

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Particular Redemption

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*He bore my sin on Calvary's tree
And righteousness bestowed on me
That I might see his face.
God justified me, set me free,
And glorified I soon will be:
How marvelous this grace.*

1

For whom did Christ die? That is a question the vast majority of today's Christians would answer easily, without any special need for reflection: "Why, for the whole world, of course. The death of Christ is of infinite value. Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ can be saved." Yes, but things are not that simple. Calvinists believe that Jesus died for the elect alone and that this has important implications for how we are to understand the nature, character, and effect of Christ's death, as well as for how we understand its extent. Yet the idea of a "limited atonement" is so foreign to most of today's Christians, and is so misunderstood even by those who have heard of it, that it needs to be carefully explained.

Admittedly, these misunderstandings are due in some measure to the way Calvinists have often expressed the doctrine. Following the TULIP acronym, they have called the third of the five points "limited atonement," which is an unfortunate way of speaking. Limited atonement suggests that the death of Christ was of limited value, and this is not what any true Calvinist wants to say. We believe, as do most Christians, that the death of Christ is of infinite value. It was sufficient to save not only our world but an infinite number of sinful worlds besides, if they should exist. But that is not what lies behind this question. The question we are raising is this: What did Jesus accomplish by his death? What did his death do? Did Jesus' death merely make salvation possible for everyone, because he died for all, without actually saving anyone? Or did his death actually accomplish the salvation of those for whom he died? The Bible seems to teach the latter. But if it does, then those who will be in heaven are those for whom Christ died and those alone. He did not accomplish salvation for those who will not be in heaven, or they would be there.

When Calvinists speak of a "limited atonement," those holding to the contrary view express their view as an "unlimited atonement," which sounds much better. That

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probably explains why even some professed Calvinists pull back at this point, calling themselves “four-point” rather than “five-point” Calvinists. But what happens when we express our understanding of Christ’s death by the words in the title for this chapter? What if we call our doctrine “definite atonement” or “particular redemption”? Will our opponents respond, “But I believe in an ‘indefinite atonement’”? In this contrast, “definite atonement” or “particular redemption” sounds much better.

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But the controversy is not really about words. It is about how the gospel doctrines hold together. If God planned from eternity to save one portion of the human race and not another, which is what election affirms, then it is a contradiction to say that he sent his Son to die for those he had previously determined not to save *in the same way* that he sent his Son to die for those he had determined actually to save. This does not mean that the death of Christ has no benefit for the whole of mankind, short of salvation. It does have benefit. It has brought an ethic into the flow of human history from which even non-Christians benefit. But it does mean that, so far as the work of salvation itself is concerned, Jesus came into the world specifically to save those individuals whom the Father had given him, and not others.

A MINORITY POSITION

When we speak of particular redemption we have to acknowledge that Reformed thinkers occupy a minority position within Christendom today, though that was not always true in church history. We believe that the doctrine is biblical, but we recognize that large segments of today’s church see things differently.

The opposite view to particular redemption is universal redemption, and if one asks informed Roman Catholics, knowledgeable members of the Greek Orthodox or Russian Orthodox communions, or even orthodox Lutherans or Arminians, they will say that this is what they believe. In fact, even many Presbyterian and Reformed people will say this, though they are not supported at this point by their confessional standards. These people all believe that Jesus died for all men and women and that the only thing that keeps them from the benefits of his death (if, indeed, there are some who do fail to benefit from it) is their unbelief or lack of faith. Those who hold to the Reformed position affirm that Jesus died for a select number of people, those whom the Father specifically had given him, that his atonement accomplished their salvation, and therefore that all of these are certain to be saved.

A good place to begin is by emphasizing certain points of agreement, since there are important matters that are not at all in dispute:

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1. *There is agreement about the value of Jesus' atonement.* When Calvinists speak of "limited atonement," as they sometimes unwisely do, they seem to suggest that somehow the death of Jesus was inadequate to save all men and women. But this is not what Reformed people believe. All of us stand together in affirming that the value of Jesus' death was so great—in fact, infinite—that it is more than sufficient to atone for all the sins of all the people in all ages of this world. The value of the death of Jesus Christ is not limited in any way. His atonement is of infinite value.
2. *We agree that there are benefits of the death of Jesus Christ for all people, benefits short of salvation.* Some of those benefits are of a temporal nature. Before the coming of Christ there was an outpouring of what theologians call common grace. God was patient with sin and delayed his judgment of it. Paul referred to this in his sermon on Mars Hill when he said that "in the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). That is true in the present as well. That is, while the gospel of grace is preached throughout the world, judgment is delayed. This is what Peter referred to when he observed that God "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

