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Review Essay (Part One): John Calvin on the Death of Christ and The Reformation's Forgotten Doctrine of Universal Vicarious Satisfaction: A Review and Critique of Tom Nettles' Chapter in Whomever He Wills¹

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Introduction

There has been a long-standing question and debate in modern Calvin studies whether or not John Calvin taught a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone. Did Calvin teach what we now call limited atonement in populist Reformed literature? Scholars are divided on the answer. G. Michael Thomas, Brian G. Armstrong, R. T. Kendall, Charles Bell, Kevin Kennedy, A. C. Clifford, and Paul Hartog are among those who believe that Calvin did subscribe to an unlimited satisfaction for all the sins of all men. Roger Nicole, Jonathan Rainbow, and Paul Helm (with qualification) believe the contrary. Pieter Rouwendal adopts a mediating position. Robert Peterson believes that Calvin's position on the extent of the satisfaction is indeterminate.² In his essay "John Calvin's Understanding of the Death of Christ," Tom Nettles has added his voice to those who side with the position that Calvin held to a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone.³

At first glance, Nettles seems to adopt the qualified argument made by Paul Helm. Helm argues that even though Calvin never overtly committed himself to a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone, he was, nonetheless, committed

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²See G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (UK: Paternoster, 1997); Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (UK: Paternoster Press, 1997); Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1985); Kevin D. Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002); idem., "Was Calvin a 'Calvinist'? John Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010), 191-212; A. C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Paul Hartog, *A Word for the World: Calvin on the Extent of the Atonement* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2009); Roger Nicole, "Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 197-225; Jonathan H. Rainbow, *The Will of God and The Cross* (Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1990); Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1982); Pieter Rouwendal, "Calvin's Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* 17 (2008): 317-35; and, Robert Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (New Jersey: Mentor, 1999).

³See Thomas J. Nettles, "John Calvin's Understanding of the Death of Christ," in *Whomever He Wills: A Surprising Display of Sovereign Mercy*, ed. Matthew M. Barrett and Thomas J. Nettles (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2012), 293-315. Parenthetical citations in this review essay are to this essay.

to it. For Helm, in order for Christ's death to be truly substitutionary, a limited satisfaction for sins is necessarily entailed. Given that Calvin held to "substitutionary atonement," as defined by Helm, he must therefore have been committed to a limited satisfaction (even if he never expressly committed himself to it).⁴ As Nettles develops his thesis statement, he moves beyond Helm to the stronger claim of Nicole and Rainbow that Calvin actually did teach a limited satisfaction, if not by name, then by direct implication. To support this, Nettles claims that we can discern two critical lines of thought from Calvin. First, for all whom Christ died, faith and all the benefits of salvation are infallibly purchased. Second, that for Calvin, the high priestly and effectual intercession of Christ, assumedly for the elect as a class, delimits the scope and extent of the satisfaction.

When it comes to dealing with the evidence in Calvin suggesting that Christ died for the sins of all men, Nettles offers an interesting interpretation, one found in seed form in Nicole and Rainbow. In the many cases where Calvin says such things as, "Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world," Nettles says that Calvin merely meant to speak "from the human perspective," or from the perspective of human phenomenology. So when Calvin stated Christ suffered in the place of all men, he did not actually mean to speak from the divine "point of view" of what God in Christ accomplished in reality. Calvin was not saying what he believed Christ had actually accomplished for all men, or what was "theologically true." Unfortunately for Nettles, there does not appear to be any substantive support for the supposition in Calvin's writings at all. At most, Nettles can only point to Calvin's use of "classes" in his interpretation of 1 Tim 2:4-6. Nettles assumes that Calvin's apparent use of "classes" sets up a sort of "rule" to interpret all of Calvin's universal statements. There are two key problems with this assumption. First, Nettles, like Nicole and Rainbow, has misread Calvin's intent, and I think this can be demonstrated reasonably enough. Second, Calvin himself never applied this *rule* universally throughout his biblical exegesis, and even on key occasions he simply never refers to it.

The primary purpose of this essay, however, is not so much to prove that Calvin subscribed to an unlimited satisfaction for all the sins of all sinners, but to remove the objections to this possibility. The reader should understand that the following review is intended as a non-exhaustive *specimen* response to Tom Nettles' analysis of Calvin on the question of the extent of the satisfaction of Christ. My aim in this essay is to demonstrate that Nettles has treated Calvin 1) ahistorically and, therefore, inaccurately, 2) inaccurately with respect to critical comments from Calvin, and 3) illogically in terms of drawing conclusions from Calvin's statements.

The historian's inductive method shows us a better way to engage in historical analysis. The respective methods of Nicole, Helm, Rainbow, and Nettles, are driven *top-down* by their own systematic assumptions and not *bottom-up* by surveying the inductively derived data from Calvin. This top-down method is sometimes described as a deductivist approach that normally begins with a set of *a priories* and then attempts to posit them or identify them within the respective primary source texts. Proper historiography, on the other hand, works inductively to gather the data from the primary source texts, where the data form its own image or pattern. The only way to solve the question regarding Calvin's view of the extent of the Christ's satisfaction is to engage in inductive analysis. Unfortunately, the inductive method

⁴See Paul Helm, "The Logic of Limited Atonement," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3 (1985): 47-54; and idem., "Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of the Doctrinal Development," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 179-185.

is often disparaged or ignored. It is time consuming, demands patience, and requires that the researcher suspend certain personal assumptions and conflicts. Conflicts arise because reading a classical author often generates more questions than the researcher's personal theological "system" can handle. The temptation is to posit a quick answer on the basis of the researcher's own personal beliefs.

Another problem with the deductivist approach is that it can fall into the trap of isolating a given author from his historical-theological context. Rainbow does this repeatedly. As an example, he treats Martin Luther by way of a simple deductivist assumption that because Luther was a true *Augustinian* he would have held to limited satisfaction.⁵ Rainbow fails to locate Luther within Luther's own theological context thereby failing to identify what a true *Augustinian* might have looked like at the beginning of the 16th century. Indeed, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, and Wolfgang Musculus, et al, would have considered themselves good and true Augustinians, yet all held that Christ died for all men.

By applying the inductive approach to the question, "What would 'substitutionary atonement' have looked like in the early 16th century?" we need to survey the writings of not only Calvin, but also those of his contemporaries. By doing this, we can identify an early Reformation doctrine of vicarious satisfaction which was not seen as entailing the more modern view of a limited satisfaction of sins.⁶ Rather than fixate on the outdated "Calvin versus the Calvinist" thesis, or rather than treat Calvin in isolation, we should seek to identify and understand the early Reformation doctrine of unlimited vicarious satisfaction. If such a doctrine did exist, we can begin to examine Calvin afresh. Then the question becomes, "Does the data from Calvin fit this model of satisfaction, rather than the later model as defined by TULIP or strict five-point Calvinist orthodoxy?" To that end, this essay will produce numerous extended quotations from the various primary sources. The use of extensive primary source quotation is often criticized in some circles. In order to resolve this question, however, we must engage original authors, such as Calvin, with extensive quotations so that we can see their theology expressed in its proper context.

