

# Calvin's Doctrine of Creation

## Introduction

For Calvin, the solution to the problem of origins lies wholly within the pages of Divine Truth. However minutely investigated, the great edifice of nature can yield nothing certain without the light of Scripture. Only those, therefore, who have learned ‘to submit the whole of their intellectual wisdom to the foolishness of the cross’, and who bring with them a ‘sober, docile, mild and humble spirit’, are qualified to meditate aright on God’s handiworks.(1)

## Creation is ‘ex nihilo’

Rejecting, then, all unScriptural theories, Calvin asserts a strictly creative act by the Tri-une God, by which all things outside Himself, ‘not only the visible world, but also the invisible spirits’, were brought into being out of nothing.(2) ‘The world is not eternal,’ he claims against the Manichaean dualists, ‘but was created by God.’(3) In opposition to Deism, he states that ‘God created the world at once, in such a manner as to be its perpetual Governor.’(4) The Pantheistic notion that God is the ‘soul the world’ he dismisses as ‘utterly vain and worthless.’(5) Both from Moses’ use of the word ‘bara’ rather than ‘yatsar’, and from the strict meaning of the verb ‘to create’, Calvin deduces that ‘the world was made out of nothing,’ for ‘creation is . . . the origination of essence out of nothing.’(6)

## Creation is a work of Divine Sovereignty

That Calvin thought of this creative act as absolutely sovereign is clear from his statement that from all eternity God was ‘wholly sufficient for Himself’, so that ‘all things in heaven and earth derive their essence . . . at His will.(9) For His own worthy purpose, God simply chose to bring the universe into being.

### **Creation is Trinitarian**

While conceding that creation is a mystery, Calvin is certain that each Divine Person has a distinct hand in it. The Father, as the Fountain of the Godhead, is the Source of the originally-created material, though not without ‘the power of His Word and Spirit’, or ‘His Wisdom and Power.’<sup>(8)</sup> The Son also created all things, especially the angels.<sup>(9)</sup> To the ‘secret efficacy of the Spirit’ is particularly ascribed the moulding, cherishing and garnishing of the ‘confused materials of heaven and earth’ till they were clothed in their final splendour.<sup>(10)</sup>

### **Age of the Universe**

In addressing the problem of the age of the universe, Calvin believes everything to be of recent origin and made in six literal days. Dating creation about 4,500 BC, and noting Moses’ normal use of the word ‘you’, he confines the whole creative process within six 24-hour days, not six indefinite geological periods, adding that by this distribution of God’s work, ‘our finite intelligence might not be overwhelmed with its contemplation.’<sup>(11)</sup>

### **God’s Blessing**

Calvin sees God’s blessing of His creatures as an act by which they were infused with ‘fecundity’, enabling them to procreate offspring. Significantly too, he believes Adam and Eve to have been created in a state of wedlock, thereby defining the only lawful context in which human propagation should take place <sup>(12)</sup>

### **Particular Works of Creation**

In describing God’s works in more detail, Calvin makes a threefold classification: the physical and sub-human universe, the world of spiritual beings, and man.

### **(1) The physical, sub-human universe**

Here Calvin distinguishes the initial creation of the primal ‘shapeless and undigested mass’ of the universe from its subsequent moulding into ‘those things which God commanded to proceed from the earth.’<sup>(13)</sup>The former is strictly creative; the latter a process using second causes. Calvin’s sequence, therefore, is from non-existence to chaos to order, or from nothing to substance to form.<sup>(14)</sup> A fine passage from the *Institutes* well captures the broad sweep of his thought: ‘God . . . created out of nothing the heavens and the earth; thence produced every kind of animate and inanimate thing, distinguished by a wonderful gradation the innumerable variety of things, endowed each kind with its own nature, assigned its offices, appointed its place and station to it, and . . . provided . . . that each kind should be preserved to the last day . . . . Thus He marvellously adorned heaven and earth with the utmost possible abundance, variety and beauty of all things, like a great and splendid house, most richly and abundantly constructed and furnished.’<sup>(15)</sup>

