Atonement

What is atonement?

The English word "atonement" does not appear in modern translations of the New Testament and is used only once in the King James Version – in Rom. 5:11, where a better rendering is "reconciliation." But "atonement" is used frequently throughout the Old Testament and means "to cover," "placate," "appease," or "effect reconciliation." As applied to the priestly work of offering sacrifices, atonement was the temporary satisfaction of God's justice and the temporary appeasement of His wrath; that's the reason priests had to offer sacrifices regularly for the sins of the people (see, for example, Heb. 9:25). Every spotless animal on the altar, and every drop of blood, pointed to the cross where the Lamb of God would shed His blood in full satisfaction of God's justice, resulting in the extension of God's grace and mercy to sinners. In this regard, Jesus did not "atone" for our sins; He "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9:26 NASB).

Even so, the word "atonement" is used today in a theological sense to describe the finished work of Christ in reconciling lost sinners to God. Paul wrote that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). God the Father is the Initiator of the atonement, and His Son is the Author and Finisher of our faith, who joyfully laid down His life for us (Heb. 12:2). Christ's death was *substitutionary* in that He died in our place (2 Cor. 5:21), and *satisfactory* in that He paid the penalty for our sins, making peace between God and sinners.

Is the atonement limited?

But did Christ die *only* for certain people, as Calvinists teach, or for all? If only for the elect, then what hope is there for those He has passed by? And if for all, as Arminians contend, wasn't His blood wasted on those who reject Him and consequently die in their sins? Let's look more closely at this issue.

First, it's important to note that both Calvinists and Arminians limit the atonement in some way. Calvinists say the atonement is limited in *purpose*; that is, Christ's death was *intended* to secure the salvation of the elect only. Arminians say the atonement is limited in *effect*; that is, Christ's death paid the sin debt for all people but is *effective* only for those who believe. In addition, Calvinists and Arminians agree that only the elect are actually saved; both reject universalism, the false teaching that God ultimately will save all people and bring them into His kingdom. Finally, both sides agree that because of Christ's finished work on the cross, a genuine invitation may be made to any person to believe in Him for salvation.

So what's the problem? John Piper, Reformed pastor, author and speaker, frames the issue this way: "We do not deny that all men are the intended beneficiaries of the cross in some sense. 1 Timothy 4:10 says that Christ is 'the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.' What we deny is that all men are intended as the beneficiaries of the death of Christ in the same way. All of God's mercy toward unbelievers – from the rising sun (Matthew 5:45) to the worldwide preaching of the gospel (John 3:16) – is made possible because of the cross…. But he is

especially the Savior of those who believe. He did not die for all men in the same sense. The intention of the death of Christ for the children of God was that it purchase far more than the rising sun and the opportunity to be saved. The death of Christ actually saves from ALL evil those for whom Christ died 'especially'" (*What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism*, www.desiringgod.org).

Piper cites many Scriptures to support the Reformed view that the death of Christ was designed for the salvation of God's people, not for every individual. Among the passages are:

John 10:15, 26-28 – "… I lay down My life for the sheep…. But you don't believe because you are not My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish—ever! No one will snatch them out of My hand."

- The non-elect don't believe *because* they are not Christ's sheep, not the other way around – a clear indication that Jesus was going to lay down His life for some, not all, say Calvinists.

John 11:51-52 – He [Caiaphas] did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to unite the scattered children of God.

- Christ's death would unite His sheep – and His sheep only – around the world, according to the Reformed understanding of this passage.

John 17:6, 9, 19 – Jesus prays, "I have revealed Your name to the men You gave Me from the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word…. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world but for those You have given Me, because they are Yours…. I sanctify Myself for them, so they also may be sanctified by the truth."

- To whom did Jesus reveal the Father's name? Only to "the men You gave Me," He says.
- Further, Jesus prays only for "those You have given Me."
- Finally, Jesus says only those who are given to Him "may be sanctified by the truth."
- Piper and other Calvinists argue that Jesus' high priestly prayer is clear evidence of a particular atonement.

Rev. 5:9 – And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because You were slaughtered, and You redeemed [people] for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation.

- Christ's atonement secures the salvation of people [not *all* people] from every sector of the human population.

If the Reformed position is correct, what are we to make of the following passages of Scripture:

John 1:29 – The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the *world*!"

John 3:16 – "For God loved the *world* in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."

John 12:47b – "…for I did not come to judge the world but to save the *world*."

2 Cor. 5:14-19 – For Christ's love compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: if One died for *all*, then all died. And He died for *all* so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One who died for them and was raised…. Now everything is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the *world* to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us.

1 Tim. 2:5-6 – For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, a man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself—a ransom for *all*, a testimony at the proper time.

Heb. 2:9 – But we do see Jesus—made lower than the angels for a short time so that by God's grace He might taste death for *everyone*—crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death.

1 John 2:2 – He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole *world*.

2 Peter 2:1 – But there were also false prophets 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.

2 Peter 3:9 – The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting *any* to perish, but *all* to come to repentance.

Calvinists generally respond to these passages by saying that the words "all," "everyone," and "world" either are references to "all the elect" or to "all kinds of people," Jew and Gentile alike. Arminians counter by saying that a plain reading of these and other Bible passages in context leads inevitably to the conclusion that "all" means all, "everyone" means everyone, and the "world" means all of humanity.

Conclusion

The Scripture passages quoted by Calvinists and Arminians seem convincing, substantial – and contradictory. Is there any way to reconcile these Bible verses without imposing upon them a meaning the writers, and the Holy Spirit, never intended? Perhaps Norman Geisler, a self-described "moderate Calvinist" and author of *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, sums it up best: "Christ's atonement was intended to *provide* salvation for all as well as to *procure* salvation for all who believe" (p. 213).

Reformed theologian Wayne Grudem provides this wise counsel:

> Although Reformed people have sometimes made belief in particular redemption [limited atonement] a test of doctrinal orthodoxy, it would be healthy to realize that

> Scripture itself never singles this out as a doctrine of major importance, nor does it once make it the subject of any explicit theological discussion. Our knowledge of the issue comes only from incidental references to it in passages whose concern is with other doctrinal or practical matters. In fact, this is really a question that probes into the inner counsels of the Trinity and does so in an area in which there is very little direct scriptural testimony – a fact that should cause us to be cautious. A balanced pastoral perspective would seem to be to say that this teaching of particular redemption seems to us to be true, that it gives logical consistency to our theological system, and that it can be helpful in assuring people of Christ's love for them individually and of the completeness of his redemptive work for them; but that it also is a subject that almost inevitably leads to some confusion, some misunderstanding, and often some wrongful argumentativeness and divisiveness among God's people – all of which are negative pastoral considerations. Perhaps that is why the apostles such as John and Peter and Paul, in their wisdom, placed almost no emphasis on this question at all. And perhaps we would do well to ponder their example (*Systematic Theology*, p. 603).

Next week: God's grace – is it irresistible?