

1 John 2:2 – Does Grace Extend to Everyone?

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INTRODUCTION

A literal translation of 1 John 2:2 reads as follows: “And He a propitiation He is for the sins of us, not for those of us only, but also for those of the whole world.” At first glance the verse seems simple enough, but there has historically been startling disagreement regarding its intended meaning.

John MacArthur concludes that the passage cannot mean that Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world, insisting that, “Jesus didn’t pay for the sins of Judas...or Adolf Hitler.”¹ MacArthur supports his view with an appeal to John 11:52,² which he says indicates that Jesus died only for the children of God. The passage reads, “...and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”³ John Piper’s explanation of the passage is similar, as he, like MacArthur, supports his 1 John 2:2 interpretation from an

¹ John MacArthur, “Limited Atonement: Explained – 1 John 2:2”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DepxyWF8euA>.

² “...And not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”

³ NASB.

appeal to John 11:52.⁴ R.C. Sproul explains 1 John 2:2 as follows: “He is the “propitiation” for us, the one who endured the wrath we deserve so that divine justice is fulfilled, not set aside. Christ is the propitiation for “the whole world,” not because He made atonement for every sinner, but because He redeemed not only Jews but people *from all parts of the world*” [emphasis mine].⁵

How can a verse so seemingly simple be construed to say almost the opposite of what it seems intended to say? To put it simply, there is theological turf at stake. If the literal translation (that Christ is the propitiation for the whole world) reflects the intended meaning, then the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement collapses, and with it, the other four points of Calvinism as understood by contemporary Reformed thinkers. Note Sproul’s recognition that, “if a person really understands the other four points and is thinking at all clearly, he must believe in limited atonement because of what Martin Luther called a resistless logic.”⁶ But what if limited atonement is debunked by 1 John 2:2 (or other passages)? Sproul makes a telling admission: “I don’t think we want to believe in a God who sends Christ to die on the cross and then crosses His fingers, hoping that someone will take advantage of that atoning death.”⁷ *I don’t think we want to believe...*

THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

In order to understand why Sproul might make such a statement, let’s examine some basics of the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement. The essential premise of the doctrine is that *the atonement is sufficient for all men, but efficient only for the elect*. On its face that doesn’t sound too problematic, but the problem

⁴ John Piper, “John Piper on Limited Atonement”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZEIPPgMkFA>.

⁵ R.C. Sproul, “Our Righteous Advocate,” Ligonier Ministries at
<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/our-righteous-advocate/>.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007), 142.

⁷ R.C. Sproul, “TULIP and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement,” Ligonier Ministries, November 19, 2012 at <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-limited-atonement/>.

becomes evident when we consider what is meant by the term *efficient*. Sproul explains it this way: “It wasn’t just a hypothetical atonement, it was an actual atonement. He didn’t offer a hypothetical expiation for the sins of His people; their sins *were* expiated.”⁸ Piper’s conclusion is similar. He asserts, “When Jesus died on the cross, paying the price for us...He decisively accomplished that for His own. His sheep. His elect...He didn’t just make it accomplishable. He accomplished it.”⁹ From this understanding, Piper considers the term *triumphantly effective atonement* as preferable to the more traditional *limited atonement*.¹⁰ Sproul likewise re-labels the term. He says, “I prefer not to use the term limited atonement because it is misleading. I rather speak of definite redemption or definite atonement, which communicates that God the Father designed the work of redemption specifically with a view to providing salvation for the elect, and that Christ died for His sheep and laid down His life for those the Father had given to Him.”¹¹ This redefinition helps explain why the Reformed view demands that regeneration precedes faith – because in this perspective *salvation for the elect was accomplished at the cross, and not when the elect actually believed*.

Further, notice the distinction Sproul suggests between meritorious and full value of the atonement: “...its meritorious value is sufficient to cover the sins of all people, and certainly anyone who puts his or her trust in Jesus Christ will receive the full measure of the benefits of that atonement.”¹² The full value is conditioned upon trust or belief. But Sproul adds another subtle yet important condition: “...the gospel is offered universally to all who are within earshot of the preaching of it, but it’s not universally offered in the sense that it’s offered to anyone without any conditions. It’s offered to anyone who believes. It’s offered to anyone who repents.

⁸ Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross*, 150.

⁹ John Piper, “John Piper on Limited Atonement”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZEIPPgMkFA>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sproul, “TULIP and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement.”

¹² Ibid.

