Elenctic Theology

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*The Work of Christ – The Atonement: Part 2*

## Limited & Unlimited Atonement

### The Extent of Christ’s Death

#### **Statement of the Issue**

##### Christians sometimes disagree on the *extent* of the atonement. The question is whether God intended to pay for the sins of each and every person or whether the work of Christ was intended only to pay for the sins of the “elect” (the “elect” means those who are predestined to salvation).

##### Reformed theologians hold to a view popularly labeled as “limited atonement.” According to this view, God intends that Christ’s work be “limited” only to those sovereignly elected. Other theologians—most notably Arminians and Lutherans—argue that God intends Christ’s work to be “unlimited,” in the sense that God intends that it apply to each and every person.

#### **The “Limited Atonement” Theory**

##### ***Statement of the Theory***

###### The Reformed position is popularly called “Limited Atonement.” It is the “L” in “TULIP,” a common acronym for the “5 Points of Calvinism.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

###### This label is somewhat misleading. The term “limited” could imply some kind of limitation in the work of satisfaction, but this is certainly not what Reformed theologians teach.

###### The real issue here is God’s *intent* in providing satisfaction for sin, regarding the objects of the satisfaction. In other words, for whose sins did Christ *intend* to make satisfaction? This question is “the pivot on which the controversy turns.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Riissen states the question succinctly: “. . . the question is of the counsel of God in sending the Son into the world and of the intention of Christ in dying; whether it had respect to men one and all, that Christ put himself in their place and satisfied for them and obtained remission of sins and salvation; or only to the elect.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

###### Simply speaking, the Reformed state that Christ intends to make satisfaction for the elect, and does not intend to make satisfaction for the reprobate. A corollary to this is the notion that satisfaction is actually made for those whom Christ intended to make it. Or, negatively stated, none of those for whom Christ intends to render satisfaction fail to partake of the satisfaction

###### Consequently, it might be best to characterize the Reformed position as “particular” or “definite” satisfaction, since Christ intends to secure satisfaction for specific individuals (i.e., the elect) rather than simply make salvation potentially available to all mankind.

##### ***Sufficiency v. Efficiency Distinction***

###### The Reformed Scholastics did not wish to denigrate Christ’s work in any way. So they stated that Christ’s work is **sufficient** (Latin: *sufficienter*) to satisfy or pay for the sins of all humanity.[[4]](#footnote-4) As Wollebius states, Christ’s atoning work considered in itself “...would suffice for the redemption of ten worlds.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

###### According to Riissen, Christ’s satisfaction would have satisfied for the sins of one and all, “if so it had seemed good to God”; since it was of infinite value, it was quite sufficient for the redemption of all mankind, “if it had seemed good to God to extend it to the whole world.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

###### But it is the last part of Riissen’s statement that is the real crux of the matter, “if it had seemed good to God to extend it to the whole world.” The Reformed contention is that it was not God’s will to extend redemption to the whole world. Thus, the Reformed make a distinction between the **sufficiency** of Christ’s work to save all mankind, and the **efficiency** of the work in actually securing salvation.

##### ***The Logic of Limited Atonement in Reformed system***

###### In the Reformed understanding, Christ’s death does not merely make salvation provisional or possible. Christ actually **secures** salvation through His sacrifice. Olevian utterly rejects the notion that “the grace of sacrifice has been scattered in the air, in order that he who would might snatch it for himself.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

###### This is the only conclusion consistent with the logic of Reformed system. Given unconditional election, and irresistible grace—which themselves follow inevitably from radical depravity and total inability—, particular satisfaction is the fitting, if not logically necessary, conclusion.

###### W.G.T. Shedd: “Since redemption implies the application of Christ’s atonement, *universal* or *unlimited* redemption cannot logically be affirmed by any who hold that faith is wholly the gift of God, and that saving grace is bestowed solely by election…. The tenet of limited redemption rests upon the tenet of election, and the tenet of election rests upon the tenet of the sinner’s bondage and inability. Soteriology here runs back to theology, and theology runs back to anthropology. Everything in the series finally recurs to the state and condition of fallen man. The answer to the question, How is the atonement of Christ savingly appropriated? depends upon the answer to the question, How much efficient power is there in the sinful will to savingly trust in it? If the answer be, that there is efficient power, either wholly or in part, in the sinful will itself to believe, then faith is either wholly or in part from the sinner himself, and is not wholly the gift of God, which is contrary to Eph. 2:8; and justification does not depend wholly upon electing grace, which is contrary to 1 Pet. 1:2; and redemption is not limited. But if the answer be, that there is not efficient power in the sinful will itself, either wholly or in part, to savingly believe, then faith is wholly the gift of God; is wholly dependent upon his electing grace; and redemption is limited by election, as is taught in 1 Cor. 3:5: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man;” and in Rom. 9:16: “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.”

###### In the order of the decrees, God elects particular individuals to salvation. Then God actually secures the salvation of the elect by having Christ render satisfaction for their sins.[[8]](#footnote-8) For these individuals God also provides the faith which is the sole condition for apprehending this satisfaction for them.

