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John Calvin and creation: Retrieving Calvin's ecological insights on Genesis 1

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Abstract

John Calvin has been largely studied given his influential role in the Reformation. I come from a Church with strong Calvinist traditions. During catechisms, we were mainly taught about Calvin's theology in areas such as predestination, redemption, Christology, power, and sacramental theology. Little has been said regarding the ecological dimensions of his thoughts. It is only recently that the Presbyterian Church has issued the devotional study guide in response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015). But the manual is more a report than a systematic ecological teaching based on Calvin. The question is how far Calvin's cosmology can contribute to shape Christian attitudes toward nature. This article tries to answer this question by retrieving the ecological implications of Calvin's comments on different aspects of Genesis 1.

Keywords

John Calvin; ecological potential; image of God; human dominion; biodiversity; Reformation

1. Introduction

The earth is under serious threat in many parts of the world mostly because of human attitudes towards other species. Scientists say that, unless our behaviours change, increased threats will affect life on the planet (Van As et al. 2012:124). To address this issue, the potential of social and religious traditions has been added on the agenda of discussion. Lynn White alleged that Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt of ecological crisis. According to him, Christianity insisted that it is God's will for humans to

exploit nature for their benefit, and thereby made possible today's conquest of nature" (White 1967:1207).

Lynn White's article is viewed as a watershed publication in eco-theological debates, similar to Martin Luther's 95 theses at the time of the Reformation (Santmire 2000:11). White concluded that "more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (White 1967:1207).

In other words, the earth crisis invites us to re-read the Bible and Christian traditions to retrieve means that can help to shape human behaviours toward nature. This is because "what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them" (White 1967:1207). Lynn White named Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) the patron saint of ecologists since "Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures" (White 1967:1206).

In fact, Christian history embodies other figures whose influence in liturgy and practices of churches is significant. One of them is John Calvin whose thoughts and theology play major role in the liturgy and practices of the reformed churches. Although thorough research has been made regarding Calvin, little has been said on the ecological potential of his thoughts. Recently, the Presbyterian Church has issued a manual of Study and devotion in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015). The manual is more a report rather than a kind of ecological catechism or teaching of the church (Presbyterian Church (USA) 2019).

Just as for other Reformers, Calvin's thought on nature has been deemed as basically anthropocentric, mostly concerned with human redemption and issues. It is possibly for this reason that there is a scarcity of literature on Calvin and ecological issues. For Santmire, the Reformers' preoccupation with human salvation has led to the de-sacralisation of nature in Protestant Theology (Santmire 1985:122).

Indeed, human salvation is the focal point of his thought, as it is the case for Martin Luther and other Reformers during this period of renaissance exalting human values. Luther is even radically anthropocentric stating in

his exposition on Genesis 1 that "God creates all these things in order to prepare a house and an inn … for the future of man" (Luther 1955:47).

However, unlike Saint Augustine and Martin Luther whose theologies focus on gracious human salvation, Calvin balanced the anthropocentric narration of salvation with a sense of "beautiful creation that mirrors God's glory" (Girardin 2017:270). For Calvin, creation is God's arena and directed toward him. Schreiner assesses Calvin's view of creation as amazingly positive, a "theatre of God's glory" (Schreiner 1991:5). In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin emphasizes his consideration of nature as a place of beauty and wonders of God.

Calvin "taught that God's glory extended beyond the fate of the individual soul and encompassed the whole of creation" (Schreiner 1991:5). For Calvin, the exciting structure and manifold outlook of the world acts as a kind of mirror in which we may see God, who would otherwise be invisible. Even the wicked are amazed by the mere observation of the wonders of the earth and sky (Calvin 1975:126). Calvin wants to emphasize the idea that everything, even a drop of rain, is directly willed by the God of grace.

It is practically difficult to turn a page in Calvin's sermons, commentaries, or treatises without finding a reference to some aspects of the natural world as these are the true display of God's grace. Raging winds and roiling seas shape the setting of his thought, while roaring animals and singing birds render his work an outstanding bestiary of Christian doctrine (Huff 1999:68). The manifold creation, including the beautiful, the violent, the charming, and the incongruous biodiversity, are regularly set before the reader in his theology.

