

Review of Raymond Blacketer, “Blaming Beza: The Development of Definite Atonement in the Reformed Tradition,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.¹

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.

Raymond Blacketer attempts to ward off the challenge that Theodore Beza developed Calvin’s theology into what became known as definite atonement. Blacketer believes there is “a clearly identifiable trajectory of thought in Christian tradition that can be described as particularist” and links this with God’s “intention” to save only the elect (125).

Blacketer is thoroughly conversant with the literature on Beza and his chapter is chock full of helpful and substantive footnotes.

The chapter contains several helpful points in the discussion. First, Blacketer correctly notes that the phrase “limited atonement” is misleading (121), since it derives from the acronym TULIP which was not used to describe the Canons of Dort until the early 20th century. Second, he correctly notes that Amyraldianism, as a form of hypothetical universalism, was never considered to be outside the boundaries of confessional Calvinism (122). Third, he rightly cautions that one should be careful not to read the results of later debates back into Calvin’s thought (122). Fourth, Blacketer correctly identifies the problem of some 20th century Calvin scholarship that attempted to read Calvin through the filter of Barth and neo-orthodoxy (123). Fifth, he rightly notes the problems with attempting to pit Calvin against later Reformed scholasticism (124).

However, his treatment is not without its problems. Blacketer errs logically and historically when he states that Calvin’s views on election and God’s sovereignty extend the particularist trajectory “and exclude a universal, indefinite satisfaction and redemption obtained in some manner by Christ which would be potentially (not simply hypothetically) available to each human individual” (125). As we have seen historically, there is no “particularist trajectory” in the patristic era, the medieval period, or even in Calvin. Logically, such a statement forecloses on Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement by begging the question, something Blacketer has already indicated one cannot and should not do.

¹ Blacketer makes the same arguments for limited atonement in Raymond Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (IVP Academic: Downers Grove, Illinois), 304-23.

Blacketer confuses the question of “intent” with that of “extent” when he refers to this particularist trajectory “that identifies those to whom God intends to bestow the benefits of Christ’s satisfaction as the elect alone” (125). Of course it is true that Calvin and the earliest leaders of the Reformed tradition believed this with respect to the “intent” of the atonement.” Where Blacketer errs is in his assumption that they also believed this with respect to the “extent” of the atonement, something they in fact never state. This is Blacketer’s assumption. He does not seem to distinguish between “intent” and “extent” here.

His statement concerning the death of Christ excluding what “would be potentially (not simply hypothetically) available to each human individual” (125) is also problematic. Hypothetical universalism actually asserts the potentiality that each human individual could be saved if they were to believe because there is an atonement made for his sins. There is nothing “hypothetical” about the extent of the atonement for the sins of all people in Hypothetical Universalism. Thus, I’m not sure what Blacketer means when he contrasts “potential” with “hypothetical.”

Blacketer considers Beza’s analysis of 1 Tim 2:4, where he notes, like Calvin and Augustine before him, Beza interprets this passage to refer to classes of people, “not every individual” (128). He states that Augustine’s “exegetical strategy” with texts using “all” in the context of atonement “means all classes” and “not every individual,” and states this was frequently Calvin’s approach as well (128-29). (See my comments on this in the review of Paul Helm’s chapter.)

But Blacketer does not take note of the fact that Augustine never taught definite atonement and in fact in numerous places in his writings clearly taught universal atonement. Not the least of examples which can be culled from his writings, as I have previously noted, is Augustine’s statement that Christ died for the sins of Judas. The same could be said with respect to Calvin’s many statements about “all” or “world” where in several atonement contexts he clearly does not restrict their meaning.

Take Calvin’s comments on Romans 5:18, for example: “Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive Him.”² Likewise, consider Calvin’s comments on Colossians 1:14: “He says that this redemption was procured through the blood of Christ, for by the sacrifice of his death all the sins of the world have been expiated.”³

As I have pointed out in “The Atonement: Limited or Universal?” in *Whosoever Will: a Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, some Calvinists interpret passages such

² J. Calvin. *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, trans. by R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 117–18.

