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The Universe as the Living Image of God: Calvin's Doctrine of Creation Reconsidered

Randall C. Zachman

I remember standing in the mountains of North Carolina several years ago, in a beautiful gorge that opened out onto the low hills of South Carolina. In this gorge was a magnificent waterfall, cascading in the sunlight over the smooth granite rocks into the shadows of the pine trees below. As I stood there gazing on the glory of this scene, I overheard two gentlemen speaking next to me. The man nearest me turned to his friend and observed, "Just think of all of the kilowatts of hydro-electricity being wasted at this falls!"

How should we regard the world in which we live? Should we contemplate it as full of marvels, wonders, and miracles, which fill our minds with awe and ravish our hearts with astonishment and admiration? Or should we look upon the world as a treasure-trove of resources bequeathed to us to be used for our own advantage and profit, to be exploited for the fulfillment of our desires? We are becoming well aware of the blindness, cruelty, and folly of the latter attitude, given the alarmingly rapid degradation of the environment since the scientific and industrial revolutions, creating our current ecological crisis. Many today accuse the Christian tradition of helping to create this crisis by its teaching about the purpose of the natural world, namely, that it was created by God for the good and enjoyment of humankind. This Christian teaching has been blamed for fostering an attitude towards the world that encourages the exploitation of nature to satisfy human needs and desires. Christians are said to teach, on the basis of Genesis 1:26, that humankind has been given dominion over every living creature, and may therefore use all creatures for the fulfillment of human aims and objectives. Such teaching is said to be anthropocentric, because it places the interests of human beings at the center of the world. In his landmark article on the historical roots of the ecological crisis,

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Lynn White Jr. claimed that, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," since it insists "that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."¹ According to White, the consequence of Christian teaching is to make it "possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."² Hence White claims that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."³ David Kinsley has recently reiterated White's charge, and has identified John Calvin as a theologian who taught an ecologically harmful view of creation. Kinsley says of Calvin's position: "God controls and directs nature; as God's agent or special creation, human beings are to imitate this relationship in their dealings with nature."⁴ So self-evident is this claim to Kinsley that he does not cite one text from the writings of Calvin to warrant it.

Kinsley's claim, if true, would do much to substantiate the claims made by White, for John Calvin has a highly developed doctrine of the creative and providential works of God. More ominously still, Calvin is arguably the most influential theologian of the English speaking world, in which the scientific and industrial revolutions developed. Is it true that Calvin taught that it is God's will that humanity exploit nature for its own ends, with indifference for the natural world *per se*? At first sight, White and Kinsley would seem to have support for their claims in Calvin's writings. In his comments on Genesis 1:26, the key text about human dominion over all creatures, Calvin appears to confirm their worst suspicions, when he says, "we must infer [from this text] what was the end for which all things were created; namely, that none of the

¹Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," in Ian Barbour, editor, *Western Man and Environmental Ethics* (Englewood, New Jersey: Addison-Wesley, 1973), 25.

²White, "Historical Roots," 25.

³White, "Historical Roots," 29.

⁴David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 111.

conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to men."⁵ Lest we think this to be an isolated statement, Calvin repeats this thought in his exposition of Psalm 24:1: "To what purpose are there produced so many kinds of fruit, and in so great abundance, and why are there so many pleasant and delightful countries, if it is not for the use and comfort of men?"⁶ Calvin also makes this one of the major points for the reader to contemplate in the narration of the six days of creation. "God himself has shown by the order of creation that he created all things for man's sake."⁷

It is therefore undeniable that Calvin consistently and repeatedly taught that the world was created for the use and comfort of humanity, and that the abundance of good things found in the world were given to us by God for our necessities as well as for our enjoyment. However, this leaves the most important question unanswered: *Why* did God will to give us all the good things of the world, even before we were created? And how does God want us to regard the good things of the world that he has bequeathed to us? We assume that when Calvin teaches that God created all things for the use and comfort of humans, this means that we are free to treat the created world as we see fit, like spoiled children in a toy store. But what did *Calvin* mean by this teaching? How did Calvin teach Christians to regard the created order? In order to answer these questions, we will examine the meaning of the

⁵Commentary on Genesis 1:26, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, edited by Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, *Corpus Reformatorum* (Brunswick: A. Schwetckhe and Son [M. Bruhn], 1863-1900), 23:27C; *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Old Testament*, 30 volumes (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843-48), 1:96. These works are hereafter are abbreviated CO and CTS respectively.

