

Bird, Michael F., and Scott Harrower, eds. *Unlimited Atonement: Amyraldism and Reformed Theology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2023. 240pp.

Many theologians today hold to the idea of unlimited atonement while also holding to the other key points of traditional Reformed soteriology. Motivated by a lack of teaching resources supporting unlimited atonement from a Reformed perspective, Michael Bird and Scott Harrower edited this work on unlimited atonement. Fourteen scholars and pastors participated in this endeavor to explain Amyraldism¹ and unlimited atonement, survey its historical development, and describe its role in the Reformed tradition. The majority of the contributors appear to represent the Anglican tradition, though some represent Baptist, Wesleyan, and Episcopalian traditions. Harrower states that the purpose of the book is to promote “a more decidedly theological account of the atonement” that will aid our interpretation of the death of Christ on the cross (16).

Because each chapter has a different author, some key themes recur throughout the book, including summaries of Amyraldism. Some scholars have equated Amyraldism with four-point Calvinism. Unlimited atonement among Reformed theologians, however, preceded Amyraut and has historically been held by theologians who have been unaware of Amyraut or his teaching. The chapters by Crisp, Bird, Woznicki, and Fisher (chs. 1, 2, 3, and 7) most clearly delineate the Amyraldian distinctives. What is (typically) distinctive about four-point Calvinism is a belief in unlimited atonement, as opposed to limited (or definite) atonement. Amyraldism is one of several versions of four-point Calvinism. All views of unlimited atonement overlap to some degree, but they argue for the concept in specific ways.

One primary distinctive of Amyraldism is its ordering of decrees. Amyraut rejected the supralapsarian and infralapsarian order of decrees (Bird, 43) and proposed a different account of divine decrees: (1) to create humans; (2) to permit the fall; (3) to ordain Christ to make satisfaction for all; (4) to elect certain persons to salvation through faith (Woznicki, 63–64). The key here is that “satisfaction” in the third decree “on its own does not lead to salvation; satisfaction only leads to salvation on the fulfillment of the condition of faith” (67). For Amyraut, God is motivated in salvation primarily to display his goodness to all men, rather than primarily to display his glory (Bird, 46–47). By sending Christ to die for the sin of all, he is seeking to “overwhelm the whole world with his mercy” (47). Subsequently, then, to ensure that some will in fact be saved, God elects some to salvation by giving them the gift of faith (48–49). It should be noted that in chapter 11 Allen refers to this ordering of decrees as “allegedly” characterizing Amyraldism, which suggests that Allen has doubts about the role of these decrees in Amyraldism (205).

Another Amyraldian distinctive is Amyraut’s idea of God’s two covenants to undergird his hypothetical universalism. Bird discusses this concept in chapter 2. The first covenant is “an absolute and unconditional covenant whereby God saves the elect out of sheer grace.” The second is “a hypothetical covenant whereby God saves anyone upon the condition of faith” (Bird, 44). The first covenant reflects God’s “electing will” and the second refers to his “saving will.” There is an “objective

¹ The subtitle of the book refers to “Amyraldism,” but some authors in the book refer to “Amyraldianism.” This review will use “Amyraldism.”

grace for all” that is necessary for anyone to come to Christ, but the “subjective grace of salvation” is based on the condition of faith. These two covenants correspond to two wills in God, a universal will to save all, and a particular will to save only the elect (Bird, 44). In chapter 7, Fisher also discusses Amyraut’s argument relating to covenant theology, but Fisher presents it as a “threefold covenant.” The first two covenants are covenants with Adam and with Israel, each requiring obedience. The third covenant is a covenant of grace requiring faith. This covenant is divided into particular and universal aspects (Fisher, 150). The third covenant presented by Fisher aligns with and includes the two covenants delineated by Bird.

