

# Limited Atonement

by Ronald Hanko

---

*The doctrine of limited atonement teaches that Christ died only for some persons, a limited number of persons, and that it is only the elect who benefit from Christ's death.*

**Topics:** "Calvinism", "Atonement"

---

## Description

Ronald Hanko preaches on the doctrine of limited atonement, the third of the Five Points of Calvinism, emphasizing the importance of understanding that Christ's death on the cross is efficacious and fully saves those for whom He died. The doctrine of limited atonement is often misunderstood and rejected, causing division among believers, but it is crucial to grasp that Christ's death is not merely a possibility of salvation but a guarantee of eternal life for His chosen people. This doctrine impacts how the gospel is preached, missions are carried out, witnessing is conducted, assurance of salvation is obtained, and the glory of God is praised, highlighting the sovereignty of God in salvation.

---

## Transcript

The doctrine of limited atonement is the third of the Five Points of Calvinism and is represented by the letter L in the word TULIP, the word we use to help us remember the Five Points and their order.

This doctrine has been given other names. It is sometimes spoken of as the doctrine of particular atonement or of particular redemption for reasons that we will see later. For the same reasons it is sometimes called definite redemption.

It is also, so it seems, the most difficult of the Five Points to receive and believe as the teaching of the Scriptures, though they certainly do teach this doctrine. It is, for this reason, often rejected by those who are Calvinistic in their other teachings, so that there are some who claim to be four-point Calvinists, accepting the other four points and rejecting this one. This, to be sure, is really an impossibility, since all five of these doctrines "hang together" and are impossible to separate from one another. Nevertheless, the fact that some attempt to be four-point Calvinists does show the difficulty of this doctrine.

It is certainly regrettable that this is so, since this doctrine concerns the work of Christ on the cross and the benefits of that work for God's people. What ought to be a source of fellowship and of unity and of mutual faith in the death and redemptive work of Jesus Christ has become instead a matter of division and even strife among those who believe differently. Let it be clear that it is not our intent in treating this doctrine to further that strife or cause division but to show as clearly as possible the teaching of the Scriptures in the

hope that this may further unity and fellowship in the truth.

---

## A. The Doctrine

### 1. Atonement.

Whenever we speak of the atonement then we are using one of the words that the Bible itself uses to describe the benefits of Christ's death. The word, at least in the Old Testament, means "a covering" and reminds us that Christ's death provides a covering for our sins before God. The English word refers to the fact that through the death of Christ God's people are "reconciled," or "at one," with Him. The death of Christ, in other words, is "at-one-ment." The Bible, of course, uses many other words to describe the death of Christ and its benefits, words such as "ransom," "reconciliation," "propitiation," "satisfaction," and "redemption." All of these words differ somewhat in meaning, but all have this in common, that they indicate that Christ's death is our salvation.

Now it really does not matter whether we use the word atonement here or one of these other words. The disagreement does not revolve around any of these words and their meanings, but around the word limited when it is added to the word atonement or to any other of these words. No one, as such, would dispute that Christ's death is atonement, ransom, reconciliation, propitiation, or redemption, and those who believe in limited atonement believe also in limited redemption, limited satisfaction, limited propitiation, and all the rest, while the opponents of this doctrine would reject the word limited when used in connection with any of the words that describe the saving power of the death of Christ and would teach a universal atonement or redemption or satisfaction. It is nevertheless very important to see that all of these words that are used to describe the death of Christ also have this in common, that they all emphasize the fact that Christ's death actually saves. This is at the heart of the continuing dispute over this doctrine.

---

### 2. Limited.

When we add the word limited, then we are answering the question, "For whom did Christ die?" Did He die for every single person who ever has lived and ever will live, or did He die only for some people?

The doctrine of limited atonement teaches that Christ died only for some persons, a "limited" number of persons. Those who teach this doctrine would agree that the "limitation" on the atonement is election, in other words, that Christ died only for the elect and that it is only the elect who benefit from Christ's death.

