

Christ's Death: Sufficient for All?

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Among those who generally accept the doctrine of a definite or limited atonement, it is often heard by way of explanation that "the atonement is sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect." In fact this terminology may be found in some of the most respected Reformed theologians such as Hodge, Shedd, Buswell and others. While no Calvinist would deny the intrinsic sufficiency of Christ's death for the redemption of all men had God so designed and intended it, I find the use of such phraseology dubious.

Maintaining the infinite intrinsic value of Christ's death is not the same as saying "He died sufficiently for all men and efficiently only for the elect." The latter seems to ascribe to Christ a purpose or intention to die in the place of all men, and to benefit all by the proper effects of His death as an atonement or propitiation. This inference is not supported by a scriptural view of the nature of the atonement or by the Calvinistic understanding of limited atonement. My purpose here is to show that this phraseology is ultimately meaningless and fails to adequately perceive the nature of the atonement. In the final analysis, it does not distinguish a definite atonement from a general or universal atonement.¹

Why is the term "sufficient for all" used in discussing the atonement?

It is with some interest that we look at some of the probable reasons why such language has become rather common in discussions of this matter. Primarily, the use of this terminology seems to be an attempt to soften the impact of the doctrine of limited atonement on the natural mind, for it is indeed no simple matter of understanding. Most people don't want a theological treatise as an explanation, they just want a simple answer (and in no more than three minutes, if you please). So we say, "His death was sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect." This may be brief and easy to remember, but accuracy and integrity have been sacrificed for the sake of brevity. Its use anticipates objections to the doctrine and pretends to diffuse those objections by declaring a universal application of the atonement. Rather than providing a real answer, however, it only deflects the potential objections and often leaves the questioner unsatisfied or at least scratching his head, wondering what it really means.

This statement has been used by good solid Calvinists who have no intention of giving way on the doctrine of limited atonement, but that does not make it valid or advisable phraseology. There appear to be several underlying reasons

why this statement has been used. I believe the following are representative of those reasons:

- There is a fear that God might be charged with injustice if an atonement is not somehow provided for all.
- A universal aspect of the atonement is perceived as necessary for a bona fide offer of the gospel to all men.
- The atonement must somehow be designed for the non-elect in order to render them inexcusable for their unbelief.
- Since Christ in His person is divine and infinite, so must be His work on the cross; therefore His death is sufficient for all.

Considered together there may be some semblance of rationale for the "sufficient for all" statement, but I hope to show that considered separately, the reasons are either invalid or the concern can be and should be answered another way. Let's take a look at these reasons individually.

First, that there is a fear that God might be charged with injustice if an atonement is not somehow provided for all.

Answer: Mercy extended to some but not all, is not to be perceived as injustice. As R. C. Sproul has suggested, all the potential acts of God may fall under two categories: justice and non-justice. Under non-justice, however, we have the sub categories of injustice and mercy. Mercy is not justice, but it is certainly not injustice. God cannot be charged with injustice. We seem to think that if God doesn't treat everyone exactly the same, and provide mercy to all alike, then He is unjust. This is simply false reasoning and a good example of the effect of the Fall on man's ability to think straight. It fails to stand up to either the Scriptures or logic.

Secondly, that a universal aspect of the atonement is perceived as necessary for a bona fide offer of the gospel to all men.

Answer: The truth of the gospel is to be proclaimed to all men. For example, "All men are under condemnation and hell bound because of their sin. There is no escape apart from faith in Christ. By the grace of God, all who believe in him are forgiven and shall be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!" Now this truth is not dependent on a universal aspect or universal intent to the atonement. In fact, the extent of the atonement and its sufficiency or efficiency have no direct bearing on the message.

According to J. I. Packer, "Preaching the gospel is not a matter of telling people that God has set His love on each of them and Christ has died to save each of them. The knowledge of being the object of God's eternal love and Christ's redeeming death belongs to the individual's assurance . . . which is to

be inferred from the fact that one has believed, not proposed as the reason one should believe."²

Or, as John Owen has said, "There are none called by the gospel even once to enquire after the purpose and intention of God concerning the particular object of the death of Christ, everyone being fully assured that His death shall be profitable to them that believe in him and obey him."³ The preacher's task is to explain man's need of Christ, His sufficiency to save, and His offer of Himself as Savior to all who truly turn to Him. If you are proclaiming a gospel message that demands a universal provision in the atonement, you are not proclaiming the gospel of the Scriptures.

