

The Witness's Conclusion

Dear Friends,

How do you relieve the tension between those Biblical passages that on the surface seem to make the death of Christ applicable to all of humanity, at least potentially, and those that make it specific to the elect? During my childhood and Christian “infancy,” I often talked with friends and classmates who held to the idea that Jesus died—but only potentially—for all of humanity. When I raised those passages that indicated that He died only for the elect—in fact any of the election passages—they would typically respond with the “parallel lines that are not really parallel” response. Their common depiction of their attempts to reconcile divine election and human free will often took on something similar to this, “In time God offers salvation to all by ‘Whosoever will...’ but when we walk through the doors of eternity into heaven, we will look over the door from eternity and read, ‘...chosen of God.’” They reduced divine election to God’s foresight of man’s “decision for God,” a clear contradiction of Paul’s emphatic assertion that our election is neither of our will nor of our running ([Ro 9:16](#)). When I raised the inconsistency of their analogy, they would respond with the idea that election and human free will in salvation are parallel lines in time. They never meet, never converge wholly in time, but in eternity they finally converge. The obvious inconsistency of the analogy fails to explain the problem. Are the lines really parallel or not? Often my friends would simply respond that they knew (reluctantly) that election is in the Bible, but they simply couldn’t understand it, so they’d just ignore it till they got to heaven. The paradigm of salvation that requires human response or cooperation for a person to gain salvation is actually a view of salvation by human effort that rejects the Biblical view that our salvation is all of God. It matters little whether the human effort relates only to an act of the will or to a whole transformation of life. The John MacArthur “Lordship salvation” controversy exposes the fallacy of this view of synergistic salvation. Even in my spiritual youth I became fascinated at the frustration of my friends who held to some of these views when I asked the simple question, “If we are saved by something that we do, how much must we do to ensure our salvation?” At least MacArthur attempts to quantify how much a person must do to ensure his salvation, but the heat of controversy over his teaching, even within his general circle of theology, witnesses the dilemma of the theological paradigm that requires any contribution of man to his salvation. The dilemma is often dodged by the question, “Well, doesn’t regeneration change the individual? Doesn’t it make some kind of change in his moral conduct?” Indeed regeneration alters a person’s moral and spiritual outlook and conduct to some extent, but the moment anyone, even a MacArthur who leans more toward the doctrines of grace than many of the folks who defend their view of universal atonement and human cooperation, requires a specified amount or kind of human response for salvation, they expose the essential role of human action that they view as necessary for salvation—or in MacArthur’s case necessary for one human to pass judgment on another human’s eternal state. Man longs to avoid submission to the final Judge and His authority. Some folks try to avoid the divine authority by ignoring the Bible and elevating their “heart” to the position of ultimate lord of their life, a blatant form of idolatry and a sad example of utter relativism not unlike the ancient Gnostic heresies that early Christianity soundly rejected (Read Iraenaeus’ “Against Heresies”). Others try to avoid the divine authority by elevating their perception to the throne through creating schemes of theology that enable them to sit in judgment on the eternal state of everyone they know or meet. “This person is saved; that person is not saved” becomes a favorite refrain of advocates of this form of idolatry. The Biblical view of salvation and of the work necessary for mortals to be saved is incredibly refreshing in comparison with the various ideas that stubbornly seek to inject man—either in the role of cause or instrument or the role of “fruit inspector”—into the salvation equation. Early in my Christian studies a very wise man taught me to compare the whole of my own interpretation with the passage of Scripture

that I was studying and interpreting. His caution; "Look on both sides of the issue carefully. If the text says too much OR too little for your view, you have the wrong view." The passages that appear to teach a universal atonement, regardless of the conditions that advocates impose onto their hearers either for salvation or for assurance of salvation, typically say far too much to support the errant views often imposed upon them. Our study this week focuses on John's confession that Jesus is the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Does this passage teach a universal atonement? If so, it teaches the doctrine of universalism, that every human ever born shall ultimately be saved. Simply put, it says too much for the conditional view of salvation that is often imposed onto it. If Jesus as the Lamb of God took away all the sin of all of humanity, nothing can separate anyone from heaven. If, as the popular theology of our time teaches, Jesus did not die for all the sins of all humanity, the passage sadly misstates the fact, for it makes no caveat for any particular sin that was not covered by the Lamb. May God bless our study, Joe Holder

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There was a man sent from God, whose name was John The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. ([Joh 1:6-9](#)) The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God. Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples; And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! ([Joh 1:29-36](#)) Apart from John's personal conclusions regarding the meaning of his testimony, we cannot complete the account of his testimony. What did John believe about the implications of the Incarnation? Why did the Incarnation occur? What was God's intent in the Incarnation? I believe that [Joh 1:29-36](#) records John's conclusions and answers to these questions. Andrew Fuller apparently introduced the rather illogical idea into Baptist theological culture that Jesus' death was "sufficient for all of humanity; efficient for the elect only." It appears that his intent was to hold to both election and free will (specifically, man's active free will in regeneration) at the same time. Supposedly this idea relieved some of the tension between the two concepts. I see no relief whatever in Fuller's alternative, and I see a rather significant contradiction in it. How can we know anything about the extent of the atonement apart from Scripture? What does Scripture say about the question? Did Jesus die for all of humanity in some mystical and prospective sense? Or did He die for the elect, the sheep? ([Joh 10:11](#) should settle the question, though many other passages corroborate the point.) It appears that Fuller's intent was to relieve the tension between the various passages that on first glance suggest a universal atonement ([Joh 3:16](#) is frequently cited.) and the passages such as [Joh 10:11](#) that indicate a specific people in the scope of Jesus' atoning death. If we accept the superficial interpretations of both groups of passages and wrestle with the question of the extent of Jesus' death, does the Fuller paradigm resolve the tension? I do not believe it relieves any of the tension. In order to preserve harmony within the Trinity (Father electing, Son redeeming, and Holy Spirit regenerating) the extent and the efficiency of the atonement must be equal. The efficiency of Jesus' death was defined by the Father's election, not by an extra-Biblical philosophical distinction between sufficiency and efficiency. In fact the artificial insertion of a disparity between the sufficiency of the atonement and its efficiency almost imposes a degree of duplicity onto the character of God. If it be true and the companion doctrine of a general "offer of salvation" in the gospel be valid, then we have God "sincerely" offering salvation to all of humanity, at least all who hear the gospel, and His divine intent

