

Review of John Piper, “My Glory I will not Give to Another!” Preaching the Fullness of Definite Atonement to the Glory of God,” in *From Heaven He Came & Sought Her*, Part 1

BY David Allen.

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The final chapter in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* covers the subject of preaching and definite atonement. John Piper does the honors. This chapter is a fitting conclusion to the book as Piper attempts to show that preaching definite atonement redounds to the glory of God.

Introduction (633-637).

Piper asserts three things as foundational for his chapter:

1. The glory of God is the heart of the gospel and the end for which God created the world.
2. The central task of ministry and preaching is the magnifying of the glory of God. Every sermon should be expository according to Piper, to which I utter a hearty “Amen!”
3. The cross is the climax of the glory of God’s grace.

No qualms here.

Definite Atonement is a Significant Part of the Glory of God’s Grace (637-639).

Piper thinks that the wording of Ephesians 1:4-6 and Revelation 5:9 point to definite atonement. “God does not raise everyone from spiritual death. He raises those whom he ‘predestined for adoption as sons’ (1:5)...This means that in the atonement God designed and secured spiritual life and its resulting faith, for those whom he predestinated to sonship” (639).

There are five problems here.

1. These texts say nothing about the extent of the atonement.
2. Piper is assuming that predestination entails definite atonement. Nowhere in Scripture is this connection made.
3. He buys into the Council of Dort's notion, later developed by John Owen, that faith is something purchased by the atonement for the elect. Nowhere in Scripture is faith said to be purchased for the elect at the cross.
4. Piper appears to think and speak about the elect in an abstract sense. This kind of generalization blurs the distinction between the believing elect and all the elect in the abstract. From a Reformed perspective, the "elect" are actually in two groups: 1) those who have believed, and 2) those yet to believe. Piper is conflating these two. But he does not seem to realize that the texts he cites pertain to believers, not the elect in the abstract. Piper is reading Reformed theology into the text. He takes what is true of believers in Ephesians 1:4-6 and then seeks to apply this to all the elect as an abstract class; an illegitimate hermeneutical move.
5. With respect to Revelation 5:9, even Heinrich Bullinger, a leading sixteenth century Calvinist, in a sermon on Revelation 5:9–10, says this "signifies an universality, for the Lord has died for all: but that all are not made partakers of this redemption, it is through their own fault."¹

The Love of God and Definite Atonement (639-642).

¹ Heinrich Bullinger, *A Hundred Sermons Upon the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (London: John Daye, Dwelling over Aldersgate, 1573), 79-80.

Piper argues for a “unique love of God for his elect that accounts for the unique effect of definite atonement in saving them” (640). He continues: “Others are not made alive. Therefore, this love is a distinguishing love. It is not given to all. It is given to sinners who are predestined for sonship” (640).

Notice the logical fallacy in this argument. Granting for the sake of argument that we can distinguish different kinds of love (God’s saving love for the elect and general love for the non-elect), how does this support or entail definite atonement? It does not.

Piper succumbs to the negative inference fallacy in his argument. He presumes that a special love for the elect entails no atonement for the non-elect.

Piper demonstrates an inability to properly distinguish between the Arminian and Amyraldian views on God’s love. He states concerning both Arminians and Amyraldians: “The preciousness of this personal love is muted where it is seen as an instance of the same love that Christ has for those who finally perish. It is not the same” (641).

Amyraldians (and all other Hypothetical Universalists I might add) distinguish degrees in God’s love for the elect and non-elect just as those who support definite atonement do. Piper has mischaracterized Amyraldians on this.

From a Reformed perspective, God’s love for the elect is greater in degree but also in purpose since it involves a purpose to save only a select number of people. Non-Calvinists would of course disagree with this limited purpose.

Additionally, most non-Calvinists believe it is not necessarily wise to talk about degrees in God’s love, especially when the analogies given come from human life and love. Perhaps God’s love should not be measured by degrees of love as found among humans since God’s love is perfect and ours is not.

In this same vein, in his sermon on “For Whom Did Christ Die?” Piper attacks Arminianism as a theology of self-salvation. He says, “In order to say that Christ died for all men in the same way, the Arminian must limit the atonement to a powerless opportunity for men to save themselves from the terrible plight of depravity.² This is a caricature of the Arminian position.

The New Covenant & Definite Atonement (642-648).

²Piper, “For Whom Did Christ Die? & What Did Christ Actually Achieve on the Cross for Those for Whom He Died?” www.monergisim.com/thethreshold/articles/piper/_atonement.html2/26/2009.

Piper states that Christ secured not only that possibility that all who believe will be saved, but also that all who are called will believe. This is what makes the atonement definite according to Piper. He continues, “The faith of God’s chosen and called was purchased by the “blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28)” (642-43).

The term definite atonement refers to this truth – when God sent his Son to die, he had in view the definite acquisition of a group of underserving sinners, whose faith and repentance he obtained by the blood of his Son. This is a divine purpose in the cross – to purchase and create the saving faith of a definite, freely chosen, unworthy, rebellious group of sinners (643).

Actually, all Calvinists who affirm an unlimited atonement could easily agree with Piper’s statement above, with one exception: his claim concerning faith as purchased by the cross. See below.

It is erroneous to state that what makes the atonement definite is only God’s intent to save all the called who will believe. All Amyraldians and Hypothetical Universalists believe this as well. What makes the atonement “definite” as the term is used by all the authors in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* is the affirmation that Christ only substituted for the sins of the elect.

One must properly distinguish between the atonement’s intent and extent. Piper is confusing intent and extent in his statement above.

Faith Purchased by Christ on the Cross.