Limited atonement is defined as the doctrine that only the sins of the elect were imputed to Christ, such that, if we were to ask the question, "For whose sins was Christ punished?" the answer will invariably be, "For the sins of the elect alone." Throughout this essay, I will generally use my preferred term "limited satisfaction" in the place of "limited atonement," as the language of satisfaction was the term used in classic 16th and 17th century literature, and because the word "atonement" has a history of ambiguity. There will be no need to labor the point that the original Reformers, Calvin included, did believe in a vicarious satisfaction wherein Christ actually bore in his own person and body the curse of the law due to sinners. Rather, what is in view here is the question of the *extent* of this vicarious sin-bearing.⁷

⁵Rainbow, *Will of God and The Cross*, 181.

⁶Apart from the survey work of G. Michael Thomas, there is no substantive and balanced analysis of this first and second generation doctrine of an unlimited vicarious satisfaction in the literature.

⁷References to Calvin's *Commentaries* and *Institutes*, and Nettles' essay will be cited parenthetically. In some of the following quotations from the original 16th century sources, I have modernized the spelling, and occasionally reformatted both text and quotations within a quotation. Further, for my Calvin commentary material, I am using the older translations published by Baker Books. For our purposes here there is no significant translation differences.

Thesis Statement and Explanation

Nettles writes,

The thesis of this article is simple: Calvin's discussion of the atonement gives sufficient warrant for his theological progeny to infer that he believed that Christ's atoning work was intrinsically efficacious for the salvation of the elect only. Both the nature of the atonement, in Calvin's extended comments on it, and its connections as the necessary and pivotal means for God to execute His eternal purpose of redemption give warrant for one to conclude this limited atonement may be inferred from several pivotal exegetical/doctrinal discussions and is more consistent with his overall theological view than is a general atonement. It is not unwarranted from Calvin's writings to infer that for Calvin Christ's death merited from God all the subsequent blessings that would certainly be given to all for whom Christ purchased them (295, emphasis added).

To say that for Calvin, the atonement of Christ is intrinsically efficacious for the salvation of the elect only is rather generic, as all parties would agree. Further, to suggest that limited atonement is "more consistent with his overall theological view" is the older argument outlined by Helm that limited satisfaction is consistent with Calvin's writings. The third and final assertion turns out to be Nettles' central argument: Salvation (i.e., the blessings of) is effectually given to all for whom Christ died. It is the last statement that cannot be proven from Calvin, as he never uses this form of reasoning or argumentation. Rather, it may only be inferred based on certain statements found in Calvin. If it can be shown that Nettles' arguments either beg the question or are simply invalid, then perhaps there may be room enough to go back and read Calvin in his own theological and historical context without the later systematic and ahistorical grid which Nettles and others have imposed upon Calvin.

Nettles on the Concept of Substitution

First, Nettles' sub-heading, "The *Power* of Substitution in Calvin."⁸ For Nettles, substitution itself has power to save. Nettles does not elaborate upon the full nature of this power, other than its certain power to "purchase" people and "salvation" for the elect exclusively. What was Calvin's doctrine of substitution? While it is true that Calvin says Christ bore "our" sins and curses, this itself does not entail a limited substitution for the elect alone or an effectual substitution as later defined by TULIP or strict five-point Calvinism. Nettles' unstated assumption is that there is only one doctrine of substitution, as defined by strict five-point Calvinist orthodoxy, in Reformation theology and history. However, it is undeniable that Luther, Zwingli, Musculus, and Bullinger, contemporaries or near contemporaries of Calvin, understood that Christ really did bear "our" sins in "our" place, that is, he truly was a vicarious substitute *in our place*, suffering the wrath of God for our sins. Nonetheless, they all believed that Christ died for the sins of all men, of all who have lived, now live, and shall live. This shows that there was another conception of vicarious satisfaction in existence of which Calvin could have also shared.

We can identify the following factual assertions within the theology of Luther, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Musculus: 1) that Christ stood in the place of men, bearing

⁸Nettles, "John Calvin," 297. Emphasis added.

the wrath and curse for sin, in their behalf, and 2) that he accomplished this for all men without exception. If this can be demonstrated, then it is clear that, historically, there was a version of substitutionary atonement which was “other than” the version of “five-point Calvinist” orthodoxy. It would then show us that the simple one-to-one association between vicarious satisfaction and limited satisfaction (as made by Nicole, Helm, Rainbow, and now Nettles) is not a *necessary* entailment. From Ulrich Zwingli, three examples:

1. “How much more had the victim to be absolutely spotless which made atonement for the sins not only of all who had been, but of all who were yet to come!”⁹
2. “Therefore the blood of Christ, offered once for all, endures to remove all the sins of all men.”¹⁰
3. “For He has atoned *for the sins of all from the founding of the world*, so is He even unto the end of the world, the bearer of salvation to all who trust in him; for He is everlasting God; through Him we were created and redeemed.”¹¹

Heinrich Bullinger held that while Christ presented himself as a satisfaction for sin, he did this in behalf of all sinners:

1. “The Lord made to meet on him, as an expiatory sacrifice, not one or another or most sins of one or other man, *but all the iniquities of all of us*. Therefore I say, *the sins of all men of the world of all ages have been expiated by his death*.”¹²
2. “Therefore, when he would sacrifice for the satisfaction of the sins of the whole world. . . . And that only sacrifice is always effectual to make satisfaction for all the sins of all men in the whole world. . . . Christians know that the sacrifice of Christ once offered is always effectual to make satisfaction for the sins of all men in the whole world, and of all men of all ages: but these men with often outcries say, that it is flat heresy not to confess that Christ is daily offered of sacrificing priests, consecrated to that purpose.”¹³
3. “And it is not amiss in this place first of all to mark, that Christ is called a propitiation, or satisfaction, *not for sinners or people of one or two ages, but for all sinners* and all the faithful people throughout the whole world. One Christ therefore is sufficient for all: one intercessor with the Father is set forth unto all.”¹⁴

From Wolfgang Musculus, one quotation will suffice at this point:

For like as God enclosed all under unbelief that he might have mercy upon all, so he will have this grace of *his mercy to be set forth to all men*: ‘So God loved the world,’ (says our Saviour), ‘that he gave his only begotten son, that everyone which believes in him should not perish,

⁹Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1981), 112. Emphasis added.

¹⁰Ibid., 234.

¹¹Ibid., 235-236. Emphasis added.

¹²Bullinger, *Isaiah*, 266b, sermon 151, as cited in Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement*, 75. Emphasis added.

¹³Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 4th Decade, sermon 7, 2: 285-286, 287, and 296. Emphasis added.

