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Nature and Human Nature in Calvin's Theology: A Prophetic Voice for Environmental Ethics

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Prophetic ministry, though rooted in the history of ancient Israel, continues to form a vital part of the 21st century Protestant Christian church. In its more historical meaning, this term draws us back to the Old Testament prophets. Faced with new and ever-changing situations, the prophets of ancient Israel repeatedly looked to the Torah for guidance. On the one hand, they drew on these ancient texts. The historic distance of the Torah texts provided them with fresh opportunities for critical insights into their current situation. On the other hand, the prophets also creatively reshaped these ancient texts. The challenges each generation faced brought them fresh insights into the meaning and application of these texts (Brueggeman 2001; Heschel 1962). They entered into a living conversation[1] with their past, thus providing a model of prophetic ministry for future religious communities in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Walter Brueggemann, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, characterizes prophetic ministry as "offering an alternative perception of reality" (2001:116). Central are the two following elements: (1) one's imaginative openness, particularly to alternatives to dominant modes of thought and life, (2) one's concrete engagement in the present in an effort to begin to live out these alternatives.

In keeping with this spirit, this paper seeks to provide an example of such prophetic ministry for the 21st century by looking at John Calvin's theology in conversation with contemporary environmental ethics. The concerns raised by the field of environmental ethics pose a serious challenge to reli-

[1] I would like to acknowledge my colleague Rachel S. Baard for introducing me to this term 'living conversation' in the context of hermeneutical theological method. See (Tracy 2000).

gious communities today. They ask what resources our religious traditions provide for the task of living responsibly in a technologically advanced and environmentally problematic society. My goal in this paper is to demonstrate that John Calvin's 16th century theology and exegesis provide rich resources for this 21st century task. Just as the Old Testament prophets drew faithfully and creatively on the Torah, so Protestant Christians can draw faithfully and creatively on another piece of our past to bring insight to our environmental challenges today.

In what follows I will first take a look at the current discussion on environmental ethics. The emphasis will fall primarily on that strain that attempts to soften boundaries between the concepts 'nature' and 'human beings.' In a second section, I will examine Calvin's theology. An initial look at contemporary Calvin studies and Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* will serve to guide us into Calvin's biblical commentaries, specifically his commentaries on the Gospel of John. Finally, in a concluding section, I will bring Calvin into conversation with environmental ethics. The goal in this final section will be the following: to critically identify the prophetic voice that Calvin can bring to Protestant Christian churches as they seek to minister to the human and nonhuman communities with whom they live.

A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT FOR PROPHETIC MINISTRY: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

As both secular and Christian environmental ethicists address current environmental conditions, many have highlighted the importance of the theoretical task. They ask, 'Are there distortions in our concepts of 'nature' and of 'human beings' that, if corrected and rethought, could fuel beneficial behaviors towards the world of nature?' In this first section, I will identify a few strains of this discussion, strains that challenges the often too-neatly-distinguished categories of the natural and the human.

In the past four decades of environmental ethical thought and practice, the value of human beings has frequently been set *in opposition to* that of nature. More specifically, the unique valuing of human beings above animals and nature has been viewed as inimical to any form of solid environmental ethics. One of the dominant frames for this discussion involves the following two categories: anthropocentrism and biocentrism. A number of thinkers focus on the value of human beings (anthropocentrism) and others on all of life

(biocentrism).[2] In each instance, the specific grouping is taken as the priority value in relation to which all others are to be considered.

For example, biocentrists, or more specifically, ecocentrists such as Aldo Leopold value the biotic community most highly. In this vein, the good of the biotic community trumps the moral worth of individuals. It is not that human individuals are ignored. However, their value is assessed only with reference to the health of the more collective entity known as "land" (Callicott 1998:63).

An Alternative Voice

While this larger discussion has the merit of clarifying the moral categories to be considered and of proposing a number of careful logical arguments, I find a subset of this discussion, perhaps now an emerging alternative voice of this discussion, particularly compelling. Some proponents of this alternative position seek to bring human beings back into the discourse of environmental ethics. 'Are not human beings also part of the "natural" environment?' they ask. Representative of this position is the secular environmental ethicist William Cronon. In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996:35), Cronon points out that humans have been modifying nature for thousands of years. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of a 'nonhuman nature' that is untouched by, unspoiled by, or independent of human beings. Indeed, the very concept of nature is a human cultural construction that reflects human judgments and human values.

