

## JOHN CALVIN AND THE BIBLE

### I. VERY CONTRADICTORY VIEWS ON THIS SUBJECT HAVE RECENTLY OBTAINED.

As far back as the year 1886-87 a well-known minister of our Church was wont to say that John Calvin held a relatively "liberal" view of the inspiration of the Christian Scriptures. The same minister was heard to cite two passages from Calvin's commentaries which, he said, showed that Calvin had held the "liberal view." Those passages were Matt. xxvii. 9 and Acts vii. 16. An examination seemed to show that the minister had misunderstood Calvin's teaching in the passages referred to; or had, without investigation, passed on the view imputed to Calvin by some other teacher who had made no sufficient study of Calvin's teaching on the matter.

A year or so later a gentleman, then Professor in Yale University, was wont to make much of the "liberal views" of the Bible held by Luther, and Calvin, and he was wont to use their views as reasons why the young men who sat in his classroom should adopt a like view—should no longer hold to the view of verbal inspiration—nor any view that made the Bible the word of God, or an infallible rule of faith and practice.

Back of 1874, J. J. Van Oosterzee, D.D., Professor in the University of Utrecht, had taught that "Errors and inaccuracies in matters of subordinate importance are to be found in the Bible. A Luther, a Calvin, a Coccejus, among the older theologians; a Tholuck, a Neander, a Lange, a Stier, among the more modern ones, have admitted this without hesitation" (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, page 205). According to Professor Prentiss, quoted by Dr. Dunlop Moore in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, January, 1893, page 60, Dr. Briggs' position in denying perfect correspondence of minor details in Scripture is the view of Calvin.

On the other hand; M. Guizot, a statesman, a historian, a scholar, a member of the Institute of France, has this to say of Calvin's regard for the Bible: "Like Calvin, many pious and learned men uphold the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures; they assert that not only the thoughts but the words in

which they are clothed are divinely inspired—every word on every subject, the language as well as the doctrine” (*St. Louis and Calvin*, page 183). Guizot does not approve of Calvin’s position on the inspiration of Scripture. He held that Calvin had made two great mistakes, one on Free-will and Predestination, and the other on the Inspiration of Scripture. He is none the less a good witness that Calvin taught that not only the thoughts but the words of the Bible in which the thoughts were clothed were divinely inspired.

According to A. A. Hodge, “The Presbyterian Church, in unison with all evangelical Christians, teaches that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, having been given by the immediate and plenary inspiration of God, are both in meaning and verbal expression the word of God to man.” Drs. A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield (in the *Presbyterian Review*, Vol. II, page 225) maintain that the line between the thoughts and words of Scripture can never rationally be drawn.

Whether these gentlemen, Drs. Hodge and Warfield, have over-estimated and over-stated the general prevalence of this view among evangelical writers or not, they had a right to regard Calvin as holding that the Scriptures are the word of God. We have no adequate ground for teaching that he believed that the Scriptures delivered to the people of God by their original writers contained incorrect teaching, Dr. Charles Augustus Briggs’ argument (as in *Whither*, page 68) to the contrary notwithstanding. Dr. Briggs in the passage cited says, “We have not the originals and can never have them. Biblical criticism brings us closer to the originals, but does not remove the errors. It is in accordance with sound logic and scientific methods to form our conceptions of the original documents from the best documents that we have. The presumption, therefore, in regard to errors in the best texts, is that they were also in the original documents.” Dr. Briggs’ inference in this “presumption” would be more worthy of respect if we knew that the copyists of these documents were equal in ability and devotion to God’s truth, to the apostolic writers, or if we knew that the sub-apostolic generation of Christians were equal to the college of the apostles. But there are valid reasons for denying this. The apostles themselves, judged by their writings, seem to have been more capable of accurate work than the men of the next generation of writers by whom copies of the apostolic writings

were made. Calvin was a clearer and more cogent reasoner than Dr. Briggs. He would probably have refused to go with the New York Union Seminary professor in his inference in regard to errors in apostolic writings. So much in regard to allegations made concerning Calvin's view of the Bible.

## II. CALVIN'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE EXPRESSED IN HIS EXPOSITION OF THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGES WHICH DEAL WITH THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE.

