

## Is There a Reformed Aesthetic?

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One settled opinion widely held about the Reformed tradition is that, whatever else it might have contributed to politics or economics, it has had relatively little influence on the arts. Certainly little influence is seen in the visual arts, but there is a broader assumption abroad that this tradition frowns on anything that is fun. At a wedding a while ago a woman, when she heard I was a Presbyterian Minister, said: “How can that be I saw you laugh!” So my address on art and aesthetics might risk being very short, like the chapter on snakes Dr. Samuel Johnson claimed to have seen in a natural history of Iceland: “There are no snakes to be found anywhere on the island”.

### Calvin and the Origin of the Reformed Tradition

Here then I want to contest this view and try to track down some snakes—or rather to open some windows which look out onto worlds that we may not remember but that still influence us. And I want to begin at the beginning, with John Calvin (1509-1564) **IMAGE**. When Calvin arrived in Geneva 1536, in many ways, the Reformation was already established: the mass had been abolished, the monasteries were closed, and images were gone from the churches. I don’t think we can imagine how sweeping these changes were. In a single generation the imaginative world of medieval Christians was gone; what was still unclear was what was going to replace this world. This is the work that Calvin undertook. The first edition of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

had already appeared before he arrived (and barely 3 years after his conversion), and a much enlarged edition appeared in 1539. Its central purpose Calvin insisted was to convey the knowledge of God and of ourselves. In a sense this purpose structures both this work and Calvin's theology as a whole—and it is likely Calvin thought of the *Institutes* as suggesting a kind of spiritual architecture for a new way of imagining the world—'plan' and 'order' are prominent terms. God's goodness and glory are readily to be seen in the created order and in humanity itself, though apart from God's intervention in Scripture and Christ, human eyes are blind to this splendor. Let me speak briefly about these two poles: the glory and the blindness.

God's glory in creation: and our human blindness

Calvin is the theologian of creation, which he called the "theatre" for God's glory (1). At the very beginning of the *Institutes* he extolls the beauty of God's work in creation:

Wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some spark of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of his glory (I, v. 1).

He goes on to detail the many aspects of the way the "Lord has furnished every man with abundant proofs of his wisdom". Whenever he discusses the use of art, it is to creation that he draws attention—let creation be your teacher, he says. Because everyone has already within them a spark of divinity, looking at this majesty everyone should be

moved to seek after God. But, alas, the ingratitude of people is such that instead of breaking into praise they are swelled with pride at their own abilities. They are blind to the mercy and wisdom of God that is spread throughout creation and, instead, fashion from this magnificence idols which lead away from God. Humans cannot see their way to God clearly in creation. In fact, Calvin says, “No one can descend into himself, and seriously consider what he is with out feeling God’s wrath and hostility toward him. Accordingly, he must anxiously seek ways and means to appease God” (II, xvi, 1). For this God provides a solution, in the savior who is Christ. Though the whole of Christ’s life is important, the climax of his life, and of this theatre, comes at the cross. And all of this is laid out in the Scripture which God provides as an aid to our blindness.

So while Calvin believed that one can see much about creation, one cannot be led to know God as creator, or indeed appreciate the full splendor of creation, apart from Scripture (2). The problem lies not with creation, but with the human incapacity to know God truly apart from Scripture. Calvin calls these our glasses which allow us to read creation: “Scripture gathering together the impressions of Deity, which till then, lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness” (I, vi, 1). God then gives this great gift of Scripture and the knowledge it contains of God as not only creator but redeemer, so that by the Spirit one can have eyes to see truly the beauty of creation.

For Calvin then the teaching contained in Scripture is meant to replace all the images of the medieval church. As he says: “In the preaching of his Word and sacred mysteries [God] has bidden that a common doctrine be set forth for all. But those whose eyes rove about in contemplating idols betray that their minds are not diligently intent upon this doctrine” (I, xi, 7). Now notice that Calvin is not simply replacing images with

words, as is often said. He is saying something even more far-reaching: there is a higher way of comprehending than that provoked by visual sight, and that is a grasping of the preached word by faith. This issues in a new and higher form of perception that Calvin often describes using metaphors of sight.

Note carefully what Calvin is doing here. On the one hand Calvin's Reformation represents a radical cultural break with all that had been taken for granted. Now there are no longer altarpieces that call believers to prayer, no images of saints, no processions or novenas— which were aesthetic as well as religious sites— by which believers connect with God. These Calvin felt were idolatrous attempts to capture God. But now believers can see the whole of life as an arena for God's presence **(3)**.

