



Lake Wales
Church of Christ
463 N. Buck Moore Rd.
Lake Wales, FL 33898
www.lakewalescoc.com
(863) 676-4114

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Tower of Strength

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”

—Proverbs 18:10

Is Atonement Limited?

The “L” of the Calvinist scheme TULIP refers to “Limited Atonement.”

The virtue, efficacy, and benefits of Christ’s work of redemption were communicated to the elect [only] (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, VIII:VI).

Election itself saved no one. It only marked out particular sinners for salvation. Those chosen by the Father and given to the Son had to be redeemed if they were to be saved. In order to secure their redemption Jesus came. Christ’s redeeming work ... was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and no one else. [God does not] leave it us to sinners as to whether or not Christ’s work will be effective. On the contrary, all for whom Christ sacrificed Himself will be saved infallibly... He came into the world to represent and save only those given Him by the Father. Thus, Christ’s saving work was limited (Steele, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 39).

The idea that Jesus' sacrifice was limited in scope—that the great majority of humanity could only watch the cross and resurrection play out in the distance, but have no hope of being included in the drama—challenges our sensibilities of fairness and justice in extreme ways. In fact, this is such a distasteful doctrine, that many modern Calvinists have abandoned it and identify themselves as “four-point Calvinists” rather than the regular five point Calvinists.

Of course, the mere fact that any doctrine challenges our sensibilities of fairness does not mean it is false. Let us instead see what the Bible says about the scope of Jesus sacrifice.

Admittedly, most human beings will be lost (Matt. 7:13–14). But is this because Jesus did not die for them? Or, did Jesus shed His blood for all mankind, in hopes that anyone and everyone would come to God through Christ? In fact, some limitations must be placed on the notion of atonement. Either Jesus' blood was limited in scope or limited in effectiveness. Calvinists say Jesus' blood is perfectly effective but limited in scope (that is, Jesus' blood perfectly saves the few people it was intended to save). I say that Jesus' blood is broad in scope but limited in results (that is, Jesus' blood perfectly saves and is available to everyone, but will only save those who desire to be saved.). Which does the Bible teach?

Let's begin with the most obvious passage of all, one that is well-known to everyone. In John 3:16, Jesus declares, “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.” Every sensible commentator agrees that “the world” here refers to the human race. For example, the *Pulpit Commentary* says, “this world cannot be the limited world of the Augustinian, Calvinist interpreters (the world of the elect); it is the whole world. Christ brought life because the heavenly Father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish.”

Many other passages teach the same thing, which most of us take for granted, that God really does love each and every human being, and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ provided a way in which each and

every human being may actually obtain salvation. We don't have to assume this—God Himself says in 1 Timothy 2:3–6, “God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...”

Similarly, in Titus 2:11, Paul says, “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men...” Of course, not all men accept the free gift of salvation. But it is there for them to accept.

So too Hebrews 2:9, “Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.”

In 1 John 2:1–2, the Apostle John says, “my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” Again, this does not teach universalism, that is, the notion that the whole world is automatically saved by the blood of Jesus, and that no one will be lost. But it certainly teaches that the scope of Jesus sacrifice is the whole world, and that He desires all to be saved. John Stott says, “this cannot be pressed into meaning that all sins are automatically pardoned through the propitiation of Christ, but that a universal pardon is offered for the sins of the whole world and is enjoyed by those who embrace it. For no man in the whole world is there any other way of being reconciled that that of the propitiation of Christ” (*Tyndale NT Commentary*, p. 89).

In John 1:29, John the Baptist cries out when he sees Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

In John 6:51, Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

And again, in John 12:32, Jesus says, “if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

Finally, in 1 John 4:14, “we have sent and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.”

Frankly, I find these passages very convincing. This is not even one of those cases where people on opposite sides of an issue can proof-text their own set of verses and avoid reconciling the whole message of Scripture. No, in this case, there simply isn't a Bible passage that suggests God offers salvation through Christ to any less than the whole world. Whether or not every individual in the world accepts is another matter! But the offer is sincere, legitimate, and available.

Please realize, the gospel is a call broadcast to all. Jesus appeals in Matt. 11:28, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” He ends the last book collected in our Bibles with a similar heartfelt appeal: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Rev. 22:17).

He didn't say this with a wink or His fingers crossed behind His back. It's a real offer, and one that He hopes we will accept. Anything less, and Jesus would seem to me like a man holding a lollipop before a baby, but snatching it away before he gets a lick. The gospel must be preached so that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21).

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“There is something exquisitely luxurious about room service. All you have to do is pick up the phone and somebody is ready and waiting to bring you breakfast, lunch, dinner, a chocolate milkshake—whatever your heart desires. With a lazy motion of the wrist, you can call for someone who will transform a soiled shirt into a clean and pressed one. That, sadly, is the concept many of us have of prayer. We have created God in the image of a bellhop. Prayer for many of us is the ultimate room service, and everything is charged to the credit card in the sky. Now, prayer is many wonderful things, but I'm pretty sure this is not one of them.”

—*Kenneth Wilson*