His view of Scripture may be drawn with certainty from his exposition of passages in which Scripture teaches concerning its own nature and origin. Take for example pages 248-249 of his *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. There, in commenting on 2 Tim. iii. 16, he says :

"All Scripture, or the whole Scripture, though it makes little difference as to the meaning. He (Paul) follows out that commendation which he had glanced at briefly. First, he commends the Scripture on account of its authority; and secondly on account of the utility which springs from it. In order to uphold the authority of the Scripture, he declares that it is divinely inspired for, if it be so, it is beyond all controversy that men ought to receive it with reverence. This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God hath spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion; but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. Whoever, then, wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him, first of all, lay down this as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.

"If it be objected, 'How can this be known?' I answer both to disciples and teachers, God is made known to be the author of it by the revelation of the same Spirit. Moses and the Prophets did not utter at random what we have received from their hand, but, speaking at the suggestion of God, they boldly, and fearlessly, testified, what was actually true, that it was the mouth of the Lord that spoke. The same Spirit, therefore, who made Moses and the Prophets certain of their calling, now also testifies to our hearts, that He has employed

them as His servants to instruct us. Accordingly we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the author of the Scripture; for although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all, and yet is visible to the elect alone. This is the first clause, that we owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it."

This passage seems to indicate clearly that Calvin held that God is responsible for the entire character of Scripture. (Notice the last sentence: *Hoc prius est membrum eandem Scripturae reverentiam deberi quam Deo deferimus, quia ab eo solo manavit, nec quicquam humani habet admixtum.*) He taught that God is so fully the author of Scripture that all its peculiarities of speech and choice of materials and cases of reasoning have His sanction.

In Acts xvii. 11, we find Luke applauding the Bereans to whom Paul had preached, because they not only received the word with all readiness but "searched the Scriptures [of the Old Testament] daily whether these new things were so." He thus shows that he would have no new religious teaching approved unless it manifestly be rooted in Old Testament teaching. What then was Luke's view of Old Testament teaching? Like Paul's view of it—that it was *God-breathed* (Θεόπνευστος); and that it could not be contradictory, nor even inconsistent, one part with other parts.

Calvin's comment on Rom. xv. 4 ("For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning; that we through patience and comfort of the Scripture might have hope") is, "*For whatsoever things.* This is an application of the example" (see the third verse) "lest anyone should think that to exhort us to imitate Christ was foreign to His purpose." "Nay;" he says, "There is nothing in Scripture which is not useful for your instruction, and for the direction of your life."

"This is an interesting passage, by which we understand that there is nothing vain and unprofitable contained in the oracles of God; and we are at the same time taught that it is by the reading of the Scripture that we make progress in piety and holiness of life. Whatever then is delivered in the Scripture we ought to strive to learn; for it were a reproach offered to the Holy Spirit, to think that He has taught anything which it

does not concern us to know ; let us also know, that whatever is taught us conduces to the advancement of religion. And though he speaks of the Old Testament, the same thing is also true of the writings of the apostles ; for since the Spirit of Christ is everywhere like Himself, there is no doubt but that He has adapted His teaching by the apostles, as formerly by the Prophets, to the edification of His people. Moreover, we find a most striking condemnation of those fanatics who vaunt that the Old Testament is abolished, and that it belongs not in any degree to Christians ; for with what front can they turn away from those things which, as Paul testifies, have been appointed by God for their salvation ?

“ But when he adds, that through the patience and the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope, he does not include the whole of that benefit which is to be derived from God’s word ; but he briefly points out the main end, for the Scripture is especially serviceable for this purpose—to raise up those who are prepared by patience, and strengthened by consolations, to the hope of eternal life, and to keep them in the contemplation of it. The word *consolation* some render exhortation ; and of this I do not disapprove, only that consolation is more suitable to patience, for this arises from it ; because then only we are prepared to bear adversities with patience, when God blends them with consolation. The patience of the faithful is not indeed that hardihood which philosophers recommend, but that meekness by which we willingly submit to God, while a taste of His goodness and paternal love renders all things sweet to us : This nourishes and sustains hope.”

This testimony as to the character and value of Scripture teaching covers the entirety of Scripture—the Old Testament and the New, every part of either.

### III. CALVIN’S DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE AS INFERRED FROM HIS VIEW OF NEW TESTAMENT QUOTATIONS FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

For his view of the propriety of the quotations of the Old Testament by New Testament writers, it will suffice to read his comment on Matt. ii. 6 (see *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. I, page 133) : “ It ought always to be observed that, whenever any proof is quoted from Scripture by the apostles, though they do not translate word for word, and sometimes depart widely

from the language, yet it is applied correctly and appropriately to their subject. Let the reader always consider the purpose for which the passages of Scripture were brought forward by the evangelists so as not to stick too closely to the particular words, but to be satisfied with this, that the *evangelists never torture Scripture into a different meaning, but apply it correctly in its native meaning* (italics mine). But while it was their intention to supply with milk children and 'novices' (1 Tim. iii. 6) in faith, who were not yet able to endure 'strong meat' (Heb. v. 12), there is nothing to prevent the children of God from making a careful and diligent inquiry into the meaning of Scripture, and thus being led to the fountain by the taste which the apostles afford."