Several times in this section, and the entire chapter, Piper speaks of “faith” being “purchased” by the atonement. This is the argument developed by John Owen in his *Death of Death*. Faith is purchased by Christ on the cross and bestowed on the elect unconditionally. The importance of this argument for Owen can be seen in his admission that if this is not true, then universal atonement and free will is “established.”

For Owen (and Piper), God designs that not only the goal (salvation of the elect) but the means to that goal (faith) are purchased by Christ in the atonement. Faith is bestowed by God “absolutely upon no condition at all” according to Owen. Thus, the elect have a right to the means of salvation purchased for them by Christ.

All of this is rooted in Owen's concept of the "Covenant of Redemption," which Piper never mentions but which underlies his argument. The "Covenant of Redemption" is a contract in eternity past between the Father and the Son to save the elect through the means of the Son's death on the cross. The Son agrees to die for the elect only.

There is no biblical statement affirming such a covenant and I critique this notion in the review of Carl Trueman's chapter: <http://www.drdauidlallen.com/theology/carl-trueman-on-john-owen-the-covenant-of-redemption-and-definite-atonement-review-9-from-heaven-he-came-and-sought-her/>.

Piper cannot demonstrate anywhere from Scripture the notion that faith is something "purchased" for the elect at the cross. Such language finds no support in the NT.

Where Owen and Piper err is in thinking that faith as a gift is equivalent to faith as a purchase. There is no causal link between the death of Christ and subjective faith. In Piper's scheme, faith becomes something of a commodity, an object instead of a relational response. This is a category confusion on his part.

"Gift" is the language of grace. "Purchase" is the language of rights. Owen's notion of the "purchase of faith" is a theoretical construct dependent on the so called "Covenant of Redemption" and a commercialistic understanding of the atonement. In fact, Owen even states that the elect are owed salvation and have a "right" to it.

Four-Point Calvinism? (648-656).

Piper critiques the views of Bruce Ware, professor of theology at Southern Seminary, Gary Shultz (a PhD graduate who studied under Ware and wrote a dissertation on the extent of the atonement, which has since been published), along with Gerry Breshears, professor of Systematic Theology at Western Seminary, who co-authored a book on the atonement with Mark Driscoll.

Piper recognizes that so called "four-point Calvinism" is not new (the section heading here reads "A Modern Appearance of an Old Error" — assuming the section headings are his and not the editors).

Piper chooses not to address any of the historical material on this subject as do many in *From Heaven He Came*. Ware has not published on the subject and Piper is basing his discussion on Ware's unpublished class notes and some personal correspondence. Furthermore, Piper admits

he has not read Shultz's dissertation, but is basing his critique on a twelve page article by Shultz published in 2010. Finally, the relevant material in the Breshears/Driscoll volume is 20 pages.

The uniformed reader might get the impression from Piper that moderate Calvinism (4-point Calvinism) is somehow a latecomer or even an aberration in Reformed theology. Notice how Piper refers to the "traditional Reformed view of definite atonement" (656). On the same page one finds this section heading: "Is a Revision of the Historic Reformed View of Definite Atonement Necessary?"

Limited atonement is a traditional view within Reformed theology, but it is not the traditional view, nor is it the oldest view within the Reformed camp.

Moderate Calvinism was the original position of early Reformed theology. Virtually every one, if not every one, of the first generation among the Reformed held it. Furthermore, Richard Muller, among others, including some in this book, have demonstrated that Amyraldianism and Hypothetical Universalism are within and not outside the boundaries of Confessional Reformed theology.

Piper's approach is to indict Ware on the charge of the double payment argument. He thinks Ware "has failed to distinguish between a penal sentence and the actual execution of that sentence" (650).

I have already critiqued the double payment argument here in a previous chapter review. For details, see here: <http://www.drdauidlallen.com/bible/limited-atonement-the-double-payment-argument-review-of-williams-chapter-in-from-heaven-he-came-and-sought-her/>. Suffice it to say that the double payment argument has been critiqued by many within the Reformed tradition, including the likes of John Davenant, Richard Baxter, Edward Polhill, Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, and W. G. T. Shedd.

Piper misses Ware's point about the elect remaining under the wrath of God until they repent and have faith (Eph. 2:1-3). Of course the sentence has not been carried out on them. The point is, as Piper himself admits, "Until the point of faith, they were heading to hell."

Piper explains the time delay between the atonement and the application of the atonement with the analogy of a prisoner whose debt has been paid, but the paperwork takes time to process and be applied to the prisoner.

This is a very poor analogy and does not explain the fact that even the unbelieving elect, remain under the wrath of God, and would go to hell should they die before they believe, as Piper has admitted. No other meaning can be assigned to Eph. 2:1-3.

Are People in Hell Now Reconciled to God through Christ?

Piper's further attempts to explain the difference between the wrath of God for the unbelieving elect and the "non-elect" in hell are also problematic.

He returns to his critique of Ware at this point. At issue for Piper is Ware's use of the term "reconciliation" (652-655).

Piper fails to discern that the biblical concept of reconciliation à la 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 involves both objective and subjective reconciliation.³ By the death of Christ on the cross, there is a sense in which God is reconciled to the world in that the payment for sin has been made.

But 2 Cor. 5:18-21 goes on to explain that in addition to this objective reconciliation, there must occur a subjective reconciliation whereby people turn to God through Christ by repentance and faith.

All unbelievers in hell were the beneficiaries of God's objective reconciliation through Christ's death on the cross. Had they repented and believed the gospel, they would have been saved. But the Scripture is clear that no one is saved by this objective reconciliation alone. There must be subjective reconciliation as well. This is Ware's point which Piper criticizes.

Although I might word some of Ware's points differently, (I would agree with Piper's demurral at using the term "peace with God" to describe those in hell), yet in essence Ware is correct in what he affirms about reconciliation.

³ See Leon Morris' defense of this point in his excellent treatment of reconciliation in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 214-250.