

Limited Atonement: A Work With An Aim

The atonement of Jesus Christ for sin is at the core of the Christian faith. Anyone who possesses true saving faith must have at least a basic understanding of the atonement. To a child it may be as simple as, “Jesus died for my sins.” To the adult it is probably more clearly understood as the death of Christ, which paid the penalty that no person could pay in order to satisfy the holiness of God. I do not aim solely to define the atonement, but rather to explain the characteristics of the atonement that are disputed today. The question that arises among many evangelicals is, “What is the extent of the atonement?” In order to do this we will investigate the aim of the atonement, which I will argue is explicitly and exclusively for the elect of God.

Before we examine the aim of the atonement we must understand that there is a mystery to the atonement. Many of the “why” questions that have arisen over history cannot be completely answered by our finite minds. These questions are not new today, nor will one find the answers to the questions that have been asked and thought through for hundreds of years. Like all things related to the Gospel, they originate with God, and His ways are not our ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8) But I will seek to make clear that the Scriptures do not leave a mystery what the aim and extent of the atonement is.

The first aspect that we will investigate in understanding the aim of the atonement is the character of God in the revelation of salvation. After the fall of Adam, God promised that the seed of Eve would be bruised by the Devil, and yet the seed would crush the Devil. We know the seed to be Jesus Christ Himself. The exclusivity of salvation becomes clearer when God chose Abraham out of all the people of the earth and promised a particular inheritance to him. This inheritance, a land and nation, was a type of the eternal inheritance that awaits those who by faith in God will enter into heaven. Calvin makes this point clear when he states, “this is not for the sake of earthly happiness, but because he delivers them from death, he preserves forever and keeps in his everlasting mercy those whom he has chosen as his people.”¹ And later states, “For he did not declare that he would be a God to their bodies alone, but especially to their souls.”² The inheritance is a spiritual one, of which its revelation is delivered to a particular person in its genesis. This particular person, Abraham, was the father of the nation of Israel, whom God kept as His own apart from all other nations of the earth. The act of choosing is a part of God’s character. He is not simply the Divine Creator who set things in motion to be worked out for some unknown end. All of His acts possess purpose and purpose in action assumes choice.

The Old Testament foretells the coming atonement in several passages (Daniel 9:24-27; Zechariah 13:1). The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming

¹ McNeil, John T, ed. Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion. Book 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, page 435.

² Ibid, page 435.

Messiah, “Surely our griefs He himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 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. 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 53:4-6) and later, “But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:10-11) In these passages we see the particularity of the atonement in the phrases “the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” and “will justify the many”. The Messiah was prophesied to give up his life for a specific group. This pattern is congruent with God’s nature of choosing for Himself a specific people. In the Old Testament it was the nation of Israel (although the entire nation was not saved, but only those who were wrought by grace) and then in the New Testament we see that God’s grace would extend to a specific people, spread throughout the earth.

Although the exclusivity of this revelation is made clear throughout the Old Testament, wherein God has chosen one nation as his people, in the promise to Abraham we also see a universality of the promise in that God would bless all the families of the earth through him. (Genesis 12:3) And so we

must discern if indeed all the families of the earth have actually received that blessing, namely the eternal spiritual life. We know this is not the case for many have been called the enemies of God. (1 Samuel 30:26; 2 Samuel 12:14; Psalm 37:20) We can therefore see that this promise of blessing is then aimed at a particular people, specifically those who have actually received it. And of these are those who are not of the nation of Israel, the Gentiles, who have been grafted into Abraham's spiritual family to receive the eternal blessing, which we understand from the New Testament.