If Calvin notes an occasional variation by a New Testament writer from the literal translation of an Old Testament passage, he notes also that the New Testament writer makes the variation to clarify the message delivered, by the writer of the Old Dispensation, and to apply it to the case for whose solution or enforcement he uses it.

#### IV. THE ARGUMENT FROM CALVIN'S TREATMENT OF THE SO-CALLED DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN ACCOUNTS GIVEN OF AN EVENT BY DIFFERENT NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

Some Modernistic writers make not a little of these differences. Calvin sees no contradictions but certain diversities.

As bearing on this point, read what he says, pages xxxviii and xxxix of *The Argument on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke*. After remarking that "Mark is generally supposed to have been the private friend and disciple of Peter," etc., he says: "But on this subject we need not give ourselves much trouble, for it is of little importance to us, *provided only we believe that he is a properly qualified and divinely appointed witness, who committed nothing to writing, but as the Holy Spirit directed him and guided his pen* [italics mine]. There is no ground whatever for the statement of Jerome, that his gospel is an abridgement of the Gospel of Matthew. . . . From the very commencement he handles the subjects in a different manner. Some things, too, are related by him which the other had omitted, and his narrative of the same event is sometimes more detailed. It is more probable, in my opinion—

and the nature of the case warrants the conjecture—that he had not seen Matthew's book when he wrote his own; so far is he from having expressly intended to make an abridgement.

“ I have the same observation to make respecting *Luke* : for we will not say that the diversity which we perceive in the three evangelists was the object of express arrangement, but as they intended to give an honest narrative of what they knew to be certain and undoubted, each followed the method which he reckoned to be best. Now this *did not happen by chance, but by the direction of Divine Providence, so under this diversity in the manner of writing the Holy Spirit suggested to them an astonishing harmony, which would almost be sufficient of itself to secure credit to them, if there were not other stronger evidences to support their authority.*”

There is much more in *The Argument* to show that while Calvin saw diversity in the narratives of the evangelists, he saw no contradictions; and in handling *the diversities* he showed that while to lazy and shallow and biblically uninformed minds, passages may appear discrepant and even contradictory, these contradictions, to sound and diligent students, guided by the Spirit, contain no warring representations, but only a *richer presentation of the one harmonious story of Christ's works, teaching and life.*

#### V. DID CALVIN HOLD, NEVERTHELESS, THAT THERE ARE ERRORS IN THE BIBLE ?

He has been represented by some to teach that there is an error in Matt. xxvii. 9, and another in Acts vii. 16; but what he says on Matt. xxvii. 9 (“ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet ”) is: “ *How the name of Jeremiah crept in I confess I do not know, nor do I anxiously trouble myself to inquire; certainly, that the name Jeremiah has been put by an error for Zechariah, the thing itself shows; [italics mine] for nothing like this is read in Jeremiah.*” To represent Calvin as here acknowledging an error in Scripture as it came from the hand of its original authors is without warrant. He says that the name Jeremiah here has *obrepserit* (crawled in), *has crept in*; and in view of what he has taught about the inerrancy of the sacred historians he can only mean that this error has *crept in* in the course of the transmission of the text to sub-apostolic ages.

As to Acts vii. 16: In his exposition of this passage, these words are found: "And whereas he" (Stephen) "saith afterwards, they were laid in the Sepulchre which Abraham had bought of the sons of Hemor, it is manifest that there is a mistake in the word Abraham. . . . Wherefore this place must be amended."

Now Calvin simply teaches here that there was a mistake in the passage as it lay before Calvin. He is not at pains to tell the reader in the passage itself or its immediate context by whom the mistake was made. But the reader acquainted with Calvin's representation of the real source of the original text of Scripture, made throughout his life, can have no doubt that he would have said, if asked who had introduced the mistake, "Oh, a copyist" (substantially as he had said of a difficulty in Acts vii. 14). In his comment on this fourteenth verse, he had said, "Whereas he saith that Jacob came into Egypt with seventy-five souls, it agreeth not with the words of Moses; for Moses maketh mention of seventy only." (And after giving comments by certain others, he gives his own view of the apparent discrepancy between Moses and Stephen.) "I think that this difference came through the error of the writers (*Librariorum*) who wrote out the books. And it was a matter of no such weight, for which Luke ought to have troubled the Gentiles who were used to the Greek reading. And it may be that he himself did put down the true number; and that some man did correct the same amiss out of that place of Moses" (Calvin, *Com. on Acts*, Vol. I, pages 197-198).