⁶Comm. Ps. 24:1, CO 31:244A; CTS 8:402.

⁷*Institutio Christianae religionis 1559*, I.xiv.22, *Ioannis Calvini opera selecta*, Volumes III-V, edited by Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Donna Scheuner (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-52), 3:172, lines 27-28; *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:181-182. References to the *Institutes* will cite both works in the following abbreviated fashion: *Inst.* I.xiv.22, *OS* III.172.27-28; (1:181-2).

three central metaphors that Calvin used to describe the created order: the theater of God's glory, the living image of God, and the beautiful garment of God.

The Theater of God's Glory

It is a commonplace that Calvin taught that the created world is the theater of God's glory; indeed, this phrase of Calvin's was used by Susan Schreiner as the title of her book on nature in the thought of Calvin.⁸ Oddly enough, however, Schreiner did not directly examine what this phrase might mean, although it would seem to deserve greater attention than it has hitherto received.⁹ If the world is a theater, then humans have been created as spectators in the audience to behold the drama enacted before them on the stage. The performance itself must be the works of God which reveal the glory of God to us. As in any good theater, the actions of God on the stage are not meant to leave us coldly indifferent, but are rather designed to move our minds and affections in a particular way. More importantly, by attentively beholding the actions of God on the stage, we are meant to arrive at a greater recognition and acknowledgment of the nature and character of the actor.

How might all of this take place? According to Calvin, the actions of God in the world set forth various powers of God; and these powers of God in turn reveal to us who God is and what he is like. As spectators of the divine performance in the world, we are to contemplate the works of God in order to discern the powers of God that shine forth in these works. "We must therefore admit that in God's individual works—but especially in them as a whole—that God's powers are actually

⁸Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, Studies in Historical Theology 3 (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1991).

⁹Schreiner does note that for Calvin nature is "a mirror, a painting, and a theater of the divine glory" that reveals God (*Theater*, 121; one may compare 65, 107). Still, she focuses on the role of God's immutability and omnipotence in maintaining the order of nature and human society in light of the threat of chaos (*Theater*, 22, 33-35, 120).

represented as in a painting. Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him, and from this to true and complete happiness."¹⁰ Since the powers of God that we see also invite and allure us to seek our happiness in the source of these powers, they must be good things that both individually and as a whole reveal to us the goodness of God. "It is no small honor that God for our sake so magnificently adorned the world, in order that we may not only be spectators of this bounteous theater, but also enjoy the multiplied abundance and variety of good things which are presented to us in it."¹¹ According to Calvin, the powers that especially reveal the nature of God are eternity, wisdom, power, goodness, justice, mercy, and truth.¹² When we behold these powers in the works of God, we are led to feel the force of these powers within ourselves; and since these powers are all good things, our feeling of these powers will lead to our enjoyment of them. "For the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy."¹³ More importantly, by our feeling and enjoyment of the powers of God—which we behold in the theater of the world—we are invited, allured, and attracted to seek the God who is the source of all these powers, in whom alone is found human happiness and blessedness.

The creation of all good things in the world for the benefit and enjoyment of humans is not, therefore, an end in itself, but is rather the way God initially reveals to humankind that he is the author and fountain of every good thing. Our use and enjoyment of the good things of creation is not intended by

¹⁰*Inst.* I.v.10, O.S. III.54.19-24; (1:63).

¹¹Comm. Ps. 104:31, CO 32:96C; CTS 11:169.

¹²Comm. Rom. 1:20, *Ioannis Calvini Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, edited by T. H. L. Parker (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 30-31; *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, edited by David W. and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959-72), 8:32. These works are hereafter abbreviated Romans 30-31; CNTC 8:32.

¹³*Inst.* I.v.9, O.S. III.53.14-16; (1:62).

God to be an end in itself, but is rather the way God allures and invites us to seek him as the source of every good thing.

