Calvin on Christ’s Satisfaction and its Efficacy: the Issue of “Limited Atonement”

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1. Introduction
Calvin’s doctrine of the work of Christ, particularly his treatment of Christ’s death and its salvific import have been the subject of a great number of inquiries, none of which have proved ultimately satisfactory. Various more or less traditional Reformed readings of Calvin’s doctrine have argued the case for “limited atonement” or “limited redemption.” Among the contemporary monographic treatments of the problem, however, various writers have argued a concept of universal or perhaps hypothetically universal atonement in Calvin’s thought.

Given these fairly wide differences of opinion in the literature, there is certainly room for yet another essay on the problem of Calvin’s perspective on the divine intentionality in redemption and the extent or limitation of Christ’s work.

Calvin’s relation to scholastic theology must be also brought into play — given that there is, in addition to the simple question of antecedents, also the question of the specific character of Calvin’s appropriation of the older materials, particularly in the case of the sufficiency-efficiency formula. In addition, much of the scholarly discussion has ignored the basic terminological problem involved in examining the questions of limited “atonement” and “for whom Christ died,” a problem recognized in the seventeenth-century by such diverse thinkers as Jacob Arminius, Richard Baxter, and John Owen. In short, fixation on the anachronistic term “limited atonement” and on the ancient but inherently vague language that “Christ died for all people” or, by contrast, “for the elect,” has led to fallacious argumentation on all sides of the issue, and has transferred its confusion from Calvin to the examination of various later Reformed alternative formulations of the doctrine of Christ’s sacrifice and its application to believers, whether in the case of the more particularistic understandings of the doctrine or in the case of the various forms of hypothetical universalism.

The problem for the doctrine of “limited atonement,” therefore, lies in the fact that the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century debate concerned neither the objective sacrificial death of Christ considered as the atonement or expiatio offered
to God for the price of sin, upon which all parties in the debate were agreed, or the unlimited value, worth, merit, power, or “sufficiency” of the satisfactio, upon which all parties were also agreed, nor precisely, indeed, the limited efficacia or applicatio, inasmuch as all parties to the debate denied universal salvation. The debates over hypothetical universalism also highlighted the question of the divine intention in or behind the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction. A relatively small group of Reformed theologians, for the most part in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, defined Christ’s sufficiency or, more specifically, his accomplishment of salvation as limited — but this view was not notably present either in Calvin’s time or at the time of the Synod of Dort. The actual issues relevant to the debate were 1) the divine intention concerning the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction, specifically, the relationship between the hypothetical, “if all would believe” and the infinite value or merit of Christ’s death, namely, its “sufficiency” for all sin; 2) the divine intention concerning the effective application of salvation to individuals, specifically, the grounds of limitation of the efficiency or efficacy of Christ’s work; and 3) the relationship between the value or sufficiency and efficiency of Christ’s satisfaction and the universal or, more precisely, indiscriminate proclamation and call of the gospel. Debate over a hypothetical universal efficacy did not arise, given that an infinite potency or potentially universal efficacy, governed by the language of sufficiency, was generally assumed, and that even advocates of hypothetical universalism, like Amyraut, assumed the efficacy or application of Christ’s work to be governed by election.

There are, then several issues to be addressed, once the topic itself has been secured from the various modern confusions. Some clarity can be achieved simply by framing the question within the structure of the terms and distinctions used by early modern Reformed theologians — namely, the satisfactio Christi, distinguished in relation to its sufficientia and efficientia, or in relation to its valor or virtus and efficacia, or in relation to its impetratio and applicatio. The Reformed debates, including the debate at the Synod of Dort and during the Amyraldian controversy, were concerned with two issues: first, the reason or ground for the limitation of the efficacy of Christ’s satisfactio; and, second, with the question of nature of the ultimate divine intentionality in making a fully sufficient satisfaction for sin. With these actual issues in mind, Calvin’s formulations can be examined, recognizing that his formulations, albeit seldom reliant on the language of the standard scholastic distinctions, nonetheless reflect their boundaries. Thus, given that Calvin did understand Christ’s satisfaction as fully paying the price for sin, i.e., as having an infinite or universal value or power, how did he frame the grounds of its limited application to or efficacy for believers? In addition, did Calvin offer an explanation of the divine intention underlying the sufficient satisfaction of Christ, specifically with regard to the question of whether God in some sense intended Christ’s objective reconciliation for all sin to be such that if all believed all would be saved?
2. Universality of offer and limitation of salvation: the exegetical issue

Calvin was one of the many Reformation-era inheritors of an Augustinian exegetical tradition within which those biblical passages that refer to an offer of salvation to the whole world or declare the saving power of Christ’s death to all people are understood as coherent with the divine intention to save only the elect. Calvin’s interpretation of these passages, offers few unique insights and follows a pattern of understanding the divine offer to be universal or indiscriminate, given the abundant value or merit of Christ’s death, but the effecting of salvation to be limited. Given, moreover, Calvin’s fundamental commitment to a view of salvation by grace alone, he also understood the limitation of salvation to be by divine intention rather than by human choice.

