DBSJ 19 (2014): 95–103

A REVIEW ARTICLE

From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective

Reviewed by
Matthew A. Postiff[1]

From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013. 703 pp. $50.00.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF BOOK AND REVIEWER

From Heaven's authors come from a wide variety of backgrounds: Christian Reformed, evangelical, Presbyterian, Anglican, Southern Baptist, Free Church, and Reformed Baptist, among others. The authors are generally covenantal in their theological perspective.

Like the editors of *From Heaven*, this reviewer did not grow up believing in definite atonement (17). I reviewed the book from a four-point Calvinistic, dispensationalist viewpoint. As such, I read with a critical eye, hoping for a better understanding of definite atonement, looking for some questions to be answered, and seeing how my understanding of Scripture fared and could be sharpened. I was not disappointed, although the book did not cast a good light on my four-point view.

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

Starting with Packer's foreword, the book rejects the descriptor "limited atonement" as inappropriate and unnecessarily negative (15, see also 121, 202, 207). The term "definite atonement" is adopted consistently throughout the book. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "The position adopted throughout this volume is that Christ died for the elect, and that the atonement he made, *whatever its broader ramifications,* was 'definite,' i.e., intended for specific individuals and essentially efficacious" (609).

From Heaven deals with definite atonement under four headings:

[1]Dr. Postiff is pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Ann Arbor, MI.

historical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, and pastoral theology, and addresses the major objections against definite atonement as well as arguments in favor. Chapter 1 lays out the thesis of the book in four parts corresponding to those sections: definite atonement is not a recent invention, it is exegetically substantiated from the text of Scripture, it is the best systematic framework with which to understand all revelation about the atonement and its related doctrines, and finally, it best addresses pastoral concerns including the unevangelized, assurance of salvation, and the glory of God. The authors of this chapter explain that a goal of the book is to develop a theological map that shows clearly how the Bible supports definite atonement, although they admit that not all will be convinced.

In chapter 2, Michael Haykin opens section I by examining various texts from Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Prosper of Aquitane. While these church fathers did not clearly express a doctrine of definite atonement, Haykin claims that there is a discernible bent toward a "particular and defined purpose of God in salvation" (74). Some of these patristic texts are stretched to make the point, and it appears many of them could be used by opponents of definite atonement in support of their view.

David Hogg takes up definite atonement in the medieval church in chapter 3. He treats Gottschalk of Orbais, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas in an attempt to show that definite atonement had good support in the ninth through thirteen centuries. Hogg makes a good case for Gottschalk believing in definite atonement; however, it is not at all clear from the evidence he adduces that Peter Lombard held the same view. And it is even less clear that Aquinas held to such a doctrine, given his belief in the "sufficient and superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the whole human race" (90). David Allen in his review charges Hogg with selective use of the evidence, showing the clear lack of consensus on the thesis of the chapter.[2]

In chapter 4, Paul Helm argues that "Calvin was committed to definite atonement" (119) despite the fact that he sometimes used indefinite language. He explains that Calvin's use of indefinite language came about because of his belief in human ignorance of the future, the aspiration of prayer for all despite the fact that some of those aspirations may not be met, and the call for universal preaching. Helm is definitely right to say that it would be very difficult to make the case that Calvin rejected definite atonement. A weak point in the chapter is Helm's extremely subtle view that "Calvin did not *commit himself* to any version of the doctrine of definite atonement" yet "he may be said to be *committed to* that doctrine" (98).

Raymond Blacketer shows Beza's tendency toward definite atonement in the fifth chapter, but his primary thesis is that Beza did not

[2]http://www.drdavidlallen.com/theology/review-of-from-heaven-he-came-and-sought-her-definite-atonement-in-historical-biblical-theological-and-pastoral-perspective-part-4/, accessed 11 August 2014.

fall prey to rationalism or scholasticism and then twist Calvin's doctrine into a particularistic monster. However, he admits that "neither Calvin nor Beza provide a fully elaborated doctrine of the extent of Christ's redemption, though they share a discernible tendency toward particularism."

