A WORD FOR THE WORLD

Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement

PAUL HARTOG
Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents, who first taught me the gospel and instilled within me a love of theology.

About the author

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Preface

The materials in this book first began as a short excursus in a thesis I wrote concerning “Ethics, Sanctification, and Assurance: Studies in Paul, Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans” (Th.M. thesis, St. Andrew’s Theological College, 2008). I am grateful for Dr. Alan Clifford’s role as a reader of my thesis, and for motivating me to research this topic for myself, even when I did not come to share all of his conclusions.

I wish to thank Tony Byrne, Reid Ferguson, Martha Hartog, and David Ponter for proof-reading drafts of this small volume. David critically supported the project through his library research. I also wish to acknowledge Amy Kramer’s interlibrary loan assistance. My sweetheart, Alne, is to be praised for her patience during this project. I rise up and call her blessed.

The current work may be a slender volume, but I believe its subject matter is weighty. I trust it may be of some help to those seeking to ascertain the actual, historical views of John Calvin. I hope this little book may even dissipate some misunderstandings concerning the Genevan reformer. And so, as my work leaves my hands and enters the hands of readers, I summon a (modified) Chaucerian well-wish: “Go, litel boke! Go litel myn historie!”

—July 2009 (the Calvin Quincentenary)
ONE

Introduction

John Calvin’s Theology might be compared to a celebrated work of art, somewhat obscured by five hundred years of craquelure. Over the centuries, some of his well-intentioned students have added their own touch-ups upon the canvas. Others have set out as art restorers, claiming to bring back the genuine colors of Calvin’s original masterpiece. However, as experts from varying perspectives have attempted to preserve and refurbish the renowned painting, the resulting project has not been without controversy. What were the theological colors that Calvin himself initially intended?

A contemporary debate rages whether John Calvin himself emphasized (or even taught) all “five points” of so-called “five-point Calvinism.” The dispute centers upon whether Calvin taught “limited atonement.” According to Alan Clifford, it is “a subject which shows no signs of subsiding,” to the point that some have denigrated the prodigious dispute as “a

1. I acknowledge that labels such as “five-point Calvinism” and “four-point Calvinism” lack uniform definitional clarity, and therefore simply obfuscate the debate at times. For example, it should be noted that the belief that “God only intended the effectual salvation of the elect” is different from “God intended the effectual salvation of only the elect.” The labels “four-point” Calvinist and “Amyraldian” can both be misleading. For example, the “four-point” language may imply that Jesus in no way died effectually for anyone. Even the Amyraldians distinguished between a universal redemption offered upon the condition of faith (which, however, sinful humans would not fulfill of themselves) and the decreed, efficacious application of Christ’s redemption to the elect. Concerning Calvinism, Basil Hall comments, “Calvin himself, of course, did not use the word ‘Calvinist’ and did not think of himself as the founder of something called Calvinism” (Basil Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in John Calvin, ed. G. E. Duffield [Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1966], 20). According to Richard Muller, “Calvin ought not to be regarded as the sole founder of the tradition that came to be called, through no connivance of his own, Calvinism. Certain aspects of that Reformed tradition certainly can be credited to Calvin, but the tradition as a whole, as it developed from the early sixteenth century onward, was always broader than Calvin and consistently drew more strongly on other formulators for other major elements of its theology” (Richard A. Muller, Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], x). “Moreover, the Reformed tradition is not defined by what John Calvin did or did not teach. It is a common but fallacious assumption that Calvin’s thought should be the sole criterion of what is genuinely Reformed” (Raymond A. Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” in The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004], 305).

Nevertheless, I take heart from P. L. Rouwendal’s advice: “Calvin’s theology is still interesting enough to be researched further, and there is enough in his theology still to be researched.”

This present study argues that Calvin apparently combined some form of “unlimited atonement” (or “universal redemption”) with his firm emphasis upon particularist “unconditional election.” The heart of the volume can be found in chapter 3, “Twelve Issues,” and readers with limited time are encouraged to focus upon that chapter. Of course, this short work will not fully exhaust the complicated issue of Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement. Nor am I so brash as to believe that this investigation will solve the conundrum to the satisfaction of all. Moreover, one should keep in mind the purpose of this work: It is a study in historical theology that examines John Calvin’s own views and interpretations; it is not necessarily a study in constructive theology that explains my own systematic views and Biblical interpretations.


5. Rouwendal cautions, “A church historian needs to disengage his own doctrinal position from the position of the person he is researching” (Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 334). Of course, my historical examination of John Calvin’s views does not necessarily reflect the theology of any specific church, fellowship, or institution either.
TWO

Four General Approaches

Robert Peterson, a Reformed theologian, acknowledges that John Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement “has been the matter of considerable debate.” Faced with the diverse (and seemingly conflicting) evidence within Calvin’s corpus, scholars have reached varying conclusions by means of varying approaches (and sometimes overlapping approaches).

In a first approach, some scholars conclude that Calvin believed in a strictly limited atonement, even though he did not emphasize the doctrine in an explicit manner. The complexities of the evidence cause Roger Nicole to concede that sometimes Calvin sounds as if he believed in “unlimited atonement.” However, after “examining the data,” Nicole remains convinced that “the balance of evidence” favors the view that Calvin upheld limited atonement. Nicole rigorously opposes the possibility that Calvin’s descriptions of a “for-all” gospel could include a for-all sacrificial provision as well, even if sovereignly and efficaciously applied to the elect alone. Nicole argues that “the proposition that the prerequisite for an indiscriminate call is a universal provision, which is the base of the whole argument, appears to us palpably and demonstrably false.” He denies that the general offer “extended to all humans” must be accompanied by any notion of a universal provision.

Within this “first approach,” some argue that Calvin’s overall system points toward a

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2. I have described these “four approaches” so as to give readers a sense of the terrain, not to portray hard-and-fast categories.


5. See also Helm, Calvin and the Calvinists; Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 197–225; Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross.


limited-atonement view, although he himself never explicitly states this conclusion.8 “The truth is,” asserted William Cunningham, “that no satisfactory evidence has been or can be derived from his writings that the precise question upon the extent of the atonement . . . ever exercised Calvin’s mind, or was made by him the subject of any formal or explicit deliverance.”9 “We admit, however,” Cunningham commented, “that he [Calvin] has not usually given any indication, that he believed in any limitation as to the objects of the atonement; . . . and that upon a survey of all that has been produced from his writings, there is fair ground for a difference of opinion as to what his doctrine upon this point really was.”10 Cunningham himself maintained, “It is likewise true, that no sufficient evidence has been produced that Calvin believed in a universal or unlimited atonement.”11 Nevertheless, Cunningham argued that unlimited atonement is “somewhat alien, to say the least, in its general spirit and complexion, to the leading features of his [Calvin’s] theological system.”12 Cunningham therefore concluded that systematic considerations provided “sufficient evidence” that Calvin must have held to limited atonement.13

W. Robert Godfrey agrees with Nicole that “definite atonement” fits better “into the total pattern of Calvin’s teaching.”14 Godfrey highlights Calvin’s “pervasive particularism.”15 Paul Helm likewise claims, “Overall, Calvin’s remarks are not consistent with universal atonement but they are with limited, definite atonement.”16 Helm posits that Calvin “could be said to be committed to definite atonement, even though he does not commit himself to definite atonement.”17 Helm adds, “There was no occasion for Calvin to enter into argument about the matter, for before the Arminian controversy the extent of the atonement had not been debated expressly within the Reformed churches.”18

In a second approach, some scholars conclude that Calvin was an “Amyraldian” or so-called four-point Calvinist.19 They maintain that Calvin held a

10. Ibid., Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation, 396.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. At the same time, Cunningham acknowledged that “it is certain that some men of distinguished ability and learning, such as Amyraut and Daillée, Davenant and Baxter, have held both these doctrines of universal atonement and universal grace, and at the same time have held the Calvinistic doctrine of election” (Cunningham, Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation, 399). Many more examples, of course, could be added, such as James Ussher, Edmund Calamy, J. C. Ryle, etc. See David W. Ponter’s compilation of primary sources at http://calvinandcalvinism.com.
17. Helm, Calvin and the Calvinists, 18; italics original.
18. Ibid.
19. R. T. Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979),
form of unlimited atonement which he espoused in combination with his definite view of “unconditional election.” The introductory sentences to R. T. Kendall’s first chapter of his 1979 monograph announced, “Fundamental to the doctrine of faith in John Calvin (1509–64) is his belief that Christ died indiscriminately for all men. Equally crucial, however, is his conviction that, until faith is given, ‘all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value.’” Charles Bell explains, “For this reason, he [Calvin] is able to teach a doctrine of predestination in which faith is limited to the elect, and, at the same time, to give proper consideration to Scripture passages which clearly teach universal atonement.”

Alan Clifford has led the Amyraldian Association in the United Kingdom and has done extensive writing on Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement. Clifford argues, “Notwithstanding the rationally-challenging paradox involved, Calvin maintained the doctrines of universal atonement and divine election side by side. Faced by clear biblical evidence for both, he refused to tamper with the


scriptural texts.”

Clifford contends that “the ‘Calvin-Amyraut’ outlook best reflects the Gospel of the grace of God according to the Scriptures.”

In a third approach, some scholars concede that there is such “ambiguity” or “tension” in Calvin, that our questions may be ultimately unanswerable. G. Michael Thomas argues that “the reformer left to his successors a theology that was . . . inherently unstable.” Thomas explains that “as a rule, Calvin spoke of the atonement as universal when he was dealing with the promise of the gospel, and particular in the context of eternal election. Whether or not this is the best analysis, it seems that a more nuanced treatment than claiming Calvin as a supporter of either universal or limited atonement is required.”

Thomas adds, “Calvin’s approach is that when universal saving will and particular predestination seem to be in conflict, particular predestination must take precedence.”

Hans Boersma claims, “It seems a fair conclusion that the groundwork of Calvin’s theology does not allow for a theory of universal atonement.” Nevertheless, Boersma acknowledges: “There is a line of thought in Calvin which wants to maintain that God wills the salvation of all people, that God extends his love and grace to all people, and in particular to those whom he has chosen as his people in a more general sense. At the same time this line of thinking causes a certain tension.” Boersma proposes a solution to this “certain tension” by distinguishing between God’s revealed will and his secret decree:

A clear overall picture has emerged: there is a distinction between God’s revealed will and secret decree. The former is normative, the latter for wonderment and adoration. The distinction does not mean a dual will in God. To maintain this seeming contradiction Calvin refers to the concept of accommodation, while denying that God’s revealed will is in any way

25. Ibid.
27. Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 34.
28. Thomas, “Calvin and English Calvinism,” 120.
30. Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 344. Boersma criticized both Kendall and (to a lesser degree) Nicole. He also expressed his gratitude toward Alan Clifford, who had been of assistance through his critiques (Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 333n1).
31. In Boersma’s perspective, “Calvin does not always attempt to dissolve it, but when he does so, he never solves it at the cost of God’s purpose as laid down in his decree. . . . Where Calvin does move toward a solution he always does so at the cost of the universal aspect, at the cost of the notion of God’s will that all people be saved, at the cost of common grace” (Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 351). Boersma adds, “They [relevant passages from Calvin] indicate a desire on God’s part that all people be saved. In terms of the extent of the atonement this means that Calvin in effect argues that Christ died for all people, i.e., with the intent that all be saved. The question as to whether Christ really atoned for someone’s sins of course depends on the Holy Spirit’s efficacious working of faith. Moreover, sensing the tension which this brings into his theology, Calvin at times limits this universal intent of the atonement, in order to bring its extent in line with his emphasis on the unity of God’s work due to his decree” (Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 351). See also Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 12–40. Like Boersma, Thomas describes the “tension” in Calvin’s theology. Cf. the response in Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 325–326.
deceptive. One cannot avoid the impression of a certain ambiguity at this point.  

Boersma pronounces, “The picture which emerges from this study is not consistent. Perhaps it is one of the weaknesses of the discussion of Calvin’s view on the extent of the atonement that one expects to find an overall, coherent, and consistent picture.” Boersma continues, “This means,” concludes Boersma, “that it is not possible to speak of a consistent, precise Calvinian view on the extent of the atonement. A lack of precision will remain. . . . Calvin is not always consistent on the point, at times accepting a universal intent, while more often asserting that this is not the real way of speaking.” Nevertheless, Boersma insists, “The dilemma must not be overcome by weakening either God’s will for universal salvation or his decree of predestination.”

In a nuanced perspective that seems to combine elements of this “third approach” with a refined “first approach,” Robert Peterson declares, “I hold to a position of limited atonement, but continue to think that the evidence is too ambiguous to allow a definitive answer to the question of what Calvin thinks on the matter.” Peterson acknowledges, “I confess uncertainty concerning Calvin’s position on the extent of the atonement.” Peterson contends that Calvin was “noncommittal on the extent of the atonement,” although systematically “the
position of limited atonement is a logical extension of Calvin’s thought.”

Peterson agrees with Robert Letham’s sentiment, “My position is that Calvin was ambiguous or contradictory on the question but that he maintained the intrinsic efficacy of the atonement.”

Peterson’s 1983 study had acknowledged that Calvin did not emphasize a limited atonement, but then added that this topic was not yet a subject of debate. Peterson concluded that “it is unfair to ask for a man’s position on a matter that became an issue only after his death.” In a 1999 work, Peterson qualified these statements:

Although I reject his major thesis, that Calvin clearly taught limited atonement, [Jonathan] Rainbow’s work has changed my thinking. I can no longer maintain, as I did in 1983, that the extent of the atonement was not an issue until after Calvin. Rainbow convinces me that Gottschalk and Bucer (in debates with Anabaptists) taught limited atonement before Calvin. I must modify my judgment, therefore, and argue that limited/unlimited atonement was not a debated issue within reformed circles until the time of Calvin’s successor, Beza. I thus agree with Robert Letham that the extent of the atonement “only became a major issue in the next generation.” The debate over this matter waited until Moses Amyrald and John Cameron began promoting unlimited atonement and thereby precipitated responses from the defenders of reformed orthodoxy. Hence the question of Calvin’s view of the extent of the atonement is somewhat anachronistic.

Peterson reasons, “The very fact that scholars have to appeal to systematic theology hints at a paucity of actual statements in Calvin on the issue of the extent of the atonement and should serve to make us examine whether or not Calvin

39. Peterson, “Calvin on Christ’s Saving Work,” 247. At the same time, Peterson recognizes Calvin’s “eschewing speculation and seeking to base his theology on the exposition of Holy Scripture” (ibid). See also Jonathan Hill, The History of Christian Thought (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 203.
41. Despite his pronounced emphasis on the efficacy of Christ’s atoning death, Calvin does not commit himself on the question of the extent of the atonement” (Letham, “Saving Faith and Assurance,” vol. 1, 125). According to Letham, Calvin followed Scripture “even where there is apparent contradiction. Consequently, he can make statements that seem contradictory” (ibid, vol. 1, 125).
42. Peterson, Calvin’s Doctrine of the Atonement, 90–91. This is how Joel Beeke construes the issue (Joel Beeke, “William Perkins and His Greatest Case of Conscience: ‘How a man may know whether he be the child of God, or No,’” Calvin Theological Journal 41 [2006], 277). Paul Helm, who was trying to counter Kendall, nevertheless acknowledged, “There are, of course, theological differences between John Calvin and later Calvinism, for example the explicit doctrine of limited atonement, covenant theology, and the careful discrimination between faith and assurance” (Helm, “Calvin, English Calvinism,” 185).
44. Peterson, Calvin and the Atonement, 119–120; italics original. Cf. a similar recognition in Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 12.
answers the questions that we ask.”  
Yet Peterson concludes: “One more point needs to be made. I am persuaded that it is fair to say that limited atonement fits better with the system of Calvin’s thought than does unlimited atonement. . . . But I still maintain that it is unwise to ask what is Calvin’s view on the extent of the atonement, because it was a question that he did not address.”

A fourth approach is exemplified by a recent *Westminster Theological Journal* article, written by P. L. Rouwendal. He concludes that Calvin espoused neither limited atonement nor unlimited atonement, but the “classic view,” which simply stated that “Christ died sufficiently for all but efficiently only for the elect.”

