

What is recorded below, is a synopsis of a two part talk recently given at the New Covenant Theology think-tank hosted by Joe Krygier. I was asked to attend and bring something to the group of how my understanding of the doctrine of the atonement had changed. Why I no longer hold to the more typical conceptions and formulations surrounding the idea of “Limited Atonement” - and yet do not surrender one iota of ground on the realities of God’s sovereignty in salvation, nor His own sovereign election of men unto to salvation, nor His power and action in predestination.

If you would prefer to hear the audio of these two presentations, you can click [HERE: REID’S AUDIO](#) and once there, click on the two sessions bearing my name. They were a bit stream-of-consciousness, but also cover some other areas which might be helpful and/or of interest.

I will freely admit that I remain in process in this discussion. My research, study and analysis is far from over. And I believe I can say in all honesty, I do not have a need for my final thoughts on this topic to end in a specific place, save for those things which it is already clear from Scripture cannot possibly be the case - such as a universal salvation.

Due to time constraints I was forced to omit an historical survey of the debate over Limited Atonement in the Reformed & Calvinistic camps, and a plethora of quotations establishing the wide scope of views and nuances within the debate.

In answer to one questioner who asked how this view differed from the Arminian view of the atonement? I had two brief responses.

1 - I can no more deny the statement “Jesus died for all men” because it is also said by Arminians, than I can deny the doctrine of the Trinity because it is held as a dogma by Roman Catholicism.

2 - Arminian theology posits that Jesus in fact had no elect He fully intended to save, who were predestinated before the foundation of the world unto salvation. The atonement merely made salvation a possibility. James Arminius’ foundational issue was with the doctrine of predestination. He simply could not admit it. Scripture in my view cannot be clearer on the subject. Nor can a sovereign election unto salvation by God not based upon mere foreknowledge be denied. These are Scriptural givens. But neither do I feel the need to posit that because these two things are true, somehow they require a doctrine of the atonement that denies that Jesus died for the sins of all men, paid the penalty for all, died in their place, and yet they are not sovereignly brought to salvation and will justly perish in their own sins. I will freely admit there is a mystery in it. But also assert it is the Bible’s teaching upon the subject. Nor do I find any reason to try and controvert the clear Scripture record that God genuinely loves all men, sincerely desires the salvation of all, and sincerely invites all to it on the basis of Jesus’ atonement, and yet does not sovereignly work in all to accomplish it. Same mystery. Same need to leave it with God.

So as not to exhaust you, my basic plan was to cover several key points.

1. Quoting Carson from the “Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God”, and R. C. Sproul in “What is Reformed Theology?”, I dealt with the inadequacy of the term “limited Atonement” itself. That it is not the atonement as an act which is limited in any way, excepting that, it was what it was - an atonement, and not something else. No one except a very narrow Hyper-Calvinist would say the atonement is limited in sufficiency. And thus the term (coined I believe by Loraine Boettner in 1942 when he first published the acronym T.U.L.I.P.) is a poor one to work from. I advanced my preference for the term “objective” atonement - though I’m not married to it.

My second issue with the term LA is that it also gives rise to ideas like: Jesus died one way for one group, and another way for another group. The truth is, this isn't a Scriptural use of atonement language, it is confusing and introduces a very artificial idea into it all. Christ died. Period. He didn't die different ways. To say He died one way or another is to move us away from the real questions like: What comes of His death? What does it mean? What does it accomplish? Does it do what it does all at once? How does a man gain an "interest" in it? etc.

I added briefly here a reminder that Christ dies - died, but once, for all. He did not die as many times as there are elect persons. He died but once. That one and the same death, is applied to all who believe. But it is nonetheless but one death. It is applicable to all. It is this one death the Father willingly receives in the place of all the just deaths of those who believe. There is no limitation in this death in the sense sometimes applied to it.