Most striking here are those who seek to highlight 'environmental racism' and inequities. They point out that academic discussions on environmental ethics as well as organizations for environmental activism fail to consider the concerns of the poor and of minority human communities (DiChiro 1996). Such communities are often as seriously affected by nuclear waste disposal and lack of clean water as are many of the animal species that environmentalists seek to protect. Yet, these human groups do not even register on what could be termed the environmentalists' radar screens.[3] Thus,

[2] Though this category of 'biocentrism' comprises the distinct voices of biocentrists, ecocentrists, and deep ecologists, among others, I have found the term 'biocentrism' to convey their overall concern over against those of anthropocentrist. For more discussion on groupings of environmental ethical positions, see Pojman 1998. Furthermore, to these two categories, that of animal liberation can be added. For the purposes of clarity and brevity, I will primarily consider biocentric and anthropocentric thinkers in this paper.

the first strain of this alternative voice represents those who would broaden our understanding of 'nature,' seeking to include consideration of the human element and to promote a more equitable understanding of environmental ethics.

Then, there is another type of proponent for this 'alternative voice.' These do not so much seek to bring human beings back into the environmental discussion. Instead, they seek to give nature more weight than it has traditionally received, while maintaining the moral framework of anthropocentrism. They acknowledge that crude instrumental value, that is, evaluating nature solely based on its instrumental value for human beings, does not do justice to the web of relations we share. Nor is it even minimally adequate for correcting destructive human attitudes toward our overtaxed natural environment. Therefore, they meet our earlier mentioned authors in finding some balanced assessment of nature and humans. However, these thinkers caution that we not reject all talk of instrumental value and human distinctiveness. To jettison the uniqueness of human rationality or the importance of cooperative linguistically-based moral discourse would, they fear, have grave consequences to the fabric of our political communities. It would particularly weaken the moral basis for upholding human rights (Derr 1996; Dobel 1998). Therefore, this second approach to an 'alternative voice' seeks to find a more complex understanding of nature and the human person, yet one that maintains the unique value of human life.

Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology: a Three-termed Analysis

The themes mentioned above are being sounded among Christian thinkers and scholars of the Christian religion. However, Christian anthropology places weight on the spiritual aspect of human life. As a result, the playing field shifts to a large degree. A serious new advantage seems to be added to the stark anthropocentric position, leaving little room for the alternative voice we just examined.

This can be construed as follows. Secular anthropocentric thinkers often locate the distinctive value of humans in a characteristic that distinguishes

[3] For example, Ramachandra Guha has noted the eVect in the Indian subcontinent, when environmental ethics are based on an understanding of nature that excludes all human elements. Ironically, because human interests are often entirely excluded from the equation, wildlands preservation has beneWted not only the tiger, the elephant, and the rhinoceros, but the wealthy segment of human society as well (Guha 1998:271).

them from animal life.[4] Rationality holds the honored position here, following in the tradition of Descartes and Kant. Self-consciousness and the capacity for conceptual language are also added to the list by some (Peterson 2001). Now, with the emphasis on the spiritual, Christians add an even weightier item to the list. Christian theologians have long identified the eternal soul, the image of God, and the spiritual dimension of existence as the locus of our relationship to God. The religion scholar Anna Peterson explains, "The soul links humans' origins, capacities, and ultimate destiny to God and, thus, forever divides them from the 'nonspiritual' part of nature" (Peterson 2001:29).[5] Thus, equipped with spirituality, the distinctive value of humans over animals, plants, or ecosystems acquires a religious sanction.

However, this conclusion does not present the whole picture. Along with the spiritual dimension of human life, Christianity also adds a new player to the mix. Human beings do not now relate only to each other, to animals, and to their natural environment. Now they find themselves in relationship to a God who makes claims on them as both the Creator of all nature, humans included, and their Redeemer. As a result, the spiritually-buttressed human distinctiveness mentioned above does not stand alone. It carries with it a reorientation of human life toward God. As a result of the Christian emphasis on relationship with God, we find in both Christian anthropocentric and biocentric thinking strong resonances of human subordination, dependence, responsibility, and gratitude.

