

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

by
Ron Rhodes, Th.D.

In Part One of this series, I set forth a number of verses and arguments in favor of the doctrine of unlimited atonement and against the doctrine of limited atonement. In this concluding installment, I shall provide further biblical arguments in favor of unlimited atonement.

A Case Study: The Savior of the Israelites

As a basic principle of biblical interpretation, it is critical to recognize that the Scriptures do not always include *all* aspects of a truth in *any one* passage. Consider the fact that Christ is called the Savior of the Israelites in a number of verses. If it is legitimate for particular redemptionists to cite certain verses in isolation to “prove” that Christ died only for the elect, then it could be argued with equal logic from other isolated passages that Christ died *only for Israel* (cf. John 11:51; Isaiah 53:8), or that He died only for the apostle Paul (for Paul declared that Christ “loved *me*, and gave himself *for me*”-- Galatians 2:20, emphasis added).¹

Related to this, it is highly revealing that Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus “will save *his people* from their sins.” Throughout the Old Testament God speaks of the Israelites as “My people.” For example, seven times God tells the Pharaoh, “Let My people go” (Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:13). (I urge the reader to check a concordance to verify that God continues to refer to the Israelites as “My people” throughout the entire Old Testament.) The last occurrence is Zechariah 13:9, where God affirms: “They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”

Now, in Luke 1:68 Zechariah said in regard to Jesus, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of *Israel*, because he has come and has redeemed *his people*” (emphasis added). Zechariah here uses the phrase “his people” in the standard Old Testament sense of “Israelites.”

In Matthew 1:21, when an angel told Joseph, “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,” the words “his people” are referring specifically to the people of Israel, not the entire company of God’s elect (which includes non-Israelites or Gentiles). Yet, as Norman Douty asks, “Who believes that the Jewish people have a monopoly on Christ’s saving grace? All hold that it goes beyond their confines to the Gentile world as well.”²

All of this is simply to say that, in like manner, when Christ is said to have purchased *the church* with His blood (Acts 20:28), we cannot limit Christ’s atoning work *to the church alone*. Simply because a particular verse only mentions God’s salvation to one group does not mean that God’s salvation is to be restricted to *only* that group.

Properly Understanding “Universal” Terms

In the previous article I discussed the particular redemptionist position that while 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” is said to refer to “all of the elect” or “all classes of men” (Jew and Gentile). Similarly, the word “world” is said to refer to the “world of the elect” or to people without distinction (Jews and Gentiles).

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct.-Dec. 1980, p. 323.

² Norman Douty, *The Death of Christ* (Irving, TX: Williams & Watrous Publishing Co., 1978), p. 132.

Contrary to this position, universal terms such as “world” *should not* be restricted in contexts that speak of the atonement. It is true that words like “all” and “world” are *sometimes* used in Scripture in a restricted sense (e.g., Luke 2:1 *olkoumene*, not *kosmos*). But context is always the determining factor in how these words should be understood. Theologian Robert Lightner correctly observes, “Those who always limit the meaning of those terms in contexts that deal with salvation do so on the basis of theological presuppositions, not on the basis of the texts themselves.”³

The scholarly lexicons, encyclopedias, and dictionaries that know nothing of the meaning “world of the elect” for the biblical word “world” (*kosmos*) include:

- Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.
- Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.
- Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament.
- Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.
- Souter’s Pocket Lexicon of the New Testament.
- The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge.
- Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible.
- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.
- The New Bible Dictionary.
- Baker’s Dictionary of Theology.
- Arndt and Gingrich’s A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.

Walter Martin, founder of the Christian Research Institute, correctly observed:

John the Apostle tells us that Christ gave His life as a propitiation for our sin (i.e., the elect), though not for ours only but for the sins of the *whole world* (1 John 2:2). . . . [People] cannot evade John’s usage of “whole” (Greek: *holos*). In the same context the apostle quite cogently points out that “the whole [*holos*] world lies in wickedness” or, more properly, “in the lap of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19, literal translation). If we assume that “whole” applies only to the chosen or elect of God, then the “whole world” does not “lie in the lap of the wicked one.” This, of course, all reject.⁴

We must also ask, How can the Holy Spirit have a ministry to the *whole world* in showing men their need of Jesus Christ (John 14-16) if the death of Christ does not make provision for the *whole world*? In John 16:8-11 Jesus said:

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to *you*; but if I go, I will send him to *you*. When he comes, he will convict *the world* of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where *you* can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned (emphasis added).

