

Limited Atonement?

Also called "particular redemption," it's a bit more controversial. Some say Calvin clearly taught this, while others say it wasn't clear, and that "limited atonement" is a more defined doctrine that developed by the 17th century. Did his theology "paved the way," as some say. They say it's not clear where he landed. People disagree because Calvin wasn't always consistent. Let's consider his commentaries.

Calvin's Commentary on 1 John 2:2

"'And not for ours only' He added this for the sake of amplifying, in order that the faithful might be assured that the expiation made by Christ, extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel. Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretense extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity, have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the schools. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word all or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world."

(There's debate over whether the following contradicts or agrees with his 1 John 2:2 commentary. Those who see no contradiction argue that "whole world" in Romans 5:18 is understood in the same restricted sense Calvin explicitly gives it in 1 John 2:2.)

Calvin's Commentary on Romans 5:18

"He makes this favor (justification - SB) common to all, because it is propounded (presented or offered) to all, and not because it is in reality extended to all; for though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God's benignity (kindness or goodness - SB) indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive him. "

Calvin's Commentary on Isaiah 53:12

*"I have followed the ordinary interpretation, that 'he bore the sin of many,' though we might without impropriety consider the Hebrew word *rvym* (rabbim,) to denote 'Great and Noble.' And thus the contrast would be more complete, that Christ, while 'he was ranked among transgressors,' became surety for every one of the most excellent of the earth, and suffered in the room of those who hold the highest rank in the world. I leave this to the judgment of my readers. Yet 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 other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that 'many' sometimes denotes 'all.'"*

John 10:11, 14-16 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

- We're told these sheep must be the chosen ones since not all sheep are saved. Perhaps you could compare this to the sheep and goats in Matthew 25.

- Rebuttal:

- The context speaks of Jesus' role as shepherd over these poor sheep harassed by the wolves (leaders). It contrasts their treatment of the sheep vs. His treatment of them. This parallels how the man born blind was treated. These leaders will not listen to Jesus' voice, but His sheep will. The Calvinist is inserting way too much into the text. Presuppositions.

John 17:2, 6, 9, 19 . . . since you have given Him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. . . . I have manifested Your name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world. Yours they were, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word . . . I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours . . . And for their sake I consecrate Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

- We're told Jesus is only praying for the elect. If Jesus gives them life, then His death was for them alone.

- Rebuttal:

- Just because Jesus prays for a select group in a specific prayer at a unique moment doesn't mean He doesn't care about others outside that group. Actually, He does pray for others who would come to believe through their word in vs. 20-21. Can Jesus do that? Jesus also taught us to pray for our enemies. Does He have to pray for enemies of the cross in every plea to God? More importantly, where does this passage say His death was limited?

Matthew 1:21 She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

- We're told this refers to the elect out of Israel.

- Rebuttal:

- But does this explain why all of Israel isn't saved? Is it because He chose not to save them or because they rejected Him? Is this a general statement, or is it meant to describe limited atonement? Where does this say, "He will die only for the sins of His elect people?"

Romans 8:32-34 He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

- We're told the elect are the only ones benefitting from Jesus' sacrifice.

- Rebuttal:

- Where does it say He only died for the elect? This passage offers hope and confidence to "those who are in Christ," as we see in vs. 1. It's specifically for the saved. This assumes too much.

Isaiah 53:11-12 Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the Righteous One, My servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the many, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

- We're told this only benefits a select group.

- Rebuttal:

- Jesus' death will not benefit everyone because not everyone puts their faith in Him. But saying His death benefits only believers is very different from saying He died only for believers.

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.

- We're told His blood purchased a specific people, and Christ shed His blood on the cross.

- Rebuttal:

- Where does it say His death wasn't offered to everyone? Can't both be true? Exodus 15:16 also calls Moses' generation a "purchased people." But would you say He purchased only a few Israelites?

God's Character

- If God wants everyone saved, doesn't that mean Jesus' sacrifice was for everyone? Isn't that what passage after passage says? Should I substitute "only the few elect" in every passage?
- 1 Tim. 2:5-6 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.
- Heb. 2:9 But we see Him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.
- John 1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"
- John 6:39-40 For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."
- John 12:32-33 "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself." He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.
- 2 Cor. 5:14-15 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that One has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised.
- Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,
- 1 Jn. 4:14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.
- Rom. 3:23-25 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins.
- Rom. 5:18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.
- John 3:16-17 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.
- 1 John 2:2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.
- 1 Tim. 4:10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.
- 2 Peter 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.
- Mark 16:15-16 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.

So, what is the gospel message? Everyone agrees "world" means every single creature in this passage. But what's the good news? That Jesus died for "the elect alone" or the entire world? What message will you share?