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Did Christ die only for the Elect? Limited Atonement vs. Unlimited Atonement

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Abstract

Almost all Christians believe that the satisfaction rendered by the death of Christ was in itself enough for the salvation of humanity. Yet, there is no consensus among Christians on the question of the beneficiaries of Christ's atoning sacrifice. The question of whether Christ's suffering and death benefited all humanity or only an elected few has triggered much debate among Christian scholars. The different responses to the question of the extent of the atonement can be categorized broadly into two, namely; particular atonement (that is, the view that Jesus Christ died only for the elect) and universal atonement (that is, the idea that Christ died for all persons). The significance of the debate and the rise in interest in this subject in recent times has prompted this literature-based research which critically reviews and analyzes publications (including books, journal articles, and dissertations) on the extent of Christ's atonement to ascertain how one might make meaning of

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the ongoing debate. The paper first presents a survey of the evidence adduced for both views; it then considers Calvin's view on the subject and ends with the author's position that the atonement is unlimited in scope in that the offer of salvation is for all people; yet it is limited in effect because only those who believe in Jesus are truly saved.

Keywords: *Atonement, Calvin, Christ, Death, Salvation*

1. Introduction

All major religions provide answers to the question of how humanity can maintain an excellent relationship with the supernatural. Christianity teaches that humans, due to sin, have been estranged from God, the Creator. According to the Christian faith, the origin of sin could be traced to Adam and Eve who, in the Garden of Eden, got deceived by Satan (acting through the serpent) to eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-15; Rev. 12:9). This sin not only affected the relationship between Adam and God but also polluted the entire human race following Adam (Ps. 51:1-5; Rom. 3:23; 5:12-21). As a corrective measure, God sent his own Son into the world to atone for the sin of humanity once-for-all. The perfect and complete atonement provision by the Son of God (Jesus, the Christ) was pre-shadowed by the institution of Old Testament sacrificial system which required the blood of animals for atonement of sin. On the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), the high priest for the animal sacrifices to deal with his own sins and those of his people (Lev. 16). In addition, daily sacrifices were made to make atonement for sin. The word "atonement" derives from the combination "at + one + ment" in reference to causing two divided parties to unite. It was Thomas More who (in 1513) used the term for the first time in reference to the price paid to reconcile two parties.[1] Atonement is God's activity in human history by which he deals with sin to re-establish the broken relationship between himself and humanity.[2]

[1] Raja Selvam, *Is Jesus's Death on the Cross a Satisfaction for the Sins of Humanity or a Demonstration of God's Love?: A Theological Understanding of Atonement in Relation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?* (LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations, 2017), 6. [Accessed online, on 2/5/2020, from http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/318]

[2] Selvam, *Is Jesus's Death on the Cross a Satisfaction for the Sins of Humanity or a Demonstration of God's Love?*, 6.

After more than a millennium of the religious celebration of the Day of Atonement, daily morning and evening sacrifices, and freely offered sacrifices, John the Baptist, openly asserted that all the sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus Christ, who is the lamb of God who deals with the problem of sin (John 1:29). By this declaration, John himself gave a definite expression of the sufficiency of Jesus' satisfaction of God's infinite justice on the cross.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews establishes a typological relationship between the Old Testament sacrifices and Christ's sacrifice, the former being the type and the latter, the antitype (Heb. 9:11-14; cf. 8:13). Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for the sin that this world has committed against its Creator (Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10). Through his death (that is, the shedding of his blood) on the cross, he established a New Covenant (Mark 14:22-25) which unlike the Old Covenant has its laws written on the heart of people rather than on stones (Jer. 31:31-34). Christ's atonement restores the mutual and love-motivated relationship between God and humankind by removing any obstacle that prevented humankind from approaching God.[3]

The facts of the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ's atoning death as well as the offer of salvation through the presentation of the gospel is a theological fact that is widely accepted. That Jesus died for sinners is not disputed. However, to say Jesus died for sinners raises the question as to whether or not he died for every sinner who would ever live. That is, for whom did Christ die? Did God intend for Jesus' crucifixion to atone for all people or only for some? These and similar questions have attracted considerable interest and aroused controversies still unabated. The controversy concerning the extent of the atonement has been, and still is, greatly agitated.

