SJT 64(3): 299–312 (2011)
doi:10.1017/S0036930611000135
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Hermeneutical discontinuity between Calvin and later Calvinism

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that Calvin's interpretation of biblical passages related to the question of the extent of the atonement differed significantly from the later tradition. This difference in interpretation is explained by the fact that Calvin did not share certain hermeneutical presuppositions which were to become almost universal among theologians of the later Reformed tradition. This article will examine two hermeneutical 'rules' which Calvin frequently employed in his interpretation of scripture and will contrast his handling of scripture with the interpretative practices employed by the later Reformed tradition. The first hermeneutical 'rule' involves those passages in scripture which state that Christ came to give his life as a ransom for 'many', or that he shed his blood for 'many'. Contrary to the later Reformed interpreters of scripture, Calvin understands these passages to mean that Christ died for all people rather than just some. The second hermeneutical 'rule' concerns Calvin's frequent appeal to the fact that the word 'all' does not always mean 'all' when it is used in scripture. Certain present-day Reformed theologians argue that since Calvin shares this second hermeneutical rule with the later Reformed tradition, then his reading of scripture must not have differed significantly from that of the later tradition. Therefore, Calvin must have held to a limited atonement. However, this article will show that this conclusion only holds true if we read *Calvin's own writings* by means of this hermeneutic.

The question of continuity and discontinuity between John Calvin and the later Reformed tradition has been a point of discussion in recent years. Arguably the most significant work in this area has been done by Richard Muller, who has written extensively on the subject demonstrating the significant continuities which exist within the Reformed tradition.[1] Muller's work in this area has been of great value to those interested in Reformation

[1] See Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1986); *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies, Calvin studies or the Reformed tradition. However, despite the contributions in this area by scholars such as Muller, there are certain differences between Calvin's theology and the theology of the later Reformed tradition which are worthy of note. One such discontinuity involves certain fundamental theological commitments involved in his interpretation of scripture. To be more precise, Calvin differs significantly from the later Reformed tradition in his handling of certain passages which are central to the later tradition's formulation of one of its more controversial doctrines – limited atonement, also referred to as particular redemption. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that Calvin's customary interpretation of certain biblical passages related to the question of the extent of the atonement differed significantly from the later tradition. This difference in interpretation is explained by the fact that Calvin did not share certain hermeneutical presuppositions which were to become almost universal among theologians of the later Reformed tradition.

This article will examine two hermeneutical 'rules' which Calvin frequently employed in his interpretation of scripture and will contrast his handling of scripture with the common interpretative practices employed by the later Reformed tradition. The first hermeneutical 'rule' to be investigated involves those passages in scripture which state that Christ came to give his life as a ransom for 'many', or that he shed his blood for 'many'. Contrary to the habit of later Reformed interpreters of scripture, Calvin understands these passages to mean that Christ died for all people rather than just some. The second hermeneutical 'rule', which is closely related to the first, concerns Calvin's frequent appeal to the fact that the word 'all' does not always mean 'all' when it is used in scripture. Certain present-day Reformed theologians argue that since Calvin shares this second hermeneutical rule with the later Reformed tradition, then his reading of scripture must not have differed significantly from that of the later tradition. Therefore, Calvin must have held to a limited atonement. However, this article will show that this conclusion only holds true if we read *Calvin's own writings* by means of this hermeneutic. The purpose of this article will be to demonstrate that John Calvin employed a biblical hermeneutic which differed significantly from the later Reformed tradition in relation to the question of the extent of the atonement. This is particularly evident in Calvin's treatment of certain key passages to which later Reformed theologians appeal in order to argue for a particular atonement.

