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Hans Boersma

Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement

Mr Boersma is a postgraduate student working at the University of Utrecht on the theology of Richard Baxter. He takes up an important theological problem, the discussion of which has been reinvigorated by the publication of R. T. Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649, and offers his own study of the basic source material.

I. Introduction

It is the task of the present paper to address the question if and how Calvin's seemingly contradictory statements on the extent of the atonement can be reconciled.¹ To give an impression of the magnitude of the problem under consideration two statements of Calvin will suffice. In a tract against Heshusius Calvin challenges him with the question: 'As he adheres so doggedly to the words, I should like to know how the wicked can eat the flesh of Christ which was not crucified for them, and how they can drink the blood which was not shed to expiate their sins?'² In seemingly flagrant conflict with this restrictive statement Calvin elsewhere exhorts his congregation to pray for others, 'for it is no small matter to have the soules perish which were bought by the blood of Christ.'³ Although these

¹ I express my appreciation to C. Graafland, C. J. J. Clements, and the students of one of their seminars at the University of Utrecht for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also indebted to A. C. Clifford for the generous way in which he has expressed his views on the problem addressed in this essay, as well as for the specific criticism on some of the details of the paper.

² John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, (LCC 22; trans. J. K. S. Reid; London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 285; John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (eds. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss; 57 vols.; *Corpus Reformatorum*, 29-85; Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863-97) 37.484 (henceforth abbreviated as *CO*).

³ *Sermon 2 Tim. 2:19*. *CO* 54.165 reads: 'Nous devons aussi avoir soin de nos freres, et estre contristez les voyans perir: car ce n'est pas peu de chose, que les ames qui ont esté rachetees par le sang de Iesus Christ perissent. Mais tant y a qu'il nous faut tousiours consoler en ceste doctrine, que Dieu maintiendra son Eglise, combien que le nombre soit petit: et non pas tel que nous souhaitterions, neantmoins qu'il se faut contenter que Dieu gardera bien tout ce qu'il a choisi à

two quotations are admittedly extreme examples they do clearly illustrate the problem at hand: did Calvin teach limited or universal atonement? Before attempting to evaluate this thorny question two methodological points must be made. In the first place, it is tempting to pick the kind of Calvin one likes and then to look for evidence to fit one's own view. Such a practice need not be a conscious attempt at misrepresentation. There is always a danger that one only has an eye for that which agrees with one's own particular view.⁴ A related mistake would be to take a number of statements from Calvin's commentaries and sermons that seem to have a bearing on the extent of the atonement in order to come to a logically coherent whole.⁵ Part of the inconclusive and unsatisfactory state of affairs in the debate is due to this narrow focus. By way of gathering a few statements here and there one might be able to prove almost anything. The most one may expect from such scattered statements is that they are generally in agreement with, and do not contradict the emerging picture too

soy.' English translation quoted in M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985) 14.

⁴ In fact, I know of but one author in the present debate whose own position is different from the one he ascribes to Calvin, namely C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme* (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1987) 41–46, who rejects the universalist interpretation of R. T. Kendall, *Calvinism and English Calvinism to 1649* (Diss. Oxford 1976; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979) 13–28. According to Graafland Calvin taught limited atonement. The *vocatio universalis* is only universal between quotation marks because it is determined by the *vocatio specialis*, i.e., by particular election and reprobation. Graafland therefore does not accept the current school of Beza interpretation, but wonders if there is a real difference between Calvin and the later development which started with Beza (Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth* 46). For a brief statement of Kendall's overall view, see his 'The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology,' in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* (ed. W. Standford Reid; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 199–214, 382–85.

⁵ This point is correctly made in connection with Calvin's view on common grace in J. Douma, *Algemene genade: Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuyper, K. Schilder en Joh. Calvijn over 'algemene genade'* (Diss. Kampen 1966; 2nd ed.; Goes, Netherland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1981) 205 n. 2, 257. Basil Hall, 'Calvin against the Calvinists,' *John Calvin* (ed. G. E. Duffield; Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology, 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 22–23, complains of a similar tendency among Barthian interpreters of Calvin. Says Hall: '[M]uch of the interpretation of Calvin, based on Barthian theology, shows the putting together of a mosaic of quotations selected mainly from the commentaries and sermons of Calvin. By selected quotations Calvin can be made almost as good a Barthian as Barth . . .'.

much. Such dispersed comments do have a certain value, but only on the basis of a particular theological pattern which must be established first. Calvin's direct and scattered remarks on the extent on the atonement have a secondary place, only after the general tendency of his theological approach has been established. This focus on underlying dogmatic principles is especially important in view of the fact that Calvin nowhere deals with the present topic at any great length. I will therefore present some themes that are relevant to the question at hand. The essay will mainly center around four such topics: after this introduction (I) follow Calvin's views on the unity of Christ's work of redemption (II), on the *unio cum Christo* (III), on God's two-fold will, and on common grace (IV). The emerging picture will give a firm enough basis on which to judge the issue at hand. I will illustrate the result by analyzing some passages in Calvin that have a more direct bearing on the extent of the atonement (V).

II. Unity of God's Work of Redemption

There is little question that Calvin viewed God's work of redemption in Christ as one whole. This is evident from the important place Calvin assigns to predestination. It is the demonstration of God's free mercy:

We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others.⁶

For Calvin election is a source of free mercy. All depends on God. He is the *prima causa* of salvation.⁷ He begins with Himself when

⁶ *Inst.* III. xxi. 1. The translation consulted is John Calvin: *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Ford Lewis Battles; ed. John T. McNeill; 2 vols.; LCC 20, 21; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). For the original cf. John Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta* (eds. Petrus Barth and Guilelmus Niesel; 5 vols; Munich: Kaiser, 1926-36) 4.369, henceforth referred to as *OS*.

⁷ *Inst.* II. xvii. 1 (*OS* 3.509). In *Comm.* Rom. 8:28 (*CO* 49.159), Calvin speaks of God as *prima causa*. For this point cf. Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Studies in Historical Theology, 2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 24-25.

He sees fit to elect us . . .'.⁸ Calvin immediately adds, however, that 'He [God] will have us begin with Christ so that we may know that we are reckoned among His peculiar people.'⁹ Christ is the 'proffered fountain of life from which supplies are available . . .'.¹⁰ Confidence must therefore be sought in him, the 'mirror' (*speculum*) in which we may contemplate our election.¹¹ The alternative is obliteration from the book of life.¹² The thrust is clear: Calvin wants to emphasize that election is election in Christ.¹³ The basis for this christological character of election lies in God's good pleasure, in the counsel of the

⁸ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (trans. and introd. J. K. S. Reid; London: Clarke, 1961) 127 (CO 8.319).

⁹ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 127 (CO 8.319).

¹⁰ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 126 (CO 8.318: 'Quum nobis in Christo proposita sit salutis certitudo, perperam, nec sine Christi ipsius iniuria, facere, qui praeterito hoc vitae fonte, ex quo haurire promptum erat, ex reconditis Dei abyssis vitam eruere moliantur.')

¹¹ *Inst.* III.xxiv.5 (OS 4.416).