2. I talked about our tendency to speak of atonement as though it were purely ex opera operato (in the doing, it is done). Scripture is clear that it is on the basis of the atonement that we enjoy the realities of salvation. Nevertheless, it is by faith we are justified, not by the atonement in the abstract. Eph. 2:3 demonstrates without contradiction that prior to faith, the elect "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind". This was entered into again later as I developed the difference between paying for sin, and justifying someone. This is a crucial distinction. To utilize Bruce Ware's thoughts on this, if even the elect remain children of wrath until we are justified, Scripture has revealed how it is Christ could pay for a man's sins, and a man still be lost. I'll did come back to this issue again.

At this point I did note how that there was an "automatic" aspect of the atonement. This aspect has to do with propitiating the Father. Upon Christ's death, the Father in effect said: "I am satisfied with **this** death, **this** blood, **this** sacrifice. All who come to me by means of **this same Lamb**, I will freely and lovingly accept. I am satisfied with Him as a substitute for any and all who will come in His name. I will not accept them alone, nor with any other substitute. With Him alone am I satisfied." Now, each one is required to appropriate the Lamb for himself. Each one must bring the same blood. Each one must believe that the Father is satisfied with Christ, and that if I come in Him, He will be satisfied with me.

Though the analogy is a mean one, nevertheless idea of escrow is useful here. An idea not altogether foreign to the Word either. I believe it can easily be substantiated in the symbol of saving up of the ashes of the red heifer (see: Numb. 19). Christ's sacrifice satisfied the Father, so that He would be willing to take in any who come by virtue of it, and it is sufficient for all. All are invited to take advantage of it by faith. The payment is made. What remains is to have our guilt removed. And this, is a function of justification. Justification is on the basis of the atonement for sure - but yet to be properly distinguished. Otherwise, we open ourselves up to a charge that John Owen tried (unsuccessfully I believe) to clear himself of - arriving at some form of eternal justification. A man may well make full restitution for his crimes - such does not alleviate His guilt. He is nonetheless still guilty of having committed the crime. Even if someone else were caught, tried, convicted and executed for his crime. He is still guilty. He must somehow be made righteous.

Christ has paid for the sins of all. Restitution (if you will) has been accomplished as well. The glory of God has been restored. Perfect obedience has been lived out. A perfect sacrifice has been slain. But until I can be declared "not-guilty" - "righteous", I am still liable to my death. There are those in Hell now for whom Christ paid the just penalty for every sin. But they remain unjustified, still in their guilt, and therefore are still punished accordingly.

Is this double jeopardy? No. It would be double jeopardy if THEY paid the penalty twice. But not if He laid up a satisfaction which fully recompensed the Father, which the Father would be pleased to receive as well if they would but come by virtue of it - owning Christ as THEIR sacrifice by faith. The problem isn't that He didn't satisfy the Father, but in a way, that He doesn't satisfy US! We must appropriate Him by faith.

Thus we have the Scripture declaring the Father was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, but we are still plead with to "be reconciled to God." (2 Cor. 5:18-20) He offered up His lamb to cleanse the Temple that we might be able to be received into it. We must offer up ours, that we might be declared just so that we CAN enter. We both offer the same Lamb. The Father will only be satisfied with Christ alone.

3. Growing out of the problem of #2, we discussed the need to recognize again the agency of the Spirit in applying salvation. That it is not "automatic." He applies the benefits of Christ' death to us in space and time. "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3 & 5). Upon the queries after salvation, no one in the Scripture is ever directed to see if they are elect, and then just realize their status and the salvation that comes with it. All are directed to repent and believe. Apart from faith there is no justification, regardless of the work done at Calvary. That does not diminish Christ's atoning work there, it is to appropriate Scripture language and sequence in terms of how one comes to partake of it savingly. If anything, this emphasizes the need for the work of the Spirit to use the Word of Christ preached to create faith in the soul (Rom. 10:17)

