

**The Spirit and The Word: John Calvin's Concept of Approaching
the Scripture**

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Introduction

There has been voluminous works written on John Calvin and numerous articles and books on his view of Scripture and his method of interpretation. In this essay, we continue to elaborate on this important subject focusing on three major points. First, we look at Calvin's view of Scripture, with a focus on his understanding of inspiration. Second, we discover Calvin's high view of Scripture by his understanding of how one should approach the Word of God. Finally, we learn about Calvin's emphasis on the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture.

This work is only an overview of Calvin's concept of approaching the Scripture, but as we will discover, he is not as dogmatic in some ways as some may think. However, we will discover how he believes that without the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, as well as, working through the reader or interpreter of the Word, one cannot understand the Word to give life. The Spirit of God not only plays a major role in Calvin's theology, but He is an intricate player in the proper understanding and interpretation of Scripture.

Calvin's emphasis on the Holy Spirit seems to sometime be overlooked when studying him and his works. One cannot understand the Word of God without the One who inspired it through holy men working through the reading. Therefore, what is John Calvin's concept of the Scripture and his approach toward Scripture?

Calvin's View of Scripture

Scripture is the Inspired Word of God

To Calvin, the Scripture is not only holy but the voice of God for people to hear and obey. It is a gift from the Lord to humanity for the purpose of revealing Himself and all the benefits He has for people. He states,

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of god in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift....¹

Along with this, Calvin believes the Bible is divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit. A question arises regarding Calvin's concept of inspiration of Scripture: what does he mean that the Word of God is inspired? To answer this, we need to look at the three basic positions on understanding the inspiration of Scripture. The three positions or views are:

- 1) the verbal inspiration or the mechanical-literal dictation;²
- 2) the "Christocentric emphasis or Doctrinal emphasis;"³ and

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford L. Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX-XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960-1961), I.vi.1 (70); see also I.vi.2-3 (70-73). Abbreviated as *Institutes*; cf. Donald K. McKim, "Calvin's View of Scripture," in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 52-53.

² Roger Nicole, "John Calvin and Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25 (December 1982): 427. Nicole lists over thirty scholars who hold this view in his article; however, he also lists just under thirty who ascribe to a different view. Cf. David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 45-46 n.5.

³ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 64 n. 58 quoting Jack B. Rogers, "Mixed Metaphors. Misunderstood Models, and Puzzlings Paradigms: A Contemporary Effort to Correct Some Current Misunderstandings Regarding the Authority and Interpretation of the Bible," (Paper presented at a conference on

3) the ambassadorial position.⁴

According to Jack Rogers the three views on the inspiration of Scripture can be depicted with a metaphor of a prime minister or president of a country. The metaphor describing the verbal inspiration position is the leader of a country dictating a letter to his personal secretary. The secretary writes down everything word for word, exactly as the leader speaks it. "This metaphor underscores the complete authority of the divinely inspired Bible."⁵ The second metaphor used to clarify the Christocentric emphasis of inspiration is how news reporters and journalists report and interpret the speeches and work of an incumbent president who is running for re-election. These "reporters" are viewed as the writers of the Scriptures who interpret who God is in Jesus Christ and recommend that their readers give allegiance to Him. They encourage their readers and hearers to get to know the "president" personally because he is the only one who can save them. "Under this metaphor Scripture is an interpreted record written by people 'who have known and been

"Interpreting an Authoritative Scripture" at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Ontario, June 22-26, 1981), 19-20.

⁴ There seems to not be any clear-cut terminology to define each position, this author has selectively picked these three terms or phrases to clarify the overall concepts.

Although Rogers' concept of the three positions on inspiration is valid, Puckett gives three similar but distinct variations of the second and third positions that focus on Calvin and not just a general viewpoint. Instead of the Christocentric emphasis, it would be the doctrinal inspiration (this author's terminology) that holds to Calvin viewing the doctrines espoused and taught are inspired but not the very words themselves. McNeill holds to this position arguing for Calvin's use of the term dictate (*dictare*) and its derivatives should be understood and referred to as ideas and doctrines instead of its reference to words. See John T. McNeill, "The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin," *Church History* 28 (June 1959): 140-143.

Instead of using the ambassadorial view, Puckett sees the third position as the verbal-doctrinal view, (this author's terminology). This view combines both verbal inspiration and the doctrinal inspiration. This, according to Puckett tries to "synthesize the strengths—and avoid the weaknesses—of the first two. While Calvin's language does suggest verbal inspiration, his lack of concern about some of the apparent errors in the text he had received suggests that verbal inspiration did not function for him as it did for later Reformed theologians." (Puckett, *Calvin's Exegesis of the O.T.*, 46 n.5).

⁵ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 64 n. 58.

drawn to commitment to Jesus Christ.”⁶ The third position, the ambassadorial view, is described as the leader's press secretary speaking at a press conference.

The press secretary:

. . .has been with the president and knows his inmost thoughts. When the press secretary speaks, he does so with the authority of the president. But the press secretary uses his own words, applying and adapting the president's ideas to the questions asked. This metaphor reminds us that the biblical writers know God intimately and that God had revealed to them His mind and will. It also reminds us that the biblical writers used their own thought forms and words, adapting divine principles to particular situations and to the capacities of their readers.⁷

As a press secretary speaks or as an ambassador speaks on behalf of the president or prime minister with full authority (like the press secretary metaphor), so the writers of Scripture write on behalf of God with full authority and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. In their writing they are not like robots or *amanuenses*, but use their personalities, styles and concept of what the Lord was guiding them to write. Puckett adds:

It is one thing to say, as Calvin does, that the Holy Spirit is author of scripture; it is quite another to describe the process by which this takes place. It is risky to try to describe in a coherent way how he may have envisioned that process, and whatever is said must be tentative, since he never systematically treated the matter. It does seem possible, however, to isolate several elements that would likely have formed a part of his understanding of the subject. His preferred figure for describing the relationship of the biblical writers to the Holy Spirit in the production of scripture is that of instrumentality. The human writer is the instrument of the Spirit of God. This fact, in large measure, accounts for the absolute authority of the Bible.⁸

Expounding on Calvin's understanding that the human writer is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, we could use another metaphor that uses a musician playing his instrument. The conductor

⁶ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 64 n. 58.

