

## QUESTION ABOUT LIMITED VS. UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

QUESTION: Hi, Tim: I wanted to ask you a question about your thoughts on Calvinism. If I remember correctly, you said that a "true Calvinist" believes that Christ died only for sins of the elect, while you believe that Christ died for the sins of the whole world. Did I understand that correctly? If I did, then in practice, and based on the other tenets of Calvinism, isn't this difference no difference at all? If God saves only the elect, but Christ died for the sins of everyone (whole world), how is that different from Christ dying for only the elect? In the end, don't both yield the same set of saved individuals?

ANSWER: I do agree with what you're saying. For the most part, *practically*, it makes no difference whether or not you believe in Limited or Unlimited Atonement. Either way, the elect get saved. So, in a sense, this debate is a rather arcane issue for theologians to argue about.

Having said that, I think the core issue in the debate is the veracity of God. If Jesus did die only for the elect, His offer of salvation to the world seems facetious, i.e., if he didn't die for the non-elect, then the offer of salvation to the whole world isn't a real offer.

Now, a thorough-going Calvinist would retort that my "veracity of God" objection could just as easily apply to the impact of election itself. Even if the Atonement is Unlimited, nevertheless, only the elect will be saved, and therefore doesn't that also mean that the offer of salvation to the whole world is facetious--since only the elect will be subject to the Irresistible Grace of God in bringing them to Christ.

So ultimately, this comes down to the roots of our feeble attempts to understand the tension between the truths of the sovereignty of God and the free-will of man. Extreme Calvinists virtually reject any "realness" of the free-will of man. Arminians virtually reject the determinate sovereignty of God, by explaining "election" as God's prior choice based upon the prescience of his foreknowledge (i.e., God elects those whom he foreknows will believe when they hear the Gospel).

I believe that here we enter a realm of true "mystery" that exceeds our feeble efforts of human understanding--and that the relationship of the sovereignty of God and the free-will of man is indeed a theological paradox, i.e., two revealed but apparently irreconcilable truths. I believe that only those who are elect will be saved. I also believe that the offer of salvation to all men is a genuine offer and that every man is morally responsible for his choice. I believe that this "paradox" rests comfortably on the mind of God, despite the fact that it is uncomfortable and apparently contradictory to my mind. This is one of those issues about which Augustine (?) said, *We speak, not because we understand, but so as in order not to be silent.*

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May 21, 2007