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Calvin and the Extent of the Atonement by M. Charles Bell

Although Dr. Bell's paper was not given at the Tyndale Fellowship Conference, its content is so apposite that it forms a very suitable member of this group of essays.

In his seminal work, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, Kendall makes the opening statement that universal atonement is fundamental to Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance.¹ Since the publication of this book, three further studies of Calvin's doctrine of faith have come forth, each of which challenges Kendall's major proposition. After surveying the evidence, R. W. A. Letham concludes, against Kendall, that 'Despite his pronounced emphasis on the efficacy of Christ's atoning death, Calvin does not commit himself on the question of the extent of the atonement'.² A. N. S. Lane criticises Kendall's thesis simply by writing a helpful article on 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance' without reference to the extent of the atonement, even though fully aware of Kendall's work. Finally, Paul Helm in his recent monograph *Calvin and the Calvinists* rejects outright Kendall's thesis and argues that Calvin and the Calvinists taught that Christ died for the elect alone.⁴

Since the Synod of Dort, the overwhelming consensus has been that Calvin taught a doctrine of limited atonement. Although the claim that Calvin in fact taught unlimited atonement is not unique to Kendall, he has certainly provided us with the most extensive defence of that thesis to date. According to Kendall, Calvin's reference at the beginning of Book 3 of the *Institute* to the 'salvation of the human race' indicates that universal atonement is the underlying assumption for what Calvin teaches on atonement in Book 2.⁵ There is, indeed, a good deal of material in Calvin's writings which would lead one to conclude that he held to the doctrine of unlimited atonement. To begin with, Calvin argues that the universal aspect of Christ's work is shown in that he shares with us our human nature. Christ is Adam's descendant. Therefore, his work on behalf of mankind is work rendered for the benefit of 'all men'.⁶ The redemption which Christ procured by his death means that 'all the sins of the world have been expiated'⁷ and since it was for

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¹ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, (Oxford) 1979, 13.

² R. W. A. Letham, 'Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort'. Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen, 1979, 1.125.

³ 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance', *Vox Evangelica* 11, 1979, 32-54.

⁴ Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists*, (Edinburgh) 1982. Cf. my article review of Helm's book forthcoming (1983) in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.

⁵ 13f. All references to Kendall are to his book, *op. cit.*, and only pagination is cited.

⁶ *Inst.* 2.13.3; cf. Paul van Buren, *Christ in our Place*, (Edinburgh), 1957, 18.

⁷ *Comm.* Col. 1:14. At *Comm.* Col. 1:20 Calvin writes, 'He says of the Father, that he is propitious to his creatures through the blood of Christ. Now he calls it "the blood of

'the sins of the whole world' that Christ died, 'God commends to us the salvation of all men without exception . . .'⁸ We ought, therefore, to have concern to care and pray for others, 'for it is no small matter to have the soules perish which were bought by the blood of Christ'.⁹

Because the extent of Christ's work is universal, it is offered likewise to every person. However, the most common doubt among men is that the benefit of Christ's death, which is 'available and ready for all', is personally available for them.¹⁰ Although Christ is offered to all, we readily see that not all receive him. This is due to their hardness and unbelief.¹¹ However, Calvin teaches that those who so reject Christ are 'doubly culpable' since they have rejected 'the blessing in which they could share by faith'.¹² It would be inexcusable to argue from this that Satan and his demons, as well as the ungodly, benefit from Christ, argues Calvin. Nevertheless, he maintains an important distinction exists between the demons and the ungodly, and that is that 'the benefit of redemption is offered to the ungodly, but not to the devils'.¹³ Even the ungodly are included precisely because Calvin consistently teaches that 'no one is excluded from this salvation' wrought by the death of Christ, provided they believe in faith.¹⁴

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Were this all Calvin had written on the subject, we might expect more agreement as to the universal character of Christ's atonement in his teaching, for clearly he taught that Christ died for 'all'. Unfortunately, Calvin complicates matters by stating in several places that 'all' does not mean each individual, but rather all 'kinds' of men. For instance,

the cross", because the pledge and price of our reconciliation with God was the blood of Christ, which was poured out on the cross . . . "Both upon earth and in heaven". If you are inclined to understand this only of rational creatures, it will mean, men and angels. But there would be no absurdity in extending it to all without exception.' Cf. *Comm. Is.* 42:6.

⁸ *Comm. Gal.* 5:12.