¹² Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 126; cf. *Inst.* III.xxiv.5 (OS 4.416). On Calvin's doctrine of assurance, cf. S. P. Dee, *Het geloofsbegrip van Calvijn* (Diss. Amsterdam 1918; Kampen: Kok, 1918) 23–57; C. Graafland, *De zekerheid van het geloof: Een onderzoek naar de geloofsbeschouwing van enige vertegenwoordigers van reformatie en nadere reformatie* (Diss. Utrecht 1961; 2d ed.; Amsterdam: Bolland, 1977) 29–44; C. Graafland, 'Van syllogismus practicus naar syllogismus mysticus,' *Wegen en gestalten in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme: Een bundel studies over de geschiedenis van het Gereformeerd Protestantisme aangeboden aan Prof. Dr S. van der Linde bij zijn afscheid als gewoon hoogleraar aan de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht* (ed. W. Balke, et al.; Amsterdam: Bolland, 1976) 105–22); C. Graafland, '“Waarheid in het binnenste”: Geloofszekerheid bij Calvijn en de Nadere Reformatie,' *Een vaste burcht voor de kerk der eeuwen: Opstellen, opgedragen aan drs. K. Exalto ter gelegenheid van zijn zeventigste verjaardag (11 juni 1989)* (ed. J. van der Graaf; Kampen: Kok, 1989), 53–81. The latter two essays emphasize the experiential aspect of faith as secondary source of assurance. See also W. Kolffhaus, *Christusgemeinschaft bei Johannes Calvin* (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche, 3; Neukirchen: Moers, 1939) 83–85. Particularly instructive is A. N. S. Lane, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance,' *VoxEv* 11 (1979) 32–54. Most agree that Calvin did not hold to a formal practical syllogism but that good works can be a secondary and confirming source of certainty. This analysis is essentially correct and in agreement with Calvin's teaching on the place and the role of repentance within the *unio cum Christo*.

¹³ *Inst.* III.xxii.1 (OS 4.380–81); III.xxiv.5 (OS 4.415–16); Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 126–27 (CO 8.318–19).

triune God.¹⁴ Christ is not only the mediator, he is the very 'Author of election.'¹⁵

The christological character of Calvin's doctrine of election forges a strong link with his soteriology. The above makes clear that Christ himself is the connecting link. The very assurance of one's faith depends on election.¹⁶ It is understandable that proponents of a Calvin interpretation which holds to limited atonement have emphasized this aspect.¹⁷ This argument could even be strengthened

¹⁴ *Inst.* II.xii.4: '[H]e was appointed by God's eternal plan to purge the uncleanness of men . . .' (*OS* 3.441). In a significant passage in *Inst.* II.xvii.1: 'In discussing Christ's merit, we do not consider the beginning of merit to be in him, but we go back to God's ordinance, the first cause. For God solely of his own good pleasure appointed him Mediator to obtain salvation for us' (*OS* 3.509). *Inst.* II.xvii.2: 'God appointed Christ as a means of reconciling us to himself' (*OS* 3.510). Cf. *Comm. Jn.* 15:16 (*CO* 47.341). These statements fall far short of a description of a *pactum salutis*. Paul Helm, 'Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity,' *EQ* 55 (1983) 70, is entirely unconvincing in asserting that Calvin maintained that there was an eternal pact between Father and Son. He has to admit that in the passages adduced as evidence 'Calvin emphasises the actual, historical obedience of the Son . . .'. This is indeed the case. Calvin knew of no *pactum salutis* as it was known among later federal theologians. For a similar anachronism, see Pierre Marcel, 'The Relation between Justification and Sanctification in Calvin's Thought,' *EQ* 27 (1985) 136. More to the point is A. A. Hoekema, 'The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching,' *CTJ* 2 (1967) 134: '[T]he doctrine of the so-called *pactum salutis* or covenant of redemption . . . is not found in Calvin.'

¹⁵ *Inst.* III.xvii.7 (*OS* 4.387: 'Unde sequitur, nullos proprio Marte vel industria excellere, quando se Christus electionis facit auctorem.'). Cf. II.xiii.3 [*OS* 3.454]. Cf. John S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica, 12; Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975) 52–53. This twofold role of Christ does not mean that Calvin falls into the trap of Nestorianism, as is argued by Johannes Dantine, 'Das christologische Problem im Rahmen der Prädestinationslehre von Theodor Beza,' *ZKG* 77 (1966) 88, 90–92; and B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-verzoening-verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* (Diss. Utrecht 1990; The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1990), 67, 334. To make the distinction between Christ as the electing God and as the elect mediator does not necessarily separate his divinity from his humanity. The distinction in view here is rather the *extra Calvinisticum*: Christ's divinity is also there where his humanity is not. Calvin maintains the unity of the two natures in the one mediator. Cf. Hans Boersma, rev. of *Verkiezing-verzoening-verbond*, by B. Loonstra, *CTJ* 26 (1991) 243.

¹⁶ This connection is already evident from the place to which Calvin assigns his doctrine of predestination, at the end of book III, after faith, repentance, and justification. Too much emphasis should not be placed on this order in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* since predestination precedes soteriology in the *Confession de Foi* of that same year (art. XII [*CO* 22.901; cf. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* (rev. David S. Schaff, 1931; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 366–67].

¹⁷ Roger Nicole, 'John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement,' *WTJ*, (1985) 220: 'The strong structure of Calvin's theology in terms of the divine purpose does appear to imply this specific reference.' Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982) 21: 'If God the Father has established Christ

by a study of the relationship between Christ's work of atonement and his work of intercession. Kendall separates these two aspects in his interpretation of Calvin: 'The Decree of election, then, is not rendered effectual in Christ's death but in His ascension and intercession at the Father's right hand.'¹⁸ This assertion has been vehemently opposed.¹⁹ While this specific aspect of the discussion is not as easy as is sometimes portrayed, it is certainly possible to come to clarity. In order to prove that for Calvin atonement was universal and intercession limited one would have to come with evidence in his writings which not only distinguishes these two priestly aspects of Christ's work, but which specifically separates the two due to a difference in efficacy. By way of support Kendall adduces only a few statements of Calvin.²⁰ In none of them are the two aspects of Christ's priestly work separated. Elsewhere, Calvin asserts that there is a 'necessary connexion between Christ's sacrificial death and His continual intercession (Rom. 8:34).'²¹ At this point it is not possible

as the sole Saviour of all his people, and if Christ has taken such people under his protection, can it be supposed that, on Calvin's view, Christ died for the whole world!

¹⁸ Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* 16.

¹⁹ The separation was first opposed by Paul Helm, 'Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development,' rev. of *Calvin and English Calvinism*, by R. T. Kendall, *SJT* 34 (1981) 181-82. He has been followed in this by Nicole, 'John Calvin's View' 206; Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 33-35; and C. Harinck, *De uitgestrektheid van de verzoening: Van de apostolische vaders tot Dordt 1618-1619* (Utrecht: De Banier, 1989) 60. Also Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* 18-19, argues that atonement and intercession are closely connected in Calvin, though Bell is of the opinion that Calvin held to universal atonement.

