

“that they also, whom you have given me, may
be with me where I am.” - John 17:24

“Father, I Desire”

ATONEMENT IN JESUS' OWN WORDS



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“Father, I Desire”

John 17:24 and the Scope of the Atonement in John’s Gospel

ABSTRACT


John 17:24 provides one of the most theologically complete and therefore, *determinative* statements concerning the *intent* and efficacy of Christ’s atonement in scripture. Because its context addresses multiple aspects – all of which are essential to the full, biblical doctrine of atonement, it is viewed as being comprehensive for that reason. Meaning, while other passages may highlight specific truths related to atonement, none of them add new conditions not inherent in the passage or its context in the chapter. And while many on both sides of the debate through the centuries have addressed some of the more common texts in the chapter – like verse 9, either side can fail to adequately address the *specific force* and inclusion of verse 24 and its necessary impact overall.

Spoken by Jesus on the eve of His sacrificial death, that frames the *essential* context. As such, this prayer reveals not only the objects of His intercession but the very people *for whom* He consecrates Himself as Priest and “Lamb of God.” Ignore or downplay *either* the person speaking – God in the flesh about to be “offered” as sacrifice and His *intentional* choice of language, or its context, and only a misrepresentation of the truth will result. Such a misrepresentation cannot be based on exegesis; For to either ignore or redact the choice of language in its context as well as the person speaking, *requires* that the interpreter is reading the text through a prior-decided lens, rather than seeing the text as it reads. This study argues that the linguistic, contextual, theological, and covenantal structure of John 17: 2, 9–24, **with specific emphasis on the all too-often ignored force of verse 24** is fundamentally incompatible with all synergistic models of salvation. And for that reason, it affirms a definite, effectual, and personal atonement grounded in the Father’s gift of a people to the Son. This results in the Son’s intentional exclusive intercession for them only based on His atoning death. The governing premise is that scripture does not and cannot contradict itself - and it is only by comparison to itself in context, that is the *only* way to properly determine its meaning.

I. INTRODUCTION

John 17:2, 9-24, is one of those rare instances where “all roads lead to an inevitable unavoidable conclusion” concerning the biblical, systematic theology of cross of Christ. Described by D. A. Carson as “a window into the Son’s deepest longings on the eve of His death,” this prayer constitutes the *only* sustained record in the gospels, in which Jesus articulates *His own interpretation* of His redemptive mission. This simply cannot be underscored or emphasized enough. Verse 24 is the all too-often ignored beating-heart of the chapter. The Incarnate Lord who is about to offer Himself, expressed His desire / will concerning the result or outcome of that offering in the most explicit way possible. He said,

“Father, *I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory...*”

 **This singular, profound and pregnant statement of desire in the Son of God is the very center of this prayer, and this debate.**

Given *who* the speaker is – God manifest in the flesh - and its context and timing in its relation to the cross Jesus is mere hours from enduring, this statement is overlooked far too often, even by those who still arrive at the same conclusion as argued herein. Its implications are so profound that it functions as a *category-defining text* for the doctrines of election, atonement, intercession, and glorification – all of which are inherent in the very meaning of “atonement” or “salvation.” But first we need to state the obvious concerning things which God has inseparably joined together in His word – and which sinful men try very hard to separate because of their pre-decided theological, philosophical and or, emotional bias for a different conclusion.

Essential Interrelationships

1. There is no “redemption” which does not inherently include actual forgiveness – “in whom we *have* redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” (Eph. 1:7; cf Col. 1:14).

2. According to Romans 8:33-34; Hebrews 7:25; Isa 53:11-12; 1 John 2:1-2 – it not possible theologically to divorce Jesus *as* Intercessor from Him *as* atoning sacrifice. Hence, “If any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins- and not ours only, but for the whole world.” (1 John 2:1-2).

I will address the term “whole world” later. At this point, I am merely pointing out the obvious – Jesus *as* intercessor / advocate is both practically and soteriologically inseparable from Him *as* atoning sacrifice. Meaning, His intercession is *based on* His work of atonement and that is *why* it is utterly effectual. Thus, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him *because* He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). The word “because” signifies the reason *why* He is so able. And the truth of Hebrews 10:14 “For *by* one offering He has made perfect forever those come to God through Him,” is therefore the basis of the intercession of 7:25.

