

Did Christ Die for all Men or Only His elect?

John Hendryx

<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/jhendryx03.html>

The following is a written response to a brother with the following question about limited atonement (that Christ died only for the elect):

Could you please clarify the extent of the atonement, limited versus unlimited? Isn't limited atonement wrong and doesn't the Bible plainly teach unlimited atonement (that Christ died for the sins of all people in the world)?

This is a very good question and has remained an issue between believers through many centuries.

Many people popularly call themselves "four-point" Calvinists because they find the idea of a limited atonement loathsome, or believe somehow that the Bible does not teach it. What is meant by a four-point Calvinist? It is generally understood to mean that an individual claims to believe in *total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace* and *perseverance of the saints* but not limited atonement (dropping the "L" in limited atonement) in TULIP (TU-IP). What is interesting about this, however, is that everyone involved actually believes in a limited atonement since we can all agree that Christ did not actually redeem everyone who ever lived. There will be some who end up in the lake of fire according to both positions. The question, therefore, is not whether there is a "limit" to the extent of the atonement, but rather, what is the nature of the limit and who limits it? Is it limited by God's choice and design or by free human choices? Did God, from eternity, sovereignly determine to whom He would apply the benefits of the atonement, or did God leave it to man's will? This is why I generally like to call my position "particular redemption" rather than limited atonement since both sides ultimately limit the application of the atonement.

If you ask one of these brothers or sisters, "*for whom did Christ die?*" they will generally answer something like this: "the Bible plainly teaches that Christ's death and His work of redemption was not only sufficient for the entire world, but that He actually died for the sins of all the world." They will back their position with this verse from 1 John 2:2 - "*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*" ...as well as John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (And leave it there as if this settles the argument).

Unfortunately this view leaves an island of righteousness in man to be able to believe the Gospel without the aid of the regenerating grace, which Christ purchased on the cross. It follows that those who hold to a general atonement believe *the one sin for which Christ did not die is rejection of His person and work* (they will cite John 3:18,36). *[Some readers have claimed that I am setting up a straw man here but this is actually the position (word for word) currently being taught by such institutions as Dallas Theological Seminary. Anyone wishing to take issue with me here I have evidence of this and will gladly provide it upon request.]* So if, as they claim, that Christ did not die for our unbelief, then who did?

What many are, in fact, teaching is that Christ *did not* die for **ALL THE SINS** of the whole world, since they have excluded the sin of unbelief. In other words they claim that Christ died for our breaking of the 2nd through 10th commandments in the decalogue but not the first commandment. So, the obvious question to answer here is "who, then, dies for our sin of unbelief?" Do we atone for it ourselves? Does God overlook our former unbelief because the sincerity of our newly found faith makes up for our previous unbelief? Does the atonement for sins of unbelief kick in only after we unlock the door by "accepting Jesus into our hearts?" It is my contention that Christ died for all our sins including the sin of unbelief. If you agree with me yet believe in a universal atonement then why are there still people in hell? If all men's unbelief has been paid for then then all sin has been forgiven - there is nothing left to forgive and we would then have universalism. But 1 John 3:23 teaches "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ." To disobey this command is a sin, and the greatest sin of all I might add. A question to ask yourself is did Christ pay for this sin or not?

It is not quite apparent to me why the text of John 3:16 should be an argument against limited atonement. The passage does not say Jesus died for everyone, but only that the Father gave his Son for **ALL THOSE WHO WOULD BELIEVE**. It says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES in HIM shall not perish but have eternal life." Right? Don't we all believe this? That is why the consistent biblical Calvinists, when presenting the gospel to unbelievers, simply teach that Christ died for "all who would believe", which is actually closer to the meaning of this text than the erroneous position that He died for all in a general kind of way, and yet for no individual in particular. Instead, we believe that the benefits of the atonement will apply only to who will be believers, so he did not die for any person who would remain steadfast in their unbelief. So I would argue that John 3:16 actually

supports the definite atonement position better than the indefinite position. They are reading into the text that Christ's death only potentially will save someone if they believe without the help and grace of the cross to do so. So in actuality, Christ died for no one in particular this scheme. His affection was only cast forth in a general impersonal kind of way rather than actually coming for His people who He set his affection on from eternity.

