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# The Ecological Crisis and the Reformed Theology of Creation: An Analysis

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This paper examines the Reformed Theology of Creation as espoused by one of the leading protestant reformers John Calvin. For Calvin, creation primarily serves as a means of God's revelation. That is, through creation the human being obtains knowledge of God and experience the goodness of God. This is so because the world of nature discloses the majesty, power, and the graciousness of God. Moreover, Calvin underscores that God nourishes and sustains both the human and nonhuman creatures through creation. In this sense, Calvin's position suggests the upholding of the integrity and well-being of creation for it to continue to serve its intended purpose as willed by God. As such, Calvin has a strong contention that God cares for all creatures. However, he failed to emphasize human responsibility towards the world of nature in ensuring that creation will continue to serve its purpose as originally intended by God.

**Keywords:** creation, creator, revelation, contemplation, knowledge, majesty, goodness.

## INTRODUCTION

The frequency of natural disasters that are taking place around the world in recent years reveals that, indeed, the entire humanity is seriously threatened by ecological crisis. Among the manifestations of ecological crisis are long droughts, devastating typhoons, and heavy rains resulting in massive

flooding. The current ecological crisis has resulted in natural disasters that have claimed human lives, livestock, and properties across the globe. Based on the Philippine experience, thousands of Filipinos have perished and millions of residents have been displaced due to massive flooding across the country in recent history.

Nevertheless, the reality of the unabated ecological deterioration that has resulted in devastating natural disasters in recent history has also generated growing concern from different individuals and institutions around the world, joining hands in addressing the problem. However, a viable solution can only be put in place when the roots of the problem have already been identified. Looking closely at the unabated global ecological deterioration, it cannot be denied that the human being has played a major role in this present phenomenon. As Indian theologian WatiLongchar points out, “Every person wants to control and manipulate the land and its resources threatening the rhythm of the universe.”<sup>[1]</sup> But it does not end there. Inasmuch as theological conviction shapes one’s practice or action,<sup>[2]</sup> it cannot be discounted that the unabated devastation of the natural world has some theological root.

Along with this, American ecofeminist advocate, Marti Kheel points to the Genesis account of creation as having a large share of guilt for what has happened to the world of nature.<sup>[3]</sup> In this account of creation, God gives the human being the privilege to have dominion over other creatures (Genesis 1:26). Indeed, critics of Christianity’s traditional creation theology like the ecofeminist advocates posit that the human attitude towards the natural world is shaped by the notion of human superiority over nonhuman creatures. There is no question that Christianity is the most influential factor in the propagation of the notion on human superiority over nature. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian tradition has provided a solid theological foundation for human domination and subjugation over nature.

Even evangelical theologians acknowledge that the Genesis account of creation has provided theological justification to human being’s domination and subjugation of nature. American eco-feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the privilege given to human being as “the

1 WatiLongchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education An Indigenous Perspective* (Tainan, Taiwan: Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia, 2013), 17.

2 Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, “Crisis, Hope and Contemporary Theology,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, eds. R. Chopp and M. L. Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 12.

3 Marti Kheel, “From Heroic to Holistic Ethics: The Ecofeminist Challenge,” in *Earth Ethics: Environmental Ethics, Animal Rights, and Practical Applications*, ed. James P. Sterba (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995), 219.

prototype of both anthropocentric and exploitative use of the animals and plants by man.”<sup>[4]</sup> Another American theologian, Daniel Migliore has similar position as he says: “The teaching that human beings alone are created in the image of God and are commanded by God to exercise ‘dominion’ over all creatures has given Western civilization religious justification for treating the natural environment in a ruthless and brutal manner.”<sup>[5]</sup>

As an ardent adherent of the Reformed faith tradition who is also deeply concerned about the unabated ecological degradation across the globe, I am particularly interested in examining the theology of creation espoused by John Calvin, one of the leading Protestant Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Calvin’s Idea of Creation as a Means of God’s Revelation**

One of the significant features of Calvin’s theology of creation is the idea that creation is a means of God’s revelation. However, getting to know the different aspects of Calvin’s idea necessitates an awareness of the circumstances behind the development of Calvin’s doctrine of creation as embodied in his monumental work, *Institutes of Christian Religion*. It is important to note that everything Calvin wrote, especially those that are embodied in the *Institutes*, had important functions for the cause of the reformation. The title itself “*Institutio* is used in the then familiar sense of instruction or education.”<sup>[6]</sup> Everything that comprised the *Institutes* including the doctrine of creation was primarily designed to provide theological instruction to the “young community of believers”<sup>[7]</sup> that had just severed its tie with the Church of Rome.

For Calvin, creation constitutes everything in the world of nature and the celestial bodies that are scattered throughout the universe.<sup>[8]</sup> Through the magnificent creation, God reveals to humanity. Inasmuch as the term revelation connotes uncovering<sup>[9]</sup> or unveiling of something<sup>[10]</sup> that is hidden,

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4 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 1992), 21.

5 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William b. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 81.

6 Bernard M G Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 155.

7 Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 65

8 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religions*, vol. I, ed. John McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 57.

9 Van A. Harvey. *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 207.

10 Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988) 585.

Calvin's idea of creation as a means of God's revelation entails that through creation human beings are given the privilege to experience God. Hence, creation discloses something about the characteristics of God and the way God relates with human and nonhuman creatures.