Of course the idea of particular redemption is made clearer in the New Covenant. In John 10:11, Jesus says, "The good shepherd lays down his life for **the sheep**," and later in 10:15, "I lay down my life for **the sheep**." Although some may misinterpret the sheep to mean all mankind, Jesus makes clear that there is a distinction between the sheep and those who are not. (Matthew 25:32) In Ephesians 5:25, Paul writes, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up **for her**". Jesus said, in Mark 10:45, that He "came not be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for **many**." Thomas C. Oden misrepresents the meaning of the word "many" here when he writes, "The atonement that is sufficient for all is not effectually received by all."³ This is to say that man determines the effectiveness of God acts, thereby reducing God to a subordinate role under man and removing the particular object of the atonement. There is indeed a particular object of Christ's atonement. The

³ Oden, Thomas C. The Word of Life, Systematic Theology. Vol. 2. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, p. 390.

effect of this particular aim is spoken of by Christ in John 10:27-28 when he says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.” This act of the atonement was a purchasing act (an act of payment), which Acts 20:28 teaches was specifically for the church: “...shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

In contrast to the use of the word “many” is the use of the words “world” and “all”. We find in Scripture that these words do not always mean everyone. In Romans 11:12, Paul writes, “Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” John Murray comments on this passage stating:

Are we to suppose that he meant that the trespass of Israel brought the riches of which he is speaking to every person who had been, is now, and ever will be in the world...it is not true that every member of the human race was enriched by the fall of Israel.⁴

Another passage that illustrates the use of these terms is Romans 5:18 where Paul writes, “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” Are we to believe that all men have received eternal life from Paul’s statement here? Murray expounds, “We cannot believe that such justification passed upon every member of the human race

⁴ Murray, John. Redemption Accomplished and Applied. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 60.

unless we believe that all men will ultimately be saved.”⁵ This is contrary, as we have seen and will continue to see, to the teaching of the Bible. A final passage to consider is 1 Corinthians 6:12 where Paul writes, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.” Paul is not saying that everything is lawful in an absolute sense. He would not condone that profaning God’s name or worship something or someone other than God is lawful.⁶ His use of the word “all” here is hyperbole and is not to be taken literally. We must engage a proper hermeneutic for these terms here as well as in other passages, as we will see, if we are to interpret them accurately. Words such as “all”, “everyone” and “world” must be qualified by what the Scriptures teach elsewhere. It is ironic that many of those who reject particular redemption will engage this same hermeneutic in other passages where it seemingly meets their needs (and often it is accurate) yet reject it according to the intent of the atonement. Scripture clearly teaches that God has purpose to all His works, and man’s acts will never supercede God’s intention.

And yet others will argue from other passages of Scripture that Christ’s atonement was aimed at the entire world. It is true that Christ’s atonement was sufficient for every sin ever committed, and yet we know that all sinners will not enjoy the inheritance promised to Abraham of eternal spiritual life. John the Baptist proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the

⁵ Ibid, p. 60.

⁶ Ibid, p. 60.

sin of the world.” (John 1:29) And Paul writes that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Timothy 2:6) These and other passages seem to indicate that Christ’s atonement for sin was aimed at everyone. However, as we have stated, not everyone is saved. So then there are two options. Either Christ’s atoning work was impotent in that the whole world is not saved, or this work was aimed at a particular people and the word “world” indicates something beyond simply all people. If we were to believe that Christ died for everyone, then this would deny God’s omniscience. He knew that some would be eternally punished just as He knew there were those who were already committed to such an end, including those who perished in the flood and in the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. His death did not include these, for it did, it would have been an ineffective death.⁷ It would also rob worth and power from Christ’s death. For to say that He died for the entire world, but that not all are saved, is to say that His death was somehow lacking. For, for Him to die to save, and yet not save some for which He died, is to die a lacking and inadequate death which simply would be heretical to ascribe to Jesus Christ, God with us. So we can see that Christ did not die for everyone, the whole world, but only for the elect.

