

GOING BEYOND THE LIMITS OF UNLIMITED ATONEMENT: CHRIST DIED FOR ALL, BUT ESPECIALLY HIS BRIDE

Chapter 109 of Taste and See by John Piper

Arminians take all the passages which say the death of Christ is “for us” (Romans 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:10) or for “his own sheep” (John 10:11, 15) or for “the church” (Ephesians 5:25, Acts 20:28) or for “the children of God” (John 11:52) or for “those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14) and say that the meaning is this: God designs and intends the atonement for all people, but he applies it as effective and saving only for those who believe and become part of “us” and “the sheep” and “the church” and “the children of God.”

In this view, then, the sentence, “Christ died for you,” means: Christ died for all sinners, so that *if* you will repent and believe in Christ, then the death of Jesus will become effective in your case and will take away your sins. “Died for you” means if you believe, the death of Jesus will cover your sins.

Now, as far as it goes, this is biblical teaching. But then Arminians *deny* something that I think the Bible teaches. They deny that the texts about Christ's dying for “us” or his “sheep” or his “church” or “the children of God” were intended by God to obtain something *more* for his people than the benefits they get *after they believe*. They deny, specifically, that the death of Christ was intended by God not only to obtain benefits for people *after* they believe (which is true), but even more, Christ's death was intended by God to obtain the *very willingness to believe*. In other words, the divine grace that it takes to overcome our hardness of heart so that we become believers was *also* obtained by the blood of Jesus. This they deny.

There is no dispute that Christ died to obtain great saving benefits for all who believe. Moreover there is no dispute that Christ died so that we might say to all persons everywhere without exception: God gave his only begotten Son to die for sin so that if you believe on him you may have eternal life. John 3:16 stands affirmed. Amen.

The dispute is whether God intended for the death of Christ to obtain more than these two things: 1) saving benefits after faith, and 2) a *bona fide* invitation that can be made to any person to believe on Christ for salvation. Specifically, did God intend for the death of Christ to obtain the free gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8) and repentance (2 Timothy 2:25)? Did the blood of Jesus obtain *both* the benefits after faith, *and* the benefit of faith itself?

Does the historic Arminian interpretation of any of the “universal” texts on the atonement necessarily contradict this “more” that I am affirming about God's intention for the death of Christ? Texts like 1 Timothy 2:6, 1 John 2:1-2, Hebrews 2:9, 2 Corinthians 5:19, and John 1:29.

I don't think so – at least it doesn't have to. Arminians historically are just as eager as Calvinists to avoid saying that these texts teach “universal salvation.” So they do not teach that the death of Christ “for all” in fact saves all. Rather they say, in the words of Millard Erickson, “God intended the atonement to make salvation *possible* for all persons. Christ

died for all persons, but this atoning death becomes **effective** only when accepted by the individual." Erickson then says, "This is the view of all Arminians" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], 829, emphasis added).

It is crucial to see what Arminians do **not** say. They do not say that in the death of Christ, God intends to **effectively** save all for whom Christ died. They say only that God intends to **make possible** the salvation of all for whom Christ died. But this interpretation of these "universal" texts does **not** contradict the Calvinist assertion that God **does** intend to obtain the grace of faith and repentance for a definite group by the death of Christ.

Arminians may deny this assertion, but they cannot deny it on the basis of **their** interpretation of the "universal" texts of the atonement. That interpretation simply affirms that all may have salvation **if** they believe. I do not dispute that. I only go beyond it.

Here's the rub: If God did this "more" in the death of Christ, he didn't do it for everyone; and so, at this level, the atonement becomes "limited." And this is what Arminians stumble over: Is there anything that God would do to get some unbelievers saved that he would not do for all? Such a "limitation" of "more grace" to some implies a choice on God's part to intervene decisively, and effectively save some and not all. This is the real stumbling block for those who give man and not God the final determination of who is saved.

What difference practically does all this make? A great deal. In affirming not only the essence of what Arminians believe (see the Erickson quote above), but also the "more" that Calvinists believe (that the blood of Christ obtains the faith and perseverance of the elect), Christians are able to cherish the death of Christ as an act of omnipotent love by which Christ, our husband, pays for us, pursues us, overpowers us with love, and preserves us as his uniquely loved bride forever. The Lover of our souls paid his own blood, not just to make his marriage possible, but to break down doors of the prison and take his beloved to himself. Strength and stability and joy and courage flow from knowing ourselves loved like this.