

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT—

A WESLEYAN VIEW

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At the Nashville meeting (1965) of the Evangelical Theological Society, Dr. Roger Nicole suggested that the *nature* and *extent* of the atonement are among the issues lying on our theological frontier. With regard to the former aspect of the atonement Nicole has in mind its substitutionary character. With this no Evangelical should disagree. With regard to the latter aspect, Nicole comments:

We are faced with a number of questions relating to the scope and intent of the atoning work of Christ. Here we are approaching the delicate, but important area of the sovereign purpose of God, where the Evangelical is called upon to resist Pelagianizing tendencies and creeping universalism.¹

And here differences among Evangelicals become apparent. The Scriptures teach, we are told, that the atonement is limited. R. B. Kuiper, for example, has written that he is "firmly convinced that [limited atonement] . . . is Scriptural."² Scripture also teaches, we are told, that the atonement is universal: "Arminian theologians have universally argued for belief in the universal extent of the atonement. . . . There is a wealth of New Testament scripture to support this conviction."³

Each of these writers is concerned with the atonement as it relates to the eternal salvation of men through the sacrifice upon the cross. One says that the design of the atonement is limited in its saving intent to those who are actually saved; the other insists that Christ's death paid the price for the sins of every son of Adam but only those who trust in Christ receive its benefits. Both writers, appealing to the authoritative Scriptures, come to diverse conclusions regarding the soteric design of the atonement of Christ.⁴

1. "Abstracts, Seventeenth Annual Meeting," p. 3.
2. R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 5.
3. W. T. Purkiser, ed., *Exploring our Christian Faith* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1960), p. 265.
4. These are cited as recent expressions of the controversy. For other defenses of universal atonement see: T. N. Ralston, *Element of Divinity*, pp. 264-277; W. B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, II, 294-296; F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II, 21-22; J. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, II, 217-40; A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 377-87; R. Watson, *Theological Institutes*, II, 281-306; H. O. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, II, 295-299; J. J. Escher, *Christliche Theologie*, II, 358-364. Discussions defending limited atonement may be found in J. O. Buswell, *A systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II, 141-144; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 393-99; L. Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, pp. 315-27; W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, 464-89; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 544-62; J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, pp. 59-75.

It is the purpose of this article to set forth the case for a universal as over against a limited or particular atonement. The method of procedure will confine discussion in so far as possible to relevant biblical data. It goes beyond the scope of this article to relate the question of the extent of the atonement to an overall system of theology. While a total theology is of importance in arriving at an adequate understanding of Scripture, it follows from the non-contradictory character of Scripture that doctrine arrived at through careful biblical study ought to fit the system—in the latter truly reflects the Word of God. Hence no attempt will be made to dispute the thesis that limited atonement quite obviously fits in well with other tenets of Calvinism.

The following survey of the biblical data regarding the extent of the atonement divides into four parts: (1) The apparent limit of the extent of the atonement, (2) the universal categories applied to the extent of the atonement, (3) the designation of sinners as unbelievers, and (4) the threats of universalism and Pelagianism.

I

It is undeniable that there are passages in the New Testament which describe the beneficiaries of the atonement in something less than universal terms. Reformed exegetes rely heavily on these passages in order to maintain a particularized view of the intent of the atonement. Boettner, for example, states that "those for whom [Christ] died are referred to as 'His people,' 'my people,' 'the sheep,' 'the church,' 'many,' or other terms which mean less than the entire human race."⁵

If these references were the only indices to the extent of the atonement, it would be poor and unnecessary inference to assert a universal atonement. It is invalid to argue: Christ died for *some* men, therefore he died for *all* men. Put into logical form, the argument is: Some S is P, therefore all S is P. Obviously, this is an invalid inference.

If, however, the Bible speaks of the atonement in universal terms—as well as in restricted terms—the situation is quite different. Then, references couched in more particular terms would cause no embarrassment for the Wesleyan position. If Christ died for all, it is quite proper to state, under special circumstances, that he died for some. That this is a proper inference may be seen through the use of a type of immediate inference found in Aristotelian logic: subalternation. Subalternation (or implication) allows that given the truth of an "A" type proposition (universal affirmative), the corresponding "I" proposition (particular affirmative) is also true. This relationship may be stated as follows: If it is true that all S is P, then it may be inferred that some S is P.⁶

5. L. Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), p. 317.

6. See, for example, David H. Freeman, *Logic: the Art of Reasoning* (New York: David McKay, 1967), p. 89.

This same principle applies to the theological question relating to the extent of the atonement. If the New Testament speaks of the atonement in universal terms, then the assertion upon occasion—even upon many occasions—in a more circumscribed manner is quite understandable. If Christ died for *all* men, then it is certainly permissible to say that he died for some men when a more intimate group is in the purview of the writer. In similar fashion the assertion "I love my children" does not necessarily mean that I love no one else. And when Paul or any other New Testament writer says that Christ died for those who believe or for the church does this necessarily mean that he died for one else? The universal elements in the New Testament compel Wesleyans to answer this question negatively.

