

THE SCOPE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

by

Christopher T. Bounds

Thomas C. Oden is one of today's most recognized and respected Wesleyan theologians. The stated goal of his systematic theology is to articulate the consensual teaching of Christianity, bridging the divide between Eastern and Western Christianity, between Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and Protestants.¹ To do so, he goes *ad fontes* as the foundation for his work—the Scriptures as interpreted in the first five centuries of Christianity. However, when Oden addresses the scope of Christ's work on the cross, while he teaches unlimited atonement as the historical "tradition," strikingly, there is no appeal to or citation of the early Church fathers.²

Oden's omission is compounded in his *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series. When summarizing the teaching of the fathers on the Nicene Creed's articles "for us men, and our salvation" and "for our sake he was crucified," there is no meaningful discussion of the extent of the atonement, even though it was the subject of significant fifth-century debate, with antecedents in much earlier polemics.³ While the universal scope of atonement is implicit, patristic sources marshaled as commentary on these Nicene statements are ambiguous on the subject when stripped from their larger literary context. In the end, other doctrinal issues rise to the fore and the debate over the limits of Christ's atonement appears to be of little concern.⁴

¹Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*, Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), ix-x; *The Word of Life*, Systematic Theology, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), ix-xviii.

²Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*, 388-91.

³Mark J. Edwards, ed., *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, Ancient Christian Doctrine, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 1-2; John Anthony McGurkin, ed., *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, Ancient Christian Doctrine, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 79-80, 86-7.

⁴Mark J. Edwards, ed., *We Believe in the Crucified and Risen Lord*, 2-23; John Anthony McGurkin, ed., *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, 80-5; 87-95.

As a preeminent Wesleyan theologian rooted in Christian antiquity, Oden's neglect here is regrettable. The appeal to early Christian tradition as an arbiter in disputed interpretations of Scripture, such as the extent of the atonement, is a classic Wesleyan approach. John Wesley, when faced with disagreements on biblical exegesis or points of doctrine, often turned to the early church as an initial appeal beyond Scripture for clarification and substantiation of a position.⁵ Others in the Wesleyan theological tradition have followed his example to varying degrees.⁶

The purpose here is to supply what is lacking in Oden's work and that of the larger Wesleyan-Arminian tradition.⁷ I will help ground the Wesleyan belief in unlimited atonement by use of the biblical exegesis and theology of the early church fathers. I will show that there is a strong and persistent understanding of unlimited atonement in the fathers. I also will address how the fathers reconciled their understanding of unlimited

⁵John Wesley, "Farther Thoughts upon Separation from the Church," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; Reprint by Baker Book House, 1978), XIII: 272; "An Address to Clergy," *The Works of John Wesley*, X: 484; John Wesley, "A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton," *The Works of John Wesley*, X: 79. For an extensive examination of the appeal to the Church fathers as a source for authority in Wesley's thought, see Scott J. Jones' *John Wesley's Conception and Use of the Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press/Kingswood Books, 1995): 81-9, 169-75. See also Ted. A. Campbell, "John Wesley's Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 1984), subsequently revised and published as *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press/Kingswood Books, 1991).

⁶Thomas C. Oden's systematic theology is the most obvious contemporary example, and William Burt Pope's *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880) is an example from a century earlier. For an overview of the Wesleyan interest in the patristic period, see Ted A. Campbell, "Back to the Future: Wesleyan Quest for Ancient Roots: The 1980s," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32, no.1 (1997).

⁷Wesleyan systematic theologies lack a serious treatment of this issue and no article has been published in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* addressing the extent of the atonement, much less the patristic treatment of it. The best Wesleyan examination of the early church's understanding of the atonement's extent is Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 77-91. However, while Oden's discussion is helpful, the bulk of attention is given to three fathers, while others appear only in footnotes without discussion.

atonement with the reality that not all people will be saved. Finally, I will conclude with a brief summary comment, connecting patristic teaching to a Wesleyan understanding of the atonement.

Patristic Teaching Through the Fifth Century

The heart of early Ante-Nicene theology on this subject of unlimited atonement is expressed well in the teaching of Irenaeus (140-202), Hippolytus (170-235) and Clement of Alexandria (150-212). Irenaeus, in his “Proof of Apostolic Preaching” and “Against Heresies,” teaches that, as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden, every human being suffers from the consequences of original sin—estrangement from God, death and the threat of eternal corruption. However, through Christ’s obedience in the work of recapitulation, salvation is made possible for “all men.”⁸ He states, “God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man.”⁹ However, while Christ’s redemptive work is intended for all, humanity has free will to resist the call of the Holy Spirit to salvation, reject God’s grace in Christ, follow false teaching, and experience God’s final judgment of sin.

