

What Is Synecdoche?

Commentary for November 14, 2023 — Synecdoche Is A Figure of Speech

[Editor's Note: This Commentary was published by Dr. Martin in February 1977. DWS]

The understanding of the rhetorical term "Synecdoche" is most important in comprehending biblical teachings. The word is pronounced something close to "SIN-ECK-DEH-KEY." It denotes a figure of speech that all languages have.

When part of something is used to describe its whole, this is called a Synecdoche. Thus, when God said that a person must love Him with **"all the heart"** (Deuteronomy 6:5), He does not mean the heart alone (as a single organ in the human body). God is referring to a part of the body to signify the whole. A Synecdoche can also be reversed to mean the whole put for a part.

"Synecdoche" definition from *Cambridge English Dictionary* (online)

Noun: a word or phrase in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole of it, for example "a pair of hands" for "a worker," or the whole of something is used to refer to a part, for example "the law" for "a police officer."

Note an example of this. On New Year's Day a Pasadena newspaper headline may say "All Pasadena Excited About New Year's Festivities." However, that would not literally be true because I happen to know a few Pasadena citizens who are unconcerned about the Rose Parade and football game (I am not one of them). In this case, a *Synecdoche* shows the whole being put for a part.

Synecdoche in the Bible

What does all this have to do with Bible interpretation? Very much indeed, especially when it comes to understanding the scope of Christ's salvation. There are many scriptures which say that God will save or reconcile "ALL" people to Himself. But many theologians, in order to avoid the conclusions that the texts refer to "everyone," apply the use of a Synecdoche to prevent the word "all" from meaning "totality."

And while it is admitted on all hands that the Bible utilizes Synecdoche, they are not used in as many places as some may think. More often than not, when the Bible uses the word "all" it means "totality," not simply a part. When Paul wrote, **"ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23), he excluded none of the human race from his statement! All of us have been sinners!

Let us look at some cardinal scriptures concerning the use of the word "all" and see if the context supports the application of a Synecdoche or not. In Colossians 1:12-15 Paul gave

thanks to God the Father and mentioned the exalted roles of Christ. Then, focusing on Christ as the central subject, Paul goes on:

“For by Him [Christ] were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him.”

• *Colossians 1:16*

Are we to imagine that Paul is leaving something out of this creation by Christ? Of course not! Paul shows that even the invisible things — all of them — were created by Him. **“And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist”** (verse 17). Without doubt, Christ existed before all and everything that He created.

Paul cannot be using Synecdoches to explain his teaching about the universality of Christ’s creation in Colossians. Common sense and grammatical law will not allow it. Since this is the case, let us now read verse 20 which is in the same context.

“And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile ALL THINGS unto himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.”

• *Colossians 1:20*

What an all-encompassing statement!

The context shows that the **“all things”** Paul referenced are those things which were both visible and invisible; plus, all thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers — whether those things are found in earth or heaven! Paul said Christ will **“reconcile all things unto Himself.”**

In the Book of Philippians Paul further emphasized this same teaching:

“That at the name of Jesus EVERY knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that EVERY tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

• *Philippians 2:10–11*

When Paul wrote that Christ will **“reconcile all things”** and that **“every knee”** will bow and that **“every tongue”** will confess **“TO THE GLORY OF GOD**, this can only be meant in a total literal SENSE.

(It ought to be mentioned that every time the word “confess” — or its cognates — is mentioned in Scripture, it always refers to a freewill, independent, personal non-coercive confession. Never does it mean confession under duress or compulsion. This same usage must hold true in this verse in Philippians. After all, this confession of all beings in the universe is to **“the glory of God.”** ELM)

God wants to be honored in a genuine and heartfelt way by His creatures. Note John 5:22–23:

“For the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son: That ALL men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father.

He that honors not the Son honors not the Father which has sent him.”

• *John 5:22–23*

Would any be so bold as to say these “alls” are not speaking of totality? ALL judgment is committed to Christ, and nothing is left out! There are other verses that have similar themes:

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw ALL men unto me.”

• **John 12:32**

“ALL that the Father gives me shall come to me ...

And this is the Father’s will which has sent me that of ALL which He has given me I should lose nothing, but raise it up again at the last day.”

• **John 6:37, 39**

These are NOT Synecdoches because Christ Himself made it clear that **“I should lose nothing.”** These verses must signify a literal totality, or the words mean nothing at all.

Romans Chapter Five

One of the most profound sections of Scripture which shows parallel evidence of “totality” in the use of “alls,” is Romans 5:12–21. The entire context needs to be read to appreciate the significance of what Paul was saying, but in this brief survey, I will quote only one of the verses. It gives parallel teaching that demonstrates beyond doubt what the “alls” signify.

“Therefore as by the offence of one [Adam] judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one [Christ] the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.”

• **Romans 5:18**

Since Paul made it clear that in Adam ALL MEN came under condemnation (even Christ was condemned to die on the tree of crucifixion, Matthew 20:18), Paul means the totality of the race. If a Synecdoche is being used here, please show from the Bible what part of the human race has not been condemned through Adam’s offense? There is no one excepted!

Now look at the parallel part of verse 18: **“By the righteousness of one [Christ] the free gift came upon ALL MEN unto justification of life.”**

Since the phrase **“ALL MEN”** in the first part of the verse signifies the totality of the human race, the **“ALL MEN”** of the second part must also mean the same thing. Grammatical laws will not allow it to be otherwise. Another Scripture which gives parallel interpretation is 1 Corinthians 15:22: **“For as in Adam ALL die, even so in Christ shall ALL be made alive.”**

There is no doubt that all of us die because all of us are **“in Adam.”** The word “all” must mean “without exception” because all humans have come from Adam. This fact of totality is then paralleled by Paul with the assurance of the resurrection that all shall have in Christ (the Second Adam). Common grammatical usage insists that the words “all” in both parts of the verse mean the same thing — totality! No Synecdoches were being used by Paul when he made these comparisons.

And though there are a few Synecdoches in the Bible (such as in Matthew 3:5), the cardinal texts which we have been citing are not examples of them. Now notice one more verse. This scripture concerns the entire human race:

“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who [God] will have ALL men to be saved, and [ALL] to come unto the knowledge of the truth. Who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in its own seasons [Greek].”

• 1 Timothy 2:3–4, 6

This ransom which Christ procured will come to **all men** because **“there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Timothy 2:5).

In this latter version Paul said that Christ is the mediator for “men.” This means ALL men — not a partiality of the human race. All humans have only one mediator — Jesus Christ! And when Paul said that God will have **“ALL men to be saved,”** he means all humans.

We realize that it is difficult for humans to believe that Christ can (and will) save all. (And there are many verses of Scripture that speak of intermediate judgments upon man.) Still, the final redemption which we have in Christ extends to all men.

What a glorious future awaits mankind through the salvation that is in Jesus Christ.

“... of all which He has given me I should lose nothing, but raise it up again at the last day.”

• John 6:39

“And I [said Jesus], if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw ALL men unto me.”

• John 12:32

These scriptures are not Synecdoches! They are literal. They mean exactly what they say.

“For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are ALL things: to whom be glory for ever [for the eons]. Amen.”

• Romans 11:36

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