

The Extent of the Atonement
An Argument for the Wesleyan Position

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Issue in Discourse

This paper seeks to answer the question, “For whom did Christ die?” While there are a variety of viewpoints on such a question, two major positions represent the debate. The first is the Calvinist position, which argues that Christ died to cover the sins only for those whom God elected before the foundation of the earth. The second is the Wesleyan position, which argues that Christ died to cover the sins of all people regardless of their eventual salvation. I will first examine both positions fairly, examine the Levitical teaching on atonement, and defend the view that I hold, beginning with an examination of the pivotal passages and closing with an overview of various doctrines and biblical theology pertinent to this discourse. Finally, I will respond to two major, anticipated objections those who hold the opposite position than myself may have with my argument.

Before moving through the positions, it is important to acknowledge several critical points on the relevance of this debate. In one sense, this issue is irrelevant to the salvation of believers, for in both positions, the sins of believers are covered. In another sense, though, this issue is relevant to evangelistic attitudes. Believers holding the Calvinist position may feel compelled to rely entirely on the work of the Holy Spirit and ignore active participation, contrary to believers holding the Wesleyan position who may feel compelled to rely entirely on active participation and ignore the Holy Spirit. While these are critiques of the two positions in their most extreme forms, I would argue there must be a balance that involves both the reliance on the Holy Spirit to do, move, and draw people to God *and* a sense of urgency to actively participate in the mission of

announcing the Kingdom of God. And it is my view that a majority of devout, God-fearing men and women who hold both of these positions share this desire for balance.

The third critical point to acknowledge in regards to relevance before beginning this discourse is the categorization of this issue. In theology, there are three categories: “die for,” “divide for,” and “debate and decide for.”¹ The “die for” category is the theology that is fundamental to the Christian faith—doctrines that one must affirm, such as the inerrancy of scripture, Jesus’ resurrection, etc. The “divide for” category is a second category where there will practically be no successful attempt to persuade, represented best by issues that define denominational differences; it is important to note that these distinctions are not salvation-altering, but issues where worshipping together would not make practical sense. An example of this, for some, could be women in ministry, style of worship, such as charismatic, Pentecostal, etc. The third category is “debate and decide for,” and in this category are the doctrines where there can be open debate, where persuasion is practical, and where those who hold different views can worship and fellowship together without any issues. I believe the issue in discourse is in this third category. I currently worship in a local church community whose official position on this very issue is different from mine but it does not bother me at all. There are devout, God-fearing men and women who hold both these positions, and I count myself blessed and enriched to engage in open, respectful dialogue about such issues. Other examples of this third category would include theories of creation, alcohol use, etc.²

¹ These terms are taken directly from systematic theology lectures given by Dr. Gerry Breshears, Chairman of the Division of Biblical and Theological studies at Western Seminary; although he separates the third point into two separate points, I think the two go hand-in-hand and so I place them together.

² I argue for and elaborate on this philosophy of “doing” theology elsewhere; however, this brief snapshot is an important premise to this discourse.

Major Positions

The Calvinist position, which states the atonement covers only those who God elected for salvation, is supported with a handful of scriptures. In Matthew 1:21, the son of Mary will save *his people* from their sins. The phrase λαὸν αὐτοῦ (*lay-on ow-too*) translates to “his people” in Greek; being in the genitive form, this phrase signals possession. Therefore, this phrase is translated correctly. Moreover, in Matthew 20:28 and Matthew 26:28, Jesus pours out his blood as a “ransom for many.” The word “many” seems to suggest that Jesus’ atonement does not apply to all—for “many” to be covered must therefore mean that some are not covered.

In John 6:37-40, all the Father gives to the Son will be kept, and not lost, by the Son; moreover, the Father’s will is that all who believe will receive salvation and the Son has come to do that, therefore, the Son’s death saves those who believe and subsequently receive salvation. This is a deductive conclusion, which concludes Jesus’ atonement saves those who believe. In John 10:11-16, Jesus is described as a good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. In John 11:51-52, Jesus died for the nation and all of God’s people scattered abroad. This again seems to suggest that Jesus’ death was not intended to cover all people but only those who were chosen by God. Lastly, in Acts 20:28, the blood of Jesus specifically purchased the Church.