The Living Image of God

Calvin uses other visual metaphors besides the theater in order to develop the relationship between our awareness of the powers of God in the universe and our knowledge of the one true God. On the basis of Hebrews 11:3, Calvin develops the metaphor of the universe as the living image of the invisible God. The text itself reads, "By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen has not been made out of things which do appear." Calvin translates the latter phrase, "So that they become the visibles of things not seen, that is the spectacles." Calvin combines this passage with Romans 1:20 in order to develop his metaphor that the universe which we behold is the living image of God. "In the whole architecture of his world God has given us clear evidence of his eternal wisdom, goodness, and power, and though he is invisible in himself he shows himself to us in some measure in his work. The world is therefore rightly called the mirror of his divinity."¹⁴

The invisible God appears to us, in a sense, in the works that he does in the world, as in a mirror or image. This means that, on the one hand, we must distinguish between the world that we see and the God whose image it is, and, on the other hand, there must be a similarity or an analogy between the image and the God representing himself therein. Inasmuch as God is the invisible, spiritual Creator of the visible and earthly image, the analogy must be one that elevates us to God by means of *anagoge*. In other words, when we see the image of God in the world, we are to lift the eyes of our minds to God, just as we turn our mind to the one portrayed when we see a portrait of that person. "By saying 'God manifested it' he means that man was formed to be a spectator of the created world, and that he was endowed with eyes for the purpose of his being led to God himself, the Author of the world, by contemplating so

¹⁴Comm. Heb. 11:3, CO 55:145-6; CNTC 12:160.

magnificent an image."¹⁵ The image must also incite us to lift our hearts to seek the God represented in the image, which happens when we feel and enjoy within ourselves the force and benefit of the powers of God beheld in the image. By these powers, God sweetly invites us to seek him from the inmost affection of our hearts.

According to Calvin, there is an ascending order of the good things set forth in the image of God in the universe, which are to lead us gradually to God like steps on a ladder. At the bottom of the ladder are the temporal benefits of this life, such as food, housing, spouse, children, and wealth, among others. From the enjoyment of these benefits we should be led to the spiritual powers of God which these temporal benefits reveal, especially God's goodness, wisdom, and power. "For in this world God blesses us in such a way as to give us a mere foretaste of his kindness, and by that taste to entice us to desire heavenly blessings with which we may be satisfied."¹⁶ Finally, we should be led from these spiritual benefits to the love of God for us which they reveal, so that we might cling to God alone.

Even at the present day God, though in a more sparing manner, testifies his favor by temporal benefits. . . . But by this he does not cast any hindrance or impediment in our way to keep us from elevating our minds to heaven, but ladders are by this means rather erected to enable us to mount up thither step by step.¹⁷

God descends to us in the image of the world so that we might ascend to God by means of that same image.

The Beautiful Garment of God

Calvin also describes the universe as the garment with which God clothes himself in order that the invisible God might become somewhat visible. Calvin derives this metaphor from

¹⁵Comm. Rom. 1:19, *Romans* 29; CNTC 8:31

¹⁶Comm. 1 Tim. 4:8, CO 52:300A; CNTC 10:244.

¹⁷Comm. Ps. 128:3, CO 32:328B; CTS 12:117.

Psalm 104:1-2, "For thou hast clothed thyself with praise and glory, being arrayed with light as with a garment, and spreading out the heavens as a curtain." Commenting on this verse, Calvin says, "in respect of his essence, God undoubtedly dwells in light that is inaccessible; but as he irradiates the whole world by his splendor, this is the garment in which he, who is hidden in himself, appears in a manner visible to us."¹⁸ Calvin especially uses this metaphor when he wishes to celebrate the beauty of the world. "That we may enjoy the sight of God, he must come forth to view with his clothing; that is to say, we must first cast our eyes upon the very beautiful fabric of the world in which he wishes to be seen by us."¹⁹ According to Calvin, when we rightly contemplate the beauty of the richly ornamented garment of the world, our minds and hearts should be ravished with admiration, so that our hearts are incited to praise God even as we are aware of our inability to do justice to the beauty of the world which we behold.

Accordingly, breaking off his description, he exclaims with admiration, —How greatly to be praised are thy works! even as we then only ascribe to God due honor when seized with astonishment, we acknowledge that our tongues and all our senses fail in doing justice to so great a subject.²⁰

Such amazement and admiration are clearly seen by Calvin as part of the upward ascent we are to make to God from the beauty of the Lord clothed in the garment of the universe to the Lord himself, by means of the praise of God that it inflames within us. "[W]e only praise God aright when we are filled and overwhelmed with an ecstatic admiration of the immensity of his power. This admiration will form the fountain from which our just praises of him will proceed, according to the measure of our capacity."²¹

¹⁸Comm. Ps. 104:1, CO 32:85A; CTS 11:145.

