

From Heaven He Came and Sought Her:
Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Perspective

Edited by David Gibson & Jonathan Gibson

(Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013).

ISBN 978-1-4335-1276-6 (hardcover) £32.99

An initial '5-point critique' of the Foreword¹ by Dr J. I. Packer

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One wonders why it was felt necessary to publishing this 704 page, 1kg tome. A heavy-weight publication by any standard, do the contributors and publisher feel so insecure regarding the salvation of the Church that nothing less can provide some much needed assurance? If they simply desire to bear witness to a fundamental Christian conviction, there are many who share it without resorting to the exclusive view of Christ's atoning sacrifice advocated in this book.

1. One notes with interest that Dr Packer applauds the use of Samuel John Stone's beautiful hymn, 'The church's one foundation', chosen as an 'elucidation' of the contributors' understanding of our Saviour's sacrifice upon the cross. In fact the second half of the first verse inspires the book's title:

From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

Presbyterian and *Westminster Confession* psalmodists would be uncomfortable that, for all its poetic and theological merits, 'a hymn of human composure' is cited to defend their darling doctrine of 'limited atonement'. Even then, there are psalms as well as hymns (not all by Charles Wesley!) which give voice to an implied fuller view of the atonement than this book's contributors are willing to allow. Psalm 67 (Scottish Psalter, second version) is noteworthy in this regard:

LORD, unto us be merciful,
do thou us also bless;
And graciously cause shine on us
the brightness of thy face:
That so thy way upon the earth
to all men may be known;
Also among the nations all
thy saving health be shown.²

Despite his commendation of Matthew Henry,³ Dr Packer would have to

¹ 13-16.

² *Psalm and Hymns for Divine Worship* (London: James Nisbet, 1875), 81.

³ Of Henry's *Exposition*, Packer says, 'Simple and practical in style while thoroughly

agree that Richard Baxter's 'disciple' (the tercentenary of whose 'home-call' falls this year) would not, like his 'master', be comfortable with the one-sided stance of the book.⁴ However, these famous Puritans would not quarrel with the sentiments of the above hymn, only the 'exclusive' use made of it. Henry's comment on Psalm 67 seems to warn against a 'selfish' conception of the benefits of Calvary. Recognising the psalm's prayerful concern for the unsaved Gentiles, Henry paraphrases it thus:

"Lord, I pray not only that thou wilt be merciful to us and bless us, but that thou wilt be merciful to all mankind, *that thy way may be known upon the earth.*" Thus public-spirited must we be in our prayers. *Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.* We shall have never the less of God's mercy, and blessing, and favour, for others coming in to share with us.⁵

The point at issue here is that Christ's bride, especially the church militant here on earth, is to have a *double* focus. She is to 'look up' to her Head, assured of her salvation by His sacrifice (Matt. 16: 18). She is also to 'look out' to the unsaved world with evangelistic compassion, obeying Christ's command to 'preach the gospel to every creature' (Mk. 16: 15). This twin focus demands a 'double-sided' or dualistic view of the atonement. Yes, it guarantees the Church's redemption. It also declares an 'open door' to the world in need of salvation, a world for which - as perspicuous Holy Scripture states explicitly and repeatedly - the Saviour died (Jn. 3: 16-17, etc). After all, what is that 'good news' for everyone that doesn't flow from Calvary?

The Anglo-Genevan version of Psalm 67 vividly forbids the Church to be preoccupied with its own salvation and survival:

May God be merciful and bless us,
 Illumine us with light divine;
 May He to us be ever gracious
 And cause His face on us to shine.
 May He to all nations
 Show His revelation
 And His way unfold.
 Great is God our Saviour;
 Let all see His favour
 And His power behold.⁶

scholarly and well-informed for substance, the Commentary remains an all-time classic, standing head and shoulders above any other popular exposition produced either before or since' (Introduction to Matthew Henry, *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life: A Puritan's View of the Good Life* (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 1998), 13).

⁴ Beside Henry's comments on Isaiah 53, John 3: 16, etc, see David P. Field, *Rigide Calvinisme in a Softer Dress: The Moderate Presbyterianism of John Howe, 1630-1705* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2004), 174; also Matthew Henry, *The Covenant of Grace*, ed. Allan Harman (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 42.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (London: James Nisbet, 1886), iv. 249.