According to Rouwendal, the classical view left the question, For whom did Christ die? rather open-ended. Rouwendal concludes, “(1) Calvin did not teach universal atonement; (2) Calvin did not teach limited atonement.” Rouwendal argues that the attempt to fit John Calvin himself within post-Calvin debates is an “anachronism” and therefore a poor example of historical scholarship. Moreover,

45. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement*, 118.
46. Ibid, 120. Peterson reiterates, “I would go so far as to conclude that limited atonement, as framed by Calvin’s successors, is a valid theological extension of his own theology” (ibid).
47. In Latin, sometimes simply stated as *sufficienter pro omnibus, efficaciter pro electis*. According to Peter Lombard, Jesus Christ offered Himself “for all, with respect to the sufficiency of the ransom, but for the elect alone with regard to the efficiency, because it effects salvation for the predestined alone” (Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae* 3.20.5). Thomas Aquinas declared, “Christ’s Passion sufficed for all; while as to its efficacy it was profitable for many” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3, quest. 78, art. 8, obj. 8). See quotations in Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” 311–312. Blacketer repeats Rainbow’s fallacious understanding of Luther (Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” 315; Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 18).
48. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 317–335. Rouwendal theorizes, “It is plausible that the Saumur theologians annexed the classical formula of the aforementioned distinction, and hence all who held the classical position” (ibid, 321). However, theologians such as Kimedoncius, Paraeus, Ursinus, and Bucanus continued to use the “classical” formula without espousing a full Amyraldian system. On the continued use of the formula (even with different emphases), see Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement,” 133–171; idem, “Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974). Ursinus will serve as one example. He proclaimed that Christ suffered “the keenest and most bitter anguish of soul, which is doubtless a sense of the wrath of God against the sins of the whole human race.” When faced with the counterargument, “If Christ made a satisfaction for all, then all ought to be saved. But all are not saved. Therefore he did not make a perfect satisfaction,” Ursinus responded, “Christ satisfied for all, as it respects the sufficiency of the satisfaction which he hath made, but not as it respects the application thereof” (Zacharius Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* [Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1994], 213–215). While Rouwendal cites three instances where Calvin explicitly mentioned the “classical” view, Clifford refers to two others as well (Clifford, “Calvin & Calvinism,” 15). Thomas concludes, “Thus Calvin found the formula insufficiently clear about the very issue at stake between himself and his opponents: whether the acceptance or rejection of the benefits of Christ’s death is to be attributed ultimately to human or divine will” (Thomas, *Extent of the Atonement*, 31).
49. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 333. One might seek more explanation from Rouwendal concerning these two assertions side-by-side, considering Rouwendal’s statements concerning the lack of contradictions in Calvin (ibid, 334). Perhaps Rouwendal meant that Calvin did not teach only an understanding of “unlimited atonement” that made salvation only possible for all, nor did he teach only a “limited atonement” that left out the “sufficiency” side of the “classic” formula?
50. Frederick Leahy agrees, “It is true that Calvin does not deal explicitly with the extent of the Atonement, but this was not the issue in his day” (Leahy, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 61). Rouwendal adds, “The classical formula was neither a point of difference between Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformed in Calvin’s day, nor a disputed subject among the Reformed. Attention was given to other subjects. The extent of the atonement first became a point of difference approximately a quarter century after Calvin’s death” (Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 326). Of course, related debates had been flaring up centuries before Calvin.
“the apparent paradoxical and contradictory statements in Calvin regarding the atonement are proven to dovetail with the classical position.”  

“Contradictions and paradoxes only appear when Calvin is read with post-Calvinian paradigms in mind.”

Unlike Boersma and Thomas, it is my opinion that Calvin’s doctrine of the atonement, when examined in Calvin’s own theological context, is actually consistent. Those questions asked at a later stage of Reformed history were not asked by Calvin. . . . As soon as one interprets Calvin in terms of later terminology, tensions, inconsistencies, and contradictions seems to abound in his works; however, this should not be attributed to Calvin, but rather to the reader who is reading him anachronistically.

Rouwendal seeks to bring God’s “revealed will” and “secret will” together.

Calvin used the conditionality of gospel-preaching to show that the universal call or promise of the gospel and God’s secret decree are not contradictory. The universal call or promise is conditional: Everybody is invited (universal) to faith and repentance (condition), and all those who believe and repent will be saved (promise). In this conditional sense one could say, according to Calvin, that God indeed wills the salvation of all men. But since God himself fulfills the condition in his elect, there is no contradiction between his revealed and his secret will.

In this harmonization, Rouwendal seemingly blurs Calvin’s “classical” view into some form of a “conditional” or “hypothetical universal” view.

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52. Ibid.
54. Rouwendal adds, “Now Clifford suggests that Calvin spoke about two different wills or even decrees in God. But Calvin did not say that it is God’s will to save all men without adding any declaration or condition” (Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 330). For Clifford’s response, see his “Calvin & Calvinism,” 35–18.
56. The Amyraldians continued to use the “classical” maxim, though they were not alone. According to John Quick’s Synodicon in Gallia Reformata (1692): “They [the Amyraldians] declared That Jesus Christ died for all Men sufficiently, but for the Elect only effectually: and that consequently his Intention was to die for all men in respect of the Sufficiency of his Satisfaction, but for the Elect only in respect of its quickning and saving virtue and efficacy; which is to say, that Christ’s will was that the sacrifice of his cross should be of infinite price and value, and most abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world; yet nevertheless the efficacy of his death appertains only unto the elect; so that those who are called by the preaching of the gospel, to participate by faith in the effects and fruits of his death, being invited seriously, and God vouchsafing them all eternal means needful for their coming to him, and showing them in good earnest, and with the greatest sincerity by his Word, what would be well-pleasing to him, if they should not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but perish in their obstinacy and unbelief; this cometh not from any defect of virtue or sufficiency in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, nor yet for want of summons or serious invitations unto faith or repentance, but only from their own fault. And as for those who do receive the doctrine of the gospel with the obedience of faith, they are according to the irrevocable promise of God, made partakers of the effectual virtue and fruit of Christ Jesus’s death; for this was the most free counsel and gracious purpose both of God the Father, in giving his Son for the salvation of mankind, and of the Lord Jesus Christ, in suffering the pains of death, that the efficacy thereof should particularly belong unto all the elect, and to them only, to give them justifying faith, and by it to bring them infallibly unto salvation, and thus effectually to redeem all those and none other, who were from all
In sum, scholars have developed multiple approaches to the study of Calvin on the extent of the atonement. In one sense, merely the recognition that Calvin’s own stance has been vigorously contested is itself noteworthy, since this alone demonstrates that Calvin could not have emphasized limited atonement as explicitly or unambiguously as many later “high orthodox” Calvinists did, such as William Perkins, William Ames, and John Owen. For example, no one has published an academic monograph or refereed article that debates whether John Owen believed in “particular redemption”! At the very least, such scholarly disputations concerning Calvin himself demonstrate that a developed doctrine of limited atonement was not an emphasis that was explicitly central to Calvin’s own theology. We fittingly focus upon his own words in the following chapter.

57. “It is often stated—and with considerable propriety—that Calvin did not write an explicit treatment concerning the extent of the atonement, in fact did not deal with this precise issue in terms to which Reformed theology has been accustomed” (Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 197). Nicole concludes that “definite atonement fits better than universal grace into the total pattern of Calvin’s teaching” (ibid, 225). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that “full discussion of the scope of the atonement is not found in Calvin’s writings, and the assessment of his position in this area has been varied” (ibid, 197–198). Throughout this essay, I use “high orthodox” Calvinism of coalescing scholastic Calvinist orthodoxy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The high orthodox were increasingly fascinated with federalism and lapsearianism. See Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999); Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

58. In this regard, it may be instructive to consider Calvin’s own polemical writing against the earlier sessions of the Council of Trent. The council’s fourth chapter of the sixth session contained an explicit declaration that Christ died for all (“Though He died for all, all do not receive the benefit of His death”), and Calvin benignly commented, tertium et quartum caput non attingo (“I do not touch upon the third and fourth chapters”). Cf. Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 28. Would later, aggressive high orthodox Calvinists, in writing a formal response to such a document, have replied to a clear statement that Jesus died for all humans in the same manner as their namesake, without even “touching upon” it? P. L. Rouwendal claims, “For the theologians of Trent, as well as Calvin, taught the classical, commonly acknowledged view on the extent of the atonement. There was no difference concerning this question between Catholics and the Reformed” (Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 330). At the same time, we have no evidence that Calvin objected to Beza’s emphasis upon “limited atonement” (Thomas, “Calvin and English Calvinism,” 123; idem, Extent of the Atonement, 41–65).
I now wish to elucidate what I perceive to be the complex structure of Calvin’s theology through a series of twelve issues and how he addressed them in his own writings.

First, will all individuals ultimately be saved? Calvin responds with a firm negative. He labeled the heretical “universalist” view an “absurdity.”

“I pass over the dreams of the fanatics, who make this a reason to extend salvation to all the reprobate and even to Satan himself. Such a monstrous idea is not worth refuting.” Calvin argues that “no one unless deprived of sense and judgment can believe that salvation is ordained in the secret counsel of God equally for all.”

“Hence it is clear that the doctrine of salvation, which is said to be reserved solely and individually for the sons of the church, is falsely debased when presented as effectually profitable to all.” As Robert Peterson avers, “It is clear that Calvin denied universalism, the teaching that all would ultimately be saved.”

Second, who is called in the offer of the gospel? Calvin firmly supports the general offer of the gospel with its universal promises. Christ “offers salvation to all indiscriminately and stretches out His arms to embrace all, that all may be the more encouraged to repent.” Therefore, “the crime of rejecting an invitation so kind and gracious” is culpable, and “no man is condemned for despising the Gospel save he who spurs the lovely news of salvation

2. Ibid. Cf. Calvin’s Titus 2:11: “He expressly declares that salvation comes to all men, having especially in mind the slaves of whom he has just been speaking. He does not mean individuals, but rather all classes of men with their diverse ways of life, and he lays great emphasis on the fact that God’s grace has condescended even to slaves” (Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 373). In his Sermon on Titus 2:11, Calvin compares the import to that found in 1 Timothy 2:6. The good news of the gospel is to be preached to all classes and orders, both to the great and to the despised.
6. Calvin, John 12:47, *The Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, 52. Cf. Calvin’s Matthew 18:12, where he notes the differences between the Matthean and Lukan parables concerning the one lost sheep and the ninety-nine. Calvin recognizes that the Matthean parable appears in a wider context concerning the restoration of a disciple, “because they are sheep over whom God made His Son the shepherd.” “Luke’s account,” continues Calvin, “has a rather different object: because the whole human race belongs to God, those who are estranged are to be gathered in, and it is as much cause for rejoicing when the lost reform as when someone finds something precious which he had given up for lost” (Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 2, trans. T. H. L. Parker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 219).
and deliberately decides to bring destruction on himself.”7 “The gospel invites all to partake of salvation without any difference,” for “Christ is there offered.”8 Therefore, “it is certain that all those to whom the Gospel is preached are invited to a hope of eternal life.”9 “So however much a man may be overwhelmed in the gulf of misery there is yet set before him a way of escape. . . . Therefore since no man is excluded from calling upon God the gate of salvation is open to all. There is nothing else to hinder us from entering, but our own unbelief.”10 Peterson rightly concludes, “It is equally plain that Calvin held to a universal and free offer of the gospel.”11

Third, why is it that not everyone believes? According to Calvin, not everyone is efficaciously drawn by the Holy Spirit. “Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him.”12 Calvin recognized that not all receive the grace offered to them, since many remain in their unbelief. While commenting upon Hebrews 9:27 and 28, Calvin noted, “It is of course certain that not all enjoy the fruits of Christ’s death, but this happens because their unbelief hinders them.”13

Calvin believed that humans are so affected by sin that they will not believe of their own accord. “We are all of us so contrary . . . to God that we cannot but resist him. So then, how can it be that we may be partakers of . . . salvation . . . unless God draw us to it by his Holy Spirit?”14 Therefore, for any individual to trust in Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel, a special work of God is required.15 Through a particular, efficacious work within specific individuals, the Holy Spirit forms faith in the all-sufficient work of Christ.16 “Because God does not work effectually in all men, but only when the Spirit shines in our hearts as the inward teacher, [Paul] adds to everyone that believeth. The Gospel is indeed

9. Calvin, 1 Timothy 2:3, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon,* 208.
12. Calvin, Romans 5:18, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians,* 117–118.
16. “For the present question is not how great the power of Christ is or what efficacy it has in itself, but to whom He gives Himself to be enjoyed. If possession lies in faith and faith emanates from the Spirit of adoption, it follows that only he is reckoned in the number of God’s children who will be a partaker of Christ. . . . Hence, we conclude that, though reconciliation is offered to all through Him, yet the benefit is peculiar to he elect, that they may be gathered into the society of life. However, while I say it is offered to all, I do not mean that this embassy, by which on Paul’s testimony (II Cor 5:18) God reconciles the world to Himself, reaches to all, but that it is not sealed indiscriminately on the hearts of all to whom it comes so as to be effectual” (Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination,* 149).
offered to all for their salvation, but its power is not universally manifest.”

Fourth, what distinguishes these specific individuals (whom the Spirit efficaciously draws) from all others? Calvin responds that only the gracious, eternal, unconditional election of God sets them apart. “The general nature of the promises does not alone and of itself make salvation common to all. Rather, the peculiar revelation which the prophet [Isaiah] has mentioned restricts it to the elect.”

“Hence, we conclude that, though reconciliation is offered to all through Him, yet the benefit is peculiar to the elect, that they may be gathered into the society of life. However, while I say it is offered to all, I do not mean that this embassy, by which on Paul’s testimony (II Cor 5.18) God reconciles the world to Himself, reaches to all, but that it is not sealed indiscriminately on the hearts of all to whom it comes so as to be effectual.”

Calvin’s commentary on John 3:16 explains: “Moreover, let us remember that although life is promised generally to all who believe in Christ, faith is not common to all. Christ is open to all and displayed to all, but God opens the eyes only of the elect that they may seek Him by faith.”

Calvin notes that although “all are equally called to penitence and faith,” “God honours with illumination none but those whom He will.” Calvin declares that “the solution of the difficulty lies in seeing how the doctrine of the Gospel offers salvation to all. That it is salvific for all I do not deny. But the question is whether the Lord in His counsel here destines salvation equally for all.”

Fifth, does this mean that the elect are saved by Christ’s work in the cross even prior to their belief? No, replies Calvin. God, through His Spirit, effectually applies Christ’s work to the elect when they believe, but they are not saved until they believe. Calvin insists, “It is not enough to regard Christ as having died for the salvation of the world; each man must claim the effect and possession of this grace for himself personally.”

“For it is nothing if the fruit of this redemption, which was purchased for us, does not show itself by faith: for otherwise, it will become a thing of naught, and for our parts utterly perish.” “For it is faith that puts us in possession of this salvation: although we find it not but in the person

17. Calvin, Romans 1:16, Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, 27; italics original.
18. Calvin, Romans 10:16, Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, 232.
19. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 149. “Such is the significance of the term ‘world’ which He had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving of God’s favour, He nevertheless shows He is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life” (Calvin, John 3:16, Gospel according to St John 1-10, trans. T. H. L. Parker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 74).
21. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 103.
22. Ibid.
23. Cf. Ephesians 2:1-7; see also Calvin’s relevant comments in his fourth sermon on Ephesians, as quoted in Blocher, “Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” 281n8.
25. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1983), 612; English spelling updated. The preceding sentence asserts that “when Jesus Christ had suffered for the sins of the world, he went up into heaven.”
of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we must needs come thither, yet if we have not this
day that he has suffered, shall not profit us one whit, as indeed it belongs not to us.”
Concerning Paul’s statements in Romans 3:25, Calvin explains, “Having just stated that God
has been reconciled in Christ, he now adds that this reconciliation is brought
to pass by faith, at the same time stating what should be the chief object of our
faith in looking to Christ.”

Calvin affirms, “First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains out-
side of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for
the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”
“Christ
is in a general view the Redeemer of the world, yet his death and passion are of
no advantage to any but such as receive that which St Paul shows here. And so
we see that when we once know the benefits brought to us by Christ, and which
he daily offers us by his gospel, we must also be joined to him by faith.”

