# CHAPTER 7

## THE IDEAL OF *BREVITAS ET FACILITAS*

In this chapter I deal with the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* as the central features of Calvin's Scriptural hermeneutics. I have investigated the hermeneutical writings of Calvin from the point of other scholars' definitions of the principles of *brevitas et facilitas*. Following this analysis, I shall now classify the data, and construct several elements of Calvin's method.

### A. Brevity

One of the features of the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* is, of course, brevity. Brevity implies interpreting the text in as brief or concise 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. Gamble says on this subject:

> As one looks at the long shelf of Calvin's biblical commentaries, one might wonder about his brevity! But for a point of comparison, we could stand Calvin's large 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,

in fact, brief.[1]

In the interpretation of Jer. 10:1-2, for example, Calvin remarked that "More things might be said, but I study brevity as far as I can; and I trust that I have briefly included what is sufficient for the understanding of this passage."[2]

Calvin suggested a few guidelines as to what he understood by brevity in the interpretation of a text. To make the exposition of a text brief does not mean to reduce the size of the interpretation of the passage without any goal in mind. It relates to the mode of interpretation and the true meaning of the author of Scripture. Calvin based the principle of brevity on the fact that the author of Scripture used this concise brevity. "This concise brevity is more emphatic than if he (Isaiah) had made a long discourse."[3] Calvin noted that the author of Scripture spoke "in a concise manner of expression."[4] First, in order to interpret the text in a brief manner, Calvin presented only a few of many testimonies. "Those who are moderately versed in the Scriptures see that

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[1] R. C. Gamble, "Calvin as Theologian and Exegete," p. 189.

[2] *Comm. on Jer.* 10:1-2, p. 12. CO 38.61. "*Possent plura dici: sed ego brevitati studeo, quantum in me est: et videor breviter comprehendisse quod ad loci huius intelligentiam sufficeret.*"

[3] *Comm. on Isa.* 8:1, p. 261. CO 36.165. "*Concisa haec brevitas magis emphatica est quam si prolixe concionatus esset.*"

[4] *Comm. on Isa.* 26:3, p. 213. CO 36.427. "*Sed quia non apponitur nota dativi casus, sed concise dicit propheta.*"

for the sake of brevity I have put forward only a few of many testimonies."[5] Secondly, Calvin argued that brevity was closely related to the genuine sense of the author. He referred to brevity as "his own custom": "Interpreters differ widely about these words, and I will not bring forward all their opinions, otherwise it would be necessary to refute them. I should have no little trouble in refuting all their views, but I will follow my own custom of shortly expressing the genuine sense of the Prophet, and all difficulty will be removed."[6] Thirdly, for brief interpretation Calvin passed over anything perplexed, ambiguous, or obscure. In his Genesis dedication in 1563, Calvin stated,

> Since in my progress I have often despaired of life, I have preferred giving a succinct exposition to leaving a mutilated one behind me. Yet sincere readers, possessed of sound judgment, will see that I have taken diligent care, neither through cunning nor negligence, to pass over anything perplexed, ambiguous, or obscure. Since, therefore, I have endeavoured to discuss all doubtful points, I do not see why any one should complain of brevity, unless he wishes to derive his knowledge exclusively from commentaries.[7]

Calvin used this principle of brevity to clear up obscure and perplexing matters. Calvin said,

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[5] *Inst.* 1.18.1, p. 231. CO 2.168. "*Qui mediocriter exercitati sunt in scripturis, vident me ex multis pauca tantum proferre testimonia, ut brevitati consulam.*"

[6] *Comm. on Da.* 7:25, p. 68. CO 41.79. "*Mihi vero parum esset negotii, si vellem singulas opiniones refutare: sed ego sequar meum morem, hoc est, breviter complectar genuinum sensum prophetae: et ita nulla difficultas restabit.*" See *Comm. on Ps.* 11:2.

[7] "The Author's Epistle Dedicatory," in *Comm. on Gen*, p. liii.

> I have dwelt a little longer on this doctrine, because there are many who are not versed in the writings of the Fathers, and cannot easily satisfy themselves, and these are knotty points; yet I have endeavoured so to clear up a matter which seems obscure and perplexing, as shortly as possible, that any one of moderate capacity and judgment can easily understand what I have said.[8]

Calvin's interpretation was not always short. Whenever any important doctrines relating to a text occurred, Calvin did a longer commentary. Then brevity, according to Calvin, did not necessarily mean reduced length. Although his exposition became a little longer, Calvin tried to interpret a text in order for his readers to understand his exegesis easily and clearly.[9]

## B. Reduction

The principle of reduction aims at reducing prolix interpretation and instead interpreting a text in as few words

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[8] *Comm. on Eze.* 1:25-6, p. 102. CO 40.57. "*Ego Paulo fui in hac doctrina longior, quia multi qui non versati sunt in lectione patrum, non tam facile se expedirent: et quaestiones istae sunt satis spinosae: tamen ego conatus sum quanta potui brevitate rem quae videtur obscura et perplexa, ita expedire, ut quivis mediocri ingenio et iudicio praeditus, facile intelligat quod dixi.*"

[9] For the study of the principle of brevity (Kürze), see Alexandre Ganoczy und Stefan Scheld, *Die Hermeneutik Calvins: Geistesgeschichtliche Voraussetzungen und Grundzüge*, pp. 120-26. They deal with this point (p. 126). Also M. C. Armour, "Calvin's Hermeneutic and the History of Christian Exegesis," p. 83, argues that brevity was not "a matter of page counts". L. Battles, "Introduction," p. lxx, in *Inst.*, says: "With few exceptions his sentences and paragraphs are packed with thought and have all the condensation possible without sacrifice of the constituent matter."

as possible. Calvin criticized Erasmus, the Scholastic Sophists, and Bucer for the prolixity of their Scriptural interpretation. In his *Commentary on Romans* Calvin pointed out Erasmus' verbosity. "The less excusable is Erasmus, who labours much in palliating a notion so grossly delirious."[10] In his *Institutes* Calvin criticized the Scholastic Sophists for being prolix in their interpretation.[11] Calvin argued that Bucer's interpretation did not help the readers understand Scripture easily because of the verbosity of the interpretation. Calvin proposed to touch only briefly on the words in order not to become too tedious to his readers (*ego volui totum hunc contextum breviter perstringere, ne abrumperem*).[12] In the interpretation of Ps. 38:1 "O Jehovah! rebuke me not in thy wrath, and chasten me not in thy anger," he said, "As I have already expounded this verse in the beginning of the sixth Psalm, where it occurs, and that I may not prove tedious to the reader. I shall notice it more briefly here."[13] His purpose in using the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* was to give the readers the true meaning

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[10] *Comm. on Rom.* 5:14, p. 205. CO 49.97. "*Quo minus excusabilis est Erasmus, qui in excusando tam crasso delirio nimium laborat.*"

[11] *Inst.* 3.6.1. p. 685. Cf. OS 3.6, 24-28. Cf. *Inst.* 1.13.3, 1.9.3.

[12] *Comm. on Jer.* 3:25. p. 95. CO 37.571.

[13] *Comm. on Ps.* 38:1, p. 54. CO 31.386. "*Quia sextus quoque Psalmus ab hoc versu incipit, ubi eum exposui: ne frustra lectores onerem, nunc ero brevior.*"

of an author as briefly as possible. He detested 'vain prattle' and went straight to the point with simplicity.[14] In the *Sermons on Job* he spoke out against verbosity and briefly gave his message.[15]

Calvin did not interpret the text with unnecessary verbosity when the text clearly explained itself. "But we have no need of a long dispute, because Scripture everywhere declares with sufficient clearness that God has determined what shall happen to us: for he chose his own people before the foundation of the world and passed by others. (Eph. 1:4)"[16]

Calvin showed us how to interpret a text as briefly as possible. In the interpretation of Rom. 1:4 "And declared to be the Son of God with Power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead", Calvin used the reducing principle of Scriptural interpretation.

> Though some indeed find here three separate evidences of the divinity of Christ - "power", understanding thereby miracles - then the testimony of the Spirit - and, lastly, the resurrection from the dead - I yet prefer to connect them together, and to reduce these three things to one, in this manner - that Christ was declared the Son of God by openly exercising a real celestial power, that is, the power is comprehended, when a conviction of it is imprinted on our hearts by the same Spirit. The language

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[14] Benjamin Wirt Farley, "John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments" (Th.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, 1976), p. 56.

