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**Rich Before We Were Born  
On Calvin's Understanding of Creation**

by Lukas Vischer

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**Lukas Vischer**

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# Rich Before We Were Born

## Preface

Lukas Vischer, distinguished Swiss theologian and committed ecumenist, died in March 2008, following a lengthy illness. Three days before his death he sent me the following e-mail:

Dear Joe,

May I share with you a personal concern? For some time I have been working on Calvin's interpretation of God's creation. I think Calvin has been miserably misinterpreted in this respect and that it is therefore important to correct the picture. You will find attached a paper on the subject. In my view Calvin has much to say—not only about social justice but also on the respect for God's creation—much more than is generally assumed. As we shall soon celebrate Calvin's anniversary this aspect of Calvin's teaching should be introduced more consistently into the general debate on Calvin's legacy. I therefore wonder whether it would be possible to get my study published some place in English? Is it thinkable that such a paper could be made available through the series of occasional papers of your office? I would be very grateful if this could be considered. . . .

With all good wishes to you and your wife,  
Lukas

I printed out Lukas's paper and read it with great interest. As I finished, I knew it would be an excellent contribution to the Calvin Jubilee year. I was prepared to send an enthusiastic "yes" to Lukas when I learned of his death. I regret that I did not respond while he was alive, but I trust he now knows that the Office of Theology and Worship is proud to publish his essay, *Rich Before We Were Born*. Readers of the Theology and Worship Occasional Papers are familiar with Lukas Vischer's previous contribution to the series, *Pia Conspiratio: Calvin's Commitment to the Unity of Christ's Church*. Like *Pia Conspiratio*, the present paper is more than a historical study; it is a constructive contribution to contemporary faith and life.

Lukas Vischer served the church with distinction for more than fifty years. Following studies at Basel, Strasbourg, Göttingen, and Oxford, he was a pastor before beginning work with the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He was director of Faith and Order from 1965–1979 and moderator of the Theology Department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches from 1982–1989. In "retirement," he taught at several universities and continued to serve the church as program director of the John Knox International Reformed Center in Geneva.

With deep gratitude for the life and work of Lukas Vischer, faithful theologian and friend,

*Soli Deo Gloria*

Joseph D. Small  
Director, Theology Worship and Education  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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## Rich Before We Were Born On Calvin's Understanding of Creation

The image of John Calvin presented over the centuries has often been a distorted one.<sup>1</sup> In recent times, theologians working on theological issues related to the environmental crisis have added their voice to the chorus. Without further thought, they assert that Calvin belongs to those theologians exclusively interested in human beings and their salvation, and who have lost sight of creation as a whole. “The loving and compassionate God is replaced by a stern-faced judge who has no room for changing his mind . . . All that God cared for, in Calvin’s thinking, were those who he had decided would be saved. As it never occurred to Calvin that animals, plants or the very land or water might have a ‘soul,’ thus he never saw any place for creation or indeed the majority of the human race, in God’s plan for the future . . . His theology meant a loss of any sense that God cared for this world.”<sup>2</sup>

Calvin as the reverse of Francis of Assisi? Is this verdict really true—or is this just another link in the long chain of clichés that have attached themselves to the Geneva Reformer? The question is worth exploring. What did Calvin really have to say about God’s creation and its integrity?

On closer inspection, it quickly becomes apparent that Calvin, on the contrary, held a view of creation, and more particularly of humankind’s role in creation, that is still surprisingly relevant to the situation today. Obviously, the environmental crisis of our time was not on his mind; in his day, human folly in its treatment of



creation had not reached the pitch it has today. So there is no point in hunting through his works, be it the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or his sermons, trying to track down quotations that could be used in the environmental debate today. The important thing is the underlying attitude that emerges from his thinking. Our responsibility for God's gift of creation is an integral part of Calvin's message; whether he is speaking of God or of human beings, he always also speaks of creation. Even as the highest of creation, human beings are also part of the created order and must submit to the order willed by the Creator. Nothing is further from Calvin's mind than the idea that human beings are destined to build their "own world" at the expense of nature. A short review of Calvin's understanding of creation and the place of human beings in creation may help illustrate this.<sup>3</sup>

### ***In God Alone Life and Fulfillment Can Be Found***

In Calvin's view, the human being cannot be conceived of at any moment as separate from God. The famous first paragraph of the *Institutes* makes this clear from the very outset: in knowing God, we know ourselves (*Institutes*, 1.1.1). As created beings, humans are dependent on God and cannot fulfill their destiny except in relation to God. God created human beings to be in communion with himself. Only by attending closely to God do they come to know their own nature.

Humankind's relation to God has been deeply disrupted, not to say destroyed, however. No words are too strong for Calvin when it comes to describing the human condition before God: ignorance, vanity, pride, misery, infirmity, perversity, corruption. The break with God is humankind's own fault; God endowed human beings with dignity, but they gambled it away and exchanged it for their fallen state.

This depravity does not belong to the essence of human nature; it is not an intrinsic characteristic, but an acquired quality. God still looks on human beings in their intended purpose. Calvin rejects the view that human beings have been reduced to “nothing” by the fall and he quotes Bernard of Clairvaux with approval: “Yet how can he whom God magnifies be utterly nothing? How can he upon whom God has set his heart be nothing? Brethren, let us take heart again. Even if we are nothing in our own hearts, perchance something of us may be hidden in the heart of God” (*Institutes*, 3.2.25). God is determined to lead his creatures to perfection. He holds his future open to them. He grants them communion.

However, human beings are not able to free themselves from their state of sin; they have sunk too low to be able to pull themselves up again by their own strength. Human beings may be able to do many things thanks to their intellectual, practical, and political capacities, but they cannot find their own way back to their true destiny. Many signs urge them to turn back to God. The gifts with which God surrounds us day by day and “drop by drop” are like “brooklets” that should lead us to the main source (*Institutes*, 1.1.1). Yet human beings get nowhere “by their own efforts” (*de sa propre industrie*); they are fundamentally dependent on God. God himself must intervene and lead them toward his future.

God’s intervention took place in Jesus Christ. Through his life, his cross, his resurrection we are his children; through him and in him we have access to God. But even the willingness to accept and trust in God’s action is not a matter of our own will but must be effected by God. The faith that causes us to accept God’s action is the work—or, as Calvin says, the *chef d’oeuvre* (masterpiece)—of the Holy Spirit (*Institutes*, 3.2.4). The initiative that leads to new life in God lies entirely with God himself and his Holy Spirit.

All our attention, therefore, has to be centered on Christ, whom Calvin never tires of describing as the source of salvation and trust. “Therefore, the moment we turn aside from him in the minutest degree, salvation, which resides entirely in him, gradually disappears . . . The name of Christ . . . is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, joy in the heart and medicine for the soul; every discourse where his name is not heard is absurd” (*Institutes*, 2.16.1). This view permeates all Calvin’s thinking. Christ is the key to all secrets in heaven and on earth.

He summarizes this conviction in a famous text: “When we see that the whole sum of our salvation, and every single part of it, are comprehended in Christ (Rev 4:12), we must beware of deriving even the minutest portion of it from any other quarter. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that he possesses it; if we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, we shall find them in his unction; strength in his government . . . since in him all kinds of blessings are treasured up, let us draw a full supply from him and none from any other quarter. Those who, not satisfied with him alone, entertain various hope from others, though they may continue to look to him chiefly, deviate from the right path by the simple fact that some portion of their thought takes a different direction” (*Institutes*, 2.16.19).