⁷ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 64 n. 58.

⁸ Puckett, *Calvin's Exegesis of the O.T.*, 47 n.24.

is directing him, but the musician is using his personality, his unique style and, even in a sense, his interpretation of the piece being played. This third position seems to give greater understanding of Calvin's view of the inspiration of Scripture than the mechanical-literal dictation position.

Rogers' creative thoughts on the three positions of inspiration of Scripture gives clarification on this subject and can help bring insights to Calvin's understanding of inspiration. Although there has been much debate on whether Calvin views the inspiration of Scripture from a mechanical-literal dictation position, or another position,⁹ it is important to observe what Calvin says and in what context he states his thoughts regarding the inspiration of Scripture.¹⁰

Calvin uses several terms besides 'inspire' and 'inspiration' to emphasise the divine origin of the Scriptures. For example in Calvin's exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16, the major verse on the inspiration of Scripture, he uses several different phrases to enhance the view of inspiration writing:

To assert its [the Scripture's] authority [Paul] teaches that it is *inspired of God* [*Divinitus esse inspiratam*], for, if that is so, it is beyond all question that men should receive it with reverence. This is the principle that distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know

⁹ See Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952, 3rd edition 1994), 101, see also 99-105. H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin's Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 50-62. Forstman gives an excellent understanding of this debate and holds to Calvin's view of dictation, as does John Murray in his book, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1979); W. Peter Stephens, (CH 5014, King's College, University of Aberdeen, Autumn 1994). See also, Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoech & Ruprecht, 1957), 183; B. A. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63; A. D. R. Polman, "Calvin on the Inspiration of Scripture," in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, ed. Jacob T. Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 98ff.; Philip Hughes, "The Inspiration of Scripture in the English Reformers Illuminated by John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (1960-1961): 141ff; Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Calvin and the Holy Scriptures," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 137ff; Kathryn E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the "Plain Sense" of Genesis 1-3* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

¹⁰ Although we could write a book or even a dissertation on this one topic, we will only give an overall synopsis of this subject to grasp a basic understanding of Calvin's view of inspiration.

that God has spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but *as organs of the Holy Spirit* [*sed ut errant Spiritus sancti organa*] uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. All those who wish to profit from the Scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle, that the Law and the prophets are not teachings handed on at the pleasure of men or produced by men's minds as their source, but *are dictated by the Holy Spirit* [*a Spiritu sancto dictatam*]. . .Moses and the prophets did not utter rashly and at random what we have received from them, but, *speaking by God's impulse* [*quum Dei impulsu loquerentur*], they boldly and fearlessly testified the truth that it was *the mouth of the Lord* [*os Domini*] that spoke through them. . .This is the meaning of the first clause, that we owe to the Scripture the same reverence as we owe to God, since it has its only source in Him and has nothing of human origin mixed with it.¹¹

As we notice from this commentary, Calvin clearly believes in the inspiration of the Scripture.¹² He uses the phrases: “inspired of God; the prophets. . .[spoke] as organs of the Holy Spirit; the Scriptures. . .are dictated by the Holy Spirit; speaking by God's impulse; and the mouth of the Lord;” to emphasise the inspiration of Scripture. In the *Institutes* he uses phrases such as “for Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit,”¹³ “God in person speaks in it,” and “God speaking

¹¹ John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, Trans. T. A. Smail, Editors, David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eedmans Publishing, 1991, repr), 329-330. Here after cited as: *Commentary on...*

¹² Although it seems clear that Calvin believes that the Bible is inspired, H. J. Kraus and Hans W. Frei, argue that Calvin does not believe the Bible is inspired and “hence does not itself in the first place inspire, but communicates and informs.” Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 21; Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Calvin's Exegetical Principles,” translated by Keith Crim, *Interpretation* (Richmond) 31, no. 1 (1977): 8-18. They clarify their point by showing that Calvin believed that the “reader, not the text, is to be illumined by the internal or inspiring testimony of the Spirit so that he may discern the written biblical word to be God's own Word, intended for his own and the Church's edification. The text is God's Word in its own right and communicates the truth quite clearly.” Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 21-22; cf. *Institutes* I.vii.4-5 (78-81). What Frei and Kraus understand has some validity, in the sense that unless the Holy Spirit illuminates a person as he or she reads the Bible, it is just another book, although a sacred one. However, one may argue that if the ‘text is God's Word in its own right,’ then for it to be God's Word would it not need to be inspired regardless of what humans think? It seems that Calvin approaches this polemic by saying both, the Scripture is the Word of God, inspired, but has no empowerment in and of itself until the Holy Spirit also works in the reader to understand the authority and message of the Word.

¹³ *Institutes* III.xxi.3 (924); cf. McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 59.

in Scripture.”¹⁴ Calvin also uses similar phrases in his other commentaries to suggest the Scriptures are inspired.

Although we observe that Calvin uses many different terms and phrases to reveal his belief that the Scripture is inspired by God, what does he mean by the Scriptures being inspired? Does he take the mechanical-literal dictation position or another position?