The debate began among the ancients. The Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians argued that the sacrifice Christ made on the cross was for all humans. Augustine (and his disciples including Prosper) opposed this teaching and argued for the limited nature of the atonement.[4] The controversy was later renewed among the Roman Catholics. Some scholars (mainly the Jesuits) supported the Semi-

[3] Selvam, *Is Jesus's Death on the Cross a Satisfaction for the Sins of Humanity or a Demonstration of God's Love?*, 6; J. B. Green, *"Kaleidoscope View" Four Views: The Nature of the Atonement* edited by Paul R. Eddy and James Beilby (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006).

[4] As cited in Francis Turretin and C. Matthew McMahon, *The Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ* (N.p: Puritan Publications, 2006), 154.

Pelagians' universal view of the atonement while others (especially the Jansenists) subscribed to Augustine's limited atonement position.[5] The controversy later became a major issues among Protestants. The Lutherans, following the Jesuits, argued for a universal satisfaction.[6] The Arminians argued that Christ died for all humans equally, not with the view of saving any people in particular, but of placing all humans merely in a salvable condition.[7] John Calvin, John Wesley and other theologians also contributed to the debate.

A survey of relevant literature on the extent of the atonement since the inception of the church reveals responses from two main schools of thought; namely, particular atonement (that is, the view that Jesus Christ died only for the elect) and universal atonement (that is, the idea that Christ died for all people). The first view is usually associated with Reformed theology while the second is associated with Arminian theology. One's position on the issue determines what they believe about what Christ accomplished on the cross and how they perceive the saved and the lost. One's view on this matter is very important because a proper view of the extent of the atonement can have a serious impact on the content of one's "gospel" as well as one's attitude toward evangelism and discipleship. Increasing interest in this subject in recent times has prompted this paper which examines the arguments for the two main positions and afterward, argues that the atonement has both limited and universal dimensions.

2. Particular Atonement (The Reformed Position)

Most Calvinists hold the particularist position on the atonement (also referred to as limited atonement or particular redemption) which states that only the elect will be saved.[8] According to Louis Berkhof Reformed theology holds that the purpose of Christ's death was to save the elect only.[9] That is, Christ died to save only those who will benefit from his redemptive activities; it is Christ who will actually apply the benefits of his atonement to those people.

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5 Turretin and McMahon, *The Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ,* 156.
6 Turretin and McMahon, *The Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ,* 157.
7 Turretin and McMahon, *The Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ,* 157.
8 Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* second edition (Illinois: Christian Liberty Press, 2007); WA Elwell, "Extent of Atonement" In WA Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* 2nd edition. pp. 114-116. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 114-115; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 843.
9 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology Revised* edited by Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Woodstick, 2019), 394

This does not mean that one can place any limit on the value or efficacy of the atonement made by Christ. The atonement Christ made has an infinite value; he offered a priceless sacrifice.[10] Yet, the benefits of the atonement is limited to those for whom it was intended "and is applied to, particular persons; namely for those who are actually saved."[11] Thus, the efficacy of the atonement is limited by God's intent not by insufficiency of its value. E. H. Palmer defines this doctrine as "Christ died only for the believer, the elect, only for those who will actually be saved and go to heaven."[12] It is further argued that there is no single person among the elect that will ultimately fall short of salvation. In other words, all the elect, no matter what happens, will eventually be saved. Thus, Christ's life, ministry, death and resurrection were purposely for the redemption of the elect, and the elect only. The atonement guarantees the salvation of all for whom it was offered, ensuring that they will definitely express faith in Christ.

Arguments in Favor of Particular Atonement

A number of arguments have been outlined in defense of limited atonement. First, the Bible makes it clear in many passages that only those who qualify in a certain way will benefit from the atonement offered by Christ. For example, one reads from Scriptures that Christ died for "his sheep" (John 10:11, 15), "his church" (Acts 20:28), and "his people" (Matt. 1:21). Moreover, Christ alludes to the elect when he spoken about those that the Father gives him (John 6:37-39).

