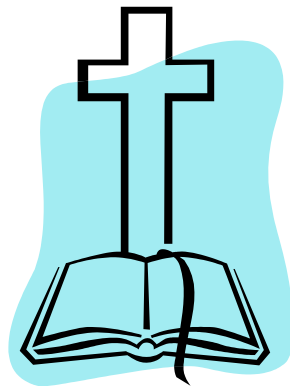


The Extent of the Atonement

By

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THE EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

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DEFINITION OF SUBSTITUTION

When we say “*Christ died for our sins*” (1 Cor. 15:3), we mean that He substituted for our sins. Christ not only died for sins but He substituted for sinners. “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Rom. 5:8). Substitution means that Christ died “in behalf of,” “in the place of,” and “in the stead of” sins and sinners.

The Bible indicates that the death of Christ is a penal satisfaction by substitution. “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45). “*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*” (Rom. 8:32)?

THE EXTENT OF SUBSTITUTION

The Issue

The issue among Bible scholars is, “For whom did Christ die?” Did He die for the whole world indiscriminately or did He die for a definite number of people? Or perhaps we can ask the question, “Why did Christ die?”

Did Christ die for the purpose of saving His elect seed personally and definitely? This is sometimes called the issue of limited or unlimited atonement. The issue deals with the extent of the atonement. Did Christ die for the whole world but His death is only applied to those who believe (the elect), or did He die for His elect exclusively? Did Christ die only to make the salvation of all men possible, or did He actually save men in His death. Does Christ’s death merely put all men in a savable position, or does His death actually guarantee the salvation of the elect? Does Christ’s death save, or does it make only a provision for all men to be saved? One view holds a limited atonement and the other a limited application of the atonement.

Let me try to explain the substitutionary death of Christ another way. Did Christ die as much for Judas as the Apostle John? Did He substitute for Esau as well as Jacob? When Christ hung upon the Cross was He dying for a people already in hell as well as for all saints of all time? For whom did Christ propitiate the wrath of God? Who did He redeem from the curse of the Law? Who was reconciled to God—all men in general or some men in particular?

John Murray, the author of *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* said,

The question is: on whose behalf did Christ offer himself a sacrifice? On whose behalf did He propitiate the wrath of God? Whom did He reconcile to God in the body of His flesh through death? Whom did He redeem from the curse of the law, from the guilt and power of sin, from the enthralling power and bondage of Satan? In whose stead and on whose behalf was He obedient unto death, even the death of the cross? These are precisely the questions that have to be asked and frankly faced if the matter of the extent of the atonement is to be placed in proper focus.

The Attitude

The purpose of this paper is to prove the Bible teaches a definite atonement or as it is sometimes called theologically particular redemption or limited atonement. Before we begin this study, I confess to honestly that I do not have the last word on this subject of definite atonement. I also realize that there have been many godly men in the church who believed that Christ died for the whole world *indiscriminately* - John Wesley, Richard Baxter, J.C. Ryle, Campbell Morgan and others. Today most evangelicals hold to an unlimited atonement and Billy Graham would fall into this category. The extent of the atonement is one of the most difficult subjects in the entire Bible, and the man who would say there are no problems with limited or unlimited atonement merely shows the

shallowness of his thinking. I personally hold to a definite atonement because, in my opinion, it fits all the Scriptures best and has the least theological problems.

The issue of the extent of the atonement is not nearly as serious as the issue of free grace salvation versus free will salvation. There are many choice servants of God who accept sovereign election but also believe in unlimited atonement. This position may not be logical and consistent but these dear brethren hold this position because they are convinced the Bible teaches an unlimited atonement. Therefore, it is with deepest humility and fear and trembling that I approach the subject of definite or limited atonement. I have no desire to bring schism to the Body of Christ. Therefore, brethren, if I disagree with some of God's servants and perhaps with you, let us do so in love. Let us each search the Scriptures diligently to see whether these things are so.

The Importance

Why is it so important to wrestle with the extent of the atonement? Why is it so necessary to believe in a definite atonement? What difference could it possibly make?

First, the atonement and its extent is a Biblical subject and therefore, we should have an earnest desire to know the truth.

Second, definite atonement is important to a right preaching of the whole gospel. The gospel in its most simple form is, "*Christ died for our sins and all who accept Him shall be saved.*" Many are truly saved who do not know, understand or believe in particular redemption. However, a right understanding of limited atonement gives us a mature and full gospel. Quite often a simple gospel becomes a defective gospel and a defective gospel becomes a perverted gospel. Therefore, a right preaching of the gospel is tied up with a definite atonement, for what one believes about the atonement affects how he preaches the gospel and the methods he uses in evangelism.