⁹ *Sermons of M. John Calvin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus*, (London) 1579 817. ' . . . behold the Turkes, which cast away the grace which was purchased for all the world by Jesus Christ: the Jewes doe the like . . . ' *ibid.*, 177. 'If we see souls which have been so precious to God go to perdition, and we make nothing of it, that is to despise the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ' *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Edinburgh) 1975, 521. 'For the wretched unbelievers and the ignorant have great need to be pleaded for with God; behold them on the way to perdition . . . And what shall we do when we see souls in peril, which are so precious before God, as he has shown in that he has ransomed them with the blood of his own Son?' *ibid.*, Eph. 6:18-19.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.15.

¹¹ *Instruction in Faith*, (Philadelphia) 1949, 35.

¹² *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, (London), 1956, 141.

¹³ *Comm. Col.* 1:20.

¹⁴ *Comm. Hebrews* 5:9.

concerning 1 John 2:2 Calvin excludes the reprobate from the term 'all' and refers it to 'those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered' throughout the world.¹⁵ Letham thinks that this statement places Calvin's so-called universalist passages in a new light. 'If "all" means all without distinction as he says it does, rather than all without exception, Calvin cannot be said to have taught universal atonement in any sense.'¹⁶ In fact, in one instance Calvin does insist that the term must always be understood to refer to 'classes of men but never to individuals'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in yet other instances, Calvin does use 'all' to mean each individual and not just classes of men. In *Comm.* Isaiah 53:12, Calvin writes,

I approve of the ordinary reading, that he alone bore the punishment of many, because on him was laid the guilt of the whole world. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that "many" sometimes denotes "all".

In his *Comm.* Romans 5:18 we read,

He makes this favour common to all, because it is propounded to all, and not because it is in reality extended to all; for though Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and is offered through God's benignity indiscriminately to all, yet all do not receive him.¹⁸

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Moreover, in *Comm.* Mark 14:24 Calvin states that 'The word *many* does not mean a part of the world only, but the whole human race'.

How is this tension to be resolved? Some have sought a solution in the scholastic formula that the power of Christ's death is *sufficient* for the salvation of all, but *effectual* only for the elect. Calvin allows the truth of this statement¹⁹ but rejects its use because the issue is not the power of Christ's death, but those for whom it was intended.²⁰ Letham offers another solution, suggesting that Calvin is so bound by Scripture that he

¹⁵ *Comm.* 1 John 2:2.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 2.67, n.76.

¹⁷ *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:5.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that with regard to the passage from Romans, Calvin's 19th century translator recorded in a footnote that 'It appears from this sentence that Calvin held general redemption', *Calvin Translation Society* edition, 211f. n.3. In his *A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, 1961, 148, Calvin asserts that it is 'incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world'. *Cf. Comm.* Is. 42:6; *Comm.* Rom. 10:16.

¹⁹ As Kendall notes, Calvin allows 'for the truth of the formula since only the elect savingly believe'. 16, n.2. As we shall see, it is true not because the scope of Christ's death is limited but because saving faith is limited to the elect.

²⁰ *Eternal Predestination*, 103, 148f.

follows the Word 'even where there is apparent contradiction. Consequently, he can make statements that seem contradictory'.²¹

Calvin's 'strong biblicism' does lead him to make statements that are only 'apparent' contradictions. For example, he often stresses that the unbelief of sinners is solely their responsibility.²² Yet just as frequently we find him emphasizing that some do not savingly believe, and this is God's doing.²³ Calvin is simply being faithful to the tension between these two ideas as they are found in Scripture.²⁴ On the other hand, are there statements which go beyond apparent biblical contradictions, such as his statements concerning the term 'all'? For instance, he can ask how the wicked can eat Christ's flesh 'which was not crucified for them' and how they can drink Christ's blood 'which was not shed to expiate their sins'.²⁵ By itself, this is a clear statement of limited atonement. Yet, as we have seen, he also states that 'it is no small matter to have the souls perish who were bought by the blood of Christ'.²⁶ In light of this 'confusion and contradiction', Letham concludes that Calvin was uncommitted as to the extent of the atonement, and that it was likely a matter which was not significant for his teaching.²⁷ However, there is evidence to suggest otherwise. For instance, Calvin's use of the term 'all' becomes consistent when we bear in mind the relation between atonement and faith in his writings. In several places he maintains that while Christ's atonement is universal, the gift of saving faith is limited to the elect.²⁸ This is precisely the situation in 1 John 2:2. Concerning the world 'and not for ours only, but also for the whole world', Calvin states that these are included 'for amplication', to convince believers that

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²¹ *Op. cit.*, 1.125.

