

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Limited Atonement: Did Jesus Die For Everyone?

Understanding Limited Atonement (Part 2)

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Christmas is my favorite holiday. It's a special time of the year when the refrain of sleigh bells can be heard jinglingly in the air, drowning out the commotion of life, and crimson poinsettias abound in full bloom. It's a time when songs of glad tidings greet storefront shoppers, and passing strangers exchange cheers of good will. It's also a time when the worst of enemies seem willing, if only for a season, to set aside their grievances in the spirit of "peace on earth." Making merry around the yuletide log, stealing romantic kisses under the mistletoe, basking in a symphony of Christmas lights and garland, and drinking homemade eggnog to the chorus of *Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire* are the very things that "help to make the season bright." I suppose that when it comes to the holiday season, I am a modern-day Peter Pan; I've never really grown up. I cherish the 25th of December as much now as I did when I was a sleepless child on Christmas Eve.

I am not alone in my love for Christmas. Among all the festivals and holidays that mark the Christian calendar, Christmas remains the most observed and most popular in the world. Of course, much of that popularity, especially in the West, stems from its commercialization and exploitation by our free-market society. We tend to get lost in the euphoria of gift-shopping, gift-wrapping, and gift-giving—as well as in the mythology of Santa Claus, tiny elves, and flying reindeer—rather than in the historical and theological meaning behind the season. Beyond its marketing appeal and secular trappings, however, Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It is the self-revelation of the Creator who condescended in human form to reconcile Himself to His estranged creatures.

Christmas is also a time, together with Easter, where reprobate sinners *appear* to rise above their depravation and suspend their antagonism toward Christianity. For a few weeks out of the year it seems that all is well in the world. Church attendance swells across the country, people seem more receptive to the gospel, and the name of Christ is paid homage to rather than used as a pejorative. It's not uncommon, in fact, for nonreligious people to step foot in a church for the very first time come the winter holidays. And almost always they are greeted by a reenactment of the first Christmas morning, performed by a cast of lay people costumed in togas and towels.

The hallmark of the Christmas season, of course, is the Nativity story. It recounts the travails of Joseph and his fiancé, Mary, as they come to terms with her unplanned pregnancy. The drama culminates in the birth of Jesus in a Bethlehem manger.

The degree to which the Nativity story is enshrined in Christian culture easily trumps the other holy days of Christianity, even Easter or Resurrection Sunday. There is something about human nature, as Dennis Bratcher reminds us, which would rather focus on the birth of a tender baby than on the torture and death of a wrongly-accused criminal! Especially for the young at heart, the imagery of Christmas—namely, angels and a young mother, shepherds and a stable, and wise men and royal intrigue—captivate our collective imagination like nothing else.¹

Many Americans, especially those unsympathetic to religious plotlines, turn surprisingly sympathetic when it comes to the story behind the first Christmas morning. They view it as a harmless love charm of sorts; a tall tale of tradition that, at its very best, fosters Christmas spirit. To the faithful, however, it's much more than that. It's a divinely inspired biography of spiritual importance; a story of reconciliation rooted in recorded history with real people traveling to literal places in order to bring about the actual Messiah.

But the joy of Christmas and its theological underpinnings have a short lifespan among believers and unbelievers. Both groups develop a waning interest in the Nativity not long after the holiday decorations are taken down. This is understandable, of course, for skeptics. But it is regrettable that most sober-minded Christians are no more inclined to unpack the theology of Christ's birth than non-Christians are the merits of flying reindeer. Indeed, hardly anyone gives the Nativity story any serious thought come December 26th.

As Americans, I fear we know the Nativity story almost *too* well, if not from the Christmas carols we sing then from the Christmas cards we send. All one need do is take a gander at their surroundings during the holiday season. Figurines of Joseph and Mary are commonplace. Baby statuettes and makeshift mangers are everywhere. Replicas of the wise men and shepherds are plentiful. And flying angels are par for the course. The pageantry of the Nativity is as familiar to our society, so it seems, as the folklore of Kris Kringle.

Familiarity, they say, often breeds contempt. But in the case of Christmas, it breeds blindness. That is to say, lost in the trappings of Christmas are the rich doctrinal truths that undergird the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. We have lost sight of its theological importance, having been visually impaired by wrapping paper, stocking stuffers, and pumpkin pie.

The vast majority of people who recite the Nativity story each year as a matter of custom usually do so without being able to offer a coherent explanation as to what it actually means, theologically speaking. They cannot see beyond a cuddly baby in a manger. The link between the birth of Christ and the deep Christology inherent to it are lost on them, particularly his hypostatic union, his sinless perfection, his incarnate deity, and the inner-workings of a triune God who brought it all about. And this is to say nothing about the Calvinist doctrine of Limited Atonement.

