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LE SAINCT ESPRIT A YCI POURTRAIT AU VIF ... CALVIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S MODUS OPERANDI IN THE LIFE OF BELIEVERS IN THE LIGHT OF THE PREFACE TO HIS COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS

ABSTRACT

The autobiographical details in Calvin's Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* illustrate the *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit working out an identification between the authors of the Psalms and the reader. In the Preface, the Psalms are divinely inspired, life-giving words that enhance the experience of the readers similar to the experience lived and expressed by the authors. The *testimonium internum Spiritu Sancti* is the core of the Preface inasmuch as expressed by means of a necessary process of anatomy and dissection of all the affections of the soul. Since the book of Psalms adequately deals with all that concerns the knowledge of eternal salvation, the *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit through the Psalms is the gospel itself.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms* has been quoted mostly on account of its autobiographical information (Mays 1990:195). However, these autobiographical sketches are so strongly framed in terms of a parallel which Calvin draws between himself and King David¹ that one would miss the point

1 Cf 1859:vii:

... comprendre l'intention de chacun de ceux qui ont composé les Pseaumes. Et pource qu'entre tous ceux-là David est le principal, ce qui m'a beaucoup servy pour entendre plus à plein les complaintes

of the Preface if one were to reduce it to a set of personal confessions.² The Preface presents an identification between the human author of Scripture and Calvin as expositor, who testifies to a *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit in creating this identification for the purpose of instruction. Inevitably, this *modus operandi* leads one to understand something of Calvin's view of Scripture.

The present article examines Calvin's indirect acknowledgement that the Psalms are divinely inspired, life-giving words inasmuch as they enhance the experience of the readers to the level of the experience lived and expressed by the authors. The autobiographical sketches only form the core of the A-B-A structure of this Preface, as an illustration of its prime purpose. I use the word "view" — as in "view of Scripture" — for lack of a better alternative. In the Preface Calvin does not use a theoretical hypothesis or even a formulated concept about Scripture, but declares the nature of this Scripture by telling his readers how he himself was gripped by a living word inspired by the Holy Spirit.

qu'il fait des affections que l'Eglise a à soustenir au dedans de soy, et par ceux mesmes qui se disent en estre membres, c'est que j'ay souffert les mesmes choses ou semblables des ennemis domestiques de l'Eglise.

... to understand the intent of each of those who composed the Psalms. Since David is the main of them, one thing helped me very much to understand more fully his complaints about the ailments which the Church has to endure within herself, and which are caused by people claiming to be members of her, namely that I too suffered similar things from inside enemies of the Church. (My translation - E.K.)

- 2 In the light of the famous *De me non libenter loquor* ... Ganoczy (1966:301-302) stresses it in the following way:

Cette *Préface* est beaucoup trop riche pour qu'on n'y voie que le passage concernant la "subita conversio". Il nous semble même clair que l'importance de ce passage est secondaire par rapport à tout ce qui y est dit sur la vocation du réformateur, comparée à celles de David et de l'Apôtre Paul (...) dans la *Préface au Commentaire des Psaumes* ce n'est pas la conversion personnelle de Calvin qui est le sujet dominant, mais le triomphe de la toute-puissance divine sur tous les empêchements humains, dans et par le ministère de son serviteur, en vue du salut de l'Eglise.

De Jong (1994:3) emphasises the same aspect:

The Psalms are the anatomy of *his* soul. They vividly reflect the swirling, wide-ranging, sometimes conflicting and competing religious dispositions of this complex and sensitive man of Geneva as he strove to live faithfully before the face of God.

2. A *MODUS OPERANDI* OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The personal tone of the Preface is obvious in the first sentence:

Si la lecture de ces miens Commentaires apporte aussi grand avancement a l'Église de Dieu comme j'ay senti de prouffit en mon endroit en les escrivant, je n'auray point d'occasion de me repentir d'avoir entrepris ce labour (1859:5).³

This echoes Augustine's quote at the end of the address to the reader of the 1560 edition of the *Institutes*: "Je me confesse estre du reng de ceux qui escrivent en profitant, & profitent en escrivant".⁴ Calvin indicates that his own spiritual growth was at stake in the process of writing these commentaries. As De Jong notes (1994:3):

Calvin's preface, then, does not belong to the biographical genre. It is a confession, a testimony, a *pro vita mea* designed to serve the exposition by acknowledging how a believing commentator cannot engage this material without becoming totally and personally absorbed into it.