The question is to what extent John Calvin's creation theology can contribute to shape Christian (human) attitudes toward non-human members of creation? To respond to this question, this article ecologically assesses and retrieves John Calvin's comments on Creation diversity in Genesis. At the heart of this article, there is a conviction that Calvin's teaching about the beauty of nature in Genesis 1 can help to shape Christian witness in today's world of environmental crisis.

2. Methodological considerations

I will use insights from the revisionist hermeneutics to retrieve ecological wisdom in Calvin's creation theology. Revisionists appeal to the dynamics of Christian tradition and history, which constantly involve self-criticism and reformation (Santmire 2000, 10). The enterprise is based on the essential feature of the reformation movement, namely "ecclesia semper refomanda est", which infuses the promise to be constantly renewed. Revisionist hermeneutics defines itself as the strategy of ecological Reformation of Christian Theology in interaction with contemporary global issues (Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate 2008:233).

Just as the classical Reformation aimed at liberating the Gospel from structural and cultural layers, ecological Reformation is concerned with re-reading Christian traditions towards "re-earthing" our identities as bounded with all creation (Werner 2020, 58). Revisionists attempt to reimagine and re-claim the ecological fullness of the classical Christian traditions for the public witness of the church. Conradie said that such enterprise should involve "the ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction" (Conradie 2019:32). Without this dual critique, eco-theology would offer no unique contribution to wider ecological debates.

In this way, revisionist insights will be critically applied in an attempt to retrieve ecological wisdom in Calvin's original works on creation theology (the Institutes of the Christian Religion and commentaries) and secondary sources related to the Reformer. The article will not attempt to harmonize or romanticize Calvin's thought in relation to current ecological frameworks. For instance, the anthropocentric worldview of the Reformer will be acknowledged, but it will be assessed through the context in which Calvin lived. In other words, this revisionist enterprise ecologically re-imagines, re-interprets, and retrieves Reformation traditions, which have been largely interested with human salvation (Santmire 2000:9).

We should recognize that we are attempting a contemporary theological interest on Calvin that the Reformer might have not implied. Still, while admitting the obvious dangers that can arise from doing this, we believe that this approach does not do violence to the Reformer's thoughts.

3. Calvin and ecological aspects of Genesis 1

3.1 Introduction

Calvin raised great insights on many aspects of creation, and here is not the place to comment on all of them. This article ecologically retrieves seven themes in Calvin's creation theology, namely creation as God's arena, human as *imago Dei*, the dominion mandate, רוח אלהים, the beauty of biodiversity, vegetarianism, and Sabbath. In conjunction with our eco-consciousness, this article strives to analyse how Calvin's appraisal of these themes can be ecologically relevant for Christians today.

3.2 Creation as God's arena

Calvin understands the world as God's display of his glory. Calvin argues that God stamps his glory upon all his works in the world, both on the splendour of the natural world and on the operation of the cultural world (Gerrish 1982:153). In his comments on Psalm 104, Calvin argues that the cosmos can be designated the garment of God, or the mirror in which he makes himself visible (Calvin 1887:86). Creation testifies on all sides to a connection with its Creator. Every creature depends on him and mirrors him. God accordingly displays his majesty in the ordering of the world and humans are the spectators (Van-der Kooi 2016:52). In the words of Calvin:

> God has been pleased … so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought, but on each of his works his glory is engraved in characters so bright, so distinct and so illustrious that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse (Calvin 1599:40).

Therefore, there is nothing in the created order that is valueless. Everything was created for a purpose of serving God's glory. Calvin understood creation as a fine and spacious God's house, provided and furnished with all it needs to instil the knowledge of the Creator. In this way, God provides for, sustains, and rules the world, not with despotism but care. Calvin thinks of God as the one who "cares and upholds" normal function

of the structures of the universe. In a series of rhetorical questions, Calvin reaffirms God's providence as he asks:

> How could the earth hang suspended in the air where it is not upheld by God's hand? By what means could it maintain itself unmoved, while the heavens above are in constant rapid motion, did not its Divine Maker fix and establish it? (Calvin 1847:3).