Thus you see in effect, whereunto we should refer this saying, where Saint
Paul tells us expressly, that the Son of God gave himself. And he contents
not himself to say, that Christ gave himself for the world in common, for
that had been but a slender saying: but [shows that] every one of us must
apply to himself particularly, the virtue of the death and passion of our
Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas it is said that the Son of God was crucified,
we must not only think that the same was done for the Redemption of the
world: but also every of us must on his own behalf join himself to our Lord
Jesus Christ, and conclude, It is for me that he has suffered.

Sixth, does this mean that the provision of Christ’s sacrifice is limited to the
elect alone, since God eternally intended to apply Christ’s work ultimately to
the elect alone? No, because Calvin seems to coordinate a universal provision
of Christ’s sacrifice with the general call of the gospel: “God commends to us
the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins
of the whole world.” Calvin affirms, “Although Christ suffered for the sins of
the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men,

26. Ibid., 178; English spelling updated. Rainbow cautions that such statements should be read with
faith as the causa instrumental a in mind (Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 94).
27. Calvin, Romans 3:25, Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians, 76.
28. Calvin, Institutes III.1.1; cf. Calvin, 2 Corinthians 5:18. Unlike some later authors, such as Tobias
Crisp, Calvin did not espouse a notion of “eternal justification.” According to Calvin, until one is united
with Christ by faith (which the Spirit efficaciously forms in the elect through the Word), one is not justi
fied. See Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement.
(Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 55. “In order that the redemption of Christ may be effectual and use
ful to us, we must renounce our former life” (Calvin, 1 Peter 1:18, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the
Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, 248).
31. Calvin, Galatians 5:12, Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Co
lossians, 99. Contrast Calvin’s own words with Leahy: “For Calvin, with Bible in hand, Christ died for all
without distinction, not all without exception” (Leahy, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 62).
yet not all receive Him.” Calvin notes that “the salvation provided by Christ is common to all mankind. For Christ, the Author of salvation, was begotten of Adam, the common father of us all.” Jesus is “Redeemer of the world . . . since He was there, as it were, in the person of all cursed ones and of all transgressors, and of those who had deserved eternal death . . . and bears the burdens of all those who had offended God mortally.” Calvin’s “Last Will” refers to “the blood of our great Redeemer, as it was shed for all poor sinners.”

According to Calvin, it is “incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world.” “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.” Calvin reiterates that the Lord Jesus suffered “for the redemption of the whole world.” “Indeed the death of Christ was life for the whole world, and that is surely supernatural.” Jesus, who was “sent to be the Redeemer of the human race” was “burdened with the sins of the world,” and “on him was laid the guilt of the whole world.”

Jesus “willed in full measure to appear before the judgment seat of God His Father in the name and in the person of all sinners, being then ready to be condemned, inasmuch as He bore our burden.” “But though our Lord Jesus by nature held death in horror and indeed it was a terrible thing to Him to be found before the judgment seat of God in the name of all poor sinners (for He was there, as it were, having to sustain all our burdens), nevertheless He did not fail to humble Himself to such condemnation for our sakes.” “Now, then, the blame lies solely with ourselves, if we do not become partakers of this salvation; for he calls all men to himself, without a single exception, and gives Christ to all, that we may be illuminated by him. Let us only open our eyes, he alone will dispel

32. Calvin, Romans 5:18, Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, 118; italics added.
33. Calvin, Institutes II.13.3.
36. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 148. Calvin continues, “But the solution lies close at hand, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but should have eternal life.”
37. Calvin, Colossians 1:14, Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, 308.
38. Calvin, Deity of Christ and Other Sermons, 55.
39. Calvin, Hebrews 8:2, Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, 105.
42. Calvin, Deity of Christ and Other Sermons, 52. “But here there is a special regard. It is that He must be the Redeemer of the world. He must be condemned, indeed, not for having preached the Gospel, but for us He must be oppressed, as it were, to the lowest depths and sustain our cause, since He was there, as it were, in the person of all cursed ones and of all transgressors, and of those who had deserved eternal death” (ibid, 95).
43. Ibid, 155–156.
the darkness, and illuminate our minds by the ‘light’ of truth.”

In this manner, a universal provision of Christ’s death seems to undergird the general call of the gospel promises. Calvin’s commentary on 2 Corinthians correlates Christ’s “sufferings” with the proclamation of the gospel “which He has given to the world.” Christ “once suffered, so now every day He offers the fruit of His sufferings to us through the Gospel which He has given to the world as a sure and certain record of His completed work of reconciliation.” The Spirit then uses the general call of the gospel and its universal promises in forming faith in the elect. God therefore uses the general provision proclaimed in the gospel as a means in his sovereign and effectual calling of the elect, thus preserving the universality of the provision and the particularity of election.

Seventh, is the fact that the provision of Christ is universally offered important to the elect themselves? Yes, affirms Calvin. The Holy Spirit does not “create” faith in the elect ex nihilo as if it were some kind of a substance or material or object or property. Faith is a confident trust in God’s promises centered in the person and work of Christ. The Holy Spirit applies Christ’s work to the elect through the preaching of the universal gospel promises grounded in the universal provision of Christ. “For it is not enough that Jesus Christ suffered in His person and was made a sacrifice for us; but we must be assured of it by the Gospel; we must receive that testimony and doubt not that we have righteousness in Him, knowing that He has made satisfaction for our sins.”

The underlying provision of Christ functions as an important, objective ground of the faith of believers, the elect. “It would have done us no good for Christ to have been given by the Father as the author of salvation, if He had not been available to all without distinction . . . We should know that salvation is openly displayed in Christ to all the human race, for in all reality He is called son of Noah and son of Adam.”

The Holy Spirit, in his particular call, points the elect to the general call of the universal promises revealed in the gospel. The elect do not receive an extra-Biblical or special revelation of their inclusion in the secret, eternal decree. The Holy Spirit, in his efficacious work, points believers to Christ as proclaimed in the gospel.

44. Calvin, Isaiah 42:6, The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, vol. 3, 295; italics added. One notes the parallel use of “calls” and “gives,” implying the correspondence of a general “call” with a general “provision.”
45. Calvin, 2 Corinthians 5:19, Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, 79; italics added. Calvin explained, “But there is a special love for those to whom the gospel is preached: which is that God testifieth unto them that he will make them partakers of the benefit that was purchased for them by the death and passion of his Son” (Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomy, trans. Arthur Golding [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987], 167).
46. In the view of Charles Bell, “It is quite clear that Calvin taught a doctrine of universal atonement. It is also clear that he taught a doctrine of predestination in which faith is limited to the elect. He could do so because he did not link the doctrines of election and atonement in a logical order of cause and effect” (Bell, Calvin and Scottish Theology, 17); cf. idem, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 120–121.
But we should remember . . . that the secret love in which our heavenly Father embraced us to Himself is, since it flows from His eternal good pleasure, precedent to all other causes; but the grace which He wants to be testified to us and by which we are stirred to the hope of salvation, begins with the reconciliation provided through Christ . . . And He has used a general term [whosoever], both to invite indiscriminately all to share in life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the significance of the term ‘world’ which He had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving of God’s favour, He nevertheless shows He is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life.\(^49\)

In a sermon on Galatians 2:20, Calvin notes how the apostle Paul shows how “every of us must apply to himself particularly” the universal redemption given in Christ (“who loved me and gave himself for me”).\(^50\) “But when we once know that the thing which was done for the redemption of the whole world, pertains to every of us severally: it behooves every of us to say also on his own behalf, The son of God has loved me so dearly, that he has given himself to death for me.”\(^51\)

This centering upon the promises proclaimed in the gospel comports well with Calvin’s overall emphasis upon the revealed Word as the foundation of confident faith.\(^52\)

None need now wonder or worry how he can escape death, since we believe it was God’s purpose that Christ should rescue us from it. The world world comes again so that no one at all may think he is excluded, if only he keeps to the road of faith. . . . And whenever our sins press hard on us, whenever Satan would drive us to despair, we must hold up this shield, that God does not want us to be overwhelmed in everlasting destruction, for He has ordained His Son to be the Saviour of the world.\(^53\)

As a corollary, believers are to focus on Christ, the “mirror of our election,” as He is revealed in the gospel.\(^54\) Christ in the gospel is “a warrant for our salvation, so as we ought to think ourselves thoroughly assured of it.”\(^55\) Calvin pulls

\(^{49}\) Calvin, John 3:16–17, Gospel according to St John 1–10, 74–75.
\(^{50}\) Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, 299–300. Calvin adds: “Every of us must apply to himself particularly, the virtue of the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas it is said that the Son of God was crucified, we must not only think that the same was done for the Redemption of the world: but also every of us must on his own behalf join himself to our Lord Jesus Christ, and conclude, It is for me that he has suffered.” For Calvin, communion is a means of applying Christ’s work in faith (Calvin, Institutes IV.17.2; IV.17.5). See François Wendel, Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 318.
\(^{51}\) Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, 300.
\(^{52}\) Calvin, Institutes III.21.2.
\(^{54}\) Calvin, Institutes, III.24.5; idem, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 127; idem, John 15:9; Sermon on 2 Timothy 1:9–10. “Calvin’s theological and pastoral acuteness made him aware that to look to Christ by faith is very different from looking at one’s faith in Christ” (Thomas, “Calvin and English Calvinism,” 119).
\(^{55}\) Calvin, Sermons on Galatians; quoted from Clifford, Calvinus, 33. Cf. Calvin, Institutes, III.24.4–6.
all this together in his comments upon John 3:16: “The whole substance of our salvation is not to be sought anywhere else than in Christ, and so we must see by what means Christ flows to us and why He was offered as our Saviour. Both points are clearly told us here—that faith in Christ quickens all and that Christ brought life because the heavenly Father does not wish the human race that He loves to perish.” Calvin adds, “God has most abundantly declared His love toward us and therefore whoever is still doubtful and unsatisfied by this testimony does Christ a serious injury, as if He had been some ordinary man who had died accidentally.”

Eighth, are there ramifications of Christ’s all-sufficient, universal provision in the ministry of evangelism? Most assuredly. Calvin insists, “We must make every effort to draw everybody to the knowledge of the gospel. For 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, that must indeed stir us to do our duty and instruct them and treat them with all gentleness and kindness as we try to bear fruit this way.” Calvin adds, “It is, as I have already said, that, seeing that men are created in the image of God and that their souls have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, we must try in every way available to us to draw them to the knowledge of the gospel.” Calvin laments, “For it is no small matter to have the souls perish which were bought by the blood of Christ.”

“Furthermore, it is clear that this doctrine of universal atonement is important for Calvin’s teaching on faith and assurance” (Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 17). Cf. Calvin, John 19:12. Helm recommends attaining certainty of one’s election “by the nature of our response to the preaching of the Christian Gospel” (Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, 26). Rainbow argues, “But Calvin had good news: God does in fact reveal to the believer the knowledge of his election” (Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 83). “If I know that Christ died for me (which knowledge is, in Calvinism, imparted by the testimony of the Spirit), then I know, without further probing or speculation, that I am elect” (Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 88). Yet Blocher explains Calvin’s counsel to troubled consciences: “Consciences that are fearful and thunderstruck by God’s judgment can only find rest if there is a sacrifice and a washing to wipe away sins’ (Institutes 2.16.5; cf. 17 and comfort for the consciences of God’s servants); ‘our consciences cannot apprehend the benefits [of God’s favor] except through the intervention of Christ’s sacrifice.’ But this implies no reduction to subjective effects: it is objective satisfaction that appeases conscience” (Blocher, “Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” 302). One wonders, if the objective ground of a “limited redemption” is only epistemologically ascertained through subjective means (by an internal testimony or by looking at the fruit of one’s sanctification), how is the assuring “comfort” objectively established for the sake of conscience? Calvin points toward the disposition and promise of God in His revealed will of the gospel.

57. Ibid, 74. In his commentary on Ezekiel 18:1–4, Calvin reiterates that God “is affected with fatherly love towards the whole human race since he created and formed it; . . . True indeed, we are abominable in God’s sight, through being corrupted by original sin, as it is elsewhere said, (Ps. XIV.1, 2;) but inasmuch as we are men, we must be dear to God, and our salvation must be precious in his sight” (from Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas Myers [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], 217).
58. Contrary to Richard Muller, who insists that a so-called “hypothetical” dimension to the “work of Christ” is “superfluous” (Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 35). See also Beza’s view that a “hypothetical” dimension is irrelevant (Thomas, *Extent of the Atonement*, 57).
a man at the first dash when he has done amiss, or when he is as it were in the high way to destruction: is a furthering of the destruction of the wretched soul that was redeemed by the bloodshed of our Lord Jesus Christ.  

Similarly, Calvin’s sermons on Ephesians exhort: “Also we ought to have good care of those that have been redeemed with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we see souls which have been so precious to God go to perdition, and we make nothing of it, that is to despise the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Calvin’s sermons on Micah explain, “Because to see souls created in the image of God move toward their own damnation is hardly a light matter, especially souls that were redeemed at such a cost by the blood of God’s son.” Calvin can even state, “So we must beware, or souls redeemed by Christ may perish by our carelessness, for their salvation to some degree was put into our hands by God.” And he adds, “We should never gloat as many do who laugh and smirk over someone else’s misfortune. Instead, we should mourn and say, ‘How sad, that poor man has given offence to God.’ It should distress us to see someone perishing who has been so dearly redeemed by Christ’s precious blood; it should distress us to see God’s righteousness and his glory diminished.” Calvin clearly was not as guarded in his wording as many later high orthodox Calvinists tended to be.

The pastoral implications are obvious:

This gives Rainbow warrant to believe that Calvin speaks only from a “judgment of charity” (Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 159–174). However, Calvin applies the same principle to apostates and those outside the church. See Calvin, 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4. Ponter comments, “There is absolutely nothing within the statements to suggest that Calvin meant to indicate that these apostates, as now known, he formerly assumed had been redeemed. He knows that these men are apostates, and, still, he says that they had been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Rainbow’s interpretation, therefore, is highly forced and unnatural” (Ponter, “A Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 16). Rainbow’s argumentation on page 170–174 seems to hit the wall on this point.

62. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses Called Deuteronomie, 731.
63. Calvin, Sermons on Ephesians, 521; cf. 684–685; Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 735: “That is a terrible honesty when we shall suffer silly souls, which were so dearly bought, to go to destruction” (English spelling updated); “when we see the souls that were bought with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, so led to ruin and destruction” (Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, 217).
65. Calvin, James 5:20, A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, vol. 3, and The Epistles of James and Jude, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 318. The diluted translation of an earlier Eerdmans series remains curious: “We must therefore take heed lest souls perish through our sloth, whose salvation God puts in a manner in our hands” (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, trans. John Owen [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], 361). Cf. Calvin’s Acts 20:28: “For it follows from this, that unless they [pastors] are faithful in putting out their labour on the Church, not only are they made accountable for lost souls, but they are guilty of sacrilege, because they have profaned the sacred blood of the Son of God, and have made useless the redemption acquired by Him, as far as they are concerned. But it is a hideous and monstrous crime if, by our idleness, not only the death of Christ becomes worthless, but also the fruit of it is destroyed and perishes.” Calvin quickly adds, “But the Church is said to have been acquired by God so that we may know that he intends it to remain complete for Himself, because it is right that He have and hold those whom He has redeemed” (Calvin, The Acts of the Apostles 14–28, trans. John W. Fraser [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], 183–184).
Thus, when in the present day the Church is afflicted by so many and so various calamities, and innumerable souls are perishing, which Christ redeemed with his own blood, we must be barbarous and savage if we are not touched with any grief. And especially the ministers of the word ought to be moved by this feeling of grief, because being appointed to keep watch and to look at a distance, they ought also to groan when they perceive the tokens of approaching ruin.  

“If the faith of one single man is in danger of being overthrown, if there is at stake the ruin of a single soul redeemed by Christ’s blood, the pastor should immediately gird himself to resist; how much less can he endure to see whole houses overthrown!”  

“And surely it is an iron hardness not to feel pity when we see souls, redeemed by Christ’s blood, going to ruin.”  

“True it is that the effect of his [Christ’s] death comes not to the whole world. Nevertheless, forasmuch as it is not in us to discern between the righteous and the sinners that go to destruction, but that Jesus Christ has suffered his death and passion as well for them as for us, therefore it behoves us to labour to bring every man to salvation, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ may be available to them.”  