The Preface is more than an interaction between text and reader/expositor though. It deals with a *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit for the purposes of teaching the reader. The key passage is the following:

3 If the reading of these commentaries of mine furthers the cause of the Church as much as I felt I have benefited from writing them, I will not regret to have undertaken such a labour. (My translation - E.K.).

This personal tone appears in the way Calvin tells his readers about the editorial process of his book; subjective expressions abound, such as "j'avoye eu en fantaisie ..." ("I had had the dream of ..."); "soudain contre ma première délibération il me veint je ne sçay comment en l'esprit ..." ("Suddenly, against my first consideration, I do not know how it came to my mind ..."); "puis après quand je vey que la chose rencontroit selon mon désir beaucoup plus que je n'avais espéré, le courage me veint ..." ("Then, when I saw that the thing was progressing to my satisfaction much more than what I had hoped for, I started feeling more courage ..."); "je doutoye que quelque jour contre mon vouloir ..." ("I was doubting that one day, against my will ..."); "Certes je puis bien dire que plutost ceste crainte m'a tiré à dresser l'ouvrage, que je n'y ay esté conduit de franche volonté ..." ("I can certainly say that this fear pulled me to set up this work, rather than I was brought to it by my own will ..."); "et mesmes j'ay senty par mon expérience propre ..." ("Even I felt by my own experience that ...").

4 *Institution* (1957:24). "I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write" (in F.L. Battles' translation, Calvin 1960:5). The address is dated by Calvin himself: 1st of August 1559.

J'ay accoustumé de nommer ce livre une anatomie de toutes les parties de l'âme, pource qu'il n'y a affection en l'homme laquelle ne soit icy représentée comme en un miroir. Mesmes, pour mieux dire, le saint Esprit a icy pourtrait au vif toutes les douleurs, tristesses, craintes, doutes, espérances, sollicitudes, perplexitez, voire jusques aux esmotions confuses desquelles les esprits des hommes ont accoustumé d'estre agitez. Le reste de l'Escriture contient les enseignemens que Dieu a enjoinct à ses serviteurs de nous annoncer, mais yci les Prophètes, d'autant que parlant à Dieu ils descouvrent toutes les affections intérieures, appellent ou plutost tirent un chacun de nous à examiner soy-mesme, afin que rien de tant d'infirmités ausquelles nous sommes sujets, et de tant de vices desquels nous sommes pleins, ne demeure caché (1859:vi).⁵

Three aspects in this passage give consistence to this *modus operandi*:

- “une anatomie de toutes les parties de l'âme” (“an anatomy of all parts of the soul”);
- “le saint Esprit a icy pourtrait au vif” (“the Holy Spirit has here vividly depicted”);
- “les Prophètes (...) tirent un chascun de nous à examiner soy-mesme” (“the Prophets draw each one of us into self-examination”).

First, Calvin makes an observation in terms of a metaphor concerning the nature of the book of Psalms: The metaphor “anatomie de toutes les parties de l'âme” is not a neutral, purely descriptive statement. It is linked to the following statement (“le saint Esprit a icy pourtrait au vif”) by the words “mesmes,

5 I am used to call this book an anatomy of all parts of the soul, for there is not one single affection in man which is not represented here as in a mirror. To put it even better, the Holy Spirit has here vividly depicted all the pains, sadness, fears, doubts, hopes, worries, perplexities, even the most confused emotions by which the minds of people are usually agitated. The rest of Scripture contains the teachings which God commanded his servants to proclaim to us; here, however, the Prophets — inasmuch as speaking to God they unveil all their inner affections — call upon, or rather draw each one of us into self-examination, so that none of the infirmities which affect us, and the many vices which we are filled with, would remain hidden. (My translation - E.K.)

