

Review of Donald Macleod, “Definite Atonement and the Divine Decree,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

BY David Allen.

Originally posted at <http://drdavidlallen.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.

Donald Macleod begins a six chapter section on “Definite Atonement in Theological Perspective.” There is much helpful material in these chapters.

Probably the most significant is the interaction with the Amyraldian and Hypothetical Universalism views within the orbit of Reformed theology. This is commendable and opens the door for further dialogue to occur.

However, this interaction is not without its problems, as there appears to be a fair amount of misunderstanding and mischaracterization of these positions.

Macleod begins his chapter by noting: “The focus of this chapter is the link between the divine intention of the atonement and its extent.” (401). Here he rightly acknowledges a distinction between the intent and extent of the atonement, but as we shall see, he appears to misunderstand the connection between the two.

He quotes the oft quoted statement by Berkhof: “Did the Father in sending Christ, and did Christ in coming into the world to make atonement for sin, do this with the design or for the purpose of saving only the elect or all men? That is the question and that only is the question” (XXX).

But this sends the discussion off the rails at the very beginning. Note the words “design” and “purpose.” All Calvinists, whether they believe in definite atonement or universal atonement, would affirm Berkhof’s statement, because they believe that the ultimate purpose of God in the atonement is the salvation of the elect.

Macleod, like Berkhof, assumes that if the issue can be stated in this fashion, then the game is over. Definite atonement is established because intent and extent are assumed to be coextensive. Macleod is reading the issue through the filtered lens of Berkhof, and he appears to be reading Amyraldianism through the lens of Warfield’s mischaracterization of Amyraldianism.

The chapter is divided into five major sections: “Arminianism” (402-06); “Eternal Predestination” (406-409); “Supra- and Infralapsarianism (409-413); Karl Barth’s

Supralapsarianism; and Hypothetical Universalism (422-34). This final section is the longest sustained discussion of Hypothetical Universalism in the book.

Of these five sections, the middle three, while interesting in and of themselves, offer little help to the argument for definite atonement.

All orthodox Christians affirm eternal predestination; the debate occurs over how this is accomplished. Eternal predestination simply does not entail limited atonement nor does it contradict unlimited atonement. Even if Reformed theology's notion of election is correct, which we can grant at the moment for the sake of argument, all that entails is that there is an atonement for the elect, not that there cannot be an atonement for the sins of the so called "non-elect." To argue otherwise is a logical fallacy.

The intra-family debate within Reformed theology over Supra- and Infralapsarianism is interesting, but again offers no help in proving definite atonement. Calvinists from both groups have affirmed definite atonement while others of both camps have affirmed unlimited atonement. One thinks immediately of William Twisse, procurator of the Westminster Assembly, who was both supralapsarian and an advocate for unlimited atonement.

The section on Karl Barth is especially unnecessary since I suspect the majority of the Reformed along with the non-Reformed would agree with Macleod's critique of Barth. There is simply no help for the argument of definite atonement by exposing Barth's problems on the issue of election.

Arminianism.

Macleod asks "how can blood-bought souls perish?" (403). He turns to "Scottish Arminian James Morison" for an answer. This is interesting for three reasons. First, Morison was a Calvinist before he shifted to more Arminian views on the atonement. Morison himself denied becoming an Arminian. "I am not an Arminian; call me a low-Calvinist, or a no-Calvinist, if you like, but I am not an Arminian."¹

Second, Macleod could have turned for an answer to the many Calvinists within the Scottish church who rejected definite atonement, such as the famous Thomas Chalmers.

¹ Oliphant Smeaton, *Principal James Morison: the Man and His Work* (Oliver & Boyd, 1902), 114. See also Andrew Robertson, *History of the Atonement Controversy in Connexion with the Secession Church* (Edinburgh, Oliphant, 1846), 161- 74; 323-325, for the specifics on Morison.

Third, Macleod references Morison with respect to the assertion that in the death of Christ, “while all objective legal obstacles to their salvation have been removed, other internal obstacles remain” (403).

One gets the impression that this point is an exclusive Arminian point. Actually this language of “legal obstacles” being removed can be found in many Calvinists who affirm unlimited atonement, as Macleod acknowledges later on (431), (John Davenant, Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, W. G. T. Shedd, and Andrew Fuller come to mind) and even in some who maintain a strictly definite atonement, like A. A. Hodge.

One wonders why Macleod does not engage the arguments of these Calvinists with respect to Christ’s death removing legal obstacles.

Macleod states that Arminianism posits “no commitment on God’s part to overcome human unbelief” (403). This is a caricature of Arminianism since their notion of prevenient grace functions in just this way. Of course, Macleod is operating from the Reformed concept that total depravity = total inability.

A major error in Macleod’s chapter is his charge that James Morison’s description of prevenient grace is “pure Pelagianism” (404). A careful reading of Morison reveals he clearly believes in the necessity of God’s enabling grace prior to human response to the gospel. This is not Pelagianism. Macleod has caricatured Morison here.

