

Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians: Expounding and Applying Scripture

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In recent years, the interpretation of Calvin has shifted from the almost exclusive emphasis on the 1559 *Institutes* in the first half of this century to his work as an interpreter of Scripture in his biblical commentaries.¹ Even studies which focus on Calvin's *Institutes* have sought to understand it in light of the development of Calvin's theology in his work as an exegete manifested in his commentaries.² Calvin's sermons have also received increasing attention, although they have at times been treated as though they were no different than his commentaries, i.e., as manifestations of the way he interpreted Scripture.³ Although it is a welcome development to have attention brought to bear on a major component of Calvin's labor as a teacher of the Catholic Church, the recent focus on the commentaries is in danger of creating the same distortions in our perceptions of Calvin's work as the previous focus on the *Institutes*.

¹T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993); David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1991); John Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: Droz, 1992); Thomas Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God: The Development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching* (New York: AMS, 1995); David Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

²Elsie 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*, ed. Brian Armstrong and Elsie A. McKee (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), pp. 154-172; 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).

³Susan Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

As I have argued elsewhere, Calvin believed himself to be called to be both a teacher and a pastor of the Catholic Church. As a teacher, Calvin sought to prepare future pastors to preach and teach doctrine drawn from Scripture, and defend such doctrine from error, first by having them read a summary of godly doctrine drawn from all of Scripture (i.e., the *Institutes*), and then by having them read contextual commentaries on each book of Scripture.⁴ Hence the attention first on the *Institutes*, and now on the commentaries, still limits our attention to the works Calvin produced for future pastors, and neglects his efforts to teach and train ordinary Christians. After all, the goal Calvin had in view was to train pastors who would teach their congregations, and every individual therein, the doctrine drawn from Scripture, first in summary form (the Catechism), and then contextually (the sermons), so that they might profitably apply this doctrine to their lives. Calvin was convinced that the church would only be restored when Scripture was rightly expounded and skillfully applied to the use of ordinary Christians, so that they might profit by their own reading of Scripture.

Hence the sermons differ from the commentaries both in terms of their audience and their objective.⁵ The commentaries have as their audience future pastors of the Catholic Church, with the goal of revealing the mind of the author with lucid brevity. The sermons have as their audience ordinary Christians within a specific congregation, with the goal of expounding the intention or meaning of the author, and of applying that meaning to their use, so that they might retain that meaning in their minds and hearts, and put it into practice in their lives. In order better to understand the specific objectives Calvin had in mind in his sermons, this article will examine the sermons on Ephesians which he preached in 1558-9. I will first compare them to the commentary on Ephesians which Calvin first published in 1548, in order to disclose the different audience and objectives of the two works. I shall then examine in detail the structure, methods, and objectives of the sermons themselves, in order better to understand what Calvin hoped to accomplish in his preaching, and how he sought to accomplish it.

I shall argue that there are three steps Calvin consistently followed in each of his sermons, though this order is clearer in some sermons than in others.⁶

⁴Randall C. Zachman, "Do You Understand What You Are Reading?' Calvin's Guidance for the Reading of Scripture", *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming); Randall C. Zachman, "What Kind of Book is the *Institutes*?", *Calvin Theological Journal* (forthcoming).

⁵Erwin Muelhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins, ihre Geschichte, ihre Form und ihre Religioesen Grundgedanken* (Berlin und Leipzig: de Gruyter and Co., 1931); Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950); T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Dawn de Vries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

⁶Parker points out that Calvin's sermons always move from exposition to application, and that the application often includes exhortations, rebukes, and the like (Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, Chapter 11). However, he is wary of attributing any method to Calvin's sermons, as he sees them

First, he sought to show the meaning and intention of Paul contained in the words of the epistle. Next, he pointed out that the meaning revealed in his exposition should be kept in mind, retained in memory, and imprinted on the hearts of the congregation. Third, Calvin sought to apply the doctrine of Paul to the use, edification, and instruction of the congregation, so that they might profit from the doctrine by putting it in practice in their lives. Such practice has not so much to do with their actions as with the thoughts and affections of their hearts. The sermon only reaches its objective when the exposition and application of Scripture makes an impact on the thoughts and affections of the hearts of the members of the congregation, so that they feel the power of the realities being set forth by Paul and expounded and applied by Calvin.

I. The Exposition of Scripture in the Commentaries

In order to disclose the unique audience and objectives for Calvin's sermons, it is useful to compare the sermons on Ephesians with the commentary on Ephesians written a decade earlier, and published in final form in 1555. The objective in this commentary is the same as in all Calvin's commentaries, namely, to reveal the mind of the author with lucid brevity. Calvin was convinced that the mind of the author was best revealed by the context of the text being interpreted. This context was comprised of many layers: the immediate linguistic context, including the use of any rhetorical or dialectical techniques by the author; the relationship of the author to his original audience; the relationship to other works by the same author; the relationship to the rest of Scripture; the relationship to other Hebrew, Greek, and Latin literature; and finally the relationship to previous and contemporary interpreters of the same text. Calvin also assumed that the commentary on Ephesians would be read within the context of his other writings for the instruction of future pastors, namely the *Institutes* and the previous commentaries on Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians.

One sees all of these aspects of the context of Ephesians addressed in the commentary. Calvin treats the epistle as though its primary audience was the Church at Ephesus at the time of Paul, although there are many places where he clearly brings the statements of Paul into his present day without any hesitation.⁷ Calvin makes several references to the problems created by the multi-

as having their own unpredictable dynamic. "The sermons are like rivers, moving strongly in one direction, alive with eddies and cross-currents, now thundering in cataracts, now a calm mirror of the banks and the sky; but never still, never stagnant" (Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 132). I agree that the method Calvin follows is not always explicitly clear, but I would argue nonetheless that Calvin does follow such a method quite consistently in his sermons.

⁷For example, at the beginning of chapter 3, Calvin makes it very clear that Paul is speaking to the Ephesians in their own context, whereas at the beginning of chapter 4, Calvin makes Paul sound like he is intentionally opposing the Roman Church in the sixteenth century.

ple codices of the epistle extant in his day, thereby showing the need to establish a reliable primary text.⁸ He is critical of the way the division of chapters breaks up the context of Paul's line of thinking.⁹ He even considers the possibility that a verse may have been added by someone other than Paul, though "as it is perfectly agreeable to the context," he is willing to accept it as written by Paul.¹⁰ He also makes reference to other letters Paul most likely wrote but that have subsequently been lost.¹¹ Calvin makes repeated reference to issues of translation from Greek to Latin, usually taking exception to the translation of the Vulgate and Erasmus by insisting that his translation "fits the context better (*contextui melius congruebat*)."¹² Even when the word itself can be translated following Erasmus, Calvin will prefer another translation because "the context induces us to prefer another view."¹³ Calvin also notes the places where Paul's Greek betrays the presence of an Hebraic way of speaking.¹⁴

Calvin assumes a familiarity with classical authors on the part of his readers. He twice seeks help from the writings of Plato to determine the meaning of Greek terms.¹⁵ He also refers to Cicero, most likely his treatise *De officiis*.¹⁶ Calvin

⁸"Most Greek copies omit the word *alk*; but I was unwilling to strike it out, because it must at least be understood" (Comm. Ephesians. 1:1, *Ioannis Calvinii opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Brunswick: A. Schwetschke and Son (M. Bruhn), 1863-1900), Vol. 51, p. 145C; henceforth CO 51:145C; *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1959-72), Volume 11, p. 123, henceforth CNTC 11:123). See also Comm. Ephesians 1:16, 5:9, 5:14, 5:21.

⁹"We see that the division of chapters is particularly unhappy, as it has separated statements which are closely related" (Comm. Ephesians 5:1, CO 51:213C; CNTC 11:196).

¹⁰"I do not know whether this has been inserted by another hand, but, as it is perfectly agreeable to the context, I am satisfied to receive it as written by Paul" (Comm. Ephesians 2:5, CO 51:164A; CNTC 11:142-3).

¹¹"If we adopt the almost universal view, that the apostle had formerly written to the Ephesians, this is not the only epistle which we have lost" (Comm. Ephesians 3:3, CO 51:178C; CNTC 11:159).