## CREATION IS AN AVENUE TOWARDS OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE OF GOD

As part of the *Institutio*, the primary purpose of Calvin's theology of creation was to help his readers come to the knowledge of God.<sup>[11]</sup> Even if Calvin is firm about his position that the ultimate source of the knowledge of God is the Scripture,<sup>[12]</sup> he acknowledged that the human being can obtain knowledge of God through creation as well. In his commentary to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, Calvin writes that the human being has the opportunity to gain authentic knowledge from the world of nature.<sup>[13]</sup> The human being is able to obtain knowledge through creation because creation is a means of God's revelation.<sup>[14]</sup> Obviously, Calvin recognizes a self-declaration of God in the whole created order.<sup>[15]</sup> This means the human being is given the opportunity to come to the knowledge of God through the order of nature.<sup>[16]</sup> For Calvin, human beings cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see God.<sup>[17]</sup> Hence, creation is a legitimate source of a true knowledge of God.<sup>[18]</sup> Calvin stressed that human beings have the capacity to know God because God has implanted in them a sense of divinity.<sup>[19]</sup> Whenever a person looks at the grandeur of creation, one thinks of God because the wonders of nature bring an awesome awareness of God upon the human being. In other words, creation is a credible witness of God to humanity.

In as much as everyone has a sense of divinity and the opportunity to come into contact with nature, nobody is deprived of an awareness of God. Hence, one does not need to be a learned person in order to know God. On

11 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religions*, vol. I, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John McNeil, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 35.

12 *Ibid.*, 6.

13 John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mckenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 32.

14 Calvin, *Institutes*, 52.

15 Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 41.

16 *Ibid.*, 40.

17 Calvin, *Institutes*, 52.

18 I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 49.

19 Calvin, *Institutes*, 43.

the contrary, Calvin firmly argues that “God is not known by those who propose to search him out by their proud but feeble reason.”<sup>[20]</sup> In the same vein, American theologian Langdon Gilkey argues “God is to be known, if at all, by His own self-manifestation to us within the world, not by our intellectual ascent beyond the world to Him.”<sup>[21]</sup>

Moreover, Calvin recognizes that creation plays an important role in establishing and strengthening human relationship with God. Through nature the human being is able to contemplate and commune with God. Citing Hebrews 11:3, Calvin stresses that the whole created order serves as a mirror upon which human beings can contemplate God who is otherwise invisible.<sup>[22]</sup> In line with this, Calvin enjoins his followers and readers not to rack their minds about God but rather, contemplate God in creation.<sup>[23]</sup>

In his analysis of Calvin’s thought, American Protestant theologian, I. John Hesselink underscores that Calvin’s intention in stressing creation as a means of God’s revelation was to inculcate in the consciousness of his audience that through the wonderful created order everyone can contemplate God.<sup>[24]</sup> Through serious contemplation of God in creation, the human being can feel the presence of God.<sup>[25]</sup>

John Calvin also warns his readers that their contemplation of God through creation should never be construed as an attempt to investigate and comprehend the essence of God. Calvin emphatically asserts that “we know the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.”<sup>[26]</sup> Thus, through creation, human can enter into fellowship and freely communicate with God.

The declaration of faith of the Psalmist provides biblical foundation of Calvin’s affirmation that the human being can come to know and feel the presence of God through creation: “O Lord our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens” (Psalm 8:1). This passage indicates that the Psalmist’s awareness of God’s presence in

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20 Calvin, *Institutes*, li.

21 Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), 325.

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, 52-53.

23 *Ibid.*, 61.

24 Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 8.

25 Shirley C. Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 40.

26 *Ibid.*, 62.

creation leads him into making a profound declaration of faith. In line with the Psalmist's declaration of faith, Calvin affirmed that no one has any excuse not to acknowledge the majesty, power and goodness of God.

## CREATION DISCLOSES MAJESTY, POWER, AND GOODNESS OF GOD

Calvin also affirms that creation discloses the majesty, power, and goodness of God that is discernible through the human senses. Along with this, Calvin considers violent natural phenomena like typhoons and earthquakes as manifestations of God's power: "Psalm 29 looks to this same end, where the prophet—speaking forth concerning God's awesome voice, which strikes the earth in thunder [v. 3], winds, rains, whirlwinds and tempests, causes mountains to tremble [v. 6], shatters the cedars [v. 5]—finally adds at the end that his praises are sung in the sanctuary because the unbelievers are deaf to all the voices of God that resound in the air [vs. 9-11]."<sup>[27]</sup>

For William Bousma, Professor of History at the University of California, Calvin's allusion to the passage in Psalm 29 indicates that "he was especially impressed by the most violent phenomena of nature because these best display God's power."<sup>[28]</sup> If Calvin were alive today, he might not anymore view the devastating natural disasters such as super typhoons, floods, and landslides as a display of God's power since these phenomena are largely precipitated by the massive destruction of the natural world. It is certain that like in the time of the Psalmist, Calvin had not yet witnessed the erratic movement of nature as a consequence of ecological destruction that the present generation has experienced. In all likelihood, what he had witnessed as the also Psalmist had, was the natural movement of nature which was not yet as devastating as it is today. If Calvin were alive today, he would most likely have a different view of violent and devastating natural phenomena.

