

## Article

# A Legacy Lost to the Reformed Imagination: Luther and Confessional Lutheranism on the Extent of the Atonement

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**Abstract:** The “Young, Restless, Reformed” movement has sought to establish itself upon reformational foundations rooted within the sixteenth century. The new movement’s undertaking, however, has virtually ignored the differences between its own adherence to “limited atonement” and the developed theology of Martin Luther. Even on an academic level, the legacy of *gratia universalis* ensconced within confessional Lutheranism has been largely lost to the Reformed imagination. This article focuses upon relevant materials in Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535) and his Sermon on John 1:29 (1537), as well as the pertinent statements found within early Lutheran confessions. What emerges is a Lutheran tradition that espoused both “unconditional election” and a robust form of “unlimited atonement,” a divine provision of redemption and satisfaction for all. In Lutheran theology, this provision in Christ *extra nos* serves as an objective foundation for confident faith. As contemporary Reformed scholars increasingly delve into the diversity of the Reformed tradition within early modernity, the distinctive Lutheran voice is another legacy worth remembering.

**Keywords:** Luther; Martin; atonement (extent of the); Lutheranism; Calvinism; history of doctrine; limited atonement; unlimited atonement



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## 1. Introduction

The September 2006 issue of *Christianity Today* included an influential and now-famous piece on the “Young, Restless, Reformed” (Hansen 2006).<sup>1</sup> In that article, journalist Collin Hansen traced the “comeback” of “Reformed theology” (which he equated with “Calvinism”) through the “famous acrostic” of “the five points of TULIP” (Hansen 2006, pp. 32–34, 38).<sup>2</sup> The essay described young evangelicals seeking “deep roots,” “serious doctrine,” “doctrinal depth,” and an “in-depth biblical theology,” and thus being “deep into doctrine,” “more theologically intense,” and “more theologically curious” (Hansen 2006, pp. 35–38). In this context, the article explains the “TULIP” doctrines of Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Regarding the “L,” Hansen explained that “Christ died for the sins of the church, not for the whole world (John 10:15; Mark 10:45; Rev. 5:9). This contrasts with traditions that teach that Christ died for all even though all may not appropriate the benefits of his sacrifice” (Hansen 2006, p. 35).

Hansen spoke of “a canon of renowned church leaders that includes Augustine, Luther, Calvin, John Owen, John Bunyan, B. B. Warfield, and Carl Henry” (Hansen 2006, p. 38).<sup>3</sup> He also listed the “leading institutions of the resurgence,” including the “Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals” (Hansen 2006, p. 35). Hansen’s later book-length study of the *Young, Restless, Reformed* noted that the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals runs the annual Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. The same volume described “Reformed theology” as “a tradition that claims John Calvin and Martin Luther” (Hansen 2008, p. 19).<sup>4</sup>

And herein lies a conundrum. According to its own website, “The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is a coalition of believers who hold the historic creeds and confessions of the Reformed faith and proclaim biblical doctrine in order to foster a Reformed awakening in today’s Church”. The implicit conflation of the “Reformation” with the “Reformed”

in much of the Alliance's materials obscures the breadth of the history of the Alliance itself, which was founded upon the "Cambridge Declaration" (1996). Original signatories included influential Presbyterian and Reformed theologians and leaders, such as James Montgomery Boice, W. Robert Godfrey, Michael S. Horton, and R. C. Sproul. Nevertheless, among others, the original signatories also included confessional Lutherans (Gene Edward Veith and J. A. O Preus III).<sup>5</sup>

The current website reiterates that "The Alliance is a broad coalition of evangelical pastors, scholars, and churchmen from various denominations, including Baptist, Congregational (Independent), Anglican (Episcopal), Presbyterian, Reformed, and Lutheran who hold the historic creeds and confessions of the Reformed faith and who proclaim biblical doctrine in order to foster a Reformed awakening in today's Church".<sup>6</sup> The website adds, "Because we represent a cross section of confessional evangelicalism, we look to historic documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Lutheran Book of Concord as accurate summaries of the key teachings of the Christian faith".<sup>7</sup> Yet the "Resources" webpage of the Alliance more narrowly promotes various publications and recordings that earnestly contend for "the doctrines of grace," as reflected in "the five points of Calvinism" or the tenets of "TULIP".

Such an amalgamation flows through the popular and social media consumed by the "young, restless, and Reformed," many of whom have facilely assumed that historic, confessional Lutheranism shared the TULIP "doctrines of grace" (along with the "five solas of the Reformation") with Calvinism.<sup>8</sup> As but one example, consider the eighty-eight minute feature film *Calvinist*, produced in 2017. In the film, Steve Lawson proclaims, "A Reformed resurgence has always been the young, restless, and Reformed. And that's the way it was in the Reformation. . . . Luther was a professor at [the] University of Wittenberg. Calvin was converted in college. It's always been this way". The narrator subsequently chimes in, "The story of Calvinism begins five hundred years ago in one of the most important events in history—the Reformation". After reviewing Luther's evangelical insights in the Reformation (focused through the historic "solas"), the movie goes on to explain "the five points of Calvinism," using the popular TULIP acronym. In this glossed history, Luther and early Lutherans are implicitly framed as being pre-Calvin Calvinists.

But is this a reliable reading of reformational history and theology? Or has the Lutheran understanding of the extent of the atonement largely been lost to the Reformed imagination, even in some academic circles? In his 1990 work *The Will of God and the Cross*, Jonathan Rainbow traced the historical context and background of Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement. Rainbow included sections on Augustine, Gottschalk, Aquinas, Wyclif, and Hus, as well as an entire chapter devoted to Bucer (cf. [Strehle 1980](#); [Thomas 1997](#), p. 1240).<sup>9</sup> Rainbow, however, granted Martin Luther only a passing nod: "Within Lutheranism, in spite of the Augustinianism of Luther himself, the familiar process of modification and synthesis took place, so that by the late sixteenth century Lutheran theology vigorously affirmed universal redemption and condemned limited redemption" ([Rainbow 1990](#), p. 181).<sup>10</sup> Rainbow's brief reference implies that Luther himself advocated a doctrine of "limited redemption," which his followers subsequently modified.<sup>11</sup>

This present article re-examines the extent of the atonement in historic, confessional Lutheranism, reaching back to Martin Luther himself. Admittedly, Luther did not delineate a comprehensive, systematic theory of the atonement, as his theology was more kerygmatic and pastoral ([Youngs 2020](#), pp. 395–96, 401–2; Cf. [George 2004](#), p. 264; [Hagen 1997](#), pp. 252n3, 255). For Luther, the atonement was not an article of intellectual curiosity but a solace for the troubled conscience and a motivation for worshipful praise ([Hagen 1997](#), p. 255). Moreover, as a further complication, the word "atonement" itself does not appear in these early Lutheran works, which focused upon the language of redemption, propitiation, satisfaction, sacrifice, payment, expiation, and reconciliation ([Masaki 2008](#), pp. 315–16).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, this essay investigates the theological concept of atonement in Luther and early confessional Lutheranism, not the exact term.

My argumentation demonstrates that although Luther may have manifested a “limited” tenor in his early *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), he patently embraced an “unlimited” emphasis in the ensuing years.<sup>13</sup> In sum, for Luther, “Jesus Christ accomplished salvation by bearing the curse for everyone” (Allison 2007, p. 11; cf. Allison 2011, pp. 398–99). Furthermore, the notion of *gratia universalis* was not an incidental element of Luther’s later theology, since it served (in his view) as an objective ground *extra nos* for a confident, assured faith.<sup>14</sup> The universal provision and the particularist application are bound together within his theological approach. Luther’s developed theology thus sidestepped the *either/or* dilemma of high Calvinism (influentially represented by the reasoning of John Owen), as Lutheran theologians held in tension that God intended to provide salvation for all people *and* to effect the salvation of his elect alone (Scaer 1967, p. 180; cf. p. 187).<sup>15</sup> We now turn our attention to this specific tension.

