

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY
An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation
Limited Atonement, part 20

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OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT (cont.)

2) **The Bible directly states that the atonement is general in nature (cont.).**

2. **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:16-17).**

Two arguments are typically made from this passage against limited atonement. The first interprets “world” (*kosmos*) that God loves as every person in the world, and argues that love for all implies atonement for all. The second appeals to the word “whoever,” arguing that if anyone can be saved, then atonement was made for all.

As stated, the first argument interprets “world” to mean every person in the world, and from this infers that God desires the salvation of every person in the world. It then argues that since God desires the salvation of every person in the world, he must have provided a means by which every person in the world could be saved. It would be ridiculous for God to desire someone’s salvation, but to refuse to provide the means necessary for that person to obtain salvation (especially when he provides it for others). This argument may be refuted in at least a few ways:

- 1) The argument that *kosmos* means “every person in the world” does not appeal to translation but to interpretation. That is, *kosmos* itself does not refer to people but to the created order of things. This is not to say that it cannot be used figuratively to refer to people, but it needs to be acknowledged that such a use is indeed figurative and not literal.

The argument can be made, however, that *kosmos* should be translated literally in these verses as “God so loved his created universe.” That God actually does love his creation is revealed in

Genesis 1-2 when God repeatedly states that it is good. This interpretation understands John to be teaching that God's love for his creation inspired him to redeem creation from its slavery to corruption, and that he chose the redemption of mankind (e.g. "whoever believes...") as the means to redeem creation. In fact, that God actually is doing precisely this is clear in Romans 8:19-22. This possible interpretation of John 3:16-17 is grammatically and syntactically feasible, is theologically consistent with the rest of Scripture, and accepts the word *kosmos* in a literal sense. This interpretation also fails to refute limited atonement.

- 2) An alternative argument derives the meaning of *kosmos* from the immediate context of John's argument. It is generally recognized by interpreters that John uses the word *kosmos* in a variety of ways. Thus, we cannot assume any one meaning in any particular case without paying attention to the context of the particular usage. An evaluation of the context of this passage reveals that here *kosmos* means "all believers, and believers only." This argument interprets this passage as an active defense limited atonement.

To make this argument from context, it is necessary to include the adjoining verse John 3:18, which includes the words: "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already." The logical argument is as follows:

- a) God sent his Son to save the *kosmos*.
- b) God did not send his Son to judge the *kosmos*.
- c) Believers are saved.
- d) Believers are not judged.
- e) Unbelievers are not saved.
- f) Unbelievers are judged.
- g) Since unbelievers are judged and not saved, contrarily to the *kosmos* which is saved and not judged, unbelievers are not part of the *kosmos* in this passage.

- h) Since believers are saved and not judged, just as the *kosmos* is saved and not judged, *kosmos* represents believers in this passage.
- 3) The argument can be made that the type of love mentioned in this passage the type of love that the Bible teaches God has for the reprobate or unsaved. It is true that God loves all humanity in general, and that he loves even the wicked in some sense. For example, he cares for their physical needs (cf. Matt. 5:44-45). But his love for the wicked is far less than his love for believers:

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1).

In fact, more often than suggesting that God cares for the wicked, the Bible teaches that God hates the wicked. For example:

“Yet if in spite of this, you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you; and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins. Further, you shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters you shall eat. I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols; for My soul shall abhor you” (Lev. 26:27-30).

“For Thou art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with thee. The boastful shall not stand before Thine eyes; Thou dost hate all who do iniquity. Thou dost destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit” (Ps. 5:4-6).

“There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers” (Prov. 6:16-19).

“Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated’” (Rom. 9:13).

Furthermore, the nature of the type of love (*agape*) mentioned in this passage is described by Paul in his famous “love chapter:”

“Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Notice that among the qualities of *agape*, Paul mentions that it does not take into account “wrong.” Actually, “evil” is a better rendering of the Greek word *kakos*, here translated “wrong,” and the word “suffered” in the English is an interpretive insertion in the English text. There is not corresponding word in the Greek text to indicate that “suffered” ought to be included in the English translation. Compare, e.g., the NIV which reads: “keeps no record of wrongs.” In fact, it is exactly because God takes evil into account that the wicked are punished eternally in Hell.

