

Review of Daniel Strange's Chapter on Those Who Never Hear the Gospel 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.

The final three chapters in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* address practical matters. In this chapter, Daniel Strange deals with the issue of the unevangelized.

Introduction.

In his introduction, Strange thinks universal atonement (UA) presents “insurmountable theological difficulties” (587). He suggests that unlimited atonement cannot be the basis of a well-meant gospel offer for those who never hear the gospel since “it makes no offer at all, thus making it ‘limited’” (587).

But this is certainly no fault of UA. It is not UA that makes the offer; it is Christians who make the offer on behalf of God.

According to those who hold to UA, there is an objective remedy for the sins of all people, regardless of whether it is offered or not, whether they hear the gospel or not, or whether they believe it once they hear it or not.

Strange continues: “As a result, further questions might be raised as to this atonement’s ‘objective’ qualitative nature (especially if a ‘penal’ rather than a ‘governmental’ theory of the atonement is espoused), and ultimately of God’s character and sovereignty. Christ has provided a *de jure* salvation for all, but *de facto* it is not accessible to all and is limited in its scope” (587).

The “objective nature” of the atonement is what it is whether people never hear the gospel or not. God’s character is not impugned if the gospel does not come to the unevangelized. Romans 1 seems to make that clear. Rather, it is the Church’s character that is impugned for lack of obedience to get the gospel to all the nations.

Interestingly, the same kind of argument with respect to God's character, namely, his universal saving love, could be made again DA.

This chapter is divided into two sections: 1) The question of the unevangelized in relation to UA; and 2) The question of the unevangelized in relation to DA.

The Unevangelized and Unlimited Atonement.

Strange immediately appeals to John Owen's Death of Death with a lengthy quotation.

Owen concluded either people can be saved apart from hearing the gospel, or the atonement must be constructed in a such a way that both the character of God and the unity of the economy of the Godhead is questioned (589).

This is a false dichotomy. It is not an either/or situation. I have addressed both issues of the character of God and Trinitarian disharmony in previous chapter reviews, so I will not cover that ground again here.

Strange proceeds to attempt to show that the atonement's objective accomplishment and subjective application is an untenable distinction (591). He queries: Can a universal atonement properly be called such when there are conditions on its application, and when not all for whom it is made hear about it?

Of course it can. The nature of conditional acceptance in and of itself indicates not all will meet the condition. Furthermore, the condition of repentance and faith for the atonement's application is placed by God himself.

Strange attempts to argue that UAs are in the same position as DAs with respect to the offer of the gospel. The unevangelized have no offer at all (592).

But there is a world of difference. UA provides the grounds for the universal offer of the gospel to all. DA does not. As I have pointed out numerous times in these chapter reviews, what is it that DA is offering the non-elect? Nothing. There is no gospel to offer them because there is no atonement made for their sins.

Referencing Robert Reymond, Strange states that UA eviscerates Christ's atoning work from its infinite intrinsic worth (593). Not at all. UAs affirm the atonement's infinite intrinsic worth and its extrinsic sufficiency to save all who believe, including every person on planet earth were they to believe because there is an atonement made for every person.

Strange asks, in what way is this category of people (those who never hear the gospel) savable if they don't have the opportunity to respond? The answer is really quite simple: they are not savable unless they believe the gospel, and they can't believe it unless they hear it. They are, nonetheless, culpable before God since they have the witness of both creation and conscience as in Romans 1:18-32.

The nature of God's objective atonement is not called into question on the UA position, as Strange suggests.

Strange then launches into a discussion of Pinnock and Hackett on the issue. He states they are "internally consistent" in making connection between UA and universal accessibility (594).

Pinnock's inclusivism is in error, as Strange rightly notes. (597)

Strange appeals to Miller's study of John 1:9 suggesting that the "light that shines in the world" is directed to those who respond to it. Here the "world" does not mean "world" but effectively means the elect (599). In previous reviews, I have already pointed out the problematic nature of this kind of exegesis.

Strange speaks of another difficulty for the UA position – the motivation for missions and evangelism "if everyone has access to respond to Christ outside of the human messenger" (599). But the vast majority of people who hold to UA also reject inclusivism.

The Unevangelized and Definite Atonement.

Strange devotes four pages to this final section. He attempts to demonstrate that DA possesses intra-systematic consistency, intra-Trinitarian harmony, and is commensurate with urgency in evangelism.

His basic position is simple: God has ordained that those chosen to salvation will hear the gospel.

He attempts to link the universality of sin with the particularity of grace as seen in the history of revelation and the revelation of history (602).

Strange rightly notes that defenders of UA will question the biblical and theological presuppositions of his case.

Strange's appeal to Acts 16:6-8 to support DA is strained at best (602). In fact, the passage has nothing to do with the extent of the atonement.

That some proponents of DA throughout history have shown an urgency in evangelism cannot be denied. What needs to be added is that many advocates of DA throughout church history have certainly lacked urgency in evangelism, and that because of their Calvinism, albeit a distorted version of it.

Strange assumes William Carey held to definite atonement, but offers no basis for this claim (604). Clearly Carey was a Calvinist, but as far as I am aware, there is no evidence in his writings that he held to DA.

Conclusion.

Strange's chapter does not appear to me to succeed in supporting DA or in showing UA to be untenable.

That some people groups are without the gospel is no less an acute problem for UA as for DA.

Finally, consider Calvin himself on this issue:

Yet notwithstanding, all they to whom our Lord Jesus Christ hath not preached his Gospel, shall not fail to perish without mercy. They cannot defend themselves by ignorance: I say that all the heathen folk and idolaters that ever were, must have their mouths stopped. And what shall become of us then, which have had our ears beaten daily with the message that God sendeth us: which is that he requireth nothing but that we should be drawn unto him, whereunto he encourageth, yea and beseecheth us, as we have seen in 2 Corinthians 5:20? Is it not a great shame for us, that God should so far abase himself in the person of his only son, that he should beseech us? Let us fall to atonement, saith he. And what hath he done on his side? What hath he offended us? Nay contrariwise, we cease not to provoke him daily against us, and yet he cometh to say unto us I will fall to atonement with you, whereas notwithstanding there is nothing but spitefulness in us, we be like little fiends, and to be short, we be damned and forlorn, and yet cometh he to seek unto us, and desireth nothing but to have the atonement made.¹

¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 2:20-21.

Here it seems that Calvin indicates there is an atonement made for the sins even of those who never hear the gospel, yet they remain guilty. Notice how his final sentence suggests a universal atonement. By the phrase “to have atonement made,” Calvin is saying that God desires to apply the atonement to any sinner that hears the external call such that their sins can be forgiven.