

*BREVITAS ET FACILITAS:*

A STUDY OF A VITAL ASPECT IN THE THEOLOGICAL  
HERMENEUTICS OF JOHN CALVIN

BY

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Brevitas et Facilitas: A Study of a Vital Aspect  
in the Theological Hermeneutics of John Calvin

ABBREVIATIONS

- BM *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*  
CO *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*  
Inst *Institutes of the Christian Religion*  
LW *American Edition of Luther's Works*  
OS *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta*  
WA *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Christian theology is the history of the interpretation of Scripture generation after generation. In certain cases, all Christian truths are the result of the vindication of those who have taken great pains to interpret the Word of God faithfully over against the deficiencies of the interpretation of the previous generation. G. W. Bethune says the following:

The historical development of theological truth is a process of opposing truths which periodically confront each other and depend on a criterion in terms of which these truths can be evaluated. In Protestant thinking only Scripture constitutes this criterion. This implies that the criterion is basically a hermeneutical discipline of which the primary aim is a historical, systematic and practical interpretation of the Biblical text as basic source and permanent foundation of Christian faith in God.<sup>1</sup>

sound theologizing is, therefore, intimately related to a



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**Abstract**

This article is the summary of my dissertation completed by the guidance of Prof. CJ Wethmar of the University of Pretoria. Calvin presented his own distinctive method of the hermeneutics of Scripture in his *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. It is called the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin was not satisfied with both Malanchthon's *loci* method and Bucer's prolixity commentary. He took the *via media* approach. Calvin's method was influenced by rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian and Chrysostom. Calvin, however, confirmed that his own principle came from Scripture itself. I deal with Calvin's view that the clarity of Scripture was related to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. After analysing Calvin's writing, I discovered ten component elements of the method of *brevitas et facilitas*.

**A. INTRODUCTION**

The history of Christian theology is the record of the interpretation of Scripture generation after generation.<sup>1</sup> In a certain sense, all Christian truths are the result of the vindication of those who have taken great pains to interpret the Word of God responsibly over against the deficient or one-sided interpretation of the heretics. C. J. Wethmar says the following:

The dialogical development of theological truth in which opposing truth claims periodically confront each other is dependent on a criterion in terms of which these claims can be evaluated. In Protestant thinking Holy Scripture constitutes this criterion. This implies that theology is basically a hermeneutical discipline of which the primary aim is a historical, systematic and practical interpretation of the Biblical text as basic source and permanent foundation of Christian faith in God.<sup>2</sup>

Sound theologizing is, therefore, intimately related to a

legitimate understanding of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

The hermeneutical methodology employed by Calvin in gleaning the true meaning of a text has given rise to considerable contemporary debate. Calvin, like other Reformers, used the so-called historical-grammatical method in the interpretation of Scripture. Although Calvin showed similarity with the other Reformers' hermeneutics in following this approach, he had a distinctive approach to Scriptural interpretation which other Reformers did not follow in all details. It included the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the central dimension of his hermeneutics, principles Calvin employed in his exegetical writings throughout his whole life.<sup>4</sup> These principles as the center of Calvin's hermeneutics, did not appear as clearly in the exegetical writings of other Reformers like Luther, Melanchthon, and Bucer. With regard to the nature of Calvin's hermeneutics, many scholars recognize that the hallmarks of Calvin's hermeneutical approach are the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Even though they have regarded this method as the distinguishing feature of Calvin's hermeneutics, they have not investigated Calvin's exegetical writings from the perspective of these principles, and have not fathomed how Calvin practically and consistently implemented the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the central dimension of his hermeneutics. They have not adequately demonstrated how Calvin's principles of *brevitas et facilitas* are rooted in the rhetorical method of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and also not that these hermeneutical principles are embedded in the basic motives of his theology. After having analysed Calvin's exegetical writings, I discovered ten component elements of the method of *brevitas et*



*facilitas*. According to my judgment, these elements of the method of *brevitas et facilitas* have not yet been exhaustively described.