The distinction which Calvin draws between the Psalms and the remainder of Scripture must be noted, but should probably not be overstressed; it is more a question of degree and proportions in the matter dealt with, than a fundamental difference in content.

pour mieux dire" ("even", "to put it better"). In other words, what first comes to Calvin's mind as reader of the Psalms, namely this "anatomy of all parts of the soul", is the product of an action, whose author is the Holy Spirit. It is important to remember that the word *anatomie*, in the context of the sixteenth century, not only points towards a description of the parts of a body, but also starts referring to the action of dissecting a body.⁶

The third aspect of this passage confirms this: The Prophets unveil their own feelings and emotions; Calvin considers them to be the instruments of the great anatomist, namely the Holy Spirit. They encourage the reader to anatomise his own soul. However, they do not do so by explicitly telling the readers: "Do the same as I do"; they do it simply "d'autant que parlans à Dieu ils découvrent toutes les affections intérieures" ("inasmuch as speaking to God they unveil all their inner affections"). Above the prophets, the Holy Spirit has a goal by using the words they address to God: namely to teach the reader of the Psalms to unveil (anatomise) all his affections in order to eliminate any trace of hypocrisy and so to pray correctly. This goal is expressed in a concise way as follows:

En somme tout ce qui peut servir à nous accourager quand il est question de prier Dieu, nous est enseigné en ce livre (1859:vi).⁷

The *modus operandi* of the great anatomist is further expounded by Calvin:

Et non seulement on voit les promesses, mais souventesfois entre le conviement de Dieu et les empeschemens de la chair, nous est proposée la personne qui se prépare et efforce à prier afin que si quelquefois nous nous trouvons agitez de diverses doutes, nous apprenions de resister et combatre, jusques à ce que l'esprit estant libre et desveloppé de tous ces empeschemens, s'eslève à Dieu (1859:vi).⁸

The internal struggle of the Psalmists urges the readers to follow the model in their own spiritual struggles. All this is, however, part of a design specifically

6 Cf. P. Robert (1984:66). A similar metaphor appears under the pen of Fénelon, in the 18th century: "Le prédicateur a fait une anatomie des passions du cœur humain qui égale les maximes de M. de La Rochefoucauld" (Littré 1967:410).

7 "In short, everything which can serve to encourage us when it comes to praying God is taught to us in this book." (My translation - E.K.)

8 One sees not only the promises, but often too, between God's invitation and the impediments of the flesh, we have before us the person who prepares and strives to pray; so much so that if sometimes we find ourselves agitated with various doubts, we should learn to resist and fight, until our spirit, being set free from all those impediments, should elevate itself towards God. (My translation - E.K.)

intended by the great anatomist to achieve this teaching goal (“afin que nous aprenions”, “so that we should learn”). The book of Psalms, Calvin insists, is a “reigle infaillible” (“an infallible rule”). He further writes:

Brief, il n’y a livre auquel plus parfaitement nous soit enseigné la manière de louer Dieu, ou auquel nous soyons plus vivement sollicités à cest exercice de piété (1859:vii).⁹

The book of Psalms therefore teaches and vehemently urges (“vivement sollicités”) the readers to pray.

3. THE *MODUS OPERANDI* ACKNOWLEDGED BY CALVIN WITH REGARD TO HIMSELF

The next section of the Preface introduces the reader to Calvin’s autobiographical sketches. Although the text bears no trace of formal divisions or subdivisions, the first sentence refers to the first sentence of the Preface quoted above:

Au reste, si les lecteurs viennent à sentir quelque fruit et prouffit du labeur que j’ay prins à escrire ces Commentaires, je veux bien qu’ils sçachent que l’expérience que j’aye eue par les combats esquels le Seigneur m’a exercé, encore qu’elle n’ait pas esté des plus grandes, m’y a toutesfois grandement servy: non-seulement à ce que je puisse déduire comment il faut pratiquer et mettre en usage toute la doctrine qu’on en pouvoit recueillir, mais aussi à ce que j’eusse plus grande ouverture à comprendre l’intention de chacun ceux qui ont composé les Pseaumes (1859:vii).¹⁰

In this instance Calvin applies to himself the general remarks he made about the nature of the book of Psalms in relationship to its readers who are

9 In short there is no book where the manner of praising God is taught to us more perfectly, or where we are being more vehemently pressed into this exercise in piety. (My translation - E.K.)

