

**Review of Jonathan Gibson, “For Whom did Christ Die? Particularism and Universalism in the Pauline Epistles,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.**

**BY David Allen.**

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Jonathan Gibson’s chapter 12 is one of the heftiest in the book, weighing in at 40 plus pages. This is to be expected since there is so much material in the Pauline letters that impinge on the question at hand.

Following a two page introduction, he divides his chapter into five sections: 1) Particularistic texts (4 pages); 2) Universal texts (25+ pages); 3) texts that deal with those perishing, false teachers, and offended brothers, for whom Christ died (2 pages); 4) Christ died for “all” and for the “world (5 pages);” and 5) Definite atonement and evangelism (1 page). This is followed by a summary conclusion.

Gibson’s chapter is helpful in many ways, chiefly in his effort to cover the key texts in Paul in a reasonably substantive way. Romans 5:12-21 and 2 Corinthians 5:14-19 receive more lengthy treatment. The writing style is clear and the chapter contains a number of helpful footnotes. Gibson attempts a fair and balanced treatment of the texts.

As a minor quibble, the section dealing with McCormick seems to me to be a bit of a rabbit trail that unnecessarily interrupts the flow and has little to do with the question at hand.

Tension in Paul?

Gibson sees a tension in Paul between particular and universal atonement texts (290). His thesis is: “...I will demonstrate that the universalistic elements in Paul’s atonement theology complement rather than compromise the possibility of interpreting Christ’s death as definite atonement” (291).

I would argue it is the other way around. The few limited texts in Paul’s atonement theology compliment rather than compromise the many universal texts which clearly affirm an unlimited atonement.

In section one, Gibson lists six “particularistic texts” that he interprets indicate Christ died only for the elect (291-295). He is attempting to interpret the many universalistic texts in light of the fewer restricted texts.

There is no tension between these texts, nor do the particularistic texts affirm definite atonement. It would be normal and natural for Paul, when writing to believers, to speak of “Christ’s death for us.” Given this kind of context, to infer from this that Christ died only for “us” is to invoke the negative inference fallacy.

Gibson acknowledges the argument is “entirely fair” (292), but attempts to blunt it in three ways.

First, he states that the argument is too simplistic because to attempt to deduce universal atonement from this argument is a non-sequitur. The problem here is that the argument is not used to deduce unlimited atonement. That comes from an exegesis of the relevant texts. The negative inference fallacy is the logical non-sequitur that Gibson himself is using in an attempt to deduce limited atonement from these so called limited texts. His attempt to turn the tables is unsuccessful.

Second, Gibson attempts to make the point that Paul absolutizes the universality of sin with “all” language that is “indisputably unambiguous.” He follows this up by saying there is no statement in Paul such as “there is not one for whom Christ did not die” (293).

He then says: “Yet when it comes to Paul’s ‘universalizing’ the target audience of Christ’s atonement, he employs deliberately ambiguous language: ‘many,’ ‘all,’ and ‘world,’ may mean ‘all without exception,’ but the terms may equally mean ‘all without distinction.’ Context must determine the meaning in each particular case” (293).

Gibson trades on the “all without distinction” vs. “all without exception” notion throughout this chapter. It is the key argument he makes in the attempt to interpret the universal passages in a restricted manner. But is this a valid distinction?

Several points need to be made in response. First, there is nothing ambiguous about Paul’s use of the word “all” and “world.” Keep in mind that these universal verses were routinely interpreted by the Church to teach universal atonement from the time of the early church Fathers to the end of the 16th century.

Second, with respect to the statement that Paul never says “there is not one for whom Christ did not die,” this is an argument from silence. Why would Paul make such a statement in the light of his many statements about the universal scope of the atonement? Gibson fails to note there is also not one statement where Paul says Christ died only for the sins of some people.

Finally, Gibson's third argument against the validity of the negative inference fallacy is to state that the onus lies on proponents of universal atonement to explain why Paul sometimes employs limited language.

The answer to this final point is quite easy to make and I have already stated it above. It would be normal for Paul to use restricted language when addressing the church to speak of Christ's death "for us." Gibson has already acknowledged the validity of the negative inference fallacy as a logical argument. He has not demonstrated how it is that the argument does not apply in the way he treats the so called "limited" texts.

Actually, the onus lies on Gibson and all particularists to explain why Paul would employ so much universal extent language in atonement texts as he does. Note again the length of the section dealing with the particularist texts (4 pages) compared with the length of the section dealing with the universal texts (25 + pages).

In section two, Gibson addresses many of the universalistic texts that speak of Christ dying for "many," "all," and for the "world" (295-321). The key argument used in this section is the fact that "all" and "world" are not always used in an inclusive sense of every person on the planet. This is, of course, denied by no one (at least, no one I know).

The problem is that Gibson wants to take this point and then use it to restrict every single use of these terms in atonement contexts to mean something along the lines of "all nations" or "some of all kinds of people," etc.

