

Limited Atonement: A biblical, theological, and practical investigation

By Lee Gatiss

INTRODUCTION

In their recent high profile book on penal substitution Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach include a few pages which address the subject of what is classically called limited atonement.¹ In answering the objection, “Penal Substitution implies universal salvation, which is unbiblical” they reveal the hidden assumption in the objection, which is that Jesus died for all people. So, the thinking goes, surely all people are saved from ever bearing the wrath of God themselves? Since many have seen problems with holding to a doctrine of the atonement which is both ‘unlimited’ and substitutionary without being universalistic, this is a reasonable topic for discussion in such a book and takes up only 10 or so pages out of over 300.² This issue has, however, taken up a great deal more space in the reviews and discussion of the book since then: the review in *Christianity* magazine, for instance, devotes about half its space to criticism of these few pages.³

The extent of the atonement, therefore, continues to be “one of the most controversial teachings in Reformed soteriology.”⁴ In the past it was the subject of intense debate with very practical consequences: General and Particular Baptists split over the issue in the seventeenth century,⁵ and others have been tried for heresy on it, like John Macleod Campbell in the Church of Scotland of the early nineteenth century.⁶ Indeed, Macleod Campbell’s book *The Nature of the Atonement* first published in 1856 spearheaded opposition to limited atonement from within the Reformed camp.⁷ Today, neo-orthodox Barthians reject it,⁸ as do many within the conservative evangelical fold – not just classic Arminians but Calvinists such as the well-known Anglican Dean of Sydney, Phillip Jensen, following the lead of the influential Australian theologian David Broughton Knox and indeed of the great nineteenth century Bishop, J. C. Ryle.⁹

Considering this topic is a challenging exercise, requiring as it does an integration of biblical exegesis, an awareness of historical and systematic theology, and pastoral implications. In addition, it can also reveal a great deal about one’s presuppositions on methodological questions. For instance, some profess to dislike limited atonement because it is ‘too neat’, as if consistency and coherence in doctrinal formulation necessarily equates to falsity. Others, claiming to follow the Bible alone, object to ‘systems’ and the use of logic in formulating doctrine, such as R. T. Kendall who asserts that “At the end of the day all that matters is what the Scriptures say... I can safely guarantee that the traditional doctrine of limited atonement is arrived at by logic

¹ S. Jeffery, M. Ovey, A. Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the glory of penal substitution* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), pages 268-278.

² Since the authors of *Pierced for our Transgressions* are associated with Oak Hill Theological College it is not surprising that they felt the need to address this subject somewhere. It was, after all, a former lecturer at Oak Hill, Dr. Martin Davie, who created a furore in 1999 with his denial of penal substitution in his Tyndale Fellowship Doctrine Lecture, “Dead to Sin and Alive to God” (unpublished) – a lecture which ended by devoting over 1500 words to the subject of limited atonement.

³ See the review by Senior Editor of *Christianity* magazine, John Buckeridge online at <http://www.christianitymagazine.co.uk/engine.cfm?i=94&id=1278&review=b&arch=1> (accessed on 25th July 2007).

⁴ R. A. Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective” in C. E. Hill and F. A. James III (eds.), *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), page 304.

⁵ See T. George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Leicester: Apollos, 1988), page 233 and G. Beynon, “The Rise and Development of the English Baptists” on *The Theologian* website at <http://www.theologian.org.uk/churchhistory/englishbaptists.html> (accessed 1st July 2007).

⁶ For the story of John McLeod Campbell’s deposition from the Church of Scotland, see G. M. Tuttle, *So Rich an Soil: John McLeod Campbell on Christian Atonement* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1986).

⁷ According to Blacketer, “Definite Atonement”, page 305. See J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement and its Relation to Remission of Sins and Eternal Life* third edition (London: Macmillian, 1869).

⁸ See, for example, J. B. Torrance, “The Incarnation and ‘Limited Atonement’” in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 2 (1984) and T. Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind: Salvation as Participation in Our Substitute in the Theology of John Calvin” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42 (1989).

⁹ Knox’s views are well summarised in “Some aspects of the atonement” in T. Payne (ed.), *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works, Volume 1: The Doctrine of God* (Kingsford NSW: Matthias Media, 2000), page 260-266. Ryle’s views are expressed in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John: Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1987), pages 61-62 (on John 1:29). John Stott may also be added to this number if we regard his brief comments in *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), page 147 as indicative of his mind on the larger issue.

and the need to look for it rather than straightforward reading of the Scriptures.”¹⁰ Others baulk emotionally at particularity in the scheme of salvation generally, while some are reluctant to accept it pragmatically because of certain apparent implications such as the conclusion that if the atonement is not universal then one cannot exhort unbelievers to come to Christ on the basis that “he died for you”.

In this essay, therefore, we will survey biblical, historical, and doctrinal arguments over limited atonement with an eye to the implications these might have on the practice of ministry and evangelism. First, we will attempt to define the exact nature of the question to which limited atonement is the answer. Then since doctrine must be built on exegesis we will examine the biblical basis of the arguments for and against it in Scripture. Third, we will survey some historical and doctrinal areas of dispute: the pre-Reformation roots of the doctrine; the debate over Calvin’s position; the Synod of Dort; and whether there is such a thing as an official Anglican stance on the subject. In conclusion, we will look at some practical implications of the doctrine.

Finally, it is vitally important not to generate more heat than light in discussion of this subject. In my view, although I believe it to be in error, the doctrine of unlimited or universal atonement is not a ‘heresy’¹¹ nor is it something over which Reformed evangelicals should seriously fall out. John Davenant, a British delegate at the Synod of Dort, wrote: “We had a special Charge in our Instructions to endeavour that *Positions* be moderately laid down, which may tend to the mitigation of heat on both parts, which we judge to be most necessary in this Second Article” (on limited atonement).¹² King James instructed the British delegates to be especially careful when “there be many oppositions between any who are overmuch addicted to their own opinions.”¹³ This is wise counsel on what can still be a touchy subject, and I intend seriously to take note of it in both the tone and content of what follows.

PART ONE: DEFINING THE QUESTION

To begin, we must see if we can define the precise question at issue. Louis Berkof speaks for many Reformed theologians when he writes:

“The question with which we are concerned at this point is not (a) whether the satisfaction rendered by Christ was in itself sufficient for the salvation of all men, since this is admitted by all; (b) whether the saving benefits are actually applied to every man, for the great majority of those who teach a universal atonement do not believe that all are actually saved; (c) whether the *bona fide* offer of salvation is made to all that hear the gospel, on the condition of repentance and faith, since the Reformed Churches do not call this in question; nor (d) whether any of the fruits of the death of Christ accrue to the benefit of the non-elect in virtue of their close association with the people of God, since this is explicitly taught by many Reformed scholars. On the other hand, the question does relate to the design of the atonement. Did the Father in sending Christ, and did Christ in coming into the world, to make atonement for sin, *do this with the design or for the purpose of saving only the elect or all men?* That is the question, and that only is the question.”¹⁴

¹⁰ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), page viii. I note with interest that on page 212 Kendall accuses “Westminster theology” of being “haunted with inconsistencies” (logical ones, presumably). They could have avoided these inconsistencies if they had “simply” changed their doctrine, he says (so it would be more logically consistent). This fails to see that for the puritans one was not free to iron out apparent inconsistencies in one’s theology without warrant from Scripture. Ironically, Kendall thus criticizes them for not being as logically consistent as he who is apparently so unconcerned with logical consistency!

¹¹ B. G. Armstrong’s book, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), which is sympathetic to Amyraut is badly named since Reformed scholars did not consider Amyraut’s denial of limited atonement to be a heresy.

¹² J. Davenant, “Doctour Davenant touching the Second Article, discussed at the conference at the Haghe of the Extent of Redemption” in A. Milton (ed.), *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)* Church of England Record Society volume 13 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), page 222 (original emphasis). N.B. Limited atonement was the subject of the second article of the Synod not, as the mnemonic TULIP might suggest, the third article.

¹³ See “Instructions of King James I to the delegates” in Milton, *ibid.*, page 94. I have updated the orthography.

¹⁴ L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1958] 1981), pages 393-394.

This is the standard definition of the question from a Reformed point of view,¹⁵ and very effectively distinguishes the Calvinist doctrine from the Arminian and Amyraldian alternatives. Berkof is patently correct in what he denies here. As Henri Blocher says, “Counterarguments usually fail to perceive the logic of ‘definite atonement’ and what it consistently allows, that is, sufficiency for all, universal offer, salvation accomplished for the ‘race’ as an organic whole, and the like.”¹⁶ We might also add that the question is not about whether God loves all that he has made or only has time for the elect. No - “The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Psalm 145:9) or as Matthew 5:44-45 suggests, we should love our enemies because God loves all, making the sun rise on the evil and the good and sending rain to both as well. As Geerhardus Vos, an advocate of limited atonement, put it, “[t]hat God loves the world in its natural existence, even outside the sphere of the covenant, contains a pledge of the bestowal upon the same world of an infinitely higher redemptive love.”¹⁷

Several theologians have very effectively shown that Scripture can speak of God’s love in different ways so that an advocate of limited atonement (or of election) can still affirm that, in some sense, God loves everyone in the world.¹⁸ This universal love is not the same as his redemptive special love for his elect, which is the type of love most emphasized in Scripture.¹⁹ Moreover, as Frame suggests, “The point at issue here is not whether God wants all men to be saved if they believe. (Of course he does!)”²⁰ Jesus is very clear: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). Often the problem people have with this doctrine is the related thought that God does not give everyone to Jesus, that is, secure the ultimate salvation of everyone. Yet this is really a problem further back, with predestination, not with the atonement *per se*, and so needs to be addressed at that level first and foremost.

Wayne Grudem, however, takes issue with Berkof’s narrowing of the question, saying that to focus on God’s intent or purpose in the atonement is to make this “just another form of the larger dispute between Calvinists and Arminians” over whether God’s plan is to save those he has chosen or to save everybody (a plan frustrated by the exercise of free will).²¹ Since it was indeed an Arminian challenge which drew out the classic definition of limited atonement at the Synod of Dort then this seems to be a strange criticism. Other questions could be used as a way in to the debate: as the Palatinate delegation said at Dort, “the whole question concerns the efficiency and efficacy of the ransom.”²² In other words, is redemption effective actually to save people or does the cross merely render us potentially saveable (if we meet certain conditions, like having faith)? Yet, again, this also connects the issue to the wider doctrinal considerations of the whole Calvinist-Arminian debate. It is hard to disentangle the atonement from election and calling.

I do not think the question can be re-phrased, “*how much* did Christ die?” in a quantitative sense, as if the atonement was ‘stuff’ that could be limited in amount and distributed in parcels to only a limited number of people. It is not as if each minute on the cross was worth 1,000 sins or some such calculation. It seems better

¹⁵ See how the question is defined in terms of design, intent, or purpose in F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology: volume 2* edited by J. T. Dennison Jr. and translated by G. M. Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2.14.XIV.ix-xi on pages 458-459; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology: Volume 2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1871] 1999), pages 544-545; L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), page 150; J. Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel” in *Collected Writings of John Murray Volume 1: The Claims of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), page 63 which also says there is advantage in using the language of “extent” also; and R. Nicole, *Our Sovereign Saviour: The Essence of the Reformed Faith* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2002), pages 58-60.

¹⁶ H. Blocher, “The Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology” in C. E. Hill and F. A. James III (eds.), *The Glory of the Atonement*, pages 280-281. In context, Blocher is warning against misinterpreting what Calvin taught on the subject, but his warning is more generally applicable.

¹⁷ See G. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God” in R. B. Gaffin (ed.), *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), page 442.

¹⁸ See D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, (Leicester: IVP, 2000), pages 17-27 where he distinguishes 5 ways in which the Bible speaks of God’s love. See also J. Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, pages 69-72; G. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God” *passim*; J. I. Packer, “The Love of God: Universal and Particular”, pages 282-284.

¹⁹ Cf. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God”, page 456 who makes this point as part of a telling biblical-theological critique of Amyraldianism which, he says, relegates God’s special love for the elect to a secondary stage in God’s decree thus making it an afterthought rather than maintaining the proper biblical “distribution of emphasis.”

²⁰ J. Frame, review of B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* in *Westminster Theological Journal* 34:2 (May, 1972), page 190. He adduces 2 Peter 3:9 in support of this contention.

²¹ W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), page 601.

²² G. M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, page 135. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 597 agrees that the central issue is the efficacy of the atonement.

to say that the atonement was qualitative in that if, for the sake of argument, God decided to elect one more person post-crucifixion, Christ would not have to go back to the cross for a few minutes more suffering, or to die again. His one death had infinite worth, because of who he is, and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) not a certain amount or intensity of suffering *per se*.²³

On the other hand, to re-frame the question as if it was merely about the extent of the atonement (as opposed to its intent) is to ask a slightly different question: ‘what did Christ do?’ as opposed to ‘what did God intend?’ Did Christ pay for the sins of those who are not elect of God and will end up in hell? That, of course, is a legitimate question but it is not the way Calvinists themselves usually choose to define the question. Neither the canons of Dort nor the Westminster Confession (commonly reckoned to be the most authoritative statements of the Calvinist position) make formal statements on the question as stated in this way.²⁴

Dividing intent from extent can open up the theoretical possibility (attractive to some) of being a Calvinist on four points while demurring on limited atonement. Yet as soon as one considers Christ’s accomplishment apart from God’s design further problems can emerge. Amyraldian (4 point Calvinist) solutions posit a divergence between the Father’s intention, the Son’s execution, and the Spirit’s application of the plan of salvation: God elects a limited number; Jesus dies for everyone; the Spirit applies the work of redemption to the elect alone.²⁵ This retains a Calvinist monergism (i.e. the Arminian ‘free will’ argument is not used to explain why all are not saved) but at the expense of agreement within the godhead.²⁶ This is a high price to pay, and would seem to be inconsistent not only logically but more importantly *with Scripture*, which asserts that the Son who prayed to the Father “not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42) also “does nothing of his own accord” (John 5:19-24) while the Spirit will not act on his own authority, but in line with what Jesus has said (John 16:7-15).²⁷

Whether we consider the eternal intent, historical extent, or historical and eternal effects of the atonement, in the end, however, we will bump up against the same doctrinal issues and exegetical puzzles. Similarly, although labels do matter in public debate because they can shape the preconceptions of the uncommitted, whether we call this doctrine limited atonement (which is misleading and unnecessarily negative), particular redemption, intentional, focused, definite, or personal effective atonement ultimately the same passages of Scripture will come up for consideration and the same doctrinal questions will need to be addressed.²⁸

PART TWO: EXEGETICAL ARGUMENTS

²³ See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 544; R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pages 672-673; Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, pages 151-152 makes the point that a sacrifice of infinite worth would be necessary for the salvation of one sinner or every sinner because of the nature of sin as an offence against a Person of infinite dignity.