According to Calvin, God's might specifically serves to preserve the structure of the world, the theatre of his glory (Van der Kooi 2016:56). This idea invites humans and Christians to more respect as they relate with any particular domain of the created order. In this way, humans are made *imago Dei* to abide by this ideal since no one "can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves" (Calvin 1599:31).

3.3 Human beings as *Imago Dei*

Calvin, like other Reformers, exalts human beings as the representative of God on earth. The *imago Dei* is interpreted as the human's ability to have *spiritual* and *special* communion with God. The *imago Dei* "distinguishes and separates us from the lower animals, brings us nearer to God" (Calvin 1599:120). For Calvin, the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1:26 reveals itself as the gift that God has awarded to Adam distinguishing humanity, in his intelligence and reason, from non-humans creatures (Faber 1990a:249). In his own words, Calvin wrote about the integrity of humanity creation that:

> Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image and likeness of God. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and was so clinging by these gifts of grace of God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him (Calvin 1975:20–21).

This means, that humans were endowed with integrity of God's nature, "soundness in all parts" (Wendel 2002:176). For Calvin, the *imago Dei* consists of integrity and righteousness, holiness and sound faculties all located in the heart and mind of Adam (Eph. 4:23 and Col. 3:10) (Faber 1990a:229). Calvin also briefly engages Chrysostom who located the *imago Dei* in human dominion over creation. In the 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin rejected Chrysostom's understanding of the *imago Dei* as dominion ability (Calvin

1599:122). However, in his commentary on Genesis 1:26, Calvin softened his criticism admitting that "human dominion" is truly a "portion, though very small, of the image of God" as he said:

> The exposition of Chrysostom is not more correct, who refers to the dominion which was given to man in order that he might, in a certain sense, act as God's vicegerent in the government of the world. This truly is some portion, though very small, of the image of God (Calvin 1578:52).

While Calvin locates the image of God in non-physical features of the human being, he does affirm that human body "sparks" of the divine image glow, that there is no part of the human creature in which "some scintillations" do not shine (Calvin 1979:95). Adam's body was well fashioned "that he did not have a finger which was not ready and eager to serve and honour God" (Calvin 2000:60).

In other words, humans are responsible to make features of God's image shining into the world. For Calvin, we are created and kept for the aim of being the glory of God and fully participating in his glorious work of creation (Crisp 2009:64). For Calvin, the image of God extends to the entire ability by which humans can rule over all living beings:

> Accordingly, the integrity which Adam was endowed is expressed by his word, when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker (Faber 1990a:230).

Calvin is convinced that the *imago Dei* of humans and their view of the natural order were deeply affected by the fall in Genesis 3 (Dieleman 2014:26). For Calvin, with regard to *imago Dei*, sin is a sign of ingratitude pervading the whole soul and each of its faculties (Faber 1990b:253). The initial position of the Reformer is that sin destroyed the *imago Dei* in humans that:

> Man, therefore, when carried away by the blasphemies of Satan, did his very utmost to annihilate the whole glory of God … After

> the heavenly image in man was effaced[1], he not only was himself punished by a withdrawal of the ornaments in which he had been arrayed – viz. wisdom, virtue, justice, truth, and holiness, and by the substitution in their place of those dire pests, blindness, impotence, vanity, impurity, and unrighteousness, but he involved his posterity also, and plunged them in the same wretchedness (Calvin 1599:155).

However, following the remarks of Albert Pighius (circa 1544), the papal provost of Utrecht, who accused him of turning human beings "into brute beasts" (Calvin 1996:38), Calvin starts speaking of *remnants* of the image surviving in the human after the Fall (Van Vliet 2009:122). Still, Calvin holds that, although God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in humans, it was so corrupted that whatever remains is a frightful deformity (Calvin 1960:189). In this way, in his "Sermons sur la Genèse" delivered on 9 September 1559, Calvin affirms:

> It is true that there are still remnants, because God did not want his trace to be totally destroyed, but this small residue which remains in us is nothing but a testimony of the ruin. It is as if there was a beautiful house or a city, which had been well built … but it has been totally ruined. … The ground is full of nothing but ruins, mortar, stone, and other things. Still the ground yields a bit of grass. There is something good to look at, but it only displays horror … One does not see any shape or order, but everything is confused. This is the same with the image of God in us at Fall[2] (Calvin 2000:236).