In his treatise “On Christ and the Antichrist,” Hippolytus speaks of the Son of God as one who enlightens the saints, teaches the ignorant, corrects the erring, acknowledges the poor, and “does not hate the female on account of the woman’s act of disobedience in the beginning, nor does he reject the male on account of man’s transgression, but he seeks all, and desires to save all, wishing to make all the children of God.”¹⁰ Hippolytus then identifies God’s desire to save all men and women as the motivation for Christ’s incarnation and “sufferings on the cross.”¹¹

Clement of Alexandria, in his “Exhortation to the Heathen,” proclaims God’s intention to make redemption possible for every person

⁸Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 3.18.1.

⁹Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 3.18.7.

¹⁰Hippolytus, “On Christ and the Antichrist,” trans. J. H. MacMahon, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 3.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 4.

through the Son. He describes Christ to unbelievers as “the lover of man” and “this, and nothing but this, is his only work—the salvation of man.”¹² Because Christ is the “savior of all men,” the “heathen” can be confident that Christ loves them and uses many different means to bring them to salvation. He concludes his appeal with the exhortation “to become partakers of (Christ’s) grace,” which is available to everyone.¹³

In the early Ante-Nicene period, no respected father can be cited within his literary context as limiting the scope of salvation, or more particularly the atonement. On the contrary, the temptation faced by the fathers was to extend the limits beyond humanity. Origen (185-254) in his “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” writes that, as the “great high priest,” Christ has offered himself not only as a sacrifice for all humanity but every “spiritual being,” including the devil and fallen angels. He states that Christ “died not only for men but also for the rest of spiritual beings . . . he died for all apart from God, for ‘by the grace of God he tasted death for all.’”¹⁴ Origen saw his teaching as the logical extension of the “rule of faith’s” teaching on the redemptive work of Christ.¹⁵

While Origen’s overly optimistic doctrine of the atonement would be rejected by later fathers, the foundational interpretive work of early Ante-Nicene teaching was passed down and developed in various ways by later Ante-Nicene writers. It found fertile ground in theologians like Victorinus (250-303) who explicitly connected Christ’s assumption of human nature and efficacious work to the Platonic understanding of universals. Because Christ assumed the universal nature of humanity, Christ’s human nature is efficacious for all humanity. He teaches, “When he took flesh, he took the universal idea of flesh; for as a result the whole power of flesh triumphed in his flesh . . . similarly he took the universal idea of soul. . . . Therefore man as a whole was assumed, and having been assumed was

¹²Clement of Alexandria, “Exhortation to the Heathen,” trans. William Wilson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 9.

¹³*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel According to John,” trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 80 (The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 1.255-6.

¹⁵Origen, “First Principles,” trans. Frederick Crombie, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), Preface, 2.

liberated. For human nature as a whole was in him, flesh as whole and soul as a whole, and they were lifted to the cross and purged through God the word, the universal for all universals.”¹⁶

This same use of Platonic philosophy to understand the unlimited extent of Christ’s redemptive work for humanity became common in later fathers, as clearly seen in Hilary of Poitiers (300-368), who teaches, “He by Whom man was made had nothing to gain by becoming Man; it was our gain that God was incarnate and dwelt among us, making all flesh His home by taking upon Him the flesh of One. For the sake of the human race the Son of God was born . . . so that by becoming man he might take the nature of flesh . . . so the body of the human race as a whole might be sanctified in him through association with this mixture.”¹⁷

While Victorinus represents one interpretive line of earlier Ante-Nicene teaching, Lactantius (260-330) represents another. He continued to develop the earlier fathers’ understanding of the cross as an example of humility for all of humanity. In teaching about the “great force and meaning” of the cross in “The Divine Institutes,” Lactantius argues that because of the humble way in which Christ died, there is “no one at all who might not be able to imitate him.”¹⁸ However, he recognizes that there is more to the cross than moral example. Christ is lifted up on the cross, elevated where everyone can see him, so that his passion might be known to “all” and become the “salvation of all.”¹⁹ Christ’s redemptive work through moral example and sacrificial death is intended for the entire human race.

In the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, the idea of unlimited atonement remains the consistent teaching of the church. Two “Doctors” of the Eastern Church, Athanasius (296-373) and Gregory Nazianzus (329-390), and two Doctors of the Western Church, Ambrose (339-397) and Jerome (347-420) represent well the teaching inherited from earlier fathers. Athanasius in “On the Incarnation of the Word” examines the motivation

¹⁶Quotation taken from J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 386-7.