²⁴ Cf. W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology: A review of the principal doctrinal discussions in the Christian church since the apostolic age Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), page 326. On page 334, Cunningham agrees with Berkof and the others listed in footnote 13 above that the question “*must* turn upon the question of the *purpose, design, or intention* of God” (emphasis original).

²⁵ See the comments of Armstrong on Amyraut’s distinctive doctrine of the trinity in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pages 172-177. According to John Frame’s review of Armstrong’s book published in *Westminster Theological Journal* 34:2 (May, 1972), page 191, Amyraut had “an extremely rigid view of the Trinitarian economy (he held that only the Holy Spirit, not the Father or Son, could work ‘efficaciously’)”. Paul Helm calls this contradiction at the heart of the godhead “the most fundamental theological criticism of Amyraldianism” in his review of another Amyraldian book in *Evangelicals Now* (2004) available online at <http://www.e-n.org.uk/2749-Amyraut-affirmed-or-Owenism-a-caricature-of-Calvinism'.htm> (accessed June 10th 2007).

²⁶ For instance, J. C. Ryle says: “In the work of the Father in election, and of the Spirit in conversion, I see limitation in the Bible most clearly. But in the work of Christ in atonement I see no limitation.” *Expository Thoughts on John, volume 1*, page 62. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, page 156 also accuses *Arminians* of destroying the harmony of the trinity.

²⁷ Interestingly, D. M. Lloyd-Jones states that “*the point of contention at the Synod of Dort [was] - in conversion where does the Holy Spirit come in?*” (emphasis original) *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), page 19.

²⁸ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach prefer the term “particular redemption”. Some call it definite or efficacious atonement, as opposed to indefinite or universal atonement. I like the term “effective personal atonement” myself because it is descriptive and shows what the alternative is, but it isn’t very snappy. The most common designation remains limited atonement, but I will use it alongside other designations throughout this essay (let the reader understand). The drawback is that, as Don Carson says, it is “objectively misleading” since “every view of the atonement ‘limits’ it in some way, save for the view of the unqualified universalist.” See D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), page 84. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 562 claims that the *Arminian* doctrine “is the limited and meagre scheme; whereas the orthodox doctrine is catholic and comprehensive.”

A Textless Doctrine?

R. T. Kendall wonders, “how many Christians would ever come to the view of limited atonement merely by reading the Bible!”²⁹ The clear implication of such a statement is that it is “a textless doctrine”,³⁰ which would indeed be a serious flaw. It is true that logical arguments have been used to support the case, such as ‘if Jesus died for all the sins even of the un-elect, then is it not unjust for God to demand double payment for the same sins by sending them to hell?’³¹ John Owen put the case compellingly like this: was Christ punished for a) all the sins of all men, b) some sins of all men, or c) all the sins of some men? If the first, then all are saved! If lack of faith is adduced as a reason for denying this universal salvation to some then Owen asks why, if Christ died for *all* the sins of even the reprobate, does this not include their unbelief which is, surely, one such sin? If it is not a sin then why should they be punished for it? If the second option is correct, then we all still have some sins to answer for, and so are not saved by the cross at all. This leaves only the third option, which is that Christ was punished for all the sins of the elect, who are truly and effectively saved by it.³²

While such questions have their place and surely deserve an answer, advocates of effective personal atonement (by whatever name) are keen to stress that they arrive at their doctrinal conclusions on the basis of serious exegetical study not simply through logic. They would emphatically reject the idea that they are squeezing God into a pre-existing, philosophically determined framework. Grudem is extremely unhelpful when he writes that “limited atonement is necessarily part of a Reformed viewpoint *because it logically follows* from the overall sovereignty of God in the entire work of redemption.”³³ That logic comes first in the consideration of Calvinist theologians is, sadly, sometimes glimpsed in their manner of presentation.³⁴ It may well be logically consistent to believe in limited atonement, given the other four points of Calvinism, but it can only truly lay claim to be “part of a Reformed viewpoint” if it is, first and foremost, consistent with the word of God.³⁵

Indeed, many would insist that the Bible itself encourages us to ask careful questions of its sometimes seemingly incompatible statements and to wrestle with them, making judicious distinctions so as to understand them correctly within the whole counsel of God. Hence it is often when meditating on apparently ‘universal’ texts like 1 John 2:2, 1 Timothy 2:4-6, or 2 Peter 2:1 that people start to ponder these issues more carefully. The question of the extent or intent of the atonement arises directly out of serious Bible study when Scripture itself (rather than an existing doctrinal framework, whether acknowledged or not) is used to interpret Scripture. Those who hold to limited atonement therefore believe that it makes more sense of the Bible’s witness as a whole, and that the supposedly “straightforward” yet atomistic reading of the universal texts creates more problems *biblically* than it solves. In this section we will, therefore, consider some of the exegetical arguments used on both sides of the argument.

1. The exegetical argument for limited atonement

There are three main arguments which, together, are used to support particular redemption. First, Reformed exegetes point to those texts which affirm that Christ died with a particular reference to a limited group of people. So he died e.g. for his sheep wherever they are scattered (John 10:11, 15) and not for those outside the flock (John 10:26-29); his people (Matthew 1:21); for many (Matthew 20:28); his family the Church (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27; 1 Corinthians 8:11; Romans 14:15); his chosen friends (John 15:13-16); for “us” his saved people (Titus 2:14 cf. “us” in 2:8 and 3:5); his elect (Romans 8:32-34); and people *from* (ἐκ) every tribe, language, people, and nation but not everyone (Revelation 5:9).

Romans 8:32 is a key text here since it seems to affirm that those for whom Christ died will also be given every spiritual blessing: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” The emphasis here is not just on the generous character of God but also on the

²⁹ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, page viii.

³⁰ The explicit accusation of D. B. Knox, “Some aspects of the atonement”, page 263.

³¹ C. H. Spurgeon (as quoted in Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, page 155) used this argument quoting a Toplady hymn in support. See also W. A. Elwell, “Atonement, Extent of the” in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984), page 98 as well as Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 595 and Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 557.

³² Owen, *The Death of Death*, pages 173-174 and 249.

³³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 596 footnote 34 (my emphasis).

³⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 546 for instance begins to prove the doctrine by considering the nature of the covenant of redemption first, then the doctrine of election, before his section on scriptural declarations. This perhaps blunts somewhat the force of his protestations on page 559 that “it is the duty of the theologian to subordinate his theories to the Bible.”

³⁵ Grudem may well agree with this, but it is not what he actually says, and he plays into opponents’ hands by writing thus.

identity of the recipients: “us” in the context of Romans 8 equals Spirit-indwelt, suffering, children of God in Christ, who in the very next verse (Romans 8:33) are called “God’s elect”. Christ’s death for someone and their receiving of the benefits of his passion are inextricably linked, says this argument. If Christ died for everyone without exception, even the un-elect, then according to the logic of this verse everyone without exception qualifies for and will receive “all things” from God (which presumably includes glorification, verse 30). Limited atonement appears to be the underlying assumption of this verse.

Furthermore, 2 Corinthians 5:14 teaches that those ‘for whom Christ died’ have died with him (however we understand “all” in that verse). When this is placed alongside Paul’s emphasis in Romans 6:5-8 that “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (6:8) it strongly suggests that Paul’s underlying theology must be either definite atonement or universal salvation.³⁶ It is also difficult to read John 6:38-39 in a way that suggests the Father sent Jesus to die for people who will remain lost. Rather, Jesus was sent by the Father to save a particular group of people and to make sure they are indeed saved on the last day. The Father also wills them to believe (6:40) of course, but this does not detract from his intentional design to save a particular group (decided on beforehand and “given” to Jesus). John 17:9 shows that those given to Jesus by the Father are a limited group, and explicitly said *not* to be “the world” (κόσμος). These are the kind of texts which lead those who favour limited atonement to consider the unlimited atonement position as more than potentially universalist. So, for example, Paul’s argument in Romans 8:32 is that God will not withhold anything from those for whom Christ died. If he died for all without exception then surely all without exception will be saved?

Those who favour the universal atonement position answer these opening arguments by pointing out that although Scripture does say Christ dies for his sheep, it does not follow logically that he did so *only* for them.³⁷ This logical observation is of course perfectly true;³⁸ but the universal atonement case does not then logically follow either. Calvinist theologians would argue that limited atonement makes better sense of these texts and can plausibly claim that the more universal statements are about universal sufficiency or invitation. They would also argue that the unlimited position cannot really explain “why limited or definite language should ever have been employed, if there was really no limitation in the object or destination of the atonement.”³⁹ Besides, the limited atonement case does not rest *solely* on the observation that Scripture says ‘Christ died for his Church’; it requires the other arguments below (i.e. that atonement is efficacious and also bestows the conditions of salvation) to hold true as well.⁴⁰ So it is not claimed that these verses alone prove the case.

On the other hand, it is claimed that definite atonement makes better sense of the passages in which texts like “Christ laid down his life for his friends” occur. So it affirms through contextual exegesis that Jesus did not die in the same way for the non-elect (for if he had, the argument of Romans 8:32 would not make sense); he did not die for strangers, wolves, thieves, robbers and those outside his flock in the same way as he did for his sheep (for that would make no sense in the narrative thought-world of John 10). Indeed, in John 10:26 the Lord says that some do not believe because they are not of his flock (not, note, vice-versa),⁴¹ so the difference is caused by something apart from and prior to the human response of faith.⁴² Whatever that is, it restricts the number of those who benefit from the laying down of the shepherd’s life (10:15). Moreover, the nature of the marriage illustration in Ephesians 5:25-27 would seem to imply that if Christ gave himself up for others (i.e. those outside his elect, Ephesians 1:4-5) he would be subverting the very picture of monogamous marriage

³⁶ See J. Owen, *The Death of Christ in the Death of Christ* in W. H. Goold (ed.), *The Works of John Owen: Volume 10* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1647]), pages 350-352. Cf. Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions*, pages 272-273. As Sinclair Ferguson puts it, “If Christ died for us, we died in Christ”: S. B. Ferguson, “Preaching the Atonement” in C. E. Hill & F. A. James III (eds.), *The Glory of the Atonement*, page 434. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 678 also links 2 Corinthians 5:14 with Romans 6:5-11 but for a different reason.

³⁷ T. L. Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement” in C. H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, page 73.

³⁸ As Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, pages 673-674 is quick to acknowledge.

³⁹ Cunningham, *Historical Theology: Volume 2*, page 340.

⁴⁰ E.g. note that these arguments are used right next to each other in the same sentence in J. I. Packer, “The Love of God: Universal and Particular” in T. R. Schreiner & B. A. Ware (eds.), *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), page 288.

⁴¹ Cf. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 674.

⁴² See Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, pages 74-76. NB verse 16 where others who have not yet believed are nevertheless termed sheep rather than wolves. They may be lost sheep, but they are sheep.

which parallels Christ's loving sacrifice, attempting something like polygamy, which is clearly not endorsed!⁴³ Grudem is correct, but perhaps too restrained, when he concludes that, "Even if they do not absolutely imply such a particularizing of redemption, these verses do at least seem to be most naturally interpreted in this way."⁴⁴

Second, it is said that Scripture presents the atonement as actually achieving salvation for people, reconciling God and man, not merely making salvation possible for all, e.g. Romans 5:8-10 (we were reconciled to God by his Son's death); Galatians 1:4 (he gave himself up to deliver us, not to make deliverance a possibility), 3:13 (he redeemed us from the curse by hanging on the tree); Ephesians 1:7 (we *have* [ἔχομεν] redemption through his blood – the present tense possession of it stands out grammatically in the context); cf. Luke 19:10 (he actually saves the lost); 1 Peter 2:24 (he definitely bore our sins, and by his wounds we were healed, not potentially healed). As Berkof says, in Scripture "there is an inseparable connection between the purchase and the actual bestowal of salvation".⁴⁵ The exegetical alternative is to add caveats to all of these verses, e.g. "we potentially have redemption", "he gave himself up to go some way towards saving us". Given that fact, it seems sensible to conclude that limited atonement rather than unlimited atonement is the best way to avoid an unbiblical universalism.

Third, the Bible shows that Christ's death actually purchased and bestows the conditions for salvation on his people. He did not simply achieve something which they must then appropriate by the exercise of free will. He himself secured the fulfilment of the conditions which must be met, e.g. Ephesians 1:3 (we have every spiritual blessing in him), 2:8 ('salvation through faith' is a gift of God, both salvation and the faith required to receive it);⁴⁶ cf. Acts 5:31, 11:18 and 2 Timothy 2:25 (repentance is also something granted by God).

There are also typological arguments. In Matthew 26, Jesus' death is equated to that of the Passover lamb (verses 17-19 and 26-28). Yet the Passover lamb in Exodus 12 was not sacrificed for the unbelieving Egyptians, but only for the people God had chosen. Egyptians could join that people and partake of the lamb, but it was not sacrificed for Egyptians *qua* Egyptians.⁴⁷ A similar argument could be constructed for the sacrificial system generally: the burnt and peace offerings for instance are made for a particular individual who places his hand on the animal (Leviticus 1:4, 3:2), so the intention is to make atonement for that individual and him alone. If Christ fulfils these Levitical offerings, then we can assume the intentionality of his offering is also similarly focused and not 'unlimited'. Similarly utilising Old Testament types, Jesus is presented in the New Testament as our great High Priest, as a Davidic King, and as the Son of Man. The High Priest atoned and interceded for God's people (Leviticus 16) not for everyone in the world; David won his victories for the benefit of God's people rather than for, say, the Philistines (e.g. 2 Samuel 5:17-25);⁴⁸ and the Son of Man received a kingdom for the saints, not for the beasts (Daniel 7).⁴⁹

2. Logical arguments against limited atonement

⁴³ See the slightly milder way this is put in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 674.

