

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Thinking and Speaking Biblically About the Death of Christ, Appendix 2:

Passages that Seem to Say Christ Died for Everyone

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(1 Timothy 4:10; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:2; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

**Since the Bible is the Word of God it is self-consistent.
Consequently if we find a passage which in itself is capable of two
interpretations, one of which harmonizes with the rest of the Scriptures
while the other does not, we are duty bound to accept the former.**

(Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*)

1 Timothy 4:10

In 1 Timothy 4:10, Paul writes to Timothy, “For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.” As it is commonly reasoned, if God is “the Savior of all men,” as Paul says, then Christ must have died for all men. For reasons which I hope to make clear, however, this interpretation is flawed.

Many have chosen to focus on the Greek word translated “especially” in trying to understand this verse. If that word could be legitimately translated, “specifically” rather than “especially,” we might conclude that Paul was saying something like this: “God is the Savior of all men (and by that I do not mean to say that He is the Savior of all men *universally*. I am referring *specifically* to all men who believe).” If the answer were as easy as finding a better translation for that one word, all debate might be ended. But it does not seem to be quite so simple. The consistent opinion of Greek scholars is that the word is rightly translated as it is—“especially.” So if we are to resolve the difficulties and disagreements in this case, we must look deeper—or at a different word.

I believe that in this case, the context informs us that we may have misunderstood Paul’s intended meaning, not of the word “especially,” but rather of the word “Savior.” Let me explain, first by examining what the verse *does* say, and then what it *cannot* be saying.

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On the surface, 1 Timothy 4:10 seems to refute all that I have said and will say about the Bible's limitation of universal terms with reference to the atonement. God is said here to be the Savior of "all men," and in this context, Paul's meaning cannot be limited to "all social classes of men" or "believers from all nations." He is definitely saying that all men everywhere are saved by God in some sense, believers and unbelievers alike, while those who believe are saved in some *special* sense. But the fact is, there is only one type, or degree of salvation when we speak of salvation from sin, hell, and judgment. There is no secondary, ordinary, or common form of this salvation, one that all men experience. No one may rightly say that God is his Savior in a redemptive sense, who is not *especially* saved, *completely* saved, and *eternally* saved. But Paul does affirm in this verse that in some sense, all men are saved by God.

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The claim is often made that what Paul *meant* to say was that God *offers* Himself as the Savior for all men, or that He is the *potential* Savior of all men, or that He is the only *available* Savior for mankind, or that He is *willing* to be the Savior of all men. If he did intend any of those meanings, however, he certainly did not make himself clear. In fact, given the way Paul *did* say what he said, we may not rightly interpret the verse in any of those ways. They would be unjustifiable *additions* to the wording of the passage. Paul plainly told Timothy that God "is" the Savior of all men, "especially of those who believe." He did not leave grammatical room for any interpretation that comes short of that.

Based on the wording of this verse, any unbeliever, if asked to describe his own relationship to God, could justly and rightly claim that in whatever sense Paul had in mind, God *is* his Savior. He could legitimately say, "God does not merely *offer* Himself as my Savior. He actually *is* my Savior in some sense, even if I never believe and am therefore never saved in the special sense." But in what way is God the Savior of all men, even those who never believe?

Again, the context (in this case, within the same verse) gives us a clue that may help us reach a sound interpretation. Paul encourages Timothy by saying that as ministers of the gospel, they are willing to "labor and suffer reproach . . ." Why are they so willing to persevere in the face of difficulty and danger? Paul continues, ". . . because we trust in the living God," who Paul then describes as "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe." In this context, where God *actually* saves all men but does so in a special way for believers, Paul may have been referring to God's providential care and concern. It is possible that he was not referring to *redemptive* salvation at all.

It is true for every member of humanity that we all "live and move and have our being" in God (see Acts 17:28). As Job asked rhetorically, "In whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind?" (Job 12:10; cf. Psalm 104:29). God sustains

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the life of all people by providing their necessary food (cf. Psalm 145:14-16). He jealously defends every human life, prescribing the severest penalty for anyone who would commit murder (cf. Genesis 9:5-6). Even an ox was to be killed if it gored a person to death (cf. Exodus 21:28). In this sense, every single member of humanity is “saved” (preserved, guarded, defended) by God who holds absolute authority to make alive and to kill (cf. Deuteronomy 32:39). It is God who “keeps back [man’s] soul from the Pit, and his life from perishing by the sword” (Job 33:18).

