

## **A Hard Saying of Jesus: Limited Atonement (or Particular Redemption)**

Limited Atonement is logically deduced from the premises of Total Depravity and Unconditional Election. It is a truth explicitly stated in many portions of scripture. It is also the aspect of the doctrine of grace most likely to elicit a negative emotional response from those in the freewill camp.

For a review of Total Depravity and Unconditional Election see:  
Unconditional Election (Pastor Timothy Boffey 12/21/09)

### Objectives

Define Limited Atonement and explain how it differs from General Atonement

Consider a common objection to the doctrine of Limited Atonement – John 3:16

Determine if the scriptures teach Limited Atonement by considering the words of Christ recorded in John 6

Atonement – reparation or expiation for sin

Reparation – the action of making amends for wrong

Expiation – make amends or reparation for guilt or wrongdoing

Redemption – the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil

Gift – something, the possession of which is transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent; a donation, present

Offer – an act of offering; a holding forth or presenting for acceptance; an expression of intention or willingness to give or do something conditionally on the assent of the person addressed; a proposal

### **Limited Atonement Defined**

The eternal redemption and salvation provided by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ is special and particular – it was intentionally designed exclusively for the elect of God (i.e. the sheep – John 10:15; all that the Father hath given me – John 6:39; the called or the foreknown, chosen before the foundation of the world, to adoption and conformation to the image of Christ – Rom 8:28-29, Eph 1:4-5), and they alone share the benefits and blessings of Christ's sacrifice, and that infallibly.

This means that Christ's death did not provide (as a free gift by grace) nor make possible (as an offer conditioned upon one's response to the gospel) forgiveness of sins and eternal life for the entire human race. Therefore, there are members of the human race that are truly without hope; they will remain dead in trespasses and sins and will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power (II

Thes 1:8-9).

Limited Atonement does not imply that the number of people under consideration is small in number (although it is consistent with scripture that the number of the elect will be a small remnant relative to the number of the ungodly; the elect are large in number but relatively small in percentage). The elect children of God are also referred to as Abraham's seed (Gal 3:29 "and if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"). God promised Abraham that he would make him to be a father of many nations and in Rev 7:9 the crowd standing before the throne of the Lamb are described as "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (see also Rev 5:9).

Nation – a large group of people sharing the same culture, language, or history, and inhabiting a particular state or area

People – human beings in general; the ordinary citizens of a country; the members of a particular nation, community, or ethnic group

Tongue – a language

Kindred – your family and relations; relationship by blood

Rom 4:16 "Therefore it (speaking of God's promise to Abraham that he should be the heir of the world) is of faith, that it might be by grace; **to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed**; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all."

God kept his promise to Abraham (according to Rev 5:9, 7:9). While Christ's death did not (by design) make provisions for the entire human race, the entire human race will be well represented in heaven.

### **General Atonement Defined**

General Atonement states the following:

Christ's death made forgiveness of sins and eternal life possible for all men though it did not, by itself, procure eternal salvation for anyone in particular. Christ paid for *most of the sins* of all men (for his death did not make provision for unbelief), but they must be obedient through belief of the gospel (at a minimum) in order to procure the benefits of his death and receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Therefore, General Atonement is a synergistic scheme of salvation in that it requires (by design) the combined efforts of God plus man in order to make salvation from death in

trespasses and sin possible. This is in stark contrast to the monergism of Limited Atonement where God alone, independent of man's efforts, makes salvation from death in trespasses and sin not only possible, but an unavoidable reality for the elect (i.e. those for whom Christ died).

### **Doesn't John 3:16 Disprove Limited Atonement?**

John 3:16 – “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.”

When this verse is used to teach General Atonement, it is typically read or interpreted as the following:

**For God so loved each and every member of Adam's race (equally and without exception) that he gave his only begotten Son to die for their sins, so that whosoever will choose to accept Christ's offer of salvation by placing their faith in him and accepting him as their personal Lord and saviour (and participation in whatever other sacraments are, by design, required in order to obtain and/or maintain forgiveness and procure eternal salvation) should not perish, but have everlasting life.**

Is this an accurate interpretation of John 3:16? Let's compare scripture with scripture.

