

“Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement: 21st Century Research”¹

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Although the dispute within Reformed theology itself concerning Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement is ongoing, research in the 21st century on this issue appears to be tipping the scales toward only one sustainable conclusion.

Paul Hartog listed and summarized the four general approaches that are usually taken with respect to Calvin’s view of extent.

1. Calvin believed in limited atonement, though he did not emphasize it specifically. John Murray, Jonathan Rainbow, Roger Nicole, Frederick Leahy, Paul Helm, William Cunningham, Henri Blocher, and W. Robert Godfrey are examples.
2. Calvin held a form of unlimited atonement along with particular election. In this group would be a number of post-Reformation scholars such as John Davenant, Amyraut, Jean Daille, Bishop Ussher, and Richard Baxter, along with modern scholars such as R. T. Kendall, Alan Clifford, Charles Bell, Curt Daniel, Kevin Kennedy, and David Ponter.
3. Calvin’s view cannot be determined due to the ambiguity of the evidence. G. Michael Thomas, Robert Peterson, and Hans Boersma fit into this category.
4. Calvin espoused neither limited nor unlimited atonement but adhered to the Lombardian formula, which, left the question open-ended. P. Rouwendal would fit this category.²

Many Calvinists today lean heavily on Roger Nicole in defense of limited atonement and in defense of the position that Calvin held to limited atonement.³ After summarizing the history of the debate from Amyraut forward, Nicole addressed the arguments for the case that Calvin held to unlimited atonement, followed by arguments to the contrary. Probably the single most important point to note first is that Nicole, along with all who support Calvin’s adherence to the

¹ Material for this paper is taken from my *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 48–96; 670–76. For the full discussion, including all footnotes, consult these pages.

² P. Hartog, *A Word for the World: Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 2009), 9–18. See also his forthcoming revision, *Calvin on Christ’s Death: A Word for the World*.

³ R. Nicole, “John Calvin’s View on the Extent of the Atonement,” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: An Elaboration of the Theology of John Calvin*, 14 vols., ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 8:119–47. This essay was originally published in 1985: R. Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 197–225.

limitarian view, admit that Calvin himself has no direct statement in his writings affirming limited atonement.

To date, the most substantive critique of Nicole is by David Ponter in his article “A Brief History of Deviant Calvinism.”⁴ Ponter is a research librarian at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and hosts the research website www.calvinandcalvinism.com. I have essentially reproduced his critique in summary form below.⁵

Nicole’s approach to the question at hand is often to argue what he himself thinks key verses in the text mean rather than arguing from what Calvin directly said. Nicole assumed a later Reformed Scholastic paradigm and then read Calvin wearing these glasses. For example, he assumed that unlimited atonement *ipso facto* entails an inefficacious atonement and a denial of perseverance, so Calvin could not adhere to a universal atonement. Logically, this begs the question and employs a false dilemma fallacy. The atonement is always efficacious for the elect and the elect always persevere.

Nicole discussed Calvin’s interpretation of some Scriptures where he appears to take an unlimited reading. He attempted to explain Calvin’s comments on passages such as John 1:29 by appealing to the intrinsic sufficiency of Christ’s death. Here Nicole failed to define sufficiency and in fact is using it in its revised version of the later Scholastics and not as it was used by the early Reformers, including Calvin. Nicole argued that imputation and application are coextensive, hence the only choice is between universalism and definite atonement. But, Jesus’s intercession for those who are among the elect in John 17 cannot logically be construed to indicate that his death was only for the elect. To do so is reductionistic and minimalistic.

Nicole thought Calvin missed “a good opportunity to assert definite atonement” in his remarks on Isa 53:12. He attempted to soften Calvin’s statements to be a reference to “all kinds of men” rather than all people without exception. But Nicole has no answer for Calvin’s universalizing statements with respect to Isa 53:12. True, Calvin does interpret some of the extent passages in the New Testament to mean “all sorts of men,” thus limiting the use of “all” to the elect. However, when Calvin does this in places such as 1 Tim 2:4, the context of his statements is God’s election of certain individuals. In other places, such as Isaiah 53 and John 1:29, Calvin does not limit the extent of the atonement to the elect. Nicole missed or ignored this distinction.

Nicole proceeded to offer counterarguments in an effort to establish Calvin’s commitment to limited atonement. The first two arguments attempt to pit election against unlimited atonement and then draw the conclusion that Calvin would not “open himself to such self-contradiction.”⁶ Nicole failed to recognize that Calvin is operating from the traditional understanding of Lombard’s sufficient/efficient formula. Christ died for all with respect to the sufficiency but only for the elect with respect to the efficiency. This dual intentionality was common among the first generation of Reformers but was obscured by the Scholastics in later generations. All first-generation Reformers affirm elements of universalism and particularism in the design of the atonement. Nicole attempted to make the accomplishment and application of the atonement coextensive. This is, however, a failure to recognize Calvin’s acceptance of the

⁴ Available online at <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/A-Brief-History-of-Deviant-Calvinism.pdf>. See also D. Ponter, “A Brief Reply to Roger Nicole’s Article: ‘John Calvin’s View on the Extent of the Atonement,’” *Calvin and Calvinism*, July 25, 2008, <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=12462>

⁵ I have not footnoted every single quotation in this section or throughout this paper. For all footnote references, consult the appropriate sections in D. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*.

⁶ R. Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 220.

sufficient/efficient formula and an attempt to frame the discussion according to the revision of the formula in later Reformed theology.⁷

For Nicole, Calvin conjoined Christ's priestly work of substitution with his work of intercession. Since the intercession is limited to the elect, so is the oblation. It is interesting that Calvin himself did not make this argument. Furthermore, Calvin's reference to those who have received the benefits of the atonement as being the recipients of Christ's intercession in no way precludes an unlimited atonement. It assumes the work of atonement and the work of intercession are coextensive, which is an innovation by later Reformed theology.

Logically, Nicole's argument proceeds as follows:

Premise 1: Christ intercedes only for the elect.

Premise 2: Christ's intercession and atonement are coextensive.

Conclusion: Christ only atoned for the elect.

The problem is with premise 2. It remains unproven. This is merely Nicole's assumption, which he imposes on Calvin.

Nicole's next argument trades on Calvin's interpretation of texts such as 1 Tim 2:4 and Titus 2:13 where the word "all" is taken to mean "all classes of men." In John 1:29 and 1 John 2:2, the word "world" is understood to indicate John's attempt to transcend a nationalistic Jewish bias. Nicole pressed the point that those who argue for universal atonement never interpret these passages in this fashion. Thus, Calvin did not hold to universal atonement. The problem for Nicole here is that Calvin does take a universal reading of some of the extent passages that he himself cites. Furthermore, so do a number of Calvinists, such as John Davenant, Charles Hodge, Robert Dabney, and W. G. T. Shedd. Nicole's argument can be turned against him. For example, if Calvin held to limited atonement, why did he interpret some of the extent passages in an unlimited way? It is simply not possible to read Calvin's statements on John 1:29 as being limited to the elect. For Calvin, John is not merely contrasting "the world" against "the Jews." Rather, Calvin viewed the Jews as a subset of the world. Jesus bore the sins of the world, which includes the Jews. Nicole has engaged in a category fallacy.

