

Review of Sinclair Ferguson, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine?” Definite Atonement and the Cure of Souls,” in *From Heaven He Came & 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.

Sinclair Ferguson’s chapter appears in the practical section of the volume and addresses the issue of assurance in pastoral ministry from the perspective of limited atonement.

The bulk of the chapter is an analysis and critique of the 19th century Scottish Presbyterian pastor McLeod Campbell’s view of definite atonement and assurance. Campbell’s *The Nature of the Atonement* is his critique of penal substitutionary atonement and advocacy for a general atonement.

McLeod Campbell on the Nature & Extent of the Atonement.

Campbell’s key error, which Ferguson likewise assumes, is that penal substitution necessitates definite atonement. For Campbell, the only way to justify the biblical position of general atonement was to deny penal substitution.

Ferguson’s choice of Campbell to address the connection of the extent of the atonement with assurance of salvation is rooted in Campbell’s pastoral ministry. Campbell was deeply concerned about the lack of assurance of salvation he saw in many of his church members. He concluded that this was due to Federal theology’s emphasis on limited atonement “and that assurance was the fruit of recognizing evidences of grace as marks that one was among the elect” (612).

Response to Campbell’s Criticism of Penal Substitution & Definite Atonement.

Ferguson lists and responds to five of Campbell’s criticisms of penal substitution and definite atonement:

1. It makes justice a necessary attribute of God but love an arbitrary one (614-616).

Campbell argued that the atonement must be universal or God's character is impugned for loving some and not others.

Ferguson thinks Campbell has confused character and relationship. Ferguson responds that it is "just for the loving God to hate sin and even to reveal that he hates sinners. No intelligible interpretation of Malachi 1:2-3 . . . can make these words mean that God loves Jacob and Esau in the same sense and in the same way..." (615).

Ferguson accuses Campbell of confusing justice with punitive justice. The former is an essential attribute of God while the latter is a relational response due to sin.

2. Federal Calvinism makes the divine-human relationship essentially legal rather than filial (616-618).

Ferguson responds in two ways. First, filial relationship is a legal standing in Scripture as revealed in Pauline "adoption" language. Second, it is questionable whether Federal Calvinism views "the Edenic relation as fundamentally legal, but not gracious" (617).

3. Forgiveness is logically prior to repentance and prior to the atonement itself (618-620).

Ferguson's critique is chiefly that Campbell has confused a divine disposition of grace with a divine act of forgiveness (619).

4. The atonement is not a penal substitution (620-623).

According to Ferguson, Campbell viewed the atonement as an act of expiation for sins, but not penal substitution. There is no imputation of our guilt and punishment to Christ. Rather, via the incarnation and crucifixion, Christ perfectly repents for us.

J. B. Torrance, in his introduction to Campbell's *Nature of the Atonement*, disputes this claim by Ferguson and argues that Campbell did affirm penal substitution. Ferguson rightly points out that this concept of Christ's "repentance" is something of which the Bible itself never speaks as the "central key" to the atonement (621).

5. Definite atonement prohibits assurance of salvation (623-628).

From Campbell's viewpoint, how can one have assurance of salvation if one does not know that Christ died for him?

Ferguson is certainly correct to point out in response that the assurance of faith is not obtained prior to our salvation (624).

However, Ferguson errs in footnote 70 when he states that the reprobate have the same warrant to believe in Christ as do the elect. Likewise, his claim that on no occasion in the NT did the apostles preach the gospel in terms of "Christ died for you, therefore believe" is inaccurate (624).

First, from a limited atonement perspective, how could the reprobate have the same warrant to believe in Christ? There is no atonement made for their sins, hence no grounds exist on which they would ever be accepted by God if they were to repent and believe the gospel. The Reformed notion of total depravity and its entailment that no one will believe unless given efficacious grace does not lessen this problem at all.

Second, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 makes it clear that Paul's normal method of bringing the gospel to any group for the first time was to preach that "Christ died for our sins." See my remarks on this in the review of Blocher's chapter here: <http://bit.ly/1tMGkiF>.

Ferguson's attempt to extricate Federal theology from Campbell's criticism with respect to assurance only partially succeeds. Whereas Campbell overplays the criticism, Ferguson underplays it.

Definite Atonement & Christian Assurance.

A final, short section rounds out the chapter entitled "Definite Atonement and Christian Assurance" (628-630).

Here Ferguson asserts that definite atonement is not only well able to sustain Christian assurance, but in fact grounds it.

Actually it is not the question of the extent of the atonement that grounds Christian assurance, but the nature of the atonement and the Savior who made it that grounds it for all who repent and believe the gospel.

Secondly, neither Ferguson's appeal to the double payment argument nor his appeal to disruption in the Trinity offer support for definite atonement. Since I have already dealt with both of these issues in previous chapter reviews, I will not do so here in detail.

Ferguson's footnote 94 erects a straw man argument against Hypothetical Universalists. His assertion that Trinitarian disharmony is entailed in all forms of universal atonement overlooks the biblical distinction yet interrelationship among the intent, extent, and application of the atonement.

Ferguson states, according to HUs, that "the Father sets forth the Son as a real propitiation for the sins of some for whom that propitiation never actually propitiates. This remains a non-propitiating propitiation, which creates a double jeopardy" (629).

No, the propitiation concerns all sins and sinners, as 1 John 2:2 indicates. Ferguson fails to see the point that the atonement in and of itself does not secure its on application. The atonement is only applied to those who meet God's condition for salvation (not propitiation), which is repentance and faith.

In the HU approach, God intended that Christ substitute for the sins of all men, hence the extent of the atonement is unlimited, but God also intended that the atonement only be applied to the elect via the special call.

For all other non-Calvinist proponents of universal atonement, God intended that Christ substitute for the sins of all men, hence the extent of the atonement is unlimited. God also desired that the benefits of the atonement accrue to all people, though God also intended that the atonement be applied only to those who believe.

Conclusion.

The reader may wish to balance out Ferguson's critique of Campbell, (and T. F. & J. B. Torrance), by reading the 1996 edition of Campbell's *The Nature of the Atonement*, which includes a very helpful introduction of Campbell's thought by J. B. Torrance.