Press, 2000); *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Calvin and the Calvinists interpret the word 'many'

It is nearly a universal practice among traditional Reformed theologians to interpret certain biblical passages as explicitly teaching that Jesus intended to die for the elect alone and not for the entirety of humanity. Perhaps the most common category of passages to which particularists appeal are those which state that Jesus came to shed his blood and to die for 'many'. Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 are parallel accounts which record Jesus' statement that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and 'to give his life a ransom for many'.[2] The general practice among Reformed thinkers is to interpret these passages as teaching that Jesus intended to instruct us that he came to die only for *many* and not for *all* people – for the elect alone and not for the entire world. Other similar passages such as Mark 14:24, in which Jesus says that the cup of the supper represents the blood of the new covenant 'which is poured out for many', and Isaiah 53:12 which says that he 'bore the sins of many', are to be interpreted in the same manner. According to the traditional Reformed interpretation, anyone should be able to recognise, from a simple reading of these texts, that the scriptures teach that Jesus came to die for the elect alone and not for the entire world.

Indeed, this is John Owen's starting point in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.[3] Owen begins the first chapter of this work by asking for whom it was that Christ died. He appeals to Matthew 20:28 and similar passages as setting forth what he claims to be the normative scriptural teaching on the question of the extent of the atonement. Owen argues that these passages are properly to be understood as teaching that Christ died only for many people and not for all people. He works from the assumption that the word 'many' was consciously employed by Jesus and the biblical writers with the intention of excluding some from the death of Christ. Having established this to be the normative biblical teaching on the question of the extent of the atonement, Owen then interprets the rest of scripture from this perspective. Since the scriptures cannot contradict themselves, then we must interpret those passages which seem to teach that Christ died for all people really to mean that he died for 'all sorts of people', 'all the elect' or 'for Gentiles as well

[2] Unless otherwise noted, scripture is from the New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lochman Foundation. Used by permission.

[3] John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967). Repr. from *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–3).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as Jews'. This basic argument is frequently employed by later particularists such as J. I. Packer, John Murray and Wayne Grudem, just to name a few.[4]

When we look at how Calvin handled this and similar passages we find a striking dissimilarity between him and later 'Calvinists' such as Owen. Passages such as Matthew 20:28 provided Calvin with a perfect opportunity to affirm particular redemption had he so desired. Instead of interpreting the word 'many' as indicating that some were excluded from the atonement, Calvin universalises the word 'many' by interpreting it to mean 'all'. The following passage illustrates how Calvin interprets Jesus' use of the word 'many' as it occurs in Matthew 20:28:

> 'Many' is used, not for a definite number, but for a large number (*Multos ponit non definite pro certo numero, sed pro pluribus*), in that he sets Himself over against all others. And this is the meaning also in Rom. 5:15, where Paul is not talking of a part of mankind but of the whole human race (*ubi Paulus non de aliqua hominum parte agit, sed totum humanum genus complectitur*).[5]

Instead of taking the opportunity to limit this passage to apply only to the elect, Calvin universalises it. This practice of universalising the word 'many' occurs frequently in Calvin's writings. When commenting on Isaiah 53:12 ('he himself bore the sins of many') Calvin writes:

> He alone bore the punishment of many, because on him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that 'many' sometimes denotes 'all' (*multos enim pro omnibus interdum accipi*).[6]

[4] This interpretative principle is affirmed by J. I. Packer in the introduction to the Banner of Truth Trust's edn of *The Death of Death*. See also John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 62–3; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 598–9.

[5] John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, ed. D. W. and T. F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959–72), vol. 2, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew Mark and Luke*, Matt 20:28. All Latin references to Calvin's New Testament Commentaries are from *Ioannis Calvini in Novum Testamentum Commentarii*, ed. A. Tholuck, 7 vols. (Amsterdam: Berolini, 1833–4; hereafter NTC), 2.181. In his commentary on Rom 5:15, Calvin asks us to observe 'that a larger number (*plures*) are not here contrasted with many (*multis*), for he speaks not of the number of men: but as the sin of Adam has destroyed many, he draws this conclusion,—that the righteousness of Christ will be no less efficacious to save many', NTC 5.76. He specifically states that 'many' is not to be understood as being contrasted with a larger number, such as 'all'.