Calvin, like other exegetes in the Augustinian tradition, viewed these words and phrases as necessarily understood in the context of other declarations by the Apostles, whether John or Paul and, in their immediate context in particular biblical passages, as varied in meaning depending on the particular subject of the passage. There are two factors brought to bear on the understanding of “world,” “whole world,” “all,” and “all people”: how the word or phrase is used in a particular place and how the broader biblical expression of divine promise impinges on the understanding of a particular passage.

Among those who argue a Calvinian doctrine of “universal atonement,” Kendall in particular misreads the exegetical tradition and misunderstands the issue. The issue is not whether the interpretive restriction of “all” or of “world” to mean “all types and classes” of persons in the world appears consistently in every biblical passage in which there is a generalized reference to humanity as “all” or as the “world.” Some of the references to “all” and to “world” are references to the human race or the created order in the most generalized terms; others indicate the extent of the promulgation of the gospel and the offer of salvation; others to the objective satisfaction, redemption, or reconciliation accomplished by Christ, sometimes with a limiting qualification added; others refer to the extent of sin; and still others (in fact, very few), require consideration of the extent of the divine will to save human beings. Accordingly, the interpretation of biblical references to “all” as referring to “all types and classes” is in fact quite restricted and concerns only a few texts, namely, those belonging to the latter category. In such cases, moreover, contra Kendall and Kennedy, Calvin does typically follow the traditional Augustinian exegesis according to which “world” and “all” may be understood, in the specific contexts of 1 Timothy 2:4-6 and Titus 2:11, as indicating all believers, all of the elect, or all types and classes of people in the world. Nor is it the case, as Kendall and Kennedy claim, that later Reformed writers drastically altered this pattern of interpretation or lack variety in interpretation.

Calvin’s exegesis of the Johannine passages, evidences a unity of theological perspective resting on Calvin’s assumptions concerning the Fourth Gospel and its theology but also an attention to the specific scope and context of particular
passages. In Calvin’s reading of the texts, there is no tension or contradiction between the universalizing language of John 1:29, 3:16, and 6:33, 51 and the particularizing arguments of John 6:37, 39, 44; 17:9, 20, given the limit implicit in the promises themselves. In his comments on 1:29 Calvin indicates that, in this passage, “world” does indeed mean all people. John 1:29, “The Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world,” teaches that “that every kind of unrighteousness that alienates human beings from God is taken away by Christ.” From Calvin’s exegetical perspective, the point of the passage is not to raise the issue of the limitation of salvation, but rather to indicate, via its reference to the “world” that the problem of sin is universal, that the sole path to salvation is Christ, and that the promise of salvation has been made not only to the Jews but to the Gentiles also. Given, moreover, that the passage, in Calvin’s view, refers to the extension of the promise to both Jews and Gentiles, the scope of the passage itself excludes explicit discussion of the saving application of Christ’s work to individuals.

When he comes to John 3:16, Calvin does not expand further on the meaning of “world” — he has already confirmed the universal sense of the word in his exegesis of the earlier passages. He does, however, indicate a divinely imposed limit on the effective application of Christ’s work. In the passage, “life is promised generally to all who believe in Christ” — indeed, but “faith is not common to all.” Nor is faith an option for all people, “for Christ is made known and displayed to all, but God opens the eyes of the elect alone, that they may seek him by faith.” In addition, Calvin makes clear, in the same passage that faith is the means by which the benefit of Christ’s death is effectively conferred: “since, therefore, faith embraces Christ, with the efficacy of his death and the fruit of his resurrection, we need not wonder if by it we obtain likewise the life of Christ.”

The next references to “world” occur in John 6. In the first of these, verse 33, Calvin again understands “world” as a reference to all people, following out his earlier reading of the Johannine usage as referring to the universality of sin and the breadth of the promise: “this passage teaches that the whole world is dead to God, except to the extent that Christ enlivens it, because life will be found nowhere else but in him.” Calvin makes no significant comment on the extent of Christ’s work with reference to John 6:51, the giving of Christ’s flesh “for the life of the world.” But, Calvin also indicates, in the same chapter, that the gift of Christ for the redemption of the universally sinful world belongs “to the counsel of the Father”—from which one can gain the assurance “that the Gospel will always have power to gather the elect to salvation” and “that all who do not profit by the teaching of the Gospel are reprobate.” In none of the contexts where he interprets “world” as indicating the universal human race, uniformly locked in sin and indiscriminately made aware of the promise of salvation does Calvin indicate a divine intention to save all people or to send Christ to save all people — in fact, he consistently points toward the limit of salvation to the elect. Yet, as we have seen, Calvin also
consistently points to Christ’s death as full payment for the sins of the world, undergirding, as it were, the indiscriminate proclamation of the gospel.