Thirdly, that the atonement must somehow be designed for the non-elect in order to render them inexcusable for their unbelief.

Answer: If Christ did not provide an atonement sufficient for all without exception, wouldn't we still be to blame for our perishing? Wouldn't we still be forced to say, "We are without excuse?" Why must we think that it is the provision of an atonement that renders men inexcusable? The Apostle Paul never discusses atonement in terms of rendering men inexcusable or as a basis for condemnation! The atonement is not designed to render men inexcusable, but rather it is designed to save some of those who already stand before God without excuse. The particularity of the atonement needs no more apology than the particular nature of the effectual call or unconditional election. Can you imagine using the same phraseology with these doctrines? -- "The effectual call is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect." Or, "God's unconditional election is sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect." Here I think we see a little of the meaningless nature of such a statement.

Fourthly, that since Christ in His person is divine and infinite, so must be His work on the cross; therefore His death is sufficient for all.

Answer: "It is a non sequitur to move from the deity of the sacrifice to the sufficiency for every individual person. Such a conclusion assumes that the Deity can perform nothing by measure."⁴ In His feeding of the five thousand, Jesus multiplied the loaves by a divine act. Yet all the loaves in the world were not multiplied, only the ones He handled and blessed for the five thousand. Again, it was a divine act (and thus infinite) that raised Lazarus from the grave. Yet this was limited to Lazarus. To say that the raising of Lazarus was sufficient for all but efficient for Lazarus makes little sense if any. It is obvious that Christ had the power to raise whomever He chose. The fact is He chose to raise only Lazarus, and His divine actions were limited to that.

Perhaps more to the point, Christ's nature, being divine and thus infinite, does not increase the intensity or quantity of that which was laid on Him at the cross. However, His nature does enable Him to bear whatever it might have

been. Our sins are not infinite, and we are not infinite; it is Christ who is infinite. Christ bore the penalty for the sins of a finite number of people. His divine nature ensured that He would successfully bear the eternal wrath due to those sins, no matter how great or how many. His atonement is sufficient for all whom it was intended. It is sufficient for all whose sins were laid on Him, no matter how many. The question is, Was Christ a real substitute for, and did He bear the punishment due to, all men or some? The doctrine of limited atonement says some, the elect, or else all would be saved. To say that His death was sufficient for all, or that His atonement was sufficient for all, certainly implies otherwise.

While our motive may be to help someone understand a particular truth regarding the doctrine of atonement, I don't think the use of such language is the way to do it. If the above reasons for using this terminology are not valid, which I have attempted to show, then the term "sufficient for all" is unnecessary. In fact it is not only unnecessary but inappropriate. It is inappropriate because there is a tendency for error to be introduced by such language. If we use language that is theologically inaccurate, which is true of the case at hand, then we will soon find ourselves entertaining erroneous theological ideas in order to explain our dubious terminology. In this case, how does one explain the rational difference between an atonement that is "sufficient" for all men and one that is "efficient" for those who are saved?

What errors are there in the "sufficiency for all" view?

One error of this view is found in its lack of precise distinction between atonement and the effectual call. By maintaining that Christ's death was sufficient for all, but efficient for the elect, there is a tendency to define the extent of the atonement in terms of personal application by the Holy Spirit.

An example can be found in the work of W. G. T. Shedd, an eminent Calvinist theologian of the nineteenth century who adopts the "sufficient for all" view. In Shedd's discussion of the extent of the atonement he differentiates between passive and active meanings. Passively, he claims, "the extent of the atonement is unlimited." Actively, which he says denotes the act of extending, it is limited. Shedd goes on:

The extent of the atonement in this sense [active] means its personal application to individuals by the Holy Spirit. The extent is now the intent. The question, What is the extent of the atonement? now means: To whom is the atonement effectually extended?⁵

This essentially identifies the doctrine of effectual calling with atonement! It removes any efficacy from the atonement itself and makes Christ's work on the cross merely tentative! If He has died for all sufficiently and the only

particularity is in the personal application by the Spirit, then I cannot see how one distinguishes this from the universal atonement of the Arminians, who claim that Christ died for all men, with its benefits accruing only to those who believe. The difference between the two does not lie in the atonement, but in the Spirit's effectual calling.

Shedd's problem is that he has decided to say "Christ's death is sufficient for all" and now he must try and explain what he means by it. While his particular reasoning may be somewhat unique, his basic solution is not. In order to find some significant difference between sufficiency and efficiency he turns to the application work of the Spirit. This is a typical problem for the "sufficiency" view, and the solution in this case is erroneous.