And indeed, our Lord Jesus was offered to all the world. . . . Our Lord Jesus suffered for all and there is neither great nor small who is not inexcusable today, for we can obtain salvation in Him. Unbelievers who turn away from Him and who deprive themselves of Him by their malice are today doubly culpable. For how will they excuse their ingratitude in not receiving the blessing in which they could share by faith? And let us realize that if we come flocking to our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall not hinder one another and prevent Him being sufficient for each of us . . . Let us not fear to come to Him in great numbers, and each one of us bring his neighbours, seeing that He is sufficient to save us all.  

Ninth, do unbelievers despise the grace that is offered to them? Yes, asserts Calvin. He exclaims: “Behold the Turks which cast away the grace which was purchased for all the world by Jesus Christ: the Jews do the like: the Papists, although they say not so openly, they show it in effect. . . . And thus we see now, how men are not partakers of this benefit, which was purchased them by our Lord Jesus

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68. Calvin, Titus 1:11, The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, 363.  
70. Calvin, Sermons on Job, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), 26; English spelling updated; italics added. To soften the meaning, Golding added an interpolation: “Jesus Christ has [to our knowledge] suffered his death and passion as well for them as for us.” This interpolation, however, is unwarranted by the French original: “Iesus Christ a enduré mort et passion pour eux aussi bien que pour nous.”  
This is because one who rejects the universal offer of the gospel despises the grace of the sufferings of Christ: “For those who reject the grace offered in Him [Christ] deserve to find Him the judge and avenger of such unworthy and shocking contempt.”\textsuperscript{73} After citing the apostle Paul in this context, Calvin notes, “It is as if he [Paul] had said that the Gospel is especially and in the first place intended for believers, that it may be salvation for them; but that afterwards unbelievers will not escape unpunished when they despise the grace of Christ and would rather have Him as the author of death than of life.”\textsuperscript{74}

For Calvin, unbelievers are culpable of rejecting Christ’s sufferings because they were “for” them and offered in mercy and grace:

> God is said to have ordained from eternity those whom he wills to embrace in love, and those upon whom he wills to vent his wrath. Yet he announces salvation to all men indiscriminately. I maintain that these statements agree perfectly with each other. For by so promising he merely means that his mercy is extended to all, provided they seek after it and implore it. But only those whom he has illumined do this. And he illumines those whom he has predestined to salvation. These latter possess the sure and unbroken truth of the promises, so that one cannot speak of any disagreement between God’s eternal election and the testimony of his grace that he offers to believers.\textsuperscript{75}

“As a result,” explains Calvin, “all those who do not repose in him voluntarily deprive themselves of all grace.”\textsuperscript{76}

Furthermore, Calvin spoke of the condemnation of unbelieving sinners as a result of rejecting Christ’s work rather than as the divine intention in sending Christ as found in the gospel. “Christ bears witness not only to his power but also to his goodness, so that He may attract men to Himself by the delightfulness of His grace. For He came to save, and not to condemn, the world (John 3:17).”\textsuperscript{77}

“Now let us see to what end the Gospel is preached, and after what manner. What else is contained in it [the Gospel], but that God intends to be reconciled to the world, as says Saint Paul in his fifth of the second to the Corinthians [2 Corinthians 5]?”\textsuperscript{78} “And it is not without cause that many understand Jesus Christ only as their Judge; for they were not willing to receive Him when God wished to give Him to them.

\textsuperscript{72} Calvin, 	extit{Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus}, 177; English spelling updated.
\textsuperscript{73} Calvin, John 3:17, 	extit{Gospel According to St John 1–10}, 76.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Calvin, 	extit{Institutes}, III.24.17; italics added. Notice the strong predestinarian language in this passage.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. II.16.1. The preceding sentence states, “Accordingly, the moment we turn away even slightly from him, our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishes away.”
\textsuperscript{78} Calvin, 	extit{Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus}, 77; English spelling updated. Calvin frequently echoed the sentiment of 2 Corinthians 5:20 that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.”
as Redeemer.”

Such comments seem to go beyond a purely abstract sufficiency; they require a theological system capable of including a compassionate desire of God that He does not ultimately will to efficaciously administer.

Tenth, in our finite comprehension of matters, may we distinguish between God’s revealed will in the universal promises of the gospel and His secret will in His eternal decree? Yes, concedes Calvin cautiously, if we understand that we thereby manifest our human, limited comprehension.

This is His wondrous love towards the human race, that He desires all men to be saved, and is prepared to bring even the perishing to safety. . . It could be asked here, if God does not want any to perish, why do so many in fact perish? My reply is that no mention is made here of the secret decree of God by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin, but only of His loving-kindness as it is made known to us in the Gospel. There God stretches out His hand to all alike but He only grasps those (in such a way as to lead to Himself) whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world.


80. Many stumble over an “inefficacious intentionality” or “velleity” in God (see Ponter, “Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 3–5). Such reasoning is the unspoken axiom behind such statements as, “For Calvin, all for whom Christ died are saved, and not all men are saved, it follows that Christ did not die for all men” (Helm, Calvin and the Calvinists, 17). Rainbow agrees that “there could be no such thing in Calvin’s theology as Christ dying for someone and that person not being saved” (Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 178). Luther clearly had room for such a concept; cf. Luther’s comments on God incarnate desiring the salvation of all in Matthew 23:37. Theodore Beza asserted, “Nothing more absurd can be said about God than that there will be something God has not willed, or that something he has willed will not be” (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 53). For Beza, the Lutheran view of a universal atonement was “intolerable,” for then Christ would have died for those already damned, and thus failed (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 56). Compare the view of Reformed theologian Rienk Bouke Kuiper, who believed that God “makes on the ground of the universally suitable and sufficient atonement a most sincere, bona fide, offer of eternal life, not only to the elect but to all men, urgently invites them to life everlasting, and expresses the ardent desire that every person to whom this offer and this invitation come accept the offer and comply with the invitation” (R. B. Kuiper, For Whom Did Christ Die? A Study of the Divine Intent of the Atonement [Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003], 86). John Murray agrees, “We found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. . . . We found that God reveals himself as not taking pleasure in or desiring the death of those who die but rather as taking pleasure in or desiring the repentance and life of the wicked. This will of God to repentance and salvation is universalized and reveals to us, therefore, that there is in God a benevolent loving-kindness towards the repentance and salvation of even those whom he has not decreed to save. This pleasure, will, desire is expressed in the universal call to repentance” (John Murray, Collected Writings of John Murray, vol. 4 [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976], 131–132).

81. See Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 23–26. Strehle maintains that “such a dichotomy in the divine will is to be considered as attributed to our finitude and does not impugn the true oneness of the divine will in itself” (Stephen Strehle, “Universal Grace and Amyraldianism,” Westminster Theological Journal 51 [1989], 346n6). David Ponter agrees, that for Calvin, “in terms of our perception and finitude, we perceive diversity within the will of God. Yet within God the will is wholly unified” (Ponter, “A Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 41). A medieval scholastic distinction already existed between God’s voluntas signi and voluntas beneplaciti (see Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 23, 53). “The concept of two wills is necessary because there are many things done by God’s providence which are forbidden by God’s law” (ibid, 24).

82. Calvin, 2 Peter 3:9, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, 364. Cf. Jerome Bolsec’s criticism of Calvin’s theology: “He should explain how God can be said to be simple, seeing he says that there are two wills in God, and how there can be a union in him between two contraries, to will and not to will, to have pleasure and not to have pleasure, to ordain and to forbid the same thing” (from Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 15). See Philip C. Holmop, The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551 to 1555: The Statements of Jerome Bolsec and the Responses of John
Although this may sound like a divine inconsistency, Calvin avers:

So again with the promises which invite all men to salvation. They do not simply and positively declare what God has decreed in His secret counsel but what he is prepared to do for all who are brought to faith and repentance . . . Now this is not contradictory of His secret counsel, by which he determined to convert none but His elect. He cannot rightly on this account be thought variable, because as lawgiver He illuminates all with the external doctrine of life. But in the other sense, he brings to life whom He will, as Father regenerating by the Spirit only His sons.83

In his commentary on Matthew 23:37, Calvin attempts a further explanation:

Seeing that in His Word He calls all alike to salvation, and this is the object of preaching, that all should take refuge in His faith and protection, it is right to say that He wishes all to gather to Him. Now the nature of the Word shows us that here there is no description of the secret counsel of God—just His wishes. Certainly those whom He wishes effectively to gather, He draws inwardly by His Spirit, and calls them not merely by man's outward voice. If anyone objects that it is absurd to split God's will, I answer that is exactly our belief, that His will is one and undivided: but because our minds cannot plumb the profound depths of His secret election to suit our infirmity, the will of God is set before us as double. . . . I would briefly say that as soon as doctrine, which is the rallying-point of unity, is brought into the centre, it is God's will to gather all men together, so that those who do not come are without excuse.84

Calvin clarifies elsewhere: “Truth it is, that God changes not, neither hath he two wills, neither does he use any counterfeit dealing, as though he meant one thing, but would not have it so. And yet does the Scripture speak unto us after two sorts touching the will of God . . . God does exhort all men generally, thereby we may judge, that it is the will of God, that all men should be saved, as he says also by the Prophet Ezekiel, 'I will not the death of a sinner, but that he turn himself and live.'”85

Eleventh, so then did Christ die for all people or for the elect? Calvin seemingly

Calvin, Theodore Beza and Other Reformed Theologians (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

83. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 106.
85. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 152–154; English spelling updated. Calvin affirmed, “If any one again objects—this is making God act with duplicity, the answer is ready, that God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned. Besides, it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish. While we look now through a glass darkly, we should be content with the measure of our own intelligence” (Calvin, Ezekiel 48:23, Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, vol. 2, 274–248). See also Calvin, Institutes I.18.3.
answers yes. Christ died intentionally as a sufficient expiation and redemption for the sins of all humanity, and He died intentionally for the efficacious salvation of the elect. Calvin declares, “Not only were the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ sufficient for the salvation of the world, but that God will make them efficacious and that we shall see the fruit of them and even feel and experience it.” Calvin discusses the case of the pardoned thief on the cross specifically: “Our Lord made effective for [the thief] His death and passion which He suffered and endured for all mankind.” According to Calvin, “Christ was so ordained to be the Savior of the whole world, as that He might save those that were given unto Him by the Father out of the whole world, that He might be the eternal life of them of whom He is the Head.”

Calvin drew implications from these tenets, including a distinction between the purchased ransom and the application of the ransom. “And what shall we do when we see souls in peril, which are so precious before God, as he has shown in that he has ransomed them with the blood of his own Son? If we see then a poor soul going thus to perdition, ought we not to be moved with compassion and kindness, and should we not desire God to apply the remedy?”

Since Christ died for all, the gospel promises are objectively true for all. Calvin makes clear that in rejecting the external call of the gospel, one also rejects this “redemption that was purchased” in the person of Christ. Unbelievers “reject the mean that God had ordained: and their unthankfulness shall be so much the more grievously punished, because they have trodden under foot the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was the ransom for their souls.” When unbelievers reject the gospel, they are “doubly culpable” for rejecting the provision and the offer.

Second Peter 2:1 describes false teachers who espoused “damnable heresies,”

86. Calvin can do so because the universal and limited designs do not ultimately contradict one another.
87. “In short, Christ died for all sufficiently (pardon being conditional), though for the elect absolutely and efficiently” (Alan Clifford, “Geneva Revisited or Calvinism Revised: The Case for Theological Reassessment,” Churchman 100 [1986], 323–324). “When Calvin speaks of the effectuality of Christ’s death for believers, he speaks to the efficiency side of the traditional sufficiency-efficiency formula. However, this does not impinge upon the fact that Calvin also held that in another sense, Christ died for all men” (Ponter, “Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 24).
88. Calvin, Sermons on Isaiah’s Prophecy, 116. “Christ was so ordained to be the Savior of the whole world, as that He might save those that were given unto Him by the Father out of the whole world” (as quoted in Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 332).
90. Translation from Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Position,” 32. Concerning this statement, Rouwendal claims, “Just one quotation seems to say, or at least imply, that Christ died only for the elect” (ibid). Rouwendal’s claim is curious, since Calvin’s comments clearly fit within the sufficiency-efficiency distinction Rouwendal describes throughout the article. On connections between election, redemption, Christ as head, and believers as members of His Body, see Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement; cf. Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 97.
91. Calvin, Sermons on Ephesians, 684–685; italics added. Calvin appends, “We should pray generally for all men.”
92. See the Deuteronomy materials above.
93. Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, 39.
“even denying the Lord that bought them.” Calvin’s commentary on this verse explains: “Christ redeemed us to have us as a people separated from all the iniquities of the world, devoted to holiness and purity. Those who throw over the traces and plunge themselves into every kind of license are not unjustly said to deny Christ, by whom they were redeemed.” In his comments on Jude 4 (“denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ”), Calvin applies the text to “those who have been redeemed by His blood, and now enslave themselves again to the devil, frustrating (as best they may) that incomparable boon.”

Twelfth, if Christ suffered for all humanity, and the Spirit works efficaciously only in particular individuals, does this mean the Trinity is not unified in redemption? Absolutely not. All three Members, although taking on distinct roles in the outworking of salvation, harmoniously formed the unified plan in eternity past and implemented it within history. Calvin may be interpreted as describing a threefold work: the Father’s eternal election, the Son’s sacrifice as proclaimed in the universal promise of the gospel, and the Holy Spirit’s effectual formation of faith in the elect through the promise of the gospel. One may distinguish between the objective provision of Christ’s sufferings and the

94. Calvin, 2 Peter 2:1, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, 346. Calvin repeatedly states that Judas was present still at the Last Supper when Jesus declared, “This is my body, which is given for you,” etc. (see the citations from Curt Daniel in Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism, 237n15).


96. Nicole argues that a universal provision within Calvin’s theology would cause inner-Trinitarian contradictions (see Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 300–304). For a response to the claim that a “universal redemption” within Calvin’s theology would annul his understanding of “substitutionary atonement,” see Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 6–7, 57–61. “By placing all of the benefits of our salvation in the person of Christ, and by making our union with Christ through faith the key to our reception of the benefits of salvation, Calvin was able to hold to a view of the atonement that was both universal and substitutionary” (ibid, 147). Contrast J. I. Packer, “What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution,” Tyndale Bulletin 25 (1974), 37. Calvin affirmed, “First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. . . . For, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith” (Calvin, Institutes, III.1.1). “For the faithless have no profit at all by the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, but rather are so much the more damnable, because they reject the mean that God had ordained: and their unthankfulness shall be so much the more grievously punished, because they have trodden under foot the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was the ransom for their souls. Therefore it standeth us on hand to receive the promises of the Gospel by faith, if we desire that Jesus Christ should communicate himself unto us, and that he should bring us to the possession and enjoyment of the benefits which he hath purchased for us: so as they belong not to any other than such as are members of his body, and are grafted into him, and receive him by faith.” (Calvin, Sermons on Galatians, 39). For a discussion of other “empty atonement” arguments, see Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 232–236. Consider the counsel of Robert Dabney: “Christ’s satisfaction is not a pecuniary equivalent, but only such a one as enables the Father, consistently with His attributes, to pardon, if in His mercy He sees fit. The whole avails of the satisfaction to a given man is suspended on his belief. There would be no injustice to the man, if he remaining an unbeliever, his guilt were punished twice over, first in his Savior, and then in Him. See Hodge on Atonement, page 369” (Robert L. Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], 521).

97. See the discussion of the Trinitarian Members in Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 106–116.

98. This does not contradict statements that Christ is “the Author of election” (see Calvin, Institutes, III.22.7).
Holy Spirit’s subjective, individual application of Christ’s work to the elect in particular. Calvin explains: “Christ’s proper work was to appease the wrath of God by atoning for the sins of the world, to redeem men from death and to procure righteousness and life. That of the Spirit is to make us partakers not only of Christ Himself, but of all His blessings.”