## 2. Particular Election and *Gratia Universalis* in Confessional Lutheranism

Scholars of historical theology recognize that confessional Lutheranism does not hold to the “five points” of high Calvinism, as the two differ in their theologies of perseverance.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, confessional Lutheranism espouses both divine election and “monergistic salvation” but also a doctrine of *gratia universalis* as relates to the extent of the atonement (cf. Commission on Theology and Church Relations 1932; Pieper 1957, vol. III, pp. 473–503; Lioy and Falconer 2019, pp. 206–7).<sup>17</sup> The treatment of “The false and erroneous doctrine of the Calvinists on predestination and the providence of God” within the *Saxon Visitation Articles* of 1592 should lay to rest any facile conflation of confessional Lutheranism with high Calvinism.<sup>18</sup> The *Saxon* articles specifically denounce the “false and erroneous doctrine” of the Calvinists “That Christ did not die for all men, but only the elect”.<sup>19</sup> The *Saxon* articles are thus more direct than the 1530 *Augsburg Confession*, which affirmed that Christ “truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, that He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men” (Article III.2–3; cf. XXIV.24–25).<sup>20</sup>

An incipient merging of a notion of “unconditional election” with a universal provision in Christ’s death was already in place within the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* (1577).<sup>21</sup> Article 11 of The *Solid Declaration* (on “Election”) denies any human basis of God’s sovereign election, including divine foreknowledge of human response (11.7–8).<sup>22</sup> God’s election rested “before the foundations of the world” only upon his own divine mercy and “the most holy merit of Christ” without any grounding in the believer whatsoever (*Solid Declaration* 11.88).

At the same time, the *Solid Declaration* affirms universal grace: “Therefore, if we wish to consider our eternal election to salvation with profit, we must in every way hold sturdily and firmly to this, that, as the preaching of repentance, so also the promise of the Gospel is *universalis* (universal), that is, it pertains to all men” (11.28). As confirmation, the *Solid Declaration* 11.28 cites Matt 11:28; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; John 1:29, 3:16, 6:40, 51; Rom 3:22, 10:12, 11:32; 2 Pet 3:9; and 1 John 1:7, 2:2.<sup>23</sup> And the *Solid Declaration* parallels the “all” who are guilty before God with the “all” who are offered divine mercy through the Gospel promises: “God has concluded them *all* in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon *all*, Rom. 11:32. The Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance, 2 Pet. 3:9. . . . Likewise it is Christ’s command that to *all* in common to whom repentance is preached this promise of the Gospel also should be offered, Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15” (11.3; italics added).<sup>24</sup>

But the *Solid Declaration* goes beyond a universal offer to a universal, objective provision in Christ’s death. Article 8, concerning “The Person of Christ,” directly attests that Jesus Christ as the God-man “suffered for the sins of the world,” because the Son of God himself suffered, “according to the assumed human nature, and truly died, although the divine nature can neither suffer nor die” (8.20).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, according to the *Solid Declaration*, the “entire doctrine” concerning God’s eternal election and his revealed Word of the Gospel “should be taken together” (11.13). Neither God’s particular election nor his

universal grace should be jettisoned (11.53). Since both are revealed in God's Word, we are not called to reconcile "this mystery" (11.53).

In confessional Lutheranism, the objective promises of the Gospel universally proclaimed to all are foundational for personal assurance (Eckardt 1992, pp. 47–48; Hagen 1997, p. 262).<sup>26</sup> The troubled soul, rather than focusing upon "the secret counsel of God as to whether he is elected and ordained to eternal life," should "hear Christ" who "testifies to all men without distinction that it is God's will that all men should come to Him who labor and are heavy laden with sin, in order that He may give them rest and save them, Matt. 11, 28" (*Solid Declaration* 11.70).<sup>27</sup> The Father wishes all to hear this Gospel proclamation and "desires that they come to Christ" (*Solid Declaration* 11.68). Therefore, the Christian should focus upon "the revealed will of God" and should not attempt to "sound the abyss of God's hidden predestination" (*Solid Declaration* 11.33; see also Kolb 2002, p. 455).<sup>28</sup>

David Scaer concludes that the exposition of the doctrine of election in the *Formula of Concord* "is absolutely adamant in opposing any suggestion that God's universal message of salvation is not sincerely intended" (Scaer 1979, p. 112). Although the human disposition wishes to inquire *cur alii, alii non* ("why some and not others"), the temptation toward rationalistic resolution must be avoided (Green 1996, pp. 71–72).<sup>29</sup> According to Lutheran theology, this is the *crux theologorum*, a cross the theologian is called to bear (Scaer 1967, p. 180). Lutheran theology holds this "mystery" in tension rather than resolving it, because "other alternatives require a negation of significant portions of the divine revelation" (Scaer 1979, p. 113).<sup>30</sup> Lutheranism refuses to understand the atonement in light of election or to understand election in light of the atonement (Scaer 1979, p. 114; cf. Scaer 1967, pp. 179–80, 187). Instead, the *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis* of Lutheranism stand in tension (Scaer 1979, p. 113; cf. Pieper 1957, vol. II, p. 43).

Two nagging questions may remain, however. The *Solid Declaration* clearly speaks of God's universal call in Gospel proclamation, as a reflection of his revealed will. But did early Lutheran theology in the sixteenth century really go beyond a universal offer in proclamation to a universal provision in the actual death of Christ? And secondly, how did Martin Luther's own personal views compare with the theological perspectives reflected in subsequent confessional Lutheranism? (cf. Kilcrease 2018).

The rest of this article argues that Luther not only emphasized a universal offer of the Gospel, the reformer also came to emphasize a universal, objective provision of Christ in the Gospel.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, historical continuity concerning the extent of the atonement prevailed between the mature Luther and the confessional Lutheran theology that developed in the decades that followed. It is true that "Luther spoke of the atonement in a less systematic way than his successors," but a theological core nonetheless persisted (Preus 2018, p. 96). The structural design of the remainder of this article moves from a general overview of Luther's views on the extent of the atonement to an examination of his *Lectures on Galatians* and his Sermon on John 1:29. Finally, the essay investigates the provision of Christ *extra nos* as a foundation for confident faith. We turn, therefore, to analyze the German reformer's own theological reflections more closely.

### 3. The Complexities of Martin Luther's Views on the Extent of the Atonement

Did Martin Luther himself espouse *gratia universalis*? In a sermon on Hebrews 9:1–11 first published in 1525, Luther asserted, "Only those called to be heirs eternal, the elect, receive the Spirit. . . . no sin is forgiven, nor the Holy Spirit given, by reason of works or merit on our part, but alone through the blood of Christ, and that to those for whom God has ordained it" (Luther 1983, vol. VII, pp. 167–68).<sup>32</sup> Luther's sermon maintained that Christ "did not say that his blood was shed for all but for many," adding that "this touches upon the subject of predestination, a subject at once too difficult and too unyielding for our feeble intellect to grasp" (Luther 1983, vol. VII, p. 178; cf. *LW* 29:213–15).<sup>33</sup> Understandably, some have used this sermon on Hebrews 9:1–11 to establish Luther's espousal of "limited atonement" (Rosenthal 2002, pp. 37–38).<sup>34</sup> But is this particular material the entirety of the story?

Consider the counsel from Luther's Pentecost sermon on John 3:16–21, which appeared in eight pamphlet editions between 1522 and 1523. He recommended that anyone seeking to know "whether I am elected to salvation" should look to the words, "God so loved the world" and "whoever believes in Him" (Plass 1959, vol. II, p. 608).<sup>35</sup> He affirmed that the "world" meant "the entire human race, all together. And no one is here excluded. God's Son was given for *all*. *All* should believe, and *all* who do believe should not perish" (Plass 1959, vol. II, pp. 608–9; italics original). He added, "Take hold of your own nose, I beseech you, to determine whether you are not a human being (that is, part of the world) and, like any other man, belong to the number of those comprised by the word, 'all'" (Plass 1959, vol. II, p. 609).

In 1534, Luther was again lecturing on John 3 (this time in his home), and he declared: "This Son and eternal life are promised and given to the wide world, in order not to exclude a single soul. Since he, therefore, includes all mankind, then neither you, nor I, nor anyone else ought to doubt" (Luther 1996, vol. II, p. 205). Luther admonished that "the one who excludes himself will have to give account. . . . since this gift is promised and granted to the entire world, which they do not want to accept because of their own unbelief, contrary to the Word of God" (Luther 1996, vol. II, p. 205). Luther explained, "Whatever I may be, I must not give the lie to God, for I, too, belong to the world. Therefore, if I'm unwilling to receive this gift, then in addition to all other sins I would be committing also this one, making God a liar" (Luther 1996, vol. II, p. 204).

