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we will recognize our responsibility to be involved in God's concern for the whole creation.

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God's Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards

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Today there is a growing tendency to fuse nature with grace. Creation is God, as in the Hindu view that nature emanates from God and returns to God in cyclic regularity, that matter is spiritual energy. The visible is but the maya (illusion) or lila (play) of the invisible. There is no essential gap between the creator and the creation. Matthew Fox, the influential American Catholic theologian, expounds creation spirituality as the mystical absorption into Mother Earth, the return to the original innocence of the child and the firm rejection of the fall/redemption theology. The contemporary ecological debate is being moved in this direction by the exponents of New Age philosophies. There is an urgent need for solid biblical foundations if evangelicals are going to enter the ecological debate effectively. This article on Calvin's and Edwards' understanding of creation as God's glory, of the fall as blinding mankind to God's revelation in creation, and of Scripture as providing the necessary glasses (to use Calvin's image) to understand God's revelation through nature is a useful study. The author discusses a number of key issues in Calvin's and Edwards' understanding of biblical orthodoxy offering a theological foundation for ecological understanding. The missing dimension in this article is the role of the Holy Spirit, without which no true understanding of nature is impossible.

Editor

One of Calvin's earliest statements of Protestant ideas,¹ the 1534 preface to Pierre Olivétan's translation of the NT, begins with his joy in creation:

God the Creator, the most perfect and excellent Maker of things, who had [p. 112](#) already shown himself more than admirable in their creation, made man as his masterpiece ... formed in his own image and likeness, in which we see a bright refulgence of God's glory.

¹ Joseph Haroutunian called this preface Calvin's 'first statement of faith as a Protestant'. See John Calvin, *Calvin: Commentaries* (transl. and ed. Joseph Haroutunian; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 58n.

Calvin's praise continued as he considered all of nature:

For he has raised everywhere, in all places and in all things, his ensigns and emblems, under blazons so clear and intelligible that no one can pretend ignorance in not knowing such a sovereign Lord.... It is evident that all creatures, from those in the firmament to those which are in the centre of the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of his glory to all men.... For the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts clamour for him; the elements dread him, the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him.²

Two hundred years later, in the small town of Northampton, Massachusetts, one of John Calvin's heirs, Jonathan Edwards, echoed the reformer's words while preaching on [Psalm 89](#):

The beauty of trees, plants, and flowers, with which God has bespangled the face of the earth is delightful, the beautiful frame of the body of men, especially in its perfection is astonishing, the beauty of the moon and stars, is wonderful, the beauty of highest heavens, is transcendent, [and] the excellency of angels and the saints in light is very glorious.³

In 1748, Edwards' poetic observations on nature were published as *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*. Since that time, scholars, beginning with Perry Miller, have sought to make sense of Edwards' use of the images of nature.⁴ In his introductory essay to Edwards' *Images*, Miller argued that Edwards used nature typologically to fuse [p. 113](#) nature and revelation: 'In this way of thinking, the image was no longer a detachable adornment on the surface of truth; it *was* truth.'⁵ Edwards appropriated Locke and Newton, extended typology to include nature and history, and accomplished a 'radical break with the past: an exaltation of nature to a level of authority co-equal with revelation'.⁶ According to Miller, Edwards' use of nature is radically different from Calvin's pessimism about the natural order. He quoted the *Institutes* to support his conclusion: 'though [nature] is a mirror in which [men] are given clear representations of God, they can get no real advantage because of their stupidity'.⁷

While Perry Miller is not entirely wrong about Locke's and Newton's influence on Edwards' theology, his conclusions about Edwards' views on nature are incorrect. Miller misunderstood Edwards because he misunderstood Calvin's theology of creation.

² *Ibid.*, 59–60.

³ Quoted in Ralph Turnbull, *Jonathan Edwards, the Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958).