Third, definite atonement is the only logical antidote to the liberal view of Universalism (all men will ultimately be saved). A liberal believes that Christ died for the whole world. He bore the sin, curse, judgment and hell of all men indiscriminately and all will ultimately be saved. This is a logical position, and liberals believe that Christ's death is effective for all men whether they believe it or not.

Fourth, definite atonement heads off the teachings of many evangelicals that Christ died for everyone in general, being very close to a Universalist position. Evangelical Christians who hold to universal redemption do not believe all men will be saved. They would emphatically deny this, but their position cracks the door for Universalism. If there was ever an hour in the history of the church when any and every form of universalism should be squelched, this is the hour!

WHAT LIMITED SUBSTITUTION DOES NOT TEACH

Definite Atonement Does Not Limit the Sufficiency of the Atonement

The death of Christ has infinite, intrinsic value and is sufficient to save any and all men who will receive it by faith. While Christ's death is designed to save only the elect, it is sufficient for this world and a thousand worlds just like it. Had there been ten thousand worlds with ten trillion people upon them, and had it been Christ's purpose to save all these people, Christ would have had to do no more than He did on the Cross to save men. No man will ever perish for the sufficiency of an atonement to save him. If he wants the atonement, he can have it.

Definite Atonement Does Not Limit a Sincere Offer of the Gospel

The gospel of Christ is to be offered to all men without exception and all who want to be saved by Christ shall be saved. The atonement is objectively available to all men on the condition of faith. There is unlimited availability to all men who want the atonement.

Definite Atonement Does Not Limit the Non-Saving Benefits of the Atonement to the World

Definite atonement does not say that there are no benefits which accrue to unsaved men because of the atonement, but these are non-saving benefits. Every good and profitable thing done for man is made possible by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR LIMITED SUBSTITUTION

Theological Statement

Negatively, the doctrine of definite atonement states that Christ was not a sacrificial substitute for every member of the human race. Positively, the doctrine of definite atonement teaches that Christ was a sacrificial substitute for a great host of sinners whom the Father from eternity had purposed to save.

Covenant of Redemption

According to the Bible, Christ's death was part of an eternal covenant. ***“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep”*** (Heb. 13:20). In Isaiah 42, the Father is speaking about the Son and says that Christ was appointed to a covenant relationship with God's people. ***“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”*** (Isa. 42:6-7).

These verses give us a hint that God the Father and God the Son covenanted together in the eternal counsels to choose and redeem a people for God's glory. When Christ came to this earth, He was committed to do the Father's will. ***“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”*** (John 5:30).

Christ made it very clear that the Father's will was to save all those the Father had given Him from eternity past. ***“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”*** (John 6:37-40).

In Christ's high priestly prayer, Christ indicated that He carried out the Father's plan in redeeming God's people.

“After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do’” (John 17:1-4).

Christ prayed for the salvation, preservation and glorification of all God's people. Who are God's people? All who trust in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior.

Union of Christ with His People

Christ has a very special relationship to His people because of His union with them. God's people are “in Christ.” This union took place in eternity past. ***“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight”*** (Eph. 1:4). This union also was evident at the Cross so that when Christ died, the believing sinner died. ***“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*** (Gal. 2:20).

When Christ died, He knew every person intimately for whom He was dying. He died for the believing sinner even when He knew how horrible that sinner would be before and after conversion. Christians were in union with Christ when He died. Were unbelievers in union with Christ when He died? I think not. Furthermore, we are told that all for whom Christ died actually died in Christ, and all who died in Christ also rose with Him and share the very resurrected life of Christ.

“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life ”(Rom. 6:3-4).

We know that the unsaved do not share the life of Christ and they could not for Christ never died for the sins of those who would not believe.

Christ's Work as a Priest

The Bible teaches that Christ is the Christian's Great High Priest. Christ not only made a sacrifice of Himself for His people but He always prays for those for whom He made this sacrifice. It is impossible to separate the atoning work of Christ and His intercession for those whom He atoned.

“. . . because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isa. 53:12)

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (Rom. 8:32-34).