In order to understand the use of the word “world” we need first to see the nature of the world. Since the fall of Adam, the world has been in bondage to sin and is therefore characterized by death. In other words, the world is

⁷ Unknown. This flow of thought is not my own, but as much as I have searched for the source, I cannot remember or find it. It is possible that I am recalling something from class or another conversation that I have had with an individual, or it could be that I read this before I began the research for this paper. Nonetheless, I do not want to appear to take credit for this thought in relation to God’s omniscience.

dead, and all that is in it will die, and those who are “of the world” are of death. Jesus makes a distinction between the world and those who belong to God when He says in John 15:19, “If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” We see that God has made a choice out of the world, to select some to be his own. Most will accept this to be true when applied to the Israelites. However, when it comes to the Church, many have a difficult time accepting that God is still in the business of choosing. I would argue that this is part of His character as displayed throughout Scripture. The word “world” then indicates something besides “everyone” when pertaining to the aim of the atonement. I would argue further that the use of the word “world” shows the degree to which God will has elected His people. For the contemporaries of Christ and the New Testament writers, this was a difficult thing to grasp. They understood that they, as Jews, were God’s chosen people. But God had promised to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth. The word “world”, I would argue, is used then to show the extent of the call of the Gospel and the securing of the elect. In Revelation 7:9-10 we read that there will be people from every nation and tongue worshipping the Lamb of God in heaven. Also, in John 11:51-52 we read that Caiaphas “did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” In short, that “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son,” does not mean that Christ

died to save every person, but that all whom Christ died for includes individuals from the whole world.

The word “world” also has significance, however, in relation to that of creation. Because the world is fallen, it too needs salvation. In Romans 8:19-22 we read, “For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.” Creation itself has suffered as the result of sin. Death and decay now characterize that which was originally intended to thrive and produce. And so not only will the elect of God receive new bodies, as they have become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), so the earth will receive newness. (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1) Thus we can now more fully understand the great title of Christ as Savior of the World.

The last point I should make about the use of the word “world” relates to that of the human race. The human race was intended to serve as a cohesive God-glorifying body. But when sin entered the world, the ability of mankind as a whole to honor God deceased. And so, Christ, the Savior of the World, came that He might redeem mankind, not in the sense that He should redeem all men, but that the human race might in the end return to its given purpose. Benjamin B. Warfield writes:

When the Scriptures say that Christ came to save the world, that he does save the world, and that the world shall be saved by him,

they do not mean that there is no human being whom he did not come to save, whom he does not save, who is not saved by him. They mean that he came to save and does save the human race; and that the human race is being led by God into a racial salvation: that in the age-long development of the race of men, it will attain at last to a complete salvation, and our eyes will be greeted with the glorious spectacle of a saved world.⁸

In other words, mankind will once again regain her divine purpose, not according to her own ability or her good works, but according only to the sovereign will of God.

Those who have objected to particular redemption reduce the atoning work of Christ to an impotent act. They also reduce the will of God to an impotent will. Thomas C. Oden writes, “God primordially willed the salvation of all; the reason that some do not share in his grace must be found in their own self-determining will.”⁹ There are two mistakes that Oden makes in this statement. He first asserts that God “willed salvation of all.” We must distinguish here between God’s will and His desire. For God to desire all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) means simply that God did not create mankind (as a group) with the purpose of being damned. Men were damned as a result of sin. God created man to glorify Him and since sin separated man from God, His act of salvation of the elect brings Him glory, as does the subsequent punishment of those who are His enemies. God’s will, as opposed to His desire, is His purpose. We know that God did not purpose all men to be saved

⁸ Warfield, Benjamin B. The Plan of Salvation. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, p. 105.

⁹ Oden, Thomas C. The Word of Life, Systematic Theology. Vol. 2. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, p. 388.

because not all men are saved and His purposes do not fail. (Job 42:2; Isaiah 46:10) The second mistake that Oden makes in his statement is to say that God's "grace must be found in their own self-determining will." The Scriptures teach that man is dead in his sins (Ephesians 2:1) and therefore does not have the resources to find God's grace. Man's will is enslaved to sin (Romans 7:14) and he therefore cannot possess any beneficial self-determining attributes. All that is of self, in a pre-regenerate state, leads to sin. It is only as a result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that one can respond (irresistibly) to the grace of God. Another grievous mistake that Oden makes is in his statement, "It is not the atonement that is limited, but our receptivity to it."¹⁰ This is to say that man can resist the purpose of God. In Isaiah 14:27 it is written, "For the Lord of Hosts has planned, who can frustrate it?", and in Isaiah 43:7 God speaks and says, "Even from eternity I am He; and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?", and lastly Paul writes in Romans 9:19, "Who can resist his will?" Seeing this truth we look to Ephesians 1:11 where Paul writes, "we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." The spiritual inheritance, earned by the atoning work of Christ was purposed before the foundations of the world. The will by which men are saved is not their own, but God's. John 1:12-13 states, "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, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 388.