The above scriptures as well as a few other key texts from the New Testament³ provide a framework to support the Calvinist position that the atonement of Jesus covers all who God elected for salvation before the formation of the universe.

The Wesleyan position, which states that Christ’s death covered the sins of all people, regardless of their eventual salvation, is also supported with a handful of

³ Eph. 1:4, 5:25, Heb. 7:25, 9:28, among others.

scriptures. The closest word-for-word translation of John 3:16 reads, "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only son in order that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life." The first half is worded slightly different from the childhood memorization version most churches use (NIV); however, all the concepts remain the same, particularly the words "world" and "all." These words seem to suggest that Jesus' atonement was meant to cover all, not some. Two chapters prior in John 1:29, John the Baptizer, upon sight of Jesus coming down to him to be baptized, declared him the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Later, in John 4:42, when the people came to believe in Jesus following the testimony of the Samaritan woman, they declared Jesus to be the savior of the world.

1 Timothy is also a source for the Wesleyan position. Particularly in 1 Tim. 2:3-6, it is declared that God's desire is for all people to be saved. The Greek word πάντας translates appropriately to "all" or "everyone." It is peculiar that in addition to God desiring all to be saved, Jesus is described as one who gave himself as a ransom for "all." If God truly desires all to be saved, then all must therefore be capable of being saved; even if all ultimately are not saved, no one can claim they did not have a realistic chance. In 1 Tim. 4:10, Jesus is described as "the savior of everyone, especially believers," which uses the same word as in the previous passage to indicate all. In 1 Tim. 1:15, Jesus came to save ἁμαρτωλοῦς (*ha-mart-owe-loose*) "sinners," which is in the accusative plural form. There is no numerical designation in this verse alone to indicate the amount of sinners saved, other than being in the plural form; however, in conjunction with Rom. 3:23-24, "for all have sinned and are falling short...and all are justified freely by his grace...that came by Jesus." It is logical, since both passages

share the same author, to suggest that Paul has the same thing in mind. Thus, Jesus came to save all.

The above scriptures as well as a few other key texts from the New Testament⁴ provide a framework to support the Wesleyan position that the atonement of Jesus covers all people, regardless of their eventual salvation.

Levitical Teaching on Atonement

Any discussion on the atonement, whether it be in regards to what atonement accomplishes, or our question in discourse, must begin with Leviticus 16. There are two goats used: the first whose life is taken and offered as an offering, and a second who is presented alive as a scapegoat (vs. 9-10). The priest slaughters the goat of the sin offering “for the people” (15). The priest then lays his hands on the scapegoat and confesses all the sins of all the people of Israel over the scapegoat and sends it, along with the sins it bears, into the wilderness where the sins will be released (20-22). This act was to be done regularly to cleanse the people of Israel and clear them of their sin debt before the Lord (30). It is undoubtedly true that New Testament language about Jesus’ atonement explicitly parallels this Levitical language; therefore, any conclusion from either position regarding Jesus’ atonement must be consistent with the Levitical teachings on atonement.

Scholars are rather confused with the appropriation of Christ’s atonement to the Levitical atonement because of the two goats and the one Jesus. If Jesus is the goat offered as a sin offering, then where does the scapegoat come into play? Some argue that Jesus is the scapegoat and not the slain goat while others go to great lengths to

⁴ Heb. 2:9, 1 John 2:2-9, Rom. 5:6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet. 2:1, 3:9, among others

argue that the goat and scapegoat are mere illustrations.⁵ I instead argue that Jesus is both. The Levitical code mentions two goats not to emphasize the two-ness, but to emphasize the roles the two goats play. Aaron could not send the slain goat deep into the wilderness because the slain goat was slain. Contrarily, Jesus was the slain goat as the sin offering for the people *and* was the scapegoat on whom the sins of the world were confessed and subsequently bore those sins deep into the wilderness where they were released, because he was presented alive through the resurrection.

