Exegetical Analysis of Calvin’s View of the Natural Order

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The scholarly discussion on Calvin's views of natural theology and natural law has been extensive. From the great Barth-Brunner debate to more recent scholarship by the likes of Grabill and Steinmetz, scholars have taken a great interest in Calvin's view on natural theology. The debate—as to just how “natural” Calvin’s theology was—has raged throughout the years with no clear consensus. Yet, despite the great deal of scholarship on Calvin’s view of natural law and natural theology, remarkably little work on Calvin’s overall view of the natural order has been undertaken. Historically, one has been hard-pressed to find any comprehensive examination of Calvin’s work on the natural order.

However, scholarship on Calvin’s view of the natural order took a gigantic step forward with the publication of Susan Schreiner’s *The Theater of His Glory* in 1991. In her book, Schreiner is able to ascend above the typical Barth-Brunner debates of Calvin’s view on natural knowledge. Schreiner examines Calvin’s sermons and commentaries along with the *Institutes* in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of Calvin’s thought on the natural order. In the foreword to Schreiner’s book, Muller evaluates Schreiner’s work when he writes, “In particular, by examining Calvin’s views on nature and the natural order—from creation, through history, to the eschaton—Schreiner sheds new light on a positive approach to nature that may well pervade Calvin’s thought.” Numerous other scholars have also positively received Schreiner’s work on Calvin’s views on the natural order. Indeed, Schreiner provides a quite thorough examination, addressing the entirety of Calvin’s writings on the natural order, placing them within their context, and arriving at an understanding of how the natural order fits in the whole of Calvin’s thought.

Yet, Schreiner’s work on Calvin’s thought on the natural order has not ended the scholarly discussion. In his review of Schreiner’s book, Zachman argues that Schreiner misses the theme in Calvin that “only in Christ do we regain the inheritance of...”
the good things of the earth that we lost in Adam and regain the ability to know God as our Father from the theater of his glory in the universe.6 Otto, in his review, has more general criticism when he writes, “The reader is left with some uncertainty as to the focus of the book and its success in fulfilling its thesis.”7 Clearly, Schreiner’s work has been met with mixed reviews, and, thus, Calvin’s view of the natural order remains debated.

As a result of the ongoing debates, further study into Calvin’s thought on the natural order is in order. Undertaking a comprehensive analysis of Calvin’s complete writings on the natural order and interacting with secondary sources would extend far beyond the length allotted for this essay. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, an examination of Calvin’s commentaries will be undertaken. Such an undertaking will require, first, looking at Calvin’s writing in his commentaries on texts relevant to the natural order and, second, interacting with the secondary sources that address Calvin’s commentaries and his views on the natural order.

Examining Calvin’s exegesis is essential for understanding Calvin’s view of the natural order. Whether Calvin sees the natural order positively or negatively, his exegesis of the biblical text will provide the basis and support for his view. While Calvin’s exegesis obviously shines through in his sermons and the Institutes, the clearest place to access his exegesis is through his commentaries. Calvin’s exegesis of passages pertaining to the natural order will show that the natural order was, to borrow from Schreiner’s language, indeed created as a theater for God’s glory; was distorted by the fall into sin, making its witness of God to mankind less clear; and is part of God’s plan for ultimate redemption and restoration.

As one might expect, the first place to examine Calvin’s exegesis involving the natural order is in the creation narrative found in Genesis. Already in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, Calvin signals what he believes to be a primary purpose of Genesis. He writes, “For this is the argument of the Book: After the world had been created, man was placed in it as a theatre for God’s glory; was distorted by the fall into sin, making its witness of God to mankind less clear; and is part of God’s plan for ultimate redemption and restoration.

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Having clearly established that, according to Calvin’s exegesis, the glory of God shines forth in Genesis 1, we can turn to the Psalms to get an even fuller sense of how powerfully, in Calvin’s exegesis, the natural order shines forth God’s glory. Throughout the Psalms, Calvin repeatedly highlights that the natural order gives humanity a clear picture of the glory of God. For example, on Psalm 19, Calvin writes that David celebrates the glory of God as it is manifested in his works. Elsewhere on that same Psalm he writes, “When we behold the heavens, we cannot but be elevated, by the contemplation of them, to Him who is their great Creator.”18 Writing on Psalm 8, Calvin continues this theme: “There is presented to us in the whole order of nature, the most abundant matter for showing forth the glory of God.”19 Let one more example suffice to again show Calvin’s view that God’s glory shines forth in the goodness of the natural order.
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to God’s glory. Clearly, throughout his exegesis, Calvin firmly establishes that God has shown forth his glory throughout the natural order for all humanity to witness.