Both of these works of Luther insist that Jesus Christ was given for the whole world, and the guilt of unbelief must be laid firmly upon human shoulders.<sup>36</sup> In fact, to disbelieve that Jesus Christ "is given also to me" is to charge God with duplicity, since Jesus Christ was given to the world and I am a member of the human race. The objective and universal provision of Christ, as proclaimed in the Gospel, implicates unbelief in the Gospel as equivalent to calling God a liar (see Scaer 1967, p. 181). If I disbelieve that Jesus was given for me, then I am calling into question the veracity of God's promissory Word. Such a line of reasoning assumes that Jesus was really given for me *even if I never believe it* and stands in tension with an Owenian argumentation from "double payment".<sup>37</sup>

Within Luther's fuller theology, however, the underscored role of Christ's universal provision is not merely an objective foundation for the culpability of unbelief. Luther primarily stressed *gratia universalis* as foundational to the personal appropriation of the Gospel in assured, confident faith.<sup>38</sup> In his 1535 theses on Romans 3:28, he asserted: "True faith says: I do indeed believe that the Son of God suffered and rose again; but He did all this for me, for my sins. Of this I am sure. For He died for the sins of the whole world; but it is very certain that I am a part of the world. Therefore it is very certain that He died also for my sins" (Plass 1959, vol. II, p. 610).<sup>39</sup>

It seems that Luther's mature thought united a universal provision of divine grace, the particular election of individuals, and the utter inability of fallen humans to contribute to their conversion. Edward Plass states of these doctrines: "Luther was convinced that Scripture taught all of them and was willing to bear, for the time being, the theological tension they created rather than make concessions that would violate any of them" (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 455n1).<sup>40</sup>

Shane Rosenthal, however, accentuates that early in Luther's career (1515–1516), his *Lectures on Romans* explain that "all these sayings must be understood only with respect to the elect, as the apostle says in 2 Tim 2:10: 'All for the elect'" (Rosenthal 2002, p. 37; cf. Pauck 1961, p. 252). And Luther adds, "For in an absolute sense Christ did not die for all, because He says: 'This is my blood which is poured out for you' and 'for many'—He does not say: for all—'for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 14:24, Matt. 26:28)" (LW 25:376; see also LW 29:213–15). One notes that Rosenthal adopted the alternative reading of "Christ did not die for absolutely all" (see Pauck 1961, p. 252).<sup>41</sup> But the intended focus of Luther's phrasing ("in an absolute sense") may have been the effectual application of redemption, as implicitly compared with a sufficient provision of redemption (cf. Allen 2016, p. 38).<sup>42</sup>

Luther's "First Lecture on the Psalms" (1513–1515) similarly tapped into a distinction between sufficiency and efficiency as encapsulated in the Lombardian formula ("sufficient for all, efficient for the elect"): "although Christ did not effectively give His ransom for Judas and the Jews, He certainly gave it sufficiently. It is rather that they did not accept it. Therefore it should not be denied that it was given, but rather it should be denied that the benefit of the propitiation was accepted" (LW 10:228). In response, Rosenthal reasons, "I certainly am willing to acknowledge that Luther exhibits a change over time. But his change is not to be conceived as a shift from particular to universal grace" (Rosenthal 2002, p. 41). Luther "merely began to emphasize the *universal offer* of grace, while continuing to be an advocate of particular grace" (Rosenthal 2002, p. 37; italics original).<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, did Luther really proclaim a universal offer without an underlying objective provision of universal grace?<sup>44</sup> Consider Luther's commentary upon Jesus' words to unrepentant Jerusalem, found within *On the Bondage of the Will*: "Here, God Incarnate says: 'I would, and you would not.' God Incarnate, I repeat, was sent for this purpose, to will, say, do, suffer, and offer to all men all that is necessary for salvation; albeit he offends many who, being abandoned or hardened by God's secret will of divine Majesty, do not receive Him thus willing, speaking, doing, and offering" (Luther 1957, p. 176).<sup>45</sup> This passage is obviously a strong declaration of divine reprobation within "God's secret will," yet it also signifies that *both* divine willing *and* divine doing stand behind the general offering of "all that is necessary for salvation".

*On the Bondage of the Will*, of course, did not espouse universalism in the sense of final salvation for all. Besides the revealed will of God to save all humans, there is another aspect of God's will: "It belongs to the same God Incarnate to weep, lament, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, though that will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish" (Luther 1957, p. 176).<sup>46</sup> Here, Luther's attention moves to the eternal, hidden, decretive will of God.<sup>47</sup> This predestinarian background remains within Luther's subsequent work, although it is not as prominently emphasized in later confessional Lutheran materials.<sup>48</sup> Luther made use of the *deus absconditus/deus revelatus* distinction, differentiating between God's hidden decree and his revealed Word (Kolb 2005, pp. 144–46; Steinmetz 1986).<sup>49</sup>

Which of the two aspects of God's will should the troubled soul focus upon? Luther's *Bondage of the Will* insists "that we may not debate the secret will of Divine Majesty, and that the recklessness of man . . . should be withheld and restrained from employing itself in searching out those secrets of Divine Majesty" (Luther 1957, pp. 175–76). Instead, one should focus upon "God Incarnate, that is, with Jesus crucified, in whom, as Paul says (cf. Col. 2.3), are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (though hidden)" (Luther 1957, p. 176). "If you believe in the revealed God and accept His Word, He will gradually also reveal the hidden God . . . if you cling to the revealed God with a firm faith, so that your heart is so minded that you will not lose Christ even if you are deprived of everything, then you are most assuredly predestined, and you will understand the hidden God" (LW 5:46).

Furthermore, in a lecture delivered in 1544 (and printed in 1550), Luther seems to diverge from his earlier explanation of "all" as found in his *Lectures on Romans*: "There is no difference between 'many' and 'all.' The righteousness of Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, our Lord and Savior, is so great that it could justify innumerable worlds. 'He shall justify man,' he says, that is to say, *all*. It should, therefore, be understood of all, because He offers His righteousness to all, and all who believe in Christ obtain it" (Plass 1959, vol. II, p. 608; italics original).<sup>50</sup> In sum, according to Luther, behind the offer of the Gospel to all lies a real, objective provision in a universal redemptive work of God Incarnate. We now turn to Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* and his Sermon on John 1:29 (see also Remy 2018, p. 573).

#### 4. Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535)

Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* (delivered in 1531 and published in 1535) contain a relevant and lengthy discussion within his comments on Galatians 3:13 and its affirmation

that Christ became a curse “for us” (LW 26:276–91).<sup>51</sup> In a treatment that also draws from John 1:29 and Isaiah 53:6, Luther developed the theme of Christ as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (LW 26:279, 285).

Jesus Christ bore “the sins of the world,” being burdened down “with the sins and guilt of the entire world” (LW 26:278). Christ “bore the person of a sinner and a thief—and not of one but of all sinners and thieves” (LW 26:277). He thus “undertook to bear the person of all sinners and therefore was made guilty of the sins of the entire world” (LW 26:279). Jesus was held under the Law’s curse, because “He had taken upon himself my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world” (LW 26:284). “In short,” synopsized Luther, “He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood” (LW 26:277; see also Terry 2013, pp. 14–15).

According to Luther, “the merciful Father” sent his Son into the world and “heaped all the sins of all men upon Him” (LW 26:280). The Father appointed him to “be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men,” directing him to “pay and make satisfaction for them” (LW 26:280; see George 2004, pp. 274–75). Jesus Christ stood condemned of “not only my sins and yours, but the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future” (LW 26:281). In Jesus Christ, “all sin is conquered, killed and buried” (LW 26:281). Although “the sins of the entire world” assail Christ’s righteousness “with the greatest possible impact and fury,” his righteousness remains invincible (LW 26:281).<sup>52</sup>

The Galatian lectures clearly distinguish between the broader provision of the atonement and its limited application. Luther’s comments upon Galatians 1:4 described Jesus Christ as “One who has taken away the sins of the whole world, nailing them to the cross (Col. 2:14) and driving them all the way out by Himself” (LW 26:38). Yet within the following paragraph, Luther added, “The offering was for the sins of the whole world, even though the whole world does not believe” (LW 26:38). Such exposition manifests that Luther did not hold that Jesus died for the sins of only those who would believe (nor does he narrowly define “the world” as some high Calvinists do)—the objective provision was broader than the ultimate application (Block 2013).

