

The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: Atonement vs. Innocence

By [Tom Elkin](#)

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I hope y'all realize that we don't have many people here tonight because everybody is home watching the President. Oh now don't laugh at that — don't laugh at that. It's one of the few times that I have had to directly compete with him and I am doing that right now. He is giving his address as we talk right now, to the best of my knowledge. The natural man and Reformed theology; we are talking about atonement tonight. Atonement versus what the world would like to think of, perhaps, as innocence. I am going to be giving you some thoughts and as I always say, if you don't agree with me, that's alright, but I want you to think about this because I do think we are being influenced significantly by what is taking place in the world today. One statement by one author, Spencer says, "the most difficult of the five points of Calvinism because of the Christian community (this one is Limited Atonement), has been so emotionally conditioned by false practices rising out of false doctrine, related to raising up missionaries and collecting funds for the same. People don't know what to do with the limited design of the atonement.

Now, this church is used to hearing atonement words. We'll talk more about it in just a little bit. But we are used to a minister from the pulpit and layman from the pulpit talking about the precious blood of Christ. That our sins are covered by his blood. We hear that kind of verbiage. We are thankful, Lord, for your sacrifice — we hear that. I guess I just want you to understand that that isn't common in every church. Hearing that verbiage is fairly unusual in today's world. If you go on vacation, go to the biggest church in town and hear what they preach about. Don't go to a PCA church—go to another church and just hear what is going on out there and see what is happening and see what you can pick up on — what's happening. Now, even in the Christian faith, where there is disagreement about this whole thing called, "Limited Atonement" — historically, that has been part of Calvinism, the Reformed Faith, and I really am as normal as I've been doing, I'm not going to debate and try to prove the limited atonement to y'all, but I am going to try to state it just a little bit and give a little bit of Scriptural reference for it. But having done that, I then want to say what that doctrine does to most people in the world today. Keep our little graph in mind. The atheists and agnostics over here — 10% of our society, 5% of these other religions, 85% say some affiliation to Christianity; perhaps 1% being Reformed over here. But this big population in here is heavily influenced by Arminian theology. Heavily influenced. But we are

over here. What struggle do these folks have with us? That's what we are trying to look at and trying to understand, a little bit.

Limited design of the atonement, what Morton Smith told me to say, God designed it to be limited and any event is rather critical. Now the point I am going to make is, most people in the world today, don't like the whole word "atonement" whether it is limited or not. They don't like the concept of the atonement. It's offensive. We'll come back to that. The atonement, Burns Brown — you may not have heard that name, but my time in California, I got to know him a little bit, he quoted one time to say, "the atonement is the center of gravity in Christian life and thought because it is the center of gravity in the New Testament. The concept of Christ paying the penalty for sin. The word atonement is only used one time in the New Testament — Romans 5:11. As a matter of fact, if you use the ESV, you don't have it translated "atonement," you have another word in there, "reconciled." But that's what the word is — it means "reconciled." The Hebrew word means, "to cover" — the sacrifice covers, the covering of the offense so that the one who was hurt doesn't see the offense and it has been paid for, hence it's come to mean sort of "forgiveness" or "reconciliation," hence the translation. Now, our sins are covered, we talk about, by the blood of Christ. That's our theology. That's what we believe.

Some of you have heard the name, B.B. Warfield. I hope you have. He's an old Presbyterian worthy, back when Princeton was a bit of a different place. He once asked a sort of a semi-rhetorical question. His question was, "what is man's fundamental need"? Is it deliverance from ignorance? Or misery? Or sin? Now, you know the answer. The fundamental need of human beings is deliverance from sin. Now as I'm saying this, our President is talking about a fundamental right to have deliverance from misery—better health care. Oh, hallelujah! Love to have better health care. That's not the issue. How we get it is the debatable thing. But he's talking about deliverance from misery. Bush and no child left behind was talking about deliverance from ignorance. But you don't hear much talk except in this little right wing over here (my left, your right) about deliverance from sin. And I'll illustrate that a bit more in just a minute. Now historically, the church fathers down through the years, have talked about the atonement in different ways, about it as a "ransom being paid." So we have been ransomed from sin. Augustine comes along and talks about it as satisfaction of God's justice. So those two concepts pretty much dominated thinking in the church. Ransom, satisfaction of justice — that's sort of been it.