4. Painful as it is (for a systematics guy that is, as I am) I addressed very briefly the problem of our systematizing doctrines based upon a view of the "order of the decrees" which in fact we cannot know - for God has not revealed them. Calvin assiduously avoided this where his heirs ran rampant with it. This is neither safe nor wise. With this, I spent a short bit on why we must beware our own logical conclusions. We can be flawlessly logical, and yet wrong, if our conclusion contradicts revelation. It is logical to assume that if God gets glory from forgiving my sin, that increasing my sin increases His glory. But Paul's "may it never be!" is the only appropriate response to what is actually pretty sound reasoning. Sound, except that revelation contradicts it. Paul confronts this problem of arriving at a logical but incorrect conclusion several times in Romans. We cannot safely extrapolate beyond revelation in concretizing doctrine. We must be held captive to what He was pleased to reveal - which belongs to us and our children (Deut. 29:29). While letting the hidden things remain with Him. No matter how logical it seems.

5. I spent some time on how we ask the questions around atonement debates in ways which are designed to produce certain answers. When we ask "did Jesus die for all men, or only for the elect" - our presupposition is that there can be no other alternatives. This is a dishonest approach. Who says it can only be one or the other? We face this tension in a number of crucial doctrinal areas. Is Jesus human or Divine? Yes. Is the Bible written by the Holy Spirit, or men? Yes. Is God one, or three? Yes. Did Jesus die for all men, or only for the elect? Yes! The requirement of a strict antithesis robs the Bible of its use of both/and language in this regard. It lays revelation captive to logic, rather than the other way around.

From this I ventured into the problem too of asking "what was God's intent in the atonement?" The problem being the question will only admit of an answer in the singular, and forces us to cram all of the Biblical data into that paradigm. It leaves no room for asking if God might have had more than one intent. Here I brought up Dr. Ware short scheme of 5 intents, and went on to establish multiple intents in God by way example from the Law. It is incontrovertibly God's intent that "thou shalt not kill." Yet

it is manifestly incontrovertible that in God's sovereignty, men are permitted to kill one another all the time. We dare not posit a lack in His sovereignty. We dare not posit self-contradiction. But we can indeed see more than one intent working at one and the same time. These are not a contradiction. They allow God to be God. Why in the mystery of His being, He does not save all, when He earnestly expresses His desire to have all saved, and makes provision accordingly is something He must unravel, not me. We must fulfill our ambassadorial roles in pleading with all men as though it were God's own voice - "be reconciled to God." Let the mystery rest with Him. Do not try to resolve it.

6. I did then go back and develop the first pictures of atonement in Gen. 3. These initial observations of Man's Fall and the Promise of the Redeemer ought to be crucial to our understanding of how atonement themes are to be understood. Sadly, they are nearly completely ignored. As a quick digest, I would note the following things from a reading of Genesis 3:

Let me also preface this with several needed contextual comments initiated by Bunyan in his work on Reprobation. Things needed to inform our overall interpretation of what comes after.

NOTE: All are created upright in Adam / Elect & non-Elect.

NOTE: All are created in the image of God / Elect & non-Elect.

NOTE: All are created for His glory / Elect & non-Elect.

NOTE: All fall together in Adam / Elect & non-Elect.

Now - Observe in the narrative:

- a. The NEED for atonement is created by human sin. Man wanting to BE God.
- b. Atonement is INSTINCTIVELY perceived as need by fallen man on some level. Hence the creation of all human religion, and man's attempt to cover himself.
- c. Atonement was first humanly ATTEMPTED apart from God by fabricating cover. It was not received by God as sufficient.
- d. Atonement is seen as humanly UNACHIEVABLE.
- e. God's act of atonement first addresses NAKEDNESS (the need for cover).
- f. God's act of atonement secondly addresses their FEAR of God (due to guilt).
- g. Atonement is God initiated.
- h. Atonement is humanly resisted.
- i. The second human attempt at atonement was BLAMESHIFTING.
- j. Atonement was for the human race ONLY - no angelic provision.
- k. Atonement was for BOTH sexes. The woman was not subsumed by the man as in the Mosaic covenant.
- l. Atonement was for "unintentional" sins or sins of ignorance - Eve was deceived.
- m. Atonement was for "intentional" sins - Adam was not deceived. Note that under the Mosaic code, a sacrifice had to be brought for such sins, but that the person also had to die.
- n. Atonement was for COLLECTIVE sin - The RACE was covered.
- o. Atonement was for INDIVIDUAL sin - EACH were covered.
- p. Atonement was SUBSTITUTIONARY.
- q. Atonement required a substitutionary DEATH.
- r. Atonement FORESTALLED immediate FINAL judgment.
- s. The promise of the Seed who was to come to bruise the Serpent's head is made to all mankind in

Adam & Eve.

