

Learning from Calvin's Methodology of Biblical Interpretation

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Abstract

Most research on John Calvin focuses on theology and history. Yet Calvin viewed himself primarily as a minister and preacher: the Bible is the revelation of God and exposition the preacher's ultimate mission. This article examines Calvin's methodology of biblical interpretation in his sermons, his perspective on the word, and his conception of preaching. Calvin's sermons reveal four characteristics: the goal of preaching is unfolding biblical texts, biblical interpretation communicates the intent of the original author, the absolute lordship and grace of God is centered upon Jesus Christ, and the text must be applied as well as explained.

Introduction

While history refers to John Calvin as one of the greatest theologians of all time, Calvin personally preferred to be thought of as a preacher.¹ He considered preaching to be God's chosen method of revealing and fulfilling his will upon earth² as well as his central tool in

¹ James Montgomery Boice, "Foreword to John Calvin," *Sermons on Psalm 119 by John Calvin* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1580, 1996), viii.

² John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for

reforming human society and church unity. Calvin's passion in preaching served as the basis of his ministry and theology, and he believed that the primary audience of the Bible was people of limited education; he stated that "the Word meets its intended audience, not through Christian commentaries and references, but only through preaching."³

Contemporary research on Calvin has mostly been on his systematic theology and his influence in church history, mainly derived from his magnum opus, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. However, considering Calvin's lifelong career as a preacher, it is startling that so little research has focused on Calvin's actual preaching. That the religious Reformation was initiated by the rededication of the church to clear exposition of the Bible and its application points to the incongruity of identifying Calvin primarily as a theologian and expert in doctrine.⁴ Finally, Calvin's self-identification as a preacher and minister requires that due focus be given to his preaching and commentaries. Fortunately, recent scholarship and literature indicate a renewed interest in Calvin's expository methodology.⁵ Calvin's commentaries are inseparable from his sermons; however, his sermons retain distinct features and dynamics that cannot be conveyed by commentaries alone. Immense treasures and insight await those who would devote themselves to the study of Calvin's sermons.⁶

Today," in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 206.

³ Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin As Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shaping of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 206.

⁴ "The Reformation was a great preaching revival, probably the greatest in the history of the Christian church." Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 43.

⁵ Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 147. For further research on Calvin's commentaries, see Elsie A. McKee, "Exegesis, Theology, and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey Jr.*, ed. Brian Armstrong and Elsie A. McKee (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 154–72; Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David C. Steinmetz, "John Calvin as an Interpreter of the Bible," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 282–91; Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," trans. Keith Crim, in *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 8–18; John L. Thompson, "Calvin as a Biblical Interpreter," in *Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58–73.

⁶ Thomas H. L. Parker is renowned for his studies on Calvin's sermons. See, e.g., *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (1947; repr., Cambridge: James Clarke, 2002); *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); *John Calvin: A Biography* (1975; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006). See also "God Calls Us to His Service": *The Relation between God and His Audience in Calvin's Sermons on Acts* (Geneva: Droz,



JOHN CALVIN
1509-1564

Calvin began his preaching ministry when he moved to Geneva in 1536 at the request of Guillaume Farel.⁷ But in the face of consistent adversity, Calvin moved to Strasbourg to preach and minister to refugees in 1538. He returned to Geneva three and a half years later, on October 13, 1541, and served as a preacher at Saint Peter's Church until he was called by the Lord; all of his existing sermons originate from this period. While Calvin was fluent in the original biblical languages and Latin, he preached in French—the most accessible language in the area. The manuscript copies of Calvin's sermons between 1549 and 1564 are attributed to Denis Reguenier, who faithfully recorded Calvin's every word. His dedicated effort left a legacy of 2023 copies of Calvin's sermons, which exist to this day, even though Calvin had never preached from a written manuscript. According to Theodore Beza, Calvin preached 268 times and lectured on 186 different occasions per year.⁸

Calvin's life as a preacher was poured out for the purpose of correctly interpreting biblical texts and applying them to edify the lives of the individual listeners unto holiness. This essay focuses chiefly on Calvin's approach to biblical interpretation as manifested in his sermons. I will first provide a basic context for the understanding of Calvin's sermons by introducing his view of the holy Scripture, as well as his hermeneutic theology. Then I will provide a second context that explores the differences between Calvin's sermons and his commentaries, which, as mentioned above, are inseparable.