I love Martin Luther. By the way, if we could bring Calvin and Luther down into the world today, I think Luther would be a good old Southern boy because he would tell it just like it was in his words, his way. May I give you a quote from Luther? He's talking about Christ right now. He's talking about Christ.

"The righteous and innocent man (Christ) must tremble and fear as a poor, damned sinner, and in his gentle, innocent heart, feel God's wrath and judgment

against sin, taste for us, eternal death and damnation, and in some, suffer all what a damned sinner has earned and suffer eternally.”

That's sort of telling it like it is, isn't it? That's Luther. Now this is Calvin:

“Christ took upon himself and suffered the punishment which by the righteous judgment of God, impended over all sinners and by this expiation, the Father has been satisfied and His wrath appeased.”

That sort of sounds like a seminary professor, doesn't it? The other one sounds like the camp meeting preacher. But both of them are saying pretty much the same thing. Christ had to suffer, bleed, die, for sin to be taken care of and removed. That means that sin is a very, very important issue. It is not passé. Now, we are forgiven, yes we are. We are covered in the blood of Christ. Now, Reformation history and boy, I am making quantum leaps here, okay, so forgive me, okay? The sort of liberal movement came in. You've heard of the name, Schleiermacher? He said, basically, that Jesus redeemed the members of this community by arousing within them a “God-consciousness” which is the counterpart of his own. Now what does that mean? I don't know. But Christ became more of our model. Then we get down — and I am making quantum leaps here again — to Karl Barth. You've probably heard that name one time or another. Barth says that the conversion of us all to God, the realization of the true humanity — that's what the incarnation is all about. Well, in talking you've got this process of taking it and not being a historical thing necessarily, but having it be a spiritual — he opens the door for universalism. And you know, it's possible that we just all are saved.

I repeat to you one of my personal experiences while a student at Columbia Theological Seminary. There was no RTS, there was no Covenant. We went to the best we could find. We went to Columbia — all of the Belhaven boys. And a guy named Harry Beverly, professor of homiletics, preached a sermon in chapel in which he said, “Christ died and in-so-doing, opened the jail cell so that all may walk out. Your task as a preacher is to tell them that the door is open, walk out.” Is that what we preach? No, I think we preach something more than that. We preach a personal relationship, we preach a personal salvation, we preach a God who indwells, we preach a God who hates sin, and sin has to be satisfied.

Okay, ransomed, satisfaction, all the way from that concept of the ancient fathers to Universalism — the atonement — oh, it's stretched out there, isn't it? We have all of these different options. And then the question of the limited design of the atonement. And this is the dividing line between the Arminianists and the Calvinists and we are not even going to into that — did Christ die for all men equally and alike or do we state that Christ died for the elect only? I have to repeat myself and say that the thing that I learned and believed — Christ's death was sufficient for the salvation of the world, but his death was efficient for the salvation of the elect. That's the old way of saying it. Okay, now just some

scripture, okay? And this is the verse that causes, perhaps, confusion to people about the atonement and universalism, etc.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.” You know John 3:16, don't you? Well, he died for the world, didn't he? Well, the slight problem is that the Pharisees used that same word, “world,” when they said, “Behold, the world is gone after him” in John 12:19. Well, hmm. So the Arminian says that the world is those that God really looks forward and is going to receive him and so he made them elect and so Christ died for them. The Calvinist says “no” — it's a Sovereign act of God, pure grace, unmerited, total depravity, unconditional election, and that atonement is for those, his people. Now, right now — I'm not trying to debate that. I'm just trying to give you some Scripture here.

“If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him, also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?” Ahh...different verses.

John 10 is a chapter that you can read if you want to get some of the flow of this limited atonement. Reading verses from John 10, verse 14 — “I am the good shepherd and know my sheep and am known of mine.” Verse 15, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” Verse 26, “You believe not because you are not of my sheep as I said unto you.” Verse 27, “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.” Verse 29, “My father, which gave them me, is greater than all.” There are other passages, but that's sort of sums up that whole question here. Now, having said that, the natural man.