Lee Gatiss, chapter 6, reviews what happened at the Synod of Dort in 1618–19. He does a fine job demonstrating that the sufficient-efficient distinction was nuanced in response to the Arminian position. Furthermore, he shows that there were a variety of views among the theologians at the Synod, and there was room for the "Reformed hypothetical universal" positions of Davenant and Ussher alongside the other stricter particularist positions. He also shows how the synod was interested in biblical study with its annotations published in the new Dutch translation of Scripture.

In chapter 7, Amar Djaballah gives a brief biography of Moïse Amyraut and then surveys the main points of Amyraut's *Brief Traitté* in order to expose the reader to his doctrine of hypothetical universalism. To sustain this doctrine, Djaballah argues, Amyraut posited an absolute predestination alongside a conditional predestination. Djaballah summarizes both Amyraut's work as well as the stages of the controversy over universal grace that followed. The charges of heterodoxy that he raises about Amyraut were enlightening, especially regarding his belief that "it is not absolutely necessary to Salvation to have a clear Knowledge of *Jesus Christ*" (190, 181). Such a belief casts a dark shadow over his whole theology, but does not entirely undo the four-point position, as there were other able defenders of similar views who worked within the bounds of orthodoxy (197).

Carl Trueman devotes the eighth chapter to explaining how Owen's book *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* shows interconnections in Owen's doctrine of soteriology. Trueman's goal is to avoid isolating one aspect of Christ's work from other aspects of it. He fashions the essay around a question: why is it, on the definite view, that all elect people are not justified immediately at the cross? Along the way he deals with the issues of equivalent and identical payment; the pecuniary and penal expressions of the atonement; and about half of the essay focuses on the atonement as it relates to the covenant of redemption.

Section II on the biblical theology of definite atonement starts with chapter 9. Paul Williamson attempts to trace themes related to definite atonement in the Pentateuch. He emphasizes that the election of Israel is a "crucial theological prerequisite for atonement" (245). That much is acceptable, but the remaining lines of argument in the chapter are very unconvincing. Williamson argues that the priestly function in Israel, which covered the entire nation, points toward definite atonement. He also says that the individual was "particularly" atoned for by the sacrificial animal he offered, but does not persuade when he extrapolates this to a particular atonement at the cross. Election can be seen in the evidence he suggests, but not full-orbed

particularism.

Alec Motyer continues to look at definite atonement in the Old Testament in chapter 10 with an inductive study of Isaiah 53. He concludes that Isaiah demands an effective atonement that is accomplished and applied to particular people. Although Motyer is transparent about his presupposition of his conservative view of the single authorship of the prophecy, he unpersuasively suggests he himself is unprejudiced in his treatment when he says that the interpreter of Isaiah 53 must have "an effective, particularistic understanding of the atonement" (261). The chapter outline is hard to follow at places where it is four levels deep.

In chapter 11, Matthew Harmon argues from the synoptics, Acts, and Johannine Scriptures that (1) Jesus died to display his Father's glory; (2) Jesus died to accomplish the salvation of his people; and (3) Jesus died for the sins of the world (267). The texts he marshals in support of his first two theses are quite convincing. On his latter point, he means *world* in the sense of "not limited to one particular ethnic group" (279). Harmon believes that *world* means all without distinction instead of all without exception.

Editor Jonathan Gibson writes the next pair of chapters, 12 and 13, in which he deals with Pauline theology of the atonement by looking at four types of texts. First are the particularistic texts concerning Christ's death for certain people. This is the shortest of the four sections, since the particularistic texts support his thesis without much argument. Second, Gibson spends a great number of pages dealing with universalistic texts. He rightly critiques a true universalist, Bruce McCormack. Further, Gibson addresses various universal-sounding texts by saying that they refer to "all without distinction" or that they speak of a universal impact of the death of Christ rather than the universal atonement. His treatment of 1 Timothy 4:10 is particularly weak because it suggests that the word *savior* has two different senses in the verse (318), which conflicts with Schreiner in chapter 14 (380–86). Third, Gibson treats texts concerning those who will finally perish by arguing that either those who are destroyed were never truly saved to begin with, *or* by saying that the text may be speaking hypothetically to strengthen the effectiveness of a warning. The chapter ends with material that is labeled under a fourth major heading, but should really be included under Gibson's treatment of the universal texts.

