

PROPITIATION IN I JOHN 2:2 (A Doctrinal Study on the Extent of the Atonement)

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This article is "Appendix II," entitled, *Definite Atonement*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977, pp 85-101.

Introduction

In discussing the design or extent of the atonement, there are three key doctrinal terms which are related to the priestly sacrifice of Christ on earth, that is, to the finished work of Christ. These terms are redemption, propitiation and reconciliation. Evangelical Arminians and Calvinistic "four point" universalists or modified Calvinists¹ hold that there is a universal design of the atonement which provides salvation for all mankind without exception or which places all of Adam's posterity in a savable state. They contend that there is a twofold application of these three doctrinal terms — an actual application for those who believe, a provisional application for those who die in unbelief. The historic "five point" or consistent Calvinist² asserts that these terms have no substitutionary reference with respect to the non-elect. In contrast to the former who hold to an indefinite atonement, the consistent Calvinist, who holds to a definite atonement, sees no purpose, benefit or comfort in a redemption that does not redeem, a propitiation that does not propitiate or a reconciliation that does not reconcile, which would be the case if these terms were applicable to the non-elect.

For those who have wrestled with the extent of the atonement, they are acutely aware that there are three problem verses³ which the five point Calvinist must

¹ For a description of Evangelical Arminians and Calvinistic "four point" universalists or modified Calvinists, see Note No. 1 to the Introduction of Appendix I, the first in a doctrinal series by the author on problem verses relating to the extent of the atonement.

² See Note No.2 to the Introduction of Appendix I.

³ Those who are theologically opposed to historic Calvinism should not hasten to the conclusion that the admission of problem verses by the five point Calvinist diminishes his theological proof for definite atonement anymore than the admission of problem verses (and there are many) by the four point Calvinist necessarily diminishes his theological proof for indefinite atonement. The real issue centers upon what does the Scripture actually teach, a definite or an indefinite atonement? Practically speaking, it is evident that God, in the wisdom of His providence, has not ordained that all true believers should agree upon the extent of the atonement and other important but non-central doctrines. Why He

scripturally answer if he is to consistently sustain a biblical position before the modified Calvinist that the saving design of the atonement is intended by the triune God only for the elect. These verses are II Peter 2:1, which pertains to redemption; I John 2:2, which pertains to propitiation; and II Corinthians 5:19, which pertains to reconciliation. If the particular redemptionist can scripturally establish in any of these verses that God's design of the atonement does not extend to the non-elect, then the theological case for the unlimited redemptionist crumples. In summary, if universal propitiation in I John 2:2 cannot be biblically established, then what purpose does a universal redemption in II Peter 2:1 or a

has so ordained is ultimately a mystery to every child of God. We do learn, however, from I Corinthians 11:19 that doctrinal differences in the church are ordained by God "that they which are approved may be made manifest." We also know that, in the wisdom of God's providence, the day of the Lord will come, but not before there is "a falling away first" and the revealing of the "man of sin" (II Thess. 2:3). In this sense, erring on important but non-central doctrines, such as the design of the atonement, can ultimately have serious consequences. As A. A. Hodge wrote over one hundred years ago: "We do not object to Calvinistic Universalism. . . because of any danger which? When considered as a final position? It threatens orthodoxy. We distrust it rather because it is not a final position, but is the first step in the easy descent of error." Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Atonement* (reprint of 1867 ed.; Cherry Hill, N. J.: Mack Publishing Co., n.d.), p.238. A study of the history of doctrine verifies Hodge's statement (e.g., cf. Spurgeon and the "Down-Grade Controversy" of 1887-92 in England or the theological erosion from Puritanism to Liberalism within 150 years (1750-1900) in New England). For these reasons the author is convinced that the doctrine of the extent of the atonement is not to be viewed lightly. Historically, a departure from definite atonement has been inseparably linked with a departure from orthodox teaching on the doctrines of original sin and substitutionary atonement. This, in-turn, has seriously affected biblical evangelism and weakened the Christian's trust and assurance in the one who declares: "I am the first, and the last; and beside me there is no God" (Isa. 44:6), "beside me there is no Saviour" (Isa. 43:11). The author is not so naive, however, as to believe that this series of doctrinal appendixes will persuade any convinced Evangelical Arminian or modified Calvinist that Christ's substitutionary atonement was particular in design for saving the elect only with no saving provision for the non-elect. Such a change in theological conviction only comes from the Holy Spirit and, for reasons ultimately known only to God, He does not in these last days appear to be changing the convictions of large numbers of traditional evangelical Christians whose existential minds are apparently closed, not being in submission to the teaching of the whole counsel of God, especially with reference to His sovereignty and the particularistic design of the atonement. The author does believe, however, that these doctrinal appendixes may help many of those who have believed through grace and are open to learning more about the doctrines of grace.

