

## Atonement: Limited or Unlimited (or both)

Before beginning a discussion on such a topic that has elicited heated discussions and controversies for centuries, I need to make some elementary comments. The ground rules that we must proceed on is the textual evidence that presents itself in Scripture. We can go on for hours with no satisfactory conclusion to the matter if we follow various constructs and formulas that have been proposed through the years. The failure of human reasoning is that it is human reasoning. We must reckon with the fact that the Fall has drastically affected our thought process. This faulty and limited reasoning does not end at salvation but will only be corrected once we are glorified. Our only authority for what we believe is the Scriptures. We must understand what the Bible means by what it says. Rather than taking a cursory look at the Bible, we must dig deep with a consistent, grammatical-historical, contextual hermeneutic. If a faithful handling of the text does not square with various paradigms, charts, or graphs, so be it. But let the text prove what we believe. Furthermore, we need to be content to allow the secret things to belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29; Is. 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-6). We may not have all of our questions answered. But that's OK. God has sufficiently revealed Himself. Let's not concern ourselves with what we don't understand, but in how we can obey/become what we do understand. Let's not force a system upon the Word and speak where God is silent.

*The atonement cannot be interpreted biblically unless we are prepared to examine our own presuppositions and retain those which undergird the apostolic concept. Hence it is highly encouraging to witness among scholars a sustained attempt to go "Back to the Bible" in formulating their theories about the atonement [Baker's Dictionary of Theology, s.v. "Atonement" p. 75].*

I do not believe we can reduce the argument to either a limited or unlimited position. We can also clearly deny the formula: provided for all; obtained for all. This is the position of Universalists, that salvation has been obtained for all. Therefore, all Christians limit the atonement, it is a matter of where the limit is. Has it been provided for all, but obtained for the elect? Or, has it been provided for the elect, and obtained for the elect? Or, in relation to the previous 2, is the atonement sufficient for all, but only efficient for the elect?

Biblical Testimony:

General Reference:

Jhn 1:29 Lamb...who takes away the sins of the world  
Jhn 3:16 God so loved the world that He gave...  
Jhn 4:42 the Christ, the Savior of the world  
2 Cor 5:19 God was in Christ reconciling the world  
1 Jhn 2:2 propitiation for the sins of the whole world  
1 Jhn 4:14 Son sent to be the Savior of the world  
2 Cor 5:14 one died for all, therefore all died  
Col 1:20 through Him to reconcile all things to Himself  
1 Tim 4:10 Savior of all men, especially of those that believe  
1 Tim 2:6 gave Himself a ransom for all

Tit 2:11 bringing salvation to all men  
 Heb 2:9 taste death for every man  
 Isa 53:6 laid on Him the iniquity of us all  
 Lk 19:10 Son of Man...to save that which was lost  
 Rom 5:6 Christ died for the ungodly

Specific Reference:

Mtt 1:21 He...will save His people from their sins  
 Jhn 10:15 I lay down my life for the sheep  
 Acts 20:28 church of God...purchased with His own blood  
 Eph 5:25 loved the church and gave Himself for her  
 Rom 5:8 Christ died for us  
 1 Cor 15:3 Christ died for our sins  
 Gal 1:4 who gave Himself for our sins  
 Gal 3:13 Christ redeemed us...being made a curse for us  
 Eph 5:2 and gave Himself for us, an offering  
 Isa 53:5 wounded for our transgressions...for our iniquities

Observations: Since there are general, as well as specific ramifications of the atonement in the aforementioned verses, we would not be exercising a consistent, textual driven argument if we reduced the argument to an “either-or” situation. (Here’s where people find out that I do not fit into a particular camp that delivers a nice, neat package. I’d rather err on the side of no construct, acrostic, or graph if what I am teaching is an accurate representation of the Scriptures. My goal is to be hermeneutically honest with the textual evidence.)