¹⁷Hilary of Poitiers, “On the Trinity,” trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 9, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899), 2.25.

¹⁸Lactantius, “Divine Institutes,” trans. William Fletcher, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), IV. 26.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

and necessity of Christ's coming. He states, ". . . the reason of his coming down was because of us, and that our transgression called forth the loving kindness of the Word . . . for of his becoming incarnate we were the object and for our salvation he dealt so lovingly as to appear and be born in a human body."²⁰ He makes clear that the "us" and "our" here are in reference to humanity as a whole. Athanasius teaches that all people have died in Adam, but through Christ's incarnation and death on the cross the "ruin of all . . . might be undone."²¹ God through Christ intends all of humanity to be redeemed, although this does not mean that all will be saved.

Gregory Nazianzus in his teaching about Christ in the "Fourth Theological Oration" declares, "He is our redemption, because he sets us free who were held captive under sin, giving himself as a ransom for us, the sacrifice to make expiation for the world."²² He argues that the Son of God is able to be a ransom for humanity and make redemption possible for humanity through his full assumption of human nature by uniting "to himself that which was condemned," so that he "may release it from all condemnation."²³ Nazianzus says he does this for "all" who share that nature he assumed.²⁴ Not only is Christ's work on the cross sufficient for the entire human race, it is intended for all humanity.

In a moving section from "Cain and Abel," Ambrose speaks of God's salvific love for all people, as well as the individual person. He writes, "He therefore is the expected who was born of a virgin and who came for my salvation and for the salvation of the entire world. . . . He perceived that those who suffer cannot be healed without a remedy. For this reason, he bestowed medicine on the sick and by his assistance made health available to all."²⁵ Because salvation is made available to all, he goes on to say that

²⁰Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," trans. Archibald Robertson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 4.

²¹*Ibid.*, 6,8.

²²Gregory Nazianzus, "Theological Orations," trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), 30.20.

²³*Ibid.*, 30. 21.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Ambrose, "Cain and Abel," tran. John J. Savage, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 42, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), 2.3.11.

whoever suffers God's judgment in the end can "ascribe to himself the real causes of his death, that man was unwilling to be cured, although he had a remedy at hand which could make possible his escape from death. The mercy of God has been made manifest to all."²⁶ Ambrose's teaching here is reiterated in his commentary "On Psalm 39" where he exhorts, "He wants all whom he has made and created to be his; would that you, O man, would not flee . . . for he seeks even those who flee." Ambrose argues that salvation is made available to all and the only reason people are not saved in the end is because of their "unwillingness to be cured."²⁷

Jerome, in a letter to the Roman nobleman Oceanus, explicitly addresses ideas associated with limited atonement—that there are some sins which Christ cannot cleanse and sinners for whom Christ did not die—and treats it as heresy. In refutation of such thinking, he contends, "What else is this but to say that Christ has died in vain? He has indeed died in vain if there are any whom he cannot make alive. When John the Baptist points to Christ and says, 'Behold the lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world,' he utters a falsehood if after all there are persons living whose sins Christ has not taken away."²⁸ Christ died to forgive the sin of every human being.

In the fourth and fifth century, along with asserting that Christ died for all, the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers address more often than earlier fathers why not all people are saved. Jerome in his "Commentary on Ephesians" makes the point that God wills to save all humanity, yet those who are not saved have only themselves to blame. He declares, "He wills all to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. But, because no one is saved without his own will for we possess free will, he wants us to will good, so that when we have willed it, he himself may will to fulfill his own counsel in us."²⁹

Jerome's contemporary, John Chrysostom (349-407) in "Homilia de ferendis reprehensionibus" concurs in his understanding, "God never

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ambrose, *Commentary of Saint Ambrose on Twelve Psalms*, trans. Ide Ni Ri (Dublin: Halcyon Press, 2000), Psalm 39, note 20.

²⁸Jerome, "To Oceanus," trans. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W. G. Martley, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 6, eds. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), Letter 69.

²⁹Jerome, "Commentary on Ephesians," trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.11.

compels anyone by necessity and force, but he wills that all be saved, yet he does not force anyone.” Why then are not all saved? Chrysostom answers, “. . . because not everyone’s will follows God’s will.”³⁰ In his “Homilies on Ephesians,” he proclaims that God “greatly longs after, greatly desires our salvation” and the only reason why the wicked are not saved is because this is what they have chosen.³¹ Another contemporary, Theodore of Mopseuestia (350-428), in his “Commentary on the Gospel of John” writes about the cause of God’s judgment on the unrighteous in John 3:17-18: “The purpose established by God is not that someone may be damned, but that all may be saved . . . indeed his grace is offered to all who want it.”³² In the end, those who are condemned are the authors of their own condemnation, not God, because God sent his Son into the world in order that all might be saved.³³

