

Review of Jonathan Gibson, “The Glorious, Indivisible, Trinitarian Work of God in Christ: Definite Atonement in Paul’s Theology of Salvation,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

BY David Allen.

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In chapter 13, Jonathan Gibson attempts to demonstrate definite atonement in Paul’s soteriology. His basic thesis is that definite atonement emerges from the Pauline letters when one approaches the issue in a biblico-systematic fashion. “Definite atonement is a theological conclusion reached on the other side of comprehensive synthesis” (332).

Strikingly, Gibson announces: “When exegesis serves the domain of constructive theology . . . one may argue not only that Paul’s theology allows for a definite atonement but that it can point in no other direction” (332). Bold words. Can Gibson deliver?

From Ephesians 1:3-14 as an anchor text, Gibson sketches five main components of Pauline soteriology: 1) God’s saving work is indivisible, 2) circumscribed by God’s grace, 3) encompassed by union with Christ, 4) Trinitarian, and 5) doxological (335-336).

No evangelical Christian would disagree with Gibson’s broad categories. The disagreement will come from what he deduces from them.

Gibson illustrates the first component from Titus 3:3-7, concluding from vv. 5-6 that redemption applied flows from redemption accomplished in a cause-effect manner.

From Rom 5:9-10 and 8:29-30, he builds on election and the indivisible saving work of God. He rightly critiques Barth for collapsing redemption applied into redemption accomplished, but seems unaware of the fact that this is what he and all Calvinists who affirm definite atonement actually do (344), despite his protestations otherwise.

Gibson critiques what he considers to be the opposite error from Barth, namely, forcing a disjunction between the moments of redemption (as is the case in Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism, Amyraldianism, and Hypothetical Universalism) (345). With respect to the latter two groups, Gibson wrongly states that their adherents fail to maintain the connection between redemption accomplished and redemption applied.

Gibson rightly denies any justification at the cross. But, unless there is an intervening condition (not mere temporality) before one is justified, there seems no escape from this position.

Many Calvinists, such as Charles Hodge for example, clearly distinguish redemption accomplished and redemption applied.

Gibson's second Pauline soteriological component, election, is treated on pages 346-349. Gibson appears to deduce that election = definite atonement. Here he avers that Arminianism, Amyraldianism, and Hypothetical Universalism result in a situation where "God's general universal love trumps his special love for the elect to the extent that the latter becomes a mere 'afterthought'" (349). This statement is false with respect to the latter two groups, and in my judgment is also incorrect with respect to Arminianism.

Gibson's third soteriological component from Paul is union with Christ (349-360). Working from Romans 5:12-21; 6:1-11; and 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Gibson concludes that union with Christ is key to Paul's soteriology.

From these passages, Gibson draws five theological conclusions.

- 1) Affirming the distinct but inseparable dimensions of union with Christ counters Barth's collapsing of one aspect into another (357).

- 2) Union with Christ counters attempts to force a disjunction between redemption accomplished and applied, which in turn necessarily render the efficacy of Christ's death contingent upon faith (357-358).

- 3) Affirming union with Christ at the moment of redemption accomplished counters any disjunction between the effect of Christ's substitutionary death and the effect of his resurrection (358-359).

- 4) Union with Christ means that Christ's substitutionary atonement is a representative atonement and not merely a bare "instead of" atonement (359).

- 5) Union with Christ means that the particularity of the atonement must take place prior to the moment of redemption applied (359-360).

There are several problems with these conclusions.

First, what does it mean to affirm “distinct but inseparable dimensions” of union with Christ? If there is some distinction between redemption accomplished and applied, as Gibson admits, then what’s the problem? If the distinction is merely chronological, as Gibson seems to assert, then how is the logic of the definite atonement scheme any different than Barth?

Second, there is no forced “disjunction” between redemption accomplished and applied. This is a distinction which Scripture itself makes.

Third, Gibson states this “disjunction” necessarily renders “the efficacy of Christ’s death dependent upon faith.” “Efficacy” is another word for “application.” Biblically, Christ’s death is not applied until faith is present. No one receives the application of the atonement until he exercises faith. Even the unbelieving elect remain under the wrath of God until they believe according to Ephesians 2:1-3.

Fourth, there is no union with Christ at the moment of redemption accomplished other than in the mind of God. Actual union with Christ takes place at the moment of justification.

Fifth, we must ask why it is that union with Christ means that the particularity of the atonement must take place prior to redemption applied? Where is this stated in Scripture? Gibson offers no warrant for this claim.

