

Review of Matthew Harmon, “For the Glory of the Father and the Salvation of His People: Definite Atonement in the Synoptics and Johannine Literature,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

BY David Allen.

Originally posted at <http://drdavidallen.com/> These reviews can also be found, with slight revisions, in David Allen, The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review, B&H Academic (2016), at pages 657-763.

Matthew Harmon authors the chapter on definite atonement in the Synoptic Gospels and Johannine literature. Harmon intends to argue three things: 1) Jesus died to display God’s glory; 2) Jesus died to accomplish the salvation of His people; 3) Jesus died for the sins of the world (where “world” does not mean “all without exception” but all without distinction”) (267).

In Part 1 of his chapter, Harmon attempts to find definite atonement in three key passages: John 6:22-58, John 17:1-26, and Rev. 4:1-5:14.

1. John 6

From John 6:37-40, 44, Harmon correctly points out that Jesus came to do the will of the Father. From verse 37, he notes the Father gives a specific group of people to the Son, and from verse 44 he notes no one can come to the Son unless the Father draws him. Harmon concludes: “Thus it is the Father’s election of a specific group of people that defines who comes to the Son...” (270).

Several points call for explication.

First, Harmon is interpreting “all the Father gives me” as referencing election. This assumes two things: 1) the Reformed interpretation of election is correct, and 2) that this passage is referencing it. For the sake of argument, let’s grant the first assumption for the moment.

Even so, nothing in the passage speaks to “election.” John 6 must be read in the light of the preceding context of chapters 1-5 as well as in its immediate context.

In John 1:6-9, John makes clear that God’s intention in sending John the Baptist was that all might believe in Christ. Jesus, not John, is the “Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” Again in John 1:29, Christ comes that he might be the savior of the world. In John 3:16, God’s love for the world is the motivation for his sending Jesus so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. John is establishing a universal desire on God’s part for the salvation of the world and a universal remedy for such through Christ’s death on the cross.

Second, when did this “giving” take place? Not in eternity past, for the use of the present tense verb indicates contemporary action: the Father was in the very process of giving to the Son those who were believing on Him.

Third, in what sense did God “give” people to his Son? Frequently in Scripture one finds the terms “gift” and “given” are idiomatically employed to denote God’s favor expressing His redemptive work for mankind. See Psalm 2:8 and Acts 4:25-26 as examples. Here the Gentile nations are said to be “given” to Christ as an inheritance. Yet this language clearly does not indicate that all the nations or all people in those nations are somehow “elected” to salvation in eternity.

John makes a connection between the “giving” and the “coming” in v. 37. Notice how verses 44-45 use different imagery but express the same meaning. “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him: and I will raise him up in the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”

Notice God’s “drawing” is parallel to His “giving” in v. 37. How is the drawing accomplished according to vv. 44-45? By means of hearing, learning, and coming to the Lord. This is John’s notion of what it means for some to be “given” to Christ. The refusal of unbelievers to come to Christ was due to their refusal to listen to the Father, as the context of John 5:37-38 and John 6 makes clear.

The reason many of the Jews did not come to Christ is not that they were not “given” to him by the Father, but is found in their own stubborn hearts. John 5:40 says they were not willing to come to Christ, not that they could not come to Christ because they had not been “given” to him by the Father. Notice how John 5:43-47 speaks often of “belief.”

Election is simply not in the picture in this passage. The “coming” of John 6:37 is synonymous with “believing” as v. 35 indicates.

What does “all that the Father gives Me” refer to in vv. 37 and 39? In v. 39 the phrase is equivalent to “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him” in v. 40. The phrase in v. 39 is equivalent to the phrase in v. 37. John is oscillating between believers viewed as a group and believers viewed as individuals, as the Greek text demonstrates.

Thus, the limited group of those given by the Father to the Son are those who have believed. It is incorrect to interpret the passage as teaching that certain persons are eternally elected to become believers.

What did Jesus mean when he said “will come to me” in v. 37a? Some Calvinist interpreters link the word “come” in verses 35, 37b, and 44 with “will come” in verse 37a. But this fails to recognize the two different Greek words used. *Hēkō* is the Greek word translated

“will come” in v. 37a, while *erchomai* is the word used in vv. 35 and 37b. Jesus appears to be thinking about all believers considered as a group in v. 37a.

What is intended by the phrase “will come to me”? Verse 39 answers the question. All believers are given by the Father to Christ and they will reach final salvation in the eschaton via the resurrection in the last days. Thus, it is final salvation that is in view, not pre-temporal election.

There is a difference in saying John 6:44 indicates specific efficacious grace given only to the elect and in viewing it as meaning no one can come to believe in Christ unless the Father draws him via enabling grace.

It is significant to note that Jesus has declared numerous times, before he speaks of the “drawing” of the Father, that only believers possess eternal life (6:27-29, 40). What John affirms in chapter 6 is that God initiates and consummates the salvation process. Grace precedes human response.

