

The Five Disputed Points of Calvinism: The “L” in TULIP- Limited Atonement

Why the cross?

Why did it become the chief symbol of Christianity?

In his book *The Cross of Christ* pastor and theologian John Stott ponders that question. He points out that Christians could have picked any number of symbols to represent their faith.

They could have chosen a **manger** to represent Jesus’ birth. **Tools** to represent his trade, carpentry. A **boat** to represent his teaching from the shores of Galilee. A **towel or basin** to symbolize the washing of the disciple’s feet. A **dove** to symbolize Jesus’ baptism. A **stone** to symbolize his resurrection from the grave. Or, if I might add my own, a **heart** to symbolize his love. But none of these things became the chief symbol, only the cross. Why?

Christians have used different symbols throughout the ages to symbolize certain things about their faith (think of the sign of the fish that you see on the back of so many cars today) but the cross is the dominant symbol. Why?

Many of us don’t know why.

This is evidenced by the large numbers of people who wear crosses around their necks but can not tell you much about what it means.

A few years ago there was an explosion of “cross jewelry,” perhaps spurred by Mel Gibson’s blockbuster movie *The Passion of Christ*. It became “chic” to wear the cross, even if one didn’t understand it.

There are even those in the church who don’t really understand the meaning of the cross and why it is so central to our faith.

I could not find this article, but one time I read about a minister who told a story about a kid in his congregation who asked his parents, “What is that man was doing up there hanging on the cross?” The parents told their child that the minister needed to explain it to him.

Today we are going to talk about the cross and its meaning. More specifically, what it does and who it is for. The “L” in TULIP- Limited Atonement, the third point of the five disputed points of Calvinism, is **all** about the cross.

John Calvin, the forefather of the Presbyterian Church, was a theologian of the cross.

The cross was central to his theology because Jesus Christ was his Lord and Savior and because he accepted the Bible to be the Word of God. For if one is grounded in those two truths then one can not help but be a theologian of the cross.

Now before I tackle what we mean by the word “limited” in this phrase “limited atonement” I am going to first talk about the meaning of the word “atonement.” For it is this word that will take us to the very heart of the cross and why it is so essential to our faith.

Atonement. What Does It Mean?

The word atonement communicates two things.

(1) First, atonement has to do with the idea of us being “made one with God.” If you look at the word closely you will see that it breaks down to “at-one-ment,” meaning, “at one” with God. So atonement, chiefly, has to do with us being made one with God.

This word actually presumes that we have a problem. There is a need for atonement. We would not need atonement if we were already “one with God.” The problem is called sin.

We talked about this a few weeks ago, but the idea here is that all human beings since Adam have been born with a sinful nature, which leads all human beings to sin. To sin is to be in rebellion against God, to break his commands, and to live for the love of self, not the love of God.

This sin problem has negatively affected our relationship with God. In fact, it has severed the relationship. Our sin has led to a divorce. Our relationship with God has become damaged goods. Atonement presumes this problem. Therefore everyone needs it. We all need to be made one with God.

(2) This brings us to the second thing that atonement communicates.

Not only is this word about our “becoming one with God again,” it is fundamentally about **how** we become one with God.

If you look up the word atone in the dictionary you will find such words as “to make reparation,” “to make up for,” “to compensate,” “to pay,” or “to recompense.”

So in terms of how we are made one with God, the word atonement implies that our sins have to first “be made up for,” “compensated for,” or “paid for.” In short, this means that God will not restore the relationship, God will not forgive, unless atonement is somehow made for our sins.

This doctrine of atonement is hitting on something that is very unique to the Christian faith.

Other world religions do not have the doctrine of atonement at the core of them. Yes, other religions do offer a philosophy on the concept of forgiveness, but it is typically forgiveness without atonement.

For example, in Islam God can forgive sins just for the sake of forgiveness, especially if a person is remorseful and repentant. In Islam there is no need for atonement, no need for payment to be

made. But in Christianity, and also in her mother religion Judaism, God can not and will not forgive sins without atonement.

Why is that?

It is because of the holiness of God. Because God hates sin, God can not simply give it a free pass. It must be dealt with, it must be paid for, and ultimately, it must be judged. If God did not deal with sin by judging it then God would not be true to his nature.

