” and “them” make no sense. God has reconciled the entire human race to Himself. Christ has removed the barrier of sin and death for all. To us, to believers, God has committed this wonderful news, the “word of reconciliation.” Christ has died and risen from the dead for the sins of all. This is the gospel!

Problem Texts in Hebrews for Limited Atonement

The writer of Hebrews wrote:⁹

⁹ But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. ¹⁰ For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings (Hebrews 2.9-10).

In verse 9, the writer explicitly stated Jesus died for all. The Greek text is better rendered, “He might taste death for each person individually.” The word translated “everyone” is παντὸς and is a genitive singular noun that means “each one.” Again, we find parallelism. While Christ died for each person (every single person) only *some* “many sons to glory” benefit in His death. This agrees with what God taught Israel with the Levitical sacrifices.

Problem Texts in Peter for Limited Atonement

Peter also confirmed that Christ died for all. He wrote:

¹⁸ For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, ²⁰ who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water (1 Peter 3.18-20).

And again:

¹ 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 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; ³ and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep (2 Peter 2.1-3).

In the above verses, Peter declared Christ died for all. In the first passage, the “just” is Christ Himself. Who are the unjust? Are the unjust only believers? Hardly. The unjust include every human being (Romans 3.23; 1 Corinthians 15.33). All have sinned, not just some. In the second passage, Peter declared Christ “bought” ([ἀγοράζω](#)) even false teachers. Elsewhere, the word ἀγοράζω is translated “redeemed” Would those who teach limited atonement have us believe these false teachers to whom Peter referred were believers? Really?

Problem Texts in John for Limited Atonement

Lastly, we consider John's testimony:

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (1 John 2.1-2).

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4.14).

John too made a distinction between believers and unbelievers regarding Christ's salvation. John stated Christ was the propitiation for "our" sins (believers). But then he declared He was the propitiation not only for "our" sins but for the sins of the "whole world." This includes unbelievers. The passage in 1 John 2 is consistent with 1 John 4 in which John stated that Christ was the "Savior of the world" (all mankind). Believers appropriate Christ's salvation on their behalf. Unbelievers do not. Nevertheless, despite a man's refusal to accept it, Jesus is the Savior of all. Language could not be more plain.

The Logical Problem of the Limited Atonement Argument

From a logical point of view, those who maintain a limited atonement view have a far more difficult argument to make than those who argue for unlimited atonement. If Christ died for all then He also died for some. In other words, SOME is a subset of ALL. If Christ died only for some He did not die for all. ALL is not a subset of SOME. ALL is outside of SOME. If but one Scripture states Christ died for all a vast weight falls upon one holding a limited atonement view. He must demonstrate that "all" means "some."

The limited atonement position falls apart if but one verse states that Christ died for all. But, as we have seen, it is

not a *single* writer that writes that Christ died for all but *several*. Paul, the writer of Hebrews, Peter, and John all state Christ died for all. These facts make the task of proving that Christ died only for believers insurmountable.

As noted above, we *expect* the writers of Scripture to declare that Christ died for believers since they wrote to believers. We do NOT expect them to declare that Christ died for all—unless He did! If all we had were passages that Christ died for believers it would be possible to make a case for limited atonement. But we don't. Many passages declare Christ died for "all," "for the whole world," etc. Since this is the case, only one kind of passage can support limited atonement. That would be a passage that stated: "Christ died for believers alone. He did not die for anyone else." Without an *explicit* Scriptural declaration ALL arguments for limited atonement collapse.

The Logic of Limited Atonement

The Scriptural argument for unlimited atonement has been made. The above texts have demonstrated the definite or limited atonement position have no Scriptural support. We will now focus on the logic of limited atonement. The center of gravity for those who maintain limited atonement is their view of the nature of the atonement. Put another way, it is how they view what Christ accomplished by His death and resurrection. Several theories of the atonement exist. The mechanics of *how* Christ paid the penalty for man's sin are not important to this study. What is important is to recognize that His work on the cross solved the problem of sin and death. His sacrifice on the cross satisfied God's justice.

Those who argue for limited atonement believe when Christ died on the cross His death saved some individuals. Their syllogism is formulated in the following manner:

1. If Christ died for all then all must be saved.

2. All are not saved.
3. Therefore, Christ did not die for all.

A corollary of this logic is if Christ died for all, and all are not saved, then Christ's death was ineffective. The Scriptures do not support this logic. On the contrary, the Scriptures teach Christ died for all and that His work was effective. From God's perspective, it was effective in that it satisfied His justice and paid the penalty for sin and death. From man's perspective, it becomes effective if one appropriates Christ's work on his behalf. This truth was demonstrated in the Levitical sacrifices.