My purpose today will be largely positive—I want to celebrate all that was gained by this revolution—specifically its influence on literature, drama, architecture, visual art and music. But I want also to signal the irony that lies behind my celebration—an irony which might well be the subject of an entirely different lecture! While the Reformation impacted much later literature and drama, a classical world of literature was essentially eclipsed, and medieval mystery plays were forbidden; while eventually the Reformation had substantial influence on visual art in Holland, artists were mostly out of work in Geneva, and the rich tradition of medieval altar pieces and devotional images was displaced, and often literally destroyed, and Reformed churches became known for their barren walls; while Geneva was to begin a new tradition of music in the Church, Calvin was firmly set against the development of renaissance polyphony as distracting from a focus on the Scriptural word. And so on. In that other lecture I would pose the question of whether the gains had necessarily to be at the cost of all that was suppressed and lost. We

who appreciate all that Calvin accomplished tend sometimes to overlook the significance of this disruption: A medieval world was swept away, community structures and their visual facades were dismantled, families were torn apart, often violently.

But I will focus on the positive sense that Calvin is redefining what counts as religious (**IMAGE**). While God's presence is made available through the preached word, in another sense God's presence has been *displaced* from these specific religious sites—images, altarpieces and so on, so that it can be seen in the whole of creation. This was to have profound impact in how believers thought about themselves and their relation both to God and the world, and it would have enormous consequence for how one thought about art and aesthetics. Previously believers sought out special times and places where God's power, and even salvation, were to be found. Now believers are not directed to particular images or places, but having their eyes opened by faith they are directed to see the world and their lives as potential material for God's saving activity—and as aesthetic material. Erwin Panofsky makes the illuminating distinction between Ignatian “ecstasy” and protestant “absorption”.<sup>1</sup> That is Ignatian spirituality directs believers' meditation on the events of the life of Christ to identify themselves, ecstatically, with these events—as though they were there. Protestants who follow Calvin, by contrast, will imagine themselves as players in the theater of creation, to see themselves, in other words, as being “absorbed” by and into the redemptive story that God is directing.

A good example is seen in Calvin's treatment of the cross. Unlike Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, in the *Institutes* the treatment of the cross as an historical event is limited to little over a single page (II, xvi, 6). But later Calvin proceeds in a long ten

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<sup>1</sup> “Comments on Art and Reformation” in *Symbols in Transformation*, p. 14.

page section to describe how our lives should take on the character of the cross (III, viii, 1-11). Each must bear his own cross; it teaches us patience and obedience; it chastises us; it teaches us to rest on God alone. And so on. Here then is one critical component of a protestant imagination. For followers of Calvin it is not in the contemplation of an image, nor in an Ignatian meditation on the events of Christ's life, that spiritual nurture and godliness are to be found. These spiritual benefits are sought as believers live out—re-enact by the power of the Spirit—this life-giving cross in their everyday life.

Before turning to speak about particular influences on art, let me try to sum up what became characteristic of the Protestant or Reformed imagination. First there is a strong element of **iconoclasm (IMAGE 1)** in Calvin's references to images and medieval practices. There had been a growing sense—among Catholics as well as Reformed—that liturgical practices and the proliferation of images and altarpieces needed to be cleansed of the growing superstitions that attended their use. For Calvin, unlike Luther for example, reform entailed their removal. To Calvin's mind these medieval practices had become so entangled with idolatry and indulgences, that they had to be abolished, at least temporarily.

Secondly the transformation Calvin brought about represented a **turn inward (2)**. Recent scholarship has emphasized how Calvin (and his followers) encouraged a rich mental picturing of biblical truth and God's presence. As nearly as I can tell this was the time when closing one's eyes in prayer became common among believers. William Perkins writing near the end of the century gives an influential example of this inward turn. In his famous work *A Reformed Catholike: Or, a Declaration shewing how neere we may come to the present church of Rome in sundrie points of religion and wherein we*

*must forever depart.*<sup>2</sup> Perkins writes what would have passed for ecumenical discussion in the late sixteenth century. When he turns to images, he acknowledges the civil use (in buildings and on coins) and even the private use to which images may rightly be put. He reiterates Calvin's point: "We hold the historical use of images to be good and lawful therefore and that is to represent to the eye the acts of histories, whether they be human or divine: and thus we thinke the histories of the Bible may be painted in private places"(172). The true pattern of virtue however, he insists, comes not by an artist but by the word of God. This pattern, Perkins claims, is what provides us with the "real presence of Christ": When the word comes to the ear "the thing signified comes to the mind; and thus by relation the word and the thing spoken of, are both present together."<sup>3</sup> But note it is to our mind that these things become present: As he says, "It is not meet that a christian should be occupied by the eyes, but the meditation of the mind." (Is this the source for modern development of the imagination, which is usually traced to Descartes?).

Thirdly Calvin introduced a strong sense of obligation **to order or reorder the world (3)**: to seek a holy and just structure in which the world may become a "restored Eden"—an idea that came to have a large influence on protestant architects in the later 16<sup>th</sup> century. The calling of Christians is not to devotional practices within the church—Calvin famously called for the Church to be locked outside of hours of worship, but to live out the faith in their homes, businesses and communities. In one sense, if sacred space was denied within the sanctuary of the church, it was because the sacred was meant to shed its glow over the whole of life.

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<sup>2</sup> Lohn Legat: Printer to the University of Cambridge, 1598. Pages in text.