By sin, humanity corrupts the *imago Dei*, and by extension the entire creation (Rom 8:20.22). The whole creation groans as "it bears part of the punishment deserved by man, for whose use all other creatures were made" (Calvin 1599:155). In other words, the perversion of humans in the world causes crisis in the natural world. For Calvin, said Conradie, we cannot understand that the world is the precious work of God and care for it if we do not have an individual experience and intimacy with the Creator (Conradie 2010:368). This means that God's glory may shine clearly in creation but the fallen human mind is unable to recognize it correctly

1 The italic emphasis is mine.

2 The translation is mine.

(Shih 2004:183). It is only through Christ, the "most perfect image of God" (Col. 3:10), that humans can start viewing God's glory and will with more clarity (Zachman 2007:64). Torrance briefly explains Calvin that "since fallen human beings cannot clearly behold the image of God in creation, it is through the Word of God that the human creature can contemplate the image of God in creation" (Torrance 1997:37).

Being God's image is thus synonym of being responsible in front of God. Unlike nearly all of patristic and medieval exegetes, Calvin does not make a difference between image and likeness as he said "it was customary with the Hebrews to repeat the same thing in different words" (Calvin 1578:52). This ideal is shared by Ellen van Wolde who thinks that both Hebrew words צלם (image) and דמת (likeness) in Genesis 1:26 give the idea of closeness and difference of human beings to the divinity (Van Wolde 2009:19). In other words, without being identical to God, human species share something of the divine, and yet God located them distant from him to rule on earth as God's image (Harland 1996:185).

In this sense, Genesis 1:26 is suggested to be read as Israel's reaction against ancient Near Eastern creation stories where humans were made for the purpose of enslavement to gods (Lohfink 1994:7). For Israel, humans have been created to serve as loyal, brave and effective instruments of the divine rule on earth (McBride 2000:10). Thus, in Genesis 1:26, humans exist not to perform the gods' tedious and arduous works, but to be a true image of God on earth.

3.4 Human dominion over creation

Gilkey notes that in Calvin's thought, the human being is an "individual strengthened inwardly, given immense creative authority and sent into an 'open' world to remould it to God's glory" (Gilkey 1976:185). Contrary to modern readers who view the Hebrew word כבש ('to subdue', Gen. 1:28) as an act of terror, Calvin thinks that verse 28 needs to be read together with verses 29–30 where humans are here granted herbs and fruits a food. Verses 29–30 instruct us "to seek from God alone whatever is necessary for us, and in the very use of his gifts, we are to exercise ourselves in meditating on his goodness and paternal care" (Calvin 1578:155).

Indeed, the verb כבשׁ has been an object of debates. When the root כבשׁ is used with humans or nations as objects, its meaning refers to something like *taking by force* (2 Sam. 8:11; Es. 7:8; Jer. 34:11). However, with land (ארץ) as its object, the verb would refer to the action of occupying the land (Nm. 32:22; 1 Chr. 22:18). In this case, the verb implies defeating nations who previously occupied the land, but the land itself has only to be taken. As for Genesis 1:28, in their process of filling the earth, human beings will occupy and control the land (ארץ), which was previously inhabited by the beasts (Lohfink 1994:9).

In Genesis 1:28, the land that is to be subdued is the same land that is to be filled by humans, and in this sense it cannot be destroyed, but should be cared for (Bauckham 2010:17). In other words, human life is dependent of the quality of the land on which they live. Therefore, Calvin noted that the action of subduing the earth should not viewed as an opportunity for excessive and unbridled consumption, but care (Calvin 1979:98). In this sense, the Evangelical statement on the Care of Creation clearly states:

> We also recognize that men, women, and children, created in God's image, have a unique responsibility for creation. Our actions should sustain creation's fruitfulness and its powerful testimony to its Creator. However, too often we have ignored our creaturely limits and have used the earth with greed, rather than care (World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) 2019:2).

