

The Extent of the Atonement: Limited Atonement Versus Unlimited Atonement (Part One)

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Among the more controversial issues related to the doctrine of the atonement is the question, *For whom did Christ die?*

There are two theological camps regarding issue. One camp argues that Jesus' death was intended to secure salvation for a limited number of people. This view is typically called "limited atonement" because God is said to have limited the effect of Christ's death to a specific number of elect persons. This view is also called "particular redemption" because advocates of this view believe redemption was provided only for a particular group of people (i.e., the elect). The second camp (my view) holds to what is called "unlimited atonement" or "general redemption." This camp argues that God did not limit Christ's redemptive death to the elect, but allowed it to be for humankind in general.¹ In this view, Christ's death made the *provision* of salvation for all humanity, but salvation becomes *effective* only for those who exercise faith in Christ. Salvation becomes *effective* only for God's elect.

In this article, we will first survey the evidence for both views. We will then set forth detailed argumentation in favor of unlimited atonement, which the author believes to be the biblical position.

¹ Walter Elwell, "Atonement, Extent of the," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 98.

The Case for Limited Atonement

Limited atonement is “the view that Christ’s atoning death was only for the elect.”² Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof explains it this way: “The Reformed position is that Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only. This is equivalent to saying that He died for the purpose of saving only those to whom He actually applies the benefits of His redemptive work.”³

Verses Offered in Support of Limited Atonement

Following are some of the key verses Berkhof and others cite in favor of limited atonement. I’ve italicized the relevant portions of each verse:

- Matthew 1:21: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save *his people* from their sins.”
- Matthew 20:28: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*.”
- Matthew 26:28: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many* for the forgiveness of sins.”
- John 10:15: “I lay down my life for *the sheep*.”
- Acts 20:28: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the *church of God*, which he bought with his own blood.”
- Ephesians 5:25: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her.”
- Hebrews 9:28: “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of *many people*; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation *to those* who are waiting for him.”
- John 15:13: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his *friends*.”

Upon first reading, verses such as these seem to support the idea that Christ died on the cross not for all people but for a particular group of people—His “people,” the “many,” the “church of God,” His “sheep,” His “friends.” Many

² Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 97.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 394.

Reformed theologians believe the doctrine of *unlimited* atonement is utterly disproven by such verses.

Arguments Offered in Support of Limited Atonement

Proponents of limited atonement, such as late Reformed scholars Louis Berkhof and Charles Hodge, set forth a number of arguments which they believe conclusively proves the truth of the doctrine. Following are eight of the more notable arguments:

(1) The Bible says Christ died for a specific group of people—the “church,” His “people,” His “sheep.” Berkhof argues, “Scripture repeatedly qualifies those for whom Christ laid down His life in such a way as to point to a very definite limitation. Those for whom He suffered and died are variously called His ‘sheep,’ John 10:11, 15, His ‘Church,’ Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25–27, His ‘people,’ Matt. 1:21, and the ‘elect,’ Rom. 8:32–35.”⁴

(2) Since the elect were chosen before the foundation of the world, Reformed scholars ask how Christ could honestly be said to have died *for all* human beings? Put another way, how could Christ design something which by virtue of His omniscience He knew would never come to pass? It doesn’t make sense, they say. Hodge clarifies this line of argument by suggesting that “if God from eternity determined to save

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one portion of the human race and not *another*, it seems to be a contradiction to say that the plan of salvation had equal reference to *both* portions.”⁵ In other words, “it would have been a waste and a lack of foresight on the part of God to have Christ die for those whom he had not chosen to salvation.”⁶

(3) Some advocates of limited atonement say Christ is defeated if He died for all men and all men aren’t saved.

(4) Some advocates of limited atonement say that if Christ died for all people, then God would be unfair in sending people to hell for their own sins. It is argued that “no law court allows payment to be exacted twice for the same crime, and God will not do that either.”⁷ Christ paid for the sins of the elect; the lost pay for *their own* sins.