The anonymous Ambrosiaster (4th century) picks up the argument of others in the fourth century. He teaches that Christ died for all and that God “wills all men to be saved.” Salvation in and through Christ is available to all, but only if people want it. He declares, “for God does not wish them to be saved in a way that the unwilling would be saved.”³⁴ He then compares this to a physician who makes a public declaration of his healing profession so that people may know that he wants to heal all. However, the sick must come to him to be cured.³⁵

Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), in his “Commentary on the Gospel of John” (1:29), teaches that Christ is the lamb of God “led to the slaughter for all, that he might drive away the sin of the world . . . for the one lamb died for all. . . .”³⁶ This “all” is clarified even more in his comments on

³⁰John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Certain New Testament Texts,” trans. Gerald Bray, *We Believe in One God*, Ancient Christian Doctrine, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 100.

³¹John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Ephesians,” trans. Gross Alexander, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 13, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889), 1.

³²Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Marco Conti, in *Ancient Christian Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 2010), 34-5.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Ambrosiaster, “1 Timothy 2:4,” J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: Migne, 1848), 17.492.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Cyril of Alexandria, “Commentary on the Gospel of John 2.1,” ed. Joel Elowsky, *New Testament IVa John 1-10*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 68.

John 3:19 when he states, “Jesus says that unbelievers had the opportunity to be illuminated, but preferred to remain in darkness. Such people, in fact, by failing to choose enlightenment, determine their own punishment against themselves . . . which was in their power to escape.”³⁷ Again, in his comments on John 10:27, Cyril teaches, “It might be said that inasmuch as he (Christ) has become man, he has made all human beings his relatives, since all are members of the same race. We are all united to Christ in a mystical relationship because of his incarnation. Yet those who do not preserve the likeness of his holiness are alienated from him.” This is what it means for the sheep to hear the shepherd’s voice.³⁸ All are reconciled to God in Christ, but those who reject or resist Christ’s work will not be in God’s family.

Prosper of Aquitaine (390-455), who followed Augustine’s teaching on predestination but came to reject his limited view of the atonement, writes: “Likewise, he who says that God does not will all men to be saved, but only a certain number who are predestined, speaks more harshly than one should speak about the depth of the unsearchable grace of God, ‘who wills all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.’”³⁹ Christ objectively accomplishes the work of salvation for all humanity, but redemption is only applied to those who repent, believe and are baptized.⁴⁰

With few exceptions, the early church fathers present a uniform witness to the unlimited scope of Christ’s salvific work in general, and atonement in particular, across East and West, Latin and Greek, and early to late theologians.⁴¹ Whether addressing this subject directly or indirectly, in different pastoral contexts and controversies, they testify to the fact that Christ died for all humanity, thus making redemption possible for any person.

Debate Over the Scope of Christian Redemption

I have shown through a general survey that the early church fathers through the fifth century held almost universally to an unlimited view of

³⁷Ibid, 128.

³⁸Ibid., 356.

³⁹Prosper of Acquitane, “Answer to the Gauls,” trans. P. De Letter, *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine*, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 32 (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 8.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹The two primary exceptions are Augustine and early Prosper of Aquitane.

Christ's atonement. At this point, I want to examine the specific debates that forced these fathers to articulate, refine, and develop their understanding, culminating in the fifth century controversy surrounding excesses in Augustinian theology.

1. Struggle With Gnosticism. Debates over the scope of Christ's salvific work had a sporadic, but recurring history in the patristic period. The earliest dispute arose in the church's struggle with Gnosticism. In his second-century refutation of Gnosticism, Irenaeus describes its "limits" on human salvation. Specifically, the Gnostics believed that there are three classes of humanity: (a) the "perfect" who are spiritual and will transition to the Pleroma and incorruptibility, (b) the "psychics" who have the potential through secret knowledge and the appropriate exercise of free will to become perfect, and (c) the "material" ones who are doomed to perish with the physical world and have no chance of achieving salvation in the Pleroma.⁴² Therefore, Gnostics believed that a whole segment of humanity is without hope of salvation. They are doomed to destruction.⁴³ In contrast, Irenaeus argued that, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the personal exercise of free will, everyone can be perfected in love and made incorruptible in the world to come.⁴⁴ The redemptive work of Christ is available to all. This is one of the truths distinguishing the church's "rule of faith" from the leading heresy of that time.⁴⁵