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (Heb. 7:25)

Christ makes sacrifice and intercession for the same people. Does Christ pray for the world? No, and the Bible clearly says that Christ does not pray for the unsaved world. ***“I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.” (John 17:9).***

Relationship of Christ's Death to Faith and Repentance

Faith is a gift from God. ***“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him” (Phil. 1:29).*** ***“...he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.” (Acts 18:27).*** Repentance is also a gift from God. ***“God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.” (Acts 5:31).*** Christ procured faith for all true believers in Christ. Christians believe because Christ purchased their faith at the Cross.

“but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.” (I Pet. 1:19-21).

Did Christ purchase faith for everyone? No, or everyone would believe in Christ. He purchased faith for His people.

Christ's Fulfilled Purpose

It is clearly taught that Christ came to save sinners. ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”*** (1 Tim. 1:15). He came to seek and to save the lost. ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”*** (Luke 19:10). He also came to save a people, ***“... and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*** (Matt. 1:21). These verses do not say that His purpose was to attempt to save lost sinners, but that His purpose was to save them. The Scriptures tell us that Christ accomplished this purpose. ***“Christ redeemed us”*** (Gal. 3:13), ***“He has now reconciled you”*** (Col. 1:22) and ***“because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”*** (Heb. 10:14). These verses do not talk about a possibility of salvation but a reality of salvation.

Declaration of Scripture

The Bible itself makes many statements to indicate that the death of Christ is limited only to those who believe or the elect of God. Christ said, ***“I lay down my life for the sheep”*** (John 10:15), and ***“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”*** (Matt. 26:28). The angel said of Jesus, ***“he will save his people from their sins”*** (Matt. 1:21). Isaiah the prophet said of Christ, ***“my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities”*** (Isa. 53:11). The Apostle Paul declared, ***“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”*** (Eph. 5:25), and also spoke of ***“the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”*** (Acts 20:28). Still further, Paul said, ***“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”*** (Rom. 5:8) and Christ ***“who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own”*** (Tit. 2:14). The Apostle Paul makes it even more personal and said, ***“who (Christ) loved me and gave himself for me”*** (Gal. 2:20). The author of Hebrews said, ***“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many”*** (Heb. 9:28).

These verses tell us that substitution for sins is found only in Christ. Men must come to Christ and Christ alone if they are to have their sins forgiven and realize that Christ bore their sin, curse, judgment and hell.

LOGICAL SUPPORT FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT

Sin of Unbelief

Those who believe in an unlimited atonement say that Christ died for the sins of all men and the only thing keeping a person from salvation is unbelief towards Christ. Is unbelief a sin? Yes. If Christ died for all the sins of all men, then did He die for the sin of unbelief? Yes. Why, then, are not all men saved, for if Christ did not die for unbelief then no one is saved? The unlimited redemption view says that Christ died for every sin except unbelief. If this is so, then he did not make a perfect and complete sacrifice for all sin. Unlimited atonement get one into deep theological water. It is better to limit the extent of the atonement and say that Christ bore all the sins of all who would ever believe on Him and those are the elect of God.

Dr. John Owen, Chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, made these piercing observations:

The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either: (1) All the sins of all men, (2) All the sins of some men, or (3) Some of the sins of all men. In which case it may be said: (1) That if the last be true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved; (2) That if the second be true, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all

the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is truth; (3) But if the first be the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins?

Your answer, Because of unbelief. I ask, is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins?" (Death of Deaths)

Sin Question

Those who believe in unlimited atonement claim that the issue with the unsaved man is no longer the sin question but the Son question. The Son has died for every sin of mankind and now unbelievers should not be concerned about sin but about the Son. However, the Bible states that sin is still very much an issue. ***"I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be], you will indeed die in your sins."*** (John 8:24). Men will die in their sins and be judged for all eternity because they have no Savior who substituted for their sins. Substitution for sin is found only in Christ.

Payment for Sin

Would God be just in demanding a payment for a debt twice? Christ did pay the debt for sin. If He paid the debt for every human being, then some men (rejectors of Christ) will pay the debt a second time by suffering in hell. This would make God unjust to demand a debt be paid twice.

So in the end, if He died and paid the actual penalty for the sins of all people who ever lived, then hell would be double jeopardy. Then how could you send people to hell when their sins have been paid for? So you can't really have a complete expiation of the sins of everybody, or you are going to end up as a Universalist. So in reality, Christ actually expiated the sins of those who believe. (John MacArthur, Jr., Pastor of Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California)

Men in Hell

We must conclude if we believe in unlimited atonement that men are in hell today for whom Christ died. This would make the death of Christ ineffective in keeping men out of hell. If His death could not keep the unbeliever out of hell, then how does the true Christian know His death will keep him out of hell? It seems as though Christ died in vain if men are in hell for whom He died.

