

**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 and Sought Her* – Part 2.**

**BY David Allen.**

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**Definite Atonement & the Free Offer of the Gospel.**

Piper asserts his belief that the free offer of the gospel to all people is one of the “benefits” or “intentions” of God in the atonement (657-664).

Scripture teaches the “free offer” of the gospel to all. But this is not something that the atonement itself “accomplished,” especially on Piper’s view of things.

In fact, this is one of the key problems with definite atonement and is one of two main reasons why so many in the Reformed tradition like Bruce Ware (see Part 1) reject it (the other being the exegetical evidence is clearly against limited atonement).

Piper correctly states that Shultz argues one cannot preach the gospel sincerely to all people on the platform of definite atonement: “If Christ did not pay for the sins of the non-elect, then it is impossible to genuinely offer salvation to the non-elect, since there is no salvation available to offer them” (658).

Piper takes strong umbrage at this claim.

We need to note that this claim articulated by Shultz has been made by many in the Reformed tradition since the days of the ascendancy of limited atonement in the late 16th century.

Piper, quoting Roger Nicole, totally misses the point of Shultz’s argument: “if the terms of the offer be observed, that which is offered be actually granted” (658-59).

Certainly no one disputes this. All Calvinists and all non-Calvinists agree with this statement. Piper attempts to justify the validity of an “offer” if the one offering “always and without fail gives what is offered to everyone who meets the terms of the offer” (659).

But is this all that is necessary? What would constitute a valid offer? At least four elements would seem to be necessary.

1. A sincere desire on the part of the one offering to give something.
2. The one offering possesses that which he offers.
3. The one offering desires that the thing offered be accepted.
4. The recipients of the offer are able to fulfill the condition of the offer.

The key point Shultz is making is that one has to be able to give what is offered to any and everyone who comes. The simple fact is, according to definite atonement, if one of the non-elect were to respond to the offer, it would be impossible for God to give salvation for no atonement exists for the non-elect to be given to any one of them.

Piper, following John Murray, attempts to blunt the force of this by arguing that what is offered in the gospel is Christ. This is a clever sidestepping of the issue. Of course it is Christ who is offered! But on what grounds is Christ offered to all? He can be offered on the grounds that He has paid the price for every person's sin.

Furthermore, though Piper himself does not make the claim, it will not do to argue that the non-elect will not come since they are not given the effectual call. This, too, sidesteps the issue.

Here is an example of Piper's confused logic:

What is offered to the world, to everyone who hears the gospel, is not a love or a saving achievement designed for all and therefore especially for no one; but rather, what is offered is the absolute fullness of all that Christ achieved for his elect. This fullest of all possible achievements is offered to all — because Christ is offered to all. And thus definite atonement turns out to be the only ground of a fully biblical offer of the gospel (659-660).

1. Piper says what is offered is offered to the “world, to everyone who hears the gospel.”
2. What is offered is not something “designed” for all.

3. What is offered to the whole world is the “absolute fullness of all that Christ achieved for his elect.”

How, by any stretch of logic, can that which Christ designed and achieved only for the elect be offered to everyone in the world?

Piper’s conclusion, “And thus definite atonement turns out to be the only ground of a fully biblical offer of the gospel,” is totally unwarranted.

This claim is astounding to me. Piper thinks that all Calvinists and non-Calvinists who affirm unlimited atonement do not have grounds for offering the gospel in a “fully biblical” manner.

Piper turns from a consideration of the validity of the universal offer to the genuineness of that offer (661-64).

First, Piper mentions those who appeal to God’s foreknowledge as problematic for the sincerity of the gospel offer. I do not know of a single Calvinist or non-Calvinist who makes the argument that the offer of salvation to all cannot be sincere since Christ knows who will accept and who will not. The reason the offer cannot be sincere on a definite atonement scheme is because the non-elect are being offered something that does not, in fact, exist for them.

Second, Piper states that the “bottom line objection” is not what God knows, but what God desires. Piper takes the position of most Calvinists by arguing that God is able to desire something sincerely, yet nevertheless decide that what he desires will not come to pass.