Nicole's argument that those statements by Calvin that appear to support a universal atonement are actually intended to speak to the indiscriminate gospel call fails to apprehend that for Calvin, the atonement is accomplished for all, and this is the ground for it being offered to all.

Nicole's eighth argument is especially specious: since Scripture limits the atonement to the elect, Calvin held to limited atonement. Some texts do indeed speak of Christ's atonement for his "sheep" or the "church." But to infer from this that Christ did not die for others is to invoke the negative inference fallacy (the proof of a proposition cannot be used to disprove its converse). One cannot infer a negative (Christ did *not* die for group A) from a bare positive statement (Christ did die for group B) any more than one can infer that Christ died *only* for Paul because Paul said in Gal 2:20, "Christ gave himself for me."

Nicole's ninth argument is Calvin's engagement with Heshusius. I will address this issue specifically in pp. 7–8 below.

Nicole's tenth argument is an appeal to the commercial language of Owen and the later Reformed Scholastics coupled with the biblical language of propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption, which indicates a completed transaction that "transforms the relationship between

⁷ On the revision of the Lombardian formula, see D. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 27–34.

God and the sinner.”⁸ But this fails to reflect the fact that the application of the atonement is conditioned on repentance and faith. The work of Christ is accomplished for all and offered to all on the condition of faith. No one is saved by the accomplishment of the atonement alone apart from faith, as many Calvinists have rightly pointed out (e.g., C. Hodge, R. Dabney, and W. G. T. Shedd).

Nicole’s eleventh argument is the familiar double-payment argument: if Christ died for the sins of all men as their substitute, then God cannot condemn anyone to hell. Several problems ensue for Nicole. First, notice that Calvin himself does not employ this argument. Second, two theological models of penal substitution can be discerned in Reformed orthodoxy. Third, Nicole assumed a flawed commercial understanding of the atonement. Fourth, he created a false dilemma fallacy: either the atonement is a penal substitution or it is not. If it is, then all men must be saved according to the commercial model or else double payment ensues. But instead of being an either/or situation, it is both/and. Christ substituted himself for all, thus satisfying the law and removing the legal obstacles such that God is objectively reconciled to mankind. However, repentance and faith are necessary for the application of the atonement and for subjective reconciliation to take place (2 Cor 5:19–21).

Nicole’s twelfth argument is that unlimited atonement fractures the Trinitarian harmony in the work of redemption, thus Calvin could not have held to limited atonement. Again, this interprets Calvin from a post-Calvin Federalism and fails to take into account Calvin’s dualistic understanding of God’s will as secret (decretal) and revealed. Nicole also failed to account for the fact that Calvinists such as Davenant, Amyraut, Baxter, and many others like them who affirmed unlimited atonement did so with the understanding that the sufficiency/efficiency formula did not impair the harmonious work of the Trinity in salvation.

Nicole’s final argument is that it is not possible for Beza to single-handedly shift the Reformed movement from universal atonement to limited atonement. Of course, no one suggested that Beza single-handedly caused such a shift. Nicole’s argument failed to take into account the rise of Federalism, Beza’s supralapsarianism, and the general impact of speculative decretalism on Reformed theology. Men such as Amandus Polanus played a significant role in theological development at the time. The rise of Socinianism, Arminianism, and Amyraldianism served to galvanize the majority of Calvinists around limited atonement early in the seventeenth century, but even then there were many Calvinists who rejected this approach and affirmed an unlimited atonement.

Ponter pointed out that Nicole erred by claiming that “all” for Calvin always signified all classes of men and not all men without exception. Nicole failed to take into account Calvin’s statements on Isaiah 53 and 2 Pet 3:9, where Calvin explicitly said “all” means elect and non-elect. Thus, Nicole committed two key logical fallacies: (1) he isolated Calvin from his own exegetical and theological tradition and then retrojected a later, more developed, tradition on Calvin; and (2) he isolated Calvin’s statements from their context and artificially grouped them with other statements of like kind to argue his case. In 1 Tim 2:1–6, Calvin does not follow the trajectory of arguing that “all” becomes “all kinds,” which is then transmuted into the meaning “some of all kinds,” which is the common approach of later Calvinists.

⁸ Nicole, “John Calvin’s View,” 223.

Ponter also authored a two-part article on Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement. This article breaks new ground in the debate.⁹ Ponter's article is initially a response to Tom Nettles's chapter "John Calvin's Understanding of the Death of Christ" in *Whomever He Wills*,¹⁰ a book written in direct response to *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, a book I coedited and contributed a chapter on the extent of the atonement.¹¹ Ponter brings to the table new historical data regarding terminology in Calvin and other first-generation Reformers regarding "redeemed souls perishing." Building on G. Michael Thomas,¹² Ponter brings the doctrine of universal vicarious satisfaction directly to bear on Calvin, answering the question whether such satisfaction entails a limited atonement in the minds of the early Reformers.

Ponter showed how Calvin's juxtaposition of individuals with classes explains his real intent: not individuals of nations but nations of individuals. He noted how Calvin conflated John 3:16 with Rom 8:32 in a way that demonstrates his adherence to unlimited atonement. Ponter demonstrates how, for Calvin, the "act" of laying down a price for a person redeemed that person. Ponter compared statements in Latin from Musculus and Zanchi, both of whom held to unlimited atonement, with similar statements in Calvin, demonstrating continuity. Ponter blows the lid off all attempts to suggest that Amyraut was somehow the deviant, drunk uncle who showed up at the family picnic and compromised the "true" Reformed doctrine of limited atonement.

Ponter noted that Nettles's approach is to take the universal statements in Calvin and suggest that Calvin merely meant to speak "from the human perspective" and did not intend to state what he actually believed concerning the extent question.¹³ Ponter's purpose is threefold: to show that (1) Nettles has treated Calvin ahistorically and therefore inaccurately, (2) Nettles has misinterpreted critical comments from Calvin, and (3) Nettles has treated Calvin illogically in the conclusions he draws from Calvin's statements.

Ponter followed an inductive or abductive method with the data. He surveyed not only the writings of Calvin but those of his Reformed contemporaries. Rather than fixate on the outdated "Calvin versus the Calvinist" thesis, or rather than treat Calvin in isolation, we should seek to identify and understand the early Reformation doctrine of unlimited vicarious satisfaction. . . . Then the question becomes, "Does the data from Calvin fit this model of satisfaction, rather than the later model as defined by TULIP or strict five-point Calvinist orthodoxy?"¹⁴

⁹ D. Ponter, "Review Essay (Part One): John Calvin on the Death of Christ and the Reformation's Forgotten Doctrine of Universal Vicarious Satisfaction: A Review and Critique of Tom Nettles' Chapter in *Whomever He Wills*," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55.1 (Fall 2012): 138–58; "Review Essay (Part Two): John Calvin on the Death of Christ and the Reformation's Forgotten Doctrine of Universal Vicarious Satisfaction: A Review and Critique of Tom Nettles' Chapter in *Whomever He Wills*," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55.2 (Spring 2013): 252–70.

¹⁰ T. Nettles, "John Calvin's Understanding of the Death of Christ," in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, ed. M. Barrett and T. Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2012), 293–315.