Yet God’s glory is clear not only in his creating work but also in his constant care and providence of that natural order.21 Throughout his exegesis of God’s glory shining through in the natural order, Calvin connects closely God’s glory in the natural order with God’s providence. Writing about Psalm 124, Calvin comments that God’s glory did not simply shine forth in God’s creating act but continues to evidence itself in God’s government of the world.22 In his commentary on Psalm 19 Calvin closely links the two: “When we behold the heavens, we cannot but be elevated, by the contemplation of them, to Him who is their great Creator; and the beautiful arrangement and wonderful variety which distinguish the courses and station of the heavily bodies, together with the beauty and splendor which are manifest in them, cannot but furnish us with an evident proof of his providence.”23 Schreiner highlights Calvin’s close linking of providence and the natural order. She writes, “we will examine providence as a foundational doctrine not in terms of predestination or the work of Christ, but in terms of creation. The created order functions in Calvin’s thought as the theater of God’s glory, the arena of divine reflection and action. Providence frames that stage.”24 This intimate connection is picked up commendably throughout Schreiner’s The Theater of His Glory.25 To attempt to address Calvin’s understanding of the natural order apart from his understanding of providence is to divide the topics as Calvin never wished to do.26

A further examination of Calvin’s exegesis shows even more clearly how closely Calvin consistently ties God’s work in the natural order with providence.27 In his commentary on Acts 17:26, Calvin writes, “Paul did first show that men are set here as upon a theatre, to behold the works of God; and, secondly, that he spake [sic] of the providence of God, which doth show forth itself in the whole government of the world.”28 Earlier in his Acts commentary, Calvin speaks of the witness Paul and Barnabas give that “in the order of nature there is a certain and evident manifestation of God,” which shines through in God’s watering the earth with rain, heating the earth with the sun, and so on.29 Here, according to Calvin, Paul and Barnabas point to God’s witness to the Gentiles both in the natural order and providence. In his commentary on the book of John, Calvin draws an even more direct line: “He [John] now attributes to him, in the same manner, the preservation of those things which had been created; as if he had said, that in the creation of the world there was not merely displayed a sudden exercise of his power, which soon passed away, but that it is manifested in the steady and regular order of nature.”30 The same connection is found in Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 93, when Calvin comments, “As yet the Psalmist has insisted upon the excellency [sic] of God in the work of creation, and the providential government of the world.”31 Finally, in his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin writes, “Hence we have then only the true knowledge of God, when we not only acknowledge
him to be the creator of the world, but when we also fully believe that the world is governed by him, and when we further understand the way in which he governs it, that is, by doing mercy and judgment and justice."32 Clearly, in Calvin’s exegesis, the natural order and God’s providence are intimately tied so that through them both, people can come to a knowledge of God, the Creator and Sustainer.

Overall, Calvin’s view of the natural order, as created, is extremely positive. Schreiner is absolutely correct that Calvin views the natural order, in its original state, as a theater for God’s glory.33 Yet, in light of mankind’s fall into sin, Calvin’s exegesis concerning the natural order shifts dramatically. Indeed, in his exegesis of Genesis 3:17, Calvin writes that it should come as no surprise that the earth, thought innocent, fell under the same punishment as mankind.34 The natural order, according to Calvin, has also been tainted by the fall. Calvin contrasts the beauty of the created, pre-fallen natural order with the post-fallen natural order: “Before the fall, the state of the world was a most fair and delightful mirror of the divine favour and paternal indulgence towards man. Now, in all the elements we perceive that we are cursed.”35 After humanity’s fall into sin, the natural order itself is in rebellion against mankind, says Calvin. Thus, according to Calvin, the relationship of the natural order to humanity has been grossly distorted.36

Calvin’s exegesis clearly shows his belief that humanity’s perception of the natural order has been horribly distorted in the fall into sin. But, is the natural order itself distorted by the fall, or is it only a matter of humankind’s being unable to see and understand the natural order as the theater of God’s glory?

