

An Exegetical Study of 1 Timothy 2:4 **(A Doctrinal Study on the Extent of the Atonement)**

Dr Gary D. Long

This article re-printed by permission from a tract entitled,
The Salvation of All Men, Grace Abounding Ministries, 1977, pp 1-6.

Preface

The purpose of this doctrinal tract is to set forth, in a readable outline form, a positive polemic for the doctrine of definite atonement — a doctrine which the author is firmly convinced glorifies the triune Jehovah to whom salvation belongs.

An outline method is used to assist the reader in his study of three theologically controversial verses in the Pastoral Epistles on the "salvation of all men." The outlines which follow were originally prepared as separate theological tracts in conjunction with an exposition of 1 Timothy and Titus at Grace Reformed Fellowship in 1974-1975.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance received from William Hendriksen's *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* — an excellent work by one of the foremost, if not the foremost, sovereign grace, New Testament commentators in our generation.

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM IN 1 TIMOTHY 2:4.

There is a twofold theological problem in this verse: the first aspect of the problem pertains to the will of God: the second aspect of the problem pertains to the universal term "all" as it relates to the salvation of men (i.e., the extent of the atonement). Does God desire to save all mankind absolutely; that is, each and every individual? Or does God desire to save all mankind relatively; that is, all men without distinction of race, nationality, or social position, not all men without exception? Within Protestantism there are three basic theological interpretations of this verse: the Arminian, the modified or four-point Calvinist and the historic or five-point Calvinist interpretations.

I. THE ARMINIAN INTERPRETATION

A. "Will" [*thelo*]. God wants (desires) all men without exception to be saved. However in the case of some His will is resisted through obstinate unbelief because man has a free will and God will not force His will upon man. If he did, man would not be free; he would be a robot. Therefore, God only elects those who He foresees will choose Him in time; that is, when they hear and respond to

the gospel. Man can respond to the gospel because he has a free will — free to choose good or evil because Christ merited this grace or ability for him and all mankind without exception when He died upon the cross. Consequently, no one can blame God for dying in unbelief and being condemned to hell. The responsibility lies solely with man: he could have chosen to be saved if he had so desired to choose Christ.

B. Objections

1. Logical: If God wants (desires) all men to be saved absolutely; that is without exception, then why does He not save them since none "of the inhabitants of the earth . . . can stay His hand, or say unto Him, 'What doest Thou'" (Dan. 4:35)?
2. Theological: God's will as desire [*thelo*] proceeds from His inclination (nature), God's will as decree [*boulomai*] is based upon His counsel and deliberation. (in reference to salvation, His counsel and deliberation took place in "eternity past" between the triune Godhead in the covenant or counsel of redemption.) Can God decree something contrary to His inclination or nature? No, humanly speaking, God chooses (i.e., decrees) in harmony with His Holy nature. And is not true that what God's soul "desireth [*thelo*], even that He doeth" (Job 23:13)? In summary, if God desires [*thelo*] to save all mankind absolutely, then each and every individual will be saved, for what He desires to do He does. The Arminian interpretation, therefore, says too much.. It leads to universal salvation which is expressly contrary to Scripture and the doctrine of eternal punishment. Also, the Arminian concept of God's foreknowledge (which is understood to mean foresight) limits God and the certainty that His plan of salvation will be accomplished because His will (according to Arminianism) can be frustrated by obstinate unbelief. This negates the clearly taught attribute of God which makes Him God, "omnipotence", Rev. 19:6
3. Biblical: The term "all men" taken by itself is capable of an absolute meaning but the the context of 1 Tim. 2 does not support it. That "all" or "all men" do not always mean all and every man that were, are, or shall be, may be made apparent by nearly 500 instances found in Scripture. "Paul definitely mentions 'groups' or 'classes' of men; kings (v.2), those in high position (v.2) etc., the Gentiles (v.7). He is thinking of rulers and (by implication) subjects, of Gentiles and (again by implication) Jews, and he is urging Timothy to see to it that in [the] public worship [at Ephesus] not a single group be omitted" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*).

