



The didactic nature of Calvin's *De Scandalis*

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Abstract

The didactic nature of Calvin's *De Scandalis*

In this article the author explores the didactic nature and value of Calvin's "De Scandalis" (1550). The reformer's clear intention was to provide guidelines for strengthening those believers grappling with all kinds of stumbling blocks on the Christian's path towards sanctification. Moreover, the questions that he attempted to answer are questions of faith even in the 21st century. It is argued that sound didactic principles are found throughout this publication of Calvin's. For that reason it was – and still is – a powerful aid to those belonging to the church of Christ in dealing with the obstacles and temptations that they may experience in their spiritual lives: Biblical truths that the world may regard as foolishness; offensive and scandalous conduct by people within the church; and calumnies brought forward by adversaries of the gospel. In this context Calvin proves himself to be the catechist par excellence and an enduring example of the conscientious teacher living by the principles of Holy Scripture.

Opsomming

Die didaktiese aard van Calvyn se *De Scandalis*

Die artikel behels 'n ondersoek na die didaktiese aard en waarde van Calvyn se publikasie "De Scandalis" (1550). Sy klaarblyklike oogmerk was om riglyne daar te stel tot geloofsversterking van Christene wat met allerlei struikelblokke op die weg van heiliging worstel. Die outeur toon aan hoe die kwessies waarop Calvyn antwoorde wou bied, selfs nog vir die gelowige van die 21e eeu relevant is, en dat gesonde opvoedkundige beginsels hierdie geskrif van Calvyn deurgaans

kenmerk. Presies daarom was dit – en is dit nog steeds – 'n uitstekende hulpmiddel vir mense wat aan die kerk van Christus behoort en in hulle geestelike lewe te staan kom voor allerlei struikelblokke en versoekings: Bybelse waarhede wat deur die wêreld as dwaasheid afgemaak word; aanstootlike en skandalige gedrag van mense binne die kerk; asook lasterlikhede of beswadding van die kant van teenstanders van die evangelie. Binne hierdie konteks bewys Calvyn homself as eksegeet by uitnemendheid en as blywende voorbeeld van die betroubare leermeester wat self deur die beginsels van die Heilige Skrif gelei word.

1. Introduction

The final part of the French Catechism of Geneva, first published in 1542 (Latin edition – 1545), deals with the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the response to the very last question Calvin explicitly uses the words *les scandales* and *scandaliser*.¹ In September 1546 he wrote to Farell that he has started work on a little book (*libellum*) that would eventually be published in Latin under the title *De Scandalis*.² At that point in time, however, he felt compelled to give it up (*abiicere coactus sum*; CO 12,380). The next month³ he wrote again to expand on the reason for not getting on with it:

1 The text of the relevant question and answer in *Le Catechisme de l'église de Geneve: c'est a dire le formulaire d'instruire les enfans en la chrestienté: faict en maniere de dialogue, ou le ministre interroge et l'enfant respond. par i calvin. 1542/1545*:

LE MINISTRE: Il faut donc qu'il y ait quelque ordre et police sur cela.

L'ENFANT: Voire, si l'Eglise est bien reiglee. C'est qu'on deputed personnages pour veiller sur les scandales, qui pourroyent estre. Et que iceux en l'autorité de l'Eglise, interdisent la communion à ceux qui n'en sont nullement capables, et ausquelz on ne la peut donner sans deshonnorer Dieu et scandaliser les fidele. (CO 6,133).

THE MINISTER: *And yet there should be a certain order and control in this regard?*

THE CHILD: *Indeed, if the Church is managed well. There should be people appointed to watch over things that may cause offence (les scandales). And those who have a position of authority in the Church should prohibit those who are not competent and can not be allowed, lest they dishonour God and bring shame on (scandaliser) the faithful.*

2 In full: *De scandalis quibus hodie plerique absterreatur, nonnulli etiam alienantur a pura evangelii doctrina* (CO 8,1ff.).

3 To Farell on 2nd October 1546.

I left off for a time a short treatise, *De Scandalis*, that I had begun, because the style did not flow so freely as I wished (*quia non ex voto fluebat stylus*), nor have I a mind to resume it, until I shall have completed the Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. (Calvin, 1998:78.)

