

www.ShepherdServe.org
You are welcome to distribute printed copies of this document, or copy and paste this document to distribute via email, as long as the document is unaltered and kept in its *entirety* (including copyright notices), and is not sold for profit. However, if you wish to post this material on your website or anywhere else online, you must first contact us to get permission. ©2007 by David Servant

The Five Points of Calvinism Considered

By David Servant

4. Limited Atonement

Finally we come to the L of the TULIP acronym, which stands for *Limited Atonement*. Because Calvinists believe that God unconditionally elected before time only certain people to be saved, Calvinists are thus faced with some difficult questions: *Why does Scripture say that Jesus died for everyone?* and *Why would Jesus die for those who are not predestined to be saved, but who are predestined to be damned?*

The non-Calvinist has no such questions to wrestle with. Because God wants every person to repent and believe, Jesus died for all, making it possible for anyone who repents and believes in the Lord Jesus to have eternal life through His substitutionary sacrifice. It is just that simple.

The Calvinist solves his dilemma by claiming that Jesus did indeed die for everyone, but that He died in a different way for the elect than for the non-elect. For the elect, Jesus purchased “saving grace,” which results in their being granted everything that was needed to save them, including Calvinism’s irresistible grace, regeneration, the gifts of repentance and faith, and so on. For the non-elect (those predestined to damnation) Jesus died that they might enjoy only “common grace,” that is, the mercy and blessings that every person enjoys during his life. It is on this basis that Calvinists like Piper interpret Paul’s words that God “is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (1 Tim. 4:10). To Piper, Jesus *saves* all men from the immediate eternal punishment they deserve all during the time they are allotted to live on the earth, but He *saves* only the elect from eternal punishment after they die (see *Piper*, p. 14, prgh. 6).

I hardly think, however, that this would make Jesus much of a “savior” to the non-elect, as it would have been better for them to never have been born than that they “enjoy” such a temporal “salvation.” Every second of “common grace” will cost them billions of years in hell where they will be tortured forever. The “common grace” that God extends to those predestined to be eternally damned makes Jesus more of a sadistic, deranged maniac than a savior to them. (What would *you* think of a person who conceives children with the intention of being kind to them for five years and then torturing them for seventy?)

Thus, the Calvinistic interpretation of 1 Timothy 4:10 is unnatural, forced and far-fetched. A more natural interpretation would be that since Jesus died for *all* people, He is

the Savior of *all* men, but especially believers, because they receive and enjoy the benefits of the salvation He offers to all men. This interpretation would harmonize much better with Paul's earlier words in the same epistle, where he wrote, "God our Savior, who desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4, emphasis added).

In contrast to the Calvinistic view which says that God offers His saving grace to only a select few, the apostle Paul declared that God offers His saving grace to everyone:

For the *grace* of God has appeared, bringing *salvation* to *all* men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age (Tit. 2:11-12, emphasis added).

Piper's Arguments

Piper claims that the non-Calvinist view of Christ's atonement is incompatible with the doctrines of total depravity and irresistible grace, (see p. 13., prgh. 5 through p. 14., prgh. 3), and he is entirely correct, because those two doctrines themselves are erroneous. Piper states that if Christ's atonement only purchased the *potential* of salvation for sinners, there is no way *anyone* could be saved, because people would be left to overcome their total depravity by their own power and regenerate themselves apart from God's irresistible grace that was purchased by Christ on the cross. Since I have already shown the grave errors of the Calvinistic doctrines of *Total Depravity* and *Irresistible Grace*, there is really no need to argue against Piper's flawed logic here. His logic is built on false doctrines. God doesn't save people by bestowing on them irresistible grace, and no one needs to overcome Calvinistic total depravity because there is no such thing as total depravity by the Calvinistic definition. No one needs to regenerate himself because regeneration does not precede faith. God regenerates those who believe, as Scripture plainly says.

