

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 7: THE ATONING WORK OF CHRIST

Lesson 22

The Extent of the Atonement

Definite Atonement and the Particularity of Grace

For Whom Did Christ Die? The Question That the Gospel Requires Us to Answer Precisely

Key Texts: John 10:11, 14–16, 26–29; Ephesians 5:25; Romans 8:32–34; John 6:37–39; John 17:9

“I Lay Down My Life for the Sheep” – The Particular Love of the Good Shepherd

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

The question of the extent of the atonement, for whom did Christ die?, is among the most carefully debated and most pastorally significant questions in the entire theology of the cross. Lessons 20 and 21 have established the necessity and nature of the atonement: the cross was necessary because the divine justice required satisfaction, its nature is penal substitutionary, and the formal structure of its saving work is the double imputation of sin to Christ and righteousness to the believer. The question now is the scope: did the penal substitutionary work of Christ extend to every human being who has ever lived or will ever live, making salvation possible for all? Or did it extend to a particular people, the elect, those whom the Father gave to the Son, actually securing their salvation by bearing their specific penalty with specific, individual, permanently effective intent?

This question is not peripheral. It follows directly from the specific nature of the atonement established in Lesson 21. If the atonement is genuinely penal substitutionary, if Christ actually bore the specific penalty for specific sins in the place of specific people, then the question of for whose sins He bore it is unavoidable. A substitutionary penalty-bearing that actually accomplishes its purpose cannot be simultaneously effective for the sins of all people without exception (which would require universal salvation, since a substitutionary penalty borne for every person would leave no sin charged to any person's account) and yet fail to secure the salvation of those for whom it was offered (which would require an atonement that bears the penalty but does not accomplish the salvation, leaving the penalty borne and the person still condemned). The logic of the penal substitution presses toward a particularist conclusion.

This lesson presents the Reformed doctrine of definite atonement (also called particular redemption or limited atonement), the conviction that Christ died with the specific intention and certain effect of saving all those whom the Father gave Him, and that His atoning work actually, objectively, and permanently secures the salvation of those specific people. The lesson examines the question through six headings: the question stated and its stakes; the biblical case for definite atonement from the particularist texts; the Trinitarian harmony of election, redemption, and application; the exegesis of the universalist-sounding texts (1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1); the logical argument from the nature of the penal substitution; and the pastoral significance of the definite atonement for the preaching of the gospel and the assurance of the believer.

I. THE QUESTION STATED: TWO POSITIONS AND THEIR LOGIC

General Atonement vs. Definite Atonement, What Is Actually Being Debated

A. General Atonement Defined

The general atonement position, associated with Arminian theology, four-point Calvinism (Amyraldism), and most non-Reformed evangelical traditions, holds that Christ's atoning work was designed and accomplished for every human being without exception, making salvation equally available to all but actually effective only for those who respond to the gospel in faith. On this account, the death of Christ provides sufficient atonement for all people (an unlimited sufficiency) but is efficient only for those who believe (a conditional efficiency). The formula is: Christ's atonement is sufficient for all but efficient for the elect alone. The intention of the atonement on this view is universal: God designed the atonement to provide the basis for the salvation of every person; the actual salvation of only some is the result of the human choice to believe or not to believe, not of any limitation in the divine intention of the atoning work.

The Amyraldian position (named for Moise Amyraut, 1596–1664, of the Saumur Academy) is a more sophisticated variant within the Reformed tradition: Christ died for all people conditionally (on the condition of faith) but for the elect unconditionally (guaranteeing their effective calling to faith). This position attempts to maintain both the universal scope of the divine love expressed in the atonement and the particular effectiveness of the election; but it does so at the cost of a bifurcated divine intention and a complex theological architecture that the strictly Reformed tradition has generally regarded as incoherent.

B. Definite Atonement Defined

The definite atonement position, the historic Reformed and confessional position, affirmed in the Canons of Dort (Second Main Point of Doctrine), the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 8), and the London Baptist Confession (Chapter 8), holds that Christ died with the specific intention and certain effect of securing the salvation of those whom the Father gave Him in election. The atonement is not unlimited in its intention but particular in its design: Christ did not merely make salvation possible for all people; He actually secured the salvation of a specific people by bearing their specific sins, absorbing the specific wrath directed at them, and purchasing their specific redemption. The formula of the Canons of Dort is precise: the death of Christ is "of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world" but "it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross... should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation." The sufficiency is universal; the intention and the efficacy are particular.

