
The influences on Calvin's hermeneutics and the development of his method

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Abstract

The article deals with Chrysostom and the humanists Valla, Budé and Erasmus who influenced Calvin's hermeneutics. Calvin appreciated Chrysostom's rejection of the allegorical interpretation and his emphasis on the 'simple sense of the text'. The article aims at showing how Chrysostom and the humanists affected Calvin's hermeneutics of interpreting the 'intention of the author of Scripture' (mens scriptoris) and seeing the 'true meaning' of the text as 'simply and briefly' (brevitas et facilitas) as possible.

1. INTRODUCTION

It would be worthwhile to investigate how John Calvin became one of the most influential biblical interpreters. His hermeneutical method has challenges our interpretation of Scripture and its application to our readers. In order to understand his hermeneutical approach to Scripture, we need to take account of all the factors which influenced hermeneutics. But it is not easy for us to grasp all of them completely. I have therefore selected Chrysostom and the humanists, who greatly influenced Calvin. Among the humanists Valla, Budé, and Erasmus had a great influence upon Calvin in his developing a hermeneutical method. The purpose of this article is to show not only how they influenced Calvin, but also how with his own hermeneutical perspective he moved beyond Chrysostom and Erasmus.

2. CHRYSOSTOM

John Chrysostom (c 347-407) was born in Antioch, a well-known center for rabbinical studies. He excelled in rhetoric and legal studies under the pagan rhetor Libanius (Baur

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1959:16-21; Amerigen 1921), and attended the lectures of the philosopher Andragathius. He did not find satisfaction as a lawyer, and abandoned his career to devote himself to Christian asceticism. Chrysostom was baptized by Meletius, bishop of Antioch and trained by Diodorus, teacher of the Antiochene school and later Bishop of Tarsus (Dockery 1992:107-108; Trigg 1988:31-38). He then studied theology, Aristotelian philosophy, the works of the Cappadocian Fathers, Josephus, and Scripture (Baur 1959:90-98; Pelikan 1967:14-15). About 373, after his mother's death, Chrysostom left Antioch to take up a more rigorous monasticism in the mountains. Subsequently, Chrysostom's ascetical discipline ruined his health. In 381 he was ordained a deacon, and in 386 the new bishop, Flavius, made him a preaching elder. In the task of preaching Chrysostom's rhetorical skill, advanced by his scholarship and piety, gained him a reputation as a biblical interpreter second to none. Sixth-century churchmen began to call him 'golden mouth' (*Chrysostomos*).

Chrysostom primarily stressed the natural, literal, grammatical and historical sense of Scripture. He accepted the authority of Scripture and emphasized the human factor in the interpretation of Scripture. He rejected the allegorical interpretation of the Alexandrian school (Clark 1977:171-185). Of course, he used allegorical interpretation in cases where Scripture itself suggested it. He used the principle *Scripture interprets Scripture*. The fact that his printed treatises and six hundred sermons contain about eighteen thousand references to Scripture is testimony to this principle. He used the Antiochene concept of *theoria* and attempted to find the true, historical meaning of the text. Where the text required more than a simple historical interpretation, he followed a typological method that was consistent with the historical event and distinct from allegorization (Dockery 1992:118). One of the most important features of Chrysostom's hermeneutics was that his interpretation had a good application to the Christian life.

Calvin's view of Chrysostom appeared in the Latin preface to an intended French translation of Chrysostom's homilies (CO 9.831-838). There Calvin stated his motivations for translating Chrysostom's sermons. Firstly, although Calvin did not follow Chrysostom's wrong theological conclusions, he admired Chrysostom as a biblical interpreter and as a good preacher. Secondly, this work was one of Calvin's literary ideals. Thirdly, Erasmus did not succeed in translating all of Chrysostom's works because he published a very incomplete edition. Finally, Calvin wanted to make a living for himself as a man of letters.

