

# Calvin Speaks



No. 49

@1985, Geneva Ministries

July, 1985

## Calvin and Art by Professor P. W. Buys

(This edition of Calvin Speaks is a selection from P. W. Buys's essay "Calvin and Art." Prof. Buys's complete essay, along with two other articles on the same subject, is found in a collection of essays entitled *Calvinus Reformatory: His Contribution to Theology, Church, and Society*. This book was published in 1982 in South Africa, and was imported by Geneva Ministries for sale in the United States. To our knowledge, we are the only place in the USA that has this book for sale, and we have fewer than 100 copies remaining. Information on ordering is found at the end of this newsletter. Prof. Buys teaches in the Department of Apologetics and Ethics, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, in the Republic of South Africa. In this section, Prof. Buys summarizes Calvin's viewpoints from his writings, but to save space, footnotes have been omitted.)

Calvin's ideas on beauty, which underlie his concept of art, can be expressed in the following main outline: **In the first place beauty should never** be regarded in isolation from the vision of the Being of God. In the second place, beauty has to be seen in conjunction with God as the Creator. In the third place one has to look at the question about what happens to the beauty of the universe as a result of the Fall. **Fourthly**, the deed of liberation of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit will have an effect on the beauty-centered activities of mankind.

### God and Beauty

Calvin's whole philosophy, including his views on beauty, should always be regarded from one central vision: God and His revelation in the universe.

In any effort to reflect on beauty the Being of God has to be regarded as being foremost. But to want to know God in His essential Being is as hazardous as looking directly into the sun. Mankind is like inhabitants of a valley. High above man the light is encircled

by clouds. Only those few who climb the mountain peaks can see the light more clearly. God reveals the luminosity of His glory when one of these rays penetrates to mankind. He reveals in this way that mankind will see the beauty of His glory, so that man may learn to worship Him.

Beauty shines exquisitely from the presence of God. Glorious splendor and presence—these are the two characteristic traits of the beauty of the Being of God.

The revelation of beauty by God is Trinitarian in nature. The Father is the source of everything—of beauty too. But this beauty would have remained concealed within the Being of the Father, if He had not chosen to reveal it in the glory of the Son. The glory of the Father has been in the process of being revealed in the Son since before creation. It is the like the formal appearance of a king in all his splendor, with his crown, his sceptre, his purple mantle. As the Father imprinted His Spirit in the Son, Who was in the image of God, so the Spirit, which emanates from the Father and the Son, [placed] his dynamic, shaping power on creation, so that God could be glorified through creation in various ways. The Holy Spirit, therefore, is the divine Artist, who gave His shaping beauty to the universe.

### Beauty and Creation

Before creation (what is meant is probably the *creatio secunda*, Genesis 1:3ff.) there was **no beauty** visible in the universe, also no order. Darkness covered everything. At a single sign from God the limitless, amorphous and chaotic mass of matter assumed glorious and beautiful shape.

God is the great Artist and the Architect, Who **illuminates** heaven and earth with His glory. The stars especially are masterpieces in which the wisdom of God is made apparent. The angels, man, plants, flowers, animals, birds, all that God created, all of these are beautiful.

## Beauty and the Fall

Creation, which once was the mirror of Divine Beauty, was shattered into splinters by the coming of sin. Man **who** looks at one of the shards now sees only his own reflection. Everything that Satan touches he deforms. The earth has been cursed because of sin. Everything becomes ugly, rotten, and miserable. It is like flowers of which the stems have been cut off—at first they still look beautiful, but gradually they wilt and then wither away.

Through the Fall man loses his true insights. He is blinded. Satan attempts to divert him by **pseudo-beauty**. This pseudo-beauty is a false light, an outward splendor, a false harmony to which man becomes addicted.

Sin has, however, not succeeded in destroying creation fully. In a universe in which good and evil, heaven and hell, are intermingled, all that is heavenly, pure, beautiful, and true serves to eliminate the scum that is floating on the surface.

## Beauty and Re-creation

God does not leave the fallen creation to its own devices. He sends His Son to save the world. Not only Israel but all the nations share in the mercy which is won by the Son — Israel receives the special mercy and the heathens the general dispensation.

The special mercy deploys in Jerusalem, the joy of the whole world for the sake of its beauty (Ps. **48:3**). There Jesus Christ, in whom all the **fulness—and** therefore also the beauty of the Godhead — is embodied is crucified (**Col. 2:9**). At the destined moment the glory of Christ will be disseminated to the heathen nations.

Whatever has been deformed by the Fall, is reformed through the redemption, the deliverance of Christ, and restored to beauty. He also opens the eyes of the redeemed so that they can once more see the beauty of God's glory in all His works.

## The Essence of Beauty

Beauty, for Calvin, is not an impersonal principle as it was among the Greeks. It is equally not, as the **Thomists** would have it, a cathedral which is gazed at from the heights by a sanctified intellectual without an awareness of the tragedy of the Fall.

For Calvin beauty is the emanation, the radiation of the glory of God. Wherever God is to be found, there is beauty to be found. The constitutive elements of beauty are the following. Firstly: clarity, light, reflection of the glory of God. Secondly: harmony, order, as revealed in the creation of God, His great work of art. Thirdly: **fulness**, perfection, excellence, ultimateness. . . . It should be unequivocally clear: Beauty is not something that can stand on its own, an independent greatness which has its own existence. "Beauty is an aspect of God, a reflex of His attributes, a reflection of His works," writes **Wencelius**.

For Calvin, the beauty of the universe is like a vast fresco which is unrolled throughout the entire course of time. It looks like a gigantic triptych which hinges on the Fall and the Redemption. The first panel is creation in all of its glory. The second is fallen man, who is gradually in the shape of the chosen, being led to God through Christ. The third is in the process of being painted now: mankind **on his march to his** eternal destination. With this triptych in mind, one could fruitfully look at Calvin's ideas on art in the light of his ideas on beauty. . . .

(The remainder of this essay is in **Calvinus Reformer**. We have fewer than 100 copies left of this 325 page book. The price is \$9.95. Also, we have about 80 copies left of Calvin's book, *Concerning Scandals*, translated by Fraser and published by Eerdmans in 1978. In this book Calvin refutes many of the charges lodged against the Reformers, particularly the charge that they were schismatic. This book has been out of print for several years. The copies we have are for sale at \$5.00 each. If you order both books, we can give you a discount: both for \$13.00. If you want either or both, we recommend you order soon, because when our stock is depleted, we will not be able to get any more.)

Calvin Speaks is published occasionally by Geneva Ministries. A free six-month subscription is available to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Address: P.O. Box 8376, Tyler, TX 75711. A donation, tax deductible, is requested. Checks should be made out to Geneva Ministries. Permission to reproduce these sermons, in whole or in part, is granted, provided the **name and address** of Calvin Speaks is included.