¹¹ D. L. Allen and S. Lemke, eds., *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010). See D. Allen, "The Atonement: Limited or Universal?" *Whosoever Will*, 61–108.

¹² G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1635)* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997).

¹³ Ponter, "Review Essay (Part One)," 139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

Ponter correctly noted that Nettles's central argument is that salvation is effectually given to all for whom Christ died. Ponter demonstrates that this assertion cannot be proven from Calvin since he never uses this kind of reasoning or argumentation. Nettles's unstated assumption is there is only one doctrine of substitution as defined by five-point Calvinist orthodoxy. Yet the problem for Nettles is the undeniable fact that Calvin's Reformed contemporaries understood and advocated the position that Christ bore the sins of all people. Ponter demonstrated this beyond any doubt from Zwingli, Bullinger, Musculus, Luther, Gwalther, Juan De Valdes, as well as the English Reformers Hooper and Cranmer.

In Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy, he rehearsed a hypothetical speech Christ might say to an unbeliever on the final judgment day. Christ suffers the curse of the law for a person who is ultimately unsaved. Calvin spoke of "intentionality" in Christ's death for this unsaved person on the final day of judgment, that he "might be blessed by my grace." Ponter stated: "If we were to assume that Calvin held to the 'substitutionary' satisfaction defined by Nettles and others, such hypothetical language could never have been sensible to Calvin." Nettles erroneously conflated Calvin's concept of the sufficiency/efficiency of the atonement with that of John Owen's later doctrine of sufficiency. He failed to take notice of the revision by Owen and others of the original Lombardian sufficiency/efficiency formula by Owen and others. To read this revision back into Calvin is, as Ponter noted, anachronistic.

Ponter addressed Nettles's proposal that when Calvin spoke of universal satisfaction for sins, he merely meant to describe Christ's death for sins from the human point of view such that no individual is to be *a priori* excluded from redemption. All people are potential candidates for salvation even though Christ only died for the sins of the elect. Ponter endeavored to show how Calvin's comments on 2 Pet 2:1 and Jude 4 invalidate Nettles's "point-of-view" hermeneutic for Calvin. Ponter asked the pertinent question: "If we assume for the moment that Calvin really did hold to limited redemption, on what basis would it have been sensible for him to imagine that known apostates. . . had been redeemed by Christ?"

Ponter referenced other statements from Calvin demonstrating that final apostates have been "bought," "ransomed," and "redeemed" by Christ's death. This language of "redeemed souls perishing" is not limited to Calvin but is found in Gwalther, Luther, Tyndale, and others. In addition, Ponter produced several Calvin quotations demonstrating that Calvin spoke of Christ shedding his blood "for the whole world." Calvin himself identified the "many" of Matt 20:28; Mark 14:24; and Heb 9:28 as equivalent to the "all" in Rom 5:15. Nettles's phenomenological reading of Rom 5:15 "is impossible," according to Ponter.

Ponter concluded that Calvin's language "mirrors the language of his contemporaries," who held to an unlimited satisfaction for sins and thus universal redemption (atonement). How could the same language for Calvin mean something different than his contemporaries? The historical data provides no evidence that such is the case. "It appears that what drives the conclusions of Helm, Rainbow, and now Nettles, is not the actual historical texts understood in terms of their own historical contexts, but their own systematic theological pre-commitments. They approach Calvin assuming that he shares their own *a priori* theological presuppositions."

In part two of his article, Ponter considered the "price of redemption" terminology in Calvin's writings as being "cancelled" or "abolished" such that those for whom the redemptive price was given perish in hell. He cited Calvin's commentary on Gal 2:20 and his sermons on Job and Timothy. This terminology of a "price of redemption for all men" occurs likewise in Musculus, Bullinger, and Zwingli. From this evidence, Ponter concluded: "It was only post-

Calvin that the idea of Christ properly or actually laying down a redemptive price for all men was denied.” What was Calvin’s concept of “all,” “classes” of men, and “world” from 1 Tim 2:4–6? For Nettles, Calvin’s use of “all” would have no real quantitative extension in the sense that Christ literally died for the sins of all. Ponter challenged this and submitted direct statements from Calvin on 1 Tim 2:4–6 and elsewhere to show otherwise.

When we read Calvin’s language of classes and orders, we must ask ourselves “Did Calvin effectively mean *some men of all kinds*, or did he mean *all men of every kind*?” The idea that Paul, and by extension Calvin, meant some of all kinds of men dates back to Augustine. Ponter showed that Augustine was speaking about God’s hidden or decretive will in 1 Tim 2:4–6, while Calvin was speaking of God’s revealed will. For Calvin, the phrase “all people” or “all nations” is distributed to mean all men of all people and all nations.

Note in context Calvin’s reference to all men being God’s “image bearers.” Ponter provided other examples from Calvin’s writings where the will of God is not to be limited to any single individual to the exclusion of others but rather to be extended to all people in a given class. In each case, when Calvin refers to “all,” he means all people of every kind or class or order. “All” for Calvin functions in this inclusive quantitative and qualitative sense. Furthermore, there are other examples in Calvin where he states that God desires the salvation of the whole human race, and where “world” means “all mankind.” The restrictive reading of Calvin by Nettles and others actually reverses what Calvin is saying.

Ponter considered Nettles’s assertion (assumption) that for Calvin Christ’s expiation and intercession refer to the same group of people—namely, the elect, and hence supported limited atonement. Ponter noted that no quotation of Calvin proffered by Nettles indicated such. Ponter wondered whether Nettles was engaging in the logical fallacy known as “affirming the consequent: If A then B, B therefore A.” There is no necessary reason to believe that Calvin taught Christ’s intercession limits the extent of the expiation on the cross. Ponter cited Augustine Marlorate, a French Reformer, who cited Musculus affirming Christ died for all men but limited the intercession to those who believe.

Nettles argued that salvation is infallibly applied to all for whom it was purchased. Ponter countered that there is no evidence of this line of reasoning in Calvin. In Rom 8:32 Nettles has confused what Paul has said to and about believers and broadened statements into an abstraction concerning all the “elect.” Nettles’s *modus tollens* argument simply does not follow and merely begs the question at hand. Paul’s *a fortiori* argument is limited in its conclusions and application to believers. There is no argument for limited atonement here. (It is a constant error of some Calvinists to equate the concept of the elect as an abstract class with all the believing elect, as Scripture intends when speaking of the “elect.”)

Ponter quoted Calvin’s comments in his *Sermons on Timothy* to demonstrate that Calvin did not believe that the “purchased blessings of salvation are infallibly applied to any and all for whom they were obtained.”

Ponter concluded his two-part review essay with a summary of each of Nettles’s arguments and how counter-factual evidence negates those arguments. “I would argue that there is no evidence in Calvin’s writings which prove or entail the doctrine of a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone.”¹⁵

Probably the strongest evidence to be marshaled in favor of Calvin as a limitarian

¹⁵ Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 268–70.

has to do with his comments against Heshusius. It is interesting that moderate Calvinists such as Davenant and others in the seventeenth century and beyond have dealt with this passage and concluded that Calvin was not teaching limited atonement.