So it was only in June 1550 that he once more wrote to Farell that the book *De Scandalis* (no longer a little booklet) would be printed during the coming winter (CO 13,606). The question arises whether this publication tends to be didactic in character, and if so, to what extent it can be shown to be just that. The book was dedicated to his close friend and family attorney, Laurent de Normandie of Noyon (Calvin, 1978:xi). In the dedicatory letter he explicitly refers to its content as *doctrina* (teaching) (CO 8,6). Calvin's use of this terminology clearly denotes the systematic and catechetical value of his intention.⁴ And indeed, the instructive character of this book for those grappling with so many stumbling blocks on the Christian's path of sanctification, is abundantly clear. Incidentally, this book was almost at once translated into French and published in December of the same year – 1550, and proved to be in such demand that it was reprinted in 1551 and again in 1560.⁵ A first Dutch version was published in 1598 under the title *Een zeer schoonende profitelick tractaet Joannis Calvinii vande ergernissen waar door hedensdaegs veel mensche afgeschricht: sommige oock vervreemt werden vande reyne leere des evangeliums*.

This is Calvin at his very best (Brooks, 1979-1980:90). It is, to my mind, regrettable that this publication of his has not been the subject of more in depth research by Calvin scholars.⁶ He commenced this work of his by carefully explaining what he regarded as *scandala*. It is quite remarkable that the word *scandalum* is not found in classical Latin,⁷ and the medieval use of it could either be related to the

4 "Sie seigt vor allem einen thetischen, katechetischen Umgang mit der doctrina." (d'Assonville, 2001:201.)

5 "Des Scandales qui empeschent anjourd'hui beaucoup de gens de venir a la pure doctrine de l'euangile, et en desbauchent d'autres." (CO 8,xxf.)

6 Bohatec, however, has done elaborate work on *De Scandalis* (Bohatec, 1950; cf. Partee, 1977:72).

7 It first surfaces in ecclesiastical Latin (Prudentius' *Apotheosis* 47 praef.; Tertullianus' *De Virginibus velandis* 3; Vulgate).

French *scandale*, or the Greek skandalon.⁸ Cottret shows that the reformer stuck close to the etymology; in its Greek meaning a scandal is a stumbling block, and the same idea is found in the corresponding Hebrew word (Cottret, 2000:202). With reference to Matthew 11:6 "Blessed is he who shall find no occasion of stumbling in me", Calvin states that not only did Christ

... know that the proclamation of his gospel contained many things utterly abhorrent to human nature, but he also foresaw that Satan's cunning would be instrumental in raising obstacles of every kind, which would make it either detestable or suspect to the world (Calvin, 1978:7; CO 8,9).⁹

Christ indeed knew that mankind would mostly strike against Him or stumble over Him (*in eum bona pars impingat*; CO 8,9).

Calvin defines the *scandala* as those various obstacles (*impedimenta*) that stand in our way as believers to divert us from the right direction (*a recto cursu nos abducunt*), keep us back (*nos retardant*), or cause us to fall (*casus occasionem praebent*) (CO 8,10). Although the obstacles that Calvin deals with in *De Scandalis* are not primarily concerned with those that he had in mind in the Catechism of Geneva (1545), he does caution the faithful not to become a stumbling block to others by unacceptable behaviour and even by ungodliness. This is particularly dealt with in the discussion of the scandals which he assigned to the second category (*secundum ordinem*) (Calvin, 1978:55 ff.; CO 8,40ff.).

Calvin first of all addressed himself to the problem as to how Christ and his gospel, being inherently good, could be a stumbling block:

I should rather say, it is men themselves who run into scandals. Christ is therefore 'a rock of offence', not because he himself provides any occasion for stumbling, but because he is dragged in as the pretext for doing so ... it would be extremely unjust to assign to Christ the blame and reproach that belong entirely to other people ... We realize therefore that such illwill (*malitia*), or badness (*corruptela*) is rooted in human nature. (Calvin, 1978:9; CO 8,11.)

8 In his Bible translation Calvin twice uses the word *scandalizo* in the sense of being offended, clearly as a direct translation of the similar Greek terminology.

9 Unless otherwise stated, all English citations of *De Scandalis* is taken from John W. Fraser's translation (1978).

He then briefly stated what his intention with this book was: to instruct and strengthen the faithful (Jones, 1995:172), and particularly those who are still weak in their faith so that they will discover what they can get to strengthen themselves for overcoming stumbling blocks (*ad superanda scandala*) (CO 8,12) in their spiritual life.