The important thing is that in all we are, in all we think and all we do, we should live in communion with Christ Jesus—there is no true life outside this communion. Christ lays the foundation on which we stand, but he also sets the framework within which we have to live and move.

## *Dependent on God's Good Creation*

As little as they can be seen as separate from God, human beings can be seen as separate from God's creation. God, who created human beings and with whom they are indissolubly related, is the Creator of *all* things. Human beings are part of this creation, and they learn about their dependence on God *in the creation that surrounds them*.

At the beginning of his *Institutes*, Calvin speaks of God's glory shining through creation (*Institutes*, 1.5.Title). It is, so to speak, a mirror in which the invisible God can be contemplated. The world was not created of itself; God made it and it serves to show forth his glory. Calvin is fond of describing it as *theatrum gloriae Dei*.<sup>4</sup> He distinguishes between two ways of seeing this: God's majesty can be seen by all in creation, but God does not rely exclusively on these "silent teachers or masters"; he also shows himself in his Word (*Institutes*, 1.6.1). But what he tells us in his Word is essentially already there for us to see in his work of creation. Conversely, God's revelation of himself in Christ lets us see and understand more clearly the order that is inherent in creation.

When it comes to the origin of the world, Calvin adheres largely to the biblical account of creation, even though he is aware that it does not tie in with scientific knowledge in every respect. "The astronomers have shown convincingly that other planets exist that are larger than the moon."<sup>5</sup> The language of the Bible is not scientific, but is adapted to the understanding of those reading and listening to it. Like a nursing mother, it stoops to the level of her children and speaks in a way they can understand.<sup>6</sup> The important thing is that we human beings should recognize God's greatness and goodness in his work of creation. It is surprising, all the same, that Calvin holds without concession to the Ptolemaic

view of the world. The idea that the earth might revolve around the sun was obviously too much for him to accept.<sup>7</sup>

In praising God's creation, Calvin frequently uses the vocabulary of architecture.<sup>8</sup> It is God's work of art, which we have to greet with wonder and respect. Everything is perfectly ordered. Calvin is particularly effusive about the sun: "No created object makes a more wonderful or glorious display than the sun. For, besides illuminating the whole world with its brightness, how admirably does it foster and invigorate all animals by its heat, and fertilize the earth by its rays, warming the seeds of grain in its lap, and thereby calling forth the verdant blade! This it supports, increases, and strengthens with additional nurture, till it rises into the stalk; and still feeds it with perpetual moisture, till it comes into flower; and from flower to fruit, which it continues to ripen till it attains maturity" (*Institutes*, 1.16.2).

Calvin praises not only the initial act of creation but God's continuing action in the universe. God is still at work. The masterpiece he has created is ruled by him (*Institutes*, 1.10.2). Nothing happens by chance; everything is the result of God's providence. Nothing can move unless it is sustained by God's grace and Spirit. He is the unfailing source of all life; the changing of the seasons, the rain, and the earth's fruitfulness are the work of his hand. The course of our human lives is set by his providence. It really is true that without God's intervention not a hair of our heads can fall. Above all, everything that the human race achieves is ultimately God's work. However hard we work, everything we achieve is still the result of God's action, and without his blessing all our efforts are in vain.<sup>9</sup>

This vision of God's immediate and active presence in nature is difficult for us to follow today, but for Calvin it was fundamental.

At every step along the way, the human race is in God's hand. This produces a consciousness of life that has consequences for our relation to creation. God speaks to us in everything that happens to us. However much creation may seem to follow laws of its own, it is nevertheless subordinate to God, and ultimately it is God who leads us.

Our dependence on God can be seen most clearly in the fact that we cannot do without food, but food is not something that can be taken for granted; it is always yet another gift from God. City dwellers should make no mistake: Even the bread they buy from the baker is ultimately a gift from God, and God gives generously. The earth is ordered in such a way that all receive what they need. God's care extends even to the animals: "In his good pleasure and kindness God supplies each kind of animal with food . . ." God does not give us only what we need to live, but is essentially generous and "there is no extrinsic cause whatever moving him to provide so liberally for every living creature."<sup>10</sup>

God's gift can never be separated from the giver; without him it ceases to be a gift. We acknowledge God the giver by turning to him in prayer. Jesus urges us to pray for our daily bread. Prayer establishes our relation to the giver. Consequently: "When God gives us bread and other food to renew our strength, we must learn to look upwards and always call him the one who feeds us; it is to him that that title is due."<sup>11</sup> And if God causes food to be in short supply, it is simply because he wants to direct our minds to himself as the giver of all things.<sup>12</sup> So what is the place of human beings in God's creation? Calvin's answer is: "As we know, it was chiefly for the sake of humankind that the world was made" (*Institutes*, 1.16.6). Not mincing his words, he describes human beings as the highest of all created beings, the most illustrious ornament and glory (*ornamentum et decus*) of the earth.<sup>13</sup> The creation is the

home allotted to them by God, but it is not simply handed over to them for their own use. Calvin's understanding of nature and its resources is not utilitarian; he sees it above all else as a testimony to God's goodness for which we must be grateful. God created the earth for our delight. "Has the Lord adorned flowers with all the beauty which spontaneously presents itself to the eye, and the sweet odor which delights the sense of smell, and shall it be unlawful for us to enjoy that beauty and this odor? What? Has he not so distinguished colors as to make some more agreeable than others? Has he not given qualities to gold and silver, ivory and marble, thereby rendering them precious above other metals or stones? In short, has he not given many things a value without having any necessary use?" (*Institutes*, 3.10.2).

Humankind's special place, however, implies a certain claim to dominion. "Man has been destined to exercise dominion over the earth, to harvest its fruits and to experience day by day anew what has been given to him by God."<sup>14</sup> According to biblical witness, animals are subordinate to human beings, but this superiority certainly does not give humans the freedom to deal with creation in any way they see fit. On the contrary, it emphasizes their responsibility for God's creation. Their special position in no way reduces their absolute dependence on God. In a lengthy section, Calvin reflects on the circumstance that God first created the universe and only then the human being. God, not man, is the creator, and the human race would do well not to overestimate its capabilities in dealing with the creation. The story of the creation shows us God's fatherly love for the human race. He did not create Adam "until he had liberally enriched the earth with all good things" (*Institutes*, 1.14.2). "God made us rich before we were born."<sup>15</sup> Precisely because the world was created for them, human beings carry a special responsibility for its preservation.

Above all, human beings have to remember that, for them, this world is only a temporary place, for they live in the expectation of the life to come. This means that, in the very end, worldly goods do not matter to them. A Christian's heart is so turned toward God's future that, imperceptibly, it grows away from this world. As we become aware of the meaning of the *vita futura*, we are no longer able to attach the same importance to this world. "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearance of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (*Institutes*, 3.7.3).

This focus on the future life obviously also has its effects on our relationship with the whole of creation. Without leading to contempt for earthly things, it releases us from the obsession with material goods and lays the basis for a "sober, righteous, and godly" life in the world.