Some clarification is needed here, for most of those who believe in a universal atonement do not believe that everyone benefits from the death of Christ in the sense that everyone is finally saved. They believe that Christ died for every person and that salvation is made available to everyone through the death of Christ, but that some only, and they are those who believe, benefit fully from Christ's death.

On the other hand, those who believe in limited atonement do not teach that the power and value of Christ's death is in any way limited. The only thing limited is the number of those for whom Christ died, and the limitation is not due to any defect in the work or death of Christ but to God's sovereign decree to save some and not others. For this reason, many who teach and believe in limited atonement prefer to speak of

"particular atonement" rather than "limited atonement," since the word particular much more accurately describes what they believe, i.e., that Christ died only for particular persons and not for all people. The word particular also leaves no doubt about what exactly is limited here.

---

### 3. Possibility or guarantee.

There is another aspect of this doctrine, however, which is not immediately apparent and which is sometimes missed in the discussion of it. That is the question as to what Christ actually did by His death on the cross. The doctrine of limited atonement teaches that Christ by His death on the cross actually saves those for whom He died and does not just make salvation a possibility. In other words, His death is reconciliation with God, satisfaction for sin, redemption, atonement, and all the rest, and guarantees eternal life to all those for whom He died. This would seem self-evident, but it is exactly this point that must be compromised in order to teach that Christ died for all men without actually and completely saving all of them. Then, somehow, Christ's death does not itself bring salvation but only allows for the possibility of salvation. Something else beside the death of Christ is needed for salvation, perhaps man's choice, decision, or believing.

---

In summary, therefore, the doctrine of limited atonement really teaches four things:

- a. That Christ's death is atonement for sin;
  - b. That because it is atonement, all those for whom He died are really and completely saved and go to heaven;
  - c. That He died only for particular persons and not for every single person who has lived or will live;
  - d. That those particular persons for whom He died are the elect, i.e., those whom God chose in eternity to be His people.
- 

## B. Scripture Passages

### 1. Primary references.

- a. Matthew 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.

Notice here the emphasis on "his people." They are the ones Jesus saves and no others. Whoever they may be (and the Scriptures teach us in other places that they are the elect), they are a limited and particular number of persons. But notice also the emphasis on the fact that He does save them. He does not merely make salvation available but saves them from their sins entirely. Most important of all is the fact that these are the reasons why He is called JESUS. To deny either of these things is to deny His very name and the meaning of His name.

b. Isaiah 53:11. 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.

c. Matthew 20:28. Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

d. Matthew 26:28. For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sin.

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

All four of these texts show that Christ gave His life for a select and limited number of persons and not for every single person. This is not to deny that there are also passages which speak of "all" or of the "world"; but if the Bible is indeed the infallible Word of God, then the two types of passages cannot contradict each other, and either it must be shown that "many" somehow does mean "every single person," or it must be shown that "all" and "world" do not necessarily refer to every single person living or who has lived. Isaiah 53:11 and Matthew 26:28 also use this language.

It might be noted here, too, that the Scriptures speak of this "many" for whom Christ gave His life in connection with the fact that that gift of His life was a satisfaction and justification for those for whom He died, a ransom that actually purchases them out of the slavery of sin and death, and that it actually remits sin, i.e., sends it away.

f. John 6:37-39. All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

This passage also says that Christ actually loses none of those for whom He does His work. It is not as though Christ comes for all and yet loses many who slip away or do not believe. If He had lost even one of those for whom He came, He would not have done the Father's will, and His work would not even have been approved of God. This, by the way, also shows that it was not even God's will that Christ should die for or make salvation possible for all men.

Here again the ones for whom He comes and does His work are those given Him by the Father, that is, the elect, those chosen by God before the foundations of the world.

This passage is also valuable because it gives clear guidance as to how the word "all" is used in the Scriptures. We must not forget that it is not only used here but further defined as "all whom the Father giveth me." The "all" for whom Christ died, as this passage shows so clearly, never includes anyone but "all" the elect.

g. John 10:14, 15. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

This passage not only teaches limited atonement by its emphasis on the sheep as the ones for whom Christ died, but it teaches very plainly what we have previously called "particular" atonement in that it tells us that Christ knows His sheep in the same way that the Father knows Him and He knows the Father, i.e.,

personally and by name. If this is true and if He laid down His life for those whom He knows personally, then He cannot have died merely so that anyone and everyone might have a chance at salvation.

h. John 10:26-28. 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.