... my concern is for the weak (*infirmos*), for when their faith is shaky then it is our place to support (*sustinere*) it as with a sustaining hand (Calvin, 1978:12; CO 8,12).

Hodler's view on the addressees of *De Scandalis* certainly does not cover the full range that Calvin contemplated. He maintains that Calvin had in mind timid people who did not dare to approach the Good News, but also those who had indeed found the gospel, but since that have once again fallen back.¹⁰ He obviously saw adult education as essential extension of catechesis (Van der Walt, 1981:21).

Obviously Calvin regarded obstacles on the way of the faithful in a very serious light. The fact that he used the concept of *scandala* (Fr. *scandales*) several hundred times in his publications is clear evidence of his passion for preventing harm to those still weak in their faith. In a letter to Farel written on 18 August 1550 he clearly states his aim with this book: that the weak (*infirmos*) should be strengthened, in order that by the firmness of their faith they may overcome whatever stumbling blocks Satan may cast in their way (CO 13,623). Even in the *Institutes* he seriously warned about the grave dangers in this regard:

Only let my readers remember this: with whatever obstacles (*quibuscunque scandalis*) Satan and the world strive to turn us away from God's commands or delay us from following what he appoints, we must nonetheless vigorously go forward. (*Inst.* 3.19.13; CO 2,622.)

2. Obstacles

Dealing with the holiness of the church in the Catechism of Geneva, Calvin makes it clear that believers can not yet be perfect, for they

10 "Es handelt sich einerseits um furchtsame Menschen, die sich der Frohen Botschaft gar nicht zu nähern wagen, und andererseits um Leute, die zwar das Evangelium gefunden haben, aber unterdessen schon wieder abgefallen sind." (Hodler, 1995:136.)

will always labour under infirmities.¹¹ It was, however, particularly in his *De Scandalis* that he explained to those harassed in their spiritual life by obstacles, to those troubled by uncertainty and to those young in the reformed faith, how obstacles may be discerned, met and overcome, and how stumbling blocks may even be converted into stepping stones "to spiritual perfection" (Atkinson, 1980:269). Elbert (1980:251) justly points out that a handbook of argument interwoven with exhortation was necessary to complement activities of the Spirit in reviving the godly in the midst of strife. Calvin wrote to help people "to contend successfully with the various obstacles which hinder people in their course of following and growing in the Christian faith" (Ray, 1979:49). In this sense his didactic endeavours was not merely focused on the church youth, as Wendel aptly points out:

The preaching of the Gospel and the institution of the teaching ministry are intended to awaken the faith and promote the collective sanctification of the members of the ecclesiastical community by establishing between them what Calvin calls the consensus of faith; that is a unanimous agreement in faith and in outward order. (Wendel, 1963:292.)

Calvin discerns three kinds of *scandala* (stumbling blocks). Some are intrinsic – these arise from the foolishness of the gospel in the eyes of worldly wisdom, and from the demand of the gospel on believers. And indeed, the gospel contains many things, which according to human standards, are irrational in the extreme, and even ridiculous (*quae humano iudicio valde sunt non absurda modo, sed etiam ridicula*), for instance the incarnation of the Son of God, his vicarious atonement and the doctrine of predestination. (Calvin, 1978:12 ff.; CO 8,13).

The second category are those obstacles that arise particularly from the strife, disunity, pride, immorality and the like among church people. Many of those who teach (*multi ex professoribus* (sic!)) bring the doctrine itself into discredit (*doctrinam ipsam deformant*) (CO 8,13).

Finally there is the extrinsic kind (*adventitia*), which are of the nature of outside attacks on believing men:

11 "Laborat enim semper infirmitatibus: nec unquam vitiorum reliquiis penitus purgabitur, donec Christo, suo capiti, a quo sanctificatur, ad plenum adhaereat." (CO 6,42.)

[I]t partly consists of fictitious calumnies and partly springs from the ingratitude of men, when they bring forth various far-fetched accusations and spitefully and wrongly level them against the gospel in order to have people to have nothing further to do with it (*ut inde exosum reddant*). (Calvin, 1978:14; CO 8,13.)