¹²Comm. Ephesians 1:10, CO 51:151A; CNTC 11:129; see also Comm. Ephesians 2:6, 2:16, 2:22, 3:9, 4:6, 5:13, 5:14, 6:23.

¹³Comm. Ephesians 4:32, CO 51:213B; CNTC 11:195.

¹⁴"The Father of glory' is a well-known Hebrew idiom (*ex usu linguae hebraicae dici*) for 'the glorious Father'" (Comm. Ephesians 1:16, CO 51:156A; CNTC 11:134). See also Comm. Ephesians 1:21, 2:2, 3:16, 4:15, 4:26.

¹⁵One time he cites Plato's *Republic* (Comm. Ephesians 4:17, CO 51:204B; CNTC 11:186), and another time he paraphrases Plato without citation: "Plato also teaches correctly that *hosiotes* lies in the worship of God, and that the other part, righteousness, relates to men" (Comm. Ephesians 4:24, CO 51:209A; CNTC 11:191).

¹⁶"We need not wonder at this, for if those voluptuous sorts of trades which can only bring corruption were denounced by the heathens, Cicero among them, as shameful, would an apostle of Christ reckon them among the lawful callings of God?" (Comm. Ephesians 4:28, CO 51:211A; CNTC 11:193).

highlights the use of rhetorical techniques by Paul, such as periphrase, amplification, *epexergasia*, *hyperbaton*, *epinicion*, apposition, metaphor, *emphatikoteron*, and synecdoche.¹⁷ He also notes the presence of dialectical arguments in Paul, such as fourfold causality, syllogisms, arguments from effect, arguments from contraries, and the distinction between genus and species.¹⁸

Calvin sets his own interpretation in the context of the work of other interpreters before him, especially Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Cyrian, and Jerome.¹⁹ He also makes implicit reference to other sixteenth century interpreters, such as Zwingli and Luther.²⁰ He contrasts his interpretation with the distortions of the same passages by previous heretical groups such as the Manichaeans, the Pelagians, the Marcionites, the Arians, and the Sabellians.²¹ He also contrasts his "simple and natural interpretation" with the "distortions" of his contemporary Roman opponents, whom he usually calls "the Sophists of the Sorbonne."²²

Calvin also gives abundant evidence that he expects his readers to be familiar with his own writings for future pastors, namely the *Institutes* and the previous commentaries on the Pauline epistles. He explicitly directs his readers to

¹⁷"And you when you were dead. An *epexergasia* of the former statements—that is, an exposition and clarification. . . . But by struggling to heighten each of these parts, he makes a break in his argument by a *hyperbaton*" (Comm Ephesians 2:1, CO 51:160B; CNTC 11:139). See also Comm. Ephesians 1:12, 1:19, 4:8, 4:13, 5:30, 6:1.

¹⁸"Three causes of our salvation are mentioned in this clause, and a fourth is shortly afterwards added. The efficient cause is the good pleasure of the will of God; the material cause is Christ; and the final cause is the praise of his grace" Comm. Ephesians 1:5, CO 51:148C; CNTC 11:126). See also Comm. Ephesians 2:14, 2:18, 4:17, 5:28, 6:1, 6:18.

¹⁹"Some think that *pastors and doctors* denote one office, because there is no disjunctive particle, as in other parts of the verse, to distinguish them. Chrysostom and Augustine are of this opinion. For what we read in the Ambrosian commentaries is too childish and unworthy of Ambrose" (Comm. Ephesians 4:11, CO 51:197C; CNTC 11:179). See also Comm. Ephesians 1:3, 1:10, 3:3, 3:10, 3:18, 4:9, 4:19, 4:30, 5:3, 5:23, 5:27, 6:15.

²⁰Zwingli seems to be in view in his discussion of baptism. "Some try to weaken this eulogy of baptism, in case too much is attributed to the sign if it is called the washing of the soul" (Comm. Ephesians 5:26, CO 51:223B). Lutheran exegesis seems to be referenced in the discussion of being made members of Christ: "Some assert that it is a twisting of this passage to refer it to the Lord's Supper, when no mention is made of the Supper; but they are very much mistaken" (Comm. Ephesians 5:30, CO 51:225-6; CNTC 11:209).

²¹"At present, we shall only notice the foolish nonsense of the Manichees in endeavoring to form from this passage two principles, as if Satan could do anything against God's will" (Comm. Ephesians 2:2, CO 51:161C; CNTC 11:140). See also Comm Ephesians 2:10, 2:20, 3:14, 4:5, 5:27, 6:12.

²²"*Christ himself being the chief corner-stone*. Those who transfer this honour to Peter; and maintain that the Church is founded on him, are so shameless as to pervert this text to support their error" (Comm. Ephesians 2:20, CO 51:175C; CNTC 11:155). See also Comm. Ephesians 1:4, 1:5, 3:12, 4:11, 4:17, 5:26, 5:32.

the *Institutes* for fuller discussions of the certainty of faith and the blessings of God in this temporal life.²³ He also refers his readers to his discussions of issues in other commentaries, making explicit mention of the previous commentaries on Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians, and telling the reader other issues will be discussed in the forthcoming Colossians commentary.²⁴

Finally, Calvin gives evidence of the programmatic distinction he made between the method pursued in his commentaries, and the method pursued in sermons, saying that in his comments he is content to indicate the mind of the apostle briefly, leaving the fuller treatment to the sermons.²⁵ He also makes an explicit distinction between the office and responsibilities of teachers and pastors, again reflecting the difference between commentaries written by teachers and sermons delivered by pastors. "Teaching is the duty of all pastors; but there is a particular gift of interpreting Scripture so that sound doctrine may be kept, and a man may be a doctor who is not fitted to preach." Calvin goes on to note that pastors are given charge of a specific flock, whereas teachers educate pastors and are responsible for the instruction of the entire Church.²⁶

It is clear from Calvin's method in the commentary that he is seeking to reveal the mind of the author with lucid brevity, a mind that is itself revealed by the context of the language he uses. Calvin clearly assumes that his reader is skilled in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and is familiar with classical philosophy and rhetoric. He also assumes that his reader knows the major figures of the Christian tradition, both orthodox (Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom) and heretical (Marcion, Sabellius, Arius, Mani, and Pelagius). He assumes that his readers are acquainted with the 16th century interpretations of Luther, Zwingli, and his Roman opponents. Finally, he clearly sets his commentary on Ephesians in the context of his other commentaries and the

²³"Let us remember, therefore, that the certainty of faith is knowledge (*scientia*), but it is acquired by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and not by the acuteness of our own intellect. If readers desire more on this, let them consult the *Institutio*" (Comm. Ephesians 3:19, CO 51:188C; CNTC 11:169). "The promise is of a long life; from which we may understand that the present life is not to be despised among the gifts of God. Of this and other subjects readers may learn in the *Institutio*" (Comm. Ephesians 6:2, CO 51:229A; CNTC 11:213).

²⁴"He therefore tells the Ephesians how eagerly the Gospel should be embraced, how highly esteemed. On this we have spoken in the Epistle to the Galatians, Chapter 2:15" (Comm. Ephesians 3:8, CO 51:181C; CNTC 11:162). "We have already spoken in 1 Cor. 12 about the offices which he here reviews" (Comm. Ephesians 4:11, CO 51:197A; CNTC 178). "*The old man*, as we have taught in the sixth chapter of Romans and other passages, means the natural disposition which we bring from our mother's womb" (Comm. Ephesians 4:22, CO 51:207C; CNTC 11:189-90). "The difference between hymns and psalms, or between psalms and songs, is not easy to determine. But I will say something about it in Colossians Chapter 3" (Comm. Ephesians 5:19, CO 51:221A; CNTC 11:203-4).

²⁵"*Ideo breviter apostoli mentem indicare mihi sufficit: plenam tractationem concionibus relinquo*" (Comm. Ephesians 4:5, CO 51:191B; CNTC 11:173).

²⁶Comm. Ephesians 4:11, CO 51:198A; CNTC 11:179.

Institutes, making it clear that in these texts he is exercising his office as a teacher, teaching the true, genuine, natural, and simple sense of Scripture to present and future pastors, so that they might preach the doctrine of Scripture to their congregations.