John 3:16 will not stand alone as an unequivocal proof text for General Atonement; at best, it is a reference text. The teacher of General Atonement will need to refer to other verses in order to establish which “world” is being referred to in the verse. For example, what about non-humans? It seems that whatever “world” is being referred to, it must consist of conscious beings that are able to believe [a *qualified* definition of “world” since its meaning is not always restricted to living, thinking things in the scriptures – see Acts 17:24 where world refers to all of creation and Psa 24:1 & 33:8 where world refers to the earth]. Therefore, anything that is not conscious and not able to believe could not be under consideration for everlasting life. [What does this mean for unborn humans? What does it mean for those that never have the gospel sent to them (“how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard”)? How about those born in a persistent vegetative state or with severe mental retardation? Does John 3:16 specifically address their fate? And if not, what is the fate of the un-evangelized?]

But, are not the fallen angels conscious beings (Matt 12:43-45) that are able to believe (James 2:19)? Does the teacher of General Atonement believe that Christ died for the sins of fallen angels? Can John 3:16 be used to prove that Christ did not die for the sins of the fallen angels? Absolutely not, for John 3:16 is totally silent as to whether or not fallen angels are under consideration; we have to look elsewhere to determine the answer to that question. Therefore, even those teaching General Atonement hold to a *qualified* definition of “world” in this verse. [The following verses can be used to show that only human

beings are under consideration in John 3:16; Heb 2:9, 16; Gal 3:16, 29; Rom 5:18.]

**World** is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the following: the inhabitants of the earth, or a section of them; a group or system of things or beings associated by common characteristics (denoted by a qualifying word or phrase), or considered as constituting a unity

Let's consider how the word "world" is used in scripture when referring to people. There are certainly examples where "world" is used in reference to all mankind.

**World = the entire human race (i.e. all of Adam's seed; Jews and Gentiles)**

Rom 3:9, 23 – (v.9) "What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved **both Jews and Gentiles**, that they are **all under sin**;" (v. 23) "For **all have sinned**, and come short of the glory of God;"

Rom 3:19-20 – "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to **them who are under the law**: that every mouth may be stopped, and **all the world** may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall **no flesh** be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

Rom 5:12 – "Wherefore, as by one man **sin entered into the world**, and **death by sin**; and so death passed upon **all men**, for that **all have sinned**:"

What I hope to demonstrate is that automatically defaulting to "world = all of Adam's seed" each and every time "world" is used in reference to people is inappropriate; for doing so will lead to contradiction or absurdity.

**World = those under the jurisdiction of Rome**

Luke 2:1 – "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the **world** should be taxed."

Would it not involve contradiction and absurdity to assume that the world of John 3:16 is restricted to the world that was under the authority of Caesar Augustus?

Rev 7:1-17 (v. 9); Gal 3:8; Matt 28:18-20

**World = the Gentiles in contrast to Jews (i.e. all of Adam's seed minus Jews)**

Rom 11:12, 15 – (v. 12) "Now if the fall of **them (the Jews)** be the riches of **the world (the Gentiles)**, and the diminishing of **them (the Jews)** the riches of the **Gentiles (the world)**; how much more their fulness?" (v. 15) "For if the casting away of **them (the Jews)** be the reconciling of the **world (the gentiles)**, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

Would it not involve contradiction and absurdity to assume that the world of John 3:16 is restricted to the Gentiles only?

Rom 10-11 – a portion of Israel is considered among the elect of God

Were not the apostles ethnic Jews?

Were not the recipients of Paul's letter to the Hebrews and James' epistle to the "twelve tribes.....scattered abroad" ethnic Jews?

Another important qualification for the world of John 3:16 is that God must love it ["for God so loved the world..."]. If a world of people exists that God does not love then it can be concluded that a world of people exists that God did not give his son to die for; a world not under consideration in John 3:16. Are there examples in scripture of people not loved by God?