Over the centuries, the early Church continued to face the threat of Gnosticism and its teaching on limited salvation. In the fourth century Gregory Nazianzus condemned heretics who taught that humanity is comprised of three different classes. According to Gregory, they interpreted Matthew 19:11, "Not all men can receive this precept, but only to those whom it has been given," to mean that the "spiritual" are determined for salvation, while the "earthly" are incapable because of their nature. Salvation is limited to a certain class of people. In response, Gregory taught that salvation is synergistic. Redemption is made possible through God's grace in Christ and human cooperation with that grace. In the end, because of Christ's coming, no human being is determined for reprobation. If people are lost, they are lost as a result of resisting "the very choosing of the things that should be chosen."⁴⁶

⁴²Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 1.5-6.1.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.22.4. See also 3.18.3-5; 3.19-20; 3.23.1-8; 5.1.1.

⁴⁵Ibid., 3.1.1-2.3.

⁴⁶Ibid., 13.

Similarly, a contemporary of Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), refuted the idea that humanity had different natures and that salvation is dependent on which nature a person has. In his lectures to catechumens preparing for baptism, Cyril taught that people become children of God through the exercise of “free will” and not from a particular nature given by God.⁴⁷ He states, “For not by necessity, but from free choice we come to such a holy adoption as sons.”⁴⁸ This adoption is possible for all through the redemptive work of Christ and faith in God exercised in the sacrament of baptism.⁴⁹

2. Struggle With Greco-Roman Philosophies. A second source of debate over the extent of salvation came from the Greco-Roman world, particularly from its fatalistic/deterministic philosophies. Against this context in the third century, Origen was careful to clarify passages of Scripture that could be understood to teach that some human beings were determined by God for salvation, while others were fated for hell. For example, in “First Principles” Origen addressed Paul’s teaching on God “hardening Pharaoh’s heart” (Romans 9:18).⁵⁰ He explains that on one hand, the human heart is hardened by persistent resistance against the will of God. On the other, it is softened by surrendering and accepting God’s grace in life. Both hearts are caused by God’s grace, but it is the human response to grace that determines whether it hardens or softens. Like the ground that receives rain, if appropriately cultivated, it brings forth a good harvest. If not, it brings forth thistles and thorns. The rain caused both, but the ground determines what comes forth from it. So the human will if untrained and uncooperative is hardened by God’s grace.⁵¹

Similarly, in the same section of “First Principles,” Origen examines Jesus’ statement, “That seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest they should happen to be converted and their sins forgiven them” (Mark 6:12).⁵² Origen recognized

⁴⁷Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), 7.12.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Origen, “First Principles,” 3.1.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

that Jesus' statement appears to show that some are fated for damnation while others are determined for salvation. He responds by arguing that this passage shows Christ as a master physician who knows what precisely needs to be done in order to bring about a cure. It is not necessarily a good thing for a person to be healed too quickly. Some illnesses require greater time for treatment if they are to be remedied. If cured too quickly they may fall into sin again. Origen's point is that God knows best when and how to apply medicine to the sin-sick soul and what works for one, may not work for the other. Thus, this passage in Mark addresses those who are not yet ready to be cured.⁵³

3. Struggle With the Apollonarian Heresy. Another controversy over the scope of Christ's redemption arose in the fourth century in the heat of the Apollonarian controversy. While Apollonarius was rejected primarily for his inadequate understanding of Christ's humanity, teaching that Christ had a human body, but not a human soul, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) identified other deficiencies in his theology. According to Gregory, Apollonarius used John 5:21, "the Son gives life to whom he will," to argue that Christ did not will to save some people. In response, Nyssa argued that because the Father wills "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" and that the Father's will is in the Son, then "the Son has the same will to save."⁵⁴ A person cannot say that the Father and Son are divided in will. In regard to why some are saved and others are lost, Nyssa, like the fathers before him, located his answer in the human response to divine grace and not in God's will to save some and "ruin" others.⁵⁵

4. Struggle With Excesses in Augustine's Theology. These debates with Gnosticism, the culture of late antiquity, and Apollonarianism set the context for the fifth century. Here, the dispute came to full expression in the early church and focused on Augustine's doctrine of predestination and his interpretation of I Timothy 2:4, "God wills that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."

Before the heat of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine (354-430) had interpreted this passage within its larger context of Paul's exhortation to

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Gregory of Nyssa, "Against Apollinarius," J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca (Paris: Migne, 1866), 60.554.

