

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

John Calvin as an Expositor

J.L.M. Haire

His achievement

It is right, in giving any account of John Calvin as an expositor, to begin with an unequivocal acknowledgement of the greatness of his contribution. He did two things of the highest value for the whole Church. He aimed at setting out the plain meaning of Scripture with clarity and brevity and , secondly, he recognized that Scripture is basically witness to God's power and grace. Consequently all who come after him can consult him with profit, as they try to grasp the exact meaning of the Biblical writers and they can profitably listen to the insights he gained into the message which the writers were presenting. He is, of course, like all men a man of his time. He is a Renaissance scholar, very interested in the discoveries of science (as we shall see) and, as a literary man of the Renaissance, he is also interested in and aware of the differences in style of the Biblical writers. Thus he has no doubt that another than the apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the Hebrews or that 2 Peter was written by some one other than the apostle. In his view an amanuensis was given a free hand and so said things which were phrased in a way the apostle would not have done e.g. on 2 Peter 3.16 he declares that "Peter himself would never have spoken thus". Equally he is a man of his time in assuming that the prophet Isaiah spoke not only of the past and present but, in chs 40-66, of future events centuries ahead after the exile. Daniel, too, spoke of the future acts of Alexander the Great. And no less as a man of his time and not surprisingly he strikes a strong polemical note, not only both in prefaces and texts against the Papacy, but also against the Lutheran interpretation of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper (e.g., in his dedication to Frederick of his commentary on Jeremiah, or in his dedication to Edward VI of England of his commentary on the Catholic Epistles) .

His achievement as expositor was recognized in the next generation by Richard Hooker in England and in the next century by the man most critical of his predestination

doctrine, Arminius himself, and by many writers nearer our time. Their high regard for his work has been recorded at the close of the English edition of a commentary on Joshua. Of these Bishop Wilson is a good example. Hooker said that "the sense of Scripture which Calvin alloweth" was considered in the Anglican Church to be of more force than if "ten thousand Augustines, Jeromes, Chrysostoms, Cyrprians were brought forth" (quoted in A. Mitchell Hunter, The Teaching of Calvin, pp21-22). Arminius wrote, "After the Holy Scriptures I exhort the students to read the commentaries of Calvin; for I tell them that he is incomparable in the Interpretation of Scripture" (ibid pl9) and Bishop Wilson's words are "Calvin's commentaries remain, after three centuries, unparalleled for force of mind, justness in exposition, and practical views." (Calvin, Commentary on Joshua p403)

The Commentaries

Calvin's first published commentary was, not unnaturally, an exposition of the epistle to the Romans, finished during his exile in Strasbourg (1539). This was followed, after his return and establishment in Geneva, by the other Pauline letters and then by the remaining NT epistles (except 2 and 3 John), and next his commentary on St. John and the harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke. He almost certainly did not write a commentary on the Book of Revelation, though the tradition that he spoke disparagingly of it rests on a secondary source whose reliability T.H.L.Parker has questioned (Calvin's NT commentaries, pp75-78). The full list of dates are Romans 1539AD, Corinthians 1547, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles 1548-49, Hebrews, Thessalonians and James 1549-50; the Catholic Epistles 1551, Acts 1552, John's Gospel and the Harmony 1553. When one reflects how, nowadays, it takes a scholar often years to produce a commentary on a single book, one marvels at this rapid production. Moreover, every single verse is expounded and its individual words often examined and compared with their use elsewhere.

Haire, Calvin, IBS 4, January 1982

We marvel, too, when we remember that he is no scholar giving his whole life to exposition and teaching, but someone who is at the same time a great systematic theologian, producing his Institutes in various editions, and an ecclesiastical statesman with a vast correspondence and many hours spent in consultation with leaders of the reform movement from all over Europe. Indeed he often could only snatch a few minutes to attend to the exposition before it was again interrupted (Mitchell Hunter, op.cit.18). Many of his lectures on Scripture, on which the latter commentaries were based, were delivered extempore on the basis of his vast knowledge of Scripture and his very accurate and tenacious memory.

