

“Ye Need Not One Be Left Behind/For God Hath Bidden All Mankind”:  
Charles Wesley’s Response to the Doctrine of Limited Atonement  
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When John Wesley collected his brother’s hymns for the use of the people called Methodists, he opened the book with his brother’s birthday anthem, *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*. This song serves as an overture for the hymnal, introducing many of the characteristic themes of Methodist belief. Beginning with overwhelming gratitude and praise for Father and Son, it quickly moves to the proper human response of spreading God’s honor throughout the world. The intense personal experience of forgiveness, liberty, and cleansing comes next and then the declaration that all is of grace by faith fills out the first six verses. With verse six, however, Charles subtly moves from proclamation to argumentation. It is not by accident that against his Roman Catholic opponents he sings, “Look and be saved by grace alone/Be justified by faith.”<sup>1</sup> Nor is the message of verse seven any less controversial:

See all your sins on Jesus laid:  
The Lamb of God was slain,  
His soul was once an offering made  
For every soul of man.<sup>2</sup>

With the introduction of the word “every” Charles arguably fires the first shot in a battle against Calvinism that will rage for the rest of his life.<sup>3</sup> Along with the second hymn in the *Collection* and at least forty-three additional hymns in this volume, Charles wrote a thirty-six stanza poem, and published two volumes entitled “Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love” with forty-six more songs to combat what he calls “the poison of Calvin.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” Hymn #1 in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, vol. 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 79. [Hereafter *Hymns*. I will only cite hymns from this collection by number, not title nor page.]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The hymn was apparently written 21 May 1739 but not published until 1740. The quoted section first appeared as v. 14 of “For the Anniversary Day of One’s Conversion” in John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1740), 122. This material was accessed through the website of The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, Duke Divinity School. [Hereafter WW.]

<sup>4</sup> The phrase about Calvin is taken from Charles Wesley’s MS Journal and is quoted by Randy Maddox in his introduction to Charles Wesley’s *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love* (1741) on WW. See also *Hymns* #2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 22, 23, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 41, 80, 83, 84, 89, 111, 114, 123, 125, 140, 162, 163, 175, 186, 193, 194, 206, 207, 305, 369, 426, 427, 431, 432, 433, 435, and 451. See also WW for [Charles Wesley,] *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love; To Which is Added the Cry of a Reprobate*

Because a full treatment of Charles Wesley's opposition to Calvinism would require a monograph, and even a complete analysis of his disagreement with the doctrine of the limited atonement is beyond the scope of this paper, I will summarize Charles Wesley's advocacy of the universal scope of Christ's atonement by considering just two of the works he wrote on the topic. First will be the second hymn in the *Collection*, "Come Sinners to the Gospel Feast" and then will be his early and extensive poem, "Universal Redemption." In examining these characteristic works we will find that Charles Wesley argues for the universal efficacy of Christ's blood from three sides of the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, reason, and experience.<sup>5</sup>

In his most-sung hymn about the universal effectiveness of Christ's atonement, "Come Sinners to the Gospel Feast," Charles Wesley does not argue from experience, but from reason and Scripture. Based on the parable of the great supper in Luke 14:16-24, Wesley casts the singers in the role of the servants sent with the invitation. Ignoring the main point of the parable, that many who were invited refused to come, Wesley focuses instead on the invitations offered to those in the city and later to those outside its gates. He begins,

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;  
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;  
Ye need not one be left behind,  
For God hath bidden all mankind.<sup>6</sup>

Here Wesley's scriptural argument is inferential rather than direct. Nowhere in the parable does it say that the host invites all the people in the world to the feast, but within the world of the parable, he does invite all the possible characters. Not only are the marginalized of the city welcomed, but the host even commands the servants to go outside the city and compel people to come in. The emphasis in this part of the parable is the indiscriminate nature of the invitation. Wesley understands that just as all the previously-uninvited characters of the parable are now promiscuously invited to the supper, so all the people of the world are inclusively invited to respond to Christ. Since