Thus, a distinction between objective provision and subjective appropriation may aid in the interpretation of Luther’s pertinent statements. In view of the objective provision in Christ, Luther insisted that “there is no more sin, no more death, and no more curse in the world, but only in Christ, who is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, and who became a curse in order to set us free from the curse” (LW 26:285).<sup>53</sup> Objectively, “If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world” (LW 26:280). And yet a subjective response of faith is required for this offered sin-bearing of forgiveness to be applied personally, and in view of this effectual divine intent Jesus’ death was *especially* for believers (cf. 1 Tim. 4:10): “By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil. But when sin and death have been abolished by this one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if it were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness” (LW 26:280).

Luther exulted in the “most delightful comfort” of Christ becoming a curse for us, to free us from the curse of the Law (LW 26:278). In fact, the source of “our highest comfort” is to behold Jesus “bearing all our sins”—that is, “my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world” (LW 26:279; see also LW 26:36–37, 287). “With gratitude and with a sure confidence,” Luther commended “this doctrine, so sweet and so filled with comfort,” that Christ “clothed Himself in our person, laid our sins upon His shoulders, and said, ‘I have committed the sins that all men have committed’” (LW 26:283–84).<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, Luther argued that only the God-man could have accomplished this amazing, universal feat, and consequently Christ’s death for all is related to “the chief doctrine of the Christian faith,” which is his deity (LW 26:282; cf. Spitz 1950, p. 178). Only Christ’s divine power could defeat the mighty force of sin, death, and the curse which

“reigns in the whole world and in the entire creation” (LW 26:282). Accordingly, although Christ bore “the sin of the whole world,” death could not overpower him (LW 26:284).

Therefore, Luther opposed the “sophists” who maintained that sin was washed away by faith working through love. He counseled his hearers to consider “Christ hanging on the cross for my sins, for your sins, and for the sins of the entire world. Hence it is evident that faith alone justifies” (LW 26: 287). He concluded that if Jesus Christ truly is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” then “it necessarily follows that we cannot be justified and take away sins through love” (LW 26:279).<sup>55</sup> A few years later, he delivered a homily on this text regarding “the Lamb of God” found in John 1:29.

### 5. Luther’s Sermon on John 1:29 (1537)

Luther also emphasized Christ’s universal provision in a sermon delivered on 3 November 1537. The scriptural source for the homily was John 1:29, where John the Baptist points to “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” (LW 22:159–70). Luther underscored the fundamental teaching of this text’s declaration of the Lamb’s bearing the sins of the world: “This is the basis of all Christian doctrine. Whoever believes it, is a Christian; whoever does not, is no Christian, and will get what he has coming to him” (LW 22:164).

Luther pronounced, “The sin of the world lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. He steps forth and becomes a vile sinner, yea, sin itself (2 Cor. 5:21), just as if He Himself had committed all the sin of the world from its beginning to its end. This is to be the Lamb’s office, mission, and function” (LW 22:168). Luther’s use of John 1:29 in this sermon is of peculiar interest, because he also composed the *Smalcald Articles* in the very same year (1537), which similarly appealed to this Johannine text (along with Isaiah 53:6) in its explanation of “the first and chief article” concerning the “Office and Work of Christ” (Part II, Article 1) (see Masaki 2008, pp. 319–20, 322–23). In his sermon on John 1:29, Luther drew from Isaiah 53:6 as well, using it as corroboration that the Lamb was divinely ordained “to bear the sins of the entire world” (LW 22:163; see also LW 22:168).

Luther’s homily paralleled Christ’s bearing of sin with his offering grace. “No one is excepted here. Therefore do not follow your own ideas, but cling to the Word that promises you forgiveness of sins through the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. . . . There is no insufficiency in the Lamb. It bears all sins from the beginning of the world. Therefore it must bear yours too, and offer you grace”.<sup>56</sup>

In Luther’s perspective, this universality certainly applies to the offer of the Gospel, but behind the universal offer stands a truly universal provision. “What more is the Lamb to do? He says: ‘You are all condemned, but I will take your sins upon Myself. I have become the whole world. I have incorporated all people since Adam into My person’” (LW 22:168). And this universal, objective provision is appropriated through a personal response of faith: “And I should reply: ‘I will believe that my dear, dear Lord, the Lamb of God, has taken all sins upon Himself’” (LW 22:168).

Nevertheless, although the Lamb is provided for all, not all receive him: “Still the world will not believe and accept this. If it did, no one would be lost. . . . If someone does not partake of and enjoy such grace and mercy, he has none to blame but himself and his refusal to believe and accept it” (LW 22:168–69). According to Luther, therefore, the universal provision of Christ underscores the culpability of unbelief. For “in obedience to the Father, this Lamb took upon Himself the sin of the whole world. But the world refuses to believe this; it does not want to concede the honor to this dear Lamb that our salvation depends entirely on His bearing our sin” (LW 22:164–65). Therefore, misguided attempts to add to Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice demean his objective provision of a full and sufficient atonement.

Luther’s sermon on John 1:29 also wields the doctrine of *gratia universalis* against the entrance of human works into salvation. “Whoever can confidently believe that the sins of the world, also his own, were laid on Christ’s shoulders will not easily be deceived and deluded by the schismatic spirits, who are in the habit of quoting us verses that deal with



good works and alms and give the impression that good works wipe out sins and acquire salvation. . . . Upon this Lamb all sins were laid" (LW 22:167).

Moreover, the doctrine of *gratia universalis* also grounds the universal summons of the Gospel promises: "For if you are in the world and your sins form a part of the sins of the world, then the text [John 1:29] applies to you. All that the words 'sin,' 'world,' and 'the sin of the world from its beginning to its end' denote—all this rests solely on the Lamb of God. And since you are an integral part of this world and remain in this world, the benefits mentioned in the text will, of course, also accrue to you" (LW 22:169).<sup>57</sup>

Luther does not stop there, however. He fundamentally claims that the confident knowledge of *gratia universalis* is vital for the sake of personal assurance. "Therefore a Christian must cling simply to this verse [John 1:29] and let no one rob him of it. *For there is no other comfort either in heaven or on earth to fortify us against all attacks and temptations, especially in the agony of death.* . . . But Christ does bear the sin—not only mine and yours or that of any other individual, or only of one kingdom or country, but the sin of the entire world. And you, too, are a part of the world" (LW 22:163–64; italics original). With a dash of wit to bring home his point, Luther surmised "You may say: 'Who knows whether Christ also bore my sin?' . . . you cannot deny that you are also part of this world, for you were born of man and woman. You are not a cow or a pig. It follows that your sins must be included . . ." (LW 22:169).

"Yes," surmises Luther, "He assumes not only my sins but also those of the whole world, from Adam down to the very last mortal. These sins He takes upon Himself; for these He is willing to suffer and die that our sins may be expunged and we may attain eternal life and blessedness" (LW 22:162–63). Luther counsels, "Anyone who wishes to be saved must know that all his sins have been placed on the back of this Lamb!" (LW 22:163). He fittingly exhorts, "But if you really want to find a place where the sins of the world are exterminated and deleted, then cast your gaze upon the cross. The Lord placed all our sins on the back of this Lamb" (LW 22:161–62).<sup>58</sup> And he adamantly insists, "There are no exceptions here. Therefore do not yield to your own thoughts, but cling to the words which guarantee you and all believers forgiveness of sin through the Lamb. Don't you hear? There is nothing missing from the Lamb. He bears all the sins of the world from its inception; this implies that He also bears yours, and offers you grace" (LW 22:169). Thus, Christ does *offer* grace to all individuals but only as a corollary to him really *bearing* the sins of all humanity, by which *any* individual (as a constituent member of the human race) may logically and confidently infer that he died for one's own sins.

Luther feared that his contemporaries had seen and heard of Jesus as the *Agnus Dei* or "Lamb of God" (in artwork and at festivals) but had failed to ascertain the personal import of the Lamb's sin-bearing sacrifice for the world. "Not only did we have the doctrine informing us that this is the Lamb which bears the sin of the world, but we also viewed the picture of St. John pointing his finger at Christ and carrying Christ on his left arm. We celebrated great festivals commemorating all this. And yet our vision was faulty; we did not understand its meaning, nor did we know why John was showing us the Lamb" (LW 22:164; see also LW 22:170).