There are also common benefits of the life and death of Christ for human society. Who can doubt that the demonstration of God's love, mercy, and compassion at Calvary—particularly as this has worked itself out in the transformed values of Christian people, blessing their homes and giving them a new concern for others in all other areas of life—has blessed people wherever the gospel of grace has penetrated? The world would be a far less gentle place were it not for Christianity. Calvinists, as well as other Christians, confess that freely.

3. *We are not in disagreement as to whether or not all people will be saved.* There are some universalists, of course. In fact, an increasingly small minority within the evangelical church affirms universalism. But for the most part, nearly all evangelicals are united in the confession, based on Scripture, that not all people will be saved, that hell is a real place, and that there are and will be people in it. We would be glad to teach that all will be saved, if we thought that this is what the Scriptures teach. If we should get to heaven one day and discover that God had saved every person who has ever walked upon the face of the earth, we would be as delighted as anyone. But that is not what Scripture teaches. Therefore, like the apostles, we attempt to warn all men and women to turn from the wrath to come.

In each of the areas mentioned, Reformed people as well as those of other evangelical theological persuasions are in substantial agreement. Furthermore, we all agree that the

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atonement must be limited in one way or another. Unless a person is a genuine universalist, and believes that every individual eventually will be saved, he or she inevitably circumscribes the atonement. Either it is limited in its *effects* (Christ died for all, but not all get saved), or it is limited in its *scope* (Christ did not die for all, but all for whom he died will be saved). Loraine Boettner, who has written so many helpful books explaining Reformed theology, has compared the situation to two bridges. One is a very broad bridge, but it only goes halfway across the chasm. The other is a narrow bridge, but it spans the divide.¹ When things are put this way, anyone can see that it is far better to have a narrow bridge that actually does the job. This is the Reformed position: that the narrow way of the Cross reaches all the way to salvation.

Charles Spurgeon took this argument one step further, arguing that those who deny particular redemption are the ones who actually limit the atonement. Spurgeon said:

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." They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say "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.²

THE DESIGN OF THE ATONEMENT

The real question is not whether the death of Jesus Christ has sufficient value to atone for the sins of the entire world, or whether his death benefits all people in some limited sense, or whether everyone will be saved. The real question concerns the *design* of the

¹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 153.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, quoted by J. I. Packer in his "Introductory Essay" to John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 14, note 1.

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atonement; that is, what did God the Father actually intend to do in sending his Son to die for us? And did Jesus do it? We can express the matter with such questions as these: Did Jesus' death actually redeem anyone? Did his sacrifice of himself make a true propitiation for our sins? Did Jesus' death reconcile any specific individual to God? Was Jesus' death an actual atonement? If the answer to these questions is "Yes," then for whom did he do these things? As we phrased things before, did Jesus' death actually save anyone, or did it only make the gift of salvation possible? When the question is asked in this way, we can see that there are only three possible answers:

- Jesus' death was not an actual atonement, but only something that makes atonement possible. The atonement becomes actual when the sinner repents of his or her sin and believes on Jesus.³
- Jesus' death was an actual atonement for the sins of God's elect people with the result that these, and only these, are delivered from sin's penalty.
- Jesus' death was an actual atonement for the sin of all people with the result that all people are saved.

We can dismiss the third possibility immediately, for all orthodox Christians agree that not all persons will be saved. On the contrary, the Bible teaches clearly that some will not be saved; in some cases, specific individuals are lost. Pharaoh is one example. Paul described him as someone whom God had raised up for the very purpose of displaying his power, judgment, and wrath (Rom. 9:17-22). Judas is another. Jesus said that "it would be better for him if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24). The rich man in Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus is yet another.

If we eliminate the third possibility mentioned above, which is universalism, we are left with options one and two:

- Jesus' death was not an actual atonement but only made atonement possible,
or
- Jesus' death was an actual atonement for the sins of those elect persons whom the Father previously had determined to give to him.

³ This is what Lewis Sperry Chafer taught. He wrote, "Christ's death does not save either actually or potentially; rather it makes all men saveable" ("For Whom Did Christ Die?" reprinted in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, [October–December 1980], 325).