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*and the Horrible Decree* (Bristol: Farley, 1741). In addition see [Charles Wesley,] *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (London: Strahan, [1742]), as well as [Charles Wesley(?)], "Universal Redemption," in John Wesley's *Free Grace*, 31–35 (Bristol: Farley, 1739). While some question Charles's authorship of "Universal Redemption" in the judgment of the author the similarity of the text to Charles's other undoubted work and his brother's repeated use of it make the case for Charles's authorship convincing. The reason the count of hymns from the *Collection* is inexact is that it is not always clear whether Wesley is confining himself to the doctrine of limited atonement or is addressing Calvinism more generally. All of the cited hymns make specific reference to the extent of the atonement.

<sup>5</sup> An additional reason for limiting this paper to these two hymns is that Wesley's two volumes of *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* are treated in John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: the Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 99-116.

<sup>6</sup> *Hymns* #2.

the whole point of the parable is that the host does not select his guests, Wesley infers that God does not elect a certain few to enjoy his grace.

Just as the first verse of the hymn makes the first scriptural argument, so the last verse makes its second scriptural argument. It says:

This is the time: no more delay!  
This is the acceptable day;  
Come in this moment at his call  
And live for him who died for all!<sup>7</sup>

Here Wesley alludes to 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 where Paul says that since Christ died for all, all should live for him. Wesley's point is straightforward: Paul says Christ died for all, so it must mean that the atonement is universal. Besides clearly stating that Christ died for all this scripture contains another argument for the universal atonement: its conclusion is nonsense if the atonement is limited. The conclusion is that people should not live for themselves. This conclusion, however, depends on the premise that Christ's death affects all people. If Christ only died for some, then they were dead, and they can no longer live for themselves. They must live the new life in Christ. But the ones outside Christ, those excluded from the benefits of his death, have no reason to leave their selfish existence. Indeed they cannot, so they have an excuse to continue living for themselves, and may with impunity ignore Paul's injunction. Clearly this understanding of the atonement makes a mockery of Paul's command. Since Paul would not issue a nonsensical order, the atonement must be universal.

Besides using scripture in the first and last verses of this hymn to argue for a universal atonement, Wesley uses reason in verse six to show that Christ's atonement is unlimited when he sings, "O let his love your hearts constrain,/Nor suffer him to die in vain."<sup>8</sup> This is one of Wesley's favorite arguments. He uses it three more times in the *Collection* alone.<sup>9</sup> Since neither the phrase nor the idea of Christ dying in vain appears in the Scripture, Wesley probably gets this idea from Paul's introduction of the concept. Paul worries about vanity in six significant contexts: 1 Corinthians 15:2, 2 Corinthians 6:1, Galatians 2:2 and 4:11, Philippians 2:16, and 1 Thessalonians 3:5. In each of them his concern is that some human action will nullify the power of God. At times he fears that something he has done will ruin his effectiveness, and on the other occasions he is afraid that something his converts do will disqualify them.

If Paul's concern is real and his warnings are not mere cries of "Wolf!" then it must be that Jesus' death avails for all humanity. If Paul runs or labors in vain, or Christians believe or receive the grace of God in vain, then the fact that some are lost must be attributed to that human vanity and cannot be ascribed to some imperfection in God's provision. It must be that Christ by his death on the cross did make a "full, perfect, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> In *Hymns* #6:2, #140:4, and #369:2.

sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.”<sup>10</sup> God perfectly gives grace and humans imperfectly receive it. On the other hand, if Christ’s death is limited in its effect, then there can be no talk of running, laboring, receiving, or believing in vain. God has not bestowed the benefits of Christ’s death on the reprobate, so of course they cannot receive it. One may hand another a gift, and the receiver may drop it, but it is impossible to drop an unoffered gift!

