



# Bible & Life

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### For Whom Did Christ Die?

By David Dunlap

Since the time of the Reformation, Calvinist leaders have argued for the teaching called "Limited Atonement." This doctrine, simply put, teaches that the death of Christ did not atone for the sins of all men, but only the sins of the elect. This Calvinist does not dispute that the power of the death of Christ is infinite and is sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, but is not applied all men. Limited atonement, representing the "L" in the "TULIP" acrostic, is one of the most debated points of Calvinism. Many who would count themselves as thorough Calvinists in other points, reject this point of doctrine, and they refer to themselves as "four-point Calvinists." This teaching is considered by leading proponents to be the weakest major tenet of Reformed theology.

For whom did Christ die? For the elect only or for all men? We read in the Scriptures that: He died for all (1 Tim 2:6); He died for every man (Heb. 2:9); He died for the whole world (John 3:16); He died for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2); He died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:8); He died for false teachers (2 Peter 2:1); He died for many (Matt. 20:28); He died for Israel (John 11:50-51); He died for the Church (Eph. 5:25); and He died for "me" (Gal. 2:20).

The general tenor of Scripture is that Christ's death is for all men, but there are three texts which warrant special attention. The first text is: "And He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1John 2:2). There are three reasons why the term "the whole world" must refer to the world of all mankind. First, because the word "world" refers to all men, unless the context indicates that it should be restricted. Second, because "our" and "world" are contrasted, the former referring to Christians and the latter to all men. Third, because the expression "the whole world" is also used in 1 John 5:19, "the whole world lieth in the evil one", to denote unsaved persons. Thus, it is reasonable that the expression "the whole world" should refer to Christ's death for all men.

The second text is: "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). In light of the context and the use of the word "world" by John, it is clear that the phrase "sin of the world" refers to all fallen human beings. The straightforward and normal use of the word "world" should and must be the meaning here. It cannot mean anything less, since there are no restrictive words linked to the phrase. Clearly, the world of all fallen human beings is in view here.

Finally, the third text is: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor, that He,

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*"Based on  
1 John 2:2,  
Christ's  
atoning work  
has made it  
possible for  
anyone in the  
world to be  
saved, but each  
sinner must  
personally  
accept Christ  
as his  
Redeemer."*

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**D. E. Hiebert**  
(1910-1995)

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by the grace of God, should taste death for every man” (Heb. 2:9). This verse clearly suggests that the penal substitutionary death of Christ made provision for the sins of every man. The phrase “should taste death” must certainly refer to the awful experience of Christ bearing God’s righteous wrath against sin on the cross. There, because of the love of God for all men, our Savior profoundly experienced being stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted (Isa. 53:4) for every man.

### **Limits the Love of God**

This leads us to another serious problem within Calvinist theology, that is, the love of God for the whole world. It may sound strange to hear that there are Christians who do not believe that God loves the whole world; nevertheless, it is true of Calvinist theology. If Christ, as we have attempted to show, by His death made provision for the lost, it must also be true that Christ loves those who are lost. If God loves all people equally, then the atonement must extend to all people. The two go together: an infinite love and an infinite atonement, an all-inclusive love and an all-inclusive atonement, an unlimited love and an unlimited atonement. We may certainly be justified in such reasoning, but what does the Bible say? The Bible makes it clear that those whom God loves are also those for whom Christ died. Paul tells us in Romans, “But God commends His love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). In another place John the apostle writes, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The love of God to man is linked with the death of Christ for man. Of course, this is a dilemma for the Calvinist. For he well knows that those whom God loves are also those for whom Christ died. If God’s love for the world is unlimited, then Christ’s atonement for the world is also unlimited. Since the Calvinist rejects the doctrine of unlimited atonement, it must follow that he also denies God’s love for the whole world. Edwin Palmer, author of the book *The Five Points of Calvinism*, explains:

*God does not love all people with the same love...Since the objects of the Father’s love are particular, definite, and limited, so are the objects of Christ’s death. Because God has loved certain ones and not all, because He has sovereignly and immutably determined that these particular ones will be saved, He sent His Son to die for them, to save them, and not all the world. <sup>1</sup>*

However, what does the Bible say? Whom does God love? God certainly has a special love for the Church (Eph. 5:25). No one would deny that wonderful truth. But does God just love the elect; or does God love those who are not elect, the lost and ungodly? The Bible teaches that:

1. God loves the world (John 3:16)
2. God loves the selfish (Rich young ruler - Mark 10:21)
3. God loves the ungodly (Rom. 5:6)
4. God loves those who love not God (1 John 4:10)

Is not the Word of God abundantly clear? God’s love extends to the whole world, and therefore, the atonement provided by the death of Christ extends to the whole world. These two complementary truths are set forth so beautifully in

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*“...What do you understand by the word ‘suffered’? — That all the time Christ lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race...”*

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**Heidelberg  
Catechism  
(1563)**

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John's gospel, "For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). This is one of the most beautiful and yet difficult verses for the Calvinist.