universal reconciliation in II Corinthians 5:19 serve? Can it be true that God the Son redeemed the non-elect for whom God the Father's wrath will never be propitiated (satisfied or appeased) by virtue of Christ's death or that God the Father has been reconciled by virtue of Christ's death to the non-elect upon whom His condemning wrath eternally abides (John 3:36)?

The purpose of this doctrinal appendix (the second in a series by the author on problem verses relating to the extent of the atonement) is to theologically approach I John 2:2, which relates to propitiation—the second of the three major doctrinal terms. May those who have believed through grace find this appendix of much help in their doctrinal study of the Word of God.

Propitiation in the New Testament

The term "propitiation" (*hilasmos*) means "satisfaction," "appeasement." Theologically, propitiation means that God's wrath against sin, demanded by His justice, is appeased on account of the death of Christ for sinners.

There are four primary references in the New Testament where the word "propitiation" is used (cf. Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4: 10). Three of the four references clearly teach that propitiation is strictly limited to a definite people, namely, the elect of God.

Romans 3:25 states that God set forth Christ "a propitiation through faith in his blood." From this reference it may be observed that, if Christ is a propitiation "through faith,"⁴ He cannot be a propitiation to those who never have faith, and "all men have not faith" (II Thess. 3:2).

Hebrews 2:17 states that Christ was made a "merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation (should be translated propitiation) for the sins of the people." In context, "the people," are identified as the "children which God hath given" Christ, (v. 13), "the seed of Abraham" (v. 16). Are not "the people" of verse 17 also to be identified with the "many sons" in verse 10 and the "every man" in verse 9 for whom "by the grace of God he should taste death"?

I John 4:10 reveals the motivating cause of propitiation. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."⁵ The propitiation is restricted here to the definite pronouns, "we," "us," and

⁴ The words "through faith" are grammatically more naturally connected with "propitiation" rather than with "being justified," "set forth" or "through his blood." Hence, it is Christ Jesus whom God has set forth as a propitiation to be received by faith through his blood.

⁵ Observe also that the love manifested in I John 4:10 is the special love of God, which is the highest form of His love expressed toward man. It is this special

"our"; that is, to believers, God's elect. Therefore, it is concluded that at least three of the four major passages on propitiation are restricted in design to God's elect.

I John 2:2

Concerning I John 2:2, Calvinistic universalists say it teaches two aspects of propitiation. One writes:

There is a propitiation which affects God in His relation to the *kosmos*—with no reference to the elect—and one which affects His relation to the elect. This twofold propitiation is set forth in I John 2:2.⁶

The sum of the four point Calvinist position is that Christ is said, in some sense, to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, meaning all mankind without exception. This, according to another Calvinistic universalist, is "the normal unbiased approach to this text."⁷

The meaning and nature of propitiation is not a matter of disagreement between four and five point Calvinists. The issue lies in the extent of propitiation as taught in I John 2:2. Much has been written concerning both sides of the issue. An examination of these writings reveals that the crux of the difference hinges upon the term "whole world." The four point Calvinists say the meaning is obvious. The words themselves, they say, without any wresting, signify all men in the world, that is, world means world. John Owen, the Puritan, writes, concerning the

redemptive love, the giving of Christ as a sacrifice, which is the motivating cause of giving all the other gifts of saving grace, the "all things" of Romans 8:32. The immediate context in Romans 8 teaches, among other things, that predestination, calling, justification and glorification are included in the "all things" of verse 32, that is, for all the Christians at Rome and, by extension, for all true believers. Now, if this be true (and it is according to context), is not saving faith also included in the "all things"? Is one justified by any other means than faith? No, not according to Scripture. Therefore, if justification is included as one of the gifts of saving grace in the "all things," then saving faith must also be included. Clearly, this passage in Romans 8 limits the extent of Christ's substitutionary death to God's elect.

⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (eight vols., Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), III, 95-96.

⁷ Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died—A Case for Unlimited Atonement* (Des Plaines, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1967), p. 81.

dogmatism with which the modified Calvinists assert their "darling"⁸ proof for unlimited atonement, by saying:

The world, the whole world, all, all men! — who can oppose it? Call them [the modified Calvinists] to the context in the several places where the words are; appeal to rules of interpretation; mind them of the circumstances and scope of the place, the sense of the same words in other places; . . . [and] they . . . cry out, the bare word, the letter is theirs: "Away with the gloss and interpretation; give us [the modified Calvinists] leave to believe what the word expressly saith."⁹

Biblical Universal Terminology

That I John 2:2 contains universal language is evident from the term "whole world." John 3:16 also uses the universal term "world" in the same manner. It is clear, therefore, that there is a biblical or divine universalism taught in Scripture. However, the issue does not center on the fact that universal terminology is used. It centers on the meaning or interpretation of that terminology.

Four Interpretations of the Term "*Whole World*"

The major views which are universalistic in their interpretation of "whole world" in I John 2:2 will be discussed under the following four systematic headings: "generical," "geographical," "eschatological," and "ethnological."

The Generical Interpretation

The generical interpretation of I John 2:2 is held by those who believe that Christ's atonement was unlimited in design for the whole human race. Their usual interpretation of the text is that Christ "is the propitiation for our sins (meaning believers), and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world (including the non-elect)." This view interprets "whole world" to mean all men generically or universally, that is, each and every member of Adam's race. Therefore, propitiation for the sins of the world does not save the world; rather it only "secures the possibility of salvation."¹⁰ Furthermore, this view distinguishes between the advocacy and propitiatory work of Christ in I John 2:1,2 and associates actual salvation only with Christ's advocacy. This means that Christ's propitiation on earth was and is universal for all men—both the elect and non-elect alike. His advocacy in heaven, however, is restricted for those only who

⁸ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (reprinted from Vol. X of Owen's Works, published in 1852 by Johnstone and Hunter, Edinburgh, and ed. by William H. Goold; London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), p. 191.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, V, 197.

believe in Him. The contingency of one's salvation, therefore, rests upon man and the so-called "condition of faith."¹¹ In other words, what now brings unbelievers into condemnation is not their sins—God has been satisfied for them by the blood of Christ—but the sin of rejecting Christ as the divinely appointed mediator of salvation. But Warfield rightly objects to this by saying:

Is not the rejection of Jesus as our propitiation a sin? And if it is a sin, is it not like other sins, covered by the death of Christ? If this great sin is excepted from the expiatory [effectual covering] of Christ's blood, why did not John tell us so, instead of declaring without qualification that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world? And surely it would be very odd if the sin of rejection of the Redeemer were the only condemning sin, in a world the vast majority of the dwellers in which have never heard of this Redeemer, and nevertheless perish. On what ground do they perish, all their sins having been expiated?¹²

There are a number of observations that can be made in objection to the generical or universal interpretation of I John 2:2. Some of the more significant ones immediately follow, others will be mentioned in the discussion under the geographical, eschatological and ethnological subheadings.

Terminological objection.

The first observation made in objection to the generical view concerns the use of the term "world" (*kosmos*) in the New Testament. That *kosmos* can and does have more than the meaning of all mankind generically cannot be denied (cf. John 1:10,11; 3:17; 12:31; 17:6,9,11,18,21,23,24).¹³ In fact *kosmos*, as

¹¹ Historic Calvinists use the theological term "condition of faith" in a different sense than that of Calvinistic universalists; that is, Christ did not die for any upon condition, *if they do believe*, but He died for all God's elect that they will believe and believing have eternal life. Because saving faith itself is among the principal effects and fruits of the death of Christ (see Note 5 above), salvation is bestowed conditionally only as viewed by the lost sinner. For him to experience salvation, he must believe; but saving faith, which is the condition for man, is also absolutely procured by Christ. Otherwise, if faith is not procured for believers, then their salvation is not all of grace. When the believer grows in grace and sees that the condition of faith has been procured by Christ, then should he not cry out to God, "O Lord, why me?"

¹² John E. Meeter (ed), *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (two vols.; Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970-73), I, 172.