Notice in this passage that “the world” is clearly distinguished from “you.” Yet the Holy Spirit is said to bring conviction on *the world*. And one of the things the Spirit convicts “the world” of is the sin of not believing on Christ (v. 9).

Are we to conclude that “the world” that is convicted of unbelief is the world of the elect? If so, then Satan, the “prince of this world” (v. 11, same context), must be the “prince of the elect.” No wonder John Calvin says

³ Robert Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), p. 165.

⁴ Walter Martin, *Essential Christianity* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1980), p. 55.

of this passage, “Under the term *world* are, I think, included not only those who would be truly converted to Christ, but hypocrites and reprobate.”⁵

The “Many” Versus the “All”

In Matthew 26:28 Jesus said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many* for the forgiveness of sins.” The reference to “many” in Christ’s words do not support limited atonement but rather support *unlimited* atonement. One must keep in mind that earlier in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus had said that *few* find eternal life (Matt. 7:14) and *few* are chosen (22:14). But Christ did not say His blood was poured out for *a few*, but for *many*. John Calvin thus declares of this verse, “By the word *many* He means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race.”⁶

This is the same meaning as in Romans 5:15: “For *if the many* died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow *to the many!*” It is critical to note that the “many” of verse 15 is clearly defined in verse 18 as “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.*”

Notice also that in verse 15 Paul speaks of Adam’s sin, and of the resultant death that comes upon all his descendants. But then the apostle goes on to speak of the grace of God and its resultant gift of life abounding *to the same company*. This is clear from the fact that “the many” in the second clause of the verse is coextensive with “the many” in the first clause.

Is God’s “Desire” Frustrated?

It is sometimes argued that if God made the provision of salvation for all human beings, but not all human beings are saved, then God’s “desire” is frustrated. However, it is important to understand that though God is completely sovereign over all things, this does not mean He necessarily brings into reality everything He “desires.” Norman Douty offers this keen insight:

Consider the beginnings of human history. God told our first parents to refrain from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Did He want them to eat of it, or did He not? Plainly, He did not want them to do so. Yet they ate of it. Was He frustrated? Of course not. He was not frustrated because, by His *efficient* grace, He could have induced them to refrain. Yet He chose to withhold that grace and to permit the Fall. Nevertheless, the full responsibility for that sin belonged to Adam and Eve, who had *sufficient* grace to refrain, but did not use it.⁷

Consider also Matthew 23:37, where Christ said: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, *how often I have longed* to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, *but you were not willing.*” What Christ desired was not what came about.

Hence, Douty is correct in concluding:

As God could have induced our first parents to refrain from eating of the tree, so He could have induced . . . the resistant Jews of Christ’s time to have received His gracious ministry of salvation. But He did not choose to effect these desirable ends. Yet this in no wise means that He wanted evil to befall any. He merely *allowed* the violation of His desires in order to carry out a hidden purpose He had in mind.⁸

One further example relates to Jesus, who told some hard-hearted Jews in John 5:34, “I say these things that you may be saved.” But “saved” they were not. Why? Because Christ added in verse 40, “*You are unwilling* to come to Me, that you may have life.” Here is a clear case of “but ye would not,” despite the clear *offer* of salvation.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), vol. 2, p. 138.

⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949); *Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3, p. 214.

⁷ Douty, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Now, I must be careful to emphasize that simply because one rejects limited atonement does not in any way mean that one lessens or diminishes the clear scriptural doctrine of the sovereignty of God in regard to election. Any who make such an allegation are simply uninformed. As Lewis Sperry Chafer put it,

Without the slightest inconsistency the unlimited redemptionists may believe in an election according to sovereign grace, that none but the elect will be saved, that all of the elect will be saved, and that the elect are by divine enablement alone called out of the state of spiritual death from which they are impotent to take even one step in the direction of their own salvation. The text, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44), is as much a part of the one system of doctrine as it is of the other.⁹

Answers to Three Common Objections

There are three objections that are often raised in opposition to the doctrine of unlimited atonement. But they are easily answered.

