

Limited Atonement in 1 John 2:2

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Abstract

Atonement, the theological issue dealing with the precise nature of Christ's work, is a central doctrine to the Christian faith and yet it is one which historically has not always achieved consensus among theologians. This problem becomes more complicated when we entertain the possibility that different biblical authors may have had competing understandings even within the New Testament canon. This project explores what might happen if we were to interpret 1 John 2:2's idea of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world in light of Rudolf Bultmann's basic thesis about the Gospel of John's view of the atonement, namely, that it was a revelatory salvific work rather than a penal substitutionary one. This is more of a theological and exegetical thought experiment than an argument for proposed normativity of belief; nevertheless, it may have value for those who have never considered the theological and literary difficulties of the standard interpretation of 1 John 2:2 within a penal substitutionary atonement paradigm. Ultimately, this project argues for the potential viability of interpreting this verse under the alternate revelatory atonement paradigm, a view which holds to a limited understanding of the extent of the atonement's work.



John Owen
(1616-1683)



John Wesley
(1703-1791)

Election in the Gospel of John and 1 John

Election is the determinant of the extent of the atonement because election tells us both *who* is being impacted and *how* they are being impacted. The issue of *how* is very important since it speaks to whether Jesus' atoning work either 1) made salvation *possible* for all, or 2) *accomplished* salvation for some and/or all.

1 John has no election doctrine, and so we must go to the Gospel of John to discover what the 'Johannine' doctrine of election might be. The Gospel is a favorite for those of the Reformed tradition for its explicit references to God's sovereignty in election (see 6:36-40, 44-45, 63-65; 8:43-47; 10:3-5, 14-16, 26-29; 17:2-3, 6; 18:37). The Gospel's doctrine of election may be summarized in that only those that God interveningly chooses will come to Jesus and be saved. Hence, we are working with some form of limited atonement for both the Gospel and presumably 1 John as well because God *accomplishes* salvation for some. This is due to the presumed continuity of the community of believers which produced both documents, and that there is no justified reason to conclude that the later community rejected this presumably earlier doctrine in light of their silence concerning the matter.

Rudolf Bultmann and Atonement in the Gospel



Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)

"He argues that for John, the plight of human beings is alienation from God and existence in unbelief, darkness, and ignorance of God. Humanity does not need an appeasing sacrifice but a revealer, light, and the knowledge of God. Jesus provides for these needs, not through the cross but through a ministry ranging from incarnation to

glorification... The one 'work' Jesus has come to do is to reveal... The Johannine sin, according to Bultmann, is ignorance; the Johannine salvation is revelation of the knowledge of God."

The Gospel clearly has a heavy election doctrine where God *accomplishes* salvation for only some. Hence, we have at least some kind of limited atonement. But, as Bultmann says, the Gospel's *kind* of atonement is revelatory rather than penal substitutionary, and so sin equals unbelief and is atoned through Jesus revealing truth to be believed. A revelatory atonement as Bultmann lays out does not help the non-elect, for it only makes things worse for them. Therefore, we might say that the Gospel has specifically a *strict* limited atonement in which Christ's work has no positive effect whatsoever for the non-elect.