10 Besides, if the readers receive any fruit and benefit from my labour in writing these commentaries, I want them to know that the experience I have had through the struggles by which the Lord has trained me, even though it was not the most severe, has greatly helped me; not only to make me infer how to put into practice the whole doctrine that could be gathered, but also to grasp deeper the intention of each of those who wrote the Psalms. (My translation - E.K.)

brought a step further in understanding the *modus operandi* of the Spirit. Unlike the traditional distinction *expositio/applicatio* supposedly familiar to the Reformers, Calvin clearly reverses the order into *applicatio/expositio*. Calvin's life experiences and struggles enabled him to present a proper *expositio* of the Psalms to his readers. However, we must understand *applicatio* in a larger sense than merely Calvin's walk through life in imitation of David. In understanding the unfolding message of the Preface, we must discern the *applicatio* of the Psalms by the Holy Spirit into his soul, so that this *applicatio* subsequently finds its expression in his life and deeds:

Ainsi doncques, jà soit qu'en lisant les tesmoignages de sa [David] foy, patience, ardeur, zèle, et intégrité, je me soye souventesfois mis à gémir et soupirer que je n'en approchoye que de bien loing, toutesfois ç'a esté une chose qui m'a beaucoup servy, de contempler en luy, comme en un miroir tant les commencemens de ma vocation, que le discours et la continuation de ma charge: à ce que je recognusse plus asseurement que tout ce qu'a souffert et soustenu ce Roy et Prophète tant excellent, m'estoit proposé de Dieu pour exemple afin de l'imiter (1859:vii).¹¹

The last section of this passage is particularly relevant: "... so that everything which this excellent King and Prophet had to endure was put by God before me as an example to imitate".

The use of the mirror metaphor implies the clear vision of something (an illumination), as well as the action of a dynamic instrument in the life of he who looks into it.¹²

11 Therefore, although in reading the testimonies of his [David's] faith, patience, eagerness, zeal and integrity, I often started moaning and sighing that I was approaching such virtues only by far; nevertheless it was something that served me much, namely to contemplate in him, as in a mirror, the beginnings of my calling as well as the course and continuation of my office. I would thus acknowledge with more certainty that all which this most excellent King and Prophet had to endure was put by God before me as an example to imitate. (My translation - E.K.)

12 Cf. Kayayan (1997:448).

4. THE *TESTIMONIUM INTERNUM SPIRITU SANCTI*

The Preface of the *Commentary on the Psalms* is clearly in line with chapter 7 of the first book of the *Institutes*: The *testimonium internum Spiritu Sancti* is the core of the Preface, more specifically the way the Holy Spirit teaches readers of the Psalms to read their own life and experience as mirrored in the psalmists' writing. The following quotation from the relevant chapter of the *Institutes* correlates with the Preface:

Parquoy il est nécessaire que le mesme Esprit qui a parlé par la bouche des Prophètes entre en nos coeurs et les touche au vif pour les persuader que les Prophètes ont fidèlement mis en avant ce qui leur estoit commandé d'enhaut (I, vii, 4); Ainsi que ce poinct nous soit résolu qu'il n'y a que celui que le saint Esprit aura enseigné qui se repose en l'Escriture en droite fermeté, et combien qu'elle porte avec soy sa créance pour estre receue sans contredit et n'estre submise à proeuves ou argumens, toutesfois que c'est par le tesmoignage de l'Esprit qu'elle obtient la certitude qu'elle mérite (...) Nous ne cerchons point ou argumens ou veri-similitudes ausquelles notre iugement repose, nous luy sumettons nostre iugement et intelligence comme à une chose eslevée par-dessus la nécessité d'estre iugée (...) Non pas aussi comme les hommes ignorans ont accoustumé de rendre leurs esprits captifs aux superstitions, mais pource que nous sentons là une expresse vertu de la divinité montrer sa vigueur, par laquelle nous sommes attirés et enflambez à obéir sciemment et volontairement, néantmoins avec plus grande efficace que de volonté ou science humaine (I, vii, 5).¹³

13 The same Spirit therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded (I, vii, 4). Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit (...) We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork (...) Nor do we do this as those miserable men who habitually bind over their minds to the thralldom of superstition; but we feel that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there. By this power we are drawn and inflamed, knowingly and willingly, to obey him, yet also more vitally and more effectively than by mere human willing or knowing (Calvin 1960:79-80).