Since the movement of nature such as strong winds and floods was not yet that devastating in his time, Calvin considered the display of power of nature as an affirmation that God "the creator reveals his lordship over the creation."<sup>[29]</sup> Calvin points out that the power of nature that is felt through human senses as described by the Psalmist is a concrete proof of God's power and divine

27 Calvin, *Institutes*, 73-74.

28 William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 166.

29 Calvin, *Institutes*, I 58.

majesty.<sup>[30]</sup> Calvin asserts that there is no more need of other evidence to prove the divine majesty because there are enough in the created order. Evidences is observable in the created order.<sup>[31]</sup>

The preceding statement is intended to refute those who refused to acknowledge the existence of God, particularly the Epicurean philosophers<sup>[32]</sup> who were sowing confusion among the believers. Disgusted by the posture of the Epicureans Calvin wrote: “This very confused diversity emboldened the Epicureans and other crass despisers of piety to cast out all awareness of God.”<sup>[33]</sup> Historically, the Epicureans were the followers of a philosophical school founded by Epicurus a philosopher born in 341 B.C.E.<sup>[34]</sup> “According to Epicurus, there is no need to attribute the regulation of celestial phenomena to divine beings.”<sup>[35]</sup> This position is sharply contrasted by Calvin who firmly affirms that the universe manifests the existence of God,<sup>[36]</sup> but the manifestation of God in the whole created order is being choked by the erroneous views of the Epicurean philosophers.<sup>[37]</sup> Moreover, Calvin’s affirmation that creation manifests divine majesty is also meant to persuade skeptics about the existence of God, so they will eventually join the fold of the reformed faith community.

It is worth stressing that the terms lord, power, and majesty that are used by Calvin as attributes of God that are discernible in creation are taken from the attributes of the political and ecclesial rulers as well as judicial magistrates in Europe before and during the reformation period.<sup>[38]</sup> Calvin used these terms to address King Francis I in a letter appealing for fair treatment of the followers of the reformation movement. The letter was attached as a preface<sup>[39]</sup> to the first edition of the *Institutes*, which he published in March 1536.<sup>[40]</sup> Calvin used the language, images, and metaphors that were familiar to his audience to make his message more palatable and convincing.<sup>[41]</sup> As Wendel attests, “Calvin employs to his own purpose the definition of public power accepted in Roman law.”<sup>[42]</sup>

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30 Ibid., 61.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 65.

33 Ibid.

34 V. Cauchy, “Epicureanism,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. V (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 466.

35 Ibid., 467.

36 Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 31.

37 Calvin, *Institutes*, 64.

38 John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 190.

39 Calvin, *Institutes*, 9.

40 Ibid., xxxiii.

41 Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 4.

42 Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairret (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 30.

By stressing God's power, majesty, and goodness<sup>[43]</sup> that have been disclosed in the fashioning of the universe,<sup>[44]</sup> Calvin reminded his audience that they ought to give their full allegiance to God inasmuch as they give their allegiance to the rulers of this world. This allegiance is to be expressed in a form of faithful worship. As Calvin aptly puts it, this happens "whenever each of us contemplates his own nature, that there is one God who so governs all natures that he would have us look unto him, direct our faith to him, and worship and call upon him."<sup>[45]</sup>

To those who believe in God, Calvin delivers an inspiring and faith affirming message. Calvin points out that through God's works in creation "The Lord shows in us his life, wisdom, and power; and exercises in our behalf his righteousness, goodness and mercy."<sup>[46]</sup> This faith affirming statement came as an inspiration to the followers of the reformation movement who were in distress amid persecution. The thought of John Calvin is in line with that of Augustine who stresses that behind the good creation is the goodness of God.<sup>[47]</sup> Indeed, the work of creating in itself is an act of sheer grace and goodness of God. God fashioned the universe not out of God's own whims and caprices but out of overflowing goodness and grace. Such graciousness and goodness is manifested throughout the universe.<sup>[48]</sup>

As far as Calvin is concerned, since creation and everything in it is an avenue for human beings to be aware and to experience the goodness of God, human beings are expected to return all honors and praises to God as an expression of gratitude: "Indeed, no one gives himself freely and willingly to God's service unless, having tasted his fatherly love, he is drawn to love and worship him in return."<sup>[49]</sup> For Calvin one of the expressions of giving honor to God is the offering of praises. Since all human beings are recipients of God's goodness and love, Calvin emphasizes that they ought to have acknowledged those benefits through faith and reverence. Pity and reverence are joined with love of God that is induced by the knowledge of God's benefits.<sup>[50]</sup>

Driven by faith, a person who is fully aware of the goodness of God cannot fail to praise God. This is also consistent with the conviction of Augustine who declares that "it dawns and breaks into morning when the creature is drawn

43 Calvin, *Institutes*, I, 66

44 *Ibid.*, 67.

45 *Ibid.*, 58.

46 *Ibid.*, 63.

47 Schaff, Philip, ed., "St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 217.

48 Calvin, *Institutes*, 67.

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, 55.