II. The Exposition and Application of Scripture in the Sermons

When one comes to the sermons on Ephesians, one is immediately made aware that Calvin is speaking to a very different audience, one comprised not of learned future pastors but of unlearned ordinary Christians. In his exposition of the text in his sermons, Calvin makes no reference to variant readings in other codices, nor does he discuss issues of translation in light of the efforts of the Vulgate and Erasmus. He does note variant meanings of words Paul uses, but simply gives his own preferences in French without referring to the Greek.²⁷ He makes only two references to the difficulty of translating certain words Paul uses into French.²⁸ He does not cite one word from Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, and only once, in the last sermon, refers to the Hebraic way of speaking familiar to the apostles.²⁹ He does refer to the writings of the heathen and the books of the philosophers, including one paraphrase from Plato, but never cites any by name.³⁰ He does not point out any dialectical devices in the epistle, and only notes one rhetorical category, the similitude.³¹ He mentions other Christian interpreters five times, all anonymously, and opposes their suggestions with the simple and natural meaning of Paul, and his intention which clearly emerges

²⁷“Now before we come to the rest, let us note that this word ‘blessing’ is taken in different senses when Paul applies it either to God or to ourselves” (Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:255A; *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, translated by Leslie Rawlinson and S. M. Houghton (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 17. Henceforth Sermons, p. 17). Calvin also notes how the word “love” can refer either to God’s love for us, or our love for each other (Sermon 2 on Ephesians, CO 51:269B, Sermons, p. 33; Sermon 20, CO 51:493C, Sermons, p. 293). Parker makes the same point: “Occasionally, he will explain the meaning of a word more carefully, but without ever (so far as I have noticed) giving the Hebrew or Greek original” (Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, p. 86).

²⁸He notes that the terms for inner and outer person are not yet common in French (Sermon 19 on Ephesians, CO 51:482B; Sermons, p. 279), and also remarks that “person” does not mean the same in Scripture that it does in French (Sermon 45 on Ephesians, CO 51:811C; Sermons, p. 650).

²⁹The apostles, “being accustomed to the Hebrew tongue,” use the word “peace” to mean both prosperity and concord (Sermon 48 on Ephesians, CO 51:856B; Sermons, p. 700).

³⁰Calvin paraphrases Plato without citing him when he speaks of how we are to resemble God: “Even the poor heathen had some understanding of it. For they said that man’s life is to tend to God, and to be conformed to his image, and that the same is also the full perfection of happiness” (Sermon 33 on Ephesians, CO 51:667B; Sermons, p. 488). He otherwise makes general references to the writings of the heathens or books of the philosophers (Sermon 28 on Ephesians, CO 51:600C, Sermons, p. 414).

³¹See, for instance, his discussion of the breaking down of the wall between Jews and Gentiles: “he uses that figure of speech (*similitude*) to declare that the ceremonies and types are abolished” (Sermon 13 on Ephesians, CO 51:405C; Sermons, p. 191).

from the words he uses.³² He mentions the interpretations of the heretics three times, only once mentioning the Manichaeans, and again shows how easily they are refuted from the intention of Paul.³³ He only refers twice to Roman theologians, calling them friars, monks, school divines, and doctors, but not specifying that they are working in the Sorbonne.³⁴ He refers in almost every sermon to what the “papists” say, however. He never refers to the *Institutes*, but does refer twice to articles of faith in the Apostles’ Creed.³⁵ Calvin does not refer to any other commentaries, but he does remind the congregation several times of the sermons he preached on Galatians, which immediately preceded the sermons on Ephesians, and also refers repeatedly to their own reading of Scripture in conjunction with their going to sermons.³⁶ Moreover, he consistently employs French idioms, with the refrain “as one says,” to make his presentation more down to earth and accessible to his congregation, and uses a very plain and simple style of French throughout his sermons.³⁷ Finally, far

³²Typical in this regard is his discussion of the role of angels in the mystery of salvation: “There are others who, not being able to dispose (*despescher*) of this passage of St. Paul’s, have thought that the angels are here among us to be like scholars and to hear the preaching of God’s Word. But that is too stupid and childish a speculation” (Sermon 18 on Ephesians, CO 51:467-8; Sermons, p. 263). So also in his discussion of not giving place to the devil, he says, “Some indeed have expounded it as being spoken of the enemies of faith, who seek occasion to slander it. But it is easy to see from the words themselves (*mais on voit facilement par ces mots*) that he intended to warn us against something we ought to be more afraid of” (Sermon 31 on Ephesians, CO 51:633A; Sermons, p. 450).

³³Calvin is especially at pains to refute Manichean ways of interpreting Paul’s discussion of opposing principalities and powers: “Now although some heretics in old time have abused this passage, intending to have made, as it were, two principles, as if God were hindered from making provision to maintain himself against Satan and from making arrangements to defend those whom he has taken into his protection. Nevertheless, if we pay attention to Paul’s meaning (*l’intention*), this question will be easily resolved” (Sermon 46 on Ephesians, CO 51: 823B; Sermons, p. 663).

³⁴It is clear from the way Calvin describes the scholastics that he does not expect his congregation to be familiar with their positions or their office. “The papists (at least such of them as have excelled others in their walk, and I speak even of the monks and friars who are called school divines (*qu’on nomme docteurs scholastiques*)) grant even more—that this election of God’s is free and that he did not choose any man for any other reason than that it pleased him” (Sermon 2 on Ephesians, CO 51:267C; Sermons, p. 31).

³⁵In one instance he refers to “the communion of saints” (Sermon 8 on Ephesians, CO 51:338C; Sermons, p. 114), and in the other to the confession that God is the Creator, in contrast to free choice of the will (Sermon 11 on Ephesians, CO 51:381A; Sermons, p. 163).

³⁶Calvin will frequently remind his congregation of what he has told them in his exposition of Galatians: for instance, “Also we have seen before in the Epistle to the Galatians how St. Paul said to Peter, ‘We are Jews by nature’. [Gal.2:15]” (Sermon 5 on Ephesians, CO 51:298; Sermons, p. 67).

³⁷Calvin listened carefully to the expressions and idioms used by his congregation in everyday life, and acknowledges that such forms of expression come from them, by introducing each idiomatic saying with the phrase, “As one says (*Comme on dit*).” There are idiomatic expressions in almost every sermon on Ephesians, such as the following, “Now then, what audacity is it to open our mouths to reply against God. Is it not a perverting of the whole order of nature? Is it in our power to pluck the sun out of the sky, or to take the moon between our teeth, as they say?” (Sermon

from studying lucid brevity, the sermons are long expositions of short passages of Scripture. There are forty-eight sermons on Ephesians, compared to thirty-five sections of the Ephesians commentary, with approximately seven thousand words per sermon, compared to approximately two thousand words per section of commentary. As we shall see, the much greater length of the sermons is directly related to the need to apply Scripture to all aspects of the congregation's life.

In sum, from the evidence internal to the sermons, it is clear that Calvin is intentionally preaching to an audience that he assumes is only familiar with the French language, the Apostles' Creed, and the Scriptures in French translation, as well as the previous sermons of Calvin himself. In other words, Calvin is preaching to the very audience he had in mind from the beginning of his work as a teacher of godly doctrine, namely, ordinary, unlearned Christians. He assumes that they have been through the first part of their education, the Catechism, and that they have been attending the second lifelong part, the sermons, in tandem with their own reading of Scripture in French translation. However, it was Calvin's conviction that Scripture was written precisely for this audience, for the Holy Spirit had accommodated the teaching of God in Scripture to the capacities of the unlearned, i.e., those untrained and unskilled in the liberal arts, sciences, and languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew literature. Thus it is only in the sermons, and not in the commentaries, that Scripture finds its intended audience.

Even though his congregation is by Calvin's own admission "unlearned," he nonetheless treats all of them as students and scholars in the school of Christ. He assumes that all of them have been attending sermons and reading Scripture for themselves, as good scholars would both attend lectures and read the primary text for themselves. He contrasts such students with the deluded fanatics who reject both preaching and reading, preferring instead to await direct revelations of God from heaven. "Let us not be carried away with such foolish conceit, but let all of us both great and small submit ourselves soberly to the order that our Lord Jesus Christ has set, which is that such as have great skill and are well versed in the holy Scriptures, and have the gift of teaching, should strive to serve the whole Church as they are bound to do, for to that end God has advanced them above others [John 15:8]."³⁸ It is clear from this passage that Calvin sees pastors as those who have great skill and are well versed in Scriptures, and who have the gift of teaching. Hence others who are not so gifted should submit themselves humbly and patiently to be taught by the pas-

2, CO 51:261C; Sermons, p. 25). Parker rightly notes of such expressions, "But here, in the sermons, he deliberately adapts his style to the grasp of the common people of his congregation" (Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, p. 148). See also Muelhaupt, *Die Predigt Calvins*, pp. 39-63, and his attempt to catalogue Calvin's sayings and images by category.