In his *Institutes* Calvin makes another distinction: an offense given and one received (*aliud datum, aliud acceptum*; CO 2,619). The first category are things done by someone that cause the ignorant and simple to stumble. Its fault arises from the doer of the thing itself, and it is the weak (*infirmi*) that are made to stumble by it. The second kind is committed by ill will or malicious intent (*animi malignitate*), and gives offense to persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride (*acerba ingenia et pharisaica supercilia*) (CO 2,620; *Inst.* 3.19.11).

For the purpose of this article, the first category mentioned in *De Scandalis* in particular will be relevant.

3. Holy Scripture

Calvin's basic instruction in this book regards the divine character of Holy Scripture, addressing us in a plain, unvarnished style (*simplex et rudis scripturae stylus*) (CO 8,15). He states that many tend towards a critical view of these sacred writings because it is not captivated by elegance of speech and clever artifice. But unless Satan deprives them of their wits (*nisi quorum mentes obstupefecit Satan*), all who read are forced to realise (*ut sentire cogantur*) that it is God who is speaking to them – for in it the living God reveals Himself in his majesty (Calvin, 1978:16; CO 8,15). Those who take up an attitude that the teaching of Scripture is absurd

... appear to be intellectually superior in their own eyes only, when they are laughing at our stupidity, because we accept with complete trust things that not only lack proof but are also incredible as far as human opinion goes (Calvin, 1978:18).

In the school of Christ no one should put trust in his own mental resources or his learning. "Provided that we show ourselves to be teachable (*dociles*) we shall not be aware of any obstacle here" (Calvin, 1978:19; CO 8,16). To Calvin's mind there was no doubt

that his views on predestination, original sin, the trinity of God and the immortality of the soul was based solely on Holy Scripture.¹²

On the notion of accommodation Hesselink refers to Calvin's view that God, of necessity, must communicate to us in "mean and lowly words" (*sub contemptibili verborum humilitate*) (CO 2,61; *Inst.* 1.8.1).

Rather than finding this offensive or a stumbling block, Calvin sees in this humble form of Scripture its 'uncultivated and almost rude simplicity', a testimony to the inherent power of the Word ... Likewise with the Scriptures, says Calvin: they derive their power and authority not from polished human eloquence but from their subject matter, which 'serves as its own support'. (Hesselink, 1997:55.)

Calvin would like the faithful in reading Holy Scripture "to go forward without stumbling" (*inoffenso*) (CO 2,327; *Inst.* 2.10.20).

If Calvin was concerned to instruct the learned readers – candidates in sacred theology, then he was tacitly acknowledging that even prepared readers occasionally misinterpret scripture. (Holder, 2006:6.)

4. Incarnation

We should, for instance, know that regarding the incarnation and death of Christ we are learning of a mystery for us to adore, "not a fable for you to laugh at, or a monstrous thing for you to fear" (Calvin, 1978:19). But, says Calvin, for those relying on their own human wisdom, everything originating from this particular doctrine (*ex doctrina emergit*), is a potent (*violentius*) and common stumbling block. It seems such an intolerable thing to human pride (*carnis superbiae*), that they simply cannot bear it that everything belonging to them be taken away. Indeed, Calvin admonishes believers not to seek a compromise to appease the wise of this world or to avoid offending them by confusing earthly things with heavenly (CO 8,18ff.). No one should imagine that he could assess the infinite wisdom of God by the small measure of our human mind (*sensus nostri modulo*).

12 "Calvijn is er rotsvast van overtuigd, dat zijn opvattingen over uitverkiezing, erfzonde, Drieenheid en de onsterfelijkheid van de ziel uitsluitend aan de bijbel ontleend zijn." (Jelsma, 2001: par. 29.)

But if we acknowledge that Scripture has come forth from God, then we should not be surprised if it contains many things that are beyond our understanding (*sensu nostro altiora*). (Calvin, 1978:25; CO 8,21.)

Depending on Scripture alone for convincing people about such great matters, Calvin addressed himself to those who are indeed troubled by obstacles of that kind, “but who are still curable” (*sanabiles*). He reminded such people that Paul clearly acknowledged the incarnation as a mystery, far beyond the reach of all human perception (Calvin, 1978:18; CO 8,16). “It is striking that he makes no attempt whatsoever to clarify or explain this doctrine.” (Van der Kooi, 2005:38.)