¹⁴Ibid., 4th Decade, sermon 5, 2:218-219. Emphasis added.

but have life everlasting.’ And in the first epistle of John, we read this: ‘But in case any man do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the just, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for the sins also of the whole world.’ *I think that there is meant by the world, all mankind, by which the world does consist, from the beginning of it, until the end.* Therefore when it is said, that *God gave his son for the world*, and that he is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world what else is meant, but that *the grace of forgiveness of sins is appointed unto all men*, so that the Gospel thereof is to be preached unto all creatures? In this respect the gentle love of GOD towards man is set forth unto us to be considered, whereby he would not have any to perish, but all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. But for all that, this general grace has some conditions going withal, of which we will speak hereafter.¹⁵

The doctrine of unlimited satisfaction was held by Martin Luther,¹⁶ Rudolf Gualther,¹⁷ Juan De Valdes,¹⁸ as well as the English Reformers, such as Richard Hooper,¹⁹ and Thomas Cranmer²⁰ and many others. All these and others held to a doctrine of vicarious satisfaction wherein Christ stood in the place of all men, receiving in their place the curse and wrath due to all of them. One could easily say that the original Reformation doctrine of unlimited satisfaction is the forgotten doctrine of the Reformation. Further, in terms of actual history, this demonstrates to us that contemporary with Calvin there was a doctrine of satisfaction which *did not* entail a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone, as expressed in the modern five-point Calvinist orthodoxy. Nettles’ first assertion, then, demonstrates that his historical analysis is system driven, that it is top-down, deductivist and *a priori*. However, when we compare Calvin to Zwingli, Bullinger, and Musculus, among others, we find identical expressions and language relating to the nature and extent of Christ’s death. Those who argue that Calvin held to a limited satisfaction cannot explain how it could be that when Calvin uses these identical expressions they did not mean the same for Calvin as they did for these other Reformers. On the other hand, reading Calvin in the light of his own historical context, gives us room to read

¹⁵Wolfgangus Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, trans. by John Merton (London: Imprinted by Henry Bynneman, 1578), 577-78. Emphasis added.

¹⁶For a sample of Luther’s many statements, see *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955), 2:384; 3:372; 5:220; 12:371; 13:239-40; 19:102.; 22:459; 23:184-85; 24:279; 26:37-38, 277-81, 282, 283-84, 285-86, 287; 40:14; and 51:316-17.

¹⁷For example, Gualther says, “And so it is necessary to have Christ’s death preached in these days, that all men might understand the Son of God died for their sins, and that they were the authors thereof.” Radulpe Gualthere, *An Hundred, threescore and fifteen Sermons, upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. by John Bridges (London: 1572), 108.

¹⁸Valdes: “Where it is especially to be understood that the duty of the Evangelical preacher is to persuade himself to know no other thing in this world but Christ crucified, since it is his proper office to publish the indulgence or general pardon made to men, confirmed by the blood of Christ, which He shed on the Cross; his duty is to preach nothing else but Christ crucified . . . for that in Christ, when hanging on the Cross, God punished the sins of all men, and for that in slaying His own flesh on the Cross, Christ slew that of all men.” Juan de Valdes, *Juan de Valdés Commentary Upon St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Church at Corinth* (London: Trüber & Co, 1883), 30-31.

¹⁹Hooper explicitly affirmed that Christ died in the place of all sinners who have lived, now live and shall live. See John Hooper, “Extracts From a Brief and Clear Confession of the Christian Faith,” in *Writings of Dr. John Hooper* (London: Religious Tract Society, [1800s]), 419.

²⁰Thomas Cranmer, “Disputations at Oxford,” in *The Writing and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP, 1844), 1:395.

Calvin in a more historically accurate manner, such that the *a priori* assumption of “limited satisfaction” is undercut and removed.

As an example, in the following quotation, Calvin rehearses a hypothetical speech Christ might say to a person on the day of judgment:

Behold our Lord Jesus Christ the Lord of glory, abased himself for a time, as says S. Paul. Now if there were no more but this, that he being the fountain of life, became a moral man, and that he having dominion over the angels of heaven, took upon him the shape of a servant, *yea even to shed his blood for our redemption*, and in the end to suffer *the curse that was due unto us* (Gal 3:13):²¹ were it convenient that notwithstanding all this, he should nowadays in recompense be torn to pieces, by stinking mouths of such as name themselves Christians? For when they swear by his blood, by his death, by his wounds and by whatsoever else: is it not a crucifying of God’s son again as much as in them lies, and as a rending of him in pieces? And are not such folk worthy to be cut off from God’s Church, yea, and even from the world, and to be no more numbered in the array of creatures? Should our Lord Jesus have such reward at our hands, for his abasing and humbling of himself after that manner? (Mich 6:30). . . . For when the son of God, who is ordained to be judge of the world (John 5:22), shall come at the last day: he may well say to us: how now Sirs? You have borne my name, you have been baptised in remembrance of me and record that *I was your redeemer*, I have drawn you out of the dungeons where into you were plunged, I delivered you from endless death by *suffering most cruel death myself*, and for the same cause I became man, and *submitted myself even to the curse of GOD my father, that you might be blessed by my grace and by my means*: and behold the reward that you have yielded me for all this, is that you have (after a sort) torn me in pieces and made a jestingstock of me, and *the death that I suffered for you has been made a mockery among you*, the blood which is the washing and cleansing of your souls has been as good as trampled under your feet, and to be short, you have taken occasion to ban and blaspheme me, as though I had been some wretched and cursed creature. When the sovereign judge shall charge us with these things, I pray you will it not be as thundering upon us, *to ding us down to the bottom of hell?* Yes: and yet are there very few that think upon it.²²

Note the critical elements. Christ suffers the curse of the law and wrath of the Father for this person, and yet this person is not ultimately saved. Calvin also identifies

²¹Calvin, as does Luther (Martin Luther, “Sermons,” in *Luther’s Works*, 51:316–317), references Galatians 3:13 many times in his writings with a universal intent. For example, he writes, “Now, since the Son of God, although He was not only pure, but purity itself, still was *the representative of the human race*, He subjected Himself to the Law; and (as Paul teaches) submitted Himself to the Law, “to redeem them that were under the Law.” (Galatians 3:13, and 4:5.). John Calvin, *Leviticus* 12:2. And again: “It follows, therefore, either that he was crucified in vain, or *that our curse was laid upon him*, in order that we might be delivered from it. Now, he does not say that Christ was cursed, but, which is still more, that he was a curse,—intimating, *that the curse of all men was laid upon him*’ (Isaiah 53:6.).” John Calvin, *Galatians* 3:13.

²²John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 196. Emphasis added. Often it is claimed that such Calvin quotations are taken out of context. Readers are invited to peruse Calvin’s many universal statements in context found on the following webpage: “The Genius and Complexity of John Calvin: Citations From Calvin on the Unlimited Work of Expiation and Redemption of Christ” (<http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=230>).

“intentionality” in Christ’s suffering for this person: so that he “might be blessed by my grace.” If we were to assume that Calvin held to the “substitutionary” satisfaction defined by Nettles and others, such hypothetical language could never have been sensible to Calvin. This “rehearsal” demonstrates that Calvin could conceptualize a form of vicarious satisfaction, wherein, the person for whom satisfaction was made might fail to be saved. What would be the point of an impossible hypothetical presented as a pastoral counseling? Nor is this a case where Rainbow’s interpretative hermeneutic is applicable, for, as Calvin rehearses, Christ is speaking, no less, to a perishing sinner, for the resurrected Christ, the line of demarcation between the elect and the non-elect has never been “unclear.”²³

Calvin and the Doctrines of Sufficiency and Satisfaction

The third critical assumption in Nettle’s argument is his conflating of Calvin’s sufficiency-efficiency doctrine with that of John Owen’s later doctrine of sufficiency. Regarding Calvin’s apparent universalism, Nettles says,

The affirmations of universal provision in other passages should be filtered through two realities. One, Calvin did receive the formula that Christ’s death was sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect. He affirms this in connection with his exegesis of I John 2:2, a passage to be quoted later, and in his polemical treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*. This is the same view stated later by the Synod of Dort under the second head of doctrine, articles three through six, and also affirmed by John Owen. Looking at the redemptive work of God from the standpoint of men, all that God provides for the reclaiming of fallen humanity is set before them as theirs if they will but take it. (299, emphasis added)