Calvin has no doubt that humanity’s view of the natural order has been deeply affected by the fall. Speaking about the natural order after the fall, Calvin writes in his commentary on Acts 17:27, “I answer, that their ignorance and blockishness is mixed with such forwardness, that, being void of right judgment, they pass over without understanding all such signs of God’s glory as appear manifestly both in heaven and earth.”37 Clearly, Calvin believes the natural order still shines forth at least a portion of God’s glory, but mankind, in its fallen state, simply cannot perceive that glory. Indeed, Calvin, in commenting on Romans 1:20, writes about the post-fall condition of the world: “Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient.”38 For Calvin, the distortion of humankind’s perception is strongly at fault: “Now [after the fall], in all the elements we perceive that we are cursed. And although (as David says) the earth is still full of the mercy of God, yet, at the same time, appear manifest signs of his dreadful alienation from us, by which, if we are unmoved, we betray our blindness and insensibility.”39

This blindness of mankind to the wonders of the natural order results, says Calvin, in the production of an uncountable number of idols. When pagans glimpse the glory of God in the natural order, rather than acknowledge God, says Calvin, they turn their eyes towards vain idols.40 Indeed, Calvin comments, the vast majority of people, when they look upon nature and the state of the world, “imagine that he [God] is an idle spectator in heaven of whatever is transacted on earth.”41 According to Calvin, pagans look upon the natural order of the world, both in its creation and governance, and see not the glory of God but, instead, make for themselves a host of different idols.

However, in addition to humanity’s inability to witness God’s glory in the natural order, the natural order itself, in Calvin’s view, experiences the corrupting effects of the fall.42 Calvin’s commentary on Romans will prove most helpful. In his commentary on Romans 8:19, Calvin writes, “I understand the passage to have this meaning — that there is no element and no part of the world which, being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, does not intensely hope for a resurrection.”43 Earlier, commenting on Romans 4:13, Calvin remarks, “The chief thing was indeed the restoration of life; it was yet necessary that the fallen state of the whole world should be repaired.”44 Yet, it is not just in his Romans commentary where Calvin addresses the fallen nature of the natural order itself. Addressing what it means for the heavens to perish, in Hebrews 1:12 Calvin writes, “But what need is there of such a strained explanation, since we know that all creatures are subjected to vanity?”45 Also, commenting
on Psalm 96, Calvin writes, “Still we are to remember that so long as ungodliness has possession of the minds of men, the world, plunged as it is in darkness, must be considered as thrown into a state of confusion, and of horrible disorder and misrule.”

In these passages Calvin cannot escape the fact that the natural order is in itself greatly affected by the fall into sin. Calvin’s exegesis of these passages leaves little doubt that, in his eyes, the natural order itself has fallen under the curse of sin.

Yet, also important for Calvin’s exegesis is the idea that the natural order suffers only because of Adam’s plunge into sin, not on account of any fault of its own. Calvin states this point unequivocally in his commentary on Romans 8: “for it [punishment for our sins] has not happened through their own fault, that they are liable to corruption.” Indeed, part of the purpose of the natural order’s fallen state is to remind humanity of its dire situation. Calvin highlights this point several times in his exegesis. For example, Calvin comments, “It is then indeed meet for us to consider what a dreadful curse we have deserved, since all created things in themselves blameless, both on earth and in the visible heaven, undergo punishment for our sins.” Nonetheless, while Adam’s sin is causative, for Calvin the natural order itself is now in a fallen state and has been corrupted in the fall.

Given his view that the whole of the natural order has been tainted with sin, Calvin also sees the corruption of the natural order as making the providence of God all the more necessary. If it were not for God’s support of the fallen natural order, the whole of the order would have fallen into complete chaos. Calvin, in his commentary on Romans 8, writes, “For in the sad disorder which followed the fall of Adam, the whole machinery of the world would have instantly become deranged, and all its parts would have failed had not some hidden strength supported them.” Commenting on the state of the natural world, Calvin writes, “It hence appears that the power of nature is not sufficient to sustain and preserve the world, but that, on the contrary, it contains the very element of its own ruin, whenever it may please God to destroy it.”

Again, Calvin emphasizes God’s sustaining care of the natural order, particularly as it suffers under the curse of the fall. Returning to Psalm 8, Calvin accuses only those who are “dull and stupid” of failing to see that it is God’s providence after the fall that provides humanity with dominion over the natural order.