The questions that I would like to raise are the following. 'In what manner can Protestant Christians contribute to the 'alternative voice' mentioned above?' 'Are there resources within the Protestant Christian tradition for a creative reframing of the relationship between humans and nature?' We have just now briefly mentioned the spiritual dimension to human identity and the reorientation toward God that Christianity as a whole brings to the table. Before looking to Calvin's theology as a resource for responding to these questions for the Protestant Christian community, I would first like to mention a group of thinkers who frame the alternative environmental positions mentioned earlier within a Christian framework.

[4] Ecofeminist thinkers have further articulated the link between uniqueness and superiority, in a manner that holds parallels for human relations to nature (Warren 1990:125-146; Peterson 2001).

[5] True, from early Christendom, the material creation has by no means been rejected as evil. Still, the spiritual life of the human being has long held a privileged position in Christian theology.

This grouping consists of Thomas Sieger Derr, Max L. Stackhouse, and Anna L. Peterson.

In *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism* (1996), Thomas Sieger Derr rejoins our earlier-mentioned theme of social equity concerns and their relationship to environmental ethics. According to Derr, the environmental movement has long sought to align itself alongside the advocates for social justice. Concern for the rights of nature seem to be a natural extension of concern for the rights of women and racial minorities. Derr accurately describes this sentiment, when he writes:

> In theory it [the environmental movement] should have been perfect. Everyone is for life and health, clean air and pure water; how could there be any quarrel with a movement devoted to these ends? (Derr 1973/75: 7)

Yet, Derr cautions those who would look to nature as the primary locus of value. To so locate value in nature does not simply extend the secular call for rights and equality to nature. Nor does it simply add a new beneficiary to the Christian call to love one's neighbor, feed the poor, and aid the oppressed. Instead, a serious complication arises. If nature becomes the primary locus of value, then these values of respect for rights, equality, love, care and freedom from oppression come into question. It is not that nature is devoid of values that would be congruous with these. The harmonious balance and biodiversity of life observed in ecosystems cohere with such values. Yet, nature is also the realm of great violence, "of the food chain, of brute struggle, and painful death" (Derr 1996:27). As many secular environmental thinkers have put it, it is the world of 'tooth and claw.'

If nature provides such a plurality of different ethical values, how then are we to choose from among them? According to Derr, it is essential to acknowledge that we start with values from outside of nature. Foremost among Derr's concerns is to preserve our basis for upholding both human rights and respect for individual human beings. To preserve our basis for such social justice concerns, he maintains, one must look to a value outside of nature to guide our reading of nature. For Christians, this does not mean primarily looking to human nature or to our national citizenship. "Theologically, we guarantee human rights," explains Derr, "...by the radical equality of the love of God, the concept of an 'alien dignity,' and a grace bestowed on us which does not belong to our humanness as such (Derr 1996:30)."

In *Public Theology and Political Economy* (1991), Max L. Stackhouse similarly notes that Christianity, unlike religions that view nature as sacred, views God as creator of, yet distinct from, the natural world. Because nature is a subordinate reality to God, nature is not the absolute or even basic guide to our existence. The standards of the Creator, not the creation, serve as guide in our attitude toward the gift of nature. Thus, Derr and Stackhouse help to begin our conversation between Protestant Christianity and environmental ethics.

To briefly summarize our discussion thus far, Christianity introduces a spiritual element to human identity. However, it does not follow from this that human beings automatically receive greater value, thus one-sidedly buttressing the position of anthropocentrists. Rather, in keeping with the spirit of the alternative voices we have heard thus far, complexity is added to the categories of nature and the human. That is, the spiritual element of human life carries with it a reorientation toward God. As Derr and Stackhouse point out, such a reorientation allows the possibility of looking to God for standards of value rather than to the subordinate and morally ambiguous world of nature. As a result, the basis for human rights, human compassion, and social justice concerns is maintained.

Max Stackhouse captures this distinctive Christian contribution to environmental ethics, when he describes it in terms of a 'three term analysis.' The discussion expands from that of nature and the human, a two-termed analysis, to that of (1) creation, partially distorted in the 'fall,' (2) humans, who are called to repair and improve creation, and (3) God, whose relationship to us as Creator and Redeemer provides us with privileges as well as standards and responsibilities.

