

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: WHY A COMPLETE ATONEMENT MATTERS

A COMPARISON BOOK REVIEW

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BY

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The Question

“For whom did Christ come to die?” Much ink has been spilled over the subject of the extent of the atonement in the modern era, yet many feel further than ever from an answer. Its weight in importance is too great to calculate; it simply matters too much to exercise apathy around this question. Thankfully, well-seasoned scholars such as David L. Allen, David Gibson, and Jonathan Gibson care enough about this complex question and its nuanced answers. This paper will interact primarily with the Gibsons’ work in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, as well as Allen’s work in *The Extent of the Atonement*, demonstrating that the former work provides a more accurate and better-defended answer for this question.

By Many Proofs

Due to these complexities and implications, debate surrounding the extent of the atonement can and will turn divisive, which is why it is crucial to stay focused on the mission at hand. Describing these matters of division, Graeme Goldsworthy describes it this way:

Suddenly the clarity of Scripture seems to mean, ‘It’s quite clear to me: why can’t you see what is obvious?’ Throwing proof texts at each other like so many grenades only results in unseemly shrapnel and much suspicion and hurt...If I as a Calvinist am to understand my Arminian brethren...then we must try to understand each other’s starting points and theological assumptions. This is where hermeneutics should play an important part. Even more basic is the desire of all of us simply to know and understand what God says to us in his word.¹

The task at hand, whether scholars or pastors or laypeople, must be “simply to know and understands what God says to us in his Word.” Both *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* and *The Extent of the Atonement* are books saturated with Scripture references. To his credit, Allen’s

¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 24.

purposes are to major on “a historical and critical review” of this doctrine as the subtitle suggests, not explicitly a biblical review. Despite this, Allen’s overall tone in *The Extent of the Atonement* seems to go on the offensive in putting so-called “limitarians,” not Scripture, in the witness stand. With D. Broughton Knox, Allen pronounces definite atonement “a textless doctrine.” *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* not only disagrees, but much more effectively presents its own exegetical defense for its position compared to Allen’s defense. After reading substantial sections of Allen’s work, I find dozens of welcomed and important challenges to classic, high, and hyper-Calvinism, but there remains little cogent support for its own position, rooted in what the Word itself says. *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* takes a different posture. Especially in Part Two, contributors aim to make their defense by many biblical proofs, becoming perhaps the most critical section of the book. Perhaps the strongest chapter in this section is Motyer’s work on Isaiah. This volume’s overall emphasis on taking God at His Word is refreshing, and to that end, it is clear that this volume stays the course more consistently.

One notable inconsistency is found in Allen’s review of Paul Williamson’s essay on tracing definite atonement in the Pentateuch. Commenting on this second section of *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, Allen writes,

These chapters fail to note the salient fact that not once in the Old or New Testament is there a direct statement that says Christ died only for the elect. Such a statement in Scripture is necessary to prove definite atonement. In the absence of such a statement, the authors are forced on the defensive and must spend time explaining why the many universal passages on the atonement don’t mean what they appear to mean.²

² David L. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 691.

This critique assumes not only a biblicist interpretation of Scripture, but narrows the expanse of systematic theology as a whole. If this becomes the basis of how to study theology, what is one to make of the Trinity or “the communion of attributes in Christology?”³ As an alternative, Gibson suggests that one’s theological interpretation of Scripture “needs to be biblical, but not biblicist,”⁴ suggesting a *biblico-systematic* method demonstrated in the book. Allen’s criticism here also runs the risk of doing the very thing he accuses the essayists in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* of doing, of “reading one’s theology into the text and drawing the wrong conclusions.”⁵ The ending phrase “what they appear to mean” is key; it reveals that Allen is carries his own presuppositional interpretation as well.

Removing my own theological persuasions as best as I can, I find both books to be important, Kingdom-minded contributions to the discussion surrounding the extent of the atonement. However, in considering the logical flow of the arguments made, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* proves to be the more robust, multi-faceted, and Scripture-reliant text. Even though *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* proves to be the better defender of its position, an important question remains: just how important is this issue altogether?

Definite Atonement For The Church

³ David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 696.

To be sure, the question of the extent of the atonement is much more than “the impractical and esoteric musings of ivory-tower academicians.”⁶ Sinclair Ferguson argues that Christian views on the atonement have “an inevitable impact, directly or indirectly, on preaching, teaching, and pastoral counseling.”⁷ I will highlight two major areas where definite atonement proves crucial for the Church, elaborated on in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.

One of the most compelling cases for definite atonement at a pastoral level is how cohesively it fits into the doctrine of Christian assurance. It is tough from a pastoral perspective to witness fellow Christian brothers and sisters struggling with doubt about their faith, especially in the midst of hard circumstances or trials. Many have been exposed to dangerous teachings that a Christian has to will himself all the way to heaven, and if he is struggling in life it is probably the result of faithlessness. Such self-justifications run counter to the gospel proclamation of, “It is finished!” (Jn 19:30). This announcement coming from the lips of Christ on the cross is a sufficient summary of what the atonement sought to do – to secure the redemption of believers, not to leave it open-ended. The particularist viewpoint better presents a *sure* righteousness. When Paul writes that “you were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20), this can only create a sense of assurance in the Christian heart if the transaction is complete. Herman Bavinck elaborates on this idea of a complete redemption:

If Jesus is truly the Savior, he must also *really* save his people, not potentially but really in in fact, completely and eternally. And this, actually, constitutes the core of the difference between the proponents and the opponents of particular satisfaction... The real

⁶ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 543.

⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, “‘Blessè Assurance, Jesus is Mine?’ Definite Atonement and the Cure of Souls,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 608.

issue [concerns] the value and power of Christ's sacrifice... To save, said the Reformed, is to save truly, wholly, for all eternity."⁸

Another stated problem with universal atonement is that it distinguishes the action of God from the nature of God. As it pertains too all of theology, including atonement, "the intention *to do* what one does constitutes the very soul of the act, without which it would no longer be an act."⁹ If God is a God of perfect action, one must labor to recognize His sacrifice as perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. These carry pastoral implications that cannot be disregarded. Any doctrine that strengthens assurance in Christ's saving work and keeps the action and nature of God in unity is a doctrine to be thoroughly embraced.

Conclusion

A quote from Allen's book is the nail in the coffin for universal atonement. "Anything that makes the preacher hesitant to make the bold proclamation that 'Christ died for your sins' is wrong."¹⁰ I could not agree more. I want to preach a Christ who is able to "save to the uttermost" (Heb 7:25), and His complete and certain atonement offers no hesitation. The question at hand will continue to be asked until Kingdom come. "For whom did Christ come to die?" The Christian must investigate Scripture, read from the fathers and scholars of the faith, and ultimately trust in and celebrate Christ's work as sufficient for us and the Church. The arguments expressed in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* magnificently defend their position, and help us in these areas greatly. May the Church be encouraged by these works.

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. III, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 467.

⁹ Henri A.G. Blocher, "Jesus Christ *the Man*: Toward a Systematic Theology of Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 570.

¹⁰ Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 789.

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