The second argument is that though God is capable of saving everyone, he will not save all people because Scripture says those who reject Christ are lost (1 John 5:12). If those who reject Christ are not saved then one may reason that Christ did not die for everyone.[13]

Thirdly, it is argued that if Christ died for everyone, then it will be unjust for God to send people to hell for their own sin because to do so means punishing the same sin twice, first punishing Christ on the cross and then punishing the sinner in hell for the same sin.[14] The concept of double punishment for one sin is

[10] Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* edited by Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Woodstick, 2017), 66.
[11] Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* edited by Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Woodstick, 2017), 66.
[12] E. H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism: A Study Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 50.
[13] Elwell, "Extent of Atonement", 114-115.
[14] Elwell, "Extent of Atonement", 115.

unacceptable to advocates of particular atonement view. Hence, it is argued that it is unjust and impossible for God to condemn people to everlasting punishment after their sins have been atoned for.[15] From a legal perspective, Elwell argues that it is not right to exact payment twice for the same offense.[16] In other words, it will be morally wrong for God to hold the people accountable for their own sin through their eternal punishment if Christ really paid fully for their sins through his death.[17] Berkhof also states that biblical data on atonement reveals that Christ's death is meant for the benefit of a certain qualified number of people (cf. Luke 19:10; Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Eph. 1:7).[18] The argument further goes like this: If Christ really paid for the sins of all, then he also paid for their unbelief; if he paid for their unbelief then God cannot withhold salvation from someone because the person did not express faith in Christ. Based on this logic, it is concluded that on the cross Christ paid for the sins of the elect and the "non-elect" or the lost will pay for their sins in hell.

Fourthly, it is argued that to perceive Christ as dying for everyone logically leads to universalism (the idea that all people will eventually be saved), an idea that advocates of general atonement do not generally accept.[19] Christ therefore defeats himself if he really died for all humanity and yet does not save all persons.

Fifthly, it is argued that Christ's intercessory work (particularly his priestly prayer in John 17:9, in which he prayed for those the Father has given him) supports limited atonement. Berkhof asks, "Why should He limit His intercessory prayer, if He had actually paid the price for all?"[20] Erickson cites Kuiper as arguing that "Since Christ prayed exclusively for those whom the Father had given him, it follows that they are the only ones for whom he died."[21] Hodge takes this argument further by comparing Christ's priestly role to that of the Aaronic priest saying that the Old Testament priest interceded for only those for whom he made sacrifices, so Jesus also made a sacrifice for only those on

15 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 594.
16 Elwell, "Extent of Atonement," 115.
17 Arthur W. Pink, *Studies on the Atonement* Edited by T Kulakowski (Np: Reformed Church Publications, 2015), 182.
18 Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 87.
19 Elwell, "Extent of Atonement", 115.
20 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 395.
21 Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 844.

whose behalf he interceded before the Father.[22] Therefore, Christ cannot "be assumed to intercede for those who do not actually receive the benefits of his redemption."[23]

Sixthly, it is argued that the fact that the elect were chosen before creation (Eph. 1:4) necessitates limited atonement because "it would have been a waste and a lack of foresight on the part of God to have Christ die for those whom he had not chosen to salvation."[24] Charles Hodge clarifies this argument by suggesting that "if God from eternity determined to save *one* portion of the human race and not *another*, it seems to be a contradiction to say that the plan of salvation had equal reference to both portions."[25] The point is that Christ would not design something which he knew by virtue of his omniscience that it would never come to pass.

Unlimited Atonement

In contrast to the foregoing position on the extent of the atonement is the contention that by his death and resurrection, Christ atoned for the sin of everyone though the benefits of his atonement can be enjoyed by only those who accept the Christian gospel.[26] Advocates of this position maintain that "the atonement is unlimited in its invitation but limited in its application."[27] This means God calls all people to experience his salvation; yet, only those who respond in faith to the gospel message benefit from the atonement. In this sense, one may consider salvation as universal in the provisional sense, but conditional in its application to an individual person. While the atonement makes it possible for all people to be saved, it does not ensure that anyone will come to faith in Christ. The universal aspect of the atonement signifies its sufficiency in dealing with the sin of the entire human race while the conditional aspect of its application underscores the need for one to respond to the gospel by faith. This view may be summarized as follows:

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22 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, All Three Volumes (Colorado: Delmarva Publications Inc., 2014). https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=VClcCgAAQBAJ&pg=PT1400&d

23 Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* 223.

24 Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 846.

