

Limited Atonement, the Free Offer of the Gospel and the Westminster Standards

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Limited Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel are subjects that are attacked by both Arminians,¹ on the one hand, and Hyper-Calvinists, on the other. The Arminians charge that if the Atonement of Christ is limited, then there can be no basis for the Free Offer. The hyper-Calvinists, in a sense, invert this charge by suggesting that the Free Offer, if true, denies Limited Atonement². For Hyper-Calvinists accept the Arminian contention that a free offer must demand an unlimited atonement of Christ.³ Having said all that, those particular points of contention are not the subject of this paper. What this paper will argue that over the course of the development of the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement and the free offer of Christ, there has been an unfortunate narrowing of the theological categories the Bible uses to express the doctrines of the person and work of Christ in relation to the divine will and the free offer of the Gospel.

What does this mean? Let me answer this by explaining my thoughts through the use of extended metaphor. We could liken the issue to a person standing outside a museum and looking through a window at a picture hanging on the wall inside the museum. Let us then imagine that the picture is wide, long and full of richness. It is a thoroughly complex piece of art. The window, through which our imaginary viewer is standing before, contains many panes of glass. This is no ordinary window. There is a sense wherein the character of God is like this work of art. God's character is rich, is long, is wide, is deep, is profound, even complex and mysterious. The Bible is our window into the character of God. The Bible as our window is rich, is long, is wide, is deep, even complex and mysterious. The Bible is like the multi-paned window before our imaginary museum. Through the many panes of the window of the Bible, we can see the detailed variegation of God's character.

This is surely a wonderful picture before us. Unfortunately, we as humans have this propensity to classify and reclassify, to reduce and organise things down to manageable, cognisable, usable, and comprehensive, (exhaustively so), little compartments of data. And in all this, to some extent, we express the very image of God in us, our God-given design. Yet, due to sin and the fallen condition, we are unsettled by mystery and complexity, and by unmanageable bits of data. Instead of the complexity of my imaginary museum window, we desire a more straightforward, less cluttered, less complex view of the picture, of God. We will tinker and refine the window, reduce the number of viewing panes to the point that we are comfortable, to the point that we now have cognitive comfort. All the gaps are closed, the blind spots removed, and the blurred sections cleared up. But when we do this, we do so at a cost.

As I think through this issue, I come to the conclusion that our God is truly awesome. He is truly a God who transcends my understanding. I surrender completely the idea that some day I will attain univocal⁴ knowledge of God. I must, with all my being, surrender the idea that someday I will attain exhaustive knowledge of God. I must, with Van Til, assert that I will never attain exhaustive knowledge of even a small particle of God's knowledge. That is, I will never attain complete epistemic unity of even a particle of God's knowledge. Forever will it be that my knowledge of God will contain gaps, blurs, blind spots, and even paradoxes. So great is our God that I must boldly confess this.

Yet furthermore, I will unashamedly confess that the Reformed theologian John Calvin was a genius.⁵ The man was raised up by God to be an instrument to reform and purify God's church. In this, he clearly excelled even Martin Luther. Calvin easily swam the diverse waters of theological systematist, preacher, pastor, polemicist, linguist and commentator. He excelled in all these disciplines. And with equal boldness I accept that when I read the body of Calvin's writings, it is as if I am looking through another window at the Bible. For all his genius, Calvin never played his hand

¹Under this grouping, I would include all sub-Calvinists, such as Pelagians, Semi-pelagians, and Wesleyans.

²The argument is superficially appealing and runs like this: If the doctrine free offer is true, then limited atonement is denied. But it is impossible for limited atonement to not be true, therefore the doctrine of the free offer is not true.

³It is granted that the Hyper-Calvinist will also bring many other charges to the table in her case against the free offer.

⁴I have to here demur the claims of theologians like Gordon Clark and Robert Reymond who have advocated that we do indeed have a univocal knowledge of God. I believe they are misreading the standard and historical definitions of Equivocal, Analogical and Univocal language.

⁵Of course it is readily owned by this writer that Calvin was incomparable to God, to Jesus, and to a lesser extent, the Apostle Paul.

at theological reductionism. He embraced the complexity of God's self-revelation in the written word of God. He embraced his own epistemic limitations. When you read his commentaries, tracts and sermons on key issues, he sought to reproduce the richness of complexity and diversity and depth he found in the Bible.⁶ While it is true that Calvin sought balance, it was not the "balance" of a rationalist. It was never a balance at the expense of biblical truth.⁷

However, after Calvin there came development, refinement, and reclassification. Not all of which was bad. Not all of which was good. Historically speaking, at the turn of the 16th century, the theological classifications of limited atonement and the free offer took a sharp turn.⁸ They became subject to a refinement, a reclassification, and a refocussing. The more generalist language of Calvin, and even of men like Ursinus and Musculus⁹, was retooled and reclassified. This in itself was not wrong, I believe. But what happens is that given our very human nature to classify, to reduce and manage, we came to embrace a reduced window. For sure, this did not happen as simplistically as I may be implying. But something of the variegation of God's revelation is necessarily lost the moment we narrow our exegetical grids. What happened was that the Canons of Dort in the 1620s became a grid through which Reformed believers came to view the Bible, came to view God's revelation of himself in that Bible. This did not happen immediately, nor did it happen to all aspects of the Reformed community at that time. But it did begin a narrowing process.¹⁰

In the 1640s, the men of the Westminster Assembly made available to the world the Westminster Confession of Faith, along with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. In regard to the work of Christ in his life and in his death, and in regard to the free offer, the Confessional statement is even more succinct than the Canons of Dort. We can appreciate the breath and depth of the Westminster Confession, in that it far exceeds the scope of Dort, or any previous Reformed Confession,¹¹ it truly is the queen of the Reformed Confessions. It is also evident that immediately after the initial framing of the Confession, the theologians themselves began to expand their concepts and categories in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. For example, regarding the Covenants of Works and of Grace, we find in the Catechisms changes in terminology which in effect expand the theological categories even more. Yet, as we jump down to the 20th century, we discover the popularisation of the mnemonic TULIP. While the TULIP is a very useful teaching tool, it does become a facility which advances a form of theological reductionism which further and further narrows our window into the character of God. What has happened is that system of thought that was characterised as Calvinism, or Augustinianism, now is seen, for the most part, along narrow decretal lines. A narrow decretal teleology now dominates the popularist understanding of Calvinism as a system of theological thought. Now, Calvinism is seen in narrow terms of God the Father and God the Son enacting a Covenant with regard to saving the elect. The Son becomes incarnate, and his life and death are seen in minimal categories of his work to save the elect. The work of the Spirit, similarly, is narrowed. Many today have no real appreciation for the old doctrine of Common Operations of the Spirit, or Common Grace.¹²

⁶An example of this will be discussed below.

⁷Needless to say, this does not mean I agree with everything Calvin said. I want to be no slave to Calvin's thought.

⁸I wish to state, that at no point am I buying into the Amyraut Thesis regarding Calvin and Beza.

⁹Both men, in their theological works will often breathlessly speak of Christ's atonement for the world, without having to feel the need to insert a caveat or qualification. They are content to just reproduce the biblical terminology.

¹⁰For example, one is hard pressed to find in Dort, broad statements which connect the free offer with the character of God or the person and work of Christ. Article 8, under the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine is simply not adequate. Having stressed all this in deliberately bold language, it is readily accepted that the Canons of Dort are rich and detailed. They are a long way from the very reductionist TULIP that has become popular in our day. If only Dort could be accurately popularised in a way that did not sacrifice its richness and depth!

¹¹With perhaps the possible exception of the Second Helvetic, which in its own right is fairly comprehensive and detailed.