Calvin's approach to biblical methodology was straightforward. He preached with the goal of simply unfolding biblical texts as they were and faithfully communicating the author's intent in the text. Calvin also emphasized the absolute lordship and grace of God in each and every one of his sermons. This thematic focus naturally developed what we now call Christ-

2001) by Wilhemmus H. Th. Moehn, who discusses the relationship between God and the preacher's audience revealed in Calvin's sermons on the book of Acts, and *Calvin's Preaching on the Prophet Micah* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2006) by Michael Parsons, which takes a close look at Calvin's sermons on the book of Micah. For a comprehensive overview of Calvin's sermons, see Steven J. Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007).

⁷ See Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), which introduces the life, philosophy, and theology of Calvin. To understand Calvin's view and philosophy in the context of the sixteenth century, see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). For a recent overview of Calvin's theology in the *Institutes*, see ParTEE, *The Theology of John Calvin*.

⁸ Clyde E. Fant Jr. and William M. Pinson Jr., *A Treasury of Great Preaching: Luther to Massillon, 1483–1742* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 2:141. Calvin preached twice on Sundays, and once every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. When the Geneva city council arranged to have Calvin preach on a daily basis, he would often preach every day every other week.

centered preaching. Finally, Calvin's aim was not merely to explain the biblical text, but to make sure it applied to those who listened. Calvin was a revolutionary in his time in that he desired the total transformation of the people, including their daily lives.

I. Understanding Calvin's Hermeneutic Theology

1. The Ultimate Authority of the Bible

Calvin's every moment in the pulpit was a manifestation of his ultimate passion to represent the Bible accurately and faithfully. He held the conviction that the Bible was the ultimate authority, which reinforced his confidence in preaching. Therefore, in order to understand Calvin's sermons, it is crucial to understand his view of holy Scripture.

First, Calvin understood the Bible as God's way of revealing his truth to people. He believed that the private meditation of the word, followed by its public interpretation, through the Holy Spirit, would lead sinful men to the knowledge of God.⁹ Calvin was able to preach faithfully the Bible without regard for his own life because of his theological conviction that what he was preaching was the absolute word of God. To Calvin, the Bible was the infallible, inerrant word of God; therefore, its correct interpretation would accurately reveal God's character and will to us. In an age in which the doctrines of the Catholic Church assumed priority over the authority of Scripture, Calvin's heart-cry of *sola Scriptura*, that the only doctrine the church must follow was the Bible, was a revolutionary teaching indeed. Steven Lawson states that "with this deep conviction about biblical authority, Calvin repeatedly entered the pulpit to minister exclusively from 'the pure foundation of the Word.'"¹⁰ Similarly, Hughes Oliphant Old notes that people are instinctively drawn towards Calvin's sermons because of his pure and ultimate trust in the authority of the Bible. "One of the most amazing things about Calvin's handling of Scripture is that his high regard for the authority of the Scriptures goes hand in hand with his willingness to regard it as a completely historical document."¹¹

⁹ J. I. Packer, "Calvin the Theologian," in *John Calvin* (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966), 167.

¹⁰ Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, 25.

¹¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Age of Reformation*, vol. 4 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 131–32. Old points out that Calvin's sermons are influential because of their focus on content and not because of their presentation. They were sermons that were unheard of before, radical in nature because the content was based upon the purely biblical picture of God's relentless grace and his agenda of faith and salvation (130).

Second, Calvin believed in the unity of Scripture.¹² Though the Bible is comprised of books written by numerous authors over a long period of time, Calvin believed that the Bible has a unified, singular message. He believed that the one and only author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit and that this author has unified the sixty-six books of the Bible into God's one and inseparable message for all times and all peoples.¹³ Calvin's belief in the unity between the Old and New Testaments is especially evident in his sermons. When he preached on Old Testament texts, he consistently supplemented the sermon with New Testament examples, and *vice versa*. The concept of biblical unity forms the foundation of the reformational principle, "Scripture interprets Scripture."

All preachers who aspire to practice biblical preaching must hold to the same high view of Scripture. Theological issues stem from biblical viewpoint, and issues in preaching ultimately stem from biblical theology. Where the Bible is not perceived as the authoritative word of God, there cannot be the accurate revelation of God's nature. Calvin's preaching was effective in drawing people to the accurate knowledge of God because of his conviction that the Bible has the highest authority in life and for salvation.