5. Original sin

Obviously the Biblical doctrine of original sin seems to be a grave stumbling block for those relying on human wisdom. This, however, does not spring from doctrine, but “in fact are the characteristic and genuine products of either human forwardness, ignorance, or curiosity” (Calvin, 1978:50). The argument usually is that

... men themselves are free from blame when they sin, but that the blame can be justifiably ascribed to God, who creates them such that they seem to be born to sin (*ut nati ad peccandum videantur*) (CO 8,37).

This is unambiguously rejected by Calvin: his teaching “does not hold the perverseness, which rules in us, agreeable to the creation of God”. We can only ascribe it to our own corrupt nature (Calvin, 1978:51).

6. Predestination

Clearly the doctrine of predestination was experienced as a major stumbling block for many contemporaries of Calvin. To his mind it was accounted for by human curiosity and forwardness (*vel curiositate, vel petulantia*) (CO 8,38). Believers should, however, always bear in mind that the point at issue here is the secret judgement of God, of which He has revealed in Scripture “as much as our power of comprehension allows and as much as matters to us”. To probe beyond that would not be to our advantage (Calvin, 1978:52). The reformer states his conviction very clearly, that according to Scripture

... the grace of Christ reaches only to those who had been preordained to salvation by free election before they were born, and that others remain in their sins as they have been destined for eternal destruction¹³ (Calvin, 1978:52).

It remains our duty to embrace reverently what the Lord, the true educator of his people (*Dominus paedagogum se fore populo suo*) (CO 8,48) teaches

... and being content with that, to refrain from all other questioning. For the true rule of wisdom in this connection is to be so self-controlled as to desire to know no more than what is revealed in Scripture. (Calvin, 1978:53.)

7. The church

Calvin deals at length with the poor state of the church, which proves to be a stumbling block for many. The faithful should, however, remember that in the form of the church the living image of Christ should appear as in a mirror (Calvin, 1978:29). We should not be upset if we find that the position of the church is often calamitous and always unstable (*plerumque calamitosa, semper instabilis*) (CO 8,24).

But when we see that its life has nevertheless endured for so many generations as if through innumerable deaths, we are bound to conclude that it was preserved (*servatam*) by the providence of God. (Calvin, 1978:25; CO 8,24.)

The church has always been able to prevail by hardship. Its history since Old Testament times has indeed been one of suffering, with God as its preserver (*Deum ecclesiae suae custodem*) (CO 8,28).

What follows this remark in *De Scandalis* is a concise overview of Biblical history, from the patriarchs in the Old Testament through the Early Church in the New Testament, much as one would expect to further the knowledge of young believers. This part Calvin concludes by stating that

... in the midst of so many losses, which were not far short of ruinous, yet the Church never ceased to expand more widely. And that really meant that it was triumphing under the ignominy

13 "ad eos Christi gratiam solos pervenire, qui gratuita electione, antequam nascerentur, ad salutem praeordinati fuerant: alios sicuti sunt aeterno exitio destinati, in suis peccatis manere" (CO 8,38ff.).

of the cross (*sub crucis ignominia triumphare*). (Calvin 1978:46; CO 8,35.)

8. The Lord's Supper

Calvin also addresses himself to the issue of controversies among Protestant leaders, that may be seen as a stumbling block for many. In particular he refers to different views on the Lord's Supper by prominent men like Luther, Oecolampadius and Zwingli. He said that it proved to be "more a source of grief than surprise that that conflict among the foremost leaders causes alarm to overtake beginners" (*tirones*,¹⁴) (CO 8,58). He warns beginners in faith, however, not to be unduly perturbed by this as it is

... an old trick of Satan's to rush otherwise prudent servants of God into controversies with each other so that he may hinder the course of sound doctrine (*sanae doctrinae cursum*) (CO 8,58; Calvin, 1978:80).

He had no doubt that these reformers were prudent men that God had endowed with singular gifts. Indeed, about the whole substance of faith they were all in remarkable agreement. On almost all teachings they were unanimous: the proper and sincere worship of God, the rejection of superstitions and idolatries, rejection of reliance on good works, total salvation in the grace of Christ, the nature and essence of penitence, and the legitimate governance of the church. Disagreement was only on the symbols themselves.