25 Hodge cited in Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 845.

26 Elwell, "Extent of Atonement", 115.

27 S. Michael Houdmann, *Questions about Salvation* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2014), 47.

> The price of redemption which Christ offered to his Father; was not only in itself sufficient for the redemption of the whole human family; but even by the decree; will and grace of God the Father; was paid for all men and every man; so that no one is; by an antecedent decree of God; particularly excluded from a participation of its fruits. Christ; by the merits of his death; has so far reconciled God to the whole human family; that the Father on account of his merits; without any impeachment of his truth or justice; can enter and wishes to enter into and confirm a new covenant of grace with sinful men [humanity] exposed to damnation.[28]

Arguments in Favor of Unlimited Atonement

Biblical supports for this view come from three main categories of biblical texts. The first group comprises those that speak of the atonement in universal terms. Here, one may cite text such as John 3:16 where John says "whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." It is argued that if God truly and impartially loves everyone and truly wants to save everyone, then Christ's death must necessarily make payment for the sins of all. Thus, universal and impartial divine love requires universal payment. Again, John the Baptist's description of Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) can only be true if Christ died for all because the word "world" (Greek: *kosmos*) "belongs to the sphere of human life as an ordered whole, considered apart from God ... . the world comes to represent humanity in its fallen state, alienated from its Maker."[29] J. C. Ryle similarly states regarding this verse:

> Christ is ... a Savior for all mankind ... . He did not suffer for a few persons only, but for all mankind... . What Christ took away, and bore on the cross, was not the sin of certain people only, but the whole accumulated mass of all the sins of all the children of Adam... . I hold as strongly as anyone that Christ's death is profitable to none but the elect who believe in His Name. But I dare not limit and pare down such expressions as the one before us... . I dare not confine the intention of redemption to the saints alone. Christ is for every man ... The atonement was made for all the world, though it is applied and enjoyed by none but believer.

[28] Turretin and McMahon, *The Substitutionary Atonement of Jesus Christ,* 157-158.

[29] Westcott cited in Norman F. Douty, *Did Christ Die Only for the Elect?: A Treatise on the extent of Christ's Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf&Stock Publishers, 1998), 76.

Paul's assertions that God gave up Christ "for us all" (Rom. 8:32) and that God is reconciling the world onto himself (2 Cor. 5: 14-15, 19) are also considered as supporting the unlimited scope of the atonement. Paul indicates that while Christ died for all, only some will live through him. Twice in 1 John the death of Christ is described as being for the world (2:1-2; 4:14). Here, Christ is presented not only as the propitiation for the sins of believers but also for those of the "whole world" and he is "savior of the world." The argument goes further that just as human sin is universal (Rom. 3:23) so the sin laid on the suffering servant of the LORD is also universal (Isa. 53:6). That is, "the extent of what will be laid on the suffering servant exactly parallels the extent of sin."[30] Also compelling is Paul's assertions that God "who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4) and also that Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Tim. 2:6). From this text, there is a sense in which Christ is Savior of unbelievers; he died for their sin, though they reject his atonement on their behalf by failing to express faith in him.

Advocates of the Reformed position respond to this argument by saying that terms such as "all," "world," and "whosoever" as used in relation to those for whom Christ died (e.g., John 3:16) must be understood in terms of the elect. Thus, "all" means "all of the elect", whether Jew or Gentile. Berkhof says "the word 'all' sometimes has a restricted meaning in Scripture, denoting all of a particular class, 1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:23, or all kinds of classes, Tit. 2:11."[31] Taking such word always in the absolute sense would teach (in some cases) that all people are actually saved. For example, the idea of universal salvation would be evident in Romans 5:18, "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people". Similarly, 1 Corinthians 15:22 reads, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (NIV). Clearly, words such as "all" cannot be taken as absolute in all cases. Moreover, Berkhof considers as unwarranted the assumption that the "world" refers to every member of the human race.[32] In his view, the word "world" refers to the "world of the elect" or to people, whether Jews or Gentile. The word "world" when used in reference to humans does not always include all people (cf. John 7:4; 12:19; 14:22; 18:20; Rom. 11:12, 15). He argues further that "there are passages which teach that Christ died

[30] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 847.
[31] Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* second edition (Illinois: Christian Liberty Press, 2007), 87.
[32] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*.

for the world ... . In the passages referred to, it may simply serve to indicate that Christ died, not merely for the Jews, but for people of all the nations of the world."[33] Concerning 1 John 2:2[34], Beza argues that "the whole world" here means "of them which have embraced the Gospel by faith in all ages, degrees, and places for there is no salvation without Christ."[35]

The second category consists of texts which clearly state that Christ died not only for those who may be saved but also for those who may perish (see Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:11; Heb. 10:29). If Christ died not only for believers but also for unbelievers, then it stands to reason that his atonement relates to unbelievers as well.