2. Calvin's Viewpoint on Preaching as the Word of God

Simply put, Calvin believed that true sermons conveyed the word of God. In support of this principle, Calvin argued that because biblical preaching involved the exposition of the word of God, the sermon itself is therefore the word of God.¹⁴ Naturally, because the Bible holds authority as God's word, the sermon must also hold the same authority if it communicates the word of God. This premise not only emphasizes the importance of the sermon as God's sacred word, but also places an enormous responsibility upon the preacher to convey the message accurately and completely. Therefore, the biblical preacher must communicate only the word of God, uncolored by human thoughts or propaganda. This is why "the relationship between preaching and the Scriptures is not merely close, but even indissoluble."¹⁵

¹² Charles Partee notes that in the *Institutes* Calvin displayed more interest in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments than in doctrine. Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 53.

¹³ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 93.

¹⁴ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 50.

¹⁵ The Bible stands as the source, standard, and criticism of preaching. The preacher, says Calvin in a hundred passages in the sermons, must declare only what he finds in the Bible. He does not enter the pulpit to advocate his own ideas, but the ideas of God, who in the church's act of proclamation, as in all her actions, "always reserves to himself the lordship and sovereign superiority" (Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 50).

Second, the sermon can become God's word because the preacher stands upon the pulpit, clothed with the authority of God, as his ambassador upon earth.¹⁶ The biblical preacher will be anointed by God through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit; therefore, his words are granted him by God alone. He is the agent of God's message and thus is vested with special authority. Calvin cautions us,

We must not think strangely of this. When the servants of God speak, they do not vest upon themselves any authority. They are only granted the power to speak the words that have been delegated to them. Therefore, preachers must never become separated from God. When a person is called as an ambassador for a King, he is delegated all power to act in the name of the King. ... The same holds for the servants of the Lord. God has called them as His tools and has assigned them a task; therefore what they do is not of their own power, but is done through the guidance of the Lord.¹⁷

The third reason why the sermon is equated with the word of God is that sermons derive from God's personal revelation.¹⁸ Calvin emphasized that God was a being who refused to be discovered by natural or unnatural human knowledge, but rather chose to disclose himself to mankind through personal revelation. Mankind may possess the seed of religious affections, but a man's rational thought, logic, and research alone cannot lead him to know the one true God. In other words, God can only be known through the revelation of Christ Jesus.¹⁹ Calvin changes the slogan from "only God can reveal God" to "only the Word of God can reveal God," which implies that Calvin limits revelation to the confines of preaching.²⁰ In conclusion, one must understand that holy Scripture is God's chosen method of special revelation in order to understand Calvin's sermons. And because the Bible is God's description of himself, preachers must not exposit biblical text according to their own ideas and philosophy. The intent of the author must be the cornerstone of all interpretation.

3. Commentaries for Pastors, Sermons for the Congregation

One effective method for understanding Calvin's sermons is to compare them to his commentaries.²¹ First, both Calvin's sermons and his commentaries

¹⁶ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 51.

¹⁷ *Calvini opera* (hereafter, CO) 26:66.

¹⁸ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 53.

¹⁹ Calvin's belief that man cannot obtain the knowledge of God without God's personal revelation in Jesus Christ is well portrayed in the *Institutes*.

²⁰ Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, 53.

²¹ For commentaries and a description of Calvin's sermons, see Zachman, *John Calvin As Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 147–72, where Zachman researches Calvin's work on Ephesians.

give utmost priority to identifying the intent of the author. Since both the commentary and the sermon deal with Scripture, we can see Calvin refusing to display his own thoughts and opinions; rather, he actively submits to the originally intended message of the author of Scripture.

Second, while there are similarities between Calvin's sermons and his commentaries, there are also distinct differences. Calvin intended his commentaries to be accessed by preachers and ministers, while his sermons were aimed at the lay believers of the congregation. Therefore, Calvin applied Hebrew and Latin when interpreting biblical text in his commentaries, often quoting Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome, Zwingli, Luther, and even Plato, while providing in-depth analysis of Greek and Latin terminology. On the other hand, he preached in common French and refrained from using biblical terminology in his sermons so they would be accessible by even the most uneducated people.