My purpose is to establish the fact that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the hallmark of Calvin's hermeneutics originated in his views on Holy Scripture, especially the principle *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.

Calvin's motivation for employing the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* in his writings, including the *Commentary on Romans*, was not that he tried to challenge Melanchthon, Bullinger, and Bucer, but rather that he sought to promote the public good of the church. In seeking to do good, Calvin wanted to provide the best interpretation (*optimam interpretationem*) that his simple readers could understand easily, without much loss of time.

Calvin stated that in his *Commentary on Romans* Melanchthon "attained his object by illustrating the principal points: being occupied with these primary things, he passed by many things which deserve attention; and it was not his purpose to prevent others to examine them."<sup>5</sup> Here he pointed out the problem of Melanchthon's *loci* method in which he discussed such passages as particularly required observation.<sup>6</sup> With this method he only dealt with important texts from the perspective of doctrine. Thus Melanchthon's work did not satisfy Calvin because Melanchthon did not explain every passage. Calvin also stated that in his *Commentary on Romans* Bucer was too diffuse for men in business to read, and too profound to be understood by such as were simple and not capable of much application: "for whatever be the subject

which he handles, so many things are suggested to him through the incredible fecundity of his mind, in which he excels, that he knows not when to stop."<sup>7</sup> Calvin argued that Bucer handled every point so extensively that it could not be read in a short time. This *prolixis commentariis*, according to Calvin, was Bucer's hermeneutical method.<sup>8</sup> He, therefore, determined to treat things so briefly, that without unnecessary loss of time, his readers might understand his work easily.<sup>9</sup> This is the reason why Calvin employed the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin's method developed as the result of the application of a *via media* approach between Melancthon's *loci* method and Bucer's method which Calvin evaluated "as too cumbersome for the average pastor to be able to wade through the swamp of passages."<sup>10</sup>

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings*, Saint Louis, 1959, 5. See also Gerhard Ebeling, *Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift*, Tübingen, 1947.

2. C J Wethmar, "Ecclesiology and Theological Education: A South African Reformed Perspective," 13. Unpublished Paper, Congress of the International Reformed Theological Institute held in Stellenbosch on June 12, 1997.

3. C. J. Wethmar, "Homologie en hermeneutiek," *HTS* vol 44 (1988), 540, describes an indissoluble connection between doctrine and interpretation as follows: "Doctrine is the form which the understanding of Holy Scripture adopts when interpreted in the light of the presuppositions of a particular horizon of understanding." Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*, Edinburgh, 1995, 6, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *A Guide Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Grand Rapids, 1986, 111-141.

4. This method first appeared in the dedicatory preface in the *Commentary on Romans* of John Calvin in Strasbourg, November 18, 1539. Later Calvin continued to employ this method in his exegetical writings. In 1564 in his farewell letter to the ministers of Geneva Calvin showed that he kept faithfully to the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* in the interpretation of

Scripture: "As to my doctrine, I have taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write what I have written as faithfully as it was in my power. I have not falsified a single passage of the Scriptures, nor given it a wrong interpretation to the best of my knowledge; and though I might have introduced subtle senses, had I studied subtilty, I cast that temptation under my feet and always aimed at simplicity." ("Calvin's Farewell to the Ministers of Geneva, On Friday, 28th April, 1564," in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, vol. 7, eds. Jules Bonnet and trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist, Grand Rapids, 1983, 375.

5. "The Epistle Dedicatory," p. xxvi.

6. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *WTJ* 47 (1985), 4.

7. "The Epistle Dedicatory," p. xxvi.

8. CO 10.404.

9. CO 10.405.

10. Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," 6.