He doesn't necessarily believe that there needs to be an atonement at all. As a matter of fact, the atonement, with its emphasis on blood, death, sacrifice, satisfaction, is offensive to many people. The concept of the limited atonement is primarily talked about at meetings that PCA-type preachers go to. You don't find many articles in the newspaper about limited atonement. You just don't hear that. And frankly, I don't think you gonna...in my lifetime anyway. As a matter of fact, to hold to the five points of Calvinism, is to be held up almost for ridicule in today's world.

Now, I want to do something that you may think is weird. I want to give you a parallel. The atonement is the way that something bad is taken care of. Christ died to cover that sin. The closest parallel that we have in our society is the question of capital punishment. What do we do when someone does something so bad that society says they have lost the right to live. That “sin” — the word we use - that “offense” (word others might use), has to be punished or satisfied by the killing or the shedding of blood of that person. It is a parallel to the theology position of the atonement. Now, bear with me here. The ACLU, I'm reading some statements that they have made, now, against the death penalty.

Statement Number One: "Capitol punishment is cruel and unusual. It is a relic of the earliest days of penology, when slavery, branding, and other corporal punishments were common place. Like those other barbaric practices, executions have no place in a civilized society."

Now, indulge me. Let me take execution, capital punishment out, and let's put atonement in. The atonement is cruel and unusual. It is a relic of the earliest days of theology, when slavery, branding, and other corporal punishments were common place. Like those other barbaric practices, the concept of atonement for sin, has no place in a civilized society. I think that fits. We don't talk about sin much in our world today. You're blessed to be in a church where sin is talked about, but I'm telling you, Joel Osteen has made the statement that he doesn't talk about sin. He talks about things that will comfort people and sin doesn't. Now, the next statement the ACLU says:

"Opposition to the death part of penalty, does not arise from misplaced sympathy for convicted murderers. On the contrary, murder demonstrates a lack of respect for human life. For this very reason, murder is abhorrent and any policy of state-authorized killings is immoral."

Now, let's do our little substitution. Opposition to the atonement does not arise from misplaced sympathy of convicted sinners. On the contrary, sinning demonstrates a lack of respect for human life. For this very reason, sinning is abhorrent. Any policy of state-authorized killing, any theology which teaches there must be atonement for sin, is immoral. Now whether you agree me if it fits or not, it's interesting, isn't it? There is a little parallel going on here. Capitol punishment involves due process of law. It's imposition is arbitrary and irrevocable. It forever deprives the individual of benefits of new evidence, of a new law that might warrant the reversal of a conviction, or the setting aside of a death sentence. Now let's put a word in there. The atonement, denies due process of law. It's imposition is arbitrary and irrevocable. It forever deprives an individual of benefits of new evidence or new law that might warrant the reversal of a conviction or the setting aside of hell.

For instance, you do realize that our laws have changed significantly in areas such as abortion. There were times when people would have been put into prison for performing an abortion. For homosexuality. It was perceived as a sin against God. A violation of the Sabbath. Where have all the blue laws gone? Oh, I grew up with the blue laws. I am familiar with them. Some of y'all don't know what that's about. But us old folk do know. The Bible in public places. The Bible in public places was a common understanding. That whole concept of right and wrong — well, it's no longer against the law. The law has changed, but you see, if you believe in the concept of the atonement, that Christ had to die to cover your sins, well what have we redefined sins? Then we don't have to worry about hell, do we? As a matter of fact, if we redefine sin, we don't have to worry about hell. And if we are all going to go to Heaven, voila! We've got it! We can do what we

wish and not have to worry about that. We've had a lot of funerals this week. I've never been to a funeral where I've heard the preacher or the person presiding get up and say, "Well, old Joe is in hell now." Well, he lived his life. This is what he wanted, so he is there. I wish we could hear from him so that we could tell him what it's like. We don't say that. The place where universalism is most fervently believed, tends to be at the funeral service. We don't talk about hell. We don't talk about sin. Okay. I'm about through with this section, okay.