Third, Calvin's commentaries only provided brief insights into the intent of the author, while his sermons were saturated with biblical exposition, also providing the listeners with Scripture's practical implications. For example, Calvin's commentaries on Ephesians were completed in 1548, with each commentary averaging 2000 letters. Calvin preached his sermons on Ephesians ten years later, around 1558 and 1559, averaging 7000 letters per sermon. The difference in length is due to Calvin's emphasis in his sermons to the application of the biblical text.

Fourth, commentaries and sermons show a divergence in choice and presentation of biblical text. For example, Calvin wrote thirty-five commentaries on Ephesians, while his sermons divided the same book into forty-eight parts. And while his commentaries were much more scholarly and academic in nature, his sermons used common phrases such as "as it is often quoted" and "as can be seen from what we found yesterday" in order to establish rapport with the audience. From these differences between his sermons and his commentaries, we can see the principles that he held in priority when interpreting and communicating biblical texts. He believed that sermons, not commentaries, were central to expositing the truth of the holy Scriptures for the benefit of the listener and for reformation within and throughout the church and society.

Thus far, I have provided a basic context for understanding and approaching Calvin's sermons. In summary, Calvin viewed the Bible as the word of God, and the preacher as the delegate. In accordance to his preaching philosophy, Calvin gave his utmost to protect the sovereignty and authority of Scripture in his life. His dedication to the word was blessed by God's providence and grace, ultimately resulting in the reformation of

the church. In the next section, I will address Calvin's methodology of biblical interpretation.

II. Calvin's Approach to Biblical Interpretation

1. Biblical Exposition as the Purpose of Preaching

To Calvin, the purpose of preaching was to unfold the text of the Bible so that the listener could understand it as easily as possible. Therefore, he sought to preach strictly upon the literal text of the Bible, to interpret it accurately and simply, and to apply it to the lives of the listeners. His methodology in doing so can be summarized into three main principles.

First, Calvin viewed conciseness and simplicity as his main concern in exposition.²² As mentioned above, even though Calvin was fluent in Hebrew and Latin, his sermons were highly accessible to the common people, as they were written in French. It is noteworthy that his emphasis on the goals of simple and concise communication did not affect his presentation of the biblical text. Calvin never strove to polish his words with literary decoration, but instead used simple language, and only occasionally encouraged listeners to use their imaginations, preferring to present by his words a clear picture of the meaning of the text.²³ This is a feature that is clearly absent from Calvin's lectures and commentaries,²⁴ as the goals of preaching and lecturing differ. As mentioned above, Calvin offered in-depth research and used the original biblical texts when educating fellow preachers, but used concise and easy terminology when preaching.

Second, Calvin preferred verse-by-verse exegesis. In other words, he read a verse, explained its meaning, and after applying it proceeded to the next verse. When an important contextual factor appeared within a text, Calvin would provide any necessary background that would help the listener understand the full meaning of the text.²⁵ While Calvin preached on biblical texts ranging from a single verse to a full chapter, he often chose two to four verses upon which to base his sermon. For example, Calvin's nineteenth sermon on Deuteronomy consisted of a text of twenty verses, while his fifth sermon on Daniel consisted of fourteen verses. With certain texts that he considered to be of great importance, Calvin would preach multiple times

²² Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," 13. Hans Kraus introduces eight principles of Calvin's preaching.

²³ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 71.

²⁴ Leith, "Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word," 217.

²⁵ Zachman, *John Calvin As Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 103–30.

to help the listeners understand their meaning. For example, he preached on 1 Timothy 2:1–6 five times, and 1 Timothy 3:1–5 four times.²⁶

While Calvin's approach to textual exposition forms the foundation for exegetical preaching, his verse-by-verse preaching method is not one that is recommended for preachers today. The text for a classic sermon should be based upon an expository unit that is lengthy enough to contain a central theme, a comprehensive interpretation, and a point of application for the audience. Therefore, Calvin's verse-by-verse approach to preaching faces the typical limitation of such preaching—an inability to provide a comprehensive and broad message to the listener.²⁷ Another limitation of this approach is in its tendency to provide two or three themes in one message, causing the sermon to lack focus, unity, and depth.²⁸ Exegetical preaching requires the strategic selection of a text that carries or conveys a central message and involves the precise and accurate explanation and application of that message to the life of the listener.

