

Evangelism – or Limited Atonement

Why Not Both?

By Bill Robinson

Whenever the doctrine of Limited Atonement is mentioned, the immediate response is that it is impossible to hold such a doctrine and still preach the gospel to the world. Such a belief, it is said, also prevents some otherwise savable people from being saved because they despair of being good enough to be among the elect. The fact is that no one, not a single solitary individual, is good enough! Be they man, woman or child, it makes no difference for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. It is the very nature inherited from Adam (human nature) which is the problem. (Cf. Ro. 3:10; Isa. 64:6)

While such a conclusion may seem plausible if only a shallow study is made of the subject, a thorough study of Scripture will prove that those who make such statements have no understanding of Scripture, the doctrine of Limited Atonement or the gospel.

It is readily agreed that by holding this doctrine, the world cannot be told that “God loves you, Jesus died for you, accept Christ as your personal Savior and you will be saved,” but since this statement is not scriptural, we should have no desire to say it anyway.

We can however, with clear conscience and full scriptural authority, tell the world that Jesus Christ is the Lord God Almighty; that He took on the form of man, suffered and died at Calvary, (Ro. 5:8) was raised from the dead three days later and after ascending into heaven, proclaimed through His Holy Spirit and the apostle Paul that by His grace, all who believe in Him are eternally saved. (Ro.3:21-26; 4:25; 10:9; 11:13; 16:25; Jn. 3:14-18; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:1-9)

So how does one believe? The way most present this, believing is a work that one has to do. The truth of the matter is that belief is a condition of the heart, a fruit – not a root. (Cf. Mt. 15:1-20) The heart of a man (not the blood pump) is the true inner man and controls all of his thoughts, words and deeds.

An analogy: If you believe that I am a man who would never lie or mislead and I tell you "the roof is falling." Your instant reaction would be to head for the door. But since you know that all men, including me, are sinners and cannot always be trusted, your instant reaction would be to look up at the roof. What you believe determines what you do!

It is true that every one must seek God in order to find Him, but who will seek God unless he already believes that God is? (He. 11:6) Paul says in Ro. 10:9-10 that we must confess and believe in order to be saved. The way it is written might lead you to believe that confession is required prior to belief. But, isn't a confession an admittance of something you already know? Otherwise, your confession is false, making you a liar and a lie most certainly cannot save you. (Cf. Re. 21:8) The point of Ro. 10:9-10 is that if you believe, you should confess because the saved are not ashamed. (Ro. 10:11) (Cf. Ro. 9:33)

The gospel of grace proclaimed through Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven for this age is the gospel we are to preach, (preaching any other gospel is cursed – Gal. 1:1-9) and not only is it compatible with the doctrine of Limited Atonement, the gospel of grace becomes utter foolishness without it. (Ro. 5:8; 9:19-24; 1 Cor. 6:112; Eph. 1:3-7; 2:1, 5-9; Php. 2:13; Jn. 1:13; 6:44, 65)

Most will agree that grace means the unmerited favor of God but what does unmerited favor mean?

- Favor: friendly regard shown toward another, especially by a superior or a special privilege or right granted or conceded.
- Un: free from or without.
- Merit: character or conduct deserving reward, honor or esteem.

From these definitions given by Webster's Dictionary, it is deduced that unmerited favor means that one is completely without character or conduct deserving of the special privilege (salvation) freely given to us by God. God has already provided it but you must receive it.

This definition is consistent with the analogy of the derelict who asks for and receives a handout which he certainly cannot claim to deserve. The analogy goes further, suggesting that grace is free for the asking and just as the derelict will receive no handout until he asks for it, neither will grace be received unless it is requested.

While this analogy tends to deal more with the doctrine of Irresistible Grace than Limited Atonement, it is important to our discussion that we understand what grace is, so a slight digression at this point is necessary.

An analogy which is more correct and to the point would be: A Doctor invents a potion, which will restore life to dead bodies. He goes to a morgue and although there are many dead bodies there, he selects only a few of them. He then injects the bodies that he has chosen with the potion and they revive. He could, if he had so chosen, have revived all of the dead, but for reasons of his own, he didn't.

In this analogy, the savior (the Doctor) does everything. The saved (the dead bodies) are totally passive. They cannot ask for the potion. Indeed, they cannot even desire it. Neither can they accept or refuse it. All they can do is praise the savior for his grace after it has been bestowed!

