

Does the Bible Teach Universal Atonement or Particular Atonement?

[On January 30, 2001, I wrote an answer to a friend who had asked me to explain the biblical texts that appear to teach universal atonement. Below is the text of that letter. Perhaps a larger audience will profit from this study.]

I had promised many weeks ago, at our last meeting, to write a letter explaining briefly my understanding of some texts which seem to teach universal atonement. This I will attempt in Chapter 1. Then in Chapter 2, I will present other texts which clearly teach particular atonement (a.k.a. limited atonement). In Chapter 3, I will give other arguments which bear on the whole question of the extent of the atonement of Christ our Lord. I will forbear to quote from C.H. Spurgeon or any others from the long list of giants in church history who held to the same truth I hold, so as to keep the letter based on Scripture alone and not history or tradition. However, I must recommend for further and more detailed reading a puritan treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by John Owen. Furthermore, I will not in this letter attempt to answer all arguments used to defend other aspects of the system of freewill-ism, for that would require more than one letter! Here, we will try to deal only with the atonement question.

Chapter 1

1. There are several texts which use the term “world”, which I will treat together, such as:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

And said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world. (John 4:42)

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:51)

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)

And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. (1John 4:14)

John, the Apostle, was sent especially to the Jews or circumcision (Gal. 2:9). The Jews proudly thought they were the only recipients of salvation. John uses the term “world” by inspiration to let the Jews know that Gentiles as well as Jews will be saved. Thus, in 1John 2:2 he makes the distinction between “our sins” (i.e. those of Jewish believers, who were the original readers of his letter) and “the sins of the whole world” (i.e. of Gentile believers as well). Furthermore, there is a sense in which Christ is the savior of the world if so much as one soul is redeemed from the world by His atonement; any part may be spoken of as the whole, speaking generically. In this

sense, we might say that the world was destroyed in the flood, when in reality eight people were delivered; or we might say that the world was preserved during the flood, seeing that those eight survived! Also, knowing that God has purposed to save people from all nations (as in Rev. 5:9 where people are *redeemed...to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation*), we can say He redeems all without distinction, but not all without exception.

The word “world” has a wide variety of meaning in God’s Word. It is even used three times in one verse to speak of 3 different worlds: *He was in the world* (earth, land of Palestine), *and the world was made by him* (whole universe), *and the world* (natural man) *knew him not*. (John 1:10).

As for John 3:16, the term world must be viewed in the whole context. (In fact, the most important rule of interpreting Scripture is: Look at the context! The context will usually make clear the meaning of any specific term of Scripture. Also, the whole system of truth, sanctified good sense, and the use of the original languages are all helpful in understanding difficult or obscure passages.) Verse 17 states that the intent and purpose of Christ’s incarnation was to save this “world”. What world did Christ save? Is Christ successful, or is He mostly a failure? If by “world” we understand the world of God’s chosen ones (both of Jew and Gentile), then He is perfectly successful.

2. Some Scriptures use the term “all”, such as:

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. (Rom. 5:18).

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. (1Cor. 15:22).

If “all” means all without exception, all of the time, then these Scriptures must be understood to teach universalism (i.e. that all men are saved and will be in heaven finally). Some very liberal theologians have taken exactly that view, but no serious student of Scripture can agree with it. The “all” in Adam are all those he represented as a federal head or representative. The “all” in Christ are all those He represented as a federal head or representative. (The same would apply to Isa. 53:6.) A closer look at the context of Romans 5 reveals that the term “many” is used more than the word “all” (see vv. 15, 19). Also, v. 17 indicates that though all without exception are dead in Adam, those who are alive in Christ are a smaller circle, called “they who receive abundance of grace”.

Another “all” is found in 2Cor. 5: 14, *For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.* (And v. 19 states, *To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.* Again, this world must be defined as those whom He reconciled. Are all men reconciled? Decidedly not. Therefore, this “world” is not every man without exception.) Verse 14 literally states, “if one died for all, then all died”. Are all men dead to sin and alive to God? No. So the “all” is restricted by those who are dead to sin and alive to God, as verse 15 clarifies: *And he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.* The “all” is those who live, those for whom Christ died.

3. 1Tim. 2:4-6 states, *Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.* If it were God's eternal plan to save all men, then He has miserably failed. (Some who hold to universal atonement have actually stated this. They say, "Hell is a ghastly monument to the failure of God" and "The atonement is worse than worthless in your case [if you do not accept it]". If however it was His plan to save "all kinds and all sorts" of men, then He has most certainly accomplished and is accomplishing His purpose. This understanding of "all" is used in the context (yes, context, once again!) in vv. 1-2, where "all men" clearly means all classes of men (kings, those in authority, as well as their subjects, etc.). Paul had no illusions that all men without exception would be saved—he later states that he endured the persecutions, etc., for the sake of these elect whom God had willed to save (2Tim. 2:10). Note that the "all" of 1Tim. 2:6 is defined as those who will be *testified* (or witnessed) *in due time*—this "all" will be visibly set apart for all to see at the last day. No, my friend, God cannot fail!