When we limit our discussion to “whom Christ died”, we rob each of the texts of their power. We must follow the author’s intent of the individual texts to enjoy the riches of what is taught. Follow along with the various terms used in the various texts to see the nuances of the terms utilized. Like a multi-faceted diamond we see specific aspects of salvation through terms like sacrifice, substitution, reconciliation, redemption, propitiation, etc. [Thanks to Dr. Trevor Craigen, theologian par-excellence for faithful hermeneutical thoughts on the following theology]

a. Substitution and Sacrifice

(i) Specific prepositions point to substitution – ἀντί (*anti*) and ὑπέρ (*hyper*)

*anti's* dominant meaning = 'instead of' or 'in the place of' whether in classical or biblical Greek. LXX usage bears this out: Gen 22:13; 44:33; Num 3:12 all of which deal unmistakably with substitution.

*"But does it mean instead of in Mt 20:28 and Mk. 10:45...? Either that, or else it means in exchange for, and each implies substitution"* [Dana & Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek

NT, p. 100. See also Morris, Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, p. 34-38].

In response to some who would deny this dominant meaning, Morris well remarks: "*But in any case even if...we take the substitutionary meaning out of the preposition, we have not taken it out of the passage, for the situation envisaged is one in which the many are condemned, their lives are forfeit. If Jesus gives His life 'a ransom for many' and thereby they are released from their condemnation, then a substitutionary transaction has taken place, understand the individual words as we will*" [Ibid, p. 36].

*hyper*'s meaning with the genitive case follows that of *anti*. See Erickson p. 814 who cites both Winer and Robertson in confirmation, and particularly the latter who remarks that only by doing violence to the context is it possible to get rid of the notion of 'instead of' for this preposition.

(ii) Specific vocabulary denotes sacrificial death

'Blood shed' ---> death. See ch. 3 in Morris for treatment of 'blood' in OT and NT [pp. 112-128]. Conclusions are clear: "*We conclude, then, that the evidence afforded by the use of the term dam in the Old Testament indicates that it signifies life violently taken...in short, death rather than life, and that this is supported by the references to atonement*" [p. 121]. The same applies to NT, blood signifies essentially death [p. 126],

or better, "*especially the life poured out in death...the symbol of sacrificial death*" [citing Armitage Robinson, Ephesians (p. 29), p. 128].

'Lamb of God' ---> sacrifice. Given the extensive OT background no other meaning is possible. See ch. 4 in Morris for treatment of this title [pp. 129-143].

(iii) Special term from OT -- Atonement

Etymologically, קָפַר (*kpr*) usually affirmed as designating 'to cover' but Zemek (pp. 60-61) well summarizes the information on etymology and usage:--

*"The question of the etymological meaning of the Hebrew root קָפַר is obscure. . . . The various Semitic analogies do not permit us to make a definitive distinction between 'to cover' and 'to wash away.' There are Semitic analogies for regarding forgiveness of sins both in terms of*

covering and in terms of washing away. . . . All in all, the solution of the problem is perhaps that the root leaves etymological play for both 'to cover' and 'to wash away'" (TDNT, s.v. "ἰλάσκειν," by K. Hermann, 3:302).

*"It has been suggested that the OT ritual symbolized a covering over of sin until it was dealt with in fact by the atonement of Christ. There is, however, very little evidence for this view"* (TWOT, s.v. כָּפַר ) by R. L. Harris, 1:452; for discussions of the historical efficacy of OT sacrifices, see: Hobart Freeman, "The Problem of Efficacy of Old Testament Sacrifices," Bulletin ETS [1962]; John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the OT," in Tradition and Testament [Chicago: Moody, 1981], pp. 59-75): *"The theological interpretation of these rites has often been influenced by partisan doctrinal considerations which do not derive from actual material and which incline our evaluation of it either to the one side or to the other. By contrast, it is essential to keep to the material itself. Certainly it would be a mistake to treat this uniformly. . . . Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Yahweh has provided and ordained blood as a means of atonement, and that blood is suitable and effective as such [emphasis added] in virtue of the נַפְשׁ, the soul or the life, which is contained in it"* (TDNT, 3:310).