⁴⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 600.

⁴⁵ L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology*, page 395.

⁴⁶ The "this" (τοῦτο) in "this is a gift of God" is neuter whereas "you have been saved" (σσωσμένοι) is masculine and "by grace" (χάρτι) and "by faith" (διὰ πίστεως) are feminine. So the gift of God is best understood as not just salvation or faith on their own but all that is bound up in 'salvation through faith'. Faith is, of course, exercised by the human recipient, but for faith as a gift of God in Scripture, see 2 Peter 1:1, 3; Phil 1:29; Acts 14:27 and 18:27. It is also implied from the fact that before God makes us alive we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1, 5) and cannot respond or take any spiritual action – therefore we need God to give us faith, to give us the ability to open our hands to receive his gift. See P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), page 175. H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), pages 340-344 avoids this conclusion of his own exegesis because he has a prior commitment to the idea that "the salvation that was purchased by Christ's death is universal in its provision, but it is not universal in its application" (page 341).

⁴⁷ As Alec Motyer writes, "the sole purpose and use of the lamb was to provide Passover cover and Passover nourishment for the people whose number and needs it matched, and once that had been achieved, it was not available for anything or anyone else. It was chosen precisely for the people and having met their needs, had no other purpose or function so nothing of it was to remain once the meal was over." *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), page 136.

⁴⁸ In Psalm 2 those who do not "kiss the Son", that is, the Davidic king, are broken, face his wrath, and perish.

⁴⁹ See David Field's suggestion for a typological approach at <http://davidpfield.blogspot.com/2006/06/limited-atonement-1.html> (accessed 1st June 2006).

As we have already seen, those who hold to universal atonement often use logical arguments in their rebuttal of the case for definite atonement. Grudem puts their case succinctly:

“Non-Reformed people argue that the gospel offer in Scripture is repeatedly made to all people, and for this offer to be genuine, the payment for sins must have already been made and must be actually available for all people. They also say that if the people whose sins Christ paid for are limited, then the free offer of the gospel also is limited, and the offer of the gospel cannot be made to all mankind without exception.”⁵⁰

This sort of reasoning often lies behind objections to limited atonement. They are, however, based on false deductions. The first usually insists that the offer must be “genuine” (whatever that means) without explicitly stating why. It has therefore imported a test of orthodoxy from somewhere and must justify it. It also assumes that for “genuineness”, payment must already have been made, which does not follow: I regularly offer, quite genuinely, to take my wife to the cinema but do not always pay in advance. Besides, Nicole argues that the offer is perfectly sincere: *if* anyone repents and believes they *will* be saved. Definite atonement actually undergirds such a sincere offer by providing a real rather than hypothetical salvation.⁵¹

Reformed theologians absolutely agree with the premise that the offer of the gospel is to be made to all,⁵² but have a number of explanations of how this is compatible with limited atonement. They might argue, for instance, that we don’t know who is elect (it is a mystery reserved for God alone) so we must tell everyone, or that universal proclamation exposes the inexcusableness of those who hear and reject the gospel.⁵³ Or they simply say something like “God commands all people to repent in e.g. Acts 17:30, so we should proclaim this too - even if we can’t quite rationalise how that coheres with what we think is the equally biblical doctrine of limited atonement.”⁵⁴ Calvinist theologians have shown that on the issue of divine sovereignty and human choice, “holding that the universe is determined... doesn’t make deliberation impotent”.⁵⁵ It is often a matter of whether we consider salvation from a divine or a human perspective, and the Bible does both. In the same way, it is possible to say (from the divine angle) that Christ died for his chosen people only while still (from the human angle) holding out the promise of salvation to all who would believe. Yet all would admit that it is difficult for our human minds to take in both perspectives at once. A forced rational consistency and exhaustive explanation is not, therefore, the *sine qua non* of the Reformed doctrine.

The second objection (that if the people whose sins Christ paid for are limited, then the free offer of the gospel also must be limited) is basically a hyper-calvinist error. It is denied by mainstream proponents of effective atonement who claim that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premise. It is not, therefore, an essential component of the doctrine of limited atonement at all, being contradicted by the explicit teaching and practice of Calvinist evangelists such as Spurgeon. It would be ironic to find Arminians or Amyraldians agreeing with the basic premise of a hyper-calvinist non-sequitur!

Both of these logical arguments seem to suggest that a limitation in the design of salvation must imply a limitation in the offer of the gospel. Yet even Arminians would not say that limited *election* must equal limited gospel offer. Therefore, I do not think these logical assertions can be made with any kind of scriptural warrant. John Murray was even so bold as to turn these objections on their head, asserting that only limited atonement supplies the basis required for a universal offer of the gospel because it alone offers not just the general love of God or the opportunity of salvation but salvation itself, a definite, accomplished, effective salvation.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 594. This is corroborated by statements in Arminian texts such as e.g. Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement”, pages 83-84. Cf. also the same connections made by Calamy, an Amyraldian, in the Westminster Assembly’s debate on limited atonement in Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation”, Volume 6, page 205 (fo. 105r).

⁵¹ R. Nicole, “Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Sept 1995), pages 403-412. Cf. Turretin, *Institutes* 2.14.XIV.liii on page 481.

⁵² See for example J. Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, pages 60 and 81.

⁵³ The arguments of William Price and John Lightfoot respectively at the Westminster Assembly. See Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation”, Volume 6, page 207 (fo. 106r).

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. Cunningham, *Historical Theology: Volume 2*, page 345 who says we must not “venture to act upon the principle of refusing to obey God’s commands until we fully understand all the grounds and reasons of them”.

⁵⁵ See B. Cooper, “Divine vs. Human Choices: Relieving the Tension with some Choice Theory” at <http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/DivinevsHumanChoices.html> (accessed 5th November 2007).

⁵⁶ Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, page 83.

3. Biblical arguments against limited atonement

In a polemical Eighteenth century book of the Calvinism against Arminianism variety, there appears the following quote:

“We may observe how impossible it is for men, even of the greatest learning and piety, to interpret Scripture with success, when they come to it prepossessed with systems, which they are listed, as it were, to defend. For instead of searching candidly the true meaning of the text, they come provided with senses which they are obliged to ingraft upon it; until by a practice and habit of wresting the Scripture on all occasions, they acquire a dexterity of extracting what doctrines they please out of it.”⁵⁷

This sounds very much like the accusation sometimes made against Calvinist exegesis of the ‘problem texts’ for limited atonement.⁵⁸ It was in fact used by a staunch Calvinist against an acclaimed Arminian! The point remains, however, that whichever side we happen to prefer in such a debate, we must always beware of trying to impose a forced consistency upon the text, and becoming so attached to our systems that we fail to listen carefully to the word of God. One side may accuse the other of twisting Scripture to make it ‘fit’, while itself being guilty of a simplistic, proof-texting use of the Bible which looks no deeper than the surface meaning of texts which appear to be ‘on their side’. Nevertheless, as I said above, these ‘problem’ texts are often precisely those parts of the word which prompt Christians to start thinking about this issue in the first place. Rather than being ‘enemies’ to be overcome or sidelined, they are catalysts and stimulants to deeper understanding, to be meditated on in both their immediate and canonical contexts.

He died for all the world

That being said, the unlimited atonement case is usually built on two main lines of exegetical argument. First, it points to those texts which affirm that Christ died for ‘all’ or for ‘the world’, such as John 1:29 where the lamb of God is said to take away “the sin of the world” or 1 Timothy 2:6 where he was “a ransom for all”. This is taken to mean that “quite obviously” the atonement was universal in intent and extent.⁵⁹ Reformed commentators respond in a variety of ways to such exegesis, and not always convincingly. The most persuasive counterarguments point out that both “world” (κόσμος) and “all” (πᾶς) should not immediately be assumed to mean “everyone without exception”, since they are used in Scripture in a variety of ways, as can be seen in standard Greek lexicons.⁶⁰ For example, Luke 2:1 (“all the world”) does not envisage the entire population of the planet taking part in a Roman census any more than Matthew 3:5 (“all Judea”) means to suggest that every man, woman, and child in Judea was baptised by John.⁶¹

The meaning of these Greek words in any particular passage must be determined by the context and not necessarily interpreted in such a way that they neatly fit into a preconceived framework devised or assumed by English speakers. Even Arminian commentators admit this when it comes to other texts such as Matthew 5:3 (all kinds of evil), Acts 10:12 (all kinds of animals), Romans 7:8 (all kinds of covetousness) or 1 Timothy 6:10 (money is a root of all kinds of evil) where the word is from the same root (πᾶς),⁶² or in John 12:19 where no-one seriously thinks the entire population of earth was following Jesus.⁶³ So it cannot be simply assumed to

⁵⁷ Quoted by A. M. Toplady in *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism* in *The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady* (Harrisburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), page 643. The quote is used against one Dr. Nowell, and is ascribed to a Dr. Middleton with the reference given as *Miscell. Tracts*, page 12.

⁵⁸ I. H. Marshall, for instance, claims to be engaged in “unprejudiced exegesis” and to be taking the Bible at “face value” in his attack on limited atonement in “Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles” in C. H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), page 52.

⁵⁹ Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement”, page 80 says of 1 Timothy 4:10 (“Saviour of all men”) that, “quite obviously, this verse is saying that ... Christ died for all men.”

⁶⁰ E.g. πᾶς, πᾶσα, πᾶν §1.a.β in W. F. Arndt & F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1957), page 636.

⁶¹ Cf. also in the LXX, Genesis 6:21 πάντων τῶν βρωμάτων for example is translated “every sort of food” (ESV). Cf. 2 Kings 8:9, 1 Chronicles 22:15, Nehemiah 13:16, Ezekiel 39:20 and Zephaniah 2:14 for similar kinds of translations in the ESV.

⁶² On 1 Timothy 6:10, I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1999), page 651 says it is hyperbole. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1963) page 138 says it is better translated “all kinds of evil”. Neither opts for a hyperbolic or “all kinds of” interpretation of the same word (πᾶς) in 1 Timothy 2:4 or 2:6. Calvinist commentator G. W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), pages 257-258 sees the same sense in 2:4, 2:6, 4:10, and 6:10 but his first consideration in the latter is the immediate context of 6:9.

⁶³ See the helpful note in Morris, *The Gospel According to John: revised*, page 111-113.

mean ‘all without exception’ in places like 1 Timothy 2:6. A very long tradition of exegesis from Augustine to Aquinas to Luther and Calvin understands “all” in 1 Timothy 2:4-6, for example, as “all kinds of” rather than “all without exception”.⁶⁴ Even if all this is discounted, however, in 1 Timothy 2:4 we must (as Calvinists and Arminians can agree), “certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen.”⁶⁵ Just because God wishes, in some sense, all to be saved does not mean he has, in another sense, actually willed to save them all by designing and providing a universal atonement. He certainly has not *elect*ed all - so Scripture itself forces us to make careful distinctions here and to find some way of reconciling these two things.⁶⁶

When it comes to the word “world”, John 1:29, John 3:16, and 1 John 2:2 are especially important texts to consider. The latter two were in fact cited in the *Remonstrance* of 1610 which contained the original five points of Arminianism, in support of universal atonement. It is unnecessary to claim that κόσμος (world) here means ‘the elect’ or ‘the church.’⁶⁷ Yet it is also unwarranted to simply assume it means ‘everyone on the planet’ without regard for the context. John specifically distinguishes the disciples from the world (e.g. John 14:17, 15:18, 17:9), thus showing that even within the Gospel itself the word “world” cannot mean everyone without exception.⁶⁸ Good arguments can be made for regarding John 1:29 as teaching that Christ, rather than being the sacrificial (Passover?) lamb or Suffering Servant for *Israel*, will in fact bear away sin for people all over the world, i.e. world means something like ‘not just for Jews.’⁶⁹ Alternatively it could be said to refer to people generally (since only universalists would argue that the sins of all people without exception are truly and actually taken away in a definite sense)⁷⁰ or that he “came as a sin-offering bearing not his own, but the sins of others.”⁷¹

As for John 3:16, when examined carefully it does not actually say anything at all about the extent or intent of the atonement directly, and so is in a sense irrelevant to the argument. What John 3:16 is talking about is God’s motivation in sending Jesus into the (darkness-loving, God-hating) world to die - he did it because he did not want to give up on humanity as a whole (as we hear him anthropomorphically contemplating in Genesis 6:5-7) but it is not about “a purpose to save every person in the world individually”.⁷² It also speaks about the universal offer and invitation of the gospel which is not the same as (and does not have to rely on) universal atonement.⁷³ It does not say God set out to save every single person in the world or that Christ died for every single person in the world. It does, however, widen out the scope of God’s love which is wide enough to embrace not just Israel but the world.⁷⁴ This is fully consistent with the background, alluded to in John 3:14-15, of the incident with the bronze serpent. God now offers salvation through Christ not just to Israelites suffering snake bites on their wilderness wanderings but to the whole sinful world. This has no bearing on the specific

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Enchiridion* XXVII, 103; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, Q.19, art.6, ad 1; Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, scholia in Romans 8, II; Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXI* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pages 54-55, 57 (on 1 Timothy 2:4-6).

⁶⁵ The words of an Arminian - Marshall, “Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles”, page 56 – heartily agreed with by a Calvinist, John Piper, in “Are There Two Wills in God?” in *Sovereign Grace*, page 110. The standard terminology for this distinction is God’s ‘revealed will’ and ‘secret will’ or ‘will of command’ and ‘will of decree’ or ‘moral will’ and ‘sovereign will’. Cf. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, pages 692-693 who rejects this two wills’ argument here which he regards as irrational.