²⁰ *Inst.* II.xvi.16: '[T]he Lord by his ascent to heaven opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam [John 14:3] . . . [H]aving entered a sanctuary not made with hands, he appears before the Father's face as our constant advocate and intercessor [Heb. 7:25; 9:11-12; Rom. 8:34]. Thus he turns the Father's eyes to his own righteousness to avert his gaze from our sins' (OS 3.503-04). *Comm.* Is. 53:12 (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* [trans. William Pringle; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853] 4.131-32); 'First, he offered the sacrifice of his body, and shed his blood, that he might endure the punishment which was due to us; and secondly, in order that the atonement might take effect, he performed the office of an advocate, and interceded for all who embraced this sacrifice by faith; as is evident from that prayer . . . "I pray not for these only, but for all who shall believe on me through their word" (John xvii.20.)' (CO 37.267). I omit the few additional references Kendall gives since they have no bearing on the point in question.

²¹ *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:6 (CO 52.272: 'Sunt enim res necessario coniunctae, sacrificium mortis Christi, et perpetua intercessio: suntque duae sacerdotii partes.'). Quotations from Calvin's NT commentaries are taken from the series *Calvin's Commentaries* (eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; rpt; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1980). It is necessary to note that at this particular juncture Calvin argues against Roman Catholicism with its view on the intercession of dead

to come to a clear-cut conclusion. Other factors need to be taken into account.

III. *Unio cum Christo*

More important than the sparse references to a (dis-) connection between Christ's death and intercession is the comprehensive concept of *unio cum Christo*. By means of faith one grows into one body with Christ. Calvin uses far-reaching terminology to describe this union with Christ. In speaking of the Lord's Supper he states: 'By bidding us take, he indicates that it is ours; by bidding us eat, that it is made one substance with us [*unam nobiscum substantiam*] . . .'.²² Indeed, if we are the true members of Christ, we share his substance. As Eve was formed of the flesh and bones of Adam, so the church shares in Christ's substance.²³ In his commentary on 1 Cor. 11:24 Calvin makes a similar strong statement:

Some people's explanation is that it is given to us when we are made sharers in all the benefits, which Christ procured for us in His own body; by that I mean, when, by faith, we embrace Christ, crucified for us and raised from the dead, and, in that way, come to share effectively in all His benefits. Those who think like this, have every right to their point of view. But I myself maintain that it is only after we obtain Christ Himself, that we come to share in the benefits of Christ. And I further maintain that He is obtained, not just when we believe that He was sacrificed for us, but when He dwells in us, when He is one with us, when we are members of His flesh, when, in short, we become united in one life and substance (if I may say so) with Him.²⁴

From the above two quotations it is clear that Calvin does not hesitate to describe the union as *substantialis*. At the same time, however,

saints. He argues that the intercession is based on Christ's sacrifice which the dead saints did not perform. Therefore they can also not perform his intercessory work. A proponent of a universalist interpretation of Calvin might care to emphasize this point. While the scope of Calvin's argument must indeed be noted, it of course remains true that Calvin sees the connection as necessary.

I refrain from referring to other references. Both Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* 32–50, and Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* 18–19, give references in defence of their respective views. Most of these passages either have no bearing on the problem at hand or appear inconclusive.

²² *Inst.* IV.xvii.3 (OS 5.344).

²³ *Comm.* Eph. 5:30 (CO 51:225: 'Quemadmodum Heva ex Adae mariti sui substantia formata est, ut esset quasi [!] pars illius: ita nos, ut simus vera Christi membra, substantiae eius communicare, et hac communicatione nos coalescere in unum corpus.'). For the same imagery, cf. Calvin, *Theological Treatises* 268 (CO 9.470).

²⁴ *Comm.* 1 Cor 11:24 (CO 49.487: 'vitam substantiam [ut ita loquar] cum ipso coalescimus.').

Calvin does not mean a mixing of substances. He qualifies his statement by means of the phrase *ut ita loquar*. In his tract against Heshusius, 'True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ,' Calvin explains in more detail what he means when using the word *substantialis*:

When I say that the flesh and blood of Christ are substantially [*substantialiter*] offered and exhibited to us in the Supper, I at the same time explain the mode, namely, that the flesh of Christ becomes vivifying to us, inasmuch as Christ, by the incomprehensible agency of his Spirit, transfuses his own proper life into us from the substance of his flesh, so that he himself lives in us, and his life is common to us.²⁵

Thus, while the *unio mystica* is not substantial in the sense of a direct mingling with Christ's flesh and blood, there is a oneness with Christ by means of the bond of the Spirit. Says Kolffhaus: 'Die Gemeinschaft kann also nicht eng und innig genug gedacht werden, sie ergreift den ganzen Menschen.'²⁶

The manner in which this communion is enjoyed is by faith. For the present discussion this is of utmost importance.²⁷ While there is no temporal distinction between faith and mystical union, the two

²⁵ Calvin, *Theological Treatises* 267 (CO 9.470). Cf. p. 314: '[W]e become substantially [*substantialiter*] partakers of the flesh of Christ not by an external sign but by the simple faith of the gospel' (CO 9.509). The entire tract argues against the physical presence of Christ under or with the bread. For Calvin Christ's substance is enjoyed in the Lord's Supper, but the manner of eating is the point of conflict: 'Spiritual then is opposed to carnal eating. By carnal is meant that by which some suppose that the very substance [*guidam substantiam ipsam*] of Christ to be transfused into us just as bread is eaten' (329; CO 9.522). In *Inst.* IV.xvii.12 Calvin argues against subtlety from Satan, stating that the Spirit is the bond, and making this comparison: 'For if we see that the sun, shedding its beams upon the earth, casts its substance in some measure [*suam quodammodo substantiam*] upon it . . .' (OS 5.356). Against Osiander, Calvin describes the idea of an essential indwelling of Christ as a *crassa mixtura* (*Inst.* III.xi.10; OS 4.192).

²⁶ W. Kolffhaus, *Christusgemeinschaft* 27.

²⁷ Kolffhaus, *Christusgemeinschaft* 36-53, is fully aware of this instrumental function of faith, when he states: 'Der Glaube verwirklicht die unio cum Christo und bringt sie in den Bereich unseres Bewusstseins' (37). He recognizes that there is 'ein Unterschied zu beachten zwischen Glauben und Teilhaben an Christus' (39). He therefore overstates his case when arguing: 'Glaube ist nach ihm [Calvin] die unio cum Christo' (37). The distinction between faith and union with Christ is also brought out by W. van 't Spijker, 'Extra nos' and 'in nobis' by Calvin in a Pneumatological Light,' *Calvin and the Holy Spirit* (Proc. Sixth Colloquium on Calvin & Calvin Studies; ed. Peter De Klerk; Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 1989) 47-48. Cf. Dee, *Geloofsbegrip* 188-94. Particularly helpful is the discussion of Paul van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Diss. Basel 1954; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957) 95-106.

are distinguished.²⁸ They relate as *prius* and *posterius*.²⁹ There is no *unio cum Christo* without *insitio in Christum*. Van Buren has adduced numerous passages in Calvin which demonstrates that Christ's sacrifice is of no use for us until he is no longer just *extra nos* but also *in nobis*.³⁰ It is important to note the distinction which is made here. It is not a distinction between Christ's sacrifice as an objective fact which has potentiality and the subsequent actualization of this potential by the Spirit's work of application. In that case the incorporation in Christ would no longer be necessary as far as Christ's death is concerned. Only his ascension and session would then be involved in the substitution. It would, in fact, mean that Calvin held to a twofold *insitio in Christum*, one involving his death and reconciliation and one involving his ascension and session. The former would then give the *potentia* for the latter. This consequence of ascribing a universalist position to Calvin has, as far as I am aware, not been noted before. It nevertheless is the achilles heel of a universalist interpretation of Calvin. For Calvin such a division of the *unio mystica* is unthinkable. He attributes great significance to the fact that in union with Christ there is a complete *mirifica commutatio*:

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.³¹

²⁸ M. van Campen, *Leven uit Gods beloften: Een centraal thema bij Johannes Calvijn* (Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1988) 33.

