

CHAPTER 6

THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS IN CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS

As a great interpreter of Scripture Calvin had his own theological presuppositions for establishing his own distinctive principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as the hallmark of his hermeneutical method as many scholars have already recognized. In this chapter I shall discuss two important theological presuppositions related to his hermeneutics. Especially I shall prove that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* derived from Calvin's view on the role of the Holy Spirit in the authors' writing Scripture and in our interpretation of it,¹ and his treatment of the principle

¹ For the studies of this issue, John W. Wyckoff, "The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to Biblical Hermeneutics" (Ph.D. Baylor University, 1990); Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 155-74; Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gague and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 189-198. Roy B. Zuck, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 41 (1984): 120-130, formulates fourteen exegetical principles: (1) The Spirit's ministry in Bible interpretation does not mean that He gives new revelation; (2) The role of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible does not mean that one's interpretations are infallible; (3) The work of the Spirit in interpretation does not mean that He gives some interpreters a mental acuity for seeing truths under the surface that are not evident to any other dedicated Bible students; (4) The role of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation means that the unregenerate do not welcome and apply God's truth, though they are able to

scriptura sui ipsius interpres.

A. The Role of the Holy Spirit

The presupposition that the Holy Spirit has a role in the interpretation of Scripture has provoked intense theological debate.² Modern liberal interpreters³ have not stressed the role of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin, however, the Holy Spirit's role in the interpretation of Scripture was a *sine*

comprehend many of its statements cognitively; (5) The Spirit's role in hermeneutics does not mean that only Bible scholars can understand the Bible; (6) The Holy Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture requires spiritual devotion on the part of the interpreter; (7) The Holy Spirit in interpretation means that lack of spiritual preparedness hinders accurate interpretation; (8) The role of the Spirit in interpretation is no substitute for diligent study; (9) The Spirit's work in biblical interpretation does not rule out that the use of study helps such as commentaries and Bible dictionaries; (10) The ministry of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation does not mean that interpreters can ignore common sense and logic; (11) The place of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible means that He does not normally give sudden intuitive flashes of insight into the meaning of Scripture; (12) The Spirit's ministry in interpreting the Bible is included in but not identical with illumination; (13) The role of the Spirit in scriptural interpretation does not mean that all parts of the Bible are equally clear in meaning; (14) The Spirit's work in interpretation does not result in believers having a comprehensive and completely accurate understanding of the entire Scriptures.

² On this issue, Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 85-114, deals with the views of K. Barth, Heinrich Ott, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Gerhard Ebeling, T. F. Torrance, Fuchs, and Helmut Thielicke.

³ Cf. E. P. Groenewald, "Krisis in die Interpretasie van die Heilige Skrif," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 10 (1969): 2-12.

qua non. A few scholars from the Reformed tradition have emphasized that the Holy Spirit has a significant role in the interpretation of Scripture.⁴ John H. Gerstner says, "the Holy Spirit's role is not to change the evidence (from unsatisfactory to satisfactory) but to change the attitudes of men from resistance to truth to submission to it. . . . The Holy Spirit causes the elect to taste the Bible as the Word of God knowing that it is divine."⁵

Calvin, as called 'the theologian of the Holy Spirit' by B. B. Warfield,⁶ showed great interest in the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷ B. B. Warfield says,

⁴ L. Floor, "Calvyn se Hermeneutiek in Vergelyking met Ebeling en Fuchs," in *Aspekte van die Nuwe-Testamentiese hermeneutiek*, ed. A. B. du Toit (Pretoria: Universiteit van Pretoria, 1970), pp. 94-107. He says, "It will be a good thing if there will be more attention for the Holy Spirit in the theological hermeneutic. . . . But the work as such of the Holy Spirit in the process of understanding should always be retained" (p. 107). Jacobus Johannes Müller, "Geestesbesit as hermeneutiese prinsiep," in *Aspekte van die Nuwe-Testamentiese hermeneutiek*, pp. 41-51. He stresses the illumination by the Holy Spirit as "an absolute necessity for any true exegesis which is labouring to interpret to us the message of the Spirit in meaningful human words" (p. 51). Packer argues that the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of Scripture; see J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 109-114.

⁵ John H. Gerstner, "The Church's Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration," in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Montgomery Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 37.

⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 484. Cf. A. Bekesi, "Kalvin, a Szentlélek theologusa," *Theological Szemle* 2 (1952): 50-52; John Murray, *Calvin as Theologian and Expositor* (London: The Evangelical Library, 1964), p. 10.

⁷ For the studies of Calvin's view of the Holy Spirit, see Simon van der Linde, *De Leer van den Heiligen Geest bij Calvijn* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1943), and Calvijns

We may say that the doctrine of sin and grace dates from Augustine, the doctrine of satisfaction from Anselm, the doctrine of justification by faith from Luther, - we must say that the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from Calvin to the Church. It was he who first related the whole experience of salvation specifically to the working of the Holy Spirit, worked it out into its details, and contemplated its several steps and stages in orderly progress as the product of the Holy Spirit's specific work in applying salvation to the soul. Thus he gave systematic and adequate expression to the whole doctrine of the Holy Spirit and made it the assured possession of the Church of God.⁸

Calvin also stressed the illumination of the Holy Spirit in its relevance for hermeneutics. Brevard S. Childs says,

To suggest that the task of theological reflection takes place from within a canonical context assumes not only a received tradition, but a faithful disposition by hearers who await the illumination of God's Spirit. This latter point has been developed so thoroughly by Calvin as to make further elaboration unnecessary (*Institutes*, I, Ch. VII).⁹

In his letter to Sadoleto, Calvin emphasized the authority of the Holy Spirit,¹⁰ and maintained that the Holy Spirit enlightened the church in interpreting Scripture.

Had you known, or been unwilling to disguise the fact, that the Spirit goes before the Church, to enlighten her

leer van de Heilige Geest," *Theologia Reformata* 14 (1) (1971): 15-31; Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957).

⁸ B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 485.

⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in A Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 12.

¹⁰ Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 247, says, "Calvin developed his doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in opposition to the thesis that the Church alone guaranteed the authority of Scripture. This was completely correct: there is no sense in which the Church has power over Scripture."

in understanding the Word, while the Word itself is like the Lydian stone, by which she tests all doctrines, would you have taken refuge in that most perplexing and thorny question?"¹¹

One of the problems of the Roman Catholic church's teachings was that it placed its own authority and tradition above the Holy Spirit and Scripture.

1. The Necessity of the Illumination of the Holy Spirit

One of Calvin's theological presuppositions starts with the correlation between man and Scripture written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, very important for us to see what Scripture is and what we are. From this perspective the knowledge of God and ourselves (*Dei cognitio et nostri*), a central theme of Calvin's theology, is closely related to Calvin's method of theological interpretation. Thus those who have not known both God the Creator and themselves, are unable to understand His Word showing us who God and man respectively are. Therefore, in order to interpret Scripture correctly, we need to know ourselves before God. For Calvin this theological presupposition was very important because he thought the theological understanding of man could ensure a correct interpretation of Scripture. From this perspective we can see

¹¹ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto: *A Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 61.

that Calvin's hermeneutics was based on his theology.

Calvin declared that man was corrupted through natural vitiation.

The apostle states: "We are all by nature children of wrath." (Eph. 2:3) How could God, who is pleased by the least of his works, have been hostile to the noblest of all his creatures? But he is hostile toward the corruption of his work rather than toward the work itself. Therefore if it is right to declare that man, because of his vitiated nature, is naturally abominable to God, it is also proper to say that man is naturally depraved and faulty.¹²

Calvin's view on the corruption of mankind, influenced by Augustine, was one of the most important themes of his theology. In his *Commentary on Eph. 5:8* Calvin called the natural man 'darkness': "Darkness is the name here given to the whole nature of man before regeneration; for, where the brightness of God does not shine, there is nothing but fearful darkness."¹³ The whole life of man is a ruinous labyrinth of wanderings until they are converted to Jesus Christ. Man, without being born again by the Holy Spirit, is under sin and darkness. Calvin thought that mankind after the fall of Adam was totally corrupt (*corruptio hominis*). L. Floor applies this anthropological background to Calvin's hermeneutics.

The theological background to Calvin's very strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit with regard to the understanding of the Bible is undoubtedly his faith in the *corruptio hominis*, the corruption of mankind.¹⁴

¹² *Inst.* 2.1.11, p. 254.

¹³ *Comm. on. Eph.* 5:8, p. 309.

¹⁴ L. Floor, "The Hermeneutics of Calvin," p. 186.

Therefore, the natural man under sin can never understand the spiritual truth of Scripture as the special revelation of God, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. "Flesh is not capable of such lofty wisdom as to conceive God and what is God's, unless it be illumined by the Spirit of God."¹⁵ Calvin described man's spiritual blindness with the explanation of John 1:4-5 "Life was in God from the beginning and that life was the light of men; this light shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not."

He shows that man's soul is so illumined by the brightness of God's light as never to be without some slight flame or at least a spark of it; but that even with this illumination it does not comprehend God. Why is this? Because man's keenness of mind is mere blindness as far as the knowledge of God is concerned. For when the Spirit calls men "darkness," he at once denies them any ability of spiritual understanding. Therefore he declares that those believers who embrace Christ are "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). This means: Flesh is not capable of such lofty wisdom as to conceive God and what is God's, unless it be illuminated by the Spirit of God. As Christ testified, the fact that Peter recognized him was a special revelation of the Father (Matt. 16:17).¹⁶

For Calvin *corruptio hominis* requires the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture.¹⁷ B. S. Childs

¹⁵ *Inst.* 2.2.19, p. 278.

¹⁶ *Inst.* 2.2.19, p. 278. Cf. A. D. R. Polman, "Calvin on the Inspiration of Scripture," in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, ed. Jacob T. Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), pp. 109-111.