⁶⁶ Another alternative, of course, (not recommended) would be to abandon the Protestant hermeneutic of ‘Scripture must interpret Scripture’ because it is built on the idea that the Bible is the word of a coherent, un-schizophrenic God.

⁶⁷ As e.g. George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford (respectively) did in the Westminster Assembly’s debate on limited atonement (*Confession of Faith* 3.6). See C. B. Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly 1642-1652” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2004), Volume 6, page 207 (fo. 106r) and page 209 (fo. 107r). N. F. Douty, *The Death of Christ: Did Christ Die only for the Elect?* (Irving, Texas: William & Watrous, 1978), pages 41-45 spends a great deal of time and effort showing this is lexicographically unwarranted (which is not entirely pertinent), while Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, pages 18-19 is not the only Calvinist to distance himself from such a suggestion.

⁶⁸ Cf. Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, page 79.

⁶⁹ See G. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God”, page 450. Cf. L. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John: Revised* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pages 127-130 for discussion of several possible allusions here and his conclusion that it is probably a composite picture of several or all Old Testament sacrifices – all of which were part of *Israel’s* benefit.

⁷⁰ See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 598. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* PILLAR (Leicester: IVP, 1991), page 151 says “world” must mean “all without distinction” rather than “all without exception”.

⁷¹ An attractive suggestion from Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 559.

⁷² G. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God”, page 443.

⁷³ See Calvin on John 3:16 in *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XVII* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pages 122-126 who applies it to indiscriminate gospel proclamation, and adds (page 125), “Christ is made known and held out to the view of all, but the elect alone are they whose eyes God opens.”

⁷⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to John: Revised*, page 203. Cf. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, page 205.

question of whether God ultimately intended the salvation or reprobation of those to whom the salvation was offered. Indeed, in Numbers 21, the bronze serpent was proffered as salvation even to those whom God had already decreed should die in the desert (Numbers 14:21-23).

Marshall avers that “it is difficult to see how one might say ‘God loves you’ without at the same time being able to say ‘Christ died for you’... It is therefore possible and indeed necessary to affirm both of the two statements with full theological integrity.”⁷⁵ Yet this is simply asserting what one is trying to prove. As noted above, Carson and others have shown that God’s love is spoken of in various ways in Scripture and certainly cannot be taken in every instance to be the equivalent of his particular, redemptive love towards those he intends to save.⁷⁶ Indeed, as we have already seen, John 6:38-39 alongside John 17:9 shows that Jesus was sent for a limited group of people “given” to him by the Father, and they are explicitly *not* the world, although they do include all those who will believe (John 17:20). There is, therefore, no scriptural or theological warrant for equating “God so loved the world” with “God sent Jesus because he intended and designed to save the whole world.”⁷⁷

Perhaps the most difficult text of this sort from a limited atonement perspective is 1 John 2:2 which explicitly says Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” This appears on the surface to speak directly into the debate and to be decisively against limited atonement. Yet we must be careful not to jump too quickly to the conclusion that John is using these terms in the way theologians centuries later did when debating the extent of the atonement. That clearly is not the main purpose of 1 John. Rather, as Carson argues:

“1 John 2:2 states something about the potential breadth of the atonement. As I understand the historical context, the proto-gnostic opponents John was facing thought of themselves as an ontological elite who enjoyed the inside track with God because of the special insight they had received. But when Jesus Christ died, John rejoins, it was not for the sake of, say, Jews only or, now, of some group, Gnostic or otherwise, that sets itself up as intrinsically superior. Far from it. It was not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world. The context, then, understands this to mean something like ‘potentially for all without distinction’ rather than ‘effectively for all without exception’.”⁷⁸

John Owen, while differing in details from Carson, also spends careful effort reconstructing the particular context of John’s readers and working out the pastoral aim and purpose of this phrase within the letter, before examining the scriptural use of the words (especially ἱλασμός, propitiation, and ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου, whole world).⁷⁹ It is simply not careful exegesis to boldly assert that “John rules out the thought that the death of Jesus is of limited efficacy” and then to quote a hymn of John Wesley which affirms the doctrine of universal atonement, as one Arminian scholar does in an otherwise weighty commentary.⁸⁰ Stephen Smalley is equally lax for importing the idea of the universal *effectiveness* of the atonement into this text without attempting to justify it.⁸¹ It is clear then that 1 John 2:2 cannot be claimed as a knock-down verse for unlimited atonement without more serious consideration being given to the context and to the exegesis of people like Owen and Carson.⁸² It should also not be used to jar against other texts which affirm a limited view as if Scripture was presenting us here with a ‘tension’ (usually called a contradiction) to be accepted by faith, unless it can be clearly shown to be addressing precisely the same question and not the distinguishably separate issue of universal sufficiency.

Apostasy and the Fruitlessness of the Cross

⁷⁵ I. H. Marshall, “Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles”, page 64.

⁷⁶ See above, footnote 16.

⁷⁷ See also the further argument of Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, page 80 relating to the parallelism with verse 17.

⁷⁸ Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, pages 87-88. In footnote 2 on page 102, he says he has defended this as the background to 1 John 2:2 in his forthcoming commentary on the Johannine Epistles in the NIGTC series. See also G. Vos, “The Scriptural Doctrine of the Love of God”, page 450. This is a much more nuanced exegesis than that which Dabney objects to in R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), page 525.

⁷⁹ Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, pages 330-338.

⁸⁰ I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), page 119.

⁸¹ S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* WBC 51 (Waco Texas: Word Books, 1984), page 40.

⁸² Cf. also the argument of Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pages 598-599 concerning the ambiguity of the περὶ+ genitive construction and the additional arguments in J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1955), pages 72-75.

The second main pillar of the universal atonement case is the so-called apostasy texts. Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11 have already been cited above as part of the limited atonement case, because they show that when Paul appeals to the idea that Christ died *for* someone (ὕπὲρ οὗ or δι' ὄν) that someone is always a Christian *brother* (ἀδελφός), a family member rather than someone who has not come to faith. They are sometimes also cited on the opposing side of the debate to show “the fruitlessness of the blood of Christ”⁸³ because they allegedly affirm that a person for whom Christ died could be “destroyed” (from ἀπόλλυμι) and hence could not be elect. There is disagreement in the commentators over what “destroyed” signifies here: on 1 Corinthians 8:11 for instance, Fee avers that “Paul most likely is referring to eternal loss” whereas Blomberg seems equally sure that, “[i]t is doubtful if Paul could imagine that these inherently amoral issues could actually jeopardize a Christian’s salvation”.⁸⁴ The unlimited atonement case, however, is that such apostasy texts show that Christ died for those who will finally fall away, i.e. the non-elect.⁸⁵

The most important of these apostasy texts is arguably 2 Peter 2:1 where Peter says that false teachers “will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction”. This is cited by opponents of particular atonement as being one of the key texts on their side, since it appears to say Christ bought (presumably with his death) some who will not make it to the new creation. So, for instance, J. C. Ryle writes that:

“I believe it is possible to be more systematic than the Bible in our statements. When I read that the wicked who are lost, ‘deny the Lord that bought them’ (2 Peter ii.1)... I dare not confine the intention of redemption to the saints alone.”⁸⁶

It might of course be possible to argue that ἀπόλλειαν (destruction) does not refer to the loss of eternal salvation, as with the cognate verb ἀπόλλυμι in 1 Corinthians 8:11 and Romans 14:15.⁸⁷ Hence, those who deny the master who bought them are not really “destroyed” eternally; this is perhaps merely hyperbole based on the word play with “*destructive* heresies”, and intended as a warning to some who are false teachers yet still truly Christians. Yet even if ἀπόλλεια can have a wider semantic range⁸⁸, it would seem to have an eternal dimension in 2 Peter itself (e.g. 2 Peter 3:7 where it is linked with the Day of Judgment). Similarly, the language of denial here alludes to Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:33 (“whoever denies me...”) with the terrifying eschatological result described there (“I also will deny”).⁸⁹

Equally possible but relatively implausible are attempts to limit the meaning of “bought” (ἀγοράσαντα) to a non-salvific purchasing,⁹⁰ since the New Testament invariably has soteriology in mind when this word is used

⁸³ An arresting phrase from Owen, *The Death of Death*, page 359.

⁸⁴ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), page 387; C. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), page 163. On Romans 14:15 see Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pages 854-855 who, although he agrees with Fee about the probability of ἀπόλλυμι signifying ultimate spiritual ruin also suggests that Paul might be exaggerating (hyperbole), that the person is not said to be genuinely regenerate (though he is incorrect to say this conclusion *must* be drawn by advocates of limited atonement), and that Paul does not say the destruction will actually take place (i.e. it is a warning). J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World* BST (Leicester: IVP, 1994), pages 365-366 gives four reasons against seeing ἀπόλλυμι in Romans 14:15 as final eschatological ruin in the context of Romans itself.

⁸⁵ See, for example, D. B. Knox, “Some aspects of the atonement”, page 263. Cf. F. Guy, “The Universality of God’s Love” in C. H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, page 49 footnote 31 who sees these texts as limiting the effectiveness of the atonement, though he considers the described result (i.e. destruction) to be “apparent hyperbole”.

⁸⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John: Volume 1*, pages 61-62. See also D. B. Knox, “Some aspects of the atonement”, pages 263 and 266 as well as R. P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died: A Case for the Unlimited Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), page 15 and Miethé (quoting Millard Erickson), “The Universal Power of the Atonement”, page 92.

⁸⁷ That is Reymond’s basic argument on those texts in *A New Systematic Theology*, page 698-700.

⁸⁸ See J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) under definitions 20.31 and 65.14 which give possible meanings of destroy or waste/ruin (e.g. Mark 14:4 and Luke 5:37). Cf. the discussion of H-C Hahn, “ἀπόλλεια” in C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Volume 1* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), pages 462-465. Clearly it does not always mean eternal destruction; context remains vital for determining the meaning.

⁸⁹ Cf. 2 Timothy 2:12.

⁹⁰ Classically, Owen, *The Death of Death*, pages 363-364 and Turretin, *Institutes* 2.14.XIV.xliii on page 475-476 who equates it with the limited redemption of sorts described for these people in 2 Peter 2:20-21. Cf. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 700-701 and G. D. Long, *Definite Atonement* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), pages 72-77.

in association with Christ.⁹¹ Marshall helpfully notes that the word for Master (δεσπότης) is often used of a master of slaves (e.g. 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18) and so the purchase in view could well be that of slaves who change ownership.⁹² This would chime in very well with the approach taken by the authors of *Pierced for our Transgressions* who, after pointing out that redemption language has significant Old Testament roots in the exodus from slavery in Egypt, go on to say,

“Yet 1 Cor. 10:1-10 reminds us that some who experienced this outwardly did not enjoy the blessings of final salvation... some who *outwardly* experienced the blessings of the Christian life were not truly born again. Thus being ‘bought’ in 2 Pet. 2:1 most likely refers to this outward perspective, and need not imply that those guilty of ‘denying the sovereign Lord’ had been *inwardly* redeemed.”⁹³

Schreiner’s interpretation works along the same lines:

“I would suggest that Peter used phenomenological language... Peter said that they were bought by Jesus Christ, in the sense that they gave every indication initially of genuine faith. In every church there are members who appear to be believers and who should be accepted as believers according to the judgment of charity. As time elapses and difficulties arise, it becomes apparent that they are wolves in the flock (Acts 20:29-30), that though they called on Jesus as Lord their disobedience shows that he *never* knew them.”⁹⁴

On the same lines we should also note that the people in view in 2 Peter 2:1 are not “unbelievers” generally, or the God-hating outside world which unlimited atonement advocates would like to address with the news that Christ died for them. They are professing Christians, members of the church (they are “among you”, ἐν ὑμῖν), and even leaders. This verse does not refer to people in general who potentially could benefit from the atonement if they would only believe, and so it cannot prove quite as much as Arminian or 4-point Calvinist interpreters would like it to. D. G. McCartney even goes as far as to say that, “since Peter gives no indication whatever that all people without distinction are the slaves of Christ, the reference to Christ’s purchasing of ‘them’ as his slaves supports rather than denies the definiteness of the atonement.”⁹⁵ Certainly what it does show, like Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11, is that professing Christians within the church (whatever their ultimate eternal destiny or true spiritual state might be) can be spoken of in Scripture as if they were beneficiaries of the salvation won for the decretally elect on the cross.⁹⁶ This falls far short of demonstrating that everybody on the planet can be spoken of (or to) in that same way, potentially or otherwise.

Moreover, as Schreiner astutely points out, “The entire discussion on limited atonement in this verse cannot be segregated from the issue of whether believers can truly apostatize.”⁹⁷ Many commentators on Romans 14:15 would also see the big doctrinal issue in that text not as unlimited atonement (which, after all, is supposed to

⁹¹ E.g. 1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9, 14:3-4. See T. R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* NAC 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holdman, 2003), page 330. Some small doubt remains since, as Owen and Long point out, there is usually some reference to the price paid (e.g. the blood of Christ) in soteriological uses. Owen also expresses doubts as to whether δεσπότης, master, refers to Christ.

⁹² I. H. Marshall, “The Development of the Concept of Redemption” in R. J. Banks (ed.), *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L. L. Morris on his 60th Birthday* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), page 159 (and see footnote 1 on that page).

⁹³ Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions*, page 275 footnote 78. Cf. Owen, *The Death of Death*, page 362 contrasting reality with apprehension and profession, Turretin, *Institutes* 2.14.XIV.xliv on page 476 contrasting internal, spiritual, and real with external and apparent as to profession, and Grudem’s similar approach to different texts in *Systematic Theology*, page 599.

⁹⁴ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, page 331 (emphasis original). See his similar argument in T. R. Schreiner, *Romans* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), page 735 footnote 17 on Romans 14:15 which he says is not an argument for the truly elect being lost, since Paul “refers to believers phenomenologically, that is, at the level of appearances, rather than at the level of true spiritual reality.”