A catalyst of the logic of those who hold to limited atonement is their view of God's sovereignty. To them, God's sovereignty means God's will cannot be frustrated by man. They reason that if Christ's death did not save men, then salvation is a work of man, not God. Such reasoning leads to a view that man's will, expressed as faith, is a work. This reasoning is complete confusion. It misunderstands everything: the nature of Christ's salvific work, the nature of God's will, and the nature of man's will.

The Fallacy of the Limited Atonement Argument

The Scriptures teach the work of Christ solved the problem of sin. He paid for the sins of all humanity. However, unless this work is accepted, it is of no use to an individual. Christ's work was effective: it satisfied the justice of God. How does one receive the benefit of Christ's work? He receives it by faith. Faith is not a work. Faith is trust in a person. Consider these examples.

1. Person A tells Person B, "I will meet you at church at 10:00 a.m." Person B trusts Person A and is there to meet him at 10. Is Person B's trust a work? No, it is faith in a person's character and integrity.
2. Person A tells Person B, "I have a check of \$1,000 for

you at the bank.” Person B does not believe him and does not go to the bank. But the check was there. The check did Person B no good because he refused to trust Person A.

In 1. above, the exercise of the will, belief, is not a work. It is trust. Man’s will in trusting Christ—that he died and rose again for his sins—is not a work: it is an acceptance and a dependence upon what God has done for him. In 2. above, while payment has been made, the one who refuses to claim the money made on his behalf receives no benefit. In the same way, Christ’s death provides no benefit to the one who refuses to accept God’s gift. It remains unclaimed. Let us be clear about the work of Christ. It satisfied the righteous demands of God’s justice and solved the problem of sin and death. A person who refuses Christ’s work on his behalf *does not affect God’s justice*. It only affects his relationship with God and his benefit.

Consider the following: Did Christ die for Saul of Tarsus? We know He did. Was Saul saved while he was seeking to destroy those who were believing in Jesus? We know he wasn’t. When was Paul saved? He was saved when he believed in Christ on the road to Damascus—not before. People are lost not because Christ did not die for them. People are lost because they refuse to trust in Christ’s work for them.

Like the mechanics of the atonement, the mechanics of belief are unknown. Several theories exist. Theories can be useful, but in this case, they are not. We simply do not have enough information to understand fully all that was involved and how Christ’s sacrifice solved the problem of sin and death. Once the gospel is understood, a person must make a decision. Either he will believe God or he won’t. Faith is a choice. We cannot understand fully how the divine will and human wills cooperate. But both are involved. Consider just a few verses that demonstrate this truth:

³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life (John 5.39-40).

“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6.44).”

And He was saying, “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 6.65).”

A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16.14).

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15.6).

Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved (Luke 18.12).

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1.12).

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3.16).

She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world” (John 11.27).

They said, “ Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16.31).

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4.5).

As seen above, the Scriptures teach God's will is for all be saved. What meaning does this have unless God has provided for all? Consider the following from Peter, Paul, and Jesus Himself:

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 Peter 3.9).

³ *This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,* ⁴ *who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2.3-4).*

¹² *"What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?"* ¹³ *"If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray."* ¹⁴ *"So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish (Matthew 18.12-14).*

³⁷ *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."* ³⁸ *"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!"* ³⁹ *"For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'" (Matthew 23.37-39)*

¹⁴ *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3.14-16).*

Those who maintain limited atonement seemingly want to help God achieve His purpose. In effect, they do not trust God because God does not need their help. They express the idea “if Christ died for all then all must be saved.” This logic has no Biblical support. For those who hold to definite atonement, God operates under a kind of divine solipsism within a framework of metaphysical determinism.

The Scriptures demonstrate human and divine wills cooperate in spiritual activity. We cannot understand the mechanics. But God, in His omnipotence and omniscience, operates within this realm without difficulty. The Scriptures declare it is God’s will all be saved. All are not saved. Does this mean that God’s will is ineffective? Does this mean that God is not sovereign? No. God is both sovereign and effective in His work. But God allows divine and human wills to work together. How can this be? We cannot know; it is beyond our capacity. The Word of God is a divine book and a human book. God the Son is wholly divine and wholly human. How is this possible? We cannot know. In philosophical language, it is in principle unknowable. Much more exists in this truth than in a discussion of limited atonement. The consequence for the logic of those who hold a limited or definite atonement necessarily affects one’s understanding of the nature of Christ, the hypostatic union, and the nature of Scripture.

Paul wrote what happened to Israel was for our benefit (Romans 15.4; 1 Corinthians 10.6). What do we learn about salvation from the Old Testament? In the Passover, a lamb’s blood had to be applied to the doorposts and lintel to be saved from the

destroying angel (Exodus 12.7, 12-13). This required a decision, an act of faith, an act of will. Without this act of human will, Israel's firstborn would not have been spared. The same may be said about the brazen serpent (John 3.14-16 cf. Numbers 21.8). The brazen serpent was effective in that it intrinsically had the power to heal but was ineffective (to the individual) unless one looked upon it. Looking upon it required faith, an act of will. Each of these was a picture, a type of Christ and His salvation. Could a Jew under the Law be saved if he refused to offer a sacrifice? No. The Law required him to offer a sacrifice and offer it with faith. It was not effective unless he acted upon what God had revealed for him to do.