### ***The Human Race Is Dragging Creation with It to Disaster***

The creation was good, but it has been perverted by human rebellion against God. Perfect as it was, it lost that perfection through Adam's fall; Adam dragged the creation with him into his fall and, hence, into suffering.

Adam's rebellion against God signifies first of all that the human race has done itself irreparable harm. It has destroyed itself and lost the place intended for it by God. Human life has been distorted by sin; human beings can no longer achieve anything that finds favor before God. Much that earns praise in human eyes is worthless before God.<sup>16</sup> Measured against God's commandment, no human being can withstand the test.



Sin has many faces. “Those who term it ‘concupiscence’ use a word not very inappropriate . . . for everything that is in man, from the intellect to the will, from the soul even to the flesh is defiled and pervaded with this concupiscence; or, to express it briefly, the whole man is in himself nothing other than concupiscence” (*Institutes*, 2.1.8). Human beings remain responsible for their acts, but they no longer have the liberty to free themselves from evil. Instead, they are utterly dependent on God and his grace for their redemption. Through his fall, Adam brought death into the account. Human beings were certainly created mortal but, from the very beginning, they were destined for a higher level of life—they were meant to ascend to a better life. Originally death did not mean “the separation of the soul from the body, no corruption, no kind of destruction, in short, no violent change.”<sup>17</sup> It was not until after the fall that death became a curse, and now the human race has to reckon with death and destruction.

The fall then also has repercussions for the whole creation. “We throw heaven and earth into confusion by our sins. For were we in the right order as to our obedience to God, doubtless all the elements would be conformable and we should thus observe in the world an angelic harmony.”<sup>18</sup> Again, the special place of the human race in creation has its effects. Because human destiny is so closely entwined with the whole creation, humankind’s turning away from God has consequences for all created things. “Ever since man declined from his high original, it became necessary that the world should gradually degenerate from its nature.”<sup>19</sup> Creation has been spoiled; though it is still God’s creation, the curse of God comes down on it in punishment. “The earth was cursed on account of Adam. Now, as the blessing of the earth means, in the language of Scripture, that fertility which God infuses by his secret power, so the curse is nothing else than the opposite, i.e. privation, when God withdraws his favor . . . Before the fall,

the state of the world was a most fair and delightful mirror of the divine favor and paternal indulgence towards man. Now, in all the elements we perceive that we are cursed.”<sup>20</sup> The disruption of the world can be seen, for instance, in the existence of fleas, beetles, worms that devour the vines, and all other pests. They are indeed God’s creatures, but their activity amounts to a sign of God’s curse. Humankind’s relationship with creation has been profoundly disrupted and God’s creatures are now turning against human beings. Nature is withholding its benefits.

The fall also perverts the social order, which had been ordered by God for harmony, solidarity, and mutual help. “The whole human race is united by a bond of fellowship . . . To make any person our neighbor, therefore, it is enough that he be a man; for it is not in our power to blot out the human nature.”<sup>21</sup> This community has a structure; it finds expression in the family, in economic interdependence and the need for commerce. What was originally intended for the good of humankind has now become a source of disorder. Human society has become the battleground of conflicting human interests.

### ***God Remains True to Creation***

Yet God does not abandon his creatures however low humankind may have sunk. God has provided for human salvation from the very beginning and in his good time made visible and real in Jesus Christ. We can partake in it by believing and trusting in God’s promise. Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, for human beings in their fallen state are blind. The light of God’s liberating Word is like the sun: “Indeed, the Word of God is like the sun, shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly, it cannot penetrate into our minds

unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it” (*Institutes*, 3.2.34). Salvation brings us the certainty of eternal life. God reconciles us to himself in Christ, and because *God* is reconciled with us, the future is bound to turn out for the best for us in this life and the next. To avoid misunderstandings, Calvin expressly adds that faith does not, of course, mean the promise of earthly prosperity and happiness. “For faith does not certainly promise itself either length of years or honors and riches in this life . . . Rather, the chief assurance of faith rests in the expectation of the life to come” (*Institutes*, 3.2.28).<sup>22</sup> Faith is the starting point of discipleship; in faith we begin to live in fellowship with Christ and let ourselves be formed by him.

As we have seen, humanity’s fall has consequences for the whole creation, but that does not put an end to God’s saving will. God sustains his creation through the darkness of the fall. It is important to remember in this connection that, for Calvin, this world was created and is sustained by God’s Word and that God’s Word has, from the beginning, always included the proclamation of salvation. Paul describes Jesus Christ as the firstborn of creation, but this is “not simply on the ground of his having preceded all creatures in point of time, but because he was begotten by the Father that they might be created in him and that he might, as it were, be the substance and foundation of all things.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere he justifies the same statement by reference to the Trinity. “The ordinary manner of speaking is used here: the Father *made all things by* the Son, and all things *are by* God through the Son.”<sup>24</sup> More than that, not only was the world created by the Word, it is also sustained by it. “The word spoken by God was not only the source of life to all the creatures so that those that were not began to be, but that his life-giving power causes them to remain in their condition.”<sup>25</sup>

Calvin can then say that Christ has been at work throughout the ages. Christ is the content, the foundation, and the goal of God's dealing with his creation. However mysterious and beyond human understanding the path of God's providence may be, Christ is its driving force at all times. The tree of life in paradise was "*la figure du Christ*"<sup>26</sup> (the expression of the Christ). Christ led the people in the wilderness.<sup>27</sup> The work of redemption brings salvation not only for the human race, but for the whole of creation. God raises Christ and sets him at his right hand. "As the right hand of God fills heaven and earth, it follows that the kingdom and power of Christ are equally extensive . . . There is nothing so elevated or excellent, by whatever name it may be named, that it is not subject to the majesty of Christ."<sup>28</sup> The miracles that Jesus performs confirm his power over the universe; he commands the sea to be still. Above all, it is thanks to his goodness that we can live on this earth. "Certain it is that in Adam everything had been cursed. We know that the earth has as it were been changed because of man—the heavens themselves bear the mark of this. For this reason, all creatures are subject to corruption as St Paul says of them in Romans 8 . . . The heavens must be renewed, and while the glory of God shines more in its splendor than in all the rest, the infection of our sins reached even that far. And as for the earth we can see the curse there . . . So how is it that the sun and the moon are in the sky, and the earth bears fruit, and men still dwell in it and the animals find feed by which they are nourished? The reason is the goodness of God, which he extends to all people—even to unbelievers."<sup>29</sup>

A distinction has to be made between common and special grace. The world is sustained by the Word—that is, by Jesus Christ, who is the life of all creatures and without whom they would perish. But the work of redemption goes further than that. Through his special grace we are snatched from death into life.