The Burden of Proof

The burden of proof here is on the objector. Meaning, anyone who objects must clearly show why and how the essential connection between Jesus as intercessor, *which depends on* Jesus as atoning sacrifice, does not exist - a task that, in this author's well-considered view, has never been achieved by any synergistic model.

This truth of intercession based on atonement, will be explored in greater detail below. So also, objections based on incorrect assumptions of 1 John 2:1-2, will be addressed and convincingly answered. This essay argues that John 17:24, when read within the structural flow of John 17:9–24, presupposes and *explicitly asserts* a definite atonement and *cannot* be reconciled with any synergistic theology of universal or unlimited atonement. The statement is so incongruent with the arguments presented by synergists that there is no reasonable, credible way to harmonize the text with that view. The only option left on the table for them, therefore, is redaction, evasion, or denial.

II. THE CONTEXT OF JOHN 17: THE HIGH PRIEST BEFORE HIS SACRIFICE


The timing of John 17 is crucial. Jesus prays this prayer immediately before Gethsemane and Golgotha. *That* is the context and it must always be kept in mind. It is therefore the High Priest's self-consecration prayer which explicitly states His purpose in what He is about to do, *why* He is – meaning what *He* desires the effect of to be, for whom He will do so.

III. THE FATHER'S GIFT OF A PEOPLE TO THE SON

A central theme in John 17 is the repeated emphasis on specific individuals whom the Father gives to the Son:

- 17:2 — “to give eternal life *to* all whom *You* have given Him.”
- 17:6 — “Yours they were, and *You* gave them to Me.”
- 17:9 — “I ask... *for those* whom *You* have given Me.”
- 17:24 — “*those* whom *You* have given Me.”

At no time in this chapter – nor the gospel in which it is found - does Jesus *ever* refer to those He intercedes for as those who “*gave themselves* to Me.” Popular synergistic teaching reframes, reorders His words like that, but that is not how *He* framed them. This “giving” by the Father is personal, definite, and eternal. Actual individuals – not “classes” of people (saved or unsaved), per the synergistic model are in view. It is not those who “choose to believe and say ‘Yes’ to Christ” as synergism insists. For that is a categorical reversal of the cause-effect relationship as Christ phrased in both here in John 17 and elsewhere - John 6:37, 44, 65.

 **The way Jesus repeatedly emphasized the truth was the Father “gives” – those so given, “come” – those who come, He will never cast out.**

Synergism *must* reverse the clear order of John 6:37 to make it “fit” their preferred model. The way Jesus said it however – “All the Father gives Me will come to Me”, does not. This is one of the places where the objector *must*

“move the goal posts.” If they admit that it is individuals who are said to be “given” – rather than the nameless group of people who choose to believe, then Jesus *ought* to have reversed the way He said what He said. Meaning, if the synergist redaction is valid, the sentence *should* read “All those who come Me, the Father will give Me.” But that is not what He said and therefore cannot be what He meant. To arrive at such a conclusion as the synergist reordering / redaction, requires the grammatical wording and logic of the relationship between subject / object and cause / effect, be reversed – hence, to “move the goal posts.” But to keep Jesus’ words *as He* said and meant them, means the synergist will be caught in a net that their system cannot escape from – which is *why* they must redact the text. In His prayer, Jesus contemplated both the specific individuals who *currently* were “His” and extended His prayer to include all future ones as well (vs. 20).

✚ Thus, for Him – not Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Owen or Spurgeon – for the terms are His, not theirs, His use of the term “those You have given to Me” is comprehensive including both current and all future, individual believers.

The burden of proof here again, is on the objector. Why is this? *Because* this essay is taking the Son of God at *His* word – not redacting, reordering or ignoring it. No semantic word-games or theological goal-post shifts will occur herein.

These individuals so “given” – which takes us back to His own language of John 6:37 and its relationship to John 6:44, 65 - are individuals who are distinct from “the world.” And per the repeated, highly intentional language of the Son, those so “given” – both those currently and “all who will believe on Me through their word,” (vs 20), are united to Him *by the* Father’s act- not *their* foreseen faith. This will be decisively demonstrated below.

✚ Not once in the chapter does Jesus refer to their faith as being the decisive cause of the Father’s “giving.” And when considered in

connection with John 6:36, 44 and 65 – as it must be, their faith in Him is clearly the result of that giving, not the cause.