Psa 5:4-6 "For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: **thou hatest all workers of iniquity**. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will **abhor the bloody and deceitful man**. [Abhor – feeling **strong hatred** for]

Psa 11:5 "The LORD trieth the righteous: but **the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.**"

Prv 6:16-19 "**These six things doth the LORD hate**: yea, seven are an abomination unto him.....(6) **a false witness that speaketh lies**, and (7) he that soweth discord among brethren.

Rom 9:13 "Jacob have I loved, but **Esau have I hated.**"

Before we go any further, let us consider the definition of hate (for it is bound to come under attack at this point).

Hate – an emotion of **extreme dislike** or aversion; **detestation, abhorrence**, hatred

Detestation – the feeling or mental state of detesting; intense dislike or hatred; abhorrence, loathing

Dislike – not to like (the absence of like); to regard with aversion; to have an objection to; to disrelish. (**The opposite of like v. in its current sense; and so less strong than hate, which is the opposite of love.**)

Abhorrence – The action of abhorring or shrinking from with horror; the feeling of detestation, repugnance, or **utter dislike**.

The following analogy correctly relates love to hate:

Love is to hate as full is to empty

Full – having within its limits all it will hold; **having no space empty**; replete.

Empty – of a material receptacle: **Containing nothing**; opposed to *full*.

There is no such thing as half-full, for to be full is to have no space empty. Empty is not a lesser degree of full, it is the absolute opposite of full.

The following analogies incorrectly relate love to hate:

Love is to hate as hot is to cold

Love is to hate as coldest is to cold (or hottest is to hot)

Hot – having or characterized by a high temperature or the sensation of heat

Cold – the proper adjective expressing a well-known quality of the air or of other substances exciting one of the primary physical sensations, due to the abstraction of heat from the surface of the body: of a temperature sensibly lower than that of the living human body

Hot and cold are both descriptions of heat. Unless used in reference to absolute zero, cold does not refer to the absence of heat, but rather, to a lesser degree of heat. Therefore, hot and cold are opposite extremes or sensations of the same thing (i.e. heat).

In the first analogy (love is to hate as hot is to cold) hot and cold are referring to sensory perceptions of heat (things perceived as having a temperature greater than our body temperature are described as hot, while things perceived as having a temperature lower than our body temperature are described as cold). In this case cold does not refer to the absence of heat, only less heat. If love is to hate as hot is to cold, then when scripture says that God hates sin, it really means that he has less fondness for sin than he does for righteousness (for hate would not be the absence of that which constitutes love, only less of it). Given that the God of scripture is “not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee (Psa 5:4)” it seems inconsistent with his revealed character for him to have positive feelings towards sin.

In the second analogy (love is to hate as coldest is to cold; love is to hate as hottest is to hot) the absurdity and contradiction involved in accepting such a definition of love and hate is obvious. While it could be said that love is to like as coldest is to cold (love is a greater degree of like – the more I like you the closer I am to loving you), to say that the same relationship applies to love and hate is to say that hate is really the same as like (if hate is only a lesser degree of love, then the more I hate you the closer I am to loving you). It would also follow that love is a greater degree of hate – which betrays the dictionary and biblical definitions of both words and results in obvious absurdity.

Therefore, given that scripture reveals a God that hates all workers of iniquity, the bloody and deceitful man, him that loveth violence, a false witness that speaketh lies, and Esau, would holding onto the presupposition that the world of John 3:16 refers to the entire human race without exception involve contradiction? How can the “hate verses” be reconciled with John 3:16? Perhaps it is a **qualified section** of the world under consideration in John 3:16; a world consisting only of those that God loves and that Christ gave his life for? Let us search the scriptures and determine if such a world exists.

**Did Jesus teach Limited Atonement?**

Jesus' teachings in John 6 were said to be "hard sayings" (v. 60); after hearing them "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (v. 66). What exactly was the Lord teaching to these men that elicited such a strong negative response from the majority of listeners?

Please read over John 6. I will pull out a number of key passages and compare scripture with scripture. Read over this chapter and consider each of the verses being used to further explain John 6.

v. 28, 29 – What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."