The one Pauline text on which Calvin offers an extended discussion of the issue is 1 Tim. 2:4-6. The context of Calvin’s interpretation of this apparently universalizing text is the Pauline command that Christians pray for all people, supported Calvin, indicates, by two arguments: first (v. 2) that such prayer conduces to a peaceful and godly life in society; and second (v. 3) that such prayer is “good and acceptable” in the sight of God. The fourth verse, “Who will have all people to be saved,” Calvin writes, stands as “a confirmation of the second argument” in which the Apostle indicates that “all our prayers should be subject to the decree of God.” Even more pointedly, the Apostle further stated that God not only “will have all people to be saved” but also would have them “come to the acknowledgment of the truth.” This divine intention, Calvin expands, is such that

God has at heart the salvation of all, because he invites all to the acknowledgment of his truth. The argument is *a posteriori*. For, if the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, it is certain that all those to whom the gospel is addressed are invited to the hope of eternal life.

Calvin is, in other words, quite intent on indicating a universal aspect of the gospel: it has to power to impart salvation to all who believe. Calvin immediately, however, raises the issue of election, comments that “those who oppose this text (locus) to predestination hallucinate” and argues that the passage in no way indicates an indiscriminate willing on the part of God that each and every person be saved. Calvin, as would various later Reformed writers including Owen, goes on to state the basic Augustinian conclusion, that the “all” of the passage indicates that “no people and no rank in the world” is excluded from salvation, that therefore the gospel ought to “be proclaimed to all without exception” because “God invites all equally to partake of salvation,” quite specifically in the sense that Paul’s language indicated “classes of human beings, and not to individual persons.”

Similarly, in his sermon on 1 Timothy 2:4, Calvin refers to those who interpret the passage as indicating a divine will or intention to save each and every human being as “beasts” who lack understanding of Scripture and who would “nullify” God’s election. Calvin continues,

Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception.

Both in his treatise on the *Eternal Predestination of God* and in his sermon on 1 Timothy 2:4, Calvin presses the issue of the text one step further, arguing in a manner that would be echoed by Beza: if God does in fact will that all without distinction “come unto the knowledge of the truth,” has his will changed since the beginning of creation? God’s truth was never given to each and every human being:
how then can God now will all to know his truth unless his will has changed? After all, the Apostle puts two phrases together in the passage — “to be saved” and “to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” Calvin answers the question with another question:

For if he willed that his truth be known to all, why did he not proclaim his law also to the Gentiles? Why did he confine the light of life within the narrow limits of Judaea?

Inasmuch as “no other will of God is understood, than that which appears in the external preaching of the gospel,” Paul simply means by “all” that “God wills the salvation of all whom he mercifully invites to Christ.” This must be the case, since not only is it the case that not all persons who could profit from the gospel are saved, but it is also true that the gospel has not been preached to vast masses of humanity in the past, namely all of the gentiles before the advent of Christ and large numbers of gentiles not reached by the gospel since the advent of Christ. Calvin, in short, denied universal grace.

As Calvin concludes in the commentary, drawing once again on the Augustinian “all types and classes” argument,

the preaching of the gospel gives life; and hence [the Apostle] justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake salvation. But the present discourse relates to classes of human beings, and not to individual persons; for his sole object is, to include in this number princes and foreign nations.

More briefly, but in the same vein, at Titus 2:11 he writes,

Bringing salvation to all people. That it is common to all is expressly testified by him on account of the slaves of whom he had spoken. Yet he does not mean individual people, but rather describes individual classes, or various ranks of life.

Quite simply, “all” does not meaning all individuals or each and every individual — and the universal proclamation of the gospel is understood as an indiscriminate offer, not as an offer that had been proclaimed our would be proclaimed to each and every human being.