¹³ Those who hold to universal propitiation in a generical sense are exhorted to refer to Owen's work (pp.189-95; 204-26) where he deals exhaustively with the terms "world," "whole world" and their equivalents. His arguments for definite atonement in response to the generical interpretation of such passages as John

effectually demonstrated in Owen's work,¹⁴ has many uses and meanings? The usual meaning being "many of mankind."

According to the New Testament Greek text, *kosmos* occurs about 185 times. It is used some 105 times by the apostle John, 47 times by Paul and 33 times by other writers. With the use of a concordance, it is readily observed that *kosmos* is never used by Paul or the other writers to mean all mankind generically in a salvation context unless John's usage is the exception. It is used of all mankind universally in a context of sin and judgment (Rom. 3:6, 19; 5:12), but never in a salvation context.

In John's writings, *kosmos* is used a total of 78 times in his gospel, 23 times in I John and 4 times in II John and Revelation. A check of each of these references, in context, reveals that there are perhaps, at the most, eleven occurrences in ten verses which could possibly, even according to Arminianism, mean all mankind generically in a salvation context. These occurrences are found in John 1:29; 3:16; two times in 3:17; once each in John 4:42; 6:33, 51; 12:47; 16:8 and once each in I John 2:2 and 4:14.

Concerning the possible usage of *kosmos* to mean all mankind without exception in the redemptive context of I John 2:2, let the reader observe that *kosmos* is used differently at least 21 out of 23 times elsewhere in the epistle. As a matter of fact, the identical term "whole world" is used in I John 5:19 where it cannot possibly mean all mankind absolutely. John writes: "we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness (in the wicked one)." Can this be true of the believer who is in Christ? Let the reader judge. If the term "whole world" in I John 2:2 means all mankind generically, it is an exceptional usage in the epistle (objectively, only in I John 2:2 and 4:14 could it possibly refer to all mankind without exception—two times out of 23 occurrences). Therefore, it is the writer's contention that the burden of proof rests upon those who interpret "whole world" generically to establish that the term means all mankind in any redemptive context, let alone I John 2:2. In the writer's research he has not found any writer who holds to an indefinite atonement attempting to do this; rather the term is always said to mean, in a "normal and unbiased approach," the whole world, meaning all mankind,¹⁵ both the elect and the non-elect.

3:16 and I John 2:2 are irrefutably stated and, in the opinion of this writer, can never be biblically disavowed because Owen's arguments are biblical.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.191-93. The reader is also referred to Hendriksen's work for a study of John's use of the term "world." Cf. William Hendriksen, A., *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (two vols. in one; London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1954), I, 79.

¹⁵ Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, p. 81.

Logical objection.

The second observation made in objection to the generical view is logical. It is based upon the principle of the analogy of faith and relates to the design of propitiation from the standpoint of the special and distinguishing love of God. The fact that Christ's blood was an appeasement of God's wrath, in order that the chief purpose of God's love might be manifested, demands Christ's death. But if God's giving His Son is a manifesting of His special distinguishing love (and it is), and if "He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things" (Rom. 8:32)? The answer to this question should be obvious. The term "whole world" cannot refer to all mankind generically in a salvation context, for the non-elect do not receive all or any of the gifts of saving grace which (according to Rom. 8:32) is assured to them if, in reality, Christ actually died for them. Do all men have faith (II Thess. 3:2)?¹⁶

Contextual objection.

A third observation made in objection to the generical view lies in the fact that the context of I John 2:2 teaches that Christ's advocacy and propitiation are the same in design and extent. This is supported by the coordinating conjunction "and," which connects verse 2 with verse 1. Certainly no Calvinistic universalist is willing to admit that Christ's advocacy actually extends to the non-elect. How, then, can propitiation be absolutely universal if Christ's advocacy is not? In an attempt to explain this objection, those who hold to the generical interpretation intimate that it is Christ's advocacy in heaven which particularizes His propitiation on earth and makes it efficacious before the Father. They say that

propitiation is conceived as merely laying a basis for actual forgiveness of sins, and is spoken of therefore rather as "sufficient" than efficacious—becoming efficacious only through the act of faith on the part of the believer, by which he secures Christ as his Advocate.¹⁷

But this attempted explanation empties the conception of propitiation from its biblical meaning and shifts the saving operation of Christ from His atoning death on earth to His intercession in heaven. However, as Warfield points out,

no support is given this elaborate construction by John; and our present passage is enough to shatter the foundation on which it is built. . . . The "advocacy" of our Lord is indeed based here on his propitiation. But it is based on it not as if it bore merely an accidental relation to it, . . . but as its natural and indeed necessary issue. John introduces the declaration that Christ is—not "was," the propitiation is as continuous in its effect as the advocacy?our propitiation, in order to support his reference of sinning

¹⁶ See Note 5, above.