⁴ Discussing Edwards on the natural order is not an easy task. The natural order, according to Edwards, is in the realm of 'secondary beauty' as opposed to 'primary beauty' (see the *Nature of True Virtue*). Secondary beauty is 'inferior'—not in the sense of lesser value, but because it is derivative. Natural beauty is a shadow of primary beauty: God's beauty. To make matters more difficult, Edwards also differentiates between simple and complex beauty. This paper is concerned with nature, a single aspect of secondary beauty—in this instance, nature's beauty—which may be either single or complex. Secondary beauty also includes 'philosophy of being, concept of God and the beauty of Christ' along with moral and ethical concerns. I am thankful to my friend Louis Mitchell, Th.D. candidate at Harvard, for explaining these distinctions in Edwards' thoughts. His unpublished paper, 'Beauty and the Experience of Beauty in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards' (seminar paper, Harvard Divinity School, 1982), was invaluable as I prepared for this study.

⁵ Perry Miller, 'Introduction', in Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (ed. Perry Miller; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Following Miller, various philosophical and literary interpretations have isolated Edwards from his Calvinism. Against such interpretations, Clyde Holbrook said of Edwards, 'From first to last he was a theologian in the broadest sense. His early scientific and metaphysical notes were linked to the deeper problem of the nature and destiny of man in God's world.... [H]e was caught by the vision of a universe whose every aspect bespoke the handiwork of a holy and beauteous God.'⁸ A full interpretation of nature in Edwards' work must take his Calvinism seriously.

Taking Edwards' Calvinism seriously in connection with creation presents a problem: besides debating the issue of natural theology, scholars have done little work on Calvin's view of nature. Susan Schreiner, in her doctoral dissertation, argued that a proper understanding of 'Calvin's doctrine of creation is necessary to restore that balance originally characteristic of his thought. Calvin emphasized both the sinfulness of the human race and the belief that the creation still reflects His glory.'⁹

This balanced view is characteristic of Calvin and the Reformed tradition which followed him. Comparing Calvin to Jonathan Edwards, a later representative of that tradition, illustrates the similarities between their views and the continuity of the role of nature in Reformed theology. When Calvin's views are properly understood, it is p. 114 clear that Edwards substantially borrowed from Calvin's theological thought on nature. In citing the similarities between the two, Perry Miller's conclusions about Edwards' 'natural theology' are corrected.

This comparison consists of three questions. First, what are the theological purposes of nature for Calvin and Edwards? Second, how does Edwards use Calvin? Third, is there a natural theology in Calvin and Edwards?

THE METAPHORS FOR NATURE

Neither Calvin nor Edwards is a utilitarian: nature is beautiful because it is beautiful. Although there are important theological purposes for nature, the excellency of creation can be enjoyed because it is delightful. According to Calvin,

In grasses, trees and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odour.... Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odour? ... Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?¹⁰

In a short essay, 'The Beauty of the World', Edwards extols the pleasantness of the colour of flowers, grass, and the sky. The essay ends with the sadness of death: 'Hence the reason why almost all men, and those that seem to be very miserable, love life, because they cannot bear to lose sight of such a beautiful and lovely world.' Men and women would 'rather live in much pain and misery than lose' the pleasure of natural beauty.¹¹

⁸ Clyde Holbrook, 'Jonathan Edwards and His Detractors', *T Today* 10 (1953), 392.

⁹ Susan Schreiner, 'The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1983), xvi.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill, transl. F. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.10.2.

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, 'The Beauty of the World', in *Images*, 137.

CALVIN'S AND EDWARDS' USE OF METAPHOR

Even though Calvin and Edwards both enjoy natural beauty, nature has important theological purposes. To describe these purposes, both use metaphorical language. In their theological works, Calvin and Edwards use rich, poetic terms to describe nature: creation is a shadow, image, school, mirror, fabric, or theatre. These words fall into four general groups reflecting four different theological uses of [P. 115](#) nature: the pedagogical metaphors, the metaphors of sight, artistic metaphors, and types.