The care for creation has been established by some Christian ecologists as a kind of Eleventh Commandment – "Thou shalt cherish and care for the earth and all within it" (Fowler 1995:77). Therefore, as Christians and heirs of the Reformation Theology, we have the duty to go on the legacy of the Reformer's view on human relationship with nature. In this sense, the declaration on creation care continues that:

> Because we await the time when even the groaning creation will be restored to wholeness, we commit ourselves to work vigorously to protect and heal that creation for the honour and glory of the Creator – whom we know dimly through creation, but meet fully through Scripture and in Christ (World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) 2019:2).

As human beings created in the image of God, we should commit ourselves to work for the good of the environment on which our life depends. Let us turn to the third theme of interest in Calvin's thought on creation theology: the *ruach Elohim*.

3.5 Ruach Elohim

Most of the Reformers conceive the רוח אלהים (*ruach Elohim*) as purely the Spirit of God. The nuance that Calvin augments is his notion of the "vivifying spirit" above the water of chaos in Genesis 1:2. Calvin emphasizes the life potential that the spirit is able to give even in the midst of an "unbreathing creation", a creation devoid of life, an indigested mass. Calvin thinks of the participle מרחפת (Gen. 1:2) as implying that either the spirit moved and agitated itself over the waters for the sake of vitalizing them or the רוח אלהים simply brooded over them to cherish them (Calvin 1979:74).

To support his argument, Calvin quotes Psalm 104:30 asking the Lord to send forth his Spirit for the renewal of the face of the earth. The reason is that when the Lord "takes away his Spirit, all things return to their dust and vanish away" (Ps. 104:29) (Calvin 1578:38). That is why many eco-theologians view the Hebrew words רוח אלהים as referring to the air, the atmosphere or the oxygen that makes life possible on earth (Hiebert 1996:10). The basic meaning for רוח is both *wind* – referring to physical air – and *breath of life*. In Ecclesiastes 1:6,[3] the word is used in the context of great rhythms of nature to depict annual atmospheric variations. In the creation text of Genesis 1, the word would also imply physical wind identical to the winds that blew on the Red sea in Exodus 14:21 (Beauchamp 1969:170).

Therefore, due to its basic meaning of air, *ruach* is used for both atmosphere and breath of life (Ezek. 37:4–10). In this sense, both humans and animals depend upon *ruach*, the breath that they respire. *Ruach* is then the primary signifier of life in biblical thought: its presence brings life; its absence means death. This premise would teach us that we breathe the same air with animal. We should then take our atmosphere very seriously since our survival and that of other creatures depends upon it. God's *ruach* is the

3 Qoh 1:6:הָרוּחַ וְעַל־סְבִיבֹתָיו שָׁב הָרוּחַ : "… and on its (wind) circuits, the wind returns".

vital principle for all living creatures. Calvin thinks of the *ruach* as the Spirit of God.

In Genesis 1, the word *ruach* is connected directly with God and God's activity of creation. The expression *ruach Elohim* implies that "air" – the atmospheric winds and the breath of life has something of divine identity, it is sacred (Hiebert 2008:15). It is for this reason that Calvin reads *ruach* as the Spirit of God, the Spirit of life. The expression *ruach Elohim* implies here that God is present as a hovering wind, the potential atmosphere that will offer life-giving breath when *erets* is born (Habel 2011:30).

By interpreting the *ruach Elohim* as simply the Spirit of life, Calvin continues affirming God's presence and providence to enable life and order in the creation. The chaos in the world needed not only the secret inspiration of God to prevent its speedy dissolution. Also, the created order, so fair and distinct, could only subsist unless it had derived from God (Calvin 1578:38). In other words, Calvin does not believe in the self-sustenance of the natural world. Calvin argues that the purpose of God in creating the world is that creation must be dependent on its Maker in order to reflect his glory.

3.6 Creation biodiversity reflecting God's glory

Calvin sees the created order as displaying the glory of God to all humanity. In his commentary on Genesis 1, Calvin insists on knowing God through the great diversity in creation. Calvin said "the intention of Moses, in beginning his book with creation of the world, is, to render God, as it were, visible to us in his works" (Calvin 1979:58). This is visible in all Calvin's exegesis of biblical texts pertaining to the created order as he said:

> We see, indeed, the world with our eyes, we tread the earth with our feet, we touch innumerable kinds of God's works with our hands, we inhale a sweet fragrance from herbs and flowers, we enjoy boundless benefits; but in those very things of which we attain some knowledge [of God's works], there dwells such an immensity of divine power, goodness, and wisdom, as absorbs all our sense" (Calvin 1578:23).

