

# Calvinism: Limited Atonement

Calvinism's definition of Limited Atonement: Christ's atonement on the cross was not for everyone, but only for those "elected" or chosen by God to be saved from before the foundation of the world (Unconditional Election). Christ did not die to atone for the sins of those He did not "elect" to be saved.

Limited Atonement is the most controversial of the five points of Calvinism, and the one that many Calvinists don't follow, which is why many people state they are "four point" Calvinists. Limited Atonement is the one point of TULIP that the 4-pointers stumble on.

R.C. Sproul was a full five point Calvinist. In this quote from his book, he criticizes four point Calvinists: *"My point is that there is confusion about what the doctrine of limited atonement actually teaches. However, **I think that if a person really understands the other four points and is thinking at all clearly, he must believe in limited atonement because of what Martin Luther called a resistless logic.** Still, there are people who live in a happy inconsistency. I believe it's possible for a person to believe four points without believing the fifth, although I don't think it's possible to do it consistently or logically. However, it is certainly a possibility given our proclivity for inconsistency."* [Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2007), 140-142.

Interestingly, Sproul does not quote any Scripture references to back up his belief in Limited Atonement, but instead relies on the "logic" of Martin Luther.

If a person was stuck on a desert island with nothing but a Bible, you would never get to Calvinism on your own. You'd have to have a Calvinist swim to shore and re-interpret everything for you in order to get to a Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible.

John 3:16: **"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.**

- Calvin's interpretation of this verse is that because God hates sin, he can only love those whom He justifies (i.e. the elect)
- Thus, "the world" and "everyone" in this verse cannot be universal, because in Calvinism God doesn't love the "non-elect" (although the Bible never says that)

- A.W. Pink in his book "The Sovereignty of God" interprets John 3:16 as follows: "The fact is that the love of God is a truth for saints only...In like manner, the 'world' in John 3:16 must, in the final analysis, refer to the world of God's people."

John 1:29: The next day he \*saw Jesus coming to him, and \*said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of **theworld!**"

- John MacArthur says that in this context, "world" has the connotation of humanity in general, not specifically every person
- "the world" cannot refer to everyone universally because according to Calvinism, Jesus didn't die for everyone...He only died for those He "pre-selected" to come to know Him.

### **Limited Atonement is an Attack on God's Character**

Num 14:18: 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in mercy, forgiving wrongdoing and violation of *His Law*; but He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, inflicting the punishment of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth *generations*.'

Ps 103:8: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in mercy.

1 John 4:8: The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

- How does the idea of Limited Atonement comport (agree) with God's character as outlined in these verses?

### **Proof-Texts Used by Calvinism in Favor of Limited Atonement**

Below are the primary Limited Atonement "proof texts" that Calvinists point to in order to argue for the doctrine of Limited Atonement. All of these verses mention God's love for a particular group or God's work with a particular group. Calvinists take these verses as statements of exclusivity when none of these verses use the words "only" or "alone."

For example, if you have two kids and you tell kid A that you love them, it doesn't mean that you don't also love kid B. You didn't say I "only" love you, you just said "I love you" while speaking with that particular child.

Same holds true for these proof text verses that Calvinism uses for Limited Atonement.

God doesn't use any words to denote exclusivity of His love or His works, He's just dealing with or speaking to a particular group.

Matt 20:28: **just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."**

- Calvinists take "for many" to mean that Jesus didn't die for everyone, only for "many." However, there is no exclusivity to the "many"

John 10:15: **just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.**

- This verse doesn't say that Jesus laid down His life for "only" the sheep. In no way does this verse prohibit Jesus from laying down His life for the "goats" as well.

Acts 20:28: Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.**

- In the process of Jesus' purchase of the Church with His blood, He also purchased the world
  - Nothing in this verse limits Jesus' purchase to only the Church. Of course He purchased the Church, but He also purchased the world.

Eph 5:25: Husbands, love your wives, just as **Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,**

- Same thing...Christ gave Himself up for the Church, but not exclusively. He also gave Himself up for the world.

If the biblical writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wanted to communicate Limited Atonement to us, it would be a very easy thing to do. All they would have had to do was include the small Greek word for "only" or "alone" (*mona*) in any of these passages. But they didn't, ever, not even once.

In contrast to the few, non-exclusive verses used by Calvinism to argue in favor of Limited Atonement, there are dozens of passages that point to the Unlimited Atonement provided by Christ's death on the cross:

John 3:16-17:

**16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.**

**17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.**

- "...the world" - *cosmos*, used 240x in the Bible and never, not once, does it refer to "the elect"

- If you interpret *cosmos* (used 4x in these two verses) as referring only to the elect, these are the only four uses of that word in the entire Bible
- If Calvinism wants to shrink the scope of *cosmos* to include only a select group of people, you have to be consistent about it...

John 15:18-19:

**18** "If **the world** hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you.

**19** If you were of **the world**, **the world** would love you as its own; but because you are not of **the world**, but I chose you out of **the world**, because of this **the world** hates you.

- "...the world" - *cosmos*, if you have a limited/specific interpretation of *cosmos* in John 3:16-17, then I need to also have a limited/specific interpretation of *cosmos* in John 15:18-19...
- Using the Calvinist definition of *cosmos* (from John 3:16-17), I would need to interpret John 15:18-19 as follows...
  - 18 If **the elect** hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.
  - 19 If you were of **the elect**, **the elect** would love you as its own; but because you are not of **the elect**, but I chose you out of **the elect**, because of this **the elect** hates you.

