

Review of Wellum’s Chapter “The New Covenant Work of Christ” 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.

Stephen Wellum addresses the subject of priesthood, atonement, and intercession in an effort to demonstrate that only definite atonement takes account of Christ’s unified priestly work: Christ only dies for the sins of those for whom he intercedes.

In the introduction, Wellum states: “. . . all general atonement views must divide Christ’s unified priestly work, redefine Christ’s relation as Priest to his people, and ultimately make ineffective his work as the Head of the new covenant – all points which Scripture will not allow” (518).

Wellum proceeds to address three issues: 1) Crucial methodological/hermeneutical issues central to the argument, 2) OT priests accomplishes a particular and unified work, and 3) Christ, like the OT priesthood, achieves a particular and effective work for his covenant people (519).

Section 1.

In section one, Wellum discusses “Priesthood and Typology,” and “Priesthood and Covenants.” Wellum is quite correct to point out that an understanding of the nature of Christ’s priestly work must be viewed in the light of covenantal structures, especially the new covenant (522).

He quotes Waldron and Barcellos: ““What is the scope, extent, and design of the new covenant? Is it a general covenant made with everyone, making salvation possible for everyone, if they will take it? Or, is it a limited covenant made only with certain persons and assuring their eternal salvation?”” (522).

As Wellum clarifies, one could ask the question, “whom does Jesus, as High Priest, represent in his death and apply the fruits of that covenant to”? Wellum believes that all general atonement views remove the work of Christ from its new covenant context.

Notice this statement carefully: “Christ’s atoning work cannot be extended to all people without also extending the new covenant benefits and privileges to all. . . . All general atonement views must either redefine the nature of the new covenant or argue that Christ dies as the covenantal Head of another covenant, whatever that is” (522).

Here is Wellum’s key assumption: the atonement’s extent and application must be coextensive. Those for whom Christ died must receive the covenant benefits.

But where in Scripture is that stated? There is no place in Scripture that asserts Wellum’s point. As we shall see, even his attempt to derive it typologically fails as well.

Section 2.

In section two, Wellum turns to discuss the unified work of the old covenant priests (523-28).

Here he offers a helpful summary of the work of the Levitical priests. One finds only one place in the section where Wellum seeks to critique advocates of a general atonement (527), and it becomes evident he is following John Owen’s argument that all for whom Christ dies he intercedes and all for whom he intercedes, he died for. Owen and Wellum think this group is coextensive and applies only to the elect.

I will point out the logical fallacy in this argument below.

Section 3.

Wellum’s third section addresses the unified work of Christ as new covenant priest. Here he moves into a full-blown critique of unlimited atonement (530-38). His basic thesis is: “A crucial problem with all general atonement views is that they fragment Christ’s priestly work of offering and intercession” (530).

Wellum asserts that Robert Lightner’s argument that Christ’s intercession is limited to his heavenly intercession only for the believing elect is in error, along with Gary Shultz’s argument that Christ’s intercession may be viewed as salvific for the non-elect. Wellum’s reasons all revolve around his own preconceived notion that the extent of the atonement as well as Christ’s intercession is limited only to the elect, an unproved assertion on his part.

Wellum has to depend on typology to get where he wants to go, and in the process he has to ignore many Scripture passages in the NT which assert the unlimited scope and nature of Christ's atonement.

Direct biblical statements trump typologizing.

Wellum acknowledges the counter-arguments general atonement advocates make to his argument (532-35) and attempts to respond to them. But here again, he is dependent upon OT typology that since OT priesthood represented only covenant people, so Christ's atonement extended only to the elect.

Wellum misinterprets Heb. 2:5-18 by failing to note the text builds on the author's quotation of Psalm 8 and the solidarity of humanity with Christ in his incarnation, leading to the statement that Christ "tasted death for every one" in Heb. 2:9. In the following section in Hebrews, the benefits of this death are described as accruing to those who have believed in Christ. Heb. 2:5-18 does not assert that the atonement and the benefits of the atonement are coextensive. This is Wellum's assumption (532-33).