Calvin’s exegesis makes clear that the natural order, though created as a wonderful theater of God’s glory, has now been horribly distorted by the fall of mankind into sin. Yet, the question remains as to what extent humanity can still witness God through the natural order. Despite the tainted nature of the natural order and the blindness of humanity, does the natural order still shine forth God’s glory for humanity to witness? It is on this question that a great deal of scholarship has argued, namely the famous debate between Barth and Brunner. Barth states boldly, “Without the biblical revelation that defines God the Redeemer Calvin sees no real knowledge of God the Creator.” On the other hand, Brunner attempts to summarize Calvin’s view when he writes, “He [God] has set us into this ‘theatre’ of his glory in order that in it we should know, contemplate and honour him as the Lord of glory. God can be known from nature other than man, but also from man himself.”

Grabill, turning from the natural order to natural law, has recently argued, “In the theology of John Calvin … the diminished natural human faculties still function sufficiently to reveal the general precepts of the natural moral law and to provide the anthropological starting point for a doctrine of natural law.” On the other hand, Niesel argued that “All that Calvin says about the natural knowledge of God is subject to the one condition: if Adam had not fallen […] man does not see the tokens of the divine glory in nature and history and reaches no sure knowledge of the Creator on this basis.” Turning to Calvin’s exegesis will again pro-

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vide a solid basis for understanding to what extent Calvin believed the natural order remains a theater of God’s glory.

While Calvin never allows for the natural order to be sufficient for complete knowledge of God after the fall into sin, examining Calvin’s exegesis allows one to conclude that Calvin understood the natural order even after the fall as still being largely the theater of God’s glory. Summarizing his commentary on Psalm 8, Calvin acknowledges that the “legitimate order which God originally established” no longer shines forth as it did, yet Calvin also points out that those under Christ still enjoy enough “of the fragments of the good things” lost in Adam that they should bring admiration to God.

However, it is not just those in Christ who can find these glimpses of God’s glory in the natural order. In his commentary on Psalm 29, Calvin is quite clear that wonders of the natural order “strike the rude and insensible with some sense of the existence of God.” Again, Calvin believes that the natural order shows forth God power and goodness not only because it has been created by God but also because it is providentially governed by him. Through his creation and rule of the natural order, particularly its most “violent and great tempests,” God “rouse(s) us from our drowsiness” and “awaken(s) the torpid, and drag(s) them, as it were, in spite of themselves, humbly to adore him.”

For example, in his commentary on Romans 1, Calvin writes, “God is in himself invisible; but as his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere, men ought in these to acknowledge him, for they clearly set forth their Maker.” In this Romans passage, Calvin points out that the author is arguing that all men are guilty before God, and one proof of this guilt is man’s failure to glorify God for the glory of the created order. He writes, “And he brings, as the first proof of condemnation, the fact, — that though the structure of the world, and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements, ought to have induced man to glorify God, yet no one dis-charged his proper duty.” Thus, Calvin concludes from Romans 1 that even after the fall “the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear.” Here, for Calvin, man’s failure to derive knowledge of God’s glory arises solely from the blindness of mankind.

Notably, Calvin’s views on the natural order were not unique to his own exegesis of Romans 1. Melanchthon, in his exegesis of Romans 1:19-20, writes, “These things, I saw, the mind acknowledges when it looks upon the creation.” Likewise, Luther had commented similarly on the Romans 1 passage and wrote, “This statement tells us that from the beginning of the world the invisible things of God have always been recognized through the rational perceptions of the divine operations in the world.” Indeed, Luther held that all people, particularly idolaters, could have clear knowledge of God, but that idolaters “erred in ascribing to their idols the divine attributes.” In his comments on Calvin’s exegesis of Romans 1, Steinmetz rightfully notes the many similarities between Calvin’s exegesis and the exegesis of Denis, Melanchthon, Bullinger, and Bucer.