<sup>3</sup> P. 185. Perkins goes on to say that when we take it the body and blood of Christ are both present "to our mind." Next quote is from p. 177.

So Calvin called believers to imagine another world in the preaching of the biblical word, but then to seek to realize this in their everyday lives. The visual then is not missing so much as displaced. These developments support David Freedberg's argument that the impulse to image the world in figures cannot be suppressed.<sup>4</sup> Reformed believers came to reject some ways of giving shape to the world. But the impact both of the preaching of the Reformers and their own study of Scripture led them to ways of thinking about and shaping the world that were to have a profound cultural influence. Indeed one might argue, since imagining is natural to us, religious traditions will invariably have an influence on the arts that are produced. In the following century music and literature in particular were to be transformed by this tradition, especially by its architectural and what might be called its documentary character. But this influence would also give the world a characteristic visual shape as well, one that would reflect the inwardness and simplicity of biblical faith. Let me turn now to some specific examples of the influence of this tradition.

### Drama **IMAGE**

In Greek drama story tellers look down from above on the drama they are portraying. For the Gospel writers "the story becomes visually concrete. And the story speaks to everybody; everybody is urged and indeed required to take sides for or against it."

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 48.

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<sup>4</sup> The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 55.



Drama in the Middle Ages was centered in the liturgy of the mass, and the mystery plays that grew out of this (**Image**). When the reformers suppressed the Mass and medieval plays,<sup>5</sup> they were certainly not taking issue with the drama of redemption these claimed to embody. What they opposed was the restriction of this story, and the ensuing drama, to the Mass. But there were two critical differences in the way the Reformers understood this drama: the location, or space, of the dramatic events, the other with what we might call the direction of the dramatic movement.

First with respect to the location of the drama: As I have argued, Calvin moved the spectacle beyond the liturgy and into the city of Geneva and the world, even as he transferred the dramatic performance from the priest to the congregation. Indeed the play, the drama, in a real sense encompassed the whole world. We are to contemplate creation, as we have seen, as a marvelous theatre for the glory of God. For Calvin, creation has a particular dramatic shape. But as God's work in creation continues, there are particular places where this drama becomes especially visible, one of these is God's calling of Israel, another is in the Church, but centrally it is seen in the Life and work of Christ—especially in his death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

The cross then is the climax of the drama. For in this single event God provides a remedy for all that keeps humans from seeing God, and its dramatic quality is underlined by Calvin: high and low are overturned, through what should be ignominious, God is glorified. The clearest expression of this comes in his commentary on John (13:31), and it must be read in its entirety (**IMAGE**):

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<sup>5</sup> Hardison claims these plays were suppressed by the reformers, p. 290. But as we have seen this was not uniformly true.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer argues that the drama comprises five acts: Creation, call and response of Israel, Christ's words and actions, Christ sending the Spirit and the Eschaton. Cf. *The Drama of Doctrine*. pp. 2, 3.

For in the cross of Christ, as in a magnificent theatre, the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures, indeed both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross, in which there has been an astonishing change of things, the condemnation of all man has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, a salvation has been restored to men; and, in short, the whole world has been renewed, and everything restored to good order.<sup>7</sup>

Note how this dramatic moment fulfills and elaborates the glory that is visible in the created order, indeed it is the climax of that same drama—in Christ the world has been made right. And this dramatic reversal is announced in the preaching of the word.

So Calvin refocuses the drama within the liturgy in a way that embraces the congregation and includes their life in the world (**IMAGE**). But the real contrast between Calvin's sense of drama and that of the medieval Mass, is made clear in the second distinctive: in the direction of the drama, and the impact of this on the sense of time. The central moment of the medieval drama was the elevation of the host which united "the role of the celebrant with the symbolism of the sacrament as Corpus Christi."<sup>8</sup> All the focus was to draw attention to this event and the redemptive reality of which it spoke. Indeed the entire arrangement of the Cathedral, as well as the structure of actions of the mass, and even the images of the altarpieces--everything was designed to draw attention

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<sup>7</sup> *Calvin Commentaries: 7. The Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers: ND), pp. 829, 830. Here may be an indirect reference to Aristotle's formulation in the phrase "change of things" ("changement des choses"), which may refer to Aristotle's change of the situation into its opposite in *Poetics*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama*, p. 65.

(and focus the emotions) on this liturgical event. Worship was to exert its centripetal pull, drawing the worshipers into the reality of this event. This focus was so pronounced that it led to the notion of ocular communion, whose effect involved simply the sight of the raised host. And the understanding of contemplation that developed from this became the basis of many medieval practices like praying the rosary or before devotional images (developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and, later, the Ignatian exercises.<sup>9</sup>

But the orientation of Calvin's drama is exactly reversed. The dramatic movement is not toward the raising of the host as a symbol of the cross, but from the substance of that "astonishing change of things" *outward*, into the believers' lives—who, in Calvin's dramatic language, are called to play their own role in the theatre of the Church. The movement was to be centrifugal—the real drama was a movement out of the sanctuary into the whole of life and the entire world.