In this sense, in his theology of creation, Calvin gave considerable attention to non-human members of the created order. Likewise, in his rhetoric, he drew suggestive imagery from the physical sphere, frequently using animals

or animal characteristics as metaphors in his theological discourse. In an impressive exegetical analysis, Calvin equates the six days of creation with God's method to give humans enough time to contemplate his "infinite glory" (Calvin 1979:78).

Calvin saw every living thing, no matter how humble or harmful, as a vehicle for the self-disclosure of its Maker (Huff 1999:3). In other words, "the created order functions in Calvin's thought as the theatre of God's glory, the arena of divine reflection and action" (Schreiner 1991:7). At his will, God makes use of elements of nature to bless or punish human beings. In the wilderness God caused a south wind to blow and brought the people a plentiful supply of birds (Ex. 19:13). When he desired that Jonah should be thrown into the sea, he sent forth a whirlwind.

For Calvin, nature discloses the goodness and majesty of the Creator, who has assigned the flora and fauna their own role in the natural revelation of divine glory. All creatures, Calvin wrote, "from those in the firmament to those which are in the center of the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of his glory" (Huff 1992, 69). The little birds that sing and the beasts that clamour for God guide the human mind to contemplate the wonders of the sacred.

Calvin's thought about wonders of nature is inspired by Genesis 1:11–13 depicting various forms of life, their species, and environments as well their interrelationships. The text reads: "the earth germinated plants (*deše'*): grasses (*'ēśeb*) producing seed (*zera'*), each according to its species (*mîn*), and trees producing fruit (*pĕrî*) with its seed (*zera'*) in it, each according to its species (*mîn*), and God considered it good" (Gen. 1:12).

The first Hebrew word *deše'* is meant to be the defining concept for the entire flora kingdom, involving grasses (*'ēśeb*) and fruit (*pĕrî*). Grasses refer mainly to cereals, possibly wheat and barley, which were the ancient Israel's basic agricultural wealth (Hiebert 1996:37). However, Calvin affirms that, although the earth was already destined to bring forth flora, it remained dry and empty until God spoke (Calvin 1578:43). Calvin continues to affirm creation's dependence on its Maker.

God command the earth to put forth flora so that "we may learn from the order of the creation itself, that God acts through the creatures" (Calvin

1979:44). In the catalogue of Genesis 1:11–13, grasses are further presented in several species (*mîn*) which in turn are identified with their distinct seeds (*zera*ʿ). The word *zera* means that the flora kingdom is made with the capacity to reproduce itself. The Reformer said that the command "Let the earth bring forth the herb which may produce seed, the tree whose seed is in itself"

> signifies not only that herbs and trees were then created, but that, at the same time, both were endued with the power of propagation, in order that their several species might be perpetuated (Calvin 1578:44).

Thereafter, God commended various created domains to generate the birds of the sky, land animals, and sea animals (Gen. 1:20–25). God directly blesses his creatures commending them to increase and grow. For the Reformer, "the force of the word which was addressed to the fishes was not transient, but rather, being infused into their nature, has taken root, and constantly bears fruit by his word" (Calvin 1578:49). Biodiversity is then part of the divine project for the natural order. Ecologically, this premise has strong ethical implications in the sense that:

> If biodiversity is part of the divine plan for the earth, then placing it under threat, as we humans are now doing, can only be seen as an act against God. For the heirs of Scriptures, the diversity of life is not just a natural wonder on which our health depends … but it is a part of the earth as God intended it (Hiebert 2009:279).

In verses 29–30, humans and animals are commanded to be vegetarian. God envisioned a world without bloodshed: Humans and animals are prescribed grasses, cereals, and fruits diets. Calvin affirms the intention of God who put creation under human dominion but set limits of their power. As he said, "for it is of great importance that we touch nothing of God's bounty but what we know he has permitted us to do; since we cannot enjoy anything with a good conscience, except we receive it as from the hand of God" (Calvin 1578:155).