This bearing of the world's sins should engender a personal response of astonished gratefulness and reverential awe. Luther exclaimed, "For how amazing it is that the Son of God becomes my servant, that He humbles Himself so, that He cumbered Himself with my misery and sin, yes, with the sins and the death of the entire world! He says to me: 'You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I am your substitute'" (LW 22:166–67). Luther returns to this reassuring topic of Christ as our substitute (and an accompanying call to personal belief) a little later in the same sermon. "If sin rested on me and on the world, we would be lost; for it is too strong and burdensome. God says: 'I know that your sin is unbearable for you; therefore behold, I will lay it upon My Lamb and relieve you of it. Believe this! If you do, you are delivered of sin'" (LW 22:169–70).

These themes found in Luther's Sermon on John 1:29 also appear throughout Luther's body of homilies and writings. The limited space allotted to this article is not sufficient

to delineate the manifold instances, so readers are encouraged to peruse the numerous examples collected by David Ponter (Ponter 2008a). For our purposes, a few examples spanning more than three decades of Luther's sermonic output must suffice.<sup>59</sup> In his Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent in 1522, Luther pronounced that Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, "must take upon himself alone not only your sin but the whole world's sin; not some of the world's sin, but all the sins of the world, be they great or small, many or few". (Johnson 2008, p. 35; cf. WA 10/1:206–7). In his Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent in 1533, Luther declared, "[Christ] helps not against one sin only but against all my sin; and not against my sin only, but against the whole world's sin. He comes to take away not sickness only, but death; and not my death only, but the whole world's death". (Johnson 2008, p. 10; cf. WA 37:201–2). A sermon on the Friday after Easter in 1540 synopsised, "He is true God, true man, who bears the sins of the whole world". (Johnson 2008, p. 152; cf. LW 51:317; WA 49:125). And a sermon from 1545 reiterates, "He did not suffer for his own sake. He suffered for your sake and for the whole world's sake". (Johnson 2008, p. 151; cf. WA 52:786–87).

As a concluding example, from a sermon on 1 Peter, Luther explained the power of the apostolic kerygma: "It is the Word of Jesus Christ that is preached to us, namely, that he died for your sin and for the sin of the whole world, and rose again on the third day, that through his resurrection he might win for us justification, life, and blessedness. . . . This is rightly called apostolic preaching". (Johnson 2008, p. 179; cf. EA 52:11; see also Johnson 2008, pp. 141, 150). And according to Luther, this apostolic kerygma of Christ's work "outside of us" is the foundation for confident faith.

## 6. Result: Christ *Extra Nos* as the Foundation

For those seeking a foundation for assured faith, Luther consistently emphasized a direct faith in Christ *extra nos* (outside of ourselves) (Peterson 2015, p. 81).<sup>60</sup> This objectively solid foundation of assurance outside of ourselves (*extra nos*) rang throughout Luther.<sup>61</sup> He declared, "And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive" (LW 26:387). His *Lectures on Galatians* exhorted his hearers to "accept this doctrine, so sweet and so filled with comfort" (LW 26:283). Christ delivers believers from "eternal terrors and torments," that they may rather "enjoy eternal and indescribable peace and joy" (LW 26: 290).<sup>62</sup> Not surprisingly the extent of the atonement is intertwined with the promise *outside of ourselves* (the Gospel) and its epistemological accessibility and immediacy (Tomczak 2014).

In order to know with certainty whether Christ died for me, I must only know that I am a sinner, because Christ died for all sinners and thus I know he died for me.<sup>63</sup> Luther insisted that the epistemological basis of assurance is the Gospel, even as the theological basis of salvation is the Gospel. If one doubts one's election, one ought to look outside oneself to Christ in confident faith, and—in turn—such Spirit-wrought, assured faith naturally motivates and empowers good works. "Our theology is certain," pronounced Luther, "because it places us outside ourselves (*nos extra nos*)" (as cited in Barnes 1989, p. 214).<sup>64</sup> He touted "A faith which does not look to its own works, nor at the strength or worthiness of its own trust—that is, its own *qualitas*, or inwrought or infused virtue implanted in the heart . . . but one which quite outside itself holds to Christ and embraces him as its own bestowed good, certain that it is now beloved of God on this account" (as cited in Siggins 1970, p. 161).

In a personal letter of 1545, Luther addressed an individual who was "tempted with thoughts about the eternal predestination of God" in a manner that drew away from Christ. "Now it is true that this is a bad temptation. However, to combat it we should know that we are forbidden to understand this matter or to concern ourselves with it. . . . God has given us His Son, Jesus Christ; daily we should think of Him and mirror ourselves in Him. There we shall discover the predestination of God and shall find it most beautiful" (Plass

1959, vol. I, p. 454).<sup>65</sup> “For after all,” continued Luther, “the person who everlastingly torments himself with thoughts about predestination gains nothing but fear. . . . Instead, look at Christ” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 454).

When one is troubled about election, advised Luther, “do not argue at length why God does this or that as He does and why he does not act differently even though He is well able to do so. Nor venture to explore the depth of divine election with your reason” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 457). “Rather,” continued Luther, “hold to the promise of the Gospel” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 457). “This,” he added, “will teach you that Christ, God’s Son, came into the world in order to bless all the nations on earth, that is to redeem them from sin and death, to justify and save them” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 457). Luther then quoted John 3:16 and explained that souls troubled with election should recognize personal guilt and helplessness, then grasp God’s promise in faith and not doubt that they “belong to the little flock of the elect” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 457).<sup>66</sup> Luther claimed that treating election in this manner (even as the Apostle Paul himself did) is “comforting beyond measure,” but the doctrine of election is indeed terrifying to those who approach it in any other way (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 457).<sup>67</sup>

Luther gave similar counsel in his *Tischreden* (“Table Talks”): “But without the Word of God I cannot know whether I am predestined to salvation, and because reason wants to search after God in this way, it does not find him. We cannot know predestination in this matter even if we were to tear ourselves to pieces in the search” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 458). Such thoughts conceived apart from God’s Word are utterly to be destroyed and sent to the devil in hell. One should rather focus upon the Father’s invitation: “Here is My beloved Son. Hear Him, look at His death, cross, and suffering” (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 458). Luther, therefore, wed together an emphasis upon Christ’s work *extra nos*, an espousal of the universal extent of this provision, and an insistence that the Holy Spirit generates confident faith in the elect through the universal promises founded upon Christ’s work *extra nos*.

Confessional Lutheranism affirms, “Since Jesus died for everyone, there is no need for the sinner to look within himself for evidence that Jesus died for him; as Luther often emphasized, faith does not rest in faith itself or in any work of God inside man, but only on the external, general call of the gospel” (Bickel 2023). Scaer, a contemporary confessional Lutheran theologian, concludes the following:

How can a person be sure that Christ died for him, if the Gospel promises, based on the atonement, are in reality only for the elect? Martin Luther thought that the reference to the [sic] God’s love for the world in John 3:16 was a greater guarantee of his own salvation than if his name were included on the sacred pages. If the passage read that “God loved Martin Luther,” he could never be sure that he was the “Martin Luther” referred to. Luther reasoned from John 3:16 that the Christian can safely and confidently conclude that God gave His Son for him personally. If God’s Son died for the world i.e., humanity, then He died for me since I without a doubt am part of humanity. (Scaer 1967, pp. 185–86)

The “certainty of faith” rests objectively upon Christ’s death for all as proclaimed in the sure word of the Gospel (Scaer 1967, p. 186). Luther’s concern for the believer’s assurance manifested an attentiveness to the subjectivity of the believer, yet within a framework of monergistic salvation. Luther agreed that only the elect were chosen from eternity past in God’s eternal and hidden decree, but he refused to collapse the outworking of the elements of soteriology. While high Calvinism came to highlight the eternal decrees, Lutheranism centered upon the revealed will of God in Christ. “Let man occupy himself with God Incarnate!” thundered the herald from Wittenberg (Luther 1957, p. 176). Luther underscored “the incarnation of the Son of God, His suffering and resurrection, and all that He did for the salvation of the world” (LW 5:42; see Block 2013).