There are passages in Calvin's writings, including his exposition of II Timothy 3:16, that would suggest that the “human writers were so overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit's inspiration that they served as nothing more than ‘sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit’ (*certi et authentici Spiritus sancti amanuenses*—4.8.9) who composed Scripture ‘under the Holy Spirit's dictation’ (*dictante Spiritu sancto*).”¹⁵ It could also be argued that Calvin held to the mechanical-literal dictation position because he used the term and its variants *dictare* more than any other term when he expounded scripture.¹⁶ However, just because Calvin uses the term *dictare*, does he literally mean that the writers were just scribes—in effect robots?

It seems at first that Calvin holds to the dictation position, but upon further study and understanding of Calvin's concept of Scripture, he does not. Being trained in humanism and

¹⁴ *Institutes*, I.vii.4 (78).

¹⁵ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 59.

¹⁶ This can be seen in numerous passages: *Institutes* IV.viii.6 (1154); IV.viii.3 (1151-1152); IV.viii.9 (1156-1158); John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Old and New Testaments, 46 vols. in 22 vol. set. Various translators (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843-1855; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984. Abbreviated as *Commentary on...*, CTS; *Commentary on Psalms*, 44:19 (CTS 2:165-166); *Commentary on Exodus*, 3:1 (CTS 1:59); *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 27:11-14 (CTS III:205-206); *Commentary on Hosea*, 14:9 (CTS 1:503ff.); *Commentary on Psalms*, 78:3 (CTS II:229); *Commentary on 1 Peter*, 1:11, 25 (239-241; 254) to cite just a few. However, one of the most debated texts in which Calvin seems to emphasise the mechanical-literal dictation view is his exposition of Jeremiah 36:4-6 (CTS IV:329-330).

becoming a Christian humanist,¹⁷ and utilising the principles of humanism as he approaches Scripture, Calvin uses the terms dictation and inspiration in a broader concept than a more literal way. The mechanical-literal dictation or the verbal inspiration takes the term 'dictate' at its face value. Those who adhere to this position argue that Calvin emphasises that "God selected both the ideas and the words of Scripture. [God] so controlled the minds and personalities of the authors that they wrote exactly the words He willed."¹⁸

However, the term dictation should be used more figuratively and more as a witness of the Author instead of a dictation from the Author. Karl Barth understands Calvin's use of this term and the understanding of inspiration as "the relationship of the biblical witnesses to the very definite content of their witnesses. It is indeed this content which inspires them. . . But Holy Scripture refuses to know or put before us anything but Christ."¹⁹

McKim rightly understands Calvin's concept of dictation by emphasising that:

¹⁷ Humanism was (and is) non-religious and not specifically a philosophical system but was "a cultural and educational approach relating to the curriculum of schools and universities. In the area of studies call the humanities, Renaissance humanists urged a rediscovery of and renewed appreciation for the works of classical antiquity in the original Latin [and Greek] language(s). . . [it focused on] grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy." (McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 45; cf. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3; 11-14; 90-93; 113-114; 168-170; Paul O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanists Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 10. "Christian humanists," McKim states, "were Renaissance humanists with a particularly religious bent who wrote on theological topics. They were trained in the classics and the art of rhetoric and approached the ancient texts of the Christian faith from a historical perspective. . . [they] wished to return to the classical sources of the faith, particularly the Bible [using the Greek and Hebrew texts] and the early church theologians, to find out what Christ intended Christianity to be." (McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 45).

¹⁸ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 60; see footnote 9 above for numerous works on this subject.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), 520-522. Barth takes the Christocentric position of inspiration and understands Calvin to take this point of view too; that the purpose of the reader of Scripture is to find Christ. Also, the writers themselves were writing as witnesses to the living Word and were led by the Spirit in what they wrote, but not automatons. He uses Calvin's exposition of John 5:39 stating that Calvin believes that Christ is the one should to approach Scripture. Cf. McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 61; Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), 96ff.

The Scriptures are God's revelation of Himself in a way commensurate with limited human capacities. The divine communication is given to humans as revelation. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the biblical writers used their own thought forms and words adapted to the special situations and capacities of the audiences they were addressing. The divine message came through human thought forms. Calvin's references to inspiration as 'dictation' are to be read in this wider sense. The term points beyond the writer to remind us that Scripture's ultimate origin is with the God who inspired the writer.²⁰

We can also ascertain this view concerning the Scriptures from the *Institutes*, especially Book I.vi-ix and IV.viii, along with other commentaries and writings. For example, Calvin in the *Institutes* discusses how the Word of God was brought forth:

But whether God became known to the patriarchs through oracles and visions or by the work and ministry of men, he put into their minds what they should then hand down to their posterity. At any rate, there is no doubt that firm certainty of doctrine was engraved in their hearts, so that they were convinced and understood that what they had learned

²⁰ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 62. This is the concept of accommodation that God in His desire to communicate His Word to us has to accommodate Himself and His Words for finite human beings to understand Him. One of the most important elements in Calvin's theology as well as his exegetical and hermeneutical methods is his understanding of the Scripture, which views God accommodating Himself to human capacity. For God to properly communicate to his people, He has to stoop down or condescend to our level for us to comprehend who He is. For human beings, who are finite, to grasp a knowledge and a relationship with the infinite God, they must realise that God, according to Calvin, accommodates Himself to them.