It is also true that God is *especially* zealous to “save” His own in this way. Only believers can pray, with David, “Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, and save me from bloodthirsty men” (Psalm 59:2). Only the Christian can confidently and thankfully repeat the words of Psalm 138:7—“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out Your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and Your right hand delivers me” (ESV). And when we remember that in 1 Timothy 4:10 Paul based his “trust in the living God” on the fact that God is “the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe,” Psalm 7:1 provides a notable parallel: “O Lord my God, in You I put my trust; Save me from all those who persecute me.” The fact is, if you are one of God’s children, anyone who would trouble you should shudder with fear, for as the Lord says to His people, “he who touches you touches the apple of My eye” (Zechariah 2:8).

I cannot be absolutely certain, but Paul’s intended meaning of “Savior” in 1 Timothy 4:10 certainly *could* refer to his confidence in this aspect of God’s providential care and preservation of all people, but “especially of those who believe.” Not only is this a valid possible interpretation, it has been considered the *correct* interpretation by many well-respected Bible expositors and teachers. The great Puritan theologian John Owen, for example, writes (with reference to 1 Timothy 4:10):

Here intended, as is agreed upon by all sound interpreters, so also [as] is clear from the matter at hand ... is the protecting providence of God, general towards all, special and peculiar towards His church.

Hebrews 2:9

Hebrews 2:9 says,

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.¹

¹ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 78.

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The interpretive question associated with this verse is straightforward and uncomplicated. There are no serious arguments about the meaning of Greek words. There are no obscure or puzzling statements. The question at hand is this: Who is “everyone”?

First of all, think of the way we commonly use universal terms like “everyone.” For example, when the members of our church gather on Sundays, I often ask, “Is everyone here?” To state the obvious, I am not asking if every member of humanity is present. I am using the word “everyone” to denote a much smaller and very specific group of people. The fact is, in its ordinary usage, the word “everyone” nearly always carries a less-than-universal meaning. If the uses of the word were statistically examined, only a tiny percentage would refer to all people everywhere. So if we were to assume the *most common* usage of the word “everyone” when reading Hebrews 2:9, we would conclude that a *limited* group of people was in view.

That being the fact, however, “everyone” in Hebrews 2:9 still *could* have universal meaning. We may not determine the answer to this question based on probabilities or statistics. The way we must determine its actual meaning is to examine the use of the word in relation to three factors:

1. *the immediate context (the verses closely surrounding the word),*
2. *the broader context (the whole book of Hebrews), and*
3. *the entire context of Scripture (particularly Leviticus 16)*

1. *The Immediate Context (vv. 9-17).*

The writer of Hebrews clearly had some group of people in view when he used the word “everyone” in 2:9. Who were those people? In the verses that follow, the writer refers to the same group of people several times. In verse 10 he calls them “sons.” In verse 11 he refers to them as “those who are sanctified,” and “brethren.” In verse 12 they are once again “brethren, and then “the congregation.” In verse 13 they are “the children whom God has given Me.” In verse 14 they are again “the children.” In verse 15 they are those who are freed from the fear of death. In verse 16 an individual from the group is named “the descendant of Abraham.” And in verse 17, after referring to them as “His [that is, Christ’s] brethren,” the writer calls them “the people.” These are all, without legitimate argument, biblical references to God’s people, not all people everywhere. When viewed in the context of the New Testament (as opposed to Old Testament Judaism), they are plain references to *believers*, or *the elect*—the people who are actually saved by the work of Christ.