Through Christ's coming not only we but the whole of creation has been restored to its original purpose. As human beings have been reinstated in their position as children of God, the state of the world can also begin to change. "But now that God is reconciled to his people, his blessing will smile even on brute animals . . . The power of reconciliation is made far more evident by being extended in part to the whole of creation . . . Had God's wrath toward his people been implacable, the sterility of the land would not have been improved."<sup>30</sup>

Once again humanity's special place in creation has repercussions. Just as the fall carried the whole creation with it into perdition, so the redemption of human beings opens up new horizons. They can again use God's gifts in a way that is in keeping with the divine order. They are once again at least partially in tune with the creation. They can learn anew what their original destiny was and can bear witness to God's love for all creatures. God's kingdom has not yet come: "Christ, it is true, is the lawful heir of heaven and earth, by whom the faithful recover what they had lost in Adam; but he has not as yet actually entered upon the full possession of his empire and dominion. Whence the apostle concludes that it is will not be perfectly accomplished until death be abolished. Here is how he reasons: if all things are subdued to Christ, nothing must be contrary or harmful to his members. But we see death still exercising his tyranny against them. It follows then, that there remains the hope of a better state than the present."<sup>31</sup> At present we are still caught up in the futility of the world.

Together with all the creatures, however, we await the perfect restoration of God's creation. "Accordingly, Paul in another passage distinguishes believers by this mark, that their conversation is in heaven, from whence they look for the Savior (Phil. 3:20). And that they may not faint in their course, he associates all the other

creatures *as companions* with them. For since Adam by his fall destroyed the proper order of nature, the creatures groan under the servitude to which they have been subjected through his sin; not that they are at all endued with sense, but that they also naturally long for the state of perfection from which they have fallen. Paul therefore describes them as groaning and travailing in pain . . .” (*Institutes*, 3.25.2).

At no time—whether as a creature, or in humankind’s fall, redemption, or perfecting in the kingdom of God—can the human race be conceived of separately from the whole of creation. God’s kingdom is also a new creation.

### ***Life Regulated by God***

The renewal that has been granted to Christians in Christ has to be made visible. Obedience does not simply mean a new “inner” attitude and behavior—it has to show itself in all areas of life—and here Calvin’s conviction that the commandments of the Old Testament continue to be valid for Christians is fundamental to his thinking. “The third use of the Law (being also the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end) has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the Law is written and engraven on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, although they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit in the Law. For it is the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge; just as a servant who desires with all his soul to approve himself to his master, must still observe, and be careful to ascertain his master’s dispositions, that he may comport himself in accommodation to them. Let none

of us deem ourselves exempt from this necessity, for none have as yet attained to such a degree of wisdom, as that they may not, by the daily instruction of the Law, advance to a purer knowledge of the Divine will” (*Institutes*, 2.7.12).

One of the keywords in Calvin’s writings and sermons is the term *bridle* or *curb*. We are bridled by God’s grace (*Institutes*, 2.5.15), by the fear of God (*Institutes*, 1.11.1), by God’s commandment (*Institutes*, 1.11.1; 12.2), by the signs of God’s presence (*Institutes*, 1.11.2), by the curbs God places on the devil and his furies (*Institutes*, 1.16.3). Adam is bridled by the fact that he was created from earth and clay so that he would not become proud (*Institutes*, 1.15.1). And lastly, God’s word “is the best bridle to control all passions: the thought that nothing is better than to practice righteousness by obeying God’s commandments” (*Institutes*, 2.15.1). “We need more than ordinary patience that we may not in our weariness reverse our course or desert our post” (*Institutes*, 3.25.1). Many other references could be given, but the important thing is that human beings should find the place allocated to them by God and remain there.<sup>32</sup>

This view corresponds to Calvin’s own spiritual journey. At one point, he mentions, almost in passing, that he had undergone a sudden conversion. He describes it in these words: “*Dieu par sa providence secrete me fit finalement tourner bride d’un autre edt e . . . par une conversion subite dompta et rangea mon cceur a la docilite.*”<sup>33</sup> (God, by his secret providence bridled [or reined] me around onto another course . . . by a sudden conversion, subdued and laid my heart to docility.) The turn of phrase is significant. God was calling him to task, and Calvin’s own ideas and wishes did not count. He had to turn away from the errors of the papal church, but also from the ideas of humanistic self-realization. Easy as it would have been for him to flourish in the Renaissance world, he had to

hand over the reins of his life to God and let himself be governed by him. This understanding runs through all Calvin's life and work. Geneva was by no means his personal choice. When the question of his going back there came up in 1540, he wrote to Guillaume Farel: "Had I the choice, I would do everything conceivable not to yield to you in this matter, but when I remember that I do not belong to myself, I offer my heart in sacrifice to the Lord."<sup>34</sup>

For Calvin, the Ten Commandments are the authoritative summary of God's will; they are the mirror that most clearly reflects God's intention and expectations. Especially in his sermons, however, Calvin goes far beyond the general formulations of the Decalogue. Interpreting particular biblical passages gives him the opportunity to reflect on the form of the divine will in concrete terms.<sup>35</sup> Scarcely any aspect of life escapes his attention. All his works and his pastoral activity testify to his concern to spell out the full consequences of Christian submission to God's will, down to the last detail.

"The key question in Geneva at the time of the Reformation was not whether people were ready to be inspired, impressed, excited and swept along by this or that religious preacher, but whether they were prepared to live according to God's word."<sup>36</sup> Where God's will was at stake, there was no choice; the only thing that counted was setting the right priorities. Aspects of Calvin's character that may seem harsh and unrelenting to us today can be traced back to this fundamental option.

This was particularly true for the church, the place above all others where the good news of the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to the Scriptures. But the church is also the place of discipleship, set from the beginning under Christ's call, charged with the task of showing forth God's



will in this world as faithfully as possible. It is guided in this by God's original intention for humankind and the whole creation and lives in the hope and expectation of the future that God has ordained for it. Something of this future already shines forth within it; every member counts and has to help the church live up to its calling. Church discipline serves the salvation of every individual, but it also serves the clarity of Christian witness.

Can God's will really be imposed in this world? Faith and inner renewal are needed to recognize it clearly, but not everyone can be expected to possess these, and not everyone belongs to the church. For as long as the world exists we will have a society in which believers and nonbelievers live together side by side. Yet society needs an order to guarantee the security of communal life. Just as the church is the place where Christians can express their calling, so the state has to guarantee public order. The two regimens are essentially different. Calvin states it succinctly: "The spiritual kingdom of Christ and public order are quite distinct things" (*Institutes*, 4.20.1). Calvin places great emphasis on this distinction and, in doing so, distances himself both from those who regard any form of public order as superfluous and from the "flatterers of princes" who immoderately praise the latter's power, and almost seem to mistake them for God himself (*Institutes*, 4.20.1).

Calvin saw his own times in a somber light. Far from considering the Reformation to which he himself had contributed as the dawn of a new era, he was deeply troubled by the changes and upheavals he was witnessing. In his view, the world had been shaken to its foundations and was in danger of running out of control. He saw God's correcting hand in this collapse of order. "We should not be surprised to see so little enduring in this world and upheavals happening every day. Why? Because those to whom God has

shown himself generous have abandoned themselves to evil and forgotten God; and he must therefore withdraw his grace and goodness from them and send them barrenness, as they deserve.”<sup>37</sup>

If chaos is to be avoided, a strong system of public order is essential, so that “people do not behave like cats and dogs, tearing each other apart . . . and the poor and humble are not trodden under foot and exploited.”<sup>38</sup> Calvin sees public office not as an honor, but as a duty. Kings, princes, and other office-bearers are responsible for the subjects under their care. In the best cases, ruler and people are bound by “mutual” obligation: The rulers seek the well-being of their subjects, who in turn owe them obedience. But even a magistrate careless of his duties is preferable to anarchy. Even though the Reformation of which he himself was part was in fact in many respects a base for revolutionary change, Calvin had little time for revolutionary political opposition, which perhaps explains his overreaction to the “tumult” in Geneva. Public order was to be preserved at all costs.

