

Sufficient for all but efficient for the elect only?

Written by Josh Winslett

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The phrase "sufficient for all but efficient for the elect only" is passed around in many christian circles as a bridge between those who believe in a universal atonement and those who believe in a particular atonement. Usually this phrase is meant to qualify Christ's sacrifice as being, in quality, of such a great infinite value and worth, that it is sufficient to potentially atone for all of humanity, but it is only actually and efficiently applied to the elect. Is this statement correct? Is Christ's sacrifice potential AND actual, or is it only potential OR only actual? I contend that the atonement was only actual, and, that it was sufficient and efficient for only those to whom it was intended, God's chosen people. In this brief article, we will discuss the problems with this contradictory statement and the real meaning of the atonement.

Was Christ a Potential Savior or Actual Savior?

As Primitive Baptists, we believe that Christ is an actual Savior and not just a potential savior. In other words, we believe that Christ did literally and victoriously save His people from their sins by, in essence, taking their sins upon Him. This view of atonement is called "*Penal Substitutionary*

Atonement." Penal substitutionary atonement states that Christ was literally punished (penal) and suffered the wrath of God for us and in our place (substitute), therefore satisfying God's wrath by His sacrifice (atonement). If God literal and actually saved his people, then how could he possibly be a potential savior? The view of atonement that proposes a potential savior is called "Governmental Atonement." Governmental atonement, as taught by Arminians, states that Christ was not literally punished for our sins to satisfy the wrath of God, but instead, God publicly manifested God's displeasure of sin by punishing His Son, and without any punishment for the exact sins committed, He extends forgiveness to those who will repent. The Government view does say that God cannot just pardon sin without any punishment, but it denies that God actually punished Christ for the exact sins committed. Governmental atonement views Christ's sacrifice as a substitution FOR punishment while penal substitutionary atonement views Christ as a sacrifice that was the substitute to take our punishment. The governmental view ignores the fact that God's wrath, which was manifested in the law, had to be satisfied for sinners to be saved. This is seen wonderfully in

Psalms 85:10

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Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

” God does not just give us mercy at the expense of his divine justice. God does not just forgive sins. God’s law has been broken and therefore God’s law must be satisfied. Me

rcy and reconc

iliation is only given to us through Jesus Christ who was sent as a propitiation for our sins. Only in Christ can mercy, truth, righteousness, and peace exist. If we believe that Christ is an actual Savior and did satisfy Gods wrath, why then would there be any need of a potential savior or potential salvation? God did, in fact, save His people from their sins (

Matthew 1:21

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When limited atonement is usually defined and defended, most Christians usually ask the following questions, “*but doesn’t God love the whole world and didn’t Christ die for all of humanity?*” These are fair but misinformed questions.

For Whom did Christ Die?

Limited atonement, also called particular redemption and definite atonement, is the Bible teaching that Christ died for a certain specific people only (his elect) and not for all men in general. I want to add that all Christians, with the exclusion of universalists, believe in some form of limited atonement. Some believe it is limited to those who hear and accept the gospel by their own free will and volition, while others maintain that it is limited to those that God sovereignly chose unto salvation before the foundation of the world. I affirm the latter. Nonetheless, the phrase 'sufficient for all but efficient for the elect only' contradicts the foundation of the doctrine of limited atonement.

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The 17th century theologian, John Owen, says it this way, “*God imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent the pains of hell for, either: All the sins of all men. All the sins of some men, or Some sins of all men.*” In

other words, you either have to believe in universalism, predestination, or a works based salvation. There truly is no middle ground, therefore, the phrase “*sufficient for all but efficient for the elect only*

” is self-contradictory, because if the atonement is only efficient for the elect then it is insufficient for the non-elect for want of efficiency. Therefore, naturally, it is incorrect.

The bible constantly affirms that God only gave His life for the sheep and that He did, in fact, victoriously save His people from their sins (**Matthew 1:21, John 10:11,15**). Christ Himself declared that He will not lose ANY that the Father had given Him. There is no potential savior for all of humanity, but an actual Savior for God's beloved elect. This is not to say that we do not view the atonement as having great value and worth, certainly Christ's sacrifice is of the greatest worth that time and eternity has to offer, but it is only applied to those for whom this great sacrifice was made. So, with the biblical understanding of for whom Christ died, we can conclude that it would be contradictory for anyone to say that the atonement was sufficient for more than those that it was intended to be efficient.

What about verses like John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4?

Both texts, as well as such like, must be read in context of the text and of the whole bible. Does God love all of humanity? **Romans 9:11** says that He doesn't love all of humanity. **John 17:9** even states that Jesus would not pray for the whole world but only those that the Father had given Him. The word “world” in the scriptures means more than just all of humanity. John, who was a Jew writing to Jews, was using the term world in John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2 to show that Christ has children even in the gentile nations. Compare this thought with

John 11: 51-52

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“A

nd this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one

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the children of God that were scattered abroad.

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1 Timothy 2:4

must likewise be rightly divided. We have already seen that God does not love all of humanity and that Christ only came to save His sheep.

1 Timothy 2:4

refers to not all men without exception but it refers to all sorts of men without distinction. John Gill writes, “

therefore all sorts of men, agreeably to the use of the phrase in 1Ti 2:1 are here intended, kings and peasants, rich and poor, bond and free, male and female, young and old, greater and lesser sinners; and therefore all are to be prayed for, even all sorts of men, because God will have all men, or all sorts of men, saved; and particularly the Gentiles may be designed, who are sometimes called the world, the whole world, and every creature; whom God would have saved, as well as the Jews, and therefore Heathens, and Heathen magistrates, were to be prayed for as well as Jewish ones.

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Dual personality, schizophrenic God?

Before the foundation of the world, the three-in-one God-head made a covenant to save sinners. The Father chose sinners to save and the Spirit sovereignly regenerates, in time, those same sinners that the Father chose. God is said to love the elect and hate the non-elect (**Romans 9:11-13**

). Why then would Christ's sacrifice be sufficient for those whom God hates? Furthermore, why would Christ's sacrifice be sufficient for those two whom the Spirit would never regenerate? This would make God the Son working against the will of the other two persons within the God-head. If this were the case, then we would have a God that has a dual contradictory personality. God forbid! Those who God chose and the Spirit regenerates are also those for whom the Son died. Consistency, thou art a jewel.

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In conclusion, the phrase "*sufficient for all but efficient for the elect only*" seems incompatible with sound biblical doctrine because it denies and contradicts, 1) the Bible; 2) Penal Substitutionary Atonement; 3) Limited Atonement; and 4) the consistency within the God-head. The atonement is sufficient and efficient for all those to whom it was intended, God's chosen people and God's chosen people only.