The Text – 1 John 2:2

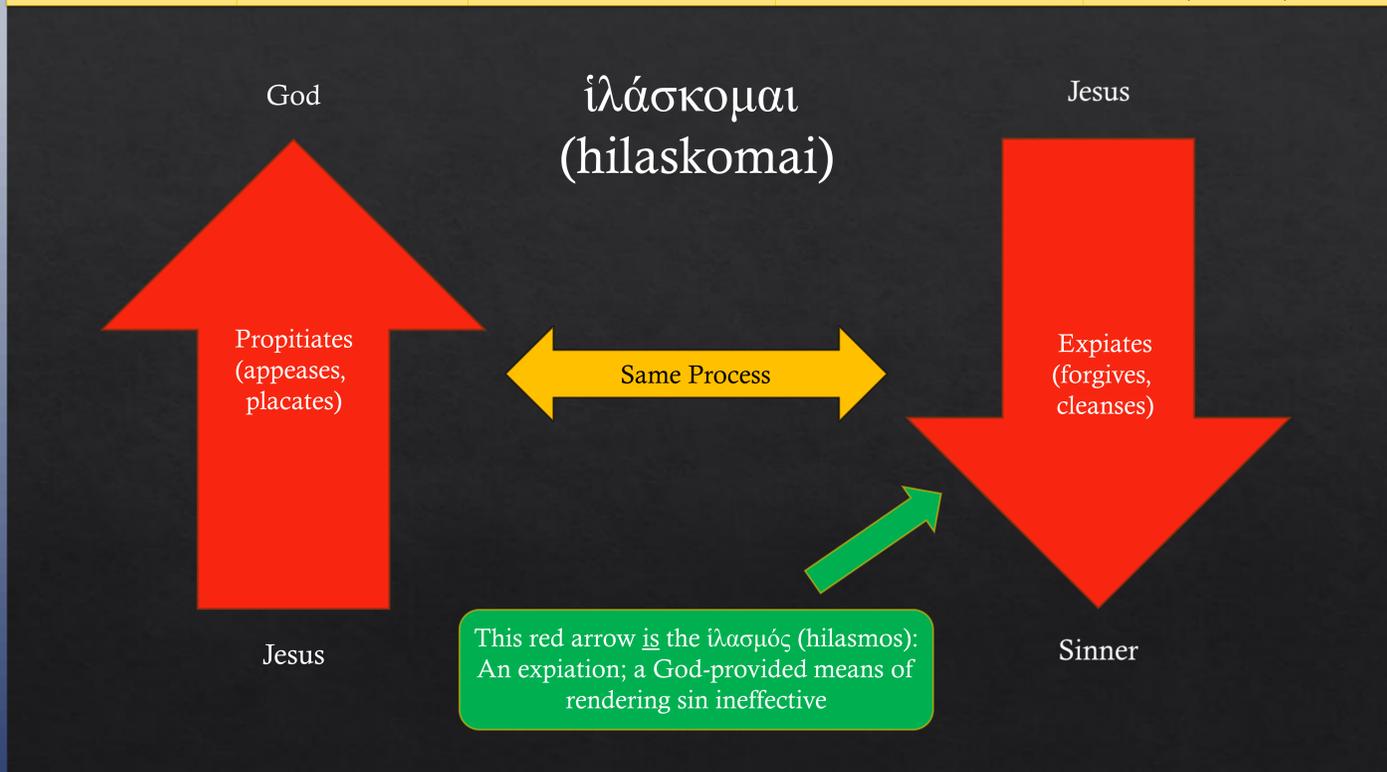
2 and [Jesus Christ] is the *ἱλασμός* (*hilasmos*) for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

NIV: *hilasmos* = "atoning sacrifice"

My translation:

2 and [Jesus Christ] is the "means-by-which-our-sins-are-rendered-ineffective-making-God's-wrath-appeased" [*ἱλασμός*]; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Kind of Atonement	Sin	Jesus' Atoning Work	Result	Benefit to the Non-elect?
Revelatory	unbelief	revelation of God's truth so that the elect will believe	infused righteousness (literal); no longer sinful, thus right with God	no; the exposure to revelation only solidifies their unbelief (strict)
Penal Substitutionary	tangible wrongdoings	substitutionary receiving of God's wrath to pay for sins and thus appease Him	imputed righteousness (figurative); still sinful, but still right with God	possibly; Jesus' work may have purchased non-salvific 'common grace' for them (non-strict)



Reasons Why ἱλασμός May Be Revelatory

- 1) ἱλασμός is not explicitly about death in 1 John, but instead refers to the "ascended" Jesus and the "send-into-world/whole incarnation" Jesus.
- 2) There are multiple descriptions of how Jesus fixes sin in 1 John: "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin," "He appeared in order to take away sins," and "[He] appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."
- 3) There is a connection in the reference to blood between 1 John 1:7 and John 6. This connection parallels *believing* with *drinking*, with both acting to "give life."

Conclusion

Definitively, both the Gospel of John and 1 John have some sort of limited atonement in that God accomplishes the salvation of some; but, more specifically, the Gospel has a strict limited atonement which has no positive effect for the non-elect at all due to Bultmann's insight concerning the revelatory atonement. I have attempted to show how 1 John may be in alignment with this more strict understanding of the extent of the atonement found in the Gospel. This involved showing how the verse which most hold up as the kingpin of unlimited atonement could actually be understood as supporting a strict limited atonement. In light of mostly exegetical/textual reasoning, as well as some important input from studies in Johannine community history, I believe I have made at least a plausible case for 1 John 2:2 to be read this way.

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