Furthermore, to imply that non-Calvinists believe that Christ's atonement only purchases the *potential* of salvation for sinners is very misleading. Christ's atonement does much more than that. It purchases for everyone what is necessary for their salvation—forgiveness, regeneration, eternity in heaven, and so on. It does not, however, purchase the forcing of people against their wills to believe in Christ, as that is not God's desire or His plan. God has given every person a free will because it is His will that each individual exercise the right to believe in Christ or reject Christ. If God wanted robots, He would have created robots. But He didn't want robots. He wants a family that loves Him. Apart from freedom of the will, love is impossible.

Jesus died for every person's sins, but that doesn't automatically mean that everyone will be saved (as Piper erroneously argues would be true if Jesus atoned for everyone's sins). Every individual must receive salvation by believing in the Lord Jesus. When people believe, then what Christ accomplished for them becomes effectual in their lives. This is the only conclusion we can rightfully draw from Scripture that tells us that Jesus died for everyone's sins and yet also tells that not everyone will be saved.

Is it true that God extends His saving grace to only a select group of unconditionally elected people? Not according to the apostle John, who believed that Jesus' atonement

was not limited for the saving of some, but accomplished on behalf of every person in the world:

And He Himself [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, *but also for those of the whole world* (1 John 2:2, emphasis added).

The word *propitiation* means “the appeasement of wrath.” John plainly declared that Jesus appeased the wrath of God, not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world. What could be more plain?

In regard to this verse that so obviously contradicts the Calvinistic idea of a limited atonement, Piper attempts to convince us that John must have meant something other than what he wrote. John must have meant, claims Piper, that Jesus not only appeased God’s wrath on behalf of his little group of Christians, but also for the sins of the rest of the Christians scattered all over the world! (see p. 15, prgh. 7). So, according to Piper, the “whole world” *really* means “the children of God scattered throughout the whole world” (p. 16, prgh. 4). But that is a forced and unnatural interpretation and a redefinition of terms. Are we really to believe that the Christians to whom John wrote thought that Jesus didn’t atone for the sins of all believers around the world, and that John wrote to correct their misunderstanding? Does Piper think his readers are that stupid? And why doesn’t Piper use the same redefinition of the phrase “whole world” when John uses it later on in the same epistle, in 1 John 5:19? There we read:

We know that we are of God, and the *whole world* lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19, emphasis added).

Was John saying that all the other Christians outside his little group were not of God and that they were lying in the power of Satan? The answer is obvious (see also 1 John 4:14).

Piper claims that John couldn’t have meant that Jesus appeased God’s wrath for the sins of the entire world, because “propitiated sins cannot be punished....Therefore if Christ is the propitiation for all the sins of every individual in the world, they cannot be punished, and must be saved” (p. 16, prgh. 6). This, of course, is only logical to the Calvinistic mind, because only Calvinists believe that man plays no part in his salvation. All others realize, as Scripture repeatedly teaches, that in order for any person to experience the benefits of salvation that Christ purchased for him on the cross, he must repent and believe. Christ’s atonement becomes effectual for people only when they meet His conditions.

We have already read where Paul wrote to the Romans that the adoption as sons *belonged* to the Jews (see Rom. 9:4). Using Piper’s logic, we would have to conclude that because sonship belongs to every Jew, then every Jew will become God’s child. But Paul made it clear that every Jew had to believe in Jesus if he was to actually possess his rightful adoption as a son. This principle is so abundantly plain in Scripture that we must wonder why Piper would even attempt to persuade us against it. Only those who have first bought into the Calvinistic doctrines of total depravity and irresistible grace can be fooled by Piper’s conclusion that Christ’s atonement was intended to save only some.

The Testimony of Jesus

Consider the following verses from John's Gospel, all of which prove that the benefits of Christ's atonement were not limited to any supposed group of unconditionally elected people, but were available to all who would believe. Except for the first quotation of John the Baptist, all the rest are from Jesus' own lips:

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away *the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29, emphasis added).

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. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the *world*, but that *the world should be saved* through Him (John 3:16-17, emphasis added).

For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and *gives life* to the *world* (John 6:33, emphasis added)

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 (John 6:51, emphasis added).

I have come as light into the *world*, that *everyone* who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if *anyone* hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, *but to save the world* (John 12:46-47, emphasis added).