[15] *Sermons on Job*. p. 102, p. 164, p. 173.

[16] *Comm. on Eze.* 18:32, p. 265. CO 40.458. "*Sed nihil opus est longa disputatione, quia scriptura ubique satis clare praedicat constitutum esse Deo quid de nobis futurum sit.*"

> of the Apostle well agrees with this view; for he says that he was declared by power, because power, peculiar to God, shone forth in him, and incontestably proved him to be God; and this was indeed made evident by his resurrection.[17]

Calvin argued that his brief interpretation agreed with the sense of the author. Calvin used the reducing principle in three ways. First, he intentionally avoided introducing the opinions of other interpreters whenever possible. While reducing other's views of the interpretation of a text, Calvin directly presented his own exposition to the readers. In the interpretation of Rom. 7:13 "Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful", Calvin said: "With no intention to offend others, I must state it as my opinion, that this passage ought to be read as I have rendered it, and the meaning is this (*Salva aliorum pace, sic legendum arbitror ut posui: itaque hunc esse sensum*)."[18] The reason why Calvin omitted many interpretations in the interpretation of

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[17] *Comm. on Rom.* 1:4, pp. 45-6. CO 49.10. "*Quanquam autem seorsum tria hic specimina divinitatis Christi quidam faciunt: per virtutem miracula intelligentes, deinde testimonium spiritus, postremo resurrectionem mortuorum: ego simul coniungere malo, et ad unum haec tria referre, hoc modo, Christum esse definitum filium Dei exserta palam vere coelesti et eadem spiritus potentia, quum a mortuis resurrexit: sed eam potentiam comprehendi dum cordibus obsignatur per eundem spiritum. Cui interpretationi bene suffragatur apostoli phrasis: dicit enim declaratum fuisse in potentia, quod scilicet potentia in eo refulserit quae esset Dei propria, ipsumque esse Deum indubie probaret. Ipsa vero enituit quidem in illius resurrectione.*"

[18] *Comm. on Rom.* 7:13, p. 258. CO 49.127

Scripture was to show the genuine meaning of the text. In the interpretation of Rom. 9:28 "For I will finish and shorten the matter," he stated, "Omitting various interpretations, I will state what appears to be the real meaning (*Omissa interpreationum varietate, mihi germanus sensus hic videtur*)."[19] Avoiding many interpretations, Calvin wanted to interpret the pure sense of the text. "Passing by the diversity of expositions, which we have received in consequence of the obscurity of the passage, I shall only state what appears to me to be in accordance with Christ's true meaning."[20] Calvin was always cautious of the readers' getting tired of long explanations of a text. "I shall not engage the reader long in reciting and disproving the opinions of others. Let every one have his own view; and let me be allowed to bring forward what I think."[21] He did not mention others' views on an unimportant matter since the argument of other interpreters made his readers waste time. He said, "As there is some difficulty in Paul's words, interpreters differ as to the meaning. I shall not spend time in setting aside the interpretations of others, nor indeed is there any need for

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[19] *Comm. on Rom.* 9:28, p. 374. CO 49.191.

[20] *Comm. on Jn.* 16:8, p. 137. CO 47.358. "*Omissa expositionum varietate, quam nobis peperit loci obscuritas, tantum afferam quod mihi videtur ex genuino esse Christi sensu.*"

[21] *Comm. on Rom.* 10:14. p. 396. CO 49.203. "*Non occupabo hic diu lectorem referendis simul ac refellendis aliorum opinionibus, sit salvum cuique iudicium: mihi vero libere proferre liceat quod sentio.*"

this, provided only we are satisfied as to the true and proper meaning."[22] He thought that it was not necessary for him to spend time in mentioning others' views.[23]

Secondly, the principle of reduction included avoiding any unnecessary disputation, argument, or controversy. Calvin argued that disputes between interpreters were "unnecessary", and served "no good purpose."[24] Calvin avoided the arguments of other interpreters in some cases because their views did not directly relate to the text. "But I do not get into that argument, for it does not affect this passage. Paul simply means. . . (*Sed ego in illam disputationem non ingredior: quia nihil facit ad praesentem locum. Nam simpliciter intelligit Paulus.* . .)"[25] In the interpretation of 1 Pet. 4:6 "That they might be judged," Calvin pointed out that others' interpretations were 'remote' from the mind of the author. "I omit the explanations of others, for they seem to me to be very remote from the Apostle's meaning (*Aliorum expositiones*

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[22] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 1:11, p. 123. CO 50.15-16. "*Quia in verbis Pauli nonnihil est perplexum: variant in sensu interpretes. Ego aliorum expositionibus refellendis non insistam: neque sane opus est, modo de vera et genuina nobis constet.*"

[23] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 5:9, p. 190. CO 49.383. "*Caeterum hic locus propter obscuritatem ad varios sensus torquetur: quibus refellendis non puto mihi necesse esse immorari, si eum, qui mihi genuinus videtur esse, protulero.*"

[24] *Comm. on Ps.* 9,(pre.) p. 109. CO 31.95-6.

[25] *Comm. on Gal.* 2:6, pp. 54-5. CO 50.187.

*omitto, quia mihi videntur a mente apostoli procul remotae*)."[26] Calvin did not dispute with others on unnecessary matters irrelevant to the author's design. "I shall not enter into any dispute as to whether the things that Paul enumerates are effects of repentance, or belong to it, or are preparatory to it, as all this is unnecessary for understanding Paul's design, for he simply proves the repentance of the Corinthians from its signs, or accompaniments."[27] Calvin thought that the duty of an interpreter was not to argue the statement of the author, but simply to interpret the meaning of focussing on the text by means of the intention of the author.

Thirdly, the reducing principle was to avoid the repetition of the same interpretation of various texts. He often suggested that the readers consulted his other commentaries and *Institutes* or other interpreters' writings. In the interpretation of Gal. 3:11 "the just shall live by faith," Calvin recommended his readers to consult his *Commentary on Romans*. "As we had occasion to expound this passage where it occurs in the Epistle to the Romans, it will be unnecessary to repeat the exposition of it here (*quia locum hunc exposuimus in epistola ad Romanos, nunc repetere non erit*

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[26] *Comm. on 1 Pet.* 4:6, p. 126. CO 55.274.

[27] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 7:11, p. 275. CO 50.90. "*Non disputabo sintne haec, quae Paulus enumerat, poenitentiae effectus, an partes, an praeparationes: quia id totum necesse non est ad intelligendam Pauli mentem. Tantum enim Corinthiorum poenitentiam probat a signis vel annexis.*"

*opus quidquid ad eius expositionem pertinet*)."[28] He disliked repeating the interpretation of the same content in different texts. For more study on a subject he suggested that the reader might consult his other commentaries. "If the reader desires more full information on this subject, he may consult what I have written on the conclusion of the Epistle to the Romans (*Plura ex fine epistolae ad Romanos petant lectores, si velint*)."[29] He also mentioned that some issues he would afterwards consider 'in the proper place' (*Rationem postea dicemus suo loco*).[30] Calvin often insisted that the readers considered his *Institutes* which was written as a guideline for understanding Scripture. "For a fuller solution, however, of this question, consult my *Institutes* (*Verum huius quaestionis solutio plenior ex Institutione nostra petatur*)."[31] On doctrinal issues he liked to employ this method. For example, he stated, "As to the reward of works, consult my *Institutes* (*De operum mercede, lege Institutionem meam*)."[32] On the doctrine of the rite of excommunication, Calvin suggested, "Should any one wish to have anything farther in reference to the rite of excommunication, its causes, necessity, purposes, and limitation, let him consult my *Institutes* (*De*

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[28] *Comm. on Gal.* 3:11, p. 90. CO 50.208.

[29] *Comm. on Gal.* 4:4, p. 118. CO 50.226.

[30] *Comm. on Gal.* 4:1, p. 117. CO 50.226.

[31] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 4:17, p. 214. CO 50.59.

[32] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 3:9, p. 132. CO 49.352.