³⁸Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:554B; Sermons on Ephesians, p. 362.

tors who have these gifts, for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ: “the preaching of the gospel and the meeting of men together to hear the holy Scripture expounded, is not something invented by men, but . . . God has so ordained it and our Lord Jesus Christ has set it down for a law, and we must keep it as a thing inviolable.”³⁹ On the other hand, Calvin did not want his congregation simply to listen to the teaching of pastors without inquiring into the truth of what they heard for themselves by their own reading of Scripture, in contrast to the customary practice of the Roman Church. “Since this is so, we ought to come together so much the more soberly and advisedly, as to God’s school and not as to man’s school, to hear the preaching. It is true that we ought to examine the doctrine, and that we must not receive all things that are preached indifferently, even like brute beasts (after the manner of the papists, who call it simplicity, to be without any understanding at all) but we must bear such honor to God’s name that when the doctrine of the holy Scripture is expounded to us, each one of us must withdraw himself from the world and forsake his own reason, so that we may submit ourselves with true obedience and humility to the things which we know have come from God.”⁴⁰ However, even with the guidance of pastors and our own reading of Scripture, the ultimate guide to the meaning of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. “For there we have a warning to hold ourselves in check, that we, being God’s true scholars, and distrusting ourselves, may not go for five feet on one sheep (as they say) but handle the holy Scripture with such reverence that God may guide us to the true understanding of it by his Holy Spirit.”⁴¹ Calvin was convinced that neither hearing the doctrine of Scripture preached, nor reading it for ourselves, would be sufficient to lead us into the truth, without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit guiding all of our studies. “Therefore, let us not think that it is enough for us to come to a sermon, or for each to read God’s Word in private, but we must have recourse to God that he may give us increase.”⁴² The true students of God not only hear sermons and read in private, but above all pray to God for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, especially when they come across something that they do not understand.⁴³

Since Calvin assumes that his listeners are reading Scripture for themselves, he makes several suggestions in his sermons regarding how they might read

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:442B; Sermons, p. 233.

⁴¹Sermon 42 on Ephesians, CO 51:773C; Sermons, p. 607.

⁴²Sermon 19 on Ephesians, CO 51:478-9; Sermons, p. 275. “Therefore when we come to be taught God’s Word, or when any one of us reads it in private, let us not imagine our minds to be so discerning that we are able sufficiently to understand whatever the Scripture tells us, but let us acknowledge our own lack of understanding and pray God to make his doctrine prevail with us in such a way that it may not slip from us” (Sermon 6 on Ephesians, CO 51:310C; Sermons, p. 82).

⁴³Sermon 16 on Ephesians, CO 51:445-6; Sermons, p. 237-8.

with the most profit. Without such guidance, one might read Scripture for a very long time without ever really benefiting from it. "You will see a number of people who labor very hard indeed at reading the holy Scriptures—they do nothing else but turn over the leaves of it, and yet after ten years they have as much knowledge of it as if they had never read a single line. And why? Because they do not have a particular aim in view, they only wander about."⁴⁴ The target at which we must aim is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, for it is to him that all Scripture bears witness. "So much the more therefore it behooves us to go to him, and when we read the holy Scripture, let the object we aim at always be to know what is the grace of God which he has shown us in the person of his only Son, and when once we know it, we shall have profited very well in God's school, and we may well cast away all other things as filth and poison."⁴⁵ Calvin cautions his congregation not to listen to the "fanatical people" who in their day are telling them they do not need to read the Law and the Prophets any more, but only the New Testament, for the Law and the Prophets also point to the Lord Jesus Christ. "So let us study the law and the prophets, knowing well that they lead us to our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁶ However, the knowledge to which Calvin directs his readers is one which is ultimately rooted in the awareness of the grace and goodness of God in the heart, leading us to cleave to God in Christ from the inmost affection of the heart. "For the purpose of the Scripture is not to feed us with vain and superfluous things, but to edify us for our salvation, that is to say, to make us perceive (*sentir*) God's goodness that we might be joined to him, and that this might be our happiness."⁴⁷ Once the goodness of God is felt in the heart, it leads us to praise God for all God's benefits, and to pray to God with confidence. "For there are two things at which we must chiefly aim and to which it is fitting for us to apply all our studies and endeavors, and they are the very sum of all the things that God teaches us by the holy Scripture. The one is the magnifying of God as he deserves, and the other is the assurance of salvation, so that we may call on him as our Father with full liberty [Rom. 8:15]. If we do not have these two things, woe to us, for there is neither faith nor religion in us."⁴⁸ Ultimately, the goal to be sought in reading Scripture is so to experience and feel the grace of God in Christ that it ravishes us completely in love.⁴⁹ "To be brief, we must be sure of the infinite good that is done to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that we may be ravished in love with our God (*d'estre ravi en l'amour de nostre Dieu*) and inflamed with a right affection to obey him,

⁴⁴Sermon 15 on Ephesians, CO 51:427C; Sermons, p. 217.

⁴⁵Sermon 20 on Ephesians, CO 51:499B; Sermons, p. 299.

⁴⁶Sermon 15 on Ephesians, CO 51:427B; Sermons, p. 216.

⁴⁷Sermon 7 on Ephesians, CO 51:326A; Sermons, p. 99.

⁴⁸Sermon 26 on Ephesians, CO 51:262C; Sermons, p. 26.

⁴⁹Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:253C; Sermons, p. 16.

and keep ourselves strictly in awe of him, to honor him with all our thoughts, with all our affections, and with all our hearts."⁵⁰

Calvin therefore addresses his congregation as fellow scholars of God in the school of Christ, studying to learn the meaning of Scripture under the guidance of a pastor skilled in the exposition of Scripture, and praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They have been delivered from the false teachers and superstitious teaching of the Roman Church in a way no less remarkable than the original inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant made with Israel. They know what the "papists" still say about free will, merits, saints, and the Mass, but they know now that such matters should be treated as "rubbish" compared to the surpassing worth of knowing God in Christ Jesus. They should know that the fact that they are now students in the school of Christ is a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work among them. "Now then when we see the holy Scripture truly expounded and applied rightly to our use, we know that the Spirit of God bears us testimony that he dwells among us, provided that we learn to receive so excellent a gift and that we realize that such is the homage that our Lord Jesus demands from us."⁵¹ They have heard Scripture truly expounded and rightly applied for decades now, and have been encouraged to read Scripture for themselves.

And yet for all this, Calvin still wonders whether they have profited from the teaching of God, or rather have been made even worse by the preaching of the gospel. People may have the gospel on their tongues more than they did before, but their lives betray what they confess. "But we see even among all that bear the name of Christians that their whole life is disordered and loose, inasmuch that they mock God to the full and despise all religion, and yet nevertheless in the meanwhile think . . . that they are greatly wronged if they are not taken as good and catholic Christians."⁵² Many use the freedom of the gospel to make as much profit as they possibly can, often at their neighbors' expense. "A man will find that they who are converted to the gospel often take most liberty to do evil. . . . But they have so profited in reverse from God's school that they are far more wily than they were before in looking after their own interest and advantage, and in taking more liberty, and in making themselves believe that all things are lawful for them."⁵³ Even pagans knew of the proper way to order marriage by the law of nature, but those who have benefited from clear doctrine and exhortations concerning marriage appear to be no better than beasts to Calvin. "But now we have teaching and we have exhortations added to spur us further forward, in order that we should not flatter ourselves in our

⁵⁰Sermon 20 on Ephesians, CO 51:496A; Sermons, p. 295.

⁵¹Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:555B; Sermons, p. 363.

⁵²Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:251C; Sermons, p. 14.