4. *For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.* (1Tim. 4:10). Does God save all men? Not in the normal sense of the word "save". Since the last phrase of the verse sets apart believers as distinct, the most likely explanation of God's being the Savior of all men is that He preserves all men in His common grace for the period of life He grants them on this earth. (See Ps. 36:6 which declares, *O LORD, thou preservest man and beast.*) The term "savior" can be rightly translated and understood this way. I know of no other sense in which it can be said that God is the Savior of unbelievers! Paul is saying, "God is not only the preserver of all, but the eternal savior of those who believe."

5. *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.* (Heb. 2:9). Every man of what group? Again, the context must be allowed to speak for itself: "many sons" (v. 10); "they who are sanctified" (v. 11); "brethren" (v.11, 12, 17); children whom God the Father gave Him (v. 13); "the people" (v. 18, which reminds us of Mat. 1:21, *And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.*) Not one of those for whom Christ tasted death will themselves taste eternal death. Christ has a 100% success rate!

6. *But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.* (2Pet. 2:1). This may be taken to speak of their earthly life being preserved (as in #4 above). It is perhaps better understood as those who professed to have been bought by the Lord, but apostatized or turned away from, or repudiated, the truth they had professed. Were they actually bought by the Lord? Not in a saving sense. Perhaps it could be said that in some sense Christ bought the rights to be Judge over them at the last day. (See Jn. 5:22, 27, *For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son...And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.*) Whatever the case, it cannot be that Christ is the ransom for their sins, for then they would be redeemed; if they somehow were to remain lost, they would be punished for sins already punished in Christ. This would violate justice by demanding two payments for sin...sort of a "double jeopardy". As one hymn writer said, "Payment God cannot twice demand, first at my bleeding Surety's hand, and then again at mine."

7. *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.* (2Pet. 3:9). There are two ways to understand this statement. First (and probably best) is the fact that since the longsuffering of God is “toward us” (or “to us-ward”), the “any” and “all” must be viewed in this context. To whom does Peter write? Chapter 1, verse 1 makes it plain that he writes to believers, those who are God’s elect (1:10). Therefore, it can be easily understood that God is not willing that any of His elect should perish, but that all of His elect should come to repentance—and they most certainly will! Peter is in effect asking, “Why does God delay (from our perspective) the second coming of Christ?” His answer: “Because there are still some of the elect yet to be saved.”

A second possible interpretation is that God “delays” the second coming of Christ because it is His revealed will that all men repent and believe (as in Acts 17:30). This delay therefore is a mercy from God, allowing more to be saved. However, who will obey this revealed will of God? Only those who, according to God’s secret will, or eternal purpose, are drawn to Christ (see Jn. 6:44). This really amounts to the same as the first explanation. It may shed some light on Rom. 2:4 as well.

Chapter 2

The above list may seem impressive when considered by itself, but I have given good answers to each one. Now consider the great quantity of texts which speak in favor of particular redemption, and ask, “Is there any good answer against them?”

1. Many Scriptures use the term “many” when referring to the number redeemed by Christ:

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:11-12).

For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Mat. 26:28).

For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45).

As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. (Jn. 17:2).

We have already noted Rom. 5:15-19.

So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation. (Heb. 9:28).

2. Other Scriptures use terms which plainly place a limitation on those for whom Christ died:

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. (Mat. 1:21).

*As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. (Jn. 10:15). Note that later in the same chapter Christ tells the unbelieving Jews, *But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.* (vv. 26-28).*

I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. (Jn. 17:9). Christ's intercessory work as Mediator is for those chosen from eternity by the Father. Also consider that the Father always hears the Son (Jn. 11:42); therefore there can be no one for whom Christ died who is not redeemed, saved, justified, glorified.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. (Acts 20:28).

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, (Eph. 5:25-26). These previous two texts speak of Christ's dying for His church. Consider also the Old Testament illustration of the Passover lamb: for whom was it slain? for the Egyptians? No. Only for Israelites. Furthermore, consider Aaron, the high priest. For whose sins did he enter into the most holy place on the annual day of atonement? For one nation only, among all the other nations of the world.

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. (Heb. 9:15).

3. A host of verses use the term "us" in some way connected with the saving work of Christ. These all must be understood in terms of believers only, as they are the ones to whom the words were written. Here are a few examples:

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8).

He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? (Rom. 8:32). Note that the "all" is qualified in the context by the "us".

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. (Rom. 8:34).

For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. (1Cor. 5:7).

And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation. (2Cor. 5:18).

Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father. (Gal. 1:4).

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree. (Gal. 3:13).

In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. (Eph. 1:7).

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: (Eph. 2:4-6).

And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour. (Eph. 5:2).

Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. (1Th. 5:10).

Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. (Titus 2:14).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (1Pet. 1:3).

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: (1Pet. 2:21).

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: (1Pet. 3:18).

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. (1Jn. 1:7).

Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1Jn. 3:16).

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1Jn. 4:9-10).

And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. (1Jn. 5:20).

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, (Rev. 1:5).

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; (Rev. 5:9).

