

CHAPTER THREE

Evidences for “Limited Atonement”

THE MATERIALS FOUND IN the previous chapter have not convinced all interpreters of John Calvin that he espoused a provision of “universal redemption.” Doubtless, Calvin often described Jesus Christ as redeeming the elect, his church, his people, and his sheep.¹ And facets of Calvin’s theology (such as his doctrine of God’s decreed will; his version of double predestination; and his espousal of eternal, unconditional election) definitely favor particularist themes.² But does the divine intention to apply

1. See Shultz, *Multi-Intentioned View of the Extent of the Atonement*, 25. Cf. Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24; 15:3; Gal 2:20; 3:13; Eph 5:2; 1 Thess 5:10; Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 191. Moreover, Beza commented more explicitly on the limits and intentions of Christ’s satisfaction during Calvin’s lifetime (although still not fully elaborated), without any response from Calvin (Blacketer, “Blaming Beza,” 123).

2. See Shepherd, *Nature and Function of Faith*, 69; McGowan, “Was Westminster Calvinist?” 52; Thomas, *Extent of the Atonement*, 34–35; Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” 112–13; Greenbury, “Calvin’s Understanding of Predestination.” Calvin spoke of divine permission as “babble” and “absurd talk,” unlike a doctrine of the “permissive will” of God as a commonplace tenet in some versions of later Reformed theology (Calvin, *Institutes* I.18.1; see Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism,” 237). “While Calvin did not invent the notion of double predestination—it can be found in Augustine and Gottschalk, and was revived by Bradwardine—his advocacy of it in a variety of writings certainly popularized the idea in the Reformed tradition” (Sinnema, “Calvin and the Canons of Dordt,” 90). Muller hypothesizes that Calvin initially added the doctrine of predestination to his *Institutes* in 1539 because he was laboring on his Romans commentary at the time (Muller, “Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology,” 195). Timothy George summarizes Calvin’s doctrine of predestination in three words: *absolute*, *particular*, and *double* (George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 233). George also emphasizes the Christocentric, pastoral, and doxological nature of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. “Predestination, as Calvin understood it, is neither a church steeple from which to view the human landscape, nor a pillow to sleep on. It

Christ's death effectually to the elect alone (who are reached by God's own gracious, unconditional initiative) entail the fullness of God's intention in the death of Christ, in a singularly strict manner?

In several instances, Calvin uses terminology that lends itself to the narrower and more defined "limited atonement" perspective emphasized by many later theologians in the Reformed tradition.³ These materials have encouraged various interpreters to argue that the later "limited atonement" tradition simply made more explicit what was implicitly Calvin's own view or at least his bent of inclination.⁴ Scholars who portray Calvin as a proponent of strictly "limited atonement" accentuate three of the reformer's passages in particular.⁵

First evidence for "limited atonement"

First, a text that is commonly discussed appears in Calvin's 1561 "Reply to Heshusius," a Lutheran.⁶ 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."⁷ William Cunningham called the passage in

is rather a stronghold in times of temptation and trials and a confession of praise to God's grace and to His glory" (ibid., 234). On Calvin's predestinarian understanding of reprobation, see also Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination*, 55–88.

3. Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 192.

4. See Gatiss, *For Us and for Our Salvation*, 75.

5. For example, see Leahy, "Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement," 59–62; Murray, "Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement," 21–22; Blacketer, "Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective," 314–15; Cunningham, *Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 400; Reymond, "Consistent Supralapsarian Perspective on Election," 162n14; Gatiss, *For Us and for Our Salvation*, 71; cf. Bell, "Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement," 118–20. Ponter focuses the argumentation: either "these three instances must be read in the light of the larger body of evidence" or "these three instances regulate and determine the meaning and intent of all that Calvin says regarding the extent of the atonement" (Ponter, "Review Essay (Part Two)," 269). Ponter opts for the former. Rainbow adds a fourth passage: Calvin's comments on John 12:32 (Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 65, 177). Yet Calvin interprets this verse as a reference to the efficacious gathering of the elect without drawing an implication concerning the extent of the provision of the atonement. Daniel notes Calvin's comments on 1 Pet 2:22 yet disagrees with a strict "limited" view of the material (see Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill," 815–16).