High Calvinism reasons that since God elected a select few, Christ died only for those select few. Confessional Lutheranism holds *sola gratia* and *gratia universalis* together in tension, believing that the revealed Word teaches both.<sup>68</sup> Luther agreed that faith itself is a

divine gift effected by the Spirit, who forms faith in the elect (whom God sovereignly chose in eternity past).<sup>69</sup> But Luther also insisted that the Spirit forms this faith through the use of divinely appointed means, specifically through the objective promises of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.<sup>70</sup> “Hence,” maintained the Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper, “we have the right conception of our eternal election only if we ever and firmly bear in mind how it actually occurred in eternity, namely, not without regard to the means, or absolutely, but in such a way as to provide for the preaching of the Gospel and the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel for the generation of faith” (Pieper 1957, vol. III, p. 476).<sup>71</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

The legacy of the Lutheran understanding of the extent of the atonement has been largely lost within the “young, restless, Reformed” movement and even in many academic circles. In 2015, a multi-view volume entitled *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement* was published. One review maintained that “the elephant in the room (or in this case, the *missing* elephant in the room) is the lack of a confessional Lutheran voice among the volume’s official disputants . . . This oversight may only bolster the Lutheran complaint of being consistently sidelined when theological teams are chosen, even though Martin Luther chronologically preceded both Calvin and Arminius” (Hartog 2015).<sup>72</sup> Four years later, another multi-perspective volume appeared on the market, *Five Views on the Extent of the Atonement* (2019), with contributions covering the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Traditional Reformed, Wesleyan, and Christian Universalist views. Confessional Lutheranism had been sidelined yet again (see Sweeney 2014).

Nevertheless, in 2021, Oxford University Press published Michael J. Lynch’s Ph.D. dissertation from Calvin Seminary, an in-depth examination of the “hypothetical universalism” of John Davenant, an Anglican theologian who flourished in the early 1600s. Within this volume, Lynch explained, “Though a few studies have noted the pre-Remonstrant debates involving the Reformed and Lutherans on the extent of Christ’s atoning work, most studies give the impression that Arminianism was the main catalyst for a heated debate over the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s passion” (Lynch 2021, p. 53). However, insisted Lynch, “One cannot fully appreciate the seventeenth-century Reformed debates without understanding the sixteenth-century Lutheran-Reformed polemical context” (Lynch 2021, p. 53).<sup>73</sup>

Such windows of insight allow beams of historical illumination to flash into the existing shadows. May such rays of awareness increase, ushering the lost legacy of the early Lutheran understanding of the extent of the atonement into the public light. *Post tenebras lux!*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This religious and social trend was later highlighted in mainstream media, as reflected in a *Time* (magazine) article discussing “The New Calvinism” within an issue covering “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now” (Van Biema 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> This simplistic equivalency is questioned by Reformed scholars themselves. For examples, see (Muller 1993, pp. 425–33; Stewart 2011, pp. 75–96; Thianto 2022, pp. 7, 56–60).

- 3 For a moderated perspective concerning the extent of the atonement in several of these theologians, see the relevant discussions in Allen (2016).
- 4 Hansen's brief references to Luther (Hansen 2008, pp. 34, 70, and 83) do not add any further historical elucidations. Scholars debate whether John Calvin himself consistently held to a strict "limited" view of the atonement (see Kennedy 2002; Rouwendal 2008; Hartog 2023). For comparisons of Luther and Calvin, see (Schaeffer 1920; Gordon 2017; Selderhuis 2017).
- 5 Both Veith and Preus were associated with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) at the time of signing the Cambridge Declaration in 1996.
- 6 By "confessional," the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has historically meant theologians and movements that fully and strictly adhere to the historical frameworks of the theological system—a fixed commitment that requires "subscribing to all of the doctrines in the Confession and Catechisms" (Smith 1997, p. 185). In the focused perspective of the Alliance, "confessional Lutheran" designates those Lutherans who fully and strictly adhere to the detailed doctrine found in the 1580 *Book of Concord* and tend to affiliate with the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, the Global Confessional and Missional Lutheran Forum, or the International Lutheran Council. The particular design of this present essay targets the forgotten legacy of "confessional Lutheranism" among the Reformed, especially those among the self-proclaimed "young, restless, Reformed". Engaging with this specific segment of the ecclesial spectrum naturally entails the meticulous reading (and citing) of historical documents, in consideration of the mindset and confessional interests of the target audience. In full disclosure, as a non-Lutheran, I do not subscribe to the *Book of Concord*, nor am I a member of any "confessional Lutheran" denomination. My personal theological views, therefore, are not bound by the historic Lutheran confessions, although I find them of historical interest.
- 7 The Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles can reasonably be interpreted in a "hypothetical universalist" manner (see Arcadi 2023, pp. 185–98).
- 8 Christine Helmer contends that the received Lutheran tradition "must be historically and critically examined" and should engage with "diverse methodologies, ideological commitments, ecclesial sympathies, and academic inquiries" (Helmer 2008, p. 114). She argues that contemporary scholarship must contribute to the "recontextualizing" and even "reconceptualizing" of Luther through dialogue and reorientation, including moving beyond the conservative/liberal divide (Helmer 2008, pp. 114–15, 120). In this regard, Helmer specifically mentions the doctrine of atonement on p. 116. Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen calls for the freeing of Luther studies from "parochialization". She particularly seeks to broaden the discussion through engagement with subaltern and post-colonial readers and scholars (Pedersen 2019). Although my work here employs the "familiar jargon" of traditional Lutheran studies, it does engage with a neglected dialogue partner—the "young, restless, Reformed". Admittedly, this targeted audience is a small segment of the ecclesial and global community, but broadening the scope of Luther reception by even one slice is a mathematical gain.
- 9 For moderated readings of some of these influential figures, see (Allen 2016).
- 10 See the similar argumentation in (Blacketer 2004, p. 313; George 2013, pp. 77–78). Cf., however, the countering quotations from Luther in George (2004, pp. 273, 275).
- 11 Many Calvinists prefer the designation of "particular redemption" or "definite atonement" rather than "limited atonement" (see Nicole 1967, p. 200).
- 12 For comparisons of Luther with Anselm, see (Mueller 1957; Peters 1972; Eckardt 1992, 2001). For Luther, Christ's death as atonement was associated with such concepts as reconciliation, expiation, redemption, and satisfaction (Hagen 1997, pp. 252–54). Paul Hinlicky maintains that Luther understood atonement primarily through the three motifs of satisfaction, liberation, and imitation (Hinlicky 2018, pp. 80–96). In a mighty "duel" between life and death, Jesus was both sin-bearer and victor over the power of death (Hinlicky 2018, p. 87). Regarding the theme of reconciliation, Sibylle Rolf emphasizes that "God reconciled the world with Himself once for all (2 Cor. 5:19), but this atonement event is reappropriated in faith and put into effect again and again" (Rolf 2017). On reclaiming "experience" (being rescued from the agonies of *Anfechtung* through the joy-eliciting divine word of reconciliation) as central to Luther's perspective (see Helmer 2015). On healing as an image for the atonement, see (Peterson 2015).
- 13 Some have also pointed to a glossal note in Luther's early lectures on Psalms (1513–1515) that states, "*Veruntamen pro electis suis ebibit, sed non pro omnibus* [But even so, he will drink for his own chosen ones, but not for all]". In his related comments on the text (Psalm 110), Luther had stated, "*humiliabit per evangelium capita in terra multorum, licet non omnia* [through the gospel he will humble the heads of many in the land, though not all]" (WA I.4, p. 227). As is customary in Luther studies, the abbreviation "WA" throughout this article references the Weimar edition (Weimarer Ausgabe): *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883–2009). See (Luther 1883–2009). The abbreviation "LW" throughout this essay references *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–2015). See (Luther 1955–2015). And the abbreviation "EA" references the Erlangen edition: *Dr. M. Luthers sämtliche Werke* (Erlangen/Frankfurt: Heyder & Zimmer, 1826–1857). See (Luther 1826–1857).
- 14 Note the mistaken use of *ex nobis* for *extra nos* throughout Hartog (2023), as well as the unusual form *extra nobis* appearing in the "Dedication" of the book (p. vii).
- 15 The *Thirteen Theses*, which were adopted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1881, combine unconditional election with a universal provision (theses 1, 2, 10–11). See (Stellhorn 1894).

