



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 6.7.2.6 – The Doctrine of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah (Christology)

Universal Atonement and Universal Justification

Two other Bible terms are used to express the results of Christ's work as our High Priest: atonement and justification.

Atonement can be defined as the establishing of peace between God and mankind. In order to remember its meaning, we can break it apart as at-one-ment, that is, getting to be at one with God again. It is about the same as reconciliation, bringing two parties together. In the Old Testament it was the blood of the sacrificial animal that brought about atonement, symbolically, between God and the people. **"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul"** (Leviticus 17:11). For this reason, the Israelites were forbidden to eat blood. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the coming of the Messiah would mean the true and final ending of the hostility between God and His people, bringing this good news from God: **"Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins"** (Isaiah 40:2). The bloody sacrifice of the Messiah would bring about atonement, reconciliation, and the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus expressed the idea of atonement by pronouncing peace to His followers. **"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid"** (John 14:27). So also on Easter Sunday evening Jesus greeted His disciples with this word: **"Peace be with you... Peace to you! ...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them"** (John 20:19, 21, 23). Since Jesus had died for the sin of the world and had risen again, the Good News of peace and forgiveness was now to be proclaimed in the world.

The apostle Paul emphasized that there was atonement and peace, not just for the Israelites, but for the Gentiles as well. There was peace with God for all mankind, won by the priestly work of the Messiah. **"Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (the Gentiles) have been brought near by the blood of Christ"** (Ephesians 2:13). Christ's atoning sacrifice not only brought a peace between God and man, but between Jew and Gentile. **"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both (Jew and Gentile) one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, ... so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near"** (Ephesians 2:14-17).

We must emphasize the fact that Christ's priestly work is for all mankind and is an atonement for every kind of sin, so that every sinful human being living in every part of the world may take comfort in what Christ has done. Listen to the missionary Paul as he addresses an audience made up of mostly Jews (but also some Gentiles) in Antioch in Pisidia: **"Let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39). That every sin has been atoned for is taught clearly by Paul's words: **"Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more"** (Romans 5:20). Christ's work is complete; it is finished. All sins of all sinners have been atoned for.

There is no Bible passage that stresses this point more clearly than these words that Paul addressed to the Christians in Corinth: **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation”** (2 Corinthians 5:19). Since Christ has atoned for all the sins of all people, the whole world has been reconciled to God. This means that God does not impute or count the sins and trespasses of the world against the world. The reason for this is very plain, as Paul continues: **“He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”** (2 Corinthians 5:21). The apostle John therefore says: **“If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7).

Because of what Christ has done as our High Priest, the Good News (the Gospel) can go out to all the world: There is forgiveness of sins for all sinners and all sins in Jesus Christ, because **“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world”** (1 John 2:2). Now that Christ has reconciled the whole world to Himself, He has given us who believe in Him a **“ministry of reconciliation”** to announce **“the word of reconciliation,”** that is, the Good News that there is forgiveness for all sins of all persons in Jesus Christ. We proclaim the message of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Listen carefully to Paul’s complete presentation of this matter: **“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”** (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

The Gospel that we proclaim as Christians is based on historical facts. It is based on events that took place in space and time: Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. If these things did not happen, there is no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no atonement, no justification, no resurrection from the dead, no eternal life. The apostle Paul teaches us the blessings of Christ’s priestly work by proposing what would be true if Jesus had not risen from the dead: **“If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable”** (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).

But since Christ has suffered and died for our sins and has risen again, the opposite of the above paragraph is true. That is, our preaching is not empty and our faith is not empty. Our message is true: there is forgiveness for all in Jesus; we have something firm to believe. The apostles of Christ were not false witnesses but faithful eyewitnesses; they had been with and seen the risen Christ. Our faith is not futile. We are not still in our sins, but our sins have been paid for in full; they are gone. Those who have died as believers in Christ have not perished, but will rise from the dead on the Last Day to be with their Lord forever. We are not the most pitiable of men, but we are the most blessed, because we have forgiveness in Jesus. We have been reconciled to God by the death of His Son.

Christ and His apostles do not want anyone to feel left out of the salvation Christ won for them by His work as our High Priest, so the fact that everyone is included is stressed in many places in the Bible. Jesus said: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (John 3:16). And Jesus said: **“The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”** (Luke 19:10). Surely all of us are lost sinners. Paul tells us: **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:23-24). **“As through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life”** (Romans 5:18). **“If One died for all, then all died”** (2

Corinthians 5:14). **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”** (1 Timothy 1:15). **“The Man Christ Jesus...gave Himself a ransom for all”** (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

When the word “many” is used instead of “all,” it does not mean “many, but not all,” rather it is a contrast between “many” and “few.” Jesus said, for example: **“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:28). In instituting the Lord’s Supper, Jesus said: **“This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”** (Matthew 26:28). **“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous”** (Romans 5:19). It is especially clear in this last passage that “many” means “all”, because *all* were made sinners by Adam’s disobedience and *all* were justified, as previous verse clearly states.