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**I. INTRODUCTION**

The hermeneutical methodology employed by Calvin in gleaning the true meaning of a text has given rise to considerable contemporary debate. Calvin, like other Reformers, used the so-called historical-grammatical method in the interpretation of Scripture. Although Calvin showed similarity with the other Reformers' hermeneutics in following this approach, he had a distinctive approach to Scriptural interpretation which other Reformers did not follow in all details. It included the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the central dimension of his hermeneutics, principles Calvin employed in his exegetical writings throughout his whole life. These principles as the center of Calvin's hermeneutics, did not appear clearly in the exegetical writings of other Reformers like Luther, Melanchthon, and Bucer. With regard to the nature of Calvin's hermeneutics, many scholars recognize that the hallmarks of Calvin's hermeneutical approach are the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Even though they have regarded this method as the distinguishing feature of Calvin's hermeneutics, they have not



investigated Calvin's exegetical writings from the perspective of these principles, and have not fathomed how Calvin practically and consistently implemented the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the central dimension of his hermeneutics. They have not revealed how Calvin handled the text of Scripture with these principles. They have not adequately demonstrated how Calvin's principles of *brevitas et facilitas* are rooted in the rhetorical method of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and also not that these hermeneutical principles are embedded in the basic motives of his theology. After analyzing Calvin's exegetical writings, I have discovered ten component elements of the method of *brevitas et facilitas*.

The purpose of my dissertation is not to explore all the principles Calvin used in his writings, but to establish the fact that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the hallmark of Calvin's theological hermeneutics originated in his views on Holy Scripture, especially the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.

Against the authority of the Roman Catholic church and its method of Scriptural interpretation, Calvin, like Luther, stressed the principles of *sola Scriptura* and *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. His theology played an important role in the development of the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. In order for his readers to understand the intention of the author of Scripture and the true meaning of the text easily and clearly, Calvin employed this distinctive principle in his own hermeneutics, which was different from that employed by the other Reformers. Calvin stated that the other Reformers failed in employing the hermeneutical principles that convey the simple and brief meaning of the text of Scripture to their readers.

Calvin clearly suggested the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as a basic dimension of his theological hermeneutics in the dedicatory preface in his *Commentary on the Epistle of*

*Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. There he agreed with his old friend Simon Grynaeus on the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin was completely confident of the superiority of this method. He insisted on it as the only hermeneutical method which helped the readers understand Scripture. In other words, Calvin presented his readers with the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as distinctive principles for the interpretation of Scripture.

In order to obtain a clear understanding of Calvin's hermeneutics, I intend to study the historical, theological, rhetorical, and hermeneutical dimensions of the issues at stake. In investigating the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*, I utilize Calvin's commentaries, his sermons and his letters, his theological treatises, and his *Institutes*.

The purpose of chapter 2 is to study the background of Calvin's hermeneutics. It includes how Calvin prepared himself to be a faithful interpreter of Scripture. I shall deal with what factors had influence on Calvin's hermeneutics. In chapters 3 and 4, I survey the history of hermeneutics from Calvin's own perspective. My emphasis will be on Calvin's attitude toward other interpreters. In chapter 5, I examine the development, the source, and the employment of the principle of *brevitas et facilitas*. In order to ascertain the origin of the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*, I compare this method with the rhetorical skill described with the same term. I argue that Calvin regarded the nature of Scripture as the source of the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Chapter 6 examines two theological presuppositions in Calvin's hermeneutics: firstly the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture, and secondly the principle *sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. As far as the Reformers' doctrine of Scripture is concerned, I deal with the fact that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* are closely related to the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture which offered the Reformers the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. In



chapter 7, I identify and describe ten component elements as the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*.