the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” It is God who wills and acts in us that we would believe. (Philippians 2:13) I would ask, “Who can then frustrate the plan of God to accomplish His atoning work?” The answer is of course, “No one.”

We would also do well to understand the eternal plan of salvation if we are to understand the intent of the atonement. If salvation is rooted in the sovereign love of God (and we have been taught that it is), then we can see that God’s plan to save those whom He has, possesses its origins in eternity. In Acts 2:23, we read, “this Man delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.” Peter writes, “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.” (1 Peter 1:20-21) Warfield writes:

And as a really substitutive atonement which actually saves cannot be universal because obviously all men are not saved, in the interests of the integrity of the atonement it insists that particularism has entered into the saving process prior, in the order of thought, to the atonement.¹¹

This eternal plan of God had a particular aim, specifically the elect, which is made clear in Romans 5:8, “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died **for us.**” In writing of the Revelation, John explained that there would be those who would worship the beast whose names had not been

¹¹ Warfield, Benjamin B. The Plan of Salvation. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, p. 98.

written in the Book of Life. Revelation 13:8 states, “And all who dwell on the earth will worship him (the beast), everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.” We see that those who would worship the beast, and thus not God, were determined (written or not written in the Book of Life) before the world was created. A good hermeneutic would demand of us that we, in understanding this eternal plan, would interpret those passages which appear to indicate an unlimited atonement, as that of particular redemption instead.

An additional element of importance in understanding the intent of the atonement is to recognize that the atonement occurred at a point in time, and at the point in time was sufficient (it was necessary only once) and satisfied the Father. The writer of Hebrews affirms the once-for-all condition of Christ’s atonement when he writes, “who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.” (Hebrews 7:27) And again later he writes, “so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the **sins of many**, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.” (Hebrews 9:28) His atoning work was an act that accomplished a specific purpose, that was ordained in eternity, and that completely satisfied the Father. This specific purpose was to bear the sins of those “who eagerly await him”, he being just dying for the unjust, “For Christ also died for sins once for all...in order that He might **bring us** to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” (1 Peter 3:18) And

in this work of bringing us to God, the Father was pleased. (Ephesians 5:2) He was not waiting to be pleased if and when we responded, but was pleased once for all by Christ's atonement, knowing the elect had been secured.

We must also understand the role of faith in the application of atonement. It is at this point that those who hold to a universal atonement differ from those who adhere to particular redemption. Charles Ryrie states, "The atonement of Christ paid for the sins of the whole world, but the individual must appropriate that payment through faith."¹² The one who holds to particular redemption would agree with this statement but would attribute the application of faith to the divine work of God alone. Ryrie uses the illustration of the Passover Lamb, the blood of which was to cover all of Israel, but was only effective for those who applied it to their doorposts. Even in this instance we must accept that God gave the faith for those individuals to respond if we hold true the Word of God when Jesus spoke in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." The faith that leads to justification is not the result of man mustering it up of his own accord, but is rather applied by the Holy Spirit according to the election of the Father. Therefore, man does not appropriate, or take possession of this payment through faith today anymore than those who applied the blood of the Passover Lamb to their doorposts without trusting God, by faith, for the atoning of their sins (for we also know that the blood of these animals did not literally atone for the sins of the people but were only a

¹² Ryrie, Charles. Basic Theology. Chicago: Moody Press, p. 373.

foreshadowing of the blood that Christ would one day shed). The Israelites who trusted God received the gift of faith just as New Testament believers do today. The repentance of their sins was according to God (John 6:65) just as Paul attests in 2 Timothy 2:25, “God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.” God gives repentance, which removes the blindness that every man possesses (2 Corinthians 4:4-6), so that he may trust Christ by the gift of faith, which is the evidence of justification. Any attempt to elevate the power of man reduces God’s omnipotence and belittles Him to something other God.