Still, Calvin’s view of the availability of God’s glory in the natural order is slightly ambiguous. Calvin’s exegesis of Hebrews 11 is not as positive about the ability of the natural order to show mankind God’s glory. In his exegesis of this passage, Calvin maintains that God’s Spirit is necessary for any person to look at the created order and come to knowledge of God. He writes, “Men’s minds therefore are wholly blind, so that they see not the light of nature which shines forth in created things, until being irradiated by God’s Spirit, they begin to understand by faith what they otherwise cannot comprehend.” Yet Calvin acknowledges that he must address the fact that “the very appearance of heaven and earth constrains even the ungodly to acknowledge some Maker.” On this apparent problem, Calvin concludes “that though there has been an opinion of this kind among heathens, that the world was made by God, it was yet very evanescent, for as soon as they formed a notion of God, they became instantly vain in their imaginations, so that...
they groped in the dark, having in their thoughts a mere shadow of some uncertain deity, and not the knowledge of the true God.” Thus, it appears again that Calvin understands the natural order as being completely capable of bringing forth at least some knowledge of God. However, it is the blindness and corruption of mankind that prevents any true and meaningful knowledge of God from being imparted from the natural order.

Turning briefly elsewhere, we find that Calvin’s exegesis on the book of Job, via his sermons, will also prove helpful, as Schreiner has demonstrated. Throughout his sermons on Job, Calvin stresses the balance between the terror of history and the security of God’s care of the natural order; God’s providence in upholding the natural order is crucial for Calvin. Calvin himself says, “God showeth himself so manifestly in his creatures as he leaves us utterly without excuse of ignorance if we honor him not.” Elsewhere Calvin acknowledges that in the fallen state, “we forget him that is the founder” of the creation. Yet Calvin still maintains that the natural order “should be a mirror of his glory” and that by these “visible things” all humanity might “see the things that are invisible.” Thus, Calvin’s exegesis of Job also highlights his belief that the natural order, though fallen, still shines forth as a theater of God’s glory.

Perhaps the clearest passage of Calvin’s exegesis on the ability of the post-fallen natural order to impart the glory of God comes in Acts 14. In verse 17, in a passage in which Calvin sees all “pretext of ignorance” being taken away from the Gentiles, Calvin writes, “And yet this letteth not but that they may be made without excuse, even without the word, who, though they be naturally deprived of light, are blind notwithstanding, through their own malice, as Paul teacheth in the first chapter to the Romans.” Throughout his exegesis of the passage, Calvin acknowledges that mankind is “brought alone unto that knowledge of Almighty God which bringeth salvation.” Yet Calvin refuses to downplay that glory of God that remains evident in the natural order, as he writes,

Notwithstanding they take this principle, that in the order of nature there is a certain and evident manifestation of God, in that the earth is watered with rain; in that the heat of the sun doth comfort it; in that there cometh such abundance of fruit out of the same yearly, it is thereby gathered for a surety, that there is some God who governeth all things. For even the heaven and earth are not moved or governed by their own motion, and much less by fortune. Therefore it remaineth, that this wonderful workmanship of nature doth manifestly show the providence of God.

Again, Calvin closely links his understanding of God’s glory shining through in the natural order with God’s upholding providence. Through both the very nature of the created order and God’s providential care for that order, Calvin clearly shows that the natural order shines forth as the theater of God’s glory even after the fall.

As has been shown from Calvin’s exegesis, even after the fall the natural order continues to shine forth God’s glory. Niesel is quite right that for Calvin “the simple knowledge of God from nature would only be possible to us if Adam had not fallen.” Yet Calvin’s exegesis has shown that Niesel, Barth, and other scholars fail to take seriously the usefulness of the natural order in showing forth God’s glory even after the fall. Likewise, Brunner and Barth both remained stuck in the knowledge-of-God-through-the-natural-order debate while they failed to address Calvin’s ideas of the natural order showing God’s glory and majesty even after the fall.

In summary, Calvin’s exegesis shows clearly that he views the natural order as originally created wonderfully, as a true theater of God’s glory (including providence) but the created order itself, and mankind’s ability to witness that glory, as having been
tainted and corrupted by the fall. However, a third point of Calvin’s exegesis remains powerfully relevant. For Calvin, the created order itself is also subject to the redeeming work of Christ.