Wesley apparently relies on this obvious deduction from Paul’s warnings as he makes the *qal va-homer* argument that if it would be a bad thing for human actions to make Paul’s labors be in vain, then how much more awful would it be for human actions to allow Jesus’ death to have no effect? By warning against letting Jesus die in vain, Wesley makes an intellectual and emotional argument for the universal atonement.

Wesley’s longest single work advocating the all-inclusive scope of the atonement is his poem “Universal Redemption.” John Wesley appended it to his anti-Calvinist sermon “Free Grace” in 1739 and then reprinted it when he launched the *Arminian Magazine* in 1778.<sup>11</sup> Charles Wesley begins the argument for the universal atonement in verse five where he argues from reason that since God created every human being, God will have mercy on them all. He writes,

Mercy for all, thy hands have made,  
Immense, and unconfin’d,  
Throughout thy every work display’d,  
Embracing all mankind.

His argument depends on the unstated premise that because mercy is by its nature undeserved, simply by existing every one of God’s human creatures qualifies for it.

In verse seven the first Scripture argument appears:

Mercy the fatal bar remov’d,  
Thy only Son it gave,—  
To save a world so dearly lov’d,  
A sinful world to save.

Alluding to John 3:16 it asserts that God gave his Son to save the world. The next verse makes the argument from three scriptures: first, from Hebrews 2:9 that Jesus tasted death for every man; next, from Hebrews 10:10 that he suffered once for all;<sup>12</sup> and finally, from Matthew 20:16 that all are called.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The Order of the Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion,” from the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662. Wesley would have used these words each time he celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

<sup>11</sup> Randy Maddox, editor’s introduction to “Universal Redemption (1739)” on WW.

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether Wesley intended this quotation from Hebrews 10:10 to be an argument for the universal atonement. In the scriptural text it is clear that “once for all”

For every man he tasted death,  
He suffered once for all,  
He calls as many souls as breathe,  
And all *may* hear the call.

Verse nine relies on Wesley's much-valued doctrine of prevenient grace which comes from John 1:9. It teaches that Jesus is the true light and that he enlightens every person who comes into the world. The verse says:

A power to chuse, a will to obey,  
Freely his grace *restores*;  
We all *may* find the living way,  
And call the Saviour ours.

This verse acquits Wesley of the charge of Pelagianism. No one naturally has the ability to choose Christ or to obey his will. God supernaturally and graciously restores this power to every person. Wesley's assurance that "we all may find the living way" comes from the knowledge that Christ's light enlightens every one.

Verses ten through twelve cite and explain Romans 8:29-30. Here Wesley espouses an understanding of foreknowledge that goes back at least to the writer called Ambrosiaster that the eternal mind of God foreknew who would properly use God's preveniently-given power to choose to accept his grace.<sup>14</sup> These, whose faith God foresees are the elect that God justifies and glorifies:

Whom his eternal mind *foreknew*,  
That they the power would use,  
Ascribe to God the glory due,  
And not his grace refuse;

Them, only them, his will *decreed*,  
Them did he *chuse* alone,  
*Ordain'd* in Jesu's steps to tread,  
And to be like his Son.

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does not mean "for all people" but "for all time." Because Charles could converse in Greek, it seems clear he should have understood the meaning of this text but by quoting the ambiguous translation from the AV he seems hijack it to serve his purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 20:16 says "many," not "all" are called, but from the context it is clear that "many" has the force of "all."

<sup>14</sup> *Ancient Christian Texts: Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians: Ambrosiaster*, translated and edited by Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 70. Cited in <http://arminiantheology.com/saturday-devotion-ambrosiaster-on-romans-829-30.html>

Them, the elect, consenting few,  
Who yield to proffered love,  
*Justify'd* here he *forms anew*,  
And *glorifies* above.

Verse fourteen refers to 1 Corinthians 15:22 and probably to Romans 3:30 and Galatians 3:8, emphasizing the double occurrence of “all” in the first passage, and the realization that since God has justified the circumcised, the uncircumcised, and the heathen, he has justified the whole world:

For as in Adam all have dy'd,  
So all in Christ may live,  
May (for the world is justify'd)  
His righteousness *receive*.