##### ***Reformed Arguments for Particular Satisfaction/Limited Atonement***

###### The Reformed understand the Scriptures to teach that Christ’s mission and death are intended for particular human beings, sometimes designated His “church,” His “body,” His “sheep,” etc.

Christ died for “many” and not for “all” (Matt. 20:28 cf. Mt. 1:21; Jn. 10:11,15; Acts 20:28).

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it (Eph. 5:25 cf. Jn. 10:15).

###### The Reformed say that the objects of Christ’s intercession and His satisfaction are one and the same individuals (cf. 1 Jn. 2:1‑2; Rom. 8:34). But they deny that Christ interceded for all men universally; they say he interceded only for the elect. In support they cite texts such as John 17:9, where Christ states, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours.”

###### The Reformed argue that the opposite view—universal satisfaction—portrays Christ as a partial, imperfect Savior. They say that if one posits a universal satisfaction, one must conclude that Christ was merely the author of **obtaining salvation,** but not **applying** **salvation**, for the unsaved.

#### **Unlimited Atonement Theories**

##### ***Statement of the Theory***

###### Essentially, unlimited atonement theory is that Christ died for the sins of the whole world. That is, he intended to extend the benefits of his atoning work to each and every person, not just to the elect.

###### Various versions of this view have been held: Universalism, Lutheranism, Arminianism, and Amyraldianism.

##### ***Universalism***

###### Universalism is the teaching that everybody will be saved.

###### The universalist argues that Christ *intended* to save each and every person through His work on the cross. They further argue that Christ’s work *in fact saves every person.*

###### Universalism is a teaching that gained some popularity in this country around the time of the Revolutionary War (e.g., through men such as John Murray and Hosea Ballou) and is still found in many churches.

###### This view is widely rejected by evangelical Christians as unscriptural.

###### Universalism is easily refuted by:

The doctrine of hell

The fact that not all people have faith, which is clearly the condition on which salvation is appropriated

##### ***Lutheranism and Arminianism***

###### Although Lutherans and Arminians differ on a great many points (e.g., the freedom and ability of the human will), on this question they are treated together because they use similar arguments against the Reformed view of limited atonement and for unlimited atonement.

###### Both emphasize the biblical passages which apparently speak of God’s saving concern for the whole world.

**John 3:16**—This passage says that God loves the *world,* not just the elect.

**1 Tim. 4:10**—Christ is the savior of *all* men, but especially of believers.

**1 Jn. 2:2**—Christ is the propitiation not only for our sins, but for those of the entire world.

**2 Pet. 2:1**—The heretics mentioned in this verse—who clearly are not saved—are nevertheless in some sense “bought” by the very Lord they deny.

The Lutherans charge the Reformed with a logical error. They point out that passages which assert Christ’s death for His sheep do not prove that Christ died **only** for His sheep. Gerhard points out that the particular is included in its universal. It is fallacious to limit the universal by the particular.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this same connection, the Lutherans (and Arminians) deny that the word “many” used in passages such as Matt. 26:28 limits those for whom Christ died, since the term “many” is often used for “all,” as in Ps. 97:1; Dan. 12:2; Rom. 5:19.

###### *The Lutherans deny that Christ interceded only for the elect.*

They admit that He does not intercede for those who died in impenitence and are in hell. But they assert that He intercedes generally for all who still live in the world, “and still have the gate of divine grace standing open before them, whether they be elect or reprobate.[[10]](#footnote-10)

At this point the Lutherans made a distinction between “general” and “special” intercession. General intercession is Christ’s prayer to the Father for all men, that His death might be applied to them. Special intercession has only the regenerate in view, that they might be built up in faith and holiness.[[11]](#footnote-11)

###### *The Lutherans argue that the reprobate could not be justly held accountable for not believing in the Son of God if His death is not intended for them.*

Gerhard states that the reprobate cannot be condemned for rejecting that which, by an antecedent decree, does not pertain to them.

They argue that the Calvinistic view leads to the absurdity that God condemns them for not having faith in a sacrifice which was in truth never intended for them.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Following this line of reasoning, the Lutherans argue that since God **offers** the benefits of Christ’s death to all men, He must—assuming the truth of Calvinism—be guilty of hypocrisy, since “. . . He would call the unbelieving to repentance and the kingdom of Christ, whom nevertheless He would exclude therefrom by an absolute decree.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

###### The fundamental issue is that the Lutherans and Arminians deny unconditional election and irresistible grace. If these are the underlying foundation for the limited atonement theory, then it follows that any systems denying these would also deny limited atonement.

##### ***Amyraldianism (i.e., “4 Point Calvinism”)***

###### ***Origin of the Theory***This theory is named after Moses Amyraut, of the school of Saumur in France. [[14]](#footnote-14)

The theory is also called “Amyraldianism.”

It is Calvinistic in the sense that it holds to unconditional election and total inability.