3. Calvin and the traditional scholastic distinction: infinite sufficiency and limited efficiency.

The specific terms used by Calvin reflect a certain degree of flexibility as determined by context: thus, Calvin employs a series of terms that typically relate to the objective nature of Christ’s work as a sacrifice, expiation, offering, price, or satisfaction; he also employs terms that can refer either to Christ’s objective work or to its subjective apprehension or application, namely, reconciliation, redemption, and salvation; and he variously refers to the value or worth, the power, and the limited efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice. A survey of the various terms and their does little
to define precisely how Calvin’s understanding of the divine intentionality underlying fulness or universality or Christ’s work related to the rather varied later formulations offered by Reformed hypothetical universalists and their opponents — nor, certainly, given the problems of terminology in the modern debates over his teaching, can the terms be wedged into the language either of unlimited or limited atonement.

As indicated above, Calvin did know and accept, with some qualification, the medieval distinction between the “sufficiency” of Christ’s satisfaction for all sin and its “efficiency” for the elect alone. This is also a point that demands some exposition, given the attempts of several writers to side-step the implication both of the formula and of Calvin’s argument arguments concerning it. By way of example, Kendall indicates that Calvin “rejects” the formula, but allows, in a limited sense, for its truth insofar as “only the elect savingly believe,” while Bell rightly notes that “Calvin allows for the truth of the statement but rejects its use because the issue is not the power of Christ’s death, but those for whom it was intended” while at the same time missing Calvin’s underlying point. Calvin did not, in fact, reject the formula. Kendall’s argument rests on the mistaken assumption that the sufficiency-efficiency/efficacy distinction implies “limited atonement” and on the claim that election can be somehow segmented off from the issue of the extent of Christ’s work leaving an”unlimited atonement” in tact — indicating both the confusion caused by use of the term “atonement” and a resultant confusion over the meaning of “efficacy.” “Calvin,” he comments, “holds that the issue with regard to Christ’s death is not the efficacy in itself but to whom Christ gives himself to be enjoyed.” “Efficacy in itself” makes no sense inasmuch as the efficacy of Christ’s satisfaction lies, as the traditional distinction indicated, precisely in its application — what Kendall thinks of as “efficacy in itself” is actually the sufficiency.

In commenting on the text of 1 John 2:1-2, “And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world,” Calvin argues that Christ is “the sole advocate” inasmuch as he alone is capable of undertaking the priestly “office” of providing God with a sacrifice for sin.

Calvin also recognizes, that verse 2, “and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” raises the question of the universality of Christ’s satisfaction. These phrases, he indicates, expand upon the first verse “in order that the faithful might be assured that the expiation made by Christ, extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel.” The implication of this universalizing statement, Calvin continues, is that application os Christ’s work extends not merely to the faithful known to those addressed by the Apostle, but to all who “by faith who embrace the gospel,” wherever and whenever that may be. Once this limitation is expressed, then the question again arises concerning the universalizing language of the text: what is the meaning of the word “all or whole,” or, as Calvin comments, “how have the sins of the whole world been expiated”? Calvin now turns to the “delirium of the
fanatics” that “deserves no refutation” — specifically use of the text as a “pretense” to “extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself.” The text does not indicate universal salvation resting on the infinite value of the sacrifice. Thus, the application of Christ’s work is limited to the faithful but the objective propitiation or sacrifice has a universal dimension related specifically to the salvation of all who faithfully hear and receive the gospel.

The exegetical tradition, Calvin recognized, had here often introduced the time-honored scholastic distinction that “Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect” in order “to avoid this absurdity.” “This solution,” Calvin adds, “has commonly prevailed in the schools.” Having stated the distinction — presumably because he recognized it to be the standard solution to the problem of the text as found in the older tradition, Calvin proceeds to indicate that it does not apply to this particular text, while at the same time indicating the theological correctness of the distinction: “Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage. The design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole church.” Calvin, thus, accepts the standard scholastic distinction, but appears to indicate that the text itself did not intend to speak either in general theological terms of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for all sin or of the restriction of that sufficient payment by efficient application to the elect only; rather, the text intended to speak directly to the question of the application of Christ’s propitiatory work to the church.

The problem here — both for the interpretation of the text and for the interpretation of Calvin — is the strict reading of the message in its declaration of salvation to Christians, in the specific context of the Apostle’s hope that those he addresses will not sin or, as Calvin says, will “abstain from sins.” The Apostle’s primary intention in his message “was to keep human beings from sinning” — while at the same time to assure his readers that, since they cannot be “perfectly righteous,” Christ is still our advocate before God. What Calvin does not do here is raise the later question of hypothetical universalism, namely, whether the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction, beyond undergirding the universal proclamation of the gospel, also represents a hypothetical salvation of all if all would believe, although his declamation against the extension of salvation to the reprobate militates against finding a tendency toward hypothetical universalism in Calvin’s exegesis of this text.