¹²A related question to this topic would be the question of the possible correlation with the modern Reformed narrowing of Calvinistic soteriology with the concurrent decline in Calvinistic evangelism? I know that in Australia, it is a given that the more doctrinally "correct" the respective Reformed church is, the less evangelistic and less culturally relevant and engaging that church is. Is there some correlation between the popular shift,

Thus now I come to my argument proper. While the actual statements of the Westminster Confession regarding the character of God, the work of Christ and the free offer are accurate in and of themselves, and their truthfulness is not to be denied, I believe they are yet inadequate in their expressions of all three concepts. For example, the Confessional statements regarding God's goodness, as an inherent and natural quality of his nature are inadequate.¹³ One has to go to fairly comprehensive systematic works to find more of the goodness of God explained. But therein lies the problem. The Westminster documents are usually the first systematic theological work people encounter in their entry into Reformed theology.¹⁴

Therefore I will argue that the statements of the Westminster Confession are too minimal. I will examine briefly something of the theological context for the statements we do have in the documents. I will then argue that men who were either contemporary to the writing of Westminster, or near contemporaries, very early found the need to be more expressive in their language. Indeed, even the Sum of Saving Knowledge cowritten by two of the finest theologians Scotland produced felt the need to be far more explicit regarding the free offer.¹⁵ What I will do in this paper is to state the initial statements in the Westminster, then place alongside them statements from the two Catechisms. I will then examine in briefly some comments made by Calvinists in respective commentaries on the Catechisms and Confession. Then I will present a scriptural case for seeing the work of Christ in a different manner, which takes in a more balanced approach to the work and death of Christ and to the free offer of the Gospel.¹⁶

The Westminster Confession:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely *offers* unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe...

To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.

reductionism, or narrowing of the understanding (call it what you may) of the Character of God and the compassion of Christ towards all men that influences the correlate decline in collective and corporate Reformed evangelism? Or is it part of a broader matter, that the more theologically precise we are, the more theologically defensive we become, and so the more our energies are directed to the theological defense of our institutions and practices, to our forms of worship, for example? In this sense, is it that the jotting and crossing of our theological letters are more important than reaching out to people? Who can answer such questions?

¹³For example, we only find the very minimal statement of God being good and does good to all in 21:1; c.f., 2:1.

¹⁴It may be thought that if one were to enter Reformed theology through the windows of works by Charnock, his *Existence and Attributes of God* for example, then there would not be this problem, but who does that? That would be a rarity. For the most part, people are introduced through the popular works by Boettner and Sproul, for example. For myself, personally, the point is underlined when I recall how often I encounter young Calvinists who receive with complete incredulity the idea that the "all" in 2 Peter 3:9 might mean more than just the elect, and that this was indeed the position of men like Calvin and Bavinck.

¹⁵That is, the elderly David Dickson and the younger James Durham.

¹⁶At the outset, I want to state that this is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion. There is a sea of material out there which deals with the free offer and the atonement. Nor is it my intention to survey every commentary on the Confession and Catechisms. My intention here is to present some material and arguments as a position paper with the view of provoking thought and discussion. I desire that we focus primarily on the text of the Confession and the language of Scripture.

And also:

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to *call*, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace...

This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace *offered* and conveyed in it...

Others, not elected, although they may be *called by the ministry of the Word*, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved...¹⁷

The Larger Catechism:

Q 32: How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant? A 32: The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provides and *offers* to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promises and give his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.

And:

Q 68: Are the elect only effectually called? A 68: All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly *called by the ministry of the word*, and have some common operations of the Spirit; who, for their wilful neglect and contempt of the grace *offered* to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ.

The Shorter Catechism:

Q 31: What is effectual calling? A 31: Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely *offered* to us *in the gospel*.

I have placed these quotations back to back in order that their conceptual unity and structure be discerned. While it is admitted that I have not cited the Westminster documents comprehensively, and while I do want to avoid the charge that I am, therefore, taking the Confession and Catechisms out of context, it does appear to me that a problem with these statements stems from an absence of a key thought. The question must be asked: What is the basis of the *particular* and the *general* call of the Gospel? In regards to the former, the Confession is clearer: The basis for the particular call is the work of Christ, who purchased redemption and justification for the elect, and to all for whom these things were purchased, will be applied the benefits of redemption and justification; this applicatory work is grounded in the work and promise of Christ. Yet, in regards the latter, there is no stated basis for the general call, only a handful of assertions.¹⁸ What grounds the general call? What does it contain? What does it exhibit? What is its function?

¹⁷WCF 7:3, 8:8, 10:1, 2 and 4a-b [emphasis mine]. Compare WCF 8:8 with the Second Helvetic Confession chapter 11, Jesus is the saviour of the world.

¹⁸C.F., David Lachman's comparable comments in *The Marrow Controversy, 1718-1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988), p., 32.

The context of the Westminster statements need to be noted first. Historically the context of the Westminster discussion on the atonement of Christ is, no doubt, that of the already emergent Arminianism, which in its own turn, gave rise to Dort, and also the emergent rise of the mediating position of Amyraldianism. That latter position holds that while Christ (conditionally) purchased redemption and justification for all men without distinction, the actual benefits of work of Christ are applied to the elect. Men like Richard Baxter, contemporary to the Westminster theologians, and men like Davenant, decades before the assembly, had put forth positions on a continuum with the Amyraldian understanding of the work of Christ.¹⁹

Specifically, as we turn to the minutes of the Westminster debates, the question of the extent of Christ's death was discussed and so on the forefront of their thinking. Before the assembly divines, Calamy proposed that "Christ did pay the price for all" with the absolute intention of saving the elect, but with the conditional intention of saving the reprobate "in case they do believe" so that thereby all men should be placed in a saveable state. Calamy asserts that not only did Christ die sufficiently for all, but that God did intend that by Christ, all men be put "in a state of salvation in case they do believe."²⁰ He cites Dort, apparently under the impression that, that Confession sides with him on this point. In response to Reynolds' claim that what he is proposing is Remonstrant (Arminianism) doctrine, Calamy is keen to separate his position from the Arminian position on the atonement. His position, he asserts, is very different to that of the Arminian position, because they have Christ's intention to save all men, conditionally, only, so that *all* men should be placed in an *equal* state of salvation.²¹ He also says that he affirms election and a reprobation out of a corrupt mass.²² After this, the debate progresses. Gillespie and Rutherford adopt the stricter position, while others take up mediating positions.²³

The debate seems to have progressed to a discussion of John 3:16 and Mark 16:15. Regarding the former verse, Calamy asserts, that in these words "a ground of God's intention of giving Christ, God's love to the world, a philanthropy the world of elect and reprobate, and not just the elect only; it cannot be meant the elect [only], because of that 'whosever believeth...'" Regarding the latter, he argues: "'Go preach the gospel to every creature.' If the covenant of grace be preached to all, then Christ redeemed, in some sense, all--both elect and reprobate; but it is preached to all; there is warrant for it."²⁴ To this Rutherford counters by asserting what Calamy has just said could be true if it is also true "that Christ died in some sense [for all]..."²⁵ However, Rutherford continues: "I deny this connection be[cause] it holds as well in election, justification, as in redemption; if he believe, he is as well elected and justified a redeemed."²⁶ Again Rutherford asserts: "There is no difference betwixt redemption and justification in this... The promise of justification is made no less to Judas than redemption... The ground of his is to make all salvable, and so justifiable." To this Seaman

¹⁹See William Cunningham's brief discussion on the language of the Confession in relation to the Amyraldian idea of unlimited redemption. Cunningham briefly examines the language of the Confession to see if it allows for a universalistic reading of Christ's purchase of redemption, co-joined with a more limited application of the benefits of that redemption; *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1979), vol 2, pp., 323-336. Cunningham addresses, too, the question of the twofold reference to the work of Christ. What he says, I would argue, is true as far as he goes, but still not enough.

²⁰Alex F. Mitchell & John Struthers, ed., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p., 152.

²¹Ibid. In this position there is absolutely no particularity in the atoning work of Christ. This is important to note, as accusing Calamy and men like him of Arminianism is naive and incorrect.

²²Ibid., p., 153. Reynolds countered Calamy by correctly asserting that Dort, far from affirming what Calamy proposes, only asserted that Christ's death was of infinite value that ten thousand worlds could be saved.

²³What is important here is that Amyraut is mentioned by name, demonstrating that his theology was well known and thus in all likelihood, the Confession was so framed with his theology in mind, viz., to *preclude* it.

²⁴*Minutes*, p., 154. I intend to walk a fine line here between Amyraldianism and the received orthodoxy of the later Protestant Scholastics.

²⁵Ibid. [Square brackets mine.]