And then later Nettles says,

His universal language, therefore, in relation to Christ’s atoning work, without exception, finds its meaning in the context of these three things: one, Christ alone is the savior of all who will be saved and there is no other savior; two, it is a linguistic device to express the expansion of the Messiah’s saving work beyond the Jews to the whole world, that is, the New Covenant inclusion of the Gentiles, the uncircumcised; three, Calvin explicitly says that Christ’s propitiatory work, both in justification and intercession, does not include the reprobate, and thus includes only the elect. (308)

First, this misunderstands the doctrine of Christ’s sufficiency as set out by Lombard, Calvin, the Synod of Dort, even the revised version of Owen and others. Second, Nettles reproduces his mistaken reading of Owen in his earlier work *By His Grace and For His Glory*. Owen’s real doctrine of sufficiency is a *hypothetical* sufficiency for those not elected. It is not an actual sufficiency for all men.²⁴ For Owen, there is no sufficient provision for all men as men. There is only a sufficient provision for all men *who come to him*. It is a sufficiency “for all” which is only hypothetical; “if they come to him” they will find a sufficient provision for their sins. This is not an actual sufficiency for all men, simply considered. Owen writes,

²³See Rainbow, *Will of God and The Cross*, 173.

²⁴See Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 302-414.

Sufficient we say, then, was the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of the whole world, and for the expiation of all the sins of all and every man in the world. *This sufficiency of his sacrifice has a twofold rise: First, The dignity of the person that did offer and was offered. Secondly, The greatness of the pain he endured, by which he was able to bear, and did undergo, the whole curse of the law and wrath of God due to sin. And this sets out the innate, real, true worth and value of the blood-shedding of Jesus Christ. This is its own true internal perfection and sufficiency. That it should be applied unto any, made a price for them, and become beneficial to them, according to the worth that is in it, is external to it, doth not arise from it, but merely depends upon the intention and will of God. It was in itself of infinite value and sufficiency to have been made a price to have bought and purchased all and every man in the world. That it did formally become a price for any is solely to be ascribed to the purpose of God, intending their purchase and redemption by it. . . . Hence may appear what is to be thought of that old distinction of the schoolmen, embraced and used by divers protestant divines, though by others again rejected, namely, "That Christ died for all in respect of the sufficiency of the ransom he paid, but not in respect of the efficacy of its application;" or, "The blood of Christ was a sufficient price for the sins of all the world;" which last expression is corrected by some, and thus asserted, "That the blood of Christ was sufficient to have been made a price for all;" which is most true, as was before declared: for its being a price for all or some doth not arise from its own sufficiency, worth, or dignity, but from the intention of God and Christ using it to that purpose, as was declared; and, therefore, it is denied that the blood of Christ was a sufficient price and ransom for all and every one, not because it was not sufficient, but because it was not a ransom.*²⁵

For Owen, therefore, the sufficiency of the satisfaction has two divisible elements. There is an internal (and abstracted) sufficiency which speaks to its inherent value. This guards Owen from falling into the trap of suggesting that Christ *suffered so much* for so much sin. That is, had God elected more, Christ would not have had to suffer more. But there is also the external or extrinsic aspect of the sufficiency of the satisfaction. For Owen, there is no external sufficiency for all men. The internal and external sufficiency relative to all mankind is purely hypothetical: *had* God elected more, then the one intrinsically infinitely valuable and sufficient satisfaction, *would have been* sufficient for them as well. The critical sentence fragment from Owen is, "therefore, it is denied that the blood of Christ was a sufficient price and ransom for all and every one, not because it was not sufficient, but because it was not a ransom." For Owen, Christ did not formally lay down a redemption "price" for all men, therefore, there is no actual sufficiency for all men.²⁶ This is a marked

²⁵ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould (London: Johnston and Hunter, 1851), 10:295-296. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Later in *Death of Death*, Owen scorns the idea of an actual external, albeit non-effectual, sufficiency for all men. Owen: "Fifthly, If the words are to be understood to signify all and every one in the world, then is the whole assertion useless as to the chief end intended,—namely, to administer consolation to believers; for what consolation can arise from hence unto any believer, that Christ was a propitiation for them that perish? Yea, to say that he was a sufficient propitiation for them, though not effectual, will yield them no more comfort than it would have done Jacob and his sons to have heard from Joseph that he had corn enough, sufficient to sustain them, but that he would do so was altogether uncertain; for had he told

departure from the earlier Reformation tradition that Christ did formally lay down a sufficient price for all men. Owen's distinction of the internal sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction retains continuity with the Anselmic tradition. His latter distinction of the external sufficiency, however, departs from it. This departure for the Reformed scholastic orthodox became the new standard from the first half of the 16th century, and it is the revision of the Lombardian formula which is generally understood and adopted by modern Reformed writers.

Owen's language matches that of Witsius, Turretin, and many others who modified the Lombardian Formula.²⁷ Herman Witsius' expression of the formula is a good case in point: "That the obedience and sufferings of Christ, considered in themselves, are, on the account of the infinite dignity of the person, of that value, *as to have been sufficient for redeeming not only all and every man in particular, but many myriads besides, had it so pleased God and Christ, that he should have undertaken and satisfied for them.*"²⁸

Unlike the revised version, Peter Lombard, and later Thomas Aquinas, held that Christ actually sustained a universal satisfaction for all sins, which effected a universally sufficient satisfaction for all sinners.²⁹ Christ also accomplished this universally sufficient satisfaction with the intention that the elect be effectually saved. This formula, however, was probably revised first by Theodore Beza. Pieter Rouwendal explains:

After the Reformation, Beza was the first to criticize this formula. During his conflict with Jacob Andreae, the latter maintained that Christ had "satisfied sufficiently for the sins of all individuals." Beza remarked that this, if rightly understood, was true, but it was said "very roughly and ambiguously, as well as barbarously." Beza's criticism of barbarous language was not against words such as "sufficient" and "efficient," but against the ambiguous use of the word "for" (*pro*). The humanistically educated Beza was skilled in Latin and understood that the preposition *pro* declared a plan and effect. Hence, the statement "Christ died for . . ." can only be completed by "the elect" or some equivalent. Calvin himself was dissatisfied with the formula sufficient-efficient, as will be shown in a separate paragraph, but he was not as critical as Beza. Calvin nowhere criticized the content of the formula, but thought it did not answer all questions regarding the atonement. Beza, however, criticized the formula itself as "ambiguous and barbarous." Beza did not deny the all-sufficiency of Christ's merit, but he denied that it was the intention of Christ to die for all men.³⁰

them he would sustain them sufficiently, though not effectually, they might have starved notwithstanding his courtesy" (*Works*, 10:337). Owen misunderstands the import of the classic doctrine of the sufficiency, and in his analogy he fails to insert the condition of faith. The sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction was never intended to communicate any certainty to any sinner apart from the presence of faith.

²⁷See, for example, Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:458-459.

²⁸Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants* (Escondido, CA: The Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1:256. Emphasis added.

²⁹See Peter Lombard, *The Sentences* (Canada: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008), 3.20.5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 3.48.2, 3.49.3; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 4.55.25, 27, 29.