²⁹ *Comm. Jn.* 6:47 (*CO* 47.151). Here Calvin argues explicitly against those who equate the two. To eat Christ is an effect or work of faith.

³⁰ Thomas Coates, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Justification,' *CTM* 34 (1963) 327, therefore seriously misrepresents Calvin by arguing that 'Calvin, in his cold, abstract, systematic approach to doctrine, has little room for the Pauline *Christus in nobis* that is so prominent in, and so characteristic of, Luther's theology.'

³¹ *Inst.* IV.xvii.2 [*OS* 5.343-44]. This 'wonderful exchange' does not mean that all of mankind shares in Christ's sonship, as is argued, for instance, by Trevor Hart, 'Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind: Salvation As Participation in Our Substitute in the Theology of John Calvin,' *SJT* 42 (1989) 74-75, with an appeal to this passage of the *Institutes*. This is incorrect since the passage occurs at the beginning of Calvin's discussion on the Lord's Supper, which is for those received into God's family by baptism, for the devout (*Inst.* IV.xvii.1; *OS* 5.342). The 'unconditionality' of participation in Christ does not preclude the gift of faith as logically preceding the union.

Participation in Christ is in no sense limited to participation in his death. The very humiliation of Christ in his incarnation is our exaltation. The whole life of Christ, from his incarnation to his ascension and session is ours in faith. The believers possess it in their head, in Christ.³²

³² *Inst.* II.xvi.16 [OS 3.504: '[U]tpote quie caelum non spe nuda expectemus, sed in capite nostro possideamus.' *Comm.* Gal. 2:20: 'Paul's writings are full of similar statements, that we so live in the world that we also live in heaven; not only because our Head is there, but because, in virtue of union, we have a life in common with Him. (John 14.1ff)' (CO 50.199).

The substitution by participation in Christ also gives the solution to the question whether Calvin taught a theory of double imputation, i.e., of active and of passive obedience. The idea that double imputation was a Bezan innovation has recently been restated by Alan C. Clifford, 'The Gospel and Justification,' *EQ* 57 (1985) 247-67; his 'John Calvin and the Confessio Fidei Gallicana,' *EQ* 58 (1986) 203-05; and his *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 171-72. It has been noted by F. L. Bos, *Johann Piscator: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Reformierten Theologie* (Kampen: Kok, [1932]) 75, that the idea was common place, however, in Lutheranism, which was engaged in a dispute about this matter from 1563-70. In this dispute Karg denied the imputation of Christ's active obedience. The meaning of Ursinus' repeated speaking of Christ's 'gehorsam, gerechtigkeit und heyligkeit' is debatable. According to Bos, *Johann Piscator* 74-78, Ursinus denied double imputation. The problem with his analysis is that it necessarily depends almost completely on second-hand information (from Ursinus' student, Pareus, himself an opponent of double imputation). The information available does not seem to warrant a decision either way, unless Pareus's comments on Ursinus are taken at face value.

Calvin himself notes that justification 'consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness' (*Inst.* III.xi.2; OS 4.183). That Calvin's overriding concern is remission of sins by means of Christ's suffering and death, i.e. his passive obedience, is clear, and Clifford is correct in pointing this out (Gallican Confession, Arts. XVI-XVIII clearly have this in mind). Calvin also identifies forgiveness with righteousness (*Inst.* III.xi.22; OS 4.206: 'idem prorsus'). We possess this righteousness through Christ's atoning death. Thus we are partakers in Christ [!] due to his obedience (*Inst.* III.xi.23; OS 4.206-07). This does not mean, however, that Christ's imputed obedience was restricted to his suffering and death, as Clifford suggests. The reason the Apostles' Creed by-passes Christ's life is because Scripture ascribes the way of salvation 'peculiar and proper' to his death (*Inst.* II.xvi.5; OS 3.486: 'peculiare ac proprium'). But the 'remainder of the obedience that he manifested in his life is not excluded.' With reference to Gal. 4:4-5 Calvin says that the basis of the pardon is the whole life of Christ (*Inst.* II.xvi.5; cf. *Comm.* Gal. 4:4: Christ became subject to the law '[i]n our name' [CO 50.227: '(n)ostro nomine']. '[I]t [i.e., Christ's submission to the yoke of the law] was certainly not on His own account that He did so' [CO 50.227]. Cf. *Comm.* Mt. 26:17). Again, these statements must not be overemphasized. Calvin never systematized Christ's obedience into two equal parts: an active and a passive part. But the basic idea of active obedience is—in a subordinate way—present in Calvin's theology, and fits perfectly with his idea of the *unio cum Christo*.

At this point it is also possible to reach a conclusion with respect to the question whether Christ's death and intercession relate as universal atonement to efficacious application. It is unthinkable that when Calvin regards the entire life of Christ, from incarnation to session, as included in the mystical union that the intercession would then be a sort of crown, which may or may not be added to Christ's body, depending on faith. In the first place, Christ's ascension would have to be separated from his death and joined to his intercession.³³ This would effectually rupture the mystical union. In the second place, the theory ignores the fundamental fact that faith is the means of the *insitio Christi*. Without faith one does not benefit from Christ at all, whether that be from his incarnation, his life on earth, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his session, or his intercession.³⁴ Without faith there is neither atonement objectively realized nor subjectively applied.

The above has demonstrated the unity of Christ's work as well as the unity between Christ and the believers, as Calvin saw it. This must have consequences for the extent of the atonement. An interpretation of Calvin on this latter issue which does not maintain

Clifford, *Atonement and Justification* 171, seems to me somewhat confusing when, with reference to *Inst.* III.xi.11,21, he argues that for Calvin righteousness consists *solely* in the forgiveness of sins and hence not in imputation of active obedience. In both passages Calvin argues against justification by works, the kind of double justification taught by Osiander and Roman Catholicism. The confusion comes to the fore when 'Beza's "double righteousness" theory' is mentioned, while actually a double imputation theory should have been referred to ('The Gospel and Justification' 257; 'John Calvin and the Confessio Fidei Gallicana' 204). The former leads to more stress on sanctification and the role of works in justification, while the latter might lead to antinomianism (Note the explicit denial of this consequence in *Comm. Gal.* 4:4; *CO* 50.227).