¹⁹Comm. Ps. 104:1, CO 32:85A; CTS 11:145.

²⁰Comm. Ps. 104:24; CO 32:93C; CTS 11:164.

²¹Comm. Ps. 145:1, CO 32:413B; CTS 12:273.

Speaking of the world as the garment in which God is clothed allows Calvin to speak of the care that God has directly for all living things on earth, over and above human beings. Certainly no part of the world seems more hostile to human interests and well-being than the desert wilderness, yet even here Calvin would have us contemplate the beauty and goodness of God. "Rivers run through the great and desolate wildernesses, where the wild beasts enjoy some blessings of God; and no country is so barren as not to have trees growing here and there, on which birds make the air to resound with the melody of their singing."²² Calvin draws two consequences from the tender care that God clearly has for all creatures. On the one hand, as we might expect, we are to follow the analogy and anagoge between God's care for other creatures and God's care for humankind. "It is not to be wondered at, if God so bountifully nourishes humans who are created after his image, since he does not grudge to extend his care even to trees . . . which are high and of surpassing beauty."²³ On the other hand, we also are to care for the creatures of God, in imitation of the care that God has for them. Thus, in his comment on the prohibition of killing a mother bird on her nest, Calvin says, "For if there is one drop of compassion in us, it will never enter into our minds to kill an unhappy little bird, which so burns either with the desire of offspring, or with love towards its little ones, as to be heedless of its life, and to prefer endangering itself to the desertion of its eggs, or its brood."²⁴ Nor should we denude the earth of trees during warfare, not only because their fruit manifests the blessing of God towards us, but also because such an act would deprive the earth of its beautiful ornamentation created by God. It is hard to harmonize such teaching by Calvin with Lynn White's claim that "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects," or his claim that, "To a Christian, a tree can be no more than a physical

²²Comm. Ps. 104:10, CO 32:89B; CTS 11:154.

²³Comm. Ps. 104:16, CO 32:91-92; CTS 11:160.

²⁴Comm. Deut. 22:6, CO 24:634B; CTS 5:56.

fact."²⁵ According to Calvin, God excludes no creature from care, and neither should we. Moreover, God is somewhat visible in the beautifully ornamented garment of the world. We should not, therefore, despoil such a garment, but should instead let its beauty ravish us with admiration, and inflame our hearts with the praise of God.

Calvin often exhorts his pious readers to contemplate God in the garment of the world in every moment of their lives, but especially on the Sabbath, which God instituted specifically for this purpose.

And certainly God took the seventh day for his own and hallowed it, when the creation of the world was finished, that he might keep his servants free from every care, for the consideration of the beauty, excellence, and fitness of his works. There is indeed no moment which should be allowed to pass in which we are not attentive to the consideration of the wisdom, power, goodness, and justice of God in his admirable creation and government of the world.²⁶

Calvin advises the reader that the best way to undertake such contemplation of the beauty of God's works is to begin with the heavens, which were for him a clearer and more distinct image of God than the earth. "When a person, from beholding and contemplating the heavens, has been brought to acknowledge God, he will learn also to reflect upon and admire his wisdom and power displayed on the face of the earth, not only in general, but even in the minutest plants."²⁷ Our admiration of the wisdom and power of God should increase in us the more we come to understand the universe by scientific observation, even when such observation reveals that the universe is in fact different from the way it is described to us in Scripture. "For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known; it cannot be denied that this art

²⁵White, "Historical Roots," 25, 28.

²⁶Comm. Ex. 20:8, CO 24:579A; CTS 4:437.

²⁷Comm. Ps. 19:1, CO 31:194C; CTS 8:308-9.

unfolds the admirable wisdom of God."²⁸ Hence our contemplation of the powers of God in his works includes scientific observation, so long as we do not confine ourselves to secondary causes, but lift our minds from the garment of the universe to the God representing himself therein. "As soon as we acknowledge God to be the supreme architect, who has erected the beauteous fabric of the universe, our minds must necessarily be ravished with wonder at his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power."²⁹

Calvin was well aware of the temptations presented to humanity by the way God reveals himself to us in the world. The world, which is the theater of God's glory, might be abused by us as the stage on which to seek our own glory. The image of God in the universe might be mistaken for the God whom it represents, so that we seek only the good things offered to us in the world, and not the God who wishes to be sought through the image. The beautiful fabric of the world might allure us by its sweetness to enjoy it alone, and not seek our happiness in the goodness of the God who is clothed in this garment. Our scientific (Calvin would say philosophical) exploration of the works of God might stop with the mediate causes we observe, so that we obscure the powers of God shining forth in all of his works. In sum, we might be tempted to think that when God created the whole world for our benefit, the whole of our good is to be sought in the world, and not in its Creator.