Paul says, in Eph. 4:8-10, when Jesus died he descended into the lower parts of the earth. Peter says in 1 Pet. 4:6 says Jesus preached the gospel to all, even the dead. More specifically, Peter also said in 1 Pet. 3:18-20 that Jesus went to proclaim the gospel to the “spirits now in prison,” referring to those who had committed tremendous evil in the days of Noah that prompted God to regret creating man and subsequently flooded the earth to rid of them.⁶ While no biblical data would suggest explicitly that Jesus carried the sins of the world *during* this deep descension to the dead to preach the gospel, the role of the offering goat was to take away sins spiritually and the role of the scapegoat was to take away sins physically. Jesus’ descension into the dead immediately following his death could very well be a fulfillment of this role of the scapegoat *and* the offering goat; both roles through the singular goat-figure Jesus.

⁵ Mathews, Kenneth. “The Atonement and the Scapegoat: Leviticus 16 by Dr. Kenneth Mathews.” Christianity Today. April 15, 2014. // Feinberg, Charles L. “The Scapegoat of Leviticus Sixteen.” Bibliotheca Sacra 115, 1958, pages 320-333.

Part of the dilemma is there is no clear interpretation of the Hebrew word “azazel” making it difficult to understand its function. Translations such as HCSB do not even translate it, instead transliterating it like most translations do with Nephilim.

⁶ I argue elsewhere of the connections between the Sons of God in Genesis 6, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, and this writing of Peter that led the early Church to conclude in the Apostle’s Creed that Jesus “descended into hell.”

Arguments for the Wesleyan Position

Before diving into the arguments in favor of the Wesleyan position, a response to one of the points in the Calvinist position is necessary, specifically their conclusions drawn from Matthew 20:28 and 26:28, that Jesus was a ransom for many. A ransom cannot be equated with the saving that takes place as a result of the ransom. In hostage crises, sometimes a ransom is required; however, the ransom and the release of the hostage is not the same action—the action of the paid ransom prompts the action of the release. The action of paying the ransom is thus a prerequisite for the action of saving the hostage. It is important in this debate not to confuse atonement, which was Jesus' death, with the resurrection, which was Jesus' raised life. To equate these two would be incorrect for both carry different implications, as will be discussed further in this section.

I will now discuss six pivotal passages before I examine the key theological doctrines affected most by their implications. The first of these is Rom. 5:10-11, *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, will we be saved by his life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we now have received reconciliation.* This passage seems to suggest a layered reconciliatory model. There is, in a sense, some reconciliation in Jesus' death and then more reconciliation in his resurrection. A Calvinist reading this might quickly note that Paul is writing to the Saints in Rome; but while that is true, in the context of this specific passage Paul is speaking more so in generalities and not specificities.

Just a few verses later, in Rom. 5:18-21, Paul says, *So then, as through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone, so also through one righteous act there is*

life-giving justification for everyone...so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through righteousness, resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This juxtaposition of Jesus' atonement with Adam in the Garden highlights an important parallel. Only a small minority of theologians would deny Adam's singular, unholy action adversely affected all humans, yet there is much less agreement on the notion that Jesus' singular, holy action favorably affected all humans. Moreover, in verse 20, Paul suggests that where the law multiplied sin, grace multiplied even more. In light of verses 18-21, compared to Paul's preceding arguments in 10-11, juxtaposed to the "all-ness" impact of Adam's sin, I must then conclude that Jesus' atonement also had an "all-ness" aspect to it.

2 Peter 2:1 is quite peculiar: *But there were also false teachers among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, and will bring swift destruction on themselves.* In various other passages in scripture, false teachers are condemned of their grave sin, yet Jesus *bought* them. False teachers, as explained in the epistles, will not receive salvation, yet they were still purchased by Jesus' atonement. This is a critical question for the Calvinist: how can the extent of the atonement be limited only to believers when by this passage the purchase of the atonement so clearly includes false teachers? One must conclude then that the atonement covers more than just believers.

1 John 2:2 continues this point that Jesus' atonement covers more than just believers, *Jesus is the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.* 1 Timothy 4:10 also echoes this point, *In fact, we labor and strive for*

this, because we have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe. Both these verses make significant claims relevant to this discourse: “Not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world;” and “the Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe.” These two vital verses suggest two major points. The first is that the atonement of Jesus certainly covered *more* than only believers. The second is that there are degrees or levels to the application of the works of Jesus; that unbelievers still receive some benefit from the atonement of Jesus, albeit believers receive more benefit. I would suggest that the benefit received by unbelievers is that their sins are covered. To be sure, I am not suggesting that all are saved, for in the confines of the work of Jesus, as previously noted, I am separating Jesus’ act of dying and his act of being raised to life.