If we believe that grace must be asked for before it can be received, then we destroy the meaning of grace. If asking makes the difference between receiving grace and not receiving it, then asking is a work of merit and grace is no longer "unmerited favor." God would be required to give grace to all who earn it by asking Him for it.

This very argument is used by the Holy Spirit when He says through Paul, "Grace is no more grace..."(Ro.11:6).

Getting back to our definition of unmerited favor (grace), I believe that Scripture gives a very clear and concise definition of it in the account of Paul's conversion. (Acts 9:1-15; 22:1-21).

God saved Paul, the chief of sinners, that his conversion might be an example to those who follow after him (1 Tim. 1:15-16). Let us, then, carefully consider that marvelous display of God's wonderful grace.

Paul was the leader of those opposed to Christ and was instrumental in the imprisonment and murder of many Jews who believed that Jesus was indeed the Christ. At the time of his conversion, Paul was on his way to Damascus to search out even more followers of Christ in order to imprison them and/or put them to death. No one can deny that Paul's character and conduct were not in any way deserving of friendly regard from God. In fact, Paul's conduct was very much deserving of instant condemnation and everlasting punishment.

God, however, reached down to Paul and bestowed upon him that matchless grace which was not only unmerited favor but the very opposite of what Paul deserved. Paul did not ask for God's grace and it is not hard to imagine that if Paul had been told to ask God in the name of Jesus for His saving grace, the one who made such a suggestion would have been instantly condemned and probably killed.

Since the Holy Spirit has given us this perfect definition of grace, should we commit blasphemy by telling men that they should ask God to bestow His grace upon them and that by their asking, they can be saved? God forbid that we ever do such a thing! Let us rather follow Paul's example. (Act 16:30-32)

Grace then, by its very nature, can be bestowed upon an individual only by the sovereign choice of the Almighty God as He wills. There can be no factor other than God's sovereign choice involved or else grace is no longer grace.

Since the grace of God is bestowed at His will and according to His purpose, it stands to reason that His purpose will be accomplished. (Cf. Isa. 46:10)

Scripture is very clear that God's purpose is to save those who believe in Jesus Christ. (Jn. 3:15-18; Acts 13:38-39; Ro. 3:26) Scripture is equally clear that God is almighty and cannot be thwarted. (Isa. 44:6-8; 45:5-13; Dan. 4:34-35)

With this in mind, let's examine the doctrine of Limited Atonement. This doctrine, briefly stated, is that Christ died only for the elect and every single one of the elect have obtained certain salvation by the sovereign grace of God through the merit of Christ. (Jn. 5:24-29; 6:35-44; Ro. 8:35-39) Remember that if Christ died for every single individual, then every single individual must be saved or there is no certainty of salvation for anyone. The book of the revelation clearly states that some end up in the lake of fire. Most certainly, Christ did not die for these!

Since the death of Christ was decreed by God according to His purpose, (Acts 2:23) then it fulfilled God's purpose exactly as He had decreed. Any attempt to add to or detract from Christ's perfect fulfillment of the Father's purpose can only be considered blasphemous, for a Holy and Perfect God could certainly not be well pleased (Mt. 3:16-17) with less than perfection.

Because the atonement brings certain salvation for all of whom the Father has chosen to provide it, God is able to bestow His grace whenever and to whomever He chooses. (Cf. Ep. 1:4-5; Re. 13:8) God could not in sovereign grace impart salvation unless that salvation was certain. The Holy Spirit could not seal a believer until the day of redemption (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14) on the basis of an uncertain act such as an individual's professed commitment. Additionally, if the atonement were not limited to those of God's choosing, God would be unable to exercise sovereign grace at all for the choice would then of necessity be left to man. If the atonement were not limited, men could claim their salvation whether God liked it or not, for if salvation is provided, why couldn't it be claimed? God would become unjust if He were to withhold that which He had already given.

Thus we see that the sovereign exercise of grace requires a limited atonement – an atonement limited to those elected to receive it and certain to save those so elected. Either an uncertain salvation or an unlimited atonement makes the gospel of the grace of God of no effect and causes God to cease being God.