Third, Calvin resorted to the principle of *Lectio continua* and chose the text of his sermons not by theme but by sequential order. As noted by one biographer,

the Sunday after his arrival [back in Geneva after his time in Strasbourg], he mounted the steps of the familiar pulpit, opened the Bible at the same page at which he had left off on Easter Day three and a half years before, took up the next passage as his text, and expounded it as though nothing had intervened.²⁹

Calvin refused to arbitrarily select the text of his sermons.³⁰ From November 12, 1550, to January 10, 1551, Calvin preached 28 times on Micah, and from February 26, 1554, to March of 1555, he preached 159 times on Job. Afterwards, he preached two hundred times on Deuteronomy from March 20, 1555, to July 15, 1556. Because Calvin was completely dedicated to the detailed exegesis of Scripture, it is likely that verse-by-verse preaching suited his needs, as it allowed him to sequentially address the entire Bible without missing a single verse. In light of Calvin's busy schedule, the selection of the biblical text according to its sequential order also served to relieve Calvin of the heavy burden of having to select a text every week.

²⁶ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 71.

²⁷ O. C. Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 316.

²⁸ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 71. Parker indicates that Calvin's sermons on Job especially lack unity, often causing confusion among young preachers as they try to understand Calvin's preaching theology.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin: Selected from the Bonnet Edition with an Introductory Biographical Sketch* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 26.

³⁰ Leith, "Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word," 213.

2. Biblical Interpretation Must Communicate the Intent of the Author

Calvin also adhered to the literary principle that one must refer to historical context and grammatical structure when discovering and interpreting the intent of the author in exegetical preaching. This principle is crucial, especially because in order to communicate the intent of the author, the preacher must first accurately understand the text himself before preaching. Church historian Philip Schaff writes of Calvin's biblical interpretation methodology, "Calvin held that the fundamental purpose of the Biblical interpreter ... is to find the true intended meaning of the author in the text."³¹ Calvin revealed that while preaching on the entirety of the Old Testament, it is almost the only task of an interpreter "to unfold the mind of the writer he has undertaken to expound."³² Similarly, Calvin's approach to interpreting the books of the New Testament was to fully understand the intent of the author. In his sermon on Ephesians 6:12, Calvin endeavored to fix any misunderstandings of the text by offering propositions such as, "If we were to focus on what Paul wanted to say ..." and "Through this text, Paul wants us to understand" By doing so, Calvin shone the spotlight on the critical issue of Paul's intended meaning throughout the biblical text.³³ Randall Zachman writes of Calvin's approach to biblical interpretation in his sermons on Ephesians,

Calvin does not explicate the meaning of the letter in his sermons by means of the original historical and linguistic context of the epistle, but rather in light of the meaning contained in the words Paul uses, always referenced in French translation.³⁴

He continues to offer a reason for why Calvin places such emphasis upon terminology: "The goal for exposing the meaning of the words is to arrive at the intention of Paul expressed in the passage, for Calvin is convinced that the words Paul uses are all meant to show his intention."³⁵

Calvin's emphasis on the intent of the author presents various implications. First, Calvin refused to rely on philosophical or meditative interpretation methods, instead pursuing the most natural and purposive interpretation of the text in further pursuit of the educational goals of his

³¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 8:524.

³² David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 33. While preaching on Psalm 8, Calvin stated that he wanted to fulfill the role of a faithful interpreter in unfolding the prophet's heart.

³³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (1562; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 663.

³⁴ Zachman, *John Calvin As Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 164.

³⁵ Ibid.

ministry.³⁶ Calvin was convinced that both the interpreter and the preacher must unfold the text of Scripture in accordance with the author's thoughts if they are to fulfill the intention of the writer of the biblical text. After studying Calvin's commentary on John 18:38, William Bouwsma comments on Calvin's interpretive inclinations,

In light of the Biblical text, it seems that Calvin shifted from an emphasis on philosophical knowledge to Biblical and exegetic concepts of knowledge and communication. When considering the intended audience to which the Scriptures were addressed, the Biblical text is far from philosophical, and Calvin's tendency to drift away from the philosophy is in accord with this view.³⁷

While many attempt to define Calvin as the theologian who founded systematic theology, or as an apologete who defended and argued for Christian truths, Calvin actually enjoyed being identified as a minister, an educator, and a preacher. All of his sermons and commentaries are aimed at helping preachers to heighten their understanding and appreciation of the Bible and to provide guidelines for aspiring preachers. Today's preachers show a serious misunderstanding of Calvin's legacy when they continually philosophize God's words; only through a return to the basic and natural exegesis of the Scriptures can the modern church find its biblical foundation for preaching.

