

TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE

PART 3: LIMITED ATONEMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

If asked whether one is a Calvinist or Arminian, a very common response is, “I’m a *four-point* Calvinist.” This indicates that the person generally follows Calvinistic, Reformation doctrine, but believes that Jesus died for everyone, not just for those chosen by God and designated as “the elect.” A “four-point Calvinist” rules out the teaching known as Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement.

This article considers the doctrine of Limited Atonement and is the third in a series which seeks to correctly understand God’s endeavor to save man from sin. In the previous articles we have considered the doctrines of Total Depravity and Unconditional Election as taught and understood by both Calvinistic and Arminian stances on theology.

Before evaluating the views of Calvinists and Arminians, who stand at odds theologically, we will first consider the actual presentations of both.

II. THE REFORMED VIEW OF LIMITED ATONEMENT¹

Enns explains Limited Atonement by saying,

This view, also referred to as particular atonement or particular redemption, states that “God *purposed* by the atonement to save only the elect and that consequently all the elect, and they alone, are saved.” Christ’s death saves all it *intended* to save. Connection is again made with the preceding doctrine of unconditional election. If God has elected certain ones to

¹ For extensive argumentation of the Limited Atonement view, see John Owen, “The Atonement,” *Introduction to Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 141-70.

salvation from eternity past, then it logically follows that He will also provide for the redemption of *precisely those* whom he has chosen.²

Note that the doctrine limits or restricts the number of people for whom Christ died.

Elwell explains that, “the choices boil down to two: either the death of Jesus was intended to *secure* salvation for a limited number or the death of Jesus was intended to *provide* salvation for everyone” and that the “first view is sometimes called ‘limited atonement’ because God limited the effect of Christ’s death to a specific number of elect persons, or ‘particular redemption’ because redemption was for a particular group of people.”³ It seems that Grudem implies “guilt by association” for anyone who is not of this Reformed persuasion by saying that:

One of the differences between Reformed theologians and other Catholic and Protestant theologians has been the question of the extent of the atonement. The question may be put this way: when Christ died on the cross, did he pay for the sins of the entire human race or only for the sins of those who he knew would ultimately be saved?⁴

Steele and Thomas under an article entitled “The Five Points of Arminianism Contrasted with the Five Points of Calvinism” refer to the doctrine of “Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement”:

Christ’s redeeming work was *intended* to save the elect only and *actually secured* salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of *certain specified sinners*. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ’s redemption *secured* everything necessary for their salvation, including faith which unites them to Him.

² Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 483, quoting R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 62, italics added.

³ W. A. Elwell, “Atonement, Extent of the” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 98, italics added.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 594.

The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, thereby guaranteeing their salvation.⁵

Steele and Thomas explain the logic of the system saying, “election itself saved no one; it only marked out particular sinners for salvation. Those *chosen* by the Father and given to the Son had to be *redeemed* if they were to be saved.”⁶ That is, if the Father chose some and then gave those chosen ones to Christ, it follows that Jesus died with the sole intention of saving only those so chosen. Palmer is specific when he says, “Since the objects of the Father’s love are particular, definite, and limited, so are the objects of Christ’s death.”⁷ Enns reflects that, “if Christ actually made an atonement for sin then the objects of that atonement must be a particular group. Otherwise the atonement’s effect is weakened because not everyone is saved for whom Christ made atonement.”⁸

Note that the presentation of the Reformed Calvinistic position is that, according to Buswell, “the atonement is particular in *design and intention*...Within the decrees of God, the atonement was intended to accomplish precisely what it does accomplish. It accomplishes the salvation of the elect of God.”⁹ Key terms used in expressing the Reformed position regarding the effects of Christ’s death are God’s *design, intention, accomplishment*, and the *securing* of the elect’s salvation.

The Calvinist position in regard to the extent of the atonement may be summarized as follows:

- 1) God *selected* individuals to ultimately be saved from sin and its consequences.

⁵ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 145, italics added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 44.

⁸ Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 327.

⁹ James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 2:142-43. Buswell goes beyond the normal Calvinistic assertions, here, and adds that it also “furnishes the ethical and logical ground for common grace...and it renders the lost ethically and logically inexcusable.”

- 2) God *made a pact* within the Godhead whereby the Father gave certain ones to Christ.¹⁰
- 3) God's *intention* was for Jesus to die only for those He chose and gave to His Son.
- 4) Jesus came to earth, not with the intention of saving all individuals in the world, but intending *to redeem only the elect*. In His death He endured the penalty of sin in a substitutionary way only and exclusively in place of certain specified or elect sinners.
- 5) Jesus' death *actually secured* the eternal salvation of only the elect and had no eternal significance for the non-elect. His redemptive work secured everything necessary for the salvation of the elect, including faith which unites them to Him.
- 6) Redemption was *designed* to bring to pass God's purpose of election.
- 7) While faith is a gift, the gospel can be offered to all universally. Faith is infallibly applied or given by the Spirit to each and every person for whom Christ died, thus guaranteeing their salvation.

