

Review of Henri Blocher, “Systematic Theology of Definite Atonement” 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.

Blocher’s chapter is the final chapter in the section on theology, and appropriately so since he attempts to develop something of a systematic theology of definite atonement.

The chapter is divided into five major sections, the first and last of which don’t deal specifically with the question at hand.

Section one, “Prolegomena,” (542-47) is a brief introduction to systematic theology, covering three areas: tradition, reason, and scripture. This is a helpful section, but somewhat tertiary to the question at hand.

Section two (547-61) addresses the extent question from a historical theology perspective. Here Blocher briefly discusses Augustine, Calvin, Andrew Fuller, Charles Hodge, Karl Barth and Bruce McCormack.

Section three (561-76) compares definite atonement (DA) with hypothetical universalism (HU) in five areas: 1) use of Scripture; 2) the love of God and gospel invitation; 3) Trinitarian harmony, the universal gospel offer, and personal assurance; 4) the double payment argument; and 5) the sufficiency question.

Section four (576-80) addresses the subject of Christ’s organic unity with humanity and its impact on the extent of the atonement.

Section five (580-81) briefly considers the extent question and time (historical sequencing), and like the first section, is really tertiary to the main question.

My evaluation and critique will focus on sections two – four and will be a bit lengthier than previous chapter reviews. I am especially grateful that Blocher engages some of my critique of definite atonement in *Whosoever Will* (61-107) at numerous points in his chapter.

Difference Between Definite Atonement and Hypothetical Universalism.

Blocher asks where the decisive difference lies between HU and DA:

Where then does the decisive difference lie? In the relationship with election. Is the purpose of the atonement identical for all, elect and reprobate? Hypothetical Universalism answers yes; definite atonement answers no. Or, in the transaction that took place on the cross, which is described by such phrases as ‘bearing sins,’ ‘satisfying divine justice,’ ‘paying the ransom-price,’ are the reprobate included as well as the elect? Hypothetical Universalism: Yes; definite atonement: no. Or, did atonement secure eternal life in such a way that those for whom it was accomplished according to its main purpose and operation shall infallibly receive it at the end? Definite atonement, yes; Hypothetical Universalism: no (548-49).

With respect to the first question, it is not accurate to say that HU asserts the purpose of the atonement is identical for all. The extent of the atonement is identical for all, but the intent (purpose) according to HU is the same as with DA: to secure the salvation of the elect. With respect to the third question it is also inaccurate to state that HU does not affirm that the atonement secures eternal life “according to its main purpose” since supporters of HU affirm that this is accomplished in the application on the grounds of both God’s intent and the atonement’s extent.

Blocher’s wording in this paragraph is somewhat confusing. If we speak of the nature of the satisfaction it is for all men. If we speak of the intention, from the HU perspective, it is unequal. Atonement secured the legal basis of salvation.

The only difference between DA and HU is the extent of sin bearing which causes HUs to talk differently about “intent” of the atonement. HUs believe God intended Christ to die for the sins of all people (unlimited atonement), but that God also intended only to give effectual grace to the elect (effectual purpose).

Misreading of Augustine, Calvin, Andrew Fuller and Charles Hodge.

Augustine.

Blocher says that Augustine's case is "complex" and that there is no unified doctrine of atonement that stands out in Augustine's writings (549). Actually this is not the case. Augustine is clear in his affirmation that Christ died for the sins of all people, including Judas.¹

Blocher tries to use Augustine's textual interpretation of some passages to indicate his adherence to DA. However, this fails to recognize that many HUs interpret these passages as Augustine did, yet they clearly held to universal atonement.

Does Blocher think Augustine had a different definition of Predestination and grace than the HUs? The later Augustine affirmed the same definition of predestination as HUs, and all Calvinists I might add.

Calvin.

With respect to Calvin, I have already addressed this issue in the review of Blacketer's chapter (see here). Blocher is heavily dependent on Nicole's outdated work on Calvin's view of extent. Much research on Calvin's view has transpired since Nicole's 1985 article.