This new dramatic sense was to have profound influence on the development of early modern drama. While the Reformers' insistence that the sacrifice of Christ was represented rather than repeated made the liturgy itself less dramatic, it expanded the dramatic action out into the world, and this expansion was to give Renaissance theatre a new dramatic structure. As Regina Schwartz notes, even if "the theater cannot *do* anything to other humans, [or] *offer* anything to God", it can awaken our longing for redemption and forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> And so she argues that this movement into the world

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<sup>9</sup> See Edwin Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Sacramental Poetics*, loc. 787. Her emphasis. Schwartz' argument is that the very elimination of the transformative work of the sacrament opened the way for later playwrights and poets to develop what she terms a sacramental poetics. Interestingly these influences coincided with the progressive narrowing of the space of performance into specific theatrical spaces. Cf Serene Jones, "Calvin's Common Reader," Lecture, April 6, 2013, Calvin Studies Society, Princeton Theological Seminary.

enabled Shakespeare and other dramatists to give their dramas a redemptive shape. So while classical dramas and their medieval descendants were suppressed, a new dramatic sensitivity, issuing from the Reformation, made possible what we might call the drama of everyday life, something that has influenced all modern drama from Shakespeare to present day Broadway.

### Literary Arts **IMAGE**

Turning to the literary arts I believe something similar can be said about the influence of Calvin's focus on the preaching of Scripture on poetry and literature more broadly. Regina Schwartz has argued that while the Reformers opposed the re-enactment of Christ's death in the liturgy, they came to believe that language, as in peaching, could "carry the mystical force of sacramental re-enactment".<sup>11</sup> Calvin saw communion as a sign and seal of this preached word, and further as an *act* of God who alone can cause "such great mysteries of God to be concealed under such humble things" (IV, 19, 2). But it is in the act of preaching that these mysteries and the summons entailed in them are made clear, and to which the worshiper is meant to respond in faith. Here the corporate singing of Psalms becomes a critical element in the drama, where the congregation together participates in the ritual of worship—I will return to this aspect a bit later.

Notice the significance of this for how we conceive time. The central focus of the transformation of things was transferred from a timeless and eternal recurrence—as in Greek tragedy and in the medieval mass, into a particular event in the past. As Calvin's preference for specific prayer services, this opened the way for the present and ongoing

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<sup>11</sup> *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God left the World* (Princeton University Press, 2008), Electronic Version, loc. 2192. Schwartz emphasizes here Calvin's focus on the sacraments as "acts".

time to have new dramatic meaning.<sup>12</sup> The drama of God's great work in Christ has transformed then the way both space and time can be understood. Rather than being absorbed into the space and time of the ritual, for Calvin the drama extends itself out into the city and its particular time. The Reformers are often accused of reducing the liturgy to language and song, but if what I'm saying is true one can also argue that they greatly *expanded* the dramatic potential of language, with great effect not only on theology, but also on subsequent literary culture—not only playwriting and poetry, but also on attitudes toward the book in general.

To illustrate this consider the way English Puritan literature of the seventeenth century reflects this theological vision.<sup>13</sup> Ernest Gilman argues that it is precisely the iconoclastic temper of Protestantism in its collision with Renaissance theory that creates the splendor of the poetry of the English Reformation. For these poets knew “the very imagining power of the mind was tainted by pride and sensuality of fallen humanity and open to the perils of worship misdirected from the creator to the creation”, while at the same time they realized that the “word was the bulwark of the spirit against the carnal enticements of the image”.<sup>14</sup> Their mistrust of the senses is clear in this Holy Sonnet of John Donne **IMAGE:**

When senses, which thy souldiers are,

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<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in Zachman, *Image and Word*, pp. xxxxx

<sup>13</sup> We do not speculate as to why these arts flourished, while painting and sculpture did not, indeed we recognize that one cannot make any claims of simple cause and effect. We seek rather to find resonances, or echoes, between the theological vision and the art produced. See, Erwin Panofsky who noted that each place “developed its own kind of Protestantism and its own kind of art.” “Comments on Art and Reformation” in *Symbols in Transformation*, op.cit. P. 9. Barbara Lewalski distinguishes several poetic styles which Calvinism influenced, but we focus on elements broadly shared by these poets. See *Protestant Poetics*, pp. 217-226.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest B. Gilman. *Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), p. 1, and see 5.6. Christopher Hill notes the influential role of the bible in the transformation of English literature from 1580 to the 1680s which he calls “the greatest age of English literature,” *The English Bible*, p.335.

Wee arme against thee and they fight for sinne...