²⁶Ibid.

replies that Rutherford is making an absurd argument for the point is simply that as all men are damnable, so now all men are savable, and if God pleases, he may choose him, justify him, and sanctify him.²⁷

Essentially, regarding John 3:16, Calamy's major argument comes to this: The universal Gospel offer has to be grounded in a universal redemption by Christ. For, if the redemption is limited, then so too must be the offer. To some extent, this argument must be admitted. For Calamy, if the universal offer is not grounded in a universal redemption, then there can be no sincerity, no verity, behind the offer to all. Rutherford countered this logic by denying the connection between the grounds for the offer and the redemption of Christ. For him, those for whom Christ died, were the elect and the elect only. Wilkinson counters that Christ could not redeem those for whom he did not intercede in prayer. Gillespie argues that the Reformed have acknowledged that the word "world" does have other meanings, other than all men. He also expresses his failure to conceive of a universal love to mankind as is maintained. For him, such a concept must deny absolute reprobation. Gillespie then tackles Mark 16:15. He further apparently concedes that there is some truth in the logical connection Calamy is adducing in regard to John 3:16. Yet, like Owen later, he says we must distinguish between the *voluntas decreti* and the *voluntas mandati* (The decretive and revealed will), for what grounds the universal call is the latter, not the former.²⁸

Against Gillespie, Calamy concedes that the term "world" sometimes denotes the elect, but sometimes the entire world. Regarding the will of God, he asserts that the *voluntas decreti* only pertains to the application of redemption. Then he asserts a double love, one general, one special. To this, Gillespie repeats his assertions. For him, apparently, John 3:16 means no more than "for God so loved the elect, that whosoever believes in him..." He repeats that the offer is not grounded upon the decretive will, and his point that a "general love" must negate absolute reprobation. Trying to come to the rescue, Lightfoot asserts that John 3:16 refers to the world in opposition to the Jews, and for the universal offer, God intends only the salvation of the elect.²⁹ Price then asserts that though in John 3:16, mankind is meant, it is not to be supposed that Christ "'intended' for all... it does not follow that Christ died intentionally for the redemption of all." Vines then asserts that by the term "world" in Jn 3:16, he does not take it to mean "the gentiles [contra Lightfoot?] but if I did, it were all one... as is whether the world here do not signify more than the elect. It seems it does, because the words do not else run well. This word denotes an intention in the gift and in the love. We could not live if there were not a general love of man to mankind." And regarding Mark 16:15, he says that the gospel is a conditional proposition of a covenant.³⁰ The arguments seem to come to an end for that day.

What is important to note here is that the key word is "intention." In the theological discourse of the 17th century, that word was loaded with currency. In terms of the Amyraut thesis, it came to signify a will of purpose, as opposed to the revealed will, which was not properly speaking effectual. Thus, in the Amyraldian schema, the will to send the Son to die for all men was a purposive will. Here it shares with the Reformed. But this purposive will, or intending will, was not effectual, but ineffectual. Here it shares with Arminianism. It seems that the categories of the day could only conceive of a will of intention that was either purposive and effectual (Reformed) or purposive and ineffectual (Amyraldian and Arminian).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p 154-5. Clearly Gillespie was wrong regarding God's general love, or he meant to deny only that universal love, in the technical theological sense of Amyraldianism, a salvific love that was indiscriminate. Or perhaps in Gillespie we have a proto-hyperCalvinist? Marshall adds that along with the mandate of God's will, there is also a promised annexed; i.e., the promise of salvation.

²⁹Ibid., p., 156. Strictly speaking, it cannot be taken in opposition to the Jewish nation, for it must include even the elect from among the Jews. The sense has to include some thought that the Gospel is for the world of men, the Gentiles, not just to the Jews, contrary to their ethno-exclusivism. The reduction of this text "for God so loved the elect..." profoundly misses the intent of Jesus here. Nicodemus would have nodded his head and said "yes the elect Jews." He would not have been challenged if Gillespie is right. Rather, the challenge came when Jesus challenged his Jewish ethno-centricity.

³⁰Ibid., pp., 156-7.

On the next day summations are made. First Goodwin: the Gospel must be preached to every creature, that the decrees of God concerning the world of his elect are kept up in indefinite expressions, that is the world, and hence all are obligated to preach to all the Gospel of Christ. Rutherford sums his position. For him, the love of John 3:16 is special. He does make the following ambiguous statement regarding the love of God: “not one scripture in all the New Testament where it can be expounded for the general...” The next day, Harris makes a summary. He notes that the concept of a conditional decree is not even possible, and that the world in John 3:16 is the world of the Gentiles, but the love is the highest love, “which cannot be a common love.”³¹

Thus it is in this context that the language of the Confession and Catechism arose. For the Reformed at Westminster,³² then, the thought was that the *intention* of Christ was singular, and that is to save the elect. The Gospel is preached to all and this is grounded in both the indefinite language of Scripture and the indefinite location of the elect. In very short-hand language, the arguments could be stated this way: God so loved all kinds, of men from diverse ethnic backgrounds, he sent his Son, that whosoever believes on him will have life. That seems to be Lightfoot’s position. Gillespie and Rutherford’s is stricter: God so loved the *elect*, that he sent his Son that whosoever believes in him will have life.³³ Rutherford is aware that the term world is general in some sense, because it is distributed afterwards, that is, because of the term “whosoever.”³⁴ Calamy wants to hold to this: God so loved all men, elect and reprobate, that he sent his Son, that whosoever believes in him will have life. Importantly, for him, what grounds the offer to all is Christ’s purchasing conditional redemption for all. Yet the question is, are these the only possible categories? Can it be that in some other sense we can say that Christ died for all men, which death can be the basis for the universal offer of Christ to all men, but yet that Christ also died with the specific *intention* of saving the elect?³⁵

What of the contemporary or near contemporary secondary sources on the Confession and Catechisms? Do they have anything to contribute to this question?³⁶ It is in the discussions of the Catechism from the 17th century that we start to see some Confessional explication of the call of God, yet no so much on the work of Christ. The Catechisms are more directed to the penitent, assuring him of what Christ has done, not so much with setting forth abstract propositions.³⁷ Therefore, here we must shift our focus away from the work of Christ to the free offer. As I asserted above, the Confession’s statements on the free offer tend to be minimal. But in the explications of the Catechisms, the orthodox are freer in their language. Vincent on SC 31, asks what is the difference between the effectual calling and the ineffectual calling? He answers that the ineffectual external call is a “bare external call of the word, whereby sinners are freely invited unto Christ, that they may have life and salvation by him, but in itself is insufficient to persuade and enable them to come unto him.”³⁸ Later when discussing SC 86, he says: “Jesus Christ is to be received by faith as he is offered to us in the Gospel.” Then he asks the question: “How is Jesus Christ offered to us in the Gospel?” He answers: “Jesus Christ is offered to us in the Gospel, as Priest, Prophet, and King, and so we must receive him, if we would be saved by him.”³⁹ These statements are minimal, but they do take us beyond the language the seemingly bare and abstract language of the call of the Gospel as found in the Confession. For now we have the words offered and invitation being used

³¹Ibid., pp., 157-160.

³²That is, of course, those who rejected the Davenant/Amyraldian schemas.

³³Clearly that interpretation is not sound, exegetically. This is a case of Systematics crunching Biblical theology and exegesis.

³⁴Minutes, p., 158.

³⁵C.f., Cunningham cited above.

³⁶Both David Dickson in his commentary on the Confession is silent on all of these issues, as is also Thomas Boston in his commentary on the Shorter Catechism is also silent on the nature of the general call. From what I could discern, he makes no substantial comment regarding the free offer in terms of the ministerial call of God.

³⁷Note the shift to first person plural in some of the answers in the Catechism, e.g., Q 31, which happens to be one of our texts at hand.

³⁸Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism: Explained from Scripture*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1980), p., 90.