(1) *The pedagogical metaphors.* The first purpose of nature is *to teach*. According to Calvin 'the contemplation of heaven and earth ... is the very school of God's children'¹² where even 'irrational creatures give instruction'.¹³ All of nature is a school; even the stars are 'preaching the glory of God like a teacher in a seminary of learning'.¹⁴ Creation teaches God's character and glory; it is a school for the Christian life. Edwards never used the world 'school', but he used similar language. For example, 'The works of God are but a kind of voice or language of God to instruct intelligent beings.... And why should we not think that he would teach and instruct in this way?'¹⁵ For Edwards, the created order teaches 'spiritual and divine things to show of what excellent advantage it will be'.¹⁶ The pedagogical metaphors depict nature as a teacher. It instructs humanity in God's glory through his works and providential care; its lessons teach that there is a God.

(2) *The metaphors of sight.* The second purpose of nature is *to show forth God's character*. The most striking metaphors for nature in Calvin's and Edwards' theologies are visual metaphors. In Calvin's thought, 'this skilful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror'¹⁷ which clearly reflects God. Nature is a 'living likeness' of God.¹⁸ The word *image* functions for Edwards in nearly the same way *mirror* functions in Calvin's works. Although image and type are closely linked in Edwards' thinking, *image* conveys actually likeness or reflection—a concept much like Calvin's mirror. For example, 'As the SUN is an image of Christ upon account of its pleasant light and benefits, refreshing life-giving influences, so it is on account of its extraordinary fierce heat, it being a fire of vastly greater fierceness than any other in the visible world whereby is represented the wrath of the Lamb'.¹⁹ The sun, in this example, is more than a pedagogical illustration, it is a mirror image of Christ's mercy and judgment.

Not all the visual metaphors are positive. Nature, besides being an image or mirror of the divine, can also be a shadow. Calvin stated that [p. 116](#) when nature is elevated to the status of creator, it becomes 'a shadow deity to drive away the true God'.²⁰ He referred to nature as the 'shadows of the world' when contemplated in relationship to God's glory.²¹

¹² Calvin, *Inst.* 1.6.4.

¹³ *Ibid.* 1.5.15.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Comm.* [Ps. 19:4](#). Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 53n.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Images*, no. 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 70.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1.5.6.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Images*, no. 128.

²⁰ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.6.

²¹ Calvin, *Sermons from Job* (transl. Leroy Nixon; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 300.

Edwards conceived of nature in the same way: nature is an image, a direct reflection of God, but it become a shadow when confronted with the reality of the thing itself. He continued the sun example from above, 'for doubtless the substance will be vastly beyond the shadow, as God's brightness and glory is so much beyond the brightness of the sun, His image. Thus the sun is but a shade and darkness in comparison of it'.²²

Theologically, the visual metaphors of mirror, likeness, shadow, and image suggest that Calvin and Edwards 'see in a mirror dimly' (1 Cor. 13:12) through the created order. Nature is a glorious, beautiful, and excellent reflection of God, but in comparison to God himself, it is still a limited reflection.

(3) *The artistic metaphors*. The third purpose of nature is *to illustrate God's creative activity*. The artistic metaphors depict nature as a theatre, painting, or exhibition. Calvin called the world a 'glorious theatre' of God's works. Men and women were placed there as spectators.²³ The universe 'was founded as a spectacle of God's glory'.²⁴ Elsewhere he wrote, 'God's powers are actually represented as in a painting'.²⁵ Words like workmanship and handiwork reappear throughout the *Institutes*. To Edwards, God is an architect who created the 'astonishing fabric of the world we behold'.²⁶ Divine glory is exhibited, expressed, and communicated through God's artistic creation.²⁷

Although they beautifully illustrate God's activity, the artistic metaphors present a theological problem. Is God like an earthly artist who creates for the sake of an audience? No, answered both Edwards and Calvin: God creates because it gives him joy. Edwards said, 'The p. 117 notion of God creating the world, in order to receive any thing properly from the creature, is not only contrary to the nature of God, but inconsistent with the notion of creation.'²⁸ The creature can recognize the Creator through his works, but that recognition adds nothing to the creation. The creation is perfect and complete without human appreciation. According to Calvin, the creation, even without human comprehension, is God's perfect handiwork: '[T]he Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us.'²⁹ God is an Artist who needs no audience; he delights in his own creation. Nature remains, even with no spectators, a perfect theatre.