Each chapter provides its own unique discussion relating to the topic of unlimited atonement. In chapter 1, Oliver Crisp presents Anglican hypothetical universalism. The term *hypothetical universalism* is used to indicate that “Christ’s saving work is in principle sufficient to save all of humanity” (28). Crisp believes Amyraut’s ordering of decrees is “questionable” (32). Crisp’s Anglican hypothetical universalism argues that the atonement “is *ordained to be really* sufficient for all humankind” and “not merely notionally sufficient” (33). This atoning work requires faith in order to be effectual. Crisp then discusses the “most significant conceptual objection” to unlimited atonement: the double payment objection. Crisp responds that because unbelievers do not have faith, they die without receiving the benefits of Christ’s work, but they do not “pay” for their sins. They merely receive the consequences of their sin.

In chapter 2, Michael Bird discusses Amyraut’s presentation of bi-covenantal universalism, explaining Amyraut’s concept of two covenants and his unique ordering of decrees. Amyraut sought to return to an “authentic Calvinism” in contrast to the “ultra-orthodox” version of Beza and Turretin. For Amyraut, the compassion of God extends to all mankind because all people are equally depraved, and they are all equally represented by the Redeemer who took on their humanity. Whereas God chooses to give the gift of faith to some, he “predestines everyone to saveableness” (50). Overall, Amyraut’s goal is to emphasize God’s mercy and grace to humanity. Though the title of this chapter focuses on “Amyraut as exegete,” the chapter includes almost nothing that qualifies as “exegesis” of Scripture. Also, it is somewhat difficult to see how God out of his goodness predestines all to “saveableness” while God’s universal goodness determines to give the gift of faith only to certain individuals.

In chapter 3, Christopher Woznicki addresses one of the key objections to Amyraldism, which is the apparent incompatibility of an unlimited atonement with penal substitution. In regard to the objection that unlimited atonement and penal substitution are incompatible because together they would lead to universal salvation, Woznicki treats this as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Woznicki then addresses the double payment objection to Amyraldism. For the Amyraldian, “satisfaction on its own does not lead to salvation. Satisfaction only leads to salvation on the fulfillment of the condition of faith” (67). Woznicki argues that “satisfaction” rather than “atonement” is the more precise word to refer to the work of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, if even the elect are under God’s wrath prior to exercising faith in Christ (cf. Eph. 2:1–3), then they are under condemnation and subject to judgment until they believe. But according to the double payment objection, this would be unjust, since their sins were already punished in Christ. Therefore, the satisfaction of Christ’s death is applied

only upon the exercise of saving faith. This chapter seems to be the most important chapter of the book because of its helpful discussion of unlimited atonement in relation to penal substitution.

In chapter 4, R. T. Mullins examines the problem of how in unlimited atonement God does not get what he desires. After much discussion about the attributes of God's greatness, his rationality, the general and meticulous nature of his decrees, and the relation of human freedom to divine decrees, Mullins questions how to account for God's unfulfilled desires for all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Mullins suggests that God's purpose for creating the universe is "that creatures can enjoy everlasting friendship with God" (85). He concludes that if one accepts his view of the universalist desire, "it would be incredibly difficult to affirm a theory of salvation that does not offer unlimited atonement" (88). The weakness of the argument is in Mullins's assumption that all would agree that "everlasting friendship with God" is God's primary purpose for creating the universe. Unfortunately, as engaging and interesting as his argumentation is up to this point, the conclusion is unsatisfying.

In chapter 5, Jonathan Curtis Rutledge seeks to "provide a framework from which one can more easily evaluate or discern the appeal of a doctrine of unlimited atonement" based on the nature of the concept of forgiveness (90). Rutledge suggests that if forgiveness is unilateral and not dependent on the cooperation of the wrongdoer to respond with repentance, then it could be argued that God forgives every sinner (if the atonement is unlimited). Unilateral forgiveness does not necessarily entail "that all human persons will eventually reside in the new creation" (99). This depends on the gift of faith. Rutledge then compares forgiveness to the atonement. The act of atonement is finished and complete in the death and resurrection of Christ, in spite of the stubbornness and sinfulness of man. For the limited atonement view, atonement for sins will certainly entail one's presence in the new creation. The unlimited atonement view holds to "a difference between *efficient atonement* and *merely sufficient atonement*" (102). Rutledge's argument is rational and interesting, but not likely convincing enough to sway proponents of limited atonement.