### **Limits the Preaching of the Gospel**

Our theological convictions will lead to practical, and oftentimes unfortunate, consequences. The Calvinistic view of limited atonement is a vivid example. In the area of evangelism, the Calvinist believes that it is improper and wrong to tell an unbeliever that Christ died for him. Why is this so? The Calvinist reasons that since Christ's death is limited to the elect alone, the riches of God's redemptive grace must extend only to the elect. In fact, the Calvinist believes that it is not even permissible to say to the unbeliever that God loves him, because God only loves the elect. Nor can we say that God's offer of salvation is extended to the unbeliever, because it is only extended to the elect, and no one knows absolutely who is one of the elect. Will this affect our gospel efforts? Undoubtedly. Will it make the presentation of the gospel more difficult? Of course. However, this is a difficulty that the Calvinist is more than willing to risk. Calvinist author Edwin Palmer explains:

*Some reason that if an evangelist cannot say to his audience, "Christ died for you," his effectiveness in winning souls will be measurably hurt. The answer to such reasoning is that, if there has to be a choice, it is better to tell the truth and not to win so many converts than to win many by a falsehood. The end does not justify the means. If the Bible says that Christ died for the elect, then an evangelist may not play God by stating that he knows everyone in his audience is elect and, therefore, that Christ died for them. He does not know it and should not state it.<sup>2</sup>*

We find this same reasoning in the arena of Christian counseling. Calvinist leaders teach those who give spiritual care that they must not tell an unbeliever that Christ died for him. Popular Christian counselor Dr. Jay Adams explains:

*As a Reformed Christian, the writer believes that counselors must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ Himself who are His elect for whom He died.<sup>3</sup>*

Explaining to the unbeliever that Christ died for him has never been a problem to the many non-Calvinist evangelists. In fact, this evangelistic practice is used effectively every day in leading many to Christ. One can hardly imagine how the gospel can even be presented at all, if Christians cannot tell unbelievers that the death of Christ and His full and glorious salvation is for them. The Calvinist undoubtedly will reply that he earnestly tells unbelievers that they are sinners, that they must repent of their sins, and that they must believe the gospel. But the Calvinist omits an all-important detail; that is, he cannot tell the unsaved the reason why they should believe: because Christ died for them.

The writers of Scripture also do not seem to be aware of this difficulty in the preaching of the gospel to the unsaved. The apostle Paul writes, "For when we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). To Timothy he writes, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). Certainly, it is permissible to tell all people that Christ died for them and that the Lord "is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

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*"It is a great mistake to speak as though Christ Jesus endured so much suffering for so much sin, and therefore, that atonement was made only for the sins of the elect. I do not find anything in Scripture that would suggest the term "Limited Atonement."*

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**Harry Ironside**  
(1876-1951)

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### Conclusion

The Scriptures clearly teach that Christ died for all men and that all men can and must respond to the gospel. This is the very heart and substance of the gospel and Christian doctrine. The truth of unlimited atonement is not new; it has been the historic doctrine of the church. It is supported by learned and godly men from the earliest days of the church, but more importantly, it is supported by the Scriptures. This has led more than a few Calvinists to concede that this doctrine of *unlimited* atonement is indeed the doctrine of the Scriptures. The moderate Calvinist theologian, Dr. Millard Erickson, in *Christian Theology* writes:

*We find that some of the verses which teach a universal atonement simply cannot be ignored. Among the most impressive is 1 Timothy 4:10, which affirms that the living God "is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe." Among the other texts which argue for the universality of Christ's saving work, which cannot be ignored, are 1 John 2:2 and Isaiah 53:6. In addition, we must consider statements like 2 Peter 2:1, which affirms that some for whom Christ died do perish.<sup>4</sup>*

The Calvinist is hard pressed to deny this truth, and yet he must; otherwise, his theology is severely weakened. If Christ loves all men and died for all, but on the other hand, elects only some to salvation, then the logic of Calvinism is threatened. However, the teaching of Scripture could not be more clear: Christ died for all.

### Endnotes

1. Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), p. 44
2. Edwin Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), p. 53
3. Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), p. 70
4. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology, vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), p. 835

—A 10-page examination of Limited Atonement is available upon request. To receive this article in PDF format please send your request to: [bibleandlife@gmail.com](mailto:bibleandlife@gmail.com)