Calvin preferred to follow Chrysostom rather than Origen, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, and Augustine. Concerning Augustine's method of interpretation, Calvin stated: *Augustinus citra controversiam in fidei dogmatibus*

omnes superat. Religiosus quoque imprimis scripturae interpres, sed ultra modum argutus. Quo fit ut minus firmus sit ac solidus (CO 9.835; Walchenbach 1974:30).

Calvin regarded Augustine as the great theologian in the dogmas of faith, but often did not follow him as an interpreter of Scripture because he was 'oversubtle, less firm and solid.' But of Chrysostom's method, Calvin remarked: *Chrysostomi autem nostri haec prima laus est quod ubique illi summo studio fuit a germana scripturae sinceritate ne minimum quidem deflectere, ac nullam sibi licentiam sumere in simplici verborum sensu contorquendo* (CO 9.835; Walchenbach 1973:30).

Calvin set a high value on Chrysostom's rejection of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and showing the genuine, simple sense of the text. This method of Chrysostom had an important influence on Calvin's ideal of *brevitas et facilitas*.

Chrysostom had a great influence on Calvin's hermeneutical method (Ganoczy & Müller 1981; Rogers & McKim 1979:114-116). On Chrysostom's interpretation of the text of Scripture Calvin expressed his opinion clearly in his commentaries. His attitude toward Chrysostom was quite nuanced. I shall demonstrate this with reference to a few casual examples. Calvin entirely agreed with Chrysostom in cases where Chrysostom correctly interpreted the text of Scripture. 'I have no objection to Chrysostom's remark, that the word *spiritual* conveys an implied contrast between the blessing of Moses and of Christ' (*Comm on Eph 1:3*). Calvin followed Chrysostom because he conveyed the grammatical interpretation of the 'little words' *nostri* (ours) and *sui* (theirs) of the text correctly (*Comm on 1 Cor 1:2*).

Calvin, however, rejected Chrysostom's interpretation in some cases according to his own rules for the interpretation of the text. Firstly, Calvin did not accept the 'forced' interpretation of a text. 'Chrysostom improperly, in my opinion, refers it to the Jews, who were carnal ... Equally forced would be that opinion, as applied to the apposite clause.' (*Comm on Jn 6:63*). According to Calvin, Chrysostom's interpretation seems to be sometimes exceedingly farfetched (*Comm on 1 Cor 6:3*). Secondly, Calvin refused Chrysostom's wrong theological interpretation. 'The exposition of Chrysostom is not more correct, who refers to the dominion which was given to man in order that he might, in a certain sense, act as God's vicegerent in the government of the world' (*Comm on Gen 1:26*). In the interpretation of John 3:5 'Unless a man be born of water,' Calvin did not accept Chrysostom's view that the word *water* meant baptism (*Comm on Jn 3:5*). Thirdly, Calvin pointed out that Chrysostom did not reveal the mind of the author of Scripture. Calvin strongly believed that the chief task of an interpreter was to lay open the intention of the writer (*mentem scriptoris*, *Comm on 2 Th 5:22*). 'I do not agree with Erasmus ... There is greater probability in the opinion of Chrysostom, who interprets it to mean severity against more atrocious sins; though I

did not think that even he has hit the Apostle's meaning' (*Comm on Tit 2:15; Comm on Isa 53:8; Comm on Gen 8:33*). Fourthly, Calvin did not follow Chrysostom if he did not follow the simple interpretation of the text. 'The clause, in grace, Chrysostom explains in different ways. I, however, take it simply' (*Comm on Col 3:16; Comm on Ac 8:36; Comm on Gal 2:6; Com on 2 Cor 1:15*).

