

**Review of Paul Helm, “Calvin, Indefinite Language, and Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*.**

**BY David Allen.**

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Paul Helm’s chapter attempts to defend the notion that Calvin’s indefinite language is “thoroughly consistent with being committed to definite atonement, and which cannot be used as convincing evidence that he denied it” (97).

Helm’s chapter brings nothing new to the table regarding Calvin’s view and is essentially the same argument he made in 1982 in his *Calvin and the Calvinists*. However, much has transpired since then on the question at hand. Helm does reference Clifford and Kennedy on the unlimited side, along with Rainbow and Nicole on the limited side, all of which appeared after 1982. However, he misses at least three important studies, all by Calvinists, which conclude Calvin held to unlimited atonement.

Curt Daniel’s 1983 Ph.D. dissertation, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” (University of Aberdeen) contains an extensive 50 page appendix entitled “Did John Calvin Teach Limited Atonement?” (pp. 776-828). He provides dozens of in-context quotations with careful analysis. Daniel addresses all of the passages in Calvin which proponents propose as indicating Calvin held to definite atonement, and thoroughly analyzes them. His conclusion that Calvin held to an unlimited atonement seems to be beyond a reasonable doubt.

Peter Rouwendal’s 2008 article is also overlooked by Helm. Rouwendal’s conclusion is striking. How could Calvin use the clear universal language with respect to the extent of the atonement if he indeed held to definite atonement? For Rouwendal, the universal propositions in Calvin’s works do prove negatively that he did not subscribe to particular atonement. Rather enigmatically, Rouwendal believes that Calvin’s universal propositions do indeed “falsify the conclusion that Calvin was a particularist, but are not sufficient to prove him a universalist.”<sup>1</sup>

This is quite problematic. Given that there are only two positions on the question of the atonement’s extent, Rouwendal’s demurral is unnecessary.

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<sup>1</sup> P. L. Rouwendal, “Calvin’s Forgotten Classical Position on the Extent of the Atonement: About Sufficiency, Efficiency, and Anachronism,” *WTJ* 70 (2008), 328.

Additionally, Helm fails to interact with the research of David Ponter, one of the librarians at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS, whose website, [www.calvinandcalvinism.com](http://www.calvinandcalvinism.com), contains extensive quotations and analysis of Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement, including an unpublished paper critiquing Nicole's arguments (and Helm's as well) for limited atonement.

Ponter's two part historical essay on Calvin's view of the extent of the atonement published in the *Southwestern Journal of Theology*<sup>2</sup> has taken the debate on Calvin to a new level and must now be reckoned with by all who affirm Calvin held to limited atonement. Ponter concludes that Calvin held to unlimited atonement.

Helm's approach to the issue is confusing and fraught with problems. For example, he writes: "... while Calvin did not commit himself to any version of the doctrine of definite atonement, his thought is consistent with that doctrine; that is, he did not deny it in express terms, but by other things that he most definitely did hold to, he may be said to be committed to that doctrine" (98). This borders on incoherence.

First, note carefully Helm's admission that Calvin did not commit himself to any version of the doctrine of definite atonement. I'm not sure how many versions there are of the view that Christ only substituted for the sins of the elect. I only know of one. But either way, Helm correctly acknowledges that Calvin did not commit himself to definite atonement.

Second, Helm avers Calvin's thought is "consistent" with definite atonement, which Helm specifies as Calvin did not "deny it in express terms." But this is logically problematic. Can it be said my thought is consistent with the view that the moon is composed of green cheese if I do not "deny in express terms" the proposition that the moon is made of green cheese? The logical fallacy is self-evident.

Third, Helm states that by means of other related concepts which Calvin did affirm, he may be said to be "committed" to the doctrine of definite atonement. Helm is attempting to show that, by entailment, definite atonement results from some of the other doctrines or concepts Calvin affirms. Unless all of Calvin's universal statements can somehow be dispatched, Helm's "entailment" argument does not work.

So as Helm suggests, Calvin did not "commit himself" to definite atonement, but he may be said to be "committed to" definite atonement. He proceeds to justify this assertion on pages 99-101. I suspect most readers will find this incoherent at best and, and at worst, logically flawed.

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<sup>2</sup> David Ponter, "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 Wills*," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 55.1 (Fall, 2012): 138-158. Part Two can be found in *SWJT* 55.2 (Spring, 2013): 252-70.

