LIMITED vs UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

I. OVERVIEW

I have delved fairly deeply into the topic of Limited vs Unlimited Atonement in the past. I have taken the opportunity to refresh some of my notes on the topic and am sharing them below. The differing views on this topic have the potential of causing disagreements and even schisms in Christ's Body, the Church. The thoughts below are my attempt to clarify the issues and – to a certain degree – describe how the views may possibly be complementary. I also discuss the possibility that our understanding of the biblical texts of the opposing views may be limited by the fact humans are trapped inside a linear time context, while God is outside of time. In God's unlimited dimension of time and economy, both views may be valid.

II. LIMITED ATONEMENT

A. Doctrine of Limited Atonement

The doctrine of limited atonement (also called particular redemption or definite atonement in Reformed/Calvinist theology) teaches that Christ's death was intended to secure salvation specifically for the Elect – those chosen by God – rather than merely making salvation possible for all humanity.

It emphasizes that the atonement is efficacious (actually accomplishes redemption) for a particular group, not universally potential for every individual.

Calvinist theologians and sources compile lists of verses that support this by highlighting language of specificity: Christ saves/dies for "His people," "the sheep," "many," "the church," those "given" to Him by the Father, etc. These passages are seen as indicating intentional, definite redemption rather than a universal one that fails to save all for whom it was made.

B. Predestination as it relates to Limited Atonement

Predestination is unconditional Election – God sovereignly chooses specific individuals for salvation before creation, based solely on His will (not foreseen faith or merit). This implies the atonement must be definite and particular: Christ dies intentionally to secure salvation for these Elect, purchasing everything needed (faith, repentance, perseverance). If God predestines only some, why would Christ atone for all?

Predestination verses reinforce that the Father gives a specific group to the Son, for whom the Son atones effectually (no waste or failure in the cross).

C. Verses Emphasizing Christ Saves "His People" or a Specific Group

1. Matthew 1:21 "She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."
   - Directly states the purpose: saving "His people," understood as the Elect.
2. John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.
3. John 10:11, 15 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep– just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."
   - Jesus explicitly dies for "the sheep," not goats or all; the non-sheep do not believe because they are not His sheep (John 10:26).
4. Ephesians 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her."
   - Christ gave Himself specifically for the church, His bride/the Elect.
5. Acts 20:28 "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood."
   - The church was purchased specifically with Christ's blood.

D. Verses Using "Many" (Not "All") for the Recipients of Atonement

1. Matthew 20:28 (cf. Mark 10:45) "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."
2. Matthew 26:28 (cf. Mark 14:24) "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
3. Isaiah 53:11–12 "Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities– because He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many …"
   - The Suffering Servant justifies and bears sin for "many," a key OT prophetic text applied to Christ in the NT.

E. Verses Showing the Father's Gift to the Son and Intent to Save/Lose None of Them

1. John 6:37–39 "All that the Father gives me will come to me ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up on the last day."
2. John 6:65 And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”
3. John 17:1–2, 9 "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son ... since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him ... I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours."
    - High Priestly Prayer: Christ intercedes specifically for those given Him, not the world at large.
4. John 11:51–52 "... he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."

F. Other Supporting Verses on Limited Atonement (Particular Redemption)

1. Titus 2:14 "who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works."
2. Galatians 2:20 "... the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."
    - Personal application to believers as the objects.
3. Revelation 5:9 "Worthy are you ... for You were slain, and by Your blood ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."
    - Redeems a specific, diverse group from all nations ... the Elect ... not every individual.
4. Romans 8:32–34 "He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all ... Who shall bring any charge against God's Elect? ... Christ Jesus is the one who died ... more than that, who was raised ... who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."
    - Links the giving up of the Son "for us" with the Elect and Christ's intercession for them.

5. Hebrews 9:15, 28 Christ is the mediator "for the redemption of the transgressions ... that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance ... so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many ..."
6. Act 13:48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.
7. Act 16:14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.

III. UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

A. Doctrine of Unlimited Atonement

The doctrine of unlimited atonement (also called universal atonement, general atonement, or universal provision in Arminian theology) teaches that Christ's death was intended to provide salvation for all humanity without exception – making forgiveness and eternal life available to every person through faith. It is not that Christ died to guarantee the salvation of every individual (which would lead to universalism), but that His sacrifice was sufficient and intended for all, with its benefits applied only to those who believe and repent. This contrasts with Calvinist limited atonement, where the atonement is designed and effective only for the Elect.

Arminian theologians (e.g., Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and modern sources like the Society of Evangelical Arminians) emphasize that the atonement is universal in scope/provision but conditional in application (requiring faith). Key verses use broad language like "the world," "all," "everyone," "whosoever," or "the whole world" to describe the objects of Christ's death, love, or ransom.

B. Predestination as it relates to Unlimited Atonement

Predestination is conditional Election – God Elects individuals or a corporate body (the church) based on His foreknowledge of who will freely respond in faith (enabled by prevenient grace). This allows for a universal atonement: Christ dies for all, providing salvation potentially for everyone, but it's applied only to those who believe. Predestination verses are seen as emphasizing God's foreknowing plan without negating human responsibility or universal provision.

C. Verses Using "the World" (Kosmos) for the Scope of Christ's Death/Love/Salvation

1. John 1:29 "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"
2. John 3:16-17 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
3. John 4:42 "... we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."
4. John 6:33, 51 "For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."
5. John 12:32 "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (Often linked to the cross drawing all without distinction.)
6. John 12:47 "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world."
7. 1 John 2:2 "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (A flagship verse: explicit distinction that it's not just believers but the whole world.)
8. 1 John 4:14 "The Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world."

D. Verses Using "All" or "Everyone" for Christ's Death/Ransom/Sacrifice

1. Romans 5:6 "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (All are ungodly, so for all.)
2. Romans 5:15, 18 "... the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many ... Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men."
3. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves ..."
4. 2 Corinthians 5:19 "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them ..."
5. 1 Timothy 2:3-6 "... God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all ..."

6. 1 Timothy 4:10 "... we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."
7. Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people ..."
8. Hebrews 2:9 "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone."
9. 2 Peter 2:1 "...even denying the Master who bought them ..." (False teachers bought by Christ yet perish … implying atonement provision for non-believers.)

E. Other Supporting Verses on Unlimited Atonement (Universal Provision)

1. Isaiah 53:6 "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned ... every one ... to His own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."
2. Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ..." (Universal invitation tied to the cross.)
3. Matthew 18:14 "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (God's will against any perishing.)
4. Romans 3:23-24 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."
5. Romans 10:13 "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."
6. 2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

IV. WHAT IF BOTH VIEWS ARE VALID?

A. Questions

1. Can we logically make the argument the bible teaches both views?
2. Is it possible in our limited human understanding (not fully appreciating that God is outside of time), that both views have validity?

B. Discussion

Yes, it is logically possible – and in fact, a position held by many respected theologians and biblical scholars – to argue that the Bible teaches elements of both limited atonement (particular redemption for the Elect) and unlimited atonement (universal provision or sufficiency for all humanity).

This doesn't mean the Bible teaches outright contradiction or that both full doctrines are equally true in the same way, but rather that Scripture presents multifaceted truths about the atonement that appear in tension when viewed through finite human logic.

The Bible contains:

1. Particular language:
    - Christ dies for "His people" (Matt. 1:21), "the sheep" (John 10:11, 15), "the church" (Eph. 5:25), "many" (Isa. 53:11–12; Matt. 20:28), those "given" Him by the Father (John 6:37–39; 17:9), ensuring none are lost and all are raised up. It also teaches that no one can “come to Jesus” unless specifically called by God (John 6:44).
2. Universal language:
    - Christ is the Lamb who takes away the sin "of the world" (John 1:29), God loved "the world" and gave His Son so that whoever believes might be saved (John 3:16–17), He is the propitiation "for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2), a ransom "for all" (1 Tim. 2:6), tasting death "for everyone" (Heb. 2:9), and dying "for all" (2 Cor. 5:14–15).