That He actually saves His sheep by His death, saves them all the way to heavenly glory, infallibly and completely, is taught in the verses quoted. These verses show that it is not our faith that determines whether we will profit from Christ's death, but the will of God. In other words, as Jesus tells the unbelieving Jews, it is not that they are not part of the sheep who profit from His death because they do not believe; but because they are not of His sheep, they do not believe, i.e., because He did not die for them, they do not receive the gift of faith which He purchases for us with His own blood nor any of the other blessings of salvation.

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

This passage identifies once again those for whom the blood of Christ was shed as a limited and particular number of persons, in this case, the church. And when we remember that very often in the Scriptures the church is contrasted with the world as a group drawn and called out of it, this makes the text even more emphatic.

j. Isaiah 53:8. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

k. Luke 1:68. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people.

Here are two more passages that define those for whom Christ gave His life as "His people" or even "My people" (God Himself speaking). Surely the wicked and unbelieving cannot be called that!

l. Titus 2:13, 14. Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of all good works.

m. Galatians 3:13. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.

These last passages define those who benefit from Christ's redemptive work as "us," and the word used is by its very nature exclusive rather than inclusive.

Titus 2:13, 14 is especially significant because it not only speaks of Christ giving Himself for us but shows that those for whom He gave Himself are surely and completely saved - redeemed, purified, and zealous of good works.

---

2. Passages which show that Christ's death actually and fully saves those for whom He died.

Many of the passages quoted above demonstrate clearly that Christ's death does not make salvation just a possibility, so that it depends on our accepting it to become efficacious but that it is salvation and the guarantee of eternal life for all those for whom He died. Since this is the real issue, however, in the debate over limited atonement, we add these passages to those previously quoted.

a. Luke 19:10. For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Notice here that Christ comes to save the lost, not just to make it possible for them to be saved, the lost being those who know themselves lost like Zacchaeus. What is especially important about this verse, though, is that it is an explanation ("For ...") of the previous verse. There Jesus says, "This day is salvation come to this house." Salvation came, therefore, to the house of Zacchaeus not because he believed but because the Son of Man comes to save.

b. Romans 5:8-10. But God commended therewith his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 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.

The point cannot be made anymore clearly than this verse makes it. We are reconciled to God by the death of Christ. That means that there is nothing anymore that is between God and us, nor can anything come between us, for having been reconciled, we shall be saved. This reference to salvation is more a reference to the final glory of God's people than to their first partaking of it, but that in no wise lessens the emphasis of the text. If anything, it makes the text even stronger, for then we have here a guarantee not only of the beginning of salvation but of eternal life itself and of heavenly glory. What is more, the passage is repeating and re-emphasizing that point, for it has already stated that we are justified by His blood (and therefore have peace with God (v. 1), and being justified shall surely be saved from wrath. The line of thought therefore is this: (1) Christ's death justifies; (2) because it justifies, it surely saves us from God's wrath; (3) therefore, there is no possibility of condemnation for anyone for whom Christ died but rather the assurance of life everlasting.

c I Peter 2:24. Who his ownself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

This passage also teaches that not only Christ's death, but also all His suffering (his stripes) have actual saving power. It is to us the death of sin and the beginning of a new life of righteousness as well as our healing. And not only is it not merely the possibility of healing, but by it we were (literally, "have been") healed.

-----

### C. Difficult Passages

Here again there are many passages which are used to teach that Christ died for all men without exception simply because they have in them the words all or world. Rather than deal with each passage separately we shall group them as to the word they use and deal with them by choosing a few representative examples to show how they must all be interpreted in the light of the rest of the Scriptures. Generally speaking, however, it may be said that these passages do not intend to show that Christ died for all men without exception but that He died for all men without distinction, that is, making no difference

between Jew or Gentile, great or small, rich or poor, slave or master.