²² *Comm. Matt.* 16:19.

²³ *Comm. Matt.* 15:13; *Inst.* 3.3.21; *Comm. Rom.* 10:16.

²⁴ *Cf.* Calvin's statements on the tension between pain and God's mercy, in Sermon 50, Job 13:11, CO 33. Calvin states that, 'There have been some who in their disputations, would always wish conclusions after the manner of the philosophers and that all things should be so put in order that there should be no disagreement, but a certain peace pact among all things; but such men never knew what it is to have been sified by God and to have passed through His judgments. And why? For, as I have said, God handles us in such a strange fashion that all things are thereby confounded.'

²⁵ *Theological Treatises*, 285. Quoted by Letham, but absent in Kendall.

²⁶ *The Mystery of Godliness*, 83. Quoted by Kendall, but absent in Letham.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, 1.125, 126, and *contra* Kendall.

²⁸ *Ibid*; *Comm. Matt.* 15:13; *Inst.* 3.3.21. In *Comm. Rom.* 10:16, Calvin states that 'the doctrine of salvation is universal' and 'God invites all men to Himself without distinction'. Nevertheless, 'The general nature of the promises does not alone and of itself make salvation common to all. Rather, the peculiar revelation which the prophet has mentioned restricts it to the elect.' *Cf. Eternal Predestination*, 148, where Calvin grants that 'righteousness is promised particularly to every individual man,' but faith is restricted to the elect.

Christ's expiation 'extends to all *who by faith* embrace the Gospel'.²⁹ The key term in his entire discussion here is 'faith'. Because faith is given only to the elect, Calvin rejects the idea that salvation extends 'to all the reprobate and even to Satan himself'. He rejects this idea not in light of the extent of the atonement, but of faith. Because faith is the interpreting factor in this passage, Calvin can state that under the term 'all', John 'does not include the reprobate', but refers to all who would believe'.³⁰ What then of Calvin's comments concerning 1 Timothy 2:5 that ' "all" must always be referred to classes of men but never individuals'? If we try to comprehend this statement within its proper context, that is, of Calvin's exposition from 1 Timothy 2:1-7, then Calvin means that *in this context* 'all' refers not to individuals but to classes of men, and here especially, to 'kings and all that are in high place'.³¹ This is confirmed as well by what Calvin says of this passage in his *Institute*.³²

We are still left with Calvin's statement concerning Christ's flesh not crucified for the wicked. Again, we must refer to the context. In this context, Calvin is refuting certain arguments of Heshusius. The main differences centre on Heshusius' claim that Christ is specially present in the sacrament and that not only believers eat of his flesh, but also the wicked eat of Christ's corporeal flesh 'by the mouth bodily without faith'.³³ Calvin rejects these ideas and teaches instead that Christ can specially be in one place at one time and he is now seated in heaven at the Father's right hand. Nevertheless, he is spiritually and really present in the sacraments so that by faith and 'the secret virtue of the Spirit we are united into one body with him'.³⁴ It is absurd, writes Calvin, to think that 'Christ is swallowed by the mouth so that he passes bodily into the stomach'.³⁵ Calvin argues that Heshusius has failed to see that the sacrament is a matter for faith. 'Only those who are united by faith' benefit from the sacrament. They alone 'truly or in reality' can be said to eat Christ's flesh.³⁶ It is a matter of the work of the Spirit, and, therefore, of faith. The idea that the 'unworthy' or the 'wicked' or 'unbelievers'³⁷ can 'eat Christ' is 'unworthy of refutation'.³⁸ By this

²⁹ *Comm.* 1 John 2:2. Italics are mine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:1-7.

³² 3.24.16.

³³ *Theological Treatises*, 270, 277.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 270, 276. At 277, Calvin states that 'I uniformly maintain that through the virtue of the Spirit there is a present exhibition of a thing absent in respect of place.'

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

³⁷ All three terms are used interchangeably by Calvin in this discussion.

³⁸ *Theological Treatises*, 282.

