

Everyone Believes in a Limited Atonement

An Examination of the Death of Christ, and for Whom it was Intended

by Geoff Volker

Everyone Has a Problem

When I talk to someone about the extent of the Atonement (for whom did Jesus die?) it seems that the very first passage of scripture pointed out to me is 1 John 2:2.

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." 1 John 2:2 (NIV)

I know I am supposed to recognize as obvious the truth of this verse, that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world. But ... just for the sake of being difficult let me pose a question about this passage of Scripture.

The Critical Question

Did Jesus really pay for ALL the sins of EVERYBODY in the world?

I know that the apparent answer is yes, but I believe that there is more to it than meets the eye. John Gerstner, that delightful reformed theologian, has said on more than one occasion that what we need is a theology of the "second glance." What he means by this is that everything is not always as it seems when we give it our "first glance." First John 2:2 is just such a verse!

If we take the verse at its face value without any qualification it would seem to teach that everyone will be saved. This proves too much! Anyone who is committed to the authority and inerrancy of the Bible knows that hell will have its full quota.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Matthew 7:13-14 (NIV)

The purpose in quoting this verse is to show that if only a few are going to be in heaven, then the rest, the many, will be in that place of eternal torment. So, having eliminated this first option, we are left with one of the following:

1. Christ died for some of the sins of all of the people.
2. Christ died for all of the sins of some of the people.

Option #1

How shall we describe this view? Let me wax nostalgic about my past. I grew up in that most scenic of all cities: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For those who slept through geography, Pittsburgh is located at the confluence (where two rivers come together) of the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers. These two rivers form the beginning of the Ohio River. The Ohio runs into the Mississippi which runs into the Gulf of Mexico. As a result, with so much water around, there had to be lots of bridges. We ... this is a tale of a particular bridge.

With much zeal the City Fathers set out to build a "double-decker" bridge. This bridge would be a delight to the eyes. Their only problem in building this bridge was their math. They failed to have enough funds set aside to finish the construction of the "double-decker" delight. Therefore, as a result of this boondoggle, the city was the proud recipient of a bridge that was only half

completed! Pittsburgh, the flower of the central Atlantic states, was now the envy of all the surround cities with its "bridge to nowhere." Here, a remarkable two level bridge stretched out across the river only to find itself but "halfway" across the water.

Such is the picture of Option #1. If Jesus Christ only paid for some of the sins of all of the people then his death on the cross is identical to the "bridge to nowhere." If there exists even one sin that has not really been paid for, then there is no hope. Hell will be the only reward and it shall never end. To have an Atonement that included every last person would indeed be something to behold. But, to have an Atonement that does not include all the sins of everyone would be to have no Atonement at all! It would not simply be a bridge to nowhere, but an Atonement to hell!

But ... our opponents say that the above scenario is not a true picture of how the cross works. They tell us that Jesus did indeed pay for all the sins of all men. But, the payment for sin that he purchased on the cross only becomes effective when we "believe."

The Weak Link of Option #1

The weak link in this view of the cross is the assumption that men are able to believe on their own. This understanding of the Atonement states in no uncertain terms that the cross in and of itself does not determine who is going to believe. But the Scriptures say:

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:44 (NIV)

Here the Word of God speaks right to the issue. No one is able to come to Christ on his own. The reason for this is again laid out in Scripture.

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV)

Two reasons given for man's inability to believe are the following:

1. The gospel is "foolishness;" a waste of time. He does not want to believe.
2. He simply cannot understand and respond to the gospel on his own.

Clearly, the Father does not draw everyone to himself. In John 5:44 all those who are drawn by the Father will be raised on the last day. Since no one is able to believe on his own how do we account for the fact that some do indeed believe? The answer is that the Father chooses those to whom he gives saving faith. Since no one wants or deserves this saving faith it must be purchased on the cross by Jesus. Faith is a gift.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast." Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

Those of you who are "into Greek" might be saying that the pronoun which makes reference to the gift of God, the "this" is in the neuter gender. This is so because "gift" is in the neuter gender, and "this" is referring to something as being a gift of God. The question that bothers some has to do with the fact that faith on the other hand is of the feminine gender. Normally, the noun and the pronoun agree in gender. Since faith is not of the same gender as the "gift" it must not be what the "this" is referring to. Therefore, Ephesians 2:8-9 is not teaching that faith is a gift of God at all. Before you go celebrating let me point out that the only other noun that is in verse 8 that gift could refer to is the word "grace." The gender for grace is also feminine, the same as

faith. The only solution that seems to fit with the rest of Scripture is that the gift of God must refer to our "entire" salvation of which faith is a part. Faith is part of that "package deal" of our salvation which our Savior purchased on the cross. Since we have already seen that it is impossible for man to believe on his own it is absolutely necessary that faith be purchased on the cross along with all the rest of our salvation. So to say that Jesus paid for the sins of all, but only those who believe actually get their sins paid for, is in effect saying that no one is going to believe, since no one is able to believe on his own.

Option #2

Did Christ die for all of the sins of some of the people? The Scriptures seem to me to clearly say yes!

"When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." Hebrews 9:11-12 (NIV)

Here we have the death of our Lord described in no uncertain terms as having actually paid for sins, having purchased our salvation. The only possible scenario that fits this description of the Atonement is Option #2. Jesus actually purchased the entire salvation of all those whom the Father had chosen in eternity past to save by Christ's death on the cross.

"When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." John 19:30 (NIV)

With the death of Jesus Christ salvation was infallibly secured. There would be no doubt about it. At the appointed time God, the Holy Spirit would draw the elect to the Savior and give them the faith to believe. Our salvation is by grace from the beginning to end, "so that no one can boast."

The point that I am seeking to make is that everyone has to qualify 1 John 2:2. You either have to add some sort of qualifier in the direction of Jesus paying for the sins of every last person but only potentially, or, you indeed say that Jesus actually paid for sins, but, you make a qualification in the direction of whom the Atonement was intended to save. Everyone believes in a Limited Atonement!