

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

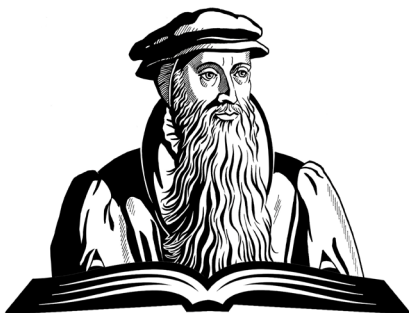
by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4:

CHRISTOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

Lecture 9

THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT



The John Knox Institute
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by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4 ~ Christology

Lectures by Dr. Stephen Myers:

1. Introduction to Christology
2. The Divinity of Christ
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- 9. The Extent of the Atonement**
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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4 ~ Lecture 9

The Extent of the Atonement

When a young man comes into mature adulthood, he usually begins to consider marriage. In surveying the possibilities, he singles out a certain young lady, which with the Lord's blessing, eventually leads to securing a wife. In marriage, a man sets his whole heart on one woman, and on one woman only, one woman who is distinguished from all others. He commits himself to his wife, whom he loves, and serves, pursues, and for whom he sacrifices all lifelong. He is kind to other women, but he has a special, unique love for one only, the woman with whom he has entered a marriage covenant. She stands apart, and must do so from all others in his heart and devotion.

Well, God created the institution of marriage, at the beginning of time in the garden of Eden. But it was designed to point to something higher and greater, namely, the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. This becomes clear throughout the Bible in the Psalms, and Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, the Prophets, the Gospels, epistles—note especially Ephesians 5—and all the way to the end, in Revelation 21. Christ seeks and secures a bride through his atoning sacrifice in the proclamation of that gospel. He weds himself to her in the covenant of grace. He chiefly has eyes for one only, a saving and eternal love for his redeemed people.

This series of lectures in this fourth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Christ. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the last couple of lectures, we've focused on the work of Christ, specifically his atonement. We've learned about both its necessity and nature. In this lecture, we will explore the Extent of the Atonement, which addresses the question, For whom did Christ die? The answer given in the Bible is that the Lord Jesus Christ offered up himself as an atoning sacrifice for a particular people, to secure definitively the salvation of a specific people from their sins.

Well, first of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of the Extent of the Atonement. John 17 is often called "Christ's High Priestly Prayer," and for good reasons. It records intercessions of Jesus on behalf of his people, which, as we learned in our sixth lecture, is one of the ways Christ executes his office as a Priest. John 17 is actually the longest recorded prayer of Christ in the Gospels. We're enabled to listen in on Christ's communion with his Father, and thereby to peer into the heart of the Lord. Hear what Christ says, in John 17, verse 9: "I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine." Christ explicitly distinguishes between those for whom he is praying, and those for whom he is not praying. He states clearly that he is not praying for the world. Well, this is consistent with what we learned from the Old Testament. For whom did Aaron and the other priests that came after him pray? Well, they did not pray for the world at large—the

Egyptians, Amorites, Philistines, and so forth. They interceded for God's own redeemed people. They represented Israel before God and presented petitions on their behalf. You will recall how the names of the twelve tribes were engraved in stone upon the breastplate of the high priest, borne, as it were, over the heart of the high priest, and brought before God's presence in the Holy Place. The smoke that rose from the golden altar of incense pictured the prayers of the saints of God's people. We see that Psalm 141, verse 2, and Revelation 8, verses 3 and 4.

So for whom was Christ praying in John 17? He says, "I pray for them... which thou hast given me; for they are thine." He is speaking of a specific people, the elect, those he came to save, those who belong to the Father and to the Son. At the beginning of the prayer, Christ says in verse 2, "That he"—that is, Christ—"should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him." And you will notice how this reference to those the Father gave to the Son, as distinguished from all others in the world, can be traced through the whole prayer. We read in verse 6, "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word." And again, in verses 11 and 12: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me... I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled." Toward the end of the prayer, we read in verse 24, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world." So the Father gave to the Son a particular people. Christ came to secure the salvation of those the Father gave him. Those who were given to him will be saved and will never be lost. And so he prays for this chosen, redeemed people.