The context of the Apostolic message, therefore, dictates the meaning of the text and excludes the use of the somewhat more formal theological construct distinguishing the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction from its efficacy. Nonetheless, Calvin not only indicates his acceptance of the distinction, he also indicates that the “reprobate” are excluded from Christ’s propitiation: if he was unwilling to declare, by using the traditional distinction, that John’s text limited the efficacy of Christ’s satisfaction to the elect, he was quite ready to state without any qualification that the Apostle surely meant to exclude the reprobate. In this particular comment, therefore, Calvin both acknowledges the theological rectitude of the distinction later used in
the *Canons of Dort* and asserts quite categorically that Christ’s expiatory death was not intended by God to save the reprobate. There is not a hint of an Amyraldian hypothetical universalism in Calvin’s argument.

A further clue to Calvin’s view of the traditional distinction between sufficiency and efficiency is found in his treatise against Pighius and Georgius on *Eternal Predestination*. Here again, he notes the distinction as the “common solution” to the problem, but notes that the distinction “does not avail” against the “absurdity” of Georgius’ claim that, if indeed as Scripture insists, Christ was the “propitiation for the sins of the whole world,” then to exclude the reprobate from Christ’s payment is to “place them outside the world.”

Nonetheless, in the treatise on *Eternal Predestination*, as in the commentary on 1 John 2:1-2, Calvin does not deny the distinction between sufficiency and efficiency, but only denies its applicability or usefulness in settling a particular argument: the distinction, in fact, does identify Christ’s propitiation as sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world and then its does restrict efficacy to the elect. Given that the distinction refers sufficiency to the payment for sin and not to all persons, it cannot answer the question of referentiality of the universal payment to all persons, including the reprobate. That is Calvin’s point, as is apparent from the subsequent argumentation: Christ died for the “expiation of the sins of the whole world” and the elect are scattered throughout the world, mixed together with the reprobate. Christ’s expiation is extended to the faithful. Calvin then restates the issue in his own language, noting that the issue was not the power (*virtus*) of Christ’s death or its objective worth (*valor*), but to whom Christ gives himself. Christ work was the “expiation of the sins of the whole world.” Reconciliation is therefore “placed before all” but the benefit is “peculiar to the elect,” because the potentially universal work of Christ is actually effective only for some. The universal offer, here, extends to all, elect and reprobate alike, and it is a valid offer given the full expiation (in itself sufficient) made for all sin — but the particularity of the application is limited by divine election. Calvin also here briefly references his other point, namely, that God cannot be viewed as willing to save each and every human being given the vast number of human beings left outside of the preaching of salvation since the beginning of the world. We are back to the outlines sufficiency/efficiency distinction, now modified in terms of the problem of the universal or, more precisely, the indiscriminate preaching of salvation over against its particular application — and perhaps looking toward the alternative distinction between accomplishment (*impetratio*) and application (*applicatio*) preferred by some later Reformed writers after the debates with Arminius and the Remonstrants. Georgius’ argument has been answered in such a way as to prevent the illusion that inclusion of the sins of the reprobate within the sufficient payment made by Christ also somehow extends participation in Christ to the reprobate as individuals.

It was, presumably, Calvin’s intention to exclude the reprobate from Christ’s payment and, at the same time, to interpret “world” in such a way as to limit its
meaning in this particular text — namely, generally and broadly rather than as absolutely universally. Even so, the phrases used by Calvin in his response echo strongly the terms used in his exposition from the following year (1553) of the Johannine passages, including his exposition of 1 John 2:1-2: when used salvifically, “world” or “whole world” indicates all of the faithful, the elect in all times and places, throughout the whole world; when used in its broadest possible meaning, “world” means all people, including the reprobate. The resemblance between the two discussions, moreover, is hardly accidental: we ought, certainly, to assume that, given the length of time requisite to the preparation of his Johannine commentaries, Calvin was writing on the Fourth Gospel at the same time that he was engaged in the refutation of Pighius and Georgius.

Calvin’s objection to the use of the distinction between infinite sufficiency and limited efficiency did not arise, moreover, because Calvin denied the infinite sufficiency of Christ’s propitiation, but simply because the issue in the particular text of Scripture in question (1 John 2:1-2) is not the contrast between the infinite sufficiency of Christ’s propitiation and its limited efficacy in application. Similarly, the issue addressed by Calvin’s response to Georgius is not a problem with the notion of the infinite sufficiency of Christ’s propitiation: rather the issue is that the term “whole world” cannot be used to extend salvation to the reprobate, since “whole world” in 1 John 2:1-2 does not indicate “all people,” but believers throughout the whole world. That Christ’s satisfaction is sufficient for all sin is not at issue in the debate.