³³ It will be remembered that in the interpretation of Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* 16–17, ascension and intercession are for the elect only.

³⁴ Of course, there remains a difference between participation in Christ and benefiting from his intercession. The latter is not imputed to us. This difference leads Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place* 90, to state: 'The question must now be asked whether the idea of Christ as intercessor is compatible with the idea of substitution.' Van Buren rightly makes the point that no incompatibility exists since it is the continual intercession which allows for incorporation into Christ (cf. *Comm.* 1 Jn. 2:1 [*CO* 55.308–091]; Heb. 10:19 [*CO* 55.114–115]).

the unity in scope and character of Calvin's doctrine of the work of Christ is necessarily fallacious. For Calvin, Christ's work of redemption fulfils God's decree, and is thus immediately connected with his doctrine of predestination. Calvin's doctrine of the mystical union demonstrates this unity of Christ's work beyond a doubt. It seems a fair conclusion that the groundwork of Calvin's theology does not allow for a theory of universal atonement.

IV. God's Will and Universal Salvation

The easiest way out would be to conclude that Calvin held to a doctrine of limited atonement. Such a conclusion would be somewhat too hasty, not only in view of the unresolved problem of the two seemingly contradictory statements mentioned in the introduction, but particularly because of an underlying theological thought pattern which is not sufficiently accommodated if there is nothing more to add to the above discussion. There are subtle and not so subtle differences among those who do not hold to outright universal atonement. Proponents of limited atonement do not always sufficiently take this into consideration and as a result run the danger of misrepresenting or straightjacketing Calvin.³⁵

Recently attention has again been focused on the fact that Calvin in all likelihood underwent the influence of the theology of the *via moderna*. It is not my intention to discuss several problems involved in establishing who had a hand in shaping Calvin's thought.³⁶ It is

³⁵ Roger Nicole, in his otherwise extremely thorough essay, 'John Calvin's View' 202, mentions Calvin's distinction between God's secret and revealed way, and the perceived similarity at this point with Amyraut. Nicole simply comments that this distinction does not provide support in favor of universal atonement. He fails to note at this point that Amyraut did not hold to universal atonement, but to hypothetical universalism, *i.e.*, the atonement is for each and every one, provided it is met with faith (insuperably wrought by the Holy Spirit). Similarly, Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 33 (cf. n. 130) does not differentiate between the positions of Kendall (Calvin was a universalist) and of Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison, Milwaukee, 1969), who interprets Calvin in Amyraldian fashion. The same kind of thinking leads C. Harinck, *De uitgestrektheid van de verzoening* 64, to the remarkable statement that Calvin's commentary on John 3:16 would 'almost' lead one to think of a universal love of God for all people, if we would not know that Calvin clearly taught predestination, and therefore [!] cannot have meant it this way. Not only does this fly in the face of some of Calvin's explicit statements concerning God's love for all men (as will be demonstrated below), but it also denies the possibility of holding to predestination and a universal love of God at the same time. This says more about Harinck's view than about Calvin's view, whether one wishes to agree with the latter or not.

³⁶ See Alister E. McGrath, 'John Calvin and Late Mediaeval Thought: A Study in Late Mediaeval Influences upon Calvin's Theological Development,' *ARG*, 77 (1986)

clear, however, that the voluntarism of Duns Scotus had an impact on Calvin's view on the *ratio meriti Christi*.³⁷ Calvin takes a Scotist position: 'Apart from God's good pleasure Christ could not merit anything.'³⁸

This late Franciscan influence is also evident in Calvin's view of the God's will. He rejects the idea of 'that absolute will of which the Sophists babble, by an impious and profane distinction separating his justice from his power . . .'³⁹ At the same time, however, Calvin can say that God has another hidden will (*aliam voluntatem absconditam*)⁴⁰ The point is that though 'God's will is . . . not at war with itself,' God speaks according to our *imbecillitas*, the *hebetudo* of our understanding. God accommodates himself to it when presenting us with his will. Calvin does not always mention this qualification of accommodation. He can also say without any restriction: 'God declares that he wills the conversion of all, and he directs exhortations to all in common.'⁴¹ There is no real contradiction between the two different ways of speaking of God's will:

58–78; and Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 21–50). There is disagreement on the question whether Calvin was taught by John Major (1469–1550), a Scottish Scotist theologian. Cf. T. F. Torrance, 'Knowledge of God and Speech about him according to John Calvin,' *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965) 76–98; McGrath, 'John Calvin' 66, 71; Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 188, n. 32; Richard A. Muller, 'Fides and Cognitio in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin,' *CTJ* 25 (1990) 210.

³⁷ McGrath, 'John Calvin' 74–77; also Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986) 1.118–119; and Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 99–107. The same point, in a somewhat broader context, has been discussed by François Wendel, *Calvin: Sources et évolution de sa pensée religieuse* (Etudes d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses, 41; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950) 92–94, 171. Wendel, *Calvin* 94, explains Calvin's rejection of the concept of *potentia absoluta* as follows: 'Sans doute n'a-t-il voulu viser que les spéculations arbitraires et les exagérations de certains nominalistes de la fin du moyen âge ou encore marquer son hostilité à l'égard de la distinction introduite par Duns Scot lui-même entre la puissance absolue et la puissance ordonnée de Dieu, distinction que devait lui apparaître comme pure subtilité.' This is a likely explanation, also in view of Calvin's use of the distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God, as will be noted below.

³⁸ *Inst.* II.xvii.1 (OS 3.509).

³⁹ *Inst.* I.xvii.2 (OS 3.205). Also in *Inst.* I.xviii.3 (OS 3.224) Calvin denies that there are in God 'two contrary wills.'

⁴⁰ *Inst.* I.xvii.2 (OS 3.204).

⁴¹ *Inst.* III.iii.21 (OS 4.78).

[A]lthough to our perception God's will is manifold, he does not will this and that in himself, but according to his diversely manifold wisdom, as Paul calls it [Eph. 3:10], he strikes dumb our senses until it is given to us to recognize how wonderfully he wills what at the moment seems to be against his will.⁴²

Although there is no contradiction between the two, this does not mean that God's will may be confused with his precept. The two are 'utterly different.'⁴³

A similar line of argument is found in *De aeterna Praedestinatione Dei* (1552). Albertus Pighius had argued that the fact that 'some believe in the gospel and others remain unbelieving is a difference . . . arising not from God's free election or His secret counsel, but from the will of each individual.' There was universal atonement. Only those who would delete their names from the book of life by their obstinacy would be condemned. Reprobation thus depended on God's foreknowledge.⁴⁴ Pighius used 1 Tim. 2:4 and Ezk. 18:23; 33:1 to argue that God willed all to be saved. To this Calvin replies: 'But I contend that, as the prophet is exhorting to penitence, it is no wonder that he pronounces God willing that all be saved. But the mutual relation between threats and promises shows such forms of speech to be conditional.'⁴⁵ With numerous examples Calvin demonstrates that God does not even make external preaching common to all. The conclusion must be that 'no one unless deprived of sense and judgment can believe that salvation is ordained in the secret counsel of God equally for all.' 1 Tim. 2:4 refers to orders of men, not to individual men: 'God wills the salvation of all whom he mercifully invites by preaching to Christ.'⁴⁶

Against Georgius of Sicily Calvin argues that he misuses 1 Jn. 2:2. The importance of this passage warrants a rather lengthy quotation:

Georgius thinks he argues very acutely when he says: Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; and hence those who wish to exclude the reprobate from participation in Christ must place them outside the world. For this, the common solution does not avail, that Christ suffered sufficiently for all, but efficaciously only for the elect. By this great absurdity, this monk has sought applause in his own fraternity,

⁴² *Inst.* III.xxiv.17 (OS 4.431).