C. Conclusion: The Arminian interpretation is not logical or theological or biblical. The expression "all men," as used here, means all men without distinction, men from every rank and class, tribe and nation (cf. Rev. 5:9). The term "all men" does NOT refer to all men without exception. The term is to be understood relatively. Why? Because there can be no metaphysical disjunction in God's will

as desiring and His will as decreeing. Both aspects of His will are in perfect harmony with each other.

II. THE MODIFIED OR FOUR-POINT CALVINIST INTERPRETATION

A. It is God's will [*thelo*] to save all men. Therefore, Christ died for all mankind without exception, placing them into a savable position. They can be saved upon the condition of faith. But, since none can believe because of being totally depraved, God out of His loving mercy and free grace, sovereignly decreed [*boulomai*] to elect some of mankind to be saved. This universal provision of salvation, made particular in application by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit and through the means of faith, makes all men responsible to believe and permits the free offer of the gospel to be genuinely made without preaching "tongue-in-cheek."

B. Objections

1. Logical: If a modified Calvinist (who holds to universal redemption) believes that saving faith is a gift of God and that Christ's death was indeed a substitutionary death — a penal-satisfaction for man's sins (i.e., a satisfaction of the retributive justice of God) — then how can he logically escape universal salvation — Faith is not a work, and the retributive justice of God has been satisfied on behalf of those for whom Christ died. If they be all mankind without exception, then all must be saved; otherwise, Christ has failed to accomplish the design of His Father's mission; that is, unless man's sins are punished twice (on Christ at Calvary and again on the unbeliever in hell). It should also be observed that "all" [*pantas*] in this verse must be understood as absolute or relative. It cannot be both. That God can save all without exception (not considering His decree) no one denies; and that He desires to save "all men," it is here affirmed. Therefore, if "all men" here refers to each and every individual, they will be saved (because, as stated in objections to the Arminian interpretation, the will of God as desire cannot be contrary to the will of God as decree). But, if God desires to save all men without exception, as the modified Calvinist teaches, then it is either true that: (1) God fails in His purpose; or (2) each and every individual will be saved. POINT: "all" in this verse must be understood in a relative sense as it is, (according to John Owen, as mentioned before), some 500 times elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., see John 3:26, Acts 19:10; 1 Cor. 9:22; II Cor. 3:2; Col. 3:11, etc.)

2. Theological: "All" must be theologically understood in a relative sense. It is the same will which God wills [*thelo*] all men to be saved (1Tim. 2:4) that He exercises upon those whom He wills [*thelo*] to harden (Rom. 9:18). God's desires [*thelo*] will come to pass (cf. Job 23:13; Ps. 132:13,14). Note that it is also God's desire that the same "all men" who are to be saved are "to come unto the

knowledge of the truth"; that is, to genuine repentance and faith (see II Tim. 2:25 where this same phrase is again used by Paul).

3. Biblical: (I refer you back to the third objection to the Arminian interpretation). The term "all men" is to be understood in a relative sense here as in v.1. Relatively speaking, then, salvation is universal; that is, it is not limited to any one group or class of mankind. "Churches must not think that prayers must be made for subjects, not for rulers; for Jews, not for Gentiles. No, it is the intention of God our Savior that 'all men without distinction of race, rank, or nationality' be saved. . . God desires ALL men — men from EVERY rank and station, tribe and nation — to be saved. . . For (there is but) one God, and (there is but) one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (v.5)" [Hendriksen].

C. Conclusion: The modified Calvinist interpretation is not logical or theological or biblical. The verse does not say that "God desires to provide salvation for all men without exception." The text says that God desires "all men to be saved" and that God desires that the same "all men" are "to come unto the knowledge of the truth." POINT: God will have no more to be saved in this verse than He will have come unto the knowledge of the truth. Those who, out of all classes and ranks of men, come unto this saving knowledge (cf. II Tim. 2:25) ultimately prove to be none other than God's elect — "Even us, whom He hath called, not from among the Jews only, but "also from among the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:24).