50 *Ibid.*, 41.

to the praise and love of the Creator; and night never falls when the Creator is not forsaken through love of the creature.”<sup>[51]</sup> In Calvin’s observation, God has been defrauded the praises due to God.<sup>[52]</sup> Calvin once again chides the Epicureans because of their too much reliance on human faculties.<sup>[53]</sup> For Calvin, the refusal of his enemies to give glory and honor to God despite God’s goodness that is conspicuously made manifest in the whole creation is a blatant act of ingratitude:

Here, however, the foul ungratefulness of men is disclosed. They have within themselves a workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works and, at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches. They ought, then, to break forth into praise of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride.<sup>[54]</sup>

For Calvin, the Epicurean philosophers are persons of ingratitude par excellence. At the same time, Calvin also tries to persuade the nobility and rulers of his days in France to discern the glory and goodness of God towards humanity as disclosed in creation and in turn give honor and praise to God. With some allusion to the passage in Psalm 8:1 and 3, Calvin stresses that “David, when he has briefly praised the admirable name and glory of God, which shines everywhere, immediately exclaims: ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?’ (Psalm 8:4 NRSV).”<sup>[55]</sup> Even if it is an anthropocentric statement that excludes nonhuman creatures in the care and love of God, it is nevertheless a profound affirmation of faith. Certainly, God is mindful of human and nonhuman creatures because God is good and gracious. Based on Psalmist affirmation on creation as a sign of God’s goodness towards humanity, Calvin affirms that God nourishes and sustains humans and nonhuman creatures alike through creation.

## **GOD SUSTAINS AND NOURISHES HUMAN AND NONHUMAN CREATURES THROUGH CREATION**

As Calvin reflects on the goodness of God that is made manifest in creation, he comes into a deep realization that apart from creation, human being

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51 Schaff, “St. Augustine,” 209.

52 Calvin, *Institutes*, 57.

53 *Ibid.*, 56.

54 *Ibid.*, 55.

55 *Ibid.*, 54-55.

cannot live. Human life comes from God because it is the very breath of God (Gen. 2:7), but the sustenance of the God given life is heavily dependent upon creation. God, the giver of life, sustains and nourishes the recipient of God's precious gift through nature. Creation shows how much God loves and cares for human beings. Hence, creation is the most essential factor for the continuance of human and nonhuman lives.

In Calvin's thought, everything in creation is designed by God for the benefit of human being. Alluding to the creation story in Genesis, Calvin has a firm conviction in the idea that creation exists primarily if not solely for the sake of human being:<sup>[56]</sup> "We ought in the very order of things diligently to contemplate God's fatherly love toward mankind, in that he did not create Adam until he had lavished upon the universe all manner of good things."<sup>[57]</sup> This firm assertion of Calvin is apparently made to assure his followers that amid difficulties, God cares for them.<sup>[58]</sup> He offers his faithful followers some word of comfort and assurance that God will continue to pour upon them God's benefits.<sup>[59]</sup>

Calvin's claim that God did not create Adam until God had prepared everything that human being needs is based on the writer's portrayal of the human being as the last to be created. However it does not follow that all other creatures that were created by God prior to the creation of human being were solely intended for the sake of the human being. Every creature has an inherent value in itself having been created out of God's overflowing goodness. As the narrative shows, God takes delight in everything that God has created. Every creature is valuable to God. Out of the same goodness and love for existence, God created the human being when the basic needs were already available in creation. Otherwise, human beings cannot live because human existence is utterly dependent upon nature. Creating the human being with nothing to live on is a negation of the goodness of God.

Although human welfare dominates in Calvin's thought, he nevertheless acknowledges that God is also concerned for nonhuman creatures. Calvin declares that God "sustains, nourishes, and care for, everything he has made, even to the least sparrow (cf. Matt. 10:29)."<sup>[60]</sup> This statement is an affirmation that God indeed continues to provide the basic needs such as food to all

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56 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 63.

57 Calvin, *Institutes*, 162.

58 Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 71.

59 Jones, *Calvin Rhetoric*, 155.

60 Calvin, *Institutes*, 197-198.

forms of creatures.<sup>[61]</sup> It is also an assertion that every creature is being cared for and sustained by God.<sup>[62]</sup> Furthermore, the position of Calvin regarding God's care for all creatures through creation has some parallelism with the claim of Indian Jesuit Samuel Rayan that the earth itself is God's provision for the entire household of God on this planet.<sup>[63]</sup> Daniel Migliore, on his part, affirms that God's continuing care for all creatures is attested in several passages of the Bible (e.g. Ps. 104:27-30) such as the affirmation of Jesus that God sends rain on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45), feeds the birds of the air, and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:26-30).<sup>[64]</sup>

For better understanding of Calvin's theology of creation, it is important to know his context and theological methodology. It is good to be familiar with Calvin's methodology and historical context since these factors shape every theologian's point of view.<sup>[65]</sup>

### Calvin's Context and Sources of his Theological Work

It is significant to stress that almost always every theological articulation is done to answer or deal with an issue that has direct bearing on the life of the faith community. John Calvin developed or formulated his theology of creation as part of his overall doctrinal writings that were designed to give shape to the theological identity of the newly formed Christian community.<sup>[66]</sup> He wanted to show to the Christian world that the faith affirmation of the new community of believers was rooted in the oldest and most fundamental faith confession of the church of Jesus Christ—the Apostle's Creed.<sup>[67]</sup> Calvin had to deal with the doctrine of creation in his writings because it is one of the fundamental concepts of Christian thought that always appears in every period of Christian history and therefore needs fresh interpretation from the point of view of Christian theology.<sup>[68]</sup> By stressing creation as a means of God's revelation, Calvin summarized the most fundamental faith affirmation of the Christian Church. Calvin had virtually laid down the foundation of the

61 Julian Hartt, "Creation and Providence," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 143.

62 Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thoughts*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 178.