This is not to say that Christian witness should confine itself to the inward sphere of faith. Because Christians are members of society as a whole, they carry their share of responsibility for public order. Calvin stresses that the distinction between the two spheres does not mean that public life is to be seen as a dirty business with which Christians should not concern themselves (cf. *Institutes*, 4.20.2). God’s claim extends to the whole of society, indeed the whole of creation. In their own place, Christians therefore have to work for the common good and so also for the maintenance of public order, which they do by acting and speaking in line with the criteria that are given them in the Gospels. As far as possible, public order should be aligned on the spiritual order of the kingdom of God. In his sermons, Calvin says very little about the distinction between the two spheres

of ruling. He believes God's commandments hold good in both spheres and apply universally.

Especially in his final years—after the fateful execution of Michael Servetus—Calvin increasingly sought the support of the city authorities, including for the preservation and aims of the church.<sup>39</sup> As a result of the political pressure to which he felt himself subjected, the basic distinction between the two spheres effectively began to fade in practice. At the theological level, however, he held stoutly to his view of the church and the state authorities right to the end. Today, in an age when the spheres of church and society have moved far apart, the distinction has become even more relevant than before. For Christians, this poses with renewed urgency the question of how the church, through its message and the fellowship in its midst, is to show forth God's will for the whole of creation.

### ***God's Gifts and Social Justice***

What does Christian witness with respect to God's gifts, human possessions, and social justice mean?

The first thing to note is that the earth's resources are meant to enhance human life; God does not give us only what is necessary for survival but ensures that life on this earth can be pleasurable—Calvin uses words like *plaisir* (pleasure) and *delectation* (delight). God prepares the space where human beings can live and move; the earth's resources are God's gift and what is given by God is there to be enjoyed. Calvin rejects the view that a true Christian has to make do with the bare essentials. Such austerity, he says, “does the dangerous thing of binding consciences in closer fetters than those in which they are bound by the Word of

God” (*Institutes*, 3.10.1). And in one of his sermons he says that we should enjoy houses and other earthly comforts and not be stricken by pangs of conscience about everything. At the same time, he is aware that material goods can mean temptation and bondage, and so he continues: “Yet we must take care not to leave free rein to our flesh to satisfy itself as it desires, for there lies an abyss and we could never overcome it.”<sup>40</sup> While material goods are not to be despised, it is important that we use them in accordance with God’s will, which in practice means with moderation (*Institutes*, 3.10.1). What is given by God must not be idolized; there must be no confusing of giver and gift. What God gives is a sign of his love, intended to help us progress on the path of salvation. What we receive from God’s hand is not the end, but a pointer to the life that is to come, a token, as it were, of the fullness that awaits us.

It is, therefore, important to be aware of what God intends with his gifts, so that we can recognize the narrow path between grateful use and excess. “Let this be our principle, that we err not in the use of the gifts of Providence when we refer them to the end for which their author made and destined them, since he created them for our good and not for our destruction. No man will keep the true path better than he who shall have this end carefully in view” (*Institutes*, 3.10.2).

Human beings may possess earthly goods, but they must always be clear in their minds that their true owner is, and always will be, God. “For we must consider that what each individual possesses has not fallen to him by chance, but by the distribution of the sovereign Lord” (*Institutes*, 2.8.45). Only in a derived sense can the goods of the earth become human possessions. Human beings are never more than stewards of God’s estate.

Respect for God's gifts implies not claiming more for ourselves than God allots to us, for both greed and meanness are basically idolatry. God grants the human race sufficient for its needs. Just as he supplied Israel with manna, so today he ensures that every human being receives his due. Calvin expresses this in a prayer: "Almighty God, since you accept to stoop so far as to show the solicitude and take the care to supply us with whatever is needful and convenient for our journey through this present life, grant that we may learn to rely so fully on you, and so to trust to your blessing, as to abstain not only from all plunder and other evil deeds, but also from every wicked coveting; and to continue in your fear, and by these means to learn also so to bear our poverty on the earth that finding our contentment and rest in those spiritual riches which you offer us through your holy Gospel."<sup>41</sup>

Work is something that is obviously required of us, for we are responsible for our own livelihood. Calvin is sharply critical of monks who feed themselves at the expense of others. "I call them teachers of passive love," he could say.<sup>42</sup> But for human beings, work is not an end in itself but a service to the community. Through our work we avoid becoming a burden on others and we help others also to find a living.

Because all property ultimately belongs to God, it must also be used to God's honor and glory. A limit is set to human property in the poverty of the poor. No one should suffer want or be forced to beg. Property must be shared in such a way that poverty is alleviated and those who possess material goods have a responsibility toward those in need, as Calvin frequently reminds us. Hoarding wealth in face of poverty is an offense against God's will. The prestige attached to wealth in the eyes of the world is deceptive, for "God places benefits in the hands of the rich so that they may have both the opportunity and the ability to help their poor neighbors."<sup>43</sup>

Christian obedience presupposes faith and the willingness for discipleship. It cannot be imposed by force. State order protects property, and theft is a crime to be punished. But even at this level, steps have to be taken to ensure that no one suffers need and the church has to speak out for social justice to be implemented. Calvin reminds us of Joseph's wisdom and the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years. The contrast between rich and poor cannot be removed, however; if the rich lack generosity, the poor have to accept their condition.<sup>44</sup> By Christian criteria, the rich who hoard their wealth are to be considered as thieves, but they are in the right before the judges. As we have seen, Calvin had no thought of justifying a social revolution. Social balance can come about only through the willing generosity of the rich, for which he appeals with added urgency. Social oppression can lead to unrest and uprisings, which are God's punishment for this failure to obey his stated will.

Calvin, in principle, affirms the value of trade and the exchange of goods. Engaging in trade is part of the natural order and so is a respectable occupation. The exchange of goods reflects the mutual dependence of human beings and serves to ensure that everyone receives what they need. Yet trade is a dangerous undertaking and will serve the common good only if it is subject to clear rules, which calls for treaties and clear agreements on weights, measures, and currencies. Trade, too, must be guided by the criterion of God's will.