This ecological motif is reinforced by the repeated affirmation 'it is good' used for the creation of each form of life by the word of God (Gen. 1:12, 21, 25), and finally *very good* for the diversity of the whole created order (Gen.

1:31) showing God's approval "of everything which he had made" (Calvin 1578:56). Saint Augustine, quoted by Hiebert, clarifies that:

> All nature's substances are good, because they exist and therefore have their own mode and kind of being, and, in their fashion, a peace and harmony among themselves … it is the nature of things considered in itself, without regard to our convenience or inconvenience, that gives glory to the Creator (Hiebert 2009:280).

Violating this diversity through the extinction of any of these species that are stated *good* by the Creator is regarded as simply an act against God and God's plan for the natural order of the world. In this regard, the human dominion of Genesis 1:28 will be used in respect of the inherent value of each species to ensure its flourishing as God intended it. Otherwise, endangering the life of this biodiversity will be understood as merely an act of hostility against God himself, because:

> The point is that God's fate and the world's future are fundamentally bound up with one another. God is so internally related to the universe that the spectra of ecocide raises the risk of Deicide. Creation is God's and thus, to wreak environmental havoc on the earth is to run the risk that we will do irreparable, even fatal harm to the Mystery we call God (Hessel 2001:192).

In this sense, in accordance with Calvin, we, humans must commit to this divine valuation of the wonders of nature and diversity of life as the starting point for any contemporary ecological action. If we respect God as the creator, we should also learn to respect the product of his work – the diversity of his creatures.

3.7 Sabbath and creation sacredness

In Calvin words, in Sabbath, "this world was in every sense completed, as if the whole house were well supplied and filled with its furniture" (Calvin 1979:101). Calvin observes that the skies without the Lights would be an empty palace, just as the earth could be a desolate land without animals and plants (Calvin 1578:62). God, thus, did not rest until he had completed the work of creation in every part.

However, in resting, God does not withdraw from his creation. In Sabbath, God blessed creation as a sacred arena, his domain. For Calvin, God continues to sustain the world by his power, governs it by his providence, cherishes and even propagates all creatures (Calvin 1979:101). Calvin believes that if God should but withdraw his hand a little, all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing (Calvin 1979:102).

Therefore, Sabbath inaugurates God's relationship to his creation. Calvin does not believe in the self-sustenance of the natural world. Calvin argues that the purpose of God in creating the world and all its creatures is that creation should be directed toward his glory (Ps. 148 and Dan. 3) (Calvin 1992:23). Through the use of mirror, theatre and garment metaphors, "Calvin pictured the earth as a generous gift of the Creator within which God shows his goodness, power and fatherly care" (Van-der Kooi 2016:47).

Calvin employs preservation language in describing God's relationship to nature:

> [A]s the world was once made by God, so it is now preserved by him, and that the earth and all other things endure just in as far as they are sustained by his energy, and as it were his hand (Calvin 1983:40).

In Genesis 2:1–4a, the six days of creation culminate in the celebration of the divine Sabbath. The NRSV reads as follows:

> 1Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. 4These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created (Gen. 2:1–4a).

This text-unit announces that the creation of the domains of the universe – שמים and ארץ and their host (צבאם) is done. Then the writer ends with three main actions of God on this day: God rested, blessed, and hallowed the Sabbath. In blessing the day of Sabbath, God invests it with a power similar to one of procreation entrusted to all living creatures (Habel 2011). Hence, the *very good* of creation completeness of Genesis 1:31 is now sealed by the sacred day, the rest of God. As Van Wolde noted, the blessing and

declaration of holiness makes the Sabbath distinct from other days (Van Wolde 2009:18).

In this sense, creation belongs to God alone, who honoured it and expects it to be kept as his sanctuary, free from any polluting idols. In Leviticus 25:2–4, Israel is requested to gather enough food in six years, because the seventh is declared 'Sabbath for the Lord.' People (Israelites) are land tenants, since on the Sabbath the land must return to its owner, YHWH. In the seventh day, the land is to be made free from agriculture in order to allow its rejuvenating, renewal, and restoration of its fertility.