⁵⁵Ibid.

pray for kings and those in authority, because God desires them to be saved and come to truth. Augustine also taught that God's will "that all be saved" meant God gives opportunities for salvation to all, but it is up to the individual to take advantage of divine opportunities through the exercise of free will. At this point, there was no attempt by Augustine to limit the scope of "all men" in this passage. He essentially follows the teaching found in earlier Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene teaching.⁵⁶

However, as his understanding of predestination became more settled in the throes of the Pelagian controversy, Augustine reinterpreted 1 Timothy 2:4 in a way that read "God wills" and "all men" in a more narrow sense. First, Augustine interpreted "God wills" to mean that God's desire to save extends only to those whom He in fact redeems. Those not elected for salvation are excluded.⁵⁷ Later, he makes even clearer that "God wills" is an expression of divine omnipotence to save only those whom He has chosen.⁵⁸ Second, as Augustine's understanding of the elect becomes more specific, his treatment of "all men" does as well. "All men" is interpreted as those predestined by God for salvation, representing the various classes of the human race, "kings, private citizens, nobles, ordinary men, lofty, lowly, learned, unlearned. . . ." "All men" means that the whole human race is represented in salvation.⁵⁹

Much of Augustine's theology of grace was favorably received by the church, as seen in the condemnation of Pelagianism at the Council of Carthage in 418, the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the decrees from the Second Council of Orange in 529. However, the extremes of his theology, particularly his doctrine of predestination and his limitation on God's salvific will in 1 Timothy 2:4, became the subject of debate in the fifth century. In the end, both extremes were rejected.⁶⁰

⁵⁶Augustine, *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), 44.2.

⁵⁷Augustine, "On Rebuke and Grace," trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887) 14.44.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 14.45-6.

⁵⁹Augustine, "Enchiridion," 103.

⁶⁰See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: Volume 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 318, and Thomas C. Oden, *The Power of Transforming Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 132-8.

Given the consensual history of received teaching on this subject, the way earlier church fathers refuted any attempts to limit the human scope of salvation, it was not surprising that Augustine's exegesis of this passage was called into question. Specifically, a group of monks and bishops in Southern Gaul led the charge, asserting that Augustine's teaching on 1 Timothy was "new and of no value," conflicting "with the intuitions of the church, with antiquity and the opinions of the fathers."⁶¹ Even Prosper of Aquitaine, who was a devoted follower of Augustinian teaching and initially followed Augustine's exegesis here, came to reject this reading of Timothy.⁶²

More specifically, no earlier church father had interpreted 1 Timothy 2:4 in Augustine's way. Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post Nicene treatments of this passage followed three main paths. First, and most prominently, the fathers used it as a basis to teach that God desires the salvation of all humanity and makes salvation possible through Christ. For example, Theodoret (393-466) in his reflection on this passage states that, although God has no need of humanity, "He thirsts for the salvation of every man."⁶³ Therefore, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God in various ways calls all who do not believe, and all who are his enemies, to salvation.⁶⁴ Similarly, Theodore of Mopsuestia, speaking on this passage in its larger context, states, "Now he gave himself for all does not mean it was for some that he allowed himself to undergo death; rather, it was in his wish to confer benefit on all in common that he saw fit to undergo the passion he suffered. . . . Christ himself likewise plainly drew near to all by his own nature and bestowed benefit on all, since he underwent the passion for all."⁶⁵

⁶¹Augustine, *Letters 211-270, 1-29*, trans. Roland Teske, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Part II*, vol. 4, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), 226.2; 225. 2, 3.

⁶²Prosper of Aquitaine, *The Call of the Nations*, trans. P. De Letter, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 14, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (New York: Newman Press, 1952), 1.12.

⁶³Theodoret, "Letter to Uranius, Governor of Cyprus," trans. Blomfield Jackson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 3, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), LXXVI.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on Minor Epistles*, trans. Rowan Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 553.

Second, fathers used 1 Timothy 2:4 as a “launching pad” to explore the underlying basis of God’s desire to save every human being. For example, Methodius (260-311) relates this verse in the context of God’s creation of human beings. Each person’s soul is directly created by God and is immortal, being sown into the mortal body by God. Because of the worth and value of the soul in the eyes of God, God desires all men to be saved.⁶⁶

Finally, fathers used God’s unlimited salvific intent here as a basis for concrete action. For example, Pope Fabian (200-250) appropriates this passage as a basis for the church to pray for schematics and heretics. Prayers are to be lifted up for God to bring repentance to their hearts and to be reconciled to the church so that their souls may not be lost in the end. God does not want any person to perish.⁶⁷ Similarly, Leo the Great (400-461) uses this passage as his rationale for the church to seek reconciliation with the heretic Eutyches, not to have him cut off from the fellowship of the church, in order that he might be reconciled to God.⁶⁸ John Cassian (360-435) emphasizes this passage as a basis for understanding “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” in the Lord’s prayer. The will of God is to pray for the salvation of all humanity, because in heaven all are redeemed, so this is what God desires here on earth and thus we should pray for it.⁶⁹

These early debates over the extent of salvation arose from a variety of sources, from the larger philosophical and religious milieu, from heretical sects in the church, and from one of the early Church’s great “doctors,” Augustine. In every case, where there was an attempt to limit the possibility of salvation for all humanity in general, and to limit the scope of atonement in particular, the fathers moved to confront and reject such teaching.