Execution gives society the unmistakable message that human life no longer deserves respect when it is useful to take it and that homicide is legitimate when being justified by pragmatic concerns. Wait a minute, human life no longer deserves respect. Human life, then, is the primary question — no, it's not. The primary question is God's glory, adherence to His Word — they take precedent over human life. The Christians who walked into the arena to be eaten by the lions could have stood up and said, "Wait a minute, this is a violation of human life — but they didn't. They walked into the arena, by and large, singing hymns, glorifying God, in the midst of the loss of life. I've got more of these, but I'm gonna — well, let's look at one little statement. "A decent and humane society does not deliberately kill human beings." Well, God does. If you mean by "killing," the sending to hell. You've got to think about that, got to think about that. If there is no life after death, then these arguments gain some clout. However, humans are all sinners, all deserving death, but they who accept Christ have his blood as a covering for their sin.

Now, there's another book that I happened to read once upon a time, by a guy named Hugo Bedau — *Major Points Against the Death Penalty* — he says, "it is unfair to kill somebody. Constitutional due process as well as elementary justice requires that the judicial functions of trial and sentencing be conducted with fundamental fairness." And he says, "that's not a fair thing to do." Well, if capital punishment is unfair, why is ultimate punishment then, not fair? Well, I think that ultimate punishment is fair. It is God's definition of what is going to happen. Inevitability of error. If you take someone's life, if you believe in the death penalty, then sooner or later, you are going to make a mistake and the wrong guy is going to be executed. But what if you believe in the Sovereignty of God? What if you believe that his honor and glory is what life is all about? It's not about how long I live and my quality of life. Some of the most meaningful lives ever lived have been cut very, very short. The greatest lives are not necessarily the ones who live the longest. It's not how long you live, it's how you live. He says it is barbarian to believe in this process of the death penalty. Well, I can understand that. Is hell barbaric, then? If you read the passages about fire and brimstone, I can understand that. Is hell barbaric, then? If you read the passages about fire and brimstone and a burning lake of fire and you read about all of that—it's fairly barbaric. But that's what God says is going to happen to the person who doesn't claim the blood of Christ. Now, if you believe that there's a God — He has given us His word, there is a Heaven, there is a hell, there is such a thing as sin, there is such a thing as election, and there is such a thing as atonement. Well, that

makes sense, doesn't it. But if you believe that man is the highest level of development of an organism on this earth, that individuals can choose — there is no such thing as arbitrary Truth, if you believe that now is all that we have, so live for now, if all are responsible then none are responsible, if you believe we are evolving, if you believe the rights of all, and that we are basically innocent people, then we have a problem here.

Marquis de Lafayette (1830) made this statement, "I shall ask for the abolition of the punishment of death until I have the infallibility of human judgment demonstrated to me." Well, I can understand what he is saying. Human beings are fallible. We make mistakes. But God doesn't. God rules and overrules. Supreme Court Justice, Arthur Goldberg wrote, "The deliberate, institutionalized taking of human life by the state is the greatest conceivable degradation to the dignity of the human personality." That's sort of interesting, isn't it? I agree with him, if you let me change one word — the deliberate institutionalized taking of human life...no...the greatest degradation to the human personality is sin. Sin is. Not the taking of human life.

There's another little statement written by a professor of human life at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill — Jeffery Sayer McCord. He quotes a gentleman named Hart, "The justification for punishing is that the return for suffering of moral evil voluntarily done, is itself just or morally good." And then he makes the comment about statement, "if this is the argument that one might have of course questioned the claim, that those who commit the crimes have ip-so-facto done something evil. Or the claim that those who do something evil deserve to suffer. Or the claim that those who deserve to suffer because they have done something evil, are rightly made to suffer by the state. He goes on to say, "making people suffer because of their immoral acts is not legitimately within the state's purview." Whoa. I've got to think about that, don't you? I have to consider what's being said there. I don't think I agree with him. 1962 it was reported to the Council of Europe the facts clearly show that the death penalty is regarded in Europe as something of an anachronism. Today, 28 European countries have abolished the death penalty either by law or in practice. Great Britain, it was abolished in 1971 with one exception, *treason*. Isn't that interesting?! You could do all sorts of things to people, but if you do something to the state, they will kill you! I think I find that interesting. France abolished it in 1981. Canada in 1976. Very, very interesting. The death penalty. It is not to be looked at.