The significant association of כָּפַר and פְּרִכּוֹ:

*"From the meaning of פְּרִכּוֹ "ransom," the meaning of כָּפַר can be better understood. It means "to atone by offering a substitute." The great majority of the usages concern the priestly ritual of sprinkling of the sacrificial blood thus "making an atonement" for the worshipper. . . . It seems clear that this word aptly illustrates the theology of reconciliation in the OT. The life of the sacrificial animal specifically symbolized by its blood was required in exchange for [emphasis added] the life of the worshipper. Sacrifice of animals in OT theology was . . . the symbolic expression of innocent life given for guilty life"* (TWOT, 1:453; cf. "The Role of Sacrifice" in: Gordon J. Wenham, The Book of Leviticus, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], pp. 25-29).

#### (iv) Specific closing observations

Paul specifically refers to Christ as 'our Passover' or 'our Paschal lamb' (1 Cor 5:7). Also recall Paul's references to Christ's blood having been shed, obviously pointing to sacrifice, and recalling OT statements that without bloodshed there is no remission of sins (e.g. Rom 3:35; 5:9; Eph 1:7; Col 1:20).

Hebrews highlights most effectively the two-fold perspective of Christ as both sacrificial victim and sacrifice-offering priest! [see Erickson, pp. 811-12]

In addition, the concept of one person voluntarily dying for another, or to pacify the gods, was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world. "A special composite word *hyperapothn'skein* ('to die for') had been formed to express it. The gospel that 'Christ died for us' would, therefore, have been readily intelligible to first-century pagan audiences" [Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pp. 63, fn.1].

The concept of atonement in the NT is, alongside of the idea of sacrifice and substitution, incorporated in several important word-groups, namely (a) Commercial terminology -- ἀγοράζω and λυτρόω, (b) Appeasement terminology - ἰλάσκομαι, and (c) Changed relationship terminology -- ἀλλάσσω.

b. Propitiation

[See Morris, chs. 5-6, and Stott, pp. 168-175]

It belongs to the language of appeasement and is directed to the need that arises from the reality of the wrath of God. It means as such the 'averting of wrath by means of an appropriate transaction or sacrifice.'

"The words of the *hilaskomai* group do not denote simple forgiveness or cancellation of sin, but that forgiveness or cancellation of sin which includes the turning away of God's wrath" [*Baker's Dictionary of Theol.*, s.v. "Propitiation" by Morris, p. 452].

There is no pagan concept of sacrifice here either.  
Where there is sin there is also wrath and judgment.  
There is also forgiveness with God,  
But forgiveness involves laying aside wrath.  
Now removal of wrath is not due to man securing an offering  
that impresses God with his earnestness,  
But to God Himself securing an offering by which He is appeased.

Stott puts it like this near the end of his brief but good treatment on this term (p. 175): "It is God himself who in holy wrath needs to be propitiated, God himself who in holy love undertook to do the propitiating, and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. Thus God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it his own self in his own Son when he took our place and died for us. There is no crudity here to

*evoke our ridicule, only the profundity of holy love to evoke our worship".*

Morris puts it this way: *"It is the combination of God's deep love for the sinner with His uncompromising reaction against sin which brings about what the Bible calls propitiation"* (p. 210).

There are two great realities herein:--

The reality and seriousness of God's reaction against sin

The reality and greatness of God's love which provided the gift which would avert His wrath from men.

Footnote: Where this term is replaced with the word **'expitiation'** there is usually a de-emphasis upon the wrath of God. Both Morris and Stott critique C.H. Dodds attempt to do just such a replacment.

### c. Reconciliation

[see Morris, ch. 7, pp. 214-250 and Stott, pp. 192-202]

It belongs to the language describing a changed relationship, from enmity to amity, and is directed to the need created by the alienation between God and man.