When plenty, Gods image and seale

Makes us Idolatrous,

And love it, not him, whom it should reveale,

When we are mov'd to seeme religious

Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.<sup>15</sup>

But despite this mistrust Donne can draw from the biblical store powerful images that feed the imagination. This was an art that grew from biblical roots. As Barbara Lewalski notes, it was not as though these poets intended to be artless. Rather following the precept of Perkins, they sought an “art whose precepts may be derived, and whose stylistic features may be imitated, from the Scriptures.”<sup>16</sup>

These poets also reflected the inner orientation of Puritanism. For the metaphysical poets the focus sooner or later came to rest on the anguish of the human soul. For this is the site of the greatest struggle to embrace God’s merciful presence, as George Herbert knew well (**IMAGE**):

Sure there is room within our hearts good store;

For they can lodge transgressions by the score;

Thousands of toys dwell there, yet out of door

They leave thee.<sup>17</sup>

It is in the human heart where the decisive battle is fought, and where God’s victory will be achieved or lost, as Donne stresses in this sonnet (**IMAGE**):

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<sup>15</sup> John Donne: The Divine Poems, Helen Gardner, ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) A Litanie, xxi, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Protestant Poetics, p. 219. She discusses Perkins’ instructions for preachers as an important source for this aesthetic disposition.

<sup>17</sup>“Sepulchre”, Works of George Herbert, F. E. Hutchinson ed., p. 40.

Battle my heart three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine and seeke to mend,  
That I may rise, and stand, o'er throw me...<sup>18</sup>

There is in this poetry as well the impulse to catalogue and lay out the plain and simple truth for all to see and comprehend. Puritan poetry frequently reflected this “empirical” temperament. Thomas Traherne in the “The Person” begins by reflecting the inclination to pare away decoration:

Mistake me not, I do not mean to bring  
New Robes, but to Display the Thing:  
Nor Paint, nor Cloath, nor Crown, nor add a Ray,  
But glorify by taking all away...

But this removal is in the service of an ‘appearance’, even a ‘revelation’ of the glory of divine creation. Barbara Lewalski describes this poetic strategy as “naming and listing objects and qualities, as if by such naming to evoke their essence.”<sup>19</sup> Surely, for Traherne, these anatomical details give their own tribute to God’s glory in creating the human image. We note below the way Rembrandt was to develop this theme.

The triumph of this plain style is seen, one might argue, in John Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. Here Milton pictures Satan using all the tools of rhetoric to tempt the Savior with the wisdom and learning from the gifted ancients so that “These rules will render thee a king complete/Within thyself, much more with empire joined.”<sup>20</sup> The Savior’s answer is a brilliant put down of this eloquence (**IMAGE**):

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<sup>18</sup> Donne: The Divine Poems. Holy Sonnets, xx, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Lewalski, p. 370.

<sup>20</sup> The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton, Douglas Bush, ed, “Paradise Regained,” IV, 283,284. p. 503, the following lines noted in the text are from p. 505. It stands to reason for those

Think not but that I know these things, or think  
I know them not; not therefore am I short  
Of knowing what I ought. He who receives  
Light from above, from the Fountain of Light,  
No other doctrine needs, though granted true;  
But these are false, or little else but dreams,  
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm (286-292).

By contrast, Scripture “our Law and Story strewed with hymns” is all that we need, “In them is plainest taught and easiest learnt, what makes a nation happy...and keeps it so.” (334, 361,2).

But what is most characteristic of this body of poetry, with all of its variety, is the tendency to rewrite the narrative of their own lives in terms of the biblical narrative of sin and salvation--to write themselves into the poetry. William Ames in his *Conscience* identified our process of sanctification with the nailing of Christ on the cross. He wrote: “The nailes whereby in this application sinne is fastened to the cross, are the very same with those whereby Christ was fastened to the cross.”<sup>21</sup> John Donne can take this exchange to the biblical extreme (**IMAGE**):

Spit in my face... and pierce my side,  
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge and crucifie mee...  
They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I  
Crucifie him daily, being now glorified.<sup>22</sup>

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committed to using the “word” as a bulwark against the flesh, temptations of rhetoric would be most compelling.

<sup>21</sup> *Conscience with power and Cases*, Bk 2, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Donne: *The Divine Poems*, Holy Sonnet vii, p. 9.



George Herbert can celebrate Easter as a personal identification with Christ's death and resurrection in "Easter Wings" (**IMAGE**):

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more,  
Till he became  
Most poor;  
  
With Thee  
O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.<sup>23</sup>

This poem shaped in the form of a pair of wings illustrates the way the visual shaping of words is meant to underline their meaning. This provides what Raymond Waddington has called a "visual rhetoric", which may be an attempt to "compensate for the loss of the orator's voice and presence in engaging an unseen audience"<sup>24</sup>. Or, from a theological

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<sup>23</sup> Easter Wings, *The Works of George Herbert*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> "Visual Rhetoric: Chapman and the Extended Poem", *English Literary Renaissance*, 13/1 (1983), p. 57. This vestige of visual culture may also be a compensation for a loss of other more embodied forms of culture. Literacy itself encourages certain elements of culture, but it discourages others. Christopher Hill argues that the decline in ballad singing may be associated with the decline of household music making and singing. "Private reading replaced community or family singing...just as it replaced reading aloud or repetition of sermons by family or group

perspective, perhaps these shapes are meant to correspond to and reinforce the presence and structure that words can provide. The aesthetic sensitivities are not suppressed but displaced, from the visual image to the language, which, to the Puritan mind, paints a truer and more lively picture.