In chapter 13, Gibson deals with the fourth set of texts, which he calls "doctrinal loci" texts that have to do with other doctrinal areas that touch on the nature of the atonement in Paul. He is compelled to take a bigger picture view because he believes that a battle over specific texts (illustrated in the preceding chapter) always ends in an impasse between the definite and indefinite camps. Gibson's thesis is that salvation is an indivisible, Trinitarian work that encompasses election and union with Christ, to the end of God's glory. The doctrine of union with Christ is central to Gibson's understanding of Paul's theology. Gibson does well to challenge the reader that the lens through which

one views Scripture on the issue of atonement must consist of not only certain texts, but also theology as a whole. As such, this chapter would seem to fit better in the next major section of the book that deals with systematic theology.

Thomas Schreiner in chapter 14 deals with a number of "problem texts" for definite atonement, with a view to showing that it *is* possible to interpret election statements to be consistent with universal statements without twisting either. He argues cogently that Paul's use of *malista* in 1 Timothy 4:10 has to refer to a subset of "all people" so that God is potentially the Savior of all kinds of people (there is no other Savior), and that he is actually the Savior of only believers (385). He argues that Peter uses phenomenological language when he speaks of false teachers "bought" by the Lord in 2 Peter 2:1. He explains that 2 Peter 3:9 "should be understood to teach that God desires the salvation of everyone" although other texts teach that "he decrees the salvation of only some" (394).

In chapter 15, Donald Macleod opens Section III on theology by dealing with the link between God's intent in the atonement and its extent. He argues a standard definite position that God has a single intent in the plan of salvation, and that is to save (not potentially save) his people. The chapter discusses various views on the order of God's decree and spends quite some ink critiquing Barth's position of "purified supralapsarianism" and the view of various hypothetical universalists (422–34). This section was very helpful. The main weakness of the chapter is how its opening questions frame the debate. Macleod asks whether God designed the cross to redeem every human being or only the elect. If you "box in" a four-pointer and even some Arminians with that question, they will say it is clear from Scripture that God never intended to save every single human. Instead of asking about *unlimited intent* versus *limited intent,* it would have been better if Macleod had asked questions more precisely connected to the point of his chapter, something like "does the Bible teach a limited *intent*?" and "does that limited *intent* require a limited *extent*, or is an unlimited *extent* feasible?" His answer is that a limited intent requires a limited extent.

Robert Letham argues in chapter 16 that three non-definite models of the atonement imply some discord in the Trinity. Amyraut and his school posit a conflict between the intent of the Father and that of the Son at the cross (440). This conclusion is only slightly overdrawn in that it does not permit Amyraut's provisional and conditional clauses to have their full weight (179–180). J. B. Torrance inverts the justice and mercy of God, making justice selective and mercy universal instead of the other way around. Letham then offers then a lengthy and weighty critique of his main target in the chapter, T. F. Torrance's doctrine of the atonement. He easily convinces the reader that Torrance's view is incoherent and logically results in a universal salvation doctrine.

Garry Williams writes chapters 17 and 18, showing the connection between the penal nature of the atonement and its definiteness. In

the first of these chapters, he develops the case that those who believe in an indefinite atonement (James Ussher and D. Broughton Knox, for example) undermine its penal substitutionary nature in contradiction to biblical texts that teach atonement is made for specific sins of specific people (515). Williams locates the particularity in the sacrifice of Christ; Ussher and Knox locate the particularity in the application of atonement. The following chapter discusses the double payment argument for definite atonement and argues that, despite protestations to the contrary, there is a sense in which a pecuniary (financial) model can be used to describe the atonement and still maintain the double payment argument. That argument can be made without commercial ideas (a double *punishment* argument), but Williams prefers to use a "punishment as payment" model, mixing the penal with the pecuniary (486).

