

**Foundations of the Faith 103**  
**Systematic Theology**  
**“Christology”**  
***The Extent of Atonement***  
**Pt. 23**

**Introduction** - “While there is wide evangelical agreement on the origin, nature, and purpose of the Atonement, there is considerable difference on its extent: Strong Calvinists maintain limited atonement, while the rest insist that the Atonement is unlimited in its availability. That is, the former believe that Christ died only for the elect, and the latter contend that Christ died for the sins of all human beings.” -Norman Geisler

The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) in response to Jacob’s Arminius (1560-1609) developed what has come to be known as “T-U-L-I-P” and acrostic that stands for five fundamental beliefs.

1. Total Depravity
2. Unconditional Election
3. Limited Atonement
4. Irresistible Grace
  
5. Perseverance of the Saints

***Calvin: The Guilt of the Whole World Was Laid on Christ***

I approve of the ordinary reading, that he alone bore the punishment of many, because *on him was laid the guilt of the whole world*. It is evident from the other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that “many” sometimes denotes “all” (ibid., on Isa. 53:12).

John 3:16-17 - *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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the *world*, but to save the world through him.

The plain statement is that God loved the world, and the clear implication is that Christ was given to die for the world (cf. v. 14). What is more, verse 17 makes it evident that world here means the whole fallen world, for it is the same world that is under God’s condemnation.

John Owen offered an astoundingly blunt retranslation on behalf of limited atonement: “God so loved his elect throughout the world, that he gave his Son with this intention, that by him believers might be saved.” (DDDC, 214). For those who accept the clear meaning of the text, this needs only God’s own reminder: “*Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it.*” (Duet. 4:2; of Rev. 22:18-19).

6. John 12:47 - “I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.” In both cases, the world signifies the same fallen, sinful world that will be judged in “the last day” (v. 48).

As elsewhere, strong Calvinists claim that world is used in a limited sense, meaning “part of the world,” namely, the elect. They point to John 12:19 as an illustration: “The Pharisees said to one another, ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!’” Nonetheless, this comparison fails.

For one thing, world in John 12:19 (Gk. *kosmos*) is used geographically, not generically.

For another, these are not the words of Jesus but of His opponents.

Furthermore, the words of the brothers of Jesus in John 7:4 are obviously hyperbole, and even extreme Calvinists admit this is not true of John 12:47, where it is Jesus' statement that does refer to the whole fallen world.

7. Romans 5:5 - Paul writes, "Christ died for the ungodly," and in verse 10 he adds, "When we were God's *enemies*, we *were reconciled* to him through the death of his Son." Both the elect and the non-elect, or Christ did not die for all His ungodly enemies. Further, if Paul meant to teach that Christ died only for the elect, he could easily have said so and thus avoided any potential misunderstanding.

8. Romans 5:18-19 - Paul's contrast of Adam and Christ reveals that the Atonement is both unlimited in its extent and *limited in its application*. That is all are savable but only those who believe will be saved. Paul twice uses the word justification to describe what Christ provided for all human beings.

9. II Corinthians 5:14-19

10. I Tim. 2:3-4 - "*God our Savior ... wants all men to be saved* and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Even Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), who believed in limited atonement, found it difficult to deny the clear meaning of 1 Timothy 2:3-4. Nonetheless, this text has been widely misconstrued by extreme Calvinists attempts to avoid the obvious:

[Here is how] our older Calvinistic friends deal with this text. "All men," say they - "that is, some men": as if the Holy Ghost could not have said "some men" if he had meant that. The Holy Ghost by the apostle has written "all men," and unquestionably he means "all men" ("CT" as cited by Iain Murray, SHC, 150).

Spurgeon added, I was reading just now the exposition of a very able doctor who explains the text so as to explain it away: he applies grammatical gun-powder to it, and explodes it by way of expounding it. I thought when I read his expositions that it would have been a very capital comment upon the text if it had read, "Who will not have all men to be saved, nor come to a knowledge of the truth" (in *ibid.*, 151).

Of course, the problem is that this is what the text *should* say if limited atonement were true - *but it does not*. Spurgeon was aware of his apparent inconsistency here, saying "I do not know that squares with this," and adding, "I would sooner a hundred times over appear to be inconsistent with myself than be inconsistent with the word of God."

11. I Tim. 2:6

12. I Tim. 4:10

13. Hebrews 2:9 - "We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God *he might taste death for everyone*." It is plain from this that Christ died for everyone, not only the elect. Responses to this conclusion follow the same line as those just discussed; it will suffice to add here only a few words about the context. First of all, it is a generic use of everyone (humanity), as is indicated not only by the contrast of humans to angels (2:7) but also by the reference to human "flesh and blood" (i.e. infleshed human nature - vs. 4). Also, since the result of death (and resurrection) of Christ destroys death and defeats the devil (vs. 14), it must have reference to all of Adam's race; otherwise, Christ would not have been victorious in reversing what Satan did. His victory would not have been complete, and therefore, God could not have been propitiated (satisfied) with His offering - but He is (2:17; cf. Rom. 3:25; 1 John 4:10).

14. II Peter 2:1

15. II Peter 3:9

16. I John 2:2 - The doctrine of limited atonement claims that all for who Christ died will be saved. However, the above passages and many others reveal, in contrast to limited atonement, that Christ did die for all and not all will be saved.

### **Theological Considerations**

- **Universal Gospel Preaching** - Unlimited advocated claim that in order for one to preach the Gospel to all, Christ had to die for all. It does seem to make more sense to say that unlimited redemption is more compatible with universal Gospel preaching. However, it must be recognized that believing in limited atonement does not necessarily dampen one's evangelistic efforts. Some great evangelists, like Spurgeon, held to limited atonement. And some who hold to unlimited atonement fail in their responsibility to witness.
- **The Value of Christ's Death** - Is some of the value of Christ's death lost if all for whom He died are not actually saved? The limited person says yes; therefore, he concludes, Christ only died for the elect. But if God designed that there be value in a universal sacrifice in that it made the whole world savable, in addition to the saving value for those who do believe, then all the value is realized though in different ways.
- **Do the Nonelect Have Their Sins Paid for Twice?** - Some limited advocates argue that if Christ died for all, then the sins of the nonelect were paid for at the cross by the death of Christ, and will be paid for again at the judgement by the condemnation of the nonelect to the lake of fire. So in effect their sins are paid for twice? When the Passover Lamb was killed, his sins were covered. But if he did not put the blood on the door, he died. Was this a second payment for his sins? Of course not. The first and sufficient payment was simply not applied to that particular house. Death after failure to apply the blood was just retribution for not appropriating the sufficient sacrifice. The Atonement of Christ paid for the sins of the whole world, but the individual must appropriate that payment through faith. The world was reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19), but those reconciled people need to be reconciled to God (vs. 20).

### **Conclusion**

The biblical, theological, and historical bases for the universal (unlimited) extent of the Atonement are solid. With one notable and explainable exception (the later Augustine), there is no significant voice in the whole history of the church up to the Reformers that defended limited atonement. Indeed, the Bible is emphatic that God loved the world and that Christ died for the same. The theological arguments springing from God's omnibenevolence are powerfully in favor of unlimited atonement - that Christ died for the sins of all human beings. Any denial of this truth arbitrarily limits God's love to only some and is based on an indefensible form of voluntarism.