In chapter 6, Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton examine the arguments of Peter Lombard, Edward Polhill, and William Ames to understand various concepts of the mechanism of the atonement, particularly in relation to the double-payment objection. Farris and Hamilton "argue that penal substitution is parasitic upon claims of unlimited atonement and as such will either admit of universal salvation or interminably suffer under the burden of a double payment" (109). Peter Lombard is the first theologian to assert that Christ's satisfaction is "sufficient for all humanity but efficient only for the elect" (110). Edward Polhill (1622–1694), an Anglican jurist, argues that Christ pays two separate debts in his death, one to the moral law, and an eternal debt to God (117). Christ suffered physical death in the place of sinners, but he could not have suffered eternal punishment in place of sinners. In relation to the double-payment problem, Polhill simply argues that God determined that Christ's death would absorb the penalty for all humanity while only being effective for those who exercise faith. William Ames (1576–1633) upholds the idea that Christ was in fact punished for our sin. However, "he is not describing a punishment that is absorbed (i.e., a debt of punishment) by Christ that brings the redemption of humankind" (126). Rather, he paid the price of redemption for us, which is the punishment of the curse that falls on all humans—he suffers bodily death. Christ's achievement is one of merit whereby he cancels (not absorbs) the eternal punishment

due to us. Christ's death satisfies God, resulting in God providing benefits to humanity. In the end, Ames avoids the double-payment objection because Christ pays the full debt of honor owed to God for human sin. "The infinite merit of the sacrifice of his infinite self offsets the infinite demerit of human sin" (129). It does seem that Ames successfully avoids the double-payment objection. The concern is the rejection—or perhaps, the redefinition of the concept of penal substitution.

In chapter 7, Jeff Fisher briefly surveys Amyraut's life and theology. Amyraut wrote a treatise in 1634 defending the Reformed doctrine of predestination, in which he highlighted God's universal grace to all humanity. Amyraut continued to assert that his views on predestination and universal grace were consistent with both Calvin's views and with Scripture. Though some (like Turretin) accused him of being Arminian, Amyraut's position was consistent with the Canons of Dort, which left the teaching on the extent of the atonement ambiguous enough for Amyraut's view. The Westminster Assembly was called during Amyraut's lifetime, and a number of members of the assembly upheld the views of Amyraldism or hypothetical universalism. Fisher points out that Amyraldism represents just one narrow version of hypothetical universalism. Fisher acknowledges that few theologians have actually held to hypothetical universalism while holding the same distinctives as Amyraut.

In chapter 8, Rory Shiner examines D. B. Knox's presentation of hypothetical universalism. Knox taught at Moore College in Sydney, Australia, from 1959–1985 and is "the father of modern Sydney Anglicanism" (154). Knox wanted preachers to be able to present Christ's sacrifice as available to all their hearers without qualification, and he believed limited atonement would push adherents away from Reformed theology. Shiner elaborates on Knox's influence among Australian Anglicanism during his lifetime and through the present day.

In chapter 9, Joshua McNall interacts with four different authors who present different variations of unlimited atonement in the twenty-first century: Andrew Louth (Orthodox), Matthew Levering (Roman Catholic), Fred Sanders (Wesleyan), and Tom Greggs (Christian Universalism). McNall seeks to demonstrate that though these agree on the extent of the atonement, this "unity does not imply a uniformity" (170). McNall concludes the chapter with three cautions from these authors: (1) Resist the urge to favor the particular or the universal. Both are in the Scriptures. (2) Rather than just recognizing the tension, also seek to address the tension. (3) Be open to ways in which the atonement provides at least some benefit for all humans. McNall points out that unlimited atonement "is, in one form or another, the consensus viewpoint of the Christian tradition" (181). This does not make unlimited atonement correct, "but it does matter."