⁴³ *Inst.* I.xviii.4 (OS 3.225: 'Perperam enim miscetur cum praecepto voluntas, quam longissime ab illo differe innumeris exemplis constat.'). Cf. *Inst.* III.xx.43 (OS 4.354), where Calvin comments on the third petition: 'Porro non agitur hic de arcana eius voluntate qua omnia moderatur et in suum finem destinat . . . Sed hic notatur alia Dei voluntas, nempe cui respondet voluntarium obsequium . . .'

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 55 (CO 8.259).

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 105 (CO 8.3000).

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 109 (CO 8.303-04).

but it has no weight with me.⁴⁷ Wherever the faithful are dispersed throughout the world, John extends to them the expiation wrought by Christ's death. But this does not alter the fact that the reprobate are mixed up with the elect in the world. It is incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world. But the solution lies close at hand, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but should have eternal life (Jn. 3:15).⁴⁸

To be completely accurate I must add that Calvin immediately continues to note—as he does throughout this treatise—that this faith emanates from the Spirit.

The question remains what Calvin means with his remark on Lombard's distinction between the sufficiency and efficiency of Christ's death.⁴⁹ The remark is followed by a sentence which is added by the French translator, who was probably somebody else.⁵⁰ The addition gives the impression that the remark on the sufficiency/efficiency distinction is still part of Georgius's statement, who would in that case be arguing that one cannot escape his argument from 1 Jn. 2:2 by means of an appeal to the ancient distinction. Calvin's reply to this would be that this is absurd, and that the appeal is relevant. Without the French comment the remark on the distinction between sufficiency and efficiency is clearly Calvin's. This explanation is corroborated by Calvin's exegesis in his commentary on the text: 'Although I allow the truth of this, I deny that it fits this passage. For John's purpose was only to make this blessing common to the whole church.'⁵¹ The tract and the commentary cannot be completely harmonized. The former states that the reprobate are included in the world, while the latter limits the world to the church.

The end of this tract on predestination and providence is also of importance, because here, too, Calvin explicitly argues that God's nature is 'single and simple,' that he has but one will, namely, 'that disclosed by Him in the law.'⁵² His secret counsel is but for honor and adoration. Also here Calvin states that his revealed will is a

⁴⁷ This sentence is omitted in the French.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 148–49 (CO 8.336).

⁴⁹ For a history of the distinction between the sufficiency and the efficacy of the atonement until the Synod of Dort (1618–19), see W. Robert Godfrey, 'Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619' (Diss. Stanford Univ. 1974) 70–131, which is, with modifications, also accessible in 'Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618,' *WTJ* 37 (1974) 133–71.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 6.

⁵¹ *Comm.* 1 Jn. 2:2 (CO 55.310).

⁵² Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 182–83 (CO 8.364).

matter of accommodation, of God prattling with us.⁵³ God does not have a 'double will.' Yet, there is also not 'any pretence or deception in His word.'⁵⁴ Calvin concludes that there is 'diversity of kinds while He wills in the same way, so that out of the variety which perplexes us a harmony may be beautifully contrived.'⁵⁵

In his commentary on Ezk. 18:32 Calvin acknowledges that God takes on a *duplex persona*.⁵⁶ Calvin closely connects this with God's universal invitation to salvation. It is important to note that he also connects it with the notion of accommodation. God 'conforms' (*conformet*) himself to our ignorance, he descends (*descendat*) to us in a certain way. God adapts his speech, speaks *metaphorice*. It is clear that the real will of God lies in his *arcana consilia*. But these secret counsels are not for us to inquire into, says Calvin with a reference to Dt. 29:29. We must simply exercise ourselves in the law.⁵⁷ Again, in his commentary on 2 Pet. 3:9 Calvin accepts the fact that God 'is prepared to bring even the perishing to safety . . . so that none may perish.' To the question how this can be harmonized with the perishing of so many people, Calvin replies that 2 Pet. 3:9 makes no mention of God's secret decree, but 'only of His loving-kindness as it is made known to us in the Gospel. There God stretches out His hand to all alike, but He only grasps those (in such a way as to lead to Himself) whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world.'⁵⁸

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

⁵³ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 183 (CO 8.365). For a discussion on Calvin's concept of accommodation, cf. J. De Jong, *Accommodatio Dei: A Theme in K. Schilder's Theology of Revelation* (Diss. Kampen 1990; Kampen: Modiss, 1990) 35–43.

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 183 (CO 8.365). Also in commenting on Ezk. 33:11 in *Inst.* III.xxiv.15 (OS 4.427), Calvin argues that God does not act deceitfully (*fallaciter*) when inviting all while not touching the hearts of all.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Eternal Predestination* 184 (CO 8.365–66).

⁵⁶ *Prael.* Ezk. 18:32 (CO 40.458): 'Respondeo . . . nihil esse absurdi, si Deus suscipiat duplicem personam, non quod ipse sit duplex, quemadmodum protervi isti canes contra nos blaterant . . .'. Thus, Calvin denies the charge that by making this distinction he makes God himself *duplex*. Cf. C. Veenhof, 'God will dat alle mensen behouden worden,' *De Reformatie* 30 (1955) 321–22). Cf. also C. Veenhof, '“Aanbod van genade”' *De Reformatie* 28 (1953) 380–82.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Comm.* Rom. 11:34 (CO 49.231), where Calvin distinguishes between the secret counsel and the revealed will of God. He emphasizes that the depth and height of the hidden counsel cannot be reached by investigation.

⁵⁸ *Comm.* 2 Pet. 3:9 (CO 55.475).

revealed will is in any way deceptive. One cannot avoid the impression of a certain ambiguity at this point. It seems that Calvin's reverence for God's revelation demands an insistence on the unity and immutability of God as well as an acceptance of the testimony of Scripture regarding God's revealed will of universal salvation. Without wanting to infringe on God's veracity, Calvin must nevertheless use the dogmatic concept of accommodation to rid himself of his dilemma.⁵⁹ It seems clear that this does not go at the expense of the decree of predestination, but tends to take away somewhat from God's universal will of salvation.