TWO BRIEF COMMENTS ON METHOD

Now, at this point in my study, I would like to make two points related to method. This will provide a transition to our examination of Calvin's theology. First, for a method in the bridging of disciplines that this study involves, I draw on the work of Selya Benhabib (1992) and Wentzel vanHuyssteen (1999). Furthermore, in attempting to bring into conversation not only distinct disciplines but disciplines that span distinct time periods, I draw further on the work of Jean Porter(1990) and Ellen T. Charry

(1997).[6] Though it is not possible, in this relatively short paper, to address the content of these authors' work in detail, I will make the following observation regarding the work of Benhabib and vanHuyssteen.

Both these authors highlight the possibility and profitability of dialogue, even when consensus is unlikely and worldviews diverge sharply. Once one thinks beyond the goal of consensus, one can allow for an *ongoing interaction* that takes on a life of its own, so to speak, allowing the richness of each field's thinking to be brought into contact, each party's questions to be challenged by the others, and subtle patterns to emerge. Applied in this study, the problems faced by environmental ethics are brought into contact with John Calvin's 16th Century work. Though Calvin certainly did not address the same concerns, and though he held differing assumptions, this contact may provide for creative and challenging avenues not otherwise apparent to environmental thinkers.

My second comment on method is the following: Since my emphasis will soon fall more on the human person than on nature directly, I would like to mention the work of Anna L. Peterson. Her work provides support for my study's assumption that human nature and environmental ethics stand in close interconnection. It also begins to fill out in greater detail the character of this 'three-termed analysis' mentioned earlier.

In *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (2001), Anna L. Peterson underlines the connection between human nature and nonhuman nature. Joining the secular environmental ethicist J. Baird Callicott, Peterson contends that our understanding of human selfhood shapes our attitude toward nature. Anthropology stands in close relation to environmental ethics.

Peterson lays the groundwork for her argument by illustrating how assumptions about human nature shape our economic and political arrangements. For example, looking at political liberalism, Peterson explains that social contract theory rests on a conviction that people are rational, autonomous, and self-interested. Its moral claims, such as the emphasis on rights to freedom from interference, make sense only in light of this anthropology. Indeed, with an individualistic view of human nature, such rights seem not only 'good,' but also 'natural.' Anthropology thus has a strong bearing on economic and political ethics.

[6] Ellen T. Charry (1997) provides a particularly interesting "aretegenic" approach to premodern theologians.

Peterson now applies this thesis to environmental ethics. Those practices and lifestyles that affect the natural environment, Peterson claims, also rest on assumptions about human nature. Along with the ethicist J. Baird Callicott, Peterson makes the following claim: We cannot begin to resolve ecological crises without transforming our thinking about what it means to be human.[7]

For example, Peterson holds that the anthropology stemming from the apostle Paul, and continuing into Protestant Christianity through Luther, provides highly ambiguous ethical implications for our treatment of nature. According to Peterson's interpretation, Paul adopts an anthropological framework that Peterson calls "'in but not of' the world" (Peterson 2001:32).[8] More specifically, Peterson underscores that, for the apostle Paul, redemption involves the creation of a 'new man.' This means that the old creation, whether human body or the material world, is not the Christian's true home. He or she is encouraged to look beyond it to the new creation. The concept of a new creation, in Peterson's interpretation, thus gives only impermanent, marginal value to nature. The old creation is being replaced and therefore bears no ultimate significance.

In summary, Peterson contends that, in looking at human nature, we find there a significant factor of our attitude towards nature as a whole. Our anthropologies thus do not necessarily oppose or compete with, but rather, meaningfully inform our environmental ethics. I now draw on Peterson's insights as I examine Calvin's view of the redeemed human person as a conversation partner for environmental ethics, finding here new possibilities both to nuance Peterson's interpretation of Pauline and Protestant Christianity and to supplement Derr and Stackhouse's earlier-mentioned contributions to this conversation.

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[7]Peterson draws on Callicott 1994. She further draws on the work of Max Oelschlaeger (1994), who has identified utilitarian individualism as contributing to the destructive treatment of the natural environment.

[8]For a similar assessment of the Christian tradition, though conceived according to different categories, see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985). This work involves a closer, more historically-sensitive examination of a number of Christian theologians including, Augustine and Luther.