In chapter 10, James Arcadi discusses the Anglican tendency to pursue a "middle way" between various theological topics, citing the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as an example of this tendency in sixteenth-century Anglicanism. Anglican views on universal atonement developed prior to and independent from Amyraut's influence. Arcadi then argues that because of the sacrifice of Christ for all, humans have a dispositional property to be saved when influenced by the appropriate stimulus. The gift of faith is that necessary stimulus. Arcadi shows how this idea is similar to Crisp's view (see chapter 1), though Arcadi's presentation avoids the potential problem of accounting for the salvation of those who are mentally or cognitively unable to exercise saving faith. Arcadi concludes that infant

baptism perhaps provides this impetus of saving faith to an infant or to those who are cognitively challenged.

In chapter 11, David Allen demonstrates that the Baptist tradition has included various forms of Calvinism for most of its history. He demonstrates that rather than representing a “softening” of limited atonement, unlimited atonement was a trajectory long recognized as an orthodox view among the Reformed since the beginning of the Reformation. A limited-atonement view was not articulated prior to Beza in 1586. Allen then focuses on the influence of English hypothetical universalism on Baptist thought. All Calvinists agree that the “effectual purpose” of Christ’s death is to save the elect alone, and this results in an “eventual limited effectual application” (209). Allen believes unlimited atonement is consistent with Reformed theology, and he classifies both Calvin and Amyraut in this category. Allen then discusses Andrew Fuller’s hypothetical universalism. Fuller was the most influential particular Baptist in the early nineteenth century and argued that a genuine offer of the gospel to all requires an unlimited atonement. Fuller strongly influenced the founding of the SBC.

In chapter 12, Michael Jensen works to explain how the particular and universal aspects of the atonement ought to provide a resource for thinking clearly about the church’s relationship with the world. Jensen argues that both Augustine and Bavinck’s account of the Cross’s impact for the common good are inadequate, and he examines three key NT passages that relate the Cross to the common good: 1 Corinthians 1:1–2:5; Colossians 1:15–23; and 1 Peter 2:11–3:22. Jensen concludes with three primary observations. (1) The atonement “establishes a community of people eager to seek the common good” (230). (2) The atonement unites people from varying nations together into one common people. (3) The Cross provides the foundation for people to stand against the sin and evil brought about by the world and to demonstrate mercy and grace to the world.

In the book’s concluding chapter, the only female contributor, Amy Peeler (an Episcopal Rector), provides a sermon on John 13. She emphasizes the fact that Jesus had chosen the twelve, and John comments on Jesus’ love for the twelve, though Judas would eventually betray him. This demonstrates the universal and particular love of Christ.

Bird and Harrower have compiled a mostly helpful collection of essays clarifying distinctives of Amyraldism and hypothetical universalism. A careful reading of the book reveals that though each author holds to unlimited atonement, it is probable that most of the authors of the book would not hold to Amyraldism in a proper sense. While all the chapters are generally helpful, some are especially valuable in understanding key arguments of hypothetical universalism. This volume is particularly useful for clarifying the distinctives of Amyraldism in comparison to other views of unlimited atonement (particularly chapters 1–3). Additionally, Woznicki’s argument in chapter 3 provides helpful groundwork for understanding the coherence of penal substitution with unlimited atonement. Chapters 1 and 3 satisfactorily deal with the double-payment objection.

Some portions of the book leave more to be desired. (1) The use of Scripture throughout the book is quite sparse, which is surprising since it is presenting a view that can be supported by many Scripture passages. Also, there is no Scripture index or subject index. The authors seem to approach the topic with the assumption that the readers are aware of key texts supporting universal atonement, and their focus is to argue for the logical and theological coherence of the unlimited-atonement view. (2) A

challenge with many edited compilations with multiple authors is the repetition of certain concepts, creating overlap among the chapters. Most authors are giving a summary of their view of Amyraut's contributions, and some topics are covered multiple times. (3) It was disappointing that the authors do not interact meaningfully at all with John Hammett's "multiple intentions" view, which was put forward in 2015, several years prior to the publication of this book.

Jonathan M. Cheek

PhD, Theological Studies | Independent Contributor