¹⁷ Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard Childs* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 300, says, "Calvin's views on illumination are tightly bound up with a number of other doctrines, especially his particularity severe views on human corruption."

says,

Although God has made himself clearly known in the scriptures, human sinfulness has prevented his revelation from being understood. Thus it is only by the illumination of divine grace, by the 'inner witness of the Holy Spirit', that the word is heard and understood (Inst.I.8.12).¹⁸

Calvin thought that human reason before regeneration could not understand the Scriptures clearly. The light of human reason differed little from darkness. The true principles "held by the human mind resemble sparks, but these are choked by the depravity of our nature."¹⁹ We, therefore, are not even competent to think aright. In all our reasoning faculties we fail miserably.²⁰ Our own reason will beget nothing but mere vanity unless "we have divine teaching to enlighten us."²¹ Calvin said that we should learn that "the gospel can be understood by faith alone - not by reason, nor by the perspicacity of human understanding."²² He also pointed out that even Christ commanded us not to depend on human reason.²³

Calvin thought that in order to be a good interpreter of Scripture, one had to be born again. Without regeneration by

¹⁸ B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Comm. on Eph.* 4:17, p. 290.

²⁰ *Comm. on Jn.* 1:5, p. 32.

²¹ *Comm. on Ex.* 25:31, p. 162.

²² *Comm. on Col.* 2:2, p. 174.

²³ *Comm. on Jn.* 22:29, p. 278.

the Holy Spirit, we do not know Him or His work. "We have nothing of the Spirit, however, except through regeneration."²⁴ Without the help of the Holy Spirit, we cannot understand the true meaning of Scripture. Because Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit, the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture is decisive. The Holy Spirit "triumphs over the natural resistance of the human heart."²⁵ Calvin believed that the Holy Spirit "would govern the human process of interpretation and render his *sensus proprius* intelligible, provided that such a process of interpretation is carried out by faithful men, seriously searching for the pure teaching of God in Scripture."²⁶ Because of man's ultimate inadequacy, we need God's ultimate remedy to understand Scripture.²⁷ In connection with the role of the Holy Spirit, K. Kantzer says the following:

It is rather a work of illumination subjectively to enable the sinner to see that which previously he had been unable to see - namely, the objective truth of God. This "seeing" of the truth, however, is not due to the Spirit's enablement of the human mind now for the first time to draw the correct conclusions on the basis of a proper evaluation of the evidence. It is rather the Spirit's working immediately upon the mind and heart of the elect to form within the human soul and to seal upon

²⁴ *Inst.* 2.3.1, p. 289.

²⁵ J. A. Heyns, "Calvinus Reformator Hodie," in *Calvinus Reformator*, p. 319.

²⁶ H. W. Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics of Holy Scripture," in *Calvinus Reformator*, p. 172.

²⁷ Kenneth Sealer Kantzer, "John Calvin's Theory of the Knowledge of God and the Word of God" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1950), pp. 397-405.

it His own divine judgment as to the truth and authority of Scripture.²⁸

Calvin believed that the Holy Spirit could enlighten our minds, but also influence the consent of our hearts.²⁹ "It will not be enough for the mind to be illumined by the Spirit of God unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by his power."³⁰ Calvin explained that the illumination of the Holy Spirit constituted our mental eyes.³¹ Calvin insisted

that there is a heavenly and secret wisdom that is contained in the gospel, which cannot be apprehended by any acuteness or perspicacity of intellect, or by any perception of sense, and is not influenced by human reasonings, and needs no meretricious ornament of words or embellishment, but simply by the revelation of the Spirit comes to be known by the understandings of men, and is sealed upon their hearts.³²

We cannot gain anything by interpreting Scripture unless God shines in us by the light of His Spirit.³³ "No man will ever be able to comprehend it by his own understanding till the Lord correct and form him anew by his Spirit."³⁴

²⁸ Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Calvin and the Holy Scripture," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 133.

²⁹ *Comm. on Ps.* 143:10, p. 257.

³⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.33, p. 581.

³¹ *Inst.* 3.1.4, p. 542.

³² "The Argument," in *Comm. on 1 Cor.* p. 41.

³³ Cyris Hee-Suk Moon, "The Spirit as the Interpreter," *The Ecumenical Review* 39 (1987): 42-3. Cf. H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 74-79.

³⁴ *Comm. on Isa.* 53:3, p. 114.

In his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545) Calvin explained the relationship between our mind and the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Our mind is too rude to be able to grasp the spiritual wisdom of God which is revealed to us through faith; and our hearts are too prone to distrust or to pervert confidence in ourselves or other creatures to rest of their own accord in God. But the Holy Spirit by his illumination makes us capable of understanding those things which would otherwise far exceed our grasp, and brings us to a sure persuasion by sealing the promises of salvation in our hearts.³⁵

Calvin believed that we could "only properly read and understand through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."³⁶

2. The Word and the Holy Spirit in Calvin

According to Dowey, the word-pair "Word and Spirit" expresses "the heart of Calvin's doctrine of special revelation, as far as he treats of it with reference to the revelation of God the Creator."³⁷ Calvin pointed out the wrong

³⁵ "The Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1545)," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 105.

³⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, p. 154.

³⁷ Edward A. Dowey Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 117. For the studies for understanding the relationship between the Word and the Holy Spirit, see Felicity Edwards, "The Relation between Biblical Hermeneutics and the Formulation of Dogmatic Theology: An Investigation in the Methodology of John Calvin," pp. 52-60; Richard Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: Word and Spirit, A Case Study," in *Calvinian: Ideas and Influence of John Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker. Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, no. 10 (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988); Jack B. Rogers & Donald K. McKim,

views of the relationship between God's Word and the Holy Spirit. There were the fanatics, the Anabaptists, and the Papists whom Calvin criticized for their incorrect understanding of the relationship between the Word and the Holy Spirit.

In his *Institutes* 1.9.1-3 Calvin dealt with the fanatics "abandoning Scripture . . . , and casting down all the principles of godliness."³⁸ They had, according to him, contempt for God's Word as the dead and killing letter, but with great haughtiness exalted the teaching office of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ Calvin criticized the fanatics for their disregard of the Word. "Let us learn, too, that we do not condemn the external word, and take pleasure only in secret inspirations, like many fanatics, who do not regard themselves spiritual, except they reject the word of God, and substitute in its place their own wild speculations."⁴⁰ He emphasized that God manifested Himself through His Word.⁴¹ "The light of the truth revealed in God's word, is so distinct that the very first sight of it illuminates the mind."⁴² Calvin identified the

The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach, pp. 103-106.

³⁸ *Inst.* 1.9.1, p. 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Comm. on Ps.* 119:17, p. 413.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Comm. on Ps.* 119:130, p. 10.

voice of God with the Holy Spirit. But he did not accept the identification of the Holy Spirit with the Word. The Holy Spirit did "nothing other than certify the Word contained in the Scriptures."⁴³ In the commentary on Is. 59:21 Calvin argued that Isaiah did not bind "the ancient folk to outward doctrine as if they were learning their ABC's; rather, he teaches that under the reign of Christ the new church will have this true and complete happiness: to be ruled no less by the voice of God than by the Spirit."⁴⁴ Calvin maintained that even Paul, who was brought up to the third heaven, urged Timothy to give heed to reading.⁴⁵ For Calvin, therefore, without the Word of God, the emphasis on the inner light of the Holy Spirit was dangerous. Calvin succinctly explained the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore the Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelation, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel.⁴⁶

On the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, Frame comments correctly,

Calvin denies that this doctrine leads to what we would today call subjectivism. He opposes those "fanatics" who forsake Scripture for alleged new revelation of the Spirit. Word and Spirit go together, so that the Spirit

⁴³ F. Wendel, *Calvin*, p. 157.

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 1.9.1, p. 93.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 94.

is recognized in His agreement with Scripture.⁴⁷

Calvin avoided the radical view on the inner light of the Holy Spirit, and emphasized the mutual bond between the Word and the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

In the polemic against the Anabaptists, Calvin gave us "an especially well-balanced account of the relations which in his view obtain between the revelation of God and the witness of the Spirit."⁴⁸

Against the enthusiasm of the Anabaptists who ignored the Word and thought that they possessed new revelation, Calvin bound the operation of the Holy Spirit to Scripture.⁴⁹

According to Balke, Calvin insisted

that the opinion of the Holy Spirit is revealed in Scripture and that the Holy Spirit is not imparted except through the Scriptures. Revelation is no ongoing

⁴⁷ John M. Frame, "The Spirit and the Scriptures," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), p. 220; William G. Young, "The Holy Spirit and the Word of God," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14 (1961): 34-59.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ J. A. Cramer, *De Heilige Schrift bij Calvijn* (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek: 1926), p. 69, says, "Calvijn bindt hierom de werking van den Heiligen Geest aan de Schrift, *Spiritus efficacia a praedicatione Evangelii non separanda est*, omdat hij het noodig acht ernstig te waarschuwen tegen de geestdrijverij der Anabaptisten, die met verachting van het Woord zich beroemden op het bezit des Geestes en hoog opgaven van hun nieuwe openbaringen, *turtent inani fiducia suarum imaginationum*." Cf. James R. Tolley, "John Calvin's Views of Revelation and Inspiration of the Scriptures" (S.T.B. diss., Biblical Seminary in New York, 1929), pp. 57-65. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 58, says, "the operations of the Word and the Holy Spirit never oppose each other."

process. Revelations beyond Scripture can just as well originate in the spirit of Satan as in the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, to whom all things are subjected, is Himself subjected to Scripture. It is, however, no offense to the Holy Spirit to be compared with Himself. Any utterance that is presented as being from the Holy Spirit must be tested by the criterion of the Word, lest Satan sneak in under the guide of the Spirit.⁵⁰

Calvin insisted that "God works in his elect in two ways (*bifariam Deus in electis suis operatur*): within, through his spirit (*intus, per spiritum*); without, through his Word (*extra per verbum*)."⁵¹ For Calvin these two elements cannot be separated from one another.⁵² By the Holy Spirit, "illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he (God) makes them a new creation."⁵³ By his Word, God "arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal."⁵⁴ On the mutual connection of Word and Spirit Calvin said,

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Willem Balkers, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, p. 98.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 2.5.5, p. 322. Cf. CO 2.233.

