

# Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory.

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# Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory

Belden C. Lane

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If well-crafted discursive speech is the coin of the realm in theology, metaphor is quintessentially the language of spirituality. John Calvin in sixteenth-century Geneva knew the value of both. His favorite metaphor in speaking of the natural world and its beauty was to describe it as a theatre of God's glory. Every human being, he said, is "formed to be a spectator of the created world and given eyes that he might be led to its author by contemplating so beautiful a representation."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the principal actor in this vast theatrical production is none other than God alone, evoking desire by "showing himself in the visible splendor of his apparel."<sup>2</sup> As Calvin understood it, the contemplation of God's beauty on the great stage of nature is a performance that absorbs the whole of creation. It is the end toward which everything is made.<sup>3</sup>

Spirituality, in Calvin's thinking, is a performance of desire shared by the whole of the universe, a deliberate practice of delight that echoes through every part of the created world. Divine praise is a cosmic as well as human impulse, resulting in transformative relationships at every level. All created reality, extending each moment from the hand of God, is shot through with longing. This is a perception, of course, that is contrary to the still popular stereotype of John Calvin. "People know to disapprove of Calvin," says Marilynne Robinson, "though not precisely why they should."<sup>4</sup> Even those who ought to know better repeat tired, old bromides of Calvin as "the Pope of Geneva, . . . an enemy of all pleasure and distraction, even of the arts and of music."<sup>5</sup>

Hence, the use of the theatre as metaphor may seem to many a strange one for Calvin.<sup>6</sup> People do not usually associate positive images of the theatre with sixteenth-century Geneva. Nor does his particular way of adapting the image mesh with the usual pattern of the *theatrum mundi* as a literary motif recurring through the history of Western thought. From Stoics (like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius) to patristic writers (like John Chrysostom and Augustine) to sixteenth-century Christian Platonists (like Ficino), the metaphor generally conceptualized humans as principal actors in a play determined by a divine Playwright.<sup>7</sup> In this pattern, the **[End Page 1]** "world as theatre" became most often a reflection on the vanity of human life, the failure of human actors to play their parts well. Calvin, by contrast, conceived of the world as a theatre for the contemplation of divine beauty, with *God* assuming the central role at the heart of the action on stage.

The image of the theatre not only allowed Calvin a way of integrating the natural world into his larger theology of divine glory. It also suggested how such a theology could (and should) be lived out in a practice of piety that embraces the whole of creation. Theology and spirituality were inseparable categories for Calvin.<sup>8</sup> He would have approved of William Ames's definition of theology as "the doctrine of living to God."<sup>9</sup> His metaphor of the theatre had the advantage of pointing up the "performance" character of all theological reflection. Theology's work remains unfinished until it is translated finally into worship and ethical action. Theology as performance necessarily completes itself in spirituality. It is inherently communal, practice-oriented, liturgical, and prophetic.

This essay is an effort to understand Calvin's use of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, asking how it connects his theology of nature with his conception of worship in assuring the continuation of the created order. It focuses on the astounding glory of God witnessed by humans on the great stage of this world and the corresponding desire that arises in the hearts of those absorbed in this...

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