

Sufficient for All?

by Jim Ellis

Among those who generally accept the doctrine of a definite or limited atonement, it is often heard by way of explanation that "the atonement is sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect." In fact this terminology may be found in some of the most respected Reformed theologians such as Hodge, Shedd, Buswell and others. While no Calvinist would deny the intrinsic sufficiency of Christ's death for the redemption of all men had God so designed and intended it, I find the use of such phraseology dubious.

Maintaining the infinite intrinsic value of Christ's death is not the same as saying "He died sufficiently for all men and efficiently only for the elect." The latter seems to ascribe to Christ a purpose or intention to die in the place of all men, and to benefit all by the proper effects of His death as an atonement or propitiation. This inference is not supported by a scriptural view of the nature of the atonement or by the Calvinistic understanding of limited atonement. My purpose here is to show that this phraseology is ultimately meaningless and fails to adequately perceive the nature of the atonement. In the final analysis, it does not distinguish a definite atonement from a general or universal atonement.¹

Why is the term "sufficient for all" used in discussing the atonement?

It is with some interest that we look at some of the probable reasons why such language has become rather common in discussions of this matter. Primarily, the use of this terminology seems to be an attempt to soften the impact of the doctrine of limited atonement on the natural mind, for it is indeed no simple matter of understanding. Most people don't want a theological treatise as an explanation, they just want a simple answer (and in no more than three minutes, if you please). So we say, "His death was sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect." This may be brief and easy to remember, but accuracy and integrity have been sacrificed for the sake of brevity. Its use anticipates objections to the doctrine and pretends to diffuse those objections by declaring a universal application of the atonement. Rather than providing a real answer, however, it only deflects the potential objections and often leaves the questioner unsatisfied or at least scratching his head, wondering what it really means.

This statement has been used by good solid Calvinists who have no intention of giving way on the doctrine of limited atonement, but that does not make it valid or advisable phraseology. There appear to be several underlying reasons why this statement has been used. I believe the following are representative of those reasons:

- There is a fear that God might be charged with injustice if an atonement is not somehow provided for all.
- A universal aspect of the atonement is perceived as necessary for a bona fide offer of the gospel to all men.
- The atonement must somehow be designed for the non-elect in order to render them inexcusable for their unbelief.
- Since Christ in His person is divine and infinite, so must be His work on the cross; therefore His death is sufficient for all.

Considered together there may be some semblance of rationale for the "sufficient for all" statement, but I hope to show that considered separately, the reasons are either invalid or the concern can be and should be answered another way. Let's take a look at these reasons individually.

First, that there is a fear that God might be charged with injustice if an atonement is not somehow provided for all. **Answer:** Mercy extended to some but not all, is not to be perceived as injustice. As R. C. Sproul has suggested, all the potential acts of God may fall under two categories: justice and non-justice. Under non-justice, however, we have the sub categories of injustice and mercy. Mercy is not justice, but it is certainly not injustice.

God cannot be charged with injustice. We seem to think that if God doesn't treat everyone exactly the same, and provide mercy to all alike, then He is unjust. This is simply false reasoning and a good example of the effect of the Fall on man's ability to think straight. It fails to stand up to either the Scriptures or logic.

Secondly, that a universal aspect of the atonement is perceived as necessary for a bona fide offer of the gospel to all men. **Answer:** The truth of the gospel is to be proclaimed to all men. For example, "All men are under condemnation and hell bound because of their sin. There is no escape apart from faith in Christ. By the grace of God, all who believe in him are forgiven and shall be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!" Now this truth is not dependent on a universal aspect or universal intent to the atonement. In fact, the extent of the atonement and its sufficiency or efficiency have no direct bearing on the message.

According to J. I. Packer, "Preaching the gospel is not a matter of telling people that God has set His love on each of them and Christ has died to save each of them. The knowledge of being the object of God's eternal love and Christ's redeeming death belongs to the individual's assurance . . . which is to be inferred from the fact that one has believed, not proposed as the reason one should believe."²

Or, as John Owen has said, "There are none called by the gospel even once to enquire after the purpose and intention of God concerning the particular object of the death of Christ, everyone being fully assured that His death shall be profitable to them that believe in him and obey him."³ The preacher's task is to explain man's need of Christ, His sufficiency to save, and His offer of Himself as Savior to all who truly turn to Him. If you are proclaiming a gospel message that demands a universal provision in the atonement, you are not proclaiming the gospel of the Scriptures.