⁵² Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, p. 117. Cf. K. V. Warren, "Luther and Calvin on the Doctrine of Scripture," *Vox Reformata* 40 (1983): 3-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 1.9.3, p. 95.

Calvin advised Sadoletto to hear Chrysostom's admonishment. "Well, then, does Chrysostom admonish us to reject all who, under the pretence of the Spirit, lead us away from the simple doctrine of the gospel- the Spirit having been promised not to reveal a new doctrine, but to impress the truth of the gospel on our minds."⁵⁶ Calvin warned Sadoletto not to separate the Holy Spirit from the Word.⁵⁷ "You, Sadoletto, by stumbling on the very threshold, have paid the penalty of that affront which you offered to the Holy Spirit when you separated Him from the Word."⁵⁸ According to B. A. Gerrish, Calvin did not hold "Word and Spirit together in a kind of dynamic relationship- as though authority were vested, not in the Scriptures *per se*, but rather in the Spirit speaking through the Scripture."⁵⁹

Calvin's view of the Spirit's operation in the confirmation of the revealed Word might seem to derogate the work of the Holy Spirit, but he strongly stressed that the Holy Spirit did not work independently, outside the Word.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *A Reformation Debate*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ B. A. Gerrish, "Biblical Authority and the Continental Reformation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 10 (1957): 355. According to him, Calvin simply insisted that the Holy Spirit "is always bound to Scripture as the medium of His revelation." (*Ibid.* 359).

⁶⁰ Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptists Radicals*, p. 99. Cf. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 242.

Warfield correctly interprets Calvin when he states.

Nor is it derogatory to the Spirit to confine His operations now to the confirmation of the revealed Word. While on the other hand to attribute to Him (the Holy Spirit) repeated or new revelations to each of the children of God, as the mystics do, is derogatory to the Word, which is His inspired product. To lay claim to the possession of a different Spirit from that which dwelt in Christ and the Apostles- for their Spirit honored the Word- and a different Spirit from that which was promised by Christ to His disciples- for this Spirit was "not to speak of Himself."⁶¹

Warfield suggests that "the Word supplies the objective factor; the Spirit the subjective factor; and only in the union of the objective and subjective factors is the result accomplished."⁶² When the Word and the Spirit unite, "knowledge is not only rendered possible to man: it is rendered certain."⁶³ Calvin said, "Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing."⁶⁴ For him the Word of God is "the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of his Spirit to believers."⁶⁵

3. The Illumination of the Holy Spirit

According to Calvin, in order to interpret Scripture man should be illuminated by the Holy Spirit who protects him from

⁶¹ Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 82.

⁶² Ibid, pp. 82-3.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.33, p. 580.

⁶⁵ *Inst.* 1.9.3, p. 96.

his sin and guides him to understand the true meaning of the text. We, however, question the relationship of the illumination of the Holy Spirit to man's understanding the text.⁶⁶ That is how the Holy Spirit plays a role in interpreting Scripture. Although Calvin did not fully explain the way in which the illumination of the Holy Spirit works, we can see a few essential elements in the activities of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture.⁶⁷

First, Calvin emphasized that the Holy Spirit was the true interpreter of Scripture. Thus the initiative of interpretation lies not with man, but with the Holy Spirit. In order to interpret Scripture man needs the help of the Holy Spirit. Bromiley also states that the Holy Spirit, the author

⁶⁶ Cf. Gottfried W. Locher, *Testimonium internum: Calvins Lehre vom Heiligen Geist und das hermeneutische Problem*. Theologische Studien, no. 81 (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1964).

⁶⁷ P. T. Fuhrmann, "Calvin, the Expositor of Scripture," *Interpretation* 6 (1952): 194, also regards this principle as one of the principles of interpretation in Calvin. Lake argues that Calvin stressed the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture; see Donald M. Lake, "The Reformation Contribution to the Interpretation of the Bible," in *Interpreting the Word of God*, eds. Samuel J. Schultz and Morris A. Inch (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), pp. 194-195. Cf. Gordon R. Payne, "Augustinianism in Calvin and Bonaventure," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982): 14-15; John W. Wyckoff, "The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to Biblical Hermeneutics," pp. 45-51. Here he argues that the work of the Holy Spirit, according to Calvin, was interpretation. Cf. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 75-6; Phyllis A. Bird, "The Authority of the Bible," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, eds. Leander E. Keck, etc., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 51-2.

of Scripture, is essential for its proper understanding.⁶⁸ G.

C. Berkouwer states as follows.

The personification of Scripture as interpreter (Gal. 3:8, 22; Rom. 9:17) intends more than a half-serious attempt which was not to be taken as a piece of actual and living interpretation. Rather, it includes the awareness that here no dead letter is at stake, but Scripture in its witness by the hand of the Spirit. Thus conceived, the phrase "is its own interpreter" draws a clear boundary which has been very important for the Reformation.⁶⁹

Luther applied this motto to the Holy Spirit. He did not "exclude the fact that the Spirit causes us to understand the mysteries of God that we as yet do not grasp, if we, without his light, force our way into Scripture."⁷⁰ "At the same time, the reference to the Spirit as 'a unique interpreter' is not a detour around Scripture."⁷¹ With the phrase 'the Holy Spirit is his own interpreter' Calvin expressed a theological presupposition of his hermeneutics. "The Spirit of God, from whom the doctrine of the gospel comes, is its only true interpreter, to open it up to us. Hence in judging it, men's minds must of necessity be in blindness until they are enlightened by the Spirit of God."⁷² He said, "the Spirit, who

⁶⁸ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Interpretation of the Bible," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed, Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), P. 71.

⁶⁹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1975), p. 127.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

⁷¹ Ibid. on Gal. 3:22, p. 228.

⁷² *Comm. on 1 Cor. 2:14*, p. 117.

spoke by the prophets, is the only true interpreter of himself."⁷³ The Holy Spirit who spoke by David is 'an assured interpreter.'⁷⁴ H. W. Rossouw defends this view of Calvin against a spiritualistic misrepresentation of it by saying:

Calvin's doctrine that the Spirit is the only true interpreter of Himself could easily be taken to mean that the mediation of a correct understanding of Scripture is a purely mystical event in which the human activity of exegesis has no role to play. Such a spiritualistic interpretation of his view would, however, render inexplicable Calvin's own concern with, and extensive contribution to the exegesis of the scriptural text.⁷⁵

Calvin stated that although man interpreted Scripture, the true authority in the interpretation of Scripture was not man, but the Holy Spirit who was "the best master of the language."⁷⁶ For him the Holy Spirit is the inner teacher,⁷⁷ and a faithful interpreter.

Calvin's view, 'the Holy Spirit is the only true interpreter,' never ignores the human side in the interpretation of Scripture. He clearly maintained that the author of Scripture was the Holy Spirit. Calvin said that Moses did not have "any intention of boastfully celebrating his own virtues, but that the Holy Spirit dictated what would

⁷³ *Comm. on 2 Pe. 1:20*, p. 389.

⁷⁴ *Comm. on Ps. 32:1*, p. 523.

⁷⁵ H. W. Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics of Holy Scripture," pp. 171-2.

⁷⁶ *Comm. on Da. 4:35*. p. 298.

⁷⁷ *Inst. 3.1.4*, p. 541.

be useful to us, and, as it were, suggested it to his mouth."⁷⁸ The apostles were "sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit (*certi et authentici Spiritus sancti amanuenses*)."⁷⁹ Calvin, therefore, insisted that their writings should be considered oracles of God."⁸⁰ For Calvin the authors - the prophets and the apostles - were the instruments of the Holy Spirit. In his comments on the literary style of Scripture Calvin argued that "the human authors' minds remained active in the production of Scripture."⁸¹ Calvin also believed that the total personalities of the authors of Scripture were involved.⁸²

Consequently, we should not depend upon ourselves in interpreting Scripture, but rather on the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit as a faithful interpreter who can open up to us the true meaning of Scripture.

Secondly, understanding Scripture in the illumination by the Holy Spirit is closely related to faith. Recently Leith has argued that Calvin failed to define the analogy of

⁷⁸ *Comm. on Ex. 3:1*, p. 59.

⁷⁹ *Inst. 4.8.9*, p. 1157.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, p. 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*

faith.⁸³ He goes on to say, "Calvin's failure to define more specifically the analogy of faith ultimately prevented him from dealing adequately with the unity of the Bible in his theology as he had emphasized it."⁸⁴ According to him, "Calvin's failure to develop either an analogy of faith or an analogy of love led to serious difficulties in his theology while Bullinger developed the analogy of faith or the analogy of love."⁸⁵ Leith, therefore, does not think that Calvin interpreted the text of Scripture with the analogy of faith. Contrary to this, Tappeiner insists that Calvin used the analogy of faith given by the Holy Spirit. Concerning the understanding of the sacraments, he says,

The specific theological basis of what Calvin does with the sacramental texts could be treated under the concept of *phraseologia sacramentalis* which is itself based upon the theological notion of *unio sacramentalis*. But this actually falls under the hermeneutical rule of the analogy of faith, since it is but a formalization of the analogy of faith in connection with a specific issue-

⁸³ The analogy of faith derived from the phrases in Romans 12: 3-6. Here Paul used the expressions like 'a measure of faith' (*metron pisteos*) and 'in proportion to his faith' (*kata ten analogian tes pisteos*). For the definition of the analogy of faith, see Henri Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987): 17-38; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Putting It All together: The Theological Use of the Bible," in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, pp. 193-206.