³⁰Rouwendal, 319-320. Thomas notes the same point with regard to Beza: "Thus the statement that Christ died sufficiently for all could only be accepted in a hypothetical sense, which to Beza, made

In English, as in Latin, there is what is called a hypothetical contrary-to-fact subjunctive. Normally this is identified by statements which contain a conditional, *if* or *had*, with *could have been*, or *should have been*, or *might have been*, and so on. For example, "If John had reached out, he would have been saved," or, "Had Mary studied for her exam, she would not have failed." The point of this form of the subjunctive is that it is not actually the case that John was saved, nor that Mary passed her exam. Owen, Turretin, Witsius, along with Abraham Booth³¹ and others, all use this form of expression. To paraphrase Witsius, "Had it pleased God to elect more, the satisfaction *would have been* sufficient for them, in that, for then Christ *would have* undertaken to make a satisfaction for them as well." The reality is, as God did not elect more so Christ did not satisfy for them, the death of Christ is not extrinsically or externally sufficient for them, only that it could have been sufficient for them.³² Here the sufficiency is only a potential sufficiency for all. The satisfaction's internal sufficiency functions for Owen, Witsius, and others in this way: 1) Christ need not suffer *so much* for so much sin, and 2) all who actually come to Christ, will never fail to find a completely sufficient satisfaction for their sins.³³ On the other hand, Calvin held to the classic Lombardian expression of the formula, not the revised Bezarian version.³⁴ To read the revision back into Calvin is anachronistic. It is highly implausible, therefore, to read Calvin's universal statements as expressions of the revised hypothetical contrary-to-fact sufficiency-efficiency formula. If we must insist that his universal statements be read in the light of the sufficiency-efficiency formula, then they are to be read in the light of the original Lombardian version which advocated an actual universal vicarious satisfaction for all men.

The second critical point is Nettles' stress on the human perspective. As emphasized in the above quotation, he imagines we can look at the redemptive work of God in two ways. We can look at it from the perspective of what God actually says and actually accomplishes, or we can look at it *from the human standpoint*. Nettles writes,

Even though only by the secret operations of His electing grace does the Spirit apply any of the benefits, *from our standpoint we are to regard every person as a candidate to receive those blessings that Christ has died to procure*, and that their refusal is the result of sin, not of non-election per se, and constitutes a criminal resistance to the divine benevolence (300, emphasis added).

This assertion forms the core presupposition which Nettles will invoke to explain the apparent universal statements in Calvin. Whenever Calvin speaks of Christ dying for all men or the world, Nettles assumes that Calvin merely meant to communicate

it irrelevant;" Thomas, 57.

³¹Abraham Booth, "Divine Justice Essential to the Divine Character," in *The Works of Abraham Booth* (London: Printed by J. Haddon, 1813), 3:61.

³²In his work, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, Nettles creates a false dichotomy between Abraham Booth and John Owen. Because of his misreading of William Shedd and Owen, Nettles posits that Owen taught an actual external sufficiency for all, while Abraham Booth did not. However, when both men are read in context, both held to only a hypothetical sufficiency for all, namely, *had* it so pleased God to elect more, the death of Christ *would have been* sufficient for them, too (See Nettles, *By His Grace*, 302-314).

³³Undergirding the theological point of the sufficiency of Christ's death is the related question of savability. If Christ did not sustain a penal relationship with all men, then his penal remedy cannot be sufficient for all men—only that it could have been sufficient for all men, had he also sustained a penal relationship for them as well.

³⁴A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1868), 333.

the idea that, from our perspective, we are to regard all men as fit candidates for salvation, and that a provision of salvation has been made for them.

This idea is not new. Rainbow, for instance, applies the same interpretative method to Calvin's many statements that there are souls who have been redeemed by Christ, who yet perish in hell. Rainbow even extends this to Calvin's understanding of general love and the divine revealed desire that all men be saved. Rainbow writes,

Did Calvin mean that Christ died for every one of these wretched unbelievers? Did Calvin base this exhortation to pray for all men on the doctrine that Christ died for all individuals? Before this question can be answered, we must take some account of Calvin's general view of the activities of Christians toward unbelievers. . . . As in the case of church discipline and pastoral care, Calvin believed that Christian activity must be based, not on the elective decree of God (about which we have no firm knowledge in cases other than our own), but a practical working assumption. The assumption in the case of unbelievers was one which dovetailed with the universal saving will of God revealed in preaching: God loves all sinners and wills all sinners to be saved. *This we have seen, was not for Calvin theologically true. But it was the assumption which has to be made concerning Christian activity toward the world of men outside of the church.*³⁵

Rainbow further states,

In the final analysis, Calvin's doctrine of church activity toward the world was not unlike his doctrine of church discipline. . . . In both cases, there is an important working assumption which must be made for this help to be given: the wayward brother, it is that because he is a member of the visible church he is a blood-bought soul; with the unbeliever outside the church, it is that Christ's death extends to him as well. In both cases the assumption is based on a degree of ignorance about election and reprobation. And in both cases, the assumption creates a kind of ethical imperative which to ignore is really to despise the blood of Christ and the souls for whom it was shed. So, *in the end, Calvin extended a kind of "judgment of charity" even beyond the pale of the visible church. Only on the last day will the line of demarcation between the elect and the reprobate be as clear to human perception as it now is to God, and only then will God's treatment of human beings fully correspond to his decree.*³⁶

Rainbow is incorrect to claim that Calvin did not believe it was theologically true that God loved all mankind and truly desired the salvation of all men by the revealed will. The evidence for this in Calvin is so overwhelming that Rainbow's comment is indefensible.³⁷ Second, if Rainbow is wrong on the first point, then there is no support for his second assertion that when Calvin said Christ suffered for and redeemed all men he simply meant it as a judgment of charity. Third, Rainbow, like Nettles, adduces no textual evidence from Calvin where he indicates he only meant

³⁵Rainbow, *Will of God and The Cross*, 171. Emphasis added.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 173. Emphasis added.

³⁷See Calvin's various comments on such verses as 2 Pet 3:9, John 3:16-17, Ps 81:13, Matt 23:37, and Lam 3:33 in his *Commentaries*.

to speak “from the human point of view.”

There is no evidence from Calvin that he meant to suggest that we are to treat the unsaved “as if it were” the case that Christ has died for them, too, as he has died for us. It is simply an inference which contradicts all the *prima facie* evidence from Calvin. Nettles cites Calvin on Romans 5:18. First the text from Calvin:

He makes this favor 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 (Calvin on *Romans* 5:18, emphasis added).

Regarding this Nettles says,

The language is carefully constructed, and Calvin’s precise affirmation will become clearer below. One can see that what Christ accomplished through His death, *was accomplished for the world*, a reality that justifies preaching the Messianic redemption to all nations. The gospel also is offered to all men irrespective of their being Jew or Gentile. Though so openly and freely declared, not all of those to whom the gospel is preached receive Christ (300, emphasis added).