-----

#### 1. All passages.

There are, therefore, first of all those passages which use the word all in connection with Christ's death. The best known passages are Romans 5:18; II Corinthians 5:14, 15; I Timothy 2:4-6; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; and II Peter 3:9.

In almost all of these passages the word all must be qualified in light of the context and very often simply means "all the elect" or "all God's people." But in every case the Scriptures themselves will provide the qualifier. Nor is this unusual. We speak that way so often in our everyday talk that we hardly realize it, simply using the word all when we are actually referring to a rather limited number of people; but we do not add the qualifier, because in the context of what we have been saying it is so obvious it does not need to be said.

Thus I Corinthians 15:22. All here very plainly means "all who are in Christ." This is the parallel to all who are in Adam, who die in Adam. In fact, the text cannot mean anything else, or it teaches that every single person will ultimately be saved, something plainly contradictory to the rest of the Scriptures.

Thus also I Timothy 2:4-6. Here all plainly means "all kinds of men," not just ordinary people, but also rulers and governors and those who are in authority. That is the whole context of the statement that Christ is the Mediator of "all" and that God wills "all" to be saved. Paul begins with that idea in the very first verse where he admonishes the church to pray for all kinds of persons, especially for rulers, something they had apparently been neglecting. He is not telling them to pray for every single person in the world, a manifest impossibility. And so in the following verses he does not introduce a new thought but simply follows up that admonition with various reasons, i.e., that God has willed the salvation of all kinds of persons and that Christ is also the Mediator of all kinds of persons. Other passages which use the word all in this same way, to mean "all kinds" or "all manner" are Matthew 4:23; 5:11; 10:1; Luke 11:42; Acts 10:12; Romans 7:8; I Peter 1:15; and Revelation 21:19. In many of these passages, in fact, that is the only thing the word all can mean. Thus even though these particular passages do not refer directly or at all to the death of Christ, they nevertheless do establish the way the word all can be and is used in the Scriptures.

Similar is Titus 2:11. If this passage teaches that the grace of God in the cross is for all men without exception, then it not only contradicts some of the passages we have already cited but contradicts the rest of Titus 2, particularly verses 13 and 14 which say that that grace and salvation were revealed for us, by which Paul refers to the church. What this means, of course, is that the word all must be and is qualified as a reference to a limited number of persons.

Likewise II Peter 3:9. Obviously this passage cannot mean that God is waiting for "all" to come to repentance in the sense that He is waiting for every single person to come to Christ and to repentance. If that were true, then Christ would never come, for that is what is being "delayed" here in the passage. Rather, as the passage itself indicates, the "all" here refers to "all of us." In fact, Peter says in the passage that it is to "us," i.e., to "all of us" that God is longsuffering and for whom He is waiting, that is for all the elect, or for all of the church.

So also with all the passages that use this language.

---

## 2. World passages.

There are also those passages that use the word world in identifying those for whom Christ died. The most often quoted passages which use this language are John 1:29; 3:16; 4:42; and I John 2:2. Those less often quoted are II Corinthians 5:19 and I John 4:14. These passages, too, must be understood in light of the rest of the Word of God. The key to these passages is John 17:9 which shows that there are two worlds, one for which Christ does not even pray, much less die (for if He could die for it, surely He could and would pray for it), and another world for which He both prays and dies: "I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine." Most of the passages must be interpreted with this in mind.

In a few of these passages, the reference of the word world is not so much to the world of the elect in distinction from the world of the wicked reprobate but to the world of the Gentiles in distinction from the world of Jews. But even in this case there are two worlds, though in this case both are redeemed by the blood of Christ. The most notable of these passages is I John 2:2.

