

The Effectual Atonement of Christ

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Many people believe that the difference between Arminianism and the Reformed faith with respect to the cross of Christ is simple—the Arminians teach that Jesus Christ died for *all men without exception* (universal atonement), while the Reformed faith teaches that Jesus Christ died *only for some*, that is, only for the elect (limited atonement).

However, that is not a correct explanation of the difference.

Arminianism is not so much an error about the number of people for whom Christ died—it is actually an error about the very nature of the cross of Christ. The issues at stake are these: “What was God’s *purpose* in the death of his Son? What did Jesus Christ *accomplish* by his death? What benefits were *purchased* by Jesus Christ in his death?”

Briefly, the Arminians taught the following, which can be discovered in the “Errors and Rejections” section of Head Two of the Canons of Dordt. First, God ordained the death of Christ “without a certain and definite decree to save any” (Error and Rejection 1). Second, the purpose of the death of Christ was to “acquire for the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or of works” (Error and Rejection 2). Third, Christ “merited for the Father only the authority or the perfect will...to prescribe new conditions [of salvation] as He might desire” (Error and Rejection 3). Fourth, the cross enables the Father “having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law [to regard] faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law and [to esteem it] worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace” (Error and Rejection 4). And fifth, God desires to apply “to all equally the benefits gained by the death of Christ,” but the obtaining of the “pardon of sin and eternal life” depends on the sinner’s “own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered” (Error and Rejection 6).

In other words, the death of Christ makes it possible for God to offer salvation to all men on whatever condition he might determine. It is possible that no one might meet the condition, and it is also possible that everyone might meet the condition. Nevertheless, the death of Christ *itself* by itself has accomplished *nothing* for any particular sinner.

Modern Arminians are less subtle than the first followers of Arminius. They simply teach that Christ died on the cross to make it possible for God to offer salvation to everyone on the condition of faith.

Nevertheless, the Bible does not teach that Christ by his death made salvation merely *possible*. Instead, the Bible teaches that Christ by his death has actually *secured* salvation for his people. The Bible teaches that Christ has *actually saved and redeemed* his people by his death. Either you believe (as the Arminian does) that Christ died for all men—but all men are not saved—so that the death of Christ is not effectual; or you believe (as the Reformed do) that Christ died for some men—and all of them are actually saved—so that the death of Christ is effectual.

In Head Two the Reformed fathers began by explaining the necessity of the death of Christ in terms of the satisfaction of God’s justice (Articles 1–2). The Reformed fathers then explained why Christ’s sacrifice is of infinite value (it is the sacrifice of the Son of God who suffered under the wrath of God as the substitute and surety of his people [Articles 3–4]). Then

the Reformed Fathers explained the need for the preaching of the cross, which is the promiscuous proclamation of a particular promise (Articles 5–7); and they finish by explaining the purpose and efficacy of the death of Christ (Articles 8–9).

In Article 8, which is the centerpiece of Head Two, the synod explains the purpose of God in the death of Christ: God’s purpose is that “the quickening [or life-imparting] and saving efficacy” should extend to “all the elect.” Therefore, God “[bestows] upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation.” In addition, Christ “[effectually redeemed]... all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation.” By virtue of the death of Christ, God bestows upon them “all the [other] saving gifts of the Holy Spirit [which] he purchased for them [gifts such as regeneration, calling, faith, justification, sanctification, and glorification].” Moreover, by virtue of the same precious death of Christ God “[purges] them from all sin,” and “[brings] them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory” (Article 8). In Article 9 the synod underlines the efficacy of Christ’s death: “This purpose...has been powerfully accomplished, and will henceforward still continue to be accomplished” (Article 9).

What is the Arminian concept of the death of Christ in comparison to this? Christ has merited salvation *for no one*. Christ has merited saving faith *for no one*. Christ has merely accomplished the possibility of salvation for all men, *if they believe*. Then whole sections of Scripture would have to be rewritten: “Christ has made our redemption from the curse of the law possible, if we accept it” (compare Galatians 3:13); “in whom we have the possibility of redemption, if we accept it” (compare Ephesians 1:7); “by whose stripes our healing has been made possible, if we accept it” (compare 1 Peter 2:24).

There really are two ways to “limit” the atonement: either you follow the biblical and Reformed faith and recognize that *by God’s purpose and design* the atonement is limited to the elect (particular redemption), or you embrace Arminianism and change the very meaning of the atonement, so that it becomes an atonement *that does not really atone*.

We thank God that four hundred years ago God through the work of the Synod of Dordt preserved the truth of the effectual atonement of Christ: “There never [shall be] wanting a church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ, which [shall] steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as their Savior, who as a bridegroom for his bride, laid down His life for them upon the cross, and which [shall] celebrate His praises here and through all eternity” (Article 9).

Originally published in:
Vol. 77 No.9 September 2018