In more recent times, Curt Daniel, P. Rouwendal, and K. Kennedy have shown why Calvin is not affirming limited atonement in this passage. My summary discussion is heavily dependent upon their works.¹⁶

Upon a cursory reading of Calvin's comments on Heshusius, one can see how he might be affirming limited atonement. Upon closer reading, however, it becomes clear this is not the case. As always, context is important to keep in mind. The point of contention has to do with the bodily presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The context has nothing to do with the extent of the atonement. Calvin rejects the notion of the bodily presence of Christ in the elements. The key quotation is Calvin's query, "I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh which was not crucified for them and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins?"¹⁷

When Calvin asks the question "I should like to know," he is using a rhetorical device to express a concept Calvin rejects. This becomes especially clear when one compares other examples of this identical phrase in Calvin's writings. Note also that Calvin uses the term "wicked" here rather than his usual term "reprobate."

Calvin is rejecting the claim apparently made by Heshusius that the "wicked" "eat the flesh that is not crucified for them." As a Lutheran, Heshusius certainly believed in unlimited atonement. How then does one explain Calvin's statement? The answer may lie in Calvin's understanding of true saving faith, which consists in one believing that Christ has died for him. Saving faith is not believing that Christ died for the world but believing that Christ died for me. In the passage in question, genuine partaking of Christ in the elements of the Supper requires that Christ has died for the one partaking. It is Heshusius who wrongly believes that one can truly partake of Christ in the Supper without faith that Christ died for him.

Rouwendal's discussion of this issue hits the nail on the head. He pointed out that this statement by Calvin is a single, isolated remark in a tract that deals with quite another subject. Hence, they cannot be viewed as a thoughtful rejection of universal redemption. Second, it is neither fair nor realistic to use this single sentence in order to ignore the many sentences wherein Calvin stated that Christ died for the whole world. Third, it should be noted that even though Calvin states here that Christ did not die for (some) ungodly, no clear doctrine of particular redemption is offered here. Fourth, one should take notice of Calvin's word choice, as well as the context wherein he uses them. The words Calvin chooses do not deny that Christ died for all men, but rather that he died for the ungodly [wicked]. The context does not deal with justification (for Calvin surely maintained that it was for the justification of the ungodly that Christ died, and hence, that Christ died for the ungodly), but rather with the Lord's Supper. Calvin's intention was to make clear that Christ is not corporally present. In the immediate context of the quoted sentence, he uses the argument that if Christ were present corporally, the

¹⁶ C. Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill," Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1983), 819–22; K. Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement*, Studies in Biblical Literature 48 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 53–56. Kennedy is dependent on Daniel for his treatment; P. L. Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement: About Sufficiency, Efficiency, and Anachronism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70.2 (Fall 2008): 317–35.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics 22, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 285.

ungodly would eat his flesh and drink his blood, which Calvin deemed impossible. Hence, it is not implausible to interpret the quoted words as follows: “I would like to know how the ungodly can eat from Christ’s flesh, and how they can drink the blood of which they have no part through faith.” Another (maybe even more plausible) interpretation would be that since the context is about eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Christ by faith, Calvin here had in mind the efficiency of Christ’s death, so that the quotation can be read as follows: “I would like to know how the ungodly can eat from Christ’s flesh that was not crucified for them effectively, and how they can drink from the blood that was not effectively shed to reconcile their sins.”¹⁸

Given the dozens of clear statements that Calvin affirmed unlimited atonement, one should not give precedence to Calvin’s more obscure comments that are not directly addressing the question of the atonement’s extent. This is a question of methodology.¹⁹

With respect to Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement, Rouwendal’s conclusion is striking:

If Calvin taught particular atonement, he would not have used the language [for universal atonement] Clifford has gathered in great number. Thus, the universal propositions in Calvin’s works do prove negatively that he did not subscribe to particular atonement, but they do not prove positively that he subscribed to universal atonement. These propositions can be used to falsify the conclusion that Calvin was a particularist, but are not sufficient to prove him a universalist.²⁰

Rouwendal himself has concluded that the evidence shows Calvin did not subscribe to limited atonement. Note also he *does not* say Calvin *did not* subscribe to universal atonement; rather, he said Calvin’s “universal propositions” in his writings “do not prove positively that he subscribed to universal atonement.” Frankly, given the clear evidence that Calvin did indeed subscribe to a form of universal atonement, Rouwendal’s demurral is unnecessary.

¹⁸ P. L. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement,” 330–31. See also R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997), 231–38, where Kendall included Daniel’s treatment of this issue. Both Daniel and Kendall follow the same trajectory. Stephen L. Costley has an excellent article on this issue published by D. Ponter, “Understanding Calvin’s Argument against Heshusius,” *Calvin and Calvinism*, February 12, 2008, <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=215>.

1. The context of Calvin’s theology as a whole does not include limited atonement.

2. The context of Calvin’s tract against Heshusius excludes limited atonement.

3. In the famous Heshusius quote, “wicked” does not mean “non-elect.”

4. Limited atonement is meaningless and out of place in Calvin’s argument against Heshusius.

5. Limited atonement refutes Calvin’s own theology of the Lord’s Supper as presented and defended by Calvin in the Heshusius tract.

6. In the Heshusius tract, Calvin argued against Christ’s local bodily presence in the elements of the Lord’s Supper, not against unlimited atonement.

¹⁹ Calvin’s reference at the beginning of Book 3 of the *Institutes* where he spoke of the “salvation of the human race” has been taken to indicate an underlying assumption of universal atonement for what Calvin wrote in Book 2. So Bell, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 115.

²⁰ P. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement,” 328. Oddly, R. Muller makes no mention of Rouwendal’s article in his *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

Kevin Kennedy's *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* is another significant work advocating Calvin taught universal atonement. Kennedy demonstrated that the concept of union with Christ is central though not necessarily programmatic to Calvin's soteriology.²¹ The question is often raised by particularists: How can the atonement be substitutionary for those who don't actually receive the benefits of Christ's death? Calvin's concept of union with Christ is the key to answering this question, according to Kennedy. For Calvin, union with Christ is "the effectual event in the actual application of our salvation." The elect and the reprobate are separated not at the point of the cross but at the point of union with Christ.

Kennedy's "Hermeneutical Discontinuity between Calvin and Later Calvinism" demonstrated that Calvin's interpretation of biblical passages related to the extent question differed significantly from later Reformed tradition.²² Calvin operated from a different hermeneutic from what would come to be entrenched in later Reformed theology. Kennedy showed how Calvin's discussion of the passages that state Christ died for the "many" indicate Calvin interpreted "many" to mean "all." Calvin does not always interpret some extent passages that employ "all" to mean "all without distinction" rather than "all without exception," as is the case with later Reformed theology. Since many post-Calvin and modern interpreters of Calvin find some similarity in his treatment of some of the "all" passages with those arguing for limited atonement in the later tradition, this is viewed as evidence Calvin held to limited atonement. Kennedy showed the fallacy of such reasoning. Kennedy's work provides additional theological support for the position that Calvin affirmed universal atonement.