A PROPHETIC VOICE: JOHN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY

The thesis that this final section of paper will test is that Protestant theology, particularly in the Reformed tradition, contains resources for a 'theologically anthropocentric environmental ethic' that does maintain the serious moral considerability of nature. Yet, surprisingly, the core of such an environmental ethic is not primarily a strong valuation of nature. The core of this ethic is *a view of the human self that is reoriented to God* and, by consequence, reoriented towards human communities and the natural world. In what follows, we will examine the character of this reorientation more closely.

Nature and the Human Person: Susan Schreiner's 1991 Study and Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*

In what follows, I will first take a look at the work of the Calvin scholar Susan Schreiner, in relation to some of my own observations on Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*. After this, I will turn our attention to one of Calvin's biblical commentaries.

In her 1991 work, *The Theater of His Glory*, Susan Schreiner makes a significant and sorely needed contribution to our understanding of Calvin and nature. Most significant for our purposes are the two following observations, one relating to the natural world and one to the redeemed human person.

First, in Schreiner's interpretation of Calvin, the natural world that God has created remains in existence despite the fall of humanity into sin. Though sin certainly carries distorting effects for all of creation, it does not annihilate the natural realm. Calvin's view of nature at its basic level recognizes the continued existence of nature. Even more interesting than the fact of this continued existence, however, is the manner in which Calvin characterizes it. Though affirming the continued integrity of the natural world, Calvin sought to avoid giving nature too great an independence from God. This is most visible when Calvin underscores nature's need for God. Already inherently fragile at the creation, the nature of the cosmos became positively threatened with the fall. The danger of disorder, chaos, and collapse, so vivid in Calvin's view of cosmology and history, shaped his view of providence into one in which God powerfully restrains and stabilizes the created order. Therefore, Schreiner presents a picture of nature as continu-

ing to exist with an integrity of its own, though with a deepened dependence on God for the preservation of its order.

Second, not only does Calvin affirm the continuation of nature, Calvin also affirms the continuation of *human* nature. Now, this often elicits surprise. Is Calvin not the theologian who most ardently spoke of the total depravity of human nature and the need for Christians to deny this human self? Nevertheless, Schreiner keenly observes that, not only the human body, but human reason and the human will as well, continue to exist in us, even after our fall into sin.

Most interesting for the subject of my study, Schreiner extends her examination of human nature into the spiritual realm, that is, into the redemptive transformation of the human person. In this area, Schreiner underscores Calvin's belief that, throughout the process of sanctification, everything primal to human nature remains in existence. That is, "the primary nature created by God remains, is reclaimed, purified and transformed."

Schreiner articulates the character of this continuity in a manner that richly portrays the role of the human capacities to will and to reason. However, in her efforts to underscore the continuation of human nature in the process of renewal, Schreiner often speaks of the human person in terms that suggest a certain independence from and a degree of opposition to God's involvement. Though Schreiner does mention divine involvement in the Christian person's sanctification, at the end of her chapter on "Creation Set Free," the reader is left with a portrait of sanctification that can be described as follows.

Though God indeed must provide the impetus for human renewal, and though, once begun, this process continues to involve God in a number of ways, the natural human faculties are not for this reason relegated to a merely passive role in the process of Christian renewal. On the contrary, natural human faculties persist and do so actively in the Christian life. The natural, redirected will strives toward the goal of perfection. The renewed mind gradually perceives both God's benevolence and the order and beauty present in nature.[9]

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[9]For example, Schreiner writes: "But this purity is attained only gradually; holiness is actively and daily pursued by the continual striving of the redirected human will... The ideas of 'growth,' 'struggle,' 'combat,' and 'striving' governed Calvin's view of the spiritual life"(Schreiner 1991:103).

Such a portrayal does not contradict Calvin entirely. A number of passages do in fact provide solid support for Schreiner's portrayal. However, at this point, I would like to suggest an observation that differs in a subtle but significant way from Schreiner's own insight that nature somehow continues and functions positively even in redemption. This observation is the following: Schreiner's portrayal seems to insufficiently emphasize and integrate a crucial aspect of Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life. Christian renewal, for Calvin, involves a deep dependence on God at every level of the process. Recognition of one's need for the intervention of God's Spirit colors every aspect of this process.