There is nothing in this passage that affirms definite atonement.

2. John 17

Harmon’s second key passage is Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. Harmon’s logic is this: intercession (for the elect only) = limited atonement (for the elect only). Since Jesus did not intercede for the world, he did not die for the sins of the world (272-72).

This is a common argument in the Limited Atonement arsenal and has been addressed and answered, even by a number of Calvinists, including the likes of Richard Baxter and John Bunyan.

Harmon writes: “To claim that Christ atones for the sins of everyone but then applies that atonement only to the elect runs contrary to the totality of the work that Christ performs in order to glorify the Father. Such a claim also presents the persons of the Trinity working at cross purposes with each other. . .” (272).

But Harmon offers no support for these claims. Can the work of an atonement made for all humanity likewise glorify the Father as an atonement made only for the elect? Of course it can. There is no disharmony in the Trinity. (I will address this claim more fully when we come to the theological chapters of the book.) Harmon is assuming what he is trying to prove: namely, that the atonement guarantees its application.

John 17 does not state that Jesus dies only for those for whom He prays. Laying aside for the moment the possibility that in context this is most likely a reference to the disciples, and even taking it as extending to the believing elect at the time, even then one is not warranted to draw the conclusion that the text means that Jesus did not die for the sins of all people, elect and non-elect (negative inference fallacy).

Harmon falls prey to generalizing that election entails limited atonement. He assumes that if Jesus prays only for the elect, then he must have died only for the elect. The mistake here is a collapsing of the intercession of Christ into His expiation for sins. This merely begs the question.

A better interpretation of John 17 was given by Harold Dekker, formerly professor and Academic Dean at Calvin Theological Seminary. I summarize his argument:

Does John 17:9 indicate Jesus died for the elect only? The context beginning with v. 4 makes clear that those to whom Jesus referred in v. 9 are those who had come to believe in him up to that point in time. Verse 20 supports this, since there Jesus says he prays also for those who will (future) believe in him.

When Jesus says he does not pray for the world (v.9), what does he mean? Jesus prayed a specific prayer for those who had and would believe in him. There would have been no point in Jesus praying these specific things for the unconverted, because they could never be true for the unconverted until they were converted. The fact that he did not do so proves nothing about his disposition toward the world or the extent of his atonement for the world.

This is made even clearer in John 17:21-23. Here Jesus does indeed pray for the world, namely, that the world might believe. Here the word “world” cannot be limited to the elect and means nothing less than the world of all people.¹

Rather than restricting the atonement, John 17 actually better supports an unlimited atonement.

¹ Harold Dekker, “God’s Love to Sinners — One or Two?,” *The Reformed Journal* 13 (March 1963), 14-15. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 725, who argues the same point.

3. Revelation 5:9-1

Harmon's third key passage is Revelation 4:1-5:14. Key here is Revelation 5:9-10, which Harmon assumes teaches limited atonement. It simply does not. All the passage does is indicate who the redeemed are and where they are from (every tribe, tongue, nation). One must assume the atonement and its application are coextensive to find evidence for definite atonement in Revelation 4-5, which is, of course, what Harmon does.

Election Circumscribes Atonement.

Harmon concludes that election circumscribes atonement, not the other way around (271). He takes "his people" in Matt 1:21, coupled with Matt 20:28 and Matt 26:28, and deduces definite atonement. He does not seem to consider the possibility that the referent of "His people" is likely the Jews viewed ethnically and not some abstract later Reformed notion of election. He avoids passages like Luke 22:20-21 where Christ includes Judas in the group of those for whom his blood is shed. As I have mentioned before, both Augustine and Calvin affirm Judas was at the table and Augustine clearly states that Jesus suffered for Judas' sins.

Harmon correctly states: "Particularism and universalism are complementary realities, not contradictory ones" (281). Precisely. But his comment is in reference to the extent of atonement combined with universal proclamation. He means to argue for the intrinsic sufficiency (value) of the atonement as the grounds for a universal preaching of the atonement. Since this is the burden of Piper's final chapter in the book, I will address this issue at that point.

Johannine Literature.

At this point, Harmon shifts to the Johannine literature where he spends the most time. He points out how John includes statements about God's election of a particular people to receive the benefits of Jesus' death in John 10. Yet he cannot produce any statement in John 10 that asserts definite atonement.

"World" in Johannine Literature

Harmon concludes by noting the key for the universal language in John is not that the atonement is for all people, but that it extends beyond Jews to include people from every tribe and tongue (281). He attempts to support this point by a discussion of the word "world" (282-87).

Something of his faulty methodology is evidenced by his comment on John 1:29: there is nothing in the context to restrict the usage of “world,” but the “numerous other restricted uses must be brought to bear” (283). But why “must” this be so? How is it that in every single atonement passage that uses the word “world,” most Calvinists inform us that the word must be restricted because in some other contexts it is restricted?