Power of the Atonement

Those who believe in unlimited atonement accuse those who believe in particular redemption of lowering the value of the Cross. They say the glories and the power of the Cross are minimized if Christ did not die for all men. These are idle words, because those who hold to the unlimited redemption view are guilty of a far more serious error than those who believe in limited atonement. Those who believe in limited atonement limit the extent of the atonement, but the unlimited atonement view limits the power of the atonement. They believe the Cross was powerless to save all men because all men are obviously not saved. An view of unlimited atonement does not magnify the merit and worth of Christ's death; it cheapens it, for it makes Christ's death powerless. Charles Spurgeon gives us a good logic when it comes to the extent of the atonement.

We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, 'Christ died for all men.

Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men?’ They say, ‘No, certainly not.’ We ask them the next question—‘Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular?’ They answer, ‘No. Christ has died that any man may be saved if’—and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ’s death; we say, ‘No, my dear sir, it is you that do it.’ We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it. (Source Unknown)

Hypothetical Salvation

If Christ died only potentially or provisionally for the sins of the whole world, then this is only a hypothetical salvation. Definite atonement says Christ actually saved a people at the Cross.

*Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for His own chosen people. His precious blood really does “save us all”; the intended effects of His self-offering do in fact follow, just because the Cross was what it was. Its saving power does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it. The Cross secured the full salvation of all for whom Christ died. “God forbid,” therefore, “that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (J.I. Packer, *Introductory Essay*).*

Number of Saved

Whether a person believes in limited or unlimited atonement the exact same number are going to be saved. Every evangelical limits the atonement somewhere or all would be Universalists. Strict freewillers say Christ died for all men but His death is available only to those who believe. Electionists who believe in unlimited atonement state that Christ died for all men but it is limited in application to the elect or those who believe. Electionists who believe in limited atonement say Christ died only for the elect and the elect are those who believe.

Not one more soul is saved in any of these views. Furthermore, definite atonement has far less theological problems. I repeat—the death of Christ only works for those who believe. Unlimited redemptionists cannot show that one more person would be saved than those who believe in a definite atonement. When the final number of the redeemed is counted, they will be the same number.

“Whatever it is tht you believe about the inherent nature of the atonement, whatever it is that you believe about the limits of the atonement, whether they’re there or not there—whatever it is that you believe about the actual efficaciousness of the death of Christ and towhom it is applied, whatever nuances of that discussion you particularly believe—in the end, the atonement will only have value to those who believe—whatever it is that you believe” (John MacArthur, Jr.).

Love of God

Those who say that God so loved the whole world that He gave His only begotten Son to die for it, must also face the inconsistency that God loved the world enough to send His Son to die for all, but did not love them enough to save all. What kind of love is this?

Purpose of God

There is a perfect unity in the works and purposes of God. God has chosen certain men to be saved. Was or is the design of redemption at odds with God's elective purposes? Was the Son seeking to save those that the Father had not purposed to save? Obviously not, for those chosen by the Father must be redeemed by the Son and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT

The Word "All"

When reading the word "all" in the Bible; we must always put it into the context of the passage. We should also remember that the Bible is written in the language of the people, so that when we see the word "all" it does not always mean "all in general" or "all inclusively." Many times "all" is given a limited meaning in the Bible. According to John Owen, the Puritan, the word "all" is given a limited meaning at least 500 times in the Bible.

The Usage of "All" "All" may mean all of all sorts, for Christ is said to be "**Lord of all**" (Acts 10:36) which means all inclusively. "All" may also mean all of some sorts. For instance in Romans 5:18 it indicates that because of the righteous act of substitution "***the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.***" If this is all men in general, then we have universalism. The "all," however, refers to the many who are made righteous in Christ which refers to true believers. "All" may also mean some of all sorts. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul said, "***Everything (All things are) is permissible for me"--but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me"--but I will not be mastered by anything.***" This is speaking only of questionable practices in the Christian life, for murder, adultery, lying and cheating were not lawful for Paul or any Christian. But some of all sorts of practices were possible for Paul within the total law of God.