### Architecture and Gardens **(IMAGE)**

We have seen that Calvin was insistent that Christian discipleship was to extend outward to the reforming of the structures of the wider world. Indeed there is evidence that Calvin wanted the theological plan of the *Institutes* to become visible in the communities and cities that lived by this plan. Bernard Palissy known for his design of gardens, often placed biblical passages on his designs, and specifically alludes to Calvin's *Institutes*. His most famous work was the design of the Tuileries fountain and gardens (1564), and a fanciful grotto for Catherine de Medici **(IMAGE)**. A current exhibit in the High Museum in Atlanta notes that Palissy "went to great lengths to recreate features of the natural world in his work".<sup>25</sup> In his published reflections he bases all his work on the provision God has made for the earth to replenish itself. Gardens are refuges, images of a restoration and replenishment, indeed an image of salvation. He concludes: "Take your refuge then in your chief, protector and captain, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, in his time and place, will know how to avenge the wrongs done to him, and to us."<sup>26</sup>

It has been known for some time that the most important architects of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were French Huguenots, but scholars have believed their faith had little to do

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discussion". And it may also have discouraged the biblical drama, even as it encouraged the epic. The English Bible, pp. 339, 342.

<sup>25</sup> "The Art of the Louvre's Tuileries," [www.high.org/Art/Exhibitions/Tuileries-Garden.aspx](http://www.high.org/Art/Exhibitions/Tuileries-Garden.aspx) accessed 1/13/14.

<sup>26</sup> From the works of Palissy, quoted in Dyrness, *Reformed Theology*, p. 111.

with the designs of their work. But recent scholars have contested this. In a PhD dissertation just completed at Fuller, Randall Working has argued that it was Huguenot architects who were responsible for much of what we know today as French neo-classical architecture. He shows that, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was Reformed Christian Sebastiano Serlio who transmitted the ideas of the Roman architect Vitruvius, through printers in Geneva, to Renaissance architects, ideas that were specifically appropriated by Huguenot builders in France in the next century. In particular Salomon de Brosse, was responsible for promoting a more sober and rationalistic strain of Renaissance architecture—what became known as neo-classicism, which opposed the emotionalism and excess of Post-Tridentine Catholic architecture.

Though the building has been destroyed contemporary drawings of the “Temple of Charenton” display a Reformed style during the Edict of Nantes (Temple harking back to the OT temple at Jerusalem) **(IMAGE)**. Working argues that “Protestant architecture employed material mimesis to respond to a spiritual, social and theological need to transform the stage for human experience.”<sup>27</sup> Many of the major neo-classical monuments of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were designed by Huguenot architects seeking to reflect the impulse to structure the world in just and ordered ways.

The second temple at Charenton was one of the few purpose built worship spaces designed by Reformed Christians—built during a time of relative calm under the Edict of Nantes in one of the few places designated for Protestant worship outside the city of Paris. It reflects many of the characteristics of the Reformed congregation of St. Pierre in Geneva—spaciousness, light, and orientation of the congregation toward the pulpit. After

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<sup>27</sup> Working, “Re-presenting the Tradition: Towards an Architectural Iconology of Early Modern French Protestantism, 1535-1623.” PhD Dissertation, 2014, p. 13.

the first temple (1607) was burned, the famous de Brosse designed this second Temple. Its Vitruvian inspired façade would serve as a model for Protestant Churches throughout the world. Its basilican plan hearkens back to the earliest Christian meeting places, without the transepts or apses of Gothic churches, and intended to facilitate the preaching of the Word (**IMAGE**). The space was designed not for private contemplation and devotion—there were no side chapels, but to the corporate experience of worship. Though spare, Working points out it is far from artless, but is designed to express the spiritual aspirations of the congregation. Worship at Charenton must have evoked the sense of Israel going into the desert to worship, because of its physical distance from Paris. Worshipers on Sunday morning would make their way out of the city, singing Psalms as they passed the limits of Paris.

### Visual arts (**IMAGE**)

What might this mean for a visual piety? Here I will look only at the most prominent of the artists who clearly express the influence of Calvin. But what it expressed was less the outward visual display but the outward reflection of an inward and personal piety. The influence here was not directly from Calvin but from the confessions and theology that he influenced, especially the Belgic Confession (1561): “The creation is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small are so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely his eternal power and godhead.” (Recall Calvin’s insistence that God’s glory is seen in both high and low.)