Indeed, many evangelicals are surprisingly amiss as to how the atonement of Christ, much less a limited one, squares with the story of his birth. Although it's on the written page for all to read, it often goes overlooked for sentimental reasons; it's the elephant in the room, as it were, that nobody wants to talk about. To draw from the Christmas story such an inflammatory doctrine as Limited Atonement is to invite shouts

of “humbug” in some circles, for it disparages the spirit of Christmas, we’re told, and denigrates the cross-work of Easter.

Popular perception would have us believe that Christ’s incarnation in Bethlehem, like his death outside Jerusalem thirty-three years later, was for the good of *all men everywhere* so that the *whole world* might be reconciled to God. Even the lovable Tiny Tim, in the timeless classic *A Christmas Carol*, hinted at this universalistic notion with his famous soliloquy: “God bless us *every one!*” But was Christ’s birth (and death) really meant to bless every person, or did God instead have another target audience in mind? Is Christmas (and Easter) celebrated every year in memorial to what God has accomplished on behalf of *all men everywhere* or merely for different *types* of men everywhere? The answers are found in the first few chapters of the New Testament.

Matthew conveys the Nativity story from the perspective of Joseph and his bewilderment over how he should handle his pregnant wife-to-be. The story unfolds with reassurance from God’s messenger that God is at work in this extraordinary circumstance. However, Matthew gives us no details about the actual birth itself, only a few events leading up to the delivery, and then a summary of what happened “after Jesus was born” (Matt 2:1).

Luke’s account, on the other hand, fills in the blanks. Most of the Nativity storyline with which we are familiar from Christmas plays and Scripture readings come from his gospel. His account is told from the perspective of Mary, a virgin, and her struggle to deal with this astonishing occurrence. Luke actually begins his narrative with the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner to Christ, and the disbelief of his father Zechariah. The entire narrative places two women, Elizabeth (John’s mother) and Mary (Jesus’ mother), at the center of the story. An angelic messenger from God named Gabriel also plays a supporting role; he announces the births of both baby boys. But it is the announcement of Jesus’ birth, in particular, that is of unique significance in our study on Limited Atonement. Luke records the angel’s words to Mary:

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son ... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God ... For nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:28-37).

These words spoken by the angel Gabriel set in motion the greatest chain of heavenly events to ever invade human history. To Mary was promised the Christ-child who was to reinstitute the Davidic line in Israel; a ruler who, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin’s womb, would reign “over the house of Jacob” for all eternity. It was a promise unlike any other; one which gave real meaning to the prophetic adage: “How beautiful ... are the feet of those who bring good news ... who proclaim salvation” (Isa. 52:7 cf. Nah. 1:15). This maiden girl, together with her carpenter husband, were God’s chosen conduits to bring about “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25).

But questions remain: Other than his eternal majesty, what exactly was this coming king to accomplish on earth? How far would his kingdom reach? What would his rule entail? And for whose pleasure would he serve?

Doubtless Mary could not see beyond the politics of her day and assumed from the angel's words that only the liberation of national Israel was in view (cf. Luke 1:54-55). Like most Jews in the first century, her concentration centered mainly on a political ruler who would reign, not so much on a spiritual one who came to redeem. But as we learn from Matthew's account, the angel had more in mind than geopolitics. Matthew tells us that it was to a fearful Joseph that the angel gave astonishing answers in a dream. The messenger consoled Joseph in his sleep with the words:

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, *because he will save his people from their sins*” (Matt. 1:21, emphasis added).

Like it or not, the details found in Matthew's account concerning Jesus' birth revolve around the central truth of Limited Atonement. They forecast, or prefigure, the doctrine to come. The angel assured Joseph with the wonderful promise that Mary's miraculous newborn would one day “save *his people* from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The specificity of the phrase “his people” cannot be stressed enough. It seems the angel had a definite audience in view, not a universal one.

Who, then, are these people Christ came to save? And why did the messenger not include “all people” in the equation? Or, stated in reverse, if the mission of Jesus was to atone for the sins of the world, as some argue, why then did the angel use such restrictive language in describing the recipients of so great a salvation?