Helm argues that accumulating and assessing quotations of Calvin relative to the extent question is inappropriate since such proof-texting “abstracts from Calvin’s deeper theological outlook” (100). Of course one needs to evaluate Calvin’s statements in light of his full theology. That goes without saying. But this in no way negates the importance of looking carefully at what Calvin did say with respect to the extent question. I wonder if Helm’s approach here is in some way a result of the fact that there are so many universal statements in Calvin concerning the atonement’s extent.

There are two ways to engage in historical inquiry. One method attempts to survey the data via induction. What did an author actually say about the specified subject? The other method, Helm’s method, is the deductive approach. This approach begins with certain presuppositions (i.e., Calvin held to limited atonement) and then attempts to discover such in the primary source material, or at least show that the presupposition is not at odds with what one finds in the source material.

What Helm wants to do in his chapter is use Calvin’s Reformed theology to reason to definite atonement. Helm seeks to answer the question whether definite atonement “fits better” than universal atonement in Calvin’s teaching.

In order to accomplish this goal, Helm develops three arguments (101-111). First, Helm looks at “Providence and the Future.” He admits that this argument may seem distant from debates about the question at hand. He is correct, for there is nothing in this section that can be found to remotely support definite atonement.

Second, Helm looks at “The Language of Aspiration” by which he means an expression on the part of Christ and Paul, which Calvin taps into, that stresses a desire for the eternal good of everyone, even when ignorant of God’s decretal will. But again, there is nothing in this section that remotely supports the notion of definite atonement.

Helm makes a startling and deeply troubling statement: “In certain circumstances a person, even the person of the Mediator [Christ], may be distracted from the revealed will of God and instead express his immediate aspiration for the salvation of those who may or may not be elected to salvation” (107).

Christ may have been “distracted” from the revealed will of God? What sort of Christology is this? Frankly, I would be surprised if the book editors did not encourage Helm to delete this statement from his chapter, as it is so obviously problematic.

But this statement seems problematic on another account. Some Calvinists wrongly assert that God does not desire the salvation of all people according to the revealed will of God. Drawing on the concept of God’s two wills, his revealed will and his decretal will, most Calvinists argue that God desires the salvation of all in the revealed will, but not in the decretal will.

Notice Helm states that that Christ himself, in certain circumstances, may be “distracted” from God’s desire that all people be saved (the revealed will) and express his “aspiration” for the salvation of those who are the non-elect (which God’s decretal will prohibits). One would have thought Helm would have expressed himself in the reverse: Christ may have been distracted from the decretal will and instead have expressed his desire for the salvation of those who may or may not be elected (all people would fall into one of these two categories).

Helm’s third argument is “Universal Preaching.” His argument here is simply an attempt to show that Calvin’s use of universal language with respect to preaching the gospel to all the world does not necessarily commit him to indefinite atonement. Quite right. Neither does it commit him, or even suggest, definite atonement, as Helm infers.

At this point, Helm is confusing the question of the intent of the atonement with its extent and application. Calvin clearly believed that God intended to save the elect only and that the elect only would actually have the atonement applied to them. Helm reasons from this, contrary to Calvin’s other statements about universal extent, that Calvin also believed in definite atonement with respect to extent, though he has to admit that Calvin nowhere in his writings affirms a strictly limited atonement.

As Ponter correctly noted:

The argument that the expiation carries within itself its own application or that it infallibly purchases faith and salvation is a post-Calvinian argument. For Calvin, faith and salvation are purchased by Christ for all the world, but the application is conditioned by faith which can be voided by the sinner’s unbelief. In Calvin’s wider theology, the gift of faith to some is determined, not by the extent or nature of the satisfaction, but by election, and then secondarily by the effectual call.<sup>3</sup>

Helm then proceeds to consider two biblical case studies in an attempt to show Calvin’s thought is commensurate with definite atonement. The first is Ezekiel 18:23. Calvin’s comments on this passage include discussion of the universal gospel offer in the light of the eternal decree. But again there is nothing in Calvin’s statements here that Helm can point to that even hints at definite atonement. Helm is merely assuming Calvin held to definite atonement and then he reads Calvin’s statements on the distinction between God’s revealed and decretal will in light of that assumption.