(5) Since Christ didn’t pray for everyone in His High Priestly prayer in John 17, but only prayed for *His own*, Christ must not have died for everyone. It is

⁴ Berkhoff, p. 395.

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), vol. 2, p. 553.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 829.

⁷ Elwell, p. 98.

argued that since the intercession is limited in extent, the atonement must be too.⁸ As Berkhof puts it, “Why should He limit His intercessory prayer, if He had actually paid the price for all?”⁹

(6) Some advocates of limited atonement have charged that unlimited atonement tends toward universalism.¹⁰ Hence, unlimited atonement cannot be the correct view.

(7) In the Middle Ages such scholars as Prosper of Aquitaine, Thomas Bradwardine, and John Staupitz taught limited atonement. It is claimed that even though John Calvin did not explicitly teach the doctrine, it seems implicit in some of his writings. Calvin’s successors then made limited atonement explicit and included it in Reformed confessions of faith such as the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith.¹¹

(8) Though terms such as “all,” “world,” and “whosoever” are used in Scripture in reference to those for whom Christ died (e.g., John 3:16), these words are to be understood in terms of the elect. In other words, “all” refers to “all *of the elect*” or “all *classes of men*” (Jew and Gentile). Berkhof says “the word ‘all’ sometimes has a restricted meaning in Scripture, denoting all of a particular class, 1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:23, or all kinds of classes, Tit. 2:11.”¹²

Similarly, the word “world” is said to refer to the “world *of the elect*” or to people without distinction (Jews and Gentiles). Berkhof says the doctrine of unlimited atonement is based

on the unwarranted assumption that the word ‘world’ ... means ‘all the individuals that constitute the human race.’ When it is used of men, [the word] does not always include all men, John 7:4; 12:19; 14:22; 18:20; Rom. 11:12, 15.”¹³

He argues that “there are passages which teach that Christ died for the world In the passages referred to it may simply serve to indicate that Christ died, not merely for the Jews, but for people of all the nations of the world.”¹⁴ In keeping with the above, the word “whosoever” is interpreted to mean “whosoever of the elect.”

⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 828.

⁹ Berkhoff, p. 395.

¹⁰ See Elwell, p. 98.

¹¹ See W. R. Godfrey, “Atonement, Extent of,” *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 57.

¹² Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 218.

¹³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 396.

¹⁴ Bekhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, p. 217.

Based on arguments such as those above, Reformed scholars believe that Christ died *only for the elect*.

The Case for Unlimited Atonement

In noted contrast to the doctrine of limited atonement, *unlimited* atonement is “the doctrine that Christ’s redemptive death was *for all* persons.”¹⁵ Christ did not die just for the elect but for the non-elect as well.

Scriptural Arguments Offered in Support of Unlimited Atonement

There are numerous verses that support the doctrine of unlimited atonement. In what follows, I shall list some of these verses and add some expositional commentary along the way (my own comments, as well as comments from well-known exegetes). Again, I’ve italicized the relevant words in each verse.

Luke 19:10—Jesus Saves the “Lost”

In Luke 19:10 we read, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save *what was lost*.” The “lost” in this verse refers to the *collective whole* of lost humanity,¹⁶ not just to the lost elect. This is the most natural understanding of this verse.

John 1:29—Jesus Takes Away the Sin “of the World”

In John 1:29 we read, “The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin *of the world*.’” What is the “world” here? Exegete B. F. Westcott tells us that the fundamental idea of *kosmos* (world) in John’s Gospel is that which “belongs to the sphere of human life as an ordered whole, consid-

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ered apart from God . . . the *world* comes to represent humanity in its fallen state, alienated from its Maker.”¹⁷

Reformer John Calvin says of this verse, “He uses the word *sin* in the singular number for any kind of iniquity; as if he had said that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ. And when he says the sin *of the world*, he extends this favor indiscriminately to the

¹⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 176.

¹⁶ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, “Online Bible,” Online Bible Software, © 1995.