On the other hand, Scripture indicates that God’s feelings for the elect are different from his feelings for sinners at large. Because of God’s love for Christ, God set his special love on certain individuals before the foundation of the world. He loved them because of who they would be in Christ, and the fact that they would become sinners was not sufficient to quench this love:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself.”

God has a special love in Christ for those he predestines to salvation. That love is not the same as the love he has for mankind in general. In fact, it is so far superior that God’s electing love cannot fail to save all whom God loves in this way. Consider Paul’s words:

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified;

and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:29-39).

Notice that in this passage, Paul explains that the Father's election of the predestined to salvation included his love and the love of Christ for those individuals. Moreover, the nature of that love is such that God will not listen to charges that would condemn these people. In fact, no created thing can ever separate these people from God's love. They will overwhelmingly conquer. This is not a description of people who might end up in hell — this is a description of people who certainly will end up in heaven. According to Paul in this chapter, the love of God that is sufficient to send his Son to die and to raise him from the dead is an unbounded love that will never allow anything to separate God from the objects of that love. That is, if God loved a person so much that he sent Christ to die for that person, there is no way that God will not ensure that person's salvation, and there is no way that God will ever punish that person in hell.

So, returning to John 3:16-17, the conclusion is that only those who are ultimately saved are the objects of God's love that motivates him to send his Son to die. As in the second refutation, only believers fall into this category, and therefore only believers populate the *kosmos* in this passage. This argument interprets this passage as direct support for the doctrine of limited atonement.

- 4) Yet another argument can be made in this passage about the word *kosmos*, drawn from John's conception of *kosmos* as a term intended

to include different types of people rather than all individuals particularly. The argument (which has often been made) is that by *kosmos* John meant to emphasize the fact that salvation was no longer restricted to the Jews, but had been expanded to include the Gentiles as well. So, when John said that God loved the *kosmos*, what he meant was God loved Jews and Gentiles alike — but generally, not individually. In the past, God had only exercised his redeeming love to save Israel. When Christ came, however, God extended that love to the Gentile nations as well. John was saying simply that God's love had been extended to additional people groups — not that individual Gentiles could not be saved before, but that the gospel call had not been issued to the Gentiles nations at large. Insofar as God's redeeming love previously had not been extended to every Jew (cf. e.g. Lev. 26:27-30; Ps. 5:4-6; Prov. 6:16-19), but only to those who were faithful (cf. Exod. 20:5-6), it should not be assumed that in Christ's death God extended this love to every individual, but only that he now began to extend the salvation to every people group in the world, not to every individual. This interpretation does not imply a refutation of limited atonement.

Further, this interpretation may be coupled with argument "2" or "3" above to explain why John chose the particular word *kosmos* even though he intended by that word "believers." It may well be that while John spoke only of believers, he chose the term *kosmos* in order to emphasize the fact that believers now included Gentiles in large numbers.

The second argument which is commonly made from this verse to refute limited atonement is that the "whoever" nature of the gospel necessitates that everyone, rather than only a limited group, be able to respond positively to the gospel. Here are a few refutations of this idea:

- 1) Regardless of how few people are enabled to respond to the gospel, it is still true that whoever believes will be saved. Therefore, it is not necessary that everyone be able to respond positively to the gospel in order for the "whoever" nature of it to be true.
- 2) Jesus stated that some people did not believe in him because the Father had not granted them the ability to come to him:

"But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, 'For

this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (John 6:64-65).

Elsewhere, God specifically prevents people from believing the gospel. For example:

“God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth” (2 Thess. 2:11-12).

Since some people are not able to believe the gospel, the assumption that everyone must be able to believe is false.

- 3) No word for “whoever” exists in the Greek text. A literal interpretation of the Greek is “all the believers,” not “whoever believes” (the same is true in John 3:15). This verse would read more accurately as: “God ... gave His only begotten son, that all the believers in Him should not perish.”¹ In other words, the Greek text makes it clear that Jesus did not come to save just anyone, but that he came to save a definite, specific group of people identified as believers. Since the identity of the elect/believers was foreordained by God, the text teaches that God gave his Son in order to save those people whom he had already chosen to believe, and that this group of elect individuals could be identified by their belief. It also affirms that belief is the means which God has ordained by which to save the elect.