Now this fact leads us to the question of who is going to do the atoning. Is God going to ask us to do it? As if that were possible. Or will God provide another way?

The answer to the question is that God does not require man to do the atoning for his sins. We are sinners and we do not have the capacity to make such payment. And since we can't atone for our sins we get the just penalty of death, alienation, separation from God **unless** God makes another way.

Atonement: The Heart of the Gospel

This reality brings us to the heart of the gospel in the Bible. The gospel as it is contained in the Old Testament, though it is somewhat shadowed, veiled, and not fully revealed, and the gospel as it is contained in the New Testament, the full and complete revelation of God, through the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament God made atonement for the sins of the people through the sacrifice of animals.

On the Day of Atonement the high priest sacrificed the life of a goat so that the sins of the people would be paid for, instead of the people paying the price through the shedding of their own blood.

Now why did blood have to be shed in order for sins to be atoned for? Because the wages of sin is death and since life is contained in the blood the blood must be spilt in order for the penalty of death to be met. God is holy and He deals with sin that seriously. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Heb.9:22)

Though this sacrificial system strikes us as shocking there is a great deal of grace in it.

In the animal God has provided a substitute, a scapegoat, who stands in the place of the guilty sinner. The innocent blood of the animal is shed instead of the blood of sinful human beings. The penalty for sin is paid, thus satisfying God's holiness and justice, yet the people get a free pass, thus demonstrating God's mercy.

Now the thing to keep in mind here is that this sacrificial system of Israel was effective only in that it pointed to something greater than itself, namely the Messiah, the very Son of God, who would come at a later time to shed his blood for the sins of God's people.

This OT sacrificial system was not truly sufficient to cover the sins of the people; it simply pointed to someone greater who could.

It was insufficient because it was the blood of an animal that was being shed. In order for true atonement to take place it needed to be the blood of a human being. A human being must pay the price for humankind's sins. Thus, in Jesus we have that. He was fully and perfectly human so his sacrifice met the standard.

Second, in order for true atonement to happen it had to be **more** than something that God just **provided**, it had to be something that God **did**.

In short, God had to be involved **in** the exchange. The animal is not God, but Jesus is, thus Christ alone brings about the forgiveness of sins through the power of his divinity.

Third, the OT sacrificial system was insufficient because the priest who offered it was himself, a sinner.

The sacrifice he made was not just for the sins of the people, but it was for himself as well. And because he was a sinner he had to make this sacrifice over and over again. But the sacrifice of Jesus was a perfect, "once-for-all" sacrifice for sin. This is the power of his full divinity and humanity.

So what we have on the cross is the true scapegoat for God's people, Jesus Christ. He is our substitute. On the cross there is a great exchange between us and him. Jesus is the one who bears the punishment that our sins deserve.

This is why the cross became the central symbol of the Christian faith. It symbolizes the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God that man can have through it.

It is a scandalous and odd symbol because it was so repugnant in the day of Jesus. It was the most despised and most cruel form of execution. It made people to gasp to think of it. It was an anathema. It was reserved for the worst of the worst.

That is why when Paul preached he said, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (I Cor. 1:23-24)

How odd that God would save his people through the weaknesses, shame, and despair of the cross, and not through raw power or brute force. That is, oddly, the power of the cross. That is the power of the "at-one-ment" that took place on the cross.

What Do We Mean by "Limited" in Limited Atonement?

Now that we have a clearer understanding of the meaning of the word atonement let us now turn our attention briefly to what we mean by the word "limited" in the phrase "limited atonement."

First, by it, we do not mean weak or insufficient; as in that the atonement that took place on the cross was somehow not enough to save us. This is **not** what we mean.

Jesus' work on the cross does not need any help in order to accomplish its purpose. Or to put it in the words of the old hymn, "What can wash away my sin? **Nothing** but the blood of Jesus." That's it. Nothing else. This is the all sufficiency of the cross.

So the phrase "limited atonement" in the theology of John Calvin must have meant something else.

Most broadly speaking, what it meant was that Jesus Christ's atonement on the cross was **limited** to only those who put their faith in him. In other words, it does not atone for the sins of those who reject the Savior.

It must be said here that **all orthodox** Christians believe in some form of limited atonement.