Thirdly, that the atonement must somehow be designed for the non-elect in order to render them inexcusable for their unbelief. **Answer:** If Christ did not provide an atonement sufficient for all without exception, wouldn't we still be to blame for our perishing? Wouldn't we still be forced to say, "We are without excuse?" Why must we think that it is the provision of an atonement that renders men inexcusable? The Apostle Paul never discusses atonement in terms of rendering men inexcusable or as a basis for condemnation! The atonement is not designed to render men inexcusable, but rather it is designed to save some of those who already stand before God without excuse. The particularity of the atonement needs no more apology than the particular nature of the effectual call or unconditional election. Can you imagine using the same phraseology with these doctrines? -- "The effectual call is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect." Or, "God's unconditional election is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect." Here I think we see a little of the meaningless nature of such a statement.

Fourthly, that since Christ in His person is divine and infinite, so must be His work on the cross; therefore His death is sufficient for all. **Answer:** "It is a non sequitur to move from the deity of the sacrifice to the sufficiency for every individual person. Such a conclusion assumes that the Deity can perform nothing by measure."⁴ In His feeding of the five thousand, Jesus multiplied the loaves by a divine act. Yet all the loaves in the world were not multiplied, only the ones He handled and blessed for the five thousand. Again, it was a divine act (and thus infinite) that raised Lazarus from the grave. Yet this was limited to Lazarus. To say that the raising of Lazarus was sufficient for all but efficient for Lazarus makes little sense if any. It is obvious that Christ had the power to raise whomever He chose. The fact is He chose to raise only Lazarus, and His divine actions were limited to that.

Perhaps more to the point, Christ's nature, being divine and thus infinite, does not increase the intensity or quantity of that which was laid on Him at the cross. However, His nature does enable Him to bear whatever it might have been. Our sins are not infinite, and we are not infinite; it is Christ who is infinite. Christ bore the penalty for the sins of a finite number of people. His divine nature ensured that He would successfully bear the eternal wrath due to those sins, no matter how great or how many. His atonement is sufficient for all whom it was intended. It is sufficient for all whose sins were laid on Him, no matter how many. The question is, Was Christ a real substitute for, and did He bear the punishment due to, all men or some? The doctrine of limited atonement says some, the elect, or else all would be saved. To say that His death was sufficient for all, or that His atonement was sufficient for all, certainly implies otherwise.

While our motive may be to help someone understand a particular truth regarding the doctrine of atonement, I don't think the use of such language is the way to do it. If the above reasons for using this terminology are not valid, which I have attempted to show, then the term "sufficient for all" is unnecessary. In fact it is not only unnecessary but inappropriate. It is inappropriate because there is a tendency for error to be introduced by such language. If we use language that is theologically inaccurate, which is true of the case at hand, then we will soon find ourselves entertaining erroneous theological ideas in order to explain our dubious terminology. In this case, how does one explain the rational difference between an atonement that is "sufficient" for all men and one that is "efficient" for those who are saved?

What errors are there in the "sufficiency for all" view?

One error of this view is found in its lack of precise distinction between atonement and the effectual call. By maintaining that Christ's death was sufficient for all, but efficient for the elect, there is a tendency to define the extent of the atonement in terms of personal application by the Holy Spirit.

An example can be found in the work of W. G. T. Shedd, an eminent Calvinist theologian of the nineteenth century who adopts the "sufficient for all" view. In Shedd's discussion of the extent of the atonement he differentiates between passive and active meanings. Passively, he claims, "the extent of the atonement is unlimited." Actively, which he says denotes the act of extending, it is limited. Shedd goes on:

The extent of the atonement in this sense [active] means its personal application to individuals by the Holy Spirit. The extent is now the intent. The question, What is the extent of the atonement? now means: To whom is the atonement effectually extended?⁵

This essentially identifies the doctrine of effectual calling with atonement! It removes any efficacy from the atonement itself and makes Christ's work on the cross merely tentative! If He has died for all sufficiently and the only particularity is in the personal application by the Spirit, then I cannot see how one distinguishes this from the universal atonement of the Arminians, who claim that Christ died for all men, with its benefits accruing only to those who believe. The difference between the two does not lie in the atonement, but in the Spirit's effectual calling.

Shedd's problem is that he has decided to say "Christ's death is sufficient for all" and now he must try and explain what he means by it. While his particular reasoning may be somewhat unique, his basic solution is not. In order to find some significant difference between sufficiency and efficiency he turns to the application work of the Spirit. This is a typical problem for the "sufficiency" view, and the solution in this case is erroneous.

In another attempt to explain how Christ's death is sufficient for all, Alexander Hodge has taken a different approach. He states that the atonement has objectively "removed the legal impediments out of the way of all men."⁶ This explanation has become quite popular, but it is not without its inherent problems.