The three roles of the Trinitarian Members are interwoven in perfect unity. In this Trinitarian plan, Christ died for all as offered in the gospel, and the Spirit uses the proclamation of the gospel to form faith in the elect, whom the Father chose in eternity past. All three Members are of one, eternal mind concerning this interweaving of election, provision, and application. For example, the Son offers Himself as a sacrifice to blot out the sins of the world in keeping with the Father’s ordination and decree. James B. Torrance explains, “As in the doctrine of the Trinity there are three persons, but one God, so there are three ‘moments’ in the one work of grace and forgiveness.”

Calvin did not collapse all of redemptive history into the eternal decrees or into the event of the cross or into the efficacious call in one’s personal life. Consider a Trinitarian prayer of John Calvin himself:

Moreover, we offer up our prayers unto Thee, O most Gracious God and most merciful Father, for all men in general, that as Thou art pleased to be acknowledged the Saviour of the whole human race by the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ Thy Son, so those who are still strangers to the knowledge of him, and immersed in darkness, and held captive by ignorance and error, may, by Thy Holy Spirit shining upon them, and by Thy gospel sounding in their ears, be brought back to the right way of salvation, which consists in knowing Thee the true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.

This Trinitarian prayer weaves together the provision of the Son as Savior of the whole race (general) with the efficacious work of the Spirit (particular). Even

99. Lane, “Quest for the Historical Calvin,” 112.
101. In Calvin, the Father is the cause (causa), the Son is the substance (materia), and the Spirit is the effect (effectus) of our salvation (see Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 89); cf. Calvin, *Institutes* III.14.17, where the “instrumental cause” is faith and the “final cause” is divine justice and praise for God’s goodness. Alan Clifford further interrelates the Trinitarian works, as he affirms, “The Father reaches out to all while only grasping the elect; the Son redeems all sufficiently but only the elect effectually; the elect alone are regenerated by the Holy Spirit but others are still subject to His influence” (Clifford, “Calvin & Calvinism,” 6). See Clifford, *Amyraut Affirmed*, 51–52.
102. Blacketer contends, “Thus to claim, for example, that God the Father intends the salvation of the elect, while the Son intends the salvation of every individual, would be considered absurd, since there cannot be two contradictory wills in the godhead” (Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” 322). This argument misses the possibility that all three Members agree to a unified plan in which each Member fulfills distinctive roles, and they all intend both the universal aspects and the particular aspects of the plan.
103. As found in Calvin, *Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, 87; Calvin, *Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus*, 612.
as Paul fervently prayed for the unsaved of Israel in the context of his extended discussion on election (Romans 10:1; cf. 9:1–3), so Calvin entreated the Triune God for lost of the whole human race.

We have highlighted a multitude of evidences for a notion of “universal redemption” in John Calvin. Before we move on, one other point should be emphasized. Statements that teach that Jesus died for the church—or believers, the godly, the flock, or the Body of Christ—do not necessarily prove that Jesus only intended His atonement for the elect alone. In the same way, the apostle Paul’s statement that Jesus Christ “loved me and gave Himself for me” does not prove that Christ died only for Paul alone. If some passages in Calvin speak of Christ’s dying for the elect and some speak of His dying for all, the general and particular statements can be reconciled into one system that teaches both, but they cannot be reconciled into one system that maintains only strict, limited redemption.

The materials found in the previous chapter have not convinced all interpreters of John Calvin that he espoused a form of “universal redemption.” Scholars who portray Calvin as a proponent of strictly “limited atonement” accentuate three of the reformer’s passages in particular.1 First, a text that is most commonly discussed can be found in Calvin’s 1561 “Reply to Heshusius,” a Lutheran.2 Regarding this text, Frederick Leahy (a proponent of “limited redemption” himself) asserts, “Students of Calvin have found only one passage which could be regarded as explicitly denying an unlimited atonement.”3 Boersma highlights this same text as an unambiguous example of strictly “particular atonement.”4 In his “Reply to Heshusius,” Calvin wrote, “The first thing to be explained is how Christ is present with unbelievers, to be the spiritual food of their souls, and in short the life and salvation of the world. As he [Heshusius] adheres so doggedly to the words, I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins?”5

The context, however, is Calvin’s opposition to the Lutheran view of the real, corporal presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, received by both believers and unbelievers.6 Rouwendal notes, “Calvin’s intention was to make clear that Christ is not corporally present.


6. Cf. Bell, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 119–120: “It is readily seen that throughout this debate, Calvin is not discussing the atonement, but rather, the necessity of the presence of the Spirit and faith for the efficacy of the sacrament. He definitely is not making a statement on the extent [sic] of the atonement” (cf. Bell, Calvin and Scottish Theology, 16–17). This context compels Henri Blocher to “confess a small measure of uncertainty” in using the text as an argument for limited redemption, as he is inclined to do (see Blocher, “Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” 280).
In the immediate context of the quoted sentence, he uses the argument that if Christ were present corporeally, the ungodly would eat his flesh and drink his blood, which Calvin deemed impossible. Heshusius adhered “so doggedly” to a literal interpretation of the bread and wine as Jesus’ body and blood. “I should like to know,” responded Calvin, how even unbelievers could partake of the real presence. Calvin explained elsewhere,

> Wherefore the supper is a certain attestation, which is addressed to the bad as well as the good, in order to offer Christ to all indiscriminately; but this is not to say that all receive him when he is offered to them. And in fact it were grossly absurd to hold that Jesus Christ is received by those who are entire strangers to him, and that the wicked eat his body and drink his blood while destitute of his Spirit. . . . Their offence then is that they rejected Christ when he was present to them.

Curt Daniel concludes, “What Calvin is denying is that these verses are interpreted literally and that the wicked eat Christ. He is not denying that the flesh of Christ was crucified for the wicked.”

In such a polemical context, Calvin emphasized the reception of Christ by the believer alone—in faith—and therefore drew his argument from the efficacious application of the atonement to the believer. Only a few paragraphs earlier, Calvin himself declared that when the ungodly at the Lord’s Table “impiously reject what is liberally offered to them, they are deservedly condemned for profane and brutish contempt, inasmuch as they set at nought that victim by which the sins of the world were expiated, and men reconciled to God.”

Elsewhere, Calvin’s own theology of the Lord’s Supper further spoke of the universal provision of Christ’s sacrifice. Calvin interpreted Jesus’ words as affirming, “The bread which I will give is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world . . . as the flesh was offered once on the cross for the salvation of the

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8. Curt Daniel helpfully compares other instances where Calvin uses the phrase “I should like to know” while engaging in diatribe concerning the Lord’s Supper (in Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 233n8).
13. Cf. Calvin’s Mark 14:24: “The word many does not mean a part of the world only, but the whole human race: he contrasts many with one, as if to say that he would not be the Redeemer of one man, but would meet death to deliver many of their cursed guilt. . . . So when we come to the holy table not only should the general idea come to our mind that the world is redeemed by the blood of Christ, but also each should reckon to himself that his own sins are covered” (from Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 3, 139; cf. Calvin’s comments on Luke 22:19: “There is no benefit in the crucified flesh itself except for those who eat it by faith” [ibid, 138]). See also Calvin, Matthew 20:28, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, 277, interpreting the phrase “and to give his life a ransom for many”: “Many” is used, not for a definite number, but for a large number, in that He sets Himself over against all others. And this is its meaning also in Rom. 5.15, where Paul is not talking of a part of mankind but of the whole human race.” Cf. Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement*, 32–33 and 66n41 on Calvin’s understanding of “definite” in this passage.
world.”14 Calvin explained, “Also when we minister the Lord’s Supper, we rehearse what was said by our Lord Jesus Christ: This is my body which is delivered for you: this is my blood which is shed for the salvation of the world.”15 “We are ordered to eat the body which was crucified for us; in other words, to become partakers of the sacrifice by which the sins of the world were expiated.”16 “He addresses the disciples by name and encourages the faithful as individuals to apply the pouring-out of His blood to their benefit. So when we come to the holy table not only should the general idea come to our mind that the world is redeemed by the blood of Christ, but also each should reckon to himself that his own sins are covered.”17 When such evidence is compared with the “Reply to Heshusius,” it becomes clear that Calvin did not deny a universal dimension to the extent of the atonement, but was opposing a Lutheran view of communion.

As a second evidence for a strictly “limited atonement” in Calvin, some scholars point to his commentary on 1 John 2:2. For example, Robert Peterson asserts that it is “significant” that the Institutes are “silent” on the question of the extent of the atonement.18 “However,” Peterson adds, “appeal can be made to Calvin’s commentaries to argue for limited atonement.”19 Peterson then appends a footnote that cites Calvin’s commentary upon 1 John 2:2 as an example. Concerning this verse (“And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world”), Calvin wrote,

He put this in for amplification, that believers might be convinced that the expiation made by Christ extends to all who by faith embrace the Gospel. But here the question may be asked as to how the sins of the whole world have been expiated. I pass over the dreams of the fanatics, who make this

15. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses Called Deuteronomie (London: Middleton, 1583), 1208; English spelling updated.
17. Calvin, Mark 14:24, Harmony of the Gospels, vol. 3, 139. All of these points (and more) have been made by others. See Daniel, “Hyper Calvinism and John Gill,” 817–823; David Ponter, “John Calvin and Tileman Heshusius,” http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=175; Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 53–56; Stephen L. Costley, “Understanding Calvin’s Argument against Heshusius,” http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=215; Costley notes that Calvin did not speak of the “non-elect,” but the “ungodly” or “wicked.” Calvin was referring to unbelievers (some of whom, theoretically, might later become believers, thereby manifesting their election).
18. Peterson, “Calvin on Christ’s Saving Work,” 246. “The Institutes seem to offer little help in determining Calvin’s view. . . . Above all, why does Calvin not even mention the extent of the atonement when he summarizes his views on the person and work of the mediator in the Institutes? . . . In his preface to the reader in the 1559 Institutes, Calvin gives his own methodological statement that one should interpret his commentaries doctrinally on the basis of the Institutes” (Peterson, Calvin and the Atonement, 117–120). Calvin himself affirmed that the pattern of his theology was found in the Institutes rather than in his more occasional sermons, commentaries, and treatises (Institutes, preface [“John Calvin to the Reader”], 4–5). Why does Calvin not explicitly emphasize the extent of the atonement in the Institutes? Perhaps because he simply accepted some form of the “medieval synthesis” on the matter as a “given,” and therefore scholarship must focus on continuities and discontinuities between Calvin and the Middle Ages (and his own contemporaries). See the materials being collected by David Ponter at “Calvin on Unlimited Expiation.”
a reason to extend salvation to all the reprobate and even to Satan himself. Such a monstrous idea is not worth refuting. Those who want to avoid this absurdity have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world but effectively only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the schools. Although I allow the truth of this, I deny that it fits this passage. For John’s purpose was only to make this blessing common to the whole Church. Therefore, under the word ‘all’ he does not include the reprobate, but refers to all who would believe and those who were scattered through various regions of the earth. For, as is meet, the grace of Christ is really made clear when it is declared to be the only salvation of the world.

Calvin applied the verse to “the expiation made by Christ” that “extends to all who by faith embrace the Gospel,” and his polemical sights were set upon “universalists” who “extend” salvation “to all the reprobate and even to Satan himself.” Calvin attacked this same “universalistic” interpretation of 1 John 2:2 in his Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God. Georgius argued that if Christ expiated the sins of the whole world, then reprobates would be effectually saved also—or the only other option is to say the reprobates are not a part of the world. Calvin’s tactic was to concede that 1 John 2:2 relates to efficacious salvation, but that it “extends” only to the whole Church.

Here one is reminded of Calvin’s commentary upon Romans 5:18: “Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all.” Calvin went on to acknowledge that “Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive him.” As Nigel Westhead notes, “The co-ordinate and co-extensiveness of offering and suffering are clear in Calvin’s comments on Romans 5:18. . . . Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men . . .” Nevertheless, the grace does not (efficaciously) “extend” to all. Elsewhere Calvin reaffirmed, “the virtue and benefits of Christ are extended unto, and belong to, none but the children of God.”

Taking this evidence of salvation “extending” efficaciously only to the elect
back into our examination of 1 John 2, Calvin’s point was not to deny that Christ suffered for all or was offered to all, but merely that His expiation did not efficaciously “extend” to all, but only to “all who by faith embrace the Gospel.” Calvin was willing to allow the “classical” maxim, “Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect.” Nevertheless, he was battling opponents who were heretical “universalists” (who believed all would be saved in the end), who read propitiatio as efficacious reconciliation. Calvin granted that 1 John 2:2 spoke of the efficacious work of salvation, and was (understandably) unwilling to apply that efficacious work to the reprobate and Satan himself. He therefore interpreted “the whole world” as “the whole Church.” In this step, Calvin paralleled Augustine’s interpretation. Moreover, Calvin took the opportunity to emphasize the exclusivity of salvation in Christ: “For, as is meet, the grace of Christ is really made clear when it is declared to be the only salvation of the world.”

In this commentary upon 1 John 2:2, Calvin allowed the scholastic tenet that “Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect” to stand as true. But he did not believe this maxim was the interpretive key to 1 John 2:2. Within his polemic (as Calvin’s argumentative sights were set upon the “universalists” who used 1 John 2:2 to espouse the ultimate, efficacious salvation of the reprobates and even Satan), Calvin granted that the text spoke of the efficientia of salvation. But he replied that 1 John 2 describes Christ’s “efficient” expiation for “the whole Church,” including those “scattered through various parts of the world.” In such an interpretation, the text was irrelevant to the question of “sufficiency.” Calvin therefore parts company from modern “four-point Calvinists” who interpret 1 John 2:2 as an all-sufficient provision of expiation for the “whole world.” On the other hand, in various other passages, Calvin could speak of the expiation of the sins of the world without any further comment or explanation.

Interestingly, Calvin’s interpretation of the “world” in 1 John 2:2 conflicts with his own approach to the meaning of world in John 17:21 (“that the world

27. Contrast Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism, 1612.
29. Calvin, 1 John 2:2, The Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John, 244. Elsewhere, Calvin affirms, “And there was not any sacrifice sufficient to make atonement [reconciliation] between God and the world, but only our Lord Jesus Christ’s offering up of himself” (Calvin, Sermons on Deuteronomy, 107; idem, Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Booke of Moses Called Deuteronomie, 660; English spelling updated).
31. See Ponter, “Calvin on Unlimited Expiation.”
may believe that thou hast sent me"). Calvin commented on this verse, “Some explain the world as the elect who were then still dispersed. But since the word ‘world’ all through this chapter means the reprobate, I am more inclined to take a different view. It happens that immediately afterwards He separates the same world which He now mentions from all His people.”

In the context of John 17, Calvin accentuated the fact that Christ intercedes only for disciples and not for the world (John 17:9). Throughout the Johannine literature, the “world” stands in opposition to God’s values and people. In his comments upon John 16:33, Calvin explained, “Under the name world, Christ here embraces everything that is opposed to the salvation of the godly and especially all the corruptions which Satan uses to lay snares for us.” Finally, it should be noted that both Girolamo Zanchi and Jacob Kimedoncius espoused a “limited” reading of 1 John 2:2, and yet they are acknowledged by Richard Muller as teaching a form of universal redemption.

The third set of materials scholars often cite as evidence for a strictly “limited atonement” in Calvin can be found in his explanations of 1 Timothy 2:4. While interpreting this verse (in which God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”), Calvin contended that “no one unless deprived of sense and judgement can believe that salvation is ordained in the secret counsel of God equally for all.” As in his comments upon 1 John 2:2, Calvin warned against using this text to defend such heretical “universalism.” Calvin responded, “Who does not see that the reference [to “all men” in 1 Timothy 2:4] is to orders of men rather than individual men? Nor indeed does the distinction lack substantial ground: what is meant is not individuals of nations but nations of individuals.” Calvin added, “At any rate, the context makes it clear that no other will is intended than that which appears in the external preaching of the Gospel. Thus Paul means that God wills the salvation of all whom He mercifully invites by the preaching of Christ.”