Jesus couldn't have made His message clearer. He gave His life for the world. Completely ignoring those passages, however, Piper isolates three passages from the Gospel of John in order to prove that "the death of Christ was designed for the salvation of God's people, not for every individual" (p. 15, prgh. 2).

Piper begins with John 10:15, in which Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep." Piper claims this verse proves that Jesus only died for the ones God predestined for salvation, the "sheep." But are we to ignore or nullify the many just-quoted verses from John's Gospel and exalt this single verse? Or would it be better to believe everything that Jesus said and let scripture interpret scripture, so that we arrive at a biblically-balanced understanding?

Note that Jesus did not say in John 10:15 that He laid His life down *exclusively* for His sheep. If He did, then He contradicted Himself in the other passages I've just quoted from John's Gospel. In the passage Piper quotes, Jesus is only emphasizing His love for His followers. If Jesus said to you, "I died for you," would that prove that He died for you and no one else? Obviously not. Then why should we conclude, as Piper does (see p. 16-17), that when Scripture *sometimes* says that Jesus gave His life as a ransom for many, or for the church, that Jesus died *only* for the elect and not everyone? Consider Piper's logic in the following quotation from his booklet:

Similarly in Titus 2:14 Paul describes the purpose of Christ's death like this: "[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquities and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." If Paul were an Arminian would he not have said, "He gave himself to redeem all men from iniquity and purify all men for himself"? (p. 17, prgh. 2)

Piper is again forcing his interpretation on a text. Why couldn't the "us" whom Jesus "gave himself for" be "those who have repented and believed"? Why must the "us" be "those individuals whom God has pre-selected for salvation"?

Once again, Piper selects a verse that seems to support his Calvinistic view and ignores all others that would contradict his view. Simply because Paul wrote in Titus 2:14 that Jesus gave Himself to "redeem *us*," rather than to "redeem *all*," that supposedly proves that Paul was a Calvinist who believed that Jesus only died for the people God predestined to be saved! Using the same flawed logic, what must Piper conclude from Paul's words in Galatians 4:4-5? There we read,

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, *in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law*, that we might receive the adoption as sons (emphasis added).

Note that Paul said God sent His Son to redeem "those who were under the Law." That would mean all Jews and only Jews. Applying the same logic that Piper applies to interpreting Titus 2:14, we would have to conclude that Jesus *only* died for the Jews. And if we adopt Piper's previously-mentioned logic (i.e., that "propitiated sins cannot be punished"; see p. 16, prgh. 6), we would also have to conclude that since God sent His Son to redeem those under the Law, then all under the Law *must* be redeemed, because redeemed people can't be sent to hell. Thus all Jews are saved! Thus we see the glaring errors and inconsistency of Piper's pathetic methods of Bible interpretation.

Piper next pulls from their context verses 6, 9 and 19 of John 17, passages from Jesus' high priestly prayer, a prayer in which Jesus prays that His church might be one in order that the *world will believe that God sent His Son* (see John 17:21). By isolating specific requests Jesus made for His followers from within this prayer, Piper tries to prove that Jesus *didn't* die for the very world that He prays would believe in Him! Amazing!

Piper next quotes John 11:51-52, a passage which tells of how Caiaphas prophesied that "Jesus should die for the nation, and not the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." Piper is truly on a search for needles in the haystack here. In the very same sentence which says that Jesus should die to gather into one the children of God scattered abroad (which Piper claims proves that Jesus didn't die for everyone), we also read that Jesus should die for the *nation* of Israel! Piper consistently ignores the majority of scriptures that contradict his doctrine, and focuses only on those that seem to support his doctrine, even if he has to ignore the first half of a sentence and focus solely on the second half of a sentence.

Did Jesus die for everyone that everyone might be saved? What does Scripture say? Consider the following:

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us *all* to fall on Him (Is. 53:6, emphasis added).

The same *all* who like sheep have gone astray are the same *all* whose iniquity fell upon Jesus. Calvinists would quickly endorse the first part of this verse as being supportive of their doctrine of total depravity. *All* are totally depraved, they would say. However, the Lord caused the iniquity of *all* those same totally depraved people to fall on Jesus. Why doesn't Piper conclude from this verse that all will be saved, since the iniquity of *all* fell upon Jesus, and "propitiated sins cannot be punished" (Piper, p. 16, prgh. 6)?