Paul Hartog is a professor at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa. His *A Word for the World: Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement* is a stout argument that Calvin affirmed unlimited atonement.²³

Hartog discussed the complex structure of Calvin's theology around twelve issues in chapter 3.²⁴

1. All people will not ultimately be saved.
2. Christ offers salvation to all indiscriminately.
3. Not everyone believes the gospel because not everyone is efficaciously drawn by the Holy Spirit.
4. Unconditional election distinguishes those efficaciously called from those not so called.
5. People do not experience salvation prior to their belief.

²¹ K. Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*. See also Kennedy, "Hermeneutical Discontinuity between Calvin and Later Calvinism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 3 (August 2011): 299–312. T. L. Wenger, "The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (June 2007): 311–28, critiqued those who want to redefine the relationship of justification and sanctification in Calvin's thought and argue that Calvin subsumed all his soteriology under the rubric of union with Christ (311). He accused those who take this approach of questionable historiography, erratic collections of Calvin's own words, and "out-prooftext[ing]" the other, leading to futile stalemates (321). Kennedy escapes Wenger's critique because he does not attempt to subsume Calvin's soteriology under the single rubric of union with Christ.

²² K. Kennedy, "Hermeneutical Discontinuity between Calvin and Later Calvinism," 299–312.

²³ P. Hartog, *A Word for the World: Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19–35.

6. Calvin coordinated a universal provision in the death of Christ with the general call of the gospel. Here Hartog cited statements from Calvin's *Institutes*, commentaries, sermons, and other writings in support. For example, Calvin stated it is "incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world." Calvin said in his commentary on Col 1:14: "This redemption was procured by the blood of Christ, for by the sacrifice of His death all the sins of the world have been expiated." According to Calvin, Christ suffered "for the redemption of the whole world." Calvin stated Jesus was "sent to be the Redeemer of the human race" and was "burdened with the sins of the world." Hartog appeals to several other Calvin quotations as proof of this point.

7. Hartog argued that, for Calvin, the universal provision of Christ in the universal offer of the gospel is important to the elect themselves. The Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ through the preaching of the universal gospel promises, which are grounded in a universal provision.

8. Hartog argued that Calvin sees ramifications of Christ's universal satisfaction for sins in the ministry of evangelism. Calvin appeals to evangelistic urgency "when we see people going to hell who have been created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ."

9. Calvin affirmed that unbelievers despise the grace that is offered them.

10. Calvin distinguished between God's revealed will in Scripture's universal promises and his secret will in his eternal decrees.

11. Calvin believed Christ died "as a sufficient expiation and redemption for the sins of all humanity, and He died intentionally for the efficacious salvation of the elect."

12. Calvin affirmed Trinitarian unity in the work of redemption.

Hartog's twelve points are well supported primarily from Calvin's own writings but also from other secondary sources who affirm Calvin's commitment to a universal atonement.

Hartog's fourth chapter addressed evidences for limited atonement in Calvin's writings. Those who assert Calvin held to limited atonement put forth three key passages from his writings: Calvin's "Reply to Heshusius" in 1561, his commentary on 1 John 2:2, and his commentary on 1 Tim 2:4. Hartog replied to each of these, demonstrating that none of the three implicate Calvin as clearly asserting limited atonement. He carefully looked at the context of each, along with secondary literature that has answered the arguments.²⁵

Hartog concluded that Calvin affirmed a form of universal atonement in tandem with personal, unconditional election. He rightly noted that Calvin should not be anachronistically labeled "Amyraldian," as he did not examine how Christ's universal satisfaction for sins worked within the framework of God's decretal will. Though Calvin spoke of the decretal will of God, he focused on God's revealed will in his commentaries and sermons.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 37–48.

²⁶ Ibid., 49–61.

Richard Muller²⁷ is considered the doyen of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Reformed historiography. Regarding the question of Calvin's view on the extent of the atonement, Muller is discreet. He comes ever so close to affirming that Calvin held to unlimited atonement with respect to the actual expiation of sin.²⁸

It is common among Reformed writers to suggest that there is little if any difference between Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement and later Reformed writers in the post-Reformation scholastic era. While Muller and others have shown that the "Calvin against the Calvinists" argument was flawed at a number of points, this did not solve the question of Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement, nor does Muller claim it does. An inductive investigation of Calvin's writings on this subject compared with later Reformed authors, particularly those in the seventeenth century, reveals a development in Reformed thought on the question of the extent of the atonement, a fact that Muller himself conceded. Many have argued that Calvin and Bullinger did not "make a major issue of the limitation of Christ's atoning work to the elect alone" because they did not believe Christ's satisfaction for sins was limited only to the elect.

There is continuity between Calvin and later Reformed Orthodoxy, but there is also significant discontinuity among Calvin, Bullinger, and other first-generation Reformers when compared to many within the orthodox period following the death of Calvin. Calvin and the first generation of Reformers believed the application of the atonement was designed and intended only for the elect, as did those in the subsequent Reformed tradition. In this sense, it was clearly limited. This is a part of the continuity in the tradition. However, when the terms and definitions are sorted out, there is a significant difference on the extent of the atonement between Calvin and Bullinger on the one hand and the later Reformed tradition as expressed by some at the Synod of Dort and later by John Owen.

Muller correctly notes that the specific terms "limited" and "universal" don't represent the usage of the Reformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. However, the concepts that those terms represent were very much debated, and not only by the Reformed against their opponents but by the Reformed among themselves, as is evidenced by what happened at Dort and beyond.

Muller also correctly asserts that the issue concerned the nature and extent of the satisfaction made by Christ for sin. He is incorrect, however, to suggest that the debate was "never over whether or not Christ's satisfaction was limited." From at least as early as the late sixteenth century, the debate was indeed over whether Christ satisfied for the sins of all people or only for the elect. Again, this debate was carried on not only between the Reformed and their opponents but among the Reformed themselves.

When Muller stated that all held the death of Christ to be "utterly sufficient to pay the price for all sin," he is trading on the ambiguity of the word "sufficient." In the sense of an

²⁷ My more extensive discussion of Muller on Calvin's view of the extent question may be found in Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*, 85–94, including all footnote citations of quotations, etc.

²⁸ R. Muller, "John Calvin and Later Calvinism: The Identity of the Reformed Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. D. Bagchi and D. C. Steinmetz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). R. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no. 2 (November 1995): 345–75; idem, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part II," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (April 1996): 125–60. Muller delimits the period of Post Reformation Reformed orthodoxy as 1565–1699 ("Calvin and the 'Calvinists,' Part II," 375).

intrinsic sufficiency—namely, that the death of Christ could have been a satisfaction for the sins of all people had God intended it to be so—all in the Reformed tradition affirmed this. However, if by “sufficient” one means “extrinsic sufficiency”—namely, that the death of Christ was actually a sufficient price for all sin because it did, in fact, pay the price for the sins of all people—then again, from Dort (if not earlier) and well beyond Dort, the debate raged over this point *in the Reformed camp*.

Muller stated that Calvin and Bullinger both “taught the sufficiency of Christ’s work of satisfaction for all sin.” The question here is what Muller means by “sufficiency.” Given that he followed this statement with a statement about the limited efficacy of the atonement, one would naturally assume he is speaking of an extrinsic sufficiency. Perhaps Muller’s most recent and significant work, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation*, will clarify these issues. In chapter 3, he addressed the issue of Calvin’s view on Christ’s satisfaction for sins and limited atonement. Muller correctly pointed out the problem of anachronism in that the term “limited atonement” was not in use in Calvin’s day.