³⁹Ibid., p., 226.

interchangeably as a component of the call of the Gospel. Not only that, but to Christ men are invited to come, and the fullness of *his* work is what is offered to all that they should come and be saved.⁴⁰

Watson is similar to Vincent in this. Regarding the call of the Gospel he notes that the outward call is “God’s offer of grace to sinners, inviting them to come and accept Christ and salvation.” He also notes that another purpose of the call is to render the impenitent inexcusable in their rejection of this invitation.⁴¹ In the extreme opposite to the brevity of Vincent and Watson, Ridgeley is vast and comprehensive. Regarding LC 62, the effectual call, Ridgeley first observes that in the ministry of the word, in the external call, Christ is set forth, in his person and in his offices and sinners are called to come to him. A little later he notes that by this external call sinners are entreated to embrace the grace of Christ.⁴² Later Ridgeley notes that the terms offer, overture, and invitation are words used by the orthodox when treating on this subject.⁴³ On the other hand, Ridgeley notes that some terms and phrases have to be rejected. We cannot, for example, suggest that “God is willing, Christ is willing, and has done his part...” or “Christ has purchased salvation for us...” or “Christ invites us to come to him and leaves it to our free will, whether we will comply or reject these invitations.”⁴⁴ He further argues that the ends of the Gospel call are manifold. One end is to salvation of the elect, another to restrain those who have only common grace, another is to set forth the glorious work of Christ, and another, that it render the impenitent inexcusable. After this he reaffirms that Christ is offered in the Gospel,⁴⁵ and the content of the Gospel, its formal content, is the declaration that all who repent and believe will be saved.⁴⁶

Earlier he discusses LC 44. Here he discusses the atonement of Christ in relation to the free offer. The first thing he notes is that it is not denied that many benefits come to the whole world, such as blessings, the preaching of the Gospel,⁴⁷ and restraining grace, all of which are *secondary* ends of Christ’s death.⁴⁸ He also grants that the orthodox do accept the idea that Christ’s death is sufficient to redeem the whole world, *had* God designed it to be so.⁴⁹ Then he comes the principle question: Whether God designed the salvation of mankind by the death of Christ, or whether he accepted it as a price of redemption for all, so that it might be said, that he redeemed some who shall not be saved by him?”⁵⁰ The subsequent discussion is taken up in arguments against these propositions. Importantly for the intent of this paper, he then discusses the relationship between the atonement and the free offer. He specifically addresses the charge that given

⁴⁰Surely here are shades of Murray and Stonehouse; c.f., point 5 in the “Conclusion” of their article: J. Murray & N. B. Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (A Report to the 15th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1948. Reprinted. n.p., n. publ., n.d.), p 27. It turns out that their remarks here actually echo the thoughts contained in the Catechisms, and in the explications of them by Vincent, Watson and Ridgeley.

⁴¹Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1890), p., 153.

⁴²Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993), vol., 2, p., 49. Ridgeley also here notes that those who have some regard for this external call thereby also partake of common grace and thus are subject to the common operations of the Spirit.

⁴³*Ibid.*, vol., 2, p., 50. Throughout the works of Vincent, Watson and Ridgeley, the words offer, invitation and overture are used interchangeably. This shows that the early orthodox did not imagine that the offer of Christ and of grace was to be limited to meaning *presentation*, merely and only, as if Christ is only presented to men by the proclamation of *facts* and *commands*. Indeed. Ridgeley is aware that some even in his time have charged that the terms like offer are unbiblical. He argues that the concept is implied in the datum of Scripture. He defends the use of the words *offer* and *invitation*, citing biblical passages to sustain his argument.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, vol., 2, p 51.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, vol., 2, p., 52 and 53.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, vol., 2, p., 54. Ridgeley notes that the conditions of the offer are instrumental conditions, in that the means to attain salvation are required of man, e.g., repentance and faith.

⁴⁷It would seem that for some of the Protestant Scholastics, the point here is not so much that the content of the Gospel preached is grounded in the atonement, but that sometimes, as a result of the general preaching of the Gospel, society and men may derive some civic benefit--restraint of sin, and so forth-- from this preaching, along with the direct spiritual benefit the elect receive from it.

⁴⁸Ridgeley, Vol 1, p., 519.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

the limited design of the atonement, the so-called offers of grace in the Gospel are illusory.⁵¹ Here he speaks of offers of Christ to sinners. He does speak of those who object, and who by citing scripture insist that we are to affirm in the Gospel proclamation that God in a most affectionate manner expostulates with men, to persuade them to turn and repent, to live and not die. To this, Ridgeley says that whatever these scriptures may mean, we are not to thereby suppose that saving grace is within the innate power of the sinner, or that God actually designs to save those who shall not finally be saved.⁵² When he comes to address the question of God desiring that men live and not die, he makes the following perplexing statement:

Let me add, therefore, that if, in the scriptures referred to, spiritual and eternal blessings be included in the word 'life,' and the contrary in the word 'death,' we may account for the sense of them without supposing that God designs what shall never come to pass, namely, the universal salvation of mankind, though a part of them shall not be saved. We may do this by considering desire in God as signifying the effects of desire in men. Thus, in his not desiring a thing, denotes it not to be the object of his desire. Accordingly, his not desiring the death of sinners, implies that they ought to endeavour to avoid it as the most formidable evil. On the other hand, his taking pleasure in a thing, as he does in the salvation of his people, signifies not only his intending to save them, but the inexpressible happiness which they shall attain by their salvation.⁵³

In another context, Ridgeley discusses the well-known optative verses, such as Ps 81:13, including Mt 23:37. He says:

Now, the sense of these and similar scriptures is no more than this, not that God can be said to wish for a thing which cannot be attained, but that the thing which the persons spoken of refused to perform, was in itself most desirable, or a matter to be wished for. When our Saviour laments over Jerusalem, as apprehending their destruction to be near, whether his words are to be considered as a wish that it had been otherwise, or as an intimation that if they had known the things of their peace their destruction would not have ensued, they are to be understood only as a representation of the deplorableness of the Jews' condition, which with tenderness of *human* compassion, he could not speak of without tears. Yet we are *not* to suppose that this mode of expression is applicable to the *divine will*.⁵⁴

Ridgeley like most of the post-Calvin Calvinists reduces these and like expressions from Scripture to mere anthropopathisms or anthropomorphisms, thereby effectively robbing them of any meaningful content which would speak to us of the character of God, and well note the distinction between Christ's mere humanly compassion which is distinguished from the divine will--not so the founder of Calvinism, John Calvin himself. What he says here is so unlike Calvin, who on Mt 23:37, clearly says that Christ desired to save all the masses of Jerusalem as the God-Man, not merely as a man. And though this is the revealed will, it is God's will nonetheless. It would seem, then, that Ridgeley's final unqualified remark is not completely correct. In his commentary on Ps 81:13, Calvin again expresses the sense of the text freely, asserting that God desires that all men be saved. Later, though, Owen, the prince of English theologians, follows the narrow reading of these texts. He simply dismisses them as anthropomorphisms, thereby effectively negating

⁵¹Ridgeley is one of the first of the orthodox to take up the argument against the rising Hyper-Calvinist polemic of contemporaries like Joseph Hussey.

⁵²Ibid., vol., 1, pp., 529-30.

⁵³Ibid., vol., 1, p., 531.

⁵⁴Ibid., vol., 1, p., 307 [emphases mine]; c.f., Francis Turretin *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1992), vol., 1, p., 228, sect., 13, and vol., 2, 556, sect., 27.

their force.⁵⁵ Dabney's presents a similar criticism to the one I am making here, of the *school of Turretin*.⁵⁶ He notes that many of the Protestant Scholastics tended to step back from terms which would indicate that there is anything other than an a mere complacency, a sort of passive delight, in God with regard to the salvation of the non-elect. They could not speak of any active principle within God with respect to their salvation. His criticism of Turretin is a bit too severe, in my estimation, as Turretin did speak of God *desiring* that all men be saved. Still, it perhaps took the revolution of the Marrow men, and specifically the teaching of Boston, to recapture the more balanced orthodox *school of Calvin*.

Moving on, Ridgeley follows the standard orthodox distinctions by noting that the proclamation of the Gospel and the obligation of all men to believe does not entail that in initial saving faith, men are required to believe that Christ died for them as a condition of salvation: "The first act of faith does not contain a person's being persuaded that Christ died for him, but that he is the object of faith as he is presented in Scripture."⁵⁷ When treating on LC 32, Ridgeley is able to again say that Christ and his salvation is offered and overtured to men in the Gospel. Indeed, he says, without this, the Gospel could not be preached.⁵⁸ He then notes that this overture is conditional, but the very conditions, faith and repentance, are blessings promised to the elect in the Covenant of Grace, purchased by Christ and effectually wrought in the elect by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹

In the end, while Ridgeley is more explicit than either Vincent or Watson, there is still a sense where he steps back from really expositing the heart of God as the ground for the free offer or of making a connection between it and the work of Christ. He only formally connects the indirect benefits of the atonement with the preaching of the Gospel. In another sense he is still a long way from the hearty language of the Sum of Saving knowledge. That document does not hold back from speaking of God and Christ's hearty, earnest and loving invitation, offers and calls⁶⁰

⁵⁵See Owen's, *Death of Death* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1983), pp., 288-9. John Macleod (*Scottish Theology* {Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1974}) will often speak of the "school of Owen" in the history of Scottish theology. By this he means the theology of Owen as expressed in the *Death of Death*, which was only Owen's second major theological work. As such it does not really reflect his later maturity, even on this subject, as can be seen by some of his later statements and works regarding the offer.