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33. See Muller, Christ and the Decree, 34–35: “The Gospel appeal is universal but Christ’s intercession, like the divine election, is personal, individual, particular.” Even in his comments upon John 17:9, however, Calvin adds, “And Christ Himself afterwards prayed for all indiscriminately.” He saw this as instructive for believers: “We ought to pray that this and that and every man may be saved and so embrace the whole human race, because we cannot yet distinguish the elect from the reprobate” (Calvin, John 17:9, The Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John, 140).
36. Calvin discusses this Scriptural text in eight places, six of which can be found at http://calvinnandcalvinism.com/?p=128.
39. Ibid. “Thus, this verse is not to be understood as teaching anything about God’s actual intention to save certain individuals. Rather, it should be understood only to be dealing with the universal offer of salvation” (Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 44).
Thus Calvin interprets “all men” in 1 Timothy 2:4 as a reference to “orders” or “classes” of humans (a common “five-point Calvinist” view today), but then he correlates the passage to the preached Word rather than the “secret counsel of God.” This view is confirmed by his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:3–5:

For although it is true that we must not try to decide what is God’s will by prying into His secret counsel, when He has made it plain to us by external signs, yet that does not mean that God has not determined secretly within Himself what He wishes to do with every single man. But I pass from that point which is not relevant to the present context, for the apostle’s meaning here is simply that no nation of the earth and no rank of society is excluded from salvation, since God wills to offer the Gospel to all without exception. Since the preaching of the Gospel brings life, he rightly concludes that God regards all men as being equally worthy to share in salvation. But he is speaking of classes and not of individuals and his only concern is to include princes and foreign nations in this number. . . . For as 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. Since at that time a great part of the world had alienated itself from God, he explicitly mentions the Mediator through whom those who were far off now draw nigh. 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.  

Calvin interpreted “all men” in 1 Timothy 2:4 as all “classes of men” rather than “individuals.” But he added that the passage does not concern God’s “secret counsel” (which pertains to the elect alone) but to the preached offer of the gospel “to all without exception.” Therefore, Calvin may even have meant “all orders

40. Calvin, 1 Timothy 2:4–5, Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, 208–210.
41. In his Sermons on 1 Timothy 2, Calvin asserts that the apostle is not speaking of specific individuals (such as Peter or Paul) as they relate to God’s secret, eternal decree (Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 149). Rather, in Calvin’s interpretation, 1 Timothy 2 addresses the external proclamation of the gospel (as the revealed will of God). Therefore, in his comments upon 1 Timothy 2, when Paul emphasized God’s revealed will for “all classes” and “all orders,” he may actually have meant by this not to exclude particular individuals. In his Sermon on 1 Timothy 2, Calvin expressly states, “For Jesus Christ is not a Saviour of three or four, but he offers himself to all” (ibid, 159). Cf. Calvin, Isaiah 53:12. To paraphrase Kennedy, Calvin is using the word “individuals” (singuli) for a fixed number of individuals (Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 46). And (according to Calvin) Paul is not addressing the topic of such particular “individuals” within God’s “secret will”; therefore, “all” is used for “all” of all classes, orders, and peoples, in the “revealed will” of gospel proclamation. In the same manner, according to 1 Timothy 2:1, we are to pray for “all” (Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 160; see Steve L. Costley, “Answering Roger Nicole on 1 Timothy 2:5,” http://www.controversialcalvinism.blogspot.com/search/
of men” in the sense of “all from all orders,” not in the (“Ownest”) sense of “some from all orders.” In any case, Calvin did not correlate 1 Timothy 2:4 to God’s “efficacious” work of salvation, but to the general call of preaching. Therefore, Calvin did not associate the verse with God’s hidden decree but rather the proclamation of the gospel. As Calvin insisted, “the context makes clear that no other will of God is intended than that which appears in the external preaching of the Gospel.” Calvin affirmed that the revealed will of the “Gospel” being preached to all classes and orders was indeed “good news.”

Calvin’s Sermon on 1 Timothy 2 echoes these same ideas (as well as many of the topics addressed in “Chapter Three: Twelve Issues”). Calvin’s sermon opposed any “universalism” that taught all humanity would be saved in the end. Calvin’s sermon supported a general offer of the gospel and emphasized the importance of evangelism. He used the opportunity to restate the bondage of sin upon unbelievers and the necessity for the Spirit’s supernatural work. The homily instructed concerning election, faith, and the culpability of unbelief. Moreover, Calvin’s sermon (by acquiescing to our finite understanding) distinguished the “secret” will of God and the “revealed” will of God.

Putting together Calvin’s comments on 1 Timothy in Concerning the Eternal Predestination and his Commentaries, Calvin argues that God wills to offer the gospel to “all without exception” (Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 109), but God does not will “all without distinction” to be saved in His hidden eternal counsel ( 1 Timothy 2:4). Such evidence may point to Calvin’s understanding of the Mediator being for all humans of every kind in the revealed will of 1 Timothy 2:4 and 5. Vermigli and Kimeleidonicus interpreted “all men” in 1 Timothy 2:4 as a reference to some of all kinds, but both were still proponents of “universal redemption.” (I thank David Ponter for this insight.)

In this manner, Calvin differed from the Augustinian interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4, which tied the “all kinds” or “all classes” into the hidden will of God in His eternal decree (see Ponter, “Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 18).

Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 109. “This verse does not mean to teach that all will be saved, rather, this verse deals with God’s revealed will only. Calvin’s only intent in this passage is to make clear that the Scriptures do not teach that all will be saved” (Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 47).

See Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 142.

“Therefore Saint Paul’s meaning is not that God will save every particular man, but he says that the promises which were given to one only people [the Jews], are now stretched out through all the world” (Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 149; English spelling updated).

“And can we come to him of the motion of our own nature? Alas no: for we are wholly against him, and there is not one iota of affection in us, but it is his utter enemy, as St. Paul says, and we do daily rebel against him” (ibid, 159; English spelling updated). “But we are all of us so contrary and such enemies to God. . . . So then, how can it be that we may be partakers of that salvation which is offered unto us in the Gospel, unless God draw us to it by his Holy Spirit?” (ibid, 151; English spelling updated).

“Truth it is, that God changes not, neither has he two wills, neither does he use any counterfeit dealing, as though he meant one thing, but would not have it so. And yet does the Scripture speak unto us after two sorts touching the will of God. . . . It is because of our grossness and rudeness: for we know, that if God will come down to us, and give us any understanding of things, he must change his own hue” (ibid, 152; English spelling updated). Just as our eyes cannot bear to look directly at the sun, so our minds cannot “comprehend that infinite majesty which is in God” (ibid, 156; English spelling updated). “So then these beasts, which would destroy God’s election, must not abuse this place, nor say, that we make a double will in God: for therein they do impudently and villainously misreport us. But we say as every man sees, that is to wit, that as far as we can perceive, God would have all men to be saved, whenever and how oft ever he appoints his Gospel to be preached unto us” (ibid, 156; English spelling updated).
other materials on 1 Timothy 2, the reformer interpreted the phrase “Who will have all men to be saved” as a reference to God’s revealed will in the external preaching of the gospel. He explicitly maintained that the text does not speak of God’s secret counsel, “neither that he means to lead us to this everlasting election and choice which was before the beginning of the world, but only shows us what God’s will and pleasure is, so far forth as we may know it.” In the context of this “revealed will,” God wishes all classes, orders, and peoples to be saved. “In that God does exhort all men generally, thereby we may judge, that it is the will of God, that all men should be saved, as he says also by the Prophet Ezekiel [18:23; 33:11].” “For he offers his gospel says he, to all, which is the mean to draw us to salvation.” “For we see how he calls all them to salvation, to whom his word is preached.” Yet, because of our sinfulness, we do not come. “Therefore, God must go further to bring us to salvation, he must not only appoint men and send men to teach us faithfully, . . . he must touch us to the quick, he must draw us unto him, and must make his work not to be unprofitable unto us, and cause it to take root in our hearts.”

Some facets found within Calvin’s interpretations of 1 John 2:2 and 1 Timothy 2:4 may parallel the interpretations of many so-called five-point Calvinists. Other details within his interpretations do not, however. In his comments on 1 John 2:2, Calvin allowed the maxim “Christ died sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently for the elect alone” to stand. Of course, throughout history, this maxim has been used in divergent ways by various theologians. More curiously, Calvin applied 1 Timothy 2:4 to “all orders” or “all classes” of humans, even though he argued that the text is not about God’s elective decree but rather about the proclaimed gospel. If Calvin viewed 1 Timothy 2:4 as a reference to “the preached Word,” why did he feel compelled to interpret the “all men” as “classes of humans” rather than “individuals”?

50. “If through the will of God the Gospel be preached to all the world, there is a token that salvation is common to all. And thus Saint Paul proves, that God’s will is that all men should be saved” (ibid, 150; English spelling updated).
51. Ibid, 152; English spelling updated.
52. Calvin connects God’s desire for all to be saved with the next phrase in 1 Timothy 4 as the means to the end (“and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”). “Thus the Scripture holds us in this simplicity, that if we desire to have salvation, we must hold the mean which is appointed for us, and which God sets before us, that is to say, we must receive his word with obedience of faith” (ibid, 159; English spelling updated).
53. Ibid, 154; English spelling updated.
54. Ibid, 156; English spelling updated.
55. Ibid, 158; English spelling updated.
56. Ibid, 156; English spelling updated.
58. “It is indeed a strange fact that Calvin sometimes interpreted ‘many’ as ‘all,’ and sometimes he interpreted ‘all’ as ‘many’” (Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 332). Thomas concurs that “Calvin bewilderingly takes ‘all’ to mean ‘some’ in some places dealing with the atonement, and ‘some’ to mean ‘all’ in others where the context is similar” (Thomas, “Calvin and English Calvinism,” 118). See Calvin’s comments on Mark 14:24 above. In John 6:45, Calvin notes that “all” must be “limited to the elect” (“and they shall be all taught of God”). Cf. Calvin, Matthew 20:28, where he explicitly reiterates that “many” refers to “all,” not a part of humanity but the whole human race. “Yet I approve of the ordinary reading, that he alone bore the punishment of many, because on him was laid the guilt of the
Perhaps, following the implications of Calvin’s argument, he understood that not every individual may actually hear the gospel proclaimed, although the gospel is now preached to every nation and class. Confirmation of this interpretation can be found in Calvin’s other comments on 1 Timothy 2:4: He notes that formerly in the Old Testament, God “lit the light of life for the Jews alone” and “allowed the Gentiles to wander for many ages in darkness (Acts 14:16).” Even in the New Testament, the Spirit sovereignty prohibited Paul from preaching in specific territories (Acts 16:6–7). “And so the Lord sends his Gospel where it pleases him, and yet is not his grace poured out upon Judea only or upon one corner of that land, but upon all the world both here and there, although there be not the like order in every place.”

Calvin maintains, then, that all individuals are not elected in God’s “secret counsel,” but he seems further to maintain that all individuals are not necessarily recipients of the preached Word of the general call of the gospel. Neither of these statements, however, explicitly addresses a third question, whether Christ’s death was a provision for all individuals. This point may sound strangely exacting, until one considers an interpretive key that appears in Calvin’s sermons on Deuteronomy:

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\text{It is true that St John says generally, that [God] loved the world. And why? For Jesus Christ offers himself generally to all men without exception to be their redeemer . . . Thus we see three degrees of the love that God has shown us in our Lord Jesus Christ. The first is in respect of the redemption that was purchased in the person of him that gave himself to death for us, and became accursed to reconcile us to God his Father. That is the first degree of love, which extends to all men, inasmuch as Jesus Christ reaches out his arms to call and allure all men both great and small, and to win them to him. But there is a special love for those to whom the gospel is preached: which is that God testifies to them that he will make them partakers of the benefit that was purchased for them by the death and passion of his Son. And forasmuch as we be of that number, therefore we are double bound already to our God: here are two bonds which hold us whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that ‘many’ sometimes denotes ‘all’” (Calvin, the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, vol. 4, 131). “To bear the sins means to free those who have sinned from their guilt by his satisfaction. He says many meaning all, as in Rom. 5.15. It is of course certain that not all enjoy the fruits of Christ’s death, but this happens because their unbelief hinders them” (Hebrews 9:28, Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter, 131). In his comments on Hebrews 5:9, Calvin explains, “At the same time he has inserted the universal term ‘to all’ to show that no one is excluded from this salvation who proves to be attentive and obedient to the Gospel of Christ” (ibid, 67). See Kennedy, Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement, 32–35.
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59. An arguable point, considering Calvin’s specific sixteenth-century context, but see Revelation 5:9 and 10.
60. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination, 108; cf. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 152, 157. See also Calvin’s preface to Olivetan’s French New Testament; Titus 2:11. Cf. some Lutheran attempts to posit a universal gospel proclamation to all humans before Christ (Kuiper, For Whom Did Christ Die? 84).
61. Calvin, Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 157; English spelling updated.
as it were [closely] tied to him. Now let us come to the third bond, which depends upon the third love that God shows us: which is that he not only causes the gospel to be preached to us, but also makes us to feel the power thereof, so as we know him to be our Father and Saviour, not doubting but that our sins are forgiven us for our Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, who brings us the gift of the Holy Spirit, to reform us after his own image.

In this revealing passage, Calvin did not collapse the history of salvation into the eternal decree. God has diachronically worked out his eternal plan of salvation in human history, and Calvin distinguishes three specific historical moments in this passage: First, the purchased redemption of Christ (which “extends to all men” as in Christ’s summons). Second, the preaching of the gospel (which is a general call to humanity). Third, God’s efficacious formation of faith in the elect, “as he not only causes the gospel to be preached to us, but also makes us to feel the power thereof.” Moreover, one might picture Calvin’s three “degrees of love” as three concentric circles. In love, Christ purchased redemption for “all humans,” of which only a smaller circle are recipients of the “second degree of love” of the general call, of which an even smaller circle are recipients of “the third love” of the Spirit’s efficacious work.

Furthermore, the three “degrees of love” can be distinguished in time. This passage may provide insights into Calvin’s diachronic, complex structure behind his views of election, redemption, general call, and efficacious call. In eternity past, God chose the elect. In a historical event, Jesus suffered for all humanity (and for the efficacious salvation of the elect). In history, the universal provision of Christ’s suffering is proclaimed through the general call of the gospel, which not everyone hears. God further works through the general call by the particular, efficacious work of the Spirit among only some of those who do hear (the elect). According to Stephen Strehle, Calvin “argues that it is not the atonement which produces limitation, nor the preaching of the gospel, but the God who works faith in his elected few and applies the benefits of Christ’s work to them alone.” Yet—within Calvin’s wider theology—this “third degree of love” also

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62. Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 167. In personal correspondence, Alan Clifford has highlighted further materials from Calvin’s *Sermons on Deuteronomy*. According to Calvin, God calls “the world to salvation” (181.a.40), and behind such a universal call is the fact that “Jesus Christ went out of the citie Jerusalem, bearing the reproach and curse of the whole world upon him” (30.a.40). “Let us mark then that here is no exception, and that God’s intent is to bring all the world to his lure” (661.a.40). Such texts concern the revealed will of the gospel proclamation (and its accompanying provision) rather than the decree of predestination.

63. This is one reason why one’s perspective cannot be based upon human views of “fairness.” In both Calvinistic and Arminian views (traditionally, at least), not all human beings receive equal opportunity to hear the gospel. Attempts to establish “egalitarian” fairness have sometimes led to the espousing of postmortem opportunities to hear the gospel. See Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Gabriel Fackre, “Divine Perseverance,” in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 71–95.

corresponds to God’s eternal, unconditional election of those same individuals prior to all human history.

Such intricacies allow Calvin to combine a form of “unlimited atonement” with “unconditional election.” And when the few texts summoned as evidences for a strict “limited atonement” in Calvin (such as the 1 John 2 and 1 Timothy 2 passages) are interpreted within Calvin’s wider, complex theology, they can no longer serve to overturn the verdict of his many references to Christ’s “unlimited” provision of redemption.
Admittedly this question of historical theology is complex, perhaps the Gordian knot of Calvin studies. On balance, however, it seems to the present writer that Calvin did at times retain both a universal redemption in some sense along with his resolute stance on particular election. It further seems that Calvin maintained God’s sovereign use of the universal call (with a coordinate universal provision in some sense) in his particular and efficacious application of salvation.

One can understand how the overall tenor of Calvin’s system may lend itself to the “limited atonement” interpretation of the “first approach” discussed earlier in this study—especially when the interpreters themselves espouse “limited atonement.”

1. “It was hardly possible,” claims G. Michael Thomas, “that any number of warnings against investigating the secret will of God could hold back Calvin’s successors, in seeking to understand a doctrine so prominent in his theology, from that dangerous but fascinating exercise. In the scope thus given for speculation and logical deduction, a theology more consistently particularistic than Calvin’s was almost bound to emerge.”