Now the church — I've got to read this one to you. I don't mean to pick on anybody, but the group within the church that sort of has taken the lead against the death penalty, and I happen to believe against the atonement, too. Episcopalians — a bishop out in Oklahoma — name is Robert Moody, has asked the parishes to ring their church bells at 6:00 p.m. on days when prisoners are executed in the state of Oklahoma. It's his way of complaining about what they are doing. Then he quoted, "I recognized that Christian men and women differ on this issue, however, as your bishop, I ask you to prayerfully address this issue

anew. For me, I have concluded that capital punishment contributes nothing that betters our society and I cannot imagine our Lord condoning capital punishment. Well, can he imagine our Lord condoning hell? I don't know. Reactions: The modern world basically does not like the whole concept of atonement. Blood, sacrifice, sin. You don't hear those kinds of words when you get outside of the confines of certain churches. So that's just not a popular thing. The debate is in part because human sin has been minimized also into non-existence. By the way, capital punishment is a very personal thing. You see the picture of the individual to be executed. You know who he is. You can read about his history. It's interesting, then, that abortion is a very impersonal thing. You don't really have that name of that baby. You don't really identify it. It doesn't have a history that you can identify it with. So it's okay to kill that baby. But it's not okay to kill that person that you can have a personal relationship with. That's just a side note.

Atonement became a barbarian concept when blood is required for sin. Human dignity and rights are seen as violated if atonement is looked at all. Now, atonement for sin, which requires a blood sacrifice is perceived by many to be unfair and barbaric and is not warranted by human behavior. Hence, mainstream Christianity. Old school, mainstream, major denomination churches are losing members right and left and one reason they are is, as the country music says, and by the way, Derek's not here—I was going to educate him about Johnny Cash since he mentioned him in church Sunday night. He was a very devout Christian man. And Willy Nelson once said about Johnny Cash, “The Lord may have saved his soul, but he sure didn't help his music career any.” Well, He did help his career ultimately. He really did. So I've got to educate Derek on that one. But back to the deal here.

Atonement for sin, which requires a blood sacrifice is unfair and barbaric, so some people say, especially these old line churches that are main-stream, that don't hold or believe in an atonement theory, like we do. Okay. But, may I read you just two verses?

Hebrews 9:22b — “And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin.”

Galatians 1:3 and 5, “Our Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen.”

The atonement is very important. I told you last time, in terms of today's world, the concept of election — that's a “no, no.” The atonement is down from it. The fact that God arbitrarily choosing some and not choosing others is not fair. But the fact that he wants to cover sin with blood is barbaric. And to be hidden in antiquity. Not to the Christian. Not to the Bible-believing Christian. Not to the Christian who wishes to live a life to honor God in Jesus Christ, who wishes to be

saved by the blood of Christ. Not to the Christian who wants to be God's person. Now, as we live in the world today, you are going to find that if you try to talk about certain things, it won't be very attractive. People won't really come in. But, if you want to do a series on suffering and depression, people will want to come to that. If you will just preach to me about how I can feel better, I will come. But if you are going to tell me about blood and sacrifice and requirements, I don't want that. So, our modern man hears this little sliver of people over here talking about this stuff and says, "I think I will go to that Joel Osteen Sunday morning service in my house." I think Joel Osteen has reached many people for the Lord, by the way. God uses people like that. I really believe that He does. I am saying that point blank. But our task is to be as close to Scripture and as close to what God wants for us as we possibly can.

Let's pray...

Heavenly Father, this is not easy. It's not easy to think about. It's not easy to get an illustration that makes the point. It's hard to do it, as a matter of fact. I pray though, that each person here, will desire to honor you and to serve you and will want to think through not because I've said it, but Lord if it's Your will, if it's Your Word, if it's Your way, then we want it. I pray that in Your graciousness and goodness, you will be with each person here, and that you will allow us to think your thoughts, to study Your Word, to think theologically, to be people who wish to study God, who wish to know You and Your way. Encourage us, we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

Let's stand.

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, rest and abide up in you, both now and forever more.

Singing of the Doxology.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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