I also expanded on how the sacrificial system retained a dual aspect in sacrifice (as above). The lamb on the Day of Atonement was slain to cleanse the Temple, not the people. The scape goat demonstrated expiation. But each was still responsible to bring his own sacrifices in due time. All three of these are types of Christ (as as others) and cannot be ignored with out flattening out the atonement portrait or collapsing all of it into only one aspect. Christ is always the only sacrifice God will accept etc. But He is appropriated one way by the Father, and another way by us.

7. I developed ever so slightly the idea that the atonement picture in Adam and Eve is one of GENERAL atonement - a promise made to all mankind. The picture in Cain & Able of INDIVIDUAL atonement. Each needing to bring a sacrifice by faith commensurate with God's. And the 3rd picture in Noah & the Ark (kopher being the first use of atonement in the "pitch") and how the emphasis there is upon the GRACE aspect of atonement.

And I closed with this quote from J. C. Ryle.

"I will give place to no one in maintaining that Jesus loves all mankind, came into the world for all, died for all, provided redemption sufficient for all, calls on all, invites all, commands all to repent and believe; and ought to be offered to all—freely, fully, unreservedly, directly, unconditionally—without money and without price. If I did not hold this, I dare not get into a pulpit, and I should not understand how to preach the Gospel.

But while I hold all this, I maintain firmly that Jesus does special work for those who believe, which He does not do for others. He quickens them by His Spirit, calls them by His grace, washes them in His blood—justifies them, sanctifies them, keeps them, leads them, and continually intercedes for them—that they may not fall. If I did not believe all this, I should be a very miserable, unhappy Christian."

J. C. Ryle, [Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of John \(New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1880\), 3:186.](#)

I have omitted a large section I did on arguing that part of our view is errant because we are looking at it only from inside the perspective of the Mosaic covenant community. A bit like trying to describe what your house looks like to someone coming to visit - only by descriptions of the inside. We have to back up before the Mosaic covenant, and even the Abrahamic covenant and see how God revealed concepts of atonement from the get go. I do think much of our atonement thinking is informed by looking at it through the lens of being inside a covenant community. This is one place where (in my estimation) Covenant Theology errs greatly, and where NCT needs to beware. The structure of Romans for instance does not begin within the "covenant community" but with the earlier and larger structures of all mankind. Thus Paul looks to establish justification by faith NOT from within the Mosaic covenant community, but runs back to Abraham. Then in chapter 5, while developing the nature of human culpability does not appeal to the Law first, or the Mosaic economy, but to Adam. I think we need to take this cue and work from the same platforms. Else what we keep getting is a modified Judaism, which was a temporary construct and neither God's starting point in Creation, nor His consummation point in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

I also spent time on how we must also ascertain where God is going in redemptive history if we are to

get a clearer understanding of the trajectory of all things since Adam. Based upon 1 Peter 2:9-10 & Rev. 20-21, it looks like His final goal is the divinely ultimate manifestation of His mercy and grace through eternal, familial society with a redeemed humanity. Paul's logic? The more that get saved, the more glorious He is. The doctrine of the atonement ought to blast us into evangelism, never dampen it. Bruce Ware's "multiple intentions".

"God's intentions in the death of Christ are complex, not simple; multiple, not single:

1. Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own, his elect.
2. Christ died for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people, making it possible for all who believe to be saved.
3. Christ died for the purpose of securing the bone fide offer of salvation to all people everywhere.
4. Christ died for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation for those who hear and reject the gospel that has been genuinely offered to them.
5. Christ died for the purpose of reconciling all things to the Father."