These sets of texts do not neatly collapse into exclusive categories without making interpretive choices.

Strict limited atonement (Christ died only for the Elect, with no universal intent or provision) struggles to fully account for the unqualified "all/world" texts without redefining them (e.g., "all kinds of people").

Strict unlimited atonement (Christ died intending to save all equally, with application conditional on faith) struggles to explain why the atonement is presented as effectual and particular in texts about the Elect/sheep/church, without implying some failure or double payment if unbelievers perish; taking particular note of John 6:44 "No man can come to me except the Father which sent me, draw him."

C. How Both Can Have Validity in Human Understanding

Many theologians resolve this by affirming both aspects without forcing a false either/or dichotomy (mutually exclusive views):

- The atonement is unlimited in sufficiency and provision (its value and offer extend to all humanity, reflecting God's genuine love and desire for all to be saved ... e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).
- It is limited in efficacy and application (it actually and infallibly secures salvation only for those who believe, who are the Elect given to the Son).

This is sometimes called hypothetical universalism (or "sufficient for all, efficient for the Elect"), held by figures like John Davenant (a delegate at the Synod of Dort), some early Reformed thinkers (e.g., Bullinger, Musculus), and certain moderate Calvinists today. It preserves:

- The particular intent/effect for the Elect (no one for whom Christ died in the full sense is lost).
- The universal scope of God's love and the cross's objective sufficiency (genuine offer to all, no arbitrary restriction).

Others, like Trevin Wax, argue the debate often misses the point by focusing narrowly on personal salvation.

Scripture uses both "limited" and "unlimited" terminology because the atonement serves multiple purposes: redeeming the Elect, reconciling the world, vindicating God's justice, defeating evil, and ultimately renewing creation (e.g., cosmic shalom). The cross is particular in who it ultimately saves but universal in its broader redemptive scope.

D. The Omni-Temporality of God (God Outside of Time)

This adds a layer. Human minds experience time linearly, so we perceive Election, atonement, faith, and application as sequential. But as God is timeless, all these occur in one eternal act.

The cross is eternally efficacious for the Elect while eternally sufficient for all. This doesn't erase the tension but suggests our finite categories (limited vs. unlimited) may not fully capture divine reality – much like compatibilism in free-will debates (God's sovereignty and human responsibility appear contradictory to us but harmonize in God).

In short, the Bible can reasonably be seen as teaching both dimensions of the atonement, and our limited understanding – especially not fully grasping God's atemporality – allows for validity in elements of both views. **The apparent tension reflects mystery rather than contradiction**, much like other biblical antinomies (e.g., divine sovereignty/human responsibility; Trinity's unity/three persons). Many Christians (including "4-point Calvinists," some Reformed moderates, and others) embrace this multifaceted reality without fully resolving it into one camp, prioritizing the gospel's core: Christ died for sinners, and salvation is by grace through faith.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Both views affirm the atonement is sufficient for all sins (infinite value of Christ's death) and reject universalism (not everyone is saved). The debate often boils down to intent (definite vs. provisional) and application (effectual for Elect vs. conditional on faith).

I am squarely in the camp of believing the bible effectually teaches both a limited and an unlimited view of atonement. I believe that – since we are trapped in a world with a linear time arrow – we are challenged in understanding the true scope of God's salvation as it relates to His predestination and foreknowledge of the Elect. Similar dichotomies exist for the doctrines of God's Sovereignty vs man's freewill, Eternal Security vs No Eternal Security; the Trinity, and perhaps other doctrines.

Incredibly brilliant, God-fearing bible scholars have debated this topic over the millennia without coming to a clear view, understanding or resolution to the debate. I firmly believe that the discussion (and resulting furor between the views) falls under the category of non-essential doctrine. Labels (e.g., Calvinism and Arminianism) are dangerous and have the tendency to "put God in a box". What counts is that Jesus came

and died for our sins, has risen and now sits at the right hand of the Father making intercession for His saints. On that – all true Christians are in full agreement.