There is a reason, however, why the Bible uses these words when speaking of the death of Christ. It does not, in other words, use them merely to make things difficult or to cause confusion but to teach a very important truth. That truth is this: that God, in saving His people does save the world. His work of salvation is not some kind of salvage work by which He manages to rescue a few here and there, but it is the salvation of the world which He originally created, though because of sin, it involves the cutting off and destruction of many persons. In other words, in the same way, that God saves His "vine" in Isaiah 5 and even saves it by cutting off many of the branches, so God saves His world. It is important that we see salvation from this perspective also, since it shows us that God is not frustrated by the coming of sin so that the best He can do is to salvage something of the wreckage of His plans, but that He in perfect wisdom accomplishes His original purpose and saves His world.

3. There are a few other passages that need to be dealt with here, notably I Timothy 4:10 and II Peter 2:1. The first passage would seem to teach that God in addition to being the Savior of His people is also in some sense the Savior of all men. II Peter 2:1 would seem to teach that the Lord in some sense of the word also "purchased" those who deny Him and are finally destroyed.

As far as I Timothy 4:10 is concerned, it must be clear that this passage cannot mean that God is the Savior of all men in the usual sense of the word, because otherwise the passage would contradict the rest of the Scriptures and teach universalism, i.e., that no one will be damned, since it does not say just that God sent His Son for all but is the Savior of all. The simplest explanation is this, and it was the explanation that John Calvin himself gave: that God is the Savior of all men in the sense that He provides life and breath, food and health and the other necessities of life for all without exception, while He gives life and health and all the other things to His people not only physically but also spiritually. This passage would simply confirm, therefore, the teaching of such passages as Psalm 145:9; Acts 17:25; and Hebrews 6:7. Savior has, then, the sense only of "provider" as far as the wicked are concerned.

With respect to the second passage, II Peter 2:1, it must be remembered first of all that the passage cannot mean that these people were actually purchased by Christ with His own blood. If that is the case, then they belong to Christ and belong to Him forever, for as He says in John 10:27, 28: "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."

Remembering that, there are several possible ways to interpret the passage. The first would simply make the words the Lord that bought them a reference to the truth of blood atonement as taught by and believed in the church leaving the reference of the pronoun them general and not a reference to these false prophets. In other words, these false prophets deny this confession of the church, "The Lord bought us." The other interpretation is very similar and would make the word them refer to the people instead of making it refer to the false teachers. Those who are bought by the blood of Christ, then, are the people of God in the past and also in the present (those to whom Peter is writing).

In conclusion, let the point made briefly above be stressed again, i.e., that if the passages that seem to teach that Christ died for all men without exception are carefully examined and then interpreted as a reference to every person one will find that they teach far more than those who believe in universal atonement want them to teach, that is, they would then teach not just that Christ died for all men without exception but that all are actually saved and go to heaven.

-----

#### D. Objection

An objection often heard against the doctrine of limited or particular atonement is that it denies the full value of Christ's sacrifice in that it teaches that Christ died only for some and not for all. Actually, this is the very opposite of the truth. It is not limited atonement that denies the value of Christ's death but the teaching that Christ died in some sense for all.

The point, once again, is that if Christ died for all and all are not in fact really and completely saved by His death, then the only possible conclusion is that Christ's death really did not do very much for them. It did not even determine finally whether or not they would perish or be saved. Christ's sacrifice, in that case, is neither very powerful or very valuable. At best it only made salvation possible.

But if all those for whom Christ died, even if they are not all men, are truly and fully saved by His sacrifice, then His blood is indeed beyond price because of its saving power. And the doctrine of limited atonement teaches that Christ's death is the full salvation of all those for whom He died.

-----

#### E. Denials of Limited Atonement

As with the other four points, this doctrine of limited atonement has also been denied in various ways throughout the history of the church.

##### 1. Universalism.

This teaching says that all men actually are saved by the blood of Christ and makes its appeal to those passages which speak of "all men" or of "the world." The difference between this teaching and that of Arminianism is that rather than teaching that Christ died for all but that all do not actually benefit from Christ's death so that they go to heaven, this teaching says that no one goes to hell and that the blood of Christ avails for all without exception.