There is a further consideration. If passages speaking of Christ's dying for a particular group be pressed to indicate a limited atonement, a *reductio ad absurdum* is encountered in Galatians 2:2. There the apostle asserts, "He loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." If this were the only datum at hand regarding the extent of the atonement would we not be compelled to speak of *unitary* atonement—that Christ died for *Paul* and for no one else?

II

The foregoing discussion indicates that limitation of the atonement in particular contexts does not rule out a universal application of the atonement—provided that scriptural proof of its universality can be brought forth. Attention must now be given to this task.

Passages indicating the universal design of the atonement are usually presented by Arminian theologians under four headings: (1) those indicating that the death of Christ was intended for all, (2) those indicating that God's will includes the salvation of all, (3) those urging a universal proclamation of the Gospel, and (4) those indicating that Christ died for some who may be lost.⁷

The literature of Calvinist-Arminian polemic abounds with suggested interpretations of these passages. Reading the discussions, one might conclude that here a theological impasse has been reached. Dedicated Christian scholars studying the same corpus of texts arrive at opposite conclusions.

Available space will not permit here a detailed analysis of all passages indicating a universally designed atonement. For our purpose it will be necessary to examine only a few of these in detail. Arminians, of course, interpret these passages universally; Calvinists seek to limit their intent. However, it must be noted that these respective tasks are not of equal scope. If our analysis set forth in part I of this discussion is valid, Reformed exegetes have the task of demonstrating that *every* apparently

7. See Purkiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-267.

universal passage is in reality limited. The Arminian, on the other hand, need find but a single passage indicating universal atonement in order to maintain his view. Any other passages which seemingly teach universal atonement—but in reality limit it to God's people—may be handled along with those noted above which do speak of the atonement in limited terms. We must now proceed to find one passage—or more—which can stand up under the Reformed onslaught.

In his book on the extent of the atonement, R. B. Kuiper accepts the challenge of demonstrating that the Bible nowhere teaches a universal atonement. He believes that he has succeeded—as indicated by the assertion that the Reformed doctrine “does justice to *all* the Scriptural data bearing on the subject.”⁸ And, in all fairness, it must be admitted that he has, in certain instances, cast substantial doubt upon favorite texts used by those defending a universal atonement. For example, consider Hebrews 2:9, “That he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” W. B. Pope cites this as one of the “positive assertions of Scripture” indicating universal atonement and observes simply: “We read that this Mediator descended below the angels *that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man, hyper pantos*: this last word does not mean for every creature, but certainly for every man.”⁹ However convincing this argument may be to a Wesleyan, Kuiper is not satisfied and cites John Owen to state the case of the opposition:

‘Every man’... is put for ‘all men’ by an enallage of number, the singular for the plural, for all men; that is, all those many sons which God by his death intended to bring unto glory, verse 10; those sanctified by him, whom he calls his brethren, verses 11, 12, and children given him by God, verse 13; whom by death he delivers from the fear of death, verses 14, 15; even all the seed of Abraham, verse 16.¹⁰

To say the least, Kuiper and Owen have made a case for the limiting of *this* reference to the extent of the atonement. Other discussions in Kuiper's book, however, leave one in a sort of no man's land—the passage could go either way. Then there are those passages which stubbornly resist all attempts to limit them.

An example of this latter type is found in I Timothy 2:6, “Who gave himself a ransom for all.” The context, unlike that of Hebrews 2:9, is universalistic throughout. The passage begins with an exhortation that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men” (v. 1). These cannot be restricted to the elect or to the church because the next verse clarifies the “all men” as including “kings and all who are in high positions” (v. 2). Immediately following is the statement

8. Kuiper, *op. cit.*, p. 63. Italics added.

9. W. B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, n.d.), II, 295.

10. Kuiper, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

that “this is good and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (vs. 3-4). Next, the apostle states that there is “one God, and one mediator between God and men” (v. 5). Again, a universal emphasis. Christ is the mediator between God and *all* men—of either blessing or judgment. Within this universal context appears the verse under consideration which states that Jesus Christ, the one mediator, gave himself a ransom *for all*. The context demands a universal application and the ransom motif precludes the assigning of this passage to the operation of common grace.