It was first in 1551, the year in which he published his commentary on the Catholic Epistles, that he printed also his first OT commentary, that on Isaiah. This book is important in two ways. He is now more pressed for time and relies on his secretary to take down his lectures. These he then revises and in them applies the understanding of the relation of the OT to the NT which he sets out systematically in the Institutes (Book II, chs 10 and 11, on the similarity and difference between the two Testaments). About this I hope to say more later. On the conclusion of his NT commentaries, he published his work on Genesis in 1554, on the Psalms and Hosea in 1557 (taking a great deal of pains and himself, as he says in the preface, gaining a great deal spiritually from the Psalms), the remaining minor prophets in 1559, Daniel in 1561. He published Jeremiah and the harmony of the Pentateuch in 1563, the year before his death, when already a very sick man. During the same year, too, he expounded Joshua and the first twenty chapters of Ezekial, at which point his health broke down. So far as the present writer can judge, these last commentaries are in no way less scholarly, detailed or spiritually profound than the earlier books. The latter two were published after his death. They, like the commentaries on Jeremiah, the Minor Prophets and Daniel, had been taken down by his skilled secretaries, Bude and Jonville, and, in the case of the first three, worked over by Calvin himself. While he did not live to write commentaries on the remaining books of the OT, he had preached a series of sermons on Job, 2 Samuel and 1 Kings (Mitchell Hunter p18; J.T. McNeill, History and Character of

Calvinism, p204) .

Many volumes have dedications to someone of outstanding importance whose acceptance of the dedication helps to give the book public recognition, especially in realms now influenced by the Reformation. Thus volumes are dedicated to the young King Edward VI of England (Catholic Epistles and Isaiah) and the second edition of Isaiah to Elizabeth I on the year she came to the throne. Similar dedications are made to several of the great German princes and the kings of Poland and Sweden. Two volumes are dedicated to his own Town Council at Geneva and to the Councillors of Frankfurt who supported the Reformed Faith. The most interesting of all the prefaces is that to the book of Psalms in which he draws aside for once the veil, telling us of his own life and seeing in the Psalmist's experience of joy and suffering a great encouragement to him and his friends.

His Method

In the preface to his first commentary in 1539, he sets out his ideal of what a commentary should be. Its chief quality should be "lucid brevity" - clarity and brevity. Paying high tribute to two predecessors in writing commentaries for the reform movement, Melancthon and Bucer, he notes how the former concentrated on the most important themes in a biblical book and did not, on many occasions, expound the individual passages, while Bucer, full of the new insights, tended not to confine himself to the exact subject in hand but drew in other related concepts. Calvin himself will seek to expound the text before him and bring out, if he can, its exact meaning. And this he succeeded in doing with such clarity and elegance as well as theological insight, that he became the guide to many who came after him.

As a renaissance scholar he used the wisdom of the Middle Ages to pursue his purpose. He chose a short passage, as for example Peter the Lombard had done and also the jurists in their comment on Justinian. He studied the words employed, examining their use by the same author elsewhere and by other authors, giving the historical background and explaining philosophical

concepts. This he had already done as a young man before he had joined the Reformation, in his commentary on Seneca's De Clementia (J.T. Neill, p105; T.H.L.Parker, op.cit., Ch.II). He then constantly applies it to the life of the Christian and to the controversies of the Reformation age, especially in his criticism of the Roman Catholic teaching, and to the ruthlessness of the authorities in their opposition to reformation. Here, however, he is more restrained than Luther in offering criticism which is directly connected with the text. Today we would often see the passage as pinpointing the errors of other bodies and not exclusively, principally, or even at all those of the current Roman Church. He is also, of course, opposed to allegorizing any passage whose literal meaning is what he believes the writer intends. As we shall see, he never uses allegorizing to evade an interpretation which is difficult or unacceptable to him, and expresses the opinion that even SaintAugustine indulged unnecessarily in this, e.g. on Ephesians 3.18. He writes, of course, in Latin, providing in some cases a French edition and offering, Verse by verse, his own Latin translation. But his comments are on the Greek and Hebrew originals of which languages he had made himself master, first of the Greek and later of Hebrew. In his understanding of Greek he has been reckoned at points a better interpreter than the great Erasmus (Hunter, op.cit,p20), but he deliberately avoids any parade of learning.

