Calvin the Expositor

by Ronald S. Wallace

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In restoring the preaching of the Word of God to its proper place within the life of the Church, the Reformers realized that the task of interpreting the Scriptures had to be undertaken in a much more serious, disciplined, and instructed way. In the Roman church preaching had been deprived of its true position; what was needed was a revival of true biblical interpretation.

None sought to meet this need more seriously and systematically than John Calvin. He grieved that Scripture, on the Protestant as well as on the Roman side, was seldom "rightly divided," and was often deformed by false comments, as if men sought to "hide its light by their own smoke." "Some mutilate it, others tear it, others torture it, others break it in pieces, others, keeping to the outside, never come to the soul of doctrine."

Amid all the other tasks that claimed his energy, Calvin therefore forced himself to produce a series of remarkable commentaries on the books of the Bible. He began with the Epistle of the Romans, and concentrated at first on completing the New Testament, deliberately omitting the Book of Revelation – an omission that drew from one of his great contemporaries the admiring cry, "O most wise Calvin!" Working in the Old Testament he produced, sometimes as a series of lectures covering the whole text of a book, commentaries on all the Minor and Major Prophets (with the exception of a portion of Ezekiel), the Pentateuch, Joshua, and the Psalms.

These works were enthusiastically received by the Church in his own day, and their appeal was universal. Even in the sixteenth century, the Anglican Thomas Hooker affirmed that Calvin's sense of Scripture was to be held as of more force than ten thousand Augustines, Jeromes, Chrysostoms, and Cyprians. Arminius, the theological opponent of Calvinism, admitted that Calvin himself was "incomparable in the interpretation of Scripture." In a strange way this appeal to people of many different types of outlook has lasted. Sir George Adam Smith, referring to the help he had received from other commentators when engaged in his own work on Isaiah, wrote: "To begin with there was Calvin, and there is Calvin – still as valuable as ever for his strong spiritual power, his sanity, his moderation, his sensitiveness to the changes and shades of the prophet's meaning." It is astonishing that what Calvin produced in the 1550s can often be set favorably beside what is being produced today, and can be regarded essentially as modern rather than as medieval.

The legacy that Calvin has left us in his work as an expositor is by no means confined to the commentaries. His long series of sermons, covering consecutively the whole text of many books of the Bible, themselves form a series of extended commentaries in which Calvin, while always adhering closely to the argument of the text, allows himself a certain liberty to expand his thought and range of application. Calvin preached these sermons without notes but after careful preparation. They were taken down in shorthand, and their text was later corrected by the preacher. In this way Calvin, preaching often on weekdays

as well as twice each Sunday and taking a few verses at a time as his text, covered the whole of the books of Job, Deuteronomy, Ephesians, Galatians, the Pastoral Epistles, the Synoptic Gospels, I and II Samuel, and many other selected portions of Scripture. His discipline in forcing his preaching to follow the text of the Bible systematically was seldom relaxed. Having been exiled from Geneva in 1538 as a result of violent opposition, he returned more than three years later and faced a large and expectant congregation in the cathedral. He made some brief and moderate remarks about the office of the ministry and about his own faith and integrity, and then without further ado took up the exposition of Scripture at the exact place at which he had previously stopped.

FOUR EXPOSITORY PRINCIPLES

An examination of Calvin's work as an expositor compels us to note certain principles on which he based his approach and method.

1. *A careful grammatical and historical exegesis of the text is indispensable.* The Roman church had tended to despise such exegesis. Gregory the Great had scoffed at the idea that knowledge of divine things in Scripture could possibly depend on man's ability in grammar. It was held that the literal sense, found by exegetical methods, was essentially mean and poor. Much deeper and richer allegorical and mystical meanings were hidden from the mere scholar with his use of Greek and Hebrew but were discoverable by other methods.

Calvin, on the other hand, held that "almost the only task" of a commentator was to "unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound." Therefore he seized his opportunities to become an expert in Greek, and arranged to be instructed in Hebrew by one of the great scholars of the day. He studied the words, the connection of the sentences, and the historical circumstances as far as these were relevant. In what was a revolutionary approach for his own time, he applied to the text of Scripture the methods of purely secular Latin and Greek scholars.

Such methods, he believed, would help him find the "true and natural meaning" of the text. For Calvin, of course, the writers of Holy Scripture were men who felt themselves confronted by God's presence and redeeming activity in the midst of all they were writing about, and knew themselves to be mastered by God's truth, to which they were seeking to bear witness under the inspiration of the Spirit. Therefore the true and natural meaning of the text and events of the Bible was bound to include this witness to Christ that the writers were constantly bearing in all they wrote. It was because he believed that the Bible contained Christ as its real and literal meaning that Calvin found Scripture to be a "most rich and inexhaustible fountain."

2. *The study of theology is an indispensable discipline for the interpretation of Scripture.* In the letter dedicating his commentary on Romans to Grynaeus, he wrote: "If we understand this epistle, we have a passage opened to us to the understanding of the whole of Scripture." Behind such a statement there lies Calvin's belief that the whole Bible gives a consistent and faithful witness to the one revelation of God in Christ, and that the witness of each author can best be understood when it is seen and interpreted in the light of this whole witness. This principle of interpretation Calvin sometimes called the "analogy of faith," recalling Paul's use of this phrase in the twelfth chapter of Romans.