In this sense, the future or well-being of humans is dependent on the Sabbath of land. Its practice safeguards the economic life of humans as well as biodiversity's life. Sabbath is not only the cessation of work, but an opportunity for the created world to renew. Moltmann writes, "the God who rests in the face of his creation does not dominate the world on this day, [rather] he feels the world; he allows the world to be affected, to be touched by each of its creatures" (Moltmann 1985:229).

Thus, as the Sabbath is for the internal renewal or restoration of the domains of creation, one should not forget that humans are also part of these domains. The same way that the Sabbath concerns animals and plants in Genesis 1, it also assumes the rejuvenation and restoration of humans who belong to the diversity of creation. Human actions should not be viewed as external forces to the earth domains, but rather they are one of the aspects that characterize the beauty of Genesis 1. Their acts should be executed in view of God who continues to provide and preserve his work.

4. Contribution to today's ecological concerns

Though ecological concerns are not the focus of Calvin, we do find in Calvin's ideas some clues that can help to shape Christian view of human-nature relationship. First, Calvin's view on the natural world is theocentric where nature serves as an arena of the glory of God. This affirmation has strong environmental implications. Because nature reveals God's glory, humans have a moral responsibility to care for it the way God would do it.

Moreover, for Calvin, God continues to sustain the world. Calvin rejects the idea that creatures are infused with the necessary inherent energy to

sustain the created order without the divine providence. Although God commands human beings to have dominion over the created things in Genesis 1:26–28, it is God who ultimately controls and cares for it, both directly and indirectly (Foser 2005:2). The Reformer implies that those who are dependent on God, namely Christians, could be true stewards of the world. However, if creation is the "arena of God's glory", why do Christians not take the lead in the environmental concerns? Conradie said Christians have left their ecological mission to natural scientists, who

> Against their own methodological inclinations, have become the prophets of our day by reiterating warnings over climate change, the loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification and a range of other "planetary boundaries", speaking truth to power (Conradie 2019:33).

The Reformer's depiction of creation as "the arena of God's glory" makes creation a "sacred space". It should encourage those who believe in God to resist and fight against attitudes that undermine creation and its diversity. To get this mindset, Conradie argues for an ecological Reformation of not only Christian ethics, but its entire ecclesiology (Conradie 2019:34).

Second, for Calvin, humans as *imago Dei* are designed as God's counterparts within the created world. However, sin corrupted the *imago Dei* and by extension, the natural order. In other words, the perversion of humans in the world causes crisis in the natural world. This can be linked with what Pope Jean-Paul II said that "people must be told that the environmental crisis is a moral crisis" (John Paul II 2001:2). That is why anthropogenic climate changes point in the direction not merely of an economic or ecological crisis, but towards a deeper moral, ethical, and spiritual failure. For Calvin, fallen human beings cannot clearly behold the image of God in creation. The Reformer once more emphasized that only born-again Christians could be good stewards of God's creation. For Calvin, we cannot understand the pricelessness of God's creation without an individual intimacy with Him (Conradie 2010:368).

Third, for Calvin, human dominion in Genesis 1:28 is to be understood in relationship with verses 29–30. For the Reformer, the vegetarian diet set limits of human power to do only what is permitted "since we cannot enjoy anything with a good conscience, except we receive it as from the hand of God" (Calvin 1578:155). Calvin's anthropocentric view of creation is

nuanced with his theocentric view of the world. In the application of their power over creation, humans must abide in the limits set by God.

Fourth, Calvin's writings strongly affirm the goodness of the created order. The fact that God created, fixed, cares for, sustains and will ultimately redeem creation opposes all forms of idea destroying the physical order. For Calvin, the goodness of creation has its ultimate source in God's goodness. This repeated feeling of Calvin correctly describes the Biblical view of nature and provides a strong foundation for a positive contemporary evangelical outlook towards the environment.

The main ecological weakness of Calvin is found in his utilitarian worldview. For Calvin, God created everything for human beings. His anthropocentric perspective has influenced his interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28 significantly (Calvin 1578:54–56). This is clearly understandable given the Reformation, and mostly the renaissance contexts in which Calvin lived where the sole intention consisted of exalting the uniqueness of human beings. Still for Calvin, the use of resources must be done within the limits established by God.

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