(4) *Typology*. The fourth purpose of nature is to be a type of God's truth. Concerning Edwards' and Calvin's use of typology, Conrad Cherry said:

Typology, an exegetical method of the ancient church, was especially important to Calvin and the Puritans as an alternative to both an unimaginative literalism and a fanciful allegorizing. Typology aimed to take a text first of all for what is said, and then, without

²² Edwards, *Images*, no. 128.

²³ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.6.2.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1.5.5.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1.5.12.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (2 vols.; Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1.97.

²⁷ For more on Edwards and artistic language, as well as his influence on the arts, see Terrence Erdt's helpful *Jonathan Edwards: Art and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

²⁸ Edwards, *Dissertation*, 97.

²⁹ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.11.

abandoning its plain meaning, move to its prefiguring of a later, historical meaning (the antitype).³⁰

Miller, and others following him, have argued that Calvin employed type exclusively from Scripture. According to this view, Edwards led a 'Puritan revolt against Puritanism' in his extension of typology from the Bible 'into nature and history'.³¹ Is Edwards' use of typology a radical break with the Reformed tradition, as Miller suggested? How did Calvin use typology?

In the *Institutes*, Calvin demonstrated the continuities between the Testaments by employing various types of the Messiah from the OT. *Institutes* 2.11 is Calvin's most explicit use of typological method. The OT foreshadowed—specially with its representative types of Christ—the revelation of Jesus as Messiah in the NT. However, this chapter is not Calvin's only use of typology. In other sections of the *Institutes*, lightning, thunder, and floods typologically represent God's power, p. 118 and the sun is a type of Christ.³² Types are plentiful in the commentaries: winds are a type for angels, farmers are a type of God as provider,³³ and a threshing floor is a type of the church.³⁴ Most of Calvin's nature typology came directly from Scripture.

Again, Edwards did not deviate substantially from Calvin's example. His natural images are drawn, primarily, from the Bible: marriage is a type for the church, Christ is represented by a lamb, a rose is a type for Christ, and the wind is a type for the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Following Calvin, the sun, stars, and light provided Edwards with many of his types. Quotations from Scripture fill the pages of his *Images*. Occasionally, Edwards turned to familiar New England images: silkworms and milled corn are types of Christ. He also borrowed freely from scientific treatises: he was particularly fond of Newton's *Optics*. Although Edwards employed typology with literary beauty and originality, and used scientific images which were not available to Calvin, most of his images are drawn from the Bible.

Both men believed that nature was a book of types, but both also adhere closely to the nature typology of Scripture. In his 'Types of the Messiah', Edwards wrote, 'Not only the things of the Old Testament are typical; for this is but one part of the typical world. The system of created beings may be divided into two parts, the typical world and the antitypical world.'³⁶ Calvin implied the same thing when he said that God had 'raised everywhere, in all places and in all things, his ensigns and emblems'.³⁷ Nature, as a type, is not limited to Edwards. Conrad Cherry argued that Edwards inherited his 'symbolic consciousness' from the Bible, Calvin, and the Puritans.³⁸

³⁰ Conrad Cherry, *Nature and the Religious Imagination from Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 18.

³¹ Miller, 'Introduction', in Edwards, *Images*, 22–30.

³² Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.6; 2.10.20; 3.25.1. The sun image is also used in his commentary on [Mal. 4:2](#).

³³ Calvin, *Comm.* [Ps. 104:3](#), [14](#) and [27](#).

³⁴ Calvin, *Comm.* [Matt. 3:12](#).

³⁵ All the examples are from *Images*.

³⁶ Edwards, 'Types of the Messiah', in *Works* 2.674.

³⁷ Calvin, 'Preface to Olivétan's New Testament', in *Calvin: Commentaries* 59.