⁹⁵ D. G. McCartney, “Atonement in James, Peter and Jude” in C. E. Hill and F. A. James (eds.), *The Glory of the Atonement*, page 179.

⁹⁶ Indeed, professing Christians are said by Paul to be “chosen by God” in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. He knows their election (from ἐκλογή the same word as in Romans 9:11). Assuming that Paul, even as an apostle, did not have special infallible knowledge of their individual elect/non-elect status, it is plausible to conclude that this is phenomenological language of some kind, based on appearances and ascribing to them, as a group perhaps, what may only have been true *decretally* (eternally) of a proportion of them. Of course, we know from elsewhere that being phenomenologically part of the community of faith does not guarantee eternal salvation, as Matthew 7:21-23 makes very clear.

⁹⁷ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, page 330.

focus on *unbelievers* and all indiscriminately) but as the perseverance of the saints.⁹⁸ These things are of course connected (as all the petals of this particular TULIP are) but the biggest issue in 2 Peter 2 is the non-perseverance and ultimate condemnation of some who outwardly may sound like believers. They were teachers of the church, feasting with them, outwardly identified with true believers, and holding out the promise of freedom to others - and yet their immoral, licentious lifestyle was a tacit denial of Christ's ownership of them and contradicted the "way of righteousness" they knew. If, however, we reject the language of outward appearance and say that Christ truly and absolutely atoned for their sin (rather than 'bought them' phenomenologically speaking) then the real question is what becomes of the guarantee of their preservation and final inheritance?

That is a question outside the scope of this essay, but interestingly it is very much in Peter's sights later in the same chapter (2 Peter 2:20-22). Peter teaches that those who are genuinely granted faith (2 Peter 1:1) are effectually called by God's glory and granted everything required for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The "elect exiles" are sprinkled with Christ's blood, born again, and will be preserved by God's power for an imperishable heavenly inheritance (1 Peter 1:1-5). And yet on the Arminian or Amyraldian reading of 2 Peter 2:1 all this is called into question because someone for whom Christ died, someone who was sprinkled with his blood and truly regenerated, will be eternally condemned and fail to enter the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The only convincing way I have found to avoid this conclusion is to deny that 2 Peter 2:1 is talking about a real effective atonement for such people.⁹⁹ As Murray puts it, "The non-elect enjoy many benefits that accrue *from* the atonement but they do not partake of the *atonement*."¹⁰⁰ Truly effective atonement is reserved for the truly elect, by God's design.

Therefore we conclude that there is a strong positive case for limited atonement, properly defined, in the Bible itself. Moreover, this position has greater explanatory power when it comes to the apparently universal texts and the apostasy passages than alternative interpretations, which often create more problems than they solve and are not as contextually sensitive.

PART THREE: HISTORICAL AND DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. From the Fathers to the Reformation

The extent of God's intentions in sending his son to die did not become a major area of dispute until after the Reformation. Late sixteenth century theologians were not, however, the first to ponder the issue as it arose from a study of the biblical data. Jerome (345-420),¹⁰¹ Augustine (354-430),¹⁰² Prosper of Aquitaine (390-455),¹⁰³ and Peter Lombard (1100-1160) all wrestled with it in some way, and although they were not as clear and developed as later theologians on this point they provided much of the standard exegetical and theological foundations for later thinking.

Augustine, for instance, when commenting on 1 Timothy 2:4 "[God] desires all men to be saved" comments, "we are to understand by 'all men,' the human race in all its varieties of rank and circumstances." This was his preferred understanding of the text although he adds, "we may interpret it in any other way we please, so long as we are not compelled to believe that the omnipotent God has willed anything to be done which was not done" i.e. that no-one God wants to save can finally end up in hell.¹⁰⁴ And from Lombard comes the

⁹⁸ Which is the doctrinal issue raised re: Romans 14:15 by Stott, *ibid.*, page 366; L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* PILLAR (Leicester: IVP, 1988), page 487 footnote 58; T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, page 735 footnote 17.

⁹⁹ Or as McCartney, "Atonement in James, Peter and Jude", page 179 footnote 5 puts it: "the passage is not really intended to address the issue of the believer's true internal regeneration and cleansing by the atoning redemptive work of the cross."

¹⁰⁰ Murray, "The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel", page 69 (emphasis original).

¹⁰¹ See Blacketer, "Definite Atonement", page 308.

¹⁰² Blacketer, *ibid.*, pages 308-310 who is even more persuasive on this than W. R. Godfrey, "Reformed Thought On The Extent Of The Atonement To 1618" in *Westminster Theological Journal* 37.2 (Winter 1974), pages 133-134. Cf. G. M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), pages 4-5. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 548 is perhaps too confident of Augustine's entire approval when he calls limited atonement "the Augustinian doctrine".

¹⁰³ W. R. Godfrey, "Reformed Thought", pages 135-136.

¹⁰⁴ *Enchiridion* XXVII, 103 in P. Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Volume 3 First Series* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, [1887] 1999), pages 270-271. The chapter begins, "Accordingly, when we hear and read in Scripture that He 'will have all men to be saved,'

commonly accepted formula that Christ offered himself “for all, with respect to the sufficiency of the ransom, but for the elect alone with regard to its efficacy, because it effects salvation for the predestined alone.”¹⁰⁵

The lesser known monk Gottschalk of Orbais (808-867) explicitly held to limited atonement, in a way that got him into trouble with his Archbishop.¹⁰⁶ Aquinas (1225-1274) also taught several key elements of the later doctrine, restricting, for instance, the efficacy of Christ’s satisfaction to the elect.¹⁰⁷ As Turretin says, “Among the ancients, it appears that the universality of redemption [i.e. ‘unlimited atonement’, not universalism] was contended for by the Pelagians and Semipelagians”¹⁰⁸ and was not something distinctively affirmed by the orthodox.

So the subject was not raised for the first time in the seventeenth century. We will look more at Calvin’s view below, but the sixteenth century reformers were not unaware of the distinctions that could be made in terms of the extent of the atonement. Martin Luther, for instance, when commenting on Romans 8:28-39 wrote that verses in Scripture about the salvation of all (such as 1 Timothy 2:4), “must be understood only with respect to the elect... Christ did not die for absolutely all.”¹⁰⁹

2. John Calvin's view

We come now to look at the debate which has raged over what Calvin thought on this issue, which is of particular relevance to those who see him as the fountainhead of Reformed theology in its “pristine spirit”¹¹⁰ and claim to be in that same tradition today. Given Calvin’s great stature and reputation amongst Protestant and particularly Reformed theologians in the seventeenth century, it is no wonder that both sides in the debate over the extent of the atonement looked to his writings for support. This had already begun to happen in the seventeenth century,¹¹¹ but claiming Calvin for support has also been a more modern occupation too. People have been keen to discover what Calvin might have said had he been at Dort. Yet, as Richard Muller writes,

“Virtually all these studies exist primarily for the sake of enlisting Calvin’s support in the establishment or justification of a contemporary theological program – and their method consists in the gathering of comments from various of Calvin’s works for the sake of reframing them into a full-scale doctrine either of limited, or universal, or, indeed, hypothetically universal atonement.”¹¹²

One example of this is the “Calvin against the Calvinists” school of thought which pits the great Genevan reformer against those who claimed to be his theological successors.¹¹³ Epitomising this view, R. T. Kendall’s *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* avers that Calvin was not himself a Calvinist on the point of limited

although we know well that all men are not saved, we are not on that account to restrict the omnipotence of God, but are rather to understand the Scripture, ‘Who will have all men to be saved,’ as meaning that no man is saved unless God wills his salvation... and that, therefore, we should pray Him to will our salvation, because if He will it, it must necessarily be accomplished” (page 270).

¹⁰⁵ *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae* 3.20.5 (Grottaferrata: Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1981), 2:128 (Migne, *PL*, 3.20.3, volume 192, column 799).

¹⁰⁶ Blacketer, “Definite Atonement”, pages 310-311. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, page 5 narrates how Gottschalk was imprisoned by the Archbishop of Rheims who took the opposite view, and that a great debate ensued between 849-860.

¹⁰⁷ He affirms Lombard’s formula, and restricts the efficacy of the cross to the elect in his comments on 1 Timothy 4:10. See Blacketer, “Definite Atonement”, page 312.

¹⁰⁸ See F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 2.14.XIV.ii on page 455.

¹⁰⁹ M. Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans* edited and translated by W. Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), page 252 (scholia in Romans 8, II). Cf. T. George, *Theology of the Reformers*, page 77.

¹¹⁰ To use Blacketer’s phrase from “Definite Atonement”, page 305: “Barthian historians... attempt to demonstrate that this doctrine was not to be found in John Calvin and thus did not belong to the pristine spirit of Reformed theology.”

¹¹¹ See, classically, Moses Amyraut’s, *Defence de la Doctrine de Calvin* (Saumur, 1644) for instance. Cf. B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pages 99-100.

¹¹² R. A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), page 6.

¹¹³ See the eponymous article by B. Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists” in G. E. Duffield, *John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) pages 19-37. Earlier, Paul Van Duren had denied that Calvin taught limited atonement but without going further to pit Calvin against the Calvinists. See P. Van Duren, *Christ in our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957) and the unfavourable review of this by J. Murray in *Collected Writings of John Murray Volume 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), pages 310-314.

atonement.¹¹⁴ Kendall's position is that Calvin limited the extent of the *intercession* of Christ rather than his work of atonement.¹¹⁵ Indeed, he claims that "Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin (1509-64) is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men."¹¹⁶

To say the least, it is bold to make a highly disputed point so essential to the wider structure of Calvin's theology, especially since Calvin never directly addressed the question "For whom did Christ die?" Kendall assures us, however, that although Arminius differs with Calvin about the extent of Christ's intercession, "Arminius and Calvin have in common the belief that Christ died for all."¹¹⁷ The idea of universal atonement was obvious for Calvin because of the passages of Scripture which speak of Christ dying for "all" or for "the world"; he did not need to expound this at length because it was so clear from the Bible itself, Kendall declares, and in his commentaries "he generally leaves verses like these alone, but never does he explain, for example, that 'all' does not mean *all* or 'world' does not mean *world*."¹¹⁸

Moreover, asserts Kendall, the puritans who did teach limited atonement and professed to be following in his tracks actually ended up opposing and repudiating Calvin's theology and the basic thrust of Reformation teaching. Their theology led to "endless introspection, the constant checking of the spiritual pulse for the right 'effects', and, possibly, legalism."¹¹⁹ What's more it was fatally flawed by "the crypto-Arminian doctrine of faith that pervaded Westminster theology" (the theology of the Westminster Assembly and divines).¹²⁰ Thus was Calvin's work undone by those calling themselves Calvinists. The root of this error was, apparently, the explicit teaching of Calvin's successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza, on limited atonement.¹²¹

In answer to this (and some of Kendall's other charges), Paul Helm's *Calvin and the Calvinists* is a classic response.¹²² He argues "both that his account of Calvin is inaccurate and that he provides a wildly exaggerated picture of Puritanism."¹²³ He points out that Kendall's view that Calvin limits the intercession of Christ is so novel as to have never been noticed by any other citable reader of Calvin. Though it is technically possible that no-one prior to Kendall writing his doctorate had spotted something of absolutely crucial importance to Calvin

¹¹⁴ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* was first issued in 1981 by OUP and is, in essence, his 1976 D.Phil thesis. On page viii Kendall puts it succinctly when he says, "As for Calvin's own 'Calvinism', I would give him four-and-a-half points out of the traditional five."

¹¹⁵ Kendall, *ibid.*, page vii and 13-16. Interestingly J. C. Ryle says the same thing: "The atonement was made for all the world, though it is applied to and enjoyed by none but believers. – Christ's intercession is the peculiar privilege of His people." *Expository Thoughts on John, volume 1*, page 62.

¹¹⁶ Kendall, *ibid.*, page 13

¹¹⁷ Kendall, *ibid.*, page 149.

¹¹⁸ Kendall, *ibid.*, page 13 footnote 2. On page viii of the 1997 reissue of his book, Kendall says "I have added Appendix I at the end to let the unbiased reader have a wider look at some of Calvin's statements regarding the extent of the atonement." Strangely, however, he omits any quotations from Calvin's commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1-6 (a classic passage in limited atonement discussions) where Calvin is very careful to say, on more than one occasion, that "all" does not mean "all without exception". Indeed, on 1 Timothy 2:5 he insists "The universal term *all* must always be referred to classes of men, and not to persons." See J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Volume XXI* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), page 57. On page 225 of his book, Kendall does however quote Calvin's comments on 1 John 2:2 where he explains that the view which sees "the world" in that verse as including even the reprobate (as Kendall would like it to) is a fanatical dream and a monstrous absurdity!

¹¹⁹ Kendall, *ibid.*, page 208.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, page 209.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, page 38. Others also identify Beza as "the chief culprit in this move away from the scriptural roots of the reformation" according to Blacketer, "Definite Atonement", page 306. See footnote 8 on page 307 for details of studies which effectively redraw this distorted picture of Beza as the corrupter of Calvinism and the withering scepticism about Kendall's thesis in R. Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement" in *Westminster Theological Journal* 47.2 (Fall 1985), pages 224-225: "can we really accept that his influence was so very far-reaching that he practically single-handedly reverted the whole trend in Reformed circles, putting himself at loggerheads not only with Calvin, but as it is alleged, with Scripture itself, and this without producing any major work centering on this topic? Somehow a lot more light should be shed on this area before such an unlikely development can be assumed to have taken place."

¹²² The basic controversy about the continuity of later Calvinism with Calvin pre-dates the Kendall-Helm exchange. See for instance the opposing views of R. Nicole, *Moyse Amyraut (1596-1664) and the Controversy on Universal Grace, First Phase (1634-1637)* (PhD Dissertation: Harvard, 1966) as contrasted with B. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*.

¹²³ P. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1982] 1998), page 10. Our focus here in this section is on Calvin, but for a vigorous challenge to the old caricatures of puritan scholastic theology see the C. R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (eds.), *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) and the groundbreaking work of R. A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1986).