The true child of God can only rejoice in the gospel of the grace of God and the doctrine of Limited Atonement. Oh what marvelous peace fills the heart of one who realizes that his salvation is not

determined by personal merit (which he can never have) but that salvation is the exercise of God's grace which provides a salvation as certain as God Himself. (Eph. 2:8-9)

Man may cry out that the Bible says, "believe and be saved," and so it does. But, believing is not an outward profession of the lips; it is an inward condition of the heart. (Isa. 29:13; Ro. 10:9) A thorough search of the Scriptures will readily show that this ability to believe in Christ is the result of sovereign grace (Jn. 6:44, 65) and the true believer can but praise God for such marvelous grace. Only the self-righteous will cry out that he has chosen of his own free will to believe in Christ. Only after the Holy Spirit has opened the heart can one believe, for faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God (Ro. 10:17 and the deaf ears of natural man must be opened before they can hear.

Another question often asked in an attempt to refute Limited Atonement is – If only the elect can be saved, how do you know who they are so you can give them the gospel?

This question implies that the gospel should be presented to the elect only. However, there is no reason why the gospel cannot, in good faith, be proclaimed to nonelect men as well as to the elect. If the gospel included the statements "God loves you" or "Christ died for you," then it would be a message that we could only preach to the elect. However, there is no Scriptural reason to include these statements in our gospel presentation. You will search the Scriptures in vain to find Christ or His apostles (even Paul) ever making such statements to unsaved people. Our job is to preach to all. God's job is to sort out the elect from the non-elect. (Cf. Mt. 22:1-14)

Let us always remember that Jesus in John 21:15-17 told Peter to "...feed My sheep...." He did not tell him to go out and convert goats. Most who supposedly preach the gospel would have us believe the opposite to be true.

Moreover, God has a dual purpose in evangelism. One purpose is to save His elect. The other is to more thoroughly fit the nonelect for condemnation (Ro.9: 22; 2 Cor. 2:14-17) so that it may be clear to all that He is just when He sentences them to everlasting torment. Thus, He would have us preach the gospel to all, whether elect or not, and the particular purpose He has intended for sending the gospel to any one individual will be accomplished.

We should never forget that judgment is committed to Christ and the responsibility of saving the elect and condemning the nonelect is His alone. We are to preach God's Word and remember that it will not return unto Him void. It will always accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. (Isa. 55:11) We may not like it but it is **God's** word and **God's** purpose that is to be accomplished. Of course, we cannot take credit for the salvation of anyone if we do it God's way but we should not want to either.

God has chosen by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1 Cor. 1:21), so let us preach to all that glorious gospel of Christ crucified and, with peace of mind and a joyful heart, leave the results to the Lord. He is perfectly able to save to the uttermost any and all whom He chooses. When we thus preach, the elect will believe and the nonelect will not.

What marvelous peace of mind is available to the one who preaches the gospel of grace and knows the doctrine of Limited Atonement. We are absolutely free to preach the pure word of God. There is no need to embellish it or try to soften it. (2 Cor 2:17) We can "tell it like it is" (1 Cor. 2:4-5) and God is totally in charge of the results. We may plant or water but God gives the increase. (1 Cor. 3:6-7)

We may wonder at the desirability of even mentioning Limited Atonement. After all, why not just preach the gospel of grace and leave it at that? If we are to preach God's Word, we should declare the

whole counsel of God. The only reason for not mentioning Limited Atonement is to Keep from hurting the feelings of some self-righteous individual who may “accept Christ” if we cater to him. (See what Jesus did in John 6:65-66.) While this may give us large congregations, what other purpose can it serve? Do we seek to please God or men? Surely God is capable of providing a large number of converts if He wants them. Besides, a large group usually attests only to the eloquence of the preacher, not to the truthfulness of his message. (2 Cor. 4:1-7)

The Bible clearly tells us that in this world evil men will prosper. Even as Christ stated – the world hated me so it must hate you also. (Jn. 15:18-19) Contrary to what the modern “Christian church” is saying, the true Body of Christ is very small. Only the true sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and He has no desire for any but His own. Are we better than He? God forbid that we should be so filled with pride that we believe that we can do anything of ourselves which is pleasing to God, for without Him, we can do nothing. (Jn. 15:5)

So let us go forth and preach the gospel of grace in its true scriptural form, which requires the doctrine of Limited Atonement. By so doing, we may not have many converts but we will have great joy because those who are converted by our ministries will be God’s converts. We also rejoice in the knowledge that those who are not converted will in no way be lost due to some lack on our part. We are responsible to preach the word of God – no more, no less. Let us therefore be that good and faithful servant whom, when his Lord comes, He shall find him so doing.

Praise God for His grace, which brings certain salvation, not according to our will but His.