6. Available as Calvin, "Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine concerning the True Partaking."

7. Leahy, "Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement," 61.

Calvin’s “Reply to Heshusius” “a very explicit denial of the universality of the atonement,” but one that “stands alone—so far as we know—in Calvin’s writings.”⁸ Hans Boersma highlights this same text as an unambiguous example of strictly “particular atonement.”⁹ 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 [in 1 Cor 11], 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?”¹⁰

The context is Calvin’s opposition to the “monstrous dogma” of an orally consumed, real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, received by both believers *and* unbelievers.¹¹ Rouwendal notes, “Calvin’s intention was to make clear that Christ is not corporally present. In the immediate context of the quoted sentence, he uses the argument that if Christ were present corporally, the ungodly would eat his flesh and drink his blood, which Calvin deemed impossible.”¹² Heshusius adhered to the “barbarous eating” of an oral consumption of Jesus’ body and blood. In response, Calvin queried how “the flesh of Christ is eaten by unbelievers, and yet is not vivifying.”¹³ 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

8. Cunningham, *Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 396.

9. Boersma, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 333.

10. Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 285; cf. 270, 286; the Latin is available in Strehle, “Universal Grace and Amyraldianism,” 354n62.

11. Cf. Bell, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 119–20: “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 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, though he is still inclined to do so (see Blocher, “Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” 280).

12. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 331.

13. Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 273; cf. 263, 267, 277. “Christ cannot be separated from his Spirit” and “as the living bread and the victim immolated on the cross, cannot enter a human body devoid of his Spirit” (*ibid.*, 285).

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 presented to them.¹⁴

Curt Daniel reasons, “What Calvin is denying is that these [Lord’s Supper] verses are interpreted literally and that the wicked eat Christ. He is not denying that the flesh of Christ was crucified for the wicked.”¹⁵

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, vivifying application of the atonement to the believing recipient.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

Elsewhere, Calvin’s own theology of the Lord’s Supper further spoke of the universal provision of Christ’s sacrifice.¹⁸ 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*

14. Calvin, “Confession of Faith in Name of the Reformed Churches of France,” 158. Cf. “given” vs. “received” in Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 283.

15. Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 820. For an alternative interpretation by Alan Clifford, see Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 819n98.

16. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position,” 331.

17. Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 284. “Indeed he is certainly offered in common to all, unbelievers as well as believers” (*ibid.*, 316). See also Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 819n97.

18. Cf. Calvin on 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, Matt 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, “Was Calvin a ‘Calvinist?’” 202; Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement*, 32–33 and 66n41 on Calvin’s understanding of “definite” in this passage.

for the salvation of the world.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ “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.”²¹ “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.”²² When such evidence is compared with the “Reply to Heshusius,” it underscores how Calvin’s opposition was targeting Heshusius’ (Lutheran) view of communion, not all senses of a universal dimension in Christ’s cross death as offered.²³

Second evidence for “limited atonement”

As a *second* evidence for a strictly “limited atonement” in Calvin, some scholars point to his commentary on 1 John 2:2.²⁴ For example, Robert Peterson asserts that it is “significant” that the *Institutes* are “silent” on the question of the extent of the atonement.²⁵ “However,” Peterson

19. Calvin, “Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal,” 425; italics added.

20. Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 1208; English spelling updated.

21. Calvin, “Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal,” 481.

22. 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,” 817–23; Ponter, “John Calvin and Tileman Heshusius”; Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement*, 53–56; Costley, “Understanding Calvin’s Argument against Heshusius”; Costley notes that Calvin did not speak of the “non-elect,” but the “ungodly” or “wicked.” Calvin was referring to unbelievers (some of whom might later become believers in God’s outworked plan, thereby manifesting their divine election).

23. Williams, *Heart of Piety*, 132–35; Allen, “Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement,” 7–9. On differences between the Lutheran and Reformed views of the Lord’s Supper, see Denlinger, “Men of Gallio’s Naughty Faith?” 57–83.