[6] Calvin, *Commentaries*, 45 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843–55; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948–50), vol. 8, Isa 53:12. *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols, *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols 29–87 (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke & Son, 1863–1900), 37.266, hereafter CO.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Calvin interprets Mark 14:24 ('This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many') in the same manner:

> 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. No doubt that in speaking to a few Christ wished to make His teaching available to a larger number. . . . 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.[7]

Calvin's interpretation of Hebrews 9:28 ('Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many') follows the same line of interpretation:

> 'To bear the sins' means to free those who have sinned from their guilt by his satisfaction. He says many meaning all (*Multos dicit pro Omnibus*), as in Rom. 5:15. It is of course certain that not all enjoy the fruit of Christ's death, but this happens because their unbelief hinders them. The question is not dealt with here because the apostle is not discussing how few or how many benefit from the death of Christ, but meant simply that he died for others, not for himself. He therefore contrasts the many to the one (*Itaque multos uni opponit*).[8]

Once again Calvin universalises the word 'many' to include all sinners, not just the elect. We should take particular note of the contrast which Calvin mentions in the last two passages. Calvin understands Jesus to be contrasting the 'many' with the 'one' Jesus Christ. Calvin wants his readers to understand the teaching of Jesus, that it was not for himself that he died but for others. Compare Calvin's interpretation of these passages with the contrast drawn by the particularists. The typical particularist interpretation of these passages is that Jesus and the biblical writers purposefully intended to teach that Christ died for 'many' sinners as opposed to 'all' sinners.[9] Contrary to this reading, Calvin interprets these passages to mean that Christ died for others and not for himself. Calvin seems to be making the point that were Jesus to have used the word 'all', then he himself would have been included in that number.

[7] Calvin, *Comm.*, Mark 14:24, *NTC* 2.311.

[8] Calvin, *Comm.*, Heb 9:27, *NTC* 7.93–4.

[9] This contrast is recognised by Curt D. Daniel in an appendix to his 1983 University of Edinburgh Ph.D. dissertation, 'Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill', p. 795. In his appendix, 'Did John Calvin Teach Limited Atonement?', Daniel argues that Calvin held to a universal atonement.

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But since Jesus wanted to make it clear that he was dying for others and not himself, he chose to use the word 'many' instead of 'all'. Therefore, according to Calvin, Christ is not contrasting the 'many' people with 'all' people. Rather, the contrast is between the 'many' people and Jesus himself. One last passage in which Calvin universalises the word 'many' is from a sermon on Isaiah 53:12 ('he himself bore the sins of many').

> That, then is how our Lord Jesus bore the sins and iniquities of many. But in fact, the word 'many' is often as good as equivalent to 'all.' And indeed our Lord Jesus was offered to all the world. For it is not speaking of three or four when it says: 'God so loved the world, that he spared not His only Son.' But yet we must notice what the Evangelist adds in this passage: 'That whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but obtain eternal life.' Our Lord Jesus suffered for all and there is neither great nor small who is 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?[10]

These five passages demonstrate a conscious and deliberate universalising of biblical passages which later Reformed theologians claim are, from a simple reading of the text, clearly to be understood as teaching that Christ died only for some people and not the whole world. Contrary to the practice of most particularists, Calvin did not take the opportunity presented by these verses to interpret the word 'many' in such a way as to limit the atonement only to the elect. The fact that this practice of universalising the word 'many' occurs so frequently and in different contexts (in his commentaries as well as his sermons) goes far towards demonstrating that this was a general hermeneutical rule in Calvin's interpretation of scripture. Calvin's interpretation of these passages seems to demonstrate not just a predisposition towards a belief in a universal atonement, but an explicit teaching on the subject.[11]

[10] Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, ed. and trans. T. H. L. Parker (London: James Clark & Co, 1956), p. 141, *CO* 35.678.