Ford Battles writes extensively on this aspect of Calvin. He states, "God in revelation was adjusting the portrait of himself to the capacity of the human mind and heart. . . Calvin makes this principle a consistent basis for his handling not only of Scripture but of every avenue of relationship between God and man. . . for Calvin, accommodation has to do not only with the Scriptures and their interpretation, but with the whole of created reality to which, for the Christian, Scripture holds the clue." Ford L. Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," *Interpretation* 31, no. 1 (Richmond, VA: Union Theological Seminary, January 1977), 20-21.

Throughout Calvin's writings he reveals how the Scriptures are actually an accommodation of God for humans because our capacity is limited. One such place in the Old Testament is found in Psalm 78:3, "If God, accommodating himself to the limited capacity of men, speaks in an humble and lowly style, this manner of teaching is despised as too simple; but if he rise to a higher style, with the view of giving greater authority to his Word, men, to excuse their ignorance, will pretend that it is too obscure." (*Commentary on Psalms*, 78:3 (CTS III: 229)).

Calvin continues this thought in 1 Peter 1:20 writing, "It is evident from this that we cannot believe in God except through Christ, in whom God in a manner makes Himself little (*quodammodo parvum facit*), in order to accommodate Himself to our comprehension (*ut se ad captum nostrum submittat*), and it is Christ alone who can make our consciences at peace, so that we may dare to come in confidence to God." (*Commentary on 1 Peter*, 1:20 (250)).

Kathryn Greene-McCreight clarifies how Calvin sees accommodation. She states, "Accommodation. . . supports and elaborates the theological topic of the unfolding of revelation and with it the unfolding of the capacity of the people of God to grasp it." (131). She also observes that Calvin has three presuppositions that he bases his view of accommodation on: "the greatness and inexpressibility of God, the dullness of the people, and the 'expressed-ness' of God in creation and redemption, that is, providence. The first implies the difficulty of ever speaking of God, the second of understanding any such talk at that stage, the third of the necessity of such talk because of the datum of God's desire to be known." Kathryn E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the "Plain Sense" of Genesis 1-3* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 132; see also her whole synopsis on "Accommodation," 131-134.

proceeded from God. . . Finally, in order that truth might abide forever in the world with a continuing succession of teaching and survive through all the ages, the same oracles he had given to the patriarchs it was his pleasure to have recorded, as it were, on public tablets. With this intent the law was published, and the prophets afterward added as its interpreters.²¹

The editorial notes in the Library of Christian Classics (LCC) emphasises that “Calvin does not here offer an explanation of the manner of inspiration in the origin of the Scriptures. However, the suggestion his language conveys is not of a mechanical verbal dictation, but of an impartation of divine truth that enters the hearts of the Scripture writers.”²² Calvin’s overall meaning of the term *dictare* when used in the *Institutes* focuses on “the context of a discussion of the doctrine or teaching (*doctrina*) which God has given in Scripture.”²³

For example, when Calvin writes about the doctrine of Scripture he states, the apostles “were to expound the ancient Scripture and to show that what is taught there has been fulfilled in Christ. Yet they were not to do this except from the Lord, that is, with Christ’s Spirit as precursor in a certain measure *dictating* the words [*Verba quodammodo dictante Christi Spiritu*].”²⁴ It would seem that Calvin is unequivocally stating the mechanical-literal dictation position, but as the editorial notes in the LCC clarify, “the adverb is, however, a deliberate qualification, discounting any doctrine of exact verbal inspiration. The context has reference to teaching, not words merely,

²¹ *Institutes* I.vi.2, (71).

²² *Institutes* I.vi.2 n. 5 (71).

²³ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 62.

²⁴ *Institutes* IV.viii.8 (1155).

showing that Calvin's point is not verbal inerrancy, but the authoritative message of Scripture."²⁵

Therefore, as McKim properly concludes:

. . . whenever Calvin speaks of dictation, his predominant emphasis is on the divine or gospel message which humans have expressed in their own words, thought forms, and contexts. . . It is by the power of the Holy Spirit, who both inspired the Scripture and illuminates it for believers in the present, that we recognize the divine authority and thus the inspiration of Scripture. Word and Spirit are bound up inexplicably for Calvin.²⁶

Calvin views the Scriptures with great reverence and approaches it carefully because of his belief in its inspiration. Out of the three major views of inspiration, it seems clear that Calvin holds more closely to the ambassadorial position over the mechanical-literal dictation position. He tries to reveal how "the Holy Spirit rules the choice of words, but only in order that these words may faithfully communicate the subject matter. Calvin is more concerned with the function [and matter] than with the form of Scripture."²⁷ He lifts the Word of God up to its rightful place, and recognises that without the Holy Spirit, no one can properly respect it, understand it or be transformed by it. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires both the Scripture and the reader of the Word, if they approach the Word properly.

The Interpreter's Attitude or Approach to the Scripture

To Calvin, the interpreter's attitude and approach to the Word of God is very important if he or she is going to interpret the Word properly. For people approaching the Word of God to interpret it, they must have reverence for it. To have reverence for the Scriptures, they must have

²⁵ *Institutes* IV.viii.8 (1155-1156 n.7).

²⁶ McKim, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 63.

²⁷ Puckett, *Calvin's Exegesis of the O.T.*, 46 n.5; cf. Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, 183; Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture," 63; Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 21-22.

faith and have been illuminated by the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Along with having faith in the Author of the Scripture, for people to properly interpret it, they must also do so in faith. Calvin states, we must “examine all Scriptural interpretation according to the proportion of faith [Rom. 12:3, 6].”²⁹ Calvin also emphasises the need to approach the Scripture with humility. Kraus expounds Calvin's thoughts regarding a letter Calvin wrote to Simon Grynaeus, stating, “Calvin demands the exegete humility first of all, and then—from another, more significant point of view—study within a community of brothers, in which each one helps the others, corrects them, engages them in a dialogue that leads to a better understanding.”³⁰

Humility is one of the keys for interpreters to have as they approach Scripture, and this humility is also revealed, by submitting the interpretations to one another for dialogue. Humility is needed when coming to the Word of God, which is seen by having an attitude of modesty and teachability.³¹ Calvin also asserts the need for the reader to have pure eyes and upright senses toward the Scripture, this can only come from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.³²

Calvin tries to show the need for the appropriate attitude and approach to the Word of God by attacking the Catholics and the Radical Reformers who, he believes, misuse the Scriptures.

