

The Protestant Imagination and the Arts

William Dyrness
Fuller Theological Seminary
January 25, 2014

John Calvin

1509-1564

- ◆ Creation is a “theatre” for the glory of God.
- ◆ Scripture gives us glasses to see this glory.
- ◆ Believers then can see the whole of life as an arena for God’s presence.



Calvin redefines what counts as religious

- ✱ Catholic believers seek to enter and relive the events of the life of Christ (through praying the rosary or the stations of the Cross). Ignatian ecstasy.
- ✱ Reformed Protestants want to take Christ with them into the World. Protestant “absorption.” (Panofsky).

Elements of the Reformed Imagination:

- ★ Iconoclastic: worship needed to be cleansed of accumulated superstitions.
- ★ An inward turn that encouraged a rich mental picturing of God's presence.
- ★ Strong need to (re-)order and structure the world; to seek a "restored Eden."

Drama

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.

Medieval Drama focused on the
liturgy of the Mass; the focus was
centripetal



“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 has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, a salvation has been restored to all; and, in short, the whole world has been renewed, and everything restored to good order.” Calvin, *Commentary on Jn. 13:31*.

Reformation preaching was a summons; the focus was centrifugal



Literature

Reformed poets and writers rewrote their own narratives in the light of the biblical narrative.

When senses, which thy soldiers are,
We arm against thee and they fight for sin...
 When plenty, God's image and seal
 Makes us Idolatrous,
And love it, not him, whom it should reveal,
When we are moved to seem religious
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.

John Donne

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.

George Herbert

Battle my heart three person'd God;
For, you as yet but knock, breathe,
shine and seek to mend.
That I may rise, and stand, o'er throw me...
John Donne

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

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.

John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, 286-292

Spit on my face...and pierce my side,
Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify
me...

They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I
Crucify him daily, being now glorified.

John Donne

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
George Herbert "Easter Wings"

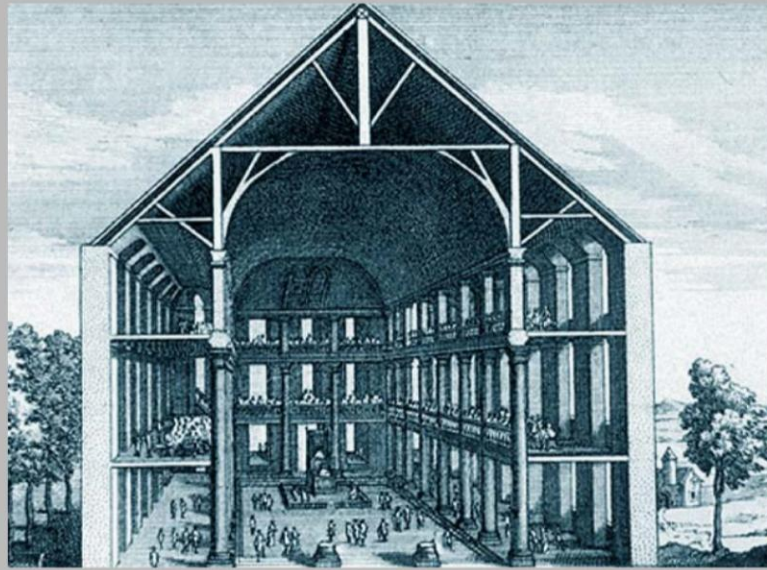
Architecture and Gardens

Huguenot architects sought to remake the world into a image of the New Creation.



Gaston La Touche, "Water Fountain in the Tuileries," c 1890
(Designed by Huguenot Bernard Palissy 1564)

Temple at Charenton 1621



Interior Temple of Charenton 1621

The Visual Arts

“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.” Belgic Confession. 1561.

Peter Paul
Rubens
Antwerp, 1611-14



Rembrandt “Descent”

1632 for Frederick
Hendrik Prince of
Orange.



