

Review of David S. Hogg, “Sufficient for All, Efficient for Some: Definite Atonement in the Medieval Church,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective – Part 4*

BY David Allen.

Originally posted at <http://drdavidallen.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.

Hogg’s chapter focuses on three figures (two prominent and one lesser-known) in the Medieval period. He begins the chapter with the statement that it is “often assumed that expression and defense of definite atonement lacked clarity or support until the 16th and 17th centuries. With respect to the medieval church, such an assumption is inaccurate and misleading” (75).

This statement itself is misleading. It is accurate in the sense that support for definite atonement can be found in Gottschalk, as Hogg notes. It is inaccurate in that outside of Gottschalk there is no support for definite atonement from either Peter Lombard or Thomas Aquinas as Hogg attempts to show. Hogg has misinterpreted both on the issue.

Hogg notes that theologians during this era wrote about other reformed doctrines in a manner “that is not only consistent with later Reformation expressions of definite atonement, but preparatory and foundational for this doctrine.” Here Hogg is referring primarily to the Lombardian formula with respect to the atonement: sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect. This is a common refrain in his chapter. But, as we shall see, Medieval theologians do not write about the extent of the atonement in a way that is consistent with the stream of later Reformed theology that advocated definite atonement.

Hogg begins his treatment with Gottschalk. Most of what he says about Gottschalk is fine. Gottschalk did indeed hold essentially the same position on definite atonement as many Calvinists hold today. What Hogg is not as clear about is the fact that Gottschalk and a few of his supporters were the only ones to hold this position during the medieval period.

One must remember that definite atonement asserts that Christ only shed his blood for the sins of the elect. This was not the position of the medieval church. Hogg is simply in error when he asserts that definite atonement “was presented to theological students as the dominant view” (80). Hogg appeals to Lombard’s Sentences which were used in all theological training as evidence. But this assumes Lombard taught definite atonement, and there is no clear evidence that he did.

When Hogg states concerning Lombard, “For Peter, Christ died for the elect . . . ,” (80) I presume he intends to convey that Lombard believed Christ died only for the elect, and that Hogg is basing this on his interpretation of the Lombardian formula. But the formula does not state Christ died for the sins of the elect only. In fact, its original meaning was that Christ died for the sins of all but was only applied to those who believed (the elect).

Lombard clearly affirms in 3.20.5 of the Sentences that Christ as priest offered himself for the sins of all with respect to the sufficiency of the satisfaction, but Christ offered himself for the elect as to its efficiency. This is the interpretation given the statement by medieval theologians and the earliest reformers.

The Lombardian formula would later be revised from its original meaning and intent in the late 16th and early 17th century by Beza and others.

Following Beza, some began to revise the formula to use hypothetical language such that Christ’s death “could have been” instead of “was” a ransom for the sins of all people. John Owen was conscious of the fact that he was revising Lombard’s formula by putting it in hypothetical terms in an effort to support his view of definite atonement. Richard Baxter took him to task for what he called Owen’s “new, futile evasion.” William Cunningham acknowledges this revision in vol. 2 of his Historical Theology.

Beza’s criticism of the Lombardian formula launched a new stage in the development of the doctrine of limited atonement. Up until Beza, the Lombardian formula was accepted by Calvin and all Reformers as acknowledging that Christ died for the sins of all, but the atonement was only applied to the elect.

Hogg also erred when he stated that “God’s foreknowledge and elective purposes imply, if not state plainly, that Christ died for the elect” (85). There is nothing in either that implies, much less “states plainly” that Christ died only for the elect. It is Hogg, not Lombard, who contends that the question of predestination necessitates definite atonement (88).

Notice how Hogg states that Lombard believed the application of the atonement was “intended” for the elect” (88). This is an entirely different question than the “extent” of the atonement. Hogg, like most of the authors in this volume, fails to distinguish the intent of the atonement from its extent, and its application.

Hogg concludes that, considered as a whole, Lombard’s “theology is consistent with later articulations of definite atonement...” (89), and that “the seeds of the doctrine of definite atonement were present in the schools and churches” (89).

I thought Lombard affirmed definite atonement with his formula? It sounds like even Hogg is not convinced. Such would only be true if Lombard held to definite atonement, and there is no clear evidence that he did. In fact, there is clear evidence he did not.

Hogg completely misinterprets the historical data when he says “Definite atonement is not a minority view in the medieval church” (89). Of course it was! The only one who clearly advocated it was Gottschalk, and those who supported him.

Hogg then turns his attention to Aquinas (89-95). He immediately informs us that Aquinas did not address the issue specifically (90). In fact, Hogg even points out that Aquinas states, on the basis of 1 John 2:2, Christ died for the sins of the whole human race (90). This is not definite atonement.

Nevertheless, Hogg says Aquinas endorsed the idea that the blood of Christ was shed for the elect alone (90-91). How could he, if he also affirmed Christ died for the sins of the “whole human race”? Hogg cannot have it both ways with Aquinas. Either Aquinas believed Christ died only for the sins of the elect or Christ died for the sins of the whole world.

Hogg’s logic appears to operate along these lines:

Aquinas believed in predestination.

Belief in predestination entails belief in definite atonement.

Therefore, Aquinas believed in definite atonement.

Hogg’s appeal to Aquinas’ use of “many” in Summa, Question 78, The Form of the Sacrament, Article 3, provides no evidence for definite atonement. In context, Aquinas is addressing the preferred verbiage to be used at the Eucharist. His reference to “many” refers to elect Gentiles. Here is the context:

Objection 8. Further, as was already observed (48, 2; 49, 3), Christ’s Passion sufficed for all; while as to its efficacy it was profitable for many. Therefore it ought to be said: “Which shall be shed for all,” or else “for many,” without adding, “for you.”

Reply to Objection 8. The blood of Christ’s Passion has its efficacy not merely in the elect among the Jews, to whom the blood of the Old Testament was exhibited, but also in the Gentiles; nor only in priests who consecrate this sacrament, and in those others who partake of it; but likewise in those for whom it is offered. And therefore He says expressly, “for you,” the Jews, “and for many,” namely the Gentiles; or, “for you” who eat of it, and “for many,” for whom it is offered.

It is not possible to conclude from this, as Hogg does, that Christ's blood "was shed for the elect alone" (90-91). Aquinas' use of "many" is no proof of definite atonement. It rather speaks to the efficacy of the sacraments for believers as the context demonstrates.

With respect to Aquinas' statements on 1 Timothy 2:4, Hogg misses the fact that Aquinas takes the "will" to be God's antecedent will and "all men" means "all without exception." Aquinas is not saying that God wills "all kinds of men to be saved." This is a serious misreading of Aquinas (94-95).

Hogg asserts that Aquinas' theology is "in keeping with the doctrine of definite atonement" (95). It would seem such is not the case.

Hogg concludes with this statement: "It is true that these theologians did not define a comprehensive articulation of definite atonement, but it is also true that when the late sixteenth-and seventeenth century Reformers did, they were not breaking new ground but continuing to water seeds that had been planted long before them" (95).

This statement needs qualification. Not only did medieval theologians not define a "comprehensive articulation" of definite atonement, but with the exception of Gottschalk, and a few others who agreed with him, the Medieval theologians did not assert definite atonement.

Hogg's chapter would be more historically accurate had he concluded such.

There are some serious methodological problems in this chapter. Hogg does not survey the full range of Aquinas' statements on the question "for whose sins did Jesus die?" He misses the many points where Aquinas affirms an unlimited extent with respect to the atonement.