Although the act of atonement establishes a judicial verdict for the sinner, it is also important to recognize the element of relationship that it also institutes. As a result of Christ’s atoning work, the elect are adopted as sons of God. John Murray writes, “covenant is not only bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but also relationship with God in that which is the crown and goal of the whole process of religion, namely, union and communion with God.”¹³ Those who reject particular redemption fail to see the expansiveness that the adoption by God of sinners is. They limit this act of grace and therefore miss out on the preciousness of the Christian relationship. J.I. Packer writes, “Sonship to God, then, is a gift of grace. It is not a natural, but of an adoptive sonship...our understanding of Christianity cannot be better

¹³ Murray, John. The Covenant of Grace. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, p. 31.

than our grasp of adoption.”¹⁴ God did not just make adoption available by the atonement, but He purposed it directly to the individual. Therefore, the individual who accepts this act as particular by God recognizes a greater value. He says to himself, “Wow, God chose me!” But as justification has met our primary need for righteousness, adoption brings us further into a relationship. The awe that the Christian should possess comes from the appreciation of being made sons and daughters of the King. We are now able to relate, and enjoy, and fellowship with the Creator of the universe. This adoption was one of purpose and choice as Ephesians 1:4-6 states, “just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” John Murray comments on this passage:

The love of God from which the atonement springs is not a distinctionless love; it is a love that elects and predestines. God was pleased to set his invincible and everlasting love upon a countless multitude and it is the determinate purpose of this love that the atonement secures.¹⁵

In Ephesians we see that the penultimate goal of this atonement, beyond our justification and adoption as children, is “the praise and glory of His grace.” It is for this, really, that we were created (Isaiah 43:7) and in this that we should

¹⁴ Packer, J.I. Knowing God. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, pp. 181-182.

¹⁵ Murray, John. Redemption Accomplished and Applied. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 10.

revel. The one who believes that he grasped hold of God's gift as if it were offered to all, often elevates himself to a position of worth rather than lifting God to that highest honor that He deserves. Particular redemption then brings us to our purposed and ultimate worth as the sons of God, yet keeps us ever humble in our remembering that we had absolutely nothing to do with the act of salvation.

The culture of our day continues to influence individual's view of the atonement. The essence of the difference can be boiled down to a man-centered doctrine of atonement versus a God-centered doctrine of atonement. Those who begin with man at the center of their theology argue that Christ's atonement simply made it possible for all to be saved. If this is so, then "it did not actually remove God's punitive wrath from anyone, but instead created a place where people could come and find mercy – **if** they could accomplish"¹⁶ this. The man-centered view makes man the source of regeneration rather than God. The atonement then becomes limited by this view because it removes the power of God to save us from our hardened and blind hearts. We, then, are responsible to overcome this handicap to receive what God has supposedly provided to all. This is not to say that the world does not receive God's mercy in any way. God's mercy is extended to all in the fact that we are not immediately killed for our sins, that the sun rises upon all, and that the

¹⁶ Piper, John. What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism. Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God Ministries, p. 13.

Gospel is preached throughout the world¹⁷. (Matthew 5:45; John 3:16; 1 Timothy 4:10) But the mercy toward salvation is extended only to the elect. And those who are the elect recognize that God's sovereignty demands that they can do nothing. Man is not autonomous. Gordon H. Clark states clearly, "There is no power, circumstance, or principle external to God that necessitates or even induces him to do anything."¹⁸

The God-centered view of the atonement recognizes that God is not only the center but also the source of salvation. In other words, He saves. He does not simply offer salvation (which is not actual salvation) but performs an act of justifying sinners (actual salvation). At any point in which God is removed from the center, salvation vanishes. For Scripture teaches that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1) No dead thing is able to accomplish anything. But when we see God at the center of salvation, we see that He works to regenerate the dead and save them. Apart from this act, the dead remain dead. Warfield, in writing about the supernatural work of God in salvation states:

Particularism in the saving process...is already given in the supernaturalism of salvation and in the immediacy of the operations of the divine grace; and the denial of particularism is constructively the denial of the immediacy of saving grace, that is, of evangelicalism, and of the supernaturalism of salvation, that is, of Christianity itself. It is logically the total rejection of Christianity.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid, p.14.