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To see this for yourself, consider the following results of Christ's death as they are described in Hebrews 2:10-17:

- In verse 10, Christ's work of atonement was carried out so that "many sons" would be *brought* (not merely *invited*) to glory. In other words, when Jesus died, He did far more than "open the life gate that all may go in," as the popular hymn says. The purpose of Christ's death was to accomplish the task of *actually bringing* people to glory. If all people everywhere are encompassed in that purpose, and if Christ accomplished the purpose for which He was sent, then all people everywhere will be brought to glory.
- In verse 11, Christ (i.e., "He who sanctifies") did not merely make sanctification available. He accomplished the work of sanctifying "those who are sanctified." Again, if He died for every single person everywhere, and if His death actually sanctifies those for whom He died, then every single person everywhere will be sanctified (also see Hebrews 13:12).
- In verses 14 and 15, Christ died in order to accomplish two goals: 1) to render powerless the devil (v. 14), and 2) to free certain people from the fear of death (v. 15). Everyone agrees that He accomplished the first goal. But the grammar of the passage connects the two goals in such a way that the second was just as certainly accomplished. In other words, the death of Christ actually freed certain people from the fear of death.
- In verse 16, Christ is said to "give help" to certain individuals by His death. To whom does He give this help? It is not given to angels, but rather to people—and not to all people everywhere, but to "the descendant of Abraham." According to Romans 9:6-8, the term "descendent of Abraham" does not even include all Jews, let alone all people everywhere. As Paul wrote, "it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendents [of Abraham]" (Romans 9:8; cf. vv 6-7). By means of His death, Christ gave help to the children of the promise (i.e., believers).
- Verse 17 informs us that the purpose of Christ's incarnation and intercessory work as High Priest (including His sacrificial death) was "to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (that is, the people of God). As a parallel to this, the purpose of Christ's atoning work was stated by the angel in Matthew 1:21—"He will save *His people* from their sins" (emphasis added).

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When viewed as a unit of teaching (rather than taking verse 9 alone and out of context), the obvious message of Hebrews 2:9-17 is that Christ, by tasting death for “everyone,” actually saved “everyone” (that is, everyone for whom He died).

2. *The Broader Context (the rest of the book of Hebrews)*

Other passages in Hebrews confirm what we have already learned from chapter 2. The sacrifice of Christ was not merely *symbolic* or *potential*, but *actual* and *effective*. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin (cf. Hebrews 10:4), but the blood of Christ did. As we already noted, Hebrews 2:11 informs us that by His death He actually sanctified His people. He did not merely *offer* sanctification; He fully *accomplished the work* of sanctification. Later, in chapters 9 and 10, we are repeatedly told that Christ’s death on the cross was effective in actually accomplishing the salvation of His people:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (9:11-12, emphasis added).

... but now once at the end of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (9:26, emphasis added).

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (10:10, emphasis added).

For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (10:14, emphasis added).

Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate (13:12, emphasis added).

These statements leave no doubt that Christ’s work of atonement was an effective work. When He died He fully accomplished the redemption (9:12), justification (10:14), and sanctification of His people (10:10, 14; 13:12).

3. *The Entire Context of Scripture (Leviticus 16)*

Much of the letter to the Hebrews is an explanation of how Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament high priesthood. To understand Hebrews 2:9 rightly, we must first understand that what the Jewish high priest did on behalf of “everyone” in the Old

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Covenant (that is, the Jews), Christ did on behalf of “everyone” in the New Covenant (that is, God’s elect).

Under the Old Covenant, God chose the Jews to be His people, setting His love on them above all other nations (cf. Deuteronomy 7:7; Isaiah 43:4). Then, through the work of the high priest, He carried out a symbolic atonement for the sins of His people through a prescribed ritual of animal sacrifice (cf. Leviticus 16). It is important to remember that the atonement of the Old Testament rituals and sacrifices was only symbolic. True forgiveness, whether for Old Testament saints or New Testament saints, has always been grounded on the sacrifice of Christ. But it is just as important to remember that atonement for sins (whether symbolic or actual) has always been made for a limited group of people—God’s people.

The symbolic atonement carried out by the Jewish high priest was *not* made for the people of other nations. We see this clearly in Leviticus 16 once we understand one particular aspect of the intercessory work of the Jewish high priest. In Exodus 28, Moses was given explicit instructions for crafting the garments that Aaron the high priest was to wear when performing his intercessory work. One garment was called the “ephod” (a sort of vest). On the shoulders of the ephod were affixed two onyx stones, each one bearing the engraved names of six of the twelve tribes of Israel. Another garment was called the “breastpiece,” which would hang in the middle of the high priest’s chest—over his heart. Attached to the front of the breastpiece were twelve precious stones, each representing one of the twelve tribes (see verses 6-21).