Any cursory study of the Scriptures' teaching on judgment and hell will show that this teaching is false. Nevertheless, as obviously contrary as it is to the Scriptures, it is in some ways more consistent and more

correct than the idea that Christ really died only to make salvation possible, since it does not deny the power of the blood of Christ to save. In fact, if we are to maintain that Christ's death has saving power, this is the only possible alternative to Calvinism.

---

## 2. Roman Catholicism.

The Roman Catholic Church denies the doctrine of limited atonement not so much by denying that Christ died only for His people but by denying that His blood is the only thing that cleanses away sin and by denying that He removed the sins of His people once for all. Thus such things as good works, penance, and purgatory are needed in addition to the blood of Christ to purge away sin. Likewise, the merits of the saints are of as much value as Christ's work in forgiving sins. This is especially true of the Roman Catholic mass, which supposedly is a non-bloody re-enactment of the death of Christ and a clear denial of the once-for-all-time value of Christ's death.

However, the Roman Catholic Church also denies the limited character of the atonement by teaching that there are more for whom the blood of Christ avails than those who finally go to heaven. For example, according to Roman Catholic teaching, the blood of Christ through the sacrament of baptism actually washes away original sin and also the original sin of some who do not continue in the way of salvation. This was also very similar to the teaching of Martin Luther and to that of the Lutheran churches today. Luther did, however, though somewhat inconsistently, teach limited atonement in other connections. It was only at this point that he "fudged."

---

## 3. Arminianism.

Arminianism, named after the followers of Jacob Arminius, against whom the original Five Points of Calvinism, Canons of Dordt, were written, taught and still teach today that Christ died for all men, though all are not actually saved and go to heaven. They explain this by teaching that Christ through His death made salvation available to all and that whether or not he will actually profit from the death of Christ depends on a person's believing and accepting what Christ has done.

This, however, makes our salvation depend more on our own choice or decision than on the death of Christ and really denies the power of Christ's blood. As the Canons of Dordt point out, this really means that Christ might have died without anyone actually profiting from His death, something which does not speak well either of the wisdom of God in sending Christ or of the value of Christ's death. It constitutes a denial of the power and value of Christ's death, therefore, even though this is the charge usually leveled against the teaching of Calvinism by those who hold to this teaching.

---

## 4. The free offer of the gospel.

This pestiferous teaching has crept into Reformed theology in recent years and is an "enemy in the camp" in that it also constitutes a denial of limited atonement.

This teaching says that God in the gospel makes a sincere and well-meaning offer of salvation to every person who hears the gospel, expressing in the gospel His desire that all be saved.

If this is true, then God lies in the preaching of the gospel, for He says what simply is not true according to the doctrine of limited atonement. His will as revealed in the cross is not that He desires that salvation of all men, but of some only, that is, of His elect, nor did He send His Son for all men but for the elect. How then can He sincerely say in the gospel that He wants all men to be saved without contradicting Himself and making Himself a liar? Nor is this taught anywhere in the Scriptures.

What is more, it is self-evident that if God really does express in the gospel a desire that all men be saved then the only possible basis for that can be that in some sense of the word He also sent Christ to die for all men. But that is not limited atonement. The problem here is that many who claim to believe in limited atonement actually do not teach it and in fact contradict it at this point. By doing so, they seriously damage the cause of Calvinism.

This teaching, by the way, is explicitly rejected in the Canons of Dordt, the original Five Points, as part of the erroneous teaching of the Arminians (cf. Canons III, IV, Rejection of Errors, 5).

---

#### 5. Modernism.

This is not the name, obviously, of any particular sect or denomination but a reference to the teaching, so common today, that the death of Christ is not even atonement or redemption, but merely an example of a man who was willing to die for His principles and an example that we must follow. This teaching would make the death of Christ an example for all, at least for all who care to give heed to it, but it is clear that by denying the redemptive character of the blood of Christ, those who teach such are outside the pale of Christianity, for the death and atoning sacrifice of Christ are the very principles on which Christianity is founded.