Paul taught men and women are saved by believing his gospel. Paul's gospel is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). If you believe this you are saved: your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life. If you will not believe this you are lost. It is that simple.

Conclusion

In the argument above, I made the following main points:

1. The Old Testament and the Gospels taught a limited atonement of Jews *only*. His death was declared for *all* Jews. Gentiles were *not* included.
2. Any passage addressed to believers indicating that Christ died for believers is *useless* to make a case for limited atonement. We would not expect anything else. The only kind of passage helpful to those who hold to limited atonement is one that explicitly states Christ died for believers and *no one else*. Since no such passage exists a Scriptural case for limited atonement cannot be made.
3. If Christ died for ALL this includes the category SOME. If Christ died for SOME the category ALL is *excluded*.

Those who argue for limited atonement must, therefore, demonstrate ALL=SOME. This cannot be done: passages from Peter, John, Paul, including Hebrews state Christ died for all humankind. A logical case for limited atonement is impossible.

4. Numerous passages testify that man is responsible to exercise his will and believe the message of salvation. The mechanics of how the divine will interacts with the human will is beyond our understanding. What we know from the Scriptures is that both wills cooperate. Several passages state God's will is that all be saved yet all are not. In these cases, the divine will is frustrated by human will yet God remains sovereign.

The Scriptures reveal a progressive revelation of the atonement. The Old Testament and gospels revealed the Messiah would die for Jews. The prophets and the gospel writers provided no information about Christ dying for Gentiles. After God saved Paul, God revealed a new message of salvation that included the salvation of Gentiles based on faith alone. This included the revelation that Christ died for all humankind. Thus, the revelation that Christ would die for all Jews was expanded to the teaching that Christ had died for all mankind. The ascended Christ revealed to Paul the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24) that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). As we have seen above, no *Scriptural* evidence exists to support a case for limited atonement. We have also seen *logic* cannot support a case for limited atonement. Therefore, the doctrine of limited or definite atonement must be viewed as a theological curiosity based upon incompetent exegesis of the Scriptures and flawed reasoning by inept theologians. It is Biblically unsound and cannot be considered orthodox Christianity.

The Lord Jesus Christ solved the problem of sin and death and satisfied the justice of God. While Christ died for all, His death is of benefit only to the one who believes Paul's

gospel. Divine will and human will cooperate in salvation. Exactly how, we cannot know. That is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to declare God's glorious gospel (our Great Commission) that Jesus Christ died for all, that God has reconciled the world to Himself, and that He has given believers a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5.14-21).

¹ See the author's study on [Israel's Covenants](#).

² I have found no one who has considered Old Testament or gospel passages to determine the extent of the atonement.

³ The other passage that deals with the Messiah's death to any degree is Psalm 22. But Psalm 22 makes no mention of sin.

⁴ The Church, the Body of Christ, is never called sheep. Sheep are always Jews in Scripture (cf. Psalm 23). The closest we come to the Church being called sheep is Paul's quotation of Psalm 44.22 in Romans 8.36. Paul *applied* this verse to illustrate the security of the believer in Christ in spite of distress and persecution.

⁵ A couple of points are worth considering. John the Baptist's statement is recorded in John's gospel. John's gospel has different emphases from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (synoptic gospels). In particular, John focused on Christ's deity. John presented Jesus as the eternal God, creator of all things, and the source of all life. John's Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1). John the Baptist's statement anticipated a larger salvation (cf. John 3.17, 12.47). We do not know when John wrote his gospel. If it was late, it could have been influenced by Paul. If so, Paul's teaching of an expanded reconciliation to Gentiles could have influenced John's work. Another point to consider is whether John the Baptist understood what he said. Other Scriptures demonstrate that God sometimes revealed things that were not understood at the time by His servants. For example, Daniel did not understand what the pre-incarnate Christ revealed to him

(Daniel 12.9-13). The disciples did not understand that Jesus would die and be resurrected (Luke 18.31-34).

⁶ See the author's study, [Two Remarkable Healings](#) for more information on this matter.

⁷ The same is true for Peter, James, and John. Their audience was believers. We would not expect them to declare that Christ's work had atoned for the sins of all unless that indeed was what He had done.

⁸ The commission of Matthew 28 was the commission Christ gave to His disciples. It was the Jewish commission which was a continuation of the "repent/kingdom at hand" message, not the commission of the Church, the body of Christ. The Church's commission is 2 Corinthians 5.18-20. See [The Great Commission](#).

⁹ See the author's study, [Who Wrote Hebrews?](#)

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