Hebrews limits Christ's atoning benefits to those who are in covenant with Christ. Nothing is said in Hebrews about the extent of the atonement being limited.

The New Testament is replete with verses that state salvation is conditioned upon faith. No one receives the covenant blessings unless he believes. God himself conditions the reception of salvation on faith according to Scripture. Actual forgiveness of sins is only applied to those who believe.

Whatever one's view of election is, only those who are in the covenant by virtue of union with Christ experience the covenant blessings of forgiveness. How does one enter into union with Christ? The scriptural answer is by faith. This, however, in no way mandates definite atonement.

Wellum's appeal to the typology of Christ as our High Priest simply cannot carry the freight he wishes to place on it. Caution should be exercised so as not to read categories of "elect" and "non-elect" from the New Testament back into the OT. Neither should we read OT categories of the sacrificial system into the NT unless we have specific biblical justification to do so.

While Wellum considers objections from contemporary scholars, I do not see where he addresses the critique of his position made by the likes of Baxter, Bunyan, W. G. T. Shedd, Polhill, Harold Decker, and many others within the Reformed ranks.

Definite Atonement and Jesus' Prayer in John 17.

Wellum supposes that if Jesus' intercession (John 17) is limited to the elect, then he only dies for the sins of the elect. But nowhere in the text itself does it state that Jesus dies only for those for whom He prays, let alone the fact that John 17 makes no mention of the death of Christ at all.

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.

To assert that the phrase "those whom you have given me" refers to the elect is forced exegesis. The context makes clear that those whom Jesus referred to in v. 9 are the disciples, and possibly those who had already come to believe in him during his earthly ministry.

Verse 20 likewise supports this understanding, for there Jesus says he prays not only for those who have believed in him, but for those who would believe in the future.

When Jesus says he does not pray for the world at this point, the meaning is obvious. This specific prayer is focused on specific people. He was praying for believers to exhibit certain spiritual characteristics which only believers could display. What point would there have been for Jesus to pray these things for the unconverted?

Here is the critical point. That Jesus did not pray for the "world" at this point does not prove he did not pray for the world of the unbelieving at other points. To assert such is to invoke the negative inference fallacy, which Wellum appears to do.

But the kicker is that in vv. 21 and 23, Jesus did pray for the world! He prayed that the world might believe. To extract the "elect" somehow from this word "world" is obviously eisegesis.¹

Wellum falls prey to generalizing that election entails limited atonement. The mistake here is a collapsing of the intercession of Christ into his expiation for sins, an unwarranted move biblically. This merely begs the question.

¹ For the exegetical argument that Jesus prayed both for the elect and for the world, interested readers might consult Harold Dekker's analysis of John 17 in, "God's Love to Sinners — One or Two?," *The Reformed Journal* 13 (March 1963), 14-15. Dekker was formerly professor and Academic Dean at Calvin Theological Seminary. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 725; and W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3:420-21, who argue the same point.

In addition to the logical fallacies of begging the question and negative inference, Wellum also commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent. His logic is as follows:

All prayed for = all died for

Therefore,

All died for = all prayed for.

The logic is obviously fallacious. Consider this example:

If a man is dead, he is not breathing.

Therefore,

If a man is not breathing, he is dead.

The latter is a false inference and is not necessarily true. The man could be holding his breath.²

Also, lurking behind Wellum's arguments is his commitment to a commercialistic view of the atonement, which we have already discussed in previous reviews.

Conclusion.

As Doug Moo said in his review of Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom Through Covenant*, "I am less certain of the argument for particular atonement, whose relevance to the key argument is not immediately obvious." The same may be said for Wellum's chapter here.

² See the discussion on this subject by David Ponter, "Some Invalid and Unsound Arguments for the Assertion that all Died-for are all Prayed-for," www.calvinandcalvinism.com/?s=Some+Invalid+and+Unsound.