III. THE ARMINIAN VIEW OF UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

Elwell says the doctrine is called General Redemption or Unlimited Atonement "because God did not limit Christ's redemptive death to the elect, but allowed it to be for mankind in general."¹¹ He says,

The death of Christ was designed to include all mankind, whether or not all believe. To those who savingly believe it is redemptively applied, and to those who do not believe it

¹⁰ Steele and Thomas site John 6:35-40 as a supporting passage "which represent[s] the Lord Jesus Christ, in all that He did and suffered for His people, as fulfilling the terms of a gracious compact or arrangement which He had entered into with His Heavenly Father before the foundation of the world." They assert that, "Jesus was sent into the world by the Father to save the people which the Father had given to Him," *Romans*, 171.

¹¹ Elwell, "Atonement," 98.

provides the benefits of common grace and removal of any excuse for being lost.¹²

Enns states that, “The doctrine of unlimited atonement, as understood by evangelicals, means that Christ died for every person but His death is effective only in those who believe the gospel.”¹³

Steele and Thomas explain the Arminian position of “Universal Redemption or General Atonement:”

Christ’s redeeming work made it *possible* for everyone to be saved but did not actually *secure* the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for *every* man, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone’s sins. Christ’s redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.¹⁴

Further, Article 2 of the Five Arminian Articles of A.D. 1610 states that Christ died for all men:

That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, The Saviour of the world, died for *all men and for every man*, so that he has *obtained for them all*, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel of John iii.16: “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And in the First Epistle of John ii.2: “and that he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the *whole world*.”¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 99. It’s noted that the addition of common grace and man’s responsibility (generally considered Arminian in nature) is what Buswell added from his rather Calvinistic perspective in a former note.

¹³ Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 327.

¹⁴ Steele & Thomas, *Romans*, 145, italics added.

¹⁵ Article 2 in “*ARTICULI ARMINIANI SIVE REMONSTRANTIA*. The Five Arminian Articles. A.D. 1610.” From Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 546, italics added.

Steele and Thomas assert from their perspective:

The Arminians also place a limitation on the atoning work of Christ, but one of a much different nature. They hold that Christ's saving work was designed to make possible the salvation of all men on the condition that they believe, but that Christ's death *in itself* did not actually secure or guarantee salvation for anyone.¹⁶

Finney supports the Arminian view reasoning, "If the atonement is not intended for all mankind, it is impossible for us not to regard God as insincere, in making them the offer of salvation through the atonement."¹⁷ Also, "That the atonement is sufficient for all men, and, in that sense, general, as opposed to particular, is also evident from the fact, that the invitations and promises of the gospel are addressed to all men, and all are freely offered salvation through Christ."¹⁸

God's intention for Christ's atoning death as seen from the Arminian perspective may be summarized:

- 1) Christ's death was a substitutionary, redemptive act for *all mankind*, for the world, for all men, and for each and every man.
- 2) Christ's substitutionary death *did not secure* anyone's eternal deliverance or take away any individual's sin *per se*, but rather made it *possible* for everyone to receive God's pardon on the condition that they believe in Christ.
- 3) The death of Christ is *provisional* for every man, i.e., it is the historical event which provides a way or means for God to

¹⁶ Steele and Thomas, *Romans*, 167, italics in original. They refer to Loraine Boettner (*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1932], 135) who says, "The Calvinist limits the extent of it [the atonement] in that he says it does not apply to all persons (although...he believes that it is efficacious for the salvation of the large portion of the human race); while the Arminian limits the power of it, for he says that in itself it does not actually save anybody. The Calvinist limits it qualitatively, but not quantitatively."

¹⁷ Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1994), 223.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

pardon anyone and everyone, but only becomes *effective* for the individual when man chooses to accept its benefits.

- 4) Redemption was *not designed only to bring to pass God's purpose of election*, but also to demonstrate God's love and service for all mankind.¹⁹ As such, redemption also provides a basis for judgment in light of the fact that some reject Christ.
- 5) God cannot, therefore, be rightly accused of being unjust in His judgment of sinful men who have not believed in Christ so as to receive forgiveness and eternal life.
- 6) The offer of eternal life *can be offered to all* on the basis of Jesus' death as a substitution for every man and as a provision that can be attained by personal faith in Him.

Having seen the teachings of both Calvinism and Arminianism in regard to the intent and effects of the death of Christ, we will now proceed to an evaluation of the views.

IV. A RESPONSE TO THE CALVINISTIC ARGUMENTS THAT CHRIST DIED ONLY FOR THE ELECT²⁰

Elwell summarizes eight arguments for the Reformed view of Limited Atonement. An evaluation of each will now be considered with refutations from both logic and from the Arminian point of view. There may be variations and/or refinements that could be made to these assertions, but Elwell seems to present the positions fairly.