John 12:32 "***But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.***" In context this refers to Christ's death, and it says all men will be drawn to Him. In the Gospel of John, the word "draw" is always used of an effective drawing to salvation. "***No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.***" (John 6:44). The "all" must be put into the context of all who believe, for all men are not saved. Christ, therefore, will save all kinds of people—Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

2 Cor. 5:15. "***And he (Christ) died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.***" The immediate context tells us that the "all" refers to all who died in Christ who are the elect or true believers. Furthermore, the context tells us that all for whom Christ died should live to God. These can only be true Christians.

1 Cor. 15:22. "***For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.***" Every human being has died in Adam (all without exception). Yet, only those "in Christ" shall have spiritual life. Only people "in Christ" shall have spiritual life and those are the ones for whom Christ died and share His life.

1 Tim. 2:6. "***Who (Christ) gave Himself as a ransom for all men.***" This very context limits the meaning of "all." In verse one, we are told that prayers are to be made for "all men." Then in verse two the "all men" are qualified as "***kings and all those in authority.***" Therefore, it is perfectly accurate to give the meaning of "ransom for all" as all men without distinction or rank, race or nationality. This "all" does not refer to every man without exception, but every man without distinction.

The Word "Every"

Hebrews 2:9 says, "***That by the grace of God He (Christ) might taste death for every one.***" The "every one" must be taken in context. The "every one" refers to "***many sons***" (2:11), "***those who are***

sanctified” (2:11), *“brethren”* (2:12), *“the children whom God has given”* (2:13) and *“the seed of Abraham”* (2:16). The context limits the “every one” to those who are true believers or the elect.

The Word “World”

Many times the term “world” is qualified by the context of a passage and is given a limited meaning:

Universe. The term “world” (*kosmos*) may mean the universe. *“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth”* (Acts 17:24).

Earth. *“Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love”* (John 13:1).

The human race. *“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”* (Rom. 3:19).

The world system. *“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out”* (John 12:31).

The Jewish world of Christ’s day. *“So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him”* (John 12:19).

The known Roman world of Paul’s day. *“... because your faith is being reported all over the world”* (Rom. 1:8).

In John 1:10, the term “world” has three different meanings in one verse: earth, universe and world system: *“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him”* (John 1:10).

Does the word “world” ever refer to those who believe in Christ? Yes. It may refer to the world of believing Gentiles: *“But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”* (Rom. 11:12, 15).

The Bible also speaks of a world of unbelievers . . . *“if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others”* (2 Pet. 2:5). Therefore, we can conclude that there is a world of believers: *“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (John 6:33). It is obvious that Christ only gives life to those who are true Christians.

John 1:29. *“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*

Quite often general, broad, universal terms such as “world” are used in the Bible to counteract the horrible Jewish exclusivist of that day. The Jews thought that salvation was shut up to the Jews only and Gentiles had no part in the blessings of salvation. Jews called the Gentiles “dogs,” “swine,” and “the world.” When John the Baptist announced the Lamb of God, he was stating that salvation was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The “world” in this context refers to the world of believers—both Jews and Gentiles.

Notice carefully John 1:20 says, *“Who takes away the sin of the world.”* This does not say Christ tries to take away sin or that He made provision for all sin. He takes it away. Therefore, this must refer to the world of believers.

John 4:42. *“... we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”* Christ is the Savior of all men in the world who believe. This again is a general term to help the Jewish exclusivists to see that the death of Christ is for the whole world if the world will have it. Christ is a Savior for the whole world but is not the Savior of the whole world or the whole world would be saved.

Notice again that this verse says Christ *“is the Savior of the world,”* so this must refer to all in the world who truly believe in Christ.

EXEGETICAL SUPPORT FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT

Hebrews 2:9 *“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.”*

Unlimited Atonement. The death of Christ is provisional for all men because Christ tasted death for all men, but His death works only for those who believe—the elect.

Limited Atonement. The word “man” is not in the original Greek and was added by the translators for what they felt was a clearer meaning. The Greek text literally says, *“Christ tasted death for every”* and the word *“every”* is in the masculine gender. The context, therefore, must determine who the “every” refers to. In Hebrews 2:10 it says that Christ brought *“many sons into glory.”* “Sons” is masculine in gender, so we can say that Christ tasted death for every son or every true believer or the elect of God.

1 Corinthians 5:19: *“that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”*

Unlimited Atonement. Christ made a provision for the reconciliation of the whole world in a positional sense (Christ’s death has rendered all men savable), but the death of Christ is applied only to those who believe or the elect.

Limited Atonement.