The following verse quotes a question asked three times in Scripture:

Whoe'er to God for pardon fly,  
In Christ may be forgiven,  
He speaks to all, “Why *will* ye die,  
And not accept my heaven!”

In Jeremiah 27:13, Ezekiel 18:31 and 33:11 the prophet implores sinners to turn to the Lord and live. “Why will ye die?” implies that there is no reason that death is inevitable and that God has made ample provision for each one to be saved. Again Wesley urges the doctrine of universal atonement with emotional force by showing the personal consequences of its truth.

Verse sixteen answers the previous question and refers again to Ezekiel 33:11 along with Matt 9:13:

No! In the death of him that dies,  
(God by his life hath sworn)  
He is not pleas'd; but ever cries,  
Turn, O ye sinners, turn.

Since God swears by himself because there is no greater (Hebrews 6:13) that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and since Jesus came to call sinners to repentance, how can anyone assert that due to the limited atonement God really has damned some from before the foundation of the world and that Christ's invitation is insincere?

After using fourteen scripture verses to argue for the universal atonement, Wesley next moves to one verse where he argues from his own experience:

And shall I, Lord, confine thy love,  
As not to others free?

And may not every sinner prove,  
The grace that found out *me*?

Although Wesley does not here, as in other places, refer to himself as the chief of sinners, his argument is that if God's grace could find him, it could find anyone, and by implication, if Christ died for him, he died for all.<sup>15</sup>

The remaining verses, with two exceptions, though packed with scriptural quotations and allusions, return to reason to carry the argument for the universal atonement. Whereas Wesley has previously made the case by citing scriptures that teach the wideness of God's mercy, in this section he mainly reasons against the negation of his position. This section also tends to broaden the discussion of the extent of the atonement to the idea of unconditional election and reprobation to which it is logically tied. Thus when Wesley shifts the basis of the argument to reason, he feels free to attack the idea of limited atonement by refuting its logical concomitants.

But before we can explore the verses devoted to reason, we need to examine the exceptions in verses eighteen and nineteen. They look as if Wesley suddenly remembers five more scripture arguments he needs to pack in before turning to reason. He draws on Matthew 1:21 and Hebrews 13:8 to write:

Doubtless thro' one eternal now  
Thou ever art the same,  
The universal Saviour thou,  
And Jesus is thy name.

The argument here is that since the name "Jesus" means "savior" he must be the savior of all people through all time. Then he refers to Isaiah 55:1, Deuteronomy 30:19, and Revelation 3:20 to say:

Ho! Every one that thirsteth come!  
Chuse life; obey the word;  
Open your hearts to make him room,  
And banquet with your Lord.

The implied argument from these scriptures is that since there is no indication from these verses that the invitation is limited to the elect, it must be open to all.

What Wesley implies in verse nineteen he makes explicit in verse twenty:

When God invites, shall man repel?  
Shall man th' exception make?  
"Come, freely come, WHOEVER WILL,

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<sup>15</sup> Verse nine of "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" refers to the singer as "chief" of sinners. See *Hymns* #1.

And living water take!”

From reason the argument is how dare a mere man circumscribe the extent of God’s invitation? What right have humans to say that the invitation offered by God does not apply to everyone?

The next two verses use reason to drive the point home. Here the issue is not that humans try to limit God’s universal invitation, but that if the atonement is limited, God himself mocks people when he commands them to do something he refuses to enable them to do:

Thou bid’st; and would’st thou bid us chuse,  
When purpos’d not to save?  
Command us all a power to use,  
Thy mercy never gave?

Thou can’st not mock the sons of men,  
Invite us to draw nigh,  
Offer thy grace to all, and then,  
Thy grace to most deny!