2. VALLA

Laurentius Valla was born in Rome in 1405. Valla's father was a consistorial advocate in Rome, and an uncle supported Valla with a humanistic training before he turned to theology. Consecrated as priest in 1431, he received a chair of eloquence at Pavia, but he left the city in 1432 due to quarrels with the jurists of the university. In 1435 or 1436 he entered the service of King Alfonso V of Aragon, his protector for the next ten years, and under his patronage Valla proved, about 1440, the falsification of the Donation of Constantine in *Declamatio de falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione*. In 1444 he wrote a critical comparison between the Vulgate and the Greek New Testament in *Collatio Novi Testamenti*. As an Italian humanist, he attacked scholasticism, the method he ridiculed in *Dialecticae Disputationes contra Aristotelicos*. In *De libero arbitrio* Valla denied the possibility of understanding the harmony of God's omnipotence with human free will, and in *De Professione Religiosorum* criticized the ideals of the religious life. Although Valla's novel and audacious views caused him to be suspected of heresy, he had a great influence on Renaissance scholars and also on the Reformers. His writings were held in esteem by Martin Luther. Benrath (1977:136-137) comments on Valla as follows. 'His didactic industry and literary productiveness, his perspicacious philological and historical criticism, his efforts to free science from the fetters of scholastic tradition are great and lasting merits.'

Valla was one of the first exponents of modern historical criticism (Breen 1931: 102-113; Torrance 1989:110-126; Parker 1993:188-191) because he used *apparatus criticus* in his *Collatio Novi Testamenti*. Concerning this work Parker (1993:188-189; cf Chomarat 1978:202-228) says;

Applying to the New Testament the methods which were increasingly being used in the elucidation of secular literature, Valla subjected the text of the Vulgate to a comparison with the Greek. The results he made into a book of notes on the New Testament. This existed in two recensions which were circulated among his acquaintance. Erasmus came upon a copy of the revision made in the fourteen-fifties by Valla himself,

borrowed it from the monastery near Brussels in the free and easy way of the sixteenth century, and published it in 1505. The book was well received in the early sixteenth century and provided a spur to New Testament scholarship. It was known under the title of *Annotationes*, Erasmus' name for it.

Calvin learned the new method of Valla through his legal training at Orléans and Bourges. Torrance (1988:125) says, 'It must also be noted that Calvin's legal training under the new methods took him out of the kind of thinking so inveterate in scholastic philosophy and theology, in which thought is addressed to oneself, in which questions are asked and answers given within the single mind' (cf also Bouwsma 1988:13; Breen 1968:107-129). Valla's influence upon Calvin's hermeneutics appeared in the *De Clementia*, the *Institutes*, and the *Commentaries*.

Calvin referred to Valla when he explicated the correct meaning of words like *licentia* (Battles & Hugo 1969:29) Calvin showed in the *De Clementia* that he followed Valla in the criticism of the Epicurean theology (Breen 1931:111; Schriener 1991:19-21). In the commentaries on Acts 26:28 and Galatians 6:8, Calvin followed Valla while he rejected Erasmus and the Vulgate. Although he did not often mention Valla, Calvin was able to develop his own hermeneutics through the new method influenced by Valla (Battles & Hugo 1969:30).

4. BUDÉ

Guillaume Budé, a French humanist, was born in Paris in 1467. He studied law at Orléans, and, after leading a fast life for several years, gave himself to study Greek, philosophy, theology, and science. On August 21 in 1522 Francis I nominated him librarian of the royal library at Fontainebleau and royal councillor, and it was owing to Budé's initiative that the king enlarged the Royal Library of Paris and also the Royal College. He felt the necessity of reforms in the Roman Catholic Church, but, like many scholars and bishops of his day, he could not leave the Roman Catholic church for the Protestant church.

Budé directly had a great influence on the humanistic learning of Calvin (Bohatec 1950:119-240). None exceeded Budé among many humanists in his influence upon the hermeneutical skills of Calvin. His influence upon Calvin clearly appeared in the *De Clementia* and his commentaries. For example, Calvin quoted many times from the books of Budé in the *De Clementia: De asse et partibus eius libri quinque, Annotationes religuae in pandecas, Commentarii linguae graecae, Forensia, De studio litera-*

rum recte instituendo, and Dictionarium graecolatinum. Calvin's *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia* clearly showed that Budé was the starting point for Calvin's hermeneutical method. Calvin followed the method of Budé: juridical interpretation, a sound method of 'historical criticism', according to Benrath 1977) and a literary criticism which was a comparative study of words (Battles 1979:43-45). Torrance (1988:134) also notes that Calvin could develop his own method in continuity with Budé,

Calvin developed further the line taken by Budé in the way in which he digs out and elucidates the meaning of words by paying attention not only to the etymology, grammar, syntax and style but also to the history of ideas and the complex of meaning within which they were originally used and acquired their distinctive significance. Then it is in this classical sense that Calvin himself employs them.