Well, this builds on what Jesus teaches us earlier in John's Gospel. Christ says, in John 6, verse 44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." Verse 65, "Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father." Likewise, in John 10, Jesus reveals that he is the great shepherd who comes to save his sheep, a particular people. We read in John 10, verse 11, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." And then in verses 28 and 29, "And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand."

All of this reflects the design of Christ's atonement. He came to secure definitively the salvation of a specific people. He died to save a chosen people, and they will be saved. Those he saves can never perish. They are both purchased and kept by his divine power. And his prayer in John 17 reflects his efficacious intercessions for them. Well what we learn of Christ in the Gospels informs how we should continue to think of him now. Christ remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. The difference between the time Christ prayed the words of John 17, and today, reflects a change in his location—from earth to heaven—but it does not reflect a change in his heart. How does the ascended Christ intercede for his people from the throne of glory? John 17 provides part of the answer. In unbreakable love, he continues to pray for a particular people—his bride, those the Father gave to him, those he came to redeem.

Well, in this lecture, we will explore further what the Bible teaches regarding the Extent of the Atonement. So secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Extent of the Atonement. In the last lecture, we learned that at the heart of the Nature of the Atonement is the idea of substitution. Christ's sacrifice was a substitutionary, or vicarious, atonement. He took the place of sinners in paying the penalty and punishment for their sin. The question before us in this

lecture is this: For whom was he a substitute? For whom exactly did he die? For whose sins did he atone? Who are the intended recipients of the blessings of the atonement? The Bible teaches us that Jesus did not die for all the sins of all men. He atoned for the sins of his elect. He died for those who were chosen by the Father to be redeemed by the Son. We are introduced again to the doctrine of the atonement in *Westminster Confession*, chapter 8, paragraph 5, which says, “The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.” That last phrase, “for all those whom the Father hath given unto him,” is relevant for this lecture.

We first need to define some of our terms regarding the Extent of the Atonement. This doctrine is sometimes called Limited Atonement. The word “limited” can be easily misunderstood. It’s not limited in its power. It’s limited in its scope, that is, it’s scope was designed to save a specific chosen people, not all men indiscriminately. But it is unlimited in its power, that is, Christ’s atonement absolutely, successfully, and certainly secures the salvation of those for whom Christ died. This doctrine is also called Definite Atonement—Christ atoned definitively for a definite people. The doctrine is also called Particular Redemption—Christ redeemed a particular people in his death on the cross. You can see how all of the names for this doctrine convey the same point.

Well, in considering the doctrinal details, let’s begin, first of all, by recognizing we need to state clearly the question before us, and to distinguish that issue from what we’re not asserting. This will introduce and open up the topic for further consideration. First of all, consider what is not being questioned. The Bible affirms that the gospel is to be proclaimed to every last person in the world. The Bible affirms, secondly, the overtures of salvation are extended indiscriminately to all those who hear the gospel. The gospel offer goes to all men. Thirdly, the sufficiency of Christ’s work is not being questioned. Is his atonement sufficient to save more people? Well, his atonement is of infinite sufficiency, to save not only all mankind throughout the history of the world, but a thousand worlds beyond that and more. So we’re not talking about the sufficiency of Christ’s work.

Secondly then, so what is being stated in this doctrine? Well, a handful of things, by way of introduction. As we’ll see in a moment, the Extent of the Atonement is rooted in the Nature of the Atonement. We’ll come back to that. Also, since all Christians believe that not everyone goes to heaven, the question is, Who limits the atonement?—God? or man? And the answer is, God does. It would be impossible if left in man’s hands. Furthermore, the sin of unbelief is found in every sinner, so Christ must die for the sin of unbelief, and the gift of faith must be purchased and secured in the atonement itself. We’ll have more to say about that as well. Also, Christ’s love for his own bride is different from his disposition toward the rest of the world. And lastly, there cannot be a double payment, meaning, Christ does not pay for the sins of all men, and then some sinners, unbelievers, pay for that same sin again in hell. That’s not possible. So with those brief thoughts, by way of introduction, we can begin to unpack the details of this doctrine.