The Preface gives the reader a glimpse of how this divine virtue and vigour works through the words of the psalmists, bringing about a conscious and voluntary obedience with greater efficiency than any human being could achieve.

5. CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL IN THE PSALMS

Calvin writes in the Preface that praying and obeying are among the main aspects which the Psalms teach. He goes a step further in the process of identification between psalmist and reader of the Psalms by characterising this obedience as the carrying of one's cross:

Benoit (1957:97) misses the point when he tries to define the Calvinian *testimonium internum Spiritu Sancti* in the following footnote to the text of the *Institutes*:

C'est ici la grande doctrine calvinienne du témoignage intérieur (ou secret) du Saint Esprit. Par elle-même, l'Écriture n'est qu'une lettre morte, comme tout autre document historique. Pour que nous puissions y découvrir la parole vivante de Dieu, et que nous ayons l'assurance que cette parole nous est adressée personnellement, il faut qu'intervienne le Saint Esprit. C'est le Saint Esprit qui utilise les écrits bibliques pour nous mettre en contact avec la parole de Dieu, et qui en même temps nous fait découvrir cette parole dans l'Écriture et nous la fait accepter comme venant de Dieu.

Such a Barthian interpretation does not do justice to Calvin's exposition, for he insists that in itself Scripture carries its indubitable credibility. Throughout Calvin's writings one finds the assertion that men — not Scripture — are spiritually dead, or blind, or numbed. Cf. the first sermon on the 2nd Letter to Timothy (1895:6):

Quant à moy, ie sçay que ceste epistre m'a autant profité que nul livre de l'Escriture, et tous les jours encores profite: et quand chacun y regardera songneusement, il n'y doute qu'il ne trouve le semblable. Et [si] nous désirons d'avoir un tesmoignage de la vérité de Dieu qui nous transperce le coeur, nous pouvons bien nous arrester ici. Car il faudra qu'un homme soit bien endormi, et plus que stupide, si Dieu ne besongne en luy quand il orra la doctrine qui en sera tiree. Voilà ce que nous avons à observer devant qu'entrer en propos.

As for me, I know that I have benefited — and still daily benefit — from this epistle more than from any other book of Scripture; when each one will have carefully considered it, there is no doubt that he will find the same. If we wish to receive a testimony of God's truth that would pierce our heart, we surely can stand still here, for one must be fully asleep and more than stupid if God does not work in him when he will hear the doctrine presented here. This is what we have to consider before entering into the matter itself. (My translation - E.K.)

D'avantage, jà soit que ce livre soit plein de tous enseignemens qui peuvent servir pour reformer nostre vie à toute sainteté, droicture et justice, principalement toutesfois il nous enseignera et duira à porter la croix, qui est une vraye espreuve de nostre obéissance (1859:vii).¹⁴

The theme of the carrying of the cross leads Calvin to state that the book of Psalms adequately deals with all that concerns the knowledge of eternal salvation, in particular the free forgiveness of sins:

Mais nous trouverons aussi que la remission gratuite des péchez, laquelle seule appaise Dieu envers nous, et nous acquiert tranquillité de conscience devant luy, y est tellement preschée et magnifiée, que nous ne pouvons pas dire que rien y défale de ce qui concerne la science du salut éternel (1859, vii).¹⁵

This brings a new dimension to Calvin's view of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Preface of the *Commentary to the Psalms*: the *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit through the Psalms is the gospel itself.

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- 14 More, though this book is full of all kinds of teachings helpful to have us reforming our life according to holiness, righteousness and justice, it will first of all teach us and lead us to carry the cross, which is a true proof of our obedience. (My translation - E.K.)
- 15 We shall also find that the free forgiveness of our sins, which only appeases God towards us and acquires us peace of mind before him, is so much preached and exalted here, that we cannot say that it is short of anything concerning the knowledge of eternal salvation. (My translation - E.K.)

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