The context clearly says that the world does not have their sins charged to their account. If this refers to the world of mankind, then every man has his sins charged to Christ which is nothing but Universalism. The world, therefore, is not all men in general, but all in the world who lay hold of Christ by faith. The term “world” is qualified by the statement *“not counting men's sins against them.”* This must refer to the world of believers (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19). The Bible often qualifies the meaning of the world (1 John 2:15; Luke 2:1; Rom. 1:8; 5:12; 11:12; John 1:10; 15:18; 17:9).

The context tells us that Christ is not the sin-bearer for all men indiscriminately, for some are reconciled to God (“us”—5:18), and some are not (“you”—5:20).

1 John 2:1-2: *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

Unlimited Atonement: Christ’s death is provisional for all in that He propitiated for the sins of the whole world, but it is a reality to those who believe or the elect.

Limited Atonement

First John 2:2 begins with “and” (*kai*) which links it with verse one. Verse one is about Christians and has nothing to say about unbelievers. The primary thought of verse one is the advocacy of Christ for believers. Christians are to take comfort in the fact that Christ is their advocate when they sin. The reason Christians can take comfort is that Christ is *“the propitiation for our sins (atoning sacrifice).”* There is a definite link between *“advocate”* and *“propitiation.”* The context deals with Christians and Christ can be a propitiation for no more than He is an advocate. The term *“whole world”* is somehow connected with believers. If Christ is a propitiation for all mankind, He surely is also an advocate for all mankind, which would teach universalism.

The *“our”* refers to the Apostle John and to all he was writing this letter to (primarily Hebrew-Christians). Christ is also a propitiation for the whole world; that is, His death is effective to all Jews and Gentiles in the world who believe in Christ. This verse is very closely connected with the prophecy of

Caiaphas concerning the death of Christ for believing Israelites and Gentiles: ***“He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation (And He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins), and not only for that nation (and not only for ours) but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (but also for the sins of the whole world)”*** (John 11:51-52)

The term ***“whole world”*** must be given a limited meaning and refer to all who believe—the elect. The Apostle John often limits the meaning of “whole world.” In 1 John 5:19 it says, ***“We know that we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”*** On the surface 1 John 5:19 indicates that the whole world is under the control of the wicked one, the devil, but further reflection shows that this is not true. Genuine Christians are not under the control of the wicked one. Therefore this means all in the world except true Christians. Revelation 12:9, which was also written by the Apostle John, says that Satan will deceive the ***“whole world”*** in the tribulation period, but we know that the elect of God will not be deceived and go after the devil’s scheme (Rev. 7:4, 9; 14:6 cf. Matt. 24:24). All in the world but true Christians will be deceived by the devil. In light of these verses, it is not illogical to conclude that the “whole world” in 1 John 2:2 refers to all in the world who believes.

All other passages that mention propitiation limit it to those who have faith in Christ (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 4:10). Therefore, Christ was a propitiation for John and those Christians he was writing to, plus all in the world who believe in Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 4:10 ***“(and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.”***

Unlimited Atonement. Christ is the Savior of all men in general but particularly to men who believe in Christ.

Limited Atonement

The term “living God” is a reference to God the Father and not the Son. In both the Old and New Testaments the title ***“living God”*** refers to the Father. Therefore, the ***“Savior”*** refers to God the Father, and this context has nothing to do with the person of Christ or His atonement for sin.

The words “Savior” (4:10) and “save” (4:16) come from the same root and can be translated “deliverer” (deliver) or “preserver” (preserve).

The context of 1 Timothy 4 is about being saved (preserved) from the teachings of demon influenced men (4:1-3). In verse 16, the word “save” definitely refers to physical deliverance or preservation: ***“because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*** Verse 16 does not refer to spiritual salvation because this would teach a works salvation. Furthermore, the context is about deliverance or preservation from demon- influenced false teachers. Timothy was to deliver or preserve himself from demon-influenced men by ***“watching”*** or ***“taking heed”*** to himself and to sound “doctrine.”

In view of the context, why not take “Savior of all men” to mean providential preserver of all men. The ***“living God”*** (God the Father) is the providential preserver of all men, especially (most of all) God preserves those who have trusted Christ (the elect).

This verse does not teach that Christ is the potential Savior of all mankind because the verse says He ***“is the Savior of all men.”*** An unlimited atonement position carried out to its logical conclusion would teach Universalism, for if Christ is the Savior of all men then all men will ultimately be saved, whether they believe or not. This is precisely the theological position of modern day neo-orthodoxy on the atonement.