Calvinists point to John 12:19 to demonstrate that "the world" (*cosmos*) can sometimes refer to a smaller group:

John 12:19: So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not accomplishing anything; look, **the world** has gone after Him!"

- "...the world" - *cosmos*, Calvinists will say, Look, *cosmos* sometimes has a limited meaning. It's obvious that the entire world did not start following Jesus.
  - This is true...in this verse, *cosmos* doesn't refer to everyone who ever lived or everyone alive on the earth, but is limited to a small minority of people in Israel at the time.
  - However, there is context in this verse that supports a limited interpretation of *cosmos*/world. It's not just interpreted that way to fit a particular theological belief.
- The Pharisees, first off, are using a figure of speech called "exaggeration" out of their frustration with what is going on. Secondly, they are clearly referring to the overwhelming outpouring of praise and worship toward Jesus by those in attendance at the Triumphal Entry.
- A Calvinist will say, See, *cosmos* has a limited audience in John 12:19, so it also have a limited context in John 3:16-17. However, there is context to support a limited meaning in John 12:29, but no context to support a limited meaning in John 3:16-17.

The way Calvinism takes cosmos in John 12:19 and applies it to John 3:16 is a logical fallacy called an "illegitimate totality transfer." An illegitimate totality transfer is the unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field. In English, this is when you take the meaning of a word in one context and interpret it the same exact way in another, unrelated context.

For example, if I use the word "apple" it could mean multiple different things...I could be referring to the fruit, a computer company, New York City (the "big apple"), or your pupil ("apple of my eye"). If I say that I'm going to eat an apple for breakfast, by the context you automatically do not think I'm going to eat my laptop. You know I'm talking about the fruit from my context.

Same goes with Bible interpretation...if someone makes a point then gives you a long list of verses, don't be impressed and automatically believe what they say. You need to look at the context of each of the verses to determine if they are proving their point, or if they are taken out of context (through illegitimate totality transfer) and used to argue a specific theological point.

Here's a simple example with the verb "run":

I **ran** out of ingredients for the salad, so I decided to make a quick **run** down to the store. While at the store, I left the car engine **running** while I made my purchase, thinking that I would be right out again. However, while I was in the store, I **ran** into my good friend Edward who was **running** for county supervisor. This resulted in my having to endure an long-winded **rundown** on how his campaign was **running**. Finally, fearing that my car would **run** out of gas, I **ran** with great haste out to the parking lot and returned home with the car surely **running** only on fumes.

### **Biblical support for *Unlimited Atonement*:**

John 1:29: The next day he \*saw Jesus coming to him, and \*said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of **theworld**!

John 3:16-17:

**16** "For God so loved **the world**, that He gave His only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

**17** For God did not send the Son into **the world** to judge **the world**, but so that **the world** might be saved through Him.

John 4:42: and they were saying to the woman, "*It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One truly is the Savior of **the world**.*"

John 6:51: I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats from this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I will give for the life of **the world** also is My flesh."

John 12:32: And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw **all people** to Myself."

John 12:47: If **anyone** hears My teachings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save **the world**.

John 15:18-19:

**18** "If **the world** hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you.

**19** If you were of **the world**, **the world** would love *you as its own*; but because you are not of **the world**, but I chose you out of **the world**, because of this **the world** hates you.

Acts 17:30: So having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now proclaiming to **mankind** that **all people everywhere** are to repent,

2 Cor 5:19: namely, that God was in Christ reconciling **the world** to Himself, not counting their wrongdoings against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

1 Tim 2:4: who wants **all people** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Tim 2:6: who gave Himself as **aransom for all**, the testimony *given* at the proper time.

1 Tim 4:10: For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of **all mankind, especially of believers**.

Titus 2:11: For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to **all people**,

Heb 2:9: But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of His suffering death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for **everyone**.

2 Peter 2:1: But false prophets also appeared among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even **denying the Master who bought them**, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

1 John 2:2: and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and **not for ours only**, but also **for the sins of the whole world**. (Cf. 1 John 5:19)

1 John 4:14: We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *to be* the Savior of **theworld**.

Rev 5:9: And they \*sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the scroll and to break its seals; for You were slaughtered, and **You purchased people for God with Your blood from every tribe, language, people, and nation**. (Cf. Rev 13:7)

Pay special attention to the following verses: 1 Tim 4:10; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:2. Calvinism has no answer for how these verses clearly state that Jesus' atonement for sin on the cross includes both believers and non-believers.

1 Tim 4:10: For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of **all mankind, especially of believers**.

- "...all mankind, especially of believers" - Paul here clearly includes everyone (all people universally), and he clarifies that he is including believers and non-believers by the phrase "especially of believers"

2 Peter 2:1: But false prophets also appeared among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even **denying the Master who bought them**, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

- "...denying the Master who bought them" - clearly Peter here is referring to non-believers, specially talking about unsaved false prophets. Jesus' atonement on the cross was for them as well.

1 John 2:2: and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and **not for ours only**, but also **for the sins of the whole world**. (Cf. 1 John 5:19)

- "...not for ours only" - John here, referring to believers, clarifies that Jesus' atonement was not just for believers
- "...for the sins of the whole world" - clearly talking about unbelievers because he already categorized that Christ was the propitiation for the sins of believers ("ours only")

While all of the "doctrines of grace" (the 5-points of Calvinism) are easily debunked by proper Bible interpretation, Limited Atonement is by far the easiest. And there are dozens of verses that directly contradict the Calvinist argument in favor. And the topper, Jesus never preached anything like "I am going to die for some of you, and the rest of you only

came into the world so My Father could be glorified in sending you to Hell." But that is the god of Calvinism.