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Culture as Divine Gift: The Future of In All Things

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Culture as Divine Gift: The Future of In All Things

Abstract

"We have to be on the lookout for God's Spirit at work in the world, and then be willing to follow wherever it leads us."

Posting about Christian engagement in culture from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/culture-as-divine-gift-the-future-of-in-all-things/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Culture as Divine Gift: The Future of In All Things

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David Henreckson

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. Ask [Michael Servetus](#), for one. 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 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 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 Spirit at work in the world, and then be willing to follow wherever it leads us.

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In many respects, this has been the mission and mandate of *In All Things* from its inception. As the new editor-in-chief, I hope to press this mandate forward. Wherever Christians may be tempted toward slothful disengagement from the world, we want to raise up voices that can wake us from our doldrums. We want to feature the contributions of scholars, practitioners, and ordinary people who can draw our attention to corners of the world we may have forgotten. We want to find the places and activities that are shot through with God's creational grace. In short, we

want to be at the forefront of the grassroots resurgence of Christian engagement with the arts, culture, and society.

What does this mean practically for the journal? At least three things.

First, *In All Things* will deliberately engage communities beyond our own. This journal has a distinctive identity, rooted in the Reformed, neo-Calvinist tradition. John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper may not be on our masthead, but they might as well serve as *ex officio* members. None of this will change. At the same time, we need to pursue conversations with people from different traditions, places, and times. If we believe God’s Spirit is at work in every square inch of creation, we have to ask ourselves what we can learn from evangelicals as well as Episcopalians, our closest neighbors as well as the sojourners who pass through our gates. We also need to attend to those historical thinkers the philosopher Robert Brandom called the “mighty dead”—figures like Calvin who have left us complex legacies to explore. Failure to heed this plurality of voices is failure to live into the calling God has given to us as heirs of particular traditions and social practices.

Second, *In All Things* will devote more energy to critical reflection on the arts, culture, and scholarship. No single institution can fill the void left by print magazines such as the *Reformed Journal* or *Books & Culture* (RIP). But here at *In All Things*, we will do our part by running more reviews—on books, film, television, poetry, and art. We also plan to run a series of online “book clubs” in which contributors will carry on public conversations about important recent works (keep an eye out for the first one, on Rod Dreher’s [The Benedict Option](#)). In doing all this, we hope to expand our imagination for what Christian scholarship and cultural criticism can accomplish.

Finally, *In All Things* will continue to feature excellent writing from people who offer fresh insights into the diversity of human experience. We want to host conversations that acknowledge the divisions that run through civil society and the church—red vs. blue, black (or brown) vs. white, coastal elites vs. folks from flyover country—while holding the belief that truth is best sought through vigorous, charitable disputation. We will not minimize the disagreements that divide our communities. At the same time, we intend to feature writing that examines the cultural and spiritual roots of our most profound differences.

We hope this last point is already evidenced in some of our recent pieces on topics such as [race](#), [gender](#), [systemic injustice](#), the [refugee crisis](#), the [shifting boundaries of evangelicalism](#), and the ways that [conservatives](#) and [minority communities](#) might live faithfully in the current political climate. We believe that Christ has called us to look for him in the difficult places—places that challenge us. This is how we hope to grow into maturity as Christians, as citizens, and as people who care about the common good of fellowship with God and neighbor. Anything less would be failure to pursue the good gifts that God has set before us.

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All these themes underwrite *In All Things*’ revised mission statement:

In All Things is a journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God’s creation. We want to expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and life of the mind—can accomplish. In pursuit of this end, we will engage in conversation with diverse voices across a wide range of traditions, places, and times.

In pursuit of these aims, *In All Things* hosts essays, reviews, and devotional pieces that seek to explore the concrete implications of Christ’s presence in all facets of life.