Also problematic is Macleod’s point that the “peculiarity” of Arminianism “makes no provision for redemption from its [sin] power” (406). He then quotes Charles Wesley’s hymn “And Can It Be” and says the hymn “challenges every element of Arminian theology” (406). Of course, this suggests that Wesley the Arminian did not understand his own theology. It appears Macleod may lack nuance in his own understanding of Arminianism.

Macleod makes the following statements:

Limiting the saving benefits of the atonement to definite, special objects of God’s love is not a violation of the mind of Christ but an expression of it....” At the last judgment, those who are “passed by” and hear Christ declare “Depart from me,” nevertheless this “carries the assurance that judgment will not be without mercy” (407).

Mercy for whom? How the person standing before Christ at the last judgment, with no atonement made for his sins, unelected, unloved by God in a saving manner, can hear the words “Depart from me” and yet this judgment “not be without mercy” is beyond me.

Problems with Macleod's chapter continue when he speaks concerning God's universal love (408). Macleod notes that in Arminianism, God's universal love is extended "equally" to every member of the human family. "God has provided a Savior suited to the needs of every human being and that he has commissioned his ambassadors to plead with every human being to accept the services of this Savior. This is all that Arminians believe; and the Reformed believe it all – every jot and title of it" (408).

I must ask how it is that Macleod can affirm these things with any consistency?

First, no Calvinist, high or moderate, believes God's universal saving love is extended "equally" to every member of the human family. (See D. A. Carson's book *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*.) The old Reformed distinction of God's love of benevolence and his love of complacency evidences my point.

Second, advocates of definite atonement cannot coherently assert that Christ is a Savior "suited to the needs of every human being." Christ is only salvifically suited to the needs of the elect since he only atones for their sins.

Third, Macleod appears to be unaware of the problem he and all high Calvinists have when pleading with "every human being" to accept Christ, namely, he has no gospel to offer the non-elect for Christ did not die for their sins. He is offering the non-elect a gospel that does not exist for them.

Hypothetical Universalism. (422-434).

Macleod, citing Muller, rightly notes there is variety within Hypothetical Universalism (422). Macleod seems to assume that HU, like Arminianism, is historically a late comer to Reformed theology. Actually, as Muller has demonstrated, HU predates definite atonement in the Reformed camp, and did not arise with English Hypothetical Universalism.

Macleod asserts that it is the "secret will" of God under discussion in debate on the extent of the atonement (428). How can this be when the secret will of God is secret? Actually, it is Scripture which is operative in the discussion. One cannot interpret Scripture in light of the "secret" will, but the "revealed" will, which strongly suggests unlimited atonement.

Macleod acknowledges the critique of definite atonement by Arminians and Hypothetical Universalists with respect to the universal offer of the gospel (429-31). He says the great evangelists of Reformed orthodoxy "were not embarrassed by the alleged inconsistency" and "wasted no time prying into the secret counsels of the Almighty or arguing with him that there was no point in pleading with every sinner since only the elect were to be saved."

But Macleod fails to mention the scourge of hyper-Calvinism historically in this very vein.

One troubling feature in this chapter is what appears to be Macleod's misunderstanding of HU. In a discussion on the importance of not trying to pry into the imponderables of God's secret will but rather engage in indiscriminate preaching, he notes that Hypothetical Universalists fare no better than their high-Calvinist counterparts: "Hypothetical Universalism provided no solution. How could they put their trust in a hypothetical redemption? How could they believe at all unless they were elected to faith?" (431).

Macleod's first question appears to misunderstand just what it is that is "hypothetical" in Hypothetical Universalism. For all HUs, the atonement is not hypothetical for the non-elect, it is actual. What is hypothetical is the conditionality of faith: if anyone believes, he shall be saved based on the fact that there is an atonement for sin.

Conditionality is operative in all orthodox Christian approaches to salvation: faith is a necessity.

With respect to the second question above, as Calvinists, all HUs believe in election and the necessity of effectual calling.

Macleod's wording in the above quotation ("elected to faith") may suggest his belief that faith is a gift purchased by Christ on the cross for the elect only. This is, of course, the view John Owen advocated, and he is followed by many Calvinists to the present day.

But Owen's argument is flawed at several levels.

1. Where in Scripture are we informed that faith is a gift purchased for the elect? Salvation is purchased, but never faith.
2. This approach treats faith as a commodity. Such a notion is an example of category confusion and is foreign to Scripture. Faith becomes something of an object instead of a relational response.
3. If faith is purchased for the elect, then the elect have a right to the means of salvation. Grace is vitiated.

4. This “faith as purchase” notion is grounded in the notion of a “Covenant of Redemption” between God and Christ in eternity. (See my critique of this in the review of Carl Trueman’s chapter.)

5. Faith as a gift is not equivalent to faith as a purchase.

6. There is simply no causal link between the atonement and faith. In fact, Owen says if faith is not purchased by the cross, then universal atonement is “established.”

Macleod asks: “Is it not fatally incoherent that God should simultaneously decree that the cross of Christ should redeem all the non-elect and provide him with grounds for their greater condemnation?” (434).

It did not seem so to Calvin, who states this very point in his comments on John 3:16.

Conclusion.

These problems notwithstanding, Macleod’s chapter should be read by all to gain understanding in how Calvinists attempt theologically to describe and define definite atonement.