Calvin's aim in the later editions of his Institutes was to give a summary of the teaching of the whole of Scripture so that the various parts of Scripture might be better understood in the light of it. He sought to "instruct candidates in sacred theology for reading the divine word, in order that they might have an easy access to it, and advance in it without stumbling." Thus he desired to provide even for the layman "a key and an entrance" in order that he might have "access . . . well and truly to understand Holy Scripture."

3. *In the task of interpreting Holy Scripture, the Word itself must be allowed always to control and reform all our presuppositions, theological or otherwise.* It is most significant that Calvin allowed the use of theological presuppositions in face of Holy Scripture only in order to allow us "access" to the meaning of Scripture. He would never have dreamed of suggesting we could find a theology or a system of doctrine that would enable us to "master" the Bible and to unfold, as in the solution of a cleverly constructed puzzle, the meaning of every part. He often confessed that he did not understand certain parts of the Bible, and he made an honest attempt to avoid using clever argument to harmonize the meaning he found in it with his own theology. That he gradually revised his *Institutes* as he wrote his commentaries may be a sign that he was willing, where he found himself able, constantly to revise his theology in the light of Scripture. "The Holy Scripture contains the mysteries of God which are hidden from our flesh, and sublime treasures of life which far surpass our human measure."

Calvin realized that the great danger threatening every expositor of Scripture is that of "presumptuously bringing our own natural shrewdness" into the task of interpretation as a decisive factor. In this respect he believed that the Roman church had failed. Their interpreters went to Scripture, not to bring their system of doctrine under the criticism of the Word so that it might be reformed, but simply to establish with scriptural proof a system that was already final. The Roman church believed that the Church had given birth to the Word; thus the primacy, in the act of interpretation, lay not with the Word but with the Church. Calvin argued rather that it was the Word that had given birth to the Church; thus the primacy, in the act of interpretation, must be given to the Word, and not to the Church with its theology.

Calvin clearly and beautifully describes his own attitude as an interpreter of Scripture in a passage in the *Institutes:*

"We do not with perverted ardor and without discrimination rashly seize upon what first springs to our

minds. Rather, after diligently meditating upon it, we embrace the meaning which the Spirit of God offers. Relying upon it, we look down from a height at whatever of earthly wisdom is set against it. Indeed, we hold our minds captive, that they dare not raise even one little word of protest, and humble them, that they dare not rebel against it."

4. *The true meaning of a passage will be found only as its relevance is found for the constantly urgent situation of the Church in the world.* In interpreting any passage of Scripture, the commentator or preacher must decide which aspects of the message of the text he wishes to dwell on and wrestle with, in order to pass on to the Church what he has found there. Calvin abhorred the practice of those who made the interpretation of Scripture simply an occasion for showing their skill in manipulating phrases, or for playing about with trivial points as if they were a game. The interpreter must never forget that Scripture is given in order that the people of God might be brought into obedience to his will in their present situation. The preacher's duty is to allow Scripture to speak to men about the will of God in concrete terms, and "to supply weapons to fight against Antichrist." He can interpret Scripture properly, therefore, only when he has his mind acutely occupied with the situation of the people for whose sake he is interpreting the Word.

Certainly Calvin himself did not always follow the principles he laid down so clearly. Sometimes his theological bias overcame his exegetical judgment, and sometimes he neglected historical research because he saw the immediate relevance of a passage so vividly. But in his approach, method, and practice, there is much to challenge us today. Many of us are tempted either to despise or to neglect the hard exegetical or theological work (or the training for this work) that alone can enable us to be consistently true interpreters of Scripture. Many of us would, in our actual practice, tend to show little faith in Calvin's thesis that in the long run a strict adherence to truth, in biblical exegesis, is the policy that will ultimately prove most effective in building up the Church. We depend on the immediate inspiration of the moment, and tend to "seize rashly" on any superficial feature of the text that may seem edifying or that gives us a pretext for constructing a good sermon – and sometimes the result is a display of skill rather than an urgent and saving message for the people of God. Far too many of us go to Scripture to have our theology confirmed rather than reformed.

CALVIN'S METHOD AND OURS

Calvin's close adherence to the text of Scripture contrasts with our usual practice today. We often try to reduce what the text says to some topic or theme or series of connected themes, which we then treat in a neatly constructed sermon, with an introduction and a conclusion. Calvin tended to dispense with such medieval scholastic forms. The announcement of his text served often for introduction enough. The argument of his sermon followed the sequence of thoughts as they arose out of the text during his progress through it, and the sermon ended when the last part of the text had been dealt with, the whole having gained its unity from the unity of the text. Calvin's method in this respect is not always so rhetorically satisfying as ours, but it does seem to ensure the conditions under which the Word of God is least likely to be obscured by our own human wisdom. Calvin's practice of disciplined preaching on lengthy and consecutive passages of Scripture would save many of us the agony of having to jump about here and there, rather tiringly, in choosing a text, and would ensure for our people that our preaching does not neglect or evade any important aspects of the biblical teaching. Moreover, the wealth of expression found in the biblical text would add a new and surprising variety to our often well-worn phraseology. "Let us apply ourselves to the text," says Karl Barth. "The true exegete will always find in it fresh depths and new mysteries; like a child in a marvelous garden, he will be filled with wonder."

But we must end with Calvin himself: "We ought to have such respect for the Word of God that any difference of interpretation on our part should alter it as little as possible. Its majesty is somewhat diminished especially if we do not interpret it with great discretion and moderation. If it be considered a sin to corrupt what has been dedicated to God, we assuredly cannot tolerate anyone who handles that most sacred of all things on earth with unclean or even ill-prepared hands."

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