In other words, after laying her emphasis on the active continuation of human nature, Schreiner does not proceed to strongly qualify this focus in light of human poverty and dependence on God. This is particularly surprising in light of her earlier-mentioned analysis of the integrity of the natural order. There, Schreiner demonstrated the continued existence of the natural world as a whole, including throughout a strong effort to qualify the integrity of nature with nature's precarious condition. Nature, she explained, stands in continual need for God's preserving and renewing activity. Surprisingly, one finds such concerns relegated to the background in Schreiner's treatment of human nature and human renewal.[10]

My contention is that Calvin's portrayal of human renewal bears far greater resemblance to Schreiner's earlier portrayal of the natural order than Schreiner herself allows. This can be particularly seen in Book II of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes.* I would like to highlight two quotations that demonstrate Calvin's overriding concern that the regenerated human person lives in deep dependence upon God.

In a passage where the continuity of human nature is clearly at hand, Calvin reflects on the implications of the possessive pronoun "our." To set the context for this quotation, Calvin has been speaking of good works. Good works, he explains, are often said to be "ours" in Scripture and common parlance. Calvin suggests the following:

> What does the possessive pronoun "ours" signify to them but that what is otherwise by no means due to us *becomes ours by God's loving-kindness* and free gift? (*Institutes* II.5.14)

[10] This is even more surprising given that Schreiner characterizes both nature and the human in terms of order. Referring to the work of Ronald S. Wallace and Lucien Joseph Richard, Schreiner depicts this sanctification of the human person as the gradual restoration of order.

Schreiner's question, and our own question, regarding the continuity of the old nature and the new nature are recast here. Rather than ask simply whether 'what was once ours' still remains 'ours' when we are redeemed, Calvin would have us simultaneously ask 'who is the One who has given us what is now ours?'

In these early chapters of Book II, we find Calvin referring extensively to a biblical passage from the Gospel of John that shows a similar concern. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Calvin gives a detailed analysis of the parable of the vine and branches, as follows:

> If we no more bear fruit of ourselves than a branch buds out when it is plucked from the earth and deprived of moisture, *we ought not to seek any further the potentiality of our nature for good*. Nor is this conclusion doubtful: "Apart from me you can do nothing"[John 15:5]. He does not say that we are too weak to be sufficient unto ourselves, but in reducing us to nothing he excludes all estimation of even the slightest ability. *Engrafted in Christ* we bear fruit like a vine ... Now Christ simply means that we are dry and worthless wood *when we are separated from him*, for apart from him we have no ability to do good (*Institutes* II.3.9).

The theme of reliance on God, mentioned earlier, stands out clearly in this quotation. In fact, Calvin's concern seems to be less between nature and the redeemed condition. The more important concern for Calvin seems to discontinuity between self-reliance and reliance on God. Thus, in the last step of our analysis of Calvin, I would like fill out my snapshot of the redeemed human person by turning our attention to Calvin's commentary on the Gospel of John.

Calvin's Commentary on the Gospel of John

In recent years, Calvin scholars have begun to devote greater attention to Calvin's commentaries. Scholars such as Barbara Pitkin (1999), Elsie Anne McKee (1989), and Richard Muller (2000) have observed that studies on the commentaries help to give a fuller picture of Calvin's theology, showing areas of Calvin's thought guided largely by the concerns of the biblical text, concerns that Calvin may not have chosen to address in his more polemically and 'locus' guided *Institutes*. In fact, given Calvin's own explicit intention that the *Institutes* be used as an aid to the reading of Scriptures, it seems both appropriate and important that we look at Calvin's commentaries in shaping our understanding of his theology. In what follows, I will examine

one passage from the commentary on the Gospel of John, chosen with reference to the biblical passage just quoted above. While consideration of the full commentary at hand and of Calvin's historical context would be methodologically more rigorous, the length of this study will require that I defer such examinations to my upcoming lengthier study on this subject. This paper can thus be considered a preliminary exploration.

In turning to Calvin's commentary, *The Gospel According to St. John*, published in 1553, six years before the final edition of the *Institutes*, I draw our attention to the passage of John 15:1-21. This includes the passage quoted above, along with some textual context that addresses similar themes and phrases. The main passage concerns the extended metaphor in which Christ describes himself as the vine, the Father as the 'husbandman,' and believers as the branches.