Obviously the merit of the atonement of Christ is given to all who believe *and to all who repent of their sins*" [emphasis mine].¹³

It is noteworthy that Sproul views the merit of the atonement as conditional based on repentance of sins, because never in the Bible is there such a condition identified. Fifty-six times in the NT repentance is mentioned. In eight instances the NT refers to repentance *that leads to* the forgiveness of sins.¹⁴ There are five instances in Revelation, one referring to "Jezebel,"¹⁵ and the others to unbelievers who have not repented of similar deeds.¹⁶ The only other context connecting repentance and sin is 2 Corinthians 12:21, in which Paul describes mourning for *believers* who have not repented of their impurity, immorality, and sensuality. Repentance *from* sins is simply not a Biblical condition for salvation. But what about 1 John 2:2? Does that passage refute or support the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement? We cannot dismiss the passage by referring to a distant and unconnected context, nor by quoting a catechism or creed, nor by repeating a theological supposition. We can only answer the question by exegeting the passage itself.

AN EXEGESIS OF 1 JOHN 2:2

To adequately handle any passage we must work through some important exegetical steps. We need to (1) verify the text and translation, (2) identify background and context, (3) identify structural keys, (4) identify grammatical and syntactical keys, (5) identify lexical keys, (6) address Biblical context, and (7) consider theological context. Then we would verify our work, put it into practice in our own lives as appropriate, and communicate it with others as God gives us opportunity.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mk 1:4, Lk 3:3, 17:3,4, 24:47, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 2 Cor 12:21.

¹⁵ Rev 2:21.

¹⁶ Rev 2:22, 9:20,21, 16:11.

¹⁷ More detail is offered on these steps, and two additional steps for Bible study (secondary verification, and exposition) in [Christopher Cone, *Integrating Exegesis and Exposition*](#):

(1) Text and Translation

καὶ αὐτὸς ἰλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου.¹⁸ A literal translation would read, “And He a propitiation He is for the sins of us, not for those of us only, but also for those of the whole world.” The NASB translates the concluding phrase as “but also for those of the whole world.” The ESV renders it, “but also for the sins of the whole world.” The NASB italicizes the phrase *for those of*, in acknowledgment that the phrase is not actually in the Greek, but the genitive *tou kosmou* implies the phrase, so it is a sound rendering. The implication of the translation is that the propitiation is for the *sins* of the whole world, rather than being for the whole world itself.

There are a couple of minor textual variants that do not affect the meaning of the words individually or the passage as a whole. A few manuscripts read *huper ton*, rather than *peri ton*. A few spell *monon* with the omega rather than the *omicron* (the *omega* indicates the genitive plural, the *omicron* indicates the adverb or adjective). We can be confident that the English translations above are good representations of the Greek text.

(2) Background and Context

John’s first epistle functions as a sequel to his Gospel. It is closely related in terminology and in thought. John addresses his letter to those he calls his little children (2:1), beloved (2:7), fathers (2:13), young men (2:13), and brethren (3:13). John writes his Gospel so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you may have life in His name” (Jn 20:31). In his first follow-up letter, John has several purposes in mind. He proclaims “what was” so that believers might have horizontal and vertical fellowship (1:3), he writes so that his joy might be complete (1 Jn 1:4), so that his little children might not sin (1 Jn 2:1), and so that those who

[Biblical Communication for Transformative Learning \(Fort Worth, TX: Exegetica Publicaitons, 2015\).](#)

¹⁸ Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies, 1993), 1 Jn 2:2.

believe can know that they have eternal life (1 Jn 5:13). His last stated purpose builds on the purpose of John's Gospel, written so that people might believe, whereas his letter was written so that those who believe might know. In the letter, John concentrates on the vertical relationship with God, through Christ, in chapters one through three, specifically focusing on the fruit of salvation: love (2:9-10). In chapters four and five he discusses the horizontal relationship of believers to each other and underscores success in those relationships as further practical evidence of the positional reality of salvation.

(3) Structural Keys

As John's is a very personal letter, it is not structured as identifiably as is his Gospel. The thought transitions are often represented by personal address (such as in 2:1, 7, 12, 4:7, 5:13). Other times we recognize the theme shifts by transitional terms, such as *for* (*hoti*, 3:11), and thematic chiasm (as in 1:6-7, 2:9-10). John also uses imperatives to move from one theme to the next (as in 2:15, 24, 3:1, 4:1). Sometimes the topic changes are thematically self-explanatory. In any case, considering these structural keys, the letter can be outlined as follows:

1-3 Vertical Fellowship

1:1-4 The Basis: The Word of Life

1:5-10 The Conditions

2:1-2 The Advocate: Jesus Christ

2:3-6 The Obedience

2:7-11 The Commandment: Love

2:12-14 The Maturity

2:15-17 The Warning of Worldliness

2:18-23 The Lie vs. The Truth

2:24-29 The Promise: Eternal Life

3:1-10 The Righteousness

3:11-18 The Love Needed

4-5 Horizontal Fellowship

4:1-6 The Discernment
4:7-18 The Love Explained
4:19-21 The Basis of Love
5:1-5 The Belief
5:6-12 The Witness
5:13-15 The Assurance
5:16-21 The Sin

(4) Grammatical and Syntactical Keys

The subject is *He (autos)*, the verb is *is (estin)*, the object is *propitiation (hilasmos)*. The third person singular pronoun (*autos*) along with the third person singular verb (*estin*) emphasize that it is Christ Himself who is the propitiation. The remainder of the verse modifies or qualifies the term *hilasmos*. It is for our sins (*ton hamartion*, in the genitive), but not the sins of us (*ton hemeteron*) only, but those of the whole world. *Of the whole world (holou tou kosmou)* is genitive, thus the three terms are linked: *whole* modifies *the world*. The differences in interpretation are not due to grammar and syntax, but rather to how two key words or phrases are defined.

(5) Lexical Keys

There are two key concepts in 1 John 2:2 that help us understand the author's intended meaning, and which are disputed: propitiation (*hilasmos*), and the whole world (*holou tou kosmou*). The Greek *hilasmos* is employed in its masculine form also in 1 John 4:10, and in neuter form (*hilasterion*) in Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 9:5. The term is translated by the KJV, NASB, and the ESV as *propitiation*, which could be understood as *the place or means by which the price of sin is satisfied*. The disagreement is not on the lexical definition of the word, but on the timing of when the propitiation is applied to the individual.

Romans 3:25 identifies Jesus as publicly portrayed as a propitiation. Hebrews 9:5 refers to the mercy seat, the place where the price was paid and the forgiveness

was rendered.¹⁹ 1 John 4:10 reiterates that Jesus was sent to be a propitiation for our sins. It is important to note that the mercy seat itself did not guarantee the forgiveness of sins – the blood had to be applied properly, according to the laws pertaining to the sacrifices.

The need for proper application is foreshadowed in Exodus 12:7, 13 at the first Passover. The shedding of blood paid the price for redemption, but the application of the blood was a separate event, even if separated by only a little time. That separate event resulted in the completion of the redemption process. In the same way, Jesus could serve as a propitiation paying completely for sin, but unless His sacrifice is applied as required (through belief in Him), that price paid is not applied, and therefore sin is not forgiven. This understanding differs from the Reformed view, which does not distinguish as separate events the price paid and the application to the elect.

The second key lexical component is the phrase *the whole world* (*holou tou kosmou*). The question is whether or not *whole* is qualified or unqualified. For example, Sproul suggests –correctly, I believe – that 2 Peter 3:8-9 qualifies all (*pantes*) as all of a specific group. He observes, “The immediate antecedent of the word any in this passage is the word us, and I think it’s perfectly clear that Peter is saying that God is not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us should come to salvation. He’s not speaking of all mankind indiscriminately; the us is a reference to the believing people to whom Peter is speaking.”²⁰ Similarly, Matthew 2:2 uses the word all (*pas*), to say that all Jerusalem was troubled along with Herod. Does the all include the houses themselves in Jerusalem? The word would not require that, but seems to be making a clear reference to the *people* of Jerusalem – those who could be troubled. Likewise, Matthew 11:13 describes all (*pantes*) the prophets as prophesying until John, yet there were clearly prophets that came after John (see Acts 21:10). The *all* is referring to a specific group.

¹⁹ The LXX translates the Hebrew *kapporeth* in Ex 25:17 as the Greek, neuter, *hilasterion*.

²⁰ Sproul, “TULIP and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement.”

Thus it is not uncommon to see a contextual qualification of universal terms. But while examples of such qualification can readily be identified, it is important to recognize that qualification should only be inferred *when the context directly calls for it*. There is no textual argument – grammatical or lexical – to be made that whole does not mean whole. The only arguments offered by those holding the qualified view are theological. There is nothing in 1 John 2:2 that suggests that whole is qualified, nor any other passage that would demand that we understand the whole of 1 John 2:2 as qualified.