63 Samuel Rayan, S.J. "The Earth is the Lord's," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 141.

64 Migliore, *Faith Seeking*, 100.

65 Werner G. Jeanrond, "Theological Method" in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, eds. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 480-81.

66 Jones, *Calvin Rhetoric*, 65.

67 Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1962), 1.

68 Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), 41.

Protestant faith affirmation that knowledge of God is a revealed knowledge. There is no true knowledge of God apart from revelation as it is “the original and determining source of our knowledge of God.”<sup>[69]</sup>

Calvin acknowledges church tradition as an important source of theologizing. However, the essential source of his theological endeavor is the Bible. Calvin affirms that the Scripture is an important guide and teacher for anyone who comes to God the Creator.<sup>[70]</sup> Every aspect of Calvin’s notion of creation as a means of God’s revelation shows that his thought is solidly grounded in the witness of the Scripture. Calvinist French theologian, Francois Wendel attests that as a scholar Calvin made an extensive study of the entire Bible and because of this, he had a more remarkable knowledge than any other reformers, about the Old Testament.<sup>[71]</sup>

Calvin’s writings had to be founded upon solid ground since his theology was addressed to different interest groups of readers, many of whom were foes rather than friends, and skeptics rather than believers.<sup>[72]</sup> Calvin was not only primarily writing for the sake of scholarly exercise but also to strengthen the faith of his followers and to win more adherents and sympathizers to the reformation movement.

Aside from providing doctrinal instruction and guidance for the adherents of the Reformed faith, Calvin’s idea of creation has had significant cultural and political implications. It must be noted that in the decade (i.e. 1523-1533)<sup>[73]</sup> when he was writing the *Institutes*, Calvin witnessed the persecution and martyrdom of the followers of the Reformation in France.<sup>[74]</sup> A portion of Calvin’s letter to King Francis I of France gives a glimpse of the harsh persecution of the followers of the reformation in France.

For this reason, most invincible King, I not unjustly ask you to undertake a full inquiry into this case, which until now has been handled—we may even say, tossed about—with no order of law and with violent heat rather than judicial gravity...For ungodly men have so far prevailed that Christ’s truth, even if it is not driven away scattered and destroyed, still lies hidden, buried and inglorious. The poor little church has either been wasted with cruel slaughter

69 Ibid., 328.

70 Calvin, *Institutes*, 69.

71 Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963), 123.

72 Ibid., 189.

73 Calvin, *Institutes*, xxx.

74 Ibid., xxxii.

or banished into exile, or so overwhelmed by threats and fears that it dare not even open its mouth.<sup>[75]</sup>

Because of the intricacies of the European socio-cultural landscape during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century reformation, every aspect of Calvin's idea of creation as a means of God's revelation has had multiple functions. He had to carefully deal with his audience that was made up of different interest groups that included the kings, nobles, intellectuals, Roman Catholics, apologists, and Calvin's own students and colleagues.<sup>[76]</sup> Hence, every aspect of Calvin's theology of creation dealt with the socio-political, cultural and theological issues that had bearing on the reformation movement.

For the guidance of contemporary adherents of the Calvinist Tradition for their faith and practice in the face of unabated ecological deterioration, it is necessary to reassess and then re-appropriate his theology of creation.

### **Calvin's Theology of Creation and the Current Ecological Crisis**

Calvin's idea of creation as a means of God's revelation has had significant role for the advancement of the cause of the reformation. Through his broad knowledge of the Christian classics and profound theological thought, Calvin was able to lay down the foundation of the reformed faith which is rooted in the witness of scriptures and church's tradition. However, he failed to give as much due importance to other creatures as he did to human beings. In Calvin's idea of creation as a means of God's revelation, the natural world is not the center of attention. In the observation of American Protestant Larry Rasmussen, Calvin's preoccupation is on the knowledge of God and of self, pushing aside the consideration of the world of nature.<sup>[77]</sup> Apparently, Calvin's main concern was the strengthening of relationship between God and human beings<sup>[78]</sup> leaving the natural world at the background. In his analysis of Calvin's thought, American theologian, David Kinsley concluded that for Calvin, nature is a subsidiary and a background to the significant drama of human salvation.<sup>[79]</sup> Calvin's position is reiterated by Karl Barth

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75 Ibid., 11.

76 Jones, *Calvin Rhetoric*, 5.

77 Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (New York: ORBIS BOOKS, 1998), 190.

78 David Kinsley, "Christianity as Ecologically Harmful," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996), 112.

79 Ibid.

who views creation as the “stage for the story of the covenant of grace.”<sup>[80]</sup> For Calvin and Barth the significance of creation lies heavily on its role as the stage of the drama of God and human encounter.

It must be noted, however, that because Calvin’s main concern when he crafted his theology of creation was on how the human being could obtain knowledge of God through nature. Inasmuch as ecological deterioration was not yet an issue during his time, he did not put emphasis on human being’s responsibility of taking care of the world of nature. As such, it is now the responsibility of the contemporary Calvinist theologians to reinterpret and re-appropriate his thought for it to be relevant to our time and to generate genuine concern for creation from the adherents of the Calvinist tradition.