We may hypothesize that Calvin’s hesitance concerning the sufficiency-efficiency distinction lies in its failure to account for all of the issues at play in the question of the value and application of Christ’s death. For in between the categories of infinite sufficiency for the sins of the whole world and limited efficiency for the elect or believers there stands the category of the divine intentionality in Christ’s death. The sacrifice stands as payment for sin and, as we have, noted that payment must be infinite given the nature of the problem of sin — but the sacrifice also stands as the ground of the salvation of the elect and in this category, unlike the category of sufficiency, the divine intention is not without limit.

5. Limited salvific intention, limited intercession, and limited union: correlative aspects of Christ’s priestly office.

Several writers, myself included, have recognized that Christ’s high-priestly intercession, namely the lengthy prayer found in John 17, provided Calvin with a biblical and exegetical foundation for discussing the limitation of Christ’s saving work to the elect alone. What is remarkable, however, is that this form of the limitation of Christ’s work has been used to argue against the attribution of a doctrine of “limited atonement” to Calvin. Kendall even goes so far as to state that although, in Calvin’s view, Christ intercedes for the elect alone, “what Calvin does
not do is to link the scope of Christ’s intercessory prayer to Christ’s death, as those after him tended to do.”

Of course, Calvin argued precisely what Kendall denies: Kendall’s attempt to sever the issue of Christ’s intercession from the limitation of Christ’s work fails in view of Calvin’s own direct statements. Thus, for example,

we see that we must begin from the death of Christ in order that the efficacy and benefit of his priesthood may reach us. It follows that he is an everlasting intercessor: through his pleading we obtain favor. ... in Christ there was a new and different order, in which the same one was to be both priest and sacrifice.

Calvin’s entire exposition here relates intercession and sacrificial death as aspects of a single priestly work. If this passage from the Institutes does not clearly enough link the “scope” of Christ’s intercession to his death, the link is certainly made in Calvin’s exegesis of Christ’s intercessory prayer in John 17 — Calvin comments that in the prayer of intercession Christ “offered (obtulit) us to the Father in some manner in his own person (in sua persona quodammodo), that we may be renewed to true holiness by his Spirit.” He continues by noting that “though this sanctification (sanctificatio) extends to the whole life of Christ, the greatest illustration of it was given in the sacrifice (in sacrificio) of his death.” The intercession hardly removes or replaces the elective purpose of God as the limiting factor in the application of Christ’s work — rather, in Calvin’s view, Christ’s intercession, like the effectual calling of the Word belongs to the discussion of how the divine will or decree is executed in the temporal order: “Both repentance and forgiveness of sins ... are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith.” The limitation of the efficacy of Christ’s work, albeit grounded in the eternal decree, is a limitation that pertains directly to the working out of salvation in the world, through the agency of Christ: Christ, after all, in Calvin’s understanding is, with the Father, the electionis author who chooses those who are his.

Beyond this Christ’s work on the cross, is the temporal ratification or confirmation of the eternal decree, given that the decree was eternally constituted in him. There is, in other words, a very clear connection in Calvin’s thought between election and Christ’s intercession, a connection that relates directly to the offer of Christ in the preaching of the gospel and to the foundational location of union with Christ in Calvin’s ordering of the application of salvation. Kendall’s argument to the contrary rests on a misinterpretation of Calvin’s comment on Romans 10:16 — where Calvin argues that the gospel’s universal invitation of all people to salvation in no way implies the election of all, Kendall turns the text on its head, as if Calvin denied the connection between election and the efficacy of the death of Christ in order to affirm the universality of salvation. By concentrating his comments on the vague language of “for whom Christ died” Kendall confuses efficacy with sufficiency, application with impetration, fails to see that Calvin’s consistent limitation of the efficacy or application of Christ’s work to the elect neither impinges on the merit or
value of Christ’s death nor implies a limit to indiscriminate preaching of the gospel. In none of these places does Calvin raise the Amyraldian question of a conditional intention or will to save in relation to the value, sufficiency, or infinite merit of Christ’s death.

We note in particular the connection between mediation and intercession, and Calvin’s interpretation of the apostle’s “all” as “all classes of men.” If this constitutes a distortion of the text to fit the concept of a predestinating will of God, the distortion is not Calvin’s but belongs to the traditional Augustinian exegesis of this and like passages. On the matter of limited intercession Calvin’s commentary on John 17:9, “I pray not for the whole world, but for those whom thou hast given me” is definitive. In addition Calvin notes in his commentary on 1 John 2:2 that he accepts the distinction of Lombard on Christ’s suffering as sufficient for all sin but efficient only for the elect. Calvin was, however, was somewhat dissatisfied with the extant dogmatic formula, at least in its application to particular biblical passages, but he did not, for whatever reason, propose a new or revised formula.