Blocher speaks of defenders (plural) around Calvin, like Beza. Here I must inquire: "Who else?" Blocher does not name anyone. The recent work of Richard Muller and others has shown that virtually all the first generation Reformers held to universal atonement. Beza's affirmation of DA does not appear until some 25 years after Calvin's death.²

Andrew Fuller & Charles Hodge.

Blocher also appears to misread both Andrew Fuller and Charles Hodge, whom he assigns to the DA camp, in disagreement with my placing them in the HU camp.³ Blocher thinks

¹ "Exposition on the Book of the Psalms," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 8:309.

² Consult David Ponter's two-part article on Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement where he shows beyond a reasonable doubt that Calvin affirmed universal atonement. "Review Essay (Part One): John Calvin on the Death of Christ and The Reformation's Forgotten Doctrine of Universal Vicarious Satisfaction: A Review and Critique of Tom Nettles' Chapter in *Whomever He Wills*," *SWJT* 55.1 (Fall, 2012): 138-158; "Review Essay (Part Two)," vol. 55, no. 2 (Spring, 2013) : 252-70.

³ For the evidence that the later Fuller came to reject limited atonement, see Peter Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller and the Revival of Eighteenth Century Particular Baptist Life*, vol. 8, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 26-27. See also my "Preaching for a Great Commission Resurgence," 292-94, in *Great Commission Resurgence*, eds. Lawless & Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010).

many of my quotations “fail to convince because the flexibility of the language used by definite atonement supporters is not recognized...” (551). Concerning my approach to Fuller, Blocher says “some complements are needed to achieve a proper balance” (552).

Actually it is the other way around. Blocher fails to recognize the flexibility of the dualism of “intent” and “extent” in Fuller and Hodge. He confuses Hodge’s clear statement about Christ’s sin-bearing for the world with the issue of the universal offer (554). For Hodge, it is the universal nature of the atonement that grounds the universal offer, which is Hodge’s point in the very quotation Blocher cites (555).

Hodge clearly states that though Christ did not die “equally” for all men (as in Arminianism), yet he died for his “sheep” and “Church,” (as in Calvinism) and “He did all that was necessary, so far as a satisfaction to justice is concerned, all that is required for the salvation of all men.” (Hypothetical Universalism). If Christ’s death accomplished “all that is required for the salvation of all men,” then it cannot be a limited substitution as in the definite atonement scheme. Hodge affirmed Christ’s universal sin-bearing.⁴

Hodge carefully distinguishes between the purpose, design, and intent of the atonement from its extent.⁵ W. G. T. Shedd likewise shares the same theology.⁶

Rather than demonstrating Fuller and Hodge to be in the DA camp, Blocher’s analysis actually demonstrates the opposite.

Recall Blocher’s point about theological method at the beginning of his chapter. Showing in Hodge’s writings where he affirms limitation in the intent or the application of the atonement while overlooking statements where he affirms universal sin-bearing is, in fact, a theological method not up to par with that expressed in his prolegomena.

Definite Atonement & Hypothetical Universalism Compared.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:555. Notice also how Robert Dabney, Hodge’s contemporary, cites Hodge as affirming universal expiation. Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 527. Dabney also writes, “Certainly the expiation made by Christ is so related to all, irrespective of election, that God can sincerely invite all to enjoy its benefits, that every soul in the world who desires salvation is warranted to appropriate it, and that even a Judas, had he come in earnest, would not have been cast out.” See also Dabney’s comment, “Redemption is limited, i.e., to true believers, and is particular. Expiation is not limited” (Ibid., 528). Dabney states, “Christ made expiation for every man” (Ibid., 525).

⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:545-46.

⁶ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3:418 affirms the same unlimited sin-bearing in the atonement: “The expiation of sin is distinguishable from the pardon of it. The former, conceivably, might take place and the latter not. When Christ died on Calvary, the whole mass, so to speak, human sin was expiated merely by that death; but the whole mass was not pardoned merely by that death. The claims of law and justice for the sins of the whole world were satisfied by the ‘offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Heb. 10:10). . . .”