Closely related to the issue of a universal will of salvation is the doctrine of common grace.⁶⁰ At this point it becomes clear that God's will for the salvation of all people comes from a disposition and an attitude of grace and love toward all people. After all, as their Creator, God is the Father of all mankind. God is gracious toward these creatures with a grace which Calvin explicitly distinguishes from the special grace given only to the elect.⁶¹ Even within this common grace there are differences. There are *speciales Dei gratiae*, which he gives *varie et ad certum modum* to otherwise wicked man.⁶² Reason and understanding are a peculiar grace of God.⁶³ Calvin uses numerous terms for this general favorable attitude toward mankind: *bonitas, clementia, indulgentia, benignitas, misericordia, amor, tolerantia, benevolentia, favor, benedictio, liberali-*

⁵⁹ A similar dilemma exists with regard to Calvin's concept of common grace. J. Douma, *Algemene genade: Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuyper, K. Schilder en Joh. Calvin over 'algemene genade'* (Diss. Kampen 1966; 4th ed.; Goes, Netherland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1981) 334, correctly criticizes Calvin for only sometimes 'speaking with two words.' Douma's analysis seems to me correct. The dilemma must not be overcome by weakening either God's will for universal salvation or his decree of predestination. A somewhat less penetrating evaluation is given by Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Diss. Amsterdam 1928; Goes, Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1928) 222–24, who recognizes God's 'desire for the salvation of non-elect men' as well as the notion of reprobation and concludes that it concerns here 'irreconcilable paradoxes' (223). Kuiper commends this as faithfulness to Scripture. This evaluation only takes one aspect of Calvin's approach. As indicated above, there are clear attempts by Calvin to overcome the 'paradox' at the cost of his recognition of God's universal love.

⁶⁰ On this point the dissertations of Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, and of Douma, *Algemene Genade*, have proven valuable sources of information.

⁶¹ *Inst.* II.ii.6 (OS 3.248); *Inst.* II.v.15 (OS 3.315).

⁶² *Inst.* II.iii.4 (OS 3.276).

⁶³ *Inst.* II.ii.14 (CO 3.257). I will not mention other occurrences. They are numerous and can be found throughout Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace*, and in Douma, *Algemene genade* 216–20.

tas, and *beneficentia*.⁶⁴ Of course, it is important to note that this common grace does not only have the motive of a sincere gospel offer. Kuiper distinguishes a six-fold purpose: (1) promotion of the welfare of mankind in general; (2) advancement of the church and the well-being of the elect; (3) invitation to repentance; (4) rendering the ungodly inexcusable; (5) God's own glory, being the all-encompassing purpose; and (6) bridling of lusts.⁶⁵ This multifaceted approach may serve as a warning not to overemphasize common grace toward the unbelievers in connection with the question of the extent of the atonement.

Another interesting feature of Calvin's view on common grace is a remarkable parallel with his dual manner of speaking of God's will. Without denying the reality and sincerity of God's revealed will, Calvin used the notion of *accommodatio* to dispose of certain difficulties. He does something similar in connection with common grace.⁶⁶ Here he speaks of an 'awareness' of divine grace.⁶⁷ Properly speaking (*proprie loquendo*) God does not give his favor and grace to the unbelievers.⁶⁸ This does not mean that Calvin's numerous passages which speak of grace toward the unbelievers have to be read in this light and are thus bereft of real contents. The invitation to repentance remains a purpose of common grace. God's desire for universal salvation and his free gospel offer must not be separated. For Calvin the latter is a matter of a universal love to all people, a matter of common grace. Nevertheless, Calvin's restrictions on common grace do indicate that he himself felt the tension which his thinking produced, a tension which he was not able to overcome adequately.

The picture which emerges from this study is not consistent. Perhaps it is one of the weaknesses of the discussion on Calvin's views on the extent of the atonement that one expects to find an overall, coherent, and consistent picture. Sections II and III of the present essay have indicated that an imposition of universalism on Calvin's theology violates his theology, breaking up one of its central

⁶⁴ Quoted in Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* 204–05; and Douma, *Algemene genade* 220–21. Calvin displays the same type of thinking in speaking of two degrees (*gradus*) of election (*Inst.* III.xxi.5–7 [OS 4.373–791]). He feels no inhibitions about speaking of God's *dilectio* to Israel as a whole. On the contrary, the establishment of the covenant is as such an act of his love.

⁶⁵ Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* 206–11.

⁶⁶ This point has been argued before by Douma, *Algemene genade* 248–521.

⁶⁷ *Inst.* III.ii.12; OS IV, 22 (*affici divinae gratiae sensu*). As Calvin himself makes clear by speaking in the same paragraph about 'the feeling of his wrath' in God's children (*terrere eos vult irae suae sensu*), the *sensus* of grace in the reprobate is not the real thing.

⁶⁸ *Prael.* Je. 33:8 (CO 39.56). Cf. Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* 108.

concerns, the participation in Christ. A somewhat different result emerges from a study of Calvin's views on God's will and his theory of common grace. There is a line of thought in Calvin which wants to maintain that God wills the salvation of all people, that God extends his love and grace to all people, and in particular to those whom he has chosen as his people in a more general sense. At the same time this line of thinking causes a certain tension. Calvin does not always attempt to dissolve it, but when he does so, he never solves it at the cost of God's purpose as laid down in his decree. Never does Calvin give any indication that he wants to rid himself of his dilemma by nibbling away at the unity of God's work of redemption in Christ. Where Calvin does move toward a solution he always does so at the cost of the universal aspect, at the cost of the notion of God's will that all people be saved, at the cost of common grace.

V. Illustrations

If the above analysis is correct one may expect the same result in those passages which have a more immediate bearing on the issue of the extent of the atonement. These passages never infringe on the decree of predestination. They never appropriate different aspects of Christ's work to different people. They indicate a desire on God's part that all people be saved. In terms of the extent of the atonement this means that Calvin in effect argues that Christ died for all people, *i.e.*, with the intent that all be saved. The question as to whether Christ really atoned for someone's sins of course depends on the Holy Spirit's efficacious working of faith. Moreover, sensing the tension which this brings into this theology, Calvin at times limits this universal intent of the atonement, in order to bring its extent in line with his emphasis on the unity of God's work due to his decree. To illustrate this it will not be necessary to go through the entire array of Calvin's passages which have been in discussion in this context.⁶⁹ Some of the more problematic examples will suffice to illustrate how one should proceed in the interpretation of Calvin's statements on the extent of the atonement.

To begin with, a few comments must be made about the two passages quoted at the beginning of this essay. If they are both taken at face value they cannot be reconciled. They are contradictory. Calvin cannot both warn that 'it is no small matter to have the soules perish which were bought by the blood of Christ' and also maintain that the flesh of Christ was not crucified for the wicked, and his

⁶⁹ Roger Nicole, 'John Calvin's View' 198-99 n. 7, 211-24, is a fine source for numerous examples.

blood not shed to expiate their sins. Nevertheless, in view of the theological analysis above the contradiction does not have to be as blatant as at first sight may appear to be the case. Paul Helm has rightly drawn attention to the continuation of the statement regarding the Christ's purchase of unbelievers: 'But yet, notwithstanding we must always comfort ourselves with this doctrine, that God will maintaine his Church . . .'.⁷⁰ Calvin explains this as the preservation of God's elect. He then continues to argue, with reference to 1 Jn. 2:19, that the 'backsliders that renounce Jesus Christ' were not of us. Admittedly, this does not solve the problem, because it is technically still possible here to separate Christ's purchase (of all) from God's maintenance of his church. This must be a wrong interpretation in view of the fact that for Calvin—as noted above—all of Christ's work is a unity and in view of the fact that this would be an isolated statement regarding a universal purchase. It seems clear that Calvin did not mean to make a statement about the actual extent of the atonement when speaking of perishing souls who were bought by Christ's blood. More likely Calvin meant to impress the responsibility of those who might become instrumental in the destruction of the souls for whom Christ's death was meant to be. Calvin thus makes somewhat of an overstatement when he uses commercial terminology to express the intent.

