

1 Timothy 2:4

Paul exhorts Timothy to pray for all men (1 Timothy 2:1). He then goes on to say that, God “would have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (verse 4). Does the Apostle really mean all men, women and children in the world? This view is certainly prevalent today. But is this the only answer? Let us look at what reformed men and calvinists (including Calvin) have had to say regarding this text.

When John Calvin addresses this text, he is confronted with those attacking the doctrine of absolute predestination: “Hence we see the childish folly,” he declares, “of those who represent this passage to be opposed to predestination.” On the face of it, there certainly appears a difficulty reconciling the two. Calvin could simply have said this is a paradox to be revealed in glory. However, Calvin states: “They might have some grounds for saying this, if Paul were speaking here about individual men...the Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception.” Calvin gives the key to the passage when, in his sermons on Election and Reprobation, he states: “...when it is said in the second Chapter of the first of Timothy, *that God would have all men to be saved*, the solution is added by and by, *that come to a knowledge of the truth.*”

John Owen agrees with Calvin. “By the words *all men* are intended only all sorts of men, suitable to the purpose of the apostle, which was to show that all external difference between the sons of men is now taken away...” Francis Turretin maintains that even verse 1 should be taken this way. He observes: “...he [the Apostle] does not immediately will that prayers should be conceived for each and everyone, since there are some for whom we must not pray. Rather he only commands that we should pray for men without distinction.” George Smeaton agrees with this, and continues, “That the allusion is not to all men numerically, may be proved, too, from the announcement that God will have all men to be saved, which refers to ranks and conditions, not to individuals; for God’s will would be effectual on all men, if the other meaning were intended.” Herman Bavinck goes so far as to state: “...the word ‘all’ in 1 Tim. 2:4 (‘who would have all men to be saved...’) is given a restricted meaning by every interpreter.”

Certainly, one such interpreter is the saintly Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall, the father of the Free Church of Scotland, who makes his own view on this text clear in his excellent work *The Signs of the Times*. He states: “God wills the salvation of no one without at the same time willing that he should ‘come to a knowledge of the truth’...Looking at the passage, in connection with the context, there can be no great difficulty in determining its meaning. In the first two verses of the chapter, the Apostle is urging Christians to pray for ‘all men’, and specially ‘for kings for all that are in authority’...In order to persuade them to gather *all classes of men* into their regards...And as all classes are represented by those for whom Christ gave Himself a ransom, He is to be preached to all without exception...A passage, then, in which the catholicity of the dispensation of the gospel of grace is declared, is that which is quoted as in harmony with the doctrine of election”.

In more recent times, Iain Murray in the Banner of Truth magazine dated February 1956, and under the title ‘Scriptural Difficulties relating to the Doctrine of Election’, not only gives a very clear and excellent interpretation of John 3:16 - denying any universal aspect to the love of God within that text - but also goes on to state, “So the aim of Paul in 1 Tim. 2, is to exhort believers to pray even for rulers who might be persecuting them, because God has now opened the door of salvation to all classes of men, He ‘will have all men to be saved,’ the time being come that Old Testament distinctions have been removed, and the Lord purposes to save some of all sorts and nations. Rev 5:9”.

In verse 6, the apostle uses similar terms so far as the ransom of Christ is concerned i.e. it is for all types and classes of men. Christ’s death actually achieves salvation for the elect; not a possible or potential salvation for all i.e. the reprobate are not brought into a ‘savable’ position. Thus, Smeaton states, “The all for whom He gave Himself a ransom, were they for whom He acted as a mediator in atonement and intercession; the ALL of whom it is said, God will have ALL men to be saved, and come to a knowledge of the truth (verse 4); the class undoubtedly coincident and identical with the elect; the All for whom the ransom was offered - and it is never ineffectual or inoperative...”

It was this glorious gospel that was to be proclaimed in due time to all nations indiscriminately, and for which the apostle was ordained a preacher.