Jesus does mention the empirical fact that they “have believed that You sent Me” (vs. 8), but it is a significant assumption read into the text that the Lord, by that phrase meant or even implied “by *their own* production of their faith, they have believed.” Jesus can acknowledge the presence of “their” belief without affirming *they* are its decisive *cause* – as He did when hearing Peter’s confession that He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus acknowledged the objective faith confessed by Peter. Yet He attributed that faith *entirely* to the revelation given by the Father – “flesh and blood did not reveal to you, but My Father in heaven.” (Matt. 16:17). There was absolutely nothing, even indirectly, that could be interpreted as Jesus praising Peter for his faith. At no point did Jesus say, “Well done!”, “*You* figured it out,” “*You let* the Father show this to you, or anything along those synergistic lines. Jesus response was 100% monergistic.

✚ It begs the question: *Why* would anyone assume His response to the how or why of *their* faith is any different than His response to Peter’s?

Saying “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you” is therefore, *categorically* devastating to synergistic models which require faith to be of human production. So, *whose* word are we to accept as authority here? *His* or theirs?

IV. CHRIST’S REFUSAL TO PRAY FOR THE WORLD (17:9)

John 17:9 – in its context, remains one of the most theologically *decisive* statements in Scripture:

“I am *not* praying for the world but *for those whom You have given Me.*”

This is no glib or casual remark. It is Christ Himself drawing a *covenantal boundary* around His intercessory ministry that He knows will be based on His

cross and resurrection. The High Priest is identifying the intended objects of His priestly work. Again, I remind the reader that intercession in biblical theology is *never* separated from atonement (cf. Isa 53:12; Rom 8:33–34; Heb 7:25), as if the two were complete distinct, unrelated things. The objector *must* separate the two theologically speaking (I am not suggesting they occur simultaneously, for at this moment, Jesus is not yet on the cross). When intercession is rightly understood theologically as *based on* atonement – this is irrefutable truth that they are two halves of the same whole, is now irrefutably established.

“But it is only a prayer for preservation from the evil one, not salvation.”

Such an objection must ignore the chapter as a whole – not to mention the fact that for Jesus, “preserved from the evil one” *is* the equivalent of saying “*saved*.” Jesus told His disciples they *would* suffer physically for His sake, so He was not here in John 17:9 asking that the Father merely protect them from Satan in the *physical* sense. So, if not the physical then He was *obviously* asking that they be protected “*from*” the evil one spiritually. For this reason, the objection above is shown to be completely superficial and invalid theologically, logically and in the flow of the chapter, soteriologically. For those who may not know, “soteriology” is the doctrine or study of salvation, especially conceding the *how* and *why* of it.

 **Therefore, any limitation in intercession requires a corresponding limitation in atonement.**

V. THELŌ — CHRIST’S VOLITIONAL INTENTION (17:24)

Now we get to the heart of the matter: The verb *thelō* (“I *desire*,” “I *will*”) in verse 24, communicates *deliberate* divine intention. When Jesus says, “Father, I *desire* that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am,” He is revealing the scope of His saving will based on *His* desire and understanding of who He is about to be offered for! He does not express this intention for “the world,” rather, He intentionally excludes the non-believing world from His request. This is the Son’s *own* expression of whom He desires /wills to save and

glorify. As such it traces back to John 17:2 – “That He may give eternal life to all You have given Him”, which traces back to the beginning of the gospel-mission, proclaimed by Gabriel prior to His birth; “Call His name JESUS for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matt. 1:21). “His people” here is a covenantal term, not merely an ethnic one.

✚ **Jesus did not come to try and expand this mission, but to accomplish it – “I have come to do Your will O God.”**

VI. “FOR THEIR SAKES, I SANCTIFY MYSELF” (17:19)

Christ’s sanctification is not a moral, physical moral purification but priestly *consecration*. The verb *hagiazō* in this context means being set apart *for sacrificial service*. Jesus consecrates Himself *as both Priest and Lamb*. He does this “*for their sakes*”—the same individuals for whom He intercedes and whom the Father has given Him. The unity of these actions is the foundation of definite atonement. *Again, the burden of proof that this is not so, is the objectors.*

VII. THE UNITY OF PRIESTLY WORK: ATONEMENT AND INTERCESSION

Throughout Scripture, the priestly roles of interceding based on offering, are inseparable (Isa 53; Rom 8; Heb 7). *Christ dies for the same people He intercedes for, and He intercedes for the same people He died for.* There is no biblical category wherein Christ dies for individuals whom He does not pray for or prays for those He does not sanctify Himself for. Synergistic models require these contradictions; *John 17 does not permit them.*

VIII. THE LINGUISTIC LOGIC OF vv. 2, 9 → 20, 24

The structural flow of John 17 forms a single, simple, *unbroken* theological chain. It does so in the plainest language possible! In verse 2 Christ identifies who it is He will give eternal life to – “those You have given.” Again, we see

the same language from the Son Himself who always frames it in monergistic language in this chapter (and other places in John – John 6:37, 44, 60-65).