Yet I deliberately venture to assert that, if their minds had not been partly exasperated by the extreme vehemence of the controversies, and partly possessed by wrong suspicions, the disagreement was not so great that conciliation could not easily have been achieved. Even if, because of the vehemence of that dispute, the controversy could not have been resolved properly, is there anything to prevent the plain truth being heard at least now, as in the calm after the storm? (Calvin, 1978:81; CO 8,58.)

As to the essence of the sacrament the teaching of them all is in common: it seals the promises of God to our hearts, supports our faith and testifies of divine grace. Its use is efficacious by the power of the Holy Spirit (*efficax per spiritus sancti virtutem*), and the bread and wine is spiritual nourishment for the soul (*animae nostrae in*

14 *tiro -onis* m. a young soldier; a recruit, beginner, learner.

spirituale alimentum fruantur). Clearly it should not be a stumbling block barring the way to the gospel (Calvin, 1978:82; CO 8,58ff.).

9. Atheism

Dealing at length with various stumbling blocks laid on the way of the faithful, Calvin exhorts them to be steadfast and strong.

There are those whose purpose it is to obliterate all fear of God from the minds of men:

... they finally break through to the point that all religions have their origins in men's brains (*ex hominum cerebro natas esse*), that God exists because it pleases men to believe so, that the hope of eternal life has been invented to deceive the simple, and that the fear of judgement is childish terror (*puerile esse terriculamentum*) (Calvin, 1978:62; CO 8,46).

Those who are still young in their faith, must know that Satan will bring forward every possible corruption. But they should heed the words of Paul:

The body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:12 ff.)

10. Relevancy

Hodler correctly indicates the immediate relevancy of *De Scandalis* in Geneva as illustrated, for instance, by Bolsec's rejection of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination.¹⁵ "Mit diesem Auftritt hatte Bolsec einen 'scandale' in der Genfer Kirche provoziert und sich der Blasphemie schuldig gemacht." (Hodler, 1995:140.) For this he was put on trial in October 1551.

A sound interpretation of Scripture was as important in the sixteenth century as it is in the 21st century. Calvin's teaching on those central Biblical truths that caused uncertainty and even became obstacles on the path of the faithful then, remains relevant right up to the present day. Randall Zachman correctly states that one of the major tasks Calvin has set for himself as an interpreter is to address the issue of difficult passages – for instance the Genesis narrative of the

15 "Des Scandales argumentierte nicht im luftleeren Raum." (Hodler, 1995:140.)

temptation and the fall of humanity in the garden – so that obstacles are removed that might cause the pious reader to stumble (Zachman, 2006:24). As far as obstacles are concerned, we can be led to see that “the questions which Calvin attempted to answer are the central questions of faith today” (Ray, 1979:49).

Apart from sound doctrine, Calvin obviously wants to see high moral values in the lives of Christians. Values indeed have “a compelling character, they ‘drive’ the members of a community to live according to certain principles” (Badenhorst, 1993:397).

Contemporary apologetics may benefit from Calvin’s clear guidelines on attempts to discredit the reformed faith, as may those who experience ill-disposed assaults on Christianity. Thus Calvin also deals with a number of, what he calls, fictitious calumnies (*ex fictis calumniis*) (CO 8,63) arising from malicious insults (*ex malignis cavillationibus*) (CO 8,63) turned by perverted men against the gospel. The faithful should bear in mind that there will always be false teachers and rogues who will attempt to bring into disrepute the true gospel and to discredit those who honour the authority of Holy Scripture.

We strongly contend that it is wrong for consciences that ought to be ruled by the Word of God alone (*uno Dei verbo*) (CO 8,70) to be ensnared by human laws. (Calvin, 1978:99.)

To that end Calvin fully agrees with the saying of Cyprian,¹⁶ that “we must not look at what others did and said before us, but we must follow what Christ, who is the first of all has commanded” (CO 8,77). The Word of God is not controlled by the church, but “the truth is possessed by the church and handed down to others because it subjects itself reverently to the Word of God” (*reverenter se Dei verbo subiicit*) (CO 8,78; Calvin, 1978:110).