1. *Objection:* If Christ died for those who go to hell, what benefit have they from His death?

Answer: We could just as well ask, What good did the bitten Israelites obtain from the brazen serpent to which they refused to look (Num. 21:8-9)? None, of course, but nevertheless God received the glory for being a God generous enough to make provision for them.¹⁰

2. *Objection:* If satisfaction has been made for all, how can any go to hell?

Answer: God has *provided* atonement for all, but He has stipulated that this atonement becomes *effective* only for those who exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Deliverance from doom depends not on the atonement alone, but on the *reception* of it. It is a fact that human beings can starve in the presence of a free feast, if they refuse to partake of it.¹¹

3. *Objection:* Why would God have Christ die for those whom He, in His omniscience, knew would never receive His provision?

Answer: We could just as easily ask a similar question in regard to numerous other events in Scripture. For example, Why did God send Noah to preach to his contemporaries if he knew they would not listen (2 Peter 2:5)? Why did God send the prophets to preach to the rebellious Israelites, knowing that on many of those occasions they would refuse to listen? The fact is, God made a provision for all people because *He is a benevolent God*.

Answering the Charge of Universalism

Limited redemptionists sometimes charge that unlimited atonement leads to Universalism. But this is special pleading. Just because one believes Christ died for all does not mean all are saved. One must *believe* in Christ to be saved. Hence, the fact that Christ *died* for the world does not *secure* the salvation of all.¹²

Salvation becomes *actual* only for the elect, although it is *potential* and available to all. “Our inheriting eternal life involves two separate factors: an *objective* factor (Christ’s provision of salvation) and a *subjective* factor (our acceptance of that salvation).”¹³

One must distinguish between the *provisional* benefits of Christ’s death and the *appropriation* of those benefits by the elect. Although the provision of atonement is *unlimited*, yet the application of it is *limited*.¹⁴ In his book *The Death Christ Died*, Robert Lightner rightly explains that:

⁹ Chafer, p. 310-11.

¹⁰ Douty, p. 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹² Walter Elwell, “Atonement, Extent of the,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 99.

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 832.

¹⁴ Cf. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1979), pp. 771-72.

The cross does not apply its own benefits but that God has conditioned His full and free salvation upon personal faith in order to appropriate its accomplishments to the individual. This faith which men must exercise is not a work whereby man contributes his part to his salvation, nor does faith . . . improve in any way the final and complete sacrifice of Calvary. It is simply the method of applying Calvary's benefits which the sovereign God has deigned to use in His all-wise plan of salvation.¹⁵

God is not unfair in condemning those who reject the offer of salvation. He is not exacting judgment twice. Because the nonbeliever refuses to accept the death of Christ as his own, the benefits of Christ's death are not applied to him. He is lost, not because Christ did not die for him, but because *he refuses God's offer of forgiveness*.¹⁶

The electing purpose of God is not complete until the elect are in glory. Since this is true--and since the cross provides salvation dependent on faith for its reception, and since the cross does not secure salvation apart from that faith--there is no contradiction here with God's sovereignty.

A Survey of Church History

It is significant that unlimited atonement has been held by a majority of scholars throughout church history. Indeed, theologian Millard Erickson points out that unlimited atonement has been held by the vast majority of theologians, reformers, evangelists, and fathers from the beginning of the church until the present day, including virtually all the writers before the Reformation, with the possible exception of Augustine. Among the Reformers the doctrine is found in Luther, Melancthon, Bullinger, Latimer, Cranmer, Coverdale, and even Calvin in some of his commentaries.... Is it likely that the overwhelming majority of Christians could have so misread the leading of the Holy Spirit on such an important point?¹⁷

Because John Calvin has been so often cited on this issue in favor of limited atonement, Lightner is careful to point out that "it is highly debatable that he did, in fact, hold that view. . . . Whereas some scholars have attempted to show that there is harmony between Calvin and later orthodox Calvinism, others have argued that contemporary Calvinism has veered significantly from Calvin's teaching, including his teaching on the extent of the atonement."¹⁸ (The reader will recall that a number of Calvin's citations in this article show him favorable to unlimited atonement.)