According to Calvin, all of the ungodly succumb to this temptation. They seek only the good things of this world, and not the God who is inviting us to himself by means of them. They are captivated by the sweetness and beauty of the world alluring them to seek God, and seek their happiness instead in temporal blessings. As a consequence, no matter how much the ungodly enjoy worldly abundance, they always desire more, and yet their desire is never satisfied, even after they plunder the whole world. "However great the abundance of

²⁸Comm. Gen. 1:16, CO 23:22B; CTS 1:86.

²⁹Comm. Ps. 19:1, CO 31:195B; CTS 8:309.

the ungodly, yet their covetousness is so insatiable, that, like robbers, they plunder right and left, and yet are never satisfied."³⁰ The ungodly hoard the good things of the earth to themselves, and never think of using their abundance to care for those in need. The ungodly are blind to the powers of God shining forth in the universe, and are ungrateful to God for any of the blessings that they enjoy. They feed on the good things of this world like beasts with their snouts in a trough, and never once lift their eyes, minds, or hearts to seek the God who feeds them.

The godly, on the other hand, have been given the eyes of faith by the Holy Spirit, and the spectacles of the Word of God in Scripture, so that they can clearly discern the image of God represented in the universe, and lift up their minds and hearts to the God represented therein. Since the godly ascend from the benefits of God to the favor and love of God which those benefits reveal, they are content with that love alone, and do not seek their happiness or satisfaction in the good things of this life.

For this reason we ought the more carefully to mark the example which is here set before us by David, who "possessed of the greatest abundance of temporal good things, . . . not only testifies that he is mindful of God, but calling to remembrance the benefits which God had conferred upon him, makes them ladders by which he may ascend nearer to God."³¹

Thus the pious will discern the blessings of God even in extreme poverty, and will use the good things that they receive with moderation, tempered by their gratitude toward God and their care for the needs of others. "And although the faithful also desire and seek after worldly comforts, yet they do not pursue them with immoderate and irregular ardor; but they can patiently bear to be deprived of them, provided they know themselves to be the objects of the divine care."³² Most

³⁰Comm. Ps. 37:21, CO 31:376C; CTS 9:36.

³¹Comm. Ps. 23:1, CO 31:238:A; CTS 8:391.

³²Comm. Ps. 4:7, CO 31:64B; CTS 8:49.

importantly for our purposes, the godly will care for the beautiful garment of the world the way God cares for it, so that they might leave it more beautiful than they first found it.

How then did Calvin teach us to regard the world in which we live? We should be attentive spectators in the theater of God's glory, who seek to recognize the actor on the stage by means of the powers revealed in his actions. We should contemplate and meditate on the world as the living image of God, in which the invisible God renders himself somewhat visible, so that the powers we behold, feel, and enjoy in this image might lead us by *anagoge* to the God representing himself to us in this image. We should be ravished with amazement and astonishment at the beauty of the fabric of the universe, which reveals the goodness of God to us and sweetly allures us to seek God.

For God — by other means invisible — clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation. . . . Therefore, as soon as the name of God sounds in our ears, or the thought of him occurs to our minds, let us also clothe him with this most beautiful ornament; finally, let the world become our school if we desire rightly to know God.³³

Moreover, because the world is the theater of God's glory, the living image of the invisible God, and the beautiful garment that God wears, we have the responsibility to imitate God's tender care for the world.

The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which 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 shall remain. 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

³³Comm. Gen., Argumentum, CO 23:7-8C; CTS 1:60.

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 every one 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.³⁴

If we had followed this teaching, would we really have been led to exploit and defile the earth with a good conscience? If we had heeded Calvin's teaching of our responsibilities toward the created world, would we really have been encouraged to gorge ourselves on the good things of the world as though we would never have to render account of our behavior to God? Is the ecological crisis of the Western world due to the fact that too many people followed Calvin's teaching about creation, or is it due to the fact that his teaching was apparently ignored?

³⁴Comm. Gen. 2:15, CO 23:44B; CTS 1:125.