If all legal obstacles to a man's salvation have been removed then what hinders his being saved? You say his unbelief? Logically then, the only reason men are condemned is unbelief. But is not unbelief a sin for which Christ suffered the legal penalties? Certainly, for even the elect were guilty of unbelief at one time. Do we then say that persistent unbelief is in a different category as some have suggested? What then about the man who never had the opportunity to disbelieve? If all the legal obstacles to his salvation have been removed and he never hears of Jesus, then certainly no just reason remains why he should be condemned. Is he then saved? If so, it is better that I tell no one the gospel. If not, then for what is he condemned? I have yet to hear a satisfactory answer.

In addition, if every legal obstacle is removed for all men, there is no basis for the wrath of God continuing upon any man. To remove the legal obstacles is to satisfy God's justice and His wrath. Why then does Scripture persist in teaching otherwise? "For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come," Col. 3:6. And again, "because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience," Eph. 5:6. The answer is that the legal obstacles have not been removed for all men but for the elect, all those for whom Christ died, so that "He

might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," Rom. 3:26. The wrath of God and the justice of God are satisfied for those for whom Christ was a substitute, and that is not all men, but by His grace it is some.

That Christ was entirely capable in His person and by His death of gaining satisfaction for all the sins of all men is not in question. But to say that the actual atonement was sufficient for all men, in all that is meant by the word atonement, must be questioned. To present the atonement as being sufficient for all will prevent understanding its nature in terms of a real satisfaction and a real penal substitution. This is seen in many contemporary treatments of the atonement which seek to interpret Christ's death with little or no reference to God's law, justice, or holy wrath. In fact, many have entirely rejected the specific penal substitution concept as antiquated or immoral or both. Also, "to remove the necessary connection between atonement and satisfaction of divine justice denudes Christ's death of all its moral sublimity and reduces it to an amazing piece of romantic extravagance."⁷

Therefore, if we, as Calvinists, confidently affirm the substitutionary and legal-penal aspects of the atonement, we must resist applying this concept to all men without exception by saying it is sufficient for all. To do so relegates the atonement to a non-effectual state and necessarily contains elements of non-substitution.

Concluding Remarks

To say that Christ's death on the cross provided an atonement sufficient for all is to specifically suggest that He has atoned for the sins of all men, which is essentially a universal atonement. This is a false conception and makes us, along with those who hold to a universal atonement, say the opposite of what we mean. As J. I. Packer has aptly stated,

We want (rightly) to proclaim Christ as Savior; yet we end up saying that Christ, having made salvation possible, has justified us to become our own saviors. It comes about this way. We want to magnify the saving grace of God and the saving power of Christ. So we declare that God's redeeming love extends to every man, and that Christ has died to save every man, and we proclaim that the glory of divine mercy is to be measured by these facts. And then, in order to avoid universalism, we have to depreciate all that we were previously extolling, and to explain that, after all, nothing that God and Christ have done can save us unless we add something to it; the decisive factor which actually saves us is our own believing. What we say comes to this-that Christ saves us with our help; and what that means is this-that we save ourselves with Christ's help.

This is a hollow anticlimax. But if we start by affirming that God has a saving love for all, and Christ died a saving death [sufficient] for all, and yet balk at becoming universalists, there is nothing else that we can say. And let us be clear on what we have done when we put the matter in this fashion. We have not exalted grace and the cross; we have cheapened them. We have limited the atonement far more drastically than [consistent] Calvinism does, for whereas Calvinism asserts Christ's death saves all whom it was meant to save, we have denied that Christ's death, as such, is sufficient to save any of them.⁸

Endnotes

1 Thomas J. Nettles has expressed this same viewpoint as part of a larger argument in *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Baker, 1986, pp. 305-315). I have borrowed several thoughts and examples from him, not all of which are footnoted.

2 J. I. Packer, *Introductory Essay to John Owen's, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, Banner of Truth, pp. 18-19. Italics mine.

3 John Owen, *Ibid.*, p. 296.

4 Nettles, *Op. cit.*, p. 308.

5 W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:464. Bracket mine.

6 A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 417.

7 Nettles, *Op. cit.*, p. 313.

8 J. I. Packer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 16-17. Inserted brackets mine.

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For Whom Did Jesus Taste Death?

By John Piper

Hebrews 2:9

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

For Those He Came to Save

Yesterday I marched for Jesus along with thousands of others in the Twin Cities and with millions of others around the world. As I turned from Nicollet Mall onto Sixth Street we were singing the second stanza of "Crown Him With Many Crowns." I am probably the only one who was thinking at that moment of this morning's message. The title of the message this morning is, "For Whom Did Jesus Taste Death?" The second verse of "Crown Him with Many Crowns" goes like this:

Crown Him the Lord of life,
Who triumphed o'er the grave.
Who rose victorious in the strife
For those He came to save.