³ J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, eds., David Torrance and Thomas Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 308.

as 1 Timothy 2:4 to refer to classes of people while at the same time affirming a universal atonement. Blacketer errs in assuming that if one reads 1 Tim 2:4 in a restricted sense, then such is evidence one must affirm limited atonement. He refers to Luther who takes a similar reading of 1 Tim 2:4, but it is clear that Luther did not affirm definite atonement and did indeed affirm unlimited atonement.

Blacketer is correct to point out that Beza's Tabula Praedestinationis "does not contain an explicit doctrine of definite atonement" (132).

Blacketer attempts to deduce from Calvin's reading of 1 John 2:2 evidence that Calvin held to definite atonement. But note how he words it: "This is strong evidence that Calvin did not teach a universal redemption that included every individual, but one that was particular to the elect" (135). Here Blacketer appears to be using the term "redemption" synonymously with "atonement." As above, he fails to recognize that a Calvinist may hold to a limited reading of 1 John 2:2 and still affirm universal atonement. Such would seem to be the case with Calvin. If Blacketer had stated that with respect to the "intent" of the atonement, Calvin believed, based on passages like 1 John 2:2, that God intended the atonement should be applied only to the elect, he would have been correct.

Blacketer appears to suggest that Ursinus, Zanchi, and Musculus (135, 139-40), all held to forms of definite atonement. This is incorrect, as all of these men, regardless of what they believed about the intention of the atonement, actually are clear in their writings that they believed Christ satisfied for the sins of all men, or what can also be termed as "universal redemption" (Musculus' favorite phrase for it), and were thus Hypothetical Universalists,⁴ as was Calvin.

Speaking of Calvin's sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3-5, Blacketer states that Calvin made the point repeatedly that God does not will the salvation of every individual, yet as far as the preaching of the gospel is concerned, Blacketer states Calvin believed God does will the salvation of all (138). Actually, for Calvin, God does will the salvation of all people individually and he makes his view clear in his comments on Lamentations 3:33:

So also God, when he adopts severity towards men, he indeed does so willingly, because he is the judge of the world; but he does not do so from the heart, because he wishes all to be innocent — for far away from him is all fierceness and cruelty; and as he regards men with paternal love, so also he would have them to be saved, were they not as it were by force to drive him to rigor.

Contra Blacketer, Calvin states clearly that God "wishes all" to be "innocent" in the sense that "he would have them to be saved." Calvin's use of "all" and "world" here makes it evident

⁴ As Richard Muller has documented in his November, 2008 lectures at Mid America Reformed Seminary.

he refers to the world of the non-elect. Calvin affirms both the universal love of God and the universal saving will of God. [FN]

Blacketer states that by the time of Dort, “the majority of Reformed thinkers made increasingly explicit what was latent in the particularist strand of Christian thought, namely, that the divine intention [note carefully Blacketer’s use of this word] in the sacrifice of Christ was to provide satisfaction specifically for the elect (140).” No doubt Blacketer intends by his use of the word “intention” to signify “extent” as well. Since God “intends” to save only the elect, Blacketer concludes the payment for sins on the cross was likewise only accomplished for the elect, and later only applied to them; hence, definite atonement.

But this is a leap in logic that is unfounded, one that appears to be made by most authors in this volume. Failure to distinguish properly between intent, extent, and application, with respect to the atonement is a critical error.

Finally, what Blacketer fails to point out historically is the fact that hypothetical universalism chronologically preceded definite atonement on the Reformed scene. It is clear that for the first generation Reformed, including Calvin, definite atonement (that Christ satisfied only for the sins of the elect) was not affirmed or articulated.⁵

⁵ With the possible exception of John Bradford and Martin Bucer, though J. C. Ryle stated Bucer was moderate on the extent of the atonement. (J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 3:158).