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This is a very manageable alternative, for it requires us only to study the terms the Bible actually uses to talk about Christ's death on the Cross. What words does the Bible use to speak of his sacrifice?

1. *Redemption.* Redemption is a commercial term, meaning "to buy back." Except for bankers who speak of redeeming bonds, ordinarily we use this word only in reference to pawnshops. If you are temporarily short of money but have something of value that can be pawned, you can take it to a pawnbroker and he will give you a fraction of its value in cash for the object. Later, if you come into sufficient money and want your possession back, you can go back to the pawnbroker and redeem your possession by paying the amount you borrowed plus interest. In the ancient world redemption frequently pertained to slavery. By paying the redemption price a benevolent person might set a favored slave free.

The terminology of redemption is used many times of Jesus' death for us. For example, Peter wrote, "You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Paul said, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). And John wrote, "with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9b).

Now let's ask the question: What kind of a redemption would it be in which the death of Jesus only makes redemption possible and in which, as a result, some of those for whom he died are still in bondage? Imagine that a friend of yours is in trouble with the law and has been taken to jail. He is arraigned before a judge, and bail is set. He has no money, but you hear of his plight and immediately take money down to the courthouse to bail him out. You appear before the judge, pay the bail price, and go home. Your wife asks, "Where is your friend?"

"He's in prison."

"In prison?" she asks. "But didn't you take the bail money down there?"

"Yes," you say. "I paid the money to redeem him, but he's still in prison. I didn't actually bring him out." What kind of redemption would that be? If there is a real redemption, then the person who has been redeemed must be set free. When the Bible says that Jesus redeemed us by his death on the Cross, that redemption must be an effective redemption, and those who have been redeemed must be actual beneficiaries of it.

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2. *Propitiation.* Propitiation is a religious term meaning “to turn aside wrath,” specifically the wrath of God. Propitiation presupposes God’s wrath against sin but shows how another person can die to bear that wrath in the guilty one’s place. Paul uses this word in Romans 3 when he says, “God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (v. 25). The phrase “sacrifice of atonement” translates the word *hilasterion*, which means “propitiation.”

Someone who denies that Christ’s death was an actual atonement must also deny that it was an actual propitiation. But what kind of propitiation would it be in which Jesus turns the wrath of God aside by his death, but in which God nevertheless pours it out on the sinner? Even in human law there is a generally recognized principle that a crime cannot be punished twice. Legal statutes pertaining to “double jeopardy” prohibit what lawyers call “multiple penalty.” If a person is sentenced to ten years in prison for a crime and then serves his time, he is entitled to go out as a free man. No one can send him back to prison and make him pay for his crime again. Or to take another example, if someone pays the fine for another person’s parking violation, the traffic court cannot require the offender to pay the fine, too. It is the same with God. God does not punish a sin twice. Therefore, if sin was actually punished in the person of Christ by his dying for it, God cannot also punish the sinner for the same crime.

If Jesus made propitiation for sin by his death, that propitiation must either be for all the sins of all the people of the world, as a result of which all people are or will be saved (the view of universalists), or else it must be a propitiation for the sins of his elect people, who alone are saved.

3. *Reconciliation.* Reconcile means “to make one” or “to establish peace” between warring parties. Paul refers to this in writing to the Corinthians, saying, “God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the message of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). What kind of reconciliation would it be in which the parties who have been reconciled are still fighting? It would not be true reconciliation at all.

Yet reconciliation is what the Bible says Jesus accomplished by his death on Calvary. Apart from Christ everyone is at war with God, regardless of what some may believe or say. We are God’s enemies. We resist him in every way we possibly can; we would kill him if we could. And that is what we did, when God became man in the person of Christ! Jesus’ death has brought God and those whom God has given him together. Paul told the Romans that while “we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). What kind of a reconciliation would it be if the parties involved should go on fighting?

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4. *Atonement.* Atonement means just what it sounds like: “to make at one” those who formerly were at odds. Atonement has much the same meaning as reconciliation. But the unique flavor of atonement is its overtone of sacrifice, for it is said over and over again in the Bible, beginning with the sacrificial religion of Israel, that sacrifices make atonement for sin. The author of Hebrews wrote of Jesus that “he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). This verse is particularly telling, for the chief point of Hebrews is that Jesus really accomplished by his death what the Old Testament sacrifices merely prefigured. They pointed forward to Christ’s work. But when Jesus died, atonement actually was made, with the result that it never needs to be repeated.