24. Blacketer, “Blaming Beza,” 135.

25. 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*, 117–20). Calvin himself affirmed that the pattern of his theology was

adds, “appeal can be made to Calvin’s commentaries to argue for limited atonement.”²⁶ Peterson then appends a footnote that cites Calvin’s commentary upon 1 John 2:2 as an example. Concerning this verse (“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” [ESV]), 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 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.²⁷

Calvin applied the verse to “the expiation made by Christ” that “extends [*extendi*] to all who by faith embrace the Gospel,” as his polemical sights were set upon the “monstrous idea” and “absurdity” of universalists who “admit into salvation” [*in salutem admittunt*] “all the reprobate and even Satan himself.”²⁸ As Trueman quips, “Calvin clearly rejects

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 accepted some form of the “medieval synthesis” on the matter as a “given,” and therefore scholarship must continue to investigate the 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.” Cf. Archbald, “Comparative Study of John Calvin and Theodore Beza,” 9–68.

26. Peterson, “Calvin on Christ’s Saving Work,” 246.

27. Calvin, 1 John 2:2, *Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, 244. See also Calvin, John 10:11.

28. Cf. the doctrine of *apokatastasis* found in Origen’s writings. Calvin maintained an important distinction: “The benefit of redemption is offered to the ungodly, but not to the devils” (Calvin, Col 1:20, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians,*

the universalist interpretation of this verse.”²⁹ Calvin attacked this same “universalistic” interpretation of 1 John 2:2 in his *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*.³⁰ Georgius argued that if Christ expiated the sins of the whole world, then reprobates also would be effectually saved—or the only other option is to say the reprobates are not a part of the world.³¹ Calvin’s tactic was to accept 1 John 2:2 as relating to the effectual application of Christ’s expiation, which “extends” only to “the whole Church.”³² At the same time, Calvin affirmed, “It is incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world.”³³

Here one is reminded of Calvin’s commentary upon Rom 5:18: “Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact *extends* [*extendatur*] to all, but because it is offered to all.”³⁴ Calvin went on to acknowledge that “Although 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.”³⁵ 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’ . . .”³⁶ Neverthe-

Philippians and Colossians, 313).

29. Trueman, “Definite Atonement View,” 38.

30. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 149.

31. Calvin opposed the use of 1 John 2:2 as found in Pighius and Georgius. See Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 266–67.

32. Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 266. “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, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 149).

33. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 149.

34. Calvin, Rom 5:18, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 117–18; italics added. In a published French sermon on Deuteronomy, Calvin employs “extends” in a general manner, declaring that “the first degree of love” (in which “Jesus Christ offers himself generally to all men without exception to be their redeemer”) “extends” [*s’extend*] to all, represented by Jesus’ arms “extended” [*estendus*] to all, both great and small (see Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 167).

35. Calvin, Rom 5:18, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 118. See also Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 803.

36. Nigel Westhead as found in Clifford, *Calvinus*, 56. Roger Nicole conceded that Calvin’s commentary upon Rom 5:18 “comes perhaps the closest to providing support for Amyraut’s thesis” (see Clifford, “Calvin & Calvinism,” 38). Nicole argued that the

less, the grace does not (efficaciously) “*extend*” to all. Elsewhere Calvin insisted, “the virtue and benefits of Christ are *extended* unto, and belong to, none but the children of God.”³⁷

Taking this evidence of salvation “extending” efficaciously only to the elect back into our examination of 1 John 2, Calvin’s specific point was *not* to deny that Christ suffered for all or was offered to all. Rather, Calvin insisted that Christ’s expiation did not efficaciously “extend” to all, but only to “all who by faith embrace the Gospel.”³⁸ Calvin was willing to allow the “classical” maxim, “Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect.”³⁹ Nevertheless, at this contextual juncture, he was battling opponents of a “universalist” stripe (who asserted that all would be saved in the end), who read *propitiatio* as efficacious reconciliation.⁴⁰ Calvin granted that 1 John 2:2 spoke of the *efficacious* work of salvation, and he was (understandably) unwilling to apply that efficacious work to the reprobate and Satan himself. He therefore interpreted “the whole world” in 1 John 2:2 as “the whole Church.” In this step, Calvin paralleled Augustine’s interpretation.⁴¹ Moreover, Calvin took the opportunity to emphasize the exclusivity of salvation in Christ: “For, as is

passage “may well refer simply to the relevance of the sacrifice of Christ to a universal offer, without actually asserting a substitutionary suffering for all mankind” (Nicole, “Moyses Amyraut,” 83n38). A nineteenth-century translator of the passages recorded in a footnote, “It appears from this sentence that Calvin held general redemption” (see Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 34n30). Contrast Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, 44. See Beach, “Calvin’s Treatment of the Offer of the Gospel,” 63.