Thirdly, universalists claim support from passages that say there will be the universal proclamation of the Christian gospel. They include Matthew 24:14; 28:19; Mark 16:15 and Luke 24:47 (cf. also Mark 1:5; 16:16; John 3:36; Acts 1:8; 17:30). The command to take the gospel to all people requires payment made on behalf of all those to whom the invitation to salvation is extended. As Norman Douty puts it, "How can God authorize His servants to offer pardon to the non-elect if Christ did not purchase it for them? This is a problem that does not plague those who hold to General [Unlimited] Redemption, for it is most reasonable to proclaim the Gospel to all if Christ died for all."[36] The point is that advocates of limited atonement cannot truly say to the sinner, "Christ died for you" because that sinner may not be among the elect for whom Christ died. There is a real difficulty at this point in that the proclamation of the gospel cannot be personalized. Lewis Sperry Chafer puts the discussion is the right perspective, saying:

> To believe that some are elect and some non-elect creates no problem for the soul winner provided he is free in his convictions to declare that Christ died for each one to whom he speaks. He knows that the non-elect will not accept the message. He knows also that even an elect person may resist it to near the day of his death. But if the preacher believes that any portion of his audience is destitute of any basis of salvation, having no share in the

[33] Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine,* 87.
[34] The text reads "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (NIV).
[35] Beza cited in Matthew s. Harding, "Atonement Theory Revisited: Calvin, Beza, and Amyraut on the Extent of the Atonement." *Perichoresis* 11, (2013): 49–73, 60.
[36] Norman Douty, *The Death of Christ* (Irving, TX: Williams & Watrous Publishing Co., 1978), 49.

values of Christ's death, it is no longer a question in his mind of whether they will accept or reject; it becomes rather a question of truthfulness in the declaration of the message.[37]

In answer to this Objection, Berkhof argues that though the gospel is to be preached to all, only the elect will eventually receive the gift of salvation through faith.[38] Again, since no one knows those for whom Christ died except God, the free offer of the gospel should be made to all without exception. The argument goes like this: "The fact that God foreknew who would be saved, and that he accepted Christ's death as payment for their sins only, does not inhibit the free offer of the gospel, for who will respond to it is hidden in the counsels of God."[39] The universal view on the extent of the atonement is held by all Arminian scholars and also by some Calvinist referred to as sublapsarians.[40]

Was John Calvin a Calvinist with Regards to the Extent of Atonement?

To ask whether John Calvin was a Calvinist seems absurd. However, this question is significant because of the debate surrounding Calvin's view on the extent of atonement. The five points that define Calvinism is represented by the mnemonic device TULIP: Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.[41] These five points are inseparable; to accept one is to accept all and to reject one is to reject all. Total depravity means, all humans are sinners and are unable to be good enough to merit salvation. This does not however mean that human beings are totally evil and have no traces of goodness in them. Rather, it means that, on their own, humans are unable to decide to follow God. Unconditional election is the idea that because of the depravity of humanity, it is God who chooses those who will be saved (Eph. 1:4-14) and leaves the rest unsaved. Steele, Thomas and Quinn define election as the fact that "God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among the fallen members of Adam's race to be the objects of His undeserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to

[37] Lewis Sperry Chafer, "For Whom Did Christ Die?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (Oct.-Dec. 1980), 316
[38] Berkhof *Manual of Christian Doctrine,* 88.
[39] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 594.
[40] Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 846.
[41] Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 846.

save."[42] God's election of those who would be saved is pre-temporal, "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). This means God knows people who will go to heaven and those who will go to hell. The people who he has chosen to be saved are referred to as the "elect." The term limited atonement, as noted above, simply means Christ's death was only for the benefit of the elect. Irresistible grace means that all the elect will definitely be saved because God's grace by which the elect are drawn is so strong that it cannot be resisted by the elect. The last idea of the five points of Calvinism, which is the perseverance of the saints, means those who are part of the elect will never lose their salvation after they have been saved. In other words, the elect will persevere to the end such that they will never lose their salvation once they have experienced it. For Calvinists, those who claim to have turned their lives toward God and then stop living that way were never truly saved as they might have claimed.