*excommunicationis ritu, causis, necessitate, finibus, moderatione si quis habere plura volet, petat ex Institutione nostra*)."[33] He especially applied this principle when he criticized the doctrines of the Roman Catholic church. On the doctrine of the authority of the Pope as the successor of Peter Calvin said: "This, however, is not the place to treat of these points. Consult my *Institutes* (*Sed iis tractandis non est hic locus: legatur Institutio nostra*)."[34] The fact that he did not combine his interpretation with doctrinal explanation gave a certain objectivity to his hermeneutical method in the interpretation of Scripture. In order to avoid repetition of the same interpretation in different passages, Calvin proposed that the readers should consider the explanation of other interpreters. Although Calvin did not entirely follow Augustine's method of interpretation, he still consulted Augustine's writings on matters of doctrine and issues of the Christian life.[35] For example, he recommended his readers to consult Augustine's *On the Advantage of Marriage*.[36] On the

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[33] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 5:5, p. 186. CO 49.381.

[34] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 9:5, p. 292. CO 49.440.

[35] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 5:5, p. 185. CO 49.381. "*Est enim apta loquutio tradere Satanae pro excommunicare: quia sicut in ecclesi regnat Christus, ita Satan extra ecclesiam: quemadmodum etiam annotavit Augustinus, sermone De verbis apostoli 68, ubi locum hunc exponit.*"

[36] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 7:6, p. 231. CO 49.405-6. "*Sed contra etiam contendo, quidquid est vitii aut turpitudinis sic tegi coniurgii honestate, ut vitium esse desinat, vel saltem desinat a Deo imputari. Quemadmodum eleganter disserit Augustinus in libro de bono coniugii, et alibi saepe.*"

teaching method of teachers, Calvin suggested his readers to read Augustine's 98th homily on John.[37] Calvin suggested that his readers should consult the writings of Augustine in order to understand easily the truth of Christianity.

### C. Retention

Calvin did not want to change the original text, but rather to retain it as he interpreted. He thought that inserting anything into the passage was neither natural nor simple. Calvin rejected Erasmus' interpretation of texts by the insertion of words, prepositions, or anything else. Calvin had various reasons preferring retention to insertion. First, he thought that inserting something into the original text for purposes of interpretation led to forced interpretations.

> I acknowledge, indeed, that it is sometimes employed in this sense, but never in the construction that Paul has here made use of, for the idea of Erasmus, as to supplying a preposition, is exceedingly forced. On the other hand, the meaning that I adopt is easy, and has nothing of intricacy.[38]

Here Calvin correctly pointed out that Erasmus' insertion did not provide the simplest and easiest interpretation of the

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[37] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 3:2, 122. CO 49.347. "*Sed nihilo minus quidquid cognitu necessarium est continebunt haec rudimenta quam absolutior doctrina, quae robustioribus traditur. Qua de re lege Homiliam Augustini in Iohan. 98.*"

[38] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 10:16, p. 334. CO 49.464. "*Fateor quidem interdum hoc sensu poni: sed nunquam in ea constructione qua hic usus est Paulus. Nam quod Erasmus praepositionem subaudit, nimis est coactum, Sensus autem, quem sequor, facilis est, nec quidquam habet implicitum.*"

text. The second reason for resisting such insertion was that the meaning of the changed passage was often not natural.

> What Erasmus has followed among the various readings I know not; but he has mutilated this sentence, which, in Paul's words, is complete; and in stead of the relative article he had improperly introduced *alius* - one, "One indeed believes." That I take the infinitive for an imperative, ought not to appear unnatural nor strained, for it is a mode of speaking very usual with Paul.[39]

Calvin wanted to interpret the meaning of the passage in a unstrained manner. Thirdly, Calvin noted that the meaning of a text became ambiguous when words were inserted "*Itaque non prorsus male Erasmus probandi verbum posuit: sed quia ambiguum esse poterat. Verbum intelligendi retinere malui.*"[40] Calvin tried to find the true meaning of a passage without supplying the words. The reason why he liked to retain the original text itself was that he believed that retention was the suitable method for understanding the real sense of the author of Scripture. Whenever he interpreted a difficult passage, Calvin respected the intention of the author (*mentem scriptoris*). That Calvin always tried to follow the intention of the author in the context of the passage was one of the great contributions of his hermeneutics. Calvin rejected Erasmus' insertion of extra words into the original text because, in

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[39] *Comm. on Rom.* 14:2, p. 493. CO 49.258. "*In diversa lectione quid sequutus fuerit Erasmus, non video. Mutilam enim sententiam reddidit, quum plena sit in verbis Pauli: et pro articulo relativo improprie posuit alius quidem credit. Nec illud asperum aut coactum videri debet, quod infinitivum pro imperativo accipio: quoniam ista loquendi formula Paulo usitatissima est.*"

[40] CO 49.130. Cf. *Comm. on Rom.* 7:15, p. 264.

his view, it departed from the author's original meaning (*apostoli mentem*). "But I have retained the words of Paul; for bolder than what is meant is the version of Erasmus: Until the sons of God shall be manifest;' nor does it sufficiently express the meaning of the Apostle."[41] He certainly believed that retention revealed the true meaning of a passage. For example, he said,

> It has not escaped my notice, that the phrase, *eis auton*, to him, is sometimes taken for *en autō*, in or by him, but improperly: and as its proper meaning is more suitable to the present subject, it is better to retain it, than to adopt that which is improper.[42]

He maintained that in many cases Erasmus did not give the reader a suitable rendering. In the interpretation of Rom. 15:30 "that ye strive together with me" Calvin rejected Erasmus' rendering because he preferred to give a literal rendering."[43]

D. Respect for the Context

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[41] *Comm. on Rom.* 8:19, p. 303. CO 49.152. "*Retinui autem Pauli verba, quia mihi audacior quam par sit visa est Erasmi versio: donec palam fiant filii Dei: neque tamen satis exprimere apostoli mentem.*"

[42] *Comm. on Rom.* 11:36, p. 448. CO 49.232. "*Non me fugit particulam* **eis auton**, *pro* **en autō** *interdum accipi, sed abusive. Quum autem proprius significatus magis praesenti argumento quadret, eum retinere praestat quam ad improprietatem confugere.*"

[43] *Comm. on Rom.* 15:30, p. 539. CO 49.282. "*Erasmus non male reddidit: ut laborantem adiuvetis: sed quia loquutio graeca Pauli plus habet energiae, reddere ad verbum eam malui.*" Cf. *Comm. on Rom.* 1:14, 6:11, 7:21, 8:2.

Calvin limited the scope of his interpretation on issues related to the passages of Scripture. He tried not to depart from the central message of a text and to wander outside the key point of the subject. Whenever he felt that he was dealing with an issue not directly related to a passage, Calvin attempted to return to the key point of the text. Calvin pointed out that other interpreters often departed from the text of Scripture. His *Commentary on Gal.* 1:10 is a case in point.

> Others interpret the words "God" and "men," as meaning divine and human concerns. This sense would agree very well with the context, if it were not too wide a departure from the words. The view which I have preferred is more natural.[44]

Calvin understood that an interpretation departing from the passage was not in accordance with the context. One of the reasons why Calvin rejected Erasmus' interpretation was that he ignored the context. "For so I understand the words, rather than in the sense given them by Erasmus, who thus renders them, 'Let no one think proudly of himself'; for this sense is somewhat remote from the words, and the other is more accordant with the context."[45] He tried not to depart from the

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[44] *Comm. on Gal.* 1:10, p. 35. CO 50.175. "*Alii Deum et homines pro divinis et humanis accipiunt. Qui sensus admodum bene quadraret, nisi esset aliquanto a verbis remotior. Eum itaque sequi malui, qui minus erat coactus.*"

[45] *Comm. on Rom.* 12:3, p. 456. CO 49.236. "*Sic enim intelligere malo quam secundum quod Erasmus vertit: Ne quis superbe de se sentiat: quia et hic sensus est aliquanto a verbis remotior, et ille melius quadrat orationis contextui.*"

common rendering when he was not constrained to do so.[46] He often criticized the interpretation of Origen for departing from the relevant subject.[47] He often emphasized that an interpreter should deal in a text only with the subject at hand. He also tried not to sacrifice a particular passage to be subservient to another one. For example, in commenting the verb 'blind' in 2 Cor. 4:4, he clearly expressed that he was not departing from the present passage. He said,

> With respect to the passage before us (*quod ad praesentem locum spectat*), the blinding is a work common to God and to Satan, for it is in many instances ascribed to God; but the power is not alike, nor is the manner the same. . . . Scripture, however, teaches that Satan blinds men, not merely with God's permission, but even by his command, that he may execute his vengeance.[48]

He intended to interpret the present passage in its own context.

## E. Simplicity

The most important element of the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* is the simplicity of the interpretation of

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[46] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 3:2, p. 167. Cf. CO 50.37.

