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 students have added their own touch-ups upon the canvas. Others have portrayed themselves 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? As Kevin Kennedy cautions, "if our theological forefathers are worth reading, they are worth reading without imposing theological or hermeneutical commitments on them which they themselves may not have affirmed."[1]

Historians recognize that the label "Calvinism" is problematic.[2] John Calvin definitely deserves pride of place in any discussion of the development of Reformed theology.[3] Nevertheless, Calvin was an influential thinker within a broader assemblage of influential thinkers.[4] "Calvin is one star in a much bigger galaxy."[5] As Christoph Strohm remarks, "there has been a view of the history of reformed Protestantism, which

1. Kennedy, "Hermeneutical Discontinuity between Calvin and Later Calvinism," 299. Kennedy's title implies that there was a rather monolithic "Later Calvinism," but the present study highlights the complexities of the phenomena. As Richard Muller insists, "No longer do we see a monolithic orthodoxy being developed in the latter half of the sixteenth century" (Muller, "*Duplex cognitio dei*," 51).

2. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism*, 11n1. Stewart maintains that "all the good historical reasons for abandoning the terminology of *Calvinist* and *Calvinism* as misrepresentative of a multifaceted, multileader and international movement still apply" (ibid., 40). See also Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," 225–44.

3. Gerrish, *Thinking with the Church*, 105–24.

4. Crisp, *Saving Calvinism*, 42.

5. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin*, 29.

overlooks the plurality of its beginnings due to an unhistorical fixation with placing Calvin in a central position—one which he did not occupy."[6] Kenneth Stewart insists that "Calvinism's *origins* are composite."[7] At most Calvin might be construed as *primus inter pares*, but statistical analyses of the subsequent generation reflect his relativized influence.[8] In 1898, the Dutch Reformed statesman Abraham Kuyper quipped that "no Reformed Church ever dreamed of naming a Church of Christ after a man" in Calvin's lifetime.[9] Because the Reformed movement was more of a "team effort" than an individual sport, a bounded level of diversity existed within the movement from its inception.[10]

Moreover, Reformation theology "emerged from the communal settings of universities, academies, and churches."[11] Therefore, Richard Muller has called for "the analysis of continuities and discontinuities in thought in the context of diversity and development in the Reformed tradition."[12] According to Jonathan Moore, "We need to be brave enough to face what is there: a complex interaction between continuities and discontinuities within a wide spectrum of diversity and development in the Reformed tradition, a tradition committed to Scripture alone."[13] Carl Trueman fears that even these themes ("continuity" and "discontinuity") may lead to "the surreptitious intrusion of anachronistic criteria into the historical task."[14] According to Trueman, questions of continuity or discontinuity "need to be set aside, or at least adopted in a highly qualified

6. Strohm, "Methodology in Discussion of 'Calvin and Calvinism,'" 79.

7. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism*, 16.

8. Strohm, "Methodology in Discussion of 'Calvin and Calvinism,'" 66; Letham, "Faith and Assurance in Early Calvinism," 358. Calvin was frequently quoted in various debates of the Westminster Assembly. See Trueman, "Reception of Calvin," 23.

9. Kuyper, "Calvinism a Life-System," 13.

10. Moore, "Calvin versus the Calvinists?" 347. "Even in the sixteenth century, Calvin was at best first among equals; his theology did not represent the entire Reformed tradition and was not the only model available to subsequent theologians" (Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 10–11).

11. Trueman, "Reception of Calvin," 24.

12. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists,'" 158.

13. Moore, "Calvin versus the Calvinists?" 348.

14. Trueman, "Reception of Calvin," 19. Cf. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement*, 90–91. Paul Helm bemoans "the mists and fogs of anachronism" that often descend upon the discussion (Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," 99).

form."[15] Texts of historical theology should be approached as contextualized historical actions.[16]

In particular, a contemporary debate specifically rages over whether John Calvin himself emphasized (or even taught) all "five points" of so-called "five-point Calvinism."[17] The dispute centers upon whether Calvin taught the doctrine of so-called "limited atonement" (a post-Calvin

15. Trueman, "Reception of Calvin," 21. Trueman emphasizes that "continuity is confessional," associated with confessional and catechetical documents rather than the writings of individual authors with no official ecclesiastical status (ibid., 22). Oliver Crisp uses the confessional unity as a reflection of "a softer face to Calvinism," as "the Reformed tradition truly is a confessionalism that tolerates doctrinal plurality within certain parameters" (Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, 237). Crisp speaks of "the virtues of this broader confessionalism" and challenges "Reformed thinkers to look again at the wealth and diversity of the tradition to which they belong," believing that later interpreters tightened the acceptable interpretations of confessional standards (ibid., 238–40). For example, he maintains that both the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession allowed for a doctrine of hypothetical universalism.