⁵⁶See, R.L. Dabney's, *God's Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy* in his (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1982), specifically pp., 283-284. (A truncated version of this article appears in his *Lectures* but with added detail: *Lectures in Systematic Theology* {Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1972}, pp., 523-535.) Here Dabney makes many interesting remarks. Firstly, speaking of the Luke 19:41 and the *extremist* interpretation, by which he means here the supralapsarrians, he notes that having recognised that Christ felt a tender compassion for the city, whom he knew God had reprobated, "their best answer seems to be, that here it was not the divine nature in Jesus that wept, but the humanity only," (*Discussions*, p., 308). In the section of this paper as reproduced in his *Lectures*, Dabney includes Turretin (and Calvin, though as noted above Dabney errs here) who would limit Christ's compassion merely to his human nature. He goes on to call this interpretation "questionable, and even perilous exegesis..." He says: "The Calvinist should have paused, when he found himself wresting these Scriptures..." (p., 532). He further calls this "unscrupulous exegesis" (p., 533). In response to this perilous theology, he posits the following counters, stated briefly: This extreme view would entail a Christ more compassionate and tender than the Father. This position, he argues, entails a serious paradox, for in the same instance, when Jesus pronounces the final doom of the city, he does so from his divine nature. This he finds inconsistent exegesis. Next he argues that this is defective Christology, for the Son is the express image of the Father. He notes: 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.' Next he alludes to the error of the Monothelites, and while not suggesting the extremists have fallen into this, he notes we cannot imply any disjunction between the human and divine wills, for the divine will and the human will find their very meeting place of the two natures in Christ (p., 309). The solution to this paradox is that this is God in Christ speaking in these instances.

⁵⁷Ridgeley, vol., 1, p., 307.

⁵⁸Ibid., vol., 1, p., 454.

⁵⁹Ibid., vol., 1, p., 457.

⁶⁰David Dickson and James Durham, "Warrants to believe" in *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, Published in *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture Proofs at Large with the Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), pp., 332-4.

Now comes the questions that needs to be asked, “where am I heading with all this?” “Where is my unity of thought that unites the disparate material and thoughts I have so far collated?” It comes to this, I want to find some biblical way that marries the free offer and the person and work of Christ in a more organic connection. It is my thought that the Protestant Scholastics tended to be focused upon resisting opponents than freely establishing the union between the person and work of Christ and the free offer. In this, they were doing less than Calvin’s own contribution at this point. The Protestant Scholastics could speak, separately of the work of Christ, and separately of the free offer, but had difficulty bringing the concepts together. Ridgeley, as with the orthodox, could say that the universal free offer--that is and as already noted, the preaching of the Gospel to all--was in some sense grounded, indirectly and secondarily, in the person and work of Christ. But yet the relationship is ambiguous. William Cunningham, in the tradition of Protestant Scholasticism and John Owen, comes closer to dealing with the relationship.⁶¹

His main polemic is with the Amyraldians who held that Christ came and died with the *intention* of providing redemption for all men, but that the application of redemption is applied only to the elect. Thus for them, the imputation of Christ and the application of his work are separated.⁶² This is clearly to be rejected. Cunningham affirms that many benefits come to all men as a secondary result of the work of Christ. He also discusses the formula of Christ’s Atonement being sufficient for all, but efficient for the elect. He states, rightly, that Calvin admitted the correctness of the statement, “but,” he says,

after controversy had thrown its light upon the subject, orthodox divines generally refused to adopt this mode of stating the point, because it seemed to ascribe to Christ a *purpose* or *intention* of dying in the room of all, and of benefitting all by the proper effects of His death, as an atonement or propitiation; not that they doubted or denied the intrinsic sufficiency of His death for the redemption of all men, but because the statement--whether originally so intended or not--was so expressed as to suggest the idea, that Christ, in dying, desired and intended that all men should partake in the proper and peculiar effects of the shedding of his blood.⁶³

Now he notes an important distinction. Cunningham notes that if the statement if taken *irrespective* of the *design* or *purpose* of Christ, it is acceptable, but that the original scholastic form “seems to indicate that, when He died, *He intended* that all should derive some saving and permanent benefit from His death.”⁶⁴ It is important to recognise that Cunningham points out that there was an important modification in the understanding of the meaning and intent of the phrase “he died sufficiently for all, and efficiently for the elect.”

If we momentarily jump to Berkhof, we can see a confirmation of the historical point Cunningham makes. Berkhof: “The question may be raised, whether the atonement wrought by Christ for the salvation of the elect, and of the elect only, has any wider bearing.”⁶⁵ Berkhof, following the lead of Walker,⁶⁶ notes that in Scotland this question was discussed by various Scottish Reformed theologians, who answered the question negatively. Berkhof cites Walker as noting: “They held, indeed, the intrinsic sufficiency of Christ’s death to save the world or worlds; but that was altogether

⁶¹As in does Berkhof his *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1984), pp., 437-39.

⁶²Cunningham, vol 2., pp., 326-336.

⁶³Ibid., vol., 2, p., 332. Regarding Cunningham’s reference to Calvin, see Calvin on 1 John 2:2. It may be that the extended controversy regarding whether or not Calvin taught limited atonement has really missed the point. If Calvin accepted the Medieval maxim of Christ dying sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect only, then the issue is in a certain sense obsolete. For it would be then evident that Calvin used neither the strict categories of the Amyraldian Protestant Scholastics, or that of the Reformed Protestant Scholastics, wherein his doctrine of the atonement had theological continuities and discontinuities with both camps; though he was more in line with the latter regarding the divine decrees and intention of Christ’s mission. If this is so, would not this account for the particularist and the universalist themes regarding the atonement in his writings?

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Berkhof, p., 398.

⁶⁶James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland, Chiefly of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1888), pp., 79-80.

irrespective of Christ's purpose, or Christ's accomplishment. The maxim that Christ died sufficiently for all was not approved, because the "For" seemed to imply some reality of actual substitution."⁶⁷ Berkhof then notes that it was not until Thomas Boston and the Marrow controversy reaffirmed that in some sense the work of Christ had a wider bearing.⁶⁸

Returning now to Cunningham, in line with what has been noted, Cunningham is prepared to concede that many of the indirect benefits of Christ's work were indeed designed to flow to all men.⁶⁹ Later he will speak of the idea that there could be a general and specific reference to Christ's atonement. Regarding this idea, he concedes, again, this could entail the truth that many collateral benefits flow indirectly from the death of Christ to all men. Or it may be taken in the Amyraldian or Arminian sense, which should be rejected.⁷⁰ But all the while, Cunningham is seemingly trapped by limited conceptual categories. I do not see him breaking out of these limited categories. For him, the general reference of Christ death is either universal in the Amyraldian sense, wherein Christ equally intended and actually purchases redemption and justification equally for all men, yet limited in its application, or the general reference regards only incidental and collateral benefits (common grace). For Cunningham, the only true basis of the free offer of the Gospel to all is the revealed will of God, that is the command of God to preach to all.⁷¹ It is beneficial to cite Cunningham's closing remarks at length, for he exemplifies the very point:

In regard to the allegation often made by orthodox divines, that this act [God's act of making unlimited offers and our warrant for the same] of God is warranted by and is based upon the infinite intrinsic sufficiency of Christ's atonement, we would only remark... that we are not aware of any Scripture evidence that these two things,--namely, the universal intrinsic sufficiency and the unlimited offers,--are connected in this way,--that we have never been able to see how the assertion of this connection removed or solved the difficulty, or throw any additional light upon this subject.⁷²

Thus, Cunningham walks a long mile to disconnect the atonement from the free offer. However, in opposition to this, I believe R.B. Kuiper makes a significant break-through on this point. He says:

Therefore the statement, so often heard from Reformed pulpits, that Christ died only for the elect must be rated a careless one. To be sure, if by "for" be meant *in the place of*, the statement is accurate enough, for those in whose stead Christ suffered he penalty of sin will not themselves have to suffer that penalty, and therefore their salvation from that penalty is assured. If, however, by "for" be meant *in behalf of* it is inaccurate, to say the least. Certain benefits of the atonement accrue to men generally, including the non-elect. Like all things that are, this is so by divine design. Charles Hodge has it right, when he says: "There is a sense, therefore, in which Christ died for all, and there is a sense in which he died for the elect only"⁷³

⁶⁷Berkhof, p., 398 [emph., mine]. I have cited directly from Walker, hence the slight variation of the wording. Walker cites Samuel Rutherford, John Brown of Wamphray, James Durham, David Dickson, and George Gillespie as the principal theologians who answered the above question negatively. It is interesting to note that all of these theologians are from the period of the second Reformation which was concurrent with the Protestant Scholastic era. Importantly, too, Berkhof, again following Walker, notes that men like Durham could only affirm that there were indirect benefits of the atonement that accrue to all men, which are not the proper fruit of the atonement.