[11] Particularists will frequently appeal to Calvin's *Commentary* on 1 John 2:2 as being an instance where he explicitly affirms particular redemption. However, in later comments on the same passage in his *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, Calvin explicitly states that '[i]t is incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world' (*Concerning*, p. 149. *CO* 8.336). Furthermore, in both cases, in his *Commentary* on 1 John and in his argument against Georgius in *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, the hermeneutical danger in Calvin's mind is not that someone might interpret this passage as teaching that Christ had died for all humankind, but rather that some

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'All' does not always mean 'all'

Another Reformed hermeneutical principle related to the question of the extent of the atonement is the principle that the word 'all' does not always mean 'all'. For instance, when Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:5–6 'For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all', particularists must interpret this passage in such a way that it agrees with what they have already determined to be the normative biblical teaching on the extent of the atonement – that Christ died for 'many' and not 'all'. Therefore, this verse cannot mean that Christ died indiscriminately for all the people in the world. It must mean that he died for people from all parts of the world, for all kinds of people, or for all the elect. This general hermeneutical principle is applied by many Reformed interpreters of scripture to the numerous biblical passages which seem to indicate that Christ died for the whole world.[12]

However, in contrast to later Reformed theologians, it is striking to see how freely John Calvin used universal language to describe the atonement. At numerous places he simply makes assertions that Christ died for the redemption of mankind or the salvation of the whole human race. The following quotations are but a sample of the many instances where Calvin speaks of Christ dying for or bearing the sins of the whole world.

> They had already been warned so many times that the hour was approaching in which our Lord Jesus would have to suffer for the redemption of the whole world (*en laquello nostre Seigneur Iesus devoit souffrir pour la redemprion du genre humain*).[13]

> God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception, even as Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world. (*nam omnium salus sine exceptione nobis a Deo commendatur, quemadmodum pro peccatis totius mundi passus est Christus*).[14] When he says 'the sins of the world,' he extends this kindness indiscriminately to the whole human race (*Et quum dicit mundi peccatum, hanc gratiam ad totum genus humanum promiscue extendit*) that the Jews might not think that the Redeemer has been sent to them alone. . . . Now it is for us to

had used this verse to teach that the whole world would be saved, including Satan. Therefore, there is reason to believe that what Calvin 'limits' in his commentary on 1 John is not the extent of the atonement, but rather the extent of actual salvation. For a fuller discussion on this passage see my *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 38–40, 49–51.

[12] See n. 4 above.

[13] Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 55, *CO* 46.836.

[14] Calvin, *Comm.*, Gal 5:12, *NTC* 6.68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> embrace the blessing offered to all, that each may make up his own mind that there is nothing to hinder him from finding reconciliation in Christ if only, led by faith, he come to Him.[15]

> He must be the redeemer of the world (*Redempteur du monde*). 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 (*d'autant qu'il estoit la comme en la personne de tous maundits et de tous transgresseurs*), and of those who had deserved eternal death (*et de ceux qui avoyent merité la mort eternelle*).[16]

> [Paul] says that 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 (*nam sacrificio mortis eius expiata sunt omnia mundi peccata*).[17]

> Let us note well, then, that the Son of God was not content merely to offer his flesh and blood and to subject them to death, but He willed in full measure to appear before the judgement seat of God His Father in the name and in the person of all sinners (*au nom et en la personne de tous pecheurs*), being then ready to be condemned, inasmuch as he bore our burden.[18]

These five sample passages state in one way or another that Christ died for the sins of the whole world. Many particularists are familiar with these and other similar passages in Calvin's writings and recognise the need to offer an explanation for them if they are to claim that Calvin held to particular redemption. For example, in discussions surrounding the 1979 publication of R. T. Kendall's book *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*,[19] in which Kendall used some of these same passages to argue that Calvin held to a universal

[15] Calvin, *Comm.* John 1:29, *NTC* 3.21.