Calvin does not mean that only believers partake of the sacrament; that is, that it is offered only to believers. It is, indeed, offered to all, even the wicked.³⁹ However, unbelievers do not truly eat Christ, rather, they receive only a 'visible sign' and so 'eat only sacramentally'.⁴⁰

Calvin stresses continually the spiritual nature of the sacrament and the fact that only by faith does one benefit from it. Only through the Spirit can one eat Christ's flesh. In this context, he notes Heshusius' statement that 'Christ is present to his creatures in many ways', and then in rapid succession counters with his own questions: How can Christ be present with unbelievers? How can he be 'spiritual food' for their souls? How can the wicked eat Christ's flesh which was not crucified for them? Then he concludes with 'my axiom, that Christ, considered as the living bread and the victim immolated on the cross, cannot enter a human body devoid of his Spirit'.⁴¹

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It is readily seen that throughout this debate, Calvin is *not* discussing the atonement, but rather, the necessity of the presence of the Spirit and faith for the efficacy of the sacrament. He definitely is *not* making a statement on the extent of the atonement. Rather he is maintaining that when faith is absent there is no benefit for the one partaking of the bread and wine. If we accept Calvin's statement concerning the wicked eating Christ's flesh which was not crucified for them as a statement on the extent of the atonement, and that, therefore, not only the atonement, but the sacrament as well are only for the elect, then Calvin is indeed inconsistent in his thinking. For earlier, in this same discussion, he stated that the sacrament *is* offered to the wicked, but they reject it and so insult Christ's body.⁴² However, Calvin is not inconsistent in his thought. He has simply resorted to the use of hyperbole in his discussion of the spiritual nature of the sacrament. The words are unfortunate because they can be misleading, and appear contradictory, if they lead one to conclude that he is making a statement on the extent of the atonement. If one is so misled, then the words appear contradictory to everything else Calvin has written on the universal nature of the atonement.

It seems both fair and sound to conclude that Calvin taught both a universal atonement⁴³ and a doctrine of predestination in which faith is

³⁹ *Ibid*, 283, '... They insult the body of Christ, inasmuch as they reject the inestimable boon which is offered them.'

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 281.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 285.

⁴² *Ibid*, 283.

⁴³ 'In his refutation of the Degrees of the Council of Trent . . . Calvin wrote that he had no comment to make on that decree which said that Christ died for all men.' CO

limited to the elect.⁴⁴ He could do this because he did not link the doctrines of election and atonement in a logical, developmental order of cause and effect. This in turn allowed him to give proper weight to Scripture passages which clearly teach universal atonement.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it seems both fair and sound to conclude that this doctrine of a universal atonement holds a place in Calvin's teaching on faith and assurance. It is important for us to know that Christ died for all the world, Calvin says, 'so that no one at all may think he is excluded'.⁴⁶ We can only be convinced of God's love for us once our sins, which separate us from him, have been expiated. Therefore, before we can experience God's fatherly love, 'the blood of Christ must intercede to reconcile God to us'.⁴⁷ Elsewhere Calvin asserts that the universal nature of God's mercy in Christ is taught in order to assure our consciences, since there is 'no difference among sinners provided faith be present'.⁴⁸ This does not bear out Letham's view that Calvin is indifferent on this matter. On the other hand, though it may be granted that Calvin holds to a universal atonement, and that this is the underlying view in his *Institute*, nevertheless, the lack of explicit references in the *Institute* to the relation between atonement and assurance is troubling and leads us to question whether it is as significant as Kendall maintains. Whatever our evaluation, it will be helpful for us to bear in mind, that the relation between the extent of the atonement and assurance of salvation simply was not the issue for Calvin that it became for later Calvinism. However, Kendall is correct in his assertion that ultimately one is left without assurance if Christ died only for the elect.

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Before concluding this study, it remains for us to examine Kendall's assertion that while Calvin taught universal atonement, he also taught that Christ did not pray for all men. If this is so, it simply removes the problem of assurance from the area of Christ's atonement to that of Christ's intercession.⁴⁹ Kendall bases his assertion on the fact that when dealing with Isaiah 53:12, Calvin refers this to Christ's prayer in John

7.371ff. Quoted from B. Hall, 'Calvin Against the Calvinists' in *John Calvin*, (Abingdon) 1966, 27.

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 3.24.17.

⁴⁵ Cf. B. G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison) 1969, for Amyraut's criticisms that 'orthodox Calvinists' were forced to forgo proper methods of exegesis when dealing with 'universalist' passages in order to remain logically consistent as decretal theologians.

⁴⁶ *Comm.* John 3:17, *Comm.* Rom. 5:11.

⁴⁷ *Comm.* John 3:16, *Inst.* 2.16.6.

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 3.24.17.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, 14. The problem has already been removed one step by Calvin's limitation of faith to the elect.