When we put these terms together, looking at their precise meanings, we see that Jesus did not come merely to make salvation possible, but actually to save his people. He did not come to make redemption possible; he died to redeem his people. He did come to make propitiation possible; he turned aside God’s wrath for each of his elect people forever. He did not come to make reconciliation between God and man possible; he actually reconciled to God those whom the Father had given him. He did not come merely to make atonement for sins possible, but actually to atone for sinners.

In his small theological classic *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, John Murray summarized the matter like this:

The very nature of Christ’s mission and accomplishment is involved in this question. Did Christ come to make the salvation of all men possible, to remove obstacles that stood in the way of salvation, and merely to make provision for salvation? Or did he come to save his people? Did he come to put all men in a salvable state? Or did he come to secure the salvation of all those who are ordained to eternal life? Did he come to make men redeemable? Or did he come effectually and infallibly to redeem? The doctrine of the atonement must be radically revised if, as atonement, it applies to those who finally perish as well as to those who are the heirs of eternal life. In that event we should have to dilute the grand categories in terms of which the Scripture defines the atonement and deprive them of their most precious import and glory. This we cannot do. The saving efficacy of expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption is too deeply embedded in these concepts, and we dare not eliminate this efficacy. We do well to ponder the words of our Lord himself: “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that of everything which he hath given to me I should lose nothing, but should raise it

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up in the last day" (John 6:38-39). Security inheres in Christ's redemptive accomplishment. And this means that, in respect of the persons contemplated, design and accomplishment and final realization have all the same extent.⁴

Christ's work on the Cross was not a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, but a real and definite salvation for God's own chosen people. A redemption that does not redeem, a propitiation that does not propitiate, a reconciliation that does not reconcile, and an atonement that does not atone cannot help anybody. But a redemption that redeems, a propitiation that propitiates, a reconciliation that reconciles, and an atonement that atones reveal a most amazing grace on God's part and draw us to rest in him and in his completed work, rather than our own.

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BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

There is only one possible way to avoid the view that the Bible teaches definite or particular redemption, and even this turns out not to be a true possibility, once it is examined carefully. Some argue that the atonement is an actual atonement for all the sins of all the world but that all persons are not saved, not because their sins are not atoned for but because they do not believe in Jesus and therefore will not accept the gospel. "It's like a gift," a person might say. "The gift has been selected and paid for, but no one can be forced to take a gift. In the same way, the world has been saved, but many will not be saved because they will not believe on Jesus."

Does that sound reasonable?

It does until we explore the nature of unbelief. Is unbelief a morally neutral choice, merely deciding to accept or not to accept salvation? Or is it a sin? It is a sin, of course. In fact, it is the most damning of all sins, for it is the equivalent of trampling the very blood of the Son of God underfoot. But this means—if Jesus died for all the sins of all men, including this sin of unbelief—that all are saved, and we are back once again to universalism.

No one has put this better or more plainly than John Owen, the great Puritan preacher and theologian. Owen's classic treatise *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647) is an attempt to show that the doctrine of universal atonement is unbiblical and therefore antithetical to the gospel. Early in the treatise Owen puts the options like this:

God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for,

⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 63-64.

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either all the sins of all men,
or all the sins of some men,
or some sins of all men.

If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved.

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That is clearly false. Some will be saved. So option number three is eliminated. The second option, according to Owen, is the one “we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world.”

But what about the first? This is the point to which we have come in our study. It is what the universalists say: Christ died for all the sins of all men. But, wrote Owen,

Why are not all free from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, “Because of their unbelief; they will not believe.” But this unbelief, is it a sin, or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died from partaking of the fruit of his death? If he did not, then did he not die for all their sins? Let them choose which part they will.⁵

If Jesus died for all the sins of all men, unbelief included, then all are saved, which the Bible denies. If he died for all the sins of all men, unbelief excluded, then he did not die for all the sins of anybody and all must be condemned. There is no other position, save that he died for the sin of his elect people only.

Of course, this is what the Bible teaches. Here are some representative texts (emphases added):

- *Isaiah 53:8*. “For the transgression of *my people* he was stricken.”
- *Matthew 1:21*. “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save *his people* from their sins.”
- *Matthew 20:28*. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom *for many*.”

⁵ John Owen, “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ: A Treatise of the Redemption and Reconciliation That Is in the Blood of Christ,” *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 10, ed. William H. Goold, (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 173-174.

