

BOOK REVIEW

The Extent of the Atonement. A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536-1675)

G. Michael Thomas

Paternoster Publishing

1997

277 pages, paper

Reviewed by Ronald Hanko

The consensus referred to in the title of this book is Second Helvetic Confession, one of the clearest and most consistent expositions of the doctrines of grace ever produced. The book, then, is an historical survey of the doctrine of the atonement from Calvin through to the great period of Reformed orthodoxy that produced the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession of Faith. As such it is not without value.

One wearies, however, of the seemingly endless number of books on the doctrine of the atonement, all of which, in one way or another seem bent on proving that the doctrine of limited or particular atonement is not Biblically or traditionally a part of Reformed theology. From that point of view this book is just another of the same.

In fact, the book is as much a repudiation of the Reformed doctrine of predestination as of the doctrine of limited atonement. This, of course, is not surprising in that the two doctrines are inextricably related so that they stand or fall together.

Indeed, the purpose of the author, which does not come to light until the very last paragraph of the book, involves the doctrine of predestination more than the doctrine of the atonement. He pleads for a reworking of the doctrine of predestination, apparently along Barthian lines: "The present study . . . proposes that an attempt such as Barth's to find a new way of understanding predestination deserves careful consideration by all who claim to stand in the Reformed tradition" (p. 253).

Thus he speaks of the atonement as being "shackled" by particular predestinarianism (p. 241) and says that "predestinarian logic could, and perhaps had to, lead away from the initial Reformation proclamation of grace" (p. 228). This, too, is not surprising. It has always been the doctrine of predestination which has born the brunt of the attack against gracious salvation. This is the reason, for example, that the Canons of Dort, the original "Five Points of Calvinism," treat the doctrine of predestination first. It was that doctrine especially to which the Arminians objected.

The author, attempting to prove "the Reformed inability to come to an agreed position on the extent of the atonement" and "the inconsistency of the doctrine of predestination with its other concerns," sometimes presents a slanted view of things. He suggests, for example, that the conclusions of the Synod of Dort were ambiguous and plays up the weaknesses of some of the delegates, particularly those from Bremen and England by way of undermining the strong position of Dort on predestination and the atonement.

Thus, too, he glosses over the fact that the Canons present one of the strongest statements regarding limited atonement to be found in any of the Reformed confessions: "It was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should *effectually* redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, *and those only*, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given Him by the Father" (II, 8 - emphases mine). This is not

ambiguous.

There is even a definite bias shown in the way that Reformed orthodoxy is described over against Arminianism and Amyrauldianism, though Thomas himself does not adopt any of these positions. Reformed orthodoxy is invariably described as rigid, scholastic, and rationalistic, and the Canons of Dort as full of cracks (p. 152). In contrast, John Cameron, the Amyrauldians and the theology of the Saumur school are described as “markedly original”(p. 180), “daring” (p. 197), “brave” (p. 241) and “uncompromising” (p. 189).

Zanchius’ doctrine of predestination, he says, “was constructed on the basis of his doctrine of God and of Aristotelian concepts of end, cause and effect,” and that “the doctrine of God itself was shaped according to the axioms of Aristotelian philosophy, mediated though the theology of Thomas Aquinas” (p. 99). Zanchius, accordingly, has the “dubious distinction.” (p 99) of being the first defender of the doctrine of limited atonement.

John Cameron, on the other hand, makes a “consistent effort to root the universal and conditional elements (of the atonement) in the nature of God, so tending to put the predestinating will of God into the background” (p. 181). And Amyraut himself comes “closer to a Biblical approach than does his opponents” (p. 203), his theology marking “a break with the scholastic logic of the past” (p. 204).

Thomas, along with many others (Clifford, Daniel, Kendall) adamantly refuses to admit the possibility that there is positive development and progress in the history of doctrines, and that the work of Beza, Zanchius, Dort, Owen and Westminster represent such progress. This bias mars the book throughout.

All this is not to say that the book is without value. There is very much interesting and valuable historical material in the book. This reviewer was especially struck by consistency and Biblicality of the views of Beza and Zanchius as well as by the weakness of Bullinger. The section on Amyrauldianism was also informative and valuable. Nevertheless, the book is part of the continuing attack on the Biblical and Reformed doctrines of sovereign unconditional predestination and a particular, effective atonement.

There is also one minor complaint that must be made concerning the format of the book. It is irritating in the extreme to have the footnotes printed at the end of the chapters, so that one must be constantly paging back and forth to see the references. We wish publishers would abandon this practice.