

Book Review:

Five Views on the Extent of the Atonement

By Adam Johnson, ed.

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019. 252 Pages.

Reviewed by Henry H. Knight III

One of the volumes in Zondervan's Counterpoints series, this book examines the extent of the atonement--did Christ die for all or for some, and if all, does that imply universal salvation?

As the editor Adam Johnson says, the issue of the extent of the atonement "resides at the intersection of predestination and the cross." (10)

Addressing this issue is an ecumenical panel of five distinguished scholars: Andrew Louth (Eastern Orthodox), Matthew Levering (Roman Catholic), Michael Horton (Traditional Reformed), Fred Sanders (Wesleyan) and Tom Gregg (Christian Universalist). With writers of this caliber one would expect substantive arguments and lively responses, and on that the book does not disappoint.

Like all books in Counterpoints series, each of the five present their arguments at some length in a chapter, each followed by shorter responses from the other four. The editor does an excellent job in providing an introduction to the issues plus a conclusion that not only summarizes but points the way forward to further the debate. The editor also makes an important contribution of his own on the first pages by reminding readers that doctrine is much more than "finding the pertinent passages of scripture and formulating a biblical view." (10) Instead, he reminds the reader that "Scripture does not offer a monolithic position regarding the extent of the atonement." (12)

This nicely foreshadows the chapters to come. Although in no set order, each author provides exegesis of scriptural passages, draws from elements of the Christian tradition, argues for how the issue should be framed, and offers theological analysis, all in service to presenting their respective viewpoints. One great strength is the way they each in their own way approach atonement from a trinitarian perspective. In the process

a wide range of related issues are addressed, including the nature of election, and God's love, mercy and freedom. All of this is presented with great clarity, making this a useful book in colleges or seminary classrooms as well as a handy reference to the major issues at stake.

There were for me two major weaknesses in the book. The question of whether grace is irresistible needed to be addressed more directly. The irresistibility of grace seemed to be assumed by several writers and was not directly challenged by others. Second, while the focus was on salvation as occurring in the afterlife, I would have wished for more attention on salvation as a new life in Christ given in the present. The Orthodox writer was the only one to really emphasize present salvation.

That said, this remains a highly informative and provocative book that contributes to understanding not only the differing positions but the reason for their disagreement. The implications of this issue for the nature and practice of evangelism are profound and this book could well serve as a catalyst for classroom discussion.