The case in point here is how to make John Calvin’s theology of creation relevant to the present ecological context. As mentioned above, Calvin convincingly emphasizes that creation is a means of God’s revelation through which human beings would come to the knowledge of God whose goodness, whose love, and whose care for humanity and all other creatures are concretely expressed through the things God has made. Sadly, in the face of the present ecological situation, to a large extent, the world of nature has virtually caused so much terrifying and deadly natural disasters. Unfortunately, due to the frequent horrible natural disasters that have victimized millions of people across the globe, instead of appreciating the goodness and mercy of God, the people have been led into questioning the very existence of God. Instead of seeing a gracious and loving God, many of our people saw the image of a God that is predominantly punitive and full of wrath in the face of the devastating and deadly natural disasters that they have been through.<sup>[81]</sup>

Virtually, the present images of destruction and deaths are the exact negation to the claim of Calvin in his theology of creation. However, this writer contends that the spirit of Calvin’s theological thought remains valid and relevant only that it needs re-appropriation by emphasizing what he failed to stress when he crafted his theology. Yes, creation remains a means of God’s revelation; it continues to be a legitimate source of the knowledge of God. It is the only means by which God nourishes and sustains humans and nonhuman creatures alike. However, the validity and integrity of this claim

80 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III “The Doctrine of Creation,” part I, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. CLARK, 1958), 44.

81 Noriel C. Capulong, “*Understanding Calamities from a Biblical-Theological Perspective*,” a Biblico-Theological Reflection delivered during a theological consultation on Calamities and Natural Disasters held on March 19, 2014 at Silliman University.

would be suspect, should the present state of affairs in the world of nature continue.

By looking at the current state of our Mother Earth, one would realize that John Calvin's claim that creation is the source of nourishment and sustenance of all life forms has been weakened. Presumably, unlike during the time of Calvin, the capacity of our Mother Earth to nourish and sustain the humans has seriously deteriorated. This current sorry situation of our Mother Earth has happened because the means that we her children, use in drawing out their basic needs from her body are destructive. Before the dawn of scientific and technological advancements, the effect of human exploitation of nature was not yet as extensive it is today. A basic example is in the practice of agriculture.

The history of human civilization reveals that during the ancient time circa 12,000 to 10,000 years ago, the tiny human population of the Planet Earth survived through hunting of animals and gathering of wild plants as the main source of food.<sup>[82]</sup> During this period, the basic need of the people, especially food, was directly provided for by nature. However, in the course of time, hunting and gathering had no longer been the main economic activity of the people. By the turn of the Neolithic period<sup>[83]</sup> or New Stone Age about 8,000 to 10,000 years ago,<sup>[84]</sup> a shift from hunting and gathering to food production took place.<sup>[85]</sup> So, it was during the Neolithic period that the primitive people embarked on agriculture.<sup>[86]</sup> But even then, for quite a long period of time under agricultural food production system, there was some degree of harmonious relationship between nature and individuals of the peasant community. To give an overview of this relatively good relationship between humans and nature, Carolyn Merchant writes:

Evolved over centuries of adaptation to productive capabilities of the natural environment on the one hand and the state of agricultural technology on the other, the peasant community produced a level of subsistence by following traditional patterns of cooperation upheld by the powerful cultural norms. In the early medieval period, these practices and norms tended to result

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82 Gordon W. Hewes, "History of Agriculture," in *Encyclopedia Americana*. International Edition, vol. I, eds. Patricia Bayer et al. 353-357 (Hanbury, Connecticut: Grolier Incorporated, 1997), 353.

83 Ibid.

84 William H. Neill, *History of Civilization: A Hand Book*, sixth edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4.

85 Hewes, "History of Agriculture," 353.

86 Ibid.

in relatively high crop productivity combined with maintenance of soil fertility. The use of plow agriculture integrated crop planting with raising of cows, pigs, and horses. In some areas, this interdependent animal and crop system incorporated the practice of carrying eroded soil back up the slopes to restore washed-out ground.<sup>[87]</sup>

It cannot be denied that agricultural activity is one form of exploitation of nature. In spite of this, the ancient method of agriculture did not make much devastating effect upon the natural world. Lynn White gives one example as to how the farmers in ancient time plowed their fields: “Early plows, drawn by two oxen, did not normally turn the sod but merely scratch it.”<sup>[88]</sup> Obviously, this mode of tilling the land would not make much problem about soil erosion since it would just scratch the surface of the ground, and it would just utilize a limited piece of land. However, this is already a thing of the past since by the advent of science and technology, farm implements had become more sophisticated, and in this case, this has consequently made the destruction more extensive. As what can be seen today in most agricultural areas, carabaos and cows being used in the plowing of the fields are much lesser. The traditional and nature-friendly mode of production in the farm has been replaced with engine-propelled technology which is more destructive. The power machine could till wide track of lands.<sup>[89]</sup> Along this line, American monk Thomas Berry laments on the impact of Industrial Revolution upon the natural world.<sup>[90]</sup> He acknowledges that while human beings have already started damaging the earth since the beginning of the agricultural civilization, it was yet at a manageable level compared to our time:<sup>[91]</sup>

In our times, however, human cunning has mastered the deep mysteries of the earth at a level far beyond the capacities of earlier peoples. We can break the mountains apart; we can drain the rivers and flood the valleys. We can turn the most luxuriant forests into throwaway paper products. We can tear apart the great grass cover of the western plains and pour toxic chemicals into the soil and pesticides onto the fields until the soil is dead and blows away in the wind. We

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87 Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 44.