⁶⁸It is well to note, it is not my intent here to discuss the Marrow-men's doctrinal claim regarding the legatees of the testament of Christ.

⁶⁹Ibid., vol., 2, p., 333.

⁷⁰Ibid., vol., 2, p., 335.

⁷¹Ibid., vol., 2, 347-8.

⁷²Ibid., vol., 2, p., 348. C.f., the sharp criticisms of Cunningham on this very matter by Dabney in his *Lectures*, p., 529. There Dabney calls Cunningham "thoroughly short-sighted," and he then goes on to affirm that it the case that in some sense Christ died for all. Dabney, like all the other 19th returned to the Medieval sufficiency-efficiency formula.

⁷³R.B., Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1959), pp., 78-9.C.F., p., 83; here he cites Candlish effectively.

It is important to note that Kuiper is not alone at this point. He is not introducing some new and fanciful construction. For example, Charles Hodge, while treating on the question of the extent of the atonement, said,

the question does not concern the value of Christ's satisfaction. That Augustinians admit to be infinite. Its value depends on the dignity of the sacrifice; and no limit can be placed to the dignity of the Eternal Son of God who offered Himself for our sins, so no limit can be assigned to the meritorious value of his work. It is a gross misrepresentation of the Augustinian doctrine to say that it teaches that Christ suffered so much for so many; that He would have suffered more had more been included in the purpose of salvation. This is not the doctrine of any Church on earth, and never has been. What is sufficient for one was sufficient for all. Nothing less than the light and heat of the sun is sufficient for any one plant or animal. But what is absolutely necessary for each is abundantly sufficient for the infinite number and variety of plants and animals which fill the earth. All that Christ did and suffered would have been the necessary had only one human soul been the object of redemption; and nothing different and nothing more would have been required had every child of Adam been saved through his blood.⁷⁴

A little later, Hodge goes on to assert:

Augustinians readily admit that the death of Christ had a relation to man, to the whole human family, which it had not to fallen angels. It is the ground on which salvation is offered to every creature under heaven who hears the gospel; but it gives no authority for a like offer to apostate angels. It moreover secures to the whole race at large, and to all classes of men, innumerable blessings, both providential and religious. It was, of course, designed to produce these effects; and, therefore, He died to secure them. In view of the effects which the death of Christ produces on the relation of all mankind to God, it has in all ages been customary with Augustinian to say that Christ died "sufficienter pro omnibus, efficaciter pro electis;" sufficiently for all, efficient only for the elect. There is a sense, therefore, in which He died for all, and there is a sense in which he De died for the elect alone.⁷⁵

In case it be imagined that here Charles Hodge reflects a departure from the Reformed tradition and so does not reflect the true orthodox position here, it would serve us very well to now quote David Paraeus, a 16th century student and successor to Ursinus. The following comments are from Ursinus's commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, and although these particular comments come from the pen of Paraeus, no one argues that they do not reflect the thoughts of Ursinus himself. Under the sub-question "Did Christ die for all?" Paraeus says:

It is in the same way, that is, by making the same distinction that we reply to those who ask concerning the purpose of Christ, Did he will to die for all? For just as he died, so he also willed to die. Therefore, as he died for all, in respect to the sufficiency of his ransom; and for the faithful alone in respect to the efficacy of the same, so also he willed to die for all in general, as touching the sufficiency of his merit, that is, he willed to merit by his death, grace, righteousness, and life in the most abundant manner for all; because he would not that any thing should be wanting as far as he and his merits are concerned, so that all the wicked who perish may be without excuse. But he willed to die for the elect alone as touching the efficacy of his death, that is, he would not only sufficiently merit grace and life for them alone, but also effectually confer these upon them, grants faith, and the Holy Spirit, and brings it to pass that they apply to themselves, by faith, the benefits of his death, and so obtain salvation for themselves the efficacy of his merits.

In this sense it is correctly said that Christ died in a different manner for believers and unbelievers. Neither is this declaration attended with any difficulty or inconvenience, inasmuch as it harmonises not only with scripture, but also with experience; for both testify that the remedy of sin and death is most sufficiently and abundantly offered in the gospel to all; but that it is effectually applied and profitable only for them that believe. The Scriptures, also, everywhere, restrict the efficacy of redemption to certain persons only, as to Christ's

⁷⁴Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1981), vol., 2, pp., 544-5.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp., 545-6.

sheep, to the elect, and such as believe, whilst on the other hand it clearly excludes from the grace of Christ the reprobate and unbelieving as long as they remain in their unbelief⁷⁶

A few lines later, Paraeus clearly reaffirms the Medieval synthesis of Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, that Christ died sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect only.⁷⁷ Thus the earlier Reformed were not hesitant to speak more boldly regarding a twofold intention or purpose of Christ in regard to the atonement. Furthermore, Kuiper also makes another good point, he notes that the respective universal and limited designs of the atonement in no way contradict each other.⁷⁸ Similarly, Charles Hodge counsels us against falling into rationalistic mode of thinking:

As God in the course of nature and in the dispensation of his providence, moves on in undisturbed majesty, little concerned at the apparent complication or even inconsistency of one effect or one dispensation with another; so the Spirit of God in the Bible unfolds the purposes, truths, and dealings of God, just as they are, assured that even finite minds will ultimately be able to see the consistency of all his revelations. The doctrines of foreordination, sovereignty, and effectual providential control, go hand in hand with those of the liberty and responsibility of rational creatures. Those of freedom from the law, of salvation by faith without works, and of the absolute necessity of holy living stand side by side. On the same page we find the assurance of God's love to sinners, and declarations that He would that all men should come unto Him and live, with explicit assertions that He has determined to leave multitudes to perish in their sins. In like manner, the express declarations that it was the incomprehensible and peculiar love of God for his own people, which induced Him to send his Son for their redemption; that Christ came into the world for that specific object; that He died for his sheep; that He gave Himself for his Church; and that the salvation of all for whom He thus offered Himself is rendered certain by the gift of the Spirit to bring them to faith and repentance, are intermingled with declarations of good-will to all mankind, with offers of salvation to every one who will believe in the Son of God, and denunciations of wrath against those who reject these overtures of mercy. All we have to do is not to ignore or deny either of these modes of representation, but to open our minds wide enough to receive them both, and reconcile them as best we can. Both are true, in all cases above referred to, whether we can see their consistency or not.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: 1994), pp., 223-4. On p., 225 we also see the statement: "Christ died for all as it regards the merit and efficacy of the ransom which he paid; but only for those that believe as it respects the application and efficacy of his death; for seeing that the death of Christ is applied to such alone, and is profitable to them, it is correctly said to belong properly to them alone..." See also *Ursinus'* comments under Question 20, where it is noted that with respect to the dignity and the sufficiency of the satisfaction which Christ made, it was "for the sins of the whole world," and "Christ made a sufficient satisfaction for the sin of all men," (pp., 106-107). Lastly, it is evident that Paraeus is willing to make a connection between the sufficiency of the atonement for all, and the offer to all. This work was originally published in 1584.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p., 224. What might serve as an example in this shift in categories is the shift in answer to Question 20 (Lord's Day, 7) of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: "Q37: What do you understand by the word "suffered"? A37: That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the *whole human race*; in order that by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the grace of God, righteousness and eternal life." In response to the phrase *the whole human race*, Ursinus answer this by invoking the Medieval maxim that Christ died sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect alone (Ursinus, p., 215). Johannes VanderKemp, in his published commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism in 1717, when answering this same question, only says that what is meant here is either that "the grievousness of Christ's sufferings, inasmuch as he sustained the wrath of God, which was kindled against the sins of all mankind" or that he redeemed various men out of races of men, that is, all kinds of men; Johannes VanderKemp, *Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), vol., 1., p., 318. VanderKemp reflects the later theological shift in regarding the extent of the atonement.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p., 79. Clearly the two "designs" of the atonement respect different senses.

⁷⁹Charles Hodge, vol 2., p., 561.