¹⁸ Clark, Gordon H. The Atonement. Hobbs, NM: The Trinity Foundation, p. 127.

¹⁹ Warfield, Benjamin B. The Plan of Salvation. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, pp. 89-90.

So then, the atoning work of Christ, administered by the Spirit through regeneration, is aimed specifically at those who are regenerated (the elect).

Beyond man's struggle with man-centeredness is his struggle with a warped understanding of God's grace. This affects his view of the aim of the atonement in that man does not wish to rest solely on the work of Christ. Instead, we often want to claim some effort of our own as the merit for which we have obtained salvation. The first struggle that we see in history after the inception of the New Covenant was the misunderstanding of many Jewish believers that they should retain the works of the Law. This is why Paul stressed that "because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20) And further, in verses 27-28, "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." And we know that this faith is a result of God's grace extended to us by the atoning work of His Son. (Ephesians 2:8) So then, man must fight the inward draw to himself as the means of faith and recognize that God's free grace, administered by His Spirit, is the means by which the atonement is applied. John Murray writes, "In the atonement something was accomplished once for all, without any participation or contribution on our part...the atonement is objective to us, performed

independently of us, and the subjective effects that accrue from it presuppose its accomplishment.”²⁰

In order to understand the greatness of God’s grace we must understand the gravity of our sinful state. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones states that man does not start in a neutral state but “in the depths of a pit.” We are not on ground level, as he puts it, but in a hole of despair.²¹ We are in whole despair. We have nothing to our credit, nothing to grab a hold of. Sin’s slimy pit has no way out except a miracle. Even what we deem as good are as “filthy rags” to God. (Isaiah 64:6) Those who would argue for an unlimited atonement might say that while in this pit, Jesus throws a rope down to us and faith is the laying hold of that rope. Anyone can grab a hold of it according to them. But as we have seen from Scripture, God saves. He does not simply make it available, but actually reaches down into the pit and pulls us out. Lest we understand this state we are in, we cannot fully comprehend the gracious act of God reaching down and pulling us out. He does not show mercy to all, but shows mercy to whomever He wills. (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15) This should then enlarge our view of God’s goodness in saving us, not lead us to squander it and attempt to steal it from Him. We should not act as if we flagged God down on the battlefield with our token of surrender and somehow earned His mercy. Mercy is a wonderful display of love as well as an indication that there is

²⁰ Murray, John. Redemption Accomplished and Applied. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 52.

²¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. God’s Way of Reconciliation. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, p. 14.

something for which the mercy is needed. But man does not like to feel bad about his sin. He “does not like the idea of substitution; they do not like the doctrine of penal suffering. That is because they have never understood the problem.”²² Until we grasp the utter ruin that we lie in, we cannot enjoy the greatness and joy of His grace.

When man fails to recognize God’s grace for what it truly is, and thus misinterprets the intent of the atonement, he will often develop an erroneous method of evangelism. If he thinks that the atonement of Christ offers salvation to all, and that salvation is dependent only upon the individual’s response, then the evangelist will become corrupt in his efforts to “win souls”. He will feel he must convince and drag people into the Kingdom. He will often make false statements (not necessarily intentionally) to try and manipulate people into believing. When he does this, he neglects the sovereign work of God. The result in our culture today is many people who profess to be Christians, and yet are unsaved. The Church is thus defamed because those who claim to be members show no good fruit. This can be a great discouragement to true believers.