³⁸ Cherry, *Nature*, chaps. 1 and 2.

Edwards and Calvin used similar metaphors to describe nature, and those metaphors (especially the metaphors of sight) imply the primary theological purpose for creation: the visible display of God's glory. Calvin said, 'Our salvation was a matter of concern to God in such a way that, not forgetful of Himself, He kept His glory primarily in view and, therefore, created the whole world for this end, that it may be a p. 119 theatre of His glory.'³⁹ In the *Institutes*, this time using the mirror analogy, Calvin made the same point: '[T]his skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.'⁴⁰

The visibility of God is an important concept in Edwards' work. He said,

By God's declaring and teaching that He is infinitely powerful and wise, the creature believes that He is powerful and wise, but in seeing His mighty and wise works, the effects of His power and wisdom, the creature not only hears and believes, but sees His power, and wisdom, and so of His other perfections.⁴¹

In his later work, *The End for Which God Created the World*, Edwards stated that God's purpose in creation was the manifestation of his glory: 'Thus we see that the great end of God's works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is but ONE; and this *one* is most properly and comprehensively called, THE GLORY OF GOD.'⁴²

For Calvin and Edwards, God's glory is visible, beautiful, excellent, and overwhelming. 'Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes,' wrote Calvin, 'cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art.'⁴³ God's visibility has two theological purposes: first, it makes men and women accountable for their refusal to worship him; and, second, God shows forth his own character through his delight in visible communication in nature.

EDWARDS' USE OF CALVIN

That Edwards used nature in a similar way to Calvin should not be surprising. According to Edwards' early biographer, Samuel Hopkins, 'he read all the books, especially books of divinity, that he could come at, from which he could hope to get any help in his pursuit of knowledge'.⁴⁴ No one knows the exact contents of Edwards' library; it p. 120 disappeared after it passed to his son. Edwards' reading can be discerned from two sources: footnote references in his works and an unpublished catalogue of books in Yale's library. From footnotes, we know that Edwards read the *Institutes*, but it is difficult to discern if he read any other works by Calvin.⁴⁵

³⁹ Calvin, *On the Eternal Predestination of God*. Quoted in Schreiner, 'Theater', xviii.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.1.

⁴¹ Edwards, 'Miscellanies', no. 777. Quoted in Miller, 'Introduction', in Edwards, *Images*, 36.

⁴² Edwards, *Dissertation*, 119.

⁴³ Calvin, *Inst.* 1.5.2.

⁴⁴ Samuel Hopkins, *Life and Character of Jonathan Edwards*, 43–44. Quoted in Thomas Johnson, 'Jonathan Edwards' Background of Reading', *The Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 28 (1930–33) 211.

⁴⁵ Various editions of Calvin's commentaries were available in Massachusetts in the early eighteenth century. See Charles Robinson and Robin Robinson, 'Three Early Massachusetts Libraries', *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 28 (1930–33) 107–75. I suspect that Edwards read some of them, but

There appears to be at least one case of direct dependence on the *Institutes* in Edwards' discussion of nature. In 1.14.21, Calvin asked, 'How should we view God's works?' His answer: believers should use nature as a mirror for the contemplation of God's attributes. The creation reflects 'those immense riches of his wisdom, justice, goodness and power'. According to Calvin, words cannot describe these things; they are attributes which can only be known by contemplation of creation.

Edwards picked up these themes in section 2 of *The End for Which God Created the World*. He was concerned with 'what thing or things are actually the effect or consequence of the creation of the world'. He concluded that 'if the world had not been created, [certain] attributes never would have had any exercise'. Edwards described these attributes, using Calvin's words, as God's power, wisdom, justice, and goodness (he added 'truth' to his list). Nature exhibits them to a 'glorious society of created beings' because it gives God glory to be known. Without the natural realm, these expressions of God would have remained hidden in himself. God is known through the communication of divine goodness as seen in the natural order.