⁵³Sermon 31 on Ephesians, CO 51:636B; Sermons, p. 453.

vices; but how much have we profited? It is to be seen daily that men storm at their wives, and wives are pert with their husbands."⁵⁴

The problem, according to Calvin, is that everyone is resistant to the message of the gospel, and is a very reluctant student of God in the Church. Both preaching and the Scriptures are clear enough, and are accommodated to our capacities, but for all that, Calvin thinks that we make up endless excuses explaining why the gospel does not pertain to us. Some use the fact that they are ordinary, unlearned Christians as an excuse not to know what is required of them. "Now therefore let us not plead that we are ignorant and thickheaded, nor the biggest idiots in the world who think they escape by subterfuges, saying, I am no scholar, I never went to school. For God has stooped in such a way that all of us from the greatest to the least may be taught in a familiar fashion by his Word."⁵⁵ Others use the excuse of the alleged novelty of the preaching of the gospel to remain with what they had always been taught, presumably under the Roman Church. "Some having heard sermons, or having been taught at some lecture, or by some other means, will perhaps say, It is possible that this may be true, and as for me, I will not oppose it, but since I am no cleric or divine, it is all the same to me, I will leave it to take its ordinary course. Some other will say, Ho! I will keep the faith of my forefathers, for it is too dangerous a matter to change. Some again may say thus, How so? It is a new doctrine that we have never heard before."⁵⁶ Still others claim to be incapable of comprehending the truth, all the while hiding the fact that they think that they are wiser than God in his Word. "And for proof of this, men will always judge according to their own ideas, so that is anything is propounded to them out of God's Word, they say, Is it so? And how is that possible? They reason, they call it into question: Is it so? ... We see, then, that they simply lie in saying they are dull and slow-minded, for they think quite the opposite. The starkest idiots, I say, and the biggest dolts of them all consider themselves to have a wisdom exceeding that of God."⁵⁷ Calvin thinks that all people have a strong affinity for empty doctrines, no matter how complex, but once they are presented with the simple and true wisdom of God in the school of Christ, they claim they are too ignorant to understand. "We are insatiable when anybody feeds us with vanities and falsehoods, but if God calls us to his school, we shrink back as much as we possibly can, and we even set this before us as a shield, that we are simple, and that we have but a small and dull understanding, and that the secrets of God's Word are too deep and incomprehensible for us."⁵⁸

⁵⁴Sermon 42 on Ephesians, CO 51:778C; Sermons, p. 612.

⁵⁵Sermon 37 on Ephesians, CO 51:715A; Sermons, p. 542.

⁵⁶Sermon 14 on Ephesians, CO 51:414-15; Sermons, p. 202.

⁵⁷Sermon 7 on Ephesians, CO 51:326-7, Sermons, p. 100.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

Because of the deep and persistent resistance the scholars of God have to the lessons God wishes to teach them in God's school, it is necessary for pastors to do much more than expound Scripture and teach doctrine in their sermons. As we have already seen above, Calvin thought that pastors were like teachers in that both teach doctrine and expound Scripture; but pastors, unlike teachers, not only expound Scripture, but also apply it to the use of their congregation. "Now then when we see the holy Scripture truly expounded *and applied rightly to our use*, we know that the Spirit of God bears us testimony that he dwells among us."⁵⁹ Ultimately, Calvin thinks our resistance to the gospel comes from our refusal to apply the gospel to our own use, so that we might profit from it, because our affections are all contrary to it. We would much prefer to preach the gospel to others than apply it to our own use. "This teaching would be easy enough to understand, if we were not utterly perverted by our wicked affections. And indeed every man is a great teacher (*grand docteur*) when it is a question of preaching to others, but yet, clear and well known as these things are, no one can apply them to their own use."⁶⁰ When it comes to preaching, doctrine, and the ability to read Scripture for themselves, Calvin thinks his congregation is in far better shape than it was under the Roman Church. But when it comes to putting the doctrine of God into practice in their lives, those who belong to the "reformation" are no better than the papists from whom they fled. "As for us, although we have the light of the gospel and can say that the superstitions of the papacy are but trifles, yet we are nevertheless far off from God's teaching. . . . As for the gospel, most men take what they like of it and tread God's truth under their feet as often as they please. In short, you will find that they who boast most often of the reformation (*quelque reformation*) nowadays, are unholy and unclean people, yes and for the most part even dogs that bark against God, despise his truth, and blaspheme against his Word, unless it is that they let it slip because they think it is neither here nor there."⁶¹

In order rightly to apply the meaning of Scripture to the use of his congregation, Calvin thinks that the preacher must do much more than simply instruct the congregation in what they do not know, for in large part the truth is clear enough to all. Rather, the preacher has to bring the meaning of Scripture to bear on every aspect of the lives of the congregation, so that they

⁵⁹Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:555B; Sermons, p. 363, my emphasis.

⁶⁰Sermon 30 on Ephesians, CO 51:623B; Sermons, p. 439. In an interesting discussion of what spiritual age his congregation is, Calvin draws an example from a student of the liberal arts and sciences. "At the same time, it may well come to pass that a child of twenty years shall have all the branches of knowledge, in which he has been trained and instructed; but yet he may still be superficial (*volage*) for all that, he may not have the skill to apply them to his use (*appliquer cela en usage*), because he is not yet mature" (Sermon 26 on Ephesians, CO 51:571C; Sermons, pp. 381-2). One wonders if Calvin is drawing from his initial years in Geneva, when he was very well instructed and formed in all knowledge, but did not know how to put such knowledge to profitable use.

⁶¹Sermon 30 on Ephesians, CO 51:623C, Sermons, p. 439.

feel the force of its teaching, and so that it bears fruit in their lives. "Our resorting to sermons must not be only to hear things we do not know, but also to be stirred up to do our duty and to be wakened when we are slack and slothful by good and holy warnings, and to be rebuked if there be any stubbornness and malice in us."⁶² Sermons must include not only teaching, but also exhortations, warnings, incitements, and rebukes, not only in general but in particular. Because we are resistant to the doctrine we hear from God, general teaching is simply not enough, because it does not come to grips with our lives in the concrete, and does not expose the secret recesses in which we hide from what we learn from God. For example, were we truly teachable, it would be enough for us to hear that we must be reformed according to the image of God in Christ. But because we are resistant to this teaching and want it to go away, God must spell this out in detail so that it comes to grips with us. "Now if he had gone no further than this, that teaching would have been received without contradiction, but in the meantime no one would have profited from it as by a living instruction. But now he will speak of lewdness, of theft, of deceitfulness, of drunkenness, of hatred, of spite, and of the sly practices that take place among neighbors. When matters are thus explained in detail, men are the more awakened."⁶³ In order for us to profit from the instruction we receive in God's school, the exposition of Scripture in sermons must ultimately lead to the exposure of the inmost thoughts and affections of each member of the congregation. "But we are so entangled in our vanities that if God only says generally that we must be reformed according to his image, and utterly deny ourselves, it does not touch us at all, but we let it pass by. Therefore he has to spell it out in detail, as if he made an anatomy of our affections and thoughts, and brings to light the vices which we want to harbor secretly."⁶⁴

The sermon only attains its objective if it brings the meaning contained in every word of Scripture to bear on the lives of the members of the congregation. This is what Calvin has in mind when he speaks of "holy Scripture truly expounded and rightly applied to our use."⁶⁵ Every word written in the letter to the Ephesians contains a meaning that must be brought to bear on the lives of the congregation in Geneva. This is why Calvin repeatedly tells his congregation that nothing that Paul wrote is superfluous, nothing was written or added by him without cause.⁶⁶ On the contrary, Calvin can tell the Genevans in

⁶²Sermon 43 on Ephesians, CO 51:783B; Sermons, p. 618.

⁶³Sermon 30 on Ephesians, CO 51:624-5; Sermons, p. 440.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*"vraye exposition de l'Escriture, et qu'elle est applique droitment a nostre usage."* Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:555B; Sermons, p. 363.