¹⁷ Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings*, I, 173.

Christians to Christ as their Advocate with the Father, and to give them confidence in the efficacy of his advocacy. The efficacy of the advocacy rests on that of the propitiation, not the efficacy of the propitiation on that of the advocacy. It was in the propitiatory death of Christ that John finds Christ's saving work: the advocacy is only its continuation? Its unceasing presentation in heaven. The propitiation accordingly not merely lays a foundation for a saving operation, to follow or not follow as circumstances may determine. It itself saves. And this saving work is common to Christians and "the whole world." By it the sins of the one as of the other are expiated. . . . They no longer exist for God?and are not they blessed whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered, to whom the Lord will not reckon sin?¹⁸

Grammatical objection.

The fourth observation made in objection to the generical view is grammatical. One contemporary Calvinistic universalist attempts to explain Christ's suffering for the sins of both the elect and non-elect by saying that His suffering was retroactive to Adam's fall and potentially available (a better term would be hypothetically available) for the non-elect both before and after the cross.¹⁹ He explains I John 2:2 by saying that Christ,

is the propitiation for our sins," which means He is the actual propitiation for [believers' sins through faith]. . . . But we are also told that He is the propitiation "for the sins of the whole world," . . [which] means that He is the *potential* propitiation only [for the non-elect]; otherwise the Apostle would have been teaching universalism.²⁰

Is this not an example of exegetical hopscotch by a Calvinistic hypothetical universalist? But what does I John 2:2 actually say? It says that Christ "is (*est*) the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." *The text does not say* that Christ is *potentially* the propitiation for "our sins and "the sins of the whole world."²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-74.

¹⁹ Norman F. Douty, *The Death Christ Died*, (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1972), p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

²¹ The verb "is", (*est*) is in the present tense and indicative mood (the mood of certainty or reality) and governs both clauses in the verse. If Christ is the potential propitiation for the non-elect, why was not the subjunctive mood used (the mood of mild contingency or potentiality which often assumes unreality depending, of course, on the context)? Why does not contextual exegesis support the translation that Christ is the *potential* propitiation of our sins and the sins of the whole world? Douty simply does not address this grammatical

Biblical objection.

The fifth and final observation made in objection to the generical view concerns the use of the term "propitiation" in Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17 and I John 4:10. In each of these references, propitiation is restricted to believers, that is, to God's elect. Furthermore, when dealing with a problem text, the principle of interpretation which requires one to determine the usage of a word or term as it is used elsewhere must not be ignored or slighted, especially when it is used elsewhere by the same author. Yet this is done by those who hold to generic universalism, for they do not mention the extent of propitiation in its other occurrences when they discuss the extent in I John 2:2. Both the modified and consistent Calvinists admit that there is some ambiguity in the interpretation of I John 2:2; otherwise there would not be the great theological controversy between them over the meaning of this verse. Is it not proper, then, for I John 4:10 also to be considered to determine if it will help remove some of the ambiguity? Does I John 4:10 help do this? "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." May the reader decide if this verse is helpful in understanding the extent of the atonement in general and the extent of propitiation in I John 2:2 in particular.

The Geographical Interpretation

The second explanation of the universal terminology in I John 2:2 is that termed under the heading of "geographical universalism." This view interprets "and he is the propitiation for our sins" as referring to the recipients of John's epistle, that is, those believers living in Asia Minor. It interprets the latter part of the verse "and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" as referring to those Christians everywhere outside Asia Minor who confess their sins to Christ their advocate. This view is close to that of Augustine, Calvin and Beza,

who understand by "the whole world" "the churches of the elect dispersed through the whole world"; and by the declaration that Jesus Christ is "a propitiation for the whole world," that in his blood all the sins of all believers throughout the world are expiated.²²

While the geographical view has much scriptural merit and is certainly in harmony with reality, it seems that the term "whole world" conveys something beyond "the world of believers outside Asia Minor." In other words, it seems to be more than just a geographical distinction. In the writer's judgment this something else is explained by the following two interpretations.

problem and provides absolutely no exegetical support for asserting that Christ is the *potential* propitiation for those who die in unbelief.