Quotations from the Early Church Fathers

Following is a representative sampling of quotations from the early church Fathers in support of the doctrine of unlimited atonement:

- Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-220) said that "Christ freely brings. . . salvation to the whole human race."¹⁹
- Eusebius (A.D. 260-340) said that "it was needful that the Lamb of God should be offered for the other lambs whose nature He assumed, even for the whole human race."²⁰
- Athanasius (A.D. 293-373) said that "Christ the Son of God, having assumed a body like ours, because we were all exposed to death [which takes in more than the elect], gave Himself up to death for us all as a sacrifice to His Father."²¹
- Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-386) said, "Do not wonder if the whole world was ransomed, for He was not a mere man, but the only-begotten Son of God."²²

¹⁵ Robert Lightner, *The Death Christ Died* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1978), p. 56.

¹⁶ Elwell, p. 99.

¹⁷ Erickson, p. 835.

¹⁸ Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, p. 159.

¹⁹ Paedagogus, ch. 11; quoted by J. Davenant, *The Death of Christ*, vol. 2 of *On the Colossians*, ed. Allport (London, 1832), p. 319.

²⁰ *Demonstratio Evangelica*, ch. 10, preface; in *ibid.*, p. 374.

²¹ *On the Incarnation of the Word*, p. 42; in *ibid.*, p. 374.

- Gregory of Nazianzen (A.D. 324-389) said that “the sacrifice of Christ is an imperishable expiation of the whole world.”²³
- Basil (A.D. 330-379) said, “But one thing was found that was equivalent to all men . . . the holy and precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He poured out for us all.”²⁴
- Ambrose (A.D. 340-407) said that “Christ suffered for all, rose again for all. But if anyone does not believe in Christ, he deprives himself of that general benefit.”²⁵ Ambrose also said, “Christ came for the salvation of all, and undertook the redemption of all, inasmuch as He brought a remedy by which all might escape, although there are many who . . . are unwilling to be healed.”²⁶
- Augustine (A.D. 354-430). Though Augustine is often cited as supporting limited atonement, there are also clear statements in Augustine’s writings that are supportive of unlimited atonement. For example, Augustine once said: “The Redeemer came and gave the price, shed His blood, and bought the world. Do you ask what He bought? See what He gave, and find what He bought. The blood of Christ is the price: what is of so great worth? What, but the whole world? What, but all nations?”²⁷ Augustine also stated, “The blood of Christ was shed for the remission of all sins.”²⁸
- Cyril of Alexandria (A.D. 376-444) said that “the death of one flesh is sufficient for the ransom of the whole human race, for it belonged to the Logos, begotten of God the Father.”²⁹
- Prosper (a friend and disciple of Augustine who died in A.D. 463) said that “as far as relates to the magnitude and virtue of the price, and to the one cause of the human race, the blood of Christ is the redemption of the whole world: but those who pass through this life without the faith of Christ, and the sacrament of regeneration, do not partake of the redemption.”³⁰ Prosper also said, “The Savior is most rightly said to have been crucified for the redemption of the whole world.”³¹ He then said, “Although the blood of Christ be the ransom of the whole world, yet they are excluded from its benefit, who, being delighted with their captivity, are unwilling to be redeemed by it.”³²

Quotations from the Reformers of the 16th Century

Further support for unlimited atonement is found in the following sampling of quotations from the Reformers of the 16th century:

- Martin Luther (A.D. 1483-1546) said that “Christ is not a cruel exactor, but a forgiver of the sins of the whole world. . . . He hath given Himself for our sins, and with one oblation hath put away the sins of the whole world. . . . Christ hath taken away the sins, not of certain men only, but also of thee, yea, of the whole world. . . . Not only my sins and thine, but also the sins of the whole world . . . take hold upon Christ.”³³
- Philip Melancthon (A.D. 1497-1560) said, “It is necessary to know that the Gospel is a universal promise, that is, that reconciliation is offered and promised to all mankind. It is necessary to hold that this promise is universal, in opposition to any dangerous imaginations on predestination, lest we should reason

²² *Catacheses*, 13:2; quoted by Smeaton, *The Apostles’ Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh, 1870; Grand Rapids, 1957), p. 498.