Stephen Wellum writes chapter 19 on the New Covenant work of Christ, asserting that the work of Christ must be understood in its priestly, covenantal context. A priest, he contends, must be specially connected to his people to have an effective ministry for them: both in offering sacrifice and interceding for them. "Provision *and* application are central to the new covenant work of Christ" (538), but general atonement views put such a division between provision and application that they break the priestly connection of Christ with his people by understanding Christ to die for all, but intercede only for some. Christ's dying and interceding must be coextensive. Theologically, this argument carries a lot of weight. But the reader is left to wonder if a priest can do all that Wellum demands, and then also do more toward those who are not savingly benefited. More work could be done to subject Wellum's argument to the counterpoints that Christ's sacrifice was different than the old covenant priest in that it was inherently infinitely sufficient, and that it does indeed provide some non-saving benefits to the non-elect.

In chapter 20, Henri Blocher starts off by striking a gracious note toward his "indefinite friends" as he begins a wide-ranging exposition of Christology. In it he comments on many theologians and topics that were covered earlier in the volume as he makes a general argument for definite atonement.

Chapter 21 opens Section IV of the book on pastoral practice, but the chapter seems to be more theological in nature than pastoral. Nonetheless, it deals with the important question of how a universal atonement position deals with the unevangelized. Daniel Strange makes the case that a universal atonement is actually a limited one, limited by who hears the message, and is open to the charge of being insincere because it makes no offer at all to those who do not hear the gospel. To circumvent this charge, universal atonement must become inclusivistic or must somehow prove the impossible: universal accessibility of the gospel. Definite atonement moves back the particularity of revelation one level to the intention of God so that "the particularity of revelation and of redemption are coextensive" (602). Actually, it is

more correct to say that the extent of revelation exceeds the extent of redemption. Strange's concern is an atonement of unlimited extent combined with revelation of limited extent. Certainly he does not intend to suggest that everyone who has access to the gospel will be redeemed.

Chapter 22 records Sinclair Ferguson's exposition of how definite atonement provides assurance to the saved. He argues that definite atonement is an absolutely necessary ingredient in the undershepherd's feeding of his flock. He makes helpful exhortations that the minister must focus upon preaching Christ and that the gospel proclamation is of Christ himself. Ferguson interacts with John McLeod Campbell's position that a definite atonement takes away personal assurance by first strongly critiquing Campbell's views and then asserting that definite atonement is the only proper ground for Christian assurance. In fact, he adds, the gospel is good news because no double payment can be extracted by God. One sufficient payment for the Christian's sins has already been completed. "*Any* form of indefinite (universal) atonement…in effect limits the efficacy of the Son's work and debilitates the power of the Spirit's ministry" (629).

Finally, John Piper in chapter 23 advocates preaching definite atonement to glorify God; in fact, he says that if we do not preach atonement as definite, we diminish the glory of the cross. In a lengthy discussion on the new covenant, he seems to indicate that there was no regeneration before the new covenant came into effect (646), which seems far-fetched given many Old Testament examples. Piper claims that four-point Calvinism is an old error resurrected by Bruce Ware and Mark Driscoll. Core statements made by those authors are not a very good representation of the view and make for easy criticism, which Piper exploits. He closes the book with some important pastoral concerns in which he asserts that definite atonement provides a valid and sincere offer of the gospel to all, supports missionary endeavor, heightens the believer's gratefulness to God, increases assurance, intensifies our affections in worship, and encourages love for people and sacrifice in witnessing for Christ.

SOME STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

A strength of the book is that it clearly defines and delineates the doctrine of definite atonement. The opening chapter defines the doctrine as that "in the death of Jesus Christ, the triune God intended to achieve the redemption of every person given to the Son by the Father in eternity past, and to apply the accomplishments of his sacrifice to each of them by the Spirit" (33).