The name "limited atonement", the 'L' in the TULIP acrostic, is the most common popular designation but arguably the most misleading, because both sides in the debate limit the atonement in some sense. The general atonement position limits the efficiency of the atonement (it is sufficient for all but efficient only for the believing); the definite atonement position limits the intention of the atonement (it was designed to secure the salvation of the elect specifically). The name "definite atonement", preferred by J.I. Packer, D.A. Carson, and others, more accurately captures what the

position actually claims: the atonement has a definite, specific, particular intention and design, not an indefinite, general, or conditional one.

II. THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT: THE PARTICULARIST TEXTS

The New Testament's Consistent Use of Particular Language for the Atoning Death

A. John 10: I Lay Down My Life for the Sheep

The most concentrated and the most explicit biblical statement of the definite atonement is found in John 10, the Good Shepherd discourse. Jesus declares: “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11, NASB 1995). And again: “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15, NASB 1995). The specificity of the language is unmistakable: He lays down His life ‘for the sheep’ (ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων, *hyper tōn probatōn*), not for all humanity without distinction. And the identity of ‘the sheep’ is defined in the immediately following context: they are the ones the Father has given to the Son, the ones who hear His voice, the ones He knows by name.

John 10:26–29 makes the particularist structure even more explicit in the confrontation with the Jewish leaders: “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (NASB 1995). The language is unmistakably particular: the sheep are a defined group (those the Father has given to the Son), distinguished from those who do not believe precisely because they are not of His sheep. The giving of eternal life is specific (‘to them’), the security is specific (‘they will never perish’), and the ground of the security is the Father’s specific gift of specific people to the specific Son. The death that the Good Shepherd lays down for the sheep is a death offered for this specific, defined, Father-given community.

B. Ephesians 5:25 and Romans 8:32–34

Ephesians 5:25 presents the death of Christ for the church with the same particularist specificity: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (NASB 1995). The self-giving of Christ in the atoning death is identified with the specific object of His love: the church. He did not give Himself up for humanity in general in the way that He gave Himself up for the church; His self-giving is specifically for and specifically secured by His love for the specific

people who constitute the church. The pastoral use of the definite atonement as the model for husbandly love reinforces the particularity: just as a husband's self-giving love is specific and personal (directed toward his specific wife, not toward women in general), Christ's self-giving love is specific and personal, directed toward the specific people He came to redeem.

Romans 8:32–34 provides the logical argument for the definite atonement in its most concentrated form: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (NASB 1995). The ‘us all’ (ὕπερ ἡμῶν πάντων, *hyper hēmōn pantōn*) for whom Christ was delivered is clearly identified in context: the same people who are the objects of election (v. 33: ‘God's elect’), the same people who cannot be condemned (v. 34), the same people for whom Christ intercedes. The deliverer-over for us all, the justifier, the intercessor, all operate on the same people, and those people are the elect. The atonement, the justification, and the intercession are Trinitarian and particularist together.

C. John 6:37–39 and John 17:9

John 6:37–39 grounds the definite atonement in the Father's specific gift of specific people to the Son: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (NASB 1995). The will of the Father for the Son is specific: He is to save ‘all that the Father gives’ Him, a defined group whose members will all come, will all be received, and will none be lost. The saving work of the Son is the saving of this specific Father-given community; and the security of the community is absolute because the Son's purpose is defined by the Father's giving.

John 17:9 makes the particularism of the High Priestly Prayer explicit: “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (NASB 1995). The intercessory prayer of the Son, which, as Lesson 18 established, is the continuing form of the priestly ministry, is specific and particular. He prays for ‘those whom You have given Me,’ not for the world. The same particularity that governs the intercession governs the sacrifice: the one who intercedes for the specific elect-of-the-Father is the same one who died for them. The priestly office, both in its sacrificial and its intercessory dimensions, is consistently particularist in its scope.

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” | “I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me.”

JOHN 10:11; 17:9, NASB 1995

III. THE TRINITARIAN HARMONY: ELECTION, REDEMPTION, AND APPLICATION

The Father Elects, the Son Redeems, the Spirit Applies, The Same People in Each Case

A. The Coherence of the Trinitarian Economy of Salvation

One of the most powerful arguments for the definite atonement is not exegetical but theological: the argument from the internal coherence of the Trinitarian economy of salvation. In the Reformed understanding of redemption, the Father elects a specific people from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4–5); the Son redeems those specific people by His atoning death; and the Spirit applies the benefits of the atonement to those specific people through regeneration, faith, and sanctification. If the three Persons of the Trinity are acting in perfect harmony, if the same people are the objects of the Father’s election, the Son’s redemption, and the Spirit’s regeneration, then the scope of the Son’s redemptive work must be coextensive with the scope of the Father’s election and the Spirit’s application. The atonement is not a general provision that the Spirit then applies to a smaller subset; it is a specific provision designed for and effectively securing the salvation of the specific people the Father has given to the Son.

