Andrew David Naselli and Mark Snoeberger align a remarkable trio to debate the extent of the atonement. They purposefully have chosen writers from three distinct backgrounds (Calvinist, Arminian, and Amyraldian) to offer a broad array of conservative evangelical perspectives on the topic. These contributors limit their discussion to the intent of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. In other words, they seek to answer the question, “For whom did Christ die on the cross?” Incredibly, the authors handle this controversial subject fairly and with tremendous grace.

All five men in this collaboration carry significant theological weight. They come from esteemed academic backgrounds, having made significant contributions in their respective fields. Most notably, Carl Trueman serves as Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary and is an editor for Themelios, one of the evangelical world’s foremost theological journals. He writes from a Calvinistic perspective. Grant Osborne works as Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He also wrote The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation and authored commentaries on Matthew, John, Romans, and Revelation. He writes from an Arminian perspective. John Hammett currently serves as Professor of Systematic Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He writes from an Amyraldian (Four-point Calvinist) perspective.

In Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement, Naselli and Snoeberger insist, “Our major goal is to help Christians better understand this controversial issue and consequently disagree with their brothers and sisters in Christ in a God-glorifying way who hold different views” (214). They assemble a team that canvasses numerous sides of the debate in an attempt to dispel common misconceptions about the various viewpoints on the extent of the atonement. The book delivers a clarion call for less denigration and more fruitful discourse on this particular issue. Naselli and Snoeberger conclude that more accurate and constructive communication will “encourage unity in Christ’s body and discourage sinful schism” (214).

After the foreword and introduction, Naselli and Snoeberger organize the work into a multiperspective format in which each author positively states his view before the remaining authors present a critical response. This format allows for very firm, but fair, criticism of each of the major positions. Each author gets equal opportunity to make the best case for his viewpoint, and to expose any weaknesses in the other perspectives.

Trueman begins by presenting the Calvinist view, or what he calls definite atonement, also known as “limited atonement,” or “particular redemption.” He offers two major arguments in support of his perspective: (1) The intent of Christ’s atoning work as the High Priest in Hebrews 9-10 mirrors that of the priest in Leviticus 16. Essentially, Trueman argues that the priest in Leviticus 16 offers the sacrifice and cleansing particularly to the people of Israel, not loosely to everyone in general (41-7). Therefore, Christ died to atone for a particular people as their Mediator. (2) The efficacy of Christ’s atoning work necessitates the atonement’s particularity. If Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross actually took away the sins of everyone in general, then how does He still punish some in Hell for their sins? Thus, Christ’s atoning death (if objectively efficacious) accomplishes the definite salvation of a particular people.

Both Osborne and Hammett note that Trueman’s argument leans more heavily on a broad theological framework than specific exegesis of biblical texts. Other weaknesses include spending
Osborne presents the Arminian view, or what he calls general atonement. He mainly focuses on the wealth of texts that suggest Christ died for everyone. Far from mere proof-texting, Osborne compiles an impressive catalogue of biblical data in support of his view. In terms of logic, he admits that both Calvinism and Arminianism form coherent systems, but sees the latter as more viable in light of the exegetical evidence. Trueman claims that Osborne confines his biblical data to isolated exegesis that misses the major thrust of the Bible as a whole. On the other hand, Hammett agrees with Osborne’s exegesis, but denies the validity of his teaching on prevenient grace.

Hammett concludes by presenting the Amyraldian perspective, or what he calls the multiple-intentions view. He argues for three intentions in the atonement: universal (Christ provides forgiveness of sins for all), particular (Christ secures the salvation of some), and cosmic (Christ’s death lays the eschatological foundation for making all things new). Osborne sees the argument as too ambiguous. In what way does Christ provide forgiveness of sins for all, if He has sovereignly decreed that salvation is only available to some? Salvation cannot be possible for all (in any actual sense) when it is only accessible to some in particular. Trueman notes that the only remaining option is hypothetical universalism, which limits the effective nature of Christ’s substitution.

Overall, the work provides an outstanding introduction to the topic of the atonement. The format makes for a fair and informative read. Naselli and Snoeberger succeed in creating a book that gives readers a greater appreciation for opposing views on the extent of the atonement. No author conclusively resolves the controversy, but each presents his case with persuasiveness and clarity, avoiding ad hominem attacks and other petty fallacies that hindered past works on the issue. Christians should learn from this book’s example by avoiding theological arrogance in their discussions of hard doctrines.