Calvin's remarks on money-lending need to be understood in this perspective. In contrast to earlier generations of theologians, Calvin said that lending money at interest was acceptable under certain strictly defined conditions. He immediately rules out loans that exploit the poor and needy, insisting that where there can be no question of repayment, the rich have a duty to

help. Things are different, in his view, when a loan benefits the individual receiving it and enables that person to make more profits; in such cases interest can justifiably be demanded. Calvin accepts a phenomenon of the economic developments of his time: Money can and should be used to overcome poverty. Money-lending, however, is usury when people in need are exploited. Only loans providing genuine assistance are legitimate. In this respect, Calvin enumerates a series of conditions. He is well aware that the money business is a minefield and anyone engaged in it is exposed to the temptations of cheating and taking advantage, so he expressly warns against making a profession of money-lending. "I do not approve of anyone making a profession of money-lending."<sup>45</sup> Loans may be granted from case to case and, in every case, the conditions must be examined very carefully. The simplest rule is that no one should grant a loan that he himself would not be prepared to take on. Calvin's statements do not simply open the door to money-lending; they represent an attempt to bring a new social phenomenon into line with God's will.<sup>46</sup>

### *Care for God's Creation*

God's creation is designed to nourish and sustain all the world's people. Famine and drought are not part of God's original order but are the consequence of human sins and errors, and are sent down upon us as a punishment by God. In principle the earth's resources are inexhaustible. "It is impossible that there should be so great a multitude of people as to be incapable of deriving support and nourishment from the earth; but by our iniquities and transgressions we shut the bosom of the earth, which would otherwise be laid open to us, and would abundantly yield fruits of every description, that we might lead a prosperous and happy life."<sup>47</sup> Clearly the phenomena of population explosion and dwindling natural resources were of no concern for Calvin.

He regarded famine and drought as passing disasters in which God's punishing hand was at work.

The abundance with which God has surrounded the human race does not mean, however, that his gifts can be wasted and frittered away. As gifts from God, they are beyond value and have to be treated with care and respect; by the way we use them, we honor their creator. Just like greed for more and more, or meanness, or hoarding, wastefulness, too, is a sin. All we receive, we receive from God. It does not belong to us; to use it willfully is to offend its giver. "The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things that God has committed to our hands, on the condition that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what remains."<sup>48</sup> Wastefulness is to be condemned because it deprives our neighbors of the gifts that are their due. Calvin himself lived in the utmost austerity.

Calvin recognizes the capacity of the human mind to create and discover; God himself endowed human beings with this gift and they are meant to use it. "Undoubtedly God did not intend to curb the discoveries that human beings make for themselves . . . The human mind is a wonderful workshop for finding this and that, and as experience shows, there is no end to it."<sup>49</sup> Calvin does not stop here, however; he goes on to say that for him the crucial question is the purpose served by human inventiveness. Innovation cannot mean that the natural order is disturbed. Human life must be characterized by humility and simplicity. Calvin condemns, therefore, the production of superfluous commodities, things which are steadily increasing. He complains that "people are completely taken up with their delights and pleasures, ostentatious display and boasting and everything that seems to them dainty and desirable."<sup>50</sup> There must be limits to



the thirst for new inventions. “We must be satisfied with the modest use of things as God has given them to us.”<sup>51</sup>

Above all, we have to show respect for the earth and the land, and work the soil with care and precaution. It is not there for us alone, but also for those who come after us, and should not be overexploited. “Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy and this diligence with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.”<sup>52</sup>

Profligacy so offends God that he no longer takes delight in his own works. Calvin’s interpretation of Psalm 104 is particularly revealing in this respect. “Let the Lord rejoice in his work (31). This statement is by no means superfluous; for God desires that the order established from the very beginning may be continued by the lawful use of his gifts . . . As the wicked infect the world with their pollutions, the consequence is that God loses delight in his own workmanship and is even almost displeased with it. It is therefore not impossible that the uncleanness, which, being extended and diffused through every part of the world, vitiates and corrupts the noble product of God’s hands and becomes offensive to him . . . Let us then take care so to weigh the providence of God, as that being wholly devoted to obeying him, we may rightly and purely use the benefits which he sanctifies for our enjoying them. Further, let us be grieved that such precious treasures are wickedly squandered away.”<sup>53</sup>

Even in time of war, respect has to be shown for the earth and the land. Everything possible must be done to avoid wars. Unrelenting in his attitude to the “troublemakers” in Geneva, Calvin urgently warned the Protestants in France against taking up arms. He was convinced that the cause of the gospel should not on any account be defended by armed force. On April 16, 1561, he wrote to Admiral Gaspard de Coligny: “If even one drop of blood is shed in France, rivers of blood will flow across Europe. It is therefore better by far to be ruined a hundred times than to expose the name of Christ and the gospel to such shame.”<sup>54</sup> War as such is to be condemned as the work of the devil. The wars that are mentioned in the Old Testament were perhaps legitimate because they were permitted—or even ordered—by God, but the wars being waged today are no better than banditry. “Acts of immeasurable cruelty and inhumanity are committed so that great chaos reigns. It is as though all kindness is to be forgotten and there is no other way of conducting a war except to forget all rights and let no law apply and human beings become raging animals.”<sup>55</sup>

War brings death and suffering; human beings who are made in God’s image are destroyed, but the land too is harmed. Calvin therefore pleads for something in the nature of a humanitarian law of war.

In a sermon on Deuteronomy 20:19–20, he urges that restraint should be exercised even in war. “No war is ever so permissible that every injustice is allowed.” The damage that is inevitably caused by any war has to be contained. “There is a general rule that we would do well to note. Whenever we are called to do something harmful or damaging we must remember this: our Lord has placed us to dwell in this world and provided us with all he considered necessary for our lives. If I then rob this land of all the goodness that God has given it to provide food for human beings then,

surely, that means that I am seeking to annihilate the kindness that God has poured out on the human race and render it ineffective. Am I worthy to be supported by this earth when I try in this way to abolish the goodness of God, which was meant for my neighbors as well as myself? When I am no longer willing to let it reign freely? Does this not make me a monster?

“This, then, is what should restrain us when we find ourselves driven by wickedness or some evil thoughts to the point of destroying trees, houses and other such things. We have to control ourselves and reflect: who are we waging war against? Not against creatures, but against the one whose goodness is mirrored here; not against one man only, but against each and everyone, ourselves included. If this were properly understood, wars would not be waged in succession as they are today, for when a war is started, nothing is spared and lands are devastated . . . Whatever happens . . . he requires us to follow this rule: do no damage. We know that our Lord has disposed the earth to be our nourishing mother and when she opens her womb to feed us, it is as though God himself held out his hand to us and offered the proof of his goodness.”<sup>56</sup>

In this connection, Calvin’s view of the Sabbath is of great importance. He considers that the Old Testament commandment still stands for Christians. God wants his people to set aside their own projects, programs, and activities at regular intervals and devote themselves wholly to God. “Believers are to rest from their own works so as to allow God to work in them” (*Institutes*, 2.8.28). The deep underlying meaning of the Sabbath is not to stop people working. “The design of the institution must always be kept in memory: for God did not command men simply to keep holiday every seventh day, as if he delighted in our indolence; but rather that we, being released from all other business, might the more

readily apply ourselves to recognizing the Creator of the world. In short, it is a sacred rest or leisure, which withdraws people from the impediments of the world, that they may dedicate themselves entirely to God.”<sup>57</sup> The true meaning of work can be understood only when it is set in a right relation to God the Creator.

Christians, too, need this special time to find the necessary detachment. Sunday gives them the opportunity to gather for worship, but there is also a social component to this, in that it gives servants and workers a respite from unremitting work.

God rested from his labors on the seventh day, and human beings are urged to follow their Creator by keeping the Sabbath, a call that cannot fail to touch us (*Institutes*, 2.8.30). The number seven suggests completion, and points to the perfecting of all things at the end of time. Sunday is there to set our lives in the proper perspective—in other words, to measure this imperfect world against the perfection of eternal life.

