



For whom did Jesus die? Exploring the extent and intent of the atonement

1. What are the issues (and why do they matter)?

1.1 Orienting the discussion

a) What do we mean by 'atonement'?

b) What do we mean by its 'extent'?

c) What do we mean by its 'intent'?

1.2 What's (not) at stake?

a) The sufficiency of Jesus' death

b) The efficacy of Jesus' atoning death

c) The universal offer of the gospel: the gospel is for all people

d) The limited nature of the atonement (rather, the question is: who puts the limits on it)

1.3 Why does this matter?

a) A litmus test of our ultimate theological authority?

b) Evangelism: how, what and why?

2. The extent and intent of the atonement: what are the major viewpoints?

2.1 Unlimited Atonement (Classic Arminian position)

a) Definition

b) Some Key Texts

John 3:16 (c.f. John 1:29)

1 Tim 2:4-6

1 Tim 4:10

Titus 2:11

2 Pet 3:9

1 John 2:2 (c.f. 4:14)

c) Key theological arguments

God's character (God is love)

Universal *offer* implies universal *possibility*

Moral *ought* necessitates moral *can*

d) Representative proponents(s)

Arminius

John Wesley (*Free Grace*):

[Unconditional election] represents our blessed Lord... as an hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity. For it cannot be denied that he everywhere speaks *as if he was* willing that all men should be saved. Therefore, to say *he was not* willing that all men should be saved is to represent him as a mere hypocrite and dissembler...

[Unconditional election] represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust. More false; because the devil, liar as he is, hath never said he 'willeth all men to be saved.' More unjust; because the devil cannot, if he would, be guilty of such injustice as you ascribe to God when you say that God condemned millions of souls to everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels for continuing in sin, which for want of that grace he will not give them, they cannot avoid. And more cruel... happy as he is, to doom his creatures, whether they will or no, to endless misery.

2.2 Limited Atonement ('5 Point Calvinism')

a) Definition

Sufficient for all (potentially, in theory); Efficient for the elect only

Canons of Dort (1619): Head II; Article 8

For this was the sovereign counsel, and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them *alone* [emphasis added] the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to him by the Father.

b) Some Key Texts

John 6:37-40

John 10:11, 15

Acts 20:28

Rom 8:31-39 (esp. 31-33)

Eph 5:25

Titus 2:14

c) Key theological arguments

Limited atonement emphasizes the efficacy of Jesus' work

Limited atonement emphasizes the Trinitarian shape of the atonement

Limited atonement emphasizes God's sovereignty

Limited atonement avoids a 'double payment' for sin

Limited atonement best deals with the sin of unbelief

d) Representative proponent(s)

John Owen:

To which I add this dilemma to our Universalists:- God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either all the sins of men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved... If the second, this is it which we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of the elect in the world. If the first, why, then, are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins?¹

¹ W.H. Goold (ed.), *The Works of John Owen*, 10 (London: Banner of Truth, 1967) 173-174.

2.3 --

a) Definition

Sufficient for all (in actuality); Efficient for the elect only

With Arminians...

With Calvinists...

b) A reformation-era proponent: Moses Amyraut

c) A contemporary proponent of a ‘multi-intentional’ view: Bruce Ware

i) Definition (in Ware’s words):

God’s intentions in the death of Christ are complex not simple, multiple not single: 1) Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own, his elect. 2) Christ died for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people making it possible for all who believe to be saved. 3) Christ died for the purpose of securing the *bona fide* offer of salvation to all people everywhere. 4) Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation for those who hear and reject the gospel that has been genuinely offered to them. 5) Christ died for the purpose of reconciling *all* things to the Father.²

ii) Key Theological Arguments

Best of both sides

1) The four-point Calvinist view *rejects some of the Arminian argumentation for unlimited atonement*. For example, four point Calvinism will deny that the universal love of God or God’s universal desire that all be saved demands unlimited atonement. Rather, as with five point Calvinism, this view will argue that there is a sense in which God does love all and want all saved, but Scripture also clearly affirms God’s special love only for the elect manifest in his elective purpose to choose, call and save only some, to the glory of his name.

2) However, the four point Calvinist view also holds that God’s elective purpose does not entail limited atonement, for such a limitation a) conflicts with the most natural and likely understandings of some of Scripture’s teaching, b) conflicts with the scope of divine purposes

² B.A. Ware, “Extent of the Atonement: Outline of the Issue, Positions, Key Texts, and Key Theological Arguments.”

