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In the School of the Holy Spirit (Summary)

The hermeneutical role of the term ‘doctrina’ in Calvin’s interpretation

There are many articles available in Hungarian on John Calvin’s hermeneutics. However, only a few of them are able to discuss its epistemological principles, the background concepts, or its main features in a great detail. There is a monograph by Alexandre Ganoczy and Stefan Scheld that was translated to Hungarian, which is of a great worth when one would like to understand Calvin’s hermeneutics in the light of Humanism and the Reformation movement, especially from a Roman Catholic perspective. There is more to be said on this topic, according to newer investigations, though.

The dissertation presented in this summary does not intend to be a comprehensive presentation of Calvin’s hermeneutics but it is an attempt to explore the great Reformer’s presuppositions and interpretative principles from the aspect of ‘doctrina,’ which is a central term in Calvin’s thinking. Furthermore, the goal of this research is to give an insight into the recent discoveries about the Reformer’s hermeneutics for Hungarian readers, to represent a Reformed viewpoint on this topic, and to give an evidence for the plausibility of the approach of ‘doctrina’ by giving a convincing selection of the Reformer’s writings (his commentaries in the first place), too. As a result of this, it turns out that the term ‘doctrina’ does not have a strict meaning for Calvin but it is a dynamic concept that can be described as an act of teaching as well as the object of teaching, moreover as the theory and the practice of Biblical thinking and Christian life.

After giving an overview of the history of research on Calvin’s hermeneutics, a careful definition is given for the term ‘doctrina,’ which makes it possible to analyze the different hermeneutical principles of Calvin from an integrative viewpoint. The firstmost hermeneutical principle is the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, which – as the chief epistemological prerequisite – enables the believer to understand the heavenly teaching. Besides the main principle, there are further principles that describe the nature of the text. It turns out that the term ‘doctrina’ gives a profound explanation to these principles: it reflects the simplicity and the clearness of the Bible, it shows the importance of divine accommodation, it reveals the true content of literal and natural meaning, and it also makes clear that the scope of the Bible is Christ Himself. Some of the principles applies to the

whole Scripture: the term ‘doctrina’ supports the concept of covenant theology, typological interpretation (typological viewpoint), the concept of Scripture interpreting itself, the principle of ‘regula fidei,’ and the edification of the Church, which is also an attribute of the Biblical text by nature.

Finally, the main conclusions of the dissertation can be summarized in five theses:

1. According to Calvin, the heavenly doctrine (‘doctrina coelestis’) can be truly known.
2. For Calvin, the reading that keeps ‘doctrina’ in mind supposes substantially a humble attitude.
3. One can grasp ‘doctrina’ in a hermeneutical circle that assumes a movement between the Scripture and the teaching based on Scripture, according to Calvin.
4. For Calvin, the meaning of ‘doctrina’ is displayed in the biblical-typological pattern of promise and fulfilment.
5. The term ‘doctrina’ contributes to an approach that views Calvin’s hermeneutical principles as an interconnected system or as an organic whole.