The reason for mentioning this, however, is that in essence its teaching is not that much different from the teaching of Arminianism in that Arminianism also denies the power and efficacy of the blood of Christ. In fact, at the time of the Synod of Dordt, the Arminians were teaching various theories of the atonement which made the atonement merely an example of God's love or of His justice and which explicitly denied that the atonement was anything more than an example.

---

#### 6. Sufficiency and efficiency.

There are also some who teach that while the death of Christ was actually powerful only for the salvation of the elect, that it was nevertheless sufficiently valuable to have paid for the sins of all mankind. This in itself is rather abstract and perhaps not overly objectionable, though the Scriptures certainly do not make such a distinction but insist that the atonement is both powerful and valuable only for the elect. However, this distinction is usually carried a step farther, so that it is taught not only that the death of Christ was hypothetically valuable enough to pay for the sins of all but that God actually intended it to do that, and that the only reason it does not is man's stubbornness in not believing and accepting the work of Christ.

This, obviously, is but thinly disguised Arminianism, and also adds up to a denial of the particular and limited character of the atonement.

---

## 7. God loves all men.

Obviously, the whole discussion of the extent of the atonement is inseparably connected with a discussion of God's love and God's intention. The teaching that Christ died for all without exception follows from the teaching that God loves all and wants all to be saved. There is, then, a very close connection between the doctrines of limited atonement and unconditional election. The Calvinist does not believe just that Christ died for some because that is the teaching of the Bible but also because he believes that the Bible teaches sovereign unconditional election, i.e., that God eternally loves and intends to save some only and not all. This is, however, the subject of another chapter.

---

## F. Practical Importance

Nor is the doctrine of limited atonement a mere abstraction but part of the truth which rules our lives and makes us holy and obedient and gives us our comfort. With that in mind let us look at some of the practical implications of the doctrine.

### 1. Limited atonement and the preaching.

Whether or not one believes in limited atonement makes a tremendous difference in the way the gospel is preached. If the cross is indeed the power of God unto salvation as the Scriptures tell us it is, then the preaching will be the proclamation of the cross and of the death of Christ on the cross, and the power by which sinners believe will be the power of God speaking to them through that proclamation and by His Spirit in their hearts.

If, however, the power of the cross depends on man's accepting it or believing it, then the preaching will degenerate into a kind of "salespitch," as in many cases it has. One need only witness the various revival meetings that are so popular, the advent of the altar call, and the begging and pleading with sinners that is introduced into the worship of the church to see what the preaching becomes when the truth of limited, efficacious atonement is denied. It becomes, in the words of another writer, a "hawking" of Jesus Christ and of the cross on order of and very much like that which goes on at a carnival.

This is not to deny that there must also go forth as part of the preaching of the cross the call to repent and believe, but if one truly believes in limited atonement, then that will indeed be a call in the sense of a command and not a thinly disguised offer of salvation to all or a vain attempt to "sell" Christ by begging with sinners. Then too, the charisma and oratorical skill of the preacher are not the main thing in preaching, as so many think today, but the fact that He preaches nothing but Christ crucified as the power of God unto salvation. What one believes about the atonement, therefore, has a profound effect on the very nature and manner of gospel preaching.

---

### 2. Limited atonement and missions.

Closely connected with the preceding is the fact that the doctrine of limited atonement means that the calling of the church in missions is not to preach the gospel to every single soul now living but to preach it when and where God sends her. It is a misunderstanding of this point that places a heavy burden of guilt on Christians today, for it is all but impossible both in terms of cost and in terms of manpower to preach the gospel to every living human being. Yet the church ought to feel guilty if Christ has died for every person and the church has not made that known to everyone living. Then there is no Christian living who ought not sell all his possessions and dedicate every moment of his life to try to accomplish this goal. If he does not, he is guilty of failing to let men know that Christ has died for them. Then too, the church in the past has never realized her calling to preach the gospel to all the world but has fallen far short of that most important calling of all, her great commission.

If, however, one believes in limited atonement, then one can be sure that the cross is not for all and be satisfied to preach the gospel when and where God sends. This is not to say that the church must not actively and aggressively do the work of missions, only that she need not feel guilty when she is not able for legitimate reasons to bring that gospel to every single man, woman, and child. She can rest content that where God has His people He will make it possible also for the church to preach the gospel both by opening the door and by providing the necessary means.