Wesley uses two rhetorical questions to show the absurdity of the idea of a limited atonement. His point is that God does not bid sinners to choose salvation when he has purposed not to save them, nor does God command all to exercise their power to repent when he has never given them such power. He answers his questions by implying that the good nature of God precludes such mockery and his honesty disallows such a deceitful invitation. Wesley also finds abhorrent Calvin’s idea that God only gives his saving grace to a “small number” of people when he apparently has offered it to all.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of a derisive, mendacious deity rouses Wesley to a fever pitch:

Horror to think that God is hate!  
Fury in God can dwell,  
God could an helpless world create,  
To thrust them into hell!

Doom them an endless death to die,  
From which they could not flee,  
No Lord! Thine inmost bowels cry,  
Against the dire decree!

Calvin himself calls God’s decree of reprobation “dreadful” but feels compelled to

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<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.22.6, 939.



believe it because he thinks the Scripture teaches it.<sup>17</sup> Wesley will have none of it. If the atonement is limited and God has consigned most of humanity to hell, then God is not love, but hate. Recoiling from the horror of this idea, Wesley shouts, “No” and marshals the depths of God’s character against the thought.

Relentlessly pushing Calvinist logic to its conclusion Wesley cries:

Believe who will that human pain,  
Pleasing to God can prove:  
Let Molock feast him with the slain,  
Our God, we know, is love.

Those who accept the limited atonement believe that God has ordered the world in this way solely because this arrangement is his good pleasure—no outside force constrains the will of God in this matter. Therefore in some sense human damnation with its everlasting pain is pleasing to God. Again Wesley cries out against this idea and says that Molock, the Canaanite god who demanded child sacrifice, is a god pleased with human pain, but not the Lord, our God.

The appalling image of the true nature of the God Calvinists proclaim marks the climax of Wesley’s argument against the idea of limited atonement and for the truth of universal redemption. True, the poem does go on for eleven more verses, but these stanzas take the case as proven and beseech the Lord to change the hearts and minds of the Calvinists, and to help the singers spread the truth of God’s unlimited salvation throughout the world:

Lord, if indeed, without a bound,  
Infinite love thou art,  
The HORRIBLE DECREE confound,  
Enlarge thy people’s heart!

Ah! Who is as thy servants blind,  
So to misjudge their God!  
Scatter the darkness of their mind,  
And shed thy love abroad.

Give them conceptions worthy thee,  
Give them in Jesu’s face,  
Thy merciful design to see,  
Thy all-redeeming grace.

When God answers these prayers and brings unity to his now-divided people, then as Jesus promises in John 17:21, “the world will believe” and Christ’s kingdom will fully come:

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.23.7, 955. The Latin word he uses is “horrible.”

Shine in our hearts Father of light,  
Jesu thy beams impart,  
Spirit of truth our minds unite,  
And make us one in heart.

Then, only then our eyes shall see  
Thy promis'd kingdom come;  
And every heart by grace set free,  
Shall make the Saviour room.

Thee every tongue shall then confess,  
And every knee shall bow,  
Come quickly, Lord, we wait thy grace,  
We long to meet thee now.

Although we do have access to twenty-three of the sermons Charles Wesley preached, as well as portions of his journal and letters, it is as a hymn writer that Wesley made his impact on the world.<sup>18</sup> Wesley's nine thousand hymns and poems cover a wide variety of topics from childbirth to death, from earthquakes to the perfidy of the American founding-fathers. As we have seen, one of the topics which most exercised him was the concept that the atonement of Christ might benefit only a small portion of humanity. This idea he battled through arguments made from scripture, reason, and experience. Because his arguments are made in song, none of them can be fully developed or defended from all caviling. At least one, it must be admitted, depends upon a misunderstanding of the scriptural text. But when carefully examined, as we have done for two of the most-widely-known hymns on the topic, it becomes clear that the force of Wesley's argument for the universal scope of the atonement is like the force of a landslide. While travelers may be able to dodge any individual rock, the sheer volume and weight of the whole phenomenon will overwhelm them.

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Wesley, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, Kenneth G. C. Newport, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).