16. Trueman, "Reception of Calvin," 21. See also Johnson, "New or Nuanced Perspective on Calvin?" 547.

17. Thompson, "Calvin on the Cross of Christ," 124. Sometimes the topic has been raised for polemical purposes (Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, 160–66). One acknowledges 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 intended the effectual salvation of only the elect" is different from "God only intended the effectual salvation of the elect." "Whichever way the verdict goes on the extent of the atonement, Calvin certainly taught that God *effectively* wills the salvation of the elect only" (Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 171n43). 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, though 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. Even the term "Calvinism" is a slippery concept (Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 353). 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" (Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," 20). According to Richard Muller, "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" (Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 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" (Blacketer, "Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective," 305). In sum, "strict conformity to Calvin's doctrine was no Reformed thinker's goal" (Denlinger, "Scottish Hypothetical Universalism," 99).

term).[18] As Raymond Blacketer rightly notes, "the question itself is flawed on a number of levels."[19] (1) The phrase "limited atonement" can only be discussed in relation to Calvin through anachronistic usage; (2) modern theologians will quibble about preferences of terminology between "particular redemption" or "effectual redemption" or "definite atonement" over "limited atonement"; and (3) evangelical views across a spectrum "limit" the atonement, whether in intention, sufficiency, or application.[20] Even with such qualifications, the subject "shows no signs of subsiding," to the point that some have denigrated the controversy as "a paper chase."[21] Paul Helm has compared the disputes to a "game of evidential ping-pong."[22] 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."[23] Within the last

18. This question is part of the larger debate concerning "Calvin and the Calvinists." See Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists"; Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, xvi–xx; Djaballah, "Calvin and the Calvinists," 7–20; Bell, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" 535–40; Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists'"; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 9–13; Lane, "Calvin versus Calvinism Revisited," 32–35; Campos, "Calvino e os Calvinistas," 11–31; Clifford, *Calvin Celebrated*; Macleod, "*Amyraldus redivivus*," 211. Martin Foord explains, "When comparing Calvin to others, it cannot be done in terms of a simple continuity and discontinuity model. This mistake helped skew the so-called 'Calvin and the Calvinists' debate in recent years" (Foord, "God Wills All People to Be Saved," 79–80).

19. Blacketer, "Blaming Beza," 121. "Studies of this issue are often plagued with wrong turns and false starts, depositing students of the question into a methodological labyrinth, to use one of Calvin's favorite terms" (ibid.).

20. Boice and Ryken, *Doctrines of Grace*, 113–14; Steele et al., *Five Points of Calvinism*, 2, 6, 39; Nicole, "Case for Definite Atonement," 200; Nicole, "Particular Redemption," 169; Carson, *Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 73–74; Muller, "Tale of Two Wills," 212; Snoeberger, "Introduction," 7; Trueman, "Atonement and the Covenant of Redemption," 202. Even the usage of "atonement" in relation to Calvin's teachings is somewhat problematic (Muller, "Davenant and Du Moulin," 126).

21. Clifford, *Calvinus*. In a review of Clifford's work, Anthony Lane predicted, "The debate about Calvin's teaching on the intent of the atonement looks set to run and run" (as quoted in Clifford, *Calvinus*, 64). It is indicative that the April 1983 issue of the *Evangelical Quarterly* contained four articles debating whether later Calvinists modified Calvin, including Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement: Torrance, "Incarnation and 'Limited Atonement,'" 83–94; Bell, "Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement," 115–23; Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 65–81; Lane, "Quest for the Historical Calvin," 95–113.

22. Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement," 100n12.

23. Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position," 335. See also Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 72.

decade, several essays specifically targeting Calvin and the extent/intent of the atonement have appeared, including those authored by David L. Allen, Matthew Harding, Paul Helm, Kevin Kennedy, Thomas Nettles, and David Ponter—and with differing conclusions.[24]

It is evident that Calvin never discussed "the question of the extent of the atonement as a separate doctrinal point."[25] This present study argues that Calvin combined the language of Christ's death as in some sense a universal *provision* along with his firm emphasis upon particularist "unconditional election." Calvin's own language was not of *atonement*, of course, as "the English term *atonement* does not correspond directly to the terms that continental theologians employed."[26] Calvin rather used such terms as *satisfaction*, *redemption*, *expiation*, and *reconciliation*.[27] In Calvin, "we have a variety of biblical motifs."[28] He taught his doctrine of atonement "by drawing on the rich tapestry of metaphor present in the Old and New Testaments."[29] He did not provide a systematization of these

24. Allen, *Extent of the Atonement*; Harding, "Atonement Theory Revisited," 49–73; Helm, "Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement"; Kennedy, "Hermeneutical Discontinuity between Calvin and Later Calvinism"; Kennedy, "Was Calvin a 'Calvinist'?"; Nettles, "John Calvin's Understanding of the Death of Christ"; Ponter, "Review Essay (Part One)"; Ponter, "Review Essay (Part Two)"; See also Gatiss, "John Calvin's View."