CALVIN'S AND EDWARDS' USE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

If God's glory is visible in nature, did Calvin or Edwards set nature next to Scripture as a separate form of revelation? The answer in both cases is no. If natural theology is an ability to arrive at a saving knowledge of God derived from creation, then neither Calvin nor Edwards promoted natural theology. However, in the theological context of both the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, most theologians believed that **P. 121** nature testified to God's existence as Creator.⁴⁶ Following Paul in Romans, both Calvin and Edwards assented to this limited use of natural revelation. Humanity is given enough knowledge of God through nature to make them responsible for their refusal to acknowledge and worship God. The deepest lessons of nature, however, are reserved for the regenerate. By exploring the effect of the Fall on nature and the relationship between nature and Scripture, it is clear that God's greatest glory is visible only to those who have eyes to see.

The Effect of the Fall on Nature

For Calvin, the Fall did not ruin nature.⁴⁷ In spite of the effects of sin, the constant threat of natural disorder, the beauty of nature was providentially protected by God: 'Notwithstanding, I say that it is the same earth which was created in the beginning.'⁴⁸ So

I do not know if they are listed in his catalogue. Surprisingly, Calvin was not often read by colonial Americans.

⁴⁶ For Edwards' ideas on natural theology, see his 'Observations on the Scripture' and 'The Insufficiency of Reason as a Substitute for Revelation'. He allows for the possibility that nature could reveal God, but because of human sin, right knowledge of the 'one, true God' is not possible with revelation. Calvin referred to natural revelation of God as a 'seed of knowledge' in the *Insti* 1.5.15.

⁴⁷ However, nature does take on a threatening aspect which it did not have before the fall. Schreiner says, 'But nature has not been just weakened; it has actively rebelled against man. The elements are now in disorder and threaten human existence' ('Theater'), 35). God's active restraint protects humanity from the threat of disordered nature. 'Although the beauties of nature were preserved by providence, they were marred by the entrance of disorder and surrounded by the threat of chaos'; however, 'nature continued to reveal the glorious nature of God' (*ibid.*, 39).

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries upon the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* 1.113f., 174f. Quoted in George Williams, 'Christian Attitudes Toward Nature', *Christian Scholars Review* 2 (1971) 13.

nature, originally meant to be a school or theatre of God's glory, continued in its purpose after the Fall.

The Fall blinded the spectators in God's theatre. Although men and women can watch the play, they cannot correctly interpret its meaning. The natural order became an idol: 'it is sufficiently clear from so many corruptions how horrible is the blindness of the human mind.'⁴⁹ Edward Dowey summarized Calvin's thought: 'God did not stop revealing himself in nature at the Fall.... Calvin never forgets for a moment that sin had blinded man to the revelation in creation, but since *sin* does it, the revelation itself is not harmed. Man's receiving apparatus functions wrongly.'⁵⁰ p. 122

In Edwards' theology, the Fall destroyed the ability to 'sense' divine things.⁵¹ According to him, natural loves, 'secondary' or 'inferior' beauty, can be perceived, but men and women can in no way discern the primary purposes of God's revelation in nature. Echoing Calvin's *Institutes*, Edwards pondered humanity's inability to see God's glory:

The invisible things of God are very plainly and clearly to be seen by the things that are made; and the perfections of the Divine Being, his eternal power and Godhead, are very manifest in the works of His hands. And yet grossly absurd notions concerning the Godhead have prevailed in the world.⁵²

He concluded that 'there is an extreme and brutish blindness in things of religion, which naturally possesses the hearts of mankind' as a result of the Fall.⁵³ The secondary beauty of humanity and nature remain intact, but, as with Calvin, they have limited use. The ability to sense superior, or primary, beauty, which could be 'comprehended in divine love', was destroyed at the Fall.⁵⁴ To be able to study the spiritual lessons of nature, the effects of the Fall on humanity—not the creation itself—must be reversed.