¹⁹ C. Gordon Olson, under a section called "Christ's ministry to the 'non-elect'" illustrates that Jesus spent time with those whom we would consider non-elect, i.e., the rich young ruler in the synoptic gospels. He also reasons, from Genesis 4, that God spent time with Cain. "If Christ didn't die for Cain, and if he had been reprobated in eternity past, why did God bother to deal with him at all? God certainly knew his status. Again we see how the issue ties in with 'unconditional election.'" *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 148.

²⁰ See Steele and Thomas, *Romans*, 166-75. They offer an extensive argumentation on this subject.

A. SCRIPTURE RESTRICTS WHO BENEFITS FROM CHRIST'S DEATH

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents the first argument for Limited Atonement or Particular Redemption:

First, in the Bible there is a qualification as to who will benefit by the death of Christ, thus limiting its effect. John 10:11, 15 says Christ died for "his sheep"; Acts 20:28 "his church"; Rom. 8:32-35 "the elect"; and Matt. 1:21 "his people."²¹

2. *The Argument Negated*

In answer to this it can be said that just because Christ died for a select group (His sheep, His church, the elect, or His people), this need not restrict the purpose or intention of His death to *only* those groups. If He indeed died for every single person in the world, this would necessarily include anyone and everyone within a smaller select group (the elect) who had been, who were then, or who would later become believers.

Several years ago I decided to buy a motorcycle. As soon as I began riding it in traffic I realized that when passing motorcyclists coming from the other direction it was customary to wave with the left hand in a friendly gesture of camaraderie. Not doing so gives the distinct impression that you're snubbing the other rider.

Occasionally I will pass a large group of oncoming cyclists and raise my hand in a friendly gesture. Usually some of the oncoming group will wave and some just look straight ahead with no response whatsoever. Now, the question: When I raise my hand, was it my intention to wave only to those who would wave back, or was I being friendly to everyone? Clearly I was waving to *all* of them and I *intended* to do so, but only some responded. Similarly, when Jesus died in a single act, there is certainly no reason to negate the possibility that He intended to die for everyone. Included in that universal group for whom Jesus died would be those who respond by God's grace, i.e., the elect (the church, His people, His sheep). But if God intended for Jesus to die only for the elect to the exclusion of all non-elect, why would God so inspire the words of Scripture which use such all-inclusive terms (i.e., the world, every man, etc.)? While this reasoning may not necessarily settle the argument, it does show that what is stated in a non-restrictive, general, or all-inclusive way

²¹ Elwell, "Atonement," 98.

(Christ's death for the whole world of mankind) doesn't rule out the action also being done for a smaller, restrictive group (i.e., the elect) within that general audience. And if reference is made to the action being done for the smaller group, such doesn't mean that it wasn't also done for others. Nowhere does Scripture say that Christ died *just* for the elect, *only* for the sheep, *exclusively* for Israel, etc. Geisler notes that "there is a logical fallacy in arguing that (1) because Christ died for believers (2) He did not also die for unbelievers."²² Saying that Christ died for the elect in some passages doesn't rule out or restrict the other Scriptures which assert that His death was for the world.

Simply put: The use of restrictive terms does not exclude the universal aspects of Christ's death. We may conclude that there is no logical or scriptural reason to believe Christ died only for the elect.

B. MAN CANNOT FRUSTRATE GOD'S EFFICACIOUS DESIGNS

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a second argument for Limited Atonement:

God's designs are always efficacious and can never be frustrated by man. Had God intended all men to be saved by the death of Christ, then all would be saved. It is clear that not everyone is saved because the Bible clearly teaches that those who reject Christ are lost. Therefore, it stands to reason that Christ could not have died for everyone, because not everyone is saved. To argue that Christ died for everyone is in effect to argue that God's saving will is not being done or that everyone will be saved, both of which propositions are clearly false.²³

2. *The Argument Negated*

The problem is that no one but Universalists say that God intends to save all men. The truth is that God does *not* intend to save all men. Indeed, *if* God intended to save all men by Christ's death alone (i.e., apart from personal faith), all men would indeed be saved. We might correctly say that God's intent in the bloody, penal, substitutionary death of Christ was to make a *provision* for the salvation of all men.

²² Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 77.

²³ Elwell, "Atonement," 98.

Now, for purposes of discussion, let's ask: *what if* God's design and intention for Christ's death was *not* to save all men, but indeed to *provide* a sufficient sacrifice that would *accommodate* the salvation of any man upon the fulfillment of a single condition for receiving the gift of eternal life, i.e., faith in His Son? Would not this understanding rather frustrate the Calvinistic argument rather than the plan or intention of God? There is, therefore, no scriptural *need* to suggest that God's plan is frustrated if Christ didn't die solely for the elect. Calvinists simply misunderstand and/or misrepresent His plan for the sake of asserting their theological system.