*"It is beyond dispute that Holy Scripture summarizes the work of Christ under the aspect of reconciliation. To be sure, there are various ways in which this word is used, for instance in the writings of Paul and a few times in those of John and in other books of both the Old and New Testaments, but wherever it is discussed it is evident that this matter lies at the heart of the gospel. . . The joy of this reconciliation occupies such a central place in Paul's preaching that we know it is not a minor part of salvation but ALL of salvation, for it concerns God's activity in Christ. For this reconciliation, however, Paul uses two words, namely, "katallage" and "hilasmos." When he speaks of katallage he always refers to the relationship of peace which is brought about by the death of Christ, to the communion in contrast with the previous enmity, to the reconciliation as the removal of all obstacles, to the access to the Father. . . Paul's other word for reconciliation, hilasmos, is also used by John when he writes, "and He is the propitiation for our sins" (I John 2:2, 4:10). . . Hilasmos refers more to the means of reconciliation, to that which effects the reconciliation. . . Hilasmos and hilasterion never imply the opposite of the katallage; rather, the katallage, the new relationship of peace after the enmity, is directly connected with the hilasmos, the taking away of sins." (Berkouwer, Work of Christ pp. 254-6).*

Recall that unsaved man is called an enemy of God--a term which denotes hostility (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21). In addition, it is helpful to note that in or near each major reconciliation passage there is reference to God's wrath. Enemy and wrath in juxtaposition!

d. Redemption

[See Morris, ch. 1, pp. 11-64, and Stott, pp. 175-182]

It belongs to the language of purchase and ransom and is directed to the need created by man's bondage to sin.

The terminology here includes 'to ransom,' 'to purchase,' 'to buy back' and 'to set free by the payment of a price.' It involves not only terms from the market place but perhaps specifically from the slave-market. In 1st Century when heard this word, thought of slave manumission or of being bought out of serious predicament.

*"It is important to realize that it is this idea of payment as the basis of release which is the reason for the existence for the whole (λύτρο-) word-group." [Morris, p. 12].*

The price is clear: 1 Pet 1:18 "the precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ."

The immediate contrast to gold and silver and the mention of blood means the reader (1) cannot mistake the transaction as being anything other than release by payment of a price, i.e. redemption, and (2) cannot mistake the transaction as being less than sacrifice.

Of importance on the other commercial term, ἀγοράζω, 'to frequent the forum' or 'to buy in the marketplace': when the object is a human being it is always used in the soteriological sense. The idea of divine ownership as a result of purchase comes out in this word [Morris, pp. 54-55].

As to the believer, then, this terminology is used to describe his being purchased out of the slavemarket of sin and set free from sin's bondage, BUT what should not be forgotten in so saying is that the believer is now a slave of God, for he was bought with a price. Set free, but a slave! (cf. Rom 6; 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23) As Morris puts in on these last two verses:

*"Believers are not brought by Christ into a liberty of selfish ease. Rather, since they have been bought by God at terrible cost, they have become God's slaves, to do His will" [p. 54].*

In Messianic contexts (Lk 1:68; 2:38; 24:21) indicates the long awaited intervention by the Almighty Saving God of Israel.

In eschatological contexts (Lk 21:28; Rom 8:23) certifies the consummation of redemption.

One question to ask about the atonement is “was it potential or actual?” As I read the various NT authors and their reflection on

I would encourage people to go to Grace to You website and under the resource section, get the transcript for the 2 week series by John MacArthur on “Actual Atonement.” <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Transcripts/90-277>

Jesus provided a real/actual atonement when He propitiated the wrath of God. He paid in full the wages of my sins and all the sins of all who would ever believe. There is no one in Hell who is there undeservedly. There are none there for whom Christ had atoned for their sins. In the same way that the Bible teaches both election and human responsibility, it also teaches both unlimited and limited aspects to the atonement. I know that I mess up the acronym from the “Calvinistic camp,” but I would hold somewhat to T.U.U.L.I.P. If you are looking for a tag for me, there isn’t one, except for possibly “Unlimited-Limited Atonement.”