Tis not the Jew 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. J. Revius



Rembrandt "Three Crosses" 1653



Jacob von Ruisdael

“Three Trees in a Landscape”

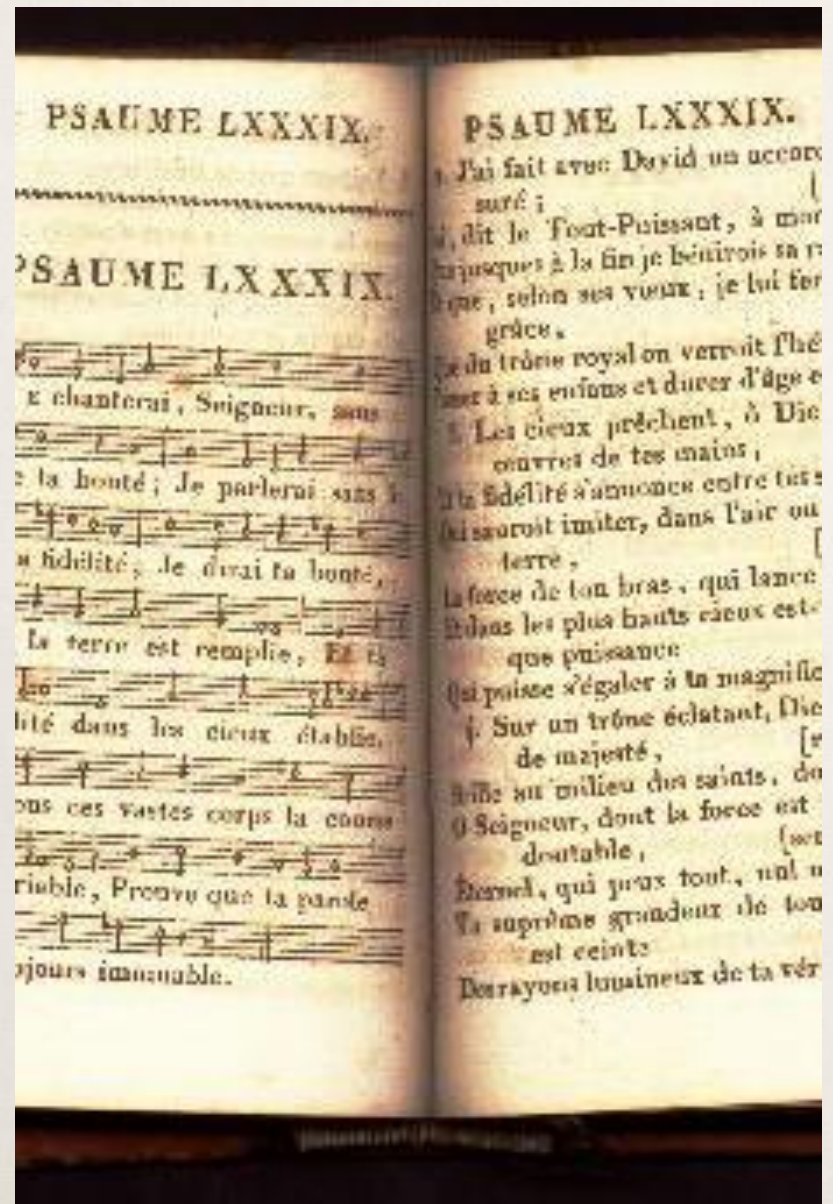
1660s

Music

“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.”

John Calvin. Letter.

Genvan Psalter 1539/1542



“Genevan Psalter” Psalm 100

Tune Louis Bourgeois, 1551

“Music of the Genevan Psalter,” CD Calvin College, 1999.



- * All people that on earth do dwell,
- * Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,
- * Serve him with joy, his praises tell;
- * Come now before him and rejoice!

- * To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
- * The God whom heaven and earth adore,
- * From men and from the angel host
- * Be praise and glory evermore.