Muller continued:

The problem for the doctrine of “limited atonement,” therefore, lies in the fact that the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century debate concerned neither the objective sacrificial death of Christ considered as the atonement or *expiatio* offered to God for the price of sin, upon which all parties in the debate were agreed, or the unlimited value, worth, merit, power, or “sufficiency” of the *satisfactio*, upon which all parties were also agreed, nor precisely, indeed, the limited *efficacia* or *applicatio*, inasmuch as all parties to the debate denied universal salvation.²⁹

Again, the question is what meaning Muller attaches to “sufficiency”: intrinsic or extrinsic. As I have demonstrated in *The Extent of the Atonement*, the nature of the sufficiency of the atonement had been modified from the original meaning of the Lombardian formula early on in Reformed theology.³⁰ Some among the Reformed redefined the issue of sufficiency to be intrinsic in nature rather than extrinsic. Davenant himself made much of this problem in his *Dissertation on the Death of Christ*. As far as I can tell, Muller nowhere acknowledges this revision of the Lombardian formula.

Muller is closer to the truth of the situation in this statement:

The actual issues relevant to the debate were (1) the divine intention concerning the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction, specifically, the relationship between the hypothetical, “if all would believe,” and the infinite value or merit of Christ’s death, namely, its “sufficiency” for all sin; (2) the divine intention concerning the effective application of salvation to individuals, specifically, the grounds of limitation of the efficiency or efficacy of Christ’s work; and (3) the relationship between the value or sufficiency and efficiency of Christ’s satisfaction and the universal or, more precisely, indiscriminate proclamation and call of the gospel.³¹

²⁹ R. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 76.

³⁰ See D. Allen, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review*, 27–34.

³¹ Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 77.

Though Muller did not mention it, David Pareaus (1548–1622) was advocating the position that God willed Christ to die for all as to the actual sufficiency and that he also willed that Christ die for the elect alone as to the efficiency (efficacy) of the atonement.³² There is no difference in Pareaus’s statement of double intentionality in the death of Christ and that found some forty years later in the teachings of John Cameron, Moise Amyraut, or John Davenant, or in Calvin approximately twenty-five years earlier.

Muller seems to come very near affirming that Calvin held to a universal satisfaction for sin in the following statement:

Thus, given that Calvin did understand Christ’s satisfaction as fully paying the price for sin, that is, as having an infinite or universal value or power, how did he frame the grounds of its limited application to or efficacy for believers? In addition, did Calvin offer an explanation of the divine intention underlying the sufficient satisfaction of Christ, specifically with regard to the question of whether God in some sense intended Christ’s objective reconciliation for all sin to be such that if all believed all would be saved?³³

Does Muller mean by “Calvin did understand Christ’s satisfaction as fully paying the price for sin” that Calvin taught an unlimited substitution? Muller remains unclear here. Muller’s statement is true, but it is true because of Calvin’s underlying doctrine of universal imputation of sin to Christ. Calvin specifically stated that Christ suffered for the sins of all people. This is not limited atonement (a satisfaction only for the sins of the elect) as the concept was understood and taught by Beza, most of the delegates at Dort, John Owen, and many of the Puritans. Muller’s statement with reference to Calvin’s view that “the universal offer here extends to all, elect and reprobate alike, and it is a valid offer given the full expiation (in itself sufficient) made for all sin—but the particularity of the application is limited by divine election”³⁴ certainly appears to affirm the point that Calvin held to an unlimited satisfaction for the sin of all people. It is difficult to invest his “full expiation (in itself sufficient) made for all sin” with any other meaning.

Muller’s statement also confirms Calvin’s view that the gospel is indeed an offer, and an offer to all, whether elect or reprobate. This understanding of Calvin on the offer of the gospel is confirmed by Beach, who one year before Muller’s *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, surveyed the history of scholarship on Calvin’s view of the free offer of the gospel and concluded from Calvin’s writings “that Calvin freely employed the language of ‘offer’ and ‘invitation,’ terms that apply to all sinners. . . . Calvin linked the language of gospel-offer unto all sinners to the notion of God’s love, favor, kindness, or goodness. . . . Calvin does not feel obliged to distinguish elect and reprobate sinners from one another.”³⁵ However, Beach wrote his entire article without once referencing Calvin’s view on the extent of the atonement, and it appears he presumed Calvin held to limited atonement.

³² D. Pareus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Willard (1852; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1985), 223.

³³ Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ J. M. Beach, “Calvin’s Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel and Divine Grace,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 67.

Muller correctly noted that Calvin, as did all the Reformed, taught a limited intention by divine decree to save only the elect. But this does not preclude that Calvin held that Christ was ordained to be the Savior of the world and that he was ordained to make a “full payment for the sins of the world,” as Muller put it. This is the meaning of Calvin’s universal language. If Muller is denying Calvin believed God has a universal saving will, then he is incorrect on this point.³⁶ Muller seems unclear concerning Calvin’s dualism with respect to intentionality. Calvin’s understanding of intentionality does not appear to differ one bit from Davenant’s understanding some fifty years later. Both held that God intended for the death of Christ to expiate the sins of all people but that he also intended to save only the elect.

Muller again appeared to suggest that Calvin affirmed Christ satisfied for the sins of all people in the following statement:

In the case of the doctrine of Christ’s satisfaction for sin, since Christ paid the price of all sin and accomplished a redemption capable of saving the whole world, his benefits are clearly placed before, proffered, or offered to all who hear: what Calvin does not indicate is any sort of universalizing intentionality flowing from the sufficiency into the actual efficacy of this offering. Calvin’s approach to the value, merit, or sufficiency of Christ’s work assumed that it was unlimited and could therefore undergird the universality of the promise and the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel, but, equally so, his approach to the eternal divine will and intention to save in Christ, to the efficacy or application of Christ’s work, and to Christ’s own high-priestly intercession assumed its limitation to the elect. The conditional or hypothetical dimension of Calvin’s doctrine, therefore, belongs to the revealed will of God in the promise of salvation to all who believe and not, clearly not, to an ultimate