2 Peter 2:1 ***“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.”***

Unlimited Atonement: Christ in His death has bought (*agoradzo*) all men, even false teachers, but He only buys men out of (*exagoradzo*) the slave market of sin when they believe (Gal. 3:13; 4:5).

Limited Atonement

General Observations. The key to finding the meaning of 2 Peter 2:1 is found in the Greek words *despotase* (Lord) and *agoradzo* (to buy), plus an understanding of the context as it is related to the Old Testament.

Facts about *Despotase*

The word “*despotase*” (Lord, Master) is usually used of God the Father when in a context of dominion and sovereignty (Acts 4:24; 2 Tim. 2:21; Rev. 6:10). W.E. Vine says the *despotase* refers to one who has “absolute ownership and uncontrolled power.” When Christ is viewed in His sovereignty and dominion, the Greek word *kurios* (Lord) is almost always used. It is a very good possibility that the title *despotase* does not refer to Christ at all but to God the Father (cf. context 2 Peter 1:17-2:4). If this is true, then the whole of 2 Peter 2:1 is taken out of the realm of the atonement, for it has nothing to do with the person or work of Christ.

Jude 4 does speak of Christ as *despotase*: “**denying our only Master (*despotase*) and Lord Jesus Christ.**” Some have tried to make “Master” refer to the Father rather than the Son, but the Greek Grandville Sharp rule demands that they be one and the same. However, the context of Jude 4 is about Christ’s sovereignty and dominion over men.

Despotase is used about thirty times in the Bible—twenty times in the Septuagint and ten times in the New Testament and it never refers to the Father or the Son as mediator unless 2 Peter 2:1 be an exception. (If *despotase* in 2 Peter 2:1 does refer to Christ, it refers to His sovereignty and not to His redeemer/mediatorship. The argument of 2 Peter 2:1 is taken out of the realm of the atonement and placed in the person of Christ and His sovereignty.

Facts About *Agoradzo*

Of its thirty references in the New Testament, *agoradzo* is never used in a soteriological (spiritual salvation) context (unless 2 Peter 2:1 be an exception) without the technical term “price” (a term for the blood of Christ) or its equivalents being stated or made explicit in the context (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Rev. 5:9; 14:3-4). When other terms other than *agoradzo* are used the price is also mentioned (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; ` Pet. 1:18-19).

It could be that *agoradzo* may not be related to the atonement at all in 2 Peter 2:1, for nothing is said in context of Christ dying for any persons or the paying of a price.

In the five references to *agoradzo* in the New Testament the extent of the purchase is limited to believers (the elect), and is never related to nonbelievers.

In contexts where no payment price is stated or implied *agoradzo* may be translated “acquire” or “obtain.” No payment price is mentioned in 2 Peter 2:1 so perhaps the word *agoradzo* should not be translated “to buy.”

Agoradzo is never used in the Bible in a hypothetical sense, unless 2 Peter 2:1 is the exception. Rather it is always used in context where the buying or acquiring takes place in reality.

View #1: Professions of False Teachers (soteriological)

This view takes Christ as the mediator and the word *agoradzo* soteriologically. These false teachers were professing to be what in reality they were not; that is, they were claiming to be bought (redeemed) but were not because they were denying Him.

In the passage under consideration no doubt the words might be interpreted of God as the providential deliverer of Israel, (Deut. 32:2); natural enough when the “false prophets” had been spoken of, who, in common with the Jews generally, boasted of Jehovah in this character.

*And in support of this it has been urged, that in the passage no mention is made of the blood or death of Christ, as is usually done when redemption by Christ is meant. But ... the words may be easily explained on the principle ... that men are spoken of according to professions and appearances, and according to the credibility of the profession, in the estimate of Christian charity. (Wardlaw, *Systematic Theology*) (Wardlaw was a 4-point Calvinist).*

*These false teachers are described according to their own profession and the judgment of charity. They gave themselves out as redeemed men, and where so accounted in the judgment of the church while they abode in her communion. (George Smeaton, *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement*).*

View #2: Sovereign Creation (non-soteriological)

Another possible view is to see the false teachers as created by the sovereign Lord for the specific end of destruction. These false teachers were denying the sovereign God or Christ who created them. This view would translate this verse ***“denying the Master who created them.”***