Indeed, Calvin, in his exegesis, highlights the necessity of the redemption of the entire cosmos that comes through the work of Christ. Dealing with Romans 8:19, which speaks of waiting for Christ, Calvin writes, “There is no element and no part of the world which, being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, does not intensely hope for a resurrection[;] … all are creatures in distress, and yet they are sustained by hope.” In commenting on Ephesians 1:10, where Christ is described as “gathering all things together,” Calvin writes, “The meaning appears to me to be, that out of Christ all things were disordered, and that through him they have been restored to order.” Calvin again addresses the redemption of the natural order in his commentary on Hebrews 2:6. Pointing out the verse from Psalm 8, Calvin notes that the state of the original creation has become “wholly decayed” and has fallen as far into decay as man himself. Yet Calvin’s exegesis of Hebrews 2 also looks forward to the renovation of the world, which will bring ultimate fulfillment to Psalm 8. According to Calvin, even the angels are included in this restoration: “But there is no reason why we should not say that the angels also have been gathered together … that they may cleave to God perfectly and wholly, and then that they may keep this state forever.” The angels too, Calvin says, need to undergo this reconciliation with God, so that they too are “beyond the risk of falling” from the grace of Christ. Calvin’s exegesis makes clear that he believes the whole of the natural order is subject to the redeeming work of Christ.

Earlier the question was raised as to exactly how the fall affected the natural order. Also relevant is the question of how Christ’s redeeming work also affects the natural order. Clearly, as seen above, Calvin’s exegesis highlights strongly the ultimate renewal and renovation of the entire natural order. Yet is this renewal simply at the consummation of all things when Christ returns, or has the natural order already been affected by Christ’s redeeming work? Calvin has no notion that the fullness of Christ’s redeeming work has taken effect on the natural order. Even after the work of Christ, Calvin, in his commentaries, continues to discuss the fallen, broken condition of the natural order. Calvin discusses the incompleteness of Christ’s redemption of the whole of creation perhaps most clearly in his commentary on Psalm 8 when he writes, “Christ, it is true, is the lawful heir of heaven and earth, by whom the faithful recover what they had lost in Adam; but he has not as yet actually entered upon the full possession of his empire and dominion … . It follows then, that there remains hope of a better state than the present.” Calvin, ever aware of the struggles of the present world, was clear that the ultimate restoration of the natural order was by no means complete.

Still, Calvin’s exegesis of other texts leaves no doubt that Christ’s work is already under way in regard to the natural order. In his commentary on Hebrews, Calvin writes, “It hence now appears that here the world to come is not that which we hope for after the resurrection, but that which began at the beginning of Christ’s kingdom.” Elsewhere in Hebrews, Calvin comments that the fundamental state of the world was changed at the coming of Christ; the things of this world were subject to decay but are now part of Christ’s eternal kingdom. Clearly, for Calvin, the redemption of the natural order has been initiated in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Although Christ’s redemption of the natural order has begun in part, Calvin asserts that such redemption will only fully happen at Christ’s second coming. In fact, in his commentaries Calvin speaks often and explicitly of such a final restoration for the natural order. He writes, “they [all creatures] according to their nature, shall be participants of a better condition; for God will restore to a perfect state the world, now fallen, together with mankind.” Speaking of the end of times, Calvin comments, “even that we ought to strive after newness of life. For he [Peter] thus reasons, as heaven and earth are to be purged by fire, that they may correspond with the kingdom of Christ, hence the renovation of men is much more necessary.” The restoration of the natural order, as Schreiner notes, does not mean the destruction of this present order. Rather, Calvin says, the restoration of the things of the natural order means that all things will again “correspond with the kingdom of Christ.”
For Calvin, crucial in the restoration of the whole of
the natural order is that all things will again reveal
the glory of God. Calvin gives this summary: “Both
heaven and earth shall be renewed for this end, —
that according to their measure they may contribute
to render glorious the kingdom of God.”

In conclusion, from Calvin’s exegesis it is clear
that God’s glory shines through in the “theater”
of the natural order. For Calvin, this glory shined
through most brightly at creation so that all who
contemplated the natural order would be led to
meditate on the glory of God. However, human-
ity’s fall into sin has also subjected the natural order
to decay, corruption, and disarray. Yet despite the
much distorted essence of the natural order and the
blindness of man to look upon it, the glory of God,
says Calvin, still shines forth for all humankind to
witness, though only dimly in comparison to its
glory before the fall. According to Calvin, God’s
glory still shines through in the natural order, and
mankind retains at least some capability to recog-
nize this glory. But the natural order will neither
be corrupted forever nor completely annihilated.
Calvin makes clear that the natural order too waits
longingly for its restoration so that it will once again
become a full display of God’s glory. Throughout
Calvin’s commentaries his emphasis on the natural
order continues to allow humanity to contemplate
the glory of God, a glory that will shine through
undeniably clearly at the ultimate restoration of the
natural order, as it did at creation.