[47] *Comm. on Rom.* 7:14, p. 260. CO 49.128. "*Illa autem Origenis expositio, quae tamen ante hoc tempus multis arrisit, indigna est quae refutetur. Legem spiritualem a Paulo vocatam dicit, quia non sit literaliter intelligenda scriptura. Quid istud ad causam praesentem?*"

[48] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 4:4, p. 195. Cf. CO 50.51. Here he showed that he handled the issue of the passage after discussing the opinion of Hilary, Chrysostom, and Augustine on Satan. Ibid, pp. 192-195.

Scripture. As Calvin had already suggested in the dedication of his *Commentary on Romans*, the purpose of simplicity was to let the readers easily understand the intention of the author.

The emphasis on simplicity was a reaction against ambiguity, perversion, and conjecture. Calvin showed simplicity in his commentaries. For example, on Rom. 2:24, "for the name of God", he said:

> But some think that it is a proof from the less to the greater, according to this import, "Since the Prophet upbraided, not without cause, the Jews of his time, that on account of their captivity, the glory and power of God were ridiculed among the Gentiles, as though he could not have preserved the people, whom he had taken under his protection, much more are ye a disgrace and dishonour to God, whose religion, being judged of by your wicked life, is blasphemed." This view I do not reject, but I prefer a simpler one, such as the following.[49]

Although he did not reject others' interpretation of this phrase, Calvin wanted a simple explanation. He thought that his intervention in others' interpretation often made his readers be confused. That incresed ambiguity. He, therefore, stressed the simplicity of expression in the interpretation of a text. In the interpretation of Rom. 6:5 "for if we have been ingrafted" Calvin said,

> But the words admit of a twofold explanation, - either that we are ingrafted in Christ into the likeness of his

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[49] *Comm. on Rom.* 2:24, p. 107. CO 49.43. "*Putant autem quidam esse argumentum a minori ad maius, in hunc sensum: Si aetatis suae Iudaeos non abs re increpuit propheta, quod propter eorum captivitatem haberetur Iudibrio inter gentes Dei gloria et potentia, ac si populum, quem in protectionem suam susceperat, non potuisset conservare: multo magis estis Dei probra et dehonestamenta, ex quorum pessimis moribus aestimata eius religio male audit. Quam sententiam ut non refello, ita simpliciorem malo.*"

> death, or, that we are simply ingrafted in its likeness. The first reading would require the Greek dative *homoioumati* to be understood as pointing out the manner; nor do I deny but that it has a fuller meaning, I have preferred it; though it signifies but little, as both come to the same meaning: but as the other harmonizes more with simplicity of expression, I have preferred it.[50]

He argued that the plain and simple sense of the text of Scripture always agreed well with the author's intention, without perverting it.[51] In the interpretation of Gal. 2:6 "Whatsoever they were" Calvin did not agree with the interpretations of Chrysostom and Jerome, but rather provided a simpler explanation.

> Chrysostom and Jerome take a harsher view of the words, as an indirect threatening of the most distinguished apostles. Whatsoever they may be, if they swerve from duty, they shall not escape the judgment of God; neither the dignity of their office, nor the estimation of men, shall protect them. But another interpretation appears to me more simple, and more agreeable to Paul's design.[52]

Calvin explained that the purpose of simplicity was for

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[50] *Comm. on Rom.* 6:5, p. 223. CO 49.106-7. "*Caeterum bifariam exponi possunt verba, vel nos Christo insitos esse in similitudinem mortis eius: vel simpliciter insitos esse similitudini. Prior lectio posceret dativum graecum* **homoiōmati** *ad modum notandum referri. Nec illam infitior habere pleniorem sensum: sed quoniam altera magis quadrat simplicitati dictionis, eam praeferre visum est.*"

[51] *Comm. on Isa.* 44:4, p. 361. CO 37.107. "*Haec quidem doctrina deduci ac fusius tractari potest: sed prius exprimenda est mens prophetae, atque simplex et genuinus sensus patefaciendus est.*"

[52] *Comm. on Gal.* 2:6, p. 54. CO 50.186. "*Chrysostomus et Hieronymus durius accipiunt: quasi oblique minetur etiam primis apostolis, in hunc sensum: qualescunque sint, non effugient Dei iudicium, si declinent ab officio: non liberabit eos vel officii dignitas, vel hominum existimatio. Mihi haec expositio simplicior videtur et magis consentanea menti Paulinae.*"

the readers to understand the true meaning of the text easily.

> For as to Ambrose's qualifying the statement in this way - You not only read, but also acknowledge, there is no one that does not perceive that it is quite foreign to the import of the words. And the meaning that I have stated is plain, and hangs together naturally, and up to this point, there is nothing to prevent readers from understanding it, were it not that they have had their eyes shut, from being misled by the different meanings of the word.[53]

Calvin believed that the ambiguity of the words of a passage often made an interpreter misinterpret the true meaning. He maintained that only the principle of simplicity could solve this problem.[54]

## F. Suitability

The criterion of suitability is related to the intention of the author, the historical situation, the grammatical construction, and the context of a particular text. Calvin insisted that the interpretation of a passage should suit the mind of the author. This reference to Erasmus in his *Commentary on 2 Cor.* 1:6 is a case in point. Calvin wrote, "Erasmus takes the participle *energoumenes* in an active sense,

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[53] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 1:13, p. 128. CO 50.18. "*Nam quod Ambrosius ita mitigat, non modo legitis, sed etiam agnoscitis: nemo est qui non videat a verbis esse omnino alienum. Sensus autem, quem affero, planus est, ac sponte fluit: neque alia ratio hactenus impedivit lectores quominus ipsum perciperent, quam quod diversa verbi significatione decepti clausos oculos habuerunt.*"

[54] Cf. *Comm. on Rom.* 6:9, 7:17, 8:26, *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 6:16, 9:8, 10:16, 11:22, *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 1:20, 8:4, *Comm. on Gal.* 1:7, 2:19, 3:2.

but a passive signification is more suitable, as Paul designed simply to explain in which respect everything that befell him was for their salvation."[55] The chief aim of an interpreter is to seek the intention of the author. In doing so the interpretation of a text will be appropriately executed. In the interpretation of Is. 26:21 "For, behold, Jehovah cometh out of his place." Calvin stated, "This meaning is more appropriate than if we were to interpret God's place to mean heaven, from which he 'cometh forth'; for Isaiah intended to express something more. When the prophets mention heaven, they exhibit to us the majesty and glory of God; but here he refers to our senses, that is, when we see that God, who formerly appeared to remain concealed and to be at rest, gives us assistance."[56]

Calvin argued that a suitable interpretation was one that agreed with the historical method of interpretation. In the interpretation of Da. 2:1, for example, "And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, where with his spirit was troubled, and his sleep

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[55] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 1:6, p. 116. CO 50.13. "*Erasmus active accepit participium* **energoumenes** *sed melius quadrat passiva significatio: quia nihil aliud voluit hic Paulus quam explicare qualiter pro eorum salute omnia sibi eveniant.*"

[56] *Comm. on Isa.* 26:21, p. 243. CO 36.446. "*Atque hic sensus aptior est, quam si locum Dei interpretemur Coelum, ex quo egredietur: nam plus quiddam exprimere voluit Isaias. Quum enim coelos nominant prophetae maiestatem Dei et gloriam nobis proponunt: hic vero ad sensus nostros respicit, quum scilicet Deum nobis auxilium ferre percipimus, qui antea latere et quiescere videbatur.*"

brake (break) from him", Calvin used the historical approach for a suitable interpretation.

> Nebuchadnezzar reigned before the death of his father, because he had already been united with him in the supreme power; then he reigned alone, and the present narrative happened in the second year of his reign. In this explanation there is nothing forced, and as history agrees with it, I adopt it as the best.[57]

He stressed that to find out the most suitable sense of a text we must consider the condition of the history of the Jews.

> Almost all agree in this sense; but when I weigh the Prophet's intention more accurately, I cannot subscribe to it: because God seems to me to confirm what he had said before, that he would be a just avenger of wickedness while he treats the Jews so harshly. To discover the most suitable sense, we must consider the condition of the exiles.[58]

He also argued that the interpretation of the text should be suitable to the grammatical construction.[59] In the interpretation of Ps. 12:4 "Those who have said we will be strengthened by our tongues; our lips are in our own power: who is lord over us?" Calvin indicated that the reading of the text should agree with the rules of grammar.