It is significant that Kuiper has a brief note on I Timothy 2:4, but makes no mention at all of I Timothy 2:6. This is hardly excusable for one who claims to do justice to all scriptural data.

Reformed exegesis of other passages also leaves something to be desired. These include references to those “for whom Christ died” being destroyed or perishing (Romans 14:15, I Corinthians 8:11). Kuiper deals with these references by appealing to Shedd who views them as “a supposition, for the sake of argument, of something that does not and cannot happen.”¹¹ However, here we must decide in favor of the comment by F. Pieper: “The objection that these passages refer to cases that cannot actually occur would destroy the whole argument of the apostle.”¹²

In dealing with the reference in II Peter 2:1 to false teachers “denying the Lord that bought them” Kuiper appeals to other Reformed scholars for the most plausible explanation: “These false teachers are described according to their profession and the judgment of charity. They gave themselves out as redeemed men, and were so accounted in the judgment of the Church while they abode in her communion.”¹³ Kuiper then adds, “Hebrews 10:29 which speaks of the sure damnation of him who ‘hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified, an unclean thing,’ must be interpreted in like fashion.”¹⁴

But here problems arise. The Bible as a rule designates men to be what they really are—not what they pretend to be. In fact, these men are actually designated in II Peter 2:1a as “false teachers,” although they hardly professed to be such. Does the apostle in the next breath designate them to be what they profess to be and not what they really are? Further, why must Hebrews 10:29 “be interpreted in like fashion?” The only apparent reason is to make it conform to a theological point of view. And one cannot escape the distinct impression that these passages are being “explained” rather than exegeted.

One final passage will be singled out. Kuiper interprets John 3:16 through the words of B. B. Warfield who accepted a qualitative rather than a quantitative interpretation of the term “world”:

11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

12. F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), II, 21n.

13. Kuiper, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

14. *Ibid.*

The measure by which we are invited to measure of the greatness of the love of God...is not that it is so great that it is able to extend over the whole of a big world: it is so great that it is able to prevail over the Holy God's hatred and abhorrence of sin....The distribution of the term "world" in our text into "each and every man" in the world...begins with the obvious misstep of directing our attention at once rather to the greatness of the world than to the greatness of God's love.¹⁵

Warfield's point is well taken that the primary emphasis here is upon God's love for a *sinful* world. But is the distributive element entirely absent? Can it not be a matter of both/and rather than one of either/or? Watson's comment on the following verses (3:17, 18) points up the difficulties involved in a restrictive interpretation:

If...we take "the world" to mean the elect only, then he of this elect world that believeth may be saved, and he of the elect world that "believeth not is condemned;" so that the restricted interpretation necessarily supposes, that elect persons may remain in unbelief, and be lost.¹⁶

On the basis of this evidence, it is concluded—to the satisfaction of Wesleyans, at least—that Reformed polemicists have failed to neutralize *all* the passages describing the atonement in universal terms. While certain "universal" passages are dealt with more or less convincingly, it is this writer's contention that some of them still stand.

III

Our third approach to the question of the extent of the atonement is somewhat different from the preceding one. Instead of citing references indicating the universal intent of the atonement, note will be taken of the New Testament writers' repeated reference to sinners as *unbelievers*, and the repeated assertion of unbelief as a ground for damnation. A sampling of this emphasis may be seen by referring to John 3:18; 8:24; II Thessalonians 2:11-12; II Corinthians 6:14; Revelation 21:8.

What is significant for our discussion is the fact that men are condemned because they do not believe and the ungodly are designated "unbelievers." Now there are many other designations which aptly describe those outside of Christ's sheepfold. They are called sinners, reprobates, ungodly, liars, wicked, etc. Why, then, are they also called unbelievers? What have they refused to believe? That Christ is their Savior from sin. This is indicated in I John 5:10-11

He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath *not believed* in the witness that God hath borne con-

15. B. B. Warfield, cited by Kuiper, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

16. Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, n.d., twenty-ninth edition), II, 291. Again, Kuiper has apparently failed to deal with John 3:17.

cerning his Son. And the witness is this, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. [Emphasis added]

If Christ died only for the elect and for no one else, why should these non-elect souls *believe* this witness concerning Christ? If, on the other hand, Christ has indeed died for them and yet they refuse to believe on Him—then their refusal is a heinous thing. John announces that those who refuse to believe that God has given eternal life in his Son make him a liar.¹⁷ If God has not provided this for all, then the non-elect are condemned for refusing to believe a lie! If God has designed sovereignly to elect certain men to salvation and pass by others—no sinner could voice an objection. And those who are passed would be justly condemned because of their sin and ungodliness—but hardly because of their unbelief.