For God has shut up *all* in disobedience that He might show mercy to *all* (Rom. 11:32, emphasis added).

The same *all* who are disobedient are the same *all* to whom God is showing saving mercy.

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for *all*, therefore *all* died; and He died for *all*, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (2 Cor. 5:14-15, emphasis added).

Paul clearly states that Christ died for *all*, thus he concludes that "all died." Notice the flow of his logic. The foundation of Paul's logic is the truth that Christ died for all. From this, Paul concludes that "all died." That is, the proof that all had died was the fact that Christ died for all. There can be no mistaking Paul here. Christ died for all who were spiritually dead, which is everyone. Paul then declares Christ's intention in dying for all, that they should repent and "no longer live for themselves, but for Him." Everyone *should* do that because Christ died for all, but not all do.

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*, the testimony borne at the proper time (1 Tim. 2:5-6, emphasis added).

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for *everyone* (Heb. 2:9, emphasis added).

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even *denying the Master who bought them*, bringing swift destruction upon themselves (2 Pet. 2:1, emphasis added).

The last-quoted scripture proves that Jesus even paid for the sins of false teachers who will spend eternity in hell. Jesus died for the sins of all people because God wants all people to be saved.

Piper implies that non-Calvinists believe that the cross was only “intended to give all men the opportunity to save themselves” (p. 17, prgh 1). That is, however, a very unfair accusation. No true Arminian believes such nonsense. No person can save himself. We can only respond to the gospel in faith, as God expects us to, using our God-given free wills under the influence of God’s drawing, in order to receive the salvation that Christ has purchased on the cross through His sufferings. That is a far cry from a person “saving himself.”

Piper’s Conclusion

Piper saves his best argument for last, which is nothing more than a twist on the argument he has used throughout his chapter on *Limited Atonement*. He correctly states that Arminians believe that (1) Christ died for all the sins of all men, and (2) the reason that not all men are saved is because they don’t believe. He then asks his “clincher” question: “But is this unbelief not one of the sins for which Christ died?” (p. 18, prgh. 1). If the Arminian answers *yes*, then according to Piper, that would mean that everyone would be saved, because God would have nothing to hold against anyone, not even their unbelief.

Certainly unbelief is one of the sins for which Jesus died. But what Piper again misses is the obvious fact that what Jesus did for everyone only becomes effectual in the lives of individuals when individuals believe. This couldn’t be more obvious in Scripture. God provided a way for *every* Israelite to escape His wrath upon Egypt, but the benefit of that salvation that God provided only became effectual in the lives of individual Israelites who believed God and applied the blood of the lamb to their lintels and door posts. God parted the Red Sea for *every* Israelite, but the benefit of that salvation only became effectual in the lives of individual Israelites when individuals trusted God and walked across on dry land. God provided manna for *all* the Israelites, but the benefit of that salvation only became effectual when individual Israelites believed God and gathered what they needed for a day. Many such biblical examples could be cited, all which foreshadowed the salvation that Christ would make available to all people in the world, a salvation that could be enjoyed by everyone who believes.

In conclusion, God is not a monster who creates people in order to take pleasure in torturing them forever! Rather, He is a Great Lover who yearns that all will be saved, and who suffered horribly on the cross to make salvation possible for all! Praise the Lord! All glory to Him!

May I now ask every reader: Did you begin reading this paper as a Calvinist? If so, do you still believe in the doctrines of Calvinism? If you do, then you must be able to refute every bit of logic and Scripture I’ve used in this paper by showing that what I’ve written contradicts Scripture and/or logic. I am still waiting for the very first refutation from a Calvinist. My email address is Servant@pulsenet.com. If you remain a Calvinist and are not able to refute what I’ve written, then you remain a Calvinist from some motivation other than obedience to Christ and His Word. Is it because of pride that you are unable to admit that you have been wrong? Or is it because of fear of what other Calvinists might think if you defect from their doctrinal system? If either is true, then I must ask an even a more searching question: Is Jesus your Lord?