The Canons of Dort capture this Trinitarian harmony with precision in the Second Main Point, Article 8: “For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend itself to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation.” The key words are ‘all the elect’ and ‘alone’ and ‘infallibly.’ The death of the Son has a definite scope (all the elect and no others), a specific mechanism (the gift of justifying faith), and a certain result (infallible salvation). The infallibility is the decisive evidence: if the atonement is designed for all people but effective only for those who believe, then the atonement is not infallible in its result. It succeeds for some and fails for others, not because of any deficiency in its infinite sufficiency but because of the contingency of the human response. On the definite atonement view, the Son’s atoning work is infallibly effective for those for whom it was specifically designed, because the same Trinitarian plan that ordained the atonement also ordained the effectual calling that brings the elect to faith.

B. The Specific Application of the Benefits

The Trinitarian harmony argument is reinforced by the consistent pattern of the New Testament’s description of the application of the atonement’s benefits. Romans 8:29–30 provides the golden chain of redemption: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (NASB 1995). The same group, those whom He foreknew, is the group

that is predestined, called, justified, and glorified. The group does not expand or contract at any link in the chain: the same specific people are the objects of each saving act. If the same people are justified who were predestined, then the atonement that grounds the justification has the same scope as the predestination. The golden chain is not a chain in which some links encompass all humanity and others encompass only the elect; it is a chain in which each link encompasses the same specific people.

IV. THE UNIVERSALIST-SOUNDING TEXTS: EXEGETICAL RESPONSES

Engaging 1 John 2:2 and 2 Peter 2:1 with Exegetical Precision

A. 1 John 2:2: The Propitiation for the Sins of the Whole World

The most significant exegetical challenge to the definite atonement position is 1 John 2:2: “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (NASB 1995). The phrase “the whole world” (ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου, *holou tou kosmou*) appears to extend the scope of the propitiation beyond the community of ‘our’ (John’s immediate readers) to the totality of humanity. The general atonement position reads this as a direct declaration of the universal scope of the atonement: Christ is the propitiation for all people without exception.

The Reformed response to 1 John 2:2 has taken several forms. The most exegetically grounded response attends to the rhetorical context and the meaning of *kosmos* in Johannine usage. John writes to a specific community of Jewish Christian believers (‘our sins’); the extension ‘not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world’ expands the scope beyond Jewish believers to include Gentile believers from every nation. This is consistent with the Johannine pattern of using *kosmos* to refer to the elect scattered throughout the world (John 11:51–52: Christ ‘was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad’, the universality is the universality of the scope of the Gentile mission, not the universality of all individuals without exception). On this reading, 1 John 2:2 is not a statement about the unlimited extent of the atonement but a statement about its trans-ethnic scope: the propitiation is not confined to Jewish believers but extends to include Gentile believers from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

A second Reformed response attends to the sufficiency-efficiency distinction: Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world in the sense that His atoning work is of infinite value and is genuinely and sincerely offered to all who hear the gospel, even though its effectual application is particular to the elect. On this reading, the universality of 1 John 2:2 is the universality of the sufficiency and the offer, not the universality of the effectual intention. The genuine offer of the gospel

to all people is grounded in the infinite sufficiency of the atonement, even if the effectual securing of salvation is particular to the elect.

B. 2 Peter 2:1: Denying the Master Who Bought Them

2 Peter 2:1 presents a different kind of exegetical challenge: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (NASB 1995). The challenge is the phrase “the Master who bought them” (τὸν ἀγοράσων αὐτοὺς δεσπότην, *ton agorasanta autous despoten*) applied to false teachers who deny the Master and bring swift destruction on themselves: if these false teachers were ‘bought’ by Christ and are nevertheless destroyed, does this not imply that Christ’s purchasing work extends to those who are finally lost?

The Reformed response notes several important exegetical considerations. First, the word ‘bought’ (*agorasanta*) does not necessarily refer to the specific soteriological redemption described in Revelation 5:9 (‘purchased for God with Your blood’); it may refer to the more general deliverance of the covenant people from bondage, as in the Old Testament background of Deuteronomy 32:6 (‘Is not He your Father who has bought you?’, NASB 1995), a redemption that includes covenant members who subsequently prove apostate. Second, the false teachers may be described as ‘bought’ from their own perspective or from the perspective of their outward covenant profession, not from the perspective of the actually effectual atonement. Third, even if the verse refers to the redemptive work of Christ, it may be describing those who were externally associated with the covenant community and who claimed the benefits of the atonement without genuinely possessing them, a category that Reformed theology consistently recognizes in its doctrine of the visible church. The verse does not require the conclusion that Christ’s atoning work was effectively accomplished for all people without exception.

