

CALVINISM: LIMITED ATONEMENT

According to Calvinistic thinking, each one of us, having been born of Adam's lineage, bears the guilt of his original sin and are, "...utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil..." (THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, U.S.A., Confession of Faith, pg. 22). Since men are allegedly born in such a depraved spiritual condition, it is also declared that God has predetermined the eternal fate of each individual: "...some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others to everlasting death" (op. cit.). Thus, we have the first two points of John Calvin's "TULIP"--Total inherited depravity and Unconditional election.

Given these two points, the next step in the logic of the Calvinist is the idea of *limited atonement*. Since, according to Calvin, man is inherently evil and unable to seek God, and since God has therefore arbitrarily decided who will, and who will not, be redeemed, it would follow that Christ's sacrifice was made only for, and is limited to, those whom God has predetermined to salvation. As it is expressed in the Calvinistic Confession of Faith found in THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, U.S.A., "As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto" (pgs. 23, 24). Obviously, included in God's "thereunto" means for man's election to glory is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thus, according to Calvinism the cross was intended only for those whom God had arbitrarily chosen for salvation. After all, why waste the blood of Christ on people whom God had decided to exclude from the number of his saved ones to begin with, his reputed impartiality notwithstanding? (Acts 10:34, 35).

As we have seen, however, God has left it to the exercise of each one's free will to either accept Christ and be saved, or not. Therefore, we would expect to find that the Scriptures teach that the cross' atoning sacrifice was made for all and is available to everyone—anyone—who will receive it. Such is exactly the case as seen in a most familiar passage: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that WHOEVER believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, emphasis added).

—Jerry F. Bassett