His glories now we sing,
Who died and rose on high.
Who died eternal life to bring,
And lives that death may die.

He triumphed over the grave and rose victorious in the strife *for those he came to save*. "For those he came to save." These words seem to signal that the writer of this hymn believes that Christ had a design to really save a particular group of people by his death. He triumphed over the grave for those he came to save. It sounds like there are some he came to save, and that for these the grave is defeated and eternal life is given.

For Everybody?

So my question this morning is this: "For whom did Jesus taste death?" Ask 100 evangelical Christians in America that question and 95 will probably say, "Everybody." And there is something healthy about that answer -- and something unhealthy. What's healthy about it is that it is not cliquish or elitist or sectarian. It has an eye on the world. It wants others to enjoy the forgiveness of sins that believers enjoy. It is not narrow and confined in its affections.

It tries to express the Biblical truth that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes might not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). It is healthy and right to believe that everyone who has faith -- no matter what race or education or intelligence or social class or former religion -- everyone who puts faith in Jesus Christ is justified and accepted with God on the basis of Jesus' shed blood. It's healthy and right to believe that no one can say, "I really want to be saved by believing Jesus, but I can't be because he did not die for me." No one can say that. There is no one who truly believes for whom Jesus did not taste death.

There are lot's of reasons why this answer (that Jesus tasted death for everyone) is a sign of spiritual health. One of the most obvious reasons is right here in our text, Hebrews 2:9:

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might *taste death for everyone*.

The answer that 95% of evangelicals would give is a healthy sign of desire to say what the Bible says.

But to say what the Bible says and to mean what the Bible means are not necessarily the same thing. Which is why I said that there is something unhealthy about answering the question "For whom did Jesus taste death?" by simply saying "everybody." What's unhealthy about it is not, first, that it's wrong. It might not be wrong. It depends on what you mean by saying that. What's unhealthy is that it stops short of asking what Jesus really accomplished when he died. It assumes that we all know what he accomplished and that this he accomplished for everybody in the same way. That is not healthy, because it is not true. My guess is that most of those 95% who say Jesus died for everybody would have a hard time explaining just what it is that the death of Jesus really, actually accomplished for everybody -- especially what it accomplished for those who refuse to believe and go to hell.

Then Why Is Not Everyone Saved?

In other words, it's unhealthy to say that Jesus tasted death for everyone and not to know what Jesus really accomplished by dying. Suppose you say to me, "I believe that Jesus died for everyone," and I respond, "Then why is not everyone saved?" Your answer probably would be, "Because you have to receive the gift of salvation; you have to believe in Christ in order for his death to count for you." I agree, but then I say, "So you believe that Christ died for people who reject him and go to hell in the same way that he died for those who accept him and go to heaven?" You say, "Yes, the difference is the faith of those who go to heaven. Faith connects you with the benefits of the death of Jesus."

There are several problems here. I will only mention one. And I dwell on this because, if this is what you believe, then you are missing out on the depths of covenant love that God has for you in Christ by understanding it to be the same as the love he has for those who reject him. And you are, in one serious way, "neglecting your great salvation," which, we saw in Hebrews 2:3, we must not do. There is a greatness about being loved with Calvary love that you will never know if you believe that those in hell were loved and died-for the same way you were.

It would be as though a wife insisted that her husband loved and sacrificed for her no differently than he loves and sacrifices for all the women in the world. But in fact Paul, the apostle, says in Ephesians 5:25-27:

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

That's what we mean when we say he died for the church, his bride. In other words there is a precious and unfathomable covenant love between Christ and his bride, that moved him to die for her. The death of Jesus is for the bride of Christ in a different way than it is for those who perish.

Here's the problem with saying Christ died for all the same way he died for his bride. If Christ died for the sins of those who are finally lost, the same way he died for the sins of those who are finally saved, then what are the lost being punished for? Were their sins covered and canceled by the blood of Jesus or not? We Christians say, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3). And we mean that his death paid the debt those sins created. His death removed the wrath of God from

me. His death lifted the curse of the law from me. His death purchased heaven for me. It really accomplished those things!

But what would it mean to say of an unbeliever in hell that Christ died for his sins? Would we mean that the debt for his sins was paid? If so, why is he paying again in hell? Would we mean that the wrath of God was removed? If so, why is the wrath of God being poured out on him in punishment for sins? Would we mean that the curse of the law was lifted? If so, why is he bearing his curse in the lake of fire?