The Relationship between Nature and Scripture

In spite of the beauty of the world, 'it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe', wrote Calvin.⁵⁵ Depending upon the example of blinded humanity, he clearly stated the relationship of Scripture and nature:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture ... clearly shows us the true God.⁵⁶

Fallen humanity cannot be taught in the school of creation; men and women can only read nature's lessons with the aid of the spectacles of Scripture. Further to explain this idea,

⁴⁹ *Inst.* 1.5.12.

⁵⁰ Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1852), 73.

⁵¹ The Fall also causes disorder in nature for Edwards, but it is primarily a disorder of perceptions. See Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination*, 57ff.

⁵² Edwards, 'Man's Natural Blindness in the Things of Religion', in *Works* 2.247.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 59.

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 1.6.1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Calvin used another analogy: p. 123 nature is like a labyrinth. Only the 'thread of the Word' can guide humanity through the maze.⁵⁷

Although Perry Miller argued that Edwards set up natural theology as a second form of revelation next to Scripture, Edwards' own works undermine Miller's assertion. Writing on 'Christian Knowledge' Edwards said:

Indeed there is what is called *natural religion*. There are many truths concerning God, and our duty to him, which are evident by the light of nature. But *christian divinity*, properly so called, is not evident by the light of nature; it depends on revelation. Such are our circumstances now in our fallen state, that nothing which it is needful for us to know concerning God, is manifest by the light of nature, in the manner in which it is necessary to know it ... it cannot be said, that we come to the knowledge of any part of christian truth by the light of nature. It is only the work of God, contained in the Old and New Testament, which teaches us christian divinity.⁵⁸

In *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, nature is always subservient to Scripture. The revealed word explains the images of nature. Arguing against Miller's interpretation of Edwards' *Images*, Conrad Cherry said, '[P]erception of the divine revelation in nature is fulfilled only in a confrontation with the revelation of God held forth in the scriptural testimonies to Christ: nature in itself, apart from Scripture and the divine Word which shines through it, has only led the world into "the grossest theological errors".'⁵⁹

Although Edwards did not use Calvin's poetic imagery (as the eyeglass example above) to describe the relationship between nature and Scripture, his commitment to the supremacy of Scriptural revelation is clear. Without the aid of Scripture, 'none would differ from the most ignorant and barbarous heathens. The heathens remain in gross darkness, because they are not instructed, and have not obtained the knowledge of divine truths'.⁶⁰ Edwards closely followed his Calvinistic heritage on this point. p. 124

Nature: Revelation for the Regenerate

Nature reveals God's glory, but only the regenerate can learn its ultimate lessons. Calvin urged his readers to take 'pious delight in the works of God ... to ponder with pious meditation to what end God created them'.⁶¹ It is a sign of true faith 'not to pass over in ungrateful thoughtfulness or forgetfulness those conspicuous powers which God shows forth in his creatures'.⁶² In Calvin's theology of nature only the redeemed can acknowledge and praise God through creation. '[S]ince we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ. The natural order was

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 1.6.3.

⁵⁸ Edwards, 'Christian Knowledge: Or, the Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth', in *Works* 2.158. Spelling, capitalization, and italics are original.

⁵⁹ Cherry, *Theology*, 46. He quotes from Edwards' 'Miscellaneous Observations on Important Theological Subjects'.

⁶⁰ Edwards, 'Christian Knowledge', in *Works* 2.158–59. See also 'Observations on the Scriptures'.

⁶¹ *Inst.* 1.14.20.

⁶² *Ibid.* 1.14.21.

that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity.’⁶³

For those who are saved, creation is, as it should have been, a school. According to Susan Schreiner, ‘the regained ability to study nature profitably is a part of [the] restored image’.⁶⁴ With his vision corrected by the lens of Scripture, Calvin profitably used nature’s images in the *Institutes*, his sermons,⁶⁵ and commentaries. For example, in his commentary on [Psalm 104](#), Calvin used natural beauty to explain spiritual truth. In his explication, Calvin wrote of light, water, wind, earthquakes, wild beasts, floods, valleys, bread, wine, oil, husbandry, mountains, birds, seasons, night and day, trees, and fish.⁶⁶