²⁸ This can be inferred from Calvin's statements on the authority of Scripture found in the *Institutes* I.vii.1 (74), when he writes, "it is worth-while to say something about the authority of Scripture, not only to prepare our hearts to *reverence* it, but to banish all doubt. . . Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard," (emphasis mine). Here we can see one must approach the Word in faith, believing it is sprung from heaven, and once we have this faith, then we should come to it with reverence. We also can see this in *Institutes* I.vii.4 (78-79); I.viii.3 (83-84).

²⁹ *Institutes* IV.xvi.4 (1327).

³⁰ Kraus, “Calvin’s Exegetical Principles,” 10.

³¹ *Institutes* I.vii.5 (81). Cf. *Institutes* I.xiii.3 (124).

³² *Institutes* I.vii.4 (79-80). Cf. Kraus, *op. cit.*, 10.

Writing about the authority of the New Testament, Calvin criticises the rational humanists for their unwillingness to see the Scripture as sacred. He states:

Three Evangelists recount their history in a humble and lowly style; for many proud folk this simplicity arouses contempt. This is because they do not pay attention to the chief divisions of doctrine from which it would be easy to infer that the Evangelists are discussing heavenly mysteries above human capacity. Surely all who are endowed with a drop of sincere modesty, on reading the first chapter of Luke, will be made ashamed. *Let all those sharp-nosed faultfinders—whose highest desire is to drive the reverence for Scripture from their own and others' hearts—come into the open. Let them read John's Gospel: whether they want to or not, there they shall find a thousand sayings to arouse, at least, their dull minds—nay, I should rather say, to burn a dreadful brand upon their consciences for the restraint of their mockery. . . Let these dogs deny that the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles; or even let them discredit history.*³³

Torrance observes this element in Calvin as well, stating:

What kind of approach to the Scriptures does Calvin suggest? 'In the first place we must be warned in the reading of the Scriptures to keep to the way that the Spirit of God points out, which will certainly be plain and consistent for those who aspire after Christ. In the second place we must not seek to be or appear to be ingenious by complicating tangled questions. Finally, we must not reject at once anything that is strange or obscure. This is the fault that deserves not a little censure in many people, when their ignorance breaks out into aversion. *He shows very little reverence for God who rejects as his oracles whatever he himself does not understand.* For what else is this but to measure the infinite wisdom of God by the small measure of our own understanding, or the whole world by one finger? But if we confess that the Scripture has come forth from God, let us not be surprised if much is contained in it beyond our understanding.'³⁴

Calvin addresses the Libertines³⁵ in the *Institutes* regarding their lack of reverence and respect for the Scripture. Calvin also argues against the Anabaptists in their treatment of Scripture

³³ *Institutes* I.viii.11 (90-91), (emphasis mine); cf. I.viii.1-2 (81-83); I.xiii.3 (123-124); I.viii.5 (85-86); I.vii.4 (78-80).

³⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 150-151, quoting from *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, II, 177; (emphasis mine).

³⁵ The Libertines were part of the Radical Reformation who did not follow the main teachings and practices of the Magisterial Reformers. They were much more liberal on their view of the Word and Spirit. For more information on the Libertines and other radical reformers see my dissertation, Daniel B. Gilbert, "The Pneumatic Charismata in the Theology of John Calvin," chapter 4 (University of Aberdeen, 2005).

as “seizing upon whatever first comes to hand where they ought to proceed further, and in stubbornly clinging to one word where they ought to compare many things together.” “From this,” Calvin continues, “it can only happen that they are repeatedly deceived, for they do not apply themselves to a sound knowledge of anything.”³⁶

The interpreter's approach to the Scripture, without reverence for God and His Word, cannot come to a great knowledge of Scripture. The interpreter's humble and correct attitude or approach to Scripture is a prerequisite for interpreting Scripture, and, in Calvin's view, it is with the Holy Spirit that one is able to approach the Word properly.

Although Calvin's concept is correct, it is clear that people can still learn and discover many life principles when reading the Bible, whether people are believers or not. For example, the principle of sowing and reaping is a universal principle that anyone who reads the texts can grasp and understand. The same is true regarding reading the Bible and discovering the historical accuracy of many of the texts. Whether people are believers or not does not necessarily keep them from understanding much the Word. However, Calvin is correct when he states that it is only through the Holy Spirit that people can have the appropriate attitude when approaching Scripture. This attitude should be one of faith and humility in order to have thorough insights to the text.

³⁶ *Institutes* IV.xvi.12 (1334-1335).

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation

The Illumination of the Holy Spirit

To Calvin, the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer is the key to interpreting Scripture. Calvin believes that without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to come to the Word of God with the right attitude; without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to properly interpret the Scripture in which the Spirit, Himself, brought forth through holy men. Floor states, "in the exegetical principles as found in Calvin there is special stress on the place of the Holy Spirit in the whole process of understanding and interpretation. In his hermeneutics especially Calvin emerges fully as the theologian of the Holy Spirit."³⁷ Calvin states, "no one should now hesitate to confess that he is able to understand God's mysteries only in so far as he is illumined by God's grace."³⁸ To be able to understand the mysteries of God, one must be illumined by God's grace which is "through the 'inner witness of the Holy Spirit.'"³⁹ Calvin emphasizes this need for anyone to not only understand the Word of God but to accept it. He states, "the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the *inward testimony of the Spirit*."⁴⁰

³⁷ Lambertus Floor, "The Hermeneutics of Calvin," *Calvinus Reformatore: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society*, Institute for Reformational Studies, Series F, no. 17 (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 182.