⁸⁴ John H. Leith, "John Calvin: Theologian of the Bible," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 341.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 342.

sacramentalism.⁸⁶

He concludes that Calvin used the analogy of faith as a principle of interpretation. Whose one is the correct view? I think that Tappeiner's statement is more correct than Leith's opinion.⁸⁷ Leith's argument does not give a sufficient proof. In fact, Calvin showed this approach in many places. Calvin said, "Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. . . . by faith alone he leads us into the light of the gospel."⁸⁸ Scripture can be understood when it is believed. According to Calvin, "understanding cannot be separated from faith, because

⁸⁶ Daniel A. Tappeiner, "Hermeneutics, the Analogy of Faith and New Testament Sacramental Realism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 49 (1977): 47.

⁸⁷ According to P. T. Fuhrmann, "Calvin, the Expositor of Scripture," 200, one of Calvin's merits was to interpret Scripture "according to the analogy of faith, that is, according to the example and attitude of faith which always look at the promises." I agree with his statement. On the definition of the analogy of faith employed by Calvin, John Owen, who translated and edited Calvin's commentary on Romans, *Comm. on. Rom.* p. 457, says: "The expression 'the measure of faith,' *metron pisteos*, in differently explained. Some, as Beza and Pareus, consider 'faith' here as including religion or Christian truth, because faith is the main principle, 'as God has divided to each the measure of Christian truth or knowledge.' Others suppose with Mede, that 'faith' here is to be taken for those various suppose with Mede, that 'faith,' here is to be taken for those various gifts and endowments which God bestowed on those who believed or professed the faith of the gospel; 'as God has divided to each the measure of those gifts which come by faith, or which are given to those who believe.' The last view is most suitable to the context. We may, however, take 'faith' here for grace, and consider the meaning the same as in Eph.iv.7. The subject there is the same as here, for the Apostle proceeds there to mention the different offices which Christ had appointed in his Church."

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 3.1.4, p. 541.

faith only generates understanding."⁸⁹ Calvin emphasized that we should have faith through the Holy Spirit, not human reason, in order to interpret Scripture. "Yea, seeing that the true knowledge of God is a singular gift of his, and faith (by which alone he is rightly known) cometh only from the illumination of the Spirit, it followeth that our minds cannot pierce so far, having nature only for our guide."⁹⁰ Calvin believed that faith should go before understanding. "It is true, indeed, that our faith begins with obedience to God, goes before understanding, in such a manner that it illuminates our minds by certain knowledge."⁹¹ By faith we can understand "those things which the eye has never seen, the ear never heard, and which far surpass our hearts and minds."⁹² Faith can kindle in our hearts more and more the light of understanding. But the work of faith is not done by our power, but the power of the Holy Spirit who enlightens us.⁹³ When we interpret Scripture according to our faith, the Holy Spirit wants to protect us from our fleshly reason and guide us to understand God's Word.

Thirdly, Calvin emphasized that in order to interpret Scripture, we should pray for the illumination of the Holy

⁸⁹ L. Floor, "The Hermeneutics of Calvin," p. 187.

⁹⁰ *Comm. on Ac. 17:27*, p. 167.

⁹¹ *Comm. on Isa. 41: 22*, p. 270.

⁹² "Argument," in *Comm. on Gen.* p. 63.

⁹³ *Comm. on Isa. 43:10*, p. 331.

Spirit. For example Calvin prayed as follows: "Grant, Almighty God, that as there is in us so little of right judgment, and as our minds are blind even at mid-day, O grant, that thy Spirit may always shine in us, and that being attentive to the light of thy word."⁹⁴ Calvin showed us to pray for our being ruled by the counsel of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵ By praying, we "may be governed by the spirit of sound understanding."⁹⁶ Childs also shows that our prayer for the illumination by the Holy Spirit is indispensable for a proper interpreting of Scripture.⁹⁷ Many scholars, unlike Calvin and Childs, have not recognized the significance of prayer for the interpretation of Scripture. Calvin insisted that we should pray for the inward light of the Holy Spirit, that we "may not labour in the unprofitable task of learning only the letter."⁹⁸ It is well known that there was "a link between Calvin's prayer life and his belief in the Holy Spirit."⁹⁹ Calvin believed that the interpreter of Scripture should pray for being aware of his poverty and blindness, and for understanding the Word of the Holy Spirit.

⁹⁴ *Comm. on Hab. 2:19*, p. 124.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Comm. on Ps. 86:11*, p. 887.

⁹⁷ Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs*, p. 290.

⁹⁸ *Comm. on Ps. 86:11*, p. 887.

⁹⁹ L. Floor, "The Hermeneutics of Calvin," p. 190.

4. The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Ideal of *Brevitas et Facilitas*

Calvin regarded the role of the Holy Spirit as an important factor establishing the principles of the *brevitas et facilitas*. In this connection it was his view that the intention of the Holy Spirit to clarify the Word was reflected in the literary style used in the Holy Scripture.

According to Calvin's statement on the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*, the first work of this ideal was to reveal the intention of the author of Scripture (*Et sane, quum hoc sit prope unicum illius officium mentem scriptoris quem explicandum sumpsit patefacere*).¹⁰⁰ The intention of the author, according to Calvin, meant that of the Holy Spirit because he thought the Holy Spirit was the true author and interpreter of Scripture. Martin Luther stressed the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰¹ Calvin also followed Luther's emphasis upon the need for the Holy Spirit's help in understanding Scripture. But Calvin formulated his own theological hermeneutical ideal beyond the perspective of simple understanding.

Calvin regarded the intention of the Holy Spirit as one

¹⁰⁰ CO 10.402.

¹⁰¹ LW 22.8. Here in the interpretation of John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word", Luther says, "No man can accept it unless his heart has been touched and opened by the Holy Spirit. It is as impossible of comprehension by reason as it is inaccessible to the touch of the hand." Cf. LW 13.16-7; LW 23.175.

of the most important theological presuppositions of a hermeneutics of Scripture.¹⁰² For Calvin the intention of the Holy Spirit is closely related to the interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰³ He maintained that an interpreter should seek the intention of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture. We, according to Calvin, never understand the true meaning of Scripture without knowing the intention of the Holy Spirit. "I reply, we shall never gain access to a true understanding of them unless we turn our eyes to the purpose to which the Spirit addresses his words."¹⁰⁴ No other interpreters emphasized the intention of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture more than Calvin. "Interpreters have touched neither heaven and earth in their explanation of this prophecy, for they have not regarded the design of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰⁵ He tried to understand the Holy Spirit's intention in the verses of Scripture.¹⁰⁶ The fact that Calvin stressed the intention of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture made his commentaries sound.

What is the intention of the Holy Spirit for Calvin?

¹⁰² Cf. H. W. Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics of Holy Scripture," p. 152, says, "the Reformers agreed. . . that the intended meaning of the scriptural text was that of the Holy Spirit. A correct understanding of Scripture is therefore an understanding of its *sensus spiritualis*."

¹⁰³ *Comm. on Jer.* 49:3, p. 39.

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 3.18.6, p. 827.

¹⁰⁵ *Comm. on Zec.* 5:1, pp. 126-27.

¹⁰⁶ *Comm. on Da.* 11:26, p. 312.

Calvin did not regard it as the new inner revelation in our hearts as the Anabaptists maintained. According to him, the Holy Spirit's intention was not to be found on the outside of Scripture, rather it lay in the text which the author wrote through the Holy Spirit's guidance. Calvin identified the intention of the Holy Spirit with the intention of the authors of Scripture because the Holy Spirit spoke to the authors - the prophets and the apostles. Calvin saw the plain meaning of Scripture as the intention of the Holy Spirit. For him to seek the intention of the Holy Spirit meant to interpret the plain or natural sense of the text: "We must first explain the Prophet's design, and lay open the plain and natural meaning of his words."¹⁰⁷ This means that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* were based on the fact that an interpreter should attempt to reveal the simple and true sense of the author through the work of the Holy Spirit.

From the perspective of the linguistic styles of Scripture and the expressions of its authors, Calvin showed us the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* in his *Institutes, Concerning Scandals*, and his commentaries.

He maintained that the authors of Scripture had their own distinctive language and exhibited a biblical rhetoric through the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin's emphasis on the divine character of Scripture over against the world's

¹⁰⁷ *Comm. on Isa.* 44:4, p. 361.

rhetorical writings is directly concerned with the role of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin even the logic and the methodical plan of philosophers could not be compared with the style of the Holy Spirit.

As Philosophers have fixed limits of the right and the honorable, whence they derive individual duties and the whole company of virtues, so Scripture is not without its own order in this matter, but holds to a most beautiful dispensation, and one much more certain than all the philosophical ones. The only difference is that they, as they were ambitious men, diligently strove to attain an exquisite clarity of order to show the nimbleness of their wit. But the Spirit of God, because he taught without affectation, did not adhere so exactly or continuously to a methodical plan; yet when he lays one down anywhere he hints enough that it is not to be neglected by us.¹⁰⁸

Calvin derived his ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* from the fact that the Holy Spirit used both a rude and refined style, and the uncultivated and even barbarous language in which Amos, Jeremiah, and Zechariah spoke.¹⁰⁹ Calvin's mention is that Moses also "clearly expresses this in a few words (*Ea vero paucis a Mose verbis dilucide exprimitur*): The secret things, he says, belong to . . . our God, but he has manifested them to us and to our children (Deut. 29:29)."¹¹⁰

In his *Concerning Scandals* Calvin described the important perspective on the linguistic style of Scripture as related to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. He maintained that in Scripture the Holy Spirit employed popular, unpretentious

¹⁰⁸ *Inst.* 3.6.1, p. 685.

¹⁰⁹ *Inst.* 1.8.2, p. 83.

