

God's Flaming Glory – Post 3 – God's Glory in Creation, According to Calvin

God the Father who Creates

The great Reformer John Calvin, of course, did not believe in Allah. Calvin believed in the Trinity – the God revealed in Scripture. More than that, the glory that he believed God had was also radically different than that glory which the Quran says Allah has.

John Calvin saw God's glory as a relational reality. He saw all of creation as the communication of His goodness. Creation, he said, was designed specifically to communicate God's glory to His special creation, humanity.

If you read much of Calvin, you will find that there is remarkably little in Calvin's thought that focuses on God primarily or solely as Creator. While Calvin wrote about God as Creator and Maker, he far more emphasized God as Father and as fatherly in His love. When Calvin did write of God as Creator and Maker, it was usually in reference to how God showed Himself to be fatherly toward His creation.

One author observing this fact wrote, "Though Calvin leads us back to the Sovereignty of God and so to a teleological conception of the universe where God is *prima causa omnium*, he never loses sight of the great Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God as revealed in Christian experience and in the Word of God."¹ In other words, the Fatherhood of God shaped Calvin's understanding of God's sovereignty and the doctrine of creation.

¹ A. B. Lavelle (1941, October-December). *The Importance of Calvin for Contemporary Evangelical Theology*. The Churchman 55.4. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php, p. 240.

When Calvin wrote of God's glory in creation, it was not primarily a creational glory He had in his mind. Creational glory is a view of glory that encapsulates glory into what has been created. Created things can observe it, but they can't go beyond observation. Calvin's vision of glory went beyond that, but also included it.

Yes, Calvin saw that the world existed to display God's glory as the Creator, but that glory was not primarily a creational display of glory (a glory displayed in creation). God's intention was more than *a display* of His holiness, sovereignty, and power. Glory wasn't meant to be merely observed in creation. God was not theatrically *displaying* when He created, but *communicating* who He is to His creation. Calvin called creation the theater through which God communicated Himself and which gave off sparks of His beauty and goodness, which displayed who God is to mankind: namely, a loving Father.

God's intention in creating and maintaining the universe was to *communicate* to His children His Fatherly care *in* His holiness, sovereignty, and power. In this, as I will be shown in detail, Calvin viewed God as Creator and God as Father as inextricably linked truths.²

Creation: the Theater

Calvin uses the language of creation as a theater in many places. When he calls it the theater, he includes not only the material and immaterial, but also the whole governing of His creation. In other words, he included both God's work of creation and of providence. For example, he wrote that Paul, in Acts 17:26,

² It is this that many theologians seem to have overlooked in their understanding of Calvin. Many will follow the stated structure of Calvin, of God revealed as both Creator (Book 1 of the *Institutes*) and as Redeemer (Book 2 of the *Institutes*), and compiling a scheme for understanding Calvin's theology on that basis. The tendency with this approach, however, is to conflate Calvin communicating his theology systematically (as he did in the *Institutes*) with his theology *itself* being segmented and/or rigid. For this reason, the mistake is often made of dividing God as Creator and Father in Calvin's thought, separating the concepts from one another [on this point, see also Michael Reeves (2021). *Rejoice and Tremble*. Crossway. 1300 Crescent Street, Wheaton, Illinois 60187. p. 94-95].

...did first show that men are set here as upon *a theater*, to behold the works of God; and, secondly, that he spoke of the providence of God, which shows itself in the whole government of the world.³

In Creation and in His providence, God communicated who He was, that human beings might come know and adore Him:

After the world had been created, man was placed in it as in *a theater*, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author.⁴

This is, indeed, the proper business of the whole life, in which men should daily exercise themselves, to consider the infinite goodness, justice, power, and wisdom of God, in this *magnificent theater* of heaven and earth.⁵

This was true of everything God had made – it was all a theater. Every part of creation, however small, exhibits sparks of beauty, sparks of “the immense weight of glory.” “In a manner,” through the works of God in the created majesty of this world, “though He is in Himself invisible, He in a manner becomes visible to us in His works.” It was for that purpose God made the world.

Creation: the Display

Calvin saw all of creation with a particular eye to humanity. He regarded human beings as being of central importance in his understanding of creation. Calvin wrote that all of God’s

³ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Acts – Volume 2*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 127. Emphasis mine.

⁴ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 28. Emphasis mine.

⁵ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 63. Emphasis mine.

other creational works led to the introduction of humanity into the world. From passages like Genesis 1 and 2, Calvin writes that God created the entire universe for the good of humanity as His children. Calvin put this plainly in his commentary on Genesis:

...we infer what was the end for which all things were created; namely, that none of the conveniences and necessities of life might be wanting to men. In the very order of the creation the paternal [care] of God for man is [visible], because he furnished the world with all things needful, and even with an immense profusion of wealth, before he formed man. Thus man was rich before he was born.⁶

Calvin saw God's glory in creation as a beauty of generous goodness to humanity.⁷ The whole point and pinnacle of a rightly ordered universe was for human beings "to keep close to God."⁸ God's glory wasn't fundamentally *in* creation, or primarily about a duty to be fulfilled.⁹

⁶ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 54.