17:9; a prayer which Calvin believes is applied only to the elect.⁵⁰ The most important criticism to be made of Kendall's assertion is that it fails to take into consideration the emphasized note of unity between Christ's atonement and his priestly intercession in Calvin's teaching.⁵¹ His intercession is 'grounded upon' his sacrifice.⁵² It is absolutely necessary that Christ's passion and his intercession be held together, for no priest is qualified apart from a sacrifice.⁵³

In dealing with Christ's priesthood and intercession, Calvin states that one must begin with Christ's death, for only in this way is his priesthood efficacious and beneficial to us.⁵⁴ For this reason Calvin may speak of a 'necessary connection' between Christ's sacrificial death and his 'continual intercession'.⁵⁵ Calvin can write that without the hope of Christ's powerful intercession, we are devoid of salvation.⁵⁶ However, it is clear that, for Calvin, the power of Christ's intercession comes from the power of his death.⁵⁷ Christ is said to intercede for us through his sacrifice, and his intercession is nothing other than 'the continual application of His death to our salvation'.⁵⁸ This death can 'daily reconcile us to God'⁵⁹ and is itself our constant intercession.⁶⁰ Finally, Calvin asserts that those who would separate Christ's office as sacrifice from

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 14, n.1.

⁵¹ Kendall makes the criticism concerning Calvin's teaching that Christ prays only for the elect, that 'this significant (and crucial) point in Calvin's theology seems to have been overlooked by a number of scholars'. He goes on to mention Paul van Buren, *op. cit.*, who 'gives attention to Christ's intercession but concludes (with no evidence) that Calvin's position is that Christ prays for those for whom He died: "all"'. Kendall, *op. cit.*, 17. But in fairness to van Buren, it must be pointed out that he nowhere deals with the extent of the atonement or of Christ's intercession. Rather, the tone of his writing makes it clear that he is thinking of Christ's intercession for believers. But the point he emphasizes is that in Calvin's teaching, Christ's sacrificial death cannot be separated from his intercession and *vice versa*; a point which Kendall seemingly has missed.

⁵² *The Mystery of Godliness*, 202.

⁵³ *Comm.* 1 John 2:1-2; *cf.* van Buren, *op. cit.*, 68.

⁵⁴ *Inst.* 2.15.6.

⁵⁵ *Comm.* 1 Tim. 2:6; *Comm.* Hebrews 8:4.

⁵⁶ *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 144.

⁵⁷ But we do not imagine that he, kneeling before God, pleads as a suppliant for us; rather, with the apostle we understand he so appears before God's presence that the power of his death avails as an everlasting intercession on our behalf.' *Inst.* 3.30.20.

⁵⁸ *Comm.* 1 John 2:1.

⁵⁹ *Comm.* Acts. 13:39.

⁶⁰ *Comm.* John 16:26; *cf.* *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 148, where he further states, 'it is said that He will always be our intercessor — but in what way? by virtue of His death and passion; by virtue of the prayer He made.'

⁶¹ *Comm.* Genesis 14:18; *Comm.* Ps. 110:4.

that of priest, 'rend Christ asunder, and subvert their own faith, which is deprived of half its support'.⁶¹

What then are we to conclude? Only when dealing with Christ's prayer in John 17:9 does Calvin ever suggest that Christ's intercession is limited to the elect.⁶² In many instances, on the other hand, he holds to be inseparable, and, in fact, identifies Christ's death and his intercession. Furthermore, even in the context of his discussion of the prayer in John 17, Calvin can write that the reason Christ does not pray for all is due to their obstinate refusal to disown the world and be joined to Christ.⁶³ If we belong to the number of those who believe in Christ, Calvin exhorts us to 'be fully persuaded that Christ hath suffered for us, that we may now enjoy the benefit of his death'.⁶⁴

The emphasis in Calvin's teaching is certainly on the unity of the death and intercession of Christ, and upon the idea that Christ's intercession flows from his sacrificial death, which, according to Calvin, was offered for all. More than that is difficult to state with certainty. For, since Calvin did not fully or consistently develop his teaching on this subject, we should hold our evaluations of it to be somewhat tentative, especially when they differ from his own emphasis.

⁶² Kendall makes the important observation that even when dealing with the prayer in John 17, Calvin does not 'link the scope of Christ's intercessory prayer to Christ's death, as those after him tended to do', *op. cit.*, 14, n.1.

⁶³ He goes on to warn that 'If then we remain in the world and are separated from our Lord Jesus Christ, it is certain that what He has prayed of God His Father does not belong to us' and cannot profit us at all.' *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy*, 145.

⁶⁴ *Comm. Is.* 53:12.