V. THE LOGICAL ARGUMENT: THE TRILEMMA OF GENERAL ATONEMENT

The Penal Substitution Requires Either Universalism, Definite Atonement, or an Atonement That Fails

A. The Logic of the Substitutionary Penalty-Bearing

The most compelling argument for the definite atonement is not exegetical but logical, the argument from the specific nature of the penal substitutionary atonement established in Lesson 21. The argument runs as follows. The penal substitutionary atonement asserts that Christ bore the specific penalty for specific sins in the place of specific people. If Christ bore the penalty for the sins of every person without exception, then one of two conclusions follows necessarily: either every person will

be saved (because their penalty has been borne by the Substitute, and there is no remaining penalty for them to face), or some people will face the penalty for sins whose penalty has already been borne by the Substitute (which would mean the same penalty is exacted twice, once from the Substitute and once from the sinner, which is a violation of divine justice).

The dilemma for the general atonement position is therefore: if it affirms the genuinely penal substitutionary character of the atonement, it must either affirm universalism (all for whom the penalty was borne will be saved) or affirm that the penalty is borne twice (which is unjust). Neither conclusion is acceptable within the bounds of orthodox evangelical theology. The only way to avoid both horns of the dilemma while maintaining the penal substitutionary character of the atonement is to affirm that Christ bore the penalty for the sins of a specific people whose salvation is thereby specifically secured, the definite atonement. Owen's formulation of this argument in *The Death of Death* remains the classic statement: if Christ paid the debt for all people, then either all are released from the debt (universalism) or the debt is collected twice (injustice). Since both alternatives are unacceptable, the atonement must have been designed for and effective in securing the salvation of a specific people.

B. The Sufficiency-Efficiency Distinction Revisited

The standard response to Owen's argument from the general atonement position is the sufficiency-efficiency distinction: Christ's death is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect. The sufficiency is infinite and genuine; the efficiency is conditional on faith. The Reformed response to this distinction is that it confuses the infinite worth of the atonement (which is indeed sufficient for all people) with the intention and the design of the atonement (which was not designed to bear the penalty for all people but to secure the salvation of the specific people the Father gave the Son). The sufficiency-efficiency distinction, properly understood, does not describe two different scopes of the atonement but one scope (the specific intention for the elect) with an infinite value that exceeds what was required to secure their salvation. The atonement is "sufficient for all" in the sense that the infinite worth of the one who died would have been sufficient to atone for any number of sinners; it is not "sufficient for all" in the sense that the penalty for all people's sins was actually borne. The value is unlimited; the intention is definite.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: CHRIST DID NOT MERELY TRY TO SAVE, HE ACTUALLY SAVED

The pastoral significance of the definite atonement is, at its core, the significance of the difference between a Savior who attempts to save and a Savior who actually saves. The general atonement view, consistently followed, produces a Savior who makes salvation possible for all but actually secures

the salvation of none: He provides the basis for forgiveness, but whether any specific person is actually forgiven depends on the human exercise of free will, which lies outside the specific intention of the atoning work. The definite atonement view produces a Savior who actually and personally secured the salvation of each member of His people by bearing their specific penalty with specific love, specific intent, and specific effect. He did not merely hold the door open; He went and sought and found the sheep that was lost, bore it on His shoulders, and brought it home rejoicing (Luke 15:4–6).

The security of the believer's salvation is directly grounded in the definite atonement. If Christ bore the specific penalty for the believer's specific sins with the specific intention of securing their specific salvation, then the salvation is as secure as the completed atoning work of the Son. Romans 8:33–34 makes this explicit: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died... who also intercedes for us." The combination of the election (the Father's specific choosing), the justification (the legal declaration grounded in the specific atonement), and the intercession (the continuing priestly advocacy of the one who died) means that the case against the elect has been permanently and specifically closed. There is no remaining charge because the penalty has been specifically borne; there is no remaining condemnation because the Substitute has specifically paid the debt; and the Intercessor who continues to plead the completed atonement is the same Person who offered it.

The definite atonement does not limit the free offer of the gospel. The God who has elected a specific people has also ordained the preaching of the gospel to all people as the means by which the elect are brought to faith, and the gospel is genuinely and sincerely offered to every person who hears it. The preacher who preaches the definite atonement does not preach a gospel of conditional or limited availability; he preaches the gospel of the actual, specific, secured love of God for His people, freely and sincerely offered to all who hear, and effective for all who are given the faith to receive it. The preaching of the gospel to all does not require the belief that Christ died for all in the same sense; it requires the belief that Christ is a sufficient Savior for all who come to Him in faith, and that is precisely what the definite atonement, with its affirmation of infinite sufficiency and definite intention, provides. To Him who loved us with a specific, personal, securing love and released us from our sins by His blood, to Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Key Texts: *John 10:11, 14–16, 26–29; Ephesians 5:25; Romans 8:29–34; John 6:37–39; John 17:9; 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1; Canons of Dort II.8*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

