

## Limited Atonement

The Reformed faith differs from other Christian belief systems in that it consistently acknowledges God as the **only** Sovereign. Equally, the Reformed faith avows that God, in His sovereignty, deals with His creation in terms of covenant. These beliefs, and the attendant doctrines, form the essence of what it is to be Reformed and they are the pillars of a Reformed World and Life view.

Within the Reformed doctrines there are a particular set which deal with Soteriology<sup>1</sup> or the Doctrine of Salvation. It is these doctrines that are generally labelled as Calvinism.<sup>2</sup> Through time the essence of Calvinistic soteriology has been distilled to the acronym T.U.L.I.P. This acronym stands for: Total Depravity; Unconditional Election; Limited Atonement; Irresistible Grace; Perseverance of the Saints. In this lesson we will focus on **Limited Atonement**.

At the heart of this issue is the question: **For whom did Jesus die?** Is Jesus death like a well in the midst of a thirsty crowd from which people may drink of their own free volition or is it more like a banquet to which guests are invited? In other words, did Jesus die for all men and then leave it to each man to either accept that salvation or did Jesus only die for His people?

The Reformers, following the Scriptures, answered by saying, Jesus died **only** for His people. Limited Atonement, therefore, is the doctrine which states that Christ died only for His sheep—those sheep which the Father had given to Jesus from eternity—and not for the whole of humanity (John 6:39-40).

With this summary of the concept of Limited Atonement complete we shall look at some proofs for this doctrine. The Westminster Divines have this to say: “It Pleaseth God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus ... to be ... the Head and Saviour of His Church ... unto whom He did from all eternity give a people, to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.”<sup>3</sup>

This statement by the Divines makes three essential points: 1. Salvation is in the *eternal purpose* of God; it does not rest with man. 2. God gave to Christ a *people*; this people (singular) being appointed from eternity to be God’s Church. 3. That Jesus would be the *Saviour* of this people (Church) in time and that He would *redeem* (die for) them alone.

Scripture is also clear on this point. The following is not an exhaustive list, but rather one which highlights the central issues:

**A.** John 10:14-16: “I am the good shepherd; and *I know My own*, and My own know Me ... “And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock *with* one shepherd.

**B.** John 10:26-28: “But you do not believe, because *you are not of My sheep*. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and *I give eternal life to them* ... no one shall snatch them out of My hand.

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<sup>1</sup> “Soter” is the Greek word meaning saviour or deliverer. Soteriology is therefore ‘saviour-ology’, if you will, or the doctrines concerning God’s redemptive acts in history.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that one can be a Calvinist without being Reformed. One cannot, however, be Reformed without being a Calvinist. To illustrate: The term Reformed Baptist is a misnomer. These should be termed Calvinistic Baptists. Their lack of covenantal theology excludes the term Reformed.

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 8:1.

C. Romans 8:28-30: And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.<sup>4</sup> For whom He foreknew,<sup>4</sup> He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son ... and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

D. 1 Peter 2: 7-8: But for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER *stone*,” and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”<sup>5</sup>; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *doom* they were also appointed.

E. Matthew 22:2-14: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Some object to this doctrine as they believe that it is unjust and does not treat men fairly. Such an objection fails to take into account the fact that *God does not owe salvation to any*. Man had his opportunity for fellowship and life with God in his federal head, Adam. When Adam fell, all of humanity fell, and all reaped the covenant sanction of death. God is, therefore, under no obligation to save any man.

Berkhof similarly answers this same point, saying: The objection is sometimes raised that this doctrine exposes God to the charge of injustice. But this is hardly correct. We can speak of injustice only when one party has a claim on another. If God owed forgiveness of sin and eternal life to all men, it would be an injustice if he saved only a limited number of them. But the situation is quite different where all have forfeited the blessings of God. No one has a right to call God to account for electing some and passing by others. He would have been perfectly just, if He had not saved any.<sup>5</sup>

When viewed correctly, one will see that this doctrine is true and in perfect accord with the Scriptures. In this view God elects His people out the mass of fallen humanity and supplies the perfect ransom. The preciousness of Christ as a substitutionary sacrifice is perfect. He died completely for those the Father had given Him. There are simply no questions. He died for a specific number. That number *will* be saved—totally and completely.

The opposite view does not give that assurance. Christ died and supplied His blood as a sacrifice, but He did it for no one and anyone. All men may accept. All men may reject. The failure of this particular position is twofold. First, it puts man into the driver’s seat. God is a passenger. God provides, in Christ, a substitute, but God is unsure if He will even gain a people. Will anyone accept His offer?

Second, why would God give such a precious gift for no one? If Christ died for all, but none accepts, then God spends eternity without a people. This would cause two questions to be pondered: 1. How could I fail so miserably? 2. Why did I essentially murder my Son?

Here are the two positions paralleled. The position espoused in this letter sees God in control. He provides a Saviour who will, guaranteed, save all Whom the father has given Him. None shall be lost. All those for Whom he died, will be saved. His sacrifice will be complete as will God’s plan. The opposite view is all uncertainty. Christ died, but for whom? God seeks a people, but whom? Christ’s blood can save the whole world, but will it save a single man? All could be saved, but none may be.

Limited Atonement is not only logical and just, it is above all Biblical. It is taught in the Scriptures by the Holy Trinity Who planned, participated, and executed this magnificent and merciful plan of salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> Foreknowledge is a Biblical term which relates to God’s decrees in eternity. This term is not to be understood as God looking into the future and making decisions upon what He saw. ‘To know’ is used in Scripture in a sense that often conveys an intimate knowledge and therefore renders the idea of mere foresight obsolete.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, (WM. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: Michigan; 1933 reprint 1987) 92