¹⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (London: John Murray, 1902), p. 31f.

whole human race.”¹⁸ Though Calvin is often cited in favor of limited atonement, here is a clear statement in which unlimited atonement is in view.

J. C. Ryle similarly states regarding this verse:

Christ is ... a Savior for all mankind He did not suffer for a few persons only, but for all mankind... . What Christ took away, and bore on the cross, was not the sin of certain people only, but the whole accumulated mass of all the sins of all the children of Adam... . I hold as strongly as anyone that Christ’s death is profitable to none but the elect who believe in His Name. But I dare not limit and pare down such expressions as the one before us... . I dare not confine the intention of redemption to the saints alone. Christ is for every man ... The atonement was made for all the world, though it is applied and enjoyed by none but believers.¹⁹

John 3:16—”Whoever” Believes in Jesus Is Saved

In John 3:16 we read, “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The Greek lexicons are unanimous that “world” here denotes humankind, not the “world of the elect.”

It is critical to observe that John 3:16 cannot be divorced from the context that is set in verses 14 and 15, wherein Christ alludes to Numbers 21. In this passage Moses is seen setting up the brazen serpent in the camp of Israel, so that if “any man” looked to it, he experienced physical deliverance. In verse 15 Christ applies the story spiritually when He says that “whosoever” believes on the uplifted Son of Man shall experience spiritual deliverance.

John Calvin comments:

He has employed the universal term *whosoever*, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term *world* which He formerly used [God so loved the world]; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet He shows Himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when He invites all men without exception [not merely ‘without distinction’] to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.²⁰

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), vol. 1, p. 64.

¹⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (New York: Robert Carter, n.d.), vol. 3, pp. 61–62.

²⁰ Calvin, p. 125, insertions added.

John 4:42—Jesus Is the Savior “of the World”

In John 4:42 we read, “They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior *of the world*.’” It is quite certain that when the Samaritans called Jesus “the Savior of the world,” they were not thinking of the world of the elect. To read such a meaning into this text would be sheer eisegesis.

Likewise, when Jesus said, “I am the Light *of the world*” (John 8:12), He certainly was not thinking of Himself as the Light of the world of the elect. “The sun in the heavens shines on *all* men, though some, in their folly, may choose to withdraw into dark caves to evade its illuminating rays.”²¹

1 Timothy 4:10—Jesus Is the Savior “of all Men”

First Timothy 4:10 says, “We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior *of all men*, and especially of those who believe.” There is a clear distinction in this verse between “all men” and “those who believe.” Apparently the Savior has done something for *all* human beings, though it is less in degree than what He has done for those who believe.²² In other words, Christ has made a provision of salvation for all men, though it only becomes effective for those who exercise faith in Christ.

Hebrews 2:9—Jesus Tasted Death “for Everyone”

Hebrews 2:9 says, “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death *for everyone*.” The Greek word “everyone” (*pantos*) is better translated “each.” If it be asked, why use the word *pantos* (each) rather than *panton* (all), we reply that the singular brings out more emphatically the applicability of Christ’s death to *each individual man*. Christ tasted death for *every single person*.

Romans 5:6—Jesus Died “for the Ungodly”

Romans 5:6 says, “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died *for the ungodly*.” It doesn’t make much sense to read this as saying that Christ died for the ungodly among the elect. Rather the verse, read plainly, indicates that Christ died for *all* the ungodly of the earth.

Romans 5:18—Christ’s Death Made Salvation Available to “All Men”

Romans 5:18 tells us, “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation *for all men*, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life *for all men*.” Regarding this verse, Calvin commented,

²¹ Norman Douy, *The Death of Christ* (Irving, TX: Williams & Watrous Publishing Co., 1978), p. 82.

²² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 834.

“He makes this favor common to all, because it is propoundable to all, and not because it is in reality extended to all [i.e., in their experience]; for though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God’s benignity indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive Him.”²³ This sounds very much like Calvin

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was teaching unlimited atonement in this statement.