Three observations stand out in our analysis of Calvin's comments here. First, the dominant theme in this passage bears close resemblance to the theme of reliance on God mentioned in our earlier analysis of the 1559 *Institutes*. Calvin describes the main point of the vine metaphor as follows: "The heart of the comparison," he writes, "is that by nature we are barren and dry save in so far as we have been engrafted into Christ, and draw new and extraneous power from Him."[11]

Now, Calvin focuses much attention on the connection between the branch and the vine, that is, on the believer's connection to Christ. He uses a number of verbs to express this idea: "engrafted," "implanted," "planted in," "take root," "joined." In almost all these uses, the main idea expressed is that we can bear no good fruit, do nothing pleasing to God, or follow what Christ commands of us, unless we are 'in Him' in these ways. Calvin thus expresses ideas similar to those observed in our analysis of the *Institutes*. However, beyond this observation of the congruity between this commentary passage and the *Institutes,* we cannot make significant conclusions regarding the strength of these ideas in Calvin's overall thought. This is due to the likelihood that, in his commentaries, Calvin followed the themes provided by biblical text rather than those of particular interest to him.

Nevertheless, the commentaries give us an opportunity to see how Calvin characterizes and elaborates on this theme of 'reliance on God' or 'being engrafted in Christ.' For our second point, then, we turn to this characterization. Most interesting here is Calvin's repeated use of the terms 'continu-

[11]All of the following quotations are taken from Calvin 1959:93-196.

ance,' 'continual,' and 'continually.' These terms appear already five times in the first four pages: "believers need continual cultivating," "they produce nothing good unless God is continually at work," "that…they may learn how necessary is the continuance of grace," and "that they may be the more stirred to meditate on it continually." Most notable is the following passage, "For, just as the commencement of strength comes from Him, so also its uninterrupted continuance." The connection between the believer and Christ is thus portrayed as having an ongoing character. The Christian life takes on a dynamic of persistent connection to Christ. The believer must be continually engrafted, planted, or rooted in Christ.

However, given that this horticultural metaphor leaves much to wonder about regarding the rational, emotional, volitional aspects of human life, we are led to ask what more this commentary passage can tell us about the character of the Christian life.[12] What is it that Christians are called to do or receive continually? The portions of the commentary including the vine metaphor as well as those just following give us a number of clues. Here, Calvin refers more concretely to prayer, trust, mutual love, and patience. However, the references to prayer are the most salient and most closely connected explicitly with 'reliance or dependence on God.' For example, Calvin writes, "[W]hen Christ here exhorts us to perseverance, we must not rely on our own efforts and activity, but pray to Him who commands us, to confirm us in His love." Again, a few pages later, Calvin echoes this, "And, indeed, the fact that most of the teachers either droop through laziness or are utterly defeated through despair happens simply because they are sluggish in their duty of prayer." Thus, Calvin's characterization of the Christian life in terms of 'being continually engrafted in Christ' may be closely related to the practice of prayer.

Our third and final point is that Calvin expresses little interest in the continuity between unredeemed human nature, on the one hand, and redeemed human nature, on the other. When he does attend to this theme in this commentary passage, one could almost say that Calvin expresses complete discontinuity between the two. For example, Calvin writes, "…man's nature is unfruitful and destitute of all good. For no man has the nature of the vine until he is implanted in Him." A little later, and more starkly, Calvin continues, "Christ is not concerned with what the branch has by nature

[12] I would like to recognize Bruce L. McCormack's influence in my asking of this question.

before it is joined to the vine, but means rather that we begin to become branches when we are united to Him. Indeed, Scripture shows that we are useless and dry wood before we are in Him."