If we apprehend anything from Matthew 1:21, besides the pageantry of the Nativity itself, it's that Christmas is far more than sharing presents and admiring decorated evergreens. It's the story of a God who condescended to earth to atone for the sins of a select group of people which He sovereignly set apart for Himself. Moreover, we learn from the angel's annunciation to Joseph that not only is this people group limited in scope but that he will save them unfailingly. To be sure, the angel did not suggest that Christ would *try* to save them, *offer* to save them, or simply *long* to save them. Rather, he would fully and completely “save them to the uttermost” (Heb. 7:25, KJV).

This group of beneficiaries for whom Christ came and died (“his people”) is not some vague, indistinct, or generic band of people who exercise their free-will so that the Savior is then free to save them. On the contrary, they are those who “God ... destined ... to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:9) and whose names were “written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8 cf. 17:8). They are “his people” (Matt. 1:21), “his offspring” (Isa. 53:10), his “sons and daughters ... brothers and sisters ... [his] children” (Heb. 2:10-14), his “sheep” (John 10:11), his “church” (Eph. 5:25) and “his friends” (John 15:13).

It is for these, and only these, that Christ came to die and make reconciliation with God on their behalf. And it all started on the first Christmas morning two thousand years ago in the backwater village of Bethlehem.

“It Is Finished”

Calvinism maintains that Christ’s redeeming work on Calvary was definite in design inasmuch as it was absolute in accomplishment. It was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and, to that end, actually secured their redemption infallibly. The atonement is not limited in its power to redeem, but merely in the extent to which it reaches and will save certain individuals.

Concerning *what* Christ’s death accomplished and for *whom* its benefits apply, the Word of God has much to say on the matter. In fact, the Bible spells out two specific reasons for the Messiah’s coming and dying. First, he came to do the will of his Father, and second, he came to “save his people.” When we apply a critical eye to both of these reasons, having already noted the perspicuity of Unconditional Election in Scripture, we naturally arrive at an atonement that cannot be anything other than limited in scale.

That Jesus’ messianic mission centered on the will of his Father is indisputable. He said as much in different ways, to different people, and at different times throughout his ministry. “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will,” he told a raucous crowd in Capernaum, “but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). To his disgruntled disciples who cocked an eyebrow over his conversation with a Samaritan woman, the Lord remarked, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work” (John 4:34, NKJV). Still, on another occasion, in response to a group of hostile Jews who were none too happy with his Sabbath miracles, he said “... for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me” (John 5:30). And lastly, we learn from Hebrews 10:9 that, while standing on the precipice of heaven, the pre-incarnate Son submitted to the Father with the words, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” The Lord’s entire earthly ministry, from his manger in Bethlehem to his cross on Calvary, centered on abiding by the will of God.

So what exactly was God’s will for Jesus on earth? To this question we are given a host of answers in Scripture. It is true that Jesus came into the world to reveal the Father (Matt. 11:27), to serve (Matt. 20:28), to preach the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43), to testify to the truth of God (John 18:37), to destroy the devil’s works (1 John 3:8), to bring judgment (John 9:39), to fulfill the Law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17), and to call sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17). Each one of these actions was a key component in Christ’s mission-statement. But equally true is the fact that just as he came to reveal, to serve, to preach, to testify, to destroy, to judge, to fulfill, and to call, he also came “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners” (Luke 4:18), to “take away our sins” (1 John 3:5), “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28), and to atone “for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). In short, it was “the [Father’s] will to crush [Jesus] and cause him to suffer” as “a guilt offering” in order to “justify many, and ... bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:10-11).

As it relates to the will of God in Christ’s atonement, no text is as potent as John 6:35-54. There we discover our Lord’s most controversial sermon, the *Bread of Life Discourse*, where he put forth in explicit detail the Father’s overarching purpose in sending His Son:

Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. *And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me*, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise *him up at the last day* ... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day ... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (emphasis added).

God’s will for Jesus, we learn from John 6, was that he would lose none of those whom the Father had given him to save but will raise them to eternal life at “the last day.” No part of that group, regardless of how prodigal, will ever be lost to the Savior. This fourfold promise that the Son will raise them up on the last day (vv. 39, 40, 44, 54) constitutes an ironclad guarantee of eternal salvation for God’s people. Jesus reiterated this truth in the strongest terms when he declared on another occasion:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, *who has given them to me*, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:11, 27-30, emphasis added).

Later, on the night of his arrest, Jesus once again spoke of this marvelous truth in his *High Priestly Prayer*. With words drenched in anguish, he interceded as high priest (Heb. 4:14-16) on behalf of “his people”—that is, for those whom the Father had given him—with words that echoed throughout the Garden of Gethsemane:

I have revealed you to *those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me* ... I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, *but for those you have given me, for they are yours* ... While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost ...” (John 17:6, 9, 12, emphasis added).