- 16 For a summary of confessional Lutheranism's evaluation of all five points of TULIP, see (Sweeney 2014).
- 17 On the role of election as an obstacle to American Lutheran unity in the nineteenth century, see (Meuser 1958, pp. 62–71; Haug 1968; Schmelder 1975). The focus of controversy was whether eternal, divine election was *intuitu fidei* ("in view of faith") (Liefeld 2006; Brenner 2017, pp. 99–103). Refinements included "in view of the merit of Christ apprehended by faith," a distinction between instrumental cause and meritorious cause, and a distinction between the consideration of faith and the foreknowledge of faith (Liefeld 2006, p. 11). The exact phrase *intuitu fidei* was not used until after the *Formula of Concord* had been adopted (Liefeld 2006, p. 12).
- 18 The terms "Calvinist" and "Calvinism" initially arose among opponents of Calvin, including among some Lutheran critics (Muller 2011b, p. 183; 2012, p. 54; cf. Billings 2009, p. 444).
- 19 English translations of the Lutheran Confessions come from Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (2023). It should be noted that within the various translations quoted in this present article, terms such as "man," "men," and "mankind" are retained, although (ironically) the use of such gendered nouns may be acknowledged as infelicitous in light of the very argument of the article—the "unlimited" and "universal" nature of the atonement offered to all humanity.
- 20 Although Martin Luther was still living at the time, Philip Melancthon was the primary architect of the *Augsburg Confession*. In 1551, Melancthon declared, "In this sacrifice are to be seen God's justice and wrath against sin, his infinite mercy towards us, and his love, in the Son, toward the human race" (Allen 2016, p. 237).
- 21 "Luther embraced *unconditional election*" (Allison 2011, p. 462). Consider this quote from Luther concerning election: "The human doctrine of free will and of our spiritual powers is futile. The matter does not depend on *our* will but on *God's* will and election" (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 461; italics original).
- 22 Within two decades of the *Formula of Concord*, some Lutheran theologians were teaching that eternal, divine election was based upon foreseen faith (Mayes 2011, p. 124). See also (Preus 1958; Söderlund 1983).
- 23 For a Lutheran exegesis of the relevant biblical materials, see (Scaer 1967, pp. 182–86).
- 24 The original English translation has "hath" for "has".
- 25 On the role of Jesus Christ as the theanthropic man (via the hypostatic union) bearing the sins of the world, see (Maxfield 2011, pp. 108–9).
- 26 The Lutheran understanding of Christian faith is interwoven with the communicative nature of the Gospel (see Rolf 2010).
- 27 Francis Pieper claimed that "no one can have any assurance of eternal election so long as he in one way or another limits universal grace (*gratia universalis*)" (Pieper 1957, vol. III, p. 482). Pieper cited the *Formula of Concord* for support.
- 28 "It is the most ungodly and dangerous business to abandon the certain and revealed will of God in order to search into the hidden mysteries of God" (LW 54:249).
- 29 "We cannot explain this mystery. In the light of the facts clearly revealed in Scripture, that the grace of God is universal, and that all men are alike totally depraved, we cannot answer the question: *Cur non omnes? Cur alii, alii non? Cur alii prae aliis?* But Scripture directs us to hold our tongue. The question should remain unanswered. . . . It has therefore been well said that in the doctrine of election a theologian takes his final examination" (Pieper 1957, vol. III, pp. 502–3; cf. vol. II, p. 43).
- 30 John Theodore Mueller rejected the simplistic division of all Protestants into "Calvinists" and "Arminians," arguing that one should not solve "the mystery of election" by denying *sola gratia* (as in Arminianism) nor by denying *gratia universalis* (as in Calvinism). Both solutions are "in direct conflict with the Word of God" (Mueller 1934, p. 610; cf. Pieper 1957, vol. I, pp. 32–33). In particular, Mueller lamented that William G. T. Shedd (the nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian) ignored "the Lutheran position," divided "all Christians into Calvinists (denial of universal grace) and Arminians (denial of the *sola gratia*)" and "left no room for the Scriptural doctrine of eternal election as the Lutheran Church confesses it" (Mueller 1934, p. 606).
- 31 Luther clearly believed in the universal offer of the Gospel: ". . . for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it, just as the gospel itself also proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context" (Luther and Melancthon, Letter to the Council of the City of Nuremberg [18 April 1533], LW 50:77). See (Torso 2018, p. 94).
- 32 Rosenthal notes, "No date is fixed on this particular sermon, but according to the editor's introductory essay (vol. 1, p. 4), the sermons from Epiphany to Easter (to which the Heb 9 sermon belongs) were first published in 1525" (Rosenthal 2002, p. 43n13).
- 33 In 1520, within a passage defending the serving of communion in both kinds to the laity, Luther explained, "The most important proof, and to me, a fully cogent one, is that Christ said, 'This is my body, shed for you and for *many* for the remission of sins.' Here you may see very plainly that the blood was given to *all*, and that it was shed for the sins of *all*" (from the *Pagan Servitude of the Church*, cited in Dillenberger (1961, p. 260); italics added). Cf. John Calvin's reply to Heshusius, critiquing the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper (Calvin 1849, vol. II, p. 527).
- 34 Rosenthal also highlights Luther's comments upon Genesis 22:17–18 (Rosenthal 2002, p. 41). One could frame this material within the "classical view" of the extent of the atonement, that "Christ died sufficiently for all and efficiently for the elect" (see Rouwendal 2008, pp. 325, 330, 333). Luther's mentor Johann von Staupitz held this position, although Rosenthal does not differentiate between the "classical view" and "particular redemption" (Rosenthal 2002, p. 43n5; cf. Oberman 1957, p. 170).
- 35 The original translation has "whosoever believeth" for "whoever believes".

- 36 “Luther was content to let this paradox or apparent contradiction stand: If a person is saved, it is completely to God’s credit; if a person is lost, it is completely that person’s own fault” (Brenner 2017, p. 17). For a summary of how the tension between these “two responsibilities” played out within Lutheranism up to the *Formula of Concord*, see (Kolb 2005, pp. 271–90).
- 37 In his comments on 2 Peter 2:1, Luther argues a similar point against those seeking forgiveness through a *mixtum compositum* of faith and a satisfaction through works. Such false teachers, by trying to add their own work to redemption, in effect deny the redemption Christ has provided for them (LW 30:171–72).
- 38 Contrast Rouwendal’s comments on Calvin in Rouwendal (2008, p. 329).
- 39 This work also declared, “Christ was slain from the beginning of the world for the sins of the whole world” (Plass 1959, vol. II, p. 605).
- 40 This does not mean, however, that Luther rejected logical precision (see White 1994).
- 41 Contrast Luther’s comments upon Isaiah 53:11, delivered in 1544 and printed in 1550, available in Plass (1959, vol. II, p. 608).
- 42 Many within the Reformed tradition have combined particularist readings of 1 Timothy 2:4 and/or Christ dying for “the many” with a form of universal atonement or unlimited redemption (Allen 2016, pp. 37n4, 38n9; cf. Foord 2009).
- 43 See the extended, relevant discussion in *Bondage of the Will* (Luther 1957, pp. 170–71).
- 44 While Rosenthal correctly distinguishes the power of the cross from its application (Rosenthal 2002, p. 42), he does not seem to employ a distinction between the divine provision of the cross and its divine application.
- 45 The original English translation has “thou wouldst not” for “you would not”.
- 46 Rosenthal quotes this passage, but he begins his citation with the material concerning “the will of Majesty” rather than the preceding material concerning the heart of God Incarnate (Rosenthal 2002, p. 38).
- 47 While commenting upon Ezekiel 18:21 and 1 Timothy 2:4 within *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther contrasted the hidden will and revealed will of God (Luther 1969, pp. 200–2). For Luther’s varying interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:4 throughout his career (including differences found in student notes of his lectures), see (Ponter 2008b; Green 1996; cf. Green 1995). Luther could associate the verse with the revealed will of God (Green 1996, p. 68; cf. LW 28:262–63). Luther was also open to the verse speaking of God’s desire for all to be “saved” in the sense of extending temporal help rather than eternal salvation, as well as God’s desiring that they come to a knowledge of the general truth of his temporal blessings rather than a personal knowledge of saving truth (LW 28:261–64; cf. Green 1996, p. 71). Lowell Green also presents what he calls an “argument from *synecdoche*” attached to exclusivity, in which Luther spoke of Christ giving himself “for the redemption of *all*” in the sense that he alone is the exclusive mediator for all who should believe, so that all who are ultimately saved are saved by him alone (Green 1996, pp. 71–72; cf. LW 28:261). Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis* asserted, “The same thought occurs in John 1:9: ‘It enlightens every man,’ and also in 1 Tim. 2:4: ‘God desires all men to be saved’—not that all are enlightened, but that the universal blessing, scattered abroad among all nations, comes from this Seed. An exclusive rather than a universal principle is meant, as though one said: ‘Nowhere is there light, life, and salvation except in this Seed’” (LW 4:177). Luther was influenced by the Augustinian interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4 (see Foord 2009, pp. 191–92; cf. LW 28:261).
- 48 “The doctrine of predestination was received into the Lutheran Confessions only with significant limitations” (Joest 1965, p. 1953). See also (Green 1996, p. 72n59; Matzat 1997; Block 2013). For a comparison of Luther and Calvin on predestination, see (Grosse 2011).
- 49 See Pieper’s materials from Luther’s *Commentary on Genesis*, in which the reformer reiterated this distinction (Pieper 1957, vol. II, p. 45n83; cf. the extended discussion in LW 5:42–50). Some confessional Lutheran theologians have also distinguished between God’s *voluntas ordinate* and a *voluntas absoluta*, and between God’s *voluntas antecedens* and his *voluntas consequens* (or his *voluntas prima* and his *voluntas secunda*) (see Pieper 1957, vol. II, pp. 34–49). However, see (Mayes 2011, p. 118).
- 50 Regarding Calvin, Rouwendal comments, “It is indeed a strange fact that Calvin sometimes interpreted ‘many’ as ‘all,’ and sometimes he interpreted ‘all’ as ‘many’” (Rouwendal 2008, p. 332).
- 51 For an alternate English translation, see (Watson 1953, pp. 268–92).
- 52 According to Luther, Christ himself (as the means of atonement) is “the most important and strongest fortress” (Vind 2019, p. 301).
- 53 Within developed Lutheranism one finds a unique emphasis upon “objective justification” (see Engelder 1933; Koehler 1945; Hardt 1985). The distinction between “objective justification” and “subjective justification” is used to make sense of the theology of the Apostle Paul but also of Luther (cf. Brenner 2017, p. 16; LW 40:366–67). “Dogmatically speaking, we may say that the doctrine of subjective justification stands or falls with that of objective justification” (Spitz 1950, p. 167).
- 54 Within his *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther repeatedly emphasizes the promise of the Gospel being *for me* and *for us* (Barnes 1989, p. 210). “Thus the whole emphasis is on the phrase ‘for us’” (LW 26:277). A complementary emphasis within Luther’s exposition of Galatians focuses upon “being in Christ” (Nüssel 2002). Anna Vind reminds that, for Luther, the believer accepts not only Christ’s atoning work and forgiveness of sins but also the very person of Christ himself, resulting in a union and real participation in Christ (Vind 2019, p. 296).
- 55 Note the misspelling of “world” as “word” in Luther (Watson 1953, p. 271): “the Lamb of God ordained from everlasting to take away the sins of the word”.