Agreeing to differ

He recognizes that others within the reformed churches may differ from him in their interpretation of scripture and that, considering our human limitations, this is inevitable. Thus he writes in his preface to the commentary on Romans (xxvii), "We ever find that even those who have not been deficient in their zeal for piety nor in reverence and sobriety in handling the mysteries of God, have by no means agreed among themselves on every point; for God hath never favoured his servants with so great a benefit that they were all endued with a full and perfect knowledge of everything; and no doubt for this

end, that he might first keep them humble, and, secondly, render them disposed to cultivate brotherly intercourse". By this he means, I think, that they might be ready to learn from each other. He continues, "Since then, what would be very desirable cannot be expected in this life, that is, universal consent among us in the interpretation of scripture, we must endeavour not to be motivated by a Craving after new interpretations or with the wish to undermine others' reputations or be moved by personal dislike of the others, or personal ambition, but write, as we do of necessity and the wish to edify, and so distinguish disputed points from the principal teaching of scripture on which we should be unanimous". Here is the very interesting and important conviction that we should be united on essentials and grant liberty of opinion elsewhere.

If he were living in the twentieth century, he would not object to interpretations of passages of scripture which differed from his interpretation, especially where we possess more accurate knowledge than was available to the men of his time. We possess older and more reliable manuscripts so that passages like 1 John 5.8 about the three that bear witness in heaven - which Calvin accepted as genuine - were already known in the next generation not to be found in the older and better manuscripts. Equally, he would gladly have accepted the new knowledge of Palestinian topography and of the Koine Greek provided by the papyri and not, as he was bound to do, use the classical authors as guides to the meaning in the NT of certain Greek words.

Again, he is for example puzzled by the Aramaic Maranatha in 1 Cor 16.22, taking it, along with the previous words, as a form of Jewish imprecation on those who are about to be excluded from salvation. Scholars today note that the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians appear much more severe than chapters 1 to 9 and suggest that such final chapters may well be the "severe" letter referred to in 2 Cor 2.3. Calvin, in whose time such a view had not been suggested, assumes that 1 Corinthians is the "severe letter". He seeks also to explain the difference within 2 Corinthians as being, first, Paul's gentle approach to attempt to win over the rebellious

church and the latter more severe words as a means to moving them to repent - an improbable solution.

When he writes his commentary on Matthew, Mark and Luke he follows Bucer, who himself went back to earlier times in setting the synoptics together. Each he sees as bearing witness in his own way and with his own emphases. Therefore he rejects Jerome's theory that Mark is a shortened form of Matthew. When the three differ from one another in detail, he considers that each naturally chooses out what seems to him central in an incident. Those healings which involve either one or two sufferers, are differently described because, in his view, either one evangelist wanted especially to concentrate on the case of the individual person like Bartimaeus, or mentioned two because he remembered the actual incident in detail. Such differences do not trouble Calvin. They are marginal. Similarly, when Matthew quotes Zechariah and attributes the saying to Jeremiah (Matt 27.9), it is a slip of memory which could happen to any human being and not important for the heart of the matter. Again, if Acts refers to a different place as the burial place of Jacob from that given in Genesis, this he considers may be a different Rabbinic tradition. As the lawyers say in another context "de minimis non curat lex". It is the essentials of the gospel which matter, something he had already said in his preface to the Romans.

Systematic theology versus exegesis?

If then Calvin saw as inevitable different interpretations of detail among reliable teachers in the Church, how far did he acknowledge differences of doctrine, or did he feel that a perfect system of doctrine could be formulated? The Westminster Fathers hoped to set up "a platform of religion for all time". Would Calvin have believed this possible? He certainly wrote his Institutes - Institutio, as in the great Roman lawyers, meant simply "a summary" in Latin - to be a summary of the teaching of scripture and so a guide to the many who, in the Reformation age were, for the first time, seeking to read and understand the Scriptures for themselves. For such he was certain that some such guidance by those more qualified

was necessary (see Francois Wendel, Calvin, p148) Undoubtedly he had a strong desire to present the Scriptures as consistent and proclaiming one clear and life-giving gospel. This can be illustrated in his writings, both by general principles and by individual passages. Thus he writes a harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke and, even more clearly in one of his last commentaries, a harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, assuming a Mosaic authorship for most of the Pentateuch. Indeed, in this later commentary, he moves over from his usual practice of following the order of the text, to rearranging the material to a much greater extent than with the synoptics, and re-orders the Pentateuch under four heads:-

1. A preface on "the dignity" or authority of God's law
2. The moral laws within the framework of the Ten Commandments.
3. The ceremonial law as foreshadowing the salvation in Christ and, with this, those political laws which belong to a particular time and place in ancient Israel and thus not to be made simpliciter the laws for modern states. As may be familiar, he sees the fourth commandment as only a law for the Jews before the Incarnation.
4. Finally, he collects those passages which he considers to be the application of the law to our time and place. This he calls "the end and use of the law" (See Harmony of the Pentateuch, I, ppxvi-xvii)

But such harmonizing is not for him a universal principle. He recognizes the great difference between the Synoptics and John, the former providing the account of the fulfilment of the OT in Christ, while John will present Christ's power and the results of his coming (Harmony, xxxvii).