Budé's influence on the hermeneutical method of Calvin also appeared in his commentaries. For example, while Calvin pointed out many problems in the interpretation of Erasmus, he simply followed the interpretation of Budé and agreed with it. An example can be found in Calvin's *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*. On understanding the terms of this text, Calvin entirely agreed with Budé's view. 'The Greek term being *hupostasis*, the old interpreter has rendered it *substantiam* (substance), Erasmus renders it *argumentum* (subject-matter), but neither is suitable. Budaeus, however, observes that this term is sometimes taken to mean boldness, or confidence, as it is used by Polybius' (*Comm on 2 Cor 9:4*). Calvin accepted his authority in the interpretation of the text. 'Budaeus renders this passage thus: "Setting foot upon, or entering on the possession of those things which he has not seen." I have followed his authority, but have selected a more suitable term' (*Comm on Col 2:18*). Calvin's agreement with the interpretation of Budé illustrates his high regard for Budé. That Calvin firmly followed the interpretation of Budé illustrates that Budé's influence on the hermeneutical method of Calvin was great and strong.

Budé's influence on Calvin's hermeneutical method certainly appeared in the fact that Calvin often used the expression 'Budaeus also has observed' (*Comm on Rom 9:3; Comm on 1 Cor 2:1; Comm on 2 Cor 1:13, 9:4; Comm on Col 2: 18; Comm on Ac 1:1; Comm on Php 3:9*). Calvin even followed Budé's computation of money. 'Now, since Josephus says that the shekel of the sanctuary was worth four Attic drachmas, if he is speaking of these, we gather from the computation of Budaeus that the price of the field was about two hundred and fifty pounds of French money; if we understand the common shekel, it will be half that amount' (*Comm on Gen 23:11; Comm on Ex*

30:12). On the denarius, Calvin also accepted Budé's computation. 'As the denarius, according to the computation of Budaeus, is equal to four times the value of a carolus and two deniers of Tours, this sum amounts to thirty-five francs, or thereby' (*Comm on Jn 2:7*; cf *Comm on Jn 6:7*). Calvin admitted the authoritative interpretation of Budé on grammatical matters of the text. A passage in his *Commentary on Philippians* is a case in point: 'But as the verb *heuriskomai* (find), while it has a passive termination, has an active signification, and means — to recover what you have voluntarily given up (as Budaeus shows by various examples) I have not hesitated to differ from the opinion of others' (*Comm on Php 3:9*).

The important fact in these references is that Calvin always showed difference to Budé. In his commentary on *De Clementia* Calvin showed respect for Budé. 'Guielmus Budaeus, the first ornament and pillar of literature, thanks to whom our France has today claimed for herself the palm of learning, has carefully and fully explained the proper meaning of this expression' (CO 5.54). Calvin gave Budé a place all by himself, above Chrysostom, Erasmus, and all other interpreters.

5. ERASMUS

Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, Dutch humanist and theologian, was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, on October 27, probably 1466. Trained at Deventer by the Brethren of the Common Life (1475-84), Erasmus spent six years as a monk and then attended the Collège de Montaigu (1494). In 1499 he met John Colet. This meeting was a turning point in Erasmus' thought. Colet's influences on Erasmus with regard to Christian humanism and the importance of a return to the normal sense of the biblical text. Inspired by the chance discovery of an obscure copy by Valla who criticized the accuracy of the Latin Vulgate, Erasmus gave himself to the production of a new Latin New Testament based on a critical Greek New Testament. This edition was printed by Froben of Basel in 1516 and was the basis of most of the scientific study of Scripture during the Reformation period. Although Erasmus did not join the Reformation, his influence was enormous. Catholics and Protestants alike quoted and cited Erasmus freely on matters of biblical and theological interpretation.