But again, Piper engages in a subtle shift away from the issue at hand. The issue is not the question of God’s two wills as many affirm in Reformed theology. The issue is our offering something to the non-elect which does not exist for them to receive.

Piper never answers this question. He rather engages in futile evasions. His argument here is off point and is simply a red herring. I might also add that it is ultimately incoherent to argue that we do not offer people the possibility of salvation. Even on the Reformed understanding of salvation, salvation for the elect is both possible and inevitable because of election and efficacious calling. Unless one wants to argue for justification in eternity or justification at the cross (Hyper-Calvinist errors), then one has to affirm Christ’s death make’s possible salvation until the point of faith when that salvation is applied to the elect.

The Atonement’s Sufficiency & Definite Atonement.

Piper fails to address this issue directly in his chapter, but it is a vital issue for the question of the extent of the atonement and preaching.

Several points are in order.

1. If limited atonement is correct, Jesus did not substitute himself on the cross for the sins of the non-elect.

2. Therefore, it is impossible that the non-elect could ever be saved since there is no atonement made for their sins. They are in the same unsaveable state they would be if Jesus had never come at all.

3. It is impossible that the atonement can ever be described as sufficiently able to save the non-elect in any way other than hypothetical: something can't be sufficient for anyone for whom it is non-existent. To suggest otherwise is simply to engage in word games, obfuscation, or equivocation.

4. Further complications emerge concerning the preaching of the gospel. How can preachers universally and indiscriminately offer the gospel in good faith to all people, which clearly includes many who are non-elect, when there is no gospel to offer them, that is, when there is no satisfaction for all their sins? The usual response is that we don't know who the elect are, so we offer the gospel to all. But this misses the point and the problem. The issue is not that we don't know who the elect are. That is a given. The issue is we are offering something to all people, including those who turn out to be non-elect, that indeed does not exist for all to whom the offer is made. An offer made to all sinners entails contradiction as the preacher knows that the satisfaction for sins by Christ on the cross was not made for all to whom the gospel comes, but pretends and speaks as if there is a legitimate offer to all to whom the gospel is preached.

5. The problem is even more acute with respect to the gospel offer by God when it is understood that it is God Himself making the offer through us. Second Corinthians 5:18-20 makes it clear that it is God offering salvation to all people through the church on the grounds of the atonement of Christ. If He Himself has limited that substitution to only the elect, how can He make such an offer genuinely to all people? It would appear such is not possible.

6. If Christ did not die for the sins of all people, what exactly is it unbelievers are guilty of rejecting? There is no atonement for their sins for them to reject! Unbelief of the gospel by its very definition involves rejection of God's provision of grace through Christ's death. The Scripture makes use of universal exhortations to believe the gospel. Definite atonement deprives these commands of their significance.

Calvinists who affirm definite atonement cloud the issue of sufficiency when they tell us that Christ's death is sufficient in the sense that if anyone believes the gospel, he will find a sufficient atonement for his sins. Therefore, all people are saveable, insofar as if anyone believes, he will be saved. No one doubts that! That proposition is true as far as it goes because it only speaks to the causal relationship between faith and salvation: anyone who truly believes will certainly be saved.

But Calvinists exhibit their confusion on this issue when asked why this is so. Their response: because there is an atonement of infinite value able to be applied to the one who believes. Of course there is. But ask the question this way: suppose one of the non-elect should believe, could they be saved? Not according to the definite atonement position because no satisfaction for sins exists for the non-elect.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine that Christ had not died at all on the cross. Now, in such a scenario, imagine this statement: "if anyone believes in Christ, he shall be saved." Such a statement is meaningless nonsense and is, in fact, false. In this scenario, there is no means provided for anyone to be saved regardless of whether they believe or not. This is precisely where the non-elect stand in relation to the cross of Christ and their sin in the definite atonement scheme.

If there is no atonement for some people, then those people are not saveable. If no atonement exists for some, how is it possible that the gospel can be offered to those people for whom no atonement exists? If anyone is not saveable, he is not offerable. One cannot offer the gospel in any consistent way to someone for whom no atonement exists.

Only universal atonement grounds the free offer of the gospel to all people.