4. All the verses quoted thus far and many more speak of an actual transaction taking place when Christ died—not just a possibility or a potential or hypothetical salvation for everyone without exception. Christ’s death wrought in its own merits a ransom, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, justification, purchase, washing, purification, sanctification, etc. (Also “perfection”, Heb. 10:14 *For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*) If only a possibility of these were accomplished (and their actual accomplishment depended on man’s will to cooperate) then the definite terms could never be stated as they are in Scripture. We would be left with an atonement that did not really atone; a ransom that did not ransom, etc.

Here are some more along the same line (which speak of an actual event occurring) which have not been cited thus far:

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: (Rom. 3:24).

Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:9-10).

Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: (Eph. 2:15-16).

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproueable in his sight. (Col. 1:21-22).

5. Another important passage is 2Cor. 5:21, *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.* Here we read of the important principle of imputation (i.e. transfer of accounts, crediting to the account of another, Christ's suretyship). Note that the imputation is two-fold. First, our sins imputed to Christ. Second, Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Universal atonement would destroy this exchange by making everyone's sins imputed to Christ, but His righteousness imputed only to a smaller group (i.e. those who by their decision make it effectual for themselves).

Chapter 3

Here are some further issues to consider:

1. If Christ died for even one person more than is actually saved, then the efficacy of His death is destroyed. No longer is it His death that saves, but something added to it. It is the sinner himself who really makes the difference by his faith, decision, baptism, sacraments, or whatever.

Did Christ die for Judas in hell as well as Peter in heaven? If so, then what made the difference in Peter? And what saving benefits did Judas receive from Christ's death?—it profited him none!

The truth is, that our faith and our receiving of Christ was all secured by His death, and are fruits flowing from it, not independent acts which we perform unaided by Divine enabling grace.

2. The idea of universal atonement necessitates that Christ could have died without anyone actually being saved at all. What an abhorrent thought! This denies the very value and merit of Christ's work. He paid a definite price for a definite people.

3. Whom did God purpose and determine to save in the first place? If you can see the doctrine of unconditional election as taught in Scripture, then to be consistent you must see that Christ died to secure the salvation of those whom the Father chose, and those alone. The whole doctrine of the Trinity (Tri-unity or three-in-one) is at stake here. Does the Father elect a smaller group than those for whom Christ dies? And does Christ die for a larger group than the Holy Spirit actually brings to salvation? No, there is unity of purpose in the eternal Godhead. It is the same group of people in view from beginning to end: none are added or deleted along the way. See Rom. 8:29-30.

4. Though what I believe is sometimes called "limited atonement", please understand that the doctrine of universal atonement places a limit on Christ's work also. Namely, it limits the efficacy or power of Christ's precious blood by saying that Christ's blood alone, in and of itself, does not save. **If Christ died for everybody, but everybody is not saved, then Christ's death does not save.**

The latter view of the atonement is like a very broad bridge which spans half the distance between God and sinners. My view of the atonement is like a narrower bridge which spans the whole distance. Everyone limits the atonement in one way or another, either in its extent or its power. Which limit is Scriptural?

5. The free offer of the gospel is in no way hindered by the truth of particular redemption; rather, it is given a true foundation. The command for all men everywhere to repent is not based on the idea that “God loves you and Christ died for you, and has a wonderful plan for your life if you will just let Him...” Rather, all men must repent because they are sinners; and all sinners who repent and believe in Christ will find acceptance with God.

The gospel message is not, “Come to Christ because He died for you.” It is, “Come to Christ because He died for sinners. He has promised to save every sinner who comes to Him.” If you are a sinner, you qualify! What a puny, flimsy view of Christ’s death is given to the average man when he is told that Christ died for him, but he may remain lost if he pleases. The assurance that Christ died for me personally is only mine as I look to Him for righteousness and submit to Him as Lord.

Now, let me destroy a straw man whom some of my opponents have set up: No one will accuse God on the judgment day by saying, “I wanted to be saved, but Christ did not die for me.” The genuine desire to be saved is itself a gift from God, and it is given only to God’s elect whom He draws to Himself. (See Php. 2:13.) The doctrines of sovereign grace do not hinder any from being saved, rather they guarantee that some will be saved!

6. Finally, to broaden the scope of the discussion just a bit, I ask, “Could God have saved everybody if He had wanted to?” If you answer “yes” then you have admitted that the final decision rests with God in some way or another! He could have chosen to save none. He could have chosen to save all. But He chose to save many, His people, His sheep, us who by His abundant grace believe.

In conclusion, lest this discussion become merely academic and cerebral, let me urge you make sure YOU are in Christ, that YOUR sins are covered by His blood. “How can I know?” you say. The answer is only by turning from sin and depending only on Christ alone for pardon and peace with God. Don’t trust your trust, nor your decision, nor your anything! Trust Christ and Christ alone.

I had not planned such a lengthy epistle, but this subject is too precious to rush through. I hope this food for thought provokes you to search the Scriptures carefully on this subject. Though the issue is not without some difficulty, I believe the evidence from Scripture is plain enough when considered carefully. I look forward to discussing it with you more in the near future.

Godspeed,

Daniel Chamberlin