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BOOK REVIEW

Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoeberger, eds. *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: Three Views*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2015. xiv + 242 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4336-6971-2. \$24.99.

The theological question of the extent of the atonement is a popular source of controversy within church and academic circles, providing scholars and laypersons alike with a bone of contention that often leads to vitriolic conflict. In addition to the disagreement, the complex and sometimes minute differences between the many views of the extent of the atonement can lead to confusion for those who are less familiar with theological studies. Editors Andy Naselli and Mark Snoeberger have attempted to counteract the often acrimonious approach to the issue by providing a “lively and robust yet irenic exchange of ideas on this important issue” (xiv). Beginning with a reminder that the purpose of theology is to strengthen the church and the Kingdom of God, the editors invite the reader to engage with a healthy, open, and respectful debate on this complex issue.

Following the established format of Broadman & Holman’s *Perspectives* series, the editors allow three authors to present three main views of the extent of the atonement, as well as to respond to the other views presented, all with the purpose of fostering sincere and godly debate around an important issue of theology. Though there are far more than three views relating to the extent of the atonement, the editors made a wise choice to cover the three central theories for the sake of creating a manageable project and a digestible study of the issue. The key question that they ask of the authors is “For whom was Christ a substitute” (6), limiting the discussion to the most significant theories regarding penal substitution. Rather than using the traditional

names for the three main views, the editors have opted for theological descriptions, both because the names that are traditionally used have unwanted freight attached to them, and because they are not necessarily the most accurate expressions of the theological stances they represent. The three views are entitled “Definite Atonement,” “General Atonement,” and the “Multiple-Intentions View.”

In chapter 1, Carl R. Trueman argues for the Definite Atonement viewpoint by making a cumulative scriptural case with a dual point: that Christ came to save particular people from their sins as their mediator and high priest, and that the Trinity works together in harmony to accomplish the end for which the atonement was the means. Christ’s penal substitutionary work on the cross was the means to accomplish this definite result. This theological framework creates an interpretive base against which all Scripture passages, especially those viewed as problematic to this view, should be weighed.

In chapter 2, Grant R. Osborne, a New Testament exegete, argues the General Atonement viewpoint by affirming that there are many texts that teach a definite aspect to the atonement, but that there are also many texts, such as 1 John 2:2, that seem to affirm that Christ died not only for the elect but for non-elect sinners as well. Osborne argues that God loved the world so much that he extended the salvific work of Christ’s atoning death to all persons, that these people for whom Christ died are capable of suffering eternal damnation if they do not repent and believe, that the call to preach the Gospel to the whole world demands a universal atonement, and that the New Testament recognizes unbelief as a choice that leads to damnation. Christ died for all people, not just the elect, and the atonement must therefore be universal.

In chapter 3, John S. Hammett takes the Multiple-Intentions viewpoint, arguing that it is the best incorporation of the biblical data. As a middle ground between the two other viewpoints, it argues that the atonement provides salvation for all but accomplishes it only for the elect. Additionally, he argues that the atonement provides payment for all people’s sins, but that it takes God applying it to the elect to make that atonement salvific.

Hammett argues that this is a more theologically comprehensive position than either of the other viewpoints discussed, and that it also preserves some of the key concerns that cause the other two sides to reject the opposing view. As a middle ground he also offers it as a way to reach theological harmony between the major opposing camps on this issue.

The book concludes with a brief recap of the three views, as well as another discussion of the importance of Christian charity and humility in approaching areas of theological controversy where sincere Christians hold strongly opposing views. Naselli presents a list of ten ways that controversy over the extent of the atonement can create schisms in the church, reinforcing the importance of arguing theological issues with care and an abundance of grace.

The book strikes a balance between detail and simplicity. From the outset the editors limit the scope of their study to a manageable question, admitting that not all positions on the extent of the atonement, never mind theories of the atonement itself, could be covered. The result is a focused book that provides useful arguments on a single question, without getting lost by trying to spread itself over too much ground. If one is looking for an exhaustive study on the extent of the atonement, this book will not provide enough detail on its own, but it will give the reader a springboard for further study.

This very simplicity does, however, lead to the singular problem that a book of this kind faces. By removing a particular issue from the broader framework of theology in which it exists, an incomplete argument is formed. Theological stances on particular issues are predicated upon basic presuppositions as well as integrated interpretations of numerous interrelated doctrines, and to attempt to discuss the single issue without a more detailed exposition of the presuppositions that form its foundation leads to a limited scope for argument. This in turn limits the usefulness of the book for those who do not share the same basic presuppositions as the authors. This is of course a necessary sacrifice that must be made for the sake of brevity but, as Trueman points out in his response to Osborne, without connecting the understanding of the atonement to larger theological differences the authors

end up talking past one another as they argue their points. Due to this weakness the book is only able to provide a beginning point for discussion of the extent of the atonement, as other theological presuppositions must be integrated into a broader discussion of the atonement in general.

As a study of the main arguments for the extent of the atonement, this book will be an invaluable resource for pastors, laypersons, and theology students who are beginning to study the different theological views of the atonement. Having three views in one volume provides an excellent method of quickly becoming acquainted with the major theological opinions in existence, and the substantial footnotes and bibliography provide a wealth of further resources that a reader can draw upon to engage with the topic on a deeper level. The language of the work is accessible enough that laypersons who do not specialize in theological studies will be able to understand and engage with the content. In addition, the respectful way that the arguments are delivered provides an excellent example of how theological differences should be handled in the church. The determination to further constructive theological discussion is one of the best features of the volume. Though the limitation of the discussion will lead readers to quickly seek out broader studies of soteriology, as a starting guide this resource will be an excellent addition to any library.

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