C. GOD WOULD BE UNFAIR IN SENDING UNBELIEVERS TO HELL

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a third argument for Limited Atonement:

If Christ died for everyone, God would be unfair in sending people to hell for their own sins. No law court allows payment to be exacted twice for the same crime, and God will not do that either. So God could not have allowed Christ to die for everyone unless he planned for everyone to be saved, which clearly he did not, because some are lost. Christ paid for the sins of the elect; the lost pay for their own sins.²⁴

2. *The Argument Negated*

The overriding assumption that Christ's death actually *secures* the salvation of those for whom Christ died (the elect) still permeates Reformed thinking. But if Jesus' death is viewed in a *provisional* way there is no basis for the present argument.²⁵ The provisional benefits of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Editor's Note: Dr. Badger answers this objection by postulating that the death of Jesus is merely *provisional*. While that is certainly an orthodox way of dealing with this issue, I feel it is biblically sound to say that the death of Christ actually removed the sin barrier, making all men savable. Being savable and having eternal life, however, are two different issues, as Dr. Badger points out as well. A careful study of Rev 20:11-15 shows that while unbelievers will be judged according to their deeds (that which is written in the *books*, plural) at the Great White Throne Judgment, their deeds will not be the basis of their being cast into the lake of fire. People will be cast into the lake of fire because their names are not found in the book of life. Of course, one must believe to get into that book. Jesus' death actually paid for the sins of those who will spend eternity

Christ's death are not extended for or given to those who do not believe in Christ. This is so because eternal life is a gracious *offer* to be *received* by faith, not a *compulsion* that is *forced* by irresistible power. If all humanity is composed of guilty sinners deserving the punishment of hell, Christ died for all such humanity, and some humans fail to appropriate by faith the benefits provided by Christ's death, how may it be said that God is unfair? Did not God provide the completely satisfactory remedy and offer deliverance by grace alone through faith alone in Christ and His finished work alone? That Christ died for every single man does not validly argue against the fairness of God. Rather, the universal extent and intention to *provide a way* of deliverance *validates* His justice and the wrathful judgment of those who refuse or neglect His gracious offer. The *primary* reason for such a death sentence is that men are sinners, are guilty, and deserve condemnation. The *secondary* reason for it is that they have not appropriated the remedy of the cross by personal faith. Elwell considers the Arminian point of view:

God is not unfair in condemning those who reject the offer of salvation. His 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.²⁶

Men stand justly condemned because of sin and guilt if they are not believers (John 3:16, 18, 36). Men will *never* stand condemned because Christ did not die for them, because He did. Therefore, it is not legitimate to say that God is unfair in sending unbelievers to hell. On the contrary, it would seem *completely* unjust for God to send some men to hell because no provision was made for their salvation.

in the lake of fire. This fits, by the way, Peter's comment concerning unbelieving false teachers (see 2 Pet 2:17) who were guilty of "denying the Lord *who bought them*" (2 Pet 2:1).

²⁶ Elwell, "Atonement," 98.

D. UNLIMITED ATONEMENT LEADS TO UNIVERSALISM

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a fourth argument for Limited Atonement:

To say that Christ died for everyone logically leads to universalism. It is true that not all of those who believe in general redemption believe in universalism; but there is no valid reason that they do not. If they were consistent they would, because they are arguing that Christ paid for everyone's sins, thus saving them.²⁷

Warfield argues that Arminianism leads to Universalism. He reasons that if indeed it is God alone who works salvation apart from man's intervention or addition, and if indeed "all that God does looking to the salvation of men he does to and for all men alike (which is the subject of the universalistic contention); why, then, all men without exception must be saved."²⁸

2. *The Argument Negated*

Essential to the scheme of Limited Atonement is the "given" that Christ's death secures the salvation for everyone for whom Christ died. The answer to this objection is rather simple. The Unlimited Atonement position does *not* assert that when Christ paid the price for everyone's sins universally that this saves them or that it secures their salvation. It does not say, as Warfield has stated, "all that God does looking to the salvation of men he does to and for all men alike." Once again, the Calvinist simply miscomprehends the fact that God's remedy for human sin, death, and eternal judgment is both *provisional* as well as *applicational*. If Jesus' death is *universally provisional* and the application of its benefits is conditionally limited to those who believe, as is suggested here, there is no reason to think or assert that Christ's death saves anyone *of and by itself*, i.e., without personal faith in Him. No reason, that is, except that the Reformed system of theology demands it. Calvinism is driven to exclude (for all practical purposes) the conditional aspect of faith in order to set forth the argument for Particular Redemption.

In summary, the Arminian and Biblicist would answer that "the several arguments that reduce to a charge of universalism are special

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, Rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 70.

pleading.”²⁹ The charge that the teaching of General Redemption leads to Universalism is just another “straw man” argument and can be set forth like this: (1) Christ paid for everyone’s sins, (2) paying for everyone’s sins saves them, so (3) everyone will be saved. In this case the second premise is wrong. Paying for everyone’s sins doesn’t save them. It simply *provides the way* for them to be saved and is the historical event upon which man can rest his eternal destiny by *believing* in the finished work of Christ. Regeneration of any man is not accomplished until it is appropriated by personal faith. So, the doctrine of Unlimited Atonement does *not* logically lead to Universalism unless the premises are misstated.