Returning to Kuiper: Kuiper then builds an case for the establishment of common grace as the designed benefit of the Atonement. Yet now comes the question of the relationship between the free offer and the atonement. After citing Bavinck and Charles Hodge to the effect there exists side by side scriptural concepts and language for two-fold reference of the atonement⁸⁰ he boldly affirms that, folly is the charge that Calvinists cannot sincerely offer Christ to all men.⁸¹ What Kuiper, following Bavinck, is trying to do is to lay down another category (contrary to Cunningham, for example), wherein we can speak of a general design and intention of Christ and the atonement, alongside the particular design of Christ, his peculiar intention of saving the elect alone. In no way does the general design effect redemption or purchase justification. It only lays down the infinite value of the atonement, thereby making the atonement available to all, able to save all that come to Christ. This infinite value grounds the offer (again contrary to Cunningham), as the sufficiency of the remedy for the sickness of all his patients, grounds the doctor's offer of it to all his patients.

The question now turns to the question of Scripture. Does Scripture lay down any warrant for supposing that in some sense the person and work of Christ has a general scope and design, as well as, side by side with this, it has a limited scope? I would say yes. Firstly, John 5 31-34: "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved." The importance here lies in the phrase *hina humeis sothete*,⁸² "in order that you should or might be saved." The sense is that Jesus is telling them these things about himself in order that they should be saved. This is a striking statement. Back to back with this, theologically speaking, is Jesus' other statements that he came to lay his life down for his sheep, and these same Pharisees are not his sheep.⁸³ Yet still, the sense of John 5:34 is one of deliberation and purpose. Jesus is purposively bearing his testimony to them in order that they might be saved. Obviously, this clause indicates something of Christ's volition, the reason why he is testifying to them.

I believe it would be wrong to imagine that this messianic intent was only accidental and in no way intended in the eternal councils of the Trinity. If it was Christ's purpose, in whatever manner, that he give his testimony in order that the very Pharisees he self-consciously knows are not his sheep may be saved, we can only conclude that in some sense, some mysterious sense, this was indeed predetermined in the eternal decrees of the Trinity. Thus, we must conclude that in some sense, Christ came and worked on this earth with the intent of bearing a testimony in order that even those not elected should be saved.⁸⁴

This verse has some implications for John 3:16 and 17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." The last phrase is key, *hina sothe ho kosmos di' autou*,⁸⁵ "in order that the world might be saved through him." At this stage, I have no problem with identifying the love of God as the general love of God which he bears to all men, and the world being the whole world.⁸⁶ Calvin, himself, seems to take a universalistic reading of this passage. Some excerpts from Calvin will suffice:

⁸⁰E.g., the infinite sufficiency of the atonement in connection with the limited efficiency of the same.

⁸¹Kuiper, p., 94.

⁸²Sothete here is: second person, plural, subjunctive.

⁸³John 10:15, and 26. Note that they do not believe because they are not Christ's sheep. It is not as if they are not Christ's sheep because they do not believe. Therefore, it is wrong to suppose that earlier in his ministry, Christ came to save even the Pharisees, but that at some later time, upon their rejection of him, he concludes that he has not come to save them. Note, it is not my intention here to discuss every verse that has been adduced historically in favour of the free offer and the universal will (revealed) of God that all men be saved, such as 2 Peter 3:9, and so forth.

⁸⁴C.f., John 1:7, and Luk 7:30.

⁸⁵Here *sothe* is third person, singular, aorist, subjunctive, passive.

⁸⁶I am not saying that I hold to this, merely that I see no reason why it should be rejected on *a priori* theological grounds. Dabney also discusses Jn 3:16 in his *Discussions* (311-313), here he calls "tortuous" the exegesis that would limit the meaning of *world* to the elect., and *Lectures* (pp, 525 and 535). His arguments against the "restrictive" interpretation are recommended reading.

Both points are distinctly stated to us: namely, that faith in Christ brings life to all, and that Christ brought life, because the Heavenly Father loves the human race, and wishes that they should not perish...

For as men are not easily convinced that God loves them, in order to remove all doubt, he has expressly stated that we are so very dear to God that, on our account, he did not even spare his only-begotten Son. Since, therefore, God has most abundantly testified his love towards us, whoever is not satisfied with this testimony, and still remains in doubt, offers a high insult to Christ...

But we ought rather to consider that, in proportion to the estimation in which God holds his only-begotten Son, so much the more precious did our salvation appear to him, for the ransom of which he chose that his only-begotten Son should die. To this name Christ has a right, because he is by nature the only Son of God; and he communicates this honor to us by adoption, when we are grafted into his body...

And he 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; 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* to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life.⁸⁷

If this reading of Calvin is correct, then clearly, the basis of the proclamation *that whosoever believes* is very much grounded, in some sense, in the person and work of Christ.⁸⁸

The next verse I wish to draw attention to is Mt 22:1-14. This is a very interesting parable. The question is, in what way does it mirror the work of Christ? And, are we excluded from inferring that in some way this is meant to speak to the work of Christ, of which the feast is typically or parabolically represented, while the son parabolically represented Jesus. I see no reason why the sufficiency of the feast must never be connected with the sufficiency of the work of Christ.⁸⁹ If this is so, then the contextual connection is very clear, the sufficiency of the feast grounds the general invitation to those invited, likewise, the sufficiency of Christ's work grounds the Gospel invitation to all men.⁹⁰ It is also clear that it cannot be denied that we must presuppose that in some sense, the king desired and intended (in some sense) that the ones called, that is, even the original ones, the Jews who found sinful excuses not to come, actually do come and feast with him and his son.⁹¹

Another verse is Matthew 23:37. Here Calvin above all is clearest. He boldly asserts that in this verse we see the God-man seeking the salvation of those who were not finally saved. Christ as God and Man desired to gather the masses of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but the leaders of that city prevented him from gathering them. And if this is used to imagine that free will is thereby proven, or that God's will is ineffectual, Calvin silences these criticisms by asserting that the will here is the will as it made known to us in the Gospel, that is, the revealed will. The idea that Christ only sought to gather the elect of the city must be rejected as unfitting to the sense of the passage. In Mark 6:34, Christ has compassion on the crowd, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36 adds that when Jesus saw the crowd

⁸⁷Calvin on John 3:16 [Emph., mine].

⁸⁸Please note, nothing I argue in this paper hinges on this particular reading of John 3:16. I adduce this reading to shed light on Calvin's own thinking and to perhaps stimulate more thought; indeed, that is the very purpose of this entire paper. It would be good to note that Calvin takes a clear universalistic reading of 2 Peter 3:9. Here other men have stood in his tracks on this verse and have not limited the scope there to the elect only. Again, what I am arguing for here, likewise, does not hinge on a universalistic reading of 2 Peter 3:9.

⁸⁹I am aware that the modern stress is on not reading too much into parables. Yet, I think the sense of some of the elements of this parable force to us to consider them as parabolically displaying not just the person of Christ, but his work also.

⁹⁰If I am right here, Cunningham is wrong.

⁹¹C.f. Turretin, *Institutes*, vol., 2, p., 509, sect., 21.

he had compassion upon them for they were ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’⁹² It is unimaginable that our Saviour did not feel or have a shepherding compassion for them, that he was not concerned with their eternal well-being, and that he never sought to gather such as these under his wings and fly with them to the bosom of his Father, to salvation and eternal life. That being so, it is out of place to imagine as some have done that in regard to Mt 23:37, he only sought to gather the elect children of that city.⁹³ From these verses, I would argue that Christ came with the intention of providing a two-fold purpose. He self-consciously came with the intention of seeking the salvation of those who finally were never saved, even those who had been passed by in the eternal decree.

As I think about this point, it’s gravity, I play in my mind the role of devil’s advocate, seeking to find ways wherein the force of what I am saying is ameliorated in some way. Clearly attempts to recourse to some of antecedent-consequent will within Jesus will not work. Nor will the attempt to posit a certain ignorance of the divine intention within the mind of Christ, the man. That annuls the very heart of his self-knowledge, the very point of chapters just like John 5. Nor could it be seriously proposed that all that was meant was that it was their duty to seek salvation. I am not sure how one turns a *passive* subjunctive into a wholly active action on their part. We would never imagine that was the thought in the parallel phrase in John 3:17, so why would one attempt such an inversion here?