What about those who lived and died before Christ died and rose again? Did Christ’s work apply also to them? Yes! Jesus’ work certainly included Abraham, for He said to the Jews: **“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”** (John 8:56). The apostle Peter testified at the Jerusalem convention: **“Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they”** (Acts 15:10-11). The apostle Paul pointed out that God had forgiven the Old Testament sinners because of Jesus’ sacrifice: **“God set forth [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed”** (Romans 3:24-25). The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that Old Testament sinners are included in Jesus’ work: **“He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance”** (Hebrews 9:15). The transgressions under the first covenant were redeemed by Jesus’ death and resurrection, and so the Old Testament believers received the promise of the eternal inheritance because of Jesus sacrifice.

When God’s Word tells us that Christ died for all, it means every individual sinner: **“Jesus ... was made a little lower than the angels ... that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone”** (Hebrews 2:9). This even includes the many who, because of their unbelief, will not benefit from what Christ has done for them. Peter writes: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring destructive heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them”** (2 Peter 2:1). Even though these false teachers denied Jesus, they were still bought by Jesus’ blood.

Christ and His apostles also make it clear that since Jesus, as our High Priest, has atoned for all sinners in the world, there is no need to add to His priestly work. Jesus said: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”** (John 14:6). Peter testified: **“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”** (Acts 4:12). The letter to the Hebrews repeats over and over again that Jesus had to bring His sacrifice only once, and that His one single sacrifice gained remission of sins for all. **“Where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin”** (Hebrews 10:18). No other sacrifice is needed. We need no other Savior. Christ’s work of atoning for the sin of the world as our High Priest is complete and needs no supplement.

On the basis of the Bible passages we have quoted above, it is certainly proper for us to speak of universal atonement and universal justification. Many passages say that Jesus has atoned for the sins of the world and that He has justified all. But there are many false teachers in Christendom who deny that Jesus atoned for all sinners. The followers of John Calvin, Calvinists, for example, believe in and teach what they call a *limited atonement*. They claim that Jesus did not atone for all sinners, but only for those who were chosen by God from eternity to come to saving faith in Christ. In other words, they claim that Jesus sacrificed Himself only for those who remain believers in Christ to their dying day. Calvinists cannot believe that Jesus died for sinners who reject Him in unbelief. But the Bible is clear that Jesus died for all persons, including even those who reject Him. The message these false teachers

proclaim is no longer the Good News of the Gospel. Instead of proclaiming forgiveness of sins to all because of Christ's work of atoning for all, they have to wrongly say: "Jesus died for you if you believe in Him. Jesus died for some of you, but not for all of you. There are some of you whom God did not want to save; Jesus did not die for you." This kind of message is not the true Gospel of Jesus Christ! God's word is clear: Jesus took away the sins of the whole world and, by His obedience, justified all.

There are also many false teachers, even among Lutherans, who accept universal atonement but do not accept universal justification. But the Bible clearly teaches universal justification in such passages as Romans 3:23-24, Romans 5:18-19, and 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. In all of these passages the Bible clearly says that all are justified, or declared righteous, on the basis of Christ's redemption of the world. It is true, however, that many reject the forgiveness and justification they have from Jesus, and thus lose these gifts. Justification and forgiveness can be received only by faith.

It is important that we do not preach God's message of forgiveness as though there were conditions that we have to fulfill before it becomes true. For example, we should not say to someone: "If you do this or that good thing, then you will be forgiven." We should not even say to someone: "If you believe, you will be forgiven." Rather our message is this: "Because Jesus has died for all, He has died for you, and therefore there is forgiveness for you. You have been declared righteous and forgiven before God, because Christ's sacrifice has paid for all your sins." One of our Lutheran teachers has said it this way: "Sinners are not justified now *if* they believe, but if they have true faith, they believe that they *have been justified* in Christ (objective justification). There is no gospel (good news!) for the sinner but this" (John Schaller: *Biblical Christology*, p. 181). So, the Gospel needs to be proclaimed as a true blessing, without *any* conditions – without any ifs, ands, or buts, as we say. It is *unconditioned* good news. Not even faith is a condition or term we need to meet; faith is only the receiving organ, that is, the way by which we receive the benefit. In Christ we all have universal atonement and universal justification!

Questions

1. What is meant by atonement?
2. What was necessary for atonement in the Old Testament ritual?
3. Why was Jesus' first word to His disciples on Easter evening so fitting?
4. What two kinds of peace did Jesus establish by His death and resurrection?
5. How do we know that Jesus atoned for all sins of all sinners?
6. Which persons have been reconciled to God through Christ's redemption?
7. What is meant by the ministry and word of reconciliation?
8. What would be true if Jesus had not risen from the dead?
9. What evidence is there that all sinners have been justified?
10. What is the only way this justification can be received?
11. Why is the doctrine of limited atonement a false teaching?
12. What do John Calvin and his followers teach about atonement?