However, I hesitate to conclude from this that Calvin holds a view that unredeemed human nature stands in discontinuity from redeemed human nature. This is due to Schreiner's own observations to the contrary in others of Calvin's texts, Calvin's tendency to write in a manner that seeks not only to accurately describe but also to persuade, and Calvin's explicit desire in this commentary to refute the Roman Catholic position in which human nature holds some capacity to contribute to salvation. Nevertheless, with no hesitation, I draw from these and our other two observations the following conclusion: Though this biblical passage from the Gospel of John afforded Calvin with ample opportunity to elaborate on the continuity in human nature and redeemed human nature, Calvin highlighted the passage's theme of self-reliance far more than this continuity. Amidst the view that Calvin upholds the continuity between original human nature and redeemed human nature, one must give heavy weight to the believer's continual reliance on God, one that Calvin characterizes in terms of engrafting into Christ and that may take concrete form in a life of persistent prayer.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a number of environmental ethicists and Protestant theologians have drawn on pre-modern Christian theologies in order both to assess past Christian attitudes towards nature and offer resources to shape contemporary attitudes. Were theorists, theologians, as well as church communities to draw on Susan Schreiner's analysis of Calvin, they would find numerous resources for a positive valuation of nature.

The following two stand out. First, the continuing existence and integrity of nature would challenge them to not dismiss nature as if it were destroyed by sin. Yet, their acknolwedgement of nature's integrity would not translate into an independent natural realm that could act as a moral guide.

Second, the continued active involvement of human nature in both our earthly, civil lives and in the Christian life of renewal would lend additional value to nature. Drawing upon the work of Anna Peterson on anthropology and environmental ethics, we can suggest that such a positive religious teaching on human nature in the Christian's spiritual life lends itself to an equally

positive attitude towards the natural world. This stands in particular contrast to a prevalent view among environmental thinkers that the Protestant Christian spiritual life is rooted in a completely new nature or new creation, one that is understood primarily in opposition to an old, fallen nature. While in this latter conception of the Christian spiritual life, all that relates to the spiritual separates us from the rest of nature, Schreiner's emphasis on a continuous human nature connects this spiritual life back to creation and nature.

However, if, as my study suggests, the continued active involvement of human nature in the Christian life were strongly qualified, if human need for God's presence were brightly highlighted, then the value given to nature would take on a subtle but significantly different character. Fragility and dependence would characterize both the nonhuman natural world and human beings. As a result, nonhuman and human nature would receive comparable qualified valuations, a substantial corrective to arrogant and egocentric tendencies in anthropocentric environmental ethics. Both human nature and the larger world of nature would be valued as a good creation and qualified as precarious, continually on the verge of chaos or sin.

Furthermore, the particularly positively-valued spiritual dimension of human life would lose much of its traditional power to separate human beings from nature. Human spiritual uniqueness would bind us to God based on no human capacity or possession. Our link to God would be based not on a possession unique to humans, but on a relationship, a relationship based on dependence and continuously maintained by grace.

Therefore, Calvin's view of nature and the human does indeed provide resources for prophetically shaping an environmental ethic, one that can be summarized as follows: A view of the human person that recognizes unique human spiritual life, without lending this uniqueness an unqualified value and independent status of its own. A Calvin-based environmental ethic is a generous ethic, one focused not on human self, human need, and human desire, but on God, and through God, on others, both human and natural.

In decisions in which the needs of humans come into conflict with those of nature, such as in the creation of a protected forest preserve in an area that would otherwise provide much-needed logging jobs, the unique relationship between God and humans may indeed lead us to favor the economic interests of the human community, particularly those of disadvantaged human communities. This places us within the positions that 'anthropocentric' ethicists would take. However, before our readers throw their hands up in frustration that Christianity once again gives little value to non-

human nature, let me point out the following. Our observations in this study would strongly limit the extent to which we could focus on these human concerns. Our favoring of human economic concerns would not be done in a stark, one-sided manner. Rather, our observations in this study would lead us to consider God's intentions for the whole of creation and to strive for a balanced ethic in which the forest ecosystem is respectfully and perhaps sustainably used for such human economic wellbeing.

Even more importantly, our study provides not only a framework for such an economic calculus, but a deep-seated *motivation* to engage in natural conservation, one lodged in our very understanding of our humanity before God. And finally, this self-understanding can contribute to a deeper theoretical analysis, one in which we critically evaluate the core philosophies that shape our economic practices and attempt to discern whether they are congruent with our theological anthropology. In keeping with Walter Brueggeman's portrait of prophetic ministry, then, as we engage the concerns of our contemporary world, we allow alternative views of nature and the human to capture our imaginations and begin to give concrete shape to our future, even if this must happen in halting efforts amidst the ambiguities, frustrations, and difficulties of the present.

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