In Section three, Blocher addresses five matters:

- 1) Scripture, including Hebrews 2:9, and the negative inference fallacy.
- 2) The Love of God & the gospel invitation
- 3) Trinitarian harmony, the universal gospel offer, and personal assurance
- 4) The double payment argument
- 5) The sufficiency question

We can only touch on each of these briefly.

The Use of Scripture.

Blocher suggests that HUs overlook “natural understandings” of texts which on the surface support unlimited atonement (562). He takes up Hebrews 2:9 as an example. He asserts “man” is not part of the original. That is a translational issue. The text says that Christ died for “every one.” Whether “man” does or does not occur in the text is immaterial.

Blocher then moves to the following context of the passage which speaks of those who benefit from the atonement in an attempt to limit the meaning of Hebrews 2:9 to the elect. This fails to consider the preceding context of the quotation of Psalm 8 which connects the incarnation to the work of Christ for all people. It also fails to recognize the biblical distinction between the extent of the atonement, which is unlimited, and its application, which is limited.

Blocher notes my point about the negative inference fallacy being employed by DAs. “Fair enough” he states. He then sidesteps the issue and attempts to turn the tables:

“Nevertheless, the tendential logic that springs from such rather favors definite atonement” (563). This assertion is not backed up with any evidence.

Blocher concludes, “Piecemeal exegesis does not yield a clear-cut answer to the choice between definite atonement and Hypothetical Universalism. The evidence must be digested by theological reflection” (563). Of course, all would affirm this. But such a statement assumes that those who affirm HU engages in “piecemeal exegesis” while those who affirm DA “digest” the exegesis by “theological reflection.”

It is my observation that piecemeal exegesis is often the fault of some who argue for DA. DA is a theological deduction from Scripture, not so much a doctrine derived from clear exegesis of Scripture.

The Love of God & the Gospel Invitation.

Blocher rightly affirms God’s universal love and universal saving will (563-565).

Trinitarian Harmony, the Universal Gospel Offer, and Personal Assurance.

I have already addressed the issue of Trinitarian harmony and the universal gospel offer in previous reviews of chapters in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*. The discussion of personal assurance is brief and I will skip it here.

In this section, Blocher offers an inadequate response to Gary Shultz’s point about the gospel content of Paul’s kerygma to the unconverted Corinthians: “Christ died for our sins” in 1 Cor 15:1-3. He attempts two defeaters: 1) Paul does not reproduce the wording verbatim; 2) “for us” may have meant Paul’s team and any who would join them (568).

Yet this statement by Paul clearly implies he preached Christ died for the sins of all. Here Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the message he preached to them when he first came to Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). He clearly affirms the content of the gospel he preached in Corinth included the fact that “Christ died for our sins.”

Notice carefully Paul is saying this is what he preached pre-conversion, not post conversion. Thus, the “our” in his statement cannot be taken to refer to all the elect or merely the believing elect, which is what the high-Calvinist is forced to argue. How else, from a Reformed

perspective of limited atonement, could Paul preach to all people that Christ had died for their sins? He could not do so with any consistency.

The entire pericope of 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 should be kept in mind. Notice how Paul comes back around to what he had said in verse 3 when he gets to verse 11: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” The customary present tense in Greek used by Paul when he says “so we preach” along with the aorist tense in Greek for “believed” make it clear Paul refers to a past point in time when they believed what it was his custom to preach.

What did Paul preach to them in his evangelistic efforts to win all of the unsaved to Christ? He preached the gospel, which included “Christ died for our sins.” And so they believed. 1 Cor 15:3 is one of the strongest passages supporting unlimited atonement.

Double Payment Argument.

Blocher attempts to blunt the problems with double payment (570-74). Since I have addressed this issue in a previous review, I will not deal with it here.

I will, however, raise one smaller issue. Blocher responds to Gary Shultz’s point about universal reconciliation in Colossians 1 (574). Blocher quotes Shultz: “In order for Christ to reconcile all things to the Father, He had to pay for all sin, including the sin of the non-elect. Otherwise, some sin would be outside his atoning work and thus outside His cosmic triumph.”