37. Calvin, *Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*. English translation from Cole, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 208.

38. Cf. Calvin, John 17:9. Contrast the tenor of this reading with Gatiss, *For Us and for Our Salvation*, 71.

39. Nettles, “John Calvin’s Understanding of the Death of Christ,” 299. Contrast Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 16n2. At the same time, Calvin seemed to believe that the classical formula did not do justice to the full divine plan in that it did not explicitly recognize God’s sovereign application of salvation (see Shultz, *Multi-Intentioned View of the Extent of the Atonement*, 25).

40. See Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 804n68.

41. See Augustine’s “First Homily” of his “Homilies on 1 John,” in *Augustine: Later Works*, 265–66; cf. Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective,” 309–10; Thomas, *Extent of the Atonement*, 32. Blacketer could have added Fulgentius of Ruspe to his discussion on page 310. See Gumerlock, *Fulgentius of Ruspe on the Saving Will of God*.

meet, the grace of Christ is really made clear when it is declared to be the only salvation of the world.”⁴²

To reiterate, Calvin allowed the scholastic formula to stand as true.⁴³ 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 “universalists” who used 1 John 2:2 to espouse the ultimate 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 so-called “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.⁴⁴

Interestingly, Calvin’s interpretation of “world” in 1 John 2:2 is in tension with his own approach to the meaning of *world* in John 17:21 (“that the world 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.”⁴⁵ In the context of John 17, Calvin accentuated the fact that Christ intercedes only for disciples and not for the world (John 17:9).⁴⁶ Throughout the Johannine literature, the “world” stands

42. Calvin, 1 John 2:2, *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*, 660; English spelling updated).

43. See R. Scott Clark’s overview of the doctrines of election and predestination in the Middle Ages (Clark, “Election and Predestination,” 90–96); cf. Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*.

44. See Ponter, “John Calvin (1509–1564) on Unlimited Expiation.”

45. Calvin, John 17:21, *Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, 148.

46. 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

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."⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

Third evidence for "limited atonement"

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 Tim 2:4.⁴⁹ While interpreting this verse (in which God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" [NKJV]), 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."⁵⁰ This, of course, would entail universalism in ultimate salvation. As

whole human race, because we cannot yet distinguish the elect from the reprobate" (Calvin, John 17:9, *Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, 140). Contra Nettles, Ponter insists that "there is no evidence in Calvin that the intercession delimits the scope of the expiation or that both are restricted to the same group" (Ponter, "Review Essay (Part Two)," 269; cf. 261). Ponter adds: "All that can be shown, and which is entirely correct, is that, for Calvin the intercession is grounded upon the expiation, such that no expiation, then no intercession is possible. There is no evidence for the inverse, that if there is an expiation for a person, then there will be an effectual high-priestly intercession for that same person" (ibid.). Ponter provides a "historically instructive" parallel from Musculus: "Moreover it is the office of a Mediator not only to pray but also to offer. And he offered himself upon the Cross for all men. For (as says Paul) 'Christ died for all men'" (as found in ibid., 261). Contra John Owen's understanding of "the inseparability of oblation and intercession" (see Tay, *Priesthood of Christ*, 18).

47. Calvin, John 16:33, *Gospel according to St John 11–21 and the First Epistle of John*, 133.

48. I thank Tony Byrne for this insight. See Muller, "Review of *English Hypothetical Universalism*," 149–50; Muller, "Revising the Predestination Paradigm."

49. For a classification of five explanations of "God wills all people to be saved" in the medieval era, see Foord, "God Wills All People to Be Saved—Or Does He?" 190.

50. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 109. Calvin discusses this Scriptural text in eight places, six of which can be found at <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=128>. "Calvin's basic understanding of 1 Timothy 2:4 appears to remain stable throughout these writings" (Foord, "God Wills All People to Be Saved," 197). For the delineation of the eight passages, see the listing in ibid.: *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione*

in his comments upon 1 John 2:2, Calvin warned against using this text to defend such heretical universalism.⁵¹ Calvin responded, “Who does not see that the reference [to “all men” in 1 Tim 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.”⁵² 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.”⁵³

Thus Calvin interprets “all men” in 1 Tim 2:4 as a reference to “orders” or “classes” of humans (a common “five-point Calvinist” view today).⁵⁴ But then he correlates the passage to the *external preaching* of the gospel rather than the “secret counsel of God.” This view is confirmed by his commentary on 1 Tim 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

8.2 (1552), *Commentarii in priorem epistolam ad Timotheum* (1556, second revised edition), *Commentarii in priorem epistolam Pauli ad Corinthios* I.27 (1556, second revised edition), *De Occulta Dei Providentia* Article I (1558), *Institutio Christianae Religionis* III.24.16 (1559), *Commentarii in Acta Apostolorum* 17.11 (1560), *Ioannis Calvini Praelectiones in librum prophetiarum Danielis* 7.27 (1560), *Sermons sur les épitres à Timothee et à Tite*, Sermon 13 (1561).

51. As in Origen’s *apokatastasis* (cf. John Wyclif’s opposition to Origen’s doctrine in Foord, “God Will All People to Be Saved,” 190). Calvin insists that the doctrine of salvation is not “effectually available to all” (Calvin, *Institutes* III.22.10).

52. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 109.

53. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 109. “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).

54. “That is, a distinction must be made between the world as comprised of classes of individuals, and the world as comprised of individuals of a class” (Helm, “Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement,” 117).

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.⁵⁵

Thus Calvin consistently interpreted “all men” in 1 Tim 2:4 as all “classes of men” rather than “individuals.” But he added that the passage does not concern God’s “secret counsel” concerning individuals (which pertains to the elect alone) but to the *preached* offer of the gospel “to all without exception.”⁵⁶ An article by Martin Foord claims that Calvin may have meant “all kinds of people” in the sense of “*all* from all kinds,”

55. Calvin, 1 Tim 2:4–5, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 208–10. On Christ as mediator, see Baylor, “With Him in Heavenly Realms,” 152–75; Thompson, “Calvin on the Mediator,” 106–35; Allen, “Perfect Priest,” 120–34.

56. Calvin asserts that the apostle is not speaking of specific individuals (such as Peter or John) as they relate to God’s secret, eternal decree (Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy 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, Isa 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 (see Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 256–60). In the same manner, according to 1 Tim 2:1, we are to pray for “all” (Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, 160; see Costley, “Answering Roger Nicole on 1 Timothy 2:5”). More precisely, the objective provision is for all, but not every individual hears a gospel presentation.

rather than in the (“Owenist”) sense of “some from all kinds.”⁵⁷ In Foord’s understanding, when Calvin maintains that 1 Tim 2:4 does *not* speak of “every particular individual,” he is referring to “*God’s hidden will concerning particular individuals.*”⁵⁸ That is, Calvin asserts that the text does not speak of God’s hidden plan for individuals but his *revealed will* (the proclamation of the gospel).⁵⁹ According to Calvin’s commentary on the passage, “But he [Paul] is speaking of classes and not of individuals and his only concern is to include princes and foreign nations in this number. *God’s will that they also should share the teaching of the Gospel* is clear from the passages already quoted and from others like them.”⁶⁰ Again, Calvin commented, “For although it is true that we must not try to decide

57. Foord, “God Wills All People to Be Saved,” 198–99; following the observations of David Ponter (ibid., 199n121); cf. Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 256–60, 269. By tracing the medieval discussions and by citing relevant materials in Calvin, Foord concludes that “All’ is a reference firstly to orders (or kinds) of people, but that doesn’t necessarily entail some from all kinds. Rather Calvin means *all* from all kinds.” For counterargument, see Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 85n55; Blacketer, “Blaming Beza,” 139n91. 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 Tim 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 Tim 2:4 and 5. Peter Vermigli put forward three understandings of the passage, declaring that “all these interpretations are quite probable and also fitting”: first, the text speaks “of all states and kinds of men, that is, that God will have some of all kinds of men to be saved”; second, “God will have all men to be saved, for as many as are saved, they are saved by his will”; third, the text refers “to the signified will or antecedent will, that all men are invited since preaching is set forth to all indifferently.” Vermigli added his own, fourth option: the “all men” is “understood only of the saints,” to “the godly who are elected” (Ponter, “Peter Martyr Vermigli”). Concerning the third option, Vermigli stated, “Thus if we relate this to the will of God, we will easily grant that he will have all men to be saved. They will not have it to be understood of the hidden and effective will which they call the consequent will. In this way one may understand such speed as ‘God illumines every man who comes into this world’ and ‘Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden’ (John 1:9; Matt. 11:21), for all are provoked by the oracles of God and all are inwardly moved by some spur.” Cf. also Kimedoncius, who interpreted “all men” in 1 Tim 2:4 as a reference to some of all kinds, but seems to have been a proponent of “universal redemption.” See Muller, “Review of *English Hypothetical Universalism*,” 149–50; Muller, “Revising the Predestination Paradigm.”