The purpose of the high priest entering into the holy of holies with the blood of the sacrificial animal (see Leviticus 16:15) was to “make atonement for himself, and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel” (Leviticus 16:17). This was why God said to Moses, “Aaron [the first high priest] shall carry the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment over his heart when he enters the holy place, a memorial before the Lord continually” (Exodus 28:29). By carrying the names of the tribes of Israel into the holy of holies, the high priest was making intercession for the Israelites *alone*, not for the Canaanites, the Jebusites, or the Hittites.

In the New Testament, God’s covenant people are not only Jews. They are His elect, chosen from every nation. God’s pattern for making atonement, however, both in the Old Testament and the New, remains unchanged. He graciously provides atonement for *His people*, not for all people everywhere. Even though the group of people known as God’s people now includes Gentiles, the designation (and therefore the atonement made for those designated) is still limited to those whom God has chosen for salvation. These, and only these, are the people in view in Hebrews 2:9 when the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “tasted death for everyone.”

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2 Peter 2:1

In 2 Peter 2:1, Peter writes of false teachers in the church who, by their heretical beliefs and immoral behavior, were “even denying the Lord who bought them.” This verse is often said to provide conclusive proof that even though these men were doomed to destruction (cf. 2:1-3, 18-22), they were “bought” along with those who are saved by the redemptive work of Christ.

This is admittedly a difficult verse to interpret conclusively. Many possible interpretations have been suggested, and it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus of opinion regarding a single meaning of the word “bought.” But one thing is certain: Even if Peter *may* have been referring to the redemptive purchase of these men, no one may rightly conclude that this is the only possible interpretation. Sound and careful exegesis does not *necessarily* lead us to that meaning. The fact is, other legitimate possible meanings carry far more weight of certainty than the popular interpretation because they harmonize with the meaning of Scripture in other places. Additionally, there are compelling reasons to doubt the supposedly obvious and popular conclusion.

I believe the strongest evidence points to the view that Peter’s intent was to expose false teachers by showing the impossibility of their claim to be Christians. It is common for New Testament writers to label men according to what they *claim* to be, rather than what they really are. Peter (I believe) was repeating the assertion that these men had been bought by Christ while at the same time, rejecting such a claim by exposing their false beliefs and immoral behavior. He used the same language one would use to describe a *genuine* believer (one who has been “bought at a price,” as in 1 Corinthians 6:20). But he may have done this in order to drive home the seriousness of biblical warnings that even within the professing church there will be wolves in sheep’s clothing (cf. Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29-30; Titus 1:16; etc.). This understanding best fits the tone of Peter’s letter—a stern warning to avoid false teachers, not an explanation of the universal broadness of God’s redemptive activity.

Another possible interpretation of 2 Peter 2:1 is that Peter was making a reference to Deuteronomy 32:5-6 where Moses rebuked Israel for acting corruptly after God “bought” them. In examining this possibility, it is interesting that in 2 Peter 2:1, the Greek word Peter used for “Master” is *Despotes* (“absolute master, owner, or ruler,” often used with respect to the ownership of slaves), not *Kurios* (sovereign Lord). *Despotes* is applied to Christ at least once elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Jude 4, particularly as worded in NASB and ESV), but *Kurios* is the common title applied to Christ when referring to His redemptive work. This choice of wording could indicate that Peter did not have a

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redemptive purchase in view when he said “bought,” but rather something related to God’s absolute ownership of the physical nation of Israel.

Peter may have used *Despotes* and “bought” in order to make reference to the spiritual condition of most of the Jews of the Old Covenant. These were people who belonged to God in the sense of His ownership of them as a nation, but who were “not His children” in a redemptive sense. They were instead part of “a perverse and crooked generation” (Deuteronomy 32:5). Peter may have been pointing out the fact that though these men were Jews, and thus, rightly claiming to have been bought by God in the Old Covenant sense (as in Deuteronomy 32), they were denying the God who bought them (in the Old Covenant sense). The fact is, most Jews denied the God who bought them in that sense, not always with their mouths, but most certainly by their false beliefs and immoral behavior. Even if one were to contend that Jesus Christ must be in view in 2 Peter 2:1 because He *is* the God who bought the physical nation of Israel (something everyone should accept as true; cf. Jude 5, particularly as translated in ESV and NET), the sense in which the Old Covenant nation of Israel was “bought” by Christ is distinctly different from the sense in which His New Covenant people were “bought.” The former purchase was only temporal, whereas the New Covenant people of God were purchased in an eternal redemptive sense.

