

#### BOOK REVIEW

Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoeberger, eds. *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: Three Views*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015. xiv + 242 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-43366-971-2. \$24.99.

With *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement*, Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoeberger present an edited volume on the important and heated issue of the extent of the atonement. Although Andrew Naselli is better known as a former Ph.D. student of D. A. Carson who also worked as his research manager, he also has completed another Ph.D. in theology from Bob Jones University and has published on the theological topic of the atonement. Thus, one can see why he would edit a volume on this topic. Mark Snoeberger's background is more difficult to track down, because he is not as well known, but he teaches theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. To my knowledge, he does not have any published work on the atonement, although it could be reasonably assumed that he has studied it in his theology courses.

Naselli and Snoeberger begin the foreword of their book as follows: “One can scarcely think of a question that Christians debate more passionately than the one our little book addresses” (xiii). Indeed, the doctrinal issue surrounding the atonement has led to many passionate discussions. Some of this passion may be warranted, while some of it is unjustified. Of course, the extent of the atonement matters, but much of this debate remains misunderstood even in the published literature, because of the lack of clarity in terminology, including the term “atonement.” Considering this, a lengthier treatment than what the editors provide would have been warranted given the lack of clarity and the degree of importance of the doctrine of atonement that

characterizes the current scholarly conversation.

Snoeberger introduces this book by giving the context of the book and content of the positions. Typically, in a book like this, the editors would use the introduction to provide the “rules of the game” for the contributors, such that they would list down clear and specific questions for each contributor to answer. This book, however, does not provide such questions. Rather, the editors take a different approach; after explaining some of the stereotypes related to those who write on this issue, Snoeberger explains the two theological prerequisites that each of the contributors must hold. Each contributor professes his “fidelity to the Word of God as the *norma normans non normata*” and affirms what the editors call “theological consistency” (4). While fidelity to the word of God and theological consistency matter for the consideration of any theological topic, these may be too broad to facilitate a fruitful discussion on such a narrow topic. One might have expected the contributors to define their terms more clearly, answer specific questions related to their position, and lay out their theological presuppositions for this specific doctrine.

Carl R. Trueman argues for the “Definite Atonement View.” This view is the so-called “limited-atonement,” or “five-point” Calvinistic view. He presents the standard presentation of this position as one might expect. Trueman, however, surprisingly cites very little recent research, including David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson’s recent 704-page tome, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). To my knowledge, this book is the most recent and comprehensive treatment of this topic, and so it is surprising to find no interaction with it.

Grant R. Osborne writes on the “General Atonement View.” While Osborne represents this position well, he nevertheless asserts through some of his comments that the issues of this debate run deep. For instance, he writes, “Proper methodology for theological formation demands that the dogmatic description do justice to all the biblical data, not just those verses that support the conclusion that the system demands” (123). This

quotation illustrates that this doctrinal issue runs deeper than merely accounting for the “biblical data”—that is, every theologian who approaches this doctrinal issue approaches it with a theological framework and method that seeks to do justice to all the biblical data. That theologians cannot agree on this matter reveals that this doctrinal issue is not merely concerned with making sense of pure “biblical data”—as if that is even hermeneutically possible—but rather, it is more so about the way theologians consider the role of hermeneutics in theological formulation.

John S. Hammett argues for the “Multiple-Intentions View of the Atonement.” This position argues that “one intention of God in the atonement was to provide forgiveness of sins for all” (149). However, given the name of the position as “multiple-intentions,” he also argues “that another intention of God in sending Christ and another intention of Christ in dying was actually to secure the salvation of some” (169–70). At the beginning of this chapter, Hammett explains his reluctance to contribute to this book. He provides three reasons, the second of which reveals some of the underlying reasons why he holds his multiple-intentions view: “While there is abundant biblical teaching on some aspects of the atonement (such as its nature, necessity, and sufficiency), by contrast the biblical teaching on the extent of the atonement is not that abundant or clear” (143–44). Hammett then cites Grudem who claims a similar point (144). This view, then, seeks to be more encompassing of multiple positions in that it believes that the biblical evidence supports all of them. Hammett, however, also makes some unfortunate comments: “[This position] allows for a natural exegesis of the texts claimed in support of both definite and universal atonement, and it goes beyond the traditional positions in more firmly including texts supporting a cosmic intention” (193). Whether a position supports a so-called “natural exegesis” seems to be in the eye of the proverbial beholder.

Because this debate is often filled with more “heat” than “light,” a primary strength of this book is that each of the contributors maintains a positive and constructive conversational tone with one another throughout the book. This aspect of the

book was refreshing, because I personally have seen discussions, in person and in writing, of this issue divide people because of the “venom” that seems to come forth when there are disagreements.

Perhaps one of the more unfortunate aspects of this book is that the editors selected contributors that have not published on this topic before. Granted, the contributors have undoubtedly taught this topic at their respective seminaries, and have thus studied the doctrine of the atonement. However, teaching about a topic and arguing one’s position in a classroom setting is quite different from publishing and arguing one’s position for the world of the larger theological enterprise to read and evaluate; the latter requires a higher level of engagement and presentation, and there are several scholars that could have been selected to contribute to this volume who could both affirm the theological commitments set forth in the preface and bring the experience gained through a more relevant publishing record.

As several of the authors recognized, this doctrinal debate is not going away any time soon, but a book like this would perhaps have done better to address more of the foundational issues in theological formulation rather than making this debate seem like a simple matter of properly putting together the “biblical data.” Theological methodology is at the heart of this debate, and it did not even receive consideration as an assigned point of discussion in this book. Similarly, a consideration of the larger hermeneutical issues would benefit this entire issue.

In conclusion, this book can be primarily useful to students who are looking for an introductory survey of these different positions before diving into more focused works on the atonement. Similarly, pastors may find this book to be of some use in ministry in the local church as they survey this doctrine in a Sunday school type of setting to show how different theologians conceive of this doctrine.

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