One possible answer is this: one might say that the only reason people go to hell is because of the sin of rejecting Jesus, not because of all the other sins of their life. But that is not true. The Bible teaches that the wrath of God is coming on the world, not just because of its rejection of Jesus, but because of its many sins that are not forgiven. For example, in Colossians 3:5-6, Paul refers to "immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed," and then says, "On account of these things the wrath of God will come." So people who reject Jesus really will be punished for their specific sins, not just for rejecting Jesus.

In What Sense Did Jesus Taste Death for a Person in Hell?

So, we go back to the problem: in what sense did Christ taste death for their sins? If they are still guilty for their sins and still suffer punishment for their sins, what happened on the cross for their sins? Perhaps someone would use an analogy. You might say, Christ purchased their ticket to heaven, and offered it to them freely, but they refused to take it, and that is why they went to hell. And you would be partly right: Christ does offer his forgiveness freely to all, and any who receives it as the treasure it is will be saved by the death of Jesus. But the problem with the analogy is that the purchase of the ticket to heaven is, in reality, the canceling of sins. But what we have seen is that those who refuse the ticket are punished for their sins, not just for refusing the ticket. And so what meaning does it have to say that their sins were canceled? Their sins are going to bring them to destruction and keep them from heaven; so their sins were not really canceled in the cross, and therefore the ticket was not purchased.

The ticket for heaven which Jesus obtained for me by his blood is the wiping out of all my sins, covering them, bearing them in his own body, so that they can never bring me to ruin -- can never be brought up against me again -- never. That's what happened when he died for me. Hebrews 10:14 says, "By one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." Perfected before God for all time, by the offering his life! That's what it means that he died for me. Hebrews 9:28 says, "Christ also, [was] offered once to bear the sins of many." He bore my sins. He really bore them (See Isaiah 53:4-6). He really suffered for them. They cannot and they will not fall on my head in judgment.

If you say to me then, that at the cross Christ only accomplished for me what he accomplished for those who will suffer hell for their sins, then you strip the death of Jesus of its actual effective accomplishment on my behalf, and leave me with what? -- An atonement that has lost its precious assuring power that my sins were really covered and the curse was really lifted and the wrath of God was really removed. That's a high price to pay in order to say that Christ tasted death for everyone in the same way.

I don't think that the Bible commands us or, in fact, lets us say that Christ died for everybody in the same way. And the context of Hebrews 2:9 is a good place to show that the death of Christ had a special design or aim for God's chosen people that it did not have for others.

What Does "Everyone" mean?

At the end of verse 9 the writer says, "By the grace of God [Christ] tasted death *for everyone*." The question here is whether "everyone" refers to every human without distinction, or whether it refers to everyone within a certain group. As when I say at staff lunch, "Is everyone present?" I don't mean everyone in the world. I mean everyone in the group I have in mind. What is the group that the writer has in mind: all of humanity without any distinction, or some other group?

Let's let him answer as we trace his thought in the next verses. Verse 10 is the support for verse 9: Christ tasted death *for everyone* "for it was fitting for him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings." In other words, immediately after saying that by the grace of God Christ tasted death for everyone, the writer explains that God's design in this suffering of Christ was to "bring many sons to glory." So verses 9 and 10 go together like this: Christ tasted death for everyone, because it seemed fitting to God that the way to lead his children to glory was through the suffering and death of Christ.

This means that the "everyone" of verse 9 probably refers to *everyone of the sons* being led to glory in verse 10. In other words the design of God -- the aim and purpose of God -- in sending Christ to die was particularly to lead his children from sin and death and hell to glory. He had a special eye to his own elect children. It's exactly what the Gospel of John says in 11:52 -- that Jesus would die to "gather together into one the *children of God* who are scattered abroad." These "children of God" that Christ died to gather are the "sons" that God is leading to glory through the death of Christ in Hebrews 2:10

You can see this in the next verses too. Verses 11 and 12:

For both He who sanctifies [i.e. Christ] and those who are sanctified [the sons he is leading to glory] are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying [in Psalm 22:22], "I WILL PROCLAIM THY NAME TO MY BRETHERN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING THY PRAISE."

In other words the sons that God is leading to glory through the death of Christ are now called Christ's *brothers*. It was for *everyone of these* that Christ tasted death.

Verse 13 goes on now to call them, not only brothers, but in another sense children of Christ:

And again, "I WILL PUT MY TRUST IN HIM" [Christ's own confession of faith in his Father along with his brothers]. And again, "BEHOLD, I AND THE CHILDREN WHOM GOD HAS GIVEN ME."