Scripture indicates are accomplished by the atonement, and c) is not needed to establish the certainty of God's saving of his elect (i.e., what limited atonement advocates care most about).

Over and against single-intention views, a multiple intentions argument...

Much of the debate over the issue of the extent of the atonement is owing to the fact that a single intention (rather than multiple intentions) was sought by both sides. As soon as one admits *multiple intentions* for the atonement, one then can account for the variety of biblical teaching. Any single intention view will have difficulty reconciling its position with one or more strains of biblical teaching.

d) Evaluation

i) Nay

Warfield asks:

How is it possible to contend that God gave his Son to die for all men, alike and equally; and at the same time declare that when he gave his Son to die, he already fully intended that his death should not avail for all men alike and equally, but only for some which eh would select (which... because he is God and there is no subsequence of time in his decrees, he had already selected) to be its beneficiaries?³

ii) Yay

Ryle:

I have long come to the conclusion that men may be more systematic in their statements than the Bible, and may be led into grave error by idolatrous veneration of a system.

3. A Little Exercise (regarding to the extent of the atonement) for Young Theologians

A parable courtesy of Walls and Dongell...

Imagine this scenario: Parents from around the world send their children to a rustic camp set in the midst of Kentucky's Bluegrass Region for the summer. All one hundred children become infected with a deadly virus during the first week of the camp and have but one month to live. Fortunately, a specialist who has seen a similar outbreak in New Mexico knows of a treatment: the Yucca cactus, when ground to a pulp, blended with vinegar and ingested over the period of three weeks, will completely counteract the virus and return the children to full health.

Unfortunately, every single child finds the smell of the concoction so utterly repulsive that no amount of coaxing by even the best of counsellors succeeds in getting anyone to eat it. To make matters worse, the virus somehow drives the children mad, prompting them to lash out in foul language at those trying to

³ B.B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942) 94.

help them and accuse their counsellors of gross misconduct. Luckily, yet another specialist develops a serum that, when injected hypodermically, creates within the child an insatiable passion for eating the Yucca mash.

Now imagine that news of the virus reaches the alarmed parents. The camp director immediately sends a letter reassuring them that he *loves* all their children, that he is offering to *all* their children the life-saving Yucca mash in *liberal quantities*, that he will supply this expensive preparation *without charge* and that all children will be brought to the cafeteria three times a day and *strongly urged* to eat.

Three months later, the parents arrive in the Bluegrass to retrieve their children. But at the campsite, they are stunned to discover that seventy-five children have died from the virus. Interrogating the director, they discover that the life-saving food could not work its wonders unless the child was injected with the appetite stimulant. On further questioning, they discover that the director had chosen to inject only twenty-five children with the serum, though he had an unlimited supply at his disposal. To say nothing about their anger and grief, the parents are utterly perplexed.

In chorus they immediately challenge the claim made by the camp director in the letter they had received, asking, ‘How can you claim to have loved the seventy-five dead children if you could have saved them but didn’t?’ We can imagine just how unconvincing some of the director’s answers might be: ‘But I offered the Yucca mash liberally, freely and passionately.’ Yes, but all this talk about the merits of the mixture misses the issue of the serum! ‘But the children are to blame, since they ate exactly what they wanted and violently rejected my help!’ Yes, but you fully controlled exactly what each child wanted! ‘But note how much attention I lavished on these children in the last weeks of their lives.’ And you call this love – to provide the most exciting camp activities to a child as she dies, while you withhold the very serum of life?

The director’s claim to love all children rings hollow at best, deceptive at worst. If love will not employ all available means to rescue someone from ultimate loss, it is hard to hear the announcement of universal love as good news. Indeed, it is hard to hear it as love at all. In our judgment, it becomes meaningless to claim that God wishes to save all while also insisting that God refrains from making the salvation of all possible. What are we to make of a God whose walk does not match his talk?⁴

Some questions to ponder...

1. Who/what do each of the characters/features of the parable represent?
2. What Biblical passages/themes come to mind that support the thrust of the story?
3. What Biblical passages/themes come to mind that challenge/complicate the thrust of the story?

⁴ J.L. Walls and J.R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) 54-55.