| Term | Definition |
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| Definite Atonement | The Reformed doctrine that Christ died with the specific intention and certain effect of securing the salvation of those whom the Father gave Him in election, the elect. Also called particular redemption or (less precisely) limited atonement. The death of Christ is of infinite worth and value, sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world, but was designed and effectively accomplished for a specific people whose salvation it thereby infallibly secures. Affirmed by the Canons of Dort (Second Main Point), the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 8), and the London Baptist Confession (Chapter 8). Distinguished from general/unlimited atonement, which holds that Christ died for all people without exception, making salvation possible for all but actually securing it for none. |
| General / Unlimited Atonement | The position that Christ's atoning work was designed and accomplished for every human being without exception, making salvation equally available to all but actually effective only for those who respond in faith. Associated with Arminian theology and four-point Calvinism (Amyraldism). The formula: Christ's atonement is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect/believing. On this view the divine intention of the atonement is universal; the actual salvation of only some is the result of the human choice to believe, not of any limitation in the divine intention. The Reformed critique: this position, combined with a genuinely penal substitutionary atonement, leads either to universalism or to the unjust exaction of a penalty twice. |
| Amyraldism | A mediating position within the Reformed tradition associated with Moise Amyraut (1596–1664) of the Saumur Academy: Christ died for all people conditionally (on the condition of faith) but for the elect unconditionally (guaranteeing their effective calling to faith). Attempts to maintain both the universal scope of the divine love in the atonement and the particular effectiveness of the election. Criticized by the strictly Reformed tradition as involving a bifurcated divine intention (God wills the salvation of all conditionally and the salvation of the elect unconditionally) and a complex theological architecture that undermines the coherence of the Trinitarian economy of salvation. |
| Sufficiency-Efficiency Distinction | The classical formula used to describe the relationship between the infinite value of the atonement and its particular intention: the death of Christ is 'sufficient for all, efficient for the elect alone.' Originally articulated by Peter Lombard (12th century) and used by Reformed theologians to affirm the infinite worth of the atonement without affirming its universal intention. The sufficiency is the infinite value of Christ's sacrifice, which would have been more than adequate to atone for any number of sinners; the efficiency (or |

| Term | Definition |
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| | <p>efficacy) is the actual securing of salvation for the elect specifically. The distinction is sometimes used by general atonement advocates to affirm a universal sufficiency alongside a particular efficacy; the Reformed position holds that the sufficiency is a statement about value, not about intention.</p> |
| <p>Particular Redemption</p> | <p>An alternative name for the definite atonement that emphasizes the particular (specific, defined, personal) character of Christ’s redemptive work: He redeemed a particular people, defined by the Father’s election, not the undifferentiated mass of all humanity. The particularity does not imply that the value of the redemption is limited or that the gospel offer is restricted; it implies that the design and the effect of the redemptive act are specific. Often preferred over ‘limited atonement’ because both sides of the debate limit the atonement in some sense (general atonement limits its efficiency; particular redemption limits its intention), and ‘particular redemption’ more accurately describes what the Reformed position actually claims.</p> |
| <p>Owen’s Trilemma</p> | <p>John Owen’s logical argument for definite atonement from <i>The Death of Death in the Death of Christ</i> (1647): if Christ bore the penalty for all people’s sins without exception, then either (1) all people will be saved (universalism, no remaining penalty to face), or (2) the penalty for some sins is exacted twice, once from Christ and once from the unbelieving sinner (a violation of divine justice). Since both alternatives are unacceptable within orthodox evangelical theology, the atonement must have been designed for and effective in securing the salvation of a specific people. The trilemma is the most compelling logical argument for the definite atonement and has been widely recognized as such even by those who do not accept its conclusion.</p> |
| <p>Kosmos in 1 John 2:2</p> | <p>The use of kosmos (‘world’) in the phrase ‘for the sins of the whole world’ (1 John 2:2), which is the primary exegetical challenge to the definite atonement position. The Reformed response: (1) The rhetorical context is the extension of the propitiation from the Jewish Christian community (‘our sins’) to Gentile believers worldwide, not a declaration of unlimited extent but of trans-ethnic scope. (2) Johannine usage of kosmos frequently refers to the scattered elect rather than every individual without exception (cf. John 11:51–52; John 4:42; John 12:32). (3) The verse may be affirming the infinite sufficiency and the genuine universal offer of the atonement rather than the universal intention of its penal substitutionary bearing.</p> |
| <p>Canons of Dort II.8</p> | <p>The Second Main Point of the Canons of Dort (1619), Article 8: the locus classicus of the Reformed confessional statement of definite atonement: ‘For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend itself to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation.’ Key terms: ‘all the elect’ (specific scope), ‘alone’ (exclusive particularity), ‘infallibly’</p> |