As Erasmus prepared a new Latin edition of the New Testament, Martin Luther was lecturing on Romans (1515-1516). In the *Enchiridion* (1503) Erasmus emphasized spiritual and allegorical interpretation, before he used the philological method of interpretation which he defended in his preface to Valla's *Collatio Novi Testamenti* (1505). Erasmus employed his hermeneutical method in publishing a new Latin New Testament based on a critical Greek New Testament in 1516. This *Novum Instrumentum's* influence was immense.

Significant influences on Erasmus' hermeneutical studies were Florentine Neoplatonism to which Colet introduced him, and the work of the early church Fathers, especially that of Origen and Jerome. Erasmus detailed his new hermeneutical method in letters, apologiae, prefaces and dedications to further editions of the *Novum Testamentum* (1519, 1522, 1527, 1535) and in the *Ratio verae theologiae* (1518), *De libero arbitrio* (1524), *Hyperaspistes* (1526, 1527), and *Ecclesiastes, sive de ratione concionandi* (1523, pub 1535) (Chavasse 1990:199).

The starting point for Erasmus' hermeneutics was 'the neo-Platonic conception of the contrast between flesh and spirit, which was grounded in the nature of the world and of man' (Payne 1969:18-19). His approach can be derived from the flesh-spirit conception which determined his anthropology. Payne (1969:17) says:

He links flesh and spirit, or body and soul, in man with letter and spirit in the Bible. The flesh was identified with the letter or literal sense, or with the history or historical sense; the spirit, with hidden meaning or mystery or allegory. The one was outward and crass: the other inward and sublime.

In the *Methodus* prefixed to the *Novum Instrumentum* Erasmus stressed the necessity of understanding the text by means of grammar in the original languages and a knowledge of the contemporary historical, geographical, and social situation. Since he thought that the Vulgate translation of Jerome did not sufficiently give the original sense of the text, Erasmus suggested that the original words of the author be recovered as far as possible by the restoration of the text (Payne 1969:26). Thus he emended the text of the New Testament.

Erasmus as a moralist also emphasized the tropological or moral sense of Scripture. For him the chief goal of interpretation was to discover the moral meaning. For example, he stressed a new lay piety in his *Enchiridion*. McGrath (1988:37) correctly points out that:

Erasmus conceived his work as a lay person's guide to Scripture, providing a simple yet learned exposition of the philosophy of Christ. This philosophy is really a form of morality: the New Testament concerns the knowledge of good and evil, in order that its readers may eschew the latter and love the former. The New Testament is the *lex Christi*, 'the law of Christ', which Christians are called to obey. Christ is the example whom Christians are called to imitate.

In the interpretation of the Psalms he also stressed the tropological reading of the text. Payne (1969:48) argues that for Erasmus the tropological sense was closely connected with the historical sense. He tried to interpret the obscure and hidden meaning of Scripture by means of the allegorical method. One of the features of his hermeneutics was that he did not abandon allegorical interpretation. But his allegorical method was not to be used to develop fantastic doctrine but rather to help his readers penetrate beneath common sense to a deeper meaning (Torrance 1988:63). On the purpose of allegory Payne (1969:39) states;

Erasmus names several purposes of allegory; (1) to veil the mysteries from the impious; (2) to exercise the minds of the pious, since we are more avid for what is hidden and acquired with labor than for what comes to us easily; (3) to fix the divine truth in our memory through imagery; (4) to lead us by degrees to perfect knowledge.

His works had a great influence on the hermeneutical method of the Reformers. Firstly, he posited new objectives for the interpretation of Scripture through the grammatical-historical method. His methods provided interpreters with solid principles of scriptural interpretation (Chavasse 1990:198). Secondly, he was the first interpreter who broke with the medieval fourfold interpretation of Scripture: the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical. He did not use the scholastic method of interpretation (Chavasse 1990:198).