### **An Objection**

To the objection ‘that the sun is necessary both for light and to fructify the earth’, yet Moses places its creation after theirs, he replies seeing that ‘to nothing are we more prone than to tie down the power of God’ to His creatures, God made everything in the order revealed to Moses ‘so that we might learn to refer all things to Him.’ Neither the labour of man nor the power the sun can render the earth fruitful, but only the blessing of God.<sup>(16)</sup>

### **Creation’s Beauty**

A prominent feature of Calvin’s approach to the universe is his sensitive appreciation of its beauty. ‘After the workmanship of the world was complete in all its parts,’ he writes, ‘and had received . . . the last finishing touch, He pronounced it perfectly good, that we may know that there is in the symmetry of God’s works the highest perfection, to which nothing can be added.’<sup>(17)</sup> The inconceivable variety - among the heavenly bodies, where the sun surpasses the

moon and stars in glory; in the earth's landscape, where 'we see in one part mountains, and in another small hills . . . meadows, forests and fields of corn . . . waters mingling with the earth and yet retaining their own habitation'; and even amongst 'the minutest plants', all set within a system of perfect unity - is just one aspect of the 'ravishing beauty' of God's universe.(18) 'If' then, he exclaims, 'a small portion of the works of God makes us amazed, how inadequate are our feeble minds to comprehend the whole extent of them!'](19)

### **Created for Man**

Not the least astonishing characteristic of the physical universe, Calvin teaches, is its creation for the service of man. By preparing everything 'which He foresaw would be useful or beneficial to him', God has clearly demonstrated that 'He made all things for the sake of man.' It was 'for human use that He disposed the motions of the sun and stars, that He filled the earth, the waters, the air with living creatures, that He produced an abundance of all kinds of fruits which might be sufficient for food.'(20)

### **(2) The World of Purely Spiritual Beings**

From his survey of the visible world, Calvin directs his attention to the world of invisible spirits. Created by Christ on the first day, these immortal and formless spirits are the agents through whom God conducts His entire providential government. Not that they are indispensable to Him, for 'whenever He pleases He passes them by and accomplishes His work by . . . His mere will,' but He chooses to employ them in His service. They therefore present no obstacle to His own immanent activity, but are themselves the agents of that activity.(21)

### **Angels**

The angels receive special mention from Calvin. Vast in number, distributed into ranks and orders like a great heavenly army, they reflect God's majesty far more than the physical universe, testifying to His near and present aid to all who call on Him in truth.(22)

'God's hands . . . never moving to do anything but by His will and disposal,' they 'guard our safety, undertake our defence, direct our ways and exercise solicitude that no harm shall befall us,' and while no believer has a guardian angel of his own, we have the much greater assurance that 'all the police of heaven' are 'with one consent watching over our salvation and ready to help us.'(23) Even the ungodly, claims Calvin, receive kindnesses through their ministry, for God has commissioned them to dispense His benefits to all. Nevertheless, on no account must they be interposed between God and ourselves as mediators, for their whole use is to assure us of God's concern for our welfare.(24)

### **Devils**

Over against the angels stand those 'numerous, most subtle and malignant unseen foes', the devils. These fallen angels 'lie in wait continually' for the souls of the righteous, 'exercise them with fighting, assail them with snares, harrass them with assaults, push them in combat, even fatigue them often, confuse, terrify and sometimes wound them', yet notwithstanding all their power, subtlety and malice, both they and Satan their head are perfectly bridled by the Most High, being used entirely for His ends, so that though our life is filled with conflict, we have a sure promise of victory over them.(25)

### **A Further Objection**

To the objection that 'because He created the fallen angels, therefore God is the author of sin', Calvin offers a vigorous repudiation. All angelic evil, he insists, springs not from nature but from its corruption. Even Satan himself is not evil 'by nature, nor from his original creation, but by the fault of his own defection.' It is the highest insult to charge the Holy One of Israel with the authorship of sin.(26)

### **(3) Man**

#### **Man's Uniqueness**

Unique among all God's creatures is man. Created last, and distinguished by so many excellent gifts, he is the noblest specimen of God's handiwork, the crowning masterpiece of creation.(27)