As I said before, the above are only *possible* interpretations of 2 Peter 2:1. It is indeed a difficult passage to interpret. The interpretations I have offered, however, are not only exegetically permissible, they set themselves logically ahead of the popular interpretation in that they align with the rest of Scripture. The common understanding of this verse, on the other hand, falls under the sheer weight of other clear passages in the Bible. It also crumbles under the universally-accepted meaning of the word “bought.”

The Greek word translated “bought” in 2 Peter 2:1, 1 Corinthians 6:20, and Revelation 5:9, is *agorazo*. In its root form, it is translated “to buy,” “to purchase,” or “to redeem.” And as everyone knows, to buy or purchase something is to acquire ownership of it by the payment of a price.

The terms of slavery are often used in the Bible to describe Christ’s purchase of men for salvation. Those who are purchased are set free from their former master. In 2 Peter 2:19, however, the men who were supposedly “bought” by Christ are said to remain “slaves of corruption.” And they *never* change for the better. They remain slaves of corruption, and their “last state has become worse for them than the first” (v. 20). Though they were allegedly bought by Christ, they *never* came to belong to Him. They were *never* freed from their former master. But how can this be? Can a person become the property of Christ and yet remain a *permanent* slave of sin?

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Many believe they have avoided the horns of this dilemma by claiming that Christ *laid down the price* for all, but only *takes possession* of those who, of their own free will, believe. Keeping in mind the meaning of the word “bought,” I would ask you to assess the validity of this idea yourself by stepping out of the theological realm for a moment and into the slave markets of the first century. This was the world from which Peter’s readers would have drawn their understanding of the words used in the New Testament.

The Greco-Roman economy of the first century literally depended on slavery. Any reasonably wealthy man living in the first century would have owned slaves. If a man went to the slave market and paid the required price for a particular slave, that slave would no longer belong to his former master. He would now belong to the one who bought him. If what took place was an actual purchase, the payment of the required price simultaneously *released* the slave from his former master and caused him to become the possession of his new master. If a man paid the price for a slave, yet that slave remained subject to the ownership of his former master, it would be incorrect to say that the new owner had bought him. He may have donated money. He may have been defrauded. But it would be ludicrous to use the word “bought” if what he did in actuality was lay down the required price only to walk away without having assumed ownership (and therefore, control) of the property in question.

Again, to “buy” or “purchase” something is a transaction involving two parts: 1) to acquire ownership of something, 2) by the payment of a price. The words “purchased” or “bought” cannot legitimately be used if only one-half of that transaction has taken place.

Because more than one valid possible interpretation exists, we may never know precisely what Peter was saying in 2 Peter 2:1. But the unarguable biblical reality is this: All who were *purchased by Christ* are also *preserved* for the day of redemption (John 6:37-39; 10:28-29; 1 Peter 1:3-5). That glorious fact will be declared forever as the work of Christ is praised by the multitude of the redeemed in heaven:

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

Notice carefully the words of that song. Christ is not being praised for laying down the price for all people while most of them are lost to the fires of hell. He is being praised because by His blood He intentionally, effectively, and finally purchased *some* people, *from* every nation.

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1 John 2:1-2

In his first epistle John writes,

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

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This passage, which initially seems to affirm a universal atonement, needs to be addressed in two ways. First I will discuss the meaning of the word “propitiation,” and then I will address the meaning of “the whole world.”

The word “propitiation” indicates not merely *potential* substitution but rather *actual* substitution. If Christ *actually* (as opposed to potentially) bore the wrath of God on behalf of every sinner, then God’s anger toward every sinner is totally appeased. He has no remaining wrath to vent on anyone, whether they are a believer or an atheist. Unless God unjustly demands double payment for the same sins (i.e., first from Christ, and then from the unrepentant sinner himself), no one can be justly punished for their sin.