2. However, numerous materials remain in Calvin’s own corpus that do not nicely fit within most summarizations of a “limited atonement” view, at least as commonly understood.

3. Unfortunately, when interpreters carry their a priori systems, structure, and terminology into Calvin, they may sometimes miss inductively discovering Calvin’s own views. Sometimes the inferential, deductive approaches of scholars seem to
skew their understanding of Calvin.5

Along with interpreters of the “third approach,” I recognize that some “tensions” and “ambiguities” exist within Calvin.6 I would argue that Calvin purposefully retained those tensions, however, because he believed that the attempt to relieve them would do disservice to the multifaceted scriptural evidence.7 Therefore, Calvin’s theology may not answer all questions to the full satisfaction of modern theologians. I agree with those many scholars who caution against anachronistically forcing Calvin to answer issues he did not address.8 Specifically, the use of “atonement” in the entire discussion is somewhat problematic, since Calvin preferred to use terms like expiation, satisfaction, reconciliation, and redemption.9 Nevertheless, Calvin (as we have seen) makes various statements concerning a universal expiation and redemption, while still insisting upon a firm view of unconditional election.10

between universal salvation and definite atonement” (Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 218).

5. Consider statements that Calvin was committed to limited atonement even though he did not commit himself to limited atonement (cf. Helm, Calvin and the Calvinists, 18). One senses that interpreters acknowledge the paucity of evidence in the latter half of the statement but still read their own views into Calvin’s mind in the first half, simply because (in their view) it must have been so.


7. “Calvin’s ‘strong biblicism’ does lead him to make statements that are only ‘apparent’ contradictions” (Bell, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 118). “It is clear that Calvin preferred to stand piously submissive to the revelation of God, often explicitly imitating the expressions of Scripture, avoiding any explorations into divine mysteries” (Strehle, “Universal Grace and Amyraldianism,” 356).

8. Besides those quoted above, see also Helm, Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed, 145: “But in fact Calvin’s views on these matters [controversies about the intended effect of the death of Christ] were undeveloped by comparison with what came after, simply because he was not faced with the later issues and forced to come to a view on them. So it is anachronistic to attempt to measure Calvin’s various statements about the atonement against what came later. The most we can ask is whether Calvin’s views are consistent with what came later.”

9. Calvin himself uses words such as “redemption,” “expiation,” “satisfaction,” and “reconciliation” (Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 1). Muller notes, “In a strict sense, ‘atonement’ is not Calvin’s word: Calvin uses expiatio, satisfactio, and reconciliatio as well as the more general term redemptio (particularly in Institutes, II.16.4–6). The two former terms refer to the work of Christ as it relates to the problem of sin and guilt, expiatio indicating specifically the propitiation or propitiatory sacrifice (i.e., the ‘atonement’) and satisfactio indicating the reparation or amends made for the wrong against divine justice. Here Calvin insists on the fullness of Christ’s work, the complete expiation or satisfaction for sin—which is to say an unlimited ‘atonement.’ On the other hand, the benefits of Christ’s death, the reconciliatio or actual redemptio, the restoration and purchase of individuals, is restricted to the elect, to those upon whom Christ bestows his benefits; and thus if the term ‘atonement’ is loosely construed to mean ‘reconciliation’ or ‘redemption,’ Calvin arguably teaches ‘limited atonement’” (Muller, Christ and the Decree, 34). Muller rightly notes the problematic term “atonement.” Yet this study has discussed examples of “redemption” and “reconciliation” being used in an “unlimited” sense (see multiple examples in Ponter, “Calvin on Unlimited Expiation”). Cf. Clifford, “Calvin & Calvinism,” 10: “Calvin clearly uses all these terms to express ‘benefits’ available to all but only ‘actually’ enjoyed by the elect. Surprisingly, Muller fails to document his claims.” On the other hand, Calvin’s commentary upon 1 John 2:2 interprets “expiation” in a “limited” sense in that specific text. It cannot be as simple as reserving some terms for a “limited” sense and others for an “unlimited” sense. “While Muller is right to detect both universal and particular aspects in Calvin’s teaching on the atonement, it is not possible to categorize Calvin’s use of words in this respect, and he over-simplifies when he concludes that ‘this distinction well fits what is loosely called ‘limited atonement’ not only in Calvin’s thought but in later Reformed theology’” (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 30).

10. In e-mail correspondence, David Ponter has noted, “Many just claim that because these later distinctions and nuances on the extent of the atonement were not ‘debated’ until post-Calvin, somehow
Along with P. L. Rouwendal (and the “fourth approach”), I acknowledge that Calvin allowed the “classic” statement of Christ’s atonement to stand. Calvin allowed the maxim “Christ’s sufferings were sufficient for all but efficient for the elect alone.” I would argue, however, that Calvin did not merely leave matters there. Calvin’s corpus reveals that more can be said than a mere repetition of the “classic” proposition. More research and study is needed, including more work that traces continuities back into the Middle Ages (with figures like Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas) and also places Calvin in his contemporary context among other reformers such as Bullinger, Gualther, Musculus, Zwingli, etc. But one can, indeed, ascertain some of the theological structure that underlies Calvin’s disparate statements. This complex structure (which can be expressed diachronically through God’s eternal decree, Jesus’ sacrifice in history, and the personal application of salvation) included the espousal of both unconditional election and a universal “provision” in some sense. Furthermore, Calvin considered it pastorally important to preserve both of these positions, which distinguishes him from common approaches to “limited atonement” as frequently understood today.

In this manner, my final assessment of the evidence may fit with some forms of the “second approach.” Calvin apparently espoused a form of “universal redemption” along with his particularist view of “unconditional election.” However, one must also acknowledge that Calvin did not develop the full “Amyraldian” system of the 1600s, including its explication of “conditional universal atonement” within the “Amyraldian” covenant structure. Interpreters should be careful so as not to make Calvin sound (anachronistically) “Amyraldian,” since the details of Calvin’s underlying structure had not developed into the full, Amyraldian covenantal scheme.

Calvin could not have had a position on it. Yet, affirming a doctrine is not the same as debating or proving it by way of a sustained polemic. The lack of the latter in no way implies the lack of the former.”

11. A fifth approach might be that Calvin changed his mind over time (cf. Curt Daniel’s summary in Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism, 232n4). “In the 19th century some scholars thought that Calvin started out holding to limited expiation and redemption, but later came to embrace an unlimited expiation and redemption position. In the 21st century, sometimes this is reversed at the popular level. Many think that Calvin first embraced the unlimited position and, then, later came to embrace particular or limited atonement” (Ponter, “Calvin on Unlimited Expiation”). According to Ponter, Calvin’s collection of materials throughout Calvin’s ministry forces “both of these claims to be unacceptable” (ibid).

12. Research of this type is being done by Ponter at http://calvinandcalvinism.com.

13. “Yet it is also clear that in terms of terminology, there is a shift away from Calvin by all sides. All sides are now trying to explain Scripture in the light of new concepts and categories. Covenant was a powerful category that came to dominate the Reformed landscape. This is especially true for Amyraut, following Cameron” (Ponter, “Brief History of Deviant Calvinism,” 48). For example, many dispensational theologians who use the label “Amyraldian” do not understand the covenantal structure behind Amyraut’s espousal of “unconditional election” and “universal atonement.” On the covenantal thought of Amyraut’s predecessors at Saumur, see Richard A. Muller, “Divine Covenanters, Absolute and Conditional: John Cameron and the Early Orthodox Development of Reformed Covenant Theology,” Mid-America Journal of Theology 17 (2006): 36–37. On the continuity between Amyraldianism and the Reformed symbols, see Richard A. Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 76–81.

Amyraut the more he realizes that the peculiar covenant theology he expounds is the key to the whole theological program at Saumur.”15 This statement needs to be moderated, as Richard Muller has moderated the supposedly “central” role of covenantal theology in John Cameron’s theology.16 Nevertheless, Amyraut’s emphasis upon covenantal theology did weave throughout his theology.

Moreover, Amyraut’s views cannot be interpreted apart from the role of John Cameron, who served as a link between Calvin and Amyraut.17 Amyraut asserted that his theological system looked beyond Cameron back to Calvin.18 Nevertheless, Amyraut’s developed interpretation of Calvin came to fruition within the covenantal structure of Cameron’s theology.19 Like Cameron, Amyraut posited a three-fold scheme of the covenant of nature, the covenant of law, and the covenant of grace.20 In Amyraut’s own words, “First, that which was contracted in

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15. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 140. Concerning Amyraut and the other Saumur theologians, Armstrong argues, “Unquestionably the predominant design of this covenant scheme was to restore what these men firmly believed to be the teaching of Scripture, Calvin, and the Dort Canons concerning the matter of predestination” (Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 142).


17. “Practically every insight which Amyraut revealed he owed, as he acknowledged, to Cameron” (Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 265). Pierre Bayle claimed, “Never was a scholar filled with a greater Veneration for his Master, than Mr. Amyraut was for Cameron. It is said he imitated him even to the Tone of his Voice and a certain Motion of his Head” (as quoted in Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965], 99–100).


19. Concerning Cameron’s covenantal theology, Muller notes, “It was preceded by the efforts of thinkers like Ursinus, Olevianus, Fenner, Perkins, Polanus, and Rollock, but still belongs to the formative phase of covenant thought” (Muller, “Divine Covenants,” 27). Cameron’s treatise on the covenants “ought not to be identified as a full-scale covenant theology, such as would appear later in the works of Johannes Cocceius, Franz Burman, Francis Roberts, and Herman Witsius” (ibid, 29).

20. Armstrong claims, “Like Cameron, Amyraut developed his whole program on the foundation of a threefold covenant teaching” (Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 265). Muller responds, “Such statements breathe too much of the air of the central dogma theory to stand scrutiny; and Cameron himself left no clear index to a center or foundation of his theology. As for the theological program at Saumur, it was far too variegated and locus oriented to be founded on any single doctrine” (Muller, “Divine Covenants,” 29). Cameron spoke of at least five covenants, three absolute and three conditional/hypothetical (the three mentioned above)—see Muller, “Divine Covenants,” 28. “Arguably, it is this discussion of absolute covenants prior to the hypothetical that is the most striking aspect of Cameron’s exposition, and one of its least appreciated elements” (ibid, 30). Cameron maintained that “this distinction of the Covenant into absolute and hypothetical covenants ‘depends on the distinction of the love of God’ into antecedent and consequent” (ibid, 33–34; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, quest. 19, art. 6, obj. 1). According to Cameron, using a fourfold structure, “The first decree has to do with the restoration of the image of God in the creature, but so as to be consistent with God’s justice; the second with the sending of the Son who saves each and every one who believes in Him...; the third with rendering men capable of believing; the fourth is to save those who believe. The first two degrees are general, the last two are particular” (quoted in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 58). “This pattern has major implications for understanding the Salmurian soteriology. It indicates a covenantal or federal continuity with Reformed predestinarianism that has been left unexamined in discussions of hypothetical universalism.
the earthly paradise and ought to be called natural; secondly, the one which God transacted in a special way with Israel and is called legal; and thirdly, that which is called gracious and is set forth in the gospel.” According to Amyraut, the eternal covenant of grace was bifurcated into a universal, conditional covenant and a particular, unconditional covenant.

Within this covenantal system, Amyraut emphasized a Trinitarian approach to redemptive history that allowed him to “bypass” the “limited atonement” of his high orthodox Calvinist peers. According to G. Michael Thomas, Amyraut’s theology “breaks new ground in relating the progressive revelation of the Trinity to the three covenants identified by the Saumur school. The covenants of nature and law pertain chiefly to the Father as creator, judge and law-giver. The covenant of grace relates to the Son, who is its mediator, and the application of the covenant of grace belongs to the Spirit. This co-ordination of the Trinity with covenantal salvation history underlines the importance of the covenant motif to Amyraut’s theology, and highlights its historical orientation.”

Therefore, according to Brian Armstrong, “... Amyraut places an unusually strong emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit. This is because he believes that the Holy Spirit is the member of the Godhead who works efficaciously.” Unlike some later theologians who have used the term “Amyraldian” of themselves, Amyraut believed that regeneration precedes faith. Yet Amyraut tied this
regeneration of the will to an illumination of the understanding in a manner that most high orthodox Calvinists rejected. According to Amyraut (borrowing from Cameron), the Holy Spirit moves the will by illuminating the understanding. Armstrong asserts: “To explain this work of the Spirit, Amyraut used almost exclusively the concept of illuminatio.”

In a related maneuver (again preceded by Cameron), Amyraut distinguished between the concepts of “natural ability” and “moral ability.” “The distinction itself is a very simple one, namely that man can respond to grace because he has been endowed with understanding and will, but that he will not respond because he is sinful.” This precise distinction of terms goes beyond Calvin’s own explicit explanations, although the groundwork is there. Furthermore, Amyraut was accused of allowing the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized by means of general revelation. John Quick’s Synodicon in Gallia Reformata relates that Amyraut denied that this had actually ever happened, however. In any case, self-professed “Amyraldians” today generally do not accept the whole theological package of Amyraut.

In his Brief Treatise on Predestination, Amyraut proclaimed that “Jesus Christ

Ordo Salutis,” in Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 7 (2002), 5017.

27. Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 249–252. “So when Cameron talks of conversion he speaks of the Holy Spirit’s action as one, though including two aspects, illumination and regeneration. And he customarily speaks of that action as occurring in the intellect, since he understands the will to be necessarily involved in any action on the intellect” (ibid, 64).


29. Amyraut maintained that human inability involved “malice of heart” rather than physical, mental, or constitutional incapacity (John Quick, Synodicon in Gallia Reformata, vol. 2 [London: Parkhurst and Robinson, 1692], 356–357). Amyraut also distinguished between “objective” grace (or “sufficient external” grace) and “subjective” (or “efficient internal”) grace (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 203). See the objective and subjective dimensions of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:16–21.


32. Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Doddridge, and others held similar views. The notion was opposed by the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675.

33. “Monsieur Testard and Amyraud declared further, that although the Doctrines obvious to us in the Works of Creation are Providence, do teach and preach Repentance, and invite us to seek the Lord, who would be found of us; yet nevertheless, by reason of the horrible Blindness of our Nature, and its universal Corruption, no Man was ever this way converted; yea, and it is utterly impossible that any one should be converted but by the hearing of the Word of God, which is the Seed of our Regeneration, and the Instrument of the Holy Ghost, whose Efficacy and Virtue only is able to illuminate our Understandings, and to change the Hearts and Affections of the Children of Men” (Quick, Synodicon in Gallia Reformata, vol. 2, 356). Questions remain concerning the caricatures of Amyraut by his opponents. See Lawrence Proctor, “The Theology of Moïse Amyraut Considered as a Reaction against Seventeenth-Century Calvinism” (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 1952), 279–289; Van Stam, Controversy over the Theology of Saumur.

34. Especially due to opposition, Amyraut himself came to avoid certain terms and phrases, although his theology remained “essentially unchanged” (Strehle, “Universal Grace and Amyraldianism,” 335). The Alençon Synod forbade the use of “conditional predestination,” Christ dying for all humans “equally,” and other terminology (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 190, 202).
died for all men equally.” Nevertheless, this was only one pole of his overall view of the atonement. Amyraut also insisted that Jesus died especially for the efficacious salvation of the elect, who had been unconditionally chosen by God. Although Amyraut’s theology went beyond Calvin in various ways, many of the “raw materials” were already there in Calvin (especially the two-fold will of God as perceived by humans; and the believer’s focus upon Christ as revealed in the gospel rather than the eternal decree). Amyraut also reached behind Calvin to employ the traditional “classic” formula that “Christ died sufficiently for all but efficiently for the elect.”

On the other hand, labels such as “the ‘Calvin-Amyraut’ outlook” may mask the historical complexities of development. Calvin never fully explained how Christ’s dying “for” all was related to the secret decree of God in eternity past. Calvin simply stated it as so: “. . . Christ was foreordained before the foundation of the world to wash away the sins of the world by His sacrifice. Without a doubt this means that the expiation of sin executed by Christ was ordained by the eternal decrees of God.” The sacrifice of Christ was ordained by the eternal decree of God, to expiate the sins of the world.