Notice, the sons that are being led to glory through the death of Christ are now called children that *God has given to Christ*. They don't just become children by choosing Christ. God sets his favor on them and brings them to Christ -- gives them to Christ. And for every one of these he tastes death and leads them to glory. This is exactly the way Jesus spoke of his own disciples in the prayer of John 17:6: "I manifested Thy name to the men whom *Thou gavest Me out of the world*; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me." So the picture we have is a chosen people that the Father freely and graciously gives to the Son as his children.

Then notice how verses 14-15 connect the aim of Christ's incarnation and death with this chosen group of children:

Since then the children share in flesh and blood [in other words, since those whom the Father gave to the Son have a human nature], He Himself likewise also partook

of the same [human nature], that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives [namely, everyone of those children and brothers that God had given him to lead to glory by his death].

So here the reason given for the incarnation and the death of Jesus (in verse 14) is that the "children" share in flesh and blood. That's the reason Christ took on flesh and blood. And the "children," according to verse 13 are not humans in general, but children God has given to Jesus. And so the whole design and aim of the incarnation and death of Jesus was to lead the sons, the brothers, the children, whom God gave to Jesus, to glory.

Your Belief Was Purchased by the Death of Christ

Now I will stop here in our text, even though we could keep right on going through the rest of this chapter showing that the aim of God in the sending and death of Jesus was to accomplish something definite for his brothers, his children, those whom God has given him out of the world. But I will stop and make a closing application.

I am not the least bit interested in withholding the infinite value of the death of Jesus from anyone. Let it be known and heard very clearly: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that *whoever believes on him* -- I say it again: *whoever believes in him* -- should not perish but have eternal life. Christ died so that whoever (in this room this morning) believes might not perish but live.

And when you believe as you ought to believe, you will discover that your belief -- like all other spiritual blessings -- was purchased by the death of Christ. The sin of unbelief was covered by the blood in your case, and therefore the power of God's mercy was released through the cross to subdue your rebellion and bring you to the Son. You did not make the cross effective in your life by faith. The cross became effective in your life by purchasing your faith.

So glory in this, Christian. Glory that your sins really were covered when Jesus tasted death for you. Glory that your guilt really was removed when Jesus tasted death for you. Glory that the curse of the law really was lifted and that the wrath of God really was removed, and that the precious faith that unites you to all this treasure in Christ was a gift purchased by the blood of Christ.

Christ tasted death for everyone who has faith. Because the faith of everyone who believes was purchased by the death of Christ.

For further reflection see:

1 Timothy 4:10
 Ephesians 5:25-27
 Titus 2:14
 John 10:15; 11:52; 17:6,9,19
 Acts 20:28
 Revelation 1:5; 3:9; 5:9
 Romans 8:28-32
 1 John 2:2 (compare John 11:52)
 2 Peter 2:1

Erroneous Theories on the Atonement

The following article by Pastor William W. Sasser is reprinted from his book *The Atoning Work of Jesus Christ*, (Franklin, TN, Grace Ministries Publications, 1997).

There have been several theories of the Atonement developed; some by God fearing upright men and others by servants of Satan himself. This writer shall attempt, by God's grace, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to briefly discuss nine of these proposed theories.

The Moral Influence Theory

The first of these theories is commonly known as The Moral Influence Theory. This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance. Thus, the Atonement is not directed "towards God with the purpose of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action." Christ's suffering and death was that of a mere martyr. Inspired by this example we, too, are supposed to be made willing to take up our crosses daily in the service of some good cause to mankind, and thus work out our own salvation. The Atonement this theory teaches is only an influence to persuade and move us to walk in the same paths that Christ walked. It is our walking in these paths which saves us and not the Christ of the cross. Christ is thus not our Savior, but only a friend.

The Refutation

The Bible indeed teaches that God is love (1 John 4:8), but this does not mean that love is God. Love is one of many attributes of God, but there are others. The being of God is best described in John 4:24, "God is Spirit." If God were love and nothing but love, there would have been no need for an Atonement. But, the fact is, that love is only one of many attributes of God; He is also a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), and Christ said, "I am the way, the Truth and the Life." Certainly then He did not mean that He was a living tangible entity which was called "truth," or "way," or "life," and neither does He mean that He is "love." No, love is not God, but only the very essence of His being.

Further, to ascribe one attribute as superior over another is to create an imbalanced God. God is perfectly balanced in His attributes. He is no more Love than He is Holy; no more Holy than He is Just, and no more Just than He is Righteous. For one to declare God to be love, and only love, or to say that the dominating characteristic of God is love, is to be guilty of presenting God with a warped nature.