The Bible leaves no doubt that at the final judgment, men are judged according to their deeds (plural), not merely according to the single sin of unbelief, as some say. I could multiply many scriptural examples of this, but consider these few:

- It was because of specific sins (“fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry”) that Paul said “the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience” (Colossians 3:5-6).
- At the final judgment, when the books are opened, the dead are judged “according to their works” (Revelation 20:12-13).
- Some men receive a more severe condemnation because of their multiplied, and/or particularly grievous sins (cf. Mark 12:38-40).
- All who remain unrepentant, far from being judged for the single sin of unbelief, are “treasuring up for [themselves] wrath in the day of wrath,” by continuing to sin in every way (Romans 2:5).
- Jesus said Himself, “the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds” (Matthew 16:27).

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The sum of my argument about the meaning of “propitiation” in 1 John 2:2 is simple. Unless we are willing to either say that Christ’s death was a propitiation that does not actually propitiate (i.e., appease God), or admit that every single person everywhere will be saved because His propitiation was effective for them, we cannot rightly conclude that He was the propitiation for every single person everywhere. The work of Christ must be “limited” in one way or the other. Either His death was offered for everyone but remains *ineffective* apart from the will of man, or it was less-than-universal in its intent. The only biblically justifiable option is to affirm the effectiveness of Christ’s death while limiting its intent.

The real difficulty with 1 John 2:2 lies in another question: Why would John say that Christ was “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world”? What does “the whole world” mean, especially here where it obviously refers to a group that is distinct from the Christians specifically addressed by John?

Most Christians believe John was making a distinction between Christians and unbelievers. They believe Christ was the propitiation for “our sins” (i.e., the sins of believers) and also “for those of the whole world” (i.e., the sins of unbelievers, even those who *never* believe). John was making some distinction in 1 John 2:2. But was he making *that* distinction—the one between believers and unbelievers? Is it possible that he making a *different* distinction? A simple examination of the biblical and historical context may help to solve the problem.

John was an apostle specifically sent to the Jews (cf. Galatians 2:9). It should not seem strange, therefore, if his letter were addressed specifically to *Jewish* Christians. There may have been Gentiles among his readers, but it would stand to reason that the flavor (so to speak) of a letter from John would be distinctly Jewish. Other letters in the New Testament have distinct cultural characteristics depending on their intended readers. This is undoubtedly true of the letter to the Hebrews. All Christians profit from studying Hebrews, and there may have been Gentiles among its original readership as well, but we rightly interpret every verse of that letter with the knowledge that it was addressed to a unique audience of *Jewish* Christians. It is almost certain that we are to approach John’s letter in the same way. And the very concept he is explaining here (propitiation) could be one indicator of that.

The *benefits* of propitiation are common to all Christians, but the biblical concept of propitiation is distinctly Jewish, rooted in the Old Testament sacrificial system. The word calls to mind the work of the Jewish high priest on the Day of Atonement. On this day, once each year, the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificial animal on the mercy seat (the cover of the ark of the covenant) inside the holy of holies (the inner part of the

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temple, cf. Leviticus 16:11-17). He did all of this in order to “make atonement for himself and for his household and for all the assembly of Israel” (Leviticus 16:17).

Interestingly, the Greek word for “propitiation” (*Hilasmos*) is used only in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. Related forms of the word are used in only two other places in the New Testament: Hebrews 2:17 and Romans 3:25. Hebrews is obviously addressed to a Jewish audience. Romans, though inclusive of a much wider audience overall, specifically addresses Jewish readers a number of times in the first four chapters, particularly in the verses surrounding Paul’s reference to propitiation in 3:25 (cf. 2:1-3; 2:17-29; 3:9; 4:1). The form of the word used in Romans 3:25 (*Hilasterion*) may actually be translated “mercy seat” (as in the NET), an unmistakably Jewish term. All of this considered, the very use of the word “propitiation” in John’s first epistle lends strong credibility to the opinion that it was initially addressed to Jewish Christians.

Additionally, 1 John 2:2 presents a striking parallel with something John recorded in his gospel. Compare 1 John 2:2 with John’s explanation of Caiaphas’ unwitting prophecy about the benefits of one man dying as a substitute for the whole nation:

You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish (John 11:49-50).