However, the true believer who holds to the doctrine of particular redemption will not truly be discouraged. For they know that God is the one who saves. It is these people who can more boldly proclaim the Gospel. It is these people who have no qualms with packing all that they possess in a coffin and moving far away with no dreams of return. It is the fruit of possessing this

²² Ibid, p. 15.

doctrine properly that will invigorate the Christian to give up his worldly possessions and comforts and to forsake all for the sake of Christ. And it is only this Christian who can lay his head on his pillow at night knowing that God will not fail in His purposes. He will not become introverted or an isolationist and withdraw from the world. No, he will recognize the great call that Christ proclaimed before He departed this earth, and he will with boldness express evangelistic zeal. It is this type of mindset that Warfield attributes to Paul of his letter to the church at Rome, when he writes:

He (Paul) is declaring that he recognizes in Christ Jesus one over against whom he has no rights, whose property he is, body and soul, to be disposed of as He will. This I not because he abases himself. It is because he exalts Christ. It is because Christ it thought of by him as one whose right it is to rule, and to rule with no limit to His right.²³

I would argue further that if from the earliest ages, children could grasp the eternal plan of God, and recognize His sovereignty in all things, including salvation, then we would have a generation that the world could not contain. They would long to obey their Heavenly Father in all things because they would recognize the preciousness of the gift of their salvation that resulted from God's particular choice of them. They would express a holiness that could not be hidden because they longed to show the fruit of that particular choice that God applied to them. They would not feel compelled to manipulate others and they would accept adversity, rejection and suffering with the same grace and enthusiasm as when they were regenerated. Humility would characterize the

²³ Warfield, Benjamin B. *The Person and Work of Christ*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, p. 75.

Church, and love would be its hallmark. I would argue that this is not the case because mankind, including believers, long to be autonomous rather than submit to the Creator God who is all-powerful and sovereign. Would we accept Him for who He is, we could be as the early church fathers who were written of in Acts 17, who upset the world. This argument goes against those who suppose that a doctrine of limited atonement results in limited evangelism. It is these people who recognize their proper role in God's purpose and do not suppose that they are playing a game of chance.

One may ask if there is anything particularly important about limited atonement that is essential to possessing true, saving faith. The answer to this question is obviously very important, but it is not easy. I must say that the answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. It is essential to the individual to understand a biblical view of limited atonement in order that he or she may possess true saving faith if by this we mean that the individual accepts and holds to the notion that God is sovereign in salvation. In other words, it is essential for the individual to understand and accept that God initiates, administrates and completes salvation and that no person can act in any way to play a part in this work. For any man or woman who adds to the complete work of Christ's atoning death is not accepting a true gift, and that is specifically, the free gift of salvation that is apart from any works (including regeneration). (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8,9; 2 Timothy 1:9) Just as Paul wrote in Romans 11:6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." So then, grace is removed if we attempt to rob God of His

work by adding something of our own to it. On the other hand, if the individual agrees that salvation is completely of God, but simply thinks that the atonement was meant for the whole world, then certainly their faith can be a saving faith. Although I do reiterate that the Scriptures speak on the contrary. What I want to warn against is the notion that man has anything to do with salvation. This is God's work, according to His plan and good pleasure and for which He gets the glory.

In conclusion I must say then that a proper doctrine of the atonement results in a deeper worship of God, a greater zeal for evangelism and a more profound, sustaining peace that results from knowing God will accomplish His purpose. The deeper worship of God comes from accepting that He chose us. From this we humble ourselves, recognizing that we do nothing, and lift God up with the great glory that He deserves. The greater zeal for evangelism comes from accepting that God will accomplish His purpose and we can be a part of this sovereign plan, rather than playing to the mindset that we are about a task that is no more than a gamble if the atonement did not have a particular aim. And finally, the more profound, sustaining peace results in the life of the believer who recognizes that he does not have to be crafty or manipulative in working for the Kingdom, but must simply obey and trust God with the results. These are the fruit (singular) of a proper doctrine of the atonement.