Therefore, as A.A. Hodge notes, it is clear that in terms of the infinite sufficiency of his work, Christ did remove all the legal obstacles out of the way of God’s saving any man he pleases.⁹⁴ It is also most true that he came to provide an atonement sufficient for all, upon which is grounded the free offer of Christ. Hodge is surely right, yet more must be said. Our language must press harder and further in order to get to the heart of the matter.⁹⁵ There is real sense where it can be said that Christ came to save all men,⁹⁶ Christ self-consciously came with a two-fold intention, of providing a way of salvation in order that men, all men, may be saved and also of concretely and absolutely saving the elect, his sheep, those whom the Father had given him. Even in his self-conscious understanding of his coming to die for his sheep, that he do nothing but the will of the Father, still on the cross will he cry to the Father, asking his Father to forgive his killers - such was his compassion. Christ’s compassion was of such a nature and kind that he is the image of the Father.⁹⁷ To see the love of the Son is to see the love of the Father. When we reduce our categories down to TULIPs we limit the very Biblical categories that express the full scope of the Fathers love to humanity.

It is clear that there have been some theological shifts in respect to three key areas. Firstly, in regard to the revealed will of God, the later Protestant Scholastics tended to downplay its apparent volitional aspect, making it a merely complacent, and rather non-volitional will. The important optative verses are usually treated as mere anthropopathism or anthropomorphisms, with little explanation beyond that.⁹⁸ Secondly, in regard to the sufficiency of the atonement, the

⁹²The construction of the sub-ordinate clause indicates to me that the reference to sheep with out a shepherd is given as explanatory to their being harassed and helpless. Thus, it was not merely that these people were physically inconvenienced and distressed.

⁹³Even Gill, while qualifying this verse to death, will grant that Christ (as a man) desired to gather the *masses* of the city, not just the elect.

⁹⁴A.A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1986), p., 330. This is an invaluable work on the Atonement. Contrary to Cunningham, Hodge does connect the free offer with the infinite sufficiency of the atonement, see pp 330-331, section 4.

⁹⁵Too often our Reformed formulations are content to rest in abstract statements, without really tapping into or connecting with the sense that Christ really and actually sought the salvation of even the reprobate.

⁹⁶For this claim I am extrapolating from the verses discussed above. For I see no reason to limit the compassion of Christ to just the then house of Israel.

⁹⁷Compare Christ with his Father’s compassion in the Old Testament where the LORD sought to save Israel time and time again, even in contexts where Israel was anything but saved - for example, the well-known verses: Eze., 18:23, 30-32, 33:1; Isa., 45:22, 55:1-13 and 65:2 and 12.

⁹⁸The classic optative verses are: Dt. 5:29, 32:29; Ps 81:13; and Isa., 48:18. Even in the titanic work of Turretin, the force of these verses is downplayed, and a more Owenic interpretation is imposed upon them. It is not that Calvin denied that the expressions contained in those 4 verses are anthropomorphic, it is that he refused to stop there, as did Owen and others from the Protestant Scholastic era. Calvin asked the question, ‘even if they are

later Protestant Scholastics tended to disconnect it from any design or intention of Christ and the Father. It became more abstract and hypothetical. The intrinsic infinite value was never denied, but always affirmed, but its extrinsic infinite value was downplayed. Thirdly, we see a gradual disconnection, which reaches its climax in Cunningham, between the infinite sufficiency the atonement and the free offer of gospel to all. These subtle shifts reflect a corresponding shift in the theological categories. By the time of the Westminster debates, or at least in the thinking of the Reformed there, there seemed to be only two alternatives: either Christ died for all and every man with *exactly* the same intention (Arminianism and Amyraldianism) or he died only for the elect, and in no substantive, designed or direct sense for all men generally; for the benefits of common grace are only *indirect* benefits. These categorical shifts, I would argue, all serve to further the narrowing down our theological categories in regard to the grace and compassion of God in Christ, one the one hand, and the work of God in Christ, on the other. I would argue that these subtle modifications were not necessary. The path the later Reformed chose to follow was a unnecessary path. The theological categories of Calvin, Ursinus, and Musculus, for example, were adequate to distinguish and separate the great Reformation soteriological distinctives from that of Arminianism and Amyraldianism, all without narrowing the theological categories which we use to describe the work of Christ, the compassion of the Father and of the Son for all men, and the basis of the free offer of the gospel.

It is not that the Westminster Confession is in error, it is that it is incomplete. It is an inadequate representation of the person and work of Christ, even of the Father and his compassion for men. The language of the Confession, in all probability, follows the theology of Gillespie and Rutherford, who expressed an inordinate amount of influence upon the Assembly. The Confession exhibits a narrowing process that was characteristic of the age. In the struggles with first the Socinians, then the Arminians, then the Amyraldians, the categories of Reformed theology were narrowed and narrowed again. Naturally, the Confession cannot be all things to all men. It cannot include, within its chapters, an indefinite amount of statements and qualifications. And it was written against the backdrop of its time. It is just unfortunate when it is seen as an exhaustive window into the character of God and Christ, in an age when these doctrines are not as self-consciously held out as they have been done by men like John Calvin. The misfortune is that in “our time” the person and work of Christ in regard to the free offer is so misunderstood by so many calling themselves “Calvinists.” The Presbyterian Church of Australia has a *Declaratory Act* which qualifies the Confession and works to safeguard the free offer. Regarding the redemption, free offer and the decree of God, it states effectively:

Redemption.

That in regard to the doctrine of redemption as taught in the Subordinate Standard, and in consistency therewith, the love of God to all mankind, His gift of His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the free offer of salvation to men without distinction on the ground of Christ’s all sufficient sacrifice, are regarded by this Church as vital to the Christian faith. And in as much as the Christian faith rests upon, and the Christian consciousness takes hold of certain objective supernatural historic facts, especially the Incarnation, the atoning Life and Death, and the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord, and His bestowment of His Holy Spirit, this Church regards those whom it admits to the office of the Holy Ministry as pledged to give chief place in their teaching to these cardinal facts, and to the message of redemption and reconciliation implied and manifested in them.

God’s Eternal Decree.

That the doctrine of God’s eternal decree, including the doctrine of election to eternal life, is held as defined in the Confession of Faith, Chapter III, Section I, where it is expressly stated that according to this doctrine

anthropomorphic, which is not denied, still, what did they mean, what do they mean to us here and now?’ Once again we can recourse to Dabney’s input here. In his *Discussions* he touches on the issue of anthropopathic language in relation to that active principle within which would have that all men would be saved (pp., 291-299 and the context). Indeed, the limited imagination regarding these verses among the Protestant Scholastics may be the reason why today, many receive the conclusions of Murray and Stonehouse with utter surprise and incredulity. There were some exceptions to the stricter Owenic mode of interpretation, such as Matthew Henry, who was as explicit on these verses as Calvin was. Having said that, I do want to stress that in no way do I want to imply that Turretin and other Protestant Scholastics denied the free and well-meant offer of grace in the Gospel. They all affirmed this against the emergent hyper-Calvinist tendencies of some.

“neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.” and further, that the said doctrine is held in connection and harmony with the truth that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, that He has provided a salvation sufficient for all, and adapted to all, and offered to all in the Gospel and that every hearer of the Gospel is responsible for his dealing with the free and unrestricted offer of eternal life.⁹⁹

Perhaps something like this needs to be published more widely as it opens up the narrow window of the Confession. In the end, I believe that Scriptures demand that we be self-conscious that Christ engaged in a two-fold work, which also should be. It would be desirable to see our Confession mirror this two-fold majestic work of God in Christ. the foundation, along with the preceptive will of God, for the free offer. Thus, given the biblical and historical data, there is a basis, contrary to Cunningham, where it can be said that Christ, in dying, desired and intended that all men should partake in the proper and peculiar effects of the shedding of his blood.¹⁰⁰ It would be desirable to see our Confession mirror this two-fold majestic work of God in Christ.

⁹⁹*The Declaratory Statement* (Brisbane [Australia]:Presbyterian Christian Education, 1980), pp., 1-2. The term *whole world* should not be rejected as it is thoroughly Scriptural.

¹⁰⁰The irony here is that neither Cunningham nor any of the Protestant Scholastics denied that there is a sense where God in Christ desires that all men be saved. Obviously, this desire for their salvation could only have been effected through the atoning work of Christ. There seems to have been some cognitive disconnection between this accepted desire, and the idea that, in accordance with this desire, Christ could have intended to make an atonement sufficient for all, as well as one which was efficient for the elect alone.

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