Second, Calvin's focus on the intent of the author diverged from the tendencies of medieval churches. The interpretive culture of the period was to engage in biblical interpretation based on various literary, philosophical, humanistic, and civic approaches. Calvin refused to yield to his contemporary culture and focused purely on the meaning of the text based on the intent of the author. Calvin especially pointed out the difference between his approach and allegorical interpretation, concluding that the emphasis in biblical interpretation must be on the true and appropriate meaning of the text.

I am not unaware of the seemingly beneficial aspects of allegorical interpretation. But if we were to take the teaching of the Holy Spirit seriously, these ideas which have enticed us so convincingly at first glance will vanish from our view in an instant. I will not succumb to such temptations. ... for true meaning, when thoughtfully confronted, will flow naturally from the text of the Scriptures.³⁸

³⁶ Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 20.

³⁷ William James Bouwsma, "Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (1982): 207.

³⁸ *CO* 41:199 (on Dan 10:5–6).

This emphasis upon the voice of the author of the Bible was Calvin's biggest contribution to the struggle against the limitations of medieval interpretative methodology.

There are two reasons for Calvin's unyielding reliance on textual meaning. First, Calvin believed that the natural interpretation of the author's intent was the method endorsed by the Bible itself. Second, because the Scriptures were recorded for the purpose of people having easy access to it, this precluded the necessity of any sophisticated interpretative mechanisms or theories. Meaning not based on the text of Scripture, no matter how graceful or powerful, will not represent the full meaning that God intended to communicate. By clarifying that the Bible was purposely written to be accessible and easily understood, Calvin has provided the church with an accurate and biblical interpretative foundation that applies even to preachers today. Scripture was written not to be criticized and analyzed, but to be heard, accepted, and understood.

Third, Calvin viewed the intent of the various authors of the Bible and the intention of the Holy Spirit, as the ultimate author of the Bible, to be one and the same.³⁹ Is it the same? Can it ever differ? These questions pose immense and fierce interpretational questions, even among the most orthodox scholars and preachers. It is not clear even yet if an emphasis on the author refers to the human author or the Holy Spirit. In the face of such controversy, Calvin fearlessly equates these two different authors as one and interprets their intention as one. He does not permit disparity between human and divine purpose in Scripture and believes that there are no multiple meanings (*sensus plenior*) that differ from the intent of the prophet who originated the message. While interpreting Psalm 87, Calvin explains, "The intent of the prophet and the intent of the Holy Spirit are so closely interrelated that they are, for all purposes, interchangeable."⁴⁰

This unified identification of the human and spiritual author of the Bible is incredibly important in terms of biblical interpretation, as it provides clear and specific answers to questions such as, Does the author suggest a meaning beyond what is represented in the literary text? and, Did the author fully understand all that the Holy Spirit has explained and record it correctly? and Can the author be inspired to the degree that he is unconscious or unaware of what he has been inspired to write? Calvin boldly answers that the human author of Scripture fully understood the intent of God when he wrote the text. Calvin's interpretative stance leaves us with a legacy which

³⁹ See Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 32–36.

⁴⁰ Calvin's commentary on Psalm 87:3 (CO 31:801).

fully answers the modern question, Whose understanding do I rely upon when interpreting the Bible: the reader's or the author's?

Modern interpretative trends have drifted from an emphasis upon the intent of the author and toward the subjective understanding of the reader or listener. The reality is that many such modern preachers and listeners are uncomfortable with the fact that there can actually be a living intention behind the text. But those who believe that the word of God comes from the mouth of God are encouraged to actively pursue and discover the intent of the author when interpreting biblical texts. Only when preachers are unshakably convinced that they are communicating the intent of the author can they boldly proclaim after each sermon, "This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God."