We see his desire to make scripture fit into the pattern of doctrine, especially in those passages which seem to teach a different theology. Honest scholar that he is, he does not bypass the difficulties. Let us take two examples: baptism for the dead in 1 Cor 15.4

and the preaching to the imprisoned spirits in 1 Peter 3.19ff. In 1 Cor 15 he rejects the view that St Paul is referring to the practice of baptizing on behalf of those who have already died. This he holds would have been a superstition which the apostle would have violently rejected. He does not consider the possibility that this is simply an argumentum ad hominem, which would argue, "You Corinthians are inconsistent, baptizing for those already dead and denying life after death". Rather he offers the suggestion that it refers to the practice of baptizing those not really adequately prepared for baptism, but, because they are ill, "as good as dead", are, out of compassion, being prematurely baptized. Similarly he rejects the view that preaching to the imprisoned spirits can mean preaching the gospel to those who had died as sinners at the time of the Flood. This would mean giving them a second chance, something he rejects as false doctrine. It must mean, he thinks, preaching to those among the sinners who had repented before they actually died in the Flood - basing this on 1 Peter 4.6, "alive in the Spirit". He admits that Peter could have expressed himself more clearly if he had written "among whom" and not simply "who did not obey" (3.20).

Calvin also seeks to defend an apostle from appearing to say what is less than truly apostolic. As we have seen, he interprets the verse 2 Peter 3.16 which speaks of the difficulty of understanding Paul as something written by an amanuensis and not by Peter himself. Similarly, when Paul in 1 Cor 8.9-10 seems to say that God is not interested in animal welfare, Calvin believes that what he really means is that God is more concerned about men (and the proper payment of the ministry) than about animals. As a final illustration of this point, he interprets 2 Cor 5.10, "We shall receive the consequences of what we have done in the flesh" to mean that, though our works are imperfect, God will graciously and generously accept these works done in faith and obedience, while the passage itself seems more to stress the fact that faith without works is dead.

His open-mindedness

If occasionally - and I think we should stress the word "occasionally" - Calvin seems to us to want unduly to harmonize the ways of thought and expression of the great range of biblical writers, we ought to note two things strongly in his favour. First, he is a man of the sixteenth and not the twentieth century. We are very much more aware than the men of the Renaissance of the extent to which language itself is an expression of culture and how the use of words may differ from one author to another. Indeed Calvin was so alert that he noted how St Paul and St John used both sarx (flesh) and kosmos (world) in ways which differed the one from the other. A fuller recognition of this, and of the fact that men express their convictions with different metaphors and with varying emphasis, leads us to seek for less harmony of expression than was assumed in the sixteenth century under the influence of the great Aristotle with his confidence in the possibility of clear and final definition.

The second and more important form of defence in Calvin's favour is the extent of his open-mindedness. This has been rather obscured in popular thought, by his resolute and, at times, overstated defence of his philosophical idea of predestination, as an attempt to expound undoubted biblical teaching on God's lordship over the world and man. This open-mindedness to new truth can be illustrated in various ways. He is, for example, very interested in the new scientific discoveries of his time, in contrast to Luther's rejection of Copernicus' theory as absurd. In his commentary on Genesis 1.16, referring to the sun and the moon as the two larger lights, he says that the astronomers have established that Saturn is in fact bigger than the moon and so sun and moon are not the two greater lights in the universe. But, he continues, Moses is here describing the earthly bodies as they appear to the ordinary man, to show the greatness of the power of the Creator. There is no conflict with the astronomers. The Bible is thus not a textbook of science, but a reliable witness to the works of God. If we turn to tradition about biblical authors, he is