The love of God can be viewed from two different perspectives, that of God's love of benevolence, and that of God's love of acquiescence. The love of benevolence is toward all mankind. As it is written, "...for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). The love of benevolence is toward all mankind in general. The love of acquiescence, however, is a special love of delight which is manifest towards God's children only. "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 8:44). Those whom the Father draws to Christ are those in whom God delights, for He gives unto them eternal life. Surely God does not love Judas Iscariot who "went to his own place;" surely He does not love the multitudes who are at this very moment weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth in a burning hell, where they will forever more be the objects of God's wrath and anger! If this, my friend, is love, it is a most peculiar way of demonstrating it.

The truth is that God demands punishment of sin. His divine justice must be satisfied, His holiness must be vindicated, and His law must be honored. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered the exact degree of torment that every child of God would have experienced in hell for all eternity, worlds without end. Christ was more than an example, more than a mere martyr; He is salvation and there is no way to escape the judgment of God except through Him; "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

This theory completely denies the spiritual condition of man (Ephesians 2:1; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:9-23), the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:30; 5:18; 8:58; Revelation 1:8, 11), and "necessitates a curtailment or surrender of every other characteristic doctrine of Christianity-inspiration, sin, the deity of Christ, justification, regeneration and eternal retribution."

The Governmental Theory

The second of the theories which this writer will discuss is known as the Governmental theory. It affirms that "because of His absolute sovereignty, God is able to relax, at will, the demands of the law and to forgive men freely without any expiation or sacrifice for sin." According to this theory the primary purpose of the crucifixion was to impress upon men the horror of sin. Christ was to furnish an example of what happened as the result of sin, and to remind men that sin would not go unpunished. The primary object of the punishment of Christ is to instill devotion in men toward their government. Christ did not suffer the exact penalty demanded of God, but something far less. God, however, in His sovereignty, can and did accept the sacrifice as sufficient whether it actually was or not.

The Refutation

First of all, this theory represents God as unjust because it teaches that He punished an innocent person-merely to impress others. Secondly, if what this theory assumes is true, that is, that God can accept a much lesser sacrifice than that which sin demands, then the blood of animals could have been used to remove sin; therefore, the blood of the Son of God was in reality no more meritorious than the blood of bulls and goats, but was efficacious only because God chose to accept it. Thirdly, this theory presents a light view of sin and its effects upon mankind in that it teaches that man possesses the power in and of himself to change his moral nature. All he needs in order to accomplish this is to surround himself with good influences.

The faulty reasoning of such a theory can be better understood when one considers the individual who conceived it. It was proposed by Hugo Grotius, a Dutch theologian and jurist of the 17th century. It was Mr. Grotius' opinion that God be regarded as the moral Governor of the universe "who must act not according to His emotions or desires, but according to the best interest of all those under His authority."

The Mystical Theory

According to those who hold the Mystical theory, the entire human race is a sort of organism. Mankind is collectively one and is joined together as the cells of protoplasm combine to form a human body. What Christ actually did when incarnated was to infuse His deity into humanity, thus giving humanity the thing needed to counteract and overcome the death and impending corruption which were introduced into the human race through Adam. Men who are saved by faith become partakers of this purified

humanity. According to some who assert the mystical theory, fallen humanity was gradually restored by Jesus Christ until, at His death, humanity was again in perfect fellowship with God as it was before the fall in Eden. It is the teaching of this theory that ultimately the entire human race will be restored unto God. Although the Mystical theory has been in existence since the early Greek fathers, it has never claimed many adherents.

The Refutation

This theory errs in several points. First, in that it asserts that the sufferings of Christ and His ultimate death are not essential to His redemptive work. Secondly, because it affirms that all men since Christ will be saved, it leaves unexplained the redemption of the Old Testament saints. This explains why some who adhere to this theory teach that there was no salvation before the time of Christ, and therefore the patriarchs perished. Thirdly, the theory lacks scriptural warrant in proving that Christ became incarnate in order to infuse deity into humanity. The Bible makes no such declaration.

The Middle Theory

Commonly called the Middle theory because it generally follows the "Socinian" theory. It teaches that God may forgive and pardon sin apart from punishment of that sin; that is, He requires no satisfaction, or Atonement. The Middle theory implies that there are persons who have never sinned. These persons will receive pardon upon the basis of repentance only, but they will never receive full pardon. However, what they do receive is sufficient to allow them to escape eternal damnation.

The Refutation

The Middle theory of the Atonement does not explain sufficiently why Christ suffered such severe punishment upon the cross. If God requires no Atonement, then why did Christ suffer? As such, this theory not only presents a warped view of the divine character of Christ, but it does not explain scripture which refers to the work of Christ. If there are persons who have never sinned, how shall they repent and what shall they repent of? In order for repentance to be true repentance, one must turn from sin and to Christ. However, if an individual has never sinned he cannot repent for he has nothing to repent of.

