

**Review of *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* – Part 1**

**BY David Allen.**

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*From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* has been touted by some as the “definitive” scholarly word on definite (limited) atonement. David Wells said of it in his endorsement printed on the first page: “This is the definitive study....” Free copies of the book were distributed to attendees at the 2014 “Together for the Gospel” conference in April.

David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson serve as editors of this substantive tome of 703 pages, including indices, published by Crossway. The work includes 23 chapters written by a notable cadre of twenty-one authors from a variety of backgrounds (including Presbyterian, Anglican and Baptist) addressing the historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral perspective on the topic.

As with any multi-author volume, the chapters ebb and flow as to content, style, and relative substance. There is the occasional unavoidable overlapping of subject matter in various chapters as well. But this should not detract from what is overall a significant study on an often misunderstood subject.

The book’s chief purpose is to defend the notion of definite atonement (more commonly referred to as “limited atonement,” and also referred to as “particular redemption”) by presenting supportive arguments and attempting to answer counter-arguments.

Organizationally, the volume’s four-fold structure: historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral, is probably the best way to approach the subject. The chapters in the first three sections are about equally divided (seven, six, and six), with each section totaling roughly 150 pages. The final pastoral section contains three chapters.

The Table of Contents is clear and provides a brief description of the major topic of each chapter. The “Select Bibliography” is only seven pages in length, and is missing some significant works that probably should be listed, even for a select bibliography. Three indices (biblical references, names, and subject) provide the reader a helpful quick reference guide. These are reasonably helpful, though there are a few errors and omissions, which is practically unavoidable in a book of this size.

J. I. Packer contributed the Foreword and it is vintage Packer; well-written and full of high praise for the book. Many will remember Packer's introduction to the Banner of Truth edition of John Owen's *Death of Death in the Death of Christ* more than fifty years ago. Packer references his earlier introduction to Owen's classic work in the current Foreword, and informs us: "I am glad to be able to say nothing in it needs to be modified or withdrawn..." (14). Thankfully, Packer's more recent Foreword is much less shrill than his earlier one, which was loaded with epithets for his non-Calvinist brothers and fell just short of denying them a seat at the table of salvation. Of the present work, Packer gives it "top marks for its range of solid scholarship, cogency of argument, warmth of style, and zeal for the true glory of God..." (16).

Editors Gibson and Gibson provide a well-crafted, two-page preface (17-18) outlining how they came to embrace definite atonement. They offer the book "with the prayer that it will paint a compelling picture of the beauty and power of definite atonement..." They inform us "The doctrine inhabits the poetic drama and the didactic propositions of Scripture."

The editors aim to provide a "depth and breadth of perspective" on the subject. Essays are written "irenicly" and "dissenting voices are engaged firmly, but there is no shrillness of tone in our replies. There is no animosity of content in the critique of individuals and the movements associated with them." This is indeed as it should be.

However, the opening sentence of the last paragraph in the preface is surprising in this context and not a little troubling: "Precisely because it is articulating the gospel of God, this volume seeks to do way with all self-righteousness on the part of those who love definite atonement as they teach it for the good of the church" (18).

Given that some in the Reformed tradition past and present have unwisely made statements along the lines of "Calvinism is the gospel," it would seem the better part of wisdom not to say of the book that "it is articulating the gospel of God." This should be especially so in light of the fact that definite atonement is the minority position in Christianity today, coupled with the fact that there have been many in the Reformed tradition itself both past and present who reject it. Since, however, the editors suggest to us it is "fair to ask for as much charity on the part of the reader as each writer has offered," I will give the benefit of the doubt at this point that they did not intend to convey the notion that definite atonement is the gospel.