| Term | Definition |
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| | (certain effect). The Canons also affirm the infinite sufficiency of the atonement (Article 3) while maintaining its particular intention (Article 8). |
| Trinitarian Harmony of Salvation | The theological argument for definite atonement from the internal coherence of the Trinitarian economy of redemption: the Father elects a specific people (Ephesians 1:4–5), the Son redeems those specific people (John 10:14–15; Ephesians 5:25), and the Spirit applies the redemption to those specific people (Romans 8:29–30). If the same people are the objects of election, redemption, and application, the scope of the Son’s redemptive work must be coextensive with the scope of the Father’s election. The golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified) confirms the consistent particularist scope: the same group is the object of each saving act. |
| Free Offer of the Gospel | The sincere, genuine, and universal offer of salvation through the gospel to all who hear it, irrespective of their election. The definite atonement does not contradict or restrict the free offer of the gospel: the God who has elected specific people has also ordained the preaching of the gospel to all people as the means by which the elect are brought to faith. The free offer is grounded not in the claim that Christ died for every person in exactly the same sense but in the infinite sufficiency of His atoning work and the genuine availability of salvation to all who come to Him in faith. The preacher who knows the definite atonement preaches the gospel with full urgency and full sincerity: ‘Come to Christ, and you will find in Him a sufficient Savior for your sin.’ |

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the question of the extent of the atonement is not merely an academic debate between Calvinist and Arminian theologians but a question whose answer directly affects the pastoral power of the gospel, the security of the believer’s assurance, and the coherence of the doctrine of the atonement established in Lessons 20 and 21. The definite atonement is not a cold doctrinal technicality; it is the declaration that Christ’s love for His people is specific, personal, and effective, that He did not merely make their salvation possible but actually secured it by bearing their specific penalty with specific intent. The pastoral consequence of this conviction is immense: it grounds the believer’s assurance not in the contingency of their own continuing faithfulness but in the completed, specific, irrevocable work of the one who bore their penalty and who will never allow the penalty to be exacted again.

We must also believe that the definite atonement does not restrict or qualify the free offer of the gospel. The God who decrees specific ends also decrees specific means, and the means by which the specific elect are brought to faith is the preaching of the gospel to all people. The preacher who holds the definite atonement does not preach a restricted gospel; he preaches the full, free, urgent gospel of the sufficient and saving Christ to every person who will hear it, knowing that the effectual calling of the Spirit will bring the elect to faith through that very preaching. The universality of the gospel offer is grounded in the infinite sufficiency of the atonement, not in the universality of its specific intention.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the definite atonement produce in you the specific, personal, particularist assurance that it was designed to produce. Christ did not die for humanity in the abstract; He died for specific people whom the Father had given Him, and His love for them was the love of the Good Shepherd for the sheep by name (John 10:3–4). The believer who has grasped this will not merely know that God loves the world; they will know that God’s love for them specifically is the kind of love that sent the Son to bear their penalty specifically, that sent the Spirit to apply the benefits of that specific bearing to them specifically, and that is now expressed in the perpetual intercession of the one who died for them at the right hand of the Father. This is the most personal possible account of divine love, and it demands the most personal possible response of gratitude, devotion, and worship.

Desire a congregation that knows the difference between a Savior who offers salvation and a Savior who secures it. Many Christians live their entire lives with a vague sense that Christ’s death provides a general resource for salvation that they may or may not have tapped into effectively enough. The congregation that understands the definite atonement will understand instead that the Savior’s love for them is not a generic goodwill extended equally to all but a specific, personal, and securing love that has already accomplished everything necessary for their salvation and that is even now presenting the completed work before the Father on their behalf.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach the definite atonement with pastoral warmth and christological specificity. The doctrine is most powerful when it is preached not as a logical argument for TULIP but as the declaration of the Good Shepherd’s personal, specific, costly love for each of His sheep. John 10:11–16 (‘I lay down My life for the sheep’), Ephesians 5:25 (‘Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her’), and Galatians 2:20 (‘the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me’) are the pastoral texts for the definite atonement, texts that press the particularism into the personal and the loving rather than the logical and the systematic.
- Address Owen’s trilemma carefully in any teaching context that engages the extent of the atonement. The trilemma, if Christ bore the penalty for all, either all are saved or the penalty is exacted twice, is the most compelling logical argument for the definite atonement, and it is

worth presenting clearly because it shows that the question of extent is not merely a preference between equally biblical options but is pressed by the logic of the penal substitution itself. Present it charitably, acknowledge the force of the general atonement tradition's responses, and show why the definite atonement provides the most coherent account of the cross as a genuinely penal substitutionary act.