(6-7) Biblical and Theological Context

In the immediate context of 1 John 2:2, John writes to believers so that they will not sin, but if they do, he wants them to understand they have an advocate (2:1). Jesus is (present tense) a propitiation for our sins – He continues to be a propitiation even today. Immediately after identifying Christ's propitiatory role, John explains the importance and reasonableness of obedience. By obedience we can have assurance of our salvation – we can know by experience (*ginosko*) that we have come to know (*ginosko*) Him. Obedience helps to provide assurance, but even when we do sin, and are thus robbed of that component of our assurance, Jesus is still our Advocate (2:1), and the Holy Spirit still abides within us (3:24) as the pledge of our inheritance (Eph 1:13-14).

Recall John's purposes in writing: so that believers might have horizontal and vertical fellowship (1:3), that his joy would be complete (1:4), that believers would not sin (2:1), and that they would know that they have eternal life (5:13). He wants believers to understand that they are in Christ, that they should walk like it, and that their position is not conditioned on continuing obedience, but that continued obedience is necessary for their fellowship – both with God and with each other. The immediate context of 1 Jn 2:2 focuses on Jesus' *ongoing and present* role as propitiation, an idea that would seem to contradict the propitiation as being a single event.

John 11:52 is a more distant context, appealed to by MacArthur, Piper, and others, as showing that Jesus didn't die for everyone, but just for His children. Such

an interpretation is dependent on the assumption that because the verse says that Jesus died for the children of God, that it means that Jesus *did not* die for those who were not the children of God. This is how MacArthur can assert that Jesus did not die for Hitler or Judas. The problem with this assumption is a logical one. The argument can be presented formally as follows:

P1 Jesus died for the children of God.

P2 The non-elect are not the children of God.

C Jesus did not die for the non-elect.

This syllogism contains a conclusion that is also an assumed (unmentioned) premise. That Jesus did not die for the non-elect does not follow from a statement that He died for the children of God. Both MacArthur and Piper depend on John 11:52 to justify the *whole* of 1 John 2:2 as qualified only to the elect. But not only is the passage distant in context from John's letter, but the assertion that the passage proves Jesus did not die for the non-elect is grounded on nothing but an assumption. Further, that assumption is read back into 1 John 2:2. Finally, this interpretive justification violates the principle that the exegete must deal with the immediate context before invoking distant contexts. In both cases (the ungrounded assumption and the contextual priority problem), this is at best inadequate exegesis.

Summary of Findings

The text and translation of 1 John 2:2 give no indication that the passage is more complicated than it appears. The background and context provides no specific data that would direct us to understand the passage in a non-literal or qualified way. The textual keys and structure of the letter indicate that 2:1-2 and 2:3-6 are different pericopes, with 2:1-2 emphasizing that Christ has a *present* ministry to believers who sin, and 2:3-6 reiterating the importance of obedience for the nurturing of fellowship. The grammar and syntax indicates a straightforward, unqualified reading. Two lexical keys support the unqualified reading: the propitiation as a *present* ministry of Christ to believers, and the *whole* world as

unqualified. The Biblical and theological contexts provide no textual evidence that 1 John 2:2 should be understood either entirely in the past tense or as unqualified. In short, there is no exegetical evidence whatsoever to support the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement from 1 John 2:2. In this passage, at least, the indication is that God's grace is provided for all, and is accessible to all. 1 John 2:2 does not deal with how application is made, but John does address that throughout the near context, identifying belief as the means of accessing God's propitiatory grace (3:23, 5:1, 5:5,10, 5:13).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Limited atonement is a tremendously influential doctrine, in the sense that it impacts other areas of theology significantly. If we draw a limited atonement view of 1 John 2:2 when the passage was not intended to be understood that way, there are several key implications. First, we find ourselves misrepresenting God's character. We say He didn't die for those for whom He did. Now, on the other hand if the limited atonement view is correct, and we argue against it, then we find ourselves equally misrepresenting God's character. The entire point of John's letter is that as we are now eternally, in the present and future, children of God, we should walk like it and continue in fellowship with Him and each other. Misrepresenting God's character is no small problem for our fellowship. It is not just a theological exercise.

Second, we find ourselves misrepresenting God's work in salvation. This has serious implications for the Gospel. As Sproul indicated, limited atonement comes with other theological requirements. It is no coincidence that the Reformed position is essentially Lordship salvation, redefining repentance (as from sin, rather than a changing of the mind), and thereby redefining the Gospel. Ultimately, the question we have to answer is whether we choose what kind of God we want to believe in, or whether we instead submit to His self-revelation? Does He have the right as Sovereign Creator to tell us who He is and what He does, or are we entitled to craft Him in the image of our choosing?