58. Foord, “God Wills All People to Be Saved,” 199; italics original.

59. Ponter, “Review Essay (Part Two),” 258.

60. Calvin, 1 Tim 2:4–5, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 209.

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."⁶¹ Of course, not all scholars have concurred with Foord's reading.⁶²

In his prayer that he ordinarily made at the ending of his sermons, Calvin declared, "Let us fall down before the face of our good God . . . That it may please Him to grant this grace, not only to us, but also to all people and nations of the earth, bringing back all poor ignorant souls from the miserable bondage of error and darkness, to the right way of salvation."⁶³ The context of 1 Tim 2:1–7 concerns prayers for the salvation of unbelievers ("all men in general"), and Calvin roots this summons to prayer in the *imago Dei* shared by all humans, thus distributing "all men" to include all bearers of the image of God.⁶⁴ "Yet notwithstanding, (as we have here exhorted) let us not leave off, to pray for all men in general: For S. Paul shows us, that God will have all men be saved, that is to say all people and all nations . . . [lest] we forget that God has made us all in his image and likeness, that we are his workmanship, that he may stretch forth his goodness over them which are at this day far from him, as we have a good proof of it."⁶⁵ This understanding of 1 Timothy 2, with its context of praying for unbelievers, fits Paul's sentiments in Rom 10:1–4, where he prays for the salvation of his fellow Israelites who did not believe.⁶⁶ It also fits Calvin's own Trinitarian prayer for the lost:

61. Calvin, 1 Tim 2:4–5, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 208.

62. See Blacketer, "Blaming Beza," 139n91; Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 85n55.

63. Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, 751; English updated. Cf. the same material in Calvin, "Prayer Which John Calvin Ordinarily Made at the Ending of His Sermons," 730.

64. "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, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1–7*, 593). See also Ponter, "Review Essay (Part Two)," 258.

65. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, 160. One may not feasibly pray for every individual universally but for all kinds and stations and nations of people.

66. "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom 10:1–2, NKJV; cf. Rom 9:1–5).

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.⁶⁷

In any case, as we have seen, Calvin purposely did not correlate 1 Tim 2:4 with God’s *efficacious* work of salvation, but with the *external* call of preaching and teaching. As Calvin insisted, Paul “is showing that God has at heart the salvation of all men, for He calls all men to acknowledge His truth.”⁶⁸ Moreover, according to Calvin, “the context makes it clear that no other will of God 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 preaching to Christ.”⁶⁹ Calvin affirmed that the revealed will of the “Gospel” being preached to all classes and orders was indeed “good news.”⁷⁰ Individuals will not find their particular names listed out in gospel proclamation, but their warrant remains in “the external preaching of the Gospel,” since “God wills the salvation of all whom He mercifully invites by preaching to Christ.”⁷¹ Therefore, Calvin did not associate the verse with God’s hidden decree but rather with the proclamation of the gospel (the will of God as found in the Word preached).⁷²

67. Calvin, “Forms of Prayer for the Church,” 102.

68. Calvin, 1 Tim 2:4–5, *Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 208.

69. 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).

70. Rainbow, *Will of God and the Cross*, 142; Foord, “God Wills All People to Be Saved,” 199.

71. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination*, 109 cf. Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah’s Prophecy*, 137–52. See Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” 797–99.

72. Calvin distinguishes between particular individuals as found in the hidden will of God and the general summons to people of all nations and estates as found in the Word preached (Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, 154). “However, the critical point to grasp is this: Calvin’s use of ‘individuals’ (and ‘every particular