III. THE HISTORIC OR 5-POINT CALVINIST INTERPRETATION

A. God wills [*thelo*] to save all men without distinction. He does this by bringing them unto a saving knowledge of the truth through the "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself as a [substitutionary] ransom [*antilutron*] for all mankind without distinction [i.e., all men regardless of rank, station, race, or nationality], to be testified in due season" (I Tim. 2:5,6). "Not during the old dispensation but only during the new can the mystery be fully revealed that ALL MEN, Gentiles as well as Jews, are now on an equal footing; that is, that the Gentiles have become 'fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel'" [Hendriksen].

B. Proof

1. Logical: Historic Calvinists use the theological term "condition of faith" in a different sense than Calvinistic universalists; that is, Christ did not die for any upon condition, IF THEY DO BELIEVE, but He died for all God's elect THAT THEY BELIEVE and believing have eternal life. Because saving faith itself is among the principal effects and fruits of the death of Christ, salvation is bestowed conditionally only as viewed by the lost sinner. For him to experience salvation he must believe, but saving faith, which is the condition for man, is also absolutely procured by Christ. Otherwise, if faith is not procured for believers,

then their salvation is not all of grace. When the believer grows in grace and sees that the condition of faith has been procured by Christ, then should he not cry out, "O Lord, why me"?

2. Theological: (same objections to the two previous theological interpretations.) The special and particular design of God's love and Christ's atonement for the elect DOES NOT hinder the free offer of the gospel to all mankind. It is God and God alone who knows the identity of the elect before they are called out of darkness into light. It is not for the ambassadors of Christ to try and determine who they are before God the Holy Spirit quickens them unto faith and repentance. The concern of the ambassadors of Christ is to be obedient and faithful to their commission to "Go. . . therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them [those saved out of every nation, not each and every one in every nation], in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). In summary, I believe, and the historic confessions of the Church state that God's will, both as desire and decree, will come to pass and that the key to understanding such passages as Ezekiel 18:23,32 and 33:11 is that GOD DOES NOT DELIGHT OR TAKE PLEASURE in willing "the death of the wicked," but He does desire and ordain their condemnation, does He not (Jude 4)? But why? to "make His power known" and magnify His justice while enduring "with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction" (Rom. 9:22). "even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.", (Matt. 11:26).

3. Biblical: (see the biblical objections to the previous two theological interpretations). The context is in harmony with the doctrine of a particular redemption, a definite atonement. The context and other salvation passages in the Scripture are harmonious. The atonement is not indefinite; it is universal in a relative sense. It is limited only in its application, but unlimited in its efficacy.

C. Conclusion: (see the conclusions to the previous two theological interpretations).

Those whom God desires to save, He will save. And those whom God saves are all men without distinction from all nations, not all men without exception and all nations.

IV. A SUMMARY PARAPHRASE OF I TIMOTHY 2:4, ACCORDING TO THE THREE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS.

A. The Arminian Interpretation: "God wants all men without exception by their own free will to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

B. The Modified or 4-Point Calvinist Interpretation: "God desires to save all men without exception and to bring them to the knowledge of the truth upon the condition of faith, since Christ's atonement was universal and placed each and every individual in a savable position."

C. The Historic or 5-Point Calvinist Interpretation: "God desires, in harmony with His eternal decree, to save all men without distinction (i.e., without respect to rank, station, race, or nationality) and bring them to the knowledge of the truth."

CHRIST DIED A SUBSTITUTIONARY-RANSOM FOR SINNERS. HE DID THIS EITHER PROVISIONALLY OR ACTUALLY, HYPOTHETICALLY OR CERTAINLY. IF PROVISIONALLY OR HYPOTHETICALLY, THEN NO ONE WILL BE SAVED IF SALVATION IS ALL OF GRACE AND NOT OF WORKS: IF ACTUALLY OR CERTAINLY, THEN SOME OF ALL MANKIND WILL BE SAVED IF SALVATION IS ALL OF GRACE AND NOT OF WORKS. "GOD FORBID THAT I SHOULD GLORY, SAVE IN THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST", (Gal. 6:14)