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[57] *Comm. on Da.* 2:1, p. 116. CO 40.557. "*In hoc igitur nihil est absurdum, Nebuchadnezer regnasse ante mortem patris, quia iam accitus fuerat in societatem imperii: deinde regnasse solum: et secundo anno regni eius hoc contigisse quod nunc narratur. Nihil in hac expositione est coactum: deinde historia consentit.*"

[58] *Comm. on Eze.* 14:21-22, p. 81. CO 40.325. "*Hic sensus fere omnibus placet. Ego tamen dum propius expendo consilium prophetae, non possum subscribere: quia videtur potius Deus hic confirmare quod ante dixit, se iustum esse vindicem scelerum, dum ita duriter agit contra Judaeos. Quo res magis liqueat, videndum est qualis fuerit exsulum conditio.*"

[59] *Comm. on Da.* 4:27, p. 278. CO 40.673.

> Some read, we will strengthen our tongues. This reading is passable, in so far as the sense is concerned, but it scarcely agrees with the rules of grammar, because the letter *lamed*, is added. Moreover, the sense which is more suitable is this: that the wicked persons spoken of being armed with their tongues, go beyond all bounds, and think they can accomplish by this means whatever they please; just as this set of men so deform everything with their calumnies, that they would almost cover the sun himself with darkness.[60]

Calvin maintained that interpretation should be suitable to the language of the particular Apostle (*cui interpreationi bene suffragatur apostoli phrasis*).[61] Calvin confirmed that the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* appeared in the style of writing of the authors of Scripture. In the interpretation of Is. 47:3 "I will take vengeance, and will not meet (thee) a man," Calvin argued that the interpretation of the text should be "more agreeable to the original text".[62]

Calvin emphasized that the interpretation of the text should be suitable to the context of the passage and the author's context. In the interpretation of 1 Cor. 2:13 "spiritual things with spiritual" Calvin argued that the sense of the word of the text should be suitable to the author's context. "*Sugkrinesthai* is used here, I have no doubt, in the sense of adapt. This is sometimes the meaning of the word, (as Budaeus shows by a quotation from Aristotle), and hence *sugkrima* is used to mean what is knit together or glued

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[60] *Comm. on Ps.* 12:3-4, p. 174. CO 31.127-8.

[61] *Comm. on Rom.* 1:4, p. 46. CO 49.10.

[62] *Comm. on Isa.* 47:3, p. 452. Cf. CO 37.166.

together, and certainly it suits much better with Paul's context than *compare* or *liken*, as others have rendered it."[63] Calvin never accepted an interpretation which was adverse to the author's context. This was one of the most valuable contributions Calvin made in the interpretation of difficult passages. Calvin regarded the contextual interpretation as the simple (*simplicius*) sense of the text.[64] Calvin interpreted a text from the perspective of the whole text (*totum contextum*) of Scripture. In the interpretation of the time of the Messiah in Jer. 30:4-5, Calvin pointed out that both Jews and Christians perverted this passage, for they applied it to the time of the Messiah. He, in turn, showed the real meaning of the Prophets: "They consider this as a prophecy referring to the time of the Messiah; but were any one wisely to view the whole context, he would readily agree with me that the Prophet includes here the sum of the doctrine which the people had previously heard from his mouth."[65] In the interpretation of Ps. 119:8 "I will observe thy statutes" Calvin also used the

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[63] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 2:13, p. 114. CO 49.343. "**Sugkrinesthai** *hic pro aptare positum non dubito. Quum enim haec interdum sit verbi significatio, sicut Budaeus ex Aistotele citat: unde et* **sugkrima**, *pro conserto vel coagmentato: longe certe melius quadrat Pauli contextui quam comparare vel conferre, sicut alii reddiderunt.*"

[64] *Comm. on Jer.* 16:16, p. 326. Cf. CO 38.251.

[65] *Comm. on Jer.* 30:4-5. 8. CO 38.614. "*Referunt omnes hoc vaticinium ad tempus Messiae: sed si quis prudenter expendat totum contextum, facile mihi subscribet, prophetam scilicet complecti summam eius doctrinae, quam pridem populus ex eius ore audierat.*" Cf. *Comm. on Lev.* 2:20.

contextual interpretation. "The term forsake is susceptible of two interpretations, either that God withdraws his Spirit, or that he permits his people to be brought low by adversity, as if he had forsaken them. The latter interpretation agrees best with the context, and is most in accordance with the phrase immediately subjoined, very far."[66]

## G. Freedom

A unique feature of Calvin's hermeneutic is freedom. This does not mean that an interpreter freely deals with the text without the influence of hermeneutical presuppositions. Rather this means that if there were many interpretations of a text, Calvin did not force his readers to accept his view only, but gave them freedom to choose the interpretation which they preferred

Calvin frequently used the expression 'Let every person adopt his own opinion' or 'I leave the interpretation of the text to my readers' in his commentaries. This principle protected Calvin from one-sidedness in the interpretation of texts because it acknowledged his limits and lack of understanding.

Calvin knew that the ambiguity of the words and some

[66] *Comm. on Ps.* 119:8, p. 406. CO 32.217. "*Quanquam istud relinquere bifariam exponi potest: vel quum spiritum suum Deus subducit: vel quum perinde rebus adversis affligi suos patitur ac si ab illis remotus foret. Atque haec posterior expositio melius convenit, propter particulam mox additam usque valde.*"

degree of obscurity in the author's words caused many interpreters to give the readers several interpretations and caused confusion in understanding the meaning of the passage. Even in the cases Calvin suggested that his readers choose one correct interpretation, while offering a few perspectives. First, Calvin let the readers choose the unforced and suitable interpretation if there were many arguments on the interpretation of a difficult and ambiguous text. Calvin, for example, respected the freedom of the readers in the interpretation of 2 Cor. 4:6 "God who commanded light to shine out of darkness." "I see that this passage may be explained in four different ways. In the first place thus: 'God has commanded light to shine forth out of darkness: that is, by the ministry of men, who are in their own nature darkness, He has brought forward the light of His Gospel into the World.' Secondly, thus. . . . The third exposition is that of Ambrose. . . . The fourth is that of Chrysostom. . . . This transition, from light that is visible and corporeal to what is spiritual, has more of elegance, and there is nothing forced in it. The preceding one, however, is not unsuitable. Let every one follow his own judgment."[67] Here Calvin left the readers to

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[67] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 4:6, pp. 199-200. CO 50.52-3. *"Video hunc locum quadrifariam posse exponi. Primo sic: Deus iussit lucem e tenebris splendescere: id est, hominum ministerio, qui suapte natura tenebrae sunt, lucem evangelii sui mundo protulit. Secundo sic. . . . Sequitur tertia, quae est Ambrosii. . . . Quarta est Chrysostomi. . . . Haec anagoge lucis visibilis et corporeae ad spiritualem plus habet gratiae, et in ea nihil est coactum. Proxima tamen non male quadrat. Fruatur quisque suo iudicio."*

select one of four interpretations, without forcing them. However he hinted that the true meaning of the passage was the most suitable and unforced one. In other words, Calvin suggested that his readers should choose the interpretation expressing the most suitable meaning. In the interpretation of 2 Cor. 4:17, he showed the same respect for the freedom of the readers;

> There is some degree of obscurity in Paul's words, for as he says, with hyperbole unto hyperbole, so the Old Interpreter, and Erasmus, have thought that in both terms the magnitude of the heavenly glory, that awaits believers is extolled; or, at least, they have connected them with the verb worketh out. To this I have no objection, but as the distinction that I have made is also not unsuitable, I leave it to my readers to make their choice.[68]

In the cases where many interpretations of a text were possible Calvin often considered the common rendering as a proper interpretation. He, however, did not compel the readers to take his view. In the passage "which is known and read" in 2 Cor. 3:2 Calvin said:

> It might also read - "Which is known and acknowledged," owing to the ambiguity of the word *anaginōskesthe*, and I do not know but that the latter might be more suitable. I was unwilling, however, to depart from the common rendering, when not constrained to do so. Only let the reader have this brought before his view, that he may consider which of the two renderings is the preferable

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[68] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 4:17, p. 212-3. CO 50.59. "*In Paui verbis aliqua est obscuritas: quia enim dicit, secundum hyperbolen in hyperbolen, tam vetus interpres quam Erasmus utraque particula extolli putarunt magnitudinem coelestis gloriae, quae fideles manet: vel certe retulerunt ad verbum operatur: quod mihi non displicet: sed quia apte etiam convenit distinctio quam posui, libera sit optio lectoribus.*"

one.[69]

Calvin often did not accept the overstrained interpretation of other interpreters, yet neither did he force the readers to follow his opinion. With reference to Gal. 6:14 he, therefore, remarked, "Some take his meaning to be, 'If the world looks upon me as abhorred and excommunicated, I consider the world to be condemned and accursed.' This appears to me to be overstrained, but I leave my readers to judge."[70] Here we can see Calvin's humility in his Scriptural hermeneutics.