In fact, this teaching comes full circle and devastates all of the other doctrines of grace. Although claiming to believe in Total Depravity, the teaching of the so-called four-point Calvinists is really that man still has the moral ability to turn to God on his own without regenerating grace (a grace purchased on the cross) effectively destroying total depravity, even though the Bible plainly teaches that no one seeks God unless first born again (1 John 5:1; John 6:37, 39, 44, 63-65; Rom 3:11. 1 Cor 2:14, John 1:13; John 3). That is to say, natural fallen man has the ability and desire (in some cases) to believe in Christ without regenerating grace. It is teaching a "conditional" election since it depends completely on God's foreknowledge of whether or not we will have faith, even though the Bible plainly teaches that election is not conditioned on something God sees in us and that faith is a divine gift (Eph 2:5-8). So in effect WE end up choosing God with our autonomous free will in this scheme, not the other way around. Those who deny limited atonement are also surreptitiously semi-pelagian in all the other doctrines of grace as well. Salvation becomes the work of man, rather than a monergistic divine work of grace. Some may argue that God's grace works together with man, but the problem with this is that it still leaves the final decision for salvation in the hands of man. Faith, apart from Christ's work on the cross, precedes saving grace in this view, contrary to everything the Bible teaches (ROM 9:16; John 1:13). God's grace would take us part of the way to salvation leaving man's will to make the final decision. So, according to those who claim that the atonement is unlimited (indefinite) there is no divine election in the final analysis, but only humans electing God even though we all know that it is God that chooses us (John 15:16).

The biblical teaching is that God, before the foundation of the world in His eternal counsels, knew and determined to whom He would apply the benefits of the atonement? (2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:2; Eph 1:4,5)

"This is the will of Him who sent Me, *that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing*, but raise it up on the last day." John 6:39 (emphasis mine)

What does "*that of all He has given Me I lose nothing*" mean except that God, in His eternal councils had already determined who would be written in the book of life and that Jesus Christ came to earth in time to

carry out their eternal redemption. Is Jesus' purpose not in sync with God the Fathers' and God the Holy Spirits'? God the Father elects certain individuals and the Holy Spirit regenerates them. Does the Son have a different redemptive agenda? No, the three Persons of the Trinity are always consistent with one another. If you believe in election, which you do unless you have torn out almost every page of your Bible, then you must believe that that Christ came to redeem His elect, and the Holy Spirit applied the benefits of the atonement only on those the Father had "given" Christ. It means that He will infallibly bring His own into His eternal kingdom. I hear someone say "but that's not fair" ... does God owe you anything my friend? Is He your debtor? The only debt He owes you is His just wrath. His choosing of you is an act of His mercy, an act of His divine good pleasure (Eph 1:4,5).

Before we get to 1 John 2:2 lets familiarize ourselves with some other biblical texts on this crucial issue:

First Take a look at these passages of Scripture:

"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Revelation 5:9 (emphasis mine)

my comment: did Christ redeem everybody by His blood in this passage? the entire world or a limited number? Doesn't it say that He purchased men FROM every tribe???

"...and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." Heb 9:12

my comment: was everybody's redemption eternal? through His blood He obtained eternal redemption - for whom? all men? then why aren't they all saved? If all men's redemption is eternal then we must become universalists.

"...who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." Titus 2:14

My question: IN this passage did Christ redeem all men from iniquity or just some? the second half of the verse also narrows the redemption to a particular people, not all people.

v.5 "...But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.... v. 8 He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? v.11... By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. v.12 ...Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors." Isaiah 53:5,8,11-12

my comment: Are the sins of the whole world "healed" by Christ's scourging in this passage? If they are, then why isn't everyone saved? What meaning does healing have then if it is unlimited? Are the words "my people" referring to all mankind or the many whom He would justify that the Father had "given" Him? (see John 17:9) Since He "bore the sin of many" this certainly is not including the reprobate but a particular people purchased out of the world.