Phil 2:13 – "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of [his] good pleasure."

I John 5:1 – "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God"

(From Young's Literal Translation) "Every one who is believing that Jesus is the Christ, of God he hath been begotten, and every one who is loving Him who did beget, doth love also him who is begotten of Him."

What came first, the begetting or the believing? Believing is a fruit of the new birth (i.e. it is the result of the work of God).

John 5:24 – He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

(From Young's Literal Translation) Verily, verily, I say to you -- He who is hearing my word, and is believing Him who sent me, hath life age-during, and to judgment he doth not come, but hath passed out of the death to the life.

What came first, passing from death unto life or the hearing and believing? Believing is a fruit of the new birth (i.e. it is the result of the work of God).

v. 33 – "For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world."

The life under consideration is eternal or everlasting life (v. 27, 39, 47, 50, 51, 53, 54, 58)

The bread of God (later referred to as bread of life) is Jesus Christ (v. 35, 48, 51)

Jesus Christ gives (not offers) eternal life unto the world

Who is it that receives eternal life? He that cometh to Jesus (v. 35, 37, 39).

Who is it that cometh to Jesus? All (not some) that the Father giveth me shall come to me (v.37). And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all (not some) which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day (v. 39). As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give (not offer) eternal life to as many as thou hast given him (John 17:2). [If the "all that the Father giveth me" is referring to the entire human race without exception Jesus failed to accomplish what he set out to do (i.e. give eternal life to all or as many as the Father gave to him).]

How do men come to Jesus? **The Father must draw them** (v. 44 – The word for draw used here is the same word used for drew in John 18:10 when Peter drew his sword from its sheath and in John 21:11 when Peter drew his fish net from the water. The sword and

the net were not enticed; rather they were pulled forcibly and that infallibly). **They must have been given to Jesus (v. 37, 39) by the Father. The ability to come to Jesus has been given unto them by the Father (v. 65). They have been taught of God – they have heard and learned of the Father (v. 45).**

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” which were given to him of the father (John 10:29). Jesus then tells certain of the Jews that they believe not “because ye are not of my sheep.....my sheep here 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.” Did Jesus give his life for anyone other than the sheep that the Father gave him to die for? Will Jesus lose and fail to raise up any that the Father gave him to die for? Do the scriptures teach that all mankind will be eternally saved? If not, then it must be concluded that the world of John 6:33 (and John 3:16) is synonymous with the sheep of John 10:11, and since Christ told members of his audience that they were not sheep it must also be concluded that he did not give his life for all of Adam’s race.

v. 37,39-40 – “All the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.....this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given men I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.....this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Is v. 40 describing a conditional scheme for obtaining eternal life? If it is, would it not also require that we see Jesus as well as believe on him? Compare v. 40 to v. 36 – one group *sees and believes not* while the other group *sees and believes*. Why is it that some believe not? Jesus provides the answer in v. 63-65 – “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing (c/w John 1:12-13, 3:3-8): the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not (I Cor 1:18; 2:14; John 8:43, 47). For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father (c/w John 10:24-29).” Consider also John 5:24 and I John 5:1 – those that believe are already in possession of eternal life; belief is a manifest token of being in possession of eternal life rather than a condition to be met in order to obtain it.

v. 44-45 – “No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.....every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.”

John 8:43, 47 – “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.....He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.”

v. 63 – “It is the spirit which quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

v. 64-65 – “But there are some of that believeth not....Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.”

v. 47 – “He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.”

John 5:24 – “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation (c/w Rom 8:1, 28-39); but is passed from death unto life.”

I John 5:1 – “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” -

v. 53-54 – “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

What does it mean to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man? It was something that the Old Testament saints did – I Cor 10:1-4 “all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”

Are v. 53-54 setting forth a condition that one must choose to meet in order to obtain eternal life?

(From Young’s Literal Translation) v.54 “he who is eating my flesh, and is drinking my blood, hath life age-during, and I will raise him up in the last day;”

So, did Jesus teach Limited Atonement?