---

### 3. Limited atonement and witnessing.

Belief in limited atonement also has an effect on the content of the believer's witness as well as the content of mission preaching. The doctrine of limited atonement means that neither the church in its mission preaching nor the believer in his witnessing may go to the lost and simply say to them, "Christ died for you!" To say that would in many cases simply be a lie and the attempt to persuade the lost by telling them this little more than seduction.

What the believer must do in his witnessing is speak of Christ and the power of His work as well as the fact that He died for the sins of His people, calling the lost to repentance and faith in Christ, and leaving the work of convincing and convicting sinners to the Holy Spirit.

---

### 4. Limited atonement and the assurance of salvation.

It should also be evident that our assurance of salvation depends on our knowing that the cross is salvation, full and free. If we should really think that the cross was only a possibility of salvation and that our benefiting from the cross was dependent on our accepting it, we would be bereft of all our comfort in Christ, for our comfort is exactly that He is all our salvation and that nothing more is needed besides Him.

If we should think that God sincerely offered salvation to all men without exception, how should we ever know that we were not among those to whom salvation was sincerely offered by God, while He had not even sent His Son to die for our sins or given us to Christ to be saved by His blood? We must know that His blood is the only thing that stands between us and hell, for if that is not sufficient to save us, then what in all the world is?

## 5. Limited atonement and the glory of God.

As far as glorifying and praising God in the church is concerned, this doctrine is also of the greatest possible value. Who could praise a God Who sincerely offers salvation to all without even intending their salvation? Who can praise a God Who sent His Son into the world and subjected Him to the shame and reproach of the cross on the mere chance that some might be saved?

One thing is certain. However much we may quibble about these doctrines, God will not allow one drop of His Son's blood to be wasted or allow His costly death to be a failure. Nor will He allow His own wisdom to be impugned by the notion that He would go to such effort and pay such a price merely in the hope that some might be saved nor allow His power to be blasphemed as though He were not able to save all those whom He intended to save and for whom He sent His Son.

It is the sovereignty of God which is really at stake here, and we ought to see that. God is not only sovereign in deciding from eternity who shall be saved, but He is the same Sovereign at the cross and in the preaching of the cross, for there also He decides who shall be saved and who shall profit from the blood of Jesus Christ His Son.

---

## G. Relation to the other four points

The doctrine of limited atonement, as we have already to some extent seen, is inseparably related to the other four points. It is, therefore, really impossible to be a three- or four-point Calvinist and reject this doctrine while maintaining all or most of the others.

As far as unconditional election is concerned, that doctrine, with the emphasis on unconditional, insists that man's faith is not in any sense of the word a condition to his salvation but that salvation is all of grace. This must also be true at the cross. If salvation through the cross is conditional and depends on man's acceptance of it, then election cannot be unconditional, since election is not a mere choice of those who will be saved but the actual planning of the way of salvation as well. So also election would be in vain if salvation in the cross still depended on man's choice or decision for Christ, for whether or not God chose someone would really make no difference. All would still hinge on man's own free will and decision.

As far as total depravity is concerned, that doctrine is the reason why the atonement must be efficacious for all those whom God has given to Christ, for the doctrine of total depravity teaches us that man has of himself no power to accept Christ or believe in the cross. He can have that power only through the cross and by the cross. If the power of the cross really depended on our acceptance of Christ, the doctrine of total depravity says that no one at all could possibly be saved by the cross.

Likewise, the doctrines of irresistible grace and perseverance follow from this doctrine, for to teach limited atonement is to teach also efficacious atonement, as we have seen, and that simply means that by His cross Christ purchased all that was necessary for our salvation and purchased it for us with the price of His own blood so that it belongs to us and so that we belong to Him and cannot be let go or lost. Thus the power of the cross is the guarantee of our salvation by the power of efficacious grace and our perseverance until the end.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ronald-hanko/limited-atonement/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**