In verse 9, Christ excludes the entire unbelieving world from His intercession. In verse 20, He includes all future believers in the group given Him by the Father. In verse 24, He expresses His desire / will that these same “given” ones be with Him in glory.

He does not say, “I desire that all people will be with Me to see My glory” – yet this is precisely what we *would* expect *if* synergistic models of atonement were valid! As such, John 17 provides the theological framework for how we interpret passages like 1 Tim. 2:6 – “He gave Himself a ransom for all men...” The unbelieving “world” remains excluded; the “given ones” remain the exclusive focus of Christ’s redemptive intent. The text itself establishes the unity of election, intercession, atonement, and glorification.

IX. REFUTATION OF SYNERGISTIC OBJECTIONS

“This prayer concerns only the apostles.” This is refuted *explicitly* by verse 20: “those who will believe in Me through their word.” Jesus here contemplates and mentions all future believers – hence, “the church” Paul said He both “loved *and* gave Himself *for*” (Eph. 5:25)

“Intercession is distinct from atonement.” Scripture binds them inseparably (Isa 53; Rom 8; Heb 7). The Intercessor intercedes based on His death. And vice versa.

“World in John 3:16 contradicts John 17.” John’s usage demonstrates multiple senses of “world,” including generalization, moral order, and elect-out-of-the-world categories. John 12:32 when considered in direct relationship with John 6:37, 44, 65 is therefore, clearly revealed to be an example of linguistic synecdoche – the overstating of the whole where the actual number is less. Synecdoche, by definition, defaults to the lower - meaning the part stands

for the whole, but the numerical scope is determined *by contextual limitation*. And it is not a pre-decided, arbitrary decision to say Joh 12:32 is synecdoche – it is an exegetical, textual one based on cross-referencing with John 6:37, 44, 65 and their context. As well as the entire flow of John 17. The synergistic model which will persist in demanding that “all men” in 12:32 is slavishly literal by that same logic, collapses itself. For it is empirically obvious that at no time in history from the cross to the present has the Son of God done so! However, in John 6:27, 44, 65 we see the following:

“All those the Father gives Me will come to Me...” (vs. 37)

“No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him” (vs. 44)

“This is why I said to you no one can come unless it has been given to him by the Father.” (vs. 65)

The “Revolving Door of Salvation”

This is what my brother referred to “the revolving door” of salvation. First, Jesus tells the “bottom-line” – *all* (not some) so given *will* (not might) come to Him. No one can “come” *unless* the Father draws. And verse 65 is truly devastating to all synergistic models. The English phrase “This is why I said to you...” is in the imperfect tense in Greek. As such, it means “As I have been saying to you.” Objections that this imperfect tense is of John’s creation as the writer of the book, not an accurate reflection of the Lord’s own repeated emphasis collapse based on the gospel being “inspired” by the Holy Spirit. Are we at liberty to redact a text because we prefer that it is not true based on such a rationale? Thus, whether Jesus’ own emphasis – or John’s in recalling the emphasis of the Lord, *either way*, the meaning is the same: The truth expressed in John 6:37, 44 and 65 was not a “one off”, casual, not repeated thing. It was something He was in the habit of repeating – which only shows how important it obviously was to Him. Here one must question, *Why* does the synergistic model which claims it is faithful to the text, here redact, reorder or openly deny His repeated emphasis?

✚ Thus, synergistic models posit a failed “Saviour”. He oversold His ability. He did not say “If I be lifted up from the earth I will try...or I want to draw all men to Me.” He said “I will” do so!

“The ‘given’ are those foreseen to believe.” The grammar here and in Joh 6:37, 44, 65 identifies the Father as the sole acting, giving subject; the giving precedes believing. Believing is the effect of giving.