Satisfaction theory, after all, develops in relation to Christology and not primarily under the head of predestination: but we do encounter the interrelationship and interpenetration of the doctrines of atonement and election under the larger complex of soteriological formulations. The efficacy of Christ’s satisfaction and election are parallel aspects of the economy of salvation.

This limitation of saving intention is not drawn out at length in Calvin’s Institutes, but it does receive explicit attention in his commentaries on the Gospel and First Epistle John. Several verses in particular indicate the limitation of the intercession: first Jesus expressly states, “I have manifested my name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world.... I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me” (vv. 6, 9). Further, granting that these few for whom Jesus prays can be identified as the circle of disciples, he adds, “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word” (v. 20): the broadening of the intercession is itself quite clearly limited. These verses, moreover, parallel the references in Jesus’ earlier discourse in John 6 to the elective will of God and the limitation placed on the work of salvation by it: “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out” and, even more pointedly, “No one can come to me unless the Father who has sent me draws him” (Jn. 6:37, 44). The issue here is one of relationship, not of absolute correspondence or abstract logical consistency: the issue is simply that Christ prays that “some,” not all, be redeemed — and that those “some” would appear to be those individuals who are the objects of the work of salvation that would culminate in his death and resurrection. There is a coherence, in other words, between Calvin’s language of a limited application of Christ’s death and the limitation of Christ’s intercession, given that Christ is the one in whom the decree was constituted and who provides its temporal confirmation.
Kendall was, therefore, fundamentally mistaken to sever Calvin’s teaching on Christ’s satisfaction from Calvin’s views on Christ’s intercession — and to argue that Calvin taught “unlimited atonement” but “limited intercession.” Calvin, certainly, did teach a limited intercession of Christ — just as he also taught that union with Christ was limited to some persons. But Kendall’s argument (and Daniel’s as well) labors under the imprecision of its own terminology and fails, for several reasons, to understand what Calvin and others of his era intended. In the first place, the work of satisfaction and the act of intercession belong to the same official function of Christ, the priestly. What is more, Kendall’s proposal of unlimited atonement and limited intercession as the proper Calvinian understanding of the problem points both toward Kendall’s own misunderstanding of the issues in the older debate and to the problem of so describing a doctrine of “unlimited atonement”: in Kendall’s terms, the “unlimited atonement” refers to the fullness or sufficiency of Christ’s death for all sin, “limited intercession” indicates the way in which Christ applies this all sufficient sacrifice to some (given that not all are redeemed). But the juxtaposition of full accomplishment and unlimited value, power, or sufficiency with limited application is precisely what the whole Reformed tradition has argued, whether Calvin or the Canons of Dort — and what Kendall repudiates as “limited atonement.”

In the second place, Kendall’s argument — posed against Wendel — that “election is not rendered effectual by the death of Christ” and that Christ’s death, therefore, need not correspond with the divine intention in election, is simply not to the point. The issue, for Calvin, as for later Reformed theologians, was that Christ’s death, infinite or utterly sufficient in its value, was rendered effectual or applicable to certain individuals by God’s elective willing or, indeed, by Christ’s intercession, understood as an aspect of the divine elective willing. For Calvin, as for the later Reformed, Christ’s death is fundamental to the order of means to the end of salvation— specifically, in Calvin’s terms, as the material cause. Calvin’s rather distinctive contribution to such formulations is that the electing will of God (which ought to be understood as a trinitarian work ad extra) is expressed in Christ’s intercession for those whom the Father has given to him — and this element of Calvin’s thought clearly passed over into the later Reformed tradition’s approaches to the limitation of the efficacy of Christ’s work.

Some conclusions.

It is certainly correct to note that Calvin had little interest in speaking to the issue of the limitation of Christ’s satisfaction to the elect, and that it is somewhat anachronistic to press the question of later Reformed debate upon him for an answer. As to the specific issues usually gathered together under the vague language of “limited atonement, the nature of the evidence, given the context and the method of Calvin’s theology, precludes a neat dogmatic conclusion — and the patterns of relationship to specific aspects of Calvin’s thought are rather diverse. Whereas there
is an easily identifiable continuity of argument that runs from Calvin's thought through that of writers like Beza, Ursinus, and Zanchi to the Canons of Dort (indeed, from the patristic and medieval materials, through Calvin and others of his time, to the Canons of Dort), there is also a body of material, including statements made by Calvin most notably in commentaries and sermons that points in the direction of some forms of hypothetical universalism, notably as found in the thought of Davenant and DuMoulin, as argued within the bounds of the traditional formula, \textit{sufficienter pro omnibus, efficienter pro electis}, but that fails to point to the more speculative form of hypothetical universalism found in Amyraut’s model of multiple divine decrees. In other words, Calvin most surely held, without qualification the basic sense of second clause of the formula, \textit{efficienter pro electis}, whether interpreted in terms of his views on Christ’s limited intercession, or his views on the intention of the preached Word, or his views on the limitation of the extent of the preaching of the gospel throughout the ages. He did not, however, labor to remove the ambiguity of the first clause, \textit{sufficienter pro omnibus}, preferring to speak of the \textit{valor} and \textit{virtus} of Christ’s work as extending to all sin or to the redemption of the world, undergirding the indiscriminate preaching of the Gospel and the promise that all who believe will be saved.