³⁸ *Institutes* II.ii.21 (281); cf. Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," 9. Calvin continues this use of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in people. We see this in *Institutes* III.ii.33-34 (580-582). Calvin states, "without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing." He continues by saying the Spirit must not only illuminate the mind but penetrate the heart of people for them to know Christ. We could carry on this thought of Calvin, which he would undoubtedly agree with, as saying the Spirit must not only illuminate the mind but illuminate the heart of people to understanding the Word of God.

³⁹ Kraus "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," 9; cf. *Institutes* I.vii.4 (79).

⁴⁰ *Institutes*, I.vii.4 (79).

It is evident that Calvin emphasises the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the believer to begin to understand the Word of God.

The Teacher and Interpreter of Scripture

The Holy Spirit is not only the Author of the Scripture, but He is the Teacher of it. Calvin consistently calls the Spirit, "Teacher" or "inner Teacher." Since He is the inner Teacher, it is the Holy Spirit who illuminates the mind to understand the Word. In his *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, Calvin makes a strong statement regarding the teaching role of the Spirit in interpretation, stating, "it is the work of the Spirit alone to teach men's minds effectively."⁴¹ The major role of the Spirit then for the interpreter is to teach him or her the Word of God and to guide them into all truth. Calvin reinforces this in commenting on John 16:14:

We now see that Christ's admonition that He would be glorified by the Spirit whom He should send is not superfluous. For it was to teach us that the *role of the Holy Spirit* was simply to establish Christ's kingdom and to maintain and confirm for ever all that the Father had given Him. What then is the purpose of the Spirit's teaching? Not to lead us away from the school of Christ, but rather to ratify that voice in which we are commanded to listen to Him; otherwise He would detract from Christ's glory.⁴²

Calvin clearly sees the role of the Spirit as the teacher and the interpreter for those who have been illumined by Him. In 1 Peter 1:11 Calvin suggests this, stating: "At the same time high praises is given to their [prophets'] doctrine, for it was the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Although the preachers and ministers were men, He was the Teacher. He does not say without reason that the

⁴¹ *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 3:6 (42).

⁴² *Commentary on John*, 16:14 (II.121). This role as the teacher of all Christ has taught, Calvin emphasises numerously. To note just a few places: *Commentary on Romans*, 11:34 (260); *Commentary on Psalms*, 119:125 (CTS V:5); *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 24:7 (CTS III:227-233); cf. Forstman. *Word and Spirit*, 74-76.

Spirit of Christ then ruled, and he makes the Spirit, sent from heaven, the Lord of the teachers of the Gospel.”⁴³

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Calvin again emphasises this, “the Spirit of God, from whom the teaching of the Gospel comes, is the *only true interpreter* for opening it up to us.”⁴⁴ Without the Holy Spirit, no one can properly interpret the Word of God. The interpreter must not only be illumined by the Spirit but needs to recognise it is the Spirit who teaches us and reveals to us the meaning of the Word of God.

The Natural or Literal Sense

When we approach the Scripture seeking the Holy Spirit to reveal the purpose or meaning of the text, we discover that it is found in the natural or literal sense of that text. Taking the natural, literal or genuine sense of Scripture is one of the main guidelines in Calvin's hermeneutical methods.⁴⁵ Calvin opposes the “four-fold sense of Scripture” and the “double-literal sense.”⁴⁶ Calvin believes

⁴³ *Commentary on 1 Peter*, 1:11 (240).

⁴⁴ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 2:14 (62). Cf. Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 77-79.

⁴⁵ Several scholars view the natural sense of Scripture to be Calvin's major hermeneutical principle above brevity and clarity. Those who hold this view are John Leith, “John Calvin - Theologian of the Bible,” *Interpretation*, vol. XXV, no. 3 (Richmond, VA: Union Theological Seminary, July 1971) 329-344; Mitchell Hunter, *op. cit.*, 82-83; and Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 122, to name a few. However, others see Calvin having other primary principles rather than brevity, clarity and/or the natural sense. For example, Forstman, *Word and Spirit*, 106-123, believes Calvin's primary principle to be the unity of Scripture. It is important to realise that all of these and other views are part of Calvin's philosophy of interpretation and part of his principles for interpretation. One should not become dogmatic in trying to comprehend all of Calvin's knowledge or views of interpretation. The twenty-first century mind tries to place everything in clear, distinct order; however, Calvin although he has an exegetical method, does not always communicate it in clear, distinct order. The only place he does anything similar is in the “Preface” in his *Commentary on Romans*, which should be the starting point to build from. Greene-McCreight gives great clarification on this topic regarding this about Calvin. She emphasises the need for the reader of Calvin to not only look at what he says regarding his interpretation, but even more importantly, is why Calvin interprets a certain way and how he comes to a particular interpretation. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram*, 19-22.