Secondly, we need to think about the relationship of the Nature of the Atonement to the Extent of the Atonement. We intentionally covered the Necessity and Nature of the Atonement before considering the Extent of the Atonement. The reason is important for you to understand. The Necessity of the Atonement supplies the background regarding the desperation of man, being spiritually dead and lost, and in a helpless condition. Those doctrines contribute to our understanding of the Extent of the Atonement. In other words, man cannot be saved, if left to himself without God’s divine initiative. But perhaps even more importantly, questions about the Extent of the

Atonement are actually rooted in the very Nature of the Atonement. So understanding the Nature of the Atonement, which we covered in the last lecture, informs and directs our view of its extent to whom it applies. In other words, the truth about the Nature of the Atonement determines the Extent of it. You ask, “Well, how so? What exactly do we mean?” In brief, we mean this: Christ was a real substitute for a real people. He did not die merely to create a hypothetical possibility of salvation. No, his atonement actually secure, guaranteed, and accomplished the successful redemption of his chosen, purchased people.

Well thirdly, let’s think about this idea of particularism, that is, the atonement referring to a particular people. Because the whole Bible teaches this particularism, that God provides atonement for his chosen people. We see it in the Old Testament. You need to see that your understanding of these New Testament concepts will be very limited without a thorough grasp of the Old Testament theology. The revelation of God’s plan of redemption began in Genesis 3:15, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” We’re told from the start that Christ would be given a specific seed, and that he would crush the head of the serpent on their behalf, which comes to full fruition in Christ’s incarnate work. In the process, we’re told Christ’s heel would be bruised—it’s a reference to his work on the cross. We read in 1 John 3, verse 8, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” This is further confirmed, for example, in Colossians 2:15, “And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly triumphing over them in it.” In the whole history of the Old Testament, we’re told of this grand work, and the New Testament spells out the fulfillment in Christ.

In the Old Testament, God, out of the counsel of his own will, chose a particular people for himself, as distinguished from the rest of the world, and he provided salvation for them. For example, Deuteronomy 7, verses 6 to 8, says, “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all the people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” The whole sacrificial system which pointed to Jesus Christ, taught the same truth. This is an important point. The sacrifices, those pictures of atonement, were applied to a particular people, not to all men indiscriminately throughout the world. We could consider a host of other texts. For example, you’ll remember the pronouns used in Isaiah 53, which we pointed out at the beginning.

Well, we see the same in the New Testament. From the opening page, in Matthew 1, verse 21, “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.” We see the same thing taught in John 10, verse 15, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” We saw it throughout Christ’s High Priestly Prayer in John 17, that he makes repeated reference to those whom the Father had given him, and that he said in verse 9, “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.” Paul charges the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, verse 28, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Well, we could provide more texts, but this should suffice. The whole Old Testament and New Testament teach that Christ died and atoned for the sins of a particular chosen people.

Fourthly, this doctrine fits within the broader context of what the Bible teaches about man's total depravity, and his spiritual inability, as well as God's election, his sovereign choice of his people. The whole Bible fits together as a perfect and consistent whole. If you have not gone through the earlier modules on Systematic Theology, I would encourage you to go back and listen to the second module, specifically, lecture 10 on the Doctrine of Predestination, and in the third module, specifically on the Doctrine of Total Depravity. We can't review all of that material here, but it's extremely relevant to understanding the Extent of the Atonement. The point is that all of these doctrines are dovetailed together.