⁶⁶A constant refrain in the sermons is the statement, "*Ce n'est point sans cause que saint Paul dit,*" or "*Ce n'est point superflue que saint Paul dit,*" or "*C'est pourquoy saint Paul dit ici.*" For Calvin, the smallest of words may contain the greatest of meanings.

his congregation why Paul wrote every single word that he set down in his letter to the Ephesians, because Calvin is convinced that Paul was addressing the same resistant students in Ephesus that Calvin was preaching to in Geneva. Calvin wants the Genevans to see what Paul had in mind as he wrote his letter, what he intended or wished to say when he set each word down on the parchment, in light of the impact Paul wanted his words to have on those who read his letter. Hence his exposition of the letter focuses on the intention (*l'intention*) of Paul, and what Paul wanted his words to do in the Ephesians, and by extension, in the Genevans. In other words, the method taken by Calvin in the sermons is inductive: Calvin recreates the process and context in the Ephesians that led Paul to write what he did, in order to show the Genevans why Paul added every sentence, every phrase, and every word; for the entire letter contains meaning that must be applied to our lives so that we might profit from it.

III. Calvin's Method of Preaching: Exposition, Retention, and Application to Use and Practice

A. Exposition

In order to reach his objective of having the meaning of Scripture bear fruit in the lives of his congregation, Calvin followed a very deliberate method with regard to the exposition and application of Scripture. The first step consisted of the exposition of the passage in Scripture on which he was preaching, so that he might reveal the meaning contained in the words Paul used. Calvin used many different terms for this aspect of his work, saying that what he intended to do was to expound (*exposer*), to explain (*deduire*), to deal with (*depescher*), to explicate (*expliquer*), or to resolve (*resoudre*) the passage in question.⁶⁷ Unlike the commentary 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. Calvin of course assumes the work of the commentaries in his sermons, but he builds on the revelation of the mind of the author by the context by seeking to show the congregation the meaning of the words they hear and read in French. At times this will involve pointing out to them that a word Paul uses has at least two meanings.⁶⁸ At other

⁶⁷Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:245B, Sermons, p. 7; Sermon 2 on Ephesians, CO 51:269C, Sermons, p. 33; Sermon 39 on Ephesians, CO 51:744C, Sermons, p. 575; Sermon 23 on Ephesians, CO 51:529C, Sermons, p. 334; Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:255C; Sermons, p. 18.

⁶⁸Calvin indicates that the words "blessing" and "love" can be taken in at least two senses. Sometimes he expounds on both senses, as in his discussion of blessing, and at other times he simply goes with what he calls the genuinely true and natural sense of Paul's words. See Sermons 1, 2, and 20 on Ephesians, CO 51:255A, 269B, 493C; Sermons, pp. 17, 33, 293.

times, Calvin will explain how Paul's words may sound unusual to French ears.⁶⁹ But this is the exception, and not, as in the commentary, the rule. Calvin usually proceeds to show the congregation the meaning that is contained in the words of Paul (*ce qui est ici contenu en ces mots de saint Paul*).⁷⁰ And he usually takes only one or two words at a time in doing this, out of his conviction that each passage contains a great meaning in a few words.⁷¹

The goal of the exposition of 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. Hence when Paul adds a few words to a phrase, Calvin says that he does this to show his intention better.⁷² Indeed, where the meaning of the words is under dispute, the meaning can be attained by following the intention of Paul in the passage, as in the abuse of Ephesians 6:12, used by "some heretics in old time" to show two principle powers, God and the devil. "Nevertheless, if we pay attention to the intention of Paul (*l'intention de Paul*), this question will be easily resolved."⁷³ The intention of Paul therefore seems to function in the sermons in the same way that the mind of Paul functions in the commentary, for Calvin uses the mind of Paul to resolve conflicts of interpretation as well.⁷⁴ Although in the commentary Calvin will speak interchangeably of the mind and intention of Paul, in the sermons Calvin only speaks of the intention of Paul. Calvin repeatedly speaks of what Paul wanted to say (*a voulu dire*), what intention (*esgard*) he had, what he intended (*a pretendu, a entendu*) to say, what he had in mind (*a regarde*), what he wanted to show us (*a voulu montrer*), as well as the line of argument Paul was pursuing (*l'argument qu'il trail*), or the theme (*propos*) he was continuing; for Calvin wants the Genevans to be aware of the deliberate intent behind every

⁶⁹Calvin indicates that the terms for the inner and outer person "are not yet common use in French" (Sermon 19 on Ephesians, CO 51:482B, Sermons, p. 279), and points out to them that "person" does not mean the same thing in Paul that it does in common French usage (Sermon 45 on Ephesians, CO 51:811C; Sermons, p. 650). He also explains that the word "peace" as used by Paul comes from the Hebrew way of speaking common to the Hebrew tongue, so that it signifies both welfare and concord (Sermon 48 on Ephesians, CO 51:586B, Sermons, p. 700).

⁷⁰Sermon 5 on Ephesians, CO 51:306B, Sermons, p. 76.

⁷¹"Or voici un passage qui est bien digne d'estre note, et lequel aussi contient une grande sentence en peu de mots" (Sermon 45 on Ephesians, CO 51:814B; Sermons, p. 653).

⁷²"And St. Paul shows his meaning even better (*montre encores mieux son intention*) when he adds that 'we should walk as children of light'" (Sermon 35 on Ephesians, CO 51:685B, Sermons, p. 509).

⁷³Sermon 46 on Ephesians, CO 51:823B; Sermons, p. 663.

⁷⁴"They stray far from Paul's thought (*a Pauli mente*), who twist this text for the purpose of injuring the righteousness of faith. . . . We must look to Paul's design (*Pauli intentio*) . . . ; what has this to do with Paul's intention (*ad Pauli mentem*)?" (Comm. Ephesians 2:10, CO 51:167A; CNTC 11:146). This passage indicates that for Calvin the mind of Paul is synonymous with the intention of Paul. However, in the sermons Calvin only speaks of the intention of Paul, never of the mind of Paul.

word set down by Paul in the letter.⁷⁵ When he expounds upon Ephesians 1:10, “to gather all things together both in heaven and in earth, by Jesus Christ, in himself,” Calvin says, “As for the word ‘gather,’ St. Paul meant to show (*a voulu monstrier*) us thereby how we are all of us in a state of dreadful dissipation, till such time as our Lord Jesus Christ restores us.”⁷⁶ The exposition of each passage of Paul’s letter is concerned above all else to show *why* Paul says what he does, why he uses each and every word, and what difference each word was intended to make in the Church, both in Ephesus, and in Geneva. So, for instance, when Calvin expounds the meaning of the phrase, “if you have heard him” from Ephesians 4:21, he says, “That then, in sum, is the reason why St. Paul adds that it is not so with us, for we have learned Jesus Christ. And how? ‘You have heard him,’ he says. And his setting down of those words is in order to cut off all opportunity of making a shield of ignorance.”⁷⁷ In order to show the intention of Paul in a passage, Calvin will go on to describe, often at length and great detail, the circumstances in us and in our lives that make the words of Paul both necessary and significant. Thus, after showing that Paul added the words, “You have heard him,” to cut off the excuse of ignorance, Calvin proceeds to show how some plead the excuse of ignorance in divine matters, saying, “I am a poor idiot. I am not able to busy myself in such matters; it is impossible for me to put my mind to that study.”⁷⁸ So also, in order to show how all is disordered until it is gathered into Christ, Calvin asks his congregation to examine themselves in light of these words of Paul, asking, “Who are you, O wretched creature? For you see that you are separated from God even from your birth. . . . You ought not only to feel this disorder in your own person, but also perceive that everything else is out of order throughout the whole world because of your perverseness.”⁷⁹ The meaning and intention of Paul can only be rightly seen if the congregation has in mind the circumstances within the Ephesians, and within themselves, that gave rise to Paul writing these words in the first place.

The context that ultimately reveals the meaning and intention of Paul lies not in the world out of which the epistle came, but rather lies in the experience, thoughts, perceptions, and affections of the congregation in Geneva. If Calvin is careful to interpret the epistle in his commentary in its original linguistic and historical context, he is insistent from the beginning of his sermons that what

⁷⁵Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:254B, Sermons, p. 7; Sermon 2 on Ephesians, CO 51:260B, Sermons, p. 23; Sermon 24 on Ephesians, CO 51:546A, Sermons, p. 352; Sermon 2 on Ephesians, CO 51:269C, Sermons, p. 33; Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:251A, Sermons, p. 12; Sermon 25 on Ephesians, CO 51:561C, Sermons, p. 370; Sermon 27 on Ephesians, CO 51:589C, Sermons, p. 401.

⁷⁶Sermon 4 on Ephesians, CO 51:294A; Sermons, p. 62.

⁷⁷Sermon 29 on Ephesians, CO 51:607A; Sermons, p. 421.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Sermon 4 on Ephesians, CO 51:294C; Sermons, p. 62.

Saint Paul taught the Ephesians is to be taught to the Church at all times and places. "When we read the epistles which St. Paul wrote to a variety of places, we must always consider that God meant they should serve not only for one time alone, or for certain people only, but for ever, and in general for the whole church."⁸⁰ In the sermons, Calvin brings the general doctrine of God in the epistle to bear on the lives of the people of Geneva in his own day. "We see that the doctrine which is contained in this epistle is directed and dedicated to us at this present day."⁸¹ Paul's intention can only be fully known when the congregation has a vivid sense of the nature of their own lives, for it is these lives that the words of Paul are meant to address.

B. Retention

Once the intention of Paul is made clear from the words he used in the passage, Calvin is confident that he and his congregation have arrived at the natural sense (*le sens naturel*) of Paul's words, of what Paul gives them to understand (*advertire*).⁸² He usually indicates his satisfaction with the clarity and faithfulness of his exposition by saying, "we see, then, St. Paul's intention (*Nous voyons donc maintenant l'intention de S. Paul*)."⁸³ This leads Calvin to his next objective in the sermons—appealing to the congregation to keep the intention and meaning of Paul's words in mind, lest they forget them or no longer think about them. Again, Calvin uses a variety of expressions which all convey the necessity of keeping the meaning of Paul in mind and not forgetting or ignoring it. He will say that this is what we have to gather (*recueillir*) from Paul's words, or what we have to observe (*a observer*), to retain (*a retenir*), to note (*noter*), and to have in memory (*ayons memoire, reduire en memoire*).⁸⁴ He also advises his congregation to weigh carefully (*peser*) the words of Paul, to meditate (*mediter*) and ruminate (*ruminer*) on the words, so that they might become imprinted (*imprime*) on their hearts and spirits.⁸⁵ As in his exposition of Paul's

⁸⁰Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:245B; Sermons, p. 7. "Now these things serve not only for the city of Ephesus, nor for any one country, nor for any one age or time, but we have need to be urged on more and more, seeing that the devil strives ceaselessly to turn us to evil" (*Ibid.*).

⁸¹Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:246B; Sermons, p. 8.

⁸²Sermon 24 on Ephesians, CO 51:546B, Sermons, p. 353; Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:257A, Sermons, p. 20.

⁸³Thus, for example, Sermon 7 on Ephesians, CO 51:332C, Sermons, p. 101, and Sermon 5 on Ephesians, CO 51:300A; Sermons, p. 70. He will also use all of his synonyms for Paul's intention, as we have given above.

⁸⁴Sermon 3 on Ephesians, CO 51:282B, Sermons, p. 48; Sermon 6 on Ephesians, CO 51:317B, Sermons, p. 89; Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:249A, Sermons, p. 11; Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:249C, Sermons, p. 12; Sermon 45 on Ephesians, CO 51:810C, Sermons, p. 649.

⁸⁵Sermon 41 on Ephesians, CO 51:766A, Sermons, p. 598; Sermon 47 on Ephesians, CO 51:843A, Sermons, p. 685.

words and intention, Calvin will describe at length the circumstances that make it necessary for us to keep the meaning of Paul in mind. One of the most persistent dangers he cites has to do with the superstitious teaching and practice of the “papists,” meaning not the official theologians of the Roman Church, but the friends, relatives, and neighbors of the Genevans.⁸⁶ Calvin very often contrasts the meaning of Paul they are to keep in mind with the sayings of the papists regarding free will, merits, and especially the patronage of the saints and the sacrifice of the Mass. Thus, after speaking of the intention of Paul to make us fall in love with the gospel which brings true peace with God, Calvin contrasts this with the foolish self-confidence of the “papists,” who treat God like a baby who can be pacified with trifles. “And in fact what are the things with which they would try to content God but trifles and petty rubbish, as if they were trying to quiet a baby? The papists must take a sprinkling of holy water; also they cross themselves endlessly; they must keep this and that vigil; they must gad about on pilgrimage; they must forbear eating flesh on such a day; they must babble so many pater nosters; they must light a candle to such a saint; they must hear so many masses; they must say so many mea culpas. In short, when a man has raked them all into a heap, it is certain that they are but scrapings of all that stinks. And yet, it seems to them that God is well paid with them, as though he were being treated like an idol or a babe, as I said before.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, he warns them of the danger of trying to find peace with God by blotting all remembrance of God from their minds and consciences, as those do the scoffers “who simply nod their heads when men speak to them of their salvation, saying, It is enough if we give only one good sigh (*souspir*), but let us alone in the meantime to have a good time; for what a thing it would be to pass the whole of our life in such melancholy? That would do us no good, and therefore let us enjoy ourselves together.”⁸⁸

Keeping the words of Paul in their minds and memories, and engraved in their hearts, will keep his congregation from being led astray by the folly of the papists who treat God like a baby, and the scoffers who want to forget God altogether. In a rare reference to a specific recent event in Geneva, Calvin speaks of how prominent members of his congregation did not keep in mind Paul’s injunction to use our gifts to build up the body of Christ, using their gifts instead to make and sell liturgical vestments for the Mass. “If a silversmith should make a cross on a chalice, he should be punished as he deserves. If some other man makes this or that, useful for popish superstitions, it shall not

⁸⁶Parker makes the same point: “The exodus of priests, monks and nuns in 1535-6 certainly did not mean that there were no Romanists left in Geneva. The *Registres* show how some of the old habits and practices lingered on in a usually quiet sort of way. Calvin had to win people over to become Bible Christians” (Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, p. 127).

⁸⁷Sermon 14 on Ephesians, CO 51:416C; Sermons, p. 202.

⁸⁸Sermon 14 on Ephesians, CO 51:417A; Sermons, p. 202.

be countenanced. If a merchantman sells rosary-beads, he shall have his punishment as he deserves. But if a man sells chasubles, albs, and all such other trinkets of the mass, that is to be allowed and borne with! Nevertheless this has been done."⁸⁹ So also, forgetting the words of Paul that we are not to have among us any wantonness or foolish talk, Calvin thinks the women of Geneva have gone from bad to worse in their talk and clothing. "For women have been allowed for a long time to become increasingly audacious. And besides, speech apart, there are also very provocative clothes, so that it is very hard to discern whether they are men or women. They appear in new dresses and trinkets, so that every day some new disguise is seen. . . . Then too ribald songs are a part of their behavior."⁹⁰ Husbands who forget the words of Paul— that they are to love their wives as their own bodies— think to themselves about their wives, "I cannot live with her, she is a mad beast, there is nothing in her but pride and haughtiness and rebellion. I cannot say a word to her without her paying me back with four." On the other hand, one who does keep these words of Paul in mind will think to himself, even when he does not have all that might be desired in his wife, "Yet I am bound to her; yes, and I am not only bound to my wife but also to God, who presides over marriage, and to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is like a mirror and living image of it to us. Therefore I am bound to do my duty toward my wife, and both to love her and support her, even though there may be vices in her."⁹¹

C. Application to Use and Practice.

As these examples make clear, retaining the intention and meaning of Paul in our minds, hearts, and memories is meant to have a direct impact on the way we think about everything we do, from the least to the greatest act, for it is our interior thoughts that lead to our external actions. 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. So, for instance, if we kept Paul's injunction and example in mind, to pray at all times for the whole Church of Christ, our prayer life would be different. "Now if this were well printed in our hearts (as I said before) we should be very alert to pray to our God without end and without ceasing."⁹² One can see, therefore, that appealing to the congregation to keep Paul's meaning in mind is but the first step of Calvin's application of Scripture to the use, profit, and practice of the congregation. The much greater length of the sermons, noted above, is directly related to Calvin's con-

⁸⁹Sermon 23 on Ephesians, CO 51:537B; Sermons, pp. 341-2.

⁹⁰Sermon 34 on Ephesians, CO 51:674-5; Sermons, p. 497.

⁹¹Sermon 41 on Ephesians, CO 51:763-4; Sermons, pp. 596-7.

⁹²Sermon 47 on Ephesians, CO 51:843A; Sermons, p. 685.

cern that his congregation profit from the doctrine of St. Paul. "But this needs to be explained at greater length, that we may understand it and fare the better (*facions nostre profit*) by it."⁹³ This dynamic is revealed by a transitional expression that frequently recurs throughout the sermons: "That, therefore, is what we have to bear in mind (*a retenir*) from the words St. Paul speaks here. But every one of us ought to apply it generally to his own use (*appliquer cela a son usage*)."⁹⁴ So, for instance, when Paul speaks of those who were far off being brought near, he says that Paul intended to show us that everything we invent to distinguish ourselves from others is nothing before God, because what unites us before God is that we were saved by God's mercy from our common miserable plight. "Now we must apply this well to our own use (*appliquer ceci a nostre usage*) . . . [E]very man searches and seeks as much as possible to bring forward something for which God has accepted him rather than his neighbors. But let us learn (*apprenons*) that although we were near God in outward appearance, yet nevertheless the only way to be in his favor and to be able to call on him . . . is that Jesus Christ is our Head."⁹⁵

The application to our use is directly related to the way we are to profit from what we learn in Scripture. Thus, after Calvin comments on the meaning of Paul's description of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, noting that God gives himself to us in Christ, he says: "And so you see in sum what we have to bear in mind (*a retenir*). Yet, that we may the better profit (*faire nostre profit*) from this passage, let us take note that we must check ourselves lest we wander into many speculations when we know God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Calvin goes on to contrast seeking to know God in Christ with the invented idols of the "papists" and the Turks, so that we might seek access to God in Jesus Christ alone, God's living image, who is adapted to our finite capacities.⁹⁶

Finally, the application to use and profit is directly related to putting the lesson learned from Paul into practice. Thus, after he expounds the meaning of Paul's exhortation to "Be angry and sin not," Calvin says, "Now we see St. Paul's intention. And therefore let us put this teaching into practice (*prattiquons ceste doctrine*), the first point of which is carefully to examine the evil that is in us, that we may be angry with ourselves."⁹⁷ So also, when Paul exhorts us to labor to the benefit of those in need, Calvin asks us to consider whether our vocations genuinely profit others. "That is what we have to remember (*a retenir*) from this doctrine of St. Paul. And it behooves us to put this teaching so much the more

⁹³Sermon 38 on Ephesians, CO 51:462B; Sermons, p. 257.

⁹⁴Sermon 6 on Ephesians, CO 51:310C; Sermons, p. 82.

⁹⁵Sermon 13 on Ephesians, CO 51:402-3; Sermons, pp. 188-9.

⁹⁶Sermon 1 on Ephesians, CO 51:256B; Sermons, p. 19.

⁹⁷Sermon 31 on Ephesians, CO 51:632B; Sermons, p. 449.

in practice (*prattiquer*), when we consider that theft is more rife nowadays in the world than it ever was."⁹⁸

As these transitions make clear, Calvin assumes that there is an important distinction that must be kept in mind at all times between the meaning and intention of Paul, best summarized as the teaching or doctrine of Paul, and the way we apply that doctrine to use and put that doctrine into practice. For instance, Calvin assumes that the doctrine of Paul concerning marriage is very clear and familiar to his congregation. However, he also knows that everyone has an excuse as to why they cannot put this doctrine into practice. "This teaching is clear and familiar enough of itself, but yet for all that, how is it practiced in the world? People would gladly plead the excuse of ignorance to get out of the performance of their duty by saying this is too high and hard to understand."⁹⁹ As indicated previously, Calvin was confident that there had been great improvement in the truth of the doctrine preached, taught, and read in the Church of Geneva since it had been freed from the papacy. He repeatedly shows his congregation that the doctrine of Scripture should give rise to very different practice than the doctrine of the Roman Church. For instance, Roman doctrine teaches us to trust in our own strength, and thus causes us to falter in uncertainty, whereas Paul teaches us to despair of ourselves and rely only on the Lord for our strength. "Thus you see how we ought to put this teaching of St. Paul into practice."¹⁰⁰ But he was not at all convinced that there had been any improvement in the way the doctrine of God was being applied to use and put into practice by his own congregation, in spite of decades of preaching. "But now we have teaching and we have exhortations added to spur us further forward, in order that we should not flatter ourselves in our vices; but how much have we profited?"¹⁰¹ Thus, when Calvin expounds the teaching of Paul that the one who steals should do so no more, he asks, "But let us see how this teaching is put into practice (*comme ceste doctrine est prattique*)." His conclusion is rather striking. "But they have so profited in reverse in God's school (*profite au rebours en l'escole de Dieu*) that they are far more wily than they were before in looking after their own interest and advantage, and in taking more liberty, and in making themselves believe that all things are lawful for them."¹⁰²

Calvin is concerned above all else in his sermons to expound the doctrine of Paul so clearly, so thoroughly, and so forcefully that it might actually be practiced by his congregation; for he realizes that the most difficult transition to make is from instruction in doctrine to practice in life. For example, in spite of

⁹⁸Sermon 31 on Ephesians, CO 638A, Sermons, p. 455.

⁹⁹Sermon 42 on Ephesians, CO 51:778; Sermons, p. 612.

¹⁰⁰Sermon 45 on Ephesians, CO 51:817-18; Sermons, pp. 656-7.

¹⁰¹Sermon 42 on Ephesians, CO 51:778C; Sermons, p. 612.

¹⁰²Sermon 31 on Ephesians, CO 51:636A; Sermons, p. 453.

the repeated teaching of Scripture that our God is both merciful, true, and powerful, our hearts waver at the slightest threats. "So much the more therefore does it behoove us to put this doctrine into practice, and to exercise ourselves in it night and day that we may taste it thoroughly." When we seem to be overwhelmed by adversity with no way to escape and no help in sight, we ought to recall the promises of God and think thus within ourselves: "Who is it that has spoken? Who is it that has promised to be our defender? Is it not he that is almighty? Could he not with one puff blow away all that the devil contrives? Though all the world were against us, what could it do, provided that our Lord vouchsafed to maintain our cause?"¹⁰³

The best way to apply Scripture to our use and profit is to bring it into our inmost thoughts, where we deliberate within ourselves concerning all that we hide from others, and even seek to hide from God. This is why Calvin's favorite device in his sermons is the imagined interior monologue, used first to show the way we think when we forget what God teaches us in his school, and then to show what difference it makes to keep the doctrine of God in our inmost thoughts. Only when the meaning and intention of Paul changes the way we actually think in our hearts about God, others, and ourselves, will Scripture profit us the way it is intended to do. The message of Paul's gospel is addressed directly to the heart, for it bears witness to the self-giving goodness and grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ through the gospel. "So then, seeing that God has given himself to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells in that great sanctuary . . . , ought we not to be fully satisfied when we have that, and to rest ourselves wholly there?"¹⁰⁴ We will only profit from this message if we are brought to a real awareness of the self-giving goodness of God, so that we might be ravished and inflamed in love for God, and dedicate our lives to God from the inmost affection of our hearts. "To be brief, we must be sure of the infinite good that is done to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, in order that we may be ravished in love with our God (*d'estre raviss en l'amour de nostre Dieu*) and inflamed with a right affection to obey him, and keep ourselves strictly in awe of him, to honor him with all our thoughts, with all our affections, and with all our hearts."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Sermon 21 on Ephesians, CO 51:507B; Sermons, p. 308.

¹⁰⁴Sermon 18 on Ephesians, CO 51:471-2; Sermons, p. 267-8. See also Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, Chapter 10, for similar descriptions of the central message of Scripture.

¹⁰⁵Sermon 20 on Ephesians, CO 51:496A; Sermons, p. 295. Calvin sees Paul as having been ravished with the same astonishment himself. "And (as I told you) the only thing that is treated here is the expressing of God's inestimable goodness, inasmuch that, instead of executing the office of teacher, to show and declare how we are joined to our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Paul himself is also astonished, and like a man ravished with wonder, confessing that he lacks sufficient and fit words to express adequately God's grace in vouchsafing to join and unite us to his only Son. . . . St. Paul was not able to express that grace, but rather showed us that it ought to ravish our minds in astonishment (*nous doit ravir in estonnement*)" (Sermon 42 on Ephesians, CO 51:780A, 781C; Sermons, pp. 614, 615).