Calvin suggested that his readers ensure that the interpretation of the text should agree to the general scope of a passage. In his *Commentary on Psalm* 49:19 he, therefore, said, "As either interpretation, however, agrees with the general scope of the Psalm, the reader may choose for himself."[71] He also implied that his readers should select the interpretation of a text which agrees with "the scope of the

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[69] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 3:2, p. 167. CO 50.37. "*Posset etiam legi, quae cognoscitur et agnoscitur, propter dubiam significationem verbi* **anaginōsesthai**: *et nescio annon melius conveniret. Nolui tamen discedere a recepta translatione, nisi coactus. Tantum admonitus sit lector ut consideret utrum sit melius.*"

[70] *Comm. on Gal.* 6:14, p. 185. CO 50.266. "*Nam quod quidam exponunt: si mundus me anathema et catharma reputat, ego vicissim illum damno et exsecrationi habeo: mihi videtur esse paulo remotius a mente Pauli. Iudicium tamen erit penes lectores.*"

[71] *Comm. on Ps.* 49:19, p. 255. CO 31.493.

passage."[72]

## H. Avoidance of Ambiguity

Calvin tried to avoid ambiguous interpretations because his readers required simple and clear explanations of Scripture. He believed that vague interpretations did not present the true sense of the passages of Scripture, but rather confused the readers. Thus for Calvin the principles of *brevitas et facilitas* were always employed against ambiguity. In the interpretation of Rom. 8:23, "Who have the beginnings", for example, Calvin avoided ambiguity.

> Some render the word first fruits, (*primitias*) and as meaning a rare and uncommon excellency; but of this view I by no means approve. To avoid, therefore, any ambiguity, I have rendered the word beginnings, (*primordia*, the elements) for I do not apply the expression as they do, to the Apostles only, but to all the faithful who in this world are besprinkled only with a few drops by the Spirit, and indeed when they make the greatest proficiency, being endued with a considerable measure of it, they are still far off from perfection."[73]

For him to avoid any ambiguity meant that he needed to clarify the meaning of the passage for the common readers to

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[72] *Comm. on Isa.* 7:6, p. 234. CO 36.148. "*Etsi autem illam interpretationem non refello, hanc tamen sequi malo, quia contextui melius quadrat.*"

[73] *Comm. on Rom.* 8:23, p. 308. CO 49.154. "*Quod alii primitias interpretantur raram et eximiam praestantiam, mihi nullo modo placet: ideoque ad vitandam ambiguitatem vertere liceret primordia. Non enim de solis apostolis, quemadmodum illi, dictum accipio: sed de universis fidelibus, qui in hoc mundo guttulis duntaxat spiritus aspersi, vel certe, quum optime profecerunt, certa eius mensura praediti, a complemento adhuc non parum absunt.*"

understand Scripture as simply as possible.

Calvin argued that the interpretation of a text became ambiguous because of the very brief expression of the original text, the ambiguity of the text, the wrong rendering of words, and departure from the author's meaning.

Although Calvin liked brevity of interpretation, he did not maintain entirely that brevity only could be the best interpretation of a text. He thought that a very short expression without enough explanation made the true meaning of God's infinite truth difficult for finite men to comprehend. He stated that brevity of expression in the original text could cause the interpretation of the passage to be ambiguous. "Brevity of expression renders this sentence obscure or ambiguous (*Brevitas verborum facit, ut obscura vel ambigua sit sententia*)."[74] Of course Calvin's description does not mean that he rejected the clarity of Scripture. In the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 3:2 "All have not faith." Calvin argued that the mode of expression was the cause of the ambiguity. "This might be explained to mean, 'Faith is not in all.' This expression is, however, ambiguous and more obscure (*Posset ita resolvi: non in ommibus est fides. Verum haec loquutio et ambigua et magis obscura foret*)."[75] Calvin, however, rejected it if an interpreter made a mistake to offer an ambiguous interpretation. Calvin, for example, criticized

[74] *Comm. on Jer.* 46:16, p. 589. CO 39.294.

[75] *Comm. on 2 Th.* 3:2, p. 348. CO 52.209.

Erasmus for obscuring Paul's meaning rather than clarifying it. In the passage "Now these things were type to us" in Cor. 10:6 he stated, "Of the term *type* I shall speak presently. Only for the present I should wish my readers to know, that it is not without consideration that I have given a different rendering from that of the old translation (the Vulgate), and of Erasmus. For they obscure Paul's meaning, or at least they do not bring out with sufficient clearness this idea - that God has in that people presented a picture for our instruction."[76] He also attacked Erasmus, for obscuring Paul's doctrine (*doctrinam Pauli obscurat*),[77] and not avoiding ambiguity.[78] Calvin sometimes rejected Erasmus' rendering because it provided an ambiguous interpretation. With reference to the passage "wisdom will perish from the wise" in 1 Cor. 1:19, he pointed out the incorrect rendering of the word: "As to the second term *athetein*, (which Erasmus renders 'reject') as it is ambiguous, and is sometimes taken to mean efface, or expunge, or obliterate, I prefer to understand it in this sense here, so as to correspond with the Prophet's

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[76] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 10:6, p. 322-3. CO 49.456-7. "*De vocabulo typi mox dicemus: nisi quod in praesentia monitos velim lectores, non temere me tam ab antiqui interpretis quam ab Erasmi versione discessisse. Obscurant enim Pauli mentem, vel saltem non clare exprimunt, Deum in illo populo delineasse quod nos erudiat.*"

[77] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 7:31, p. 258. CO 49.421.

[78] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 11:25, p. 382. CO 49.489. "*Nolui autem cum Erasmo vertere coena peracta: quia in re tanti ponderis vitanda fuit ambiguitas.*"

word vanish or be hid."[79]

Calvin tried to avoid ambiguity by following certain rules. He used the grammatical approach in order to remove ambiguity.[80] By understanding a proposition clearly, he avoided obscurity. His *Commentary on Jer.* 2:2 is a case in point:

> Some render the words, "I remember the piety or kindness of thy youth;" and *lak* may be thus taken, as it is in other places. Others omit this word; while others consider a copulative to be understood, I remember thee, and the kindness of thy youth." But none, as I think, have attained to the meaning of the Prophet: there is yet no obscurity in the words, if a preposition be considered as being understood, so as to read thus, - that God remembered his people *for* the kindness which he had shewn to them, and for the love which he had manifested towards them from the beginning.[81]

He showed that ambiguity could be removed by taking into account the immediate context of a passage. "But the Prophet removes all ambiguity by the words which immediately follow in the second clause (*Sed videtur etiam tolli omnis ambiguitas*

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[79] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 1:19, p. 79. CO 49.323. "*Secundum verbum* **athetein**, *quod Erasmus vertit reiicere, quum ambiguam habeat significationem et aliquando sumatur pro delere, vel expungere, aut obliterare: in hoc sensu accipere hic malo, ut respondeat verbo prophetae, evanescere aut abscondi.*" Cf. *Comm. on Mal.* 2:13, p. 550.

[80] *Comm. on Jer.* 2:21, p. 112. CO 37.521.