Peter is quoting from Deut. 32:5-6 where God is dealing with Israel as professors and within the covenant relationship. Yet Israel was a stiff-necked people and many were not saved even though they were under the covenant of grace and called ***“the people you bought”*** (Ex. 15:16). Deut. 32:6 says, ***“Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?”***

The word “bought” could better be translated “acquired” or “gotten,” and this act is equated with the fact that God “made” and “established” Israel. Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek manuscript of the Old Testament, uses the word *ktizo* for “established” and *ktizo* can be translated “to create.” Duet. 32:6 teaches that the pre-incarnate Jehovah (Christ), the sovereign Lord, owns the covenant nation of Israel because He acquired (bought), made, and established it for the purpose of making Israelites a covenant and privileged people who were to be to Him ***“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”*** (Ex. 19:6). The words “acquired,” “made,” and “established” stress the idea of creation.

Second Peter 2:12 says that these false teachers were ***“born only to be caught and destroyed.”*** When the context of 2 Peter is compared with Deut. 32:5-6 it seems that the argument is:

*Just as God sovereignly acquired Israel out of Egypt in order to make her a covenant nation because He had created her for that purpose, so Christ, the sovereign Lord, acquired the false teachers in order to make them a part of the covenant nation of God in the flesh because He created them within the mystery of His providence, for the purpose of bringing glory to Himself through their foreordination unto condemnation. (Gary Long, *Second Peter 2:1*).*

The argument fits the context of 2 Peter 2 and the overall argument of the Book of Second Peter. It is also consistent with other teachings on false teachers (Jude 4) and with God’s sovereign purposes for the wicked (Rom. 9:20-24).

It is illogical to think that Christ would die for those who God caused to be born for destruction (2 Pet. 2:12). It is not reasonable to believe that Christ died hypothetically for anyone, for His death was particular and there was a specific design to the atonement—to purchase and redeem all who lay hold of Christ by faith (the elect).

*If Christ substituted for all, this is universalism;
If Christ substituted for no one, this is nihilism;
If Christ substituted for some, this is salvation.*

HOW TO PRESENT THE GOSPEL FROM A LIMITED ATONEMENT PERSPECTIVE

1. All men are sinners, spiritually dead and separated from God.

2. Because men are sinful, they are in rebellion to God.
3. God is holy and just and must judge all rebellion against Him.
4. God will judge all people and has promised eternal punishment for all who do not have their sins forgiven.
5. God is love and He sent His Son into this world to die for sinful people, and promises eternal life to all who believe in His Son, Jesus Christ.
6. Christ died for the sin, curse, guilt, judgment and hell of all who believe in Christ.
7. Christ died for sinners and you are a sinner in need of God.
8. You will know Christ died for your sins the moment you believe that Christ died for you.
9. You must change your mind about Christ (repent) and received Him as your Savior for sin and Lord (God) who has a right to rule in your life.
10. Whether you receive God's love, which results in eternal life, or God's wrath, which results in eternal judgment, is directly related to whether you believe that Christ died for your sins and accept Him as your Lord (God).

CONCLUSION

Whatever position a Christian holds on the extent of the atonement, he must preach Christ and His death for sin and sinners as the only way to God (John 14:6).

Whatever view a Christian takes on the extent of the atonement, he must do so with humility, admitting a *great mystery*. The mystery is not that Christ died for all people inclusively and His death is applied to all people that believe. The real mystery is that Christ died for His elect exclusively, and yet His death is offered to all people without exception or discrimination.

If one believes in sovereign election, the extent of the atonement should not divide his fellowship in Christ with other Christians. After all, none of us has the final answer on the atonement, and we must remember that Christ died for all Christians so we would love Him more. For sure, we all must keep learning and keep studying until the Lord comes, or we go home to be with Him in death. Then, and only then, will we have a perfect theology and a perfect understanding of the atonement. John MacArthur, Jr. sums it up well:

In the end, however, we don't need to separate, we don't need to become divisive, we don't need to sort of break fellowship over what exactly is the inherent, innate character of the atonement, because in the end, the death of Jesus Christ is only efficacious for those who believe. And in the end whatever was going on, on the cross, it has no application to those who don't believe—right? So, whatever you want to say about its inherent limits or non-limits—in the end you come to the same place.

The bottom line is that *the death of Christ only works for those who believe*. To say Christ's death works for all men without exception is to open the door wide to Universalism. If the Bible teaches Universalism (all will be saved), then there is no Christianity, and we should go out and "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).