Regarding the two occurrences of the phrase “all men” (“... just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for *all men*, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for *all men* ...”), impartial exegesis demands that the phrase must have the *same extent* in both clauses.²⁴ In other words, just as *all men* on the earth were brought to a state of condemnation through one sin (Adam’s), so salvation was made available for *all men* by Christ’s death on the cross (though the *reception* of this salvation depends upon exercising faith in Jesus).

1 John 2:2—Jesus Atoned for the Sins “of the Whole World”

First John 2:2 says, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins *of the whole world*.” A natural reading of this verse, without imposing theological presuppositions on it, supports unlimited atonement. In fact, a plain reading of this verse would seem to deal a knock-out punch to the limited atonement position. It simply would not make sense to interpret this verse as saying, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our [*the elect*] sins, and not only for ours [*the elect*] but also for the sins of the whole world [*of the elect*].”

Isaiah 53:6—The Iniquity “of us All” Was Laid on Jesus

Isaiah 53:6 says, “*We all*, like sheep, have gone astray, *each of us* has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity *of us all*” (Isa. 53:6). This verse doesn’t make sense unless it is read to say that the same “all” that went astray is the “all” for whom the Lord died. “In the first of these statements, the general apostasy of men is declared; in the second, the particular deviation of each one; in the third, the atoning suffering of the Messiah, which is said to be on behalf of all. As the first ‘all’ is true of all men (and not just of the elect), we judge that the last ‘all’ relates to the same company.”²⁵

Theologian Millard Erickson notes that “this passage is especially powerful from a logical standpoint. It is clear that the extent of sin is universal; it is specified that every one of us has sinned. It should also be noticed that the extent of what will be laid on the suffering servant exactly parallels the extent of sin. It is

²³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p. 211.

²⁴ E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London, 1886), pp. 119–20.

²⁵ Douty, p. 73.

difficult to read this passage and not conclude that just as everyone sins, everyone is also atoned for.”²⁶

2 Peter 2:1—Jesus Paid the Price Even for Those Who Deny Him

In 2 Peter 2:1, we are told that Christ even paid the price of redemption for false teachers who deny Him: “But there were also *false prophets* among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord *who bought them*—bringing swift destruction on themselves.” Erickson notes that “2 Peter 2:1 seems to point out most clearly that people for whom Christ died may be lost . . . there is a distinction between those for whom Christ died and those who are finally saved.”²⁷

John 3:17—Through Jesus Salvation Is Available to “the World”

John 3:17 says, “For God did not send his Son into *the world* to condemn *the world*, but to save *the world* through him.” Commenting on this verse, Calvin said that “God is unwilling that we should be overwhelmed with everlasting destruction, because He has appointed His Son to be the salvation *of the world*.”²⁸ Calvin also stated, “The word *world* is again repeated, that no man may think himself wholly excluded, if he only keeps the road of faith.”²⁹ Clearly God has made the *provision* of salvation available to all human beings.

The Universal Proclamation of the Gospel

In keeping with the above verses, there are also many verses which indicate that the Gospel is to be universally proclaimed to *all* human beings. Such a universal proclamation would make sense only if the doctrine of unlimited atonement were true. Consider the following:

- Matthew 24:14 says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached *in the whole world* as a testimony *to all nations*, and then the end will come.”
- Matthew 28:19 says, “Therefore go and make disciples *of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .”
- In Acts 1:8 Jesus said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the ends of the earth*.”

²⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 830.

²⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 831.

²⁸ Cited in Douty, p. 15.

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, vol. 1, p. 126.

- Acts 17:30 says, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands *all people everywhere* to repent.”
- Titus 2:11 says, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared *to all men*.”
- In 2 Peter 3:9 we read, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish*, but *everyone* to come to repentance.”