Drawing from Calvin’s theology, Edwards believed that God imparted an ability to perceive divine beauty.⁶⁷ Edwards called this ability to see ‘a sense of the heart’. For Calvin and Edwards, a corrected sense, a correction accomplished by grace, gives the saint insight into God’s revelation through nature. In this passage, which [p. 125](#) illustrates this new perception, Edwards related his own conversion experience:

The first instance, that I remember, of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things, that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Tim. i.17. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.* As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of glory of the Divine Being.... Not long after I first began to experience these things ... I walked abroad alone ... and as I was walking there, and looking upon the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious *majesty* and *grace* of God, as I know not how to express.... [M]y sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm sweet cast or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity, and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon and stars, in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature.⁶⁸

‘The appearance of everything was altered’ after God imparted a sense of beauty to Edwards’ soul.⁶⁹ His new-found delight was ‘exceedingly different’ from anything he had known as a boy. He has always been fascinated with nature, but after his conversion he could ‘see the visible symbols of [God’s] presence’.⁷⁰

Seeing, tasting, and sensing are words that both Calvin and Edwards used to describe the ability to perceive nature’s beauty. Grace, given by God and explained in Scripture, enables the saint to view the play in God’s theatre, to see the reflection in the mirror, to taste divine sweetness, and to read lessons in the school of nature. Natural knowledge of

⁶³ *Ibid.* 2.6.1.

⁶⁴ Schreiner, ‘Theater’, 168ff.

⁶⁵ For a discussion on the themes of book 1 of the *Inst.* compared to Calvin’s sermons, see Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence dans la prédication de Calvin* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978).

⁶⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (5 vols.; transl. J. Anderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 143–71.

⁶⁷ Erdt (*Jonathan Edwards*, 1–20) has a fine extended discussion comparing Calvin’s and Edwards’ theology on ‘sensing’ God. He highlights many passages from the *Inst.* which Edwards seems to echo in his works.

⁶⁸ Edwards, ‘Personal Narrative’, in *Works* 1.13.

⁶⁹ For more on this, see Edwards’ beautiful sermon, ‘A Divine and Supernatural Light’.

⁷⁰ Miller, ‘Introduction’, in Edwards, *Images*, 33.

God, after the Fall, is a kind of revelation reserved for the regenerate. Only a believer can know God's original intention in nature: knowledge of himself as Creator, Provider, and Redeemer.

CONCLUSION

Perry Miller argued that once Edwards 'grasped that all we know or can know is the idea garnered from the objects of experience', he 'was dedicated to the proposition that the relation of mind to object, of truth **P. 126** to embodiment, is intimate, vital and indissoluble'.⁷¹ This philosophical dedication led Edwards to the conclusion that the images of nature were not separate from truth; they were truth. To Miller, Edwards was a Lockean typologist who fused nature with grace.

Nature was not truth for Jonathan Edwards. He followed Calvin too closely to make such a theological mistake. He carefully maintained the distinction between the visible and invisible worlds: 'creation is *of* God, and *in* God, and *to* God',⁷² but creation never *is* God. The natural order is always a foreshadowing of the greatest Beauty: Christ's excellency.

Although Calvin and Edwards closely linked nature and revelation, Miller's interpretation missed Calvin's passion for natural beauty and therefore missed Edwards' dependence on the reformer. For both, natural revelation condemns fallen humanity. However, for redeemed men and women, nature is a revelation of God's glory which brings the believer in closer union with him. With corrected sight, the regenerate person can use nature to teach Christian truth, see God visibly manifested, acknowledge and praise the Creator, and read the world as a book of types of the world to come. After grace, humanity can respond to God's creation using Calvin's words:

What else can we then do
But stir ourselves to trust,
Invoke, praise, love Him?
For all God's handiwork
Is made for man.⁷³

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⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷² Edwards, *Dissertation*, 120.

⁷³ Calvin, *The Piety of John Calvin: An Anthology Illustrative of the Spirituality of the Reformer of Geneva* (transl. and ed. F. Battles; Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1969), 190.