3. “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men” (Rom. 5:18).

From this passage, liberal theology might argue universal justification (all men are justified), and on that basis universal salvation (all men are saved). This position is assumed to be false; the time will not be taken to refute it.

¹This is actually how the verse was translated in the earliest English translations, e.g. Wyclif (1380), Tyndale (1534), Geneva (1557), Rheims (1582). The King James (1611) translated the verse with the famous “whosoever” (following Cranmer’s 1539 translation), and the popularity of that translation, coupled with the popularity of this verse in particular, has ensured that nearly every English translation since then has followed this interpretive tradition — though the NRSV and NLT are a notable exceptions.

An argument against limited atonement might be made from this passage to the effect that the justification spoken of here is conditional upon belief. That is, Christ's one act of righteousness (i.e. his death on the cross) justified every person in the world, but that justification becomes effective only upon belief. This recalls the distinction made earlier between impetration and application. General ransom theory would see in this verse a universal impetration of justification (Jesus obtains justification for all men), but a limited application (only those who actually believe are justified). There are at least two significant problems with this interpretation.

- 1) The idea of conditional justification is not presented by the text, but must be assumed on some basis other than the immediate teaching. What the text explicitly teaches is that man is justified by Christ's act of righteousness "as" (meaning "in the same way as") he is condemned for Adam's transgression. Clearly, the context asserts that condemnation was not conditional upon the condemned men's acceptance of that condemnation. Rather, condemnation was rendered by the act of Adam's sin alone, and justification was rendered by Christ's act of obedience alone.
- 2) Justification is not spoken of in this passage, whether conditionally or unconditionally, as resulting to the whole of humanity. The phrase "all men" must be taken in the context of the epistle to the Romans, not just in the context of the immediately surrounding verses. In the context of the entire epistle, "all men" in this verse means "all believers." The explanation of this is as follows:

Paul begins the argument of justification by faith through Christ in Romans 1. Continuing the argument in Romans 3:21-23, he states:

"The righteousness of God has been manifested ... even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

The word in Greek which is translated as "all" in the phrases "all those who believe" and "all have sinned") is *pas*, the same word which appears in the fifth chapter referring to "all men." Notice that both these phrases ("all those who believe" and "all have sinned") refer to the same group of people. Paul's point is that everyone who is saved by believing in Christ has previously sinned. No one is saved

who has not been a sinner, so that no one can claim salvation on the basis of personal works of merit.

In the course of Paul's argument, Paul continues to assume that his reader knows he is talking about believers, not about every person on the planet. In chapter 3, Paul talks about "all" men who have been redeemed, meaning believers. In chapter 4, he illustrates this justification by faith through the example of Abraham, still talking about believers (who are Abraham's spiritual children). He is still talking about these same people in chapter 5, verse 1 when he says "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God." The word "therefore" demonstrates that Paul is drawing a conclusion from the preceding argument (in chapter 3) and example (in chapter 4) regarding the same people (the "we") about whom he first spoke, i.e. the "all" who were redeemed in chapter 3. Paul continues to argue with respect to the salvation of these same people throughout chapter 5, including in verse 18 where he again uses the term "all" and says that "all" these were justified by Christ's one act of righteousness (the atonement). In short, in the context of Paul's argument in Romans 3-5, "all men" in Romans 5:18 refers to believers, not to everyone in the world.

- 3) Some have taken "all men" in this verse to refer to "all mankind," meaning "Jews and Gentiles" as opposed to Jews only (cf. the fourth refutation of the general ransom argument drawn from the use of *kosmos* in John 3:16-17). Just as the argument begun in Romans chapter 3 refers to "all those who believe" and to "all [who] have sinned, being justified as a gift" (Rom. 3:22 ff.), it asserts the inclusion of the Gentiles in this justification: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also" (Rom. 3:29). Therefore, the "all men" in chapter 5 may mean "not just Jews, but Gentiles as well." This interpretation does not hold that God justifies all Jews and all Gentiles, but understands the salvation of these peoples in terms of the remnant discussed in Romans 11:5: "In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice," saved of course by means of faith (cf. Rom. 3:22-24; 5:1).
4. **"For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet**

now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:14-19).