Nettles is trading on an ambiguity. The question should be, Does the “world” function for Nettles in the same way it does here for Calvin? The problem is that Nettles provides no evidence from Calvin that the term “world” is to be understood phenomenologically. In as much as Rainbow suggests that Calvin is exhorting us simply to act “as if” Christ had died for all men, when in fact he had not, Nettles is advocating the same basic idea. The real line of investigation should be how Calvin means to employ the term “world” in the wider context of his writings. Given that Calvin specifically says Christ “suffered for” the *sins* of “all the world,” the most natural reading of Calvin suggests a universal vicarious satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. On what *textual* grounds from Calvin on Romans 5 could Nettles suggest otherwise? Nettles applies his interpretative method to another famous Calvin statement:

“Which he hath purchased.” The four reasons, whereby Paul doth carefully prick forward the pastors to do their duty diligently, because the Lord hath given no small pledge of his love toward the *Church in shedding his own blood for it*. Whereby it appears how precious it is to him; and surely there is nothing which ought more vehemently to urge pastors to do their duty joyfully, than if they consider that the price of the blood of Christ is committed to them. For hereupon it follows, that unless they take pains in the Church, *the lost souls are not only imputed to them*, but they be also guilty of sacrilege, because they have profaned the holy blood of the Son of God, *and have made the redemption gotten by him to be of none effect*, so much as in them lies. And this is a most cruel offense, if, through our sluggishness, the death of Christ do not only become vile or base, but the fruit thereof be also abolished and perish; and it is said that God hath purchased the Church, to the end we may know that he would have it remain wholly to himself, because it is meet and right that he possess those whom he hath redeemed (Calvin on *Acts* 20:28, emphasis added).

Nettles comments,

Calvin represented this as the danger of the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. From a purely *phenomenological standpoint*, the potential within every aspect of saving truth can be rendered of no effect by the unfaithfulness of men and their blind refusal to consent to the purpose of God in each part. Faithless ministers not only endanger souls but profane the sacred blood of the Son of God and make ‘useless the redemption acquired by Him, as far as they are concerned.’ It is not useless in the infallible purpose of God but ‘as far as they are concerned;’ to the degree that their faithless work is concerned in the matter, it is useless (301, emphasis added).

Nettles would have us believe that Calvin only means to suggest that the redemption price only appears to have been voided from the human point of view. While there is some truth to this, Nettles cannot adduce evidence which indicates that Calvin spoke of the redemption of the visible church as only a *phenomenological* redemption.

The next text of interest which Nettles cites is Calvin on 2 Pet 2:1. Here is Calvin’s commentary on 2 Pet 2:1 and Jude 4:

Though Christ may be denied in various ways, yet Peter, as I think, refers here to what is expressed by Jude, that is, when the grace of God is turned into lasciviousness; for Christ redeemed us, that he might have a people separated from all the pollutions of the world, and devoted to holiness, and innocency. They, then, who throw off the bridle, and give themselves up to all kinds of licentiousness, *are not unjustly said to deny Christ by whom they have been redeemed* (Calvin on 2 Pet 2:1, emphasis added).

And, indeed, in the Second Epistle of Peter, Christ alone is mentioned, and there he is called Lord. But He means that Christ is denied, *when they who had been redeemed by his blood*, become again the vassals of the Devil, *and thus render void as far as they can that incomparable price* (Calvin on Jude 4, emphasis added).

Regarding Calvin’s comments on 2 Pet 2:1, Nettles says,

We see the same defeat of grace in Calvin’s look at 2 Peter 2 when he pointed out that ‘those who throw over the traces and plunge themselves into every kind of license are not unjustly said to deny Christ, by whom they were redeemed.’ That does not mean that Christ’s purpose to ‘have us as a people separated from all the iniquities of the world, devoted to holiness and purity’ will fail in any instance (302).

Nettles’ phenomenological argument suffers from a serious flaw that brings us face to face with the problematic of his method and interpretation. Nettles’ hypothesis proposes that when Calvin spoke in terms of universal satisfaction he merely meant to describe Christ’s redemption from the human point of view, that is, no man is to be *a priori* excluded from redemption. We are to “view” all men as potential candidates of salvation and redemption. When we meet individuals within the church, we are to view them from this charitable perspective. When we meet individuals outside of the church, similarly, we are to also see them in this most charitable light as viable

candidates for redemption, for, as Nettles would explain, there is provision enough, on the terms of limited satisfaction, for them as much as there is for any man in the world. As noted, this is a modification and extension of Rainbow's "judgment of charity" argument.

Evaluation and Response

Calvin and the Language of Redemption

How can we test this hypothesis? What evidence could one adduce to falsify this hypothesis? Or what evidence would make it improbable? I would argue that in Calvin's comments on 2 Pet 2:1 and Jude 4 we have exactly such falsifying data which invalidates Nettles' "point of view" hermeneutic. We have here a case of known apostates, men who have left the church, repudiating it by denying Christ anew. From the human point of view, these apostates are known exactly for what they are, or at least in the eyes of Peter and Jude. They are men who have been accused a second time. Peter says, "These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, *for whom the black darkness has been reserved*" (2 Pet 2:17). Jude writes, "For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, *those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation*, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). If we assume for the moment that Calvin really did hold to limited redemption, on what basis would it have been sensible for him to imagine that known apostates, men doomed to hell according to the inspired writers, had been redeemed by Christ? Rainbow's judgment of charity idea falls apart at this point. Nettles' "human point of view" hermeneutic suffers the same problem. The *human point of view* is clearly laid out for us by Peter and Jude: these men are doomed to hell. How meaningful is it for someone to propose that, from our standpoint we are to regard these persons as candidates to receive those blessings that Christ has died to procure, or further, that they have been redeemed?

To state this in another way, how sensible would it have been for John Owen to say of these apostates, "They have been redeemed"? Note, Calvin does not say, that we, or Peter or Jude, had *assumed* they *had been* redeemed. Surely the more plausible explanation is that Calvin believed that in some actual sense, in some objective and real sense, Christ had redeemed these men. These are not the only statements we have from Calvin which further demonstrates the inapplicability of Nettles' interpretation of Calvin here. Calvin, for example, says, "It follows, moreover, that the *poor souls whom our Lord Jesus Christ has bought* so dearly that he did not spare himself to save them, *perish and are given into Satan's possession*."³⁸ Calvin expressly affirms that there are souls which "perish" and are given into Satan's possession but which had been "redeemed." Calvin could not have been talking about some hypothetical counterfactual provision of salvation which would have been for them had they not fallen away. What limited satisfaction advocate has ever spoken of redeemed souls perishing in hell?

Again, to come back to our earlier question, "What evidence could Nettles present from Calvin to suggest that the *prima facie* reading should not be the accepted reading here?" When unbelievers are in view, the same problem presents itself. Calvin later writes,

³⁸Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 525. Emphasis added.