Calvin also appreciated the Old Testament institution of the sabbatical year, on which he had this to say: “According as each region is more fertile or richer, fields are fallowed every third or fourth year, lest they should become altogether unproductive through exhaustion of their fat and humidity. Indeed a soil can hardly be found of such fecundity as to be fitted for constant productiveness without intermission. Some relaxation is therefore given, until the land recovers its substance and vigor; but this only pertains to wheat, barley, oats, peas, beans and vegetables.

“As to meadows and vineyards, the state of things is different, since, when meadows are mown every year, the fertility of the soil is not weakened; whilst vines degenerate unless they are cultivated. It was a sign of extraordinary and exceeding fertility that the land of Canaan could bear six successive years’ sowing without being worn out.”<sup>58</sup>

### *Calvin's Lasting Importance*

How relevant is Calvin's witness on God's creation to our situation today? What does it have to say to us in relation to the current social and environmental crisis?

Calvin does not speak directly to our present situation, any more than the Bible itself does. The problems we face today did not exist in the same form in his day, so the real question is how far Calvin's theology and reforming work in Geneva contain solid elements that we can still productively build on today. Although Calvin's reputation may not seem very promising in this respect, it is clear from a closer reading that the Geneva Reformer opened up some unexpected perspectives, as the following three comments will show.

### *Fulfilling God's Will*

It is striking to note how contemporary criticism of Calvin goes in opposite directions. On one side, he is described as "the most modern among the reformers," considered to have built a bridge between the Christian faith and the dawning modern age, and opened doors that later generations could pass through. Many see in him an early pioneer of democracy. Whether in a positive or negative sense, Calvin is regarded by many as one of the fathers of the modern world. On the other side, critics paint a very different picture. Calvin is judged to be one of those theologians who stress humankind's total dependence on God, a view of humanity that goes hand in hand with a stern image of God. God is unyielding; he deals with his creation and the human race according to his own eternal counsel. Human beings are destined for salvation or damnation. Everything is ultimately for the honor of God, and the lives of the elect and of the damned alike have to serve

this end. Because this emphasis on the divinity of God left little room for his humanity, the verdict of some critics continues that Geneva was bound to become a “gloomy affair.”<sup>59</sup>

While both interpretations can find support in different aspects of Calvin’s life and writings, they both miss the essential point. He was neither the “father of the modern world” nor the “harsh taskmaster” who subjugated the city of Geneva. What really motivated him was his concern to bring life as he found it in his own day under the control of God’s will. The human being is designed to live subordinate to God; only in submission to God is he human in the full sense. Calvin was clear-sighted enough to know that new developments were taking place in his times. His concern was to master the innovations and place them into the service of God’s plan and will. He was dealing with people who had acquired a new potential for self-realization, but, in his view, such self-determination could easily lead to separation from God and therefore bring disaster upon the world. The decisive question is how God’s name can be blessed and glorified even amid the changes of the age. Calvin’s spirituality lies in radically posing this question.

Calvin would have resolutely opposed any system that accepted social injustice as an inevitable fact. He approved of property, but considered it as an instrument in the service of human community. He would equally have opposed any system turning God’s creation into objects and treated as matter of human exploitation. His theology runs counter to present-day assumptions. In Calvin’s eyes, both social injustice and the destruction of nature are an offense against the Creator. How could Christians possibly acquiesce in a social order that has adopted a system based on offense against the Creator?

### *The Limits to Human Self-realization*

It is Calvin's understanding of the human being that is most important, however. He speaks vehemently against the idea that the vocation of human beings is to determine their own destiny and realize their own potential. God gives humankind space. He does indeed make them rich before they are born. They can and should evolve in that space, but they remain totally subordinate to God. They are dependent on God the Creator and on the creation within which he has placed them. They have to be content with that which God in his goodness has given them.

The human race has acquired new capabilities; it has developed far beyond the abilities that seemed to mark it out in previous centuries. Human dominion over creation has been extended, yet at the same time humankind remains clearly faced with limits. The fragility of human existence is becoming increasingly apparent. Human beings have to show restraint. What they are learning in their treatment of the creation should bring them to reason. If the human race is to survive, it will have to accept this "God's bridle."

Calvin tried to interpret God's will for the people of his times. He saw the future not in human self-determination, but in humankind's total dependence on God and the creation. He was aware of what was emerging in his times—he had a "progressive" as well as a "conservative" streak—and these new developments had to be brought under control through the witness of the Holy Scriptures. Much may have remained imperfect, but Calvin's intention makes his a prophetic, warning voice even five hundred years on.

Calvin calls the people of today to return to the limits that God has set for humankind.

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### *Old Testament Witness*

No other reformer devoted as much attention to the Old Testament as Calvin. He commented on almost every book of the Hebrew Bible and, for all his focus on the Christ event, his thinking contains many elements of Old Testament thought.

The bond with the earth, which is a main feature of Old Testament witness, has largely been lost in the Christian tradition. What the Old Testament had to say about the land and fertility was spiritualized very early on. The rules set out in the Old Testament concerning the treatment of the land gradually faded into the background or were transposed to the spiritual sphere. In the Western church, the institution of the jubilee year, for example, with its concrete ordinances for justice and responsibility for creation, was replaced by the introduction of Holy Years, with their promises of indulgences and pious exercises. Is it not an irony of history that the law of Israel, so closely tied to the land, found no place in the legal traditions of the Christian world? Roman law, codified on the order of a Christian emperor, deals purely with persons and property. Responsibility for the earth has no place in it.

Calvin's merit lies in having transmitted Old Testament thinking to the Christian church in a new way. Israel's bond with the earth and humankind's dependence on the Creator are central pillars of his theology and practice.





## Notes

1. A review of the many different and contradictory verdicts on Calvin can be found in: Gabriel Mützenberg, *Lobsession calviniste* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1979); or Eberhard Busch, “Who Was and Who Is Calvin? Interpretations of Recent Times,” *Reformed World* 57, no. 4 (December 2007): 237–250.
2. Elizabeth Breuilly and Martin Palmer, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (London: Cassell, 1992), 92. Only someone who has never read a line of Calvin’s writings could say such a thing! Less extreme, but no less erroneous, are the comments by Dave Bookless in *When Enough Is Enough*, ed. R. J. Berry (London: Apollos, 2007), 37. He claims to detect an anthropocentric understanding of creation in Calvin’s thinking, a view which, in his opinion, not only is fundamentally wrong, but also inevitably leads to “technocentrism.”
3. A detailed study of Calvin’s understanding of creation based on his sermons has been presented by Richard Stauffer: *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978).
4. *Créé pour spectacle de la gloire de Dieu, Institutes*, 1.5.5; 1.15.20. Or: *Dieu n’a besoin de rien emprunter d’ailleurs, car Il est parfait, et mêmes devant qu’Il eux crée le monde avait-il faute de rien? Et quand il y avait crée, c’était que pour son profit et usage? C’est seulement a fin que sa bonté, et vertu, et sagesse, et justice fussent cogner de nous et qu’en fuissions témoins. Car il nous a mis ici comme en un théâtre, a fin que nous contemptions sa gloire en toutes ses créatures*, Eighth sermon on the Letter to the Ephesians, *Calvini Opera* (hereafter, CO) LI, 346.
5. Fourth sermon on Genesis, quoted in Stauffer, 55.
6. Sermon XLII on Deuteronomy, CO XXVI, 387.