[81] *Comm. on Jer.* 2:2, p. 69. CO 37.496. "*Vertunt quidam, Recordatus sum pietatis, vel misericordiae adolescentiae tuae, et* **Lak** *ita posset resolvi, sicuti quibusdam aliis locis. Alii autem omittunt particulam* **Lak**: *alii vero subaudiunt copulam, Recordatus sum tui et misericordiae. Nullus autem, meo iudicio, assequutus est prophetae mentem, quum tamen nulla sit obscuritas in verbis, si subaudiatur particula, quod scilicet Deus recordetur populi sui, propter misericordiam qua ipsum complexus est, propter misericordiam qua ipsum complexus est propter amorem quo prosequutus est eum ab initio.*"

*prophetae verbis: paulo post in secundo membro addit*)."[82] Calvin's strategy for removing ambiguity was to consider the main subject of a passage. Calvin thought that digression from the central subject led the readers away from the text. "Let us now see what the Prophet means. With regard to the passage, as I have said, there is not ambiguity, provided we bear in mind the main subject (*Iam videndum est quid velit propheta: quod ad verba spectat, nulla est, ut dixi, ambiguitas, modo teneamus summam rei*)."[83] Calvin maintained that avoiding argument could remove ambiguity. "Let contention be avoided, and there will be nothing of obscurity (*Facessant contentiones, et nihil erit obscuri*)."[84] In order to avoid ambiguity, Calvin suggested that the interpretation of a passage should correspond with the author's word.[85]

## I. Avoidance of Forced Interpretation

Calvin avoided forcing or twisting a text, but tried to seek out the true meaning of a passage. Calvin identified a number of causes for forced interpretation. The first was the harsh attacks which the Church Fathers launched against early church heresies. Calvin clearly explained that the incorrect

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[82] *Comm. on Jer.* 13:16, p. 178. CO 38.164.

[83] *Comm. on Mic.* 7:11-2, p. 385. CO 43.420.

[84] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 10:16, p. 335. CO 49.464.

[85] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 1:19, p. 79. CO 49.323.

interpretations of the Fathers often resulted from their resistance to the doctrines of heresy. In the passage "whose minds the god of this world" in 2 Cor. 4:4, Calvin pointed out that the Fathers had twisted the text:

> He (Paul) intimates, that no account should be made of their perverse obstinacy. "They do not see," says he, "the sun at mid-day, because the devil has blinded their understandings." No one that judges rightly can have any doubt, that it is of Satan that the Apostle speaks. Hilary, as he had to do with Arians, who abused this passage, so as to make it a pretext for denying Christ's true divinity, while they at the same time confessed him to be God, twists the text in this way - "God hath blinded the understandings of this world." In this he was afterwards followed by Chrysostom, with the view of not conceding to the Manicheans their two first principles. What influenced Ambrose does not appear. Augustine had the same reasons as Chrysostom, having to contend with the Manicheans.[86]

Calvin indicated that they had interpreted the texts from the perspective of the doctrines of their time. Another cause for forced interpretation was the attempt by the Roman Catholics to establish their doctrines. In the interpretation of the passage "But faith, which worketh by love" in Gal. 5:6, Calvin criticized them: "There would be no difficulty in this passage, were it not for the dishonest manner in which it has

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[86] *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 4:4, pp. 192-3. CO 50.50. "*Significat quam nihili fieri debeat perversa illorum obstinatio. Non vident, inquit, solem in meridie, quia diabolus eorum sensus excaecavit. Quin de Satana loquatur apostolus, nemini recte iudicanti dubium esse potest. Hilarius, quia negotium habebat cum Arianis, qui hoc praetextu abutebantur, ut Christum confitendo Deum veram eius divinitatem negarent, sic contextum torquet: Deus excaecavit huius saeculi sensus. Id postea sequutus est Chrysostomus, ne Manichaeis duo principia concederet. Quid Ambrosium impulerit, non apparet. Augustino eadem ratio fuit, quae Chrysostomo: quia cum Manichaeis erat illi certamen.*"

been tortured by the Papists to uphold the righteousness of works."[87] In the interpretation of Gal. 5:14, Calvin said:

> The love which men naturally cherish toward themselves ought to regulate our love of our neighbour. All the doctors of the Sorbonne are in the habit of arguing that, as the rule is superior to what it directs, the love of ourselves must always hold the first rank. This is not to interpret, but to subvert our Lord's words.[88]

A third cause for a forced interpretation of the Bible was the mistaken theological views of a text. In his *Institutes* Calvin refuted the Scholastic theologians who, in his view, twisted the meaning of the text for their purpose: "Now in that quarrel the marked shamelessness of the theologians is evident, who corrupted and forcibly twisted all the passages of Scripture they cited for their purpose."[89]

Calvin often criticized Erasmus for perverting the true sense of a passage. Erasmus sometimes interpreted the text by rendering words differently, and changing the original text, rather than adhering to the words of Scripture themselves. As a result of that, he became one of the interpreters of

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[87] *Comm. on Gal.* 5:6, p. 152. CO 50.246. "*Locus hic nihil habet difficultatis: nisi eum calumniose torquerent papistae ad iustitiam operum adstruendam.*"

[88] *Comm. on Gal.* 5:14, pp. 160-1. CO 50.251. "*quemadmodum quisque affectu carnis propensus est ad se amandum, ita nobis commendari a Deo amorem erga proximos. Evertunt enim, non interpretantur verba Domini, qui inde colligunt (ut faciunt omnes Sorbonici) amorem nostri semper ordine priorem esse: quia regulatum inferius sit sua regula.*"

[89] *Inst.* 3.4.4, p. 627. CO 2.458-9. "*In eo vero certamine insignis theologorum impudentia apparuit, qui tot locos scripturae depravarunt et vi detorserunt, quot in rem suam citabant.*"

Scripture whom Calvin often criticized. On Erasmus' insertion of the words into the text, in the passage "Neither let us tempt Christ: in 1 Cor. 10:9 Calvin remarked: "This is a remarkable passage in proof of the eternity of Christ; for the cavil of Erasmus has no force - "Let us not tempt Christ, as some of them tempted God;" for to supply the word God is extremely forced."[90] Against Erasmus' inserting a preposition into a passage, Calvin displayed the simplicity of his interpretation without forcing the meaning of the words. In the passage "the cup of blessing" in 1 Cor. 10:16, Calvin accused Erasmus of forcing the text: "I acknowledge, indeed, that it is sometimes employed in this sense, but never in the construction that Paul has here made use of, for the idea of Erasmus, as to supplying a preposition, is exceedingly forced. On the other hand, the meaning that I adopt is easy, and has nothing of intricacy."[91] Calvin always thought that the principle of retention protected an interpreter from perverting the true meaning of the words. In the passage "I am a debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians" in Rom. 1:14, Calvin said, "Those whom he means by the Greeks and

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[90] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 10:9, pp. 325-6. CO 49.459. "*Locus hic insignis est de aeternitate Christi: neque enim valet Erasmi cavillum, ne Christum tentemus, sicut quidam eorum tentaverunt Deum.*"

[91] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 10:16, p. 334. CO 49.464. "*Fateor quidem interdum hoc sensu poni: sed nunquam in ea constructione qua hic usus est Paulus. Nam quod Erasmus praepositionem subaudit, nimis est coactum. Sensus autem, quem sequor, facilis est, nec quidquam habet implicitum.*"

barbarians, he afterwards explains by adding, both to the wise and to the foolish; which words Erasmus has not rendered amiss by "learned and unlearned," (*eruditos et rudes*) but I prefer to retain the very words of Paul."[92]

Calvin argued that the exposition of a text would be too strained if the context was not be considered.[93] In the interpretation of Ps. 94:15 "But judgment will return unto righteousness", Calvin emphasized the context of the passage. "The form of expression used by the Psalmist is a little obscure, and this has led some to read the first part of the verse, as if it contained two distinct clauses - justice will return at the end, and then, judgment would be fitted or conformed to justice."[94] Calvin stated that an interpreter could not interpret the text correctly if he perverted the meaning of the author: "though interpreters have tried to bring light, yet the effect has been to pervert the real meaning of the Prophet."[95] Calvin maintained that an

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[92] *Comm. on Rom.* 1:14, p. 60. CO 49.18. "*Quos per Graecos et Barbaros intelligat, ostendit exegesi: ubi nominat eosdem aliis epithetis sapientes et stultos: pro quibus non male vertit Erasmus, eruditos et rudes: sed ego ipsa Pauli verba retinere malui.*"

[93] *Comm. on Mic.* 4:6, p. 274. CO 43.353. "*Sed illa expositio nimis coacta est. Videmus etiam contextum repugnare. . .*"

[94] *Comm. on Ps.* 94:15, p. 24. CO 32.25. "*Quia phrasis prohetae nonnihil obscura est: disiunctim quidam haec duo legunt, Iustitia ad finem revertetur: postea, iudicium revertetur.*"

[95] *Comm. on Mal.* 2:10. pp. 541-2. CO 44.445. "*quum vellent interpretes lucem afferre, nihil aliud quam corrupta fuit genuina mens prophetae.*"

interpreter forced the text when he did not confine himself to a particular passage.[96] He himself, however, always tried to explain the relevant matter dealt with in such a passage.[97]

Calvin recognized that an interpreter should use the grammatical method in order not to twist the text.[98] Although he was influenced by Chrysostom in his hermeneutics, Calvin did not approve of Chrysostom's twisting the text because of his disregard of the grammatical method. Calvin made this point in his *Commentary on 1 Cor.* 12:28: "As the Apostle is here enumerating offices, I do not approve of what Chrysostom says, that *antilepeis*, that is, *helps* or *aids*, consist in supporting the weak."[99]

Calvin pointed out that the heretics, e.g. the Arians and Servetus had tortured the text in order to prove their doctrines. In the interpretation of Jn. 10:36 "Do you say that I blaspheme?" Calvin pointed out this problem: "The Arians anciently tortured this passage to prove that Christ is not God by nature, but that he possesses a kind of borrowed Divinity. But this error is easily refuted, for Christ does not now argue what he is in himself, but what we ought to

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[96] *Comm. on Jer.* 46:19, pp. 592-3. CO 39.297. Cf. *Comm. on Ps.* 8:1, p. 93. CO 36.166.