There is a provision of forgiveness for all to whom the gospel comes. There is a provision of forgiveness for all who come to the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Some may try to evade the issue by arguing that the non-elect will not believe because they cannot believe apart from effectual calling. There are two problems with this response. First, it begs the question whether the Reformed understanding of total depravity as total inability and the Reformed notion of effectual calling are correct. Second, even if these are correct, the problem is not lessened: one cannot offer something to another in good faith when that "something" does not exist.

Summing up the Problems with Piper's Chapter.

Adherence to definite atonement negatively impacts three areas of practical theology.

### 1) The Problem of the Diminishing of God's Universal Saving Will

Calvinists have trouble defending God's universal saving will from the platform of limited atonement. The basic issue is this: if Christ did not die for the non-elect, how can this be reconciled with passages of Scripture such as John 17:21,23; 1 Tim. 2:4-6; and 2 Pet 3:9 that affirm God desires the salvation of all people? Moderate Calvinists and non-Calvinists have no trouble here since they affirm Christ did indeed die for the sins of all people, hence God can make "the well-meant offer" to all.

Without belief in the universal saving will of God and a universal extent in Christ's sin-bearing, there can be no well-meant offer of the salvation from God to the non-elect who hear the gospel call.

### 2) Problems for the Genuine Offer of the Gospel in Evangelism

We are to express and display God's love for humanity in the way we command all men to repent, in our preaching of the gospel, in our compassionate invitations, and in our indiscriminate offerings of Christ to all. Christ's own heart and ministry, in this respect, is our pattern. We are to point the lost to the sufficiency of Christ to save them. In addition to Christ's express evangelistic commands and God's will that all be saved, Christ's actual sufficiency in his atonement for all should also form a basis for our evangelism.

Limited atonement undermines the well-meant gospel offer. We are to evangelize because God wills all men to be saved and has made atonement for all men, thus removing the legal barriers that necessitate their condemnation. Christ died not only for "sinners" but for the sins of all sinners. When Calvinists use the terminology "Christ died for sinners," the term "sinners" becomes something of a code word for "the elect only." In order to be consistent with their theology, Calvinists must resort to the deliberately vague statement "Christ died for sinners."

### 3) Problems for Preaching

Anything that makes the preacher hesitant to make the bold proclamation that “Christ died for your sins” is wrong. If one thinks it is true that Christ only suffered for some, preaching will be deeply affected. The preacher does not know who the elect are, so he must preach to all as if Christ’s death is applicable to them, even though he knows and believes all are not capable of salvation. This makes the preacher operate on the basis of something he knows to be untrue. This is a problem for the pulpit.

From the standpoint of preaching, the free and well-meant offer of the gospel for all people necessarily presupposes that Christ died for the sins of all men.

Piper’s Conclusion: Preach the Fullness of Definite Atonement.

Piper concludes that the aim of preaching is to display the fullness of God’s glory. “The glory of the cross is the fullness of its definite achievement. Therefore, we diminish the glory of the cross and the glory of grace and the glory of God when we diminish definite atonement” (667).

Just the opposite is true. There is no statement in Scripture that says Christ died only for the sins of the elect. There are many statements that affirm Christ died for the sins of all.

Definite atonement represents a departure from the historic Christian consensus that Jesus suffered for the sins of all humanity. 2) Biblically, the doctrine of limited atonement simply does not reflect the teaching of Scripture. 3) Theologically and logically, limited atonement is flawed and ultimately indefensible. 4) Practically, limited atonement creates serious problems for God’s love and universal saving will; it provides an insufficient ground for evangelism by undercutting the well-meant gospel offer; and it undermines the bold proclamation of the gospel in preaching.

Definite atonement is a distortion of the gospel. When we fail to preach the gospel of 1 Corinthians 15:3, which includes preaching the fact of Christ’s death for the sins of all people, we diminish the glory of the cross and the glory of grace and the glory of God . . . and the glory of God’s love.

The doctrine of limited atonement truncates the gospel and the glory of God by sawing off the arms of the cross too close to the stake.

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God's glory is indeed what it is all about. Unlimited atonement brings God not just "greater glory" but maximal glory.