To understand this emphasis it is important to note the contrast with what was happening with the Catholic Counter Reformation, which was taking a different direction in its art. Peter Paul Rubens might be taken as representative of the Baroque style that resulted, and that enthralled the young Rembrandt (**IMAGE**). This magisterial work for the altar in the South Transept at Antwerp (done about 1611-14), would have been well known to Rembrandt (probably by a visit but certainly through a print of Lucas Vorsterman after Rubens). In this deposition all the grandeur and heroic drama of the moment. The pictorial focus of the picture is on the bleeding wound. Simon Schama says: “All the forms in this painting seem to coalesce, or to coagulate, like Christ’s blood into a dominating tragic center”—which is Christ’s wound (Rembrandt’s Eyes, p. 164). The wound, and the naked reality of Christ’s death both speak of the sacrifice especially in its position over the altar. But it is the size that would have astounded the viewer 420 by 310 centimeters, life-sized figures towering over the viewer, who like St. John seem to be called on to hold up the falling body.

In a strikingly comparison, Rembrandt painted this “Raising the Cross” (**IMAGE**) in 1632-33 for Frederick Hendrik, Prince of Orange. According to the earliest biographies, Rembrandt attached himself to the Mennonites, though others report relations with Remonstrants, here I argue that in general with the rest of his culture, he shows a general impact of Calvin’s ideas. Note for example the blue figure helping in the center, who it turns out is Rembrandt himself. As Calvin specified and the Puritans after did so commonly, we are to put ourselves into the story—here Rembrandt literally painted himself into the picture, even as reformed poets wrote themselves into their verse. But Rembrandt’s placement here is unique. For it turns out that in this picture, not the

wounds of Christ, but Rembrandt himself is fulcrum on which the picture turns. The inward turn in poetry had its counterpart in Holland, not only in the person of Huygens himself but in the work of the preacher Jacobus Revius, who in a sonnet published in 1630 wrote (**IMAGE**):

Tis not the Jews who crucified,  
Nor who betrayed you in the judgment place,  
Nor who, Lord Jesus spat into your face,  
Nor who with buffets struck you as you died.

Tis not the soldiers who with brutal fists  
Raised the hammer and raised the nail  
Or the cursed wood on calvary's hill,  
Or drew lots, tossed the dice to win your cloak

I am the one, oh Lord, who brought you there,  
I am the heavy tree too stout to bear  
I am the rope that reined you in.

The scourge that flayed you nail and spear,  
The blood soaked crown they made you wear  
Twas all for me, alas, twas for my sin.

Here then is a Protestant reading of the Counter Reformation symbolism trumpeted by Rubens—a poem that Rembrandt probably knew. Stripped down, less than a tenth the size of Rubens, destined to call forth the private prayer and devotion of the Stadholder, the image is to serve for private contemplation, for witness, not public display in the service of corporate worship.

That Rembrandt continued this witness is seen in this next print, the 3<sup>rd</sup> State of “Three Crosses” signed and dated in 1653 (**IMAGE**). As is frequently the case Rembrandt, who did not need a theological advisor, here bases his work on his personal reading of Luke 23:44-46. These prints engraved to sell on the market represent Rembrandt’s own thinking (not that of any patron). The bad thief on our right is shown blind, while Christ turns toward the other. Beneath the centurion kneels “Surely this man was innocent.” The crowd beat their breasts, while his acquaintances stand at a distance. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus walk by in front on their mission to retrieve Jesus’ body. And while the dog barks in anguish, light falls on Jesus from heaven.

There is another more subtle version of “Three Crosses” that I signal briefly before closing this section, called significantly “Three Trees in a Landscape” by Jacob von Ruysdael (**IMAGE**). This which appears at first glance as a straightforward view from a particular location, turns out on closer examination to be a deeply moving meditation on life and salvation. Notice how the light falls on the central broken tree, speaking surely of the one “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (I Peter 2:24). The flowing river, (and parallel pathway with its figures) recall Ps. 104 where the figures return from their labors. But note especially the solid house at the left, more closely seen, in ruins. A fellow student of mine in the 70’s did his doctorate on this artist. John

Walford points out that this is really a meditation on the preacher's "vanity" of Ecclesiastes—a common theme in the preaching of the day. But it is not vanity that Ruysdael underlines, his interpretation of this allusive word is "brokenness". The world is broken, but because of the one broken on the tree, there is hope, as the light falling on the tree reminds us.

### Music (**IMAGE**)

Finally we turn to music. While this study is not directly about a Christian aesthetics of worship, my comments have shown that Calvin clearly sought to involve the whole congregation in worship as participants and not simply spectators. Perhaps the two ways this is seen most clearly is in his careful and systematic explication of Scripture through regular preaching—which amounted to kind of congregational catechesis, and in the introduction of congregational singing, especially of the Psalms. Very early in Calvin's tenure in Geneva Calvin outlined the importance of music in a letter to a colleague: "It is very expedient for the edification of the Church, to sing some psalms in the form of public prayer, by which one offers petitions to God or sings his praise, in order that the hearts of all may be moved and incited to compose similar prayers...with the same affections."<sup>28</sup> Significant—and unprecedented, is the insistence that the whole congregation participates in this form of sung prayer. Calvin was famously suspicious of the emotions, but here he recognizes the role that they can play in directing affections toward God. The first Reformed Psalter was published (**IMAGE**), in French, in 1539 and it was enlarged in 1542 (Calvin apparently even tried, unsuccessfully, to compose some