²² Meeter (ed.), *Selected Shorter Writings*, 1, 170.

The Eschatological Interpretation

The third interpretation of the universal terminology in I John 2:2 is that view termed "eschatological universalism," the future world that is saved at the second coming of Christ, which will include all the elect from all ages. This is the view set forth by Warfield and has much to commend it. In John 1:29, 3:17 and 12:47, John declares that the mission of the Son in coming into the world is not only to save individuals but to save the world itself. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." This, however, will not come to pass until the eschatological future, at the end time, when God's redemptive plan is complete. Then, and then only, will there be a saved world. Concerning this view, Warfield writes:

It is the great conception which John is reflecting in the phrase, "he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world." This must not be diluted into the notion that he came to offer salvation to the world, or to do his part toward the salvation of the world, or to lay such a basis for salvation that it is the world's fault if it is not saved. John's thinking does not run on such lines; and what he actually says is something very different, namely that Jesus Christ is a propitiation for the whole world, that he has expiated the whole world's sins. He came into the world because of love of the world, in order that he might save the world, and he actually saves the world. Where the expositors have gone astray is in not perceiving that this salvation of the world was not conceived by John—any more than the salvation of the individual—as accomplishing itself all at once. Jesus came to save the world, and the world will through him be saved; at the end of the day he will have a saved world to present to his father. John's mind is running forward to the completion of his saving work; and he is speaking of his Lord from the point of view of this completed work. From that point of view he is the Savior of the world. . . . He proclaims Jesus the Savior of the world and declares him a propitiation for the whole world. He is a universalist; he teaches the salvation of the whole world. But he is not an "each and every" universalist: he is an "eschatological" universalist.²³

In Warfield's exposition²⁴ of the term "world" in I John 2:2, he discusses his eschatological universalism view and what this writer has systematically termed "generical" and "geographical" universalism. However, he does not mention or discuss the fourth and following interpretation, namely, that termed "ethnological universalism." Although, in this writer's judgment, Warfield's eschatological universalism adequately explains John 1:29, 3:17 and 12:47 (there will be a future world in which all the sins of that world will be taken away), it does not

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.176-77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.169-77.

seem, as presented by Warfield, to fully account for the contextual meaning of *kosmos* in John 3:16 or in I John 2:2.

The Ethnological Interpretation

The ethnological interpretation asserts that the term "world" in both I John 2:2 and John 3:16, although including the geographical and eschatological views, also stresses that some without distinction, not all without exception, out of the Gentiles as well as out of the Jews (Rom. 9:24) have had their sins propitiated by the death of Christ. It is as though the Lord were saying: "The Jews, Nicodemus, no longer have a national monopoly on the salvation of Jehovah. Do you not, Nicodemus, remember the words of the prophet Isaiah who said, 'I will also give the Holy One of Israel for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth' (Isa. 49:6)? Nicodemus, did not the psalmist prophesy of me when he said, 'therefore will I give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and sing praises unto thy name' (Ps. 18:49)?" Did not "the apostles and brethren that were in Judea," when "they heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God," declare: "then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18)? Is not the term "world" used of the Gentiles by the apostle Paul in Romans 11:11, 12, 15? Certainly it is. Is it used absolutely (meaning all Gentiles without exception) or is it used relatively (meaning all Gentiles without distinction)? Relative, otherwise Christ's teaching on hell would be erroneous. But if *kosmos* refers to Gentiles in a relative sense in Romans 11 (and it does), is this how the apostle John uses it in I John 2:2? The writer believes it is. But can it be established whether John, who was probably writing from Ephesus in Asia Minor, was writing first of all to Jewish believers in his epistle while living in a Gentile environment? Arthur Pink cites four convincing reasons that he was. They are:

(1) In the opening verse he says of Christ, "Which we have seen with our eyes. . . and our hands have handled." How impossible it would have been for the apostle Paul to have commenced any of *his* epistles to *Gentile* saints with such language! (2) "Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which *ye* had *from the beginning*" (I John 2:7). The "beginning" here referred to is the beginning of the public manifestation of Christ? In proof compare 1:1, 2:13, etc. Now these believers, the apostle tells us, *had* the "old commandment" *from the beginning*. This was true of *Jewish* believers, but it was not true of *Gentile* believers. (3) "I write unto you, fathers, because *ye* have known Him from the beginning" (2:13). Here, again, it is evident that it is *Jewish* believers that are in view. (4) "Little children, it is the last time: and as *ye have heard* that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. *They* went out from *us*, but they were not of *us*" (2:18,19). These brethren to whom John wrote *had* "heard" from Christ Himself that Antichrist should come (see Matt. 24). The "many antichrists" whom John declares "went out *from us*" were all *Jews*, for during the first century none but a

Jew posed as the Messiah. Therefore, when John says "He is the propitiation for our sins," he can only mean for the sins of *Jewish believers*. (It is true that many things in John's Epistle apply equally to believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Christ is the Advocate of the one, as much as of the other).²⁵

Furthermore, when John added, "and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world," he signified that

Christ was the propitiation for the sins of the *Gentile believers too*, for, . . . "the world" is a term *contrasted* from Israel. This interpretation is unequivocally established by a careful comparison of I John 2:2 with John 11:51,52, which is a strictly parallel passage: "And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also He should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad." Here Caiaphas, under inspiration, made known *for whom* Jesus should "die." Notice now the correspondency of his prophecy with this declaration of John's: "He is the propitiation for our (believing Israelites) sins." "He prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation." "And not for ours only." "And not for that nation only." "But also for the whole world"? That is, Gentile believers scattered throughout the earth. "He should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad."²⁶

Conclusion

The reader will have to judge for himself which of the four universalistic interpretations of I John 2:2 is the most biblical. For this writer the ethnological view best interprets the meaning of the immediate and general context. It is the writer's position along with most historic Calvinists that in the first part of I John 2:2,

the believing *Jews* alone are intended, of whom John was one; and the addition [last part of the verse] is not an extending of the propitiation of Christ to *others than believers*, but only to *other believers* [i.e., Gentile believers]. If it might be granted that in the first branch [first part of the verse] all believers then living were comprehended, who might presently be made partakers of this truth geographical view], yet the increase or accession [last part of the verse] must be, by analogy, only those who *were to be* in after ages [eschatological view] and remoter places than the name of Christ had then reached unto,—even all those who, according to

²⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *The Atonement* (Venice, Florida: Chapel Library, n.d.), pp.13-14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14.

the prayer of our Savior, John xvii. 20, should believe on his name to the end of the world.²⁷

It can be readily seen from this interpretation that the geographical and eschatological views are both included within the ethnological interpretation. The geographical view is included by its very nature; that is, that God's elect are scattered among the Jews and Gentiles throughout the whole world. And it should be apparent that the ethnological and eschatological views are closely related as seen in John 3:16,17, where both are consecutively set forth. But Warfield's eschatological view, by itself, tends to minimize the geographical or world-wide aspect of Christ's atonement and fails to mention the ethnological view. Although all three views are in harmony with the scriptural doctrine of election, it is this writer's conclusion that the geographical and eschatological views do not, by themselves, fully answer the intention of the apostle John in I John 2:2. Rather it seems that John wants to make it clear to his readers in this verse (as well as John 3:16) that the Old Testament particularism in relation to the nation of Israel is now past, so he uses the universal term "whole world," Christ has now brought in the New Covenant and has prepared the way for New Testament universalism? A divine universalism which teaches that Messiah is the Saviour of the spiritual seed of Abraham, who testify in 'due season'²⁸ that they are none other than Christ's ransomed ones, God's elect. It is for this very reason that the sovereign grace ambassador of Christ knows that God will make "known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy" by calling them out "not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:23,24). Therefore, he carries out the great commission with full assurance and much boldness, enduring "all things for the elect's sake, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (II Tim. 2:10).

²⁷ Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, p. 226.

²⁸ "The 'due season' comprises the entire new dispensation. . . . Not during the old dispensation but only during the new can the mystery be fully revealed that all men, Gentiles as well as Jews, are now on an equal footing; that is, that the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (Eph. 3:6; cf. Eph. 2:11,12)." Cf. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 99.