E. CHRIST DIED TO SAVE, NOT TO MAKE SALVATION POSSIBLE

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a fifth argument for Limited Atonement:

Christ died not just to make salvation possible, but actually to save. To argue that Christ died only to provide the possibility of salvation is to leave open the question of whether *anyone* is saved. If God’s designs are only of possibilities, not actualities, then no one is secure and everything is open to doubt. But the Bible clearly teaches that the death of Jesus actually secures salvation for his people, thus making it a certainty and limiting atonement (Matt. 18:11; Rom 5:10; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Eph. 1:7).³⁰

Steele and Thomas follow this line of thinking:

The Scriptures describe the end intended and accomplished by Christ’s work as the full salvation (actual reconciliation, justification, and sanctification) of His people...The Scriptures state that Christ came, not to enable men to save themselves, but to *save sinners*.³¹

2. *The Argument Negated*

The assertion that “Christ came to save, not to make salvation possible” seems rather pithy, at least on the surface. It could be easily

²⁹ Elwell, “Atonement,” 99.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

³¹ Steele and Thomas, *Romans*, 168 (citing as support, Matt 1:21; Luke 19:10; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:3-4; 1 Tim 1:15; Titus 2:14; and 1 Pet 3:18), italics in original.

accepted if not carefully analyzed. First, we need to realize the deficiency which underlies the reasoning. The argument that if “Christ died only to provide the *possibility* of salvation [this would] leave open the question of whether *anyone* is saved” is, as pointed out above, to exclude the subsequent working of the Holy Spirit in regenerating a believing sinner. The question of whether *anyone* is saved should not be seen within the parameters of the extent of God’s intention regarding Christ’s death, but ought to be relegated to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.³²

Looking at the texts cited in Elwell’s description will determine whether the assertion is supported by Scripture. In Matt 18:11 Jesus says, “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”³³ In context, this verse is an introduction to the parable of the one lost sheep and the Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine secure sheep in search of it. Clearly they are all sheep, not goats. And clearly they were His sheep. Here, the use of the word “save” indicates a restoration of the straying sheep back into the realm of safety, into the flock. The context deals with restoring and protecting one of “these little ones” which are already His (cf. Matt 18:10, 14). To use this verse as support for the idea that Christ’s death accomplishes and secures eternal salvation is to ignore the context and to force-read theological concepts into the context which are not there.

Paul says in Rom 5:10 “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” The fact that Christ died for us while we (believers) were yet sinners (Rom 5:8), we (believers) are justified by His blood (5:9a), we (believers) will be saved from His wrath (5:9b), we (believers) were reconciled to God by Christ’s death, and will be saved through His life (5:10) does not exclude (indeed, does not even address) all the rest for whom Christ might have died. It only serves to demonstrate that the benefits of His historic death are applied to believers who can presently rejoice in that “we have now *received* the reconciliation” (5:11, italics added).

Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” When seen in the surrounding context, the verse indicates that, in light of

³² Such will be the subject of the next article in this series, i.e., the doctrine of Irresistible Grace.

³³ There is a textual question as to whether Matt 18:11 was in the original autograph, but see Luke 19:10 for a similar statement.

the fact that God has reconciled the world to Himself by Christ's death (5:19a) and that He has given believers the ministry of reconciliation (i.e., taking the gospel to the world of unbelievers, 5:19b-20), we ought to live lives characterized by justice (righteousness). This is affirmed in the verses immediately following (i.e., 6:1-3) and then by Paul's example of suffering faithfully for Christ's sake (6:4-10). We may conclude that in Christ's becoming sin on our behalf His intention was that we might be forgiven and then that we might have opportunity to live for and serve Him. Such intention does not at all negate the broader intention of God to reconcile the world to Himself through Christ's death. If He did not reconcile the whole world to Himself, how might believers be expected to go forth in a ministry of reconciliation to unbelievers?

Galatians 1:4 speaks of Christ "who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father," but, again, just because there are intentions and ramifications of deliverance from sin and from the present evil age for believers does not argue against the more general and universal understanding of His death. Nothing is proven by the use of this verse. Consequently, that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us" (Gal 3:13) doesn't limit God's intention other than to say that only those who have responded in faith (us) have received its provisional benefits, i.e., that Christ suffered the curse in the place of believers. This does not demonstrate that He didn't do the same for unbelievers, as well.

Ephesians 1:7 says, "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace." Again, the simple answer is that using this Scripture fails to exclude everyone from the intention of His redemptive effort. It speaks only of the benefit obtained by those who believe.

So, the argument that Christ's death actually secures the salvation for whom He intended to die is unfounded in Scripture regardless of the misinterpreted proof texts which are offered as support. The conditional aspect of belief in Christ and the subsequent application of His death-benefits by the Spirit are overlooked and/or ignored along with what should be an obvious fact that salvation (regeneration, eternal life) is not "secured" until the condition of personal faith is met. Why is it necessary to assert that Christ's death secures salvation when indeed salvation is not even present until one believes in Him? It is at the time of faith that we look for assurance, not before!