⁶ *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Printing, 1998), 134.

2. The biblical data concerning our Saviour's 'loving action and initiative' demands a broader view of the atonement than the book presents. And there are numerous exponents of the Reformed Faith who would reject as 'only half the picture' the concept of 'definiteness' assumed by the contributors. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Davenant, Baxter and Ryle - and Matthew Henry⁷ - instantly spring to mind. In short, providing a more balanced and coherent account of the biblical data, a more honourable alternative to 'limited atonement' is available, no less 'definite' than this book is advocating.

3. Packer's backward look to his famous 1959 'Introductory Essay' to John Owen's *Death of Death* actually exposes a fundamental flaw in his 'definite atonement' thesis. He who wrote that 'a half-truth masquerading as a whole truth becomes a complete untruth'⁸ finds his maxim rebounding with devastating effect. In short, to insist that the biblical Gospel is *only* about its efficacy in redeeming the elect, is to present 'a complete untruth'. Packer's position can only be maintained by suppressing and manipulating perspicuous data.

4. Of course, Dr Packer's concept of 'definite atonement' consists perfectly with hypercalvinism. Surely this is not his position after all these years? Or does his endorsement of John Gill - called by Spurgeon 'the Coryphaeus of hypercalvinism'⁹ - suggest otherwise? In view of his commendation of Whitefield, Spurgeon and Nettleton this is obviously doubtful. But it is arguable that these large-hearted evangelists were better than their creed, and their rare success does not validate their restrictive soteriology. Furthermore, why does Dr Packer assume that his 'Owenite' Trinitarian perspective on the Covenant of Grace is the only valid one? In this respect, Matthew Henry provides a fuller and more persuasive account¹⁰ than that given by Owen and Gill. The type of account found in Henry is typical of a view which affirms the effectual salvation of the Church without denying or belittling a wider provision in Christ's death for others who might sadly reject what is nonetheless a divinely-intended and all-sufficient atonement. For all the scholarship applauded by Dr Packer, numerous scholars have argued cogently that the 'Owenite' perspective - being biased and unbalanced - is only half the picture!

5. Dr Packer is correct to argue that there is more to the Reformed Faith than 'TULIP'. Stating that the 'L' is 'inappropriate' and 'menacing', it is no wonder that he and his ilk have replaced 'limited' by 'definite' in recent

⁷ Recent biographies by Allan M. Harman and Philip H. Eveson fail to acknowledge Henry's 'Baxterian/Amyraldian' view of the atonement. The latter seems determined to present him as an 'Owenite', which is simply untrue. See Allan M. Harman, *Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence* (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2012); Philip H. Eveson, *Matthew Henry* (Darlington: EP Books, 2012).

⁸ Introductory Essay to John Owen's *Death Of Death In The Death Of Christ* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 2.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting & Commentaries* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 9.

¹⁰ See Matthew Henry, *The Covenant of Grace*, ed. Allan Harman (Fearn, Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2002).

decades. Yet ‘a rose by any other name...’ applies also to the iconic tulip. In short, the ‘menacing’ doctrine remains the same according to Packer’s view of it. But we dare not insult the beautiful flower, chiefly associated with the Netherlands. After all, the mnemonic fails to do theological justice to the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618-19), of which too many ‘Tulipians’ are ignorant. Are they aware that the sequence of the ‘Heads of Doctrine’ actually demands the rather less-fragrant ‘ULTIP’? They spout ‘TULIP’ but have they actually read the Canons? Indeed, the articles behind the ‘L’ never use ‘limited’. Instead, the Canons speak of Christ’s atonement as being ‘abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world’, albeit that its ‘life-giving and saving efficacy [extends] to all the elect’. The Canons also affirm that unbelievers do not ‘perish ... because of any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross but through their own fault’. Since they also state that the ‘Universal Proclamation of the Gospel’ involves God’s ‘command to repent and believe’,¹¹ they arguably imply that universal gospel endeavour is only possible on the basis of a ‘limitless atonement’. Thus, provided it is correctly used, ‘TULIP’ may still be used, despite Dr Packer’s misgivings and his appeal to an ambiguous ‘definite’ alternative. By all means ‘lay it to rest’ for representing a biased and menacing falsehood. However, when the Canons are carefully studied to ascertain the overall balance of their teaching, a case may be made to reconfigure ‘TULIP’ as follows:

T = TOTAL PERVERSITY¹²
U = UNIVERSAL LOVE¹³
L = LIMITLESS ATONEMENT¹⁴
I = INFALLIBLE GRACE¹⁵
P = PARTICULAR SALVATION¹⁶

One is reminded that while Dr Packer nailed his colours to John Owen’s mast in 1959, his D. Phil thesis was on Richard Baxter.¹⁷ Yet Baxter was not slow to associate himself with the divines of Dort. Owen’s editor, W. H. Goold, found it difficult to reconcile Baxter’s rejection of Owen’s view of the atonement with his admiration for the divines of Dort.¹⁸ Indeed, Baxter’s words are truly remarkable when he declares: ‘In the article of the extent of redemption, wherein I am most suspected and accused, I do subscribe to the Synod of Dort, without any exception, limitation, or exposition, of any word, as doubtful and obscure’.¹⁹ It remains to be said, that had the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and its derivatives expressed a Dort-like

¹¹ For quotations from the Canons of Dort, see ‘The Three Forms of Unity’ in *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Printing, 1998), 531-76.

¹² *Canons of Dort*, III-IV: 1-3.

¹³ *Ibid.* I: 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* II: 3-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* III-IV: 10-1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* I: 6-11; V.

¹⁷ See J. I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003).

¹⁸ See *The Works of John Owen, DD*, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53), x. 430.

¹⁹ See W. Orme, ‘A Life of the Author’, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), i. 456.

belief in the atonement's universal sufficiency, much confusion and disharmony might have been avoided among the 'dogmatical word-warriors'²⁰ of the seventeenth century.

It is entirely regrettable that Dr Packer endorses so much that is questionable in Owen's soteriology, not least because his Anglican allegiance demands a fuller and less restrictive stance.²¹ Besides arguing that the universal sufficiency of the atonement is merely hypothetical, Owen's commercial theory of the atonement leads him to evacuate it of any real provision.²² So there is nothing substantial on offer for all, and nothing to be rejected by unbelievers! In his view, it is only sufficient for whom it is efficient, a view vigorously insisted upon later by John Gill.²³ More closely aligned with the language of Dort, Baxter is able to affirm that Christ died for all sufficiently, albeit for the elect efficiently. What is worse, Owen really tampers with the text when he exegetes the universal statements of the Bible in favour of his dogmatic agenda.²⁴ He really 'explains them away'! Baxter's position is clearly more satisfactory when he states:

When God saith so expressly that Christ died for all [2 Cor. 5: 14-15], and tasted death for every man [Heb. 2: 9], and is the ransom for all [1 Tim. 2: 6], and the propitiation for the sins of the whole world [1 Jn. 2: 2], it beseems every Christian rather to explain in what sense Christ died for all, than flatly to deny it.²⁵

As an unashamed 'Baxterian' *alias* 'Amyraldian' *alias* 'Authentic Calvinist', I agree with Baxter's description of Owen an 'over-orthodox doctor'.²⁶ I believe Dr Packer merits the same evaluation. In which case, since his foreword serves as the figurehead of the weighty Crossway vessel, one suspects that, since its launch in late 2013, it has a worrying and heavy list to starboard already, not helped by the ghost of John Owen at the helm (who never knew of anyone brought to Christ through his ministry while he was alive).²⁷ That said, I reserve my final judgement until the crew's various contributions have been investigated. The big question about the book is this: will it stimulate or suppress evangelistic enterprise? The critique continues...

²⁰ See the title page of Baxter's *Catholick Theologie* (London, 1675).

²¹ See J. C. Ryle, ed. Alan C. Clifford, *Ryle on Redemption: The Gospel According to John Charles Ryle* (Norwich: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 2014).

²² See Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 - An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990/2002), 126ff.

²³ *Ibid.* 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 142ff.

²⁵ R. Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind* (London: 1694), 286.

²⁶ See R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester (London: T. Parkhurst et al, 1696), ii. 199.

²⁷ *Works*, viii. p. viii. I recall Dr Sinclair Ferguson's citing of this detail during an address on John Owen at the Banner of Truth Ministers' Conference in 1986. However, when the address appeared in print, the detail had been deleted. See 'John Owen On The Spirit In The Life Of Christ' (*The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issues 293-294, February-March 1988).