- Be scrupulously careful to maintain the free offer of the gospel in all preaching and evangelism contexts, even while holding the definite atonement. The person who has never heard or received the gospel should be invited to Christ with full urgency and full sincerity: 'Come to Him as you are, with your sin and your need, and you will find in Him a Savior who is sufficient for everything you bring.' The definite atonement does not require the preacher to know in advance who the elect are; it requires the preacher to preach the gospel to all and to leave the effectual calling to the Spirit who brings the elect to faith through that very preaching.
- Engage sympathetically with those in your congregation who hold the general atonement position. Many sincere, Bible-believing, gospel-loving Christians hold the general atonement from genuinely pastoral instincts: they want a God whose love is universal, they want a gospel that is genuinely offered to all, and they are concerned that the definite atonement might undermine missionary urgency. Address each of these concerns directly and charitably: show how the definite atonement is consistent with the universal love of God, the genuine free offer of the gospel, and the most rigorous missionary urgency, because the same God who elected the specific people also ordained the specific mission to reach them.
- Read the primary sources: John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647) for the classic Reformed case; and J.I. Packer's introduction to the *Banner of Truth* reprint of Owen (titled 'Saved by His Life?') for the most accessible modern engagement. For a comprehensive treatment that engages the full range of biblical and theological issues, David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson's *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (2013) is the most substantial contemporary defense of the doctrine available.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Where do you currently stand on the extent of the atonement, and how did you arrive at that position? Was it through exegetical study of the relevant texts, through systematic theological reasoning, through the tradition you were raised in or trained in, or through some combination of all

three? What specific biblical texts or theological arguments have most shaped your view? And where do you feel the most theological uncertainty or the most unresolved pastoral tension regarding this question?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

- 2.** Read John 10:7–29 carefully. Identify every instance in which Jesus uses language that limits the scope of His saving work to a specific group (the sheep, those the Father has given Him, those who know Him as He knows the Father). What is the relationship between those for whom He lays down His life and those the Father has given Him? How does verse 26 ('you do not believe because you are not of My sheep') describe the relationship between unbelief and the identity of the sheep, is unbelief the reason someone is not a sheep, or is not being a sheep the reason for the unbelief?
- 3.** Read Romans 8:29–34. Identify the complete golden chain of redemption in verses 29–30 (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified). Is the same group the object of each link in the chain, or does the group expand or contract at any point? How does verse 32 ('delivered Him over for us all') identify 'us all' in context (who are the 'we' throughout this passage)? How do verses 33–34 (the charges against the elect, the justification, the death, the intercession) describe the relationship between the atoning death and the specific security of the elect?
- 4.** Read John 6:35–40 carefully. What does verse 37 ('all that the Father gives Me will come to Me') establish about the relationship between the Father's giving and the Son's receiving? What does verse 39 ('that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day') establish about the efficacy of the Son's saving work for those the Father has given Him? How does the specific language of the Father's giving and the Son's not-losing illuminate the particular character of the saving work described throughout this passage?
- 5.** Read 1 John 2:1–2 and the Johannine use of kosmos in John 11:51–52 and John 12:32. In 1 John 2:2, what is the specific rhetorical move from 'our sins' to 'the whole world', what is being expanded and why? How does John 11:51–52 ('He prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad') illuminate the way John uses universal-sounding language to describe the trans-ethnic scope of the elect? Is John 11:52 describing a universal extent or a universal scope (gathering the elect from all nations)?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

- 6.** The lesson presents Owen's trilemma: if Christ bore the penalty for all people's sins without exception, either all are saved (universalism) or the penalty is exacted twice (injustice). How would you respond to someone who says: 'The solution is that Christ's death provides the possibility of

forgiveness for all people, and the actual forgiveness is conditioned on faith, so the penalty is not exacted twice for believers, but it is only applied for those who believe? Is this response adequate? What does it do to the specifically penal substitutionary character of the atonement, is it still a penalty borne, or has it become a conditional provision?

7. The lesson presents two Reformed responses to 1 John 2:2: (1) the trans-ethnic scope reading (kosmos refers to Gentile believers from all nations, not every individual without exception); and (2) the sufficiency-offer reading (the verse affirms the infinite sufficiency and genuine universal offer, not the universal penal bearing). Which response do you find more exegetically compelling, and why? Are the two responses mutually exclusive, or can they be held in complementary relationship?

