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Culture as Divine Gift

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Culture as Divine Gift

IN ALL THINGS IS COMMITTED TO A CHRIST WHO STRETCHES AT LEAST AS WIDE AS THE COSMOS

Thanks to a handful of rather dour portraits, we tend to imagine the reformer John Calvin as a stern man with eyes that burst with brimstone, crags in his forehead deep as canyons, and a thin, narrow frame suggesting that he rarely enjoyed a fine meal (not true).

With an appearance this grim and gaunt, it's easy to assume that Calvin's gospel is no good news, and that a Calvinist view of the world is a dim one at best.



Certainly, aspects of this representation are true. Yet, for all that, this image of Calvin misses the bigger picture. Calvin was clearly in love with the world, particularly its natural beauty and power. He often wrote of the grandeur of God's creation—a grandeur so terrifying and overwhelming that it could temporarily evoke faith in even the most hardened heart.

The natural world, he said repeatedly, is the theater of divine glory. It is a vast stage on which God moves the planets, sun, moon, and stars about for his pleasure.

Calvin got some dimensions of this theater wrong. He rejected Copernicus, after all: he thought the earth stood still as the stars and planets danced around us. And many other aspects of the theater were simply unknown to him. He lived hundreds of years before Einstein predicted the existence of black holes. The theater of divine glory turns out to be much, much bigger and stranger and more fascinating than Calvin could've imagined. Even so, his fascination with the cosmos still applies. God is always

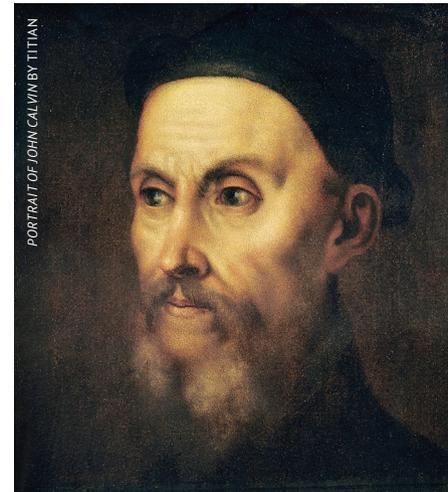
already at work in his creation.

And not just in the natural world, either. In the Institutes, Calvin tells his readers that God "fills, moves, and invigorates all things through the Spirit." All the arts and sciences, including those cultivated by "impious" persons, are gifts from God: "physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences." If we neglect these divine gifts, Calvin writes, "we will be justly punished for our sloth."

Notice two very striking claims here. First, any form of human activity may be thoroughly charged with divine inspiration—God's Spirit is at work even among those who fail to revere him. Second, Calvin reminds his readers—many likely devout Christians studious enough to plow through hundreds of pages of challenging systematic theology—that if we fail to value culture and science as

sluggish in her pursuit of good things. She is unwilling to do what she is called to do.

So, we need to ask ourselves: Are we guilty of this vice? Do we habitually shirk our divine calling to engage with the overwhelming beauty, complexity, and diversity of human culture? How can we avoid being cultural sluggards? If we listen to Calvin, the answer seems quite straightforward: we have to be on the lookout for God's



PORTRAIT OF JOHN CALVIN BY TITIAN

To be slothful is not merely having trouble getting out of bed on time, or putting off the kitchen remodel that your spouse has been requesting for years. Rather, the slothful person is habitually sluggish in her pursuit of good things.

gifts of God, we are guilty of the vice of sloth.

What a strange accusation. What does it mean to equate neglect of human culture with slothfulness? For Calvin, we should remember, sloth is not the same as being lazy. To be slothful is not merely having trouble getting out of bed on time, or putting off the kitchen remodel that your spouse has been requesting for years. Rather, the slothful person is habitually

Spirit at work in the world, and then be willing to follow wherever it leads us.

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