The Socinian Theory

This theory affirms that God is pure benevolence, that His exercising His wrath in justice is incompatible with His character, and that a sinner may be forgiven upon repentance. The work which Christ wrought only made pardon known to man, but did not actually secure it. The pardon of sinners was already prepared in God's benevolent nature, all Christ did was to make it known. The sacrifices in the Old Testament were suitable only to a barbarous age and did not typify the Atonement of Christ by any stretch of the imagination. God, because of sympathy for the weakness of the people, permitted such sacrifices.

The Refutation

This theory, needless to say, is not in harmony with the Bible's description of the nature of sin and is at variance with the teachings of scripture concerning Christ's reward pending the completion of His meritorious work. Instead of Christ's active and passive obedience being the ground and price paid for the sinner's salvation, the Socinian theory asserts that Christ's life and death were only examples to us of the manner in which we should live and submit to God. Finally, the Bible definitely teaches that the Old

Testament ceremonies and sacrifices were types and illustrations of the things to come (Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:17).

The Ethical Theory

According to advocates of this theory, Christ is a universal mediator, who is touched with sympathy for the sick, weary, guilty and hopeless. In the work of the Atonement, there is no imputation or transfer of sin to Christ, neither is His righteousness imputed to all born-again believers. What does happen, is that the race approaches God representatively suffering for sin and repenting through Christ. While man cannot repent in and of himself, still the Atonement of Jesus Christ has no value apart from repentance. In order for God to be just, He must reveal Himself to every sinner. According to the Ethical theory, "The Gospel is preached to a nation, not when within certain geographical boundaries it has been proclaimed at scattered points, but only when in reality all individuals of all the nations have known it." Each one who is saved must receive salvation through the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel.

The Refutation

A clarification of terms is in order. A mediator is not one who reveals another, but one who intervenes between two persons to bring them into agreement. The Bible declares, "By His stripes we are healed," but this theory sets forth nothing in the sufferings of Christ from which God can justly pardon and accept the sinner. If our sins are not imputed to Christ nor His righteousness to us, then is Christ dead in vain (Galatians 2:21).

This theory errs in that it presents repentance as an effective cause and not as a consequence of the Atonement. Therefore, it sets forth salvation as partly by grace and partly by works. The Ethical Theory is also faulty in that it fails to answer the question of how infants receive salvation, because it holds that regeneration never occurs except through "the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel."

The Arminian Theory

Christ died so that God could offer salvation to all upon the ground of evangelical obedience; perfect legal obedience is not necessary. The Atonement itself was general in its nature without any application of it on God's part. Any individual may accept or reject faith and obedience, thus accepting or rejecting salvation as offered by God by a simple act of volition.

The Refutation

This theory, like many others, fails to provide a satisfaction or appeasement to divine justice and law. It also presents the possibility of failure in that some for whom Christ died may ultimately end up in hell. Scripture is totally against such claims as Christ said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... I give unto them eternal life, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand; My Father which gave them me is greater than all; no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 6:37; 10:27-29). Such scriptures as these plainly teach that the Atonement was not to secure the means of salvation, but to procure salvation itself.

The Lutheran Theory

This theory differs basically in one aspect from the generally accepted "Satisfaction" view of the Atonement. Namely, in that it teaches such was the value of Christ's sacrifice that God could offer salvation to all that believe in His Son.

The Refutation

The Lutheran theory rejects the doctrine of election thus omitting a part of the truth. Even though salvation is not election, election is included in God's all wise and sovereign purpose, "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate ... Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth" (Romans 8:29,33).

The question for those who proclaim the Lutheran theory is not "did Christ die for only those who truly believe?", but "Who shall believe?" According to scripture, those whom God foreknew were predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). It is impossible for one to become like Christ without truly believing in Him as Lord and Savior. Those who believe are those whom God foreknew (Romans 8:29-30).

The General Theory

This theory teaches that Christ died for sinners in general and not for a particular people determined before hand by God. It further teaches that the works of the Atonement and Redemption are not united in one and the same work, but are two separate works. In other words, God chose to reconcile the entire world through the Atonement, but He has selected from the world those who shall be redeemed.

The Refutation

If the entire world has been reconciled through the Atonement, then there are no grounds upon which this reconciliation can be destroyed, for scripture declares, "I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it that men should fear before Him" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Whatever God has reconciled shall remain reconciled, and nothing can be changed or altered concerning it.

This theory of the Atonement is incompatible with those scriptures which teach that Christ's death was confined to the elect (John 10:11, 15, 26-28).