“This is about preservation, not atonement.” This logic is quite revealing. For it demonstrates the objector does not connect the dots – to wit; Intercession based on atonement is what “preserves.” You cannot divorce what scripture has inviolably – and I say, obviously joined together

“Jesus was only praying at that moment for the elect.” This idea – that by His specifically praying for the elect at that moment, does not require that He did not pray for others elsewhere, or that He died only for them. It is simply His specific mention and emphasis at that time.

Trying to be gracious here, I find this last objection to be the shallowest and “forced” of all. Because the One praying is not a finite human being. He is;


- a. The eternal Word of God “made flesh” (John 1:1-2, 15),
- b. The Son of God who is “the image of the Father – the exact representation of His being” (Heb. 1:3),
- c. The One who said, “If you see Me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:9)
- d. The “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). – Again, “the world” is not and cannot be rightly understood to mean every person without exception per synergistic models, but rather *more* than Jewish believers only, but “men *from* every nation, tribe and tongue.” (Rev. 5:9). Thus, per the Apostles teaching it was “*the church of God* He purchased *with His own blood.*” (Acts 20:28)

“Prevenient Grace changed humanity.” The objection based on “prevenient grace” per Arminian / Synergistic models is no answer at all. For according to

that idea, the Father supernaturally gives this “prevenient grace” (PG) – grace coming before faith, in equal measure, to everyone without exception. He did this without their consent by the way! So, for those who argue that it is a “violation” of the sinner for God to in any way alter their dispositions or desires apart from consent, it’s strange that they do not object here. Strange? Inconsistent? Or inherently contradictory?

Despite the universally applied “PG” only some are believers. This PG supposedly changed the condition of all sinners from being *unable* to believe to being once again able. A statement which at once affirms the doctrine of Total Depravity by the way! For if not truly unable to believe because of the fall, why would PG that restores this ability even be needed? Furthermore, *if* PG so altered the “determinative effect of sin” – meaning that without it, sin’s hold on the sinner *determines* the choices they will make (another affirmation of Total Depravity), then *why* is it that the majority still choose unbelief and rebellion? If PG brought them back to the baseline of *neutrality* – is the glory and person and promise of Christ so repulsive that even when the determinative power of sin is removed by PG, the majority still refuse Him?

But wait; Is unbelief a morally neutral state? Not at all – “whatever is not of faith is sin.” (Rom 14:23). God’s *command* is to believe on His Son and love one another (1 John 3:23). Since unbelief is rebellion and sin, it demonstrates that sinful conditions are *still* determining their non-response! In which case, the so-called prevenient grace is ineffective. And it makes the sinner who does believe “better” in some way - wiser, humbler, more spiritual - than the masses who do not. It must be so! **For if PG is unilaterally equal in measure across the board, yet all are not by it persuaded to believe and say “Yes”, then the reason why some do cannot be attributed to grace!** This then introduces the very element of self-boasting that is repeatedly rebuked and condemned in scripture.

 **Synergism by its definition, therefore, is the theology of “I” – “I chose, choose, consent, submit, cooperate, endure, repent, believe...I, I, I.” In other words, self-boasting.**

X. CONCLUSION

John 17:24 stands as Christ's *own* understanding of His mission as Priest and Sacrifice. In the plainest language possible, it expressly denotes the specific, exclusive objects of His saving work which always includes His intercession. So, the “very heart of the chapter”, verse 24, explicitly details the specific, exclusive ones *He desires* in glory. The ones He *wants* to be *with* Him in eternity are those the Father has given Him!

✚ **Only a definite atonement secures a definite people — and only such security satisfies the desire Christ expresses in John 17:24.**

NOTES – Authors Who Argued on Similar Themes

1. D. A. Carson, ***The Gospel According to John***, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 552–553.
2. John Calvin, ***Commentary on the Gospel According to John***, trans. W. Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 206.
3. Herman Bavinck, ***Reformed Dogmatics***, Vol. 3: ***Sin and Salvation in Christ*** (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 368–371.
4. Ben Witherington III, ***John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), pp. 275–279.
5. B. B. Warfield, “**The Saviour of the World**,” in ***The Person and Work of Christ*** (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1950), pp. 178–182.
6. Leon Morris, ***Studies in the Fourth Gospel*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp. 120–125.
7. D. A. Carson, ***The Gospel According to John*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 556–559.

8. John Owen, ***The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*** (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1959), pp. 52–55.