F. BOTH REPENTANCE AND FAITH ARE SECURED

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a sixth argument for Limited Atonement:

Because there are no conditions to be met in order to be saved (i.e., salvation is by grace and not by works, even an act of faith), both repentance and faith are secured for those for whom Christ died. If the design of the atonement were for everyone, then all would receive repentance and faith, but this is clearly false. Therefore, Christ's death could have been intended only for those who will repent and believe, namely, the elect.³⁴

The essence of this argument is similar to the argument that the teaching of Universal Redemption leads to Universalism, discussed earlier, and similar answers would apply. It also assumes there are no active human conditions to be met and then equates faith with an act. We must note well that even faith is ruled out as a condition for regeneration in the Calvinistic system. This makes it necessary, in the structural support of that system, to assert the idea that God must *first regenerate* the sinner and *then give* faith and repentance to him, like some commodity.

2. *The Argument Negated*

Where the argument goes wrong is in the equation of faith with an action or a work. Faith is not a work, but a passive response. Belief is the result of being convinced (notice the passive nature of the words here) that something is true. No one *does* anything when he believes. When one is convinced that the gospel is true and that God is able to perform His promises, he has faith.³⁵ When we speak of "saving faith" we mean that the Spirit of God has acted in such a gracious way as to produce the conviction that the gospel message is true and that God is able to perform the promises He makes within the body of that message. In regard to repentance, it is indeed an act, and, as Hodges points out, "No text in the New Testament (not even Acts 11:18) makes *any direct connection*

³⁴ Elwell, "Atonement," 98-99.

³⁵ See Rom 4:18-21 for an illustration and definition of faith. Abraham was "fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform."

between repentance and *eternal* life. No text does that. Not so much as one!”³⁶

There should, at this point, be no need to stress that no human act (such as repentance) is worthy or meritorious enough to gain one an acceptable position before God. To suggest that, “both repentance and faith are *secured* for those for whom Christ died” is to simply assert a tenet of the Calvinistic system. But an assertion is not a demonstration of truth. To say that all would necessarily receive repentance and faith if Christ’s death were intended for everyone is, first, to assume that repentance is a gift of God, and not an active personal *decision* to conform one’s lifestyle to God’s character and to turn from sin.³⁷ Second, it fails to recognize that faith is the human enlightenment to the truth of the gospel message (not a commodity given by God) and, as such, is not an act. With the proper understanding of faith and repentance, there is no need to consider them to be gifts. If they were gifts, no one would be held responsible for belief or rejection of the gospel, nor for success or failure in proper living.

G. “WORLD” DOES NOT MEAN EVERYONE IN THE WORLD

I. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents a seventh argument for Limited Atonement:

The passages that speak of Christ’s death for “the world” have been misunderstood. The word “world” really means the world of the elect, the world of believers, the church, or all nations.³⁸

Steele and Thomas admit that:

Some passages speak of Christ’s dying for “all” men and of His death as saving the “world,” yet others speak of His death as being definite in design and of His dying for particular people and securing salvation for them... There are two classes of

³⁶ Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 2001), 10. This work is an excellent recent clarification on the doctrine of repentance. See also Hodges’ previous work *Absolutely Free!: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas and Grand Rapids: Redención Viva and Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 143-63, italics in original.

³⁷ An active decision is not a condition for salvation, indeed it couldn’t be, because man isn’t saved by his actions. See Rom 4:2-6; 11:6.

³⁸ Elwell, “Atonement,” 99.

texts that speak of Christ's saving work in *general terms*:
 (a) Those containing the word "world"—e.g., John 1:9, 29; 3:16, 17; 4:42; II Corinthians 5:19; I John 2:1, 2; 4:14 and
 (b) Those containing the word "all"—e.g., Romans 5:18; II Corinthians 5:14, 15; I Timothy 2:4-6; Hebrews 2:9; II Peter 3:9.³⁹

In explanation of these universal or general terms involved in these passages, Steel and Thomas argue:

One reason for the use of these expressions was to correct the false notion that salvation was for the Jew alone. Such phrases as "the world," "all men," "all nations," and "every creature" were used by the New Testament writers to emphatically correct this mistake. These expressions are intended to show that Christ died for all men without distinction (i.e., He died for Jews and Gentiles alike) but they are not intended to indicate that Christ died for all men without exception (i.e., He did not die for the purpose of saving each and every lost sinner).⁴⁰

2. *The Argument Negated*

This seems to be a rather contrived explanation. Steele and Thomas offer no biblical support that "world" or "all" were intended to be used this way. In fact, the writers were able to express the idea of Jew/Gentile inclusion into God's plan and did so clearly when they wanted to do so (cf. Gal 3:28).