[16] Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 95, *CO* 46.870. This quotation is interesting in that in it Calvin makes no distinction between who the transgressors were or who was deserving of eternal death. While it is true that the elect were at one time transgressors and deserving of eternal death, there is nothing here to indicate that Calvin had only the elect in mind. Furthermore, appealing to the fact that Calvin switches to more exclusive language ('for us' and 'our cause') and arguing that he had in mind only the elect, may be countered with the fact that he then continues by saying that Christ was there 'in the person of all cursed ones and of all transgressors, and of those who had deserved eternal death'. Surely the elect were not the only transgressors deserving of eternal death. In this passage Calvin is most naturally understood to have had the whole human race in mind.

[17] Calvin, *Comm.*, Col 1:14, *NTC* 6.225.

[18] Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 156, *CO* 46.919.

[19] R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

atonement, some contemporary 'Calvinists' such as Paul Helm and Roger Nicole came to Calvin's defence, as it were, answering Kendall's claim that Calvin held to a universal atonement. Helm and Nicole appealed to the fact that, since in many of these same passages Calvin mentions the benefits which accrue to 'us', the elect, this indicates that when Calvin says that Christ died for the sins of the whole world, he really only meant that Christ did this for all of 'us', or for all the elect.

For example, in the last two passages cited above, Calvin states that Jesus appeared before the judgement seat of God 'in the name of all poor sinners'. However, Roger Nicole appeals to the fact that Calvin goes on to state that he did this because he had to 'sustain all *our* burdens'.[20] Nicole makes the claim that we are to understand Calvin's universal language to be qualified by the particular references he makes to what Christ has done on behalf of the elect. Nicole goes on to argue that we must understand Calvin's qualification of the universal language in these two passages to be Calvin's normative understanding of the atonement because Calvin elsewhere repeatedly appeals to the hermeneutical principle that the word 'all' does not always mean 'all'. In essence, Nicole is arguing that Calvin follows the same hermeneutical principles as later Reformed theologians.

Calvin's qualifications of the word 'all'

It is true that, when the word 'all' appears in scripture, Calvin frequently does limit it to mean something other than 'all people indiscriminately'. However, he generally does so in order to limit the extent of *salvation* and not the extent of the atonement. For example, when commenting on 1 Timothy 2:4 'who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth', Calvin counters the objection that this passage precludes the doctrine of election.

> They argue, 'If God wills all men without distinction to be saved, then it is not true that by his eternal counsel some have been predestined to salvation and others to perdition.' There might be some grounds for holding this if in this passage Paul were concerned with individuals (*si Paulus hic de singulis hominibus ageret*), . . . [but] 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.

[20] Roger Nicole, 'John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement', *Westminster Theological Journal* 47/2 (Fall 1985), p. 217, emphasis added. This article has been repr. in Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth: The Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), pp. 283–312. See also Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 43–4.

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> 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 (*At de hominum generibus, non singulis personis, sermo est*) and his only concern is to include princes and foreign nations in this number.[21]

Calvin's comment on the same verse while refuting Pighius in his treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* is virtually identical.

> Who does not see that the reference 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. At any rate, the context makes it clear that no other will of God is intended than that which appears in the external preaching of the Gospel.[22]

Upon examination of these two comments on 1 Timothy 2:4 it is necessary first to understand that Calvin is not dealing with the question of the extent of the atonement but with the extent of actual salvation. He is arguing against those who use this verse as a proof text against the doctrine of predestination. Intent on safeguarding the doctrine of election Calvin interprets this verse to be dealing with the *revealed* will of God. The revealed will of God, that God intends all to be saved, is the ground for the universal preaching of the gospel. When Calvin limits the word 'all' to refer only to classes and not to individuals, he means that this verse tells us nothing about which individuals God, according to his *secret* will, has intended to save. There is indeed a similarity between Calvin's interpretation of this verse and the particularist interpretations of similar scriptures. However, we must note that, in this context, Calvin means only to limit the extent of actual salvation and not the extent of the atonement.