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- *Luke 1:68.* "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed *his people.*"
- *John 10:11.* "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for *the sheep.*"
- *John 13:1.* "It was just before the Passover Feast. 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 17:1-2, 9.* "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.* ... I pray for *them.* I am not praying for the world."
- *Galatians 3:13.* "Christ redeemed *us* from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for *us.*"
- *Ephesians 5:25.* "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for *her.*"
- *Romans 8:28-32.* "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, *who have been called according to his purpose.* For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is *for us*, who can be against *us*? 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?"

In this last passage, those who have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified are also those for whom Christ died. They are those who have been chosen by God to belong to Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world.

THE PROBLEM TEXTS

Even as we refer to these verses, some will think of other verses that they believe teach that Jesus died for everyone. What about those texts? This is a serious matter, for if there are texts that do teach that Jesus died for everyone, then we are going to have to revise our theology or at least reconcile the two sets of passages. For it must be the Scriptures and not mere logic on our part that determines our convictions in theological matters.

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There are three types of problem passages:

1. *Passages that seem to teach that God has a will to save everyone.* Here are some examples: "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" (Ezek. 18:32); "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4); or, perhaps the most often cited of these passages—"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"(2 Pet. 3:9).

However, none of these verses is really to the point. The most frequently cited verse, 2 Peter 3:9, is not talking about the salvation of all men and women, but only of the elect. The issue is the delay of Christ's return, and Peter is explaining that God has delayed it, not out of indifference to us and what we may be suffering, but because he wants to bring to repentance all whom he has determined in advance will be gathered in. If Christ should come now, there would be generations of yet unborn people, containing generations of Christians yet to come, who would not be in heaven. Therefore, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting [any of his elect ones] to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

This is how John Owen understood the text. He wrote:

Who are these of whom the apostle speaks, to whom he writes? Such as had received "great and precious promises," chap. 1:4, whom he calls "beloved" (chap. 3:1); whom he opposeth to the "scoffers" of the "last days," verse 3; to whom the Lord hath respect in the disposal of these days; who are said to be "elect" (Matt. 24:22). Now, truly, to argue that because God would have none of those to perish, but all of them to come to repentance, therefore he hath the same will and mind towards all and everyone in the world (even those to whom he never makes known his will, nor ever calls to repentance, if they never once hear of his way of salvation), comes not much short of extreme madness and folly.⁶

In 1 Timothy 2 Paul is urging that prayers be made for everyone—not just the poor and oppressed but also "for kings and all those in authority" (v. 2). In this context, verse 4 is best understood as Augustine and Calvin understood it, namely, that God is saving people from all categories of humanity. He is willing even to save kings, as unlikely as that may seem. So pray for them, says Paul, even though they may be the very ones who are persecuting you at this time.

⁶ John Owen, "The Death of Death in the Death of Christ," 348.

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As far as the passage in Ezekiel goes, the verses say only that God does not find joy in taking vengeance. On the contrary, he finds joy in the salvation of his people, much as we are told that the angels rejoice in heaven over even one sinner who repents. Besides, in that chapter, where Ezekiel is explicitly citing the requirements of the law of Moses, it may well be that it is physical and not spiritual rewards and punishments that are in view; that is, physical death which is the punishment for some of these transgressions. Since this was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, it may even be the contrast between the death of the people *versus* their survival as a nation that the prophet has in mind.

2. *Passages in which it is suggested that some people for whom Jesus Christ died will perish.* In this category are such passages as these: “Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died” (Rom.14:15); “So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge” (1 Cor. 8:11); “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:26-27); “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” (2 Pet. 2:1).

The first two of these passages are entirely off the mark, for in them Paul is not speaking of a believer being lost. He denies elsewhere that this is even possible. He is speaking only to Christians who by their irresponsible behavior show disregard for the welfare of their fellow believers. They do not care if they hurt them in regard to their spiritual walk.

Hebrews 10:26-27 is closer, but again it is not quite on target. These verses should be seen in the context of the entire book of Hebrews, which was written to Jews who had received knowledge of Christ and Christianity, but who were not yet at the point of abandoning their Judaism, with its ritual feasts and sacrifices for sin, in order to accept the perfect sacrifice provided by Jesus through his death on Calvary. People in that position are warned that if, after having been taught the only true way of salvation, they should go back to their empty forms and ceremonies, thereby rejecting Christ, there will remain no other sacrifice for them and they will be lost. They will be lost because they were not true believers in the first place. Those who claim to benefit from Christ’s blood yet remain defiant in their sin deceive themselves into a false assurance.