88 Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” in *Environmental Ethics: Concepts, Policy, Theory*, ed. Joseph Des Jardins (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), 49.

89 Ibid.

90 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1998), 7.

91 Ibid.

can pollute the air with acids, the rivers with sewage, the seas with oil—all this in a kind of intoxication with our power for devastation at an order of magnitude beyond reckoning.<sup>[92]</sup>

As a consequence of the extensive exploitation of our Mother Earth aggravated by the use of toxic chemicals, millions of peoples around the world are suffering from hunger, ill health, and malnutrition. The severe international problem of hunger and malnutrition is caused by confluence of interrelated issues of socio-political injustice, economics, and ecological deterioration. The problem of hunger and malnutrition are among the manifestations that indeed our Mother Earth is seriously ill. Even the hardworking farmers are no longer capable of providing food to their families because the yields of their farms have seriously dwindled. This scenario happens because the land has lost its fertility and is poisoned and devastated. Every person, regardless of status in society, ought to be concerned about the deteriorating condition of beloved Mother because all life forms are utterly dependent upon her. Hence, the nourishing and sustaining capability of Mother Earth ought to be restored for the sake of humanity especially the less privileged in society.

### **Toward a Reaffirmation of Calvin's Theology of Creation**

In the face of the deteriorating condition of our Mother Earth, John Calvin's theology of creation needs more deliberate reaffirmation that could be translated into concrete actions. In so doing, it is also important to do some re-appropriation and re-interpretation of his thoughts knowing the fact that our ecological context is considerably different from that of Calvin. Along with this, Muriel Montenegro of Silliman University Divinity School asserts that "theology is a timely reflection of the meaning of the gospel in a particular space and time."<sup>[93]</sup>

To make the people feel the presence of a majestic, loving, and caring rather than a punitive God, the beauty and grandeur of creation ought to be ensured. That is, whatever is left amid devastation should be preserved and protected. Whatever has been destroyed will have to be restored. This is indeed a missiological challenge to all believers particularly the adherents of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, *Christology in Situation of Calamities/Disasters and Suffering*, a lecture delivered during a theological consultation on Calamities and Natural Disasters held on March 19, 2014 at Silliman University.

the Calvinist tradition to be more deliberate in their proclamation and action towards restoration of the devastated creation.

For the people, especially the less fortunate in society, in order to have a concrete experience of God's nourishing and sustaining concern for them, all activities that are harmful to creation or Mother Earth for that matter will have to come to an end. That is, friendlier and less harmful activities towards the world of nature by which people's lives are sustained and nourished will have to be deliberately reclaimed and re-introduced.

## RECLAIMING AND PROMOTING SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE

In view of the fact that chemically based farming method threatens all life forms in the bosom of Mother Earth, it is incumbent upon all stakeholders—farmers and consumers alike—to reclaim, promote, and support life-enhancing agriculture. Farmers ought to look back and identify forms of proven and tested farming techniques used by their forebears in promoting the well-being of Mother Earth and all natural life forms. Contemporary farmers ought to rediscover certain aspects of old techniques of farming<sup>[94]</sup> that were practiced by ancient farmers. Some aspects of the old farming method can be combined with modern techniques that are ecologically affirming. This agricultural method is popularly known as organic farming.<sup>[95]</sup> Organic farming is a method that grows plants without applying synthetic fertilizers and chemicals. Aside from relying on natural soil fertility, it also applies organic fertilizers that are derived from animal wastes, decomposed plants, and other natural biodegradable materials.

Since the practice of modern agriculture has become customary to most farmers, they have to be made aware of its advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis organic farming:

Modern agriculture is characterized by extensive, large-scale monoculture, and depends on high chemical inputs and intensive mechanization. Although productive as defined by the one-dimensional measure of a single crop, its over-reliance on chemical pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers comes with a string of negative impacts on health and the environment: health risks

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94 Radford-Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 259.

95 Ibid.

to farm workers, harmful chemical residues on food, reduced biodiversity, deterioration of soil and water quality, and increased risks of crop disease.

On the other hand, organic farming is characterized by ecologically sound practices:

Organic farming largely excludes synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. Instead, it is an ecosystem approach that manages ecological and biological processes, such as food web relations, nutrient cycling, maintaining soil fertility, natural pest control and diversifying crops and livestock. It relies on locally or farm-derived renewable resources, while remaining environmentally and ecologically viable.<sup>[96]</sup>

Modern agriculture is basically driven by a strong desire for huge profit and accumulation of more wealth at the expense of the well-being of nature and human beings. Modern agriculture does not benefit the ordinary farmers; it only serves the interest of multinational corporations that manufacture chemicals and agricultural machineries, and of those that have the power and money to acquire and control huge tracts of land by all means. In short, this is a greed-driven method of farming.