sure that Hebrews was not written by the apostle Paul, the style and presentation are quite different. He is inclined to follow Eusebius' view that the author may be Luke or Clement (Commentary on Hebrews xxvii). He draws an interesting distinction among the OT quotations in the NT. Some are exact quotations. Others are quotations from memory which give the essence of the OT passage but not in the same words. He believes that a writer, like a preacher, may use a quotation from a previous writer, giving it a meaning that fits his point (and so bring the point home) even if that is not what the original author meant. Thus when the author in Hebrews 2.7 quotes the eighth Psalm about man being made "a little lower than the angels", the author uses the phrase to mean, not "to a little extent" but "for a little while", Calvin comments, "It was not the apostle's design to give an exact explanation of the words. "For there is nothing improperly done, when verbal allusions are made to embellish a subject in hand, as Paul does, in quoting a passage in Romans 10.6 from Moses, 'who shall ascend into heaven etc'. Here Paul does not join the words 'heaven and hell' for the purpose of explanation but as ornaments". Good scholar that he was, he saw no difficulty in rejecting a word in the text which could have got in by scribal error. So in Hebrews 11.37, for example, in the list of the sufferings of the men of faith, he has no hesitancy in rejecting "they were tempted" before they were "sawn asunder" as unsuitable and due to dittography, the words for "sawn" and "tempted" being so similar (ἐπρόσθησαν and ἐπειράσθησαν)

We see the same readiness to face problems in his detailed examination of the relation of the OT to the New. He was under attack from those like Servetus who treated the OT as purely a testament of law or by his opponents in the Sorbonne, who claimed that salvation was by good works. Calvin sees the OT as a foreshadowing of the New, referring explicitly to the letter to the Hebrews (Instit.II.11.4). He writes in the previous chapter of the Institutes (II.10,20) , "As the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more He (God) increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning, when the

first promise of salvation was given to Adam (Gen.3.5) , it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fulness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last, when all the clouds were dispersed, Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth." Here is a form of the theory of progressive revelation - not progressive advance by men but progressive enlightenment by God. It is this conviction that guided him in first commenting on almost the whole of the NT before he turned to the Old, and, when he did so turn, he began with what has often been considered the OT book which most foreshadows the New, the book of Isaiah. Here he even uses the NT to interpret the OT., e.g., in 1 Cor 2.9 in Paul's use of Isaiah 64.4. Calvin speaks frequently of God accommodating himself to human limitations. "God", he says, "accommodated diverse forms to different ages (Inst. II.11.13)". To speak of God as our enemy till reconciled in Christ is an expression accommodated to our capacity (II.16.2; cf I.17.13 on "God repenting"). God takes the initiative. One does not have to wait for forgiveness till one has first repented or been reconciled by Christ. There is no question of God simply standing for "justice" and Christ for "mercy". Again, when asked why Genesis did not deal with the creation of angels, Calvin replied that God was accommodating himself to the weakness of common folk, giving them what they could take in (Inst.I.14.3). This made him averse to speculation in general. We all know how, when he was asked what God was doing before He created the world, he replied with his grim humour, that He was cutting rods in the greenwood for those who asked impertinent questions. For Calvin, the Jews are like children whose weakness could not yet bear the full knowledge of heavenly things (Inst.II.7.2) , or like children under a tutor (Comm. on Galatians 4.2).

At the same time Calvin is sure that the OT is not what Servetus wanted to make it out to be, a testament of law. In it, as in the New, there is both grace and hope of life beyond death. To support this, he not only quotes passages like Isaiah 26.19-21, Daniel 12.1-2, and Job 26, but he so interprets the Psalmists faith in God

as their ultimate salvation. He reminds us of how the NT itself saw the OT saints as looking forward for a city which has foundations (Heb 11). His intention is always to see the two Testaments as a whole with the full light shining in the face of Christ. Sometimes he does treat a verse in the OT as absolute, as when he accepts the words of the Psalmist in the closing verse of Ps. 137, blessing the man who dashes the infant children of Babylon against a rock, without relating it to Paul's instructions to Christians to leave vengeance in the hands of God or of the lawfully appointed authorities (Romans 12 and 13). He defends this as a word from God, and not, as we would be inclined to say, as the expression of the Psalmist's natural horror at Babylonian barbarity (See R.S.Wallace, Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament, p110; McNeill, op.cit.p213). Dr Ronald Wallace in his book brings out very impressively what a strong sense Calvin had of the Bible as the Word of God. Here God speaks to us as nowhere else and we must take what he says with due awe and reverence.