³⁶ Although Muller has had many opportunities in his writings to affirm Calvin’s belief that God desires the salvation of all men in the revealed will, the most he does is *imply* it. Noting Calvin’s comments on Nah 1:3, Muller said that “frequently, God defers punishment and ‘suspends’ his anger against the ungodly in order to demonstrate his willingness to pardon sin—but neither does he tolerate the abuse of his patience” (R. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003], 3:583). Again, observing Calvin’s comments on Jonah 4:2, Muller said, “Indeed, God works toward the salvation of the human race at the very same time that he is angry at sin: the ground of our hope of mercy and pardon is, therefore, the ‘infinite and inexhaustible’ goodness of God, who does not respond in anger to the constant provocation of sinful humanity.” (Ibid., 3:583–84) On this text, Calvin himself clearly said, “This slowness to wrath proves that God provides for the salvation of mankind, even when he is provoked by their sins. Though miserable men provoke God daily against themselves, he yet continues to have a regard for their salvation” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 14 vols., trans. John Owen [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984], 3:125). Calvin is abundantly clear in his exposition of 2 Pet 3:9: “So wonderful is his love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost.” In another work Muller considered Calvin’s sermon “offers an even more direct promotion of the universal task of preaching the gospel: ‘that God would have all the world to be saved: to the end that as much as lies in us, we should also seek their salvation’” (R. Muller, “‘To Grant this Grace to All People and Nations:’ Calvin on Apostolicity and Mission,” in *For God So Loved the World: Missiological Reflections in Honor of Roger S. Greenway*, ed. A. C. Leder [Belleville, Ontario: Essence, 2006], 225). J. H. Merle d’Aubigne correctly expounded Calvin’s view of God’s revealed will in 1 Tim 2:4 and *explicitly* says, “Calvin declares that it is the will of God that all men should be saved” (J. H. Merle d’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin*, 8 vols., trans. W. L. B. Cates [New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1877], 7:90–94)

willing of God to save all on condition of belief.³⁷

What Muller said is correct as far as it goes: Christ did pay the price for sin. However, Calvin said more than this. As the quotations from Calvin above demonstrate, Christ paid the price for sin *for the world*, not merely for sin that was sufficient for the world. Unless Muller meant to indicate an extrinsic sufficiency in Calvin, he has failed to represent him correctly. Muller's statement that, for Calvin, Christ's high-priestly intercession "assumed its [Christ's work on the cross] limitation to the elect" is problematic. It is true that for Calvin the expiation and intercession are inseparable, but in the sense that the expiation grounds the intercession, making the latter possible. But from this it cannot be assumed that Calvin reversed the logic and believed that limited intercession entailed or proved limited expiation. If this is Muller's approach, then it is logically fallacious.

For all its benefits, Muller's work with respect to Calvin's views on the extent of the atonement is problematic on three fronts. First, he makes no attempt to define and distinguish the concept of sufficiency as intrinsic or extrinsic. Though it appears in most of his uses of the term, he means an extrinsic sufficiency. Second, he makes no mention of how Beza and others changed the Lombardian formula by the beginning of the seventeenth century. This appears to be a historical oversight on his part. Third, he sidesteps some of Calvin's clear statements about the universality of the satisfaction of Christ for sin, such as Calvin's sermon on 2 Tim 2:19 and his statement "it is not a little thing, that souls perish that have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ."

Muller spoke of "vagueness" and "difficulty" in using such phrases as "for whom Christ died." But there is no vagueness here. It is quite clear. For example, with respect to Calvin's comments on 1 Tim 2:4, it seems clear that Calvin was not interpreting the word "all" to mean "some of all kinds" but rather "every one of all kinds." Muller's actual understanding of Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement remains unclear to me. It is difficult to discern whether he is in essential agreement with Cunningham, Nicole, Helm, Letham, and Rainbow who argue Calvin held to a limited satisfaction for sins (the elect only) or whether he has conceded Calvin held to a form of universal satisfaction for all sins (elect and non-elect). What does not seem unclear is Calvin's own position given all the data. It is growing ever more difficult to deny the notion that Calvin understood the atonement to be a universal satisfaction for sins.

Paul Helm³⁸ has defended the view that Calvin held to limited atonement in a chapter entitled "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.³⁹ Helm attempts to defend the notion that Calvin's indefinite language is "thoroughly consistent with being committed to definite atonement, and which cannot be used as convincing evidence that he denied it." His chapter brings nothing new to the table regarding Calvin's view and is essentially the same argument he made in 1982 in his *Calvin and the Calvinists*. However, much has transpired since then on the question at hand. Helm does

³⁷ Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 105–6.

³⁸ Material in this section of the paper is taken from my *Extent of the Atonement*, 670–76.

³⁹ Paul Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Perspective*, eds. D. Gibson and J. Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 97–119.

reference Clifford and Kennedy on the unlimited side and Rainbow and Nicole on the limited side, all of whom appeared after 1982. However, he misses at least three important studies, all by Calvinists, which conclude Calvin held to unlimited atonement.

Curt Daniel's 1983 PhD dissertation, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill," contains an extensive fifty-page appendix entitled "Did John Calvin Teach Limited Atonement?" He provides dozens of in-context quotations with careful analysis. Daniel addresses and analyzes all the passages in Calvin that proponents of limited atonement cite as indicating Calvin held to definite atonement. His conclusion that Calvin held to an unlimited atonement seems to be beyond a reasonable doubt.⁴⁰

Helm also overlooks Peter Rouwendal's 2008 article. Rouwendal's conclusion is striking. How could Calvin use the clear universal language with respect to the extent of the atonement if he indeed held to definite atonement? For Rouwendal, the universal propositions in Calvin's works do prove negatively that he did not subscribe to particular atonement. Rather enigmatically, Rouwendal believes that Calvin's universal propositions do indeed "falsify the conclusion that Calvin was a particularist, but are not sufficient to prove him a universalist."⁴¹

Additionally, Helm fails to interact with the research of David Ponter,⁴² including an unpublished paper critiquing Nicole's arguments (and Helm's as well) for limited atonement.

Helm's approach to the issue is confusing and fraught with problems. For example, he writes: "while Calvin did not commit himself to any version of the doctrine of definite atonement, his thought is consistent with that doctrine; that is, he did not deny it in express terms, but by other things that he most definitely did hold to, he may be said to be committed to that doctrine."⁴³ This borders on incoherence.

First, note carefully Helm's admission that Calvin did not commit himself to any version of the doctrine of definite atonement. Second, Helm avers Calvin's thought is "consistent" with definite atonement, which Helm specifies as Calvin did not "deny it in express terms." But this is logically problematic. Can it be said my thought is consistent with the view that the moon is composed of green cheese if I do not "deny in express terms" the proposition that the moon is made of green cheese? The logical fallacy is self-evident.

Third, Helm stated that by means of other, related concepts that Calvin did affirm, he may be said to be "committed" to the doctrine of definite atonement. Helm is attempting to show that, by entailment, definite atonement results from some of the other doctrines or concepts Calvin affirms. Unless all Calvin's universal statements can somehow be dispatched, Helm's entailment argument does not work. If such arguments work for Calvin, then they would entail Hypothetical Universalists also believed in definite atonement.

Helm argues that accumulating and assessing quotations of Calvin relative to the extent question is inappropriate since such proof-texting "abstracts from Calvin's deeper theological outlook."⁴⁴ Of course one needs to evaluate Calvin's statements in light of his full theology. That goes without saying. But this in no way negates the importance of looking carefully at what Calvin did say with respect to the extent question.

⁴⁰ Curt Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill," 777–828.

³² P. L. Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement: About Sufficiency, Efficiency, and Anachronism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 328.

⁴² See D. Ponter, "John Calvin (1509–1564) on Unlimited Expiation, Sin-Bearing, Redemption and Reconciliation," *Calvin and Calvinism*, March 1, 2008, <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=230>.

⁴³ P. Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

Helm's method, is deductive. This approach begins with certain presuppositions (i.e., Calvin held to limited atonement) and then attempts to discover such in the primary source material or at least show that the presupposition is not at odds with what one finds in the source material. What Helm wants to do in his chapter is use Calvin's Reformed theology to reason to definite atonement. Helm seeks to answer the question whether definite atonement "fits better" than universal atonement in Calvin's teaching. In order to accomplish this goal, Helm develops three arguments.