[97] CO 10.403.

[98] *Comm. on Gen.* 41:40, p. 329. CO 23.525.

[99] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 12:28, p. 416. CO 49.507. "*Quoniam hic officia recenset apostolus, non recipio quod ait Chrysostomus,* **antilepeis**, *hoc est, subsidia vel opitulationes, consistere in* sustinendis infirmis."

acknowledge him to be, from his miracles in human flesh."[100]

The reason why Calvin was not fond of perverting and wresting the words of a passage was that he wanted the readers to understand the true meaning of Scripture easily and simply. He did not willingly adopt interpretations which twisted the words. Rather he presented the readers with his interpretation, without forcing and perverting the passage of Scripture.[101]

## J. Avoidance of Conjecture

Calvin avoided conjecture in the interpretation of a passage because it was not based on solid and sound argument,[102] but rather started from incorrect thinking. Calvin demanded interpreters to remove speculations and adhere

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[100] *Comm. on Jn.* 10:36. p. 420. CO 47.253. "*Torquebant hunc locum olim Ariani, ut Christum probarent non natura Deum esse, sed quasi precariam habere divinitatem. Sed facilis est huius erroris refutatio, quia non disputat hic Christus quis in se sit, sed qualis ex miraculis in carne humana agosci debeat.*"

[101] There are many places in which Calvin expressed opposition to forcing and twisting the true meaning of the text. See *Comm. on Rom.* 3:4, 28, 9:17, 11:1, 33, 12:16, 18, 13:11, 14:22, *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 5:5, 7:33, 8:13, 15:10, 29, 10:10, 36, 11:10, 12:4, *Comm. on 2 Cor.* 1:10, 6:13, *Comm. on Gal.* 3:16, 6:13. *Comm. on Gen.* 4:7, 9:6, *Comm. on Ex.* 1:21, *Comm. on Lev.* 4:22, *Comm. on Nu.* 11:16. *Comm. on Jos.* 24:25, *Comm. on Da.* 7:13, *Comm. on Hos.* 1:2, *Comm. on Am.* 2:13, 6:4, *Comm. on Na.* 1:9, *Comm. on Zec.* 14:20, *Comm. on Mal.* 3:8, 16. In his *Commentary on Ps.* Calvin avoided forced interpretations approximately 80 times.

[102] *Comm. on Eze.* 1:4, p. 63. CO 49.30.

to simple doctrine(*hac ergo simplici doctrina contenti simus*).[103] He criticized Erasmus for frivolous conjectures. For example, in the interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:32, Calvin said, "Now by those that fought with beasts, are meant, not those that were thrown to wild beasts, as Erasmus mistakingly imagined, but those that were condemned to be set to fight with wild beasts - to furnish an amusement to the people."[104] Calvin felt that Erasmus sometimes did not interpret the text correctly because of frivolous conjectures. A further example in this regard refers to Erasmus' view on Pentecost. "Erasmus had preferred to render it - until the fiftieth day, influenced by frivolous conjectures rather than by any solid argument."[105] Calvin showed, in one case, that inserting the principal verb into the original text caused Erasmus to conjecture the true meaning of the passage.[106] While Erasmus emphasized textual criticism more than the authority of the original text of Scripture, Calvin stressed the original words of the biblical text. Consequently, in Calvin's view, Erasmus' interpretations smacked of subjectivity. Calvin aimed at

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[103] *Comm on Rom.* 8:21, p. 305. CO 49.153.

[104] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 15:32, p. 40. CO 49.553. "*Pugnabant autem ad bestias, non qui feris obiiciebantur, sicuti Erasmus falso existimavit: sed qui damnati erant, ut commissi in certamen cum bestiis populo spectaculum exhiberent.*"

[105] *Comm. on 1 Cor.* 16:8, p. 72. CO 49.568. "*Erasmus maluit usque ad diem quinquagesimum, frivolis coniecturis motus, magis quam ullo firmo argumento.*"

[106] *Comm. on Rom.* 8:3, p. 279. CO 49.138.

objectivity. The fact that Calvin regarded objectivity in the interpretation of Scripture as important should be highly praised.

Calvin pointed out that misguided conjectures often resulted from allegorical interpretation, and might be refuted by the author's words, and that an interpreter should try to seek out the genuine meaning of a text. A case in point can be found in his *Commentary on Eze.* 16:10-13.

> Here the Prophet, in a metaphor, relates other benefits of God by which he liberally adorned his people; for we know that nothing has been omitted in God's pouring forth the riches of his goodness on the people. And as to the explanations which some give of these female ornaments allegorically, I do not approve of it, as they fruitlessly conjecture many trifles which are at variance with each other. First of all, their conjectures may be refuted by the Prophet's words: then, if we suffer the Prophet's words to be turned and twisted, what these allegorical interpretations chatter with each other is entirely contrary in their meaning. Let us, therefore, be content with the genuine sense.[107]

Calvin pointed out the mistakes of many Rabbis, leaning on conjecture because they did not interpret the text simply. In the interpretation of Da. 5:8 "Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, or make known to the king the interpretation thereof", Calvin said: "Because

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[107] *Comm. on Eze.* 16:10-13, p. 106. CO 40.343. "*Hic propheta metaphorice commenmorat alia Dei benficia, quibus populum suum liberaliter ornavit. Scimus enim nihil prorsus fuisse omissum, quin Deus divitias suae bonitatis erga populum illum profunderet. Quod allegorice quidam ludunt in ornatu isto mulliebri, mihi non probatur: et futiliter etiam excogitant multas naenias, quae inter se confligunt. Primum argutiae facile possunt refelli ex prophetae verbis: deinde etiam si patiamur inflecti aut torqueri prophetae verba, tamen quod garriunt illi allegorici interpretes inter se, multis modis contrarium est. Contenti ergo simus genuino sensu.*"

this seems absurd, many Rabbis have hazarded various conjectures. . . . We do not require their guesses. . . . There is no necessity to conjecture any transposition of letters, or any inversion of their order, or any change of one into another."[108] The reason why Calvin was against conjecture was that conjectural interpretation had no sufficient foundation(*Quanquam illa coniectura forte non satis firma esset*).[109] In the interpretation of the four words, *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin* in Da. 5:25-28 he also rejected conjecture: "He repeats the word *mene* twice. Some conjecture this to apply to the numbering of the years of the king's life, and also to the time of his reign; but the guess seems to be without any foundation. I think the word is used twice for the sake of confirmation. . ."[110]

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[108] *Comm. on Da.* 5:8, p. 322. CO 40.704. "*Quia videtur hoc esse absurdum, Rabbini hic multum laborant. . . . Nos autem non opus habemus illis coniecturis. . . . Ergo quid opus est nunc divinare fuisse literas transpositas, vel fuisse alio ordine scriptas, vel subiectas alias aliis. . .*"

[109] *Comm. on Da.* 5:10-11, p. 324. CO 40.706.

[110] *Comm. on Da.* 5:25-8, p. 342. CO 40.718. "*Bis verbum unum repetitur, Mene. Quidam sic distinguunt, quod numerati fuerint anni vitae regis, deinde numeratum fuerit tempus regni: sed illa argutia non videtur mihi firma esse. Ego igitur puto confirmationis causa bis fuisse positum hoc verbum. . .*"