However, it wants to be able to affirm the “universalistic” passages concerning Christ’s work and rejects limited atonement.

###### ***Statement of the Theory***

Christ was appointed to be the savior of all men equally.

However, God foresaw that because of the wickedness and depravity of all men, none would believe in Christ. Therefore, by a special decree of election, God gives certain particular individuals the gift of faith.

These individuals are then able to experience Christ’s saving work, while the remainder of mankind is left to perish in unbelief.

###### ***Similarities and Differences Between Amyraldianism and Standard Reformed System***

Amyraldianism is definitely not an Arminian system because there is no synergism and it affirms the Calvinistic views of total inability and unconditional election.

However, Amyraldianism rejects limited atonement or particular satisfaction, which is an essential tenet of Calvinism.

In the standard Reformed system, the decree of the death of Christ comes **after** the decree to elect particular individuals for salvation. Thus,

In Amyraut’s schema, the decree of the death of Christ comes **before** the decree of election.

See *infra* for the differences in the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).

###### ***Opposition by the Reformed to Amyraldianism***

The Reformed point out the logical inconsistencies in Amyraut’s theory.

They say it presents Christ’s as double-minded.

In Amyraldianism, Christ allegedly wills salvation for all, that it might be applied to them.

But then Christ wills to grant faith only to a select few.

And apart from this faith, His redeeming work cannot be applied.

Francis Turretin delivers a strong argument against the view.

He says it makes a mockery of the infinitely wise and holy Jesus, who in effect says, “I desire that to come to pass, which I know neither will nor can take place; and I am even unwilling that it should, for I refuse to communicate the only means by which it can ever be brought to pass, and the granting of this means depends upon myself alone.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The absurdity, according to Turretin, is obvious. Christ both wills and does not will the salvation of the same individuals in Amyraut’s system. Christ dies with the intent of saving whom He does not intend to save since He does not grant them faith, apart from which they could never experience salvation.

#### **The Order of Salvation (*Ordo Salutis*)**

##### ***Limited Atonement Views***In these views the decree for election and reprobation occur before or prior to the death of Christ. Thus, in these views the elect are known and decreed before the decree of the death of Christ.

###### ***Supralapsarianism (Limited Atonement View)***

Election and Reprobation occur before (*supra* or above) the Fall.

The Order: Election – Reprobation – Creation – Fall – Death of Christ

###### ***Infralapsarianism (Limited Atonement View)***

Election and Reprobation occur after (*infra* or below) the Fall, but before the death of Christ.

The Order: Creation – Fall – Election – Reprobation – Death of Christ

##### ***Unlimited Atonement Views***In these views the decree for election and reprobation occur after the death of Christ. Thus, in these views the elect are known and decreed after the decree of the death of Christ.

###### ***Amyraldianism (Unlimited Atonement View)***

Election and Reprobation occur after the Death of Christ.

The Order: Creation – Fall – Death of Christ – Election – Reprobation

###### ***Lutheranism (Unlimited Atonement View)***

***Same as b.(1)***

###### ***Arminianism (Unlimited Atonement View)***

***Same as b.(1)***

1. See <https://www.monergism.com/topics/doctrines-grace/five-points-calvinism> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Turretin, *Institutio,* XIV, xiv, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leonardus Riissenius, *Francisci Turretini Compendium Theologiae didactico‑elencticae ex theologorum nostrorum Institutionibus auctum et illustratum* (Amsterdam, 1695) XII, ii (cited in Heppe, p. 478). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Heppe, p. 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wollebius, XVIII, 1, proposition xxiii (cited in Beardslee, p. 105). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Riissen, XII, ii (cited in Heppe, pp. 477‑8). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “. . . *ut quidam imaginatur sparsam esse illam oblationis gratiam in aerem, ut eam ad se rapiat qui volet*.” See Gaspar Olevianus, *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti inter Deum et electos itemque de mediis, quibus ea ipsa substantia nobis communicatur, libri duo* (Geneva, 1585) p. 69 (cited in the German edition of Heppe, p. 380). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note the sentiment of Maresius (X, 41‑42): “Nor moreover are the giving of Christ to be Redeemer and his satisfaction ordained before eternal election, as the same Remonstrants falsely assert and those who ride their hobby, being ready to do battle for universal or at least objective grace, as they love to say, but it is subordinate to it [eternal election], as completing it and carrying it out.” Cited in Heppe, p. 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gerhard, IV, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Quenstedt, III, 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hollaz, 749 (cited in Schmid, p. 345). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gerhard, IV, 178 (cited in Schmid, p. 363). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gerhard, IV, 178 (cited in Schmid, p. 363). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brief historical sketches of Amyraut and the theologians from the French school of Saumur are readily available in religious encyclopedias, such as *Schaff‑Herzog*. Brian Armstrong’s *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) is an in‑depth, sympathetic treatment. A. A. Hodge’s considerably less sympathetic *The Atonement* also gives a helpful theological analysis, but little raw historical background. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Turretin, XIV, xiv, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)