(as Kendall alleges), it is not particularly plausible.¹²⁴ He also demonstrates that although Calvin does not speak of a limited atonement in those words he does teach all the elements of the doctrine of definite atonement, concluding that, “Calvin teaches that the death of Christ actually remitted sin, that such remission was for the elect, and that Christ intended to die for the elect.”¹²⁵

Helm very effectively challenges Kendall’s exegesis of Calvin’s commentaries to show that to make them favour Kendall’s view they must be divorced from their context and twisted somewhat.¹²⁶ As Murray was quick to argue, “if there are any texts which offered Calvin the opportunity to set forth the doctrine of universal atonement they are 1 John 2:2 and 1 Timothy 2:4, 6”¹²⁷ and yet it is precisely when commenting on those texts that Calvin is so careful to say that “the whole world” for which Christ’s propitiation was offered “does not include all the reprobate”¹²⁸ and that the “all” whom God wishes to save and for whom Christ has paid the ransom “must always be referred to classes of men, and not to persons”.¹²⁹ Hence Helm is right to conclude that, “Kendall has often been driven to mangle and distort the evidence and confidently to put forward novel views for which there is little or no support.”¹³⁰

Amongst Barthian reinterpreters of Calvin the issue of limited atonement arises as part of a consideration of Christ’s incarnational union with humanity. Did he enter into a redemptive union with all humanity simply by virtue of taking human flesh, or was that union non-redemptive in and of itself? As Kennedy puts it, “Since Christ shared this common fraternal union with all of humanity, in Calvin’s mind, Christ’s death could have been nothing other than a death for all of humanity.”¹³¹ How a person can be incarnationally united to Christ and yet still end up lost is a question that “has bedevilled the Barthian *schema* and led to regular charges of universalism.”¹³² Certainly the incarnation was a prerequisite for the atonement,¹³³ which Calvin spends some time defending in *Institutes* II.xii. Yet, as a recent study of Calvin’s correspondence with Vermigli makes clear, he certainly did not consider incarnational union to be salvific.¹³⁴ As Bavinck says, “if the incarnation had itself effected the reconciliation and union of God and man, there would have been no place for a living, and especially not for a dying, of the Lord Jesus.”¹³⁵

Sometimes quoted is this statement by Calvin where he certainly seems to assume a doctrine of limited atonement, in the context of his sacramental polemics against Heshusius:

¹²⁴ Helm, *ibid.*, page 36-38. It is not particularly biblical to separate these things either. There are some for whom Christ explicitly does not pray (e.g. in John 17:9), and it seems that those for whom he died are the same group as those he intercedes for (e.g. Romans 8:34).

¹²⁵ Helm, *ibid.*, page 30.

¹²⁶ Helm, *ibid.*, pages 38-46.

¹²⁷ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: volume 4*, page 313 (in a review of Van Duren’s book, *Christ in our Place*).

¹²⁸ J. Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXII* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), page 173 (on 1 John 2:2). Moreover, when he says of the disputed clause of 1 John 2:2, “I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretence extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself” he assumes that if the expiation or propitiation is made for someone then their *salvation* is assured. With that linkage he could not have held to unlimited atonement without being a universalist (unless he was knowingly inconsistent with his own exegesis, which – we must confess - is always a possibility for a mere mortal).

¹²⁹ J. Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXI* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), page 57 (on 1 Timothy 2:4). Cf. pages 54-55 where he says, “the Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception... God invites all equally to partake salvation. But the present discourse relates to classes of men, and not to individual personas; for his sole object is, to include in this number princes and foreign nations.”

¹³⁰ Helm, *ibid.*, page 80.

¹³¹ K. D. Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement* (New York, Peter Lang, 2002), page 149. A *spiritual* union is necessary on top of this in order for the benefits of Christ’s work to be appropriated; the incarnational union is not of itself salvific on Kennedy’s scheme. But see J. B. Torrance, “The Incarnation and ‘Limited Atonement’”, pages 32-40 and T. Hart, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind”, especially pages 79-84. Kennedy acknowledges an affinity to Hart on page 14.

¹³² A. T. B. McGowan, “Was Westminster Calvinist?” in L. Quigley (ed.), *Reformed Theology in Contemporary Perspective: Westminster: Yesterday, Today – and Tomorrow?* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006), page 55.

¹³³ See R. A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Fearn: Mentor, 1999), pages 25-44 (also published as *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Atonement* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Co, 1983).

¹³⁴ See M. A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, forthcoming), chapter 4. I am grateful to Dr. Garcia for a pre-publication copy of his tremendously helpful book.

¹³⁵ H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), page 331 (chapter XVII).

“...the first thing to be explained is how Christ is present with unbelievers, as being the spiritual food of souls and, in short, the life and salvation of the world... I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was *not crucified for them*, and how they can drink the blood which was *not shed to expiate their sins*?”¹³⁶

Although some may quibble even at this,¹³⁷ it is safe to conclude with Garcia that “Calvin’s line of thinking bears a more positive relationship to the later terminology of a limited atonement than some have wished to perceive.”¹³⁸ It is certainly correct to affirm with Blocher that, “Calvin gives no hint of hypothetical universalism when commenting on Amyraldian proof-texts.”¹³⁹ What he might have said at Dort must remain a mystery and somewhat ambiguous, in that he can be selectively quoted on either side of the debate. Given what was said above about the pre-history of the debate, Calvin had probably at least brushed up against the idea of limited atonement in his lifetime,¹⁴⁰ and it is possible that he deliberately avoided taking a view in a more explicit discussion of it. Yet I do not think his underlying sympathies (given his doctrine of God’s sovereignty and Christ’s penal substitutionary atonement) would have been with the Arminians, or later with the Amyraldians or Barthians.¹⁴¹

Whether this is as important as the amount of ink spilled on the question would suggest is uncertain. The Reformed tradition was not, of course, the brainchild of just one man, even a giant like Calvin. Bucer, Vermigli, Zanchi and others all stood in that same theological current, and were unambiguous about definite atonement. It is certainly noteworthy that Calvin never took issue with them about this.¹⁴² Acknowledging that it is a “fallacious assumption that Calvin’s thought should be the sole criterion of what is genuinely Reformed”¹⁴³ should facilitate a more historically accurate and less emotionally weighted assessment of Calvin’s doctrine.

3. The Synod of Dort

The issue of God’s intent in the atonement became a major dividing issue only in the early seventeenth century. After the death of Arminius in 1609, forty-six of his followers in the Netherlands issued their ‘Remonstrance’ or protest against the Calvinist orthodoxy of the great majority of their fellow ministers. They summarised their creed under five points concerning predestination, the atonement, faith, grace, and perseverance. Point two of the Remonstrance said,

“Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no-one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer, according to the word of the Gospel (Jn 3:16): ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ And in 1 Jn 2:2: ‘And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.’”¹⁴⁴

A counter-remonstrance was issued by Calvinists and a conference was held in 1611 between the two parties but with no agreement reached.¹⁴⁵ Then in 1618 after much controversy and preparation, the National Synod of

¹³⁶ (my emphasis) J. Calvin, “Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper in order to Dissipate the Mists of Tileman Heshusius” in *Treatises on the Sacraments* (Fearn: Christian Heritage, 2002), page 527 (*De Vera Participatione*, CO 9.484).

¹³⁷ Garcia notes that a small degree of uncertainty must remain because we don’t have access to Heshusius’s original to which Calvin is responding. See also the slight hesitations of an otherwise positive H. Blocher, “The Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology”, pages 280-281 (footnote 8) and the less convincing cavils of Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, page 39 (footnote 58).

¹³⁸ Dr. Garcia asked me not to quote page numbers from his pre-publication version, as these will change when the final version is published. The quotation is from chapter 4.

¹³⁹ H. Blocher, “The Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology”, page 280.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, page 12 makes a good case for believing Calvin was at least aware of the issue.

¹⁴¹ Cf. the similar conclusion of McGowan in “Was Westminster Calvinist?”, page 62.

¹⁴² As Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 672 footnote 3 observes.

¹⁴³ Blacketer, “Definite Atonement”, page 307, 315-317.

¹⁴⁴ Text in G. Bray (ed.), *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1994), page 454. Cf. P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom Volume 3: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), page 546. Schaff gives the date of the Arminian Articles as 1610 when they were laid before the estates of Holland and West Friesland, but Bray dates them from the official Dutch edition published in 1612.

¹⁴⁵ See P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom volume 1: The History of Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pages 509-519.

Dort was convened to respond to these five points.¹⁴⁶ As Schaff notes, this was “the only Synod of a quasi-ecumenical character in the history of the Reformed Churches” since delegates from the Reformed churches of several other countries were invited to attend with voting rights.¹⁴⁷ The rejection of Arminianism was a foregone conclusion, however, since no Remonstrant delegates were permitted (though they did attend and were interviewed about their teaching). Yet the Synod was far from monochrome, with various shades of opinion expressed on several issues, not least on the atonement.

This means that the final agreed statement was a consensus document which on this doctrine especially left several loose ends and questions unanswered.¹⁴⁸ For instance, G. M. Thomas states that “an explicit link between infinite sufficiency and indiscriminate preaching is avoided... [and] no explanation is offered as to how the sufficiency of Christ’s death relates to the non-elect... As a result of the biggest disagreement of the Synod, it was impossible to find an acceptable way of relating universal and particular aspects of the atonement in the final document.”¹⁴⁹ Space was left for different Reformed churches to fill in such gaps in their own distinctive ways while preserving a clear framework of consensus against the Arminian position. Nor are the Canons of Dort as tightly logical and neat as some would like to claim since in them there is, as Thomas says, “no attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between the assertion of universal sufficiency, preaching and inexcusability, on the one hand, and limited saving will and efficacy on the other.”¹⁵⁰

The agreed text on this “Second Head of Doctrine” includes these significant articles:

“The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.” (Article 3)

“the promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.” (Article 5)

“And, whereas many who are called by the gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief; this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross, but is wholly to be imputed to themselves.” (Article 6)

“it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to Him by the Father; that he should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he purchased for them by his death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in his own presence forever.” (Article 8).¹⁵¹

This is limited atonement in its classic statement: anti-Arminian on the one hand, and yet moderate when compared with some of the more rigidly particularistic predestinarian theologies around at the time. It is vital to note what the points at issue at Dort were, what was said and what was not said. The Lombardian formula of “sufficient for all, efficacious for the elect” is not employed in quite the way it had been previously. While many could see the usefulness of such a memorable distinction it was not universally popular with Calvinists.

¹⁴⁶ Note that the famous “Five Points of Calvinism” were therefore framed in a polemical content against the original “Five Points of Arminianism.” They were not discussed in the order which the later mnemonic TULIP would suggest (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints), although this can be a helpful memory aid and seems peculiarly appropriate when summarising the conclusions of a meeting in Holland.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, page 514.

¹⁴⁸ See Milton’s comments in *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, page 295 that “The drawing up of the canons was a complex and acrimonious affair” which took three weeks between sessions 128 and 129 of the Synod (page 296).

¹⁴⁹ G. M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, page 133.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, page 133.

¹⁵¹ See the text in P. Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, pages 561-564 (Latin) and 586-587 (English). See also G. Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation*, pages 463-466 which includes a translation of the “Rejection of Errors” section not in Schaff. The 1619 English translation (including the Rejection of Errors section) can be found in A. Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, pages 305-308.

Calvin himself, though he admits the truth of it, thought it irrelevant where others often invoked it,¹⁵² and while many delegations did utilise a form of it in their submissions, the Genevans at Dort refused to.¹⁵³ They did not deny the infinite worth and sufficiency of the atonement – see Articles 3 and 6 above where it is linked to the deity of the one dying – but they wanted to avoid the impression that it was ever God’s plan to actually save everyone through this infinitely sufficient sacrifice. Blacketer and Cunningham both highlight that it can be misused or misinterpreted in such a way that an Arminian could affirm it, which would of course make it less useful in this polemical context, and that it lacks the key element of clearly defining God’s intention.¹⁵⁴

At Dort, advocates of this doctrine were very careful to affirm that there should be ‘promiscuous’ preaching of the gospel to all without distinction, and that the atonement was utterly sufficient to cover the sins of everyone who ever lived. They explicitly framed their doctrine so as to rule out potentially erroneous conclusions (e.g. certain hyper-calvinist errors) in the same way those in the Patristic period guarded the doctrine of the Trinity from the errors of tri-theism or modalism. So that to say limited atonement itself implies lack of evangelism or potentially leads to a narrow-minded, insular faith would be on a par with accusing Athanasius of being a ‘potential’ tri-theist - it ignores what was specifically affirmed and denied. Moreover, of course, later advocates of Dort’s doctrine such as George Whitefield and Charles Spurgeon are among the most successful evangelists in history and rejected hyper-calvinism in their example as well as their teaching.¹⁵⁵

4. The Anglican view

Amongst Anglicans, there has sometimes been debate over what the official position of the Church of England is on this issue. Do the official formularies of the Church of England have anything to say on the subject which would bind confessional Anglicans to a particular view? Some have claimed that Article 31 of *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* settles the issue against limited atonement: “The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual.”¹⁵⁶ This is the line taken by Terry L. Miethe in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, where he questions how Jim Packer can be both an advocate of limited atonement and an Anglican minister.¹⁵⁷ Miethe also claims, along with the respected Anglican theologian D. Broughton Knox, that the *BCP*’s Catechism teaches unlimited atonement when it asks “What dost thou chiefly learn in these Articles of thy Belief?” and the answer is given, “I learn to believe in... God the Son, Who hath redeemed me, and all mankind.”¹⁵⁸ Other texts in the formularies have occasionally been cited (less successfully) in this debate.¹⁵⁹

Packer’s withering response regarding Article 31 is that “Miethe’s whole discussion is unsatisfying... he treats echoes of biblical phraseology in sixteenth-century Anglican formularies as the Church of England taking sides

¹⁵² E.g. J. Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume XXII*, page 173 (on 1 John 2:2). That is not to say he *rejected* it as Kendall suggests. Cf. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, page 39.