Endnotes

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useful. However, to do so in a reasonable way would
require a great deal more time and length. Only brief
comments comparing Calvin’s exegesis to those of his
contemporaries will be made in this essay. For a fuller
examination, reference David Steinmetz’s Calvin in
Context; Anthony Lane’s John Calvin: Student of the
Church Fathers (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) and
Gordon’s Calvin, 106-108.
10. John Calvin, Commentary on the First Book of Moses
Called Genesis, translated by John King. 2 Vols. (Grand
Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), Argument,
64.
13. For Calvin’s view of the structure of the cosmos, refer-
ence his Commentary on Genesis, 1:6-9, Vol. 1, 78-81;
1:14, Vol. 1, 85.
17. John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, trans-
lated by James Anderson, 5 Vols. (Grand Rapids,
Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), Ps. 19:1, Vol. 1, 308-
309.
18. Ibid.
19. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps 8:1, Vol. 1, 93.

20. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps 95:3, Vol. 4, 34.


24. Schreiner, Theater, 7.

25. Schreiner, Theater, 7, 21, 113.

26. Not only in his commentaries but also in his Institutes, Calvin ties knowledge of God in the natural order and providence together. For such a connection reference the Institutes I.v.


33. Schreiner, Theater, 5.

34. Calvin, Commentary on Genesis, 3:17, Vol. 1, 173.

35. Ibid.

36. Schreiner emphasizes the rebellion of the natural order against mankind in Theater, 28-29.


40. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps. 96:4-6, Vol. 4, 50.

41. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps. 33:6, Vol. 1, 549.

42. Steinmetz, in his Stob Lecture entitled “John Calvin: Reshaping Christian Tradition in Reformation Europe -- Calvin and the Impotent God,” delivered at Calvin Theological Seminary on November 4, 2009, rightly emphasizes human blindness to the continuing “theater of God’s glory” but does not take seriously enough the effect of the fall on the natural order itself. Schreiner rightly notes the effects in Theater, particularly 28-30.

43. Calvin, Commentaries on Romans, Rom. 8:19, Vol. 1, 303.

44. Calvin, Commentaries on Romans, Rom. 4:13, Vol. 1, 169.


46. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps. 96:10, Vol. 4, 57.

47. Dowey, in The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), fails to take seriously the destructive forces of the fall on the natural order itself, claiming Calvin believes “the revelation [in creation] is not harmed.” 73.


49. Calvin, Commentaries on Romans, Rom. 8:21, Vol. 1, 305.

50. Ibid.

51. Schreiner, Theater, 28-30.

52. Calvin, Commentaries on Romans, Rom. 8:20, Vol. 1, 304-305.


55. For an introductory summary to the Barth-Brunner debate, see David C. Steinmetz’s Calvin in Context, 23-25.


58. Grabill, Reformed Doctrine of Natural Law, ix.


60. Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Ps. 8:7-9, Vol. 1, 107-108.
64. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Ps. 29:5, Vol. 1, 479.

65. Schreiner emphasizes the ability of the believer to see the glory of God in the natural order (*Theater*, 113) but does not adequately address the glory of God shining forth for unbelievers to see, which Calvin addresses in Act 14 and Romans 1, as demonstrated above.


69. Ibid.
70. Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, translated by Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 76.

72. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
78. Schreiner, “Through a Mirror Dimly,” 181.
81. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 19-20.

86. Nowhere in *Natural Theology: Comprising ‘Nature and Grace’* could I find either Barth or Brunner discussing the natural order as a witness of God’s glory. Pure knowledge of God from the natural order versus natural order as shining forth God’s glory is quite different. The distinction is important.

87. It should be noted that even though Calvin’s exegesis concerning the natural order highlights the glory of creation, the effects of the fall, and the ultimate redemption of the natural order, Calvin does not systematically arrange his theology as such. Thus, when later Reformed traditions speak the theological language of “creation, fall, redemption,” they create a system in a way that Calvin never did. Nonetheless, when examining Calvin’s exegesis, we find that the three categories — however they are termed and described — are present.