These two cases are usually considered the most favourable to the view that Calvin held to the errancy of the sacred text. They are worthless for the purpose.

## VI. THE TEACHING IN THE INSTITUTES AS TO THE BIBLE.

John Calvin was, for his age, and remains so for our own day, the eminently biblical theologian. He was possessed of extraordinary powers of rational intuition, saw deeply and intuitively into the hearts of things. He was possessed of keen powers of observation. He went for the materials of his system neither to the intuitive reason, nor to natural sense experience; but to the revealed word of God. Whatever was taught in the Bible satisfied him. Of biblical materials he builded the great



system known by his name. By biblical teaching he checked his elaborations, and by biblical teaching he further confirmed the particulars of his teaching and the system as a whole—set forth in the *Institutes*; and if there is a word in the *Institutes* indicative of the untrustworthiness of Scripture, we have yet to discover it.

It is difficult, however, in the limited space at our command, adequately to quote the proofs in his own words which abound in this great work. A few citations only must suffice.

From Book I, Chap. VII, 1: "Before I proceed any further, it is proper to introduce some remarks on the authority of the Scripture, not only to prepare the mind to regard it with due reverence, but also to remove every doubt. For when it is admitted to be a declaration of the word of God, no man can be so deplorably presumptuous, unless he be also destitute of common sense and of the common feelings of men, as to derogate from the credit due to the speaker. But since we are not favoured with daily oracles from heaven, and since it is only in the Scriptures that the Lord has been pleased to preserve His truth in perpetual remembrance, it obtains the same complete credit and authority with believers when they are satisfied of its divine origin, as if they heard the very words pronounced by God Himself."

From Book I, Chap. II, 2 (on the question: How shall we be persuaded of its divine original): "How shall we distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? For the Scripture exhibits as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things of their taste."

From Book I, Chap. VII, 4 we read further: "The principal proof . . . of the Scriptures is everywhere derived from the character of the Divine Speaker. The Prophets and Apostles boast not of their own genius or any of those talents which conciliate the faith of the hearers, nor do they insinuate arguments from reason; but bring forward the sacred name of God, to compel the submission of the whole world." Calvin makes clear that he believes that, "If we wish to consult the true interest of our consciences; that they may not be unstable and wavering, the subjects of perpetual doubt; that they may not hesitate at the smallest scruples—this persuasion must be sought from a higher source than human reasons, or judgments, or conjectures—even from the secret testimony of the Spirit. It is

true that, if we were inclined to argue the point, many things might be adduced which certainly evince if there be any God in heaven, that He is the Author of the Law and the Prophecies, and the Gospel" (Vol. I, Chap. VII, 4). "As God alone is a sufficient witness of Himself, in His own Word, so also the Word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit" (*Ibidem*).

In Book I, Chap. VIII, Calvin sets forth "Rational Proofs to Establish the Belief of the Scriptures," but in the final paragraph says, "There are other reasons, and those neither few nor weak, by which the native dignity and authority of the Scripture are not only maintained in the minds of the pious, but also completely vindicated against the subtleties of calumniators but such as alone are not sufficient to produce firm faith in it, till the Heavenly Father, discovering His own power therein, places its authority beyond all controversy. Wherefore the Scripture will then only be effectual to produce the saving knowledge of God, when the certainty of it shall be founded on the internal persuasion of the Holy Spirit."

Calvin would seem to implicate the Holy Spirit in the errancy of Scripture; if it were originally errant.

In Book I, Chap. IX, 1, Calvin says: "The office of the Spirit, then, which is promised to us, is not to feign new and unheard-of revelations, or to coin a new system of doctrine, which would seduce us from the received doctrine of the Gospel, but to seal to our minds the same doctrine which the Gospel delivers."

The Modernists, who represent Calvin's view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture as essentially their own, appear to show great capacity for empty assertion.

Calvin regarded the Christian Scriptures as from God in whole and in part; and he endeavoured to conform his life and character thereto; and not without a great degree of success, according to the view of even Ernest Renan, since he pronounced him the most Christian man in three centuries.

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