In relation to the intention of the Father and Christ in His death, there are numerous passages that suggest that what He did on the cross was for all men. "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. John 3:16). John 3:17 clarifies the term "world" by equating the "world" with the one He came into, with the one He did not (at His first advent) come to judge, and with the one which He came to save. The "world" is clearly the entire world of lost men which He could judge if He were so inclined. Jesus, in John 12:47, says that He didn't come to judge this world, but to save it. Elwell adds an Arminian answer to this Calvinist assertion by saying:

³⁹ Steele and Thomas, *Romans*, 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The Bible teaches that Christ died for “sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15; Rom 5:6-8). The word “sinner” nowhere means “church” or “the elect,” but simply all of lost mankind.⁴¹

The world, i.e., the normal understanding of that term, indicates all mankind. Norman Geisler clarifies the problem by quoting John Owen’s *retranslation* of John 3:16 as follows: “God so loved his elect throughout the world, that he gave his Son with the intention, that by him believers might be saved.” Geisler comments that this interpretation, “needs no response, simply a sober reminder that God repeatedly exhorts us not to add to or subtract from His words (Deut. 4:2; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19).”⁴²

Additionally, there are three grand soteriological themes that indicate the universality of the atonement: First, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also *for the whole world*” (1 John 2:2). John could have said, “for the world” or “for those who would believe,” but he said “the *whole* world.” A normal reading will lead us to the plain understanding of the all-inclusiveness of Christ’s death. Chafer states,

The meaning of [propitiation] is inexpressibly sweet. It refers to a divinely provided place of meeting...The mercy-seat of the Old Testament is spoken of in Heb. 9:5 as a place of propitiation. There, covering the broken law, was the blood-sprinkled mercy-seat, and there was the Shekinah light which spoke of the presence of God.⁴³

To trifle with the clear meaning of this verse for the sake of a theological system seems unthinkable. It also serves to change the “sweetness” of God’s grace into bitterness.

Second, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Cor 5:19). Can it legitimately be asserted that “the world” means less than all humanity? Paul could have easily said “the elect” or “those who believe,” but the inspired text simply says “the world.” Chafer notes,

⁴¹ Elwell, “Atonement,” 99.

⁴² Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 202, quoting John Owens, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 214.

⁴³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation: A Clear Doctrinal Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1917), 38.

The world is thus thoroughly changed in its relation to God by the death of His Son. God Himself is not said to be changed; He has thoroughly changed the world in its relation to Himself by the death of Christ. God Himself has undertaken the needed mediation between His own righteous Person and the sinful world.⁴⁴

The sinful world is certainly in view here, and so, the passage says that God does not impute (place to their account) their *trespasses*. God has transferred (imputed) them to the Savior on the cross. Is there a better description of what took place in Jesus' provision of reconciliation than to say that in His death He made peace with God for mankind and, thus, made the world savable?

Third, it was the OT sacrificial system that required blood alone for atonement. "When I see the blood I will pass over you" (Exod 12:13). "Blood makes atonement for the soul" (Lev 17:11). So, Jesus would say, "For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28).⁴⁵ In contrast to His blood being shed for many, 1 Tim 2:6 says that Christ "gave Himself a ransom for all" and the immediate context (1 Tim 2:1-6) qualifies the term "all." It refers not to all the elect, but to "all men" (2:1) and "all who are in authority" (2:2), and indicates that God desires "all men to be saved" (2:4).⁴⁶ If "all men" in this verse refers only to all the elect, this would be a tautology, a truism, and would need not be said, because God would know that all the elect would indeed be saved. What would be the point of saying it? The phrase makes sense only if the whole world is meant. Surely this contextual use of "all" here argues against such a restrictive use as "all the elect"!

⁴⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁵ Remember, we have just shown that the restrictive use of "many" doesn't necessitate a restriction to only some to the exclusion of others.

⁴⁶ Geisler astutely says, "Even if 'all' can and does mean less than literally all men in some passages, it still leaves open the question of what 'all' means in this passage. And there is ample evidence that Paul has reference to the entire human race in 1 Timothy 2:4-6," *Chosen But Free*, 211.

H. “ALL” DOES NOT MEAN EVERYONE.

1. *The Calvinist Argument Stated*

Elwell presents an eighth argument for Limited Atonement:

Finally, the passages that say Christ died for all men have also been misunderstood. The word “all” means “all classes” of men, not everyone.⁴⁷

Palmer, for instance, gives the following explanation of the Calvinist view in answer to the Arminian objection that “all” and “world” are universal, general, or all inclusive (as per John 1:29; 4:42; 2 Cor 5:14-15; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 John 2:2).

2. *The Argument Negated*

The answer to this objection is that often the Bible uses the words *world* or *all* in a restricted, limited sense. They must always be interpreted in their context and in light of the rest of Scripture. We must do this in any normal reading. For example, if a newspaper should report that a ship was sunk, but all were rescued, it is obvious that it means that all that were on the ship were rescued, and not all that are in the world.⁴⁸

The problem is that Palmer has not demonstrated, by giving any biblical context regarding the passages in question, that “all” or “world” *should* be used in such a restrictive way. He has only given an illustration of how we *might* speak.

V. AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE VARIOUS VIEWS OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

Certainly the Calvinist and Arminian doctrines of Jesus’ atonement are contradictory. Enns sets forth the problem with Calvinism:

Many Calvinists emphasize that although the atonement is particular, Christ died only for the elect, yet the offer of the gospel is for everyone. How both of these facts can be true is paradoxical—a mystery that cannot be explained; it is one of many “irreconcilable” opposites of Scripture. God’s thoughts and ways are not man’s thoughts and ways. He has always been faithful and true. Therefore we must trust Him where our

⁴⁷ Elwell, “Atonement,” 99.

⁴⁸ Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 52, italics in original.

philosophical efforts to harmonize His mysteries are utterly confounded.⁴⁹

So what is the answer? Where is the correct understanding of the scriptural teaching in the matter? Having given the basic tenets on the subject of the divine intent for Christ's death by both Calvinism and Arminianism above, one may conclude, on the basis of a normal reading of Scripture, that Jesus' death was a sufficient provision for all men. His intent was to be the Savior of the world of sinful men and His death on the cross was sufficient to redeem or pay a sufficient (read, "supreme") price as payment for human sin and to reconcile (make savable) the world to Himself. Only when bound by a theological system which demands adherence to unfounded tenets such as the teaching of total inability to believe in Christ for eternal life (called by Calvinists "total depravity") and the teaching of *unconditional election* (based on the idea that God's past choice of certain sinners is done apart from His eternal nature, omniscience, and infallible knowledge) is one bound to follow the idea that Christ died only for a select few to the exclusion of others.

Additionally, whereas the Scripture may indeed restrict who will *benefit* from Christ's death, it does not equate Christ's death with the application of those benefits by the Holy Spirit and, thus, does not teach that Christ's death secures salvation for anyone. There is no contradiction in the assertion that Christ's death was sufficient to bear the sins of the world and, yet, be efficient in a saving way, only for those who believe in Him for eternal life. Simply, that Scripture uses restrictive language at places in discussing benefits to the church, Israel, the sheep, the elect, etc., doesn't rule against the other teaching that His death is offered for the broader spectrum of the entire world of mankind. What He provisionally did for everyone (the large, all inclusive group), He also did for everyone who would believe (the smaller, selective, restricted group). The *application* of the universal provision of Christ's death by the ministry of the Holy Spirit during the course of anyone's individual life need not be equated with the cross itself. Christ's death for all provides the way of salvation, but the Holy Spirit is the One who actually applies Christ's work and, thus, secures salvation for each person who believes the gospel. Douty succinctly states, "It is strongly asserted by Limited Atonement men that *the cross saves*, as though we do not as thoroughly believe the same. Indeed, the cross saves, and in the same sense in which

⁴⁹ Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 483.

a remedy cures.”⁵⁰ There need be no contradiction at all as long as there is no imposing theological system demanding it.

Further, since no passage in the Bible teaches that God’s intent for Christ’s death was *only* for the elect, there is no ground for asserting that God’s purpose is frustrated. The theological system that speculates and imposes such fabricated intention upon us is frustrated.

God is not unfair in sending someone to hell if Christ died for that person as a member of humanity and if that person does not appropriate God’s forgiveness by means of faith. Since Jesus’ death does not secure one’s salvation (for such is not taught in the Bible) and since faith in Christ is the necessary condition to secure (and to be assured of) one’s salvation, the charge that double jeopardy is involved is simply a rhetorical argument without biblical foundation. If the substitutionary sacrifice was not appropriated, then the pardon (and Christ’s death, the basis for the pardon) is ineffective. Grace that is rejected is not effectual.

That Unlimited Atonement leads to Universalism is a “straw-man” argument because, again, the avenue for salvation is faith. The object of faith is the finished work of Christ (the Atonement). If there is no faith in Christ, God’s provision is to no avail. Universalism is not at all a logical outcome of the Unlimited Atonement position. Christ died to make salvation *possible*, but not to the exclusion of the necessity of personal faith in Him. When faith is present, the human appropriation and the Spirit’s application of His provisional death is what effectually saves.

Since repentance is an act, a decision to get right with God, it is ineffectual in obtaining the gift of eternal life. Since faith is a human response to the gospel message and an assurance that it is true, faith is not some commodity given by God. Faith is within the sinner by the Spirit as He effectively convicts and convinces the sinner who hears the gospel. Faith is not secured by Christ’s death. No Scripture teaches such a thing.

To say that universalistic terms like “world” and “all” used by Scripture writers mean a restricted group is an imposition of the Calvinistic theological system onto the text of Scripture. It seems correct, based on the normal reading of Scripture, to throw off the teaching of Limited Atonement (as well as the Calvinistic system which teaches it) in favor of a normal hermeneutic.

⁵⁰ Norman F. Douty, *The Death of Christ: A Treatise which Considers the Question: “Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?”* (Irving, TX: Williams & Watrous Publishing Co., 1978), 54, italics in original.

We may conclude that God's intent in the death of Christ was a provisional payment and a substitution for God's wrath on the world of sinful men. It was meant to provide the way (cf. John 14:6) for eternal life through His death in place of every man conditioned solely upon personal belief in Christ. When the truth is so simple, why convolute it with a complicated system?