Second Peter 2:1 is the most powerful of the texts in this category, for it seems to speak of those who have actually been redeemed by Jesus’ death and yet perish. But we have to look closely at the nature of those about whom Peter is speaking. They are “false

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prophets,” “false teachers” who teach “destructive heresies.” Are they Christians? No. Therefore, they are not saved people who perish, but rather unsaved people.

How is it, then, that Peter can speak of them “denying the Sovereign Lord who bought them”? The best approach is to think of this as describing what these unbelieving teachers claimed rather than what they had actually received from Jesus. But even if this is not the answer, if it is supposed that the people in view actually are Christians, we should recognize that the verse will also present difficulties in regard to the doctrine of perseverance, which most people who deny the doctrine of particular redemption nevertheless want to uphold. It is not merely a problem for five-point Calvinists but also for four-point Calvinists.

3. *Passages in which the work of Jesus seems to be intended for the entire world.* To many this is the most important group of passages. They are numerous (emphases added): “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of *us all*” (Isa. 53:6); “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of *the world!*” (John 1:29); “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of *the world*” (John 4:42); “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for *all men*” (Rom. 5:18); “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); “Christ . . . died for *all*, and therefore all died. And he died for *all*, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:14-15); “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave him-self as a ransom for *all men*” (1 Tim. 2:5-6); “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of *the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

What do we do with these passages and others like them?

First, we need to point out that the words assumed to include all people—“all” and “world”—do not necessarily have that scope, either in our own speech or in the Bible. That is to say, they often refer to all of a particular class, but not to all people universally. If someone at a meeting says, “Everyone is now free to go to lunch,” “everyone” would obviously refer only to those who were at the meeting and not to everyone in the world.

Many of the Bible passages cited above are like that. Isaiah 53:6 says that God laid on Jesus “the iniquity of us all.” But it is clear from the verse immediately before this that the ones for whom Jesus bore iniquity are those who have been brought to a state of

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“peace” with God, that is, those who have been justified (cf. Rom. 5:1). Again, they are those who have been “healed” (v. 5), not those who continue to be spiritually sick or dead. In the same way, the passages in John’s Gospel that speak of Jesus being the Savior of the world mean only that Jesus is the only Savior the world will ever have, not that he will save every individual in it. Many other scattered passages that use the word “all” mean only “all of us.”

The most difficult of all the passages mentioned is the one cited last—1 John 2:2, which says that Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” It is difficult because, alone of all these passages, it seems to make a distinction between a merely limited atonement and a universal one, affirming the latter.

There are several different ways in which this verse might be understood, however. First, John may be stressing *the universal application of Christ’s work*. Since “sacrifice of atonement” is a strongly Jewish term and something associated in Jewish minds with the propitiation made at the temple on the Day of Atonement, John may be saying, “Jesus made propitiation for our sins; but not just the sins of us who are Jews, which we might think since atonement is a Jewish tradition, but for all the peoples of the world. In that sense, he is a universal Savior.”

Second, John may be stressing *the exclusiveness of the work of Jesus as the means of salvation*. In this case, his words would mean some-thing like this: “Jesus died for our sins, and not just for the sins of us Christians who have the wrath of God propitiated for us by his death, as if other people might have other means of having their sins propitiated. No, Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all the people of the world who ever will have their sins propitiated. There is no salvation outside of him.”

Third, John may be stressing *the timeless character of the atonement*. In this case, he would be saying, “Christ is the propitiation, not only for the sins of those of us who live in this present age, but for all who will ever be born into this world, until Jesus comes again.” In any case, if the scope of this verse is not restricted in some way, it teaches universal salvation and not merely universal atonement. But as we have already seen, most evangelicals are not prepared to accept this, because of other clear teaching in the Bible.

“WHOSOEVER WILL MAY COME”

There may still be strong objections to the doctrine of definite atonement or particular redemption in some people’s minds. A common objection holds that if God did not intend to save all people indiscriminately, and if Christ did not die in order to take away the sins of all the people in the world, then it is not possible for Christians to offer salvation to all

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without distinction. In fact, it would not be possible to offer salvation to anybody, since we would have no way of knowing whether or not the person to whom we are speaking is one for whom Jesus actually died.