Fifthly, let me tie these threads together by laying out the Biblical doctrine as a whole. John Owen, seventeenth-century English Puritan and Reformed theologian, spells this out very clearly and concisely. Listen carefully, and try to follow along with what he says:

The Father imposed his wrath, and the Son underwent punishment, for either 1) all the sins of all men; 2) all the sins of some men; or 3) some of the sins of all men. In which case, it may be said, 1) that if the last be true, that Jesus died for some of the sins of all men, then all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved. Well, that cannot be true. Secondly, that if the second be true, Christ died for all the sins of some men, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the Biblical truth. But then thirdly, if the first case be true, that Christ died for all the sins of all men, then the question is, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins. He died for the sins of all, then they all should be saved. Well, some might answer, "Well, because of unbelief." Then we ask, Is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If yes, it is a sin, then Christ suffered the punishment due for it, or he did not. If he did not suffer the punishment for the sin of unbelief, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died? If he did not suffer the punishment for the sin of unbelief, he did not die for all their sins.

Well, you can see and appreciate the full force of Owen's argument, which proves that Christ died for all the sins of some men, all the sins of God's elect people. This includes their sin of unbelief. He thereby secured a complete and comprehensive salvation for his own people.

Well, thirdly, we turn to the polemical consideration of this doctrine of the Extent of the Atonement. In doing so, we'll deal with the error of Arminianism. First of all, the error of Arminianism teaches that Christ died for the sins of all men. If he truly atoned for the sins of all, then all should be saved. How could they perish if Christ paid the penalty for their sin? This does not comply with the teaching of Scripture.

Secondly, Arminians also do not understand the relationship of the Nature of the Atonement to its Extent. And so they assert that Christ died for the potential possibility of salvation of all men, if sinners respond with faith, and believe the gospel. But if Christ's atonement was only a possibility, then it was possible that none would believe and be saved, and therefore possible that Christ's atoning sacrifice would be a complete failure. This also contradicts the teaching of Scripture. The omnipotent God could not fail in his intentions. This false doctrine grants all the power to man, and strips God of his power.

But thirdly, it is even worse. Think of the implications of this error. Not only would the atonement possibly fail, it would most certainly fail, and none would be saved. Its success would depend on men having faith to believe, but the natural man is dead in trespasses and sins, and he's ignorant and blind. He's completely unable to believe. Faith must be given as a sovereign gift from God, as we see in Ephesians 2. As we heard a moment ago, Christ died for the sin of unbelief in his people, and purchased for them the gift of faith. This could only apply to his elect, whose salvation Christ himself secured.

Fourthly, can draw a few practical applications for ourselves. Let me illustrate the implications of this doctrine for Christian experience. Let's return to the illustration with which I opened at the beginning of the lecture about a young man seeking a wife. What would you think of a husband that told his wife that he loves her, but he also loves all of the other women in the world just as he loves her. You would be terribly offended, and rightly so. Well, this applies to Christ's atonement. When the Christian looks at the cross, he sees Christ's particular love for his bride, not a generic love for a nebulous, undefined mass of humanity. Christ carried his specific people on his heart, and in his mind, when he offered himself as a sacrifice for their particular sins, all of them. In love, he secured and guaranteed their salvation. Well this is a great aid to the assurance of God's love. Christ was securing the atonement for my sins, in love. This is not a cold doctrine. These truths warm the heart of every believer.

Secondly, this doctrine shows us that the good news of salvation is all of grace, from beginning to end, and top to bottom. God takes the initiative. He provides everything. He guarantees the whole of our salvation. Christ's atonement is perfect and complete. The gospel is God giving to us what we do not deserve and could not obtain ourselves. And since all comes from God, all the glory must go to God. We are led to magnify and bless his glorious name for the abundant riches of grace found in the gospel. There is no God like our God and like our Savior.

Well, in conclusion, in the earlier lectures, we focused our attention on the doctrines related to Christ's person, as the incarnate Word, the God-man, in two distinct natures in one person forever. Over these last three lectures, we have considered the doctrine of the Atonement, its Necessity, its Nature, and its Extent, all pertaining to the work of the Mediator. In the next and final lecture, we will conclude our study of Christology with a consideration of the Preeminence of Jesus Christ.