However, St. Paul speaks here expressly of the saints and the faithful, but this does not imply that we should not pray *generally for all men*. For *wretched unbelievers* and the ignorant have a great need to be pleaded for with God; *behold them on the way to perdition*. If we saw a beast at the point of perishing, we would have pity on it. 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*? If we see then a poor soul going thus to perdition, ought we not to be moved with compassion and kindness, and should we not desire God to apply the remedy?³⁹

To incorporate Rainbow's terminology, "What actual evidence from the text of Calvin is there to believe that Calvin did not think this was theologically true, but only an *assumption* for the sake of Christian ministry to these unsaved, yet all the while, there is actually no actual satisfaction accomplished for them, that is, "in their behalf"? Calvin, as expositor of his own theology writes,

And that speaks not only to those who are charged with the responsibility of teaching God's word, but to *everyone in general*. For on this point the Holy Spirit, who must be our guide, is not disparaging the right way to teach. If we wish to serve our Master, that is the way we must go about it. *We must make every effort to draw everybody to the knowledge of the gospel. For when we see people going to hell who have been created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that must indeed stir us to do our duty and instruct them and treat them with all gentleness and kindness as we try to bear fruit this way.⁴⁰

From the human point of view, these men are "going to hell." Note the tense again, and that he clearly speaks to an accomplished reality, not to a potential one. Calvin again:

And now there is another reason we must extend this teaching a bit further. It is, as I have already said, that, *seeing that men are created in the image of God and that their souls have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ*, we must try in every way available to us to draw them to the knowledge of the gospel.⁴¹

On the other hand, when Luke speaks of the priests, he is speaking of the responsibility of those who hold *public office*. Principally, they are ordained to bear God's word. So when some falsehood appears or Satan's wicked disseminations proliferate, it is their duty to be vigilant, confront the situation, and do everything in their power to protect poor people from being poisoned by false teachings and *to keep the souls redeemed by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ from perishing, from entering into eternal death*.⁴²

The language of "redeemed souls perishing" is not unique to Calvin. For

³⁹Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 684-85. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰Calvin, *Sermons on Acts 1-7* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 587-588. Emphasis added.

⁴¹Ibid., 593. Emphasis added.

⁴²Ibid., 112. Emphasis added.

example, Rudolph Gualther, a near contemporary of Calvin, wrote,

But this man of sin . . . will be under the judgment of no man, *although he bring infinite souls of men, (that were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ)*, and bind innumerable people prentices, with the common enemy of mankind the Devil, *unto the slaughter-house of everlasting damnation.*⁴³

It is undeniable that Gualther held to an actual unlimited satisfaction for all the sins of all men, without exception. His language, therefore, demands to be taken in a straightforward manner. Luther's wording is nearly identical:

But you are no longer of the church, or members of the church, for in this holy church of God you are building your own new apostate church, the devil's brothel with limitless whoredom, idolatry, and innovation, by which *you corrupt those who have been baptized and redeemed along with yourselves. And you swallow them down through the jaws of hell into the abyss of hell itself, with a countless multitude, along with the terrible wailing and deep sorrow of those who see this with spiritual eyes and recognize it.*⁴⁴

From another source, William Tyndale:

And I wonder that M. More can laugh at it, and not rather weep for compassion, *to see the souls for which Christ shed his blood to perish.* And yet I believe that your *holy church* will not refuse at Easter to receive the tithes of all that such blind people rob, as well as they dispense with all false gotten good that is brought them; and will lay the ensample of Abraham and Melchizedec for them.⁴⁵

In the original Reformed polemic against Rome, one line of argument was that due to Roman Catholic indulgences and negligence countless multitudes of souls which had been redeemed by the blood of Christ were being lost to eternal destruction. With that understanding, statements like these from Calvin now make perfect sense:

Hence it ought to be observed, that whenever the Church is afflicted, the example of the Prophet ought to move us to be touched (*sumpatheia*) with compassion, if we are not harder than iron; for we are altogether unworthy of being reckoned in the number of the children of God, and added to the holy Church, if we do not dedicate ourselves, and all that we have, to the Church, in such a manner that we are not separate from it in any respect. Thus, when in the present day the Church is afflicted by so many and so various calamities, and *innumerable souls are perishing, which Christ redeemed with his own blood*, we must be barbarous and savage if we are not touched with any grief. And especially the ministers of the word ought to be moved by this feeling of grief, because, being

⁴³Rudolphe Gualter, *Antichrist* (Imprinted in Sothwarke by Christopher Trutheall, 1556), 120b and 121b. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴Martin Luther, "Against Hanswurst," in *Luther's Works*, 41:209-210. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵William Tyndale, "Answer to Sir Thomas Moore's Dialogue," in *The Works of the English Reformers William Tyndale and John Frith*, ed. Thomas Russell (London: Printed for Ebenezer Palmer, 1831), 2:131. Emphasis added.

appointed to keep watch and to look at a distance, they ought also to groan when they perceive the tokens of approaching ruin. (Calvin, *Isaiah 22:4*, emphasis added)

When the language of Calvin is compared to Luther we again see strong similarities of expression. Both make mention of God's compassion to countless souls perishing who have been redeemed in the context of churchly indifference, and the lack of true pastoral care and ecclesial oversight.

Calvin has many statements where he apparently asserts that Christ shed his blood for the whole world. For example, he comments, "Also when we minister the Lord's Supper, we rehearse what was said by our Lord Jesus Christ: This is my body which is delivered for you: *this is my blood which is shed for the salvation of the world* (Matt 26:26 and 1 Cor 11:24)."⁴⁶ This essentially parallels Calvin's statements regarding texts which use the phrase "the many" in reference to the death of Christ, especially his comment on Matt 20:28. In many of these instances, Calvin expressly notes that "many" means "all" as in Romans 5, where "all" in Adam die. He also explicitly connects them to John 3:16. When his comments are seen cumulatively, there is no reasonable way not to take him at his word:

That, then, is how our Lord Jesus bore the sins and iniquities of many. But in fact, this word "many" is often as good as equivalent to "all." And indeed, our Lord Jesus was offered to all the world. For it is not speaking of three or four when it says: "For God so loved the world, that he spared not His only Son." But yet we must notice that the Evangelist adds in this passage: "That whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but obtain eternal life." Our Lord Jesus suffered for all, and there is neither great nor small who is not inexcusable today, for we can obtain salvation through him. Unbelievers who turn away from Him and who deprive themselves of him by their malice are today doubly culpable. For how will they excuse their ingratitude in not receiving the blessing in which they could share by faith?⁴⁷

Yet 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" (Calvin, *Isaiah 53:12*, emphasis added).

The word "many" (*pollon*) is not put definitely for a fixed number, but for a large number; *for he contrasts himself with all others*. And in this sense it is used in Romans 5:15, where Paul does not speak of any part of men, *but embraces the whole human race* (Calvin on *Matthew 20:28*, emphasis added).⁴⁸

⁴⁶Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 1208. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, trans. T.H.L. Paker (Cambridge: James Clark, 2002), 140-41.

⁴⁸Compare Thomas Tymme's translation of Marlorate's quotation of Calvin on this passage: "But Christ here puts, many, not definitely for any certain number, but for a great number: because he opposes or sets himself against many. And in this sense the Apostle Paul takes it when he says: 'For through the sin of the one, many be dead: much more plenteous upon many was the grace of God, and gift by grace: which was of one man Jesus Christ.' In the which place Paul speaks not of any certain number of men,

“Which is shed for many.” By the word “many” *he means not a part of the world only, but the whole human race*; for he contrasts many with one; as if he had said, that he will not be the Redeemer of one man only, but will die in order to deliver many from the condemnation of the curse. It must at the same time be observed, however, that by the words for you, as related by Luke, Christ directly addresses the disciples, and exhorts every believer to apply to his own advantage the shedding of blood. Therefore, when we approach to the holy table, *let us not only remember in general that the world has been redeemed by the blood of Christ, but let every one consider for himself that his own sins have been expiated* (Calvin on *Mark 14:24*, emphasis added).