## II. THE SOURCE OF THE IDEAL OF *BREVITAS ET FACILITAS*

For Calvin Scripture was not complicated, but simple. Scripture was simply the eloquent speech of the Holy Spirit for his simple people. Therefore, to vitiate the simplicity of Scripture was to destroy the whole of Scripture. For Calvin the simplicity of Scripture was immediately connected with his hermeneutical method. This supplied Calvin with the foundation for the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as his hermeneutical ideal. Calvin believed that Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel employed a simple and easy style in order for ordinary people to understand God's Word more easily. This made him believe that the style of Scripture had its orientation in *brevitas et facilitas*. Consequently Calvin, influenced by rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian in his ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*, confirmed that the authors of Scripture demonstrated this ideal. Calvin made this ideal a part of his own hermeneutical method. The clarity of Scripture offered the Reformers the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Calvin confirmed that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* derived from the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.

## III. THE ELEMENTS OF THE IDEAL OF *BREVITAS ET FACILITAS*

My investigation delineated several elements in the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* Calvin employed in his writings. Brevity meant to interpret the passage concisely. In order to make the interpretation of the text brief, Calvin avoided any disputation, argument, or controversy. He also avoided the repetition of the same interpretation of various passages, and often suggested that the readers consult his other

commentaries and the *Institutes* as well as other interpreters' writings.

Calvin, if possible, did not change the original text, but rather tried to retain it. Since he felt that inserting things into the original text was not natural and simple, Calvin dared to reject Erasmus' insertion of words, prepositions, etc. Calvin had reasons for preferring retention to insertion. First, he thought that inserting something into the original text for purposes of interpretation forced the meaning of the text. Calvin always disliked the ambiguity caused by inserting words. The result of insertion was that the readers became confused and inept at understanding the genuine meaning of a passage.

Calvin limited the scope of his interpretation to the issues related to a particular passage of Scripture. He tried not to depart from the center of the text, nor to wander outside the key subject of the text. Whenever he felt that he handled an issue not directly related to the text, Calvin tried to return to the relevant text. This showed that he attempted not to interpret Scripture in a subjective fashion.

Calvin thought that the true meaning of the text was the suitable, obvious, and simple one rather than the twisted or ambiguous one. Over against 'torturing' Scripture, Calvin stressed that the true interpretation should be obvious and natural, not allegorical.

He refuted the use of conjecture in the interpretation of the text because it was not based on solid and sound argument, but rather started from imagination. On this point Calvin often criticized Erasmus for frivolous conjecture. Calvin thought that the purpose of simplicity was to let the readers easily understand the mind of the author.

The principle of simplicity was a reaction against ambiguity, perversion, and conjecture. He thought that the plain and simple sense of the words of Scripture agreed well with the author's mind. For him to remove ambiguity meant to



seek the natural and suitable meaning of the text. According to Calvin, the criterion of suitability was related to the intention of the author and the context of the present text.

One of the distinctive features of Calvin's hermeneutics was that he did not force the readers to accept his view but gave them freedom to choose the interpretation which they preferred. This shows that he recognized the imperfection of his own interpretation, and that, as an interpreter, he was humble.

Calvin criticized Christian interpreters for twisting the meaning of the text away from its simple sense. Calvin tried not to twist the meaning of the text, but rather with these principles to interpret it literally, simply, and clearly. Thus employing the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*, he broke with the allegorical and scholastic interpretation of preceding centuries. He warned that an interpreter should not pervert the words of Scripture by means of his own opinions and his own doctrines and experiences. Calvin emphasized the necessary objectivity in Scriptural interpretation, against subjective methods of interpretation.

Although Calvin used the theological interpretation of the text, unlike the Fathers, he was not dominated by doctrinal interpretations. Calvin recognized significant doctrines in the text, and sometimes explained subjects relating to doctrine. He, however, passed over the interpretation of doctrines which was not directly related to the passage. As the result of that, he did not get involved in meaningless arguments with other interpreters. He only attempted to interpret the true meaning of the text without exhausting his readers.

The fact that Calvin interpreted the text by means of the intention of the author of Scripture makes us recognize him as one of the great interpreters in the history of Protestant interpretation. One of the purposes of his hermeneutics was to help the readers understand the mind of the author of