Blocher then states that Shultz presumably would not assert that Christ died for the sins of fallen angels, “and therefore his cosmic triumph does not require his payment for the sins of all his enemies.” Shultz speaks of “all sins,” which in context means “all human sins,” including the sins of the non-elect. Blocher takes this and extends it beyond what Shultz says to include the fallen angels.

Atonement and Sufficiency.

Since I have addressed this issue in other chapter reviews, I shall be brief. Blocher argues the atonement is sufficient for the salvation of reprobates (the non-elect) “since it made certain the gift of faith” (574). This is problematic.

Blocher is trading on an intrinsic sufficiency of value, not an actual sufficiency such that were one of the non-elect to believe, he would be saved. It is impossible that such could be the

case for, by definition, there is no atonement for the non-elect. The atonement is in no way sufficient for the sins of the non-elect because no atonement exists for their sins.

Christ the Redeemer as Man.

Blocher attempts to argue the point that the Headship of Christ over “his” people necessitates definite atonement.

Blocher finds “a tension” with Andrew Fuller’s insistence that Christ’s death, considered irrespective of “the appointment of God, with regard to its application,” was “for man, not as elect or non-elect, but as sinners” (577-78). “What is this ‘sin’ in Fuller’s sentence, against which the wrath of God was discharged? . . . The “price paid” metaphor refers to the transaction itself, not to latter application” (578).

But no tension exists as Blocher fails to recognize Fuller affirmed unlimited expiation and distinguished the atonement’s extent from its application.

For Blocher, Christ died as the “Head” of a new humanity. Considering the largest community in which the structure of headship is established, and most radical import – the human genus – we may affirm both definite atonement and a universal reference. . . .” (578).

Blocher believes Christ’s headship as the New Adam grounds such propositions as man, in a generic sense, was redeemed on the cross; the “world” was reconciled (2 Cor. 5:19); and “every human being qua human being is concerned.”

“How is humanity involved?” Blocher queries. Christ appropriates “man” in a generic sense of humankind. “He creates in himself Jews and Gentiles ‘into one new Anthropos Considering the dimension of unity of humankind, he deserves to be called “the Savior of the world (John 14:42)” (579).

What of those who do not believe? For Blocher, the bond of human solidarity entails that Christ’s work, as Head of the genus, concerns all people. All are called to believe in Christ. If they refuse, they “cut themselves off from humanity as a genus: they confirm for themselves the Adamic condemnation” (579).

Blocher concludes this section: “Highlighting the organic dimension, the corporate character, of humanity illuminates the foundation in atonement of universal invitation, and why faith is required for enjoyment” (580).

But exactly how such is possible on Blocher’s terms is difficult to see. No foundation exists for a universal invitation because no foundation exists for the salvation of all who are

considered to be the non-elect. What one hand gives, the other takes away in Blocher's system of DA. It is difficult to see how Blocher can affirm DA, a "universal reference," and a universal gospel call (578).

CONCLUSION.

While I appreciate Blocher's chapter in many ways, I can't help but sense that he engages in a systemic misreading of some of the primary sources. His failure to note clear universal satisfaction language in Augustine, Fuller, and Hodge, not just universal offer language, is problematic.

In summary, there are six common presuppositions undergirding the arguments of these chapters in the systematic theology section of *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*:

1. Limited intent entails limited extent. The notion that God's intention in the atonement (to save the elect) entails a limitation in Christ's sin-bearing such that there is an imputation of the sins of the elect only to Christ at the cross.
2. Election entails limited extent. God's salvific intention is expressed in the divine decree of election, and election entails the notion that atonement is only made for the sins of the elect.
3. Penal substitution entails limited extent.
4. Hypothetical Universalism in all forms entails Trinitarian discord.
5. Old Testament priestly typology entails New Testament definite atonement.
6. There are only two options: either definite atonement or universalism.

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We have seen in the reviews of the chapters in the theological section that 1) these are theological deductions, and 2) none has clear Scriptural support.