

Review of *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective – Part 2*

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.*

The editors contribute an introductory chapter entitled “Sacred Theology and the Reading of the Divine Word.” This is a very helpful chapter that provides an overview of the work and its intent to present a “biblico-systematic” approach. The metaphors of the production of a “web” and “map” to and through definite atonement succeed in aiding the reader to orient himself as to how the authors of the book are approaching the topic (38-39).

The editors define definite atonement in a very generic way that does not clearly articulate the heart of the concept as a limited substitution of Christ for the sins of the elect only (33). No doubt this limited substitution is indeed what the editors intend to convey by their definition. Yet, surprisingly, their definition could be affirmed by all Calvinists, including Amyraldians and Hypothetical Universalists. What distinguishes the latter two groups of Calvinists from the authors of this book is their disagreement with the definition of the extent of the atonement as a limited satisfaction for sins. All Calvinists (High, Amyraldian, or Hypothetical Universalists), agree on the intent of the atonement. Just as TULIP does not map Calvinism, but is a point on the map, so the label “Hypothetical Universalism” does not map all Calvinists who adopt a position of unlimited satisfaction for sin.

Notice the definition speaks to the “intent” and “application” of the atonement, but it does not specifically reference the “extent.”

The rest of the chapter makes clear why this is so: the authors, like all high-Calvinists, cannot conceive of any category of penal substitution that does not, ipso facto, require definite atonement with respect to its actual extent as an unlimited satisfaction for sin (for example, 49-50, and the John Murray quote asserting there is no such thing as an unlimited atonement by insisting on the false either/or dichotomy between a limited efficacy and a limited extent [51]). In short, the authors conflate, and thus confuse, the notions of “intent” and “extent” when it comes to the atonement. Hence, the mere reference to “intent” in the definition (33) is considered sufficient to include extent as well, since for the editors and authors of this volume, intent and extent are coextensive.

As it stands, Amyraldians and Hypothetical Universalists could actually affirm this definition. With respect to the extent of the atonement, what distinguishes the latter two groups

of Calvinists from the authors of this book is their disagreement with the heart of definite atonement, which affirms that Christ provided a limited satisfaction for sins. All Calvinists (High, Amyraldian, or Hypothetical Universalists), agree on the intent of the atonement: to save the elect only. Furthermore, just as TULIP does not map Calvinism (as the editors correctly note), but is a point on the map, so the label “Hypothetical Universalism” does not map all Calvinists who adopt a position of unlimited satisfaction for sin.

It is refreshing to see that most of the authors repudiate a number of the usual historical mistakes when it comes to the extent of the atonement. Many of these are summarized in the Introduction by the editors. First, they correctly note that it “introduces distortion” and “lobotomizes history” to view the subject “through the lens of labels derived from prominent personal names in Reformation history” (42). Second, they distinguish between Amyraldianism and Hypothetical Universalism, a distinction not always made in Reformed historical theology. Third, authors avoid the term “Calvinist” in preference for “Reformed” throughout the book, rightly noting that it is by no means certain Calvin himself affirmed definite atonement. Fourth, the authors wisely want to avoid couching the discussion in the anachronistic use of the acrostic TULIP, though appearing to succumb to Packer’s notion that the five points stand or fall together, a notion all moderate Calvinists and many non-Calvinists like myself reject (43).

The editors provide the reader with a useful survey of the chapters to come. The exegetical chapters attempt to locate the individual atonement texts within an overall theological framework (44); a commendable method. The theological chapters aim to make four key points: 1) the saving work of Christ is indivisible; 2) is circumscribed by God’s electing grace and purpose; 3) has its center in union with Christ; and 4) is Trinitarian (45-49). The editors conclude with a survey of the pastoral chapters of the book.

Many within the Reformed tradition themselves will raise eyebrows at the following statement: “Proponents of a general, universal atonement cannot in fact, if being consistent, maintain a belief in the sincere offer of salvation for every person” (52). This is quite amazing in that the history of Reformed theology is replete with moderate-Calvinists¹ pressing this very argument against their definite atonement brothers, with little in the way of rejoinder forthcoming. Whether this claim can be substantiated by the chapters which follow remains to be seen. We shall be especially interested in how those who write the theological and pastoral chapters address this issue.

¹ My use of the term indicates all Calvinists who affirm Christ died for the sins of all men in an unlimited substitution, whether Hypothetical Universalist, Amyraldian or Baxterian.