A similar treatment of the word 'all' is found in Calvin's commentary on Titus 2:11. In his commentary on this passage ('For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men') he writes:

> 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. Since God does not despise even the lowest and most degraded

[21] Calvin, *Comm.*, 1 Tim 2:4, *NTC* 6.353.

[22] Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clark & Co, 1961), p. 109, *CO* 6.546.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> class of men, it would be extremely foolish that we should be slow and negligent to embrace his goodness.[23]

The verse in question would seem to indicate that salvation will actually come to all people. As he had done on the previous occasions noted above, Calvin disallows the interpretation that this verse deals with the salvation of particular individuals. This verse does not mean to teach that all will be saved, rather, it deals with God's revealed will only. Calvin's only intent in this passage is to make it clear that the scriptures do not teach that all will be saved. He therefore qualifies the word 'all' in his comments here to make the verse compatible with election. In God's revealed will God can express the desire that all be saved. Yet, in his secret will, God can will that only his elect actually come to salvation. Calvin's qualification of the word 'all' in this context is meant to limit the extent of actual *salvation* and not the extent of the *atonement*. Calvin's comments on John 6:45 ('It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught of God"') should be understood in a similar manner:

> When He says *all*, it must be limited to the elect, who alone are the true children of the Church. . . . Isaiah shows that the Church is only truly built up when her children are taught by God.[24]

Calvin frequently used the language of being 'taught' by God to indicate what a believer experiences when he or she believes the Gospel. Since not all will be saved, then not all will be 'taught' by God in this saving manner. He therefore limits this salvific benefit to the elect alone for only the elect will be 'taught' by God in such a way that they actually come to be partakers of salvation.

Qualifying Calvin's own use of the word 'all'

It is quite clear from the passages cited above that Calvin did sometimes limit the word 'all' to refer to 'classes of men' as opposed to 'all men' as is indeed similar to later particularist interpretations of those scriptural passages which use universal language to describe the death of Christ. We must now

[23] Calvin, Comm., Tit 2:11, NTC 6.476. (*Nominatim universis communem esse testatur propter servos, de quibus loquutus erat. Interea non intelligit singulos homines, sed ordines potius notat, aut diversa vitae genera. Atque hoc non parvam emphasin habet, quod Dei gratia ad servile usque genus se demiserit. Nam quum Deus ne infimos quidem et postremae sortis homines despicat, plus quam absurdam foret, nos ad amplexandam eius bonitatem pigros esse ac desides.*)

[24] Calvin, Comm., John 6:45, NTC 3.124. Helm refers to this quotation as proof that when Calvin uses the word 'all' he is not necessarily referring to the whole world (*Calvin and the Calvinists*, p. 46).

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ask why it is that particularists appeal to Calvin's qualification of the word 'all' as proving that he taught a limited atonement. The reason is simple. As the first section of this article demonstrated, particularists take as normative the biblical passages that speak of Christ dying for 'many' or for 'his sheep' or 'his Church'. They interpret these passages as teaching that Christ died *only* for 'many' rather than 'all' people. When particularists come to those biblical passages which speak of Christ dying for the 'world' or for 'all', they interpret them to conform to what they have already determined to be the normative scriptural teaching, that Christ died only for 'many' and not 'all'. Thus, the passages which state that Christ died for 'all' are interpreted to mean that Christ died for 'all sorts of people' or 'all of the elect'. By appealing to the places in Calvin's writings where he similarly interprets the word 'all' to mean something other than 'all the people in the world', particularists believe that they have found a commonality between their own interpretation of scripture and Calvin's. This appeal is, in essence, a claim that Calvin shares their hermeneutic. It seems to be that this appeal is meant to create ambiguity with regard to Calvin's meaning in those many places where he employs universal language to speak of the atonement.