Christ’s pastoral statement “They were yours; you gave them to me” is a forceful affirmation that even *before their conversion* the Lord’s disciples—and by extension all true believers—belonged to God! What a wonderfully unfathomable concept to consider! Moreover, God told the apostle Paul that He had “many people in [Corinth]” who belonged to Him even though the Corinthians had yet to hear the gospel and were *not yet saved* (Acts 18:10 cf. 13:48). Having sovereignly chosen to redeem them, the Father had set them aside in eternity past for the express purpose of giving them to the Son in

time and space as a love gift. In biblical vernacular, Jesus “obtained [them] with his own blood” all those given to him from the Father (Acts 20:28 ESV cf. Rev. 5:9; 14:4).

It’s worth recapping for the sake of clarity: Earlier in John’s gospel, in the aforementioned *Bread of Life Discourse*, the Lord had declared “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (6:37 cf. v. 39; Heb. 2:13). He repeated this truth in his *Good Shepherd* statement: “My Father ... has given them to me” (John 10:11). And he reaffirmed it in his *High Priestly Prayer*: “They were yours; you gave them to me” (John 17:6). These three statements combined suggest a specific group of people beloved by God from all eternity and preserved by Christ for safekeeping. The disciples, to include all believers for all time, were infinitely precious to the Son, not because of anything intrinsically valuable in them, but because they were promised to Him by his Father before time began (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:1). And as Christ’s *Passion* later demonstrated, Jesus considered the Father’s gift so precious that he was willing to die to receive it (them).

These passages allude to Limited Atonement. Each soul inducted into this distinct group, earmarked for Jesus Christ by God’s sovereign decree, is guaranteed to be raised to life at the last day and will live forevermore. Since the Bible forbids universal salvation, we understand this group (those given to the Son) to therefore be limited in number and specific in name. They are the Elect, and it is for them only, at the exclusion of all others, that Christ laid down his life. This was God’s will for sending His Son into the world.

Secondly, Jesus came into the world to “save his people” from their sins—that is, he came to die for all those whom the Father had given him. The virgin birth in and of itself was a great miracle, but the child miraculously born to Joseph and Mary would perform an even greater miracle. By his *active obedience* (perfect Law-keeping) and his *passive obedience* (perfect sin-bearing), Christ set free, delivered, redeemed, and saved all those earmarked for him by the Father. And this he fully accomplished to the “uttermost,” without exception and without failure (Heb. 7:25, KJV).

If we are to assume that Jesus set free, delivered, and redeemed every single person everywhere and for all time vis-à-vis Universal Atonement, we would expect to find a myriad of verses that say as much. Instead, we find only the contrary. Throughout the New Testament the various writers use *exclusive* language, and with great repetition, to describe those for whom Christ came to die. That is to say, they avoid all-inclusive terms when speaking of Christ’s atonement. For example:

- Christ atoned for the sins of “**his people**” (Matt. 1:21); he was the sin-bearer who “was sacrificed once to take away the sins of **many**” (Heb. 9:28 cf. Isa. 53:11); he gave his life “as a ransom for **many**” (Matt. 20:28), and “poured out [his blood] for **many** for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). It goes without saying that “his people” and the “many” referred to in these texts are one and the same but, by definition, they do not constitute “all people.” They are exclusive words, not all-inclusive. By virtue of the terminology (i.e. “his people” and “many” as opposed to “all people” and “everyone”), these verses have Limited Atonement in view.

- Christ died “so that in him **we** might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21); that is, “**we** were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10) whereby “**we** have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:14). By using the term “we,” rather than “all,” it is evident that the apostle Paul used exclusive language to build a case for Limited Atonement.
- Christ said that he “[laid] down his life for **the sheep**” (John 10:11), meaning “**the church** and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25-27); that is, “**the flock** ... which he obtained for himself with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). If we accept these verses at face value, we are inclined to conclude that it is the Elect—and them alone—for whom Christ died. He did not die for sheep and goats combined, nor did he die for the penitent and unrepentant alike. Rather, he died for “the sheep,” “the church,” and “the flock.”
- Christ “gave himself for **our** sins to deliver **us** ... according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal. 1:3-4) where “the blood of Jesus ... cleanses **us** from all sin” (1 John 1:7). In doing so, “Christ redeemed **us** from the curse of the law, having become a curse for **us**” (Gal. 3:13). This “our” and “us” to whom Paul and John refer stands in clear distinction from “all” or “everyone.” Again, they are exclusive words, not all-inclusive.
- Christ died “for **us** while we were yet sinners” (Rom. 5:8) and “gave himself for **us** to redeem **us**” (Tit. 2:14) in order “that he might bring **us** to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Once again, this “us” to whom Peter and Paul refer stands in contrast to “all” or “everyone.” Those who were brought near to God through the death of Christ are exclusive in number and specific in name.