¹⁵³ As did the delegations from Emden, Overijssel, and North Holland. See Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, pages 138-140.

¹⁵⁴ Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective”, page 311. Cunningham, *Historical Theology: Volume 2*, page 332.

¹⁵⁵ See, especially, I. Murray, *Spurgeon and Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995).

¹⁵⁶ See for instance how Article 31 (and the BCP Catechism) were used by John McLeod Campbell in his heresy trial in G. M. Tuttle, *So Rich an Soil*, page 47. Cf. R. P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, page 13.

¹⁵⁷ See T. L. Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement”, page 88. He also cites similar words from the Holy Communion service in the *Book of Common Prayer* in support of this contention.

¹⁵⁸ See Miethe, *ibid.*, footnote 45 on page 95, and D. B. Knox, “Some aspects of the atonement”, page 262. I believe the use of the Catechism and Prayer Book to oppose limited atonement may go back to Bishop Francis White at the York House Conference in 1626 where he used those documents to pillory some aspects of Dort’s teaching as inconsistent with the Church of England’s doctrine, according to N. Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c.1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). For example, he said, “The Dortists... have denied that Christ died for all men.” On such a basis “how could we say to all communicants whatsoever ‘The Body of our Lord which was given for thee’, as we are bound to say?” (pages 176-177).

¹⁵⁹ For example, according to Toplady, Dr. Nowell averred that the *Te Deum* in Morning Prayer of the *BCP* asserts universal atonement when it says of Christ, “When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death: thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers”. Toplady’s reply was that “The Church, in this place, does evidently limit redemption to only a part of mankind. For, by saying that Christ opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers, she virtually declares that he opened heaven to believers only: so that in the judgment of the Church, they alone were intentionally redeemed by Christ who should finally believe. And what is this but the very essence of that innocent, yet much dreaded thing, called Calvinism?” A. M. Toplady, *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism in The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady* (Harrisburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), page 641. I’m not convinced that either side proves their point conclusively by citing this text, but Toplady was surely right to point out the faulty logic of the Arminian exegesis of it.

in a seventeenth-century debate”.¹⁶⁰ This is probably why there is no discussion of the extent of the atonement with regard to Article 31 in any of the standard commentaries on the Articles.¹⁶¹ It is simply not what this Article is concerned with. Apart from Packer’s accusation of anachronism (which may not be precisely accurate considering what was said above about pre-seventeenth century awareness of the question) there is even more that could be said against such exegesis of the Anglican formularies. Considered in the context of the rest of Article 31 itself, it is clear that the disputed line in the first half of the Article is intimately linked to the assertion in the second part against the Roman Catholic Mass. To quote the Article in full:

The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits.

Thus it is abundantly plain that this Article, when read in its immediate context, is an assertion of the *sufficiency* of the atonement designed to undercut the doctrine and practice of Mass sacrifice: the “wherefore” in the middle is crucial. As Oliver O’Donovan rightly concludes, the “cardinal assertion of Article 31” is that “there is no *other* grace available to mankind than that offering once made...Our salvation is wrought for us in the death and resurrection of a first-century man - not strung out week by week in ritual representation through history.”¹⁶²

It would therefore be irresponsible to handle half of Article 31 as if it were a proof text for a doctrine of the universality of the atonement. The context should not be ignored when interpreting any text, a point of even greater importance when it is also noted that this Article comes in the section (Articles 25-31) devoted to the sacraments and not, for instance, in the section on salvation (Articles 11-18) where soteriological concerns are concentrated.¹⁶³ Cardinal Newman ran aground on this very Article in his Tract 90 when he insisted the Roman Catholic Mass was not being rejected here because “sacrifices of Masses” was plural. In the end he realised the impossibility of that interpretation and left the Church of England. Advocates of universal atonement need not do that of course, but it would be safer for them not to place so much weight on an equally implausible interpretation of Article 31.

This stress on the sufficiency of the atonement is also characteristic of the other Anglican formularies. The Homilies, for example, in preaching the cross, present it as sufficient to pay the ransom for all who truly believe in Christ:

¹⁶⁰ Packer, “The Love of God: Universal and Particular” in T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (eds.), *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), page 289. He is referring to the Article’s echoing of 1 John 2:2 that the atonement was for the “sins of the whole world”. Interestingly neither the Article nor the Communion liturgy quote that verse’s negative assertion that Christ was a propitiation for our sins “*and not for ours only*”, which may have made this a more persuasive argument for the Arminian case.

¹⁶¹ See, for example, W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Vine Books, 1978); O. O’Donovan, *On The 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986); E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1935); T. P. Boulton, *An Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England in an Exposition of The Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1875); G. Burnet, *An Exposition of the XXXIX Articles of the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1699] 1814); E. H. Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion: Historical and Doctrinal* (H. B. Durand: New York, 1865); T. R. Jones, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles by the Reformers* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co, 1849) which contains extracts from Cranmer, Latimer, Hooper, Ridley, Jewel and others on each of the Articles, showing (under Article 31 on pages 199-206) that their emphasis was firmly on the *sufficiency* of the atonement as against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass. I have yet to find *any* commentary on the Articles which discusses limited atonement under Article 31. Even E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology on the Basis of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Houston, Texas: Classical Anglican Press, 2000) who has a section on limited atonement (pages 229-232) and is not sympathetic to the classic definition of it, does not mention Article 31.

¹⁶² O’Donovan, *On The 39 Articles*, page 125 (italics original).

¹⁶³ I pass over consideration of the Catechism text because of limitations of space. Suffice to say I think it is ambiguous at best, yet if it *could* be shown to be an assertion of unlimited atonement it would also have to be admitted that as a summary of the second article of the Apostles Creed (which is what it is supposed to be) it says rather more than is warranted by that Creed itself.

“Christ, by his one oblation and once offering of himself upon the cross, hath taken away our sins, and hath restored us again into God's favour, so fully and perfectly, that no other sacrifice for sin shall hereafter be requisite or needful in all the world.”¹⁶⁴

“Christ is now made the righteousness of all them that truly do believe in him. He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the Law in his life...”¹⁶⁵

“So pleasant was this sacrifice and oblation of his Son's death, which he so obediently and innocently suffered, that he would take it for the only and full amends for all the sins of the world. And such favour did he purchase, by his death, of his heavenly Father for us, that, for the merit thereof - if we be true Christians indeed, and not in word only - we be now fully in God's grace again, and clearly discharged from our sin.”¹⁶⁶

The clear stress here is on the uniqueness and universal sufficiency of the cross for all who truly believe, in the same polemical atmosphere where some were claiming other satisfactions for sin were available.

Article 17, of course, is more clearly focused on the issue of predestination and God's eternal plan, stating that:

Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby, before the foundations of the world were laid, He hath constantly decreed by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation as vessels made to honour.

Given that there is no explicit mention of the debate between limited and unlimited accounts of the atonement here, which would be more consistent with the tenor of this Article? What it appears to teach is that in eternity God chose a group of people and then worked out their deliverance from “curse and damnation” so he could bring them to “everlasting salvation”. “Those whom He hath chosen” are those who are delivered from curse and damnation (presumably by the cross). Those delivered from damnation are those who are brought to everlasting salvation. This is focused, intentional redemption. There is no mention in Article 17 of a conditional or hypothetical universalism, only of the salvation of the chosen. It is stressed, however, that who those “chosen” are remains a mystery to us (it is part of “His counsel secret to us”), which leaves the way open for a universal proclamation of the gospel. It is possible to make a very good case that an Arminian or Amyraldian spin on this Article would be far more contrived, and that limited atonement is fully consistent with how the Article describes God's plan.

Historically, there was an attempt in 1595 to clarify the Articles of Religion in an even more explicitly Calvinist direction. This failed in England, although the nine so-called Lambeth Articles were later incorporated into the Irish version of the articles by Archbishop Ussher.¹⁶⁷ These Lambeth Articles did not, however, contain an explicit statement on limited atonement,¹⁶⁸ otherwise they may not have been approved by Ussher, who was

¹⁶⁴ Book II: The Second Homily concerning the Death and Passion of our Saviour Christ in *Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be read in Churches* (Berith Publications: Lewes, 1986), page 298.

¹⁶⁵ Book I: Homily 3 “Of the Salvation of all mankind”, *ibid.*, page 15.

¹⁶⁶ Book II: “Of the Passion: for Good-Friday” in *ibid.*, page 287. There are two potentially ambiguous lines in the Homilies which could be used on the other side of the argument. They are both in “The Second Homily concerning the Death and Passion of our Saviour Christ” in Book II. First, the sermon speaks of Christ as “suffering death universally for all men” (*ibid.*, page 291) and then later exhorts the congregation thus: “O sinful man... Did Christ suffer his passion for thee, and wilt thou shew no compassion towards him?” (*ibid.*, page 294). The ambiguity is in whether this latter exhortation is addressing an unconverted man, or a sinful Christian. If it is definitely the former then this could be cited as an instance of an appeal based on an ‘unlimited’ atonement. However, given the more consistent stress on the *sufficiency* of the cross in the formularies generally, and the way in which all listeners are usually assumed to be professing (though sinful) Christians, I think it would be best to interpret these two texts in line with that broader picture. If anyone is minded to do otherwise then there should at least be a recognition of the tentative nature of such a conclusion and the weight of evidence on the other side.

¹⁶⁷ On the Lambeth Articles see P. Schaff, *The History of Creeds*, pages 658-662. On the Irish Articles (and their pedigree as “the chief basis of the Westminster Confession”) see pages 662-665. According to Fuller (as cited in Schaff, page 661), Dr. Reynolds also attempted to get the Lambeth Articles into the Prayer Book at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604.

¹⁶⁸ The Articles said: “1. God from eternity hath predestinated certain men unto life; certain men he hath reprobated. 2. The moving or efficient cause of predestination unto life is not the foresight of faith, or of perseverance, or of good works, or of any thing that is in the person predestinated, but only the good will and pleasure of God. 3. There is predetermined a certain number of the predestinate, which can neither be augmented nor diminished. 4. Those who are not predestinated to salvation shall be necessarily damned for their sins. 5. A true, living, and justifying faith, and the Spirit of God justifying [sanctifying], is not extinguished, falleth not away; it vanisheth not away in the elect, either finally or totally. 6. A man truly faithful, that is, such a one who is endued with a justifying faith, is certain, with the full assurance of faith, of the remission of his sins and of his everlasting salvation by Christ. 7. Saving grace

himself probably an Amyraldian.¹⁶⁹ Proposals from Bishop Carleton and others in the 1620s that the Canons of Dort be formerly established as authoritative in the Church of England were not followed through.¹⁷⁰ After the Restoration in 1660 when “Arminianism returned as a flood”¹⁷¹ the Church of England reverted to the *Thirty-nine Articles* without change or further clarification, despite the anti-puritan nature of that settlement and almost a century of further theological debate since they were first devised.¹⁷²

Thus the Articles have never been amended to either specifically include or exclude limited atonement. So we can say as regards the official standards of the Church of England that they make no definitive statement either for or against it *per se*, nor should we necessarily expect them to. Their ambivalence allows a certain breadth of views within a generally Reformed framework, and it remains debateable how consistent different views of the atonement would be within that system. The formularies do, however, very clearly declare the utter sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross for the salvation of everyone who believes.

PART FOUR: PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

There are two practical areas of ministry in which this doctrine is especially important: assurance and evangelism. With these, and a concluding reflection on the whole debate, we draw this essay to a close.

1. Evangelism

Some find it surprising that one can be a 5-point Calvinist and also believe in evangelism. Yet Calvinists have consistently rejected as a perversion any view that restricts gospel preaching. Calvinists do not remove the Parable of the Sower, and its promiscuous sowing of the seed of God’s word, from their Bibles. As Packer rightly says, “a Christian should evangelize better – more earnestly, more tirelessly, more expectantly – for being a Calvinist!”¹⁷³

Yet this does not comport well with a theory of evangelism which sees the essential message of the gospel as “Christ died for you”. Attachment to this theory of gospel presentation lies behind some objections to limited atonement. So, for example, Kendall insists that unlimited atonement is the correct doctrine and that it does matter – “I can say to anybody, ‘Christ died for you.’ In our evangelism this makes a real difference: certainly to the evangelist if not also to the person we are trying to reach for Christ.”¹⁷⁴ No less than four times in his short section on limited atonement, David Broughton Knox appeals to this formula: Preachers should be at liberty, he says, and indeed are obliged, to press home the gospel offer by saying to each sinner, “Christ died for you”;¹⁷⁵ it is improperly restrictive to deny the propriety of laying on the conscience of the unconverted their duty to repent because Christ died for them;¹⁷⁶ in fact “all may be told ‘Christ has died for you; therefore accept the proffered salvation’”;¹⁷⁷ and limited atonement “blunts the point of evangelism in preventing the pressing home of the claims of Christ on the consciences of the hearer, by interdicting such phrases as ‘Christ died for

is not given, is not granted, is not communicated to all men, by which they may be saved if they will. 8. No man can come unto Christ unless it shall be given unto him, and unless the Father shall draw him; and all men are not drawn by the Father, that they may come to the Son. 9. It is not in the will or power of every one to be saved.” For the text of the Articles see P. Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pages 523-524.

¹⁶⁹ According to Godfrey, “Reformed Thought”, page 169: “Although the term is anachronistic, Ussher’s views on the atonement... must be called Amyraldian.”

¹⁷⁰ See Milton, *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, page 381 and the details in N. Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, pages 152 and 176-177. Carleton himself opposed universal atonement, denying that it was “a truth of the Scripture, or the doctrine of the Church of England” according to A. M. Toplady, *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England in The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady*, page 245 note d (Section XIX).

¹⁷¹ The judgment of A. M. Toplady, *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England*, page 278 (Section XX).

¹⁷² On the Restoration Settlement see Lee Gatiss, *The Tragedy of 1662: The Ejection and Persecution of the Puritans* (London: Latimer Trust, 2007), especially pages 12-23.

