The Ideal of *Brevitas et Facilitas*: The Theological Hermeneutics of John Calvin

Myung Jun Ahn
(Christian Theological University, Pyongtaek, Korea)

**ABSTRACT**

Calvin presented his own distinctive method of the hermeneutics of Scripture in his Commentary on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Romans. It is called the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin was not satisfied with both Melanchthon’s loci method and Bucer’s prolixity commentary. He took a via media approach. Calvin’s method was influenced by rhetoric of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian and Chrysostom. Calvin, however, confirmed that his own principle came from Scripture itself. I deal with Calvin’s view that the clarity of Scripture was related to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. After analyzing Calvin’s writing, I discovered ten component elements of the method of *brevitas et facilitas*.

1 **INTRODUCTION**

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

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

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

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

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

Calvin clearly suggested the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* as a basic dimension of his theological hermeneutics in the dedicatory preface in his *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Romans*. There he agreed with his old friend Simon Grynaeus on the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Calvin was completely confident of the superiority of
this method. He insisted on it as the only hermeneutical method which helped the readers understand Scripture. In other words, Calvin presented his readers with the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* as distinctive principles for the interpretation of Scripture.

2 CALVIN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE OTHER INTERPRETERS

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 Bude's views and interpretations proves that Bude had strongly influenced Calvin.

Calvin pointed out the fundamental problem with Origen's allegorical interpretation of Scripture. 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 sufficiently 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\textsuperscript{15}, because by inserting words, verbs, etcetera, 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, \textit{Scriptura sui ipsius interpres}. Luther's hermeneutical principle of Scripture\textsuperscript{16} 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\textsuperscript{17} 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 \textit{loci}. Although in the interpretation of the text, Bucer\textsuperscript{18} did not use the \textit{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.

3 THE SOURCE OF THE IDEAL OF \textit{BREVITAS ET FACILITAS}

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

4 THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS IN CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS

Calvin had his own theological presuppositions for establishing his own distinctive ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. His method was related to the role of the Holy Spirit\(^1\) and the principles *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Firstly, Calvin regarded the role of the Holy Spirit as an important factor establishing the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. 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*)\(^2\). The intention of the author meant that of the Holy Spirit because he thought the Holy Spirit was the true author and interpreter of Scripture. For him to seek the intention of the Holy Spirit meant to interpret the plain or natural sense of the text. 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 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. 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.

Secondly, Calvin showed us the relationship of the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* to the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*. The clarity of Scripture offered the Reformers the principle *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Calvin interpreted an expression in the light of the same meaning which it
has in another passage of Scripture. He interpreted an obscure passage with reference to a clear passage. 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 principles, Calvin correctly found the simple and natural view, the meaning of a passage becomes clear. Calvin also maintained that the interpretation of a passage be evident from the whole of Scripture or the whole context. By using the expression of the author and the common usage of Scripture, Calvin employed 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*.

5 THE ELEMENTS OF THE IDEAL OF *BREVITAS ET FACILITAS*

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

Calvin, if possible, did not change the original text, but rather tried to retain it. Since he felt that inserting things into the original text was not natural and simple, Calvin dared to reject Erasmus’ insertion of words, prepositions, etcetera. 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 did not attempt 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 of Scripture 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 a solid and sound argument, but rather started from imagination. On this point Calvin often criticized Erasmus for frivolous conjecture. Calvin thought that the purpose of simplicity was to let the readers easily understand the mind of the author.

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

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

Calvin criticized Christian interpreters for twisting the meaning of the text away from its simple sense. Calvin tried not to twist the meaning of the text, but rather with these principles tried 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.

6 CONCLUSION

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 from Job* proved the practical application to the Christian life.

NOTES:

1. This article is the result of research done for a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of professor C J Wethmar in the department of Systematic Theology at the University of Pretoria. The title of my dissertation is “Brevitas et Facilitas: A Study of a Vital Aspect in the Theological Hermeneutics of John Calvin”.


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 kerklke dogma met besondere verwysing na die teologie van Gerhard Ebeling*, Amsterdam 1977, 177.


CO 10.402-403.


On the influence of Chrysostom upon Calvin’s hermeneutics, see Alexandre Ganoczy und Klaus Müller, *Calvins Handschriftliche Annotationen zu Chrysostomus: Ein Beitrag zur Hermeneutik Calvins*, Wiesbaden 1981; Alexandre Ganoczy and Stefan Schell, a w, 118-9; Jack B Rogers and Donald K McKim, a w, 114-116; John Robert Walchenbach, a w.

Josef Bohatec, a w, 119-240.


Johannes Müller, Martin Bucers Hermeneutik, Heidelberg 1965.


CO 10.403.


CO 2.168, CO 41.79, CO 40.57.
23  CO 50.208, CO 50.226, CO 50.59.
24  CO 49.258.
25  CO 50.175.
26  CO 50.13, CO 36.446, CO 40.557.
27  CO 49.153, CO 49.553, CO 49.138.
28  CO 37.107, CO 50.186.
29  CO 50.52-3, CO 50.59.