These are but a handful of texts that speak to a definite or particular atonement. Christ’s propitiating and expiating death was geared toward, and applied to, “his people,” “his church,” “his sheep,” “the flock,” and the “many”—that is, the collective “we,” “our,” and “us” who make up the Elect of God. Isaiah said it best some eight hundred years before the birth of Christ when he prophesied: “He was cut off ... for the transgression of *my people* ... For he bore the sin of *many*” (Isa. 53:8, 11-12, emphasis added). Likewise, the high priest Caiaphas, when plotting Christ’s death with the Sanhedrin, prophesied “that Jesus would die ... for *the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one*” (John 11:51-52, emphasis added). It seems both Isaiah and Caiaphas understood Limited Atonement long before John Calvin.

Jesus came into the world to do God’s will, which was to save unfailingly and definitively a particular group of people given to him by the Father. We conclude, therefore, that both reasons for his coming and dying (to do God’s will and to save “his people”) demand the doctrine of Limited Atonement. For it was clearly not God’s will to give all people to His Son nor was it His will that all people should be saved. Christ laid down his life only for his sheep and he saves only those given to him by the Father (cf. Heb. 2:13). The *Bread of Life Discourse* in John 6, the *Good Shepherd* statement in John 10, and the Lord’s *High Priestly Prayer* in John 17 tell us as much.

For whom did Christ die?	
"His people"	Matt. 1:21
"My people"	Isa. 53:8
"The many"	Heb. 9:28 cf. Isa. 53:11-12; Matt. 20:28; 26:28
"The sheep"	John 10:11
"The church"	Eph. 5:25-27
"The flock"	Acts 20:28
"The scattered children of God"	John 11:51-52
"His offspring"	Isa. 53:10
"His friends"	John 15:13
"sons and daughters ... [his] children"	Heb. 2:10-14
"We," "Us," & "Our"	2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:8-10; Col. 1:14; Gal. 1:3-4; 3:13; Tit. 2:14; 1 John 1:7; 1 Pet. 3:18

If the Bible is clear on one thing about the death of Christ's it's this: He sufficiently and efficaciously *ransomed* and *reconciled* his people to God as a sacrificial *substitute*, making full *propitiation* (satisfaction) for their sins. In other words, his death actually accomplished something. It was not a theoretical atonement, such as in Universal Atonement that, at best, promises only possibilities.

Universal Atonement offers an atonement that makes all men redeemable. Limited Atonement, however, redeems certain men completely. Universal Atonement offers an atonement that makes all men savable. Limited Atonement, however, saves certain men to the uttermost. To reject the Calvinist view of Limited Atonement in exchange for the Arminian view is to end up with an atonement that leaves men less than totally free or actually redeemed, a reconciliation that leaves men still estranged from God, a propitiation that leaves men still under the wrath of God, and a substitutionary death that still makes the sinner coffer up the faith to pay the debt for his sins. Redemption and reconciliation, to say nothing about Penal-Substitution and propitiation, can never be guaranteed in Arminianism; they are dependent upon what man does with his faith rather than what Christ has already done irrespective of faith.

The Bible teaches that those for whom Christ died have been eternally redeemed; they are truly free and their debt has been fully paid. It teaches that those who are

reconciled to God through Christ's atonement are *actually* reconciled and the wall of separation that existed between them and God has been torn down (cf. Col. 2:14). It teaches that Christ's death on the cross was a sacrifice that fully satisfied the wrath of God. It also teaches that Christ was indeed a substitute, a kinsmen redeemer, who acted in place of, as well as on behalf of, his Elect. When Jesus died on the cross, he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30), indicating that he had fully, finally, and fruitfully ransomed the Elect. Thankfully, he did *not* say, "It is now *possible* only if people believe!"

Jesus came to do the will of his Father. He came to save his people from their sins. He came to seek and save that which was lost. He came to bear witness to the truth. And he did it all perfectly and particularly—he accomplished exactly what he was sent to accomplish—so that none of those whom the Father had given him would be lost.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ Dennis Bratcher, *The Christmas Season*; (CRI / Voice, Institute, 2011); January 03, 2011