
CALVIN AND THE BIBLE

By Benjamin B. Warfield¹

It is inadequate praise to say of Calvin that he was the best expositor of the Scriptures of his day; that he knew them better than any of his contemporaries, and was the most capable man of his time in unveiling their treasures to others. This is universally admitted. “Calvin,” says Reuss, “was, beyond all question, the greatest exegete of the century.” “The greatest exegete . . . of the Reformation,” repeats Farrar, “was undoubtedly Calvin.” So authoritative was his exposition that Richard Hooker—“the judicious Hooker”—remarks that in the controversies of his day, “the sense of Scripture which Calvin alloweth” was of more weight than if “ten thousand Augustines, Jeromes, Chrysostoms, Cyprians were brought forth.”

In point of fact, Calvin introduced a new exegesis—the modern exegesis; and he is justly called, therefore, as Diestel, for example, calls him, “the creator of genuine exegesis.” Accordingly, his commentaries alone, of those of his age, remain in use until today, and continue to be appealed to by the most scientific of modern expositors. “They belong,” says Wohlenberg, “to the works which are never antiquated.” “Like Bengel’s *Gnomon*, they are continually reprinted, and will be continually read; so long as a sound and devout exposition of Scripture exists, so long Calvin’s commentaries will never be forgotten.”

The effect of their first publication may be gathered from the enthusiastic praise of a scholar like Joseph Scaliger. He expresses his preference for the “Commentaries,” properly so-called, which were written out by Calvin’s own hand, above the expository “Sermons” which were taken down from his lips as he preached them; and then exclaims: “O, the great man! None of the ancients can be compared to him! How well he has understood the Scriptures! The first little money I get, I shall buy all his works. . . . O, how well Calvin has followed the meaning of the prophets; no one better. Calvin’s mind and judgment are final.”

Similarly, in our own time, Professor A. J. Baumgartner, setting himself to investigate the quality of Calvin’s Hebrew learning, after remarking on Calvin’s “astounding, multiplex, almost superhuman activity,” adds: “And—a most remarkable thing!—this work has never grown old; these commentaries whose durable merits and supreme value men of the most diverse tendencies have signalized—these commentaries remain to us even today an astonishingly rich, almost inexhaustible mine of profound thoughts, of solid and often ingenious interpretation, of wholesome exposition, and at the same time of profound erudition.”²

¹ From *The Presbyterian* (June 30, 1909): 7-8; reprint, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—I*. Edited by John Meeter. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 397-400.

² Editor’s note. Consider two additional commendations of interest. Charles Spurgeon: “It would not be possible for me too earnestly to press upon you the importance of reading the expositions of that prince among men, John Calvin. . . . Of all commentators I believe John Calvin to be the most candid. . . . He is scrupulously careful to let [the Word of God] speak for itself, and to guard against every tendency of his own mind to put upon it a questionable meaning for the sake of establishing some doctrine which he feels to be important, or some theory which he is anxious to uphold.” Jacob Arminius [yes, the father of Arminianism!]: “Next to the perusal of the Scriptures, which I earnestly inculcate, I exhort my pupils to peruse Calvin’s commentaries . . . for I affirm that he excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture, and that his commentaries ought to be more highly valued than all that is handed down to us by the Library of the Fathers. . . .”

Calvin's interest in the Scriptures was interest in their teaching: it was because they reveal to us the saving love of God, and his holy will for us, that he delighted in them. He was not therefore insensible, however, to their more human charm. "Let us pay attention to the style of Isaiah," he says, "which is not only pure and elegant, but also is ornamented with high art—from which we may learn that eloquence may be of great service to faith. And, in point of fact, Jesus Christ has not less called the wise with the brilliancy of the star, than he has drawn the peasants with the voice of the angels." He is far from despising, then, what we may call beauty of form, whether in the inspired Word or in its expounders.

The eighth chapter of the first book of the "Institutes" is full of the signs of his appreciation of the literary beauty of the Bible. Here, too, it is peculiarly, no doubt, the majesty of the matter which attracts him. But this very majesty of matter brings with it a quality of style. He boldly declares that no human writing speaks to the heart like the Bible. "Read," says he, "Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, or any others whatever of that company; I confess they will allure, delight, move, enrapture you in a wonderful way; but if then, you turn to the reading of this holy Book, will you, nill you, it will so vividly affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your mind, that compared with the depth of this impression, all the force of these rhetoricians and philosophers will seem almost nothing. So that it is easy to perceive that the Holy Scriptures breathe out something divine, and, by a great interval, surpass all the gifts and graces of human industry." Calvin is giving us here a transcript of his own experience in reading the Scriptures: they, as Coleridge would have phrased it, "found" him, as no other writings were able to do.

Though discovering thus, something much more impressive than literary charm in the Scriptures, he by no means denies, however, that literary charm, too, may be theirs. "I confess, indeed," he goes on to say, "that the diction of some of the prophets is elegant and polished, and even splendid; and that they are not inferior in eloquence, to profane writers." He only insists that that "majesty of the Spirit" of which he has been speaking, is independent of these things; and whether "we read David, Isaiah, and their like, whose speech is pleasant and agreeable, or Amos (the shepherd), Jeremiah and Zechariah, whose harsher language smacks of rusticity," the same divine impressiveness is present. Similarly in the New Testament, the same power is felt amid the greatest diversities of style. Let it be allowed that three evangelists recite the history of our Lord in a style that may be called "low and mean." But we can hardly so characterize the first chapter of Luke; or the discourses of Christ incorporated into these Gospels. And then there is John—John "thundering from his sublimity," and casting into the dust by a force more powerful than that of any thunderbolt, the obstinacy of all whom he does not conquer to the obedience of faith. The same heavenly majesty is found in Paul and Peter. How wonderful that men like these without consideration in the very mob so short a time before, "should suddenly begin to discourse so magnificently of the heavenly mysteries!"

It was not, however, the homage of his admiration alone that Calvin gave to the Scriptures. He gave to them the homage of his faith and obedience. In them he heard the very words of God, as if they were pronounced by his very lips. And to these words he bent his ear, the Spirit in him bearing witness with his spirit that they are the words of God. "Let it be considered, then," he says, "an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught of the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated carrying with it its own evidence . . . equal to that of an intuitive perception of God himself in it." What made him so great—as an expositor, a theologian, a prince in God's house, in the hearts of men, and, above all these, in his own heart (for greater is he that rules his spirit than he who captures a city) was that he made these Scriptures the guide of his thought and life, and brought all his activities of mind and speech and hand into subjection to their teaching.