Calvin, Nature, and Women

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Introduction

When we say, "We are persuaded from Scripture that masculinity and femininity are rooted in who we are by nature," what do we mean by "nature"? How do we relate our view of nature to our understanding of the role of women? In this article, I will examine how John Calvin, to whom contemporary Reformed churches owe so much for their confessions and practices, used the argument from nature to understand the role of women as different from that of men.

When Calvin uses the term "nature," at first glance, it appears that he is referring to the creation account, the state before the fall. For example, in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2:12, where Paul addresses the issue of women teaching and subsequently the account of Eve, Calvin explains woman is not entitled to teach, because "woman . . . by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey." Calvin appears to suggest that woman is subject to man by nature because the subjection was ordained in the creation story. Nonetheless, for Calvin, many other things also are regulated by nature. For instance, the need for a distinction of ranks in society is based on natural reason: "[T]he political distinction of ranks is not to be repudiated, for natural reason itself dictates this in order to take away confusion." Breast feeding, for Calvin, is divinely constituted by nature: "[H]e [God] constitutes nurses; and they who deem it a hardship to nourish their own offspring, break . . . the sacred bond of nature." Nature teaches respect for parents: "the honor of parents, . . . [t]he honor due to the old . . . is dictated by nature itself." Calvin regards these things as ordered by nature, yet they are not parts of the creation story. This suggests that, in Calvin's mind, certain things are already determined by nature whether or not they are in the pre-fall creation story. How, then, does Calvin decide certain things are ordered by nature? Why does Calvin use the concept of nature in his theology? What impact does this argument of nature have upon his understanding of the role of women?

The term nature can mean many things. In this article, however, I use it to mean either God-assigned purpose, current structure and tendency, or the natural world, and discuss the term primarily in light of the first two. My thesis is that, in his application of natural law, Calvin's view of women was shaped by his view of nature, which reflected cultural views in his time about women. I will discuss this by examining Calvin's view of nature, his use of natural law, and his views of women.

Nature

The idea that one "should live in accordance with nature" was "one of the most ancient and pervasive moral ideas," although the concept of nature has changed over time. Greek philosophers had different concepts of nature. For example, the earlier Greek philosophers thought that nature was a blind and nondirective force that operated by chance. But, for Plato, nature, as an intelligent product of God, was something human reason could understand. For Aristotle, nature was a cause of order, which humans could not explain. The Christian approach to nature was to see it as God's creation.

Calvin often uses the concept of nature in his works. He appeals to nature or something related to nature in his expressions such as "order of nature (ordo naturae—ordre de nature); the 'sense of nature' (sensus naturae); the 'voice of nature itself' (vox ipsius naturae), 'nature itself dictates' (ipsa natura dictat); and simply 'by nature' (naturaliter), or variant forms such as 'the law engraoven (or implanted) on all by nature' (legem naturaliter omnibus insi- tam)." Calvin has a high regard for nature: "This, indeed, was the genuine order that the fabric of the world should be the school in which we might learn piety, and thence be conducted to eternal life and perfect felicity." In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:14, he writes, "Paul again sets nature before them as the teacher of what is proper." Nature teaches certain order and governance:

We began to handle this point, why S. Paul does in this place namely forbid women to meddle with the office of teaching: and it is this, because the Church of God must have a certain order and governance . . . . For it were a great shame for us not to have that honesty at the least which nature teaches the very heathen. And if it be so, . . . have yet notwithstanding some kind of governance amongst them, how much more ought it to be observed amongst us?

For Calvin, nature teaches many other things regarding the roles of women: "Now, the human race could not exist without the woman; as nature itself taught Plato . . . to speak." For him, public office should not be the concern of women: "Natural propriety has been maintained, women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs." He saw it as unnatural for women to govern men: "Now it is certain that women were never received to any public office. And who has let it, or been the stay of it, but that God only has imprinted such a knowledge in nature, that although we be not otherwise taught, yet we know that it were an unseemly thing to have women govern men?" Calvin frequently appeals to nature regarding the role of women.

Calvin refers to nature both before and after the fall. The former refers to "created perfection and humanity as an expression of the image of God," and the latter refers to "fallen nature and all that is opposed to God and the law of . . . creation." The distinction is expressed in his commentary on Ephesians 2:3: "For we are not born such as Adam was at first created. . . ." For Calvin, humanity after the fall is limited in comprehension:

We acknowledge man by nature to be blind, darkened in understanding and full of corruption and perversity of heart so that of himself he has no power to be able to comprehend the
true knowledge of God as is proper, nor to apply himself to good works. But on the contrary, if he is left by God to what he is by nature, he is only able to live in ignorance and to be abandoned to all iniquity.26

Calvin regarded nature as an arena that reflected God’s glory. The cosmos reflects God’s wisdom, power, goodness, and providence, and all the beauties of creation are a divine revelation of the nature of God.21 In his commentaries and sermons on Job, Isaiah, and the Psalms, Calvin writes that natural beauty is a means of glimpsing God’s glory reflected in the world.22 For example, in his commentary on Psalm 104, he says, “That we may enjoy the sight of him, . . . that is to say, we must cast our eyes upon the very beautiful fabric of the world in which he wishes to be seen by us.”23 Pre-fall nature was an ordered world ordained by God: “the regularities within nature are not to be thought of as being intrinsic to it, but reflect the ordering imposed upon it by God in creation.” The rain does