It is true that Reformed theologians admit that Christ's sacrifice is *sufficient* for the sins of the whole world. However, it is efficacious only for the elect and pays the ransom price for these alone.¹⁸ This refinement does not nullify the argument presented here. If Christ's atonement offers no saving benefit to a given individual for any reason whatever the net effect is the same. In any case, it is not intended for him. And the question remains, how he may be judged "because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God?" (John 3:18).

IV

A word must now be said about the threat of Pelagianism and universalism. Our discussion of the latter will center around Romans 5:18,

So then as through one trespass the judgment came unto all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life (ASV).

Traditionally, particularists have sought to limit the scope of "all men" in the second clause while Wesleyans have taken it to be universal in scope. It has been charged, however, that this latter approach may be followed only by those willing to hold the position of unrestricted universalism. John Murray, for example, argues that "justification of life" cannot mean anything less than

actual justification, the justification that is in Christ and unto eternal life. And we cannot believe that such justification passed upon every member of the human race unless we believe that all men will ultimately be saved, something contrary to Paul's teach-

17. John does state that the witness refused by the ungodly is that God gave *us* eternal life. On the basis of this, it could conceivably be argued that all John desires is for the ungodly to believe the truth concerning Christ's relationship to believers. While such an intellectual assent on the part of unbelievers might rid them of the charge of making God a liar, it is hardly the sort of belief demanded of all men. Judgment is based on a lack of belief (John 3:18; 8:24) and this judgment could hardly be reversed through intellectual assent (which Satan no doubt owns) to the saving benefits of Christ's atonement.

18. See J. O. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), II, 142.

ing elsewhere and to the teaching of Scripture in general.¹⁹ The only alternative to an unrestricted universalism, Murray contends, is to restrict the extent of "all men" in the second clause.

Though Paul uses the expression "all men" in the first part of the verse in the sense of all men universally, yet he must be using the same expression in the second part of the verse in a much more restricted sense, namely of all those who will be actually justified.²⁰

Orton Wiley on the other hand insists that the reference to "all men" must be taken in an all-inclusive sense in both parts of the verse. He avoids the position of universalism—that all men actually will be saved—by construing the phrase "justification of life" as a reference to prevenient grace which only makes salvation a possibility for all men.²¹

Here, both Wiley and Murray are partially right—and, consequently, partially wrong. Murray is right—and Wiley wrong—with regard to the meaning of "justification of life." In this context it can hardly mean anything other than actual salvation. But, on the other hand, we take Wiley over Murray with regard to the meaning of "all men" in the second part of the verse. This, of course, seems to lead to an acceptance of unrestricted universalism. A careful analysis of the passage, however, will show that this is not the case. It is possible to slip between the horns of the dilemma posed by Murray that the "all men" must be understood in a restricted sense or else one must accept the final salvation of all men.

In order to understand Romans 5:18 properly, the parallel structure of the verse must be taken into account. There are two clauses, each with corresponding elements pointing to the overcoming of the sin of Adam through the righteousness of Christ. On the one hand there are the one trespass, judgment and condemnation. On the other hand there are the one act of righteousness, the free gift and justification. All of these are related in some way to "all men." This may be diagrammed as follows:

Clause 1	Clause 2
One trespass	One act of righteousness
Judgment	Free gift
All men	All men
Condemnation	Justification of life

The "one trespass" is, of course, the transgression of Adam and the "one act of righteousness" is the obedience of Jesus Christ the second Adam. These stand over against each other as polar opposites. The same is true of the references to "condemnation" in clause 1 and "justification of life" in clause 2. If the latter refers to actual salvation—as Murray

19. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 60.

20. *Ibid.*

21. H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1959), II, 132.

contends and we agree—then it follows from the parallel construction that the former refers to actual damnation. But it is no more true that *all men* receive the sentence of eternal death than it is that all men are finally saved. How, then, is the verse to be understood?