¹¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.21.3, p. 924. Cf. CO 2.681.

language in order for common people to understand the text more easily.¹¹¹ Its style was "unpolished and free from embellishments."¹¹² Calvin thought that Moses and a great many of the prophets were "just as accomplished in their own language as any of the Greek and Roman philosophers and orators who are read with the greatest admiration and approval."¹¹³ He said that their language was by no means on the same level of brilliance: "the style of Jeremiah smacks of the countrymen, and Amos's is redolent of the herdsman."¹¹⁴ Here Calvin pointed out that the authors of Scripture did not use academic words, but rather the common style of language in their circumstances. This led Calvin to confirm Scripture as the source of *brevitas et facilitas*. He said; "no orators can influence us more forcibly than Scripture with its plain, unvarnished style."¹¹⁵ The Holy Spirit worked in the authors who wrote the Holy Scriptures in the simple and common style. The foundation of the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* was based on the fact that in order for common people to understand easily, the Holy Spirit made the authors of Scripture employ the clear and simple style of language.

¹¹¹ *Concerning Scandals*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 15.

¹¹² Ibid. on Rom. 2:1, p. 84. Cf. Romans, 2:1.

¹¹³ Ibid. on Rom. 2:18, p. 91.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. on Rom. 5:15, p. 208.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. on Rom. 6:15, p. 222.

In his *Commentary on Romans* and *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* Calvin took an example from Paul's style to exhibit the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin demonstrated that Paul set forth his argument in a simple and plain style (*iam planior facilliorque est deductio*).¹¹⁶ He argued that the Apostolic writings, from which eloquence could be learned, conveyed spiritual wisdom in a plain and simple style.¹¹⁷ Calvin believed that Paul spoke the truth in a humble style through the working of the Holy Spirit. "The highest mysteries have been delivered to us in the garb of a humble style, in order that our faith may not depend on the potency of human eloquence, but on the efficacious working of the Spirit alone."¹¹⁸ By the work of the Holy Spirit Paul could strengthen his argument in plain words.¹¹⁹ Calvin indicated that Paul used a simple style of speech to express the heavenly wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

He says then that he adapts spiritual things to spiritual, in accommodating the words to the subject; that is, he tempers that heavenly wisdom of the Spirit with a simple style of speech, and of such a nature as carries in its front the native energy of the Spirit. In the meantime he reproves others, who, by an affected elegance of expression and show of refinement, endeavor to obtain the applause of men, as persons who are either devoid of solid truth, or, by unbecoming ornaments,

¹¹⁶ *Comm. on Rom.* 2:1, p. 84. Cf. *Romanos*, 2:1, p. 37.

¹¹⁷ *Comm. on Rom.* 2:8, p. 91.

¹¹⁸ *Comm. on Rom.* 5:15, p. 206.

¹¹⁹ *Comm. on Rom.* 6:5, p. 222.

corrupt the spiritual doctrine of God.¹²⁰

The work of the Holy Spirit was very important in bringing about the simple style of Scripture and Calvin asserted that the Holy Spirit was the best master of language.¹²¹ In his *Commentary on 2 Cor. 2:13* Calvin explained.

The words taught by the Spirit, on the other hand, are such as are adapted to a pure and simple style, corresponding to the dignity of the Spirit, rather than to an empty ostentation. For in order that eloquence may not be wanting, we must always take care that the wisdom of God be not polluted with any borrowed and profane lustre.¹²²

Calvin said that even Scripture, as given by the Holy Spirit, revealed to us a pure and simple style, the principle of *facilitas*.

Calvin's theological presupposition that the Holy Spirit illuminated an interpreter sufficiently reflects the fact that one of the foundations of the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* derived from the intention of the Holy Spirit and the linguistic style of Scripture.

B. Scriptura Sui Ipsius Interpres

Verbum supra ecclesiam. Ecclesia nata est ex Dei verbo.

With these slogans the Reformers affirmed the priority and superiority of Scripture to the visible Church, the Roman

¹²⁰ *Comm. on 1 Cor. 2:13*, p. 114.

¹²¹ *Comm. on Da. 4:35*, p. 298.

¹²² *Comm. on 1 Cor. 2:13*, p. 114.

Catholic church.¹²³ The Reformers' new emphasis on the authority of Scripture gave them not only a theological key against the authority and the tradition of the Roman Catholic church, but also produced one of the most important principles of the interpretation of Scripture.

Calvin followed the other Reformers who propagated the Reformation with slogans like *sola Scriptura* and *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.¹²⁴ For him the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* was one of the most important theological principles in the interpretation of Scripture.

1. *Sola Scriptura*

The hermeneutical principle of the Reformers, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, was directly related to one of the great Reformation slogans, *sola Scriptura* which "stands for the Reformers' total view of how the Bible should function as an authority in the conscience of the individual and in the

¹²³ John T. McNeill, "The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin," *Church History* 28 (1959): 131.

¹²⁴ J. I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed., D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 350. Here he says, "Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture, just as one part of a human teacher's message may and should be interpreted by appeal to the rest. . . . Scripture must be approached as a single organism of instruction, and we must look always for its internal links and topical parallels, which in fact are there in profusion, waiting to be noticed."

church's corporate life."¹²⁵ The slogan *sola Scriptura* was a mighty weapon of the Reformers.¹²⁶ With this slogan the Reformers fought the authority and the tradition of the Roman Catholic church, and placed the authority of Scripture over them.¹²⁷ This principle *Scriptura Scripturae interpres* did not render an interpretation subordinated to the dogma of the church (*ecclesia Scripturae interpres*).¹²⁸ The term *sola Scriptura*, therefore, played a decisive role in the Reformers' whole understanding of Christianity.¹²⁹ J. I. Packer says,

¹²⁵ J. I. Packer, "Sola Scriptura in History and Today," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), p. 43.

¹²⁶ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Bd. 1, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), p. 449, says, "Inderdaad hebben de kerken der Hervorming tegenover Rome geen machtiger wapen dan de Schrift."

¹²⁷ The Roman Catholic church accepted the authority of Scripture, but put Scripture next to the church. Cf. C. J. Wethmar, *Dogma en Verstaanshorison: 'n Histories-sistematiese ondersoek in verband met die hermeneutiese funksie van die kerklike dogma met besondere verwysing na die teologie van Gerhard Ebeling* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1977), p. 177, says, "Die Rooms-Katholieke kerk wil die Skrifgesag aan die kerk bind deur die uitleg van die Skrif as prerogatief van die kerklike oorlewing daarvan voor te behou. Aan die kerklike tradisie word, ten opsigte van die Heilige Skrif, sowel 'n interpretatiewe as 'n aanvullingsfunksie toegeken."

¹²⁸ E. P. Groenewald, *Die Eksegese van die Nuwe Testament* (Pretoria: Universiteit van Pretoria, 1938), p. 8.

¹²⁹ For example, Martin Bucer, *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, trans., and ed. D. F. Wright (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), p. 187, says: "By what reasoning, then, will these theologians defend the propriety of asserting that 'the Church gives Scripture its authority, has power over Scripture, can change Scripture,' etc.? Can it be said that an ambassador imparts authority to his prince's mandate, or to the brief that records it, or that he has power over it, or can change anything in it? It is not rather the case that the

The Reformers' whole understanding of Christianity, then, depended on the principle of *sola Scriptura*: that is, the view that Scripture, as the only Word of God in this world, is the only guide for conscience and the church, the only source of true knowledge of God and grace, and the only qualified judge of the church's testimony and teaching, past and present.¹³⁰

For the Reformers Scripture was the only authority against the authority which the Roman Catholic church accorded its tradition in determination of the interpretation of Scripture.¹³¹ In Luther's statement of *sola Scriptura*,¹³² the strong claim of the *sola* already had the power of an hermeneutical principle of Scripture, namely, that Scripture interprets itself "without the imposition of exterior norms or

brief vindicates the trustworthiness of the ambassador, and that he should be so closely bound to his brief that whatever he says that is not explicitly stated in it, whatever exposition he gives of its implications, must be in complete harmony with its express contents, assuming he intends faithfully to discharge his commission?" He rejected the authority of the Roman church's pope, but rather the work of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Peter Matheson, "Martin Bucer and the Old Church," in *Martin Bucer Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D. F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 5-16.

¹³⁰ J. I. Packer, "Sola Scriptura in History and Today," pp. 48-9.

¹³¹ For the studies on the Reformers' hermeneutics of Scripture, see Klaas Runia, "The Hermeneutics of the Reformers," pp. 121-152; Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, pp. 152-174. McGrath says, "The Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* is rendered either meaningless or unusable without a reliable hermeneutical programme" (p. 152).

¹³² WA 7.95-101.

tradition."¹³³ The Roman Catholic church's view that Scripture should be interpreted by the teaching office of the church was based upon the theological presupposition that Scripture is obscure. The Reformers rejected this. They based their assertion on the fact that Scripture is clear.¹³⁴ H. Bavinck saw the perspicuity of Scripture as the strong bulwark of the Reformation.¹³⁵ On account of this perspicuity Scripture has the capacity of interpreting itself.¹³⁶ This discovery of the

¹³³ Gordon Clarke Chapman Jr., "The Hermeneutics of Hermann Diem: A Renewed Conversation between Existentialist Exegesis and Dogmatic Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University: Boston, 1963). pp. 7-8. H. W. Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics of Holy Scripture," in *Calvinus Reformator*, pp. 151-2, says, "The significance which the *sola scriptura* had for the Reformation movement can, however, only be adequately grasped if the hermeneutical relevance of the *sola* is taken into account. Such an understanding of the *sola scriptura* would at the same time reveal that the Reformers' conception of the exclusive authority of Scripture entailed a new view of the nature of this authority and of the way in which it is actually exercised. For the Reformers the confession of the *sola scriptura* originated in the context of a dispute which was primarily of a hermeneutical nature; that is, a dispute in which the real issue at stake was the correct interpretation and understanding of the Biblical message."