As we come to sum up our findings, we could do much worse than refer to the four headings under which the famous nineteenth German orthodox scholar Tholuck characterized the achievement of Calvin, a judgement which the editors of the English translation of Calvin's commentaries printed in their final volume, the commentary on Joshua (pp345-375)

The first quality which Tholuck singled out in Calvin's Doctrinal Impartiality. He will expound the passage in its clear sense, unlike those who alter its meaning to fit in with their theology. Thus in his interpretation of the famous passage of Peter's confession in Matthew 16.18 Calvin believes that it is Peter himself, thus enlightened, who is the rock and not simply Peter's faith. When he expounds 1 Cor 14.53 about women keeping silent in the Church, he comments that, while this is a general rule in the Church, there are exceptions, such presumably as the prophetesses in both OT and NT. When he notes that Jude (v9) quotes an incidence in the Apocrypha, he writes that this may contain a genuine tradition. He comments on the phrase "that it may be fulfilled", common in the NT and introducing quotations from the OT. He notes that

sometimes this refers to a direct fulfilment of OT prophecy and at other times to a fulfilment, which resembles the OT passage in an analogous way but is not a direct fulfilment. (cf. Tholuck on Joshua p351)

The second mark of Calvin's exegesis in Tholuck's judgment is his Exegetical Exactness. More than Luther or Melancthon before him, he seeks out the precise meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words. On Psalm 9.17, for example, he has to admit that he is uncertain of the exact meaning of the Hebrew word, Sheol which the next century interpreters were so uncertain of, so that our Authorized Version translated the word 31 times as "Hell" and 31 times as "the grave". As we have already noted, he observed the different use by Paul and John of the words "sarx" and "kosmos". Again and again he takes great pains to find out the exact meaning of the Hebrew or Greek word. While he, like all men before the discovery of the papyri, had to use the earlier classical Greek authors as his models, he did note, for example, that the NT uses "ecclesia" in a sense different from the classical authors. Just as he probably felt that he had not the key to interpret the apocalyptic language of the book of Revelation any more than a term like Sheol, so he, not unnaturally, tended to interpret those NT passages which we now recognize as expressing the early Christian expectation of Christ's speedy return, in terms of the fact that we all, in this short life, are not far distant from meeting our Lord at death.

The third characteristic which Tholuck notes is the extent of his Learning. He has a most accurate knowledge of scripture. Someone has counted how, in the Institutes, there are 3098 quotations from the NT and 1755 from the OT. He can easily put his finger on parallel passages all over scripture. As the Institutes show, he has also a remarkable and accurate knowledge of the Church Fathers especially of Augustine, but in the commentaries he prefers to illustrate from other passages of scripture.

This brings us to Tholuck's fourth, and, in many ways, most important characteristic, Calvin's deep Christian Piety. He has "a lively religious feeling". His Christian experience of the mercy of God in Christ gives

him a profound insight into the meaning of the words of prophet and apostle. "He lives in the persons he expounds". His sudden conversion which he simply mentions and no more, in the preface to the Psalm, gave him a zeal for scripture. (cf. McNeill, op.cit.p108). He finds the Bible self-authenticating. The illumination of the Holy Spirit enables Christians to be certain that here is the Word of God.

I will close with some sentences taken from his exposition of the third chapter of St John's Gospel, which make this insight clear, and so make him a very great exegete:

"This Nicodemus was a distinguished man and at the same time upright, and yet ignorant and unenlightened with regard to the facts of the internal spiritual world.....The Evangelist relates the history in full, because it contains instruction respecting the corrupt nature of the human race and because it teaches who has rightly entered into the school of Christ.... The learned scribe comes by night: for the splendour of his own dignity had blinded his eyes....Many indeed long for a new doctrine, merely because it is new. It is easy to see, however, that it was not curiosity which influenced Nicodemus, for he wished to be thoroughly instructed...(But) the mind of Nicodemus was a field grown over and over with tares. It needed first to be cleared and ploughed. This was the object of the discourse on the new birth....The Kingdom of God is not, as many suppose, heaven but rather that spiritual life, which is begun by faith in this world and daily increases.Attention must be paid to the term Born Again. It denotes the commencement of a new existence in respect to the whole man".

This last sentence makes clear the fulness of Calvin's insight. "The whole man" is altered by the new birth and so, as well as justification, there must be sanctification and discipline, following up the light shed by Word and Sacrament.