

Those For Whom Christ Died: Some Reflections



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Introduction

The Statement of Belief of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary affirms the following truth concerning Jesus Christ: "We believe that Jesus Christ...gave Himself as a perfect substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of all men" (page 6, 1995–1997 catalog).

The Issues

Not all Christians agree with the above statement. One Reformed theologian states, "God, existing in eternity outside of and anterior to all time, decreed to send the Second Person of the Trinity into the world, at the appropriate moment, to save a chosen few. He came to make salvation actual and certain, not merely possible. This view has been called 'Limited Atonement,' although some theologians prefer 'Definite or Particular Atonement,' and others 'Limited Redemption' or 'Particular Redemption.'" (Reformed Theology Today by Louis Igou Hodges. Columbus: GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1995, pages 74, 75).

Response to 'Limited Atonement' verses

Those who believe in limited atonement point to Bible verses like Acts 20:28 where we read about "the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" and Ephesians 5:25–27 where we read that "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing". In response we point

to Galatians 2:20 where Paul states that God's Son "loved me, and gave himself for me." No one suggests this verse is teaching that Christ loved and died for only Paul. Thus, in the same way, the verses in Acts and Ephesians quoted above do not teach that Christ died for the church alone. Hebrews 2:10 teaches that Christ died to bring "many sons" safely to glory. Obviously this benefit of salvation is limited to believers alone. But this is not the only purpose for Christ's death. The previous verse teaches that Christ tasted "death for every man." Thus, while I recognize that one purpose for Christ's death was to actually secure the salvation of those who would believe, I believe this is not the only purpose. I also believe that Christ died to make salvation available to everyone. In the remainder of this brief article, support for this second purpose will be given.

Biblical support for general atonement

There are a number of verses in the Bible that teach Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for the sins of everyone:

2 Peter 2:1 describes those false teachers who bring swift destruction upon themselves as "denying the Lord that bought them." In the NT, 3 Greek words describe redemption, and these words describe a progression: the first word refers to the purchase of a slave; the second word refers to taking the slave out of the slave market, while the third word describes setting the slave free. It is this first word that is used in 2 Peter 2:1. These false teachers who deny Christ were purchased by Him but not removed from the slave market or set free. Interestingly, Louis Igou Hodges recognizes the problem this verse poses for those who teach limited atonement. He states, "Particularly troubling is II Peter 2:1. Reformed interpretation of this text needs further study." (Hodges, page 188).

In 1 John 2:2 we are told that Jesus Christ "is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." "Propitiation" has the idea that the death of Christ was a sacrifice that removed God's wrath. Whether this benefit is permanent or temporary, potential, is not explained. What is clear, however, is that the 2 groups receiving this benefit are not Jewish believers and believers of all ethnic backgrounds; rather, the 2 groups receiving this benefit are believers and the whole world.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14–21, Christ's love motivates believers because they realize that if Christ died for everyone, it was because everyone died [when Adam sinned and thus needed a savior from sin and death—v 14]. Furthermore, Christ's love motivates believers because they understand the moral obligation of all believers ("they which live") to live for the One who died and rose again for them (v 15). Specifically, the value of Christ's death for the world is stated in verse 19 as a reconciliation, [a removal of hostility] between the world and God. And we are not left to wonder about the nature of this reconciliation: it is both temporary ("not imputing their trespasses unto them" something which will not be true at the Great White Throne Judgment—see Revelation 20:11–15) and potential (the message we are to give to the world is not. "realize you are already reconciled" but "be ye reconciled to God"—v 20)

Theological support for general atonement

The Bible teaches that God chose some to salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:13). There is debate in our circles as to whether or not this election was based on God's awareness of who would trust Christ for salvation, but it is beyond the scope of our article to consider this issue. The point is that those who believe in limited atonement think it is inconsistent for people to believe in election but to reject the concept of limited atonement. They ask, "if God has chosen some to be saved, what purpose would be served by Christ dying as a sacrifice for everyone? Would that not be a waste?" An appropriate response can be made by paraphrasing John 3:16–18. God's love for the world is expressed by the sending of His Son so that anyone who believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. Notice the difference between purpose and result: The purpose for God sending His Son was not "to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved"; nevertheless, the result is mixed: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the

only begotten Son of God.” Thus, there is a negative result attached to Christ’s death as a sacrifice for everyone: it becomes the basis of condemnation for those who do not believe. While God could be righteous in sending the lost to hell for many other sins, He could not be righteous in doing so if Christ had not died as a sacrifice for the whole world.

Practical support for general atonement

The Bible tells us that God’s Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16) but He does not whisper this in our ears! He personalizes the gospel promises made in His Word. But there must be promises for everyone in general if this is to happen. After all, there are no promises in the Bible with our names specifically mentioned. The limited atonement view robs the believer of this assurance by making the gospel promises for the elect alone. In such a case, one is left to base assurance of salvation on the ability to persevere. Some Calvinists reject this as a distortion of their view. They say the Holy Spirit uses the promise that anyone who believes has everlasting life to create assurance. “Fair enough” I say, if that really is their view. But Calvin himself taught that God gives some non-elect a temporary faith which does not save! (see Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, chapter 2, number 11, and Reformed theologians like Louis Berkhof agree with Calvin. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941 page 502.)

Furthermore, believing that Christ died for the whole world encourages a free offer of the gospel to everyone. We do not preach the gospel to every person because we do not know who is elect and who is not; we preach the gospel to every person because that is what we were commanded to do! (Mark 16:15). This gospel we preach is nothing less than the truth that Christ died for the sins of the whole world. The offer is given to all because a provision has been made for all!