Furthermore, the book delineates that "definite atonement does not exhaust the meaning of the cross." Readers of a different theological persuasion who are looking for something to like in this book will appreciate the clear statements that Christ's death is sufficient for all; that the gospel is to be freely and indiscriminately preached to all; that

God's love (in a certain sense) extends to the non-elect; that God is in a salvific stance toward the world; and that the atonement has implications for more than just the church (34). Definite atonement is not always portrayed this way "on the street," but multiple authors in the volume mention "the infinite *inherent* sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ…to redeem the whole world and many worlds besides" (426, 443–4).

A weakness is that the authors do not give a full accounting of the universal implications of the cross, nor do they make clear precisely how the infinite sufficiency of Christ's death relates to unbelievers. Indeed, the text does not deny that there are universal implications of the cross, but it zeroes in on the definite aspect of the atonement while not adequately connecting that to the other "sibling" aspects of it. For instance, Harmon writes that his conclusion in chapter 11 "does not exclude non-salvific benefits that the non-elect experience as a result of the death of Christ" (287; see also 407 and 638), but these benefits are not covered in detail anywhere in the book. A question that must be answered is, how does the definite relate to the indefinite, and what exactly was accomplished by the indefinite part, if anything?

The nature of the book as a compilation of essays makes it difficult for it to deal with certain topics in a uniform and non-repetitive way. Some of the length of the book comes from repeated treatment of certain authors or questions. For example, Amyraut's theology is described or addressed in all of chapter 7, and significant parts of chapters 15, 16, and 20. The double payment argument is addressed in chapters 18 and 20. Harmony in the Trinity is covered in a number of places as well.

Although the book bills itself as being even-handed, there are a number of places where the text is harsh in its criticism of differing viewpoints, and its insistence that certain theologians "must" hold this or that view. On a number of occasions, the view imputed to these theologians is in words that they would most certainly reject out of hand. *From Heaven*'s authors may believe that is how their opponents must think, but in reality that may not be the case. For example, a statement like "he intercedes salvifically for the non-elect" (529) is nonsensical even to many four-point Calvinists.

The authors set the bar somewhat low—the idea seems to be that it is sufficient to show that there is particularity in the atonement. Many theologians agree with that fact but do not subscribe to full-fledged definite atonement. Any orthodox theologian *has* to say there is a limitation somewhere along the line, for universalism is clearly out of bounds.

IMPACT

From Heaven is billed as a landmark text defending the Reformed doctrine of definite atonement.[3] Judging by the content of the book, the claim is legitimate. With 23 essays by 21 well-known evangelical authors and a foreword by J. I. Packer, it is a scholarly, comprehensive, and very weighty defense of definite atonement.

The book has been heavily promoted by the publisher, Crossway Books. There is a website dedicated to the book[4] and 7,000 copies were given away at the Together for the Gospel conference in April 2014. The book has also been promoted on The Gospel Coalition website. With its well-known authors and glowing recommendations by many respected theologians, the book will surely have a great impact in promoting definite atonement.

However, the volume will not convince many opponents of definite atonement because most of this ground is well-traveled and the book does not hit a grand slam. Another reviewer, David Allen, recently completed chapter-by-chapter reviews of the book in which he rejects many sections as exegetically faulty.[5] So, the controversy continues. But from now on, *From Heaven* will be, and should be, required reading in the field.

---

[3]Editors David and Jonathan Gibson claim that since the 1600s and Owen's classic *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, there has not been a thorough and comprehensive treatment of definite atonement in all theological disciplines. See http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2013/11/18/the-definitive-work-on-definite-atonement-a-new-website-new-interview-and-new-video/, accessed 8 August 2014.

[4]http://fromheavenhecameandsoughther.com/, accessed 19 August 2014.

[5]http://www.drdavidlallen.com/