Christians (if their theology is straight) are not Universalists. Universalism is a form of heresy. The Bible clearly speaks of God's judgment and it speaks of the reality of hell, eternal separation from God. Jesus himself said more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. So we can not be Universalists with out dismissing significant portions of the Bible, unpleasant as they be.

I like what Dr. John Gerstner once told Dr. Ronald Scates, pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas Texas. He said, "Ron, all Christians believe in "limited atonement." The real question is **who** do we believe does the limiting? God or man?"

That question brings us to the heart of the classical reformed understating of "limited atonement."

Does man limit the atonement of Christ through his rejection of Jesus? Or does God limit the atonement because God only applies it to those whom he predestined for salvation in Christ, while justly choosing to pass over the rest in their sin?

The strength of the first option- man limiting the atonement of Christ by his rejection of him- is that the free will of man, at least on the surface, comes out unscathed. Plus, it keeps God from looking like a bad guy.

The weakness of this understanding is that it puts salvation, ultimately, in man's hands, which is like putting a nuclear bomb in Kim Jong Il's hands. It's going to blow up! Man is going to make the wrong choice. He's going to choose himself, not God!

Would God really be gracious to just sit back and passively watch us make the same mistake that Adam made over and over?

The strength of the second option- God limiting salvation to those whom he has chosen in Christ- is that it puts salvation squarely in God's hands, where it can not be lost. God must reach down to us and do the choosing, the electing, the quickening of the human heart, enabling us and

overwhelming us with the grace of Christ so that we will come to believe. It is truly “a rescue of sinners.”

This understanding of salvation, to me, seems to make more sense the older one gets and the longer we live in the faith. Later on, we come to realize that our salvation it had a whole lot more to do with God than it did us.

The weakness of this understanding is that it makes God look unfair, because of what it says about those who were not chosen.

But back to Calvin, he opted for the latter case, warts and all. Atonement was limited because God had chosen some in Christ, but others he passed over. This was not because he was mean, cold, or dour, but rather it was because he was seeing this in the Bible.

When Calvin would read a passage like we read today and he would hear “All that the Father gives to me will come to me,” he would then say to himself, “Those whom God has chosen **will** come to Christ, so what does that say about those who do not come?”

He would hear Jesus say in that text that it was “the will of God who sent him to **not** lose anyone that was given to him,” and again ask himself what does this say about those who do not come to Christ? Was it God’s will that they come? The implication seems to be no.

Calvin would also look at Jesus’ response to those who were so upset with him in this text (“Stop grumbling. You don’t get what I’m saying because the Father has **not** drawn you to me.”) and conclude that Jesus’ detractors had simply been passed over by God, they were not chosen. Jesus did not shed his blood for them because **all** whom he shed his blood for would wake up and come to faith. “**All** that the Father gives to me will come to me”

So, in summary, why did Calvin believe in limited atonement?

For starters he believed the Bible’s teaching on hell to be true. If hell were real then atonement was limited if for no other reason other than that.

Calvin also believed that man was depraved. Because of Adam we have a sinful nature and one of the consequences of that is that we have lost the capacity to choose God of our own accord, at least in any way that would be pleasing to God.

Why? Because humankind didn’t just trip, but fell, headlong, face-first. God had to intervene and quicken within him a capacity to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

This, in turn, led to Calvin’s embracing the Bible’s teaching on election/predestination.

It was clear to him that all people did not believe (just as it would be clear to us today); therefore he couldn’t conclude any other thing other than that had God chosen to pass over them and let them receive the just penalty for their sins. This is strong. But it is what Calvin concluded from his study of Scripture.

You see, when you put salvation fully, completely, and squarely in the hands of God and then you look at the world and see that not everyone believes it is a conclusion that can be legitimately drawn.

Conclusion

To bring this message to a close I would say this.

Though what we have looked at this morning, in terms of “limited atonement,” is very much a worthy and necessary endeavor, if we are going to be any good at loving God with our minds and taking the teaching of the Bible seriously, the most important thing we can say this morning is this: **If you are a follower of Jesus Christ your sins have been fully paid for.** Through the cross God has accomplished your salvation. And if you do not believe in Jesus Christ then the call goes out to you this morning to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

Without the cross of Christ you have no hope.

Would you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ this morning? Place your life in his hands? Confess to God today that you are a sinner, with no hope of saving yourself and ask God to apply the cleansing blood of Jesus to your life. Remember without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Amen.