In view of such passages, it is legitimate to ask, If Christ died only for the elect, how can an offer of salvation be made to all persons without some sort of insincerity, artificiality, or dishonesty being involved in the process? Is it not improper to offer salvation to everyone if in fact Christ did not die to save everyone?³⁰ As Norman Douty puts it, “How can God authorize His servants to offer pardon to the non-elect if Christ did not purchase it for them? This is a problem that does not plague those who hold to General [Unlimited] Redemption, for it is most reasonable to proclaim the Gospel to all if Christ died for all.”³¹

The fact is, those who hold to limited atonement cannot say to any sinner with true conviction, “Christ died *for you*.” After all, he or she may be one of the non-elect. Reformed counselor Jay Adams is forthright in saying, “As a reformed Christian, the writer believes that

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counselors must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ himself who are his elect for whom he died.”³² Berkhof candidly admits, “It need not be denied that there is a real difficulty at this point.”³³

In limited atonement, the preaching of the Gospel (the “good news”) cannot be personalized (i.e., Christ died “*for you*”).³⁴ Rather, those who hold to this view believe the gospel must be presented to people in very general terms, such as, “God loves sinners,” or “Christ died for sinners.”

As noted above, this is not a problem for those who hold to unlimited atonement. Lewis Sperry Chafer puts things into perspective for us:

³⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 832.

³¹ Douty, p. 49.

³² Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 70.

³³ Cited in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 833–34.

³⁴ Robert Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), p. 166.

To believe that some are elect and some nonelect creates no problem for the soulwinner provided he is free in his convictions to declare that Christ died for each one to whom he speaks. He knows that the nonelect will not accept the message. He knows also that even an elect person may resist it to near the day of his death. But if the preacher believes that any portion of his audience is destitute of any basis of salvation, having no share in the values of Christ's death, it is no longer a question in his mind of whether they will accept or reject; it becomes rather a question of truthfulness in the declaration of the message.³⁵

Putting the “Limited” and “Unlimited” Verses Together

How do we put the “limited” and “unlimited” verses together so that, taken as a whole, all the verses are interpreted in a harmonious way without contradicting each other? With Lewis Sperry Chafer, Robert Lightner, Norman Douty, and others, I believe that seemingly restrictive references can be logically fit into an unlimited scenario much more easily than universal references made to fit into a limited atonement scenario. Perhaps Chafer explains it best:

The problem that both groups face is the need to harmonize passages that refer to limited redemption with passages that refer to unlimited redemption. To the unlimited redemptionist the limited redemption passages present no real difficulty. He believes that they merely emphasize one aspect of a larger truth. Christ did die for the elect, but He also died for the sins of the whole world. However, the limited redemptionist is not able to deal with the unlimited redemption passages as easily.³⁶

The two sets of passages—one seemingly in support of limited atonement, the other in support of unlimited atonement—are not irreconcilable. While it is true that the benefits of Christ's death are referred to as belonging to God's “sheep,” His “people,” and the like, it would have to be shown that Christ died *only* for them in order for limited atonement to be true. No one denies that Christ died for God's “sheep” and His “people.” It is only denied that Christ died *exclusively* for them.³⁷ Certainly if Christ died for the whole of humanity, there is no logical problem in saying that he died for a specific *part* of the whole.³⁸

Robert Lightner offers this excellent closing summary:

³⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.-Dec. 1980, p. 316.

³⁶ Chafer, p. 323.

³⁷ Elwell, p. 99.

³⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 832.

The task of harmonizing those various Scriptures poses a far greater problem for those who hold to a limited atonement than it does to those who hold to an unlimited position. Those who hold to an unlimited atonement recognize that some Scriptures emphasize the fact that Christ died for the elect, for the church, and for individual believers. However, they point out that when those verses single out a specific group they do not do so to the exclusion of any who are outside that group since dozens of other passages include them. The “limited” passages are just emphasizing one aspect of a larger truth. In contrast, those who hold to a limited atonement have a far more difficult time explaining away the “unlimited” passages.³⁹

In Part Two of this article (in the next issue of *CTS Journal*), we will examine further evidences in support of unlimited atonement.

³⁹ Lightner, p. 166.