Whether Calvin subscribed to the limited view of the atonement or not has been debated since the seventeenth century.[43] A detailed analysis of the issue cannot be done in this paper because of the obvious limitations of time and space. Yet, given the impact of Calvin's teachings on Reformed theology, it is important to consider some of his explicit and implicit assertions on the extent of atonement in his Institutes, commentaries, and other publications. Calvin held that the benefits of the atonement are applied only to those who believe; yet the extent of the atonement is unlimited.[44] For example, Calvin's commentary on Colossians 1:14 underlines his view that Christ's atonement dealt adequately with the sin of the world. He wrote, "This is our liberty, this our glorying against death, that our sins are not imputed to us. He says that this redemption was procured by the blood of Christ, for by the sacrifice of His death all the sins of the world have been expiated."[45] Similarly, in his commentary on John 3:16, Calvin argued that;

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[42] David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined, Defended, and Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1963, 2004), 27.

[43] David L. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

[44] Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of God's Sovereignty and Free Will.* Third edition. (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2010).

[45] John Calvin, *John Calvin's Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Altenmunster: Jazzybee Verlag Jurgen Beck, 2012), n.p. https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=p9te7XnHrRkC&pg=PT137&lpg=PT137&dq=

> The writer of the fourth gospel, has employed the universal term *whosoever*, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the term *world* which He formerly used [God so loved the world]; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet He shows Himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when He invites all men without exception [not merely 'without distinction'] to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.[46]

Calvin also affirmed (with reference to Galatians 5:12) that: "God commends to us the salvation of *all men without exception*, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world."[47] Commenting on John 1:29 with particular reference to the use of the singular noun "sin", Calvin wrote "He uses the word *sin* in the singular number for any kind of iniquity; as if he had said that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ. And when he says the *sin of the world*, he extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race."[48]

Calvin also taught that Christ suffered and provided salvation for the whole human race, saying, "We must now see in what ways we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only begotten Son, not for private use, but to enrich the poor and needy. And the first thing to be attended to is, that so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which *he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race* is of the least benefit to us."[49] Calvin commenting on Isaiah 53:12 stated "I approve of the ordinary reading, that he alone bore the punishment of many, because on him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that 'many' sometimes denotes 'all.'"[50] Calvin stated that "Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and in the goodness of God is offered unto all men without distinction, His blood being

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[46] John Calvin, *Commentary on John's Gospel* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 125.

[47] John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 127.

[48] Calvin, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, 64.

[49] John Calvin, *Obtaining the Grace of Christ: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book 3). (Alachua, FL: Bride-Logos, 2010). (emphasis mine). https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=Tu4QBQAAQBAJ&pg=PT55&dq

[50] John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah.* Volume 4. (Wheaton, IL: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 100.

shed not for part of the world only, but for the whole human race."[51] On a whole, "Calvin remains more open to the idea that the biblical text often implies God's universal desire to save all of mankind, having sent Jesus to die as the perfect expiation on behalf of the whole world."[52]

Given the defining essentials of Calvinism (that is, the TULIP) and Calvin's comments on the extent of the atonement outlines above, it is clear that Calvin was not a Calvinist at least on the issue of the extent of the atonement. Yet, Calvin's successors claim that he subscribed to the limited atonement view. Calvin seems to have been misinterpreted and misrepresented by his successors, disciples and colleagues. For example, Theodore Beza who is Calvin's direct disciple and successor argued that Christ's atonement was intended and effectual only for the elect and yet, claims to be represent Calvin's view in the closest possible way.[53] The idea of limited atonement may be regarded as extreme Calvinism; it goes beyond what Calvin himself taught on the matter.[54]

The Position taken by this paper

The arguments on both sides of the debate concerning the extent of the atonement have been outlined above. A careful observation shows that some of the arguments advanced by the two parties are not fully persuasive. For example, the argument in favor of unlimited atonement based on the biblical assertions that Christ died for "the world", or for "all of us" or something similar, may not be valid when the texts in question are read in context. For example, when the expression "all of us" (in Rom. 8:32) is read in its immediate context one realizes that it refers to all those "who have been called according to his [God's] purpose" (v. 28)—that is, the predestined.[55] A contextual reading of the statement about God's so loving the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16) requires the reader to understand the text in relation to "that whoever believes

[51] Calvin cited in John R. Rice, *Predestined for Hell?: Biblical Answers to Questions about Hyper-Calvinism, Predestination and Election; the Theory of Calvinism Exposed* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1986), 12.

[52] Harding, "Atonement Theory Revisited," 62.

[53] Harding, "Atonement Theory Revisited," 49–73.