Now we come to the famous text that our "four-point" brothers put all their weight upon as teaching an unlimited atonement:

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." 1 John 2:2

At first glance I must admit that this appears to be a pretty good text to back up their argument but upon closer examination, it falls apart. The problem is that if the four-pointers read this verse the way they intend to then we must also conclude that the whole world's sins have already been atoned for (believers and unbelievers) and thus all will be saved (universalism). If Christ is a propitiation or atonement for all men's sins, paying for all sins ever committed, then why isn't everyone in the whole world saved???? So the verse actually proves to much. The verse simply means, (and there is no doubt this is what Paul meant), Christ did not die for every person without exception but every person without distinction. . All kinds of people everywhere, is what is meant. We see this elsewhere when the Scriptures say, Christ "purchased for God with [His] blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9). Many will argue that He didn't die for our unbelief, which I believe I thoroughly discredited in my argument above. John is speaking, rather, of sins for people *throughout the whole world*, not each and every person's sins. There are too many problems with saying that the text includes all men (believers and unbelievers) and, as I have shown, this leads to an unbiblical universalism. Saying Christ died for the sins of the whole world is similar in the use of language in many other passages in Scripture such as Mark 1:5 which says, "And all the country of Judea was going out to him,

and all the people of Jerusalem." If you think the "all in this passage means every single person without exception, you have missed the point, it means large numbers of people; all persons without distinction, but not all persons without exception.

Christ died for all of the sins of His elect, including their previous sin of unbelief. Belief in the Gospel does not make up for our previous sin of unbelief. Belief (faith) is the witness that God has already wrought grace in our hearts, the inevitable response to His work of regeneration in our souls. ([John 3:21](#)) Christ clearly came to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11) and some people are not his sheep: "...but you do not believe because you are not my sheep." (John 10:26) Jesus prayed for His own but he would not pray for those the Father had NOT given him: "I pray for them. *I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.*" Emphasis mine (John 17:9).

This teaching does have great practical value; specifically that our prayers for the lost will be effectual. As we go out to do missions, to reach the lost, we can have confidence that we go not in vain but that we carry with us the Word of God which has the power to raise the dead to life. We don't just go in the hope that maybe someone will be saved; or that Christ died for no one in particular. But rather that He died for a particular people to make them His own. If my hope was based solely on whether someone would respond to the Gospel message by their own free will then I would despair because no one would respond (ROM 3:11. 1 Cor 2:14)... but because God has an eternal plan, a bride he has chosen for His Son, I can rejoice in the knowledge that God's word proclaimed will effectually bring home those whom he delivers the inward call. (ROM 8:28-30)

Finally, remember that it is not a question of whether or not Christ's redemption was able to cleanse the sins of all men, as we know it clearly could have if this is what He so desired. The question is what does the Bible teach about the divine intent with regard to the atonement, which I hope this short paper has answered.

Soli Deo Gloria

John Hendryx

P.S. Historically many of the greatest minds the church has produced were 5 pointers, not four. Some of the more well known ones were Jonathan Edwards, C.H. Spurgeon, A.A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, John Owen, John Calvin, George Whitfield, Thomas Goodwin and more recently, J.I. Packer, R.C Sproul, John Piper, Iain Murray, Michael Horton, James Boice and John Murray

On the subject of Particular Redemption (Unlimited Atonement) also see:
2 Peter 2:1 and Universal Redemption (A MUST SEE)

Simon Escobedo III

<http://aomin.org/2PE21.html>

[The Nature of the Atonement Why and for Whom did Christ die?](#) 

Phil Johnson

[The Son of Man Came to Give His Life a Ransom for Many](#) 

John Piper

[To God be the Glory](#) 

Wayne Mack - A Popular Exposition of the Biblical Doctrine of
Particular Redemption

[For Whom Did Christ Die? \(2\)](#) 

C.H. Spurgeon

See also Lorraine Boettner at

<http://www.mbrem.com/calvinism/bchap12.htm>