The key to its understanding lies in the preposition "*eis*" found in both clauses of the original text. The first clause speaks of judgment coming upon all men *unto* (*eis*) condemnation. This indicates that through the transgression of the one man Adam judgment has come to all men (universally), its end result being "unto condemnation." However, not in every case is this end realized. Some men find salvation through Jesus Christ.

Following the same line of thought in the second clause, a similar understanding results. Through the one act of righteousness there comes to all men—in a universal sense—the free gift not *of* justification of life but *unto* (*eis*) justification. Not all men will be possessors of justification of life. Some remain under judgment unto condemnation. Only those who pass from death unto life through faith in Christ are actually justified in this sense.

Interpreted in this fashion, Romans 5:18 demands neither limited atonement nor unlimited universalism; rather, it points to a universal atonement in the Wesleyan sense. It indicates the universal design of the atonement but not the final salvation of all men. Because of Adam's sin all men are under a judgment which eventuates in eternal death—if the way of sin is followed. The other side of the Gospel coin reveals a free gift given to all men which leads to life—if Christ is followed.

This appears, to this writer at least, to be a sound interpretation of Romans 5:18. It recognizes the parallel structure of the verse. It views the phrase "justification of life" as meaning actual salvation (as the counterpart of condemnation). And it views the phrase "all men" in the same sense in both clauses. Although "all" and "every" are used in a restricted sense in certain other contexts, the parallel construction throughout this verse makes it difficult to interpret "all men" universally in one clause and restrictively in the other.²²

Finally, are we Pelagianizing the Gospel? If one equates the view of universal atonement with Pelagianism—then we must plead guilty. But this writer rejects the views of Calvinists and Arminians who insist that the nature of the atonement dictates its extent.²³ Rather he agrees—on this point at least—with Charles Hodge that

22. To date this writer has found only one interpreter who follows essentially the view given above. See *in loc. A.* Berkley Mickelsen in C. F. Peiffer and E. F. Harrison, eds., *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962).

23. From the Calvinist side, John Murray writes: "It is to beggar the concept of redemption as an effective securing of release by price and by power to construe it as anything less than the effectual accomplishment which secures the salvation of those who are its objects" (*op. cit.*, p. 63). From the opposite quarter, Orton Wiley and John Miley reject the penal substitutionary view of the atonement in favor of the governmental because the former—in their opinion—demands either universal salvation or limited atonement (see Wiley, *op. cit.*, II, 246-47).

the question does not concern the nature of Christ's work. But admitting the work of Christ to have been a true satisfaction for sin, its design may still be an open question.²⁴

The attempt to prove limited atonement on the basis of the substitutionary nature of Christ's high priestly work tends to prove too much. If it be argued that God cannot but acquit those for whom Christ died then the question arises whether God can *ever* manifest wrath toward them—even for a time. But Scripture plainly asserts that prior to conversion the elect are objects of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 2:13). Now if Christ took their place and they died with him does it not follow that these can *never* be under the wrath of God? This is the conclusion reached by Karl Barth, who maintains that there is no transition from wrath to grace in history and that men need only be told that they are already in Christ. It is in this direction that the contemporary threat of universalism lies. And it must be remembered that Barth comes out of a Reformed—not an Arminian—background. If, however, Reformed theologians of more Evangelical persuasion see no difficulty in God's showing wrath toward those for whom Christ died—at least for a time—is it completely untenable for Wesleyans to hold that God's wrath may rest ultimately and finally upon those who tread underfoot the Son of God and disregard the sacrifice made on their behalf?²⁵

We began with a reference to the nature and extent of the atonement. We have tried to show why some Evangelicals believe the atonement to be substitutionary in nature and universal in extent. May those Evangelicals who agree, and those who disagree on the latter, join forces in presenting the former to a world that is lost apart from the cross of Christ.

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24. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1877), II, 544.

25. A cogent argument for limited atonement is presented by John Murray (*op. cit.*, p. 69) based on II Corinthians 5:14, "One died for all; therefore all died." This leads, Murray contends, to the conclusion that all for whom Christ died also died (aorist) in him—an event in the past—and all such must "in due time" partake of new life in Christ (p. 71).

It must be pointed out, however, that pushed unduly this line of thought encounters the same difficulty noted above: how can these elect souls *ever* be objects of God's wrath? The situation becomes even more acute when Ephesians 2:5 is considered: "Even when we were dead through our trespasses [God] made us alive [aorist tense] with Christ." If believers not only died with Christ but were also *made alive* not "in due time," but in the past—a facet overlooked by Murray—then they should always manifest godliness and never be under condemnation.