#### **Man's Duplex Nature**

Standing midway between heaven and earth, man shares with the lower creatures a body 'taken from earth and clay', and with the angels 'an immortal yet created essence' called the soul. The mysterious union of these two elements constitutes his uniqueness.(28) That Calvin assigned great importance to the body is evident from his reminders that care for our health is a religious duty, and that our bodies, no less than our souls, are the altars at which God is to be worshipped.(29)

It is, however, the soul to which he pays most attention. As a 'substantial entity distinct from the body, endowed with sense and intelligence, and incorporeal in its nature', the soul survives after death, having received its immortality at creation.(30) Besides its more mundane function of animating the body, its chief work is to 'hold the primacy in the government of man's life.' For this purpose it was given the amazing ability to traverse heaven and earth in its thoughts, to gather up the ages in its memory, conceive of God and angels, cover an astonishingly wide range of emotions, apprehend what is right and wrong, and perform innumerable operations.(31)

#### **Each Soul Created Separately**

A further feature of Calvin's doctrine of the soul is noteworthy. While man's body was originally formed from dust and is now produced by ordinary generation, his soul, both in the original creation and in every instance of conception, is breathed immediately into his bodily substance by God. It is neither traduced from the parents, nor infused into each body out of a 'universal

soul-mass', nor transfused out of the essence of God, but newly created from nothing.(32)

### **The Image of God in Man**

All other characteristics of man's nature recede into the background when Calvin comes to consider man's creation in the image of God. While omitting much else he has to say on the subject, the classic statement on it from the *Institutes* informs us as to what constitutes this image and where it is seated: 'The image of God extends to all the dignity by which man is raised above every species of animal. This term therefore denotes the integrity of our whole nature, as it appeared when Adam was endued with a right judgment, had his affections in harmony with his reason, had all his senses sound and well regulated, and everything in him well ordered to represent the glory of his Creator. And though the principal seat of this image of God was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its faculties, yet there was no part of man, not even the body, in which some scintillations of it did not shine forth.'(33) It was therefore as God's image-bearer that man was able in Eden to commune with his Maker, exercise authority over the animal kingdom and mould all nature to his purposes.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the great importance accorded by Calvin to man as central to all God's purposes in creation, it is onto a higher plane altogether that his thoughts on the matter finally converge. God's bountiful provision and 'fatherly care' were never intended to make man self-centred and independent of Himself, but rather to draw from us a life devoted to His praise. Hence the manifestation of His own glory is our chief end, as it is of all His other works. 'There is' therefore 'no part of our life, and no action so minute, that it ought not to be directed to the glory of God.' 'As all things are from Him and through Him, so also they are for Him.'(35) Eloquent testimony to Calvin's utter devotion to this high ideal is afforded by the following concluding quotation: 'In every part of the world, in heaven and on earth, God has written and as it were engraven the

glory of His power, goodness, wisdom and eternity. Truly indeed, then, has Paul said that the Lord never left Himself without a witness, even to those to whom He has sent no knowledge of His Word. For all creatures, from the firmament even to the centre of the earth, are witnesses and messengers of His glory to all men, drawing them on to seek Him, and having found Him, to do Him service and honour according to the dignity of a Lord so good, so powerful, wise and everlasting; they were even helping each one in his place upon that quest. For the little singing birds sang of God, the animals acclaimed Him, the elements feared and the mountains resounded with Him, the rivers and springs threw glances towards Him, the grasses and the flowers smiled. So that in truth there was no need to seek Him afar', 'since He meets us in the very fabric of the world.(36)

### References

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6. Comm on Gen 1:1; Inst. 1.15.5.
7. Arg to Comm on Gen; Comm on Exod 3:14.
8. Inst. 1.13.24; 1536 ed of Inst. Opp I, 64.
9. Comm on John 1:3,9; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:3.
10. Comm on Gen 1:2; Inst. 1.13.22.
11. Comm on Gen 2:1; Warfield : *Prin. Theol. Rev.* XIII, 201—2.
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13. ibid 1:21,24.
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