¹³⁴ For example, Zwingli argued that Jesus Himself conferred the clarity of Scripture on us. Cf. Gottfried W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), pp. 212-3. For the study of the clarity of Scripture, see Gregg Robert Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995).

¹³⁵ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Bd. 1, p. 449.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 450. For the study of the relationship between the perspicuity of Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture, see Hendrik Willem Rossouw, *Klaarheid en Interpretasie. Enkele probleemhistoriese gesigspunte in verband met die leer van die duidelikheid van die Heilige*

Reformers opened up a new approach to the interpretation of Scripture. The Reformers applied the *sola Scriptura* to their theological interpretation of Scripture.¹³⁷

G. C. Berkouwer says:

Nowhere was the relationship between authority and interpretation so clearly expressed as in the Reformation confession of Scripture, which, based on *sola Scriptura*, offered a perspective on the real relationship between authority and interpretation, and expressed it in its hermeneutical rule: *sola scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Sacred Scripture is its own interpreter).¹³⁸

2. Luther's Method

The history of theology is the record of how the church has interpreted Scripture. In fact, the interpretation of Scripture has played a great role in forming the theology of the Christian community. From this perspective we cannot

Skrif (Amsterdam: Drukkerij en Uitgeverij Jacob van Campen N. V., 1963), pp. 246-270. Cf. P. C. Potgieter, "Perspicuitas - Vir Wie?" in 'N Woord op sy tyd: 'n Teologiese Feesbundel aangebied aan Professor Johan Heyns ter herdenking van sy sestigste verjaarsdag, eds. C. J. Wethmar and C. J. A. Vos (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1988), pp. 89-96.

¹³⁷ Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," in *The New Hermeneutic*, vol. 2, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York, Harper & Row, 1964), p. 79. Ebeling points out the following. "Now although the exclusive particle *sola scriptura* was directed against this Catholic view of tradition, yet the so-called Scripture principle of the Reformers did not really consist in a reduction of the sources of revelation, a quantitatively narrower definition of the norm. Rather the *sola Scriptura*, as opposed to the hermeneutical sense of the Catholic principle of tradition, was itself already a hermeneutical thesis."

¹³⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, p. 127.

neglect the significance of Martin Luther's interpretation of Scripture in the Reformation.¹³⁹ If we ask ourselves how Luther's doctrine of justification by faith began, we cannot help but recognize that his Reformation came from his new interpretation of Scripture over against the Roman Catholic church's.¹⁴⁰ Paul Althaus comments on Luther's interpretation of Scripture:

His theology is nothing more than an attempt to interpret the Scripture. Its form is basically exegesis. He is no "systematician" in the scholastic sense, and he is no dogmatician - either in the sense of the great medieval systems or in the sense of modern theology.¹⁴¹

Therefore his theology was formed by his attempt to interpret Scripture from a new perspective, not according to the Roman Catholic church's method. At the Diet of Worms he did not

¹³⁹ Gerhard Ebeling, "New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," pp. 34-46. Here he emphasizes the hermeneutical revolution which occurred in Luther's thinking. Karl Bauer, *Die Wittenberger Universitätstheologie und die Anfänge der deutschen Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928), p. 145, emphasizes that Luther became the Reformer through his new hermeneutics: "Aber zum Reformator ist er weder durch seinen Nominalismus, noch durch die Anregungen, die ihm vom Humanismus kamen, sondern durch seine neue Hermeneutik."

¹⁴⁰ A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 6. Here he also states that the real significance of the tower discovery of M. Luther lies in the realm of interpretation, and that his hand at last grasped the key with which the Scriptures could be unlocked. A. E. McGrath also points out that the broad features of Luther's doctrine of justification are to be attributed to a new manner of interpreting the Bible, especially the Pauline writings, Cf. A. E. McGrath, "Luther," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 415.

¹⁴¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans., Robert S. Schultz, p. 3.

accept the authority of popes and councils because his conscience was captive to the Word of God. He asserted *sola Scriptura*.¹⁴² This motto included the fact that Scripture interprets itself because it has its own self-authentication.

For Luther *sola Scriptura* became an important hermeneutical principle, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.¹⁴³ This method appeared in his writings as early as 1519 and continued to play an important role in his interpretation of Scripture.¹⁴⁴ For Luther the principle of the self-interpretation of Scripture came from his emphasis of the authority and clarity of Scripture.¹⁴⁵ In the Leipzig Disputation with Eck in July 1519,¹⁴⁶ Luther emphasized the

¹⁴² David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority," *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 258-73.

¹⁴³ WA 10.3.238.

¹⁴⁴ Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confession*, p. 89. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 76-78.

¹⁴⁵ For the studies of the relationship of the clarity of Scripture to Luther's hermeneutics, see Erling T. Teigen, "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 46 (1982): 147-166; Bernhard Rothen, *Die Klarheit der Schrift*, Teil 1: Martin Luther, Die wiederentdeckten Grundlagen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

¹⁴⁶ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, pp. 47-8. Here he gives us a brief background of the Leipzig Debate: "Originally, the debate was planned as a disputation between Eck and Luther's colleague Karlstadt, but Eck's preparatory theses were primarily addressed to Luther. As a result, the leading champions on each side debated one another in Leipzig. They also took the leadership in the controversies of the following decades. It was Eck's intention to reveal Luther as a heretic and he succeeded in doing so. Luther revealed his heresy by denying that the

authority of Scripture:

I regret that the holy doctor penetrates the Scripture as deeply as a spider does the water. In fact, he runs away from them as the devil from the cross. Therefore, with all my regard for the fathers, I prefer the authority of the Scriptures, which I commend to those who will judge me.¹⁴⁷

Over against Erasmus' view that Scripture was a dark book that needed interpretation by the teaching office of the church, Luther defended his thesis on the clarity of Scripture.¹⁴⁸ We can easily find the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* from Luther's Catechisms. In his *Ten Sermons on the Catechism* (1528) Luther said that the interpretation of Scripture was in itself.¹⁴⁹

In Luther's Catechisms there are various patterns that

decisions of a council were infallible. This became particularly clear when he asserted that many of the teachings of Huss condemned by the Council of Constance were good Christian teaching. Luther thus established a clear opposition between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the church. Luther did not understand the authority of the Scripture in a legalistic way but rather felt that only those teachings that were based on Scripture could be considered binding in the church. Luther cited John Gerson and Augustine in support of this way of thinking although he admittedly did not do full justice to their position." Cf. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 299-348.

¹⁴⁷ WA 2.282, quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁸ Hermann Sasse, "Luther and Word of God," in *Accent in Luther's Theology*, ed Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 67. Luther discussed the clarity of Scripture particularly in *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), p. 71, pp. 123-132. Cf. WA 18.609, 653.

¹⁴⁹ LW 5.186.

use this method. The first pattern is a simple quotation of Scripture. For example, in the section on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Luther used this pattern of *sola Scriptura*.

For without the Word of God the water is merely water and no Baptism. But when connected with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul wrote to Titus (3:5-8), "He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure."¹⁵⁰

The reason why Luther did not explain the quoted text is that the text itself has a clear meaning without an exegete's interpretation. Luther also showed this pattern in explaining the fourth commandment in the *Large Catechism*:

St. Paul also highly exalts and praises this commandment, saying in Eph. 6:2, 3, "This is the first commandment with a promise: that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth."¹⁵¹

A second pattern is Luther's use of illustrations from Scripture. This pattern involves using people and events from Scripture to explain points in the catechisms. In his explanation of the first commandment, Luther used the illustration of Saul and David.¹⁵²

Thirdly, Luther interpreted the text by the context. In the interpretation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," Luther said the following commandment is

¹⁵⁰ SC 349.

¹⁵¹ LC 383.

¹⁵² LC 370-71.

more easily understood from the preceding one (the fifth commandment, "you shall not kill").¹⁵³

Fourthly, Luther interpreted the meaning of a text from the meaning of the whole of Scripture. For example, Luther said, "in the Scriptures, to have long life means not merely to grow old but to have everything that pertains to long life—health, wife and child, livelihood, peace, good government, etc., without which this life can neither be heartily enjoyed nor long endure."¹⁵⁴ Here the phrase "in the Scriptures" means the meaning of a text in the light of the whole of Scripture as related to it. This pattern embodied an approach towards Biblical Theology.

Fifthly, one of the distinctive expressions of this principle is "Christ himself says" or "Christ teaches." For example, he said,

But the right way to deal with this matter would be to observe the order laid down by the Gospel, Matthew 19:2, where Christ says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."¹⁵⁵

For Luther, Christ is the interpreter of the law. The statement that "Christ himself says" goes beyond the simple quotation. This pattern shows that Luther highly respected Christ's interpretation in using the *sola Scriptura* principle.

¹⁵³ LC 392.

¹⁵⁴ LC 383.

¹⁵⁵ LC 402.

3. The Relationship of the Principle *Scriptura Sui Ipsius Interpres* to the Ideal of *Brevitas et Facilitas*

Since Calvin was a theologian of Scripture, he intended to formulate his hermeneutics as well as his theology by means of the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura*.¹⁵⁶ The *Genevan Confession* shows us Calvin's understanding of *sola Scriptura*.

First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord.¹⁵⁷

His firm faith in Scripture alone made him use a theological principle of Scriptural interpretation, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. This principle was closely related to his doctrine of Scripture. The fact that all Scripture is inspired by God Calvin accepted.¹⁵⁸ Thus the real author of Scripture was not human, but God.¹⁵⁹ Calvin's view of the divine inspiration of

¹⁵⁶ John H. Leith, "John Calvin. Theologian of the Bible," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 330.