If we leave aside the rather slippery phrases “limited” and “unlimited atonement,” we can draw some more accurate conclusions concerning Calvin’s views on the extent and limitation of Christ’s work in relation to other writers in the Reformed tradition. Calvin taught that the value, virtue, or sufficiency of Christ’s work served as payment for the sins of all human beings, and provided the basis for the divine promise that all who believe will be saved, assuming that believers are recipients of God’s grace and that unbelievers are “left without excuse” — as also did, granting different nuancings of the relation of divine intentionality to the value or sufficiency of Christ’s death, Theodore Beza, the Canons of Dort, John Davenant, Pierre Du Moulin, Moises Amyraut, Francis Turretin, and a host of other often forgotten and sometimes maligned Reformed writers of the next two centuries, among them both particularists and hypothetical universalists. On the other hand, Calvin assumed that Christ’s work, albeit sufficient payment for the sins of the world and for securing the salvation of all human beings even a thousand worlds, is by divine intention effective for the elect only, as did Beza, Gomarus, Du Moulin, Davenant, Turretin, and, in his own way, Amyraut as well. He argued this limitation of efficacy in terms of the limited intercession of Christ, the divine intention and effective will to save only the elect, and the historical limitations of the preaching of the gospel as, he believed, intended by God — again assumptions shared by various particularists and hypothetical universalists alike.

There are, in other words, continuities between Calvin’s teaching and various currents later Reformed theology on this issue, just as there are differences typically brought abut by altered contexts of debate and formulation. These continuities, however, as well as the discontinuities or differences, are not matters of simple one-
to-one correspondences, as assumed in the standard literature on limited and unlimited atonement. Rather, they are more precisely described as complex patterns of reception, adoption, and adaptation of exegetical traditions, traditionary vocabulary and formulae, and of nuances given to them in debates and conversations that were often mediated to the later Reformed through the writings of the Reformers, with various Reformers, notably Calvin, but also often with equal influence, other formulators of his generation, serving as significant points of inception for the specifically Reformed argumentation. In the case of the doctrine of Christ’s satisfaction for sin, since Christ paid the price of all sin and accomplished a redemption capable of saving the whole world, his benefits are clearly placed before, proffered, or offered to all who hear: what Calvin does not indicate is any sort of universalizing intentionality flowing from the sufficiency into the actual efficacy of this offering. What cannot, therefore, be documented from Calvin is a notion of two wills in God, one hypothetical, the other and absolute, as characteristic of Amyraut’s approach. Nor does Calvin allow an unfulfilled or somehow thwarted divine intention to apply the sufficient satisfaction of Christ effectively or efficiently to all people: the divine intention in the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel is to save the elect wherever they may be. Insofar as Calvin’s sense of the indiscriminate proclamation and offer is linked to a divine willing akin to what had been traditionally called the preceptive will of God, his formulation has affinity with Davenant’s concept of an “ordained sufficiency,” albeit not an exact correspondence.

Carefully parsed, there are, therefore both universalizing and limiting dimensions to Calvin’s doctrine of Christ’s work, dimensions that carry over variously into the later Reformed tradition — but not in such a way as to enable a set of utterly clear distinctions to be made among the parties of the later debates. Those debates, took place, typically, within the general boundaries of the language of the Synod of Dort and had to do not with the universal sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, not with the limitation of its efficacy or application to the elect, not with the universal or indiscriminate proclamation of salvation for all who believe, nor, indeed, with the exception of the Amyraldians, over the denial of universal grace. The debates, quite specifically, were concerned with the divine intentionality underlying the sufficiency or infinite value of Christ’s death and its relation to the universal or indiscriminate preaching of the gospel. The muddled nature of the historiography has been caused in large part by continued recourse to terms, namely, “unlimited atonement” and “limited atonement,” that were not used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that do not properly reflect the issues in debate. Like that other slippery anachronism, “christocentric,” “limited” and “unlimited atonement” are terms that ought to be avoided, indeed, removed from the historical discussion.