35. When Amyraut insisted that “Christ died for all men equally,” he spoke of the sufficiency side of the “classic” formula. This has been documented in Proctor, “Theology of Moïse Amyraut,” 376n78. The original impetus for Amyraut’s treatise was an apologetically oriented conversation over dinner at the Bishop of Chartres’ residence. A nobleman present was “filled with horror by the doctrine of predestination as taught in our [Reformed] churches,” and regarded it as “contrary to the nature of God and His gospel to say that He created the greatest part of mankind with the express purpose of damming them.” Amyraut’s explanations of predestination seemed helpful, and so he developed them and put them into writing (see Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 81). Within this context, Amyraut’s treatise emphasized the “universal” aspect of his view of the atonement, although he also held to unconditional election and God’s particular, efficacious work in the elect.

36. Cf. Calvin’s wide structure of God’s universal love in Christ narrowed especially to believers: “For as He declared His love toward mankind when He spared not His Only Son but delivered Him to death for sinners, also He declares a love which He bears especially toward us when by His Holy Spirit He touches us by the knowledge of our sins and He makes us wail and draws us to Himself with repentance” (Calvin, Deity of Christ and Other Sermons, 108). Cf. the clarity of God’s love for humanity in Calvin’s John 3:16. First Timothy 4:10 narrows a general salvation to a particular application: “God who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.” Interestingly, Calvin interpreted “Saviour” in this verse as applicable to God’s “common benevolence” (see Rainbow, Will of God and the Cross, 147). In this manner, Calvin echoed the Augustinian interpretation of the verse.

37. For Amyraut’s twofold discussion of God’s will, see Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 166–167. “The two will distinction, adopted from the medieval scholastics, was taken for granted in Reformed theology” (Thomas, Extent of the Atonement, 166). The “two wills motif” had “a long and distinguished pedigree” (ibid, 220).

38. Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 92.


40. om Armstrong refers to “Amyraut’s constant insistence that this universal offer in the atonement was in fact the expression of the eternal will of God, even for those to whom the gospel message never came” (Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 211). His bifurcation of the eternal decree into the conditional decree of universal provision and the unconditional decree of election allowed him to focus upon the former.


disparate tenets together was Christ Himself: “Election and the work of expiation and reconciliation are conjoined because both are founded in Christ.”

For that matter, Calvin never systematically listed an “order” to the decrees at all. Amyraut himself recognized this:

… I am well aware that Calvin has said many things relating to the ‘impulsive’ causes of the decrees of God, but as to their order I do not see that he has ever said a word. Why God has created man for hope of perpetual blessedness, he states that the only reason for this is His goodness. Why, man having fallen into sin and condemnation, God willed to send His son into the world to redeem men by His death, Calvin states that the only reason for this is an admirable love of God for mankind. Why He has elected some and passed by others in imparting the grace of faith, Calvin states that the only reason for this is the mercy and severity of God. Why God has preferred one individual to another in the distribution of this grace, Calvin does not recognize any other reason than solely the perfectly free will of God. Why He has willed to save believers and to condemn unbelievers unto eternal punishment, Calvin has thought that the reason for the latter must be taken from the justice of God whereas the reason for the former must be taken from His mercy . . . But what has been the order according to which God has arranged all these things in His eternal wisdom, when it is a question of His having proposed of thinking or willing what comes first or last, Calvin has never explained this nor has he the least interest in doing so.

However, according to John Quick’s *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata*, the Amyraldian party (in an accommodation to human perception) spoke of the “logical” order (but not the “chronological” order) of the decrees:

As to making distinct decrees in the council of God, the first of which is to save all men, through Jesus Christ, if they shall believe in him, the second to give faith unto some particular persons, Amyraut, along with Testard, declared, that they did this upon no other account than of accommodating it unto that manner and order which the spirit of man observeth in his reasonings for the succour of his own infirmity; they otherwise believing, that though they considered this decree as diverse, yet it was formed in

43. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 34.
44. Calvin can state that the elect were drawn from a “corrupt mass” (Calvin, *Institutes*, III.23.3; see also *Institutes*, III.22.7; cf., however, *Institutes*, III.21.5, Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 90–91). On so-called “non-speculative” forms of purported “hypothetical universalism” prior to Amyraut, see Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); cf. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 322 (and his inclusion of insights from Richard A. Muller). Authors sometimes use “non-speculative” to refer to forms of so-called “hypothetical universalism” that do not postulate a “speculative” ordering of the decrees, etc. As in many related issues, the terms are debated.
God in one and the selfsame moment, without any succession of thought or order of priority and posteriority. 46

This setting of Calvin’s positions into a more federalist system with some lapsarian structure are Amyraldian developments beyond Calvin. 47 Stephen Strehle queries, “one must ask, therefore, whether such lapsarian schemata do not in the end undermine Amyraut’s stated devotion to Calvin. 48

Calvin, in his own mind, believed he was being faithful to Scripture with its disparate materials, and so he remained satisfied to leave such “incomprehensible” matters to the mind of God. Calvin cautioned,

The election of God will be a fatal labyrinth for anyone who does not follow the clear road of faith. Thus, so that we may be confident of remission of sins, so that our consciences may rest in full confidence of eternal life, so that we may boldly call God our Father, under no circumstances must we begin by asking what God decreed concerning us before the world began. Rather we must begin by seeking what through His paternal love He has revealed to us in Christ and what Christ himself daily proclaims to us through the Gospel. 49

Anthony Lane claims, “Calvin’s position, acceptance of the paradoxical duality in God’s will, is less logically tidy and less scholastically appealing, but truer both to Scripture and to human experience.” 50 Lane concludes,

46. Quick, Synodicon in Gallia Reformata, vol. 2, 355. One might refer to a “speculative” turn, simply because the Scriptures do not reveal an exact “order to the decrees” (logical or otherwise). Of course, there are many matters not fully explicated in Scripture that systematic theologians have nevertheless arranged in an orderly fashion. For critical evaluations of lapsarian schemes in general, see Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology, 233. “In my opinion this is a question which never ought to have been raised. . . . God’s decree has no succession; and to Him no successive order of parts; because it is a contemporaneous unit, comprehended altogether, by one infinite intuition.”


49. Calvin, Concerning the Eternal Predestination (CO 8:307); as quoted in Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 163. According to Basil Hall, Calvin did not systematize any “lapsarian” order of decree, and “he would have regarded discussion of it as being impertinently precise in setting out God’s purposes” (Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” 27).

50. Lane, “Quest for the Historical Calvin,” 110. Lane maintained that “Calvin was happier than them [the later high orthodox Calvinists] to allow paradox and tension in his theology and not to attempt to tie together all loose ends, but this does not mean that he renounced logic or had no interest in consistency” (ibid., 98). Nicole responds, “This is very true, but should be tempered by the principle that we should beware also of pressing him into an illogical mold!” (Nicole, “John Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement,” 10). W. Stanford Reid acknowledges, “Although some might accuse Calvin of being a rationalist, the fact of the matter is that he was logical in his thinking, seeking to avoid false deductions and analogies. Yet at the same time, he was quite prepared to acknowledge that he did not have all the answers, since he was dealing with the mystery of God Himself. He was, therefore, always willing to draw a line and say, ‘Thus
Calvin was above all a biblical theologian... His constant involvement with the biblical text, together with his aversion to speculation beyond what is revealed, kept him from abandoning some of the genuine biblical tensions and paradoxes... Calvin was prepared to recognize both God's universal love for all mankind and his desire for all to repent and his purpose that some only should be saved. To the feeble human mind these are irreconcilable. The mark of the true disciple of Calvin is his willingness to accept biblical paradox and not to seek to reconcile it in the direction of one pole or the other.51

For this reason, Calvin rigorously defended the existence of the hidden decree of God, yet turned the reader's attention to the revealed Word of God (rather than the inner workings of the secret decree), as demonstrated in his commentary on Ezekiel: "But we must remark that God puts on a twofold character: for he here wishes to be taken at his word. As I have already said, the Prophet [Ezekiel] does not here dispute with subtlety about [God's] incomprehensible plans, but wishes to keep our attention close to God's word."52

Amyraut also desired to keep our “attention close to God’s Word,” especially the conditional promises universally given to all. According to Brian Armstrong, Amyraut accentuated God’s “conditional will” more emphatically than Calvin had, but only because of the absence of this doctrine among the high orthodox Calvinists. “[Amyraut] frankly admitted that his almost exclusive emphasis on the conditional will of God is different from that of Calvin, but insisted that Calvin, too, taught this conditional will.”53

Armstrong summarizes the resultant Amyraldian focal points as follows:

...far and no farther.' In this he showed a mixture of systematic logic and a sense of mystery into which he would not delve. . . . In formulating a doctrine such as election, for example, though it is based on the sovereignty of God, and one may be tempted to include many logical implications of the doctrine, he held that it is improper, in fact sinful, to go beyond what the Bible has to say on the matter. Even though this limitation leaves certain paradoxes in the Christian faith, they are to be accepted, he said, and ideas that seem irreconcilable should be held in tension, since the sovereign God has spoken through His prophets and apostles” (W. Stanford Reid, "The Transmission of Calvinism in the Sixteenth Century," in John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World, ed. W. Stanford Reid [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 43). William Placher agrees that Calvin "was willing to leave questions unanswered, 'necessary consequences' undervived, and apparent inconsistencies suspended in tension" (William Placher, Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996], 53). H. Bauke has called Calvin's theology a complexio oppositorum (in John. T. McNeill, The History and Character of Calvinism [New York: Oxford University Press, 1954], 202). For two opposing views on logic and the extent of the atonement, see Paul Helm, “The Logic of Limited Atonement,” Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology 3 (1985): 47–54; and Kevin Bauder, “The Logic of Limited Atonement,” http://www.centralseminary.edu/publications/20050204.pdf. See also Tony Byrne, “Paradox and Mystery,” http://theologicalmeditations.blogspot.com/2005/06/paradox-and-mystery.html.

51. Lane, “Quest for the Historical Calvin,” 113.
53. Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 269; cf. 221.
By emphasizing the incomprehensibility of God’s electing decree, [Amyraut] radically shifts the ground of discussion from speculation regarding God’s pretemporal counsel to contemplation of the order of events as they have occurred in history. . . . By juxtaposing the conditional and absolute wills of God and emphasizing the conditional will, he likewise focuses the attention upon the mercy of God as revealed in Christ, in Christ as the cause of our election. In all of this he thinks he has faithfully represented Scripture and restored the true emphasis of Calvin.54

Armstrong concludes, “At all times, Amyraut enjoined, we are to focus our attention upon Christ and contemplate God’s merciful nature as revealed to us in Christ.”55 Much of this tactic positioned Amyraut near the Lutheran approach to unconditional election, gratia universalis, Christ ex nobis, and the “extent of the atonement”56 “[Amyraut] replaced predestination by making the doctrine of justification his central teaching. . . . This in turn served to direct his attention to the law-gospel antithesis, which had almost completely disappeared from orthodox theology.”57 Armstrong notes,

But although Amyraut has resort to Calvin as the source of his parceling the foedus gratiae into two heads, the use that he makes of this bifurcation is quite peculiar to Amyraldian theology. For while using it to emphasize the hidden and revealed nature of God’s will, the absolute, incomprehensible and the conditional, accommodated work of God in grace, he

54. Ibid, 221.
55. Ibid, 268.
57. Armstrong, Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy, 268. Armstrong uses “orthodox” of the post-Calvin congealing of Reformed theology. Against this reading, Muller retorts, “Thus, if one anachronistically draws a rather strict and narrow line of development from Calvin to Turretin and denominates only what fits in this particular Genevan trajectory as ‘orthodoxy,’ then various Reformed views, developed entirely within the confessional understanding of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed, can be cordoned off and identified as opponents of the Reformed Orthodox” (Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1, 79).
shifts his emphasis decidedly to the latter as the proper object of religious contemplation. That is, while there can be but little doubt that Amyraut regarded this bifurcation as native to early Reformed theology—to Calvin in particular—his own use of it tends to sound a great deal like Luther.\(^{58}\)

In any case, Amyraut’s version of uniting “unconditional election” with “unlimited redemption” was only one form of doing so among many during the Reformation and the generations that followed. Lee Gatiss muses, “Perhaps this has been overlooked because our view of seventeenth century hypothetical universalism has been too monochrome and ‘Amyraldian’, not sufficiently sensitive to the variation which existed at the time.”\(^{59}\) Gatiss has documented that British espousers of “universal redemption” “differed fundamentally from Amyraldianism, and even denied elements of Amyraldianism.”\(^{60}\) For example, James Ussher, John Davenant, and John Preston did not agree with the Amyraldian *ordo decrétorum* (“order of the decrees”).\(^{61}\)

Therefore, although “Amyraldianism” has often been attached to varying forms of “moderate” Calvinistic systems that include “unlimited atonement,” the label can be deceptive, since “Amyraut’s position depended on other distinctive theological commitments which were not shared by all hypothetical universalists,” including his ordering of the decrees, his views on original sin, his distinctions between moral and natural ability, and his particular understanding of the Trinity as connected to redemption.\(^{62}\) Richard Baxter referred to “the middle way of Universal Redemption” that united “universal redemption” with “unconditional election,” and there were plenty of proponents of such “middle ways” in his time.\(^{63}\) Nevertheless, most modern forms of so-called “four-point” Calvinism are “not as sophisticated as the carefully framed Calvinist universalism of a more scholastic age.”\(^{64}\)

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58. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 200. One might argue that our understanding of Calvin on “the extent of the atonement” places him closer to Luther than is often recognized. For a modern, confessional Lutheran assessment of Amyraldianism, see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 25–26: “Also the hypothetical universalism of the Amyraldists, according to which Christ gained grace for all men, but God’s will is to create faith only in the elect, practically denies the *gratia universalis*.” Thomas contends that Amyraut’s “many works give evidence of concern to resist union with Roman Catholicism and promote union with the Lutherans, to stress the importance of the Protestant doctrine of justification” (Thomas, *Extent of the Atonement*, 187). Amyraut defended Reformed-Lutheran intercommunion but considered union with Roman Catholics to be impossible (ibid, 212). See also the Reformed statements of the Confession of Thorn that purposely paralleled Lutheran views (ibid, 213). “To Amyraut, Thorn was proof that universal atonement was not at variance with Reformed theology at its best, and a model for Reformed-Lutheran co-operation” (ibid, 213).


Our meanderings into Amyraut have drawn us away from the primary sources of Calvin, but they adequately demonstrate the complexities of labels such as “Calvinism” and “Amyraldianism.”

What then of Calvin himself? Perhaps the best approach (since ultimately it is the only one available to us) is to demonstrate how Calvin answered the specific issues he did address (as I have done above), and to refuse to make Calvin solve questions he did not answer. Specifically, we might avoid the imposition upon Calvin of anachronistic terminology such as “Amyraldian,” “the four points” or “the five points,” an “order of the decrees,” etc.

While one may not agree with all that Calvin says (nor Amyraut nor Luther), one must at least appreciate Calvin’s attempt to come to terms with difficult issues embedded within the Scriptural texts. Ultimately Calvin’s attempts drive us back to the Bible itself. It is at the bar of Scripture that all theology must be judged. “The question is not, ‘What did the reformers believe and teach?’ . . . nor even, ‘What is the historical view of the church?’ as important and helpful as these matters are; but the crux of the matter is, ‘What saith the Scriptures?’”

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65. Concerning the “Calvin and the Calvinists” debate, Muller reminds us that “the simple fact” is “that none of the documents was produced in order to set the terms of debate, whether positive or negative, for various twentieth-century theological movements” (Richard A. Muller, After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], vi).

66. For example, Calvin did not intricately systematize a “multiple intents” approach as others have done. This is not to say that such a systematic project is not noteworthy, only that a historical study of Calvin does not go beyond his own materials. For a “multiple intents” example, Bruce Ware is purportedly working on such a monograph, of which some of his preliminary thoughts have appeared on the Internet. See also Gary Lee Shultz Jr., “A Biblical and Theological Defense of a Multi-Intentioned View of the Extent of the Atonement” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008). For a popularized simplification based upon Ware’s approach, see Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, Death By Love: Letters from the Cross (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 163–181.


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