- 56 Rosenthal quotes from Plass (1959, vol. II p. 608). Rosenthal italicized *offer*, while Plass italicized *yours* and *you* (Rosenthal 2002, p. 42). One could as reasonably emphasize both *bears/bear* and *offer*, as I have done.
- 57 Cf. Luther's 1528 letter to an unknown recipient, as excerpted in Pieper (1957, vol. II, p. 43).
- 58 On the "epistemology of the cross" (and not just the "theology of the cross"), see (Trelstad 2006).
- 59 These five passages have been chosen because they all appear within a single Fortress Press volume of materials selected from Luther's writings (Johnson 2008). See also (Ngien 2018, pp. 31–32, 50, 194).
- 60 C. F. W. Walther said of confessional Lutheranism: "Her entire teaching is designed to keep man from seeking salvation within himself, in the powers of his nature and will, in anything he does or is, and to bring him to seek salvation *outside* of himself" (as found in Engelder 1934, p. 5).
- 61 "Hence, if we wish to be sure of our election and salvation, we *must trust in the grace of God offered to all men in the Gospel* and not confide in our own works or merits" (Mueller 1934, p. 590; italics original). "Again the believer cannot become sure of his election and salvation as long as he doubts or limits universal grace (*gratia universalis*)" (Mueller 1934, p. 595). "Wherever the doctrine is taught that the grace of God does not exist for the greater part of mankind, every hearer, particularly the sinner convicted by the Law, must remain in doubt whether there is grace for him. But such doubt absolutely destroys faith" (Pieper 1957, vol. II, p. 50).
- 62 For this reason, the 1575 translators of Luther's commentary on Galatians addressed the English version "to all afflicted consciences, which groan for salvation" (Luther 1979, p. xi).
- 63 Furthermore, in confessional Lutheranism, the believer's focus never leaves Christ, since the Christian is *simul justus et peccator* (see Joest 1955; Chaireire 2018).
- 64 "Luther scored few things more scathingly than this 'monster of uncertainty,' for it struck at the very heart of Scripture. It was a 'gospel of despair'" (Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 426; cf. Tomczak 2014). The reformer exclaimed that the "monster of uncertainty is worse than all other monsters" (LW 26:386; cf. the full context of LW 26:385–87 and its use of John 3:16).
- 65 Cf. Luther's "A Sermon on Preparing to Die" (1519), cited in Lull (1989, pp. 644–45). See Luther's letter to Barbara Lischner, who was troubled about her salvation (in Plass 1959, vol. I, p. 456). See also Calvin's similar advice in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.24.5: "But if we are elected in him, we cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we look at him apart from the Son. Christ, then, is the mirror in which we ought, and in which, without deception, we may contemplate our election" (Calvin 1966, p. 244).
- 66 Regarding the cross and the "great exchange" being a manifestation of the seriousness of sin, see (Hoyum 2021, pp. 336–39).
- 67 Luther noted the thematic order developed in the Epistle to the Romans. The Apostle Paul used the law to confirm human condemnation, then explained justification by faith, then described living in the Spirit, and only then did he discuss the doctrine of divine election. On "the comfort of election," see (Wengert 2006). On the Lutheran development of "justification by faith alone," see (Nüssel 2000).
- 68 "Lutheran theologians in the Age of Orthodoxy were particularly concerned about distinguishing their doctrine from that of Calvinism" (Brenner 2017, p. 39; cf. Preus 1958). The "Age of Orthodoxy" stretched from the *Book of Concord* in 1580 through the death of Johann Gerhard in 1637 (Mayes 2011, p. 111).
- 69 "Here there is no other work of ours but that we do not reject the offered mercy but accept it by faith. And even this is a gift of the Holy Spirit, because 'not all have faith' (2 Th 3:2)" (Luther's commentary on Psalm 51:13 from the year 1532, as quoted in Rosenthal 2002, p. 42).
- 70 For the sacramental emphasis, which is integral to confessional Lutheranism, see (Cary 2007, pp. 265–81; Maxfield 2011, pp. 99–100, 108–9). For an early summary of Luther's own understanding of "the right use of the sacraments", see "A Sermon on Preparing to Die" (1519) in LW 42:95–115.
- 71 The entire context of the passage is worth perusal. Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:13. For Lutheranism, the divinely appointed means are Word and Sacrament (see Barnes 1989, pp. 209–22). Cf. the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* II.48; *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 18; and Table Talk 2631b in *Letters of Spiritual Counsel* 122, as found in Cary (2007, p. 275).
- 72 Carl Trueman (Reformed/Presbyterian), one of the representative authors in *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement* (Naselli and Snoeberger 2015), in a later volume co-authored with Robert Kolb (Lutheran) acknowledged that "the diverse influences shaping Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have become clearer" and he recognized "the variations among the Reformed on the extent of the atonement" (Kolb and Trueman 2017, pp. 83–84; cf. Thomas 1997). Trueman highlighted the work of Richard Muller as "crucial" in this rethinking of the diversity of the Reformed tradition within early modernity (Kolb and Trueman 2017, p. 83n70; cf. Hartog 2023, pp. 120–23). Muller himself has noted that "there was a significant hypothetical universalist trajectory in the Reformed tradition from its beginnings" (Muller 2011a, p. 25).
- 73 For Beza, the Lutheran view of a universal atonement was "intolerable," for then Christ would have died for those already damned, and thus failed in his atonement (Thomas 1997, p. 56). But Reformed movements of rapprochement also surfaced (Clifford 2017; Denlinger 2012). For instance, the Reformed statements found in the Confession of Thorn purposely paralleled Lutheran views (Thomas 1997, p. 213; Pontor 2014). Philip Schaff claimed that Amyraut's theology was "an approach, not so much to Arminianism, which he decidedly rejected, as to Lutheranism, which likewise teaches a universal atonement and a



limited election" (Schaff 1993, vol. I, p. 481; cf. Thomas 1997, pp. 187, 212–13; Harding 2013, p. 64; Clifford 2017). Nevertheless, see the critical assessment of Amyraldianism in Pieper (1957, vol. II, pp. 25–26).

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