⁶⁶Methodius, “The Banquet of the Ten Virgins,” trans. William R. Clark, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 6.2.7.

⁶⁷Fabian, “The Epistles of Pope Fabian,” trans. A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 1.

⁶⁸Leo the Great, “Letters of Leo the Great,” trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 12, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895), XCVIII.3.

⁶⁹John Cassian, “Conferences,” trans. C. S. Gibson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 11, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894), 11, 20.

The Fathers' Reconciliation of Unlimited Atonement with the Reality That Not All People Are Saved in the End

The question brought to the fore by Augustine in the fifth century was, "If God wills all to be saved, why are some redeemed and others not?" Augustine gives a clear answer: God wills omnipotently the elect to be saved and wills the rest to reprobation.⁷⁰ However, while Augustine's reply was rejected as a whole by the fathers, he forced them to clarify the church's historic position.

At this point, I want to offer a brief survey of the patristic response to this question and the development that takes place in their understanding. Foundational to their teaching is the belief that reprobation is the result of human failure to cooperate with God's grace and not any divine decision or lack of intention to save people through the work of Christ. Justin Martyr (103-165) states the consensus of the fathers, "But if the word of God foretells that some angels and men shall be certainly punished, it did so because it foreknew that they would be unchangeably wicked, but not because God had created them so. So that if they repent, all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God"⁷¹

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria explains why some who hear the Gospel do not believe. In 1 Corinthians 1:24 the Apostle Paul writes, "but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power and wisdom of God."⁷² Clement teaches that "all men are called," but this Scripture has reference specifically to those "who willed to obey."⁷³ While all are called to salvation in a general sense, only those who obey are "called" in this particular sense. In the end, the reason why some do not come to Christ is because they are unwilling. The cause for reprobation is found in humanity and not in God, because "there is no unrighteousness with God" and "it lies in us to accept or to turn aside."⁷⁴

⁷⁰Augustine, "Enchiridion," trans. J. F. Shaw, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 97-8.

⁷¹Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 141.

⁷²Clement of Alexandria, "Stromata," trans. by William Wilson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885) I.18.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Directly addressing this issue, John Chrysostom writes, "But he [the apostle Paul] says that all have sinned and need the glory of God. If, then, all have sinned, how is it that some are saved, but others perish? Because not all willed to draw near. For as His part, all have been saved. For all were called."⁷⁵ This foundation informs the fathers' interpretation of God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Jerome places the blame on Pharaoh and not God. Following the earlier interpretation of Origen, Jerome compares the action of divine grace to the heat of the sun, and as such is always good. The fact that some are hardened by that grace, while others are not, flows directly from the human response to grace in attitude and action. The disposition of humanity determines the type of reception grace receives, and God enables humanity to determine for themselves what that reception will be.⁷⁶

Taking a slightly different approach, but making the same basic point, John of Damascus (676-749) teaches that "it is customary of Scripture to speak of what God allows as his action."⁷⁷ Statements in the Old and New Testaments that attribute evil to God must be understood as God allowing it to happen, not because he caused the evil. Saying that God hardened Pharaoh's heart is acknowledging simply that God allowed it to happen. Reprobation is not a result of the limits of atonement or God's will to save, but the response of humanity, recognizing that God permits people to reject the grace given to all in Christ.

Next, the fathers moved to clarify potential misunderstandings of the relationship between God's foreknowledge of reprobation and the divine will. Specifically, they taught that divine foreknowledge of people in final reprobation did not imply that God determined them to be in that state. John Chrysostom writes, "But if the word of God predicts that angels and men are going to be punished, it predicts these things because He foreknows that they are going to be unchangeably wicked, but not because God made them such."⁷⁸

Irenaeus, in refuting the Marcionite charge that Scripture teaches that God is evil because he hardened Pharaoh's heart, argues that in divine fore-

⁷⁵John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans," trans. George B. Stevens, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), Homily 16.

⁷⁶Jerome, "Letter to Hedybia" in *Letters of Jerome*, trans. Andrew Cain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 120.10.

⁷⁷John of Damascus, "On the Orthodox Faith," 4.19.