"All Without Distinction vs. "All Without Exception?"

Let's parse the phrase "all sinners without distinction." All sinners = every human being. "Without distinction" means every human being regardless of ethnicity, gender, etc. It is not possible to change the meaning of this phrase into "some of all kinds of people."

Yet this is exactly what Gibson is doing. The "all without distinction" concept becomes code for "some of all without distinction." Thus, "all" becomes "some of all sorts," an unwarranted move by Owen<sup>1</sup> and here followed by Gibson.

Ask yourself what the statement "all without distinction" means in the context of the atonement passages. The answer is it means "all kinds of people," that is, all people of every kind, not some people of every kind. The problem with applying this distinction to passages like

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 10, ed. by W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 197.

1 Tim 2:4 is the use of “all” in the text gets transmuted into meaning “some of all kinds of people.”

Since the adjective “all” modifies “men” in the Greek text of 1 Tim 2:4, it is not possible to change “all” into “some men of all kinds,” thus making the “all” modify “kinds” not “men” properly considered.

Yet this is the semantic shift that Gibson makes: “all” becomes “some.” Apparently, for some Calvinists, since “all” sometimes means “all of some sorts” or “some of all sorts,” it can never mean in any atonement context all humanity including each and every person. The logical fallacy of such an approach is evident. In context, Paul is asking Christians to pray for actual people, not for classes of people.

Augustine disagrees with Gibson on this with respect to 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

Of this death the Apostle Paul says, “Therefore all are dead, and He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again.” Thus all, without one exception, were dead in sins, whether original or voluntary sins, sins of ignorance, or sins committed against knowledge; and for all the dead there died the one only person who lived, that is, who had no sin whatever, in order that they who live by the remission of their sins should live, not to themselves, but to Him who died for all, . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Here it is evident that Augustine makes no use of the “all without distinction” concept, and in fact states clearly that the extent of Christ’s death extended to “all” who were dead in sins.

Calvin and Spurgeon likewise disagree with respect to 1 Timothy 2:4-6. From Calvin’s own sermon on the Timothy passage it is evident that “all people” or “all nations” means something along the lines of “all men of all people and all nations” in a distributive sense.<sup>3</sup>

This can be seen also in Calvin’s commentary on this passage, which Gibson quotes:

For there is one God, the creator and Father of all, so, he declares, there is one Mediator, through whom access to God is opened to us, and this Mediator is not given only to one nation, or to a few men of a particular class, but to all, for the benefit of the sacrifice, by

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, “The City of God and Christian Doctrine,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series. 2:245.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 160.

which he has expiated for our sins, applies to all. . . . The universal term “all” must always be referred to classes of men but never to individuals. It is as if he had said: “Not only Jews but also Greeks, not only people of humble rank but also princes have been redeemed by the death of Christ.” Since therefore he intends the benefit of his death to be common to all, those who hold a view that would exclude any from the hope of salvation do Him an injury.

The Holy Spirit bids us pray for all, because our one mediator bids all to come to Him, since by his death He has reconciled all to the Father.<sup>4</sup>

Calvin’s statement that the term “all” here “refers to classes of men but never to individuals” must be read carefully in the context. What Calvin means is “all men of all nations” in a distributive sense.

Nowhere in Calvin’s writings does he use this distinction to deduce limited atonement as Gibson does.

The bifurcation of “all without distinction” and “all without exception” is ultimately a distinction without a difference. If I speak of all men without racial, gender, or other distinctions, am I not speaking of all men without exception? Whatever the distinction is and whatever the scope of the “all” is must be supplied by the context. The two phrases simply cannot be compartmentalized linguistically. The distinction is artificial.

What About 1 Corinthians 15:3-11? Gibson fails to discuss one of the most important Pauline texts that speaks to the question of the extent of the atonement: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul writes: “For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. . . .” Here Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the message he preached to them when he first came to Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). He clearly affirms the content of the gospel he preached in Corinth included the fact that “Christ died for our sins.”

Notice carefully Paul is saying this is what he preached pre-conversion, not post conversion. Thus, the “our” in his statement cannot be taken to refer to all the elect or merely the believing elect, which is what Calvinists who affirm definite atonement are forced to argue.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus & Philemon*, in Calvin’s *New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 10, eds., David Torrance & Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 210-211. See also Charles Spurgeon, “Salvation By Knowing the Truth,” *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 26 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1972), 49-50.

The entire pericope of 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 should be kept in mind. Paul returns to what he had said in verse 3 when he gets to verse 11: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” The customary present tense in Greek used by Paul when he says “so we preach” along with the aorist tense in Greek for “believed” make it clear Paul refers to a past point in time when they believed what it was his custom to preach.

What did Paul preach to them in his evangelistic efforts to win all of the unsaved to Christ? He preached the gospel, which included “Christ died for our sins.” And so they believed.

1 Corinthians 15:3 is one of the strongest passages supporting unlimited atonement.