The major problem with this section, and indeed the chapter, is the fact that Gibson has fallen into the trap of the false dilemma fallacy. Gibson’s logic is as follows: either Christ died for all men such that all are rendered saveable were they to believe, or Christ died to effect the salvation of the elect. If Christ died to effect the salvation of the elect, then he did not die for the sins of all men.

In other words, the logic is: either A or B. Not A, therefore B. Gibson’s reductionist approach doesn’t work. The extent of the atonement is not either/or. It is both/and. Christ died for the sins of all men and he died to effect the salvation of all who believe.

A further problem with Gibson’s discussion of union with Christ is he fails to interact with Kevin Kennedy’s *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, where Kennedy concluded Calvin held to an unlimited atonement.

Gibson’s fourth component of Pauline soteriology has to do with the Trinity. “A Trinitarian approach moves us towards a doctrine of definite atonement...” (368). Gibson argues that any form of unlimited atonement creates “dissonance” in the Trinity.

This charge is problematic on several accounts.

First, it assumes there can be only one purpose of God in the atonement: the salvation of the elect.

Second, note this sentence with respect to Hypothetical Universalists: “They force the conclusion that Christ died for everyone as their ‘general Savior’ to offer an atonement that would never actually atone” (370). Here Gibson is again conflating the extent of the atonement with its application. I suspect he is working off a commercial understanding of the atonement here, like John Owen, which necessitates that the atonement must be applied to those for whom it is made.

Third, Gibson argues that since the Holy Spirit does not bring the gospel to all the unevangelized, then somehow there is dissonance between the Spirit, the Father and the Son. But this overlooks the fact that it is first Christians who bring the gospel to the unevangelized and then the Holy Spirit works through the means of the Word. The “problem” of the unevangelized is as much a problem for the Calvinist as it is for the non-Calvinist.

Finally, Gibson’s charge concerning disunity among the Trinity, especially with respect to the Holy Spirit, presupposes a Reformed understanding of anthropology (total depravity = inability) and the irresistible nature of the efficacious call. All non-Calvinists would disagree at these levels as well.

Ultimately, Gibson is trading on a false dilemma. He wrongly assumes that the Father did not intend for the Son to provide a satisfaction for all sin, and thus imports dissonance in the Trinity that does not exist.

Gibson’s three-fold response to what he considers problems with the position of Hypothetical Universalists like Davenant of old and more recently, Daniel, whom he quotes (369), is weak.

First, he brings up the unevangelized argument again and states, “In this regard, the Spirit underperforms and in so doing brings disharmony into the Trinity” (369).

Second, he suggests it is difficult to avoid the fact that the Son ends up with a “confused” or “split” personality (369-370). This fails to reckon with what most Calvinists affirm concerning the distinction between God’s revealed will and his decretal will.

Third, he suggests that the notion of a dual intent with respect to the extent of the atonement “gives the impression that there exist two ‘economies’ of salvation (371). This is an impression or inference on his part, one which all Hypothetical Universalists deny and justify reasons for their denial in their writings.

Where is the Hypothetical Universalist who has argued that the Son desired the salvation of anyone contrary to the wishes of the Father? Hypothetical Universalists would, I suspect, consider Gibson’s analysis a caricature of their position.

Interestingly, Calvinists who oppose the notions of common grace and God's universal love use the same argument Gibson makes and posit the identical Trinitarian disharmony in an effort to discredit these notions. Most Calvinists affirm both common grace and universal love, and yet see no disharmony in the Trinity.

Universal atonement, God's universal love and desire for the salvation of all people, and the universal offer of the gospel in no way entails any intra-Trinitarian disunity.

Gibson's fifth Pauline component concerns God's glory. He bluntly states: "A salvation intended but never realized can bring God no praise" (371).

But how can this be sustained? If, as many Calvinists argue, God is glorified via the damnation of the non-elect, how is it that He cannot be glorified if in His love he made atonement for the sins of all men such that at the judgment they are doubly culpable for rejecting the gospel? Indeed, this is Calvin's point with respect to his comments on John 3:16. If a limited atonement can redound to God's greater glory, as some Calvinists claim, then an unlimited atonement can redound to God's maximal glory.

Conclusion.

Gibson informs us early on that he is not "imposing" a systematic grid over the universal texts while privileging the particularistic texts (333). Yet one completes this chapter with the sense that, unfortunately, that is just what has happened.

He speaks of exegesis, yet from his previous chapter he was unable to furnish a single Pauline text that directly affirms definite atonement. He is, in one sense, forced to deduce definite atonement theologically from Paul in this chapter, since the exegetical data is not on his side.

Gibson's false dilemma fallacy excludes any possibility that Christ could die for the sins of all people.