25. Kennedy, "Was Calvin a 'Calvinist'?" 194.

26. Blacketer, "Blaming Beza," 122; cf. Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 84n5.

27. In Latin, *expiatio*, *redemptio, reconciliatio*, and *satisfactio* (Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 76). For this reason, David Ponter prefers the language of *satisfaction* (Ponter, "Review Essay (Part One)," 140). Blacketer acknowledges that *redemptio* can be used in "an objective indefinite sense" and in "a definite sense as applied to the elect" (Blacketer, "Blaming Beza," 122n4). Of course, one must distinguish between the concept of "atonement" and the word *atonement*, which is a word of English origin (Hesselink, "Calvin on the Atonement," 316n3). Contemporary discussions largely acquiesce to the use of the now conventional term "atonement." Nevertheless, the conventional terminology may mask anachronism or ambiguity, as the present study will also explain. On the biblical terminology of *redemption*, *reconciliation*, and *propitiation*, see Chafer, "For Whom Did Christ Die?" 311.

28. Hesselink, "Calvin on the Atonement," 316.

29. Sumner, "Theory and Metaphor," 49. The label of "metaphor" is considered by some to be lacking: "It is by no means clear, however, what is meant by describing biblical language on the atonement . . . as metaphorical" (Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 102). But see Blocher, "Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of the Atonement," 629–45; Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*, 10–11. Calvin and other historic theologians were setting forth "a coherent doctrine which reflected, they believed, God's own understanding of what was transacted at Calvary; an understanding which was encapsulated

diverse motifs, but he "achieved a high degree of integration . . . with the various biblical languages of atonement."[30] Calvin affirmed, "No language, indeed, can fully express the fruit and efficacy of Christ's death."[31] In a sense, although he approached the atonement with an inner consistency, "Calvin never formulated a systemic doctrine of atonement."[32] Robert Peterson has discussed six biblical atonement themes within Calvin, believing that the Genevan reformer did not thoroughly synthesize them: the obedient second Adam, the victor, the legal sacrifice, the historical sacrifice, the meritor of grace, and a cruciform example.[33]

The heart of this volume may be found in Chapter Two, "Twelve Issues," and more casual readers are encouraged to focus upon that chapter's primary source materials, but not necessarily to the neglect of the other chapters. The first chapter traces the *status quaestionis* of the research topic by examining three general approaches. Chapter Three examines the evidences for so-called "limited atonement" adduced within Calvin's writings. Chapter Four warns against a facile understanding of the options and trajectories in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. The Reformed tradition exhibited a spectrum of diversity in the early modern period. The final Epilogue in Chapter Five reviews specific lessons and conclusions reached through the historical investigations, seeking a possible pattern *emerging* from facets in Calvin, and suggesting a non-speculative "complex-intentioned" framework for contemporary consideration.[34]

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in a series of God-given keywords, such as expiation, propitiation and reconciliation" (Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 106). Cf. Wells, *Cross Words*. Stephen Holmes attempts to align "five potential accounts of the extent of the atonement" with specific metaphors for the atonement (Holmes, "Nature of the Atonement and the Extent of the Atonement," 12–17).

30. Blocher, "Atonement in John Calvin's Theology," 203.

31. Calvin, Eph 5:1, *Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, 196.

32. Sumner, "Theory and Metaphor," 51, 57. Cf. Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 112. On the inner consistency ("the stability, constancy, and consistency") of Calvin's teaching on the atonement, see Blocher, "Atonement in John Calvin's Theology," 282.

33. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement*, 85. On the incorporation of facets of a *Christus Victor* approach into Calvin's theology, see Saito, "Theory of the Atonement," 9–10, 76–82, 106–7; Sumner, "Theory and Metaphor in Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement"; Treat, "Expansive Particularity," 46, 54–55; Estes, "Reincorporating Christus Victor in the Reformed Theology of Atonement."

34. Obviously, Calvin himself never used such a phrase.

Admittedly, this brief study will not fully exhaust the complicated issue of Calvin's view of the so-called "extent of the atonement."[35] 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 perspectives, along with an overview of interpretations and trajectories into the post-Reformation period. Only the final chapter (the Epilogue) extends "toward" a more *constructive task, and even then only in framework form, suggesting a possible pattern emerging from facets in Calvin*.[36] If nothing else, perhaps this small volume will spur on further study and even further adaptation and refinement.

35. Cf. Kennedy, "Was Calvin a 'Calvinist'?" 212.

36. 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). Cf. the dispositions found in Hastie, "Straight Talk on John Calvin." Roger Nicole relates, "Correspondence with Dr. [Curt] Daniel has elicited the fact that he originally held to definite atonement and thought that Calvin also held that view. His further studies have led him to the opposite conclusion both as to Calvin's position and as to his own understanding of Scripture" (Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," 208n46).