First, Helm looks at "Providence and the Future." He admits that this argument may seem distant from debates about the question at hand. He is correct, for there is nothing in this section that can be found to remotely support definite atonement.

Second, Helm looks at "The Language of Aspiration," by which he means an expression on the part of Christ and Paul, which Calvin taps into, that stresses a desire for the eternal good of everyone, even when ignorant of God's decretal will. But again, there is nothing in this section that remotely supports the notion of definite atonement.

Helm's third argument is "Universal Preaching." His argument attempts to show that Calvin's use of universal language with respect to preaching the gospel does not necessarily commit him to indefinite atonement. Quite right. Neither does it commit him to definite atonement, as Helm infers.

Helm is confusing the question of the intent of the atonement with its extent and application. Calvin clearly believed that God intended to effect the salvation of the elect only and therefore the elect only would actually have the atonement applied to them. Helm reasons from this, contrary to Calvin's other statements about universal extent, that Calvin also believed in definite atonement with respect to extent, though he has to admit that Calvin nowhere in his writings affirms a strictly limited atonement.

Helm proceeds to consider two biblical case studies in an attempt to show Calvin's thought is commensurate with definite atonement. The first is Ezek 18:23. Calvin's comments on this passage include discussion of the universal gospel offer in the light of the eternal decree. But again there is nothing in Calvin's statements here that Helm can point to that even hints at definite atonement. Helm assumes Calvin held to definite atonement and then reads Calvin's statements on the distinction between God's revealed and decretal will in light of that assumption.

Helm's second case study is 1 Tim 2:4 and Calvin's sermon on this passage. This is an attempt to extract definite atonement from Calvin's statements about the universality of gospel preaching. But again, he can find nothing in Calvin here to support the supposition that he held to limited atonement. Helm has assumed that Calvin's understanding of 1 Tim 2:4-6 took "all men" to mean "some men of all kinds" rather than "all men of every kind." There is no evidence for this from Calvin himself. Calvin is speaking not of the secret will of God (as Augustine had approached these verses) but of the revealed will.

From Calvin's own sermon on the Timothy passage it is evident that "all people" or "all nations" means something along the lines of "all men of all people and all nations" in a distributive sense. This can be seen also in Calvin's commentary on this passage:

For there is one God, the creator and Father of all, so, he declares, there is one Mediator, through whom access to God is opened to us, and this Mediator is not given only to one nation, or to a few men of a particular class, but to all, for the benefit of the sacrifice, by which he has expiated for our sins, applies to all. . . . The universal term "all" must

always be referred to classes of men but never to individuals. It is as if he had said: “Not only Jews but also Greeks, not only people of humble rank but also princes have been redeemed by the death of Christ.” Since therefore he intends the benefit of his death to be common to all, those who hold a view that would exclude any from the hope of salvation do Him an injury.

The Holy Spirit bids us pray for all, because our one mediator bids all to come to Him, since by his death He has reconciled all to the Father.⁴⁵

In fact, the Timothy passage actually asserts that the foundation for universal gospel preaching is a universal atonement. Calvin nowhere denies this.

Helm closes his discussion by noting three things. First, “given the opportunity to make the scope of Christ’s work universal in intent, Calvin does not take it, as his exegesis of 2 Cor 5:14 shows.” Helm queries: “So if through his use of indefinite language Calvin presupposes a universal atonement . . . why, when he comes to the standard passages for ‘universal atonement,’ such as 1 John 2:2, does he not take the opportunity to state unequivocally that he is a proponent of universal atonement?”

Second, Helm wants to distinguish between the world as composed of classes of individuals and the world as composed of individuals of a class. Helm stated:

The question may be raised, would such indiscriminate language warrant a preacher asserting to all and sundry that “Christ died for you”? Only if the formulation were taken as an inference drawn from “Christ died for all” or “Christ died for the world,” but not if from “Christ died for everyone in particular.” The first premise, Calvin would hold, is true, while the second is false. That is, a distinction must be made between the world as comprised of classes of individuals, and the world as comprised of individuals of a class. Taken in the first way, the language would not be warranted, but in the second sense, the language is clearly warranted. Christ died for the world.⁴⁶

This is an effort to explain away the universal language in 1 Tim 2:4–6 and to extract definite atonement from Paul’s statement that Christ died for “all.” But this is an abortive attempt. Attempting to force the meaning of “all without distinction” on the universal texts is to explode them with “grammatical gunpowder,” as Spurgeon said in his sermon on this passage. The “all without distinction” concept often becomes code for “some of all without distinction.” Thus “all” becomes “some of all sorts,” an unwarranted move.

With respect to the NT texts that use universal language, the bifurcation of “all without distinction” and “all without exception” is ultimately a distinction without a difference. If I speak of all men without racial, gender, or other distinctions, am I not speaking of all men without exception? Whatever the distinction is and whatever the scope of the “all” is must be supplied by the context. The two phrases simply cannot be compartmentalized linguistically. The distinction is artificial.

Third, Helm mentions Calvin’s explanation of the connection of universal preaching with election. But again, there is simply nothing here in Calvin that hints at definite atonement.

⁴⁵ J. Calvin, “The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus & Philemon,” in *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols., ed. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10:210–11.

⁴⁶ P. Helm, “Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement,” 117.

The long and short of Helm's chapter is to make the point that "definiteness in belief can be allied with indefiniteness of expression." Helm stated:

May we not conclude, then, that the use of indefinite language is not only consistent with definite providence and definite election but that it is also consistent with being committed to the doctrine of definite atonement? Even though, as I have argued, Calvin does not commit himself to that belief. The use of indefinite language cannot therefore be used as an argument against such a commitment.⁴⁷

Helm's conclusion is simply not warranted. The evidence he adduces neither supports the position that Calvin held to a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone nor weakens the evidence suggesting he held to an indefinite atonement.

Helm retrojects a later version of substitutionary atonement into Calvin; one that is determined and defined by the dictates of a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone along lines developed by John Owen and the revised version of the Lombardian formula. Helm actually fails to do what he desires to do: read Calvin historically as a theologian in his own context.

CONCLUSION.

It seems clear from the evidence that Calvin held a dualistic approach to the atonement, which was in line with the Lombardian formula—namely, that Christ died sufficiently for the whole world in the sense that he satisfied for the sins of the world but that Christ died efficaciously only for the elect. This reading of Calvin's various statements on the atonement and its extent harmonizes all the data. Those who advocate the position that Calvin taught limited atonement tend to deal deductively with the data. Based on Calvin's theology of election, they presume he must have held to limited atonement since universal atonement is purportedly inconsistent with election. Passages in Calvin that appear to teach universal atonement must be interpreted to mean something else than what they appear to mean on the surface. On the other hand, advocates for the position that Calvin taught an unlimited atonement tend to view the data inductively.

R. Muller, along with others, has demonstrated that most of the first generation of Reformed theologians in the sixteenth century held to unlimited atonement with a specific intent on God's part to apply it only to the elect. It would appear that Calvin fits that trajectory as well.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 119.