²³ *Oratoria 2 in Pasch.*, i.e., Passover; quoted by Davenant, p. 374.

²⁴ On Ps. 49:7,8, sec. 4; quoted by Smeaton, p. 499.

²⁵ On Ps. 118, Sermon 8; quoted by Davenant, p. 411.

²⁶ On Ps. 118, Sermon 8; in *ibid.*, p. 425.

²⁷ Quoted in Smeaton, p. 505.

²⁸ Quoted in Davenant, p. 410.

²⁹ *Oratorio de Recta Fide*, no. 2, sec. 7; cited in Smeaton, p. 502.

³⁰ *Answer to Vincentius*; in Davenant, p. 321f.

³¹ *Reply to Capitula Gallorum*, no. 9, in *ibid.*, p. 425.

³² *Reply to Capitula Gallorum*, no. 9, in *ibid.*

³³ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*; quoted by Morison, *The Extent of the Atonement* (Glasgow, 1882), pp. 121f., 125.

this promise pertains to a few others and ourselves. But we declare that the promise of the Gospel is universal. And to this are brought those universal expressions which are used constantly in the Scriptures.”³⁴

- Other luminaries involved to some degree in the Reformation who held to unlimited atonement include Hugh Latimer, Myles Coverdale, Thomas Cranmer, Wolfgang Musculus, Henry Bullinger, Benedict Aretius, Thomas Becon, Jerome Zanchius, and David Paraeus.³⁵

Quotations from Other Luminaries from Recent Church History

Still further support for the doctrine of unlimited atonement is found in the following quotations from recent luminaries in church history:

- Church historian Philip Schaff said, “His saving grace flows and overflows *to all* and *for all*, on the simple condition of faith. . . . If, by the grace of God, I could convert a single skeptic to a child-like faith in Him who lived and died for me and for all, I would feel that I had not lived in vain.”³⁶
- Bible expositor B. F. Westcott said, “Potentially, the work of Christ extends to the whole world.” Moreover, “the love of God is without limit on His part, but to appropriate the blessing of love, man must fulfill the necessary condition of faith.”³⁷
- Bible expositor A. T. Robertson said that the word “world” in John 3:16-- “For God so loved *the world*”-- means “the whole cosmos of men, including the Gentiles, the whole human race,” and adds that “this universal aspect of God’s love appears also in II Cor. 5:19; Rom. 5:8.”³⁸

I’m Convinced (In Conclusion)

In this brief two-part series, we have looked at both sides of the debate regarding the extent of the atonement. It is my conclusion that when one considers all the scriptural evidence collectively, the only possible correct view is that of unlimited atonement. Indeed, it is the only position that makes complete sense of all the “limited” and “unlimited” verses taken as a whole.

Article from *CTS Journal*, Volume 2, Number 3 (Winter 1996), a publication of Chafer Theological Seminary, Orange, CA.

Ron Rhodes received his Th.M. and Th.D. degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Rhodes is the executive director of *Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries*--a discipleship ministry that helps Christians become biblically literate. A free bimonthly newsletter is available. We invite you to write: P.O. Box 80087, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688.

³⁴ Melancthon, *Common-places*; in Davenant, p. 337.

³⁵ For documentation, see Douty, pp. 139-41.

³⁶ Cited by Douty, p. 160.

³⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1882), pp. 21, 55, 56.

³⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York, 1930), vol. 5, p. 50.

Unlimited atonement. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Five Problems with Limited Atonement. For Whom Did Christ Die? A Defense of Unlimited Atonement. David Allen - For whom did Jesus die? The atonement makes a way for all to respond to the Gospel call. Part of the effect of the atonement is the restoration of the ability to respond to God's call of salvation (see Prevenient grace). Salvation is available for all. The doctrine of unlimited atonement rejects the predeterminism associated with Calvinism and states that every human has the opportunity to accept Jesus through faith. The atonement legally pays for the sins of those who believe on Jesus. Only those who believe on Jesus are forgiven. Only the believers' sins are paid. What it does not state.