11. Didactics

The relevant question remaining is whether sound didactic principles do come to the fore in Calvin’s *De Scandalis*. Although he had no formal training in didactics, it is quite remarkable how basic principles of this discipline permeate many of his works. This is particularly true of *De Scandalis*. This learned theologian realised

16 “Non spectandum quid ante nos alii fecerint aut dixerint, sed quod mandavit Christus, qui primus omnium est, sequendum esse.” (Cyprian, Ep, LXXIV,9.)

perfectly well – as Stuart *et al.* formulated (1985:24) four centuries later – that he first had to reduce the content of his teaching to the elementary, so that the learner from there may be able to grasp complex structures. His exposition of three different kinds of stumbling block as distinction within the broader picture of obstacles, is an excellent illustration of this methodology.

The principle of totality is obvious in Calvin's teaching. In more recent didactics it is recognised that the intellect is part of the bigger entity of the whole personality as formulated by Duminy and Söhnge (1980:21 ff.):

The Christian educator appreciates this as a step in the right direction because he believes that the unity of man's thinking, feeling and appreciation, his desires and aspirations should always be maintained.

Mursell discerns a set of six educational principles. These are context, focalisation, socialisation, individualisation, sequence and evaluation (Mursell, 1954:xi). At least four of these are indeed employed in *De Scandalis*.

"The meaningfulness and therefore the effectiveness of learning depends largely on its context." (Mursell, 1954:69.) This is indeed fully recognised in *De Scandalis*. Calvin excellently succeeds in sketching the particular setting of the obstacles that he deals with, as it was well known by his readers – issues that they almost certainly have experienced themselves. As in many of his writings he employs the metaphor as figure of speech to make all the more clear his intention. For instance on the incarnation of Christ he writes:

In the same way (*Eodem etiam modo*) let us also prepare the way for ourselves to Christ, and indeed that pious longing will be like (*imo*) horses and ships to us, enabling us to pass by all obstacles. For just as (*sicuti*) you need a cultivated and wellprepared mind in order to engage in the study of the higher disciplines, so you require a trained mind for the heavenly philosophy. (Calvin, 1978:18; CO 8,17.)

Dealing with the church he states that it is being continually tossed about by many different tempests just as in a stormy sea (*imo quod, non secus ac in procelloso mari*) (Calvin, 1978:30; CO 8,24).

"Meaningful and effective learning must be organized about a focus." (Mursell, 1954:108.) There must be a sharp focus on what people need to know or want to learn, so that the reader may see a

plan or pattern in what is being dealt with. This is obviously the case in *De Scandalis*. Meaningful learning should always take into account the learner's own aptitude and abilities (Mursell, 1954:172). And indeed, it is a clear objective of Calvin's to lead his readers towards overcoming certain obstacles. They should know that they may trust Christ and that they have the power of the Holy Spirit at their disposal for this purpose.

In dealing with the principle of sequence and the organisation of learning, Mursell says that it "must be regarded and in practice treated as a process of mental growth" (Mursell, 1954:210). In the case of *De Scandalis* Calvin in the same way leads his readers towards spiritual growth.

The purpose of teaching according to Schultz (1981:33) is to furnish material "damit ausdrücklich zugleich Autonomie, Selbstbestimmung gefördert wird". For Calvin it was important that his readers should be guided to attain a sound basis for a strong and mature faith.

Another important didactic principle is that instruction and learning can be effective only if representative facets of reality are placed within reach of the learner (Frazer *et al.*, 1990:60). This too is adhered to by Calvin, not only in *De Scandalis*, but throughout his commentaries and sermons.

12. Conclusion

The publication of *De Scandalis* was, and still is, a powerful aid for those belonging to the church of Christ to deal with obstacles and temptations of three different kinds that they may experience in their spiritual life: Biblical truths that the world may regard as foolishness, offensive and scandalous conduct by people within the church, and calumnies brought forward by adversaries of the gospel.

In this context the John Calvin of *De Scandalis* proves himself to be the catechist par excellence and an enduring example of the conscientious teacher living by the principles of *sola Scriptura*.

In a final encouragement Calvin reminds his readers that the children of God can scarcely expect to take a single step without Satan putting some stumbling block in their way.

Unless our softness hinders us, Christ alone suffices for overcoming any scandals (i.e. stumbling blocks) whatever, since he lifts us up above the world by his heavenly power. (Calvin, 1978:117; CO 8,83.)

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Key concepts:

Calvin
catechist
didactics
stumbling blocks

Kernbegrippe:

Calvyn
didaktiek
kategeet
struikelblokke