Contrary to modern agriculture that is characterized by monoculture, organic agriculture deliberately observes intercropping to maintain the balance of insect populations and soil nutrients.<sup>[97]</sup> Practicing farmers in organic agriculture have reported that consistent use of this farming technique has resulted in healthier soil and good harvests.<sup>[98]</sup> Moreover, organic farming does not only offer bright promise for the restoration of soil fertility, but it also promotes good health for the people who consume organically grown agricultural products.<sup>[99]</sup> In the face of the reality of massive ecological destruction, organic farming brings the promise of healing to Mother Earth. Gradually, organic farming is a practice that recaptures the emphasis of John Calvin since it will restore the nourishing and sustaining capability of

96 *The Case for A GM-Free Sustainable World*, 53-54.

97 Clayton Brascoupe, "Reflections of a Native American Farmer," in *People's Ecology: Explorations in Sustainable Living*, ed. Gregory Cajete, 151-174 (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1999) 162.

98 "Weeds Your Way" – Organic Farmers Share Secrets of Herbicide-Free Farming accessed June 25, 2015 <http://ofrf.org/>

99 "Organic farming: The future of Philippine agriculture" accessed June 25, 2015 <http://www.fareasternagriculture.com/crops/agriculture/organic-farming-the-future-of-philippine-agriculture>

our Mother Earth by improving soil fertility, promoting biodiversity and decreasing soil, water, and air pollution.

Since organic agriculture is still in its introductory stage for the present generation of farmers, farmers have some reservation about organic agriculture because of the observation that it has lower yields compared to modern farming methods. In some instance, organic farming may have lesser yields compared to modern farming, but if one is to consider the overall monetary costs involving the two methods, the latter entails much larger investment.

On top of the issue of farm yields, the paramount concern that everybody must bear in mind is the ecological cost that all humankind pays for the continuance of modern farming method. It must be stressed that the apprehension about lesser yields in organic farming does not stand on solid ground. A study conducted by the London-based Independent Science Panel has documented outstanding successes of farmers that practice organic agriculture in developing countries. The farmers have experienced significant increase in their food production through organic agriculture:

The success of sustainable agriculture has been concretely demonstrated in a review of 208 projects and initiatives from 52 countries. Some 8.98 million farmers have adopted sustainable agriculture practices on 28.92 million hectares in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Reliable data on yield changes in 89 projects show that farmers have achieved substantial increases in food production per hectare, about 50-100% for rain fed crops, though considerable greater in a few cases, and 5-10% for irrigated crops (though generally starting from a higher absolute yield base). These projects included both certified and non-certified organic systems, and integrated as well as near-organic systems. In all cases where all data were available, there were increase in per hectare productivity for food crops and maintenance of existing yields for fibre.<sup>[100]</sup>

There are indeed compelling reasons to encourage the farmers to practice organic farming and abandon destructive conventional farming. This can be done through massive education and awareness campaign to help the farmers realize that organic farming is their viable share in bringing healing upon the wounded Mother Earth. Moreover, organic farming is a concrete manifestation

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100 Ibid, 57.

of repentance on the part of the farmers for their sin of commission against Mother Earth and God. By practicing organic farming, the farmers become God's partners in the process of redeeming creation from total collapse. Organic farming will also revitalize creation as the source of sustenance and nourishment for the human beings as claimed by John Calvin.

In addition, organic farming does not only lead to the restoration of the soil fertility and biodiversity; it will also enhance good health of human beings. Through organic farming, the farmers are able to produce organic and toxin-free food supplies that are available for human beings to consume. The organically produced food supplies will improve the health of the consumers because these are free from pesticide residue. Thus, aside from promoting organic farming among small farmers, it is also equally important to encourage people to eat healthy, organic, unprocessed food and to patronize organically grown farm products. The consumers need to realize that by eating organic food, they are demonstrating their opposition to the use of synthetic and chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides and their support to organic farming.<sup>[101]</sup>

Organic agriculture promotes the health and well-being of the Earth, human beings, and all life forms that are heavily dependent upon nature for survival. It is a farming method that promotes subsistence agriculture. I call organic farming method as subsistence agriculture because its concern is the production of healthy food supplies directly from the farm for human consumption. Our ancestors practiced subsistence agriculture. Because of this agricultural practice, the natural world and its dependent organisms have been well for centuries until the introduction of modern agriculture. The concern of subsistence agriculture is to ensure that fresh and healthy food is available on every table of every family. It is not concerned with profit and accumulation of wealth; rather it focuses on human survival and the promotion of biodiversity in the ecosystem.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, John Calvin has a very profound theological formulation on creation. Notably, however, reading Calvin's theology of creation from the vantage point of the current ecological crisis, one would vividly notice that he fails to emphasize human being's responsibility of caring and upholding the integrity of creation. However, it has to be noted that Calvin's theology of creation was heavily shaped

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101 Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 162.

by his own socio-cultural and historical context. After about five centuries since the formulation of his theology of creation, it has been found that his thought is wanting. The challenge for the contemporary Reformed Theologians therefore is to do a re-articulation of Calvin's thought in order to produce a contemporary model of Reformed theology of creation that is relevant and responsive to the sad state of the natural world. Indeed, every generation of theologians must write its own theology for its own time and place.<sup>[102]</sup> Since the situation of the Reformed Protestants has changed, there is also a call for some doctrinal change. However, any doctrinal change ought to also demonstrate some mark of continuity with the Reformed tradition.<sup>[103]</sup>

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102 John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 109.

103 Ibid.

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