“To bear,” or, “take away sins,” is to free from guilt by his satisfaction those who have sinned. He says the sins of many, that is, of all, as in *Romans 5:15*. *It is yet certain that not all receive benefit from the death of Christ; but this happens, because their unbelief prevents them*. At the same time this question is not to be discussed here, for the Apostle is not speaking of the few or of the many to whom the death of Christ may be available; but he simply means that he died for others and not for himself; and therefore he opposes many to one (Calvin on *Hebrews 9:28*, emphasis added).

From these statements we can see that “the many” for Calvin is the same as “all” in *Rom 5:15*: “But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.” In *Rom 5:15*, it is obvious that the phenomenological reading is impossible. Nor could it be objected that “all” denotes “classes” of men, but not individual persons. That being obviously so for us and for Calvin, our only reasonable conclusion can be that “the many” in such passages as *Heb 9:28* was literally equivalent to the “all” of *Romans 5:15*. Furthermore, Calvin writes,

Thus ye see in effect, whereunto we should refer this saying, where Saint Paul tells us expressly, that the Son of God gave himself. And he contents not himself to say, that *Christ gave himself for the world in common*, for that had been but a slender saying; but [shows that] *every [one] of us must apply to himself particularly*, the virtue of the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas it is said that the Son of God was crucified, we must not only think that *the same was done for the Redemption of the world*: but also *every [one] of us must on his own behalf join himself to our Lord Jesus Christ, and conclude, It is for me that he has suffered. . . . Also when we receive the holy Supper*, every man takes his own portion, to show us that our Lord Jesus Christ is communicated unto us, yea even to every one of us. Saint Paul therefore doth purposely use that manner of speech, to the end we should not

but comprehends all mankind.” Augustine Marlorate, *A Catholike and Ecclesiastical Exposition of the Holy Gospel after S. Mathew, gathered out of all the singular and approved Deuines (which the Lorde hath geuen to his Churche) by Augustine Marlorate. And translated out of Latine into Englishe, by Thomas Tymme, Mimister, Sene and allowed according to the order appointed* (Imprinted at London in Fletestreate near vnto S. Dunstones churche, by Thomas Marshe, 1570), 453.

have any cold imagination, after the manner of diverse ignorant persons, which take themselves to be Christians, and yet in the meanwhile are as wretched beasts. But when we once know that *the thing which was done for the redemption of the whole world, pertains to every* [one] *of us severally*: it behooves every [one] of us to say also on his own behalf, The son of God hath loved me so dearly, that he has given himself to death for me . . . But when we once know that the thing which was *done for the redemption of the whole world, pertains to every* [one] *of us severally*.⁴⁹

There are a number of points that can be adduced. First, this language is strikingly similar to that of Bullinger:

It is true that the faithful man, by believing, before received the food that gives life, and still receives the same, but yet when he receives the sacrament, he receives something more. . . . Moreover the same man obeys the Lord's institution and commandment, and with a joyful mind gives thanks for his and *the redemption of all mankind*; and makes a faithful remembrance of the Lord's death, and witness the same before the church, of which body he is a member. This is also sealed to those which receive the sacrament, that the body of the Lord was given and *His blood shed, not only for men in general, but particularly for every faithful communicant whose meat and drink He is, to life everlasting*.⁵⁰

Calvin's communion language is almost a direct image of Bullinger's. The force of this argument is buttressed by the fact that it is undeniable that Bullinger held to universal redemption of all mankind and a universal satisfaction for all sin. For this, two more quotations will suffice:

Our Lord therefore became man, by the sacrifice of himself to make

⁴⁹John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1995), 299-300, 212-213. Emphasis added. All page numbers after the ellipsis refer to the Childress translation: John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 1997). See also Marlorate's interesting conflation of two Calvin comments: "That our savior Christ under the name of many, does mean not only a part of the world, *but all mankind also*. For he opposes or sets many against one: as if he should say that he is the redeemer not of one man only, but that he suffered death to deliver many from the guilt of sin, and curse. Even so in the fifth to the Romans, S. Paul takes many for all men, by a comparison between one and many [Rom. 5.]. Neither is there any doubt, but that Christ speaking here to a few, meant to make the doctrine common to more. Notwithstanding we must also not that in Luke, he speaking to his Disciples by name, exhorts all the faithful, to apply the effusion of his blood to their use. *Therefore, when we come to the Holy Table, let not only this general cogitation come into our mind, that the world is redeemed by the blood of Christ, but also let every man think with himself that Christ has satisfied for his sins.*" Augustine Marlorate, *Mathew*, 643-644. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰Heinrich Bullinger, "Chapter XXI Of the Holy Supper of the Lord," *The Second Helvetic Confession*, in James T. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries, in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 2:867-868. Emphasis added. Though this confession was first composed in Latin by Bullinger in 1562, and Calvin's *Sermons on Galatians* were preached earlier in the years 1557-1558, the striking similarity most probably reflects a common underlying theology. For example, compare Zwingli's statement: "But now I come to the words I quoted [Jn. 6:53]: 'Except ye eat,' i.e., *except ye firmly and heartily believe that Christ was slain for you, to redeem you, and that His blood was shed for you, to wash you thus redeemed* (for that is the way we are in the habit of showing bounty and kindness to captives—first freeing them by paying a ransom, then when freed washing away the filth with which they are covered), 'he have no life in you.' Since, therefore, *Christ alone was sacrificed for the human race*, He is the only One through whom we can come to the Father." Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1981), 128. Emphasis added.

satisfaction for us; on whom, as it were upon a goat for the sin-offering, when all the sins of the whole world were gathered together and laid, he by his death took away and purged them all: so that now the only sacrifice of God has satisfied for the sins of the whole world.⁵¹

And:

Also they declare by the way, whom he has redeemed: that is to wit, men of all tribes, etc. In which rehearsal he does imitate Daniel in the 7. chap. and signifies an universality, *for the Lord has died for all: but that all are not made partakers of this redemption, it is through their own fault.* For the Lord excludes no man, but him only *which through his own unbelief, and misbelief excludes himself.*⁵²

Coming back to Calvin, we can see that in these cases, Calvin's language mirrors the language of his contemporaries, which lends weight to the argument that Calvin's theology of satisfaction was continuous with them as well. We can see from the examples of Calvin's language of "redeemed souls perishing" and of the redemption of the world relative to the individual, striking parallels between his expression and that of Gualther, Luther, Tyndale and Bullinger, all of which held to an unlimited satisfaction and universal redemption.

The point then is this: Why are we to imagine that the same language for Calvin apparently meant something completely different? What evidence is there within the data of the various texts that he himself adopted a different understanding of the critical terms like "world" or "redeemed souls perishing"? In terms of the pure historical data, there is no evidence to suggest this reading. It appears that what drives the conclusions of Helm, Rainbow, and now Nettles, is not the actual historical texts understood in terms of their own historical contexts, but their own systematic theological pre-commitments. They approach Calvin assuming that he shares their own *a priori* theological presuppositions.

⁵¹Bullinger, *Decades*, 1st Decade, Sermon 7, 1: 136.

⁵²Henry Bullinger, *A Hundred Sermons Vpon the Apocalypse of Iesu Christ* (London: Printed by John Daye, Dwellyng ouer Aldersgate, 1573), 79-80. Emphasis added. Note the parallels here with Calvin's statement on Heb 9:26. There are too many such similarities of expressions between Calvin and his contemporary Reformers to suggest that it was Calvin, rather uniquely, who stood apart from his Reformed brothers and advocated a doctrine of limited satisfaction.