8. The lesson argues that the Trinitarian harmony of salvation (Father elects, Son redeems, Spirit applies, the same people in each case) provides a theological argument for the definite atonement independent of any specific exegetical text. How persuasive do you find this argument? What would have to be true of the relationship between the Father's election and the Son's redemption if the atonement were genuinely universal in its intention, would the Trinitarian Persons be acting toward different groups of people? Is a Trinitarian economy of salvation coherent if the scope of the Son's redemptive work differs from the scope of the Father's election?

9. The lesson carefully distinguishes between the definite atonement and the restriction of the gospel offer, arguing that the definite atonement is fully consistent with the sincere, free, and urgent offer of the gospel to all people. How does this consistency work specifically, what is the theological ground of the free offer if Christ did not die for all people in the same sense? How would you respond to the Arminian who says: 'If Christ did not die for that person specifically, how can I sincerely tell them that Christ died for their sins and invite them to come to Him?'

10. The lesson describes the pastoral significance of the definite atonement as the significance of 'the difference between a Savior who attempts to save and a Savior who actually saves.' How does this description illuminate the difference in pastoral power and in the ground of assurance between the two positions? Is this description fair to the general atonement position, does it accurately characterize what the general atonement position actually claims about the effectiveness of Christ's saving work?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends preaching the definite atonement with pastoral warmth through texts like John 10:11–16, Ephesians 5:25, and Galatians 2:20 ('who loved me and gave Himself up for me') rather than primarily through logical argument. Think of a specific sermon or teaching context in which you could present the definite atonement in this pastoral register. What would be the main point, the primary text, and the pastoral aim? How would you communicate the specific, personal, securing love of Christ for His people without losing the doctrinal precision of the doctrine?

- 12.** The lesson warns about engaging ‘sympathetically with those in your congregation who hold the general atonement position.’ Identify the most pastorally motivated objection to the definite atonement that a sincere member of your congregation might raise, and draft a response that is theologically precise, exegetically grounded, and genuinely charitable. What specifically does the definite atonement offer that the objector’s pastoral instinct is looking for, and how does the doctrine provide it?
- 13.** Owen’s trilemma has been called the most compelling logical argument for the definite atonement. Have you ever used it in a teaching or pastoral context? If so, what was the response? If not, design a brief teaching presentation (five to seven minutes) on the trilemma that would be accessible to non-theologians in a small group or Sunday school context, clear, logical, and pastorally grounded rather than merely combative.
- 14.** This lesson closes Unit 7’s engagement with the systematic questions about the atonement (necessity, nature, and extent). Lessons 23 and 24 will turn from the systematic to the specific and the narrative: the cry of dereliction from the cross (Lesson 23) and the seven last words of Christ (Lesson 24). How do the systematic foundations established in Lessons 20–22 prepare you to engage the narrative of the cross in Lessons 23–24 with greater theological depth and greater pastoral power than you would have without them?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson’s prayer time with a meditative reading of John 10:1–16 and John 17:1–12 read together, the Good Shepherd discourse and the opening of the High Priestly Prayer. Read the Good Shepherd passage attending to the language of the particular: ‘His own sheep’ (v. 3), ‘I know My own’ (v. 14), ‘I lay down My life for the sheep’ (v. 15). Then read John 17:1–12 attending to the same language of particular love: ‘You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life’ (v. 2), ‘I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me’ (v. 9). Let the specificity of both passages accumulate: the same particular love that governs the High Priestly Prayer governs the atoning death. The Shepherd who prays for the specific sheep is the Shepherd who died for the specific sheep.

Spend time in personal, specific worship of the Shepherd who died for you, not for humanity in the abstract but for you, specifically, by name. The Good Shepherd calls His own sheep by name (John 10:3); He knows them with the same intimacy with which the Father knows Him (v. 15); and He lays down His life for them with the same voluntariness with which He takes it up again (v. 17–18). Receive the specific, particularist love of the Shepherd not as a cold doctrinal position but as the most personal possible declaration of divine love: He died for you, bearing your specific penalty, so that

you might receive His specific righteousness, and He is now at the right hand of the Father praying for you specifically, by name, with the completed atonement as the ground of His advocacy.

Pray through the definite atonement's pastoral implications for your congregation. Bring before the Father the specific members of your congregation who most need the specific, particularist assurance that the definite atonement provides: those who struggle to believe that God's love is for them specifically, not just for humanity generally; those who doubt whether the cross has really secured their salvation or merely made it conditionally possible; those who are weighed down by the recurring guilt of sin and who need to know that the penalty for that specific sin was specifically borne by the specific Person of the Son. Pray that the Spirit would apply the specific, personal, securing love of the Good Shepherd to each specific heart that needs it.

Close with Galatians 2:20 spoken together, the most personally expressed declaration of the definite atonement in all of Scripture, Paul's own reception of the particular love of the Son as directed specifically and personally at him:

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

GALATIANS 2:20, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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