that only the elect respond "savingly." If salvation is a true gift of God and not a general, propositional offer, the tension disappears. Based on this perspective, I believe that Fuller's idea, though quite popular today in many theological circles, fails its primary objective. Let's examine [Joh 1:29](#) in light of this background and see if it clarifies the question.

1. "Behold the Lamb of God..." Given the fact that John was a Levite, the son of a Jewish priest, he would have gained extensive personal instruction regarding the significance of the Jewish sacrificial system and especially the significance of the various sin offerings that were periodically made by the priests on behalf of the Jewish people.

2. 3. Even more enlightening to our question is John's conclusion regarding his assessment that Jesus "...taketh away the sin of the world." This passage is cited almost as frequently as [Joh 3:16](#) in favor of a general atonement, the name of the doctrine that holds that Jesus died potentially for all humanity. The passage simply says too much for that doctrinal concept. First of all, there is nothing in this lesson regarding a potential benefit from the death of Christ. The passage unequivocally states a fact, a conclusion, "...that taketh away the sin of the world." It does not state that He would make it possible for the sin of the world to be taken away, finally conditioned on other factors or conditions to be completed by those who potentially would be saved. The passage draws a specific conclusion. He takes away the sin of the world!

4. 5. If Jesus as God Incarnate, the Lamb of God indeed accomplished His assignment, when He completed His work, there could be no sin remaining in the "world" for which He offered Himself in substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

6. Two rules can be observed to ensure that we arrive at the correct interpretation of a given passage. The first rule questions if our interpretation sufficiently states the conclusions of the lesson. The second rule questions if our interpretation overstates the conclusions of the lesson. If we embrace an interpretation that compromises either conclusion, we have specific evidence that we have not arrived at a correct interpretation of the passage. Advocates of the "sufficient but not efficient" view of the atonement will attempt in various ways to harmonize their view with this passage. However, at the end of the day they must deal with the glaring contradiction that their conclusion imposes onto the passage. If Jesus, the "Lamb of God," truly took away the sin of the world, the only logical and consistent conclusion we can reach from the passage is universalism, that all of humanity were embraced in the atonement, their sins were removed, and they therefore stand before God in atoned sinlessness. Only a diabolical and unjust deity would send them to hell without any residual sin! If we conclude that Jesus died potentially for the sins of all humanity, we must grapple with the obvious absence in the passage of any indication of mere potentiality in the intent of Jesus' death. Did He take away the sins for which He died, or didn't He? If He took them away, how can we then conclude that their sins remain to justify their eventual condemnation? Often advocates of this theological view will say that Jesus died for all sin except for the sin of not believing in Jesus, so every person who will ever be born comes into the world with every sin they shall ever commit wholly covered by the atonement with one exception, the sin of not believing in Jesus. If this concept be true, why did John not qualify his statement in [Joh 1:29](#) to state that Jesus as God's Lamb took away all the sins of the world with one exception? By this exception, this view fails to harmonize with the text, as well as many others. Unfortunately in the polarizing debate of theology, many terms invade the dialogue that fail the Biblical concepts they intend to promote. In this case, the term "limited atonement" gained wide acceptance as contrasted with "unlimited atonement" for the opposite view. However, both theological views actually impose limits on the extent of the atonement. The "unlimited atonement" view excludes one sin from coverage in the death of Christ. Advocates of this view clearly define not believing in Jesus as a sin, with great zeal they state their belief that Jesus took away the "sin of the world," and they apparently fail to see the glaring inconsistency between their views and the various passages that they typically cite to support

their view. The "limited atonement" view by definition limits the atonement to the elect only. One view limits the atonement based on the divine intent. The other view equally limits it based on human failure to cooperate with God's intent. Both views in fact limit the atonement. Perhaps "particular" atonement would be a more appropriate term. Jesus died for a particular people, His elect ([Mt 1:21](#)). What is the logical and Biblical conclusion of this passage and the many other passages that deal with the death of Christ? Jesus' death "took away" all the sins of all for whom He died. This interpretation offers the simplest and most straightforward view of the passage. The passage does not say that He would take away the sin of the world "if..." It states the outcome of the atonement as a concise fact, not as a mere potential, nor as a fuzzy "sufficient-efficient" paradigm that leaves the conclusion of His atonement up to the actions of humanity. As we examine other contexts, we shall examine this truth in greater detail. We shall also examine the fallacy of human cooperation in the essential work of regeneration. The two errant views go hand in hand.

Elder Joe Holder