⁷⁸John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans," 8.30.

knowledge God “has handed over to their infidelity as many as He knows will not believe, and has turned His face away from such ones, leaving them in the darkness which they chose for themselves.”⁷⁹ The general principle at work in Pharaoh and in all unrepentant sinners is that God hands them over to their wickedness because He knows they will remain recalcitrant in their sin. Again, Pharaoh is the source for his hardening, not God.

Next the fathers addressed the relationship of God’s foreknowledge with predestination. Cyril of Alexandria confronts an excuse made by some unbelievers. He states their position: “Some make a ready excuse for their lack of faith . . . saying ‘if they are called whom God foreknew according to his previous choice, there is nothing those who have not yet believed can do. For we have not been called or predestined.’”⁸⁰ In response, Cyril teaches that no person can come to God without being called of God. All people are dependent on God for this call and cannot come in their power. However, Cyril makes clear that all are given this call. The reason why some come and others do not is because of their decisions and choices. In the end, all who do not come to God do so because they “did not will to come.”⁸¹ Predestination is based upon God’s foreknowledge of those who in fact accept the divine invitation.

Key to the fathers teaching on predestination is their synergistic understanding of salvation and the role that humanity plays in God’s work of predestination. Hilary of Poitiers (300-368) makes this case. In his discussion of Psalm 64:5, “blessed is he whom you have chosen and taken up,” and Jesus’ words, “Many are called, but few are chosen,” Hilary teaches that those chosen by God are chosen based on their own actions and reception of the Gospel. It is not “a matter of random judgment,” but is based on their own choices in response to divine grace.⁸²

Chrysostom elaborates further, teaching that Christians have been predestined by God in love.” Thus, predestination does not happen as a result of any human good works, but from the love of God. However, he clarifies, it is not by divine love alone, but from “our virtue” as well.⁸³ He

⁷⁹Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 4.29.2.

⁸⁰Cyril of Alexandria, “In Epistolam ad Romanos,” *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca (Paris: Migne, 1866), 74.828-29.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Hilary of Poitiers, “In Psalmum,” *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: Migne, 1848), 9.415.

⁸³John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Ephesians,” trans. George B. Stevens, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), Homily 1.

states, "For if it were from (His) love alone, it would be necessary that all would be saved. But again, if it were from virtue alone, His coming would be superfluous, and all that He did through dispensation. But it is neither from love alone, nor from our virtue, but from both."⁸⁴ Chrysostom makes clear that the only cause for reprobation and not election is found in humanity and not in God.

John of Damascus teaches that no human being can merit salvation and that without divine grace "it is impossible for us to will . . . good. However, it is our power either to remain in virtue and to follow God who called us to it, or to depart from virtue."⁸⁵ Regarding the reprobate, he teaches, "Total desertion happens when, after God has done everything to save, the man remains unreformed and not cured, or rather incurable."⁸⁶

Finally, the fathers made a distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will. John of Damascus culminates the fathers' reflection here by making this distinction, teaching that God wills all to be saved in His antecedent will, but in his consequent will, taking into account the "wills" of humanity, God condemns those who have rejected His grace.⁸⁷ He states, "But the total desertion happens when, after God has done everything to save, the man remains unreformed and not cured, or rather, incurable, as a result of his own resolve. Then he is given over to complete destruction, like Judas. . . . It is necessary to know that God antecedently wills all to be saved and to reach His kingdom, for he did not make us to punish, but to share in His goodness, because He is good. But He wills that sinners be punished, because He is just. Now the first (will) is called antecedent will, and will of good pleasure, but the second (will) is called consequent will and a giving way (and it comes) from our fault."⁸⁸

While the fathers as a whole believed that God wills to save all, they recognized through Scripture and experience that not all humanity will be saved in the end. People are condemned in the end because of their own refusal to cooperate with the grace of God in Christ, which they could have done. As the church fathers addressed the doctrine of predestination, they linked it to God's foreknowledge of a person's response to

⁸⁴Ibid., 2.30.

⁸⁵John of Damascus, "On the Orthodox Faith," 2.29.

⁸⁶Ibid., 2.29.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

grace, recognizing its foundation in a divine and human synergism, with priority given to God's grace. Finally, they clarified their understanding of why not all are saved by making a distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Thomas Oden in his systematic theology does not substantiate unlimited atonement in the early consensual tradition of the church, the foundation is clearly there. Our confidence as Wesleyans in "unlimited atonement" is grounded not only in our interpretation of God's Word, the Scriptures, but also in the earliest reflection and interpretation of the Scriptures in the church. Our belief in unlimited atonement was the consensual exegesis and understanding of the first 500 years of Christianity.