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in W. Stanford Reid, "The Battle Hymn of the Lord" *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* (St. Louis: Foundation for Reformation Research, 1971), Volume II, p. 38. Next quote is from p. 39.



of the music.) In the introduction to the later edition Calvin wrote: “We know by experience that singing has great strength and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal.” In a sense, as one scholar points out, this represents a revolution in pop music, for here the whole congregation came together to sing in unison giving them a sense of unity and inspiring them to go out to seek the kingdom that they were singing about. Soon English and Dutch translations appeared, and in these places people would gather an hour before the service to sing hymns “after the Genevan fashion”. Understandably this aroused opposition and even ridicule—Queen Elizabeth famously called this music Genevan jiggs.<sup>29</sup>

Though unison singing without instruments would not strike a modern as a particularly exciting innovation, a tradition was born that has transformed Christian worship—and not just in the Reformed tradition. One has only to recall the place of hymns in the great awakenings, or modern praise choruses in contemporary worship. That this influence is still alive in the Protestant tradition became clear in research I just concluded on the relative role of art and aesthetics in Christian, Buddhist and Muslim worship. One question posed to protestant respondents in that research elicited an unexpected response. We asked Protestant worshipers: “At what point in the service are you moved to prayer, or experience the presence of God? What triggers this?” Of the 39 responses, 21 mentioned some form of music. And of these only 8 specifically mentioned the words—the lyrics, or put music in relation to the sermon. (Only two even mentioned the sermon as triggering prayer or closeness to God, and these mentioned it only in connection with music!) No other category came close. This answer was particularly

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<sup>29</sup> “Battle Hymn”, pp. 42, 43, 52. Ironically the classical composer Clement Marot was commissioned by Calvin to compose some of the music, though he was unsuccessful in getting a public stipend for the composer. The work was completed later by Beza.

striking because our protocol had included no reference to music at all. This supports the argument that, though the story about what God has done in Christ is central to Protestant worship, in order for this to move the worshipers—for it to become a living image, it has to take on aesthetic, or in this case a musical form.<sup>30</sup> All of this led me to conclude that the basic trope that best sums up Protestant worship is the call to sing a new song. This may be an appropriate summary to all the influences we have been tracing, for it insists that life-giving worship encourages Reformed Christians to shape the events of their lives into a melody that is offered in praise to God (**IMAGE and music**).

And this also may be an appropriate place draw my remarks to a close, because it illustrates the way the light of this tradition still illumines much of our worship life. Catholics would not see music as a primary site of God's presence, nor would Muslims. Their responses focused on the Mass and on the prostration—when their forehead touches the ground. These continuing influences speak both to our identity of Reformed Christians, but also to the differences that are represented by faith traditions. Happily we are more often seeking to appreciate this diversity than quarrel over it—but it also should motivate us to appropriate our tradition both with gratitude, but also with a mature awareness of what we might have given up that was, after all, worth keeping.

To return briefly to “that other lecture” to which I referred earlier, I want to end by calling us to a critical appreciation and appropriation of our heritage. For it is high time we realized that the gains did not have to be purchased at the price of so much

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<sup>30</sup> This is consistent with a study done by Peter Marsden that shows that, surprisingly, Protestants are significantly more likely than either Catholics or Jews to say that art brings them closer to God, since in his study music was included in the arts. Peter V. Marsden, “Religious Americans and the Arts in the 1990s” in Alberta Arthurs and Clenn Wallach, eds. *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life* (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 76. I believe when the Protestants were asked about “art” they naturally (and perhaps primarily) thought about music!

suspicion and suppression. I think Calvin himself knew this. I have found a little noticed passage in the *Institutes*, where, after a long much quoted diatribe against image making, he admits: “This present age offers proof of the fact that it may be a fitting thing to lay aside, as may be opportune in the circumstances, certain rites that in other circumstances are not impious or indecorous” (4.10.32). Today I submit, 500 years after Calvin’s birth, we live in such different circumstances; a rethinking of these issues is timely and necessary.

1/21/14

Appendix: Some suggestions for follow up.

Christian artists to watch (check out their websites):

Ed Knippers, Virginia/Washington, D. C.

Mako Fujimora, New York City/Princeton.

Joel Sheesley, Wheaton/Chicago

Tim Hawkinson, Altadena/Los Angeles

Lynn Aldrich, Los Angeles

For an active Christian arts organization check out Christians in the Visual Arts (civa.org); For a world class magazine with examples of Christian art and poetry check out *Image Journal* (imagejournal.org).

For examples of churches that are using the arts to good effect go to the website for the Calvin Institute of Christian worship (worship.calvin.edu), click on resources and then

click on “Visual arts” and you will see a wide range of resources and examples of the arts used in worship.

And to keep up with all that’s going on at Fuller Theological Seminary in the arts check out the website for the Brehm Center ([brehmcenter.com](http://brehmcenter.com)).