Helm’s second case study is 1 Timothy 2:4 and Calvin’s sermon on this passage. This is an attempt to extract a concept of definite atonement from Calvin’s statements about the

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<sup>3</sup> David Ponter, “Review Essay, (Part Two),” *SWJT* 55.2 (2013), 261.

universality of gospel preaching. But again, Helm can find nothing in Calvin here to support the supposition that he held to limited atonement. Helm has assumed that Calvin's understanding of 1 Timothy 2:4-6 took the "all men" phrase to mean "some men of all kinds" rather than "all men of every kind." There is no evidence for this from Calvin himself. Calvin is not speaking of the secret will of God (as Augustine had approached these verses), but the revealed will.

From Calvin's own sermon on the Timothy passage it is evident that "all people" or "all nations" means something along the lines of "all men of all people and all nations" in a distributive sense.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen also in Calvin's commentary on this passage:

For there is one God, the creator and Father of all, so, he declares, there is one Mediator, through whom access to God is opened to us, and this Mediator is not given only to one nation, or to a few men of a particular class, but to all, for the benefit of the sacrifice, by which he has expiated for our sins, applies to all. . . . The universal term "all" must always be referred to classes of men but never to individuals. It is as if he had said: "Not only Jews but also Greeks, not only people of humble rank but also princes have been redeemed by the death of Christ." Since therefore he intends the benefit of his death to be common to all, those who hold a view that would exclude any from the hope of salvation do Him an injury.

The Holy Spirit bids us pray for all, because our one mediator bids all to come to Him, since by his death He has reconciled all to the Father.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the Timothy passage actually asserts that the foundation for universal gospel preaching is a universal atonement. Calvin nowhere denies this.

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 160.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus & Philemon*, in Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, vol. 10, eds., David Torrance & Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 210-211.

Helm closes his discussion by noting three things. First, “Given the opportunity to make the scope of Christ’s work universal in intent, Calvin does not take it, as his exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:14 shows. Helm queries: “So if through his use of indefinite language Calvin presupposes a universal atonement . . . why, when he comes to the standard passages for “universal atonement,” such as 1 John 2:2, does he not take the opportunity to state unequivocally that he is a proponent of universal atonement? (116)

Second, Helm wants to make the distinction between the world as comprised of classes of individuals and the world as comprised of individuals of a class. Helm states:

The question may be raised, would such indiscriminate language warrant a preacher asserting to all and sundry that “Christ died for you?” Only if the formulation were taken as an inference drawn from “Christ died for all” or “Christ died for the world,” but not if from “Christ died for everyone in particular.” The first premise, Calvin would hold, is true, while the second is false. That is, a distinction must be made between the world as comprised of classes of individuals, and the world as comprised of individuals of a class. Taken in the first way, the language, the language would not be warranted, but in the second sense, the language is clearly warranted. Christ died for the world.

This is an effort to explain away the universal language in 1 Timothy 2:4-6 and to extract definite atonement from Paul’s statement that Christ died for “all.” But this is an abortive attempt. I shall deal with these verses in a later post, so here I only offer some brief comments.

Attempting to force the meaning of “all without distinction” on the universal texts is to explode them with “grammatical gunpowder” as Spurgeon said in his sermon on this passage. The “all without distinction” concept often becomes code for “some of all without distinction.” Thus, “all” becomes “some of all sorts,” an unwarranted move.

With respect to the NT texts which use universal language, the bifurcation of “all without distinction” and “all without exception” is ultimately a distinction without a difference. If I speak of all men without racial, gender, or other distinctions, am I not speaking of all men without exception? Whatever the distinction is and whatever the scope of the “all” is must be supplied by the context. The two phrases simply cannot be compartmentalized linguistically. The distinction is artificial.

Third, Helm mentions Calvin’s explanation of the connection of universal preaching with election. But again, there is simply nothing here in Calvin that hints at definite atonement.

Conclusion:

The long and short of Helm's chapter is to make the point that "definiteness in belief can be allied with indefiniteness of expression" (119).

May we not conclude, then, that the use of indefinite language is not only consistent with definite providence and definite election but that it is also consistent with being committed to the doctrine of definite atonement? Even though, as I have argued, Calvin does not commit himself to that belief. The use of indefinite language cannot therefore be used as an argument against such a commitment (119).

Helm's conclusion is simply not warranted. The evidence he adduces neither supports the position that Calvin held to a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone nor weakens the evidence suggesting he held to an indefinite atonement.

Helm retrojects a later version of substitutionary atonement into Calvin; one which is determined and defined by the dictates of a limited satisfaction for the sins of the elect alone along lines developed by John Owen and the revised version of the Lombardian formula. Helm actually fails to do what he desires to do: read Calvin historically as a theologian in his own context.