¹⁵⁷ *The Genevan Confession (1536)*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises, The Library of Christian Classics*, trans., J. K. L. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 26.

¹⁵⁸ On the Calvin's view of the inspiration of Scripture see John Murray, "Calvin's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4, *Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 156-175.

¹⁵⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.1, p. 74. "Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard." This statement means that the ultimate proof of the authority of Scripture is that God himself addresses us in Scripture.

Scripture appears in his interpretation of 2 Timothy. 3:16

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God".

First, he commends the Scripture on account of its authority. . . . In order to uphold the authority of the Scripture, he declares that it is divinely inspired; for, if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever then wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit. . . . Moses and the prophets did not utter at random what we have received from their hand, but, speaking at the suggestion of God, they boldly and fearlessly testified, what was actually true, that it was the mouth of the Lord that spake. . . . This is the first clause, that we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.¹⁶⁰

For him only Scripture was authoritative because it was dictated by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶¹ The principle *sola Scriptura*

¹⁶⁰ *Comm. on 1 Ti. 3:16*, pp. 248-9.

¹⁶¹ For the studies on Calvin's view of the inspiration of Scripture, see A. D. R. Polman, "Calvin on the Inspiration of Scripture," in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, ed., Jacob T. Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959): 97-112; J. I. Packer, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *God's Inerrant Word*, pp. 101-112; R. C. Sproul, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit," in *Inerrancy*, ed., Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), pp. 337-354; John Murray, "Calvin and the Authority of Scripture," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4, *Studies in Theology*, pp. 176-190; Douwe Johannes de Groot, *Calvijs opvatting over de inspiratie der Heilige Schrift* (Zutphen: N.V. Nauta & Co's Drukkerij, 1931); Donald K. McKim, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, pp. 43-68; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "The Inspiration of Scripture in the English Reformers Illuminated by John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (1960-1): 140; Werner Krusche, *Das*

is based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore Scripture as the Word of God has its own authority.¹⁶²

Calvin followed Luther's view that Scripture is its own interpreter, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.¹⁶³ Calvin, developed this slogan and used it in his commentaries.¹⁶⁴ For him this is one of the most important theological principles. Wallace states:

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.¹⁶⁵

Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin, pp. 161-84; Leon McDill Allison, "The Doctrine of Scripture in Theology of John Calvin and Francis Turretin" (Th.M. thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1958).

¹⁶² Von Hans Helmut Eßer, "Die Lehre vom *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* bei Calvin innerhalb seiner Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift," *Verbindliches Zeugnis: Schriftauslegung-Lehramt-Rezeption*, eds. W. Pannenberg und Th. Schneider (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), pp. 246-258.

¹⁶³ A. Ganoczy, "Calvin als paulinischer Theologe," in *Calvinus Theologus*, ed. W. H. Neuser (Neukirchener: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), p. 50.

¹⁶⁴ C. Schwöbel, "Calvin," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 99, says, "Although the *sola scriptura* principle points to the common ground in the Reformers' understanding of scripture, this should not disguise the distinctiveness of their respective approaches to the theology of the Word of God and to the practice of biblical interpretation. Calvin's understanding of biblical exegesis is based on Luther's theology of the Word of God and developed against the back-drop of an intimate knowledge of the theory and practice of biblical interpretation of other Reformation theology."

¹⁶⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, "Calvin the Expositor," *Christianity Today* 18 (1964): 9.

For him this principle means that the true meaning of Scripture must be found in Scripture alone.¹⁶⁶ It also entails a literal interpretation, rejecting the fourfold sense of Scripture of the Medieval Ages.

Now let us see how Calvin used the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. The strong point of Calvin's own interpretation is that when he interpreted one passage, he did it with the help of other passages as far as possible. For example, in the interpretation of the one verse of Rom. 9:5 Calvin used five passages from the Old Testament.¹⁶⁷

First, Calvin interpreted an expression in the light of the same meaning which it has in other passages of Scripture. It is the general method he followed. In the explanation of a word, Calvin applied this principle. "*abbirim* is translated strong by some commentators; I have preferred to follow those who explain it to mean bulls, which it means also in Ps. 50:13, though in this passage the Prophet employs the word bulls to denote metaphorically those who are very strong and powerful."¹⁶⁸ He also interpreted the passage "That I might obtain some fruit," in Rom. 1:13 with the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. "He (Paul) no doubt speaks of the fruit, for the gathering of which the Lord sent his Apostles, 'I have

¹⁶⁶ P. C. Potgieter, "Calvin as Scriptural Theologian," in *Calvinus Reformator*. p. 129.

¹⁶⁷ *Comm. on Rom. 9:5*, p. 341.

¹⁶⁸ *Comm. on Isa. 34:8*, p. 51.

chosen you, that ye may go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit may remain.' (John 15:16)."¹⁶⁹ In the interpretation of Isa. 18:2 "To a people terrible from their beginning hitherto", he connected this sentence with Deut. 28:37 and Jer. 18:16. Calvin said:

He calls it terrible, because so great calamities would disfigure it in such a manner that all who beheld it would be struck with terror. I cannot approve of the exposition given by some, that this relates to the signs and miracles which the Lord performed amongst them, so as to render them an object of dread to all men; for the allusion is rather to that passage in the writings of Moses, 'The Lord will make thee an astonishment and a terror.' Deut. 28:37. In like manner it is said elsewhere, 'for the shaking of the head and mockery.' (Jer. 18:16, and 19:9, 13, 18). He therefore means that they are a nation so dreadful to behold as to fill all men with astonishment, and we know that this was foretold and that it also happened to the Jews.¹⁷⁰

With this principle he also interpreted the expression of Isa. 27:9 "in the day of the east wind". "When the prophet spoke of 'the day of the east wind,' he had his eye on the situation of Judea, to which, as we learn from other passages, that easterly wind was injurious."¹⁷¹ Calvin interpreted the passage "Thou wretched" in Isa. 54:11 in the light of the same meaning in Hag. 2:10: "All this was expressed by Haggai in a single word, when he said, 'The Glory of the latter temple shall be greater than the glory of the former,'"¹⁷² On the

¹⁶⁹ *Comm. on Rom. 1:13*, p. 59.

¹⁷⁰ *Comm. on Isa. 18:2*, p. 37.

¹⁷¹ *Comm. on Isa. 27:9*, p. 258.

¹⁷² *Comm. on Isa. 54:11*, p. 144.

passage "spreadeth it out as a tent" in Isa. 40:22, Calvin said, "David also employs the same form of expression (Ps. 104:2), and both speak of the aspect and spreading out of the heavens with respect to us; for they do not mean that God spreads out the heavens, that he may dwell in them, but rather that there may be given to us a place of habitation under them."¹⁷³ In the interpretation of Isa. 51:6 "My salvation shall endure for ever.", he used the same sentence of Ps. 102:26.27.¹⁷⁴ In the interpretation of Christian doctrine, e.g., election, Calvin did not force the passages into doctrines, but rather recommended his readers to consider other passages related to the subject. In the passage "even to them who are called according to his purpose" in Rom. 8:25, Calvin explained the word purpose as follows;

The word purpose distinctly excludes whatever is imagined to be adduced mutually by men; as though Paul had denied, that the causes of our election are to be sought anywhere else, except in the secret good pleasure of God; which subject is more fully handled in the first chapter to the Ephesians, and in the first of the second Epistle to Timothy; where also the contrast between this purpose and human righteousness is more distinctly set forth. Paul, however, no doubt made here this express declaration, - that our salvation is based on the election of God.¹⁷⁵

Secondly, Calvin interpreted an obscure passage with reference to a clear passage. In the interpretation of Isaiah

¹⁷³ *Comm. on Isa. 40:22*, p. 227.

¹⁷⁴ *Comm. on Isa. 51:7*, p. 72. Calvin said, "And with this sentiment agree the words of the Psalmist, 'The heavens shall wax old and vanish away: but thou, Lord, art always the same, and thy years are not changed.' (Psalm cii. 26, 27)."

¹⁷⁵ *Comm. on Rom. 8:29*, p. 316.

17:9, Calvin used this principle. "This passage will be made more plain by the writings of Moses, whom the prophets follow; for in the promises he employs this mode of expression, 'One of you shall chase a thousand,' (Lev.xxvi 8; Joshua xxiii. 10) and in the threatenings, on the other hand, he says, 'One shall chase a thousand of you.' (Deut. xxxii 30)."¹⁷⁶ By using this principle, Calvin viewed his interpretation more sound than others'.

But the Sophists are wrong in their exposition; for, while they acknowledge that famine, barrenness, war, pestilence, and other scourges, come from God, they deny that God is the author of calamities, when they befall us through the agency of men. This is false and altogether contrary to the present doctrine; for the Lord raises up wicked men to chastise us by their hand, as is evident from various passages of Scripture. (1 Kings xi. 14, 23) The Lord does not indeed inspire them with malice, but he uses it for the purpose of chastising us, and exercises the office of a judge, in the same manner as he made use of the malice of Pharaoh and others, in order to punish his people (Exod, i. 11 and ii. 23).¹⁷⁷

The principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* is closely related to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Since the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* is to seek the meaning of a text with simplicity and naturalness, it is very important for an interpreter to use the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. With this principle, Calvin correctly found the simple and natural meaning of a passage. Whenever we find the simple and natural view, the meaning of a passage becomes clear. In the interpretation of Isaiah 34:11, for example, "He

¹⁷⁶ *Comm. on Isa.* 27:9, p. 28.

¹⁷⁷ *Comm. on Isa.* 45:8, p. 403.

shall stretch over it the cord of emptiness.", Calvin stated,

Some view the phrase 'an empty cord' as bearing an opposite sense, and apply it to the Jews; but I take a more simple view, and think that, like all the preceding statements, it must relate to the Edomites. And to make it more clear that this is Isaiah's natural meaning, we read the same word in the Prophet Malachi, who lived a long time afterwards. That passage may be regarded as an approbation of this prophecy. . . . What Isaiah had foretold more obscurely, Malachi explains with greater clearness.¹⁷⁸

Calvin also maintained that the interpretation of a passage could be evident from the whole of Scripture or the whole context.¹⁷⁹ He showed us how to apply this principle.