In another attempt to explain how Christ's death is sufficient for all, Alexander Hodge has taken a different approach. He states that the atonement has objectively "removed the legal impediments out of the way of all men." ⁶ This explanation has become quite popular, but it is not without its inherent problems.

If all legal obstacles to a man's salvation have been removed then what hinders his being saved? You say his unbelief? Logically then, the only reason men are condemned is unbelief. But is not unbelief a sin for which Christ suffered the legal penalties? Certainly, for even the elect were guilty of unbelief at one time. Do we then say that persistent unbelief is in a different category as some have suggested? What then about the man who never had the opportunity to disbelieve? If all the legal obstacles to his salvation have been removed and he never hears of Jesus, then certainly no just reason remains why he should be condemned. Is he then saved? If so, it is better that I tell no one the gospel. If not, then for what is he condemned? I have yet to hear a satisfactory answer.

In addition, if every legal obstacle is removed for all men, there is no basis for the wrath of God continuing upon any man. To remove the legal obstacles is to satisfy God's justice and His wrath. Why then does Scripture persist in teaching otherwise? "For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come," Col. 3:6. And again, "because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience," Eph. 5:6. The answer is that the legal obstacles have not been removed for all men but for the elect, all those for whom Christ died, so that "He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," Rom. 3:26. The wrath of God and the justice of God are satisfied for those for whom Christ was a substitute, and that is not all men, but by His grace it is some.

That Christ was entirely capable in His person and by His death of gaining satisfaction for all the sins of all men is not in question. But to say that the actual atonement was sufficient for all men, in all that is meant by the word

atonement, must be questioned. To present the atonement as being sufficient for all will prevent understanding its nature in terms of a real satisfaction and a real penal substitution. This is seen in many contemporary treatments of the atonement which seek to interpret Christ's death with little or no reference to God's law, justice, or holy wrath. In fact, many have entirely rejected the specific penal substitution concept as antiquated or immoral or both. Also, "to remove the necessary connection between atonement and satisfaction of divine justice denudes Christ's death of all its moral sublimity and reduces it to an amazing piece of romantic extravagance." ²

Therefore, if we, as Calvinists, confidently affirm the substitutionary and legal-penal aspects of the atonement, we must resist applying this concept to all men without exception by saying it is sufficient for all. To do so relegates the atonement to a non-effectual state and necessarily contains elements of non-substitution.

Concluding Remarks

To say that Christ's death on the cross provided an atonement sufficient for all is to specifically suggest that He has atoned for the sins of all men, which is essentially a universal atonement. This is a false conception and makes us, along with those who hold to a universal atonement, say the opposite of what we mean. As J. I. Packer has aptly stated,

We want (rightly) to proclaim Christ as Savior; yet we end up saying that Christ, having made salvation possible, has justify us to become our own saviors. It comes about this way. We want to magnify the saving grace of God and the saving power of Christ. So we declare that God's redeeming love extends to every man, and that Christ has died to save every man, and we proclaim that the glory of divine mercy is to be measured by these facts. And then, in order to avoid universalism, we have to depreciate all that we were previously extolling, and to explain that, after all, nothing that God and Christ have done can save us unless we add something to it; the decisive factor which actually saves us is our own believing. What we say comes to this-that Christ saves us with our help; and what that means is this-that we save ourselves with Christ's help.

This is a hollow anticlimax. But if we start by affirming that God has a saving love for all, and Christ died a saving death [sufficient] for all, and yet balk at becoming universalists, there is nothing else that we can say. And let us be clear on what we have done when we put the matter in this fashion. We have not exalted grace and the cross; we have cheapened them. We have limited the atonement far more drastically than [consistent] Calvinism does, for whereas Calvinism asserts Christ's death saves all whom it was meant to

save, we have denied that Christ's death, as such, is sufficient to save any of them.⁸

Endnotes

1 Thomas J. Nettles has expressed this same viewpoint as part of a larger argument in *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Baker, 1986, pp. 305-315). I have borrowed several thoughts and examples from him, not all of which are footnoted.

2 J. I. Packer, *Introductory Essay to John Owen's, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, *Banner of Truth*, pp. 18-19. Italics mine.

3 John Owen, *Ibid.*, p. 296.

4 Nettles, *Op. cit.*, p. 308.

5 W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:464. Bracket mine.

6 A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 417.

7 Nettles, *Op. cit.*, p. 313.

8 J. I. Packer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 16-17. Inserted brackets mine.