7. Copernicus's epoch-making work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* had appeared in 1543. Calvin was clearly not impressed by it. For him, the rising and setting of the sun belonged to the natural order. In fact, he emphatically rejected the new understanding in one of his sermons: *Ne soyons pas semblables à ces fantastiques qui ont un esprit d'amertume et de contradiction, pour trouver à redire par tout et pour pervertir l'ordre de nature. Nous en verrons d'aucuns si frénétiques, non pas seulement en la religion, mais pour montrer partout qu'ils ont une nature monstrueuse, qui diront que le soleil ne se bouge, et que c'est la terre qui se remue et qu'elle tourne. Quand nous voyons de tels esprits, il faut bien dire que le diable les ait possédés*, Eighth sermon on 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, CO IL, 677; cf. Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin*, 188.
8. *Ce bâtiment tant artificiel*, *Institutes*, 1.5.1; *ce bâtiment du monde—une école pour être enseignés à piété*, *Institutes*, 11.6.1.
9. Commentary on Genesis 43:12, CO XXIII, 541.
10. Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Psalm 145:16, CO XXXII, 417.
11. Sermon XLIX on Matthew 4:2–4 and Luke 4:2–4, CO XLVI, 614.
12. Lessons on the twelve prophets, Haggai 2:19, CO XLIV, 119.
13. Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Psalm 24:1, CO XXXI, 244.
14. Commentary on Genesis 1:28, CO XXIII, 29.
15. *Ita prius fait locuples quam nasceretur*, Commentary on Genesis 1:26, CO XXIII, 27, see also 29. Likewise below: *Ecce tibi paratum a me victum antequam factus esses, me igitur patrem agnosce*, CO XXIII, 29.
16. *Institutes*, 11.3: *(leur vertus) seront bien louées en Petat politique et du commun bruit des hommes, mais au siege judicial de Dieu elles ne vaudront pas un festu pour acquérir*

*justice*. The overall title of the chapter is: *Que la nature de l'homme ne produit rien qui ne merite condamnation*.

17. Commentary on Genesis 3:19, CO XXIII, 77.
18. In Commentary on Jeremiah 5:25, CO 39.
19. Commentary on Genesis 2:2, CO XXIII, 32.
20. *Ibid.*, 3:17, CO XXIII, 72f.
21. Commentaries on the New Testament (Harmonia Evangelica), Luke 10:30, CO XLV, 613.
22. Also *Institutes*, 3.2.38: *Dieu ne testifie point son amour envers ceux qu'il fait fructifier temporellement et aussi ne declare sa haine envers ceux qu'il afflige*.
23. New Testament Commentaries, Colossians 1:15–16, CO LII, 85.
24. New Testament Commentaries, John 1:3, CO XLVII, 4.
25. *Ibid.*, John 1:4, CO XLVII, 5.
26. Commentary on Genesis 2:9, CO XXIII, 38.
27. *Institutes*, 1.13.10.
28. New Testament Commentaries, Ephesians 1:20–21, CO LI, 158–159.
29. Sermon XI on 1 Corinthians 11:2–3, CO XLIX, 721–722.
30. Lectures on the twelve prophets, Joël 2:22, CO XLII, 559.
31. Commentary on Psalms, Psalm 8:6, CO XXXI, 94.
32. Sermon CXIX on Deuteronomy 20:16–20, CO XXVII, 629.
33. Preface to the commentary on the Psalms, CO XXXI, 22.
34. Letter to Farel, November 1540, CO XI, 100.
35. Albrecht Thiel has examined certain of Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy in this respect in a careful and informative study: *In der Schule Gottes: Die Ethik Calvins im Spiegel seiner Predigten fiber das Deuteronomium* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999).
36. Karl Barth, "Reformierte Lehre, ihr Wesen und ihre Aufgabe," in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1924), 192. In Calvin's sermon on Deuteronomy, No.

CLXXXIX, CO XXIX, we read these words: *Il faut que la parole reforme notre vie.*

37. Third sermon on Deuteronomy, CO XXVI, 622.
38. Sermon on Titus 2:15—3:2, CO LIV, 559.
39. Frédéric Amsler, “L’affaire Servet et la naissance de l’unanimisme protestant genevois,” *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d’Etudes* 58, nos. 4–5 (August 2006).
40. *Il faut bien user des maisons comme de toutes autres commodités de la vie présente que nous ne faisons point scrupule de toutes corvées : mais cependant gardons-nous de lâcher la bride a notre chair, afin de contenter selon les convoitises : car c’est un abime, et jamais nous n’en pourrions venir a bout*, CO XXVII, 402.
41. Lectures on the twelve minor prophets, 643, quoted by André Biéler, *Calvin’s Social and Economic Thought* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches/World Council of Churches, 2005), 269.
42. Calvin’s criticism of monasticism always returns to this point, so that it applies only to a limited extent to the monastic movement as a whole. Calvin admits that honorable forms of monasticism existed in earlier times and even expresses a certain admiration for the unwavering asceticism of early monastic life (*Institutes*, 4.13.8), but he has no time for the monastic practices of his own day.
43. Sermon CXLI on Deuteronomy 24:19–24, CO XXVIII, 198–199, quoted in Biéler, 284.
44. *Ibid.*
45. CO X, 248.
46. A detailed presentation of Calvin’s economic and social thinking will be found in Biéler’s *Calvin’s Social and Economic Thought*.
47. Commentary on Isaiah 30:23, CO XXXVI, 524.
48. Commentary on Genesis 2:15, CO XXIII, 44.

49. Sermon CXXVII on Deuteronomy, CO XXVIII, 29.
50. Sermon CXXVII on Deuteronomy, CO XXVIII, 29.
51. Ibid.: *qu'on se contente d'avoir l'usage naïf tel que nostre Seigneur l'offre.*
52. Commentary on Genesis 2:15, CO XXIII, 44.
53. Commentary on the Psalms, 104:31, 35, CO XXXII, 97–98.
54. Letters, CO XVIII, 426.
55. CO XXVI, 14, *Ainsi voyons-nous, en somme, qu'aujourd'huy ce ne sont que brigandages de toutes les guerres qui se meinent : qu'il y a de cruauté et inhumantez so exorbitantes, que c'est une confusion extreme, qu'il semble qu'on veuille oublier toute equite, et qu'une guerre ne se puisse faire, qu'on oublie toute droicture, qu'il n y ait plus de loy, que les hommes deviennent comme bestes furieuses.*
56. Sermon CXIX on Deuteronomy 20:16–20, CO XXVII, 637.
57. Commentary on Genesis 2:3, CO XXIII, 33.
58. Commentary on Exodus 23:10, CO XXIV, 585.
59. Karl Barth, *Die Menschlichkeit Gottes*, Theologische Studien 48 (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), 13. Without reference to any sources, Albert Schweitzer feels able to state that Calvin never laughed more than once in his life. Schweitzer, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Leipzig 1908, 1920 (3 Aufl.), 18.