The Gentiles were entirely shut out from his (God) kingdom, as is sufficiently evident from the whole of Scripture. Paul says, 'Ye were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now by Christ Jesus, ye who formerly were far off have been made nigh by the blood of Christ.' (Eph. 2:12,13).¹⁸⁰

Calvin believed that one passage could help in the understanding of other passages by comparing the two passages. This method has some value for the solution of a difficult exegetical problem.¹⁸¹

Thirdly, by using the expression of the author and the

¹⁷⁸ *Comm. on Isa.* 34:11, p. 53.

¹⁷⁹ *Comm. on Isa.* 5:20, p. 186. "Through some limit this statement to judges, yet if it be carefully examined, we shall easily learn from the whole context that it is general." Cf. *Comm. on Rom.* 5:5, p. 192. "I do not refer this only to the last sentence, but to the whole of the preceding passage."

¹⁸⁰ *Comm. on Isa.* 56:3, p. 179.

¹⁸¹ *Inst.* 4.16.23, p. 1346.

common usage of Scripture,¹⁸² Calvin employed the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. In the passage "The zeal of Jehovah of hosts will do this." in Isa. 37:32, Calvin interpreted with the help of an expression which the author of Isaiah had already employed in Isa. 9:7. "The same mode of expression was employed by him on a similar occasion (Isa. 9:7)."¹⁸³ He insisted on our considering the ordinary language of the author. "But I think that the former meaning is more agreeable to the context and to the prophet's ordinary language; and we ought carefully to observe those forms of expression which are peculiar to the prophets, that we may become familiar with their style."¹⁸⁴ In the interpretation of Eze. 3:3 "Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness", he mentioned that Jeremiah used the same expression elsewhere (Jer. 15:16).¹⁸⁵

Calvin interpreted a passage by referring to a general usage of Scripture. D. C. Puckett also mentions that Calvin interpreted the text by referring to the ordinary usage of the word. "Frequently Calvin justifies a translation by appealing to the ordinary usage of the word in the Old Testament, yet often without specifying the texts upon which he bases his

¹⁸² *Comm. on Rom. 4:17*, p. 175. Calvin interpreted the word call according to the usage of Scripture.

¹⁸³ *Comm. on Isa. 37:32*, p. 141.

¹⁸⁴ *Comm. on Isa. 62:3*, p. 323.

¹⁸⁵ *Comm. on Eze. 3:3*, p. 130.

judgement."¹⁸⁶ In the interpretation of Hos. 9:14 "Give them, O Lord: what will thou give? Give them a miscarrying and dry breasts.", Calvin rejected other interpreters' view because they did not comprehend the design of the prophet. He argued,

Christ says, that when the last destruction of Jerusalem should come, the barren would be blessed, (Luke 23:29) and this he took from the common doctrine of Scripture, for many such passages may be observed in the prophets."¹⁸⁷

Pointing to the weakness of other interpreters with their forced interpretations, Calvin referred to a mode of expression frequently employed in Scripture. In connection with the passage "Behold, I will bring a wind upon him." in Isa. 37:7, Calvin stated:

Others translate it, 'I will put my Spirit in him,' as if the prophet were speaking of a secret influence of the heart; but that is a forced interpretation. It is a highly appropriate metaphor that there is in the hand of God a wind or whirlwind to drive Sennacherib in another direction. To compare wicked men to 'straw or chaff' (Ps. 1:4) is a mode of expression frequently employed in Scripture, because God easily drives them wherever he thinks proper, when they think that they are standing very firm."¹⁸⁸

Calvin's ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* was intended as a safeguard against forced interpretation. The method of referring to the common usage of Scripture prevents an exegete from twisting the meaning of a text. The principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* is indispensable to the ideal of *brevitas*

¹⁸⁶ David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, p. 62.

¹⁸⁷ *Comm. on Hos. 9:14*, p. 341.

¹⁸⁸ *Comm. on Isa. 37:7*, p. 113.

et facilitas. Calvin argued that a simple interpretation suitable to the sense, and less forced, was closely related to the form of speech used in Scripture.

With regard to the present passage, I simply understand it to mean, he raised his face towards God. That I might inquire, says he, by supplication and prayers. Some translate, that I might seek supplication and prayer. Either is equally suitable to the sense, but the former version is less forced, because the Prophet sought God by supplication and prayers. And this form of speech is common enough in Scripture, as we are said to seek God when we testify our hope of his performing what he has promised.¹⁸⁹

In the interpretation of the names of Sodom and Gomorrah, Calvin attempted to interpret them in the light of the common mode of speaking adopted by the prophets.¹⁹⁰ According to the common usage of Scripture, Calvin interpreted a text with the help of the same word as used by other authors.¹⁹¹ He also recommended the reader to observe the usual phrase of Scripture.¹⁹² "To recompense into the bosom is a phrase frequently employed in Scripture."¹⁹³ He said, "We ought, therefore, to notice this mode of speaking, which occurs everywhere in Scripture, - the same thing is ascribed to God and to his servants."¹⁹⁴ Calvin believed that the usual mode

¹⁸⁹ *Comm. on Dan. 9:3*, p. 142.

¹⁹⁰ *Comm. on Jer. 49:18*, p. 86.

¹⁹¹ *Comm. on Rom. 5:4*, p. 191.

¹⁹² *Comm. on Rom. 7:5*, p. 249.

¹⁹³ *Comm. on Isa. 65:6*, p. 384.

¹⁹⁴ *Comm. on Jer. 36:8*, p. 334.

of speaking in Scripture was the key to the principle
Scriptura sui ipsius interpres.¹⁹⁵

Calvin recognized that good interpretations were more customary in Scripture. In the explanation of the passage "For he hath smeared their eyes." in Isa. 44:18, Calvin stated this principle.

Here some interpreters supply the word "God," and others supply the words "false prophets," and say that the people were blind, because the false prophets led them astray; for they would never have plunge into such disgraceful errors if they had not been deceived by the impostures of those men, their eyes being dazzled by wicked doctrines. Others do not approve of either of these significations, and it might also refer to the devil. But as a different exposition is more customary in Scripture, I rather adopted, namely, that God hath blinded them by a righteous judgment; if it be not thought preferable to view it as referring to themselves, because they voluntarily shut both their minds and their eyes; in which case there would be a change of number, which frequently occurs among Hebrew writers. I have stated, however, what I prefer; and it is exceedingly customary among Hebrew writers, when they speak of God, not to mention his name."¹⁹⁶

In order to define a meaning of a word correctly, Calvin referred to the customary mode of Scripture. "It is customary in the Scriptures to employ the word *conceptions* for denoting the designs and efforts of men (Job 15:35; Ps. 7:14; Isa. 26:17, and 59:4). The metaphor is taken from pregnant women."¹⁹⁷

When many interpretations occurred due to not knowing the

¹⁹⁵ *Comm. on Rom. 8:17*, p. 302.

¹⁹⁶ *Comm. on Isa. 44:18*, pp. 376-7.

¹⁹⁷ *Comm. on Isa. 33:11*, p. 22.

correct meaning of a word, Calvin chose the interpretation corresponding to the sense which was commonly found in Scripture.¹⁹⁸ In the interpretation of the passage "Then shall break forth as the dawn thy light," in Isa. 58:8, Calvin applied this principle to his explanation. "By the word light he means prosperity, as by the word 'darkness' is meant a wretched and afflicted life; and this mode of expression occurs frequently in Scripture."¹⁹⁹ Calvin maintained that certain interpretations were unnatural and inconsistent with the style of the authors, the modes of expression which were customary among the prophets. He stated,

We must therefore observe carefully those modes of expression which are customary among the prophets, that we may understand their meaning, and not break off sentences, or torture them to meanings different from what was intended. Exceedingly unnatural and inconsistent with the style of the prophets is the interpretation of those who explain 'the land' to mean heaven and the blessed life; for the land Canaan was given to the children of God with this intention, that, being separated from the whole world, and having become God's heritage, they might worship him there in a right manner; and consequently, to dwell in the land by right of inheritance means nothing else than to remain in the family of God.²⁰⁰

According to Calvin, Ezekiel and Paul were examples of good interpreters who did not cross the boundaries of Scripture.²⁰¹ He tried to go if Scripture would go, and to

¹⁹⁸ *Comm. on Isa.* 52:15, p. 108.

¹⁹⁹ *Comm. on Isa.* 58:9, p. 235.

²⁰⁰ *Comm. on Isa.* 60:21, p. 299.

²⁰¹ *Comm. on Eze.* 1:25-26, p. 102.

stop if Scripture would stop. Calvin did his best to interpret Scripture by the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.

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*.

In this chapter I deal with the ideal of brevity and clarity as the central features of Calvin's scriptural interpretation. I have investigated the hermeneutical efficacy of Calvin's view from the point of other scholars' definitions of brevity and clarity. Following this analysis, I shall evaluate the data, and present several pieces of evidence to support my thesis.

A. Brevity

Calvin's view of the function of the ideal of brevity et facilitas is evident in his preface to the *Institutes*. Brevity implies interpreting the text in as brief a manner as possible. If we compare the size of Calvin's commentaries to that of others, we will find him consistently adhering to this principle. Goshé says of this subject:

As one looks at the long shelf of Calvin's biblical commentaries, one might wonder about his brevity. At a point of comparison, we could stand Calvin's single-volume Genesis commentary up against Luther's eight-volume commentary on the same book. Or we could compare Calvin's one-volume Romans commentary with Bucer's huge four-volume work. By these terms Calvin is