Although Caiaphas was sinfully advocating the murder of Jesus, John explains in the next verses what *God* meant when He sovereignly moved Caiaphas’ mouth to speak:

Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation [Israel], and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad [God’s elect from every nation]” (John 11:51-52).

Here in his gospel, John was clearly noting the abolition of any Jew-Gentile distinction in God’s redemptive plan by including elect Gentiles along with elect Jews as the beneficiaries of Christ’s death (cf. John 10:16 and 12:32). In 1 John 2:2, he is again explaining (to Jewish Christians, I believe) the benefits of Christ’s death as the propitiation for their sins. The parallel is strong evidence that he had the same distinction in mind when He said, “and not for ours only [i.e., Jewish Christians only], but also for those of the whole world [God’s elect from every nation, Jew and Gentile alike].” He was saying the same thing Paul said when he referred to God’s elect as “vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us who He also called, *not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles*” (Romans 9:23-24, emphasis added).

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All factors considered, instead of assigning universal meaning to “the whole world,” Scripture compels me to believe that John was magnifying Christ’s racially impartial work. He was reminding his Jewish readers that God’s chosen people are no longer only Israelites, but men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Remember Revelation 5:9 once again:

Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

14

2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Now all of these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

If “the world” in this passage includes every single person everywhere, then every single person everywhere has been reconciled to God through the death of Christ. But according to Paul in another place, reconciliation to God is the guarantee of final salvation. “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10). If every single person has been reconciled, every single person will be saved.

Notice, however, what immediately follows the phrase “reconciling the world to Himself.” Paul narrows the scope of his intended meaning by adding, “not counting their trespasses against them.” If he meant to say that every single person everywhere is actually reconciled to God, he also meant to say that God does not count *anyone’s* trespasses against them. The two phrases are grammatically inseparable in this respect. But this in turn would mean that every single person everywhere will be justified.

God justifies men by imputing their sin to Christ and His righteousness to them. The man who is justified, according to David and Paul, is the one to whom God does not impute sin (cf. Psalm 32:1-2; Romans 4:6-8). But if that were the true condition of every single person, every single person will be in heaven. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:30, “those whom He justified He also glorified” (NKJV). Not all will be justified and glorified, however, so it is biblically inconsistent to conclude that all have been reconciled.

“The world” in 2 Corinthians 5:19, refers to those like Abraham who will eventually believe God and be justified (cf. Romans 4:3). The rest will suffer eternal punishment for sins which most definitely *are* counted against them.” And if God holds their sins against them forever, they were never reconciled to God through the death of Christ

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Conclusion

Doctrinal matters should not be resolved according to presuppositions, traditions, or personal preferences. Historical and literary context, as well as scriptural harmony, are the keys to understanding the Bible rightly. With regard to the matter at hand, there are serious doctrinal consequences for rejecting a limited atonement.

15

For example, as believers, the only reason we may be sure that we will never be separated from the love of God is this: God's love for us was so great that it motivated Him to send Christ to die in our place (cf. Romans 8:31-39 with specific reference to v. 32). But as the popular doctrine goes, *God loved those who perish just as much He loves those who are saved. He wanted to save those who perish just as much as He wanted to save those who are saved. He sent Christ to die for those who perish, just as much as He sent Him to die for those who are saved. And yet, since His redemptive love and the effectiveness of Christ's death were dependent upon their "free will," He was not able to save them.* This is unarguably the view held by most professing Christians. But if this is, in fact, the *biblical* doctrine of God's redemptive love for man, no assurance of salvation remains for the believer.

Think carefully about this: According to the common belief (perhaps your belief), in the case of the millions who perish, *even though* God loved them, *even though* He wanted to save them, *even though* He sent Christ to die for them, *they are not saved.* If this is truly the case, what is your source of hope as a believer? *You may not hope in God's love.* If it was not quite strong enough to save those who perish, it is not quite strong enough to save you. *You may not hope in the death of Christ.* If it was not quite effective enough to save those who perish, it is not quite effective enough to save you. *But what is left?* What supplies the missing strength and effectiveness? According to the popular view, the missing link (so to speak) is none other than that old idol of "free will." The believer is left with no source of confidence whatsoever but his own ability to cling to God.

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<https://www.ccwtoday.org/2004/04/thinking-and-speaking-biblically-about-the-death-of-christ-appendix-2/>