

God calls all men to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and freely promises to all such people that they will be redeemed from sin and inherit eternal life (Isaiah 55:1; John 3:16; Romans 9:33; Revelation 22:17). Furthermore, God has promised to give his Holy Spirit to all of his elect, in order that they may be made willing and able to repent and believe (Psalm 110:3; John 6:37, 44; Acts 13:48; 16:14). The elect constitute a great multitude of men and women whom God appointed to eternal life before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 5:9–10). God’s election was not based on anything seen or foreseen in the elect; it proceeded from his free and sovereign grace alone (Deuteronomy 7:7–8; Romans 9:11–16; 2 Timothy 1:9). Furthermore, God the Father entrusted the elect to his Son, who undertook to redeem, call, justify, sanctify and glorify them (Isaiah 53:10–11; Matthew 20:28; Luke 19:10; John 6:37–40; 10:27–28).

(Sola 5 Confession 4.3)

In a recent online conversation about a particular theological subject, one commenter opined: “My problem with Christian universalism is the same exact problem I have with Calvinism. It’s God forcing us to love him.” The comment reveals a grave misunderstanding of the biblical doctrines of grace. The Bible certainly teaches that God is sovereign in every aspect of salvation, and that apart from his intervening grace, no one would willingly follow him. The Bible equally teaches, however, that God does not FORCE us to love him against our will. Saving grace is far more powerful than that, and Confession 4.3 seeks to unpack this grace.

The proclamation of the gospel is universal: **God calls all men to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.** Isaiah 55:1 invites “everyone” to come to God for soul-satisfying salvation (cf. Revelation 22:17). The promise of forgiveness is equally universal for all who believe: **and freely promises to all such people that they will be redeemed from sin and inherit eternal life.** John 3:16 is explicit that “whoever believes in him [will] not perish but have everlasting life” and Romans 9:33 adds that “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” If all the initiative in salvation lies with God alone (Confession 4.1), is the call to repent and believe really as universal as these texts make it seem? *We must take God’s word as it is: If God extends the call to “all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), so must we. Our responsibility is not to ensure that people believe, or even to worry about the mechanism by which they come to believe. We are not told to first ascertain whether or not a person is elect. We are told simply to preach the gospel universally and call people to believe—and then to trust God to do his work of saving those whom he will save.*

Hypothetically, what would happen if someone whom God had not elected chose to repent and believe the gospel? *The Bible does not call us to think in hypothetical terms, but to believe what it says. Scripture clearly asserts that NO ONE will believe apart from God’s sovereign initiative. In this instance, the hypothetical is a sheer impossibility.*

The Confession goes on to detail the power of God’s saving grace: **Furthermore, God has promised to give his Holy Spirit to all of his elect, in order that they may be made willing and able to repent and believe (Psalm 110:3; John 6:37, 44; Acts 13:48; 16:14).** The commenter cited at the beginning of this lesson complained about God “forcing us to love him.” The Confession asserts that God does not force us, but makes us willing to believe—a willingness that we would never display apart from his grace. Pick out the key phrases from the following texts that highlight this truth.

Psalm 110:3: *David writes of God’s people “offer[ing] themselves freely” to God in the day of his power. There is no unwilling compulsion here.*

John 6:37, 44: *In this discourse, Jesus does not portray the image of God dragging unwilling subjects kicking and screaming into his kingdom. Instead, those whom the Father has given “will come” to Christ, even if it is only by the Father’s initiating grace. When the Father initiates grace, the formerly unwilling become willing to obey the gospel.*

Acts 13:48: *In this narrative account, Luke paints a picture of those in whom the Lord has worked initiating grace. Rather than resisting, “they began rejoicing and glorifying” and “believed.” This is a picture of*

beautiful willingness on behalf of “as many as were appointed to eternal life.” The appointment must not be missed, but the appointment resulted in willingness to believe.

Acts 16:14: This text may be less explicit than the above texts about the subject’s willingness, but it tells us that “the Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” and gives no indication that she was resistant to that. Instead, she believed and expressed her willingness to obey by baptism and persistent Christian hospitality (v. 15).

Simply put, we must be persuaded that nobody is willing to believe apart from God’s initiating grace, but nobody on whom God showers initiating grace will be unwilling to believe. The beauty of saving grace is that it turns unwilling rebels into willing subjects of the King.

We sometimes have the impression that the lost will vastly outnumber the saved at the final judgement, but this supposition is not very clearly supported by Scripture. The Confession gets to the heart of the matter: **The elect constitute a great multitude of men and women whom God appointed to eternal life before the foundation of the world.** The appointment before the foundation of the world is spoken of in (Ephesians 1:4), while Revelation 5:9–10 speaks of the astounding diversity of God’s chosen ones. Revelation 7:9 tells us that this astounding diversity will amount to “a great multitude that no one could number.” Some appeal to Matthew 7:13–14 to argue that the lost will far outstrip the saved at final judgement. How would you handle the seeming tension between these texts? It is important to understand that Matthew 7:13–14 is primarily an ETHICAL, not a PROPHETIC, text. That is, the Lord was challenging his disciples about the PRESENT number of people walking the road to destruction and exhorting them to be faithful in their evangelism because of that. It is not a prophecy that there will ALWAYS be a majority of people on the road to destruction, only a challenge to act because that was PRESENTLY the case. The point of the text is that, when we see people on the road to destruction, we must love them enough to act.

How should it encourage us that **God appointed** people to salvation **before the foundation of the world**? It should encourage out evangelism even in the darkest of times. When people seem wholly given to wickedness, we should be encouraged that God always has his appointed one and he will save them through our witness.

The next statement in the Confession is a point of great encouragement: **God’s election was not based on anything seen or foreseen in the elect; it proceeded from his free and sovereign grace alone.** This was true of Israel in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 7:7–8) and is true of every person whom the Lord saves (Romans 9:11–16; 2 Timothy 1:9). In what sense is this truth an encouragement? It should encourage our prayers for and our evangelism to the lost, for we know that NO ONE is beyond God’s saving grace. God does not respond to good in us, and there is no evil too deep for his grace to overcome. It should also encourage us in our perseverance, for we know that our sins, as dreadful as they are, do not remove us from God’s favour. Further, it should encourage those who are considering the call to the gospel that there are no skeletons in their closet that will prevent God’s forgiveness in the gospel from being applied to them. This is a promise that we can confidently offer in our evangelism.

God’s initiative in salvation further guarantees that salvation is not only POSSIBLE for all, but CERTAIN for those for whom Christ died: **Furthermore, God the Father entrusted the elect to his Son, who undertook to redeem, call, justify, sanctify and glorify them.** Once again, this truth should encourage our evangelism because we KNOW that there are people whom God wishes to save and that he WILL save those he intends to save. Because Christ was crushed God WILL declare a people righteous (Isaiah 53:10–11). The Son did not come to make salvation a possibility, but to actually save the lost (Luke 19:10), and ALL whom the Father gave to him will come to him and receive life (John 6:37–40; 10:27–28). How can this understanding help you in defending the doctrine of “limited atonement”? Limited atonement does not in any way limit what God is able to do. Instead, this biblical teaching stresses that God has limited the number of people he will save AND PROMISES TO ACTUALLY SAVE THEM. Unlimited atonement would mean that God makes salvation possible and leaves it to us to respond in repentance and faith, which no one will ever do. Limited atonement guarantees that he will actively work to save those whom he has given to his Son.