

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to explore the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* in the theological hermeneutics of John Calvin. In his exegetical writings, Calvin pointed out that many interpreters before him had not expounded the genuine meaning of the author of Scripture correctly, clearly, briefly, and simply. According to my investigation, Calvin faithfully adhered to the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* - from his first *Institutes* (1536) to his last commentary. Calvin's hermeneutical products abundantly proved him to use these principles as a theological hermeneutical approach to Scripture.

Calvin was not born a great interpreter, but his humanistic training made him not only the great theologian of the Reformation, but also made him one of the great interpreters in the history of Christianity. His humanistic training helped him develop his biblical interpretation. Calvin was influenced by Chrysostom who had already interpreted the plain, literal meaning of the text straightforwardly. Although he did not entirely agree with Chrysostom's interpretation because of his theological and grammatical mistakes, Calvin recognized him as a pioneer of

the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. The fact that Calvin never rejected Budé's views and interpretations proved that Budé had strongly influenced Calvin.

Calvin pointed out the fundamental problem with Origen's allegorical interpretation of Scripture: It forced the meaning of the text. Calvin argued that Origen's allegorical method had started from the wrong presupposition of hermeneutics - a mistaken wrong hermeneutic based upon the terms letter and spirit. Calvin argued that the interpretation of Ambrose had been more ingenious than solid. Calvin sometimes agreed with him when his interpretation was suitable. But he stated that Ambrose's interpretation had generally focused on the doctrinal issues related to the passage. Calvin pointed out that Jerome had not revealed the intention of the author simply, and had forced the meaning of the text. Although Augustine had a great influence on Calvin's theology, Calvin did not follow Augustine's biblical interpretation from the perspective of the grammatical-historical approach and the intention of the author. He pointed out that Augustine had often understood the text as a doctrine which was not related to the relevant passage. Nevertheless, Calvin normally agreed with the doctrine of Augustine.

Calvin maintained that, in order to establish and to justify the doctrine and the tradition of the Roman Catholic church, the 'Papists' interpreted the text with their own unacceptable methods. Calvin maintained that the basic problem

of the Roman Catholic church was that they forced the text to support their own theological positions such as the system of indulgences, the rewards of works, the mass, and Purgatory. Calvin argued that the Jewish interpreters failed to interpret the text of the Old Testament correctly because they did not accept Jesus as the Christ and the Messiah. For them the christological interpretation of the text of the Psalms was impossible.

Erasmus, breaking with the Middle Ages' interpretation, introduced the grammatical-historical method. Although Erasmus had a great influence upon the Reformers, Calvin often rejected the interpretation of Erasmus, because by inserting words, verbs, etc., into the original text, he did not get to the true meaning of the text, and did not reveal the intention of the author.

M. Luther decisively rejected the Roman Catholic church as the only authority for interpreting Scripture, and proclaimed that Scripture was its own interpreter, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Luther's hermeneutical principle of Scripture was christological because he always regarded Christ as the center of Scripture and the goal of the interpretation of the text. Calvin did not follow Luther's interpretation when Luther's view was frivolous and not solid.

Like Erasmus, Zwingli emphasized the moral aspect of Scripture. Showing a preference for Origen's allegorical method of interpretation, Zwingli extensively used the

distinction between the natural and non-literal senses of Scripture. As the result of that, his method of Old Testament interpretation was allegorical.

Calvin noted that Melanchthon only touched on major points when interpreting texts. But according to Calvin, Melanchthon did not sufficiently explain the meaning of important passages because he used the method of *loci*. Although in the interpretation of the text, Bucer did not use the *loci* method of the Aristotelians, Calvin did not follow him entirely because his interpretation was too prolix and academic.

Calvin maintained that the Anabaptists denied the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. That was their basic hermeneutical weakness. He pointed out that the Anabaptists emphasized the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the extreme. Calvin also said that the Libertines used allegorical interpretation, and forced the simple meaning of Scripture.

Although Calvin was influenced by rhetoricians like Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian and Chrysostom, he confirmed that Scripture itself demonstrated the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as its own hermeneutical mode. Calvin faithfully followed this approach in his *Institutes*, treatises, sermons, and commentaries.

Calvin held his own theological presuppositions for the interpretation of Scripture. Calvin believed that the true interpreter of Scripture was the Holy Spirit who inspired the

authors to write it. Thus Calvin thought that in order to interpret the text correctly, an interpreter needs the help of the Holy Spirit. However he warned Sadoletto and the Anabaptists not to separate the Holy Spirit from the Word of God. Calvin showed that the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* was closely related to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin's views on the clarity of Scripture formed the basis for his consistent application of the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* in his works.

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

Calvin, if possible, did not change the original text, but rather tried to retain it. Since he felt that inserting things into the original text was not natural and simple, Calvin dared to reject Erasmus' insertion of words, prepositions, etc. Calvin had reasons for preferring retention to insertion. First, he thought that inserting something into the original text for purposes of interpretation forced the meaning of the text. Calvin always

disliked the ambiguity caused by inserting words. The result of insertion was that the readers became confused and inept at understanding the genuine meaning of a passage.

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

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

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

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

to Calvin, the criterion of suitability was related to the intention of the author and the context of the present text.

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

In the light of this study, we can declare Calvin's ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*, to be the central principle of his theological hermeneutics.

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

Although Calvin used the theological interpretation of the text, unlike the Fathers, he was not dominated by doctrinal interpretations. Calvin recognized significant doctrines in the text, and sometimes explained subjects

relating to doctrine. He, however, passed over the interpretation of doctrines which was not directly related to the passage. As the result of that, he did not get involved in meaningless arguments with other interpreters. He only attempted to interpret the true meaning of the text without exhausting his readers.

The fact that Calvin interpreted the text by means of the intention of the author of Scripture makes us recognize him as one of the great interpreters in the history of Protestant interpretation. One of the purposes of his hermeneutics was to help the readers understand the mind of the author of Scripture easily and briefly. In order to accomplish this goal, Calvin employed the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. For Calvin to interpret the true meaning of the text was to understand the words of the author or the intention of the author. Calvin identified the genuine meaning of the text with the intention of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin's practical purpose with the interpretation of texts was to edify the people of God. Calvin challenged an interpreter to consider the Christian life and the church's edification, without falling into theoretical argument. He always interpreted the meaning of the passage practically for the readers to understand easily and briefly. Especially the interpretation used in Calvin's *Sermons on Job* proved the practical application to the Christian life.