There are two answers to this. First, we are to offer salvation to everyone because we are told to do it and because we have ample biblical examples to that effect. If God tells us to proclaim the gospel to everyone, we can be sure that this makes sense. But we are to do it even if it does not seem to make sense to us. We must remember Ezekiel 33:11: "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die?" Or Isaiah 55:1, which makes free offer of the gospel:

"Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;

and you who have no money,
come buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost."

Or Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." We are called to offer Christ, as he offers himself, freely to everyone.

But second, and speaking strictly, the gospel is not so much an offer—that people may politely accept or refuse, according to their own pleasure—as it is a command to turn away from sin and come to Jesus. We have gotten into the habit of treating the gospel as an offer, which in one sense it is. But we have forgotten that, even more than an offer, it is a command to sinners to repent and believe. It is only after people have done this and have turned to Jesus that they can know that they are among those for whom Christ died.

J. I. Packer has pointed out that the statement "Christ died for you," which has become so common in today's evangelism, simply cannot be found in any of the sermons recorded for us in Scripture (see, for example, the sermons in the book of Acts, chapters 2–5, 7, 10, 13, 17, and 22). Packer writes:

The fact is that the New Testament never calls on any man to repent on the ground that Christ died specifically and particularly for him. The basis on which the New Testament invites sinners to put faith in Christ is simply that they need Him, and that He offers Himself to them, and that those who receive Him are promised all the benefits that His death secured for His people. What is universal and all-

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inclusive in the New Testament is the invitation to faith, and the promise of salvation to all who believe. ... The gospel is not “believe that Christ died for everybody’s sins, and therefore for yours,” any more than it is, “believe that Christ died only for certain people’s sins, and so perhaps not for yours.” The gospel is, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for sins, and now offers you Himself as your Saviour.” This is the message which we are to take to the world. We have no business to ask them to put faith in any view of the extent of the atonement; our job is to point them to the living Christ, and summon them to trust in Him.⁷

A good example of the kind of preaching Packer describes is Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon was a great Calvinist who believed in a definite atonement. But this did not stop him from becoming one of the most effective evangelists of his age. He did not lie to people. He did not say, “I know you are elect; therefore, Christ died for you.” For Spurgeon, it was enough to say, “You are a sinner, and Jesus died for sinners. If you would be saved, you must repent of your sin and believe the gospel.”

Does this weaken the gospel message? Far from weakening the message, the doctrine of definite atonement strengthens it and alone makes it a genuine gospel. Suppose we go to the lost with the message that Jesus died for everyone but without the conviction that his death actually accomplished salvation for those who should believe. Suppose, in other words, that we proclaim a redemption that did not redeem, a propitiation that did not propitiate, a reconciliation that did not reconcile, and an atonement that did not atone? That would be a fool’s errand. But if we can say, “Christ died for sinners to restore them to God; if you believe on him, you are saved and can know that he has died for you,” then we have a message worth proclaiming and our hearers have a gospel worth believing.

God does not honor falsehood or lies. He honors truth. Therefore, is it not more likely that he will honor this kind of honest presentation, though there is precious little of it today? Let’s speak the truth, especially since it is such a wonderful truth. For what we proclaim is no mere possibility of salvation, but salvation itself. We preach that Jesus died for his people, actually dying in their place. He redeemed them from the terrible bondage of their sin. He propitiated the wrath of the Father on their behalf. He reconciled them to God. He is a sufficient and entirely suitable Savior. And when he said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), it really was finished! Salvation was accomplished. Therefore, all who will believe on him have been saved by him, and there is nothing more to add.

But here is the other side. If those to whom we speak do not repent of their sin and trust in Christ, they are not potentially saved, as some would have it; they are actually and

⁷ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1961), 68-69.

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finally lost. This gracious doctrine thus sets before the unbeliever not only the availability of salvation but also the necessity of trusting in Christ, which no other gospel truly does.

Do not say, "But I do not know if Jesus died for me or not." You cannot know the answer to that in the abstract. The only way you will ever know is if you will come to Jesus. If you do come, then you know that you are one for whom he died. Therefore, come to Jesus! And if you have not done so before, come now!⁸

⁸ Boice, J. M., Ryken, P. G., & Sproul, R. C. (2002). *The doctrines of grace: rediscovering the evangelical gospel*. Crossway Books, chapter five.