This is certainly true in the case of an article written by Roger Nicole on Calvin's view on the extent of the atonement.[25] After discussing the passages where Calvin states that the word 'many' often means 'all', Nicole immediately appeals to the passages where Calvin qualifies the word 'all' to mean something other than 'all the people in the world'. Nicole sees this as counting against the claim that Calvin taught a universal atonement, since Calvin was frequently predisposed to understand the word 'all' to be referring to the elect alone. Furthermore, Nicole draws attention to the fact that in many other passages where Calvin uses universal language to describe the extent of the atonement we sometimes find particular references to what Christ has done 'for us' or for 'his people'.[26] Nicole's claim here is that we should understand these limiting phrases as constituting a qualification of Calvin's universal language when he is describing the atonement. The larger implication from Nicole's two-pronged argument is quite clear – *if Calvin is predisposed to qualify the word 'all' when it appears in scripture, then it is reasonable for*

[25] This could equally be deduced from Helm's writings. Both point to Calvin's inclusion of such phrases as 'for us' at places where he also writes of Christ dying for the whole world. Helm and Nicole argue that the inclusion of such limiting phrases as 'for us' indicate a qualification of the universal language employed by Calvin. Their point is that while Calvin does frequently employ phrases such as 'Christ died for the sins of the whole world', he should be understood to mean that 'Christ died for the sins of all the elect'.

[26] Nicole, 'John Calvin's View', p. 217.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us to interpret Calvin's own use of the word 'all' as meaning something other than 'all' when Calvin himself is speaking of the extent of the atonement. In other words, since Calvin recognises that the word 'all' does not always mean 'all' when it appears in scripture, then there is no reason to believe that Calvin meant 'all' when he uses the word.

We must ask whether this is a reasonable conclusion from the passages discussed above in which Calvin qualifies the word 'all'. First, we should note that in all the passages discussed above, Calvin is limiting the extent of salvation and not the extent of the atonement. Furthermore, even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that Calvin was predisposed to qualify the word 'all' when it appears in scripture, upon what grounds do we make the leap that this gives us licence to qualify *Calvin's own use* of universal language when he is describing the atonement? It is one thing to find in Calvin a predisposition to qualify the word 'all' occasionally when it occurs in scripture. It is quite a different matter to state that Calvin's qualification of the word 'all' in scripture gives us licence to read Calvin's own use of the word 'all' as being similarly qualified wherever it appears in his own writings. Doing such is all the more absurd when one considers how Calvin uses universal language so frequently and in various contexts to describe the atonement. Not only should we resist the temptation to find in Calvin a biblical hermeneutic which we ourselves may employ, we should also resist the greater temptation of reading Calvin's own words by means of that hermeneutic. Such a leap is both unfounded and absurd.

Conclusion

Later Reformed theologians believe that when they identify hermeneutical similarities between their own and Calvin's interpretation of scripture, this must mean that Calvin also shares the theological commitments of the later Reformed tradition. In the case of the present discussion that would be the doctrine of particular redemption. However, the passages to which we have attended in this article demonstrate that there are striking dissimilarities between Calvin's reading of scripture and that of the later Reformed tradition. Furthermore, in many instances the only way that we can arrive at the conclusion that Calvin held to a particular atonement is if we read Calvin's own words using a certain Reformed hermeneutic. Even if Calvin sometimes used a certain hermeneutical principle when he interpreted scripture, this surely does not give us licence to interpret his own writings by means of that hermeneutic. Furthermore, since Calvin recognises the existence of, and explicitly affirms, this hermeneutical principle, we may assume that he was aware of the possibility that his own words could have been read using

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this principle. Despite this possibility Calvin still frequently used universal language to describe the atonement.

John Calvin is seen by many as the father of one of the great Protestant traditions – the Reformed tradition. In fact, this tradition is known to many people simply as 'Calvinism'. Yes, there are many continuities between Calvin and the later Reformed tradition. However, to assume continuities within a tradition where they do not exist is to run the risk of missing the real contributions of the various members of that tradition. The real danger is failing to recognise discontinuities, for it is often in these discontinuities that we find the unique contributions to any tradition. Finally, 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.

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