With respect to the use of kosmos in the Gospel of John, the word characteristically means human beings in rebellion against God. See John 1:29 where it is the sins of the “world” that must be atoned for. In John 3:16, the world is spoken of as being loved, condemned and then some are saved out of it. The latter two outcomes occur because of either belief or unbelief according to 3:18. John 3:19 is consistent with this.

A comparison of 1 John 2:2 with 1 John 5:19 illustrates how Harmon’s treatment of kosmos in 1 John 2:2 is in error. In 2:2, Christ is the propitiation for the sins “of the whole world.” In 5:19, “the whole world” lies under the sway of the wicked one. The phrase translated “the whole world” in both passages is identical in Greek. “World” in 1 John 5:19 must mean “the unbelieving world” as in all people with the exception of believers. The word does not and cannot mean “some of all kinds” of people, but of necessity must refer to all unbelieving people without exception.

The same meaning attaches to 1 John 2:2. Christ is the propitiation of “our sins” (believers), and of the sins of “the whole world” (all unbelievers). The atonement is unlimited.

Harmon does not appear to have followed his own advice: “Only the context can determine what kosmos means, not a priori assumptions” (287).

Like all the chapters in this section, Harmon bases virtually his entire case on the supposition that universal terms with respect to the extent of the atonement signify “all without distinction” and not “all without exception.” (See my comments on the problems with this in previous reviews.)

John 10: Christ and His Sheep

Harmon says in a footnote regarding John 10:15: “It simply will not do to assert that a text like this does not explicitly ‘say that Christ died only for the church, or that he did not die for the non-elect,’ as does David L. Allen...” (277).

Yet he affirms my basic assertion: “True, the claim that Jesus laid down his life for his sheep does not logically demand that he died only for the elect....” He then attempts to blunt the force of this fact.

What Harmon cannot demonstrate is where in the text does it non-logically demand that Christ died only for the sheep? According to standard logical protocol, all things must be established by good and necessary consequence.

By what logic does one exclude Jesus' critics from the scope of His death by the revelation that they are not His sheep? There is nothing in Jesus' statement that limits the scope of his death. As long as the Pharisees and other unbelievers refuse what Jesus is saying, they are incapable of receiving the saving benefits of His death.

Even if Jesus' statement indicates that his critics are not now nor ever will be among his sheep, such does not affirm or entail limited atonement. To assert that the statement does teach or entail limited atonement is to succumb to the negative inference fallacy.

Even from Harmon's perspective, he must believe that Jesus died for more than just those who are Christ's sheep since he believes Christ died for the unbelieving elect who are not yet His sheep.

Harmon's error here is taking what applies to believers and extrapolating the predication to all of the elect in the abstract. What are the exegetical grounds for reading "sheep" in John's context as the abstract class of all the elect? There are none.

John 10 and Logic

Here is the argument Harmon desires to set out from John 10:

Christ died for his Sheep.

Pharisees are not his sheep.

Therefore Christ did not die for them.

The burden of this section, and indeed most of the chapter, is an attempt to employ this kind of logical argument without explicitly stating it. But his logical argument is invalid.

Consider this parallel example from D. A. Carson:

All orthodox Jews believe in Moses.

Smith is not an orthodox Jew.

Therefore Smith does not believe in Moses.

The conclusion does not follow and the syllogism is logically fallacious. Analogies could be added ad infinitum.

John loves Mary.

Bill is not Mary.

Therefore John does not love Bill.

No matter how you parse it, it is invalid logic, and no sound argument can be grounded in an invalid logical argument. It does not matter what interpretation of the sheep one takes in John 10, the argument is invalid.

Harmon wrongly concludes from John 10 that Christ died only for those given to Him. Jesus' statements in John 10 in no way prove exclusivity. When we are told Jesus died for his "friends," does that prove he died only for them? Did he not die for his enemies as well? The point here is that simple positive statements cannot logically be used to infer category negations.

Conclusion.

1. Harmon does not engage the many Reformed authors who critique the standard interpretation of these passages as limited to the elect only. Where is reference to Charles Hodge, Dabney, or Shedd on many of these universal texts?
2. It appears Harmon is dealing in supposed implications from his own presuppositions which he brings to the text from the Reformed system.
3. The burden of proof is on Harmon to show why and how in every atonement passage where universal terms are employed, the meaning of these terms should be restricted and thus

transmuted into limited terms on the basis of a few examples where contextually the terms are restricted. This is simply not possible exegetically.

4. John employs words such as “light,” “life,” “bread,” and “gift” as they appear in a general or universal context. These are important in a consideration of the question at hand. Scripture routinely plays up the universal aspects of Christ’s work, especially in John’s Gospel. There are far more universal terms and statements with respect to the extent of the atonement than there are restricted terms and statements.

5. Harmon continuously repeats the mistake of the negative inference fallacy in his chapter.