Erasmus among the humanists had a great influence upon the Reformers, including Calvin. Erasmus' influence upon Calvin clearly appeared in the *De Clementia*. There Calvin mentioned the books of Erasmus: *Adagia* (35 times), *Panegyric of Philip* (3 times), *Apophthegmata* (7 times), and *Education of a Christian Prince* (8 times). The method which Calvin used in explicating the text of Seneca was borrowed from Erasmus' *Paraphrases*. Calvin's *Institutes* was more indebted to him than appeared on the surface. Thus Erasmus' influence upon Calvin was very great.

Erasmus' influence on Calvin as critic and exegete was far reaching. The former's insistence upon the necessity of knowing the original languages of the Bible; his principle that the more obscure passages of the Bible should be interpreted with the help of those which are clear; his plea for understanding the Bible in its 'natural, or historical and grammatical' sense, and spiritually, that is, for moral edification; his view of

the Bible as having been written under the direction of the Holy Spirit (*Ut enim Spiritus ille divinus, mentium apostoliarum moderatur*) without a forced uniformity as to content.

(Haroutunian 1958:19)

In spite of Erasmus' influence, Calvin did not follow Erasmus entirely. Especially, Calvin criticized Erasmus' interpretation of Scripture (Compier 1992:217-233). For example, in his *Commentary on Romans* in 1540 Calvin only once agreed with him (*Comm on Rom 2:8*), but rejected Erasmus' interpretation eighteen times (*Comm on Rom. 1:14; 1:23; 4:20; 4:21; 5:14; 7:16; 7:24; 8:2; 8:3; 8:19; 9:10; 12:3; 12:9; 12:14; 12:16; 14:2; 15:16; 16:4*).

Calvin criticized several aspects of Erasmus' hermeneutics. Firstly, Calvin pointed out that Erasmus did not reveal the mind of the author properly. In the interpretation of Titus 1:7 'For a bishop ought to be blameless, as a governor of the house of God,' Calvin said, 'The Latin word *dispensator* (steward or manager) — employed in the old translation, and retained by Erasmus — does not at all express Paul's meaning; for, in order that greater care may be exercised in the election, he adorns the office of a bishop with this honorable eulogy, that it is a government of the house of God' (*Comm on Tit 1:7*). He pointed out that Erasmus did not reveal Luke's mind because he translated a verb wrongly (*Comm on Ac 2:22; cf Comm on Ac 24:19-22; 26:28; Comm on 1 Pe 1:13, 3:4*). Secondly, Calvin argued that Erasmus did not understand Scripture wholly so that he did not interpret the meaning of the text correctly. In the interpretation of Acts 3:26 'He hath raised up his Son,' Calvin (*Comm on Ac 3:26*) said,

I like not Erasmus' translation; for he saith, when he had raised him up, as if he spake of a thing which was done long ago. But Peter meaneth rather, that Christ was raised up, when he was declared to be the author of the blessing; which thing, since it was done of late and suddenly, it ought to move their minds the more. For the Scripture useth to speak thus, as in the last place, of Moses, whereunto Peter alludeth.

Thirdly, Calvin (*Comm on Rom 8:3*) complained that Erasmus revised the original text too drastically. Consequently Erasmus' interpretation became unnatural. Fourthly, Calvin pointed out that Erasmus, for example, made a mistake in translating the words of the text of 1 Peter 4:1. 'Erasmus has incorrectly, as I think, rendered the

word "he who did suffer." (*patiebatur*) applying it to Christ. For it is an indefinite sentence, which generally extends to all the godly, and has the same meaning with the words of Paul in Rm 6:7, He who is dead is justified or freed from sin' (*Comm on 1 Pe* 4:1).

6. CONCLUSION

We do not entirely agree with every interpretations of Scripture by Calvin. But one of the things we can get from him is that having his own continuous view of hermeneutics, he critically made use of other interpreters and developed his own hermeneutical perspective. That included the ideal of *brevitas et facilitas* mentioned in the dedicatory epistle in his *Commentary on Romans*. With this method he tried to show not only the intention of the author of Scripture, but also the true meaning of the text as simply and briefly as possible.

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