¹⁷³ See J. I. Packer, “A Calvinist – and an Evangelist!” in *Serving the People of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer volume 2* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pages 209.

¹⁷⁴ Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, page viii.

¹⁷⁵ Knox, “Some aspects of the atonement”, page 261.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, page 263.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, page 264.

you’.”¹⁷⁸ Clearly it is a point of no small importance for Knox that a preacher can and should move the conscience of unbelievers to accept Christ by telling them that he died for them.

But is such pathos in evangelism recommended by the example or command of the earliest gospel preachers? Is the emotive plea to the conscience to accept salvation because it was won at so high a price as the death of Jesus a biblical method of winning souls? Cunningham had no hesitation in saying that appealing to people on such a basis is “a mode of preaching the gospel never adopted by our Lord and His apostles”.¹⁷⁹ A cursory glance at the evangelistic speeches in Acts, for example, reveals that this technique was never employed by the apostles or men such as Steven or Philip so effective in preaching. The sermons and speeches in Acts all have their distinctive marks, and yet the essential core of the message appears to be “Christ is risen, and is appointed as Lord and judge.” The cross is obviously not absent from a proclamation about a *risen* messiah (how and perhaps why he first died seems an obvious detail to include), but it is not necessarily the focal point of every apostolic proclamation, which we might imagine it should be if we had only read 1 Corinthians 2:2 or 15:3. Still less is an unlimited atonement made the basis for an appeal to the conscience for acceptance. Indeed, the conscience of Peter’s hearers is cut to the quick (Acts 2:37), just as some of Paul’s Athenian audience were no doubt arrested to hear of their impending judgment by Jesus (Acts 17:31). The response called for on each occasion was not “accept the proffered salvation”, or “love God back”, but simply “repent!”¹⁸⁰

This is evangelism as patterned for us by the apostles and recorded by Luke. The absence of our shibboleth, “Christ died for you”, or of an explanation of the mechanics of the atonement may come as a surprise, since preaching which has included such things has in the recent past been greatly used by God. But it cannot claim a straightforward mandate from the scriptures, or be insisted on as a *sine qua non* of true biblical evangelism. 1 Corinthians 15:14 does not say that our preaching is useless without an unlimited atonement. So what should we make of Kendall-Knox evangelism? Grudem avers, “I do not think we should rush to criticize an evangelist who tells an audience of unbelievers, ‘Christ died for your sins,’ if it is made clear in the context that it is necessary to trust in Christ before one can receive the benefits of the gospel offer.”¹⁸¹ We should not, of course, *ever* rush into criticism, especially if people merely “unreflectively use ambiguous language.”¹⁸²

Besides, Reformed theologians do affirm that the world is different as a result of the cross, even if that does not mean the whole world is saved as a result. There are benefits given indiscriminately to everyone as a result of what Christ did, not least the introduction of “many uplifting moral influences into the world.”¹⁸³ In that sense Jesus’ death has benefited the whole world of elect and non-elect alike. As Hodge puts it, “Augustinians do not deny that Christ died for all men. What they deny is that He died equally, and with the same design, for all men.”¹⁸⁴ So, as far as “Christ died for you” language is concerned, “we do not reply to the Arminian tenet with an unqualified negative,” says Boettner, “But what we do maintain is that the death of Christ had special reference to the elect in that it was effectual for their salvation, and that the effects which are produced in others are only incidental to this one great purpose.”¹⁸⁵

Yet, since this is a method of evangelism without an explicit biblical sanction it would be better to rethink it. Its undoubted effectiveness in former times may, in any case, be due more to cultural factors than we care to admit. Telling people that ‘Christ died for you’ may have had a particularly compelling significance for the post-World War II generation for whom the idea of people laying down their lives for others was not merely a platitude but often an evocative and tender memory. Yet there may also be something deeper than that. As Doug Wilson has written:

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, page 266.

¹⁷⁹ Cunningham, *Historical Theology: Volume 2*, page 345.

¹⁸⁰ On apostolic preaching in Acts see L. Gatiss, “The Evangelistic Sermons in Acts” on *The Theologian* at <http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/acts-sermons.html>.

¹⁸¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 602.

¹⁸² *ibid.*, page 602 footnote 45.

¹⁸³ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, page 160. Cf. books such as A. J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilisation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) or J. Kennedy & J. Newcombe, *What if Jesus had Never Been Born? The Positive Impact of Christianity in History* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

¹⁸⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 558. See also Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel”, page 64.-65.

¹⁸⁵ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, page 161.

“When many individuals in a culture have received the mark of baptism, the presence of this obligation works its way out into the cultural assumptions held in common by all. And this is how a culture can come to be very wicked, and yet be, to use Flannery O Conner's phrase, Christ-haunted... Oddly, many unbelievers have a better sense of this than we do. They know that a claim of Christ rests upon them - they feel the weight of it. They want to ignore this claim, but it still presses on them.”¹⁸⁶

In such a context, appealing to the conscience to ‘accept the Christ who died for you’ may have a very powerful effect on those haunted by the unexplored but weighty obligation of their baptism. In the same way, many unbelievers in the past have been stirred by the evangelistic use of Revelation 3:20 and the knocking of Christ on the door of their hearts, despite the fact that this text in its context is clearly addressed to existing members of a church, to rouse them from complacency, not to outsiders *per se*.¹⁸⁷ Yet it has been successful precisely because many intuitively felt the significance of their at least nominal membership of an established national church. Yet as the ghost of nominal Christianity is driven out by a post-modern secularism which cares very little for Jesus and whether he loves us or not, perhaps such a strategy has had its day. We must find new methods of declaring the old truth that “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (Hebrews 7:25), which are as faithful as possible to the Bible’s witness concerning the effectiveness and sufficiency of the cross. For instance, “he died to pay for sin” or “the cross was for sinners like you and me” both stress the completeness of his work without becoming unhelpfully enmeshed in this more nuanced debate.

2. Assurance

R. T. Kendall was concerned in his work on Calvinism that a proper ground of Christian assurance be found. When asked “How do I know Christ has died for me?” he thought it necessary to be able to reply “he died for you because he died for everyone.” By rejecting limited atonement, this expedient was designed to prevent introspective questioning as to whether one was part of the elect group for which Christ died. However, as Helm points out, all Kendall managed to do was relocate the question: if Kendall was correct about the true limitation being at the point of Christ’s intercession, then the doubting church member would be taught to question, “How do I know Christ is praying for me?”¹⁸⁸

Scripture, however, uses limited atonement as a comfort and encouragement to believers. We saw that above when we examined Romans 8:32. It also applies the atonement with a specific reference to the elect, the church, even the individual (Galatians 2:20) to bolster our confidence, trust, and perseverance. Ultimately, say advocates of limited atonement, if Christ died for everyone indiscriminately then those passages which apply his death for his people as a particular comfort to those people lose their pastoral force. A doubting or despairing Christian may well ask, “Why should I be reassured by the cross that he has a special love for *me* as a believer, when actually he died for everyone indiscriminately?”¹⁸⁹ As Sinclair Ferguson points out, the doctrine of unlimited atonement “cuts the nerve of assurance of salvation based on the atonement. For if Christ’s atonement was made for someone who is never saved by it, how can I look to it with confidence that I will be “saved by his precious blood”?”¹⁹⁰ Paul Helm agrees and asks, “How can a person be satisfactorily assured that he is saved by believing in a Saviour who loves everyone, but whose love and whose death in the case of many is ineffective because it does not correspond with God the Father’s electing purpose?”¹⁹¹

Definite atonement is potentially of greater practical use in pastoral ministry than alternatives: if people can be shown from Scripture and delight in the fact that God had a particular, personal, and effective design in sending Jesus to do everything necessary for their salvation, then they can be liberated from fear of their own substandard religious performance. They can appropriate and appreciate the atonement, as something accomplished specifically for them as a person – he truly is “My Jesus, my Saviour” - and they can put faith to

¹⁸⁶ D. Wilson, *Mother Kirk: Essays and Forays in Practical Ecclesiology* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001), pages 97-98.

¹⁸⁷ On the evangelistic employment of this text see the chapter on “Reaching a Decision” in J. R. W. Stott’s classic, *Basic Christianity* (IVP: Leicester, 1971 [1958]), pages 122-124 where he confesses it helped him as a seeker to understand the step of faith. See also the very helpful contextual correction in the more recent J. Chapman, *Know and Tell the Gospel: Help for the Reluctant Evangelist* (St. Matthias Press: Sydney, 1981), pages 169-171.

¹⁸⁸ See Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, page 50.

¹⁸⁹ See Turretin, *Institutes* 2.14.XIV.xl on page 474. Recently I was told by a minister friend that he had been asked this precise question by a parishioner (who had not read Turretin!).

¹⁹⁰ S. B. Ferguson, “Preaching the Atonement”, page 439.

¹⁹¹ Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, page 49.

work, secure in the finished work of Christ. As D. Clair Davis said, “Jesus didn’t die to open the door. He didn’t die to give you some help. He didn’t die to stir you up to make something of yourself. He did a lot more than that. He *saved* you from your sins. He set you free from your foolish unbelief, so that now you see him in his glory.”¹⁹² That means that when trouble comes or we stumble, we can look to him, with whom we have been united, and know that since he died for us he will not let us go, but complete what he began. We do not forget the corporate nature of the atonement or the Christian life. He died for his church, a flock, his people. Yet limited atonement also allows us to glory in a “warm and tender individualism”¹⁹³ which rejoices in the truth that we are known by name and were redeemed by a personal, powerful God.

3. Concluding reflections

Finally, James I instructed the British delegation at the Synod of Dort, “Your advise shall be to those Churches, that their Ministers do not deliver in the Pulpit to the people those things for ordinary doctrines, which are the highest points of Schooles, and not fitt for vulgar capacity, but disputable on both sides.”¹⁹⁴ This is, in some respects, wise and helpful advice. Not that true doctrine should ever be hidden as if we were ashamed of it, but it is potentially unedifying to use the ordinary means of grace, the regular preaching ministry, as a platform on which to carry out a theological battle between Calvinists, Arminians, and Amyraldians.

While I am firmly convinced of the truthfulness and biblical faithfulness of the doctrine of limited atonement, it is also, as Wayne Grudem comments, “a subject that almost inevitably leads to some confusion, some misunderstanding, and often some wrongful argumentativeness and divisiveness among God’s people – all of which are negative pastoral considerations.”¹⁹⁵ Some may accuse limited atonement of being the thin edge of the hyper-calvinist wedge; but on the other hand, many members of the Synod of Dort were agreed that those “who rejected this doctrine tended toward the quicksand of Popery, Pelagianism, and Socinianism.”¹⁹⁶ Mudslinging amongst evangelicals is always an unedifying spectacle, and should be avoided in public if at all possible, especially when the disputed doctrine is not one of primary importance. A brotherly disagreement in a spirit of love and humility as we search the scriptures together is much more likely to ‘win friends and influence people’.

As an example of this, it has sometimes been remarked to me that it was a sad day for my own church (St. Helen’s, Bishopsgate in London) when John Wesley preached there one Tuesday in May 1738 and was told “Sir, you must preach here no more.”¹⁹⁷ Surely barring the great evangelist from this grand pulpit showed what a graceless, unbelieving place it was in those days? Yet I was intrigued by this since Wesley had preached at St. Helen’s in March that same year without any adverse reaction being reported, and when the other great evangelist Whitefield preached there in 1736 he was received far more favourably.¹⁹⁸ I was less surprised, however, at the strong reactions against Mr. Wesley when I tracked down the printed version of his sermon on Romans 8:32 which is the text he preached on at St. Helen’s in May 1738. From start to finish it is a sustained, emotive, combatative, highly prejudiced and somewhat patronizing rant against Reformed doctrines of predestination and, of course, limited atonement. That latter doctrine was, he said, “[f]latly contrary to... the whole tenor of the New Testament”, and he complained bitterly against “the horrible blasphemies contained in this horrible doctrine.” To those who might disagree with his Arminian convictions he said, “You represent God as worse than the devil; more false, more cruel, more unjust... no scripture can prove predestination... I

¹⁹² D. Clair Davis, “Personal Salvation” in P. A. Lillback (ed.), *The Practical Calvinist: An introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), page 32.

¹⁹³ The words of J. Gresham Machen, as quoted in Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, page 683.

¹⁹⁴ “Instructions of King James I to the delegates” in *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort* page 93.

¹⁹⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 603.

¹⁹⁶ W. R. Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618”, page 170. See also the historical note on Arminianism after the Synod of Dort in Schaff, *The History of Creeds*, pages 515-516.

¹⁹⁷ Journal entry for Tuesday 9th May 1738 in *The Works of John Wesley Volumes 1-2: Journals Vols. 1-2* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2007), page 93. The Sunday before he had been told something similar by those at St. Lawrence’s and St. Katherine Cree’s Church, having been “enabled to speak strong words at both.”

¹⁹⁸ See R. Blackhouse (ed.), *The Journals of George Whitefield* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1993), page 31. Whitefield, of course, was a Calvinist whereas Wesley was an Arminian.

abhor the doctrine of predestination.”¹⁹⁹ My sympathies are clearly with the discerning pastor or churchwarden who sought to protect St. Helen’s from hearing such divisive and melodramatic things again!

So while particular redemption informs our doctrine at many levels and challenges our received practices, it may well be better to keep such a disputable matter somewhat in the background of an ordinary preaching ministry. It is a doctrine, to be sure, which belongs in the engine room of theology, a major component of the potent theological apparatus which is the Reformed faith. Yet while engines are impressive in their ability to get things moving, it can be messy, and rather disturbing for those less mechanically-minded, to see them disassembled and laid out on the floor in pieces. It is, therefore, a doctrine to be handled with particular care.

¹⁹⁹ *The Works of John Wesley Volumes 7-8: Sermons Volume 3* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2007), pages 380-383. This printed edition states that it was preached at Bristol in the year 1740, but there is little reason to doubt it was substantially the same as the sermon given on the same text in mid-1738. Itinerant evangelists are not known for re-writing entire sermons for different congregations!