The general ransom argument asserts that two particular areas of this passage prove that Christ atoned for the sins of every person ever. The first is verse 14 which states that Christ “died for all.” The general ransom viewpoint interprets this as meaning that Christ died for every person in the world, and in at least every age since Christ. In contrast, the limited atonement position asserts that “all” means “all of us (Christians).”

The strength of the limited atonement is proven from the next phrase: “therefore all died.” Paul’s point is that all for whom Christ died died with Christ. That is, everyone for whom Christ died participated in Christ’s death — but only believers share in Christ’s death in this way. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

“For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him” (Rom. 6:5-8).

All those who die with Christ are united to him in his death. All those who are united to Christ in his death are certain also to be united to Christ in his resurrection, and they will all have eternal life. That is, all who die with Christ are saved. Since “all” for whom Christ died also died with Christ, Paul can only have been referring to believers when he said, “One died for all.”

It is sometimes argued that the foregoing explanation fails to accept the plain, literal reading of the text with regard to the word “all,” as if the presence of that word somehow necessitated the meaning “every person in the world.” The problem with this kind of thinking is that “all” (*pas*) is a very ambiguous word. It tells us how much or how many, but it does not tell us how much or how many of what. One must answer the question “All what?” In this case, the text does not explicitly say “all of us (Christians)” or “all people ever.”

In this text, the context indicates that the answer to the question “All what?” is “All of us Christians.” This is clear not only from the phrase “therefore all died,” but also from the fact that in this letter Paul and Timothy (referred to in 5:11-14 as: “we” six times, “us” twice, “I” once, and “ourselves” twice) were writing a personal letter to the church in Corinth (referred to in 5:11-14 as: “you” four times, “your consciences” once). They were talking about themselves and the Corinthians, and by extension their words apply to all believers everywhere. In this context, it is quite natural to read “all” as referring to “all of us.”

The second portion of this scripture to which the general ransom position appeals is verse 19, which states that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” The general ransom position teaches that the word “world” (*kosmos*) refers to every person in the world. To prove this interpretation, it claims that the text requires that “world” refer to people, more particularly, to every person in the world, because it immediately says of the “world” that God was not counting “their trespasses against them.” Here are some problems with this interpretation:

- 1) When Paul says that God is reconciling the world to himself, it is possible that he is speaking literally. As mentioned before, the idea that God is reconciling creation to himself through the reconciliation of humanity is taught clearly in Romans 8:19-22. Interpreted in this way, 2 Corinthians 5:19 teaches that God was reconciling creation to himself through the remnant of humanity by not counting the trespasses of the ones “who live” (cf. v. 15) against them.
- 2) More likely, though, “world” refer to people, the same people whose trespasses are not being counted against them. But if “world” here means “everyone in the world,” then Paul taught that God was reconciling everyone in the world to himself — this is universalism, the idea that everyone in the world will be saved. Further, to understand “world” as “every person in the world” is to interpret “world” in a manner which is not indicated by the text. Yes, the text indicates that “world” here is a metaphor for a group of people, but the text does not identify that group of people as “every person in the world,” and that meaning also cannot be drawn simply from the metaphoric use of the word “world.”

As stated, if “world” refers to people, then it refers specifically to those people whose trespasses are not counted against them. This is the same group who has been “reconciled.” Paul proves that this group

of reconciled people must necessarily be saved when he states, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10). That is, “If ... we were reconciled ... we shall be saved.” The point is that there can’t be anyone who is reconciled, or who will be reconciled, whose sins are not counted against him, and who ends up in hell. All who are reconciled are saved, and all whose sins are not counted against them are saved.

In fact, in other contexts these very facts are affirmed by the general ransom theory, which states that one is not actually forgiven or reconciled until the Holy Spirit applies salvation to the life of the believer. As stated earlier, the disagreement between general ransom and limited atonement is not on the extent of the application, but on the extent of the impetration. However, in this text, Paul is speaking about application — actual reconciliation and forgiveness — not about impetration or potential for reconciliation and forgiveness.

Thus, since verse 19 does not refer to impetration but to application, not to the scope of Christ’s work on the cross but to the effect of that work on believers, it has no bearing on the disagreement between general ransom and limited atonement.