[54] One may also agree with Rice that Calvin's was progressive; he seems to have argued initially for limited atonement before somewhat modified his position in later years (cf. Rice, *Predestined for Hell?*, 11-12).

[55] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 849.

in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."[56] Similarly, by considering the statements about Jesus' loving and dying for "his church" or "his sheep" in their right contexts, one realizes that in these texts Jesus is connecting his death specifically to the salvation of the elect. Salvation is connected to "his church" and "his sheep" exclusively; yet it does not mean his atonement relates to these categories alone.[57]

Again, it must be noted that Jesus' "limited" intercession in his priestly prayer (John 17) does not necessary mean his atonement is limited because "intercession is not limited to prayers that the work of redemption be realized, nor is it always dependent on atonement."[58] Believers intercede for others though they have made no atonement. Therefore, it is not the case that Jesus' intercessory ministry be connected only to his atonement. Moreover, the fact that Christ prayed only for the elect in this text does not mean he never prayed for the non-elect also. There are instances when Christ seem to have prayed for the non-elect (Luke 23:34); Jesus directed his disciples to pray for God to send laborers into his harvest (10:2) even though he knew that not all would be saved (Matt. 13:28:30). Furthermore, the fact that believers were elected in Christ in eternal past (Eph. 1:4) does not necessarily suggest that Christ died only for the elect. God, being omniscient, knew before creation those who would belief and chose them according to his foreknowledge (1 Pet. 2:2; cf. Rom. 8:29).

Scriptures that emphasize that Christ died for the elect, for the church, and for individual believers highlight only one aspect of the larger truth about the atonement and salvation. There are a number of passages that suggest that Christ died for the sins of others people outside the elect. The specific/limited aspect of the atonement is found in verses connoting that Christ died for a specific people: his sheep (John 10:11); his friends (John 15:13) while the universal aspect is found in the assertion that Christ died for the "whole world" (1 John 2:2); "all" (2 Cor. 5:15); "every human" (Heb. 2:9). The fact that Christ bought the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28) may allude to the limited nature of the atonement; but at the same time, the universal aspect of the atonement is underscored by the fact that the church's gates are wide open to "everyone who calls" (Rom. 10:13),

[56] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 849.
[57] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 849-850.
[58] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 850.

to "all you who are weary and burdened" (Matt. 11:28) and that "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9) is invited to respond to the gospel.

Based on the discussions so far, the author takes the position that the atonement is unlimited in scope in that the offer of salvation is for all people; yet it is limited in effect because only those who believe in Jesus are truly saved. In other words, "the Savior has done something for all persons, though it is less in degree than what he has done for those who believe."[59] This is the exact idea that Paul expresses in 1 Timothy 4:10 the living God "is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe" (NIV).

That said, the outstanding issue has to do with the efficacy of the atonement. Advocates of the limited atonement view assume that all those for whom Christ died will by necessity be saved. Based on this, it is argued that if Christ died for all persons, then all persons will be saved (inherit everlasting life) and no one will miss heaven. The solution to the universal-salvation trap is to realize that inheriting eternal life involves two separate factors, namely; "an objective factor (Christ's provision for salvation) and a subjective factor (our acceptance of that salvation)."[60] Thus, the fact that Christ died for someone will not automatically save the person unless the second condition—the acceptance of salvation—is met through a personal conscious decision. There is therefore the possibility that someone for whom Christ died and hence made salvation available may fail to accept it and eventually perish.

3. Conclusion

Both the limited and unlimited views of the extent of the atonement preserve something of theological relevance. The limited atonement position emphasizes the certainty of God's salvation and his initiative in offering his salvation to humans. If salvation was based on work, none would have merited it. The general atonement position, on the other hand, maintains the fairness of God in the offer of salvation. However, going by this understanding salvation cannot be certain because Christ died for all. First, the atonement must not be isolated from God's larger plan and strategy for the world. God's salvific plan through the atonement precedes human sin and need for new life. God's plan for salvation took plan in eternal past before creation. Given this understanding,

[59] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 851.
[60] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 851.

the atonement must always be anchored in the Father's eternal purpose which established the Son as the only Mediator in the divine-human relationship. From the debate one thing is clear: Unless one believes in universally effectual salvation, everyone limits the effectiveness of Jesus' death. The discussions in this paper lead to the conclusion that Christ died to save the elect but he died for the sin of all humanity.

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