Limited Atonement in 1 John 2:2
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Abstract

Atonement, the theological issue dealing with the precise nature of Christ’s work, is a central doctrine to the Christian faith and yet it is one which historically has not always achieved consensus among theologians. This problem becomes more complicated when we entertain the possibility that different biblical authors may have had competing understandings even within the New Testament canon. This project explores what might happen if we were to entertain the possibility that different biblical authors may have had competing understandings even within the New Testament canon. Specifically, this project argues for the limited atonement doctrine in the Gospel of John, more specifically looking at 1 John 2:2.

Rudolf Bultmann and Atonement in the Gospel

“...He argues that for John, the plight of human beings is alienation from God and existence in unbelief, darkness, and ignorance of God. Humanity does not need an appeasing sacrifice but a revealer, light, and the knowledge of God. Jesus provides for these needs, not through the cross but through a ministry ranging from incarnation to glorification... The one ‘work’ Jesus has come to do is to reveal... The Johannine sin, according to Bultmann, is ignorance; the Johannine salvation is revelation of the knowledge of God.”

The Gospel clearly has a heavy election doctrine where God accomplishes salvation for only some. Hence, we have at least some kind of limited atonement. But, as Bultmann says, the Gospel’s kind of atonement is revelatory rather than penal substitutionary, and so sin equals unbelief and is atoned through Jesus revealing truth to be believed. A revelatory atonement as Bultmann lays out does not help the non-elect, for it only makes things worse for them. Therefore, we might say that the Gospel has specifically a strict limited atonement in which Christ’s work has no positive effect whatsoever for the non-elect.

The Text – 1 John 2:2

2 and (Jesus Christ) is the ἱλασμός (hilasmos) for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.  

NIV: hilasmos = “atonement sacrifice”

My translation:

2 and-Jesus-Cristos-is-the-means-by-which-our-sins-are-rendered-ineffective-making-God’s-wrath-appeased-[ἵλασμος]; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Kind of Atonement

Sin

Jesus’ Atoning Work

Result

Benefit to the Non-elect?

Revelatory

unbelief

revelation of God’s truth so that the elect will believe

infused righteousness [literal]; no longer sinful, thus right with God

no; the exposure to revelation only solidifies their unbelief [strict]

Penal Substitutionary

tangible wrongdoings

substitutionary receiving of God’s wrath to pay for sins and thus appease Him

imputed righteousness (figurative); still sinful, but still right with God

possibly; Jesus work may have purchased non-salvific ‘common grace’ for them (non-strict)

God

Propitiates (appeases, placates)

Same Process

Jesus

Expiates (forgiven, cleanses)

This red arrow is the ἱλασμός (hilasmos):
An expiation; a God-provided means of rendering sin ineffective

Reasons Why ἱλασμός May Be Revelatory

1) ἱλασμός is not explicitly about death in 1 John, but instead refers to the “ascended” Jesus and the “send-into-world/whole incarnation” Jesus

2) There are multiple descriptions of how Jesus fixes sin in 1 John: “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin,” “He appeared in order to take away sins,” and “[He] appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”

3) There is a connection in the reference to blood between 1 John 1:7 and John 6. This connection parallels believing with drinking, with both acting to “give life.”

Conclusion

Definitively, both the Gospel of John and 1 John have some sort of limited atonement in that God accomplishes the salvation of some; but, more specifically, the Gospel has a strict limited atonement which has no positive effect for the non-elect at all due to Bultmann’s insight concerning the revelatory atonement. I have attempted to show how 1 John may be in alignment with this more strict understanding of the extent of the atonement found in the Gospel. This involved showing how the verse which most hold up as the kingpin of unlimited atonement could actually be understood as supporting a strict limited atonement. In light of mostly exegetical/textual understanding, as well as some important input from studies in Johannine community history, I believe I have made at least a plausible case for 1 John 2:2 to be read this way.

Bibliography


Buchsel, Werner. The Community of the Beloved Disciple: Studies in Johannine Community History, with both acting to “give life.”