The atonement covers all of sin, allowing all the opportunity to receive salvation through the gospel. Romans 5:10-11 speaks of this as well, saying there was reconciliation in Jesus’ death, but much more reconciliation in his raised life. Moreover, the reconciliation received in his raised life is described as salvific reconciliation; the reconciliation received in his death is *not* described as salvific. Ephesians 1:7-14 expands on this as well, stating the reconciliation received in Jesus’ death was the covering of sin, but that an additional benefit—the reception of an inheritance—is given to those who respond to the gospel with belief. Therefore, I conclude that the grace in Jesus’ resurrection is applied only to those who believe, whereas the grace in Jesus’ death, namely the covering of sin, is applied to all.

This conclusion I have made carries with it implications that bring to question other important doctrines, namely foreknowledge, predestination, and sanctification. In

Colossians 1:22, Paul says, *But now He has reconciled you by His physical body through His death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before Him.* It is my view that in God's sovereignty, he knew before the creation of the universe all who would believe.⁷ Many people, though, use predestination and election interchangeably, and that is wrong in my view. To be elected is to be chosen whereas to be predestined is to be given a purpose. In just about every passage of scripture dealing with predestination, the predestined purpose for the foreknown believers is for us to be conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. God foreknew who would believe the gospel; therefore, elected them to receive the result for that belief *and* predestined them to be conformed to the image of Christ. This notion coincides with the aforementioned notion that there are two levels to the work of Christ: the first that covers all sins (through his death), and the second that saves, sanctifies, and enables one for good works in preparation for eternal life (through his raised life).

Objections

The two primary objections my devout and God-fearing Calvinist brothers might make is that to suggest unbelievers receive reconciliation in anyway would entitle them to salvation, and that if there is just one atonement, there must also only be just one salvation. My response to such observations is that if covering of sin is all that is required to receive full, eternal salvation, then Jesus' resurrection was unnecessary. Furthermore, in Hebrews 7:23-28, Jesus is described as a high priest who made one offering that covered two sets of people: their own and those of all the people.

⁷ John 10:27-30, Eph. 1:5, among others.

Therefore, Jesus' one atonement *is* able to cover two different sets of people in different ways. There is different application from the death and from the life.

Moreover, if Jesus' death was all that was necessary, then his death was enough; however, both the Calvinist and the Wesleyan would affirm that Jesus' death alone was not enough, which is why he was raised. His death was enough to cover all of sins, but not to save all; the covering that all receive is a reconciliation for the death required from our sin, which is why a second level of reconciliation is received through his resurrection. Christ's resurrection serves as a sign that he was who he said he was, and this is why the gospel hangs on the belief in the resurrection. By believing in the resurrection, one is indicating a belief that the sign was true, that Jesus really was (and still is) the Son of God and Messiah.

Complete reconciliation, as Heb. 7:25 states, is still given by grace to those who believe. Even those who believe do not in and of themselves deserve eternal life in the presence of God, but God has chosen to give that complete reconciliation to those who believe the gospel. If we believe the gospel, but our sins were not forgiven, then we could not be in the presence of God. Heb. 10:19-22 says, *Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way He has opened for us through the veil (that is, His flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.* By Jesus' death, our hearts were sprinkled clean of evil, and we are able to be in God's presence. This harkens back to the Levitical code that required one to be cleansed of sin before entering the Holy of Holies.

We, having our sins covered through the death of Jesus, can be in God's presence, but the ability to be in God's presence temporarily, such as in the temple, does not equate to being in God's presence eternally. The singular atonement is a partial reconciliation, giving each individual the ability to be drawn near to God's presence, and to receive complete reconciliation if they follow the one criterion, which is belief in the resurrection. Therefore, with aforementioned scriptures indicating so, I must affirm there are levels of reconciliation, but that does not equate to universal eternal life; the covering of sin in the atonement does not equate with acceptance of the resurrection. The atonement is, in a sense, a prerequisite for complete reconciliation. This returns us to God's stated desire for all humanity: that all would be saved. To be sure, that God "desires all to be saved" does not mean all will be saved but instead that all are able to be saved; this therefore requires the view that Jesus' atoning death applies to all.

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