⁴⁶ The Medieval Church does affirm the fourfold sense of Scripture. The Scriptures are viewed as having four layers or senses to obtain a full understanding of the text. They are: 1) the literal-historical sense, which is rarely the true meaning; 2) the allegorical sense, which is what we should see and believe; 3) the moral or tropological sense, what we should do after understanding the text; and 4) the anagogical sense, what we may hope.

that the spiritual sense is found in the natural or literal sense and not separate from it. Rossouw writes:

According to Calvin, the words *litera* and *spiritus*, as they are used by Paul, bear no reference to different senses of Scripture, but rather to the question whether the one Word of God which comes to us in the words of Scripture, is received with the heart or not. *Spiritus* refers to the *doctrina spiritualis*; that is, to a kind of teaching which is not just spoken by mouth, but which penetrates the soul with a living awareness (*vivo sensu*). The contrast between *litera* and *spiritus* has nothing to do with different modes of explication (*expositio*), but refers to the absence or presence of power (*vis*) and fruit (*fructus*). A 'spiritual' interpretation of Scripture is an interpretation in which the Spirit of God is at work, illuminating our minds so that we can discern the pure doctrine of Scripture, and sealing this doctrine on our hearts so that we may enjoy the full benefits thereof. For Calvin the pure doctrine of Scripture is not hidden in a mystical way behind the literal sense of the text. It is, on the contrary, contained in this literal sense. We can only hope to interpret Scripture according to its 'spiritual' sense, if in humble obedience to the text we concentrate on its literal sense, thus allowing the divine Author of Scripture to purify our interpretation of any human opinion and unscriptural tradition and prejudices.⁴⁷

Rossouw gives a good explanation of Calvin's understanding of the literal and spiritual senses. To separate the two is separating the Word from the Spirit, like the Radicals do in Calvin's understanding. For Calvin, Word and Spirit are inseparable and it is the Spirit of God who brings forth the proper sense of Scripture, which is the literal sense. Childs reveals how Calvin rejects the double-literal sense as well, stating:

Calvin rejected any dichotomy between the literal and spiritual senses. . . opposing Nicholas of Lyra's double literal sense and Faber's disparagement of the historical. Calvin spoke of

This fourfold sense of Scripture develops from some of the early Church Fathers who prescribe reading the Scripture searching for the literal, moral and allegorical senses, with the literal not being as important as the latter two. Origen and Augustine develop this method from slightly different perspectives, but by the medieval times, the Church carries this on adding the fourth sense. The Roman Catholic Church of the fifteenth and sixteenth century continues this hermeneutical method along with some other procedures. Cf. Rossouw, 'Calvin's Hermeneutics of Holy Scripture', in *Calvinus Reformatore: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society*. Institute for Reformational Studies, Series F, n.17. Potchefstroom, South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982, 173; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 70; Brevard S. Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," *Beitrage zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift fur Walther Zimmerli zum 70*, eds. Herausgegeben van Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart und Rudolf Smend (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 82-83.

⁴⁷ Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics," 174.

the *versus scripturae sensus* which is both literal and spiritual, the single true sense of the text. Above all, Calvin's approach focused on the text itself, not trying to penetrate through it in a search for something behind it, because for him the text was the faithful vehicle for communicating the oracles of God. Calvin does not therefore need to add a secondary or spiritual meaning to the text because the literal sense is its own witness to God's divine plan.⁴⁸

Calvin disregards Nicholas of Lyra's double literal sense strongly. Calvin also uses several Jewish scholars to help him understand the meaning of terms and the historical and cultural background of the Old Testament. The Jewish scholars stress the "plain, self-evident meaning of the text," which includes the reference of the grammatical style and gives the reader the natural, literal sense.⁴⁹

Calvin maintains the need for the interpreter to hold to the natural sense of Scripture and try not to dress it up for the readers. In his *Commentary on Galatians*, Calvin reveals this principle very clearly as he vehemently attacks, the misuse of allegory which was so popular. He writes regarding Galatians 4:22:

As the story which he [Paul] cites seems to have nothing to do with the question, he gives it an allegorical interpretation. But he writes that these things are *allagoroumena*. Origen, and many others along with him, have seized this occasion of twisting Scripture this way and that, away from *the genuine sense (a genuino sensu)*. For they inferred that the *literal sense* is too meagre and poor and that beneath the bark of the letter there lie deeper mysteries which cannot be extracted but by hammering out allegories. And this they did without difficulty, for the world always has and always will prefer speculations which seem ingenious, to solid doctrine. . . Scripture, they say, is fertile and thus bears multiple meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is the most rich and inexhaustible fount of all wisdom. But I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings which anyone may fasten to it at his pleasure. Let us know, then, that the *true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one*. . . and let us embrace and hold it resolutely. Let us not merely

⁴⁸ Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture," 87, (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture," 83-86; Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram*, 95-106; Also Rossouw, "Calvin's Hermeneutics," 153.

neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the *literal sense (a literali sensu)*.⁵⁰

Calvin interchanges the literal sense with the terms natural, genuine and simple sense, all meaning the same. The literal sense of Scripture is not hidden or a mystery but is “the single true sense of the text.”⁵¹ To Calvin, the literal sense is also not taking each term literally or taking certain genres of the Scripture literally, as some modern fundamentalist do, for Calvin also recognises the need for proper textual criticism, as well as the element of figurative language. Regarding figurative language and the use of allegory, Calvin does not disregard the proper use of allegory, but due to his humanistic training, he did not fully adopt its use, except when he deemed necessary.⁵²

Calvin continues to stress the need for the natural sense in his *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*. Expounding on 3:6 concerning the letter and the Spirit, Calvin reveals the tragic misuse and abuse of allegory over and against the true natural meaning of Scripture. He states:

Great authority has been given to a comment of Origen's to the effect that by the letter we should understand the grammatical and natural sense of Scripture, which he calls the literal sense, and by the Spirit the allegorical sense, which is commonly held to be spiritual. Thus for several centuries it was commonly said and accepted that here Paul is giving us a key for expounding the Scriptures allegorically, whereas in fact *nothing could be further from his mind*. . . This passage has been distorted and wrongly interpreted by Origen and then by others, and they have given rise to the *most disastrous error that Scripture is not only useless but actually harmful unless it is allegorized*. This error has been the source of many evils. Not only did it open the way for the corruption of the *natural meaning of Scripture* but also set up boldness in allegorizing as the chief exegetical virtue. . . The terms ‘letter’

⁵⁰ *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:22 (84-85), (emphasis mine).