Holmes Rolston also holds this view about what Calvin believed: "God is father from the start. The world is ordered to demonstrate his paternal care in all man's needs, material and spiritual. From the very first, his will has ever been to sustain man by his grace alone" [Holmes Rolston III. (1972). *John Calvin Versus The Westminster Confession*. John Knox Press. Richmond, Virginia. p. 35].

⁷ In contrast to this, Albert Mohler put the importance of God rightly ordering everything in creation as primary. For example, Mohler preached that "...fruit is a seed delivery system... Its *seed* – that's the purpose of the tree. The tree is a seed delivery system and the fruit is the specific mechanism whereby it is delivered. In other words, when you create a seedless orange, you have just defied the very purpose of an orange existing. The orange fruit existed in order to bear the seed . . . the 'each according to its kind' is very important because that means that the kinds themselves are important *and* the differentiation between them is important to the Creator" [Albert Mohler. (2013, April 14). 3. *Genesis 1:3-19*. Albertmohler.com. <https://albertmohler.com/sermon-series/genesis, 26:16-27:29>].

⁸ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 167.

Again, Rolston agrees with this assessment of Calvin. Quoting Calvin, he writes that "A steady 'communion with God was the source of life to Adam'" [Holmes Rolston III. (1972). *John Calvin Versus The Westminster Confession*. John Knox Press. Richmond, Virginia. p. 25].

⁹ Again, in contrast to Calvin, Albert Mohler had this to say when preaching on Genesis 2:5, "What in the world is that about? You have plants but they're not growing; you have bushes that are not in the land, no small plant in the land had yet sprung up; everything is ready but it hasn't quite happened yet. What is it waiting for? ...The arrival of the man and the woman. The arrival of the one who is going to have the responsibility for the stewardship and dominion of this creation. The one who is going to *till* the ground and the one who is going to receive the gifts... In other words, what we have right here in Genesis chapter 2 in verses 4 and following, is a clear indication that humanity is not only not an accident, not only not an imposition on the planet, the planet was made for human habitation. And the planet itself and even the rest of creation is waiting for the arrival of the human being in order for it to flourish" [Albert Mohler. (2013, August 5). 8. *Genesis 2:4-25*. Albertmohler.com. <https://albertmohler.com/sermon-series/genesis, 7:00-8:08>].

When Calvin looked at creation, God's glory wasn't to be found in the order and immensity of the universe. God's glory was seen in that God had provided an immense abundance of goodness to humanity revealed in the order and immensity of the universe:

[It is] in the very order of things [that believers ought] diligently to contemplate God's fatherly love toward mankind, in that He did not create Adam until He had lavished upon the universe all manner of good things ... Now when He disposed the movements of the sun and stars to human uses, filled the earth, waters, and air with living things, and brought forth an abundance of fruits to suffice as foods, in thus assuming the responsibility of a foreseeing and diligent father of the family *He shows His wonderful goodness towards us.*¹⁰

Calvin delighted in this goodness of God. His heart gushed in love for this truth and spilled out into words that glorified God. This delight of his (and what should be the delight of all Christians) was not that of a mere observer, but the delight of a partaker. As he wrote of Acts 14, where Paul spoke of God's goodness in His providence:

...For why doth the sun and stars shine in the heavens, save only that they may serve men? Why doth the rain fall from heaven? Why doth the earth bring forth her increase, save only that they may minister food to men? Therefore, God hath not set man upon earth that he may be an *idle beholder of his work, as being set upon a theater*, but to exercise himself in praising the liberality of God, [while enjoying] the riches of heaven and earth.¹¹

¹⁰ John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Know Press. Louisville KY. p. 161-162. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Acts – Volume 2*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 16. Emphasis mine.

For Calvin, the world was made as a theater of divine glory.¹² A theater which would not merely display God's greatness, but would be where God communicated His love. The divine glory that the faithful see by the grace of God in creation is the glory of His paternal goodness. For we "cannot behold Him clearly unless [we] acknowledge Him to be the fountainhead and source of every good."¹³

The display of God's glory went far beyond the greatness of what has been created, and meant so much more than a mere apprehension of His attributes, or observation of His unity and love. God wanted to communicate His glory in creation so that people might come to be irradiated by His glory. In creation, that display of glory was meant to help people recognize God's paternal care in everything He had made, and long for adoption by Him.¹⁴ In Calvin's own words, that "...we should perceive the glory of Jesus' Father brightly displayed."¹⁵

Calvin did not separate God's fatherliness and love from His sovereignty and providence in creating and sustaining the universe. The two went hand in hand, the latter supplying the former in infinite abundance. For

[God] was pleased to display His providence and paternal care towards us in this, that before He formed man, He provided whatever He foresaw would be useful and [beneficial] to him.¹⁶

¹² John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Hebrews*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 234.

¹³ John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Know Press. Louisville KY. p. 42.

¹⁴ In this adoption actually coming to fruition for the elect, as Thomas Goodwin wrote, "Christ might be glorified by being the cause of all our glory by adoption, and in that all we have, we have through him" (Thomas Goodwin (n.d.). *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D., Volume 1*. Edinburgh: James Nichol. p.98).

¹⁵ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 135.

¹⁶ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 117.