3. The Sovereignty and Grace of God in Christ Jesus

In contrast to Luther, whose main focus was upon Christ-centered sermons, Calvin's sermons focused upon God's sovereignty and grace. Calvin's sermons based upon this theme exhibit the following characteristics.

First, a central theme discovered in Calvin's sermons is the sovereignty and grace of God, found in Christ Jesus. Calvin goes further to make it evident in his sermons that God's sovereignty and grace are inseparable from the personhood of Jesus. This is an essential foundation that underlies all of Calvin's sermons and commentaries. After comparing Calvin's and Luther's sermons, Sidney Greidanus observes the following characteristics in Calvin's sermons on the Old Testament:

Luther was concerned mainly about the issue of salvation and focused on justification by faith in Christ. Consequently, finding Christ in the Old Testament became Luther's priority. Calvin, though affirming justification by faith in Christ, has a broader viewpoint; namely, the sovereignty and glory of God. The broader perspective enables Calvin to be satisfied with biblical messages about God, God's redemptive history, and God's covenant without necessarily focusing these messages on Jesus Christ.⁴¹

As mentioned by Greidanus, Christ is not always depicted in Calvin's sermons in the Old Testament. However, we can find that Calvin repeatedly refers to Jesus Christ, either directly or indirectly, in all of his sermons on Genesis, often portraying Jesus as the manifested fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.⁴² Calvin never interpreted the Old Testament by

⁴¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 127.

⁴² John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 1:1–11:4*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).

itself, but gazed upon it in light of the New Testament. Calvin's purpose in preaching was to reveal the mercy and grace of God, which appears to human beings regardless of their limitations and sinfulness. And the embodiment of such mercy and grace was perfectly represented in the personhood of Jesus Christ. Because of this, we must conclude that in the center of Calvin's biblical interpretation methodology there is Christ Jesus.

Second, in Calvin's sermons, the love and grace of God are revealed through Christ and the cross. We cannot become preoccupied with Calvin's emphasis on God's sovereignty and grace to the point that we become blind to his elaborate portrayal of the fulfillment of God's sovereignty and grace in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Thomas Parker concluded that we must not moralize Calvin's gospel as a simple teaching, but recognize that his sermons proclaim the grace of God in Jesus Christ.⁴³ To Calvin, who emphasized man's fall from grace and his enmity and open rebellion toward God, Christ was the ultimate channel through which redemption could be granted. For example, in his sermon on Ephesians chapter 1, Calvin starts by praising the grace and glory of God given through Jesus Christ. "The good he has done us in Jesus Christ is beyond all comparison more excellent and noble. For we shall see hereafter that such as know the love that God shows us in our Lord Jesus Christ have all that they can wish, high and low, far and wide."⁴⁴

Calvin's God-centered focus on Jesus Christ is exemplary for all Christian preachers today. In fact, the Master Preacher, Jesus, interpreted the Old Testament through this same principle. "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). The "Scriptures" referred to by Jesus is, of course, the Old Testament. Because the Old Testament records the Messiah who was to save mankind from its sins, it can be said that there is no book that is un-messianic in the Old Testament.⁴⁵

⁴³ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 81–82.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 16.

⁴⁵ David Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 167–68. For arguments that all sermons must be revelatory of Christ Jesus, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). And for an interpretational basis for Christ-centered preaching, see Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

4. *Biblical Interpretation for the Purpose of Specific Application*

Calvin considered biblical exegesis as the first priority of preachers, but his ministry did not stop at exegesis. His sermons were aimed specifically to help lay Christian listeners, who lived in varying circumstances and times, to apply the word of God to their lives and be transformed unto holiness. In his sermon on 2 Timothy 4:1–2, Calvin criticizes the uselessness of doctrine without application: “If the application and practice of discipleship were left to listener, they would not be able to move a single step to follow in Christ’s footsteps. Doctrine in itself cannot benefit anyone.”⁴⁶ Doctrine without application is a boat without a rudder. There must be direction and purpose in an exegetical sermon. While exegesis can form the foundation for preaching, it cannot become the goal of preaching. Calvin reflects the importance of application in the time and space that he allots to the practice of the word in his sermons, resulting in sermons that are substantially lengthier than their commentary counterparts. While commentaries are limited to explaining the meaning of the text, the sermon is preached to reflect on the text, to reflect on our lives, and to apply Scripture where it is most needed.