It is far more difficult to explain away the 'Heshusius passage' with which this essay began. Proponents of a universalist interpretation of Calvin have had great difficulty explaining this passage, since it clearly asserts limited atonement. The amount of space which M. Charles Bell allots to the passage is indicative of the problems it presents to a universalist interpretation.⁷¹ The atonement was limited, *i.e.*, not for unbelievers. Calvin does not add at this point that this is because of God's secret decree. Neither does he have to. His overriding concern at this point is not the extent of the atonement.

⁷⁰ Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* 40. Cf. above n. 3.

⁷¹ M. Charles Bell, 'Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement' 119–20; and M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* 16–17. Bell is correct that throughout the debate Calvin is not discussing the atonement, but the necessity of the presence of the Spirit and faith for the efficacy of the sacrament. This does not take away the fact that in the statement under discussion Calvin explicitly states that Christ's flesh was not crucified for the unbelievers and that his blood was not shed to expiate their sins. By calling this statement 'unfortunate' and then disposing of it as a 'hyperbole' Bell betrays his weakness at this point. It is the same weakness as present in my own comments on the passage I just discussed. Again, the deciding factor in determining which of the two views may prevail lies in the general thrust of Calvin's theology, with which other statements of Calvin on the extent of the atonement concur.

There is no need for Calvin to add that in a certain way it would be legitimate to say that Christ died for all people. To do so would in fact damage his argument against Heshusius.

That this is the most satisfactory way of solving the two most strikingly contradictory statements concerning the extent of the atonement is clear from the fact that this solution fits with the approach Calvin takes elsewhere. In his commentary on 1 Tim. 2:5, for instance, he writes:

The universal term 'all' must always be referred to classes of men but never to individuals. It is as if he had said, 'Not only Jews, but also Greeks, not only people of humble rank but also princes have been redeemed by the death of Christ.' Since therefore He intends the benefit of His death to be common to all, those who hold a view that would exclude any from the hope of salvation do Him an injury.⁷²

It is clear that Calvin wants to maintain the universal offer also in connection with this passage. But he is categorical in his denial of a universalist interpretation. It is not even possible to argue that Calvin feels that at this point the context demands a limited interpretation. The above quotation excludes a universalist interpretation in connection with *all* texts where the word πάντες occurs.⁷³

Still, Calvin himself does not stick to this rule of thumb. In fact, in his exegesis of Rom. 5:18 he comments that 'Paul makes grace common to all men, not because it in fact extends to all, but because it is offered to all. Although Christ suffered for the sins of the world, and is offered by the goodness of God without distinction to all men, yet not all receive Him.'⁷⁴ The same is meant in Rom. 5:15, according to Calvin.⁷⁵ He then adds that unbelief is the hindering factor in not enjoying the fruits of Christ's death. That death is the determining factor is also found elsewhere.⁷⁶ This point is brought out strikingly in the commentary on Jn. 3:16, where Calvin writes that God

⁷² *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:5 (CO 52.270).

⁷³ Nicole, 'John Calvin's View' 219–20, adds the following examples of the same kind of limitation: *Calvin's Calvinism* 105; *Comm.* Tit. 2:11; Jn. 6:45; 12:32; 17:9.

⁷⁴ *Comm.* Rom. 5:18 (CO 49.101).

⁷⁵ *Comm.* Heb. 9:28 (CO 55.120). This instance is remarkable since the text itself speaks of 'many,' not of 'all.'

⁷⁶ *Comm.* Heb. 5:9: 'At the same time he has inserted the universal term "to all" to show that no one is excluded from this salvation who proves to be attentive and obedient to the Gospel of Christ' (CO 55.64). *Comm.* Heb. 9:28: 'He says many meaning all, as in Rom. 5:15. It is of course certain that not all enjoy the fruits of Christ's death, but this happens because their unbelief hinders them' (CO 55.120). Cf. *Comm.* 1 Jn. 2:2: 'He puts this [i.e., the phrase '(A)nd not for ours only'] in for amplification, that believers might be convinced that the expiation made by Christ extends to all who by faith embrace the Gospel' (CO 55.310). According to *Comm.* Is. 53:12 (CO 37.267) the intercession is for those who entered Christ's sacrifice by faith (cf. above, n. 20).

shows He is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life.

Moreover, let us remember that although life is promised generally to all who believe in Christ, faith is not common to all.⁷⁷

Calvin adds to this that it is the elect whose eyes God opens. In other words, faith as given by the Holy Spirit determines one's participation in Christ's death. In the context of the gospel offer Calvin can even say that God is reconciled to the whole world, which in this passage clearly means 'all men.' But this statement is not a separate, distinct statement on the extent of the atonement: God shows himself reconciled 'when he invites all men . . .' There is no absolute statement that God is reconciled to the world. Only, as far as the gospel offer is concerned, God *shows* himself reconciled. In other words, the element of universal atonement here expresses the intent of universal salvation with which God gave his Son. It is but a small step to formalize Calvin's comment and to say that according to his revealed will God shows himself reconciled to all men but that in his secret decree he has limited this reconciliation to the elect. Since the former is God's normative, prescriptive will it is connected to the gospel offer.⁷⁸

VI. Conclusion

These passages illustrate how Calvin approaches the issue of the extent of the atonement. He never addresses the question directly. When confronted with it he will maintain that redemption, taken as a whole, depends on the work of the Spirit, on faith. God presents man with this redemption according to his well-meant gospel offer, or, one might say, according to his revealed will. The fact that Calvin at times—but by no means consistently—tends to restrict the *κόσμος* and *πάντες* passages as referring to the elect parallels his ambiguity in his teaching on God's desire that all men be saved and the restrictions he builds in with regard to the character of common grace. This means that it is not possible to speak of a consistent, precise Calvinian view on the extent of the atonement. A lack of precision will remain. If the above argument is correct it is Calvin's view that *Christ's work of redemption, as a whole, was (only) in a*

⁷⁷ *Comm.* Jn. 3:16 (CO 47.65).

⁷⁸ It seems to me that Nicole, 'John Calvin's View' 213, is somewhat too restrictive in his interpretation. He is correct in stating that a universal offer of salvation does not presuppose universal atonement. But he by-passes Calvin when he states that there is no universal provision as requisite for the well-meant offer. For Calvin there is, in a sense, a universal provision: reconciliation is universal in the sense that it is—as far as God's revealed will is concerned—intended for all.

sense!) meant for all and is only applied to the elect. By using this description Christ's death is not separated from the rest of his redemptive work. Some words have been placed between parentheses because Calvin is not always consistent on the point, at times accepting a universal intent, while more often asserting that this is not the real way of speaking.