

Why Did Christ Die?

A Review Of The Limited/Unlimited Atonement Debate

In considering the death of Christ, one is forced to think very solemnly and soberly at the awesome price that was paid for salvation. Furthermore, this price was paid in spite of the fact that no human deserves the privilege of redemption. Romans 5:8 states “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

There are essentially two views as to why Christ died. However, the Bible suggests that there were multiple reasons for His death. For example, He died for all people (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 1 John 2:1-2), for the elect (2 Timothy 2:10), for Israel (Acts 5:31), for the Gentiles (Acts 28:28), and for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). In answering the question as to what Christ’s death on the cross accomplished, the Bible also makes several claims. His death destroyed death (2 Timothy 1:10), destroyed the Devil (Hebrews 2:14), saved us from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9), took away sin (John 1:29), and satisfied God’s divine justice (Romans 3:23-26).

However, in systematizing these statements of purpose and intent, the first primary view is that Christ died to make salvation possible for all. This view is commonly called universal atonement. Most often, people of a Lutheran, Arminian, and many Catholics have held to this type of a position. This concept is seen in verses such as John 3:16, which indicate that God loves the whole world. The second primary view is that Christ died to save and keep save the elect. This view is commonly called limited atonement, as the sacrifice of Christ is limited to the elect. Limited atonement is most often held by Reformed groups and Augustinian Catholics. An often quoted verse for this view is Acts 20:28, which claims that Christ purchased the church of God.

Perhaps a better conclusion would be to accept both as being true, and more. In a paper on this subject, Bruce A. Ware suggests, in summarizing this issue, that there are five key purposes for the death of Christ.¹ First, “Christ died for the purpose of securing the sure and certain salvation of his own, his elect.” This can be seen in Ephesians 5:25, in which Paul writes “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” Christ did indeed die to save the church, His elect ones.

Second, He died “for the purpose of paying the penalty for the sin of all people making it possible for all who believe to be saved.” 1 John 2:2 teaches “and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.”

Christ died to make the objective sacrifice for sin, which is able to be applied to the elect.

Third, he died “for the purpose of securing the *bone fide* offer of salvation to all people everywhere.” This can be seen in the Great Commission passage of Matthew 28:18-20, in which, based on His resurrection authority, Christ commands His disciples to make disciples “all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Fourth, he died “for the purpose of providing an additional basis for condemnation for those who hear and reject the gospel that has been genuinely offered to them.” John 3:18 indicates “he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” It would be unjust of God to hold rejection of the death of Christ against unbelievers if this death were never for them to begin with.

Fifth, “Christ died for the purpose of reconciling all things to the Father.” Ephesians 1:9-10 reveals that God “made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.” Thus, the death of Christ was, fundamentally, to make salvation possible and able to be applied to the elect, to genuinely offer the Gospel to all without hypocrisy and to justify condemnation, and to reconcile all things to the Father.

¹ Ware, Bruce A. *Extent of the Atonement: Outline of The Issue, Positions, Key Texts, and Key Theological Arguments*. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Pg 3.

All Scripture Taken From The New American Standard Bible. The Lockman Foundation, 1995