Calvin’s application of the word in his sermons shows the following characteristics. First, Calvin bases the practice of the word upon its accurate exposition. Zachman comments that “Calvin’s method in his sermons is to bring Paul’s meaning and intention to light, so that the congregation might always have that meaning in mind, in order to transform the way they think and the way they live.”⁴⁷

According to Parker’s summary of Calvin’s sermons, Calvin interpreted each verse of the biblical text and based the application of the text on his interpretation;⁴⁸ his application of the text was guided by the wording and the text itself.⁴⁹ One thing to note is that Calvin believed that the temporal or spatial discord between the time at which the text was written and the time at which it was being preached did not hinder the application of the text in any way. In fact, we can see Calvin applying the words of Paul to the Genevans identically to how he applied them to the Ephesians, concluding that in his sermon he had delivered “holy Scripture truly expounded and

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 945–57.

⁴⁷ Zachman, *John Calvin As Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian*, 169. For a comprehensive introduction to the relationship between Calvin’s commentaries and sermons on Ephesians, see pages 163–72.

⁴⁸ Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 70–71.

⁴⁹ Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 117.

applied rightly to our use.”⁵⁰ While the Scriptures are addressed directly to the audience of that time, Calvin believed that the text was applicable at face value to the circumstances and the people of his own day.

A sermon is comprised of exegesis and application. Application without exegesis is empty action, and exegesis without application is empty teaching. Biblical application of the text requires that the application be based upon the accurate and appropriate exposition of the word. Haddon Robinson states,

In the expository sermon the idea is derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context. This deals first with how the preacher comes to his message, and second, with how he communicates it.⁵¹

According to this definition, expository preaching requires research followed by research-based application. Exegesis and application are inseparable. Calvin was a preacher who well understood the synthetic and complementary relationship between the two.

Second, Calvin emphasized that application must start from the self. He believed “it would be better for [the preacher] to break his neck going up into the pulpit if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God.”⁵² It is noteworthy that Calvin addressed the audience as “we” instead of “you,” emphasizing the fact that the preacher must, in all humility, be the first to apply the word of God in his life. He observes,

Seeing that the assembled flock ought to hear the word of God by the mouth of a man, he that speaks must certainly testify that it is all in good faith, and that he has such a reverence for the teaching he proclaims that he means to be the first to be obedient to it, and that he wishes to declare that he is not only imposing a law on others but that the subjection is in common and that it is for him to make a start.⁵³

Calvin’s revolution was possible only because his sermons and his commentaries were exemplified in his godly life. He preached with words in the pulpit and preached with his life outside. Preachers today must understand that they are obliged not only to interpret and communicate biblical text, but also to be transformed first and foremost in the presence of the word of God. Calvin’s view of preaching tells us today that the word of God does not discriminate in its choice of audience, but that all who stand before it

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 363.

⁵¹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (1980; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

⁵² CO 26:304.

⁵³ CO 53:257.

are accountable to practicing it in a God-fearing manner. Phillip Brooks's principle of "Truth through Personality" conveys this truth,⁵⁴ as does Robinson's preaching philosophy.⁵⁵ Calvin not only influences readers and listeners throughout all ages because of his excellent commentaries and sermons, but he does so moreover by the life of holiness that complemented his preaching. He was a true man of God who as a preacher humbly submitted to the authority of the word he preached to his audience.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed Calvin's hermeneutic philosophy and his interpretative methodology in his sermons. Calvin believed that the Bible was the authoritative word of God and thus was able to proclaim the word in all confidence. His unwavering trust in the Bible enabled him to adopt an interpretative philosophy that understood and unfolded the word at face value. He also viewed the sermon as a communication not between man and man, but between God and man, where the personhood and will of God was revealed through the sermon.

Calvin's hermeneutic philosophy encourages us to renew our attitude toward preaching and the word. Both the preacher and audience must recognize the voice of God in the Bible. We have also discovered that Calvin's sermons, when analyzed against the backdrop of his commentaries, reveal Calvin's preaching theology and his belief that preaching accurately unfolds the Bible as it is. Calvin proclaims even today that preachers must bear the heart of God and interpret his word through the Holy Spirit, and it would be wise for preachers today to listen with an open heart.

⁵⁴ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 27.

⁵⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.