⁵¹ Childs, “The Sensus Literalis of Scripture,” 87.

⁵² Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram*, 99-104. Calvin continues to speak against allegory, but also utilises it some throughout his work. i.e., *Commentaries on Genesis* 2:8 (CTS I:113-115); 49:1f. (CTS 2:438ff.); *Commentary on Isaiah*, 19:12 (CTS II:60-62); 33:18 (CTS III:33-35); *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 31:24 (CTS IV:116-118); *Commentary on Daniel* 8:20-25 (CTS II:118-131); 10:5-6 (CTS II:240-243); also the *Institutes*, III.iv.4-5 (626-629); II.v.19 (339-340); II.v.19 n. 39 (339).

and 'Spirit' have nothing to do with the methods of expounding Scripture but with its force and fruit.⁵³

It is clear that Calvin desires to hold to the natural meaning of Scripture as one of his primary hermeneutical guidelines. He believes in “. . .the well-known principle, ‘Sacred scripture is its own interpreter’. . .Thanks to Calvin's often admired knowledge of the Bible and his power of memory he was able to pursue the usage of specific Hebrew and Greek expressions, not in terms of association of ideas, but in terms of specific expressions and their *real meaning*.”⁵⁴

Throughout his commentaries, Calvin re-emphasises this important principle. He uses words or phrases such as the need for: sobriety; moderate procedure; genuine sense; we must observe the purpose of the Holy Spirit; ponder what the Holy Spirit teaches; the literal sense; and the sense will flow of its own accord.⁵⁵ Parker carries these thoughts of Calvin through stating, “the literal sense is that ‘dictated’ by God himself; give the literal sense a chance, learn from it what God intended in general, and then it will all come together and of its own accord make excellent sense.”⁵⁶

Calvin learns this principle from his humanistic training and the Church Father, John Chrysostom. Writing about Chrysostom's exegetical principles, he states, “the outstanding merit of our author Chrysostom is that it was his *supreme concern* always not to turn aside even to the slightest degree from the *genuine, simple sense of Scripture*, and to allow himself no liberties by

⁵³ *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 3:6 (41-43), (emphasis mine).

⁵⁴ Kraus, “Calvin's Exegetical Principles,” 15-16, (emphasis mine).

⁵⁵ *Commentary Exodus*, 26:1ff. (CTS II:172-173); *Commentary on Genesis*, 49:1f. (CTS II:439); *Commentary on Daniel*, 10:5-6 (CTS II:242). Cf. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 71-72.

⁵⁶ Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, 72.

twisting the *plain meaning of the words*.”⁵⁷ It is the natural, genuine, and literal sense or meaning of Scripture that Calvin believes with great conviction to be one of the major principles in interpretation that the Holy Spirit illuminates in believers as they study the Scripture.

Conclusion

We have observed in this essay an overview of Calvin's understanding of the inspiration of Scripture and his high view of the Bible. Although there are numerous scholars who have various views on Calvin's understanding of this foundational concept, there is strong evidence that Calvin believed the Word of God was inspired by the Holy Spirit through holy men. Whether that means the mechanical-literal dictation or the ambassadorial position, Calvin believed the Bible was the inspired Word of God and was a man of the Word.

After learning about Calvin's overall view of Scripture, discovering how one should approach Scripture was very important to Calvin. He did not believe one should just view the Bible as an ordinary book and just try to read it or interpret it from an academic or sceptical attitude. He emphasized throughout the *Institutes* and his other works the importance of approaching the Word with great humility and reverence. As one reads Calvin's understanding of interpreting Scripture, one realizes how serious he felt about the proper attitude of the reader and interpreter of the Bible. It is not to be taken lightly.

This leads us to the final observation of Calvin's approach to Scripture and that is the foundational role of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, people could not come to the

⁵⁷ John R. Walchenbach, "John Calvin as Biblical Commentator: An Investigation into Calvin's Use of John Chrysostom as an Exegetical Tutor," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974), 3, quoting from Calvin's "Preface" to Homilies of Chrysostom, *CO IX*, 831-838, (emphasis mine).

knowledge of God or understand the Word of God. They could not be regenerated or sanctified or live a godly life. It is the Holy Spirit who is the “the fountain of all understanding, wisdom, and truth, and avouched unto us by Christ, the Son of the everlasting God.”⁵⁸

Calvin's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit, both in the Word of God and in believers, as well as their approach and interpretation of Scripture, has also been shown. To Calvin, the Holy Spirit is intricately involved in helping believers understand the Word. Why so much emphasis on the Holy Spirit? Well, Calvin knew that without the inner workings of the Spirit and the illumination of the Spirit, one will not only pervert the Word, but make idols of their own interpretations and lead others away from the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus.

Today, it is just as important than ever to heed Calvin's understanding and approach to the Word of God. Whether we are believers in the Western world or in the Majority world, we too must rely on the Holy Spirit in all areas of our lives, but especially in how we approach, read, and interpret the Holy Scripture.

⁵⁸ Calvin, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” *Commentary on Psalms*, (CTS I:xxxix).