

Brown, Austin. *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement*. Pensacola: independently published, 2022. 172pp. + 6pp. (front matter) + 26pp. (back matter).¹

“Who could ever have thought that the death of Christ, which was destined to secure peace and destroy enmity . . . could have been so fruitful in the production of strife?”²

The answer is both obvious and a little disconcerting: God. He foresaw the debates that would be engendered—for centuries, even among his own true children—by how he chose to explain in Scripture the meaning of the death of Christ. God could have circumvented virtually all such strife and put the precise implications of the atonement beyond all reasonable doubt. Many on opposite sides of the debate are convinced that he has; and there seems little doubt that those on all sides of the debate will, in glorified retrospect, recognize that God’s explanation is obvious and (glorious prospect!) agree on it.³

But in the meantime, Brown reflects, “It is the peculiar trait of men,” fallen and finite as we are at present, “to war over ideas, not least, theological ones. . . . The extent of the atonement is not a doctrine to die over, however, and yet, here we are, standing in a pool of blood, still squaring off, fists raised” (158–59). He is not talking about Calvinists versus Arminians. He is talking about Calvinists versus Calvinists.

Brown is humorous,⁴ blunt, incisive, sometimes abrasive, and certainly boisterous (strict particularists may be inclined to take that adjective in its more negative connotation). The reason for both his posture and his tone is autobiographical: “The amount of vitriol I have suffered at the hands of my fellow kinsmen is legion, and it explains why my tone is rather cheeky, if not mildly tart. The question of the extent of the atonement is a full contact sport, and I’m not going to pretend that it isn’t” (3). (He includes a bit more detail about his personal experience in Reformed circles in chapter 21, “Some Practical Implications”—a chapter worth reading twice, as a preface as well as a prologue.) Though he is not an academician or professional theologian, he is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (though currently a member of a church in the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches), and deeply and widely read especially in Reformed theology.⁵

¹ Note that this work is available for free download at <https://soundofdoctrine.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/a-reformed-critique-of-limited-atonement-100.14.pdf>.

² John Davenant, the mostly seventeenth-century Church of England Calvinist theologian and proponent of hypothetical universalism, quoted by Brown (158).

³ Relatedly, see my essay earlier in this issue of *JBTW*, “Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements.”

⁴ One of my favorite parts of Brown’s book is his semi-facetious Catechism of Strict Particularism (98–100), along with his reference to “Make Owen Great Again” baseball caps (115). Even the book’s cover is an ironic play on the cover of limited atonement’s authoritative volume, 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). Though Brown takes pointed issue with Carl Trueman’s particularism, I suspect he would subscribe to Trueman’s maxim: “Pomposity is antithetical to piety, and humor is the best way to avoid it.”

⁵ Some of the supplemental information included in this review has been gleaned from personal email correspondence with the author.

Brown demonstrates throughout the book what he claims on page 1: that “various stalwarts of the Reformed tradition happily embraced universal satisfaction: Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Baxter, Davenant, Charles Hodge, Dabney. The list goes on.” Indeed, the list continues in a couple of appendixes—one including a collection of quotations from a number of those stalwarts, from Baxter to Zwingli, and another containing an extensive chart listing proponents of Arminianism, Classic/Moderate Calvinism, High Calvinism, and Hyper-Calvinism. Brown himself identifies as a classically moderate Calvinist who holds “that Christ did in fact pay an objective price for the sins of humanity,” alongside the view “that Christ did not die with an equal intent for all men” (5).

Calvinists typically assert that Christ’s death is efficient only for the elect but sufficient for all. Brown, as an avowed Calvinist, questions the logic of that assertion for the strict particularist: “How could Christ’s death be *at all* sufficient outside of his dying for their sins in some sense?” On the view of strict particularism, when it comes to the non-elect, “Christ didn’t do anything for their sins. Therefore (and here’s the rub), what he didn’t accomplish on their behalf is allegedly sufficient to deal with their sin. Since Christ didn’t die in any sense for the sins of the non-elect, how is his death *presently* sufficient for them? Answer: It isn’t. It could have been, but it isn’t” (9–10).

This, of course, has ramifications for the NT’s universal gospel call. If atonement is explicitly *not* made for the non-elect, then there is no atonement available for the non-elect, leaving no basis for a universal gospel call. In short, a strictly particularistic atonement pulls the rug out from under any meaningful, legitimate universal offer (nothing new here). To illustrate his point, he entertains the hypothetical supposition that Christ made no atoning sacrifice for anyone, in which case there would be no gospel. “In order for the gospel to be truly offered, there has to be a reality behind it that legitimizes the offer” (15). Consequently, “as soon as we establish that it would be absurd to offer the gospel to a world of non-died-fors, it necessarily follows that there is no gospel for the non-died-fors” (16). It may be objected that in this hypothetical scenario there is no atonement of *any* kind to ground *any* offer; and yet, that is the point—if Christ did *not* die for the non-elect (in some sense), then no atonement exists to ground a universal gospel offer to the non-elect. Whether we know who the elect are is irrelevant to the *logical* inconsistency of trying to append “a legitimate, universal gospel offer” to a “limited expiation” (17).

From this point on, Brown’s progression spreads out into a variety of related considerations. The fact that the non-elect reject offers of eternal life—which can be offered only on the ground of Christ’s atoning death—presupposes the reality of what is rejected. Additionally, Brown asks whether the non-elect can be “held accountable for rejecting something that was never really [objectively] available to them” because it was, in retrospect, obviously never objectively made for them (34). Citing John Murray’s defense of a universal gospel offer in conjunction with a strictly limited atonement, Brown asks: “If it is strenuously objected that Christ did not, in fact, die for the non-elect, as he [Murray] does, then how is Christ’s death perfectly sufficient for the non-elect?” (38).

In addressing “The Scope of John 3:16” (chapter 8), Brown traces the descriptions of Jesus’ mission in John, and the implications of the context of John 3:16, to demonstrate that “the world of men, to which Christ came and offered himself, was unequivocally comprised of the non-elect” (49–50). Additionally, the universal language used in Numbers 21:8–9 indicates an unlimited provision of a

means of healing—an incident to which Jesus explicitly parallels his atonement in John 3:14–15 (50). Brown also devotes chapters to other key universal texts (1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:9; 1 John 2:2) and addresses particularistic efforts at exegetical circumvention with help from other notable Reformed thinkers.

In a chapter that may annoy some particularists as much as Arminians must be annoyed by Calvinist charges of Pelagianism, Brown highlights the fine and perforated line dividing High Calvinism from Hyper-Calvinism. One is in danger of breaching that boundary when he makes a legitimate biblical doctrine (e.g., divine sovereignty or, more specifically, election) “the absolute controlling element whereby all seemingly contrary evidence is brought into submission to this fundamental point” (81). The result is a reductionistic theology—one that concludes, for example (as one pastor whom Brown quotes says), that God obviously cannot possibly love the non-elect or else he would save them. “The fundamental problem here is an unwillingness to allow” complementary and equally authoritative “biblical data to nuance” the favored, chosen doctrine (86). It is a problem that bedevils not a little Reformed theology.⁶ In words very dear to my heart (because they echo my own teaching for years), Brown asks: “What is acceptable mystery, dear Christian, and what is not acceptable mystery, and why?” (86). Everyone agrees there is a curtain of mystery; where we disagree is where that curtain drops, and how much Scripture we allow to influence *where* it drops.⁷ Brown is hardly accusing all strict particularists of Hyper-Calvinism. “But we should be prepared to say that a person who denies God’s universal saving desire (or balks at the word ‘offer’ or is afraid to say to the unconverted that God loves them) is wading out into the unbiblical waters of reductionistic Calvinism. And they should stop. It carries the notable scent of Hyper-Calvinism” (87).

Chapter 13 (“Harmony, Not Confusion”) makes the point that skewed questions produce bad answers (e.g., the excluded middle fallacy). To construe an irreconcilable contradiction between God’s intention to secure the salvation of the elect and, simultaneously, demonstrate his love for the world, is both unbiblical and wrong-headed. “All that needs to be shown is that God has a variety of complementary reasons for doing things the way he does” (94).

Brown disarms Owen’s trilemma, along with the double jeopardy argument, citing Charles Hodge’s insightful discussion of *penal* vs. *pecuniary* substitution and the related issue of conditionality (100–1, 103) and Ursinus’s commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (102). He also addresses “a technical component to this discussion that is often lost on strict particularists”—viz., the “idea that Christ suffered a just equivalent (*tantundem*), and not the exact penalty the Law demands of sinners (*idem*)” (108), citing Richard Baxter’s lengthy answer to the question “Is it not unjust to punish him that Christ died for, even one sin twice?” (short answer: no) and an extended explanatory illustration of these categories by Tony Byrne (109–12). Brown closes the chapter with a rather telling interview excerpt featuring Carl Trueman, in which he admitted that he generally ignores the theology of the

⁶ Granted, it bedevils Arminian theology as well, but that is not the subject under the microscope here.

⁷ For a detailed exploration of this phenomenon in a specific theological context, see my article, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart,” *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

Hodges and Dabney, and that the double jeopardy argument is not a weight-bearing component of the limited-atonement position (113–14).

Any extended argument against limited atonement worth its wood pulp would have to interact with the imposing collection of particularistic essays in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*. Brown does so, selectively but effectively. He cites and/or interacts with chapters by Schreiner, Letham, Williams, Trueman, Williamson, Haykin, Gatiss, and the editors (David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson). He interacts with Trueman’s essay on Owen rather extensively to demonstrate the kind of theological tunnel vision that shapes strict particularism (115–20). Schreiner’s essay figures most prominently in Brown’s discussions of 2 Peter 2:1 (130–34) and 1 Timothy 4:10 (135–38).

Beneath the surface of Brown’s wide-ranging polemic against the limited-atonement view of his fellow Reformed brethren is a bottom line. The bottom line of Brown’s argument is not that 4-point Calvinism, or 4.5-point Calvinism, or historic hypothetical universalism are entitled to be considered and treated as legitimate expressions of Calvinism or Reformed theology. Rather, while none of these align entirely with TULIP, all of them are legitimate expressions of 5-point (Dortian) Calvinism, precisely because the ubiquitous TULIP acronym subtly distorts the statement of Dort on the atonement. And the corroboration he provides for that argument—including the venerable historical theologian Richard Muller—is compelling (161–63). Even the modern magisterial anthology defending particularism, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, includes an essay by Lee Gatiss that makes the same concession.⁸

In detective series, the private investigator is typically the gadfly of the professional constabulary: unconventional, interfering, and annoying even (and especially) when he is right. Brown is, by any normal definition, a lay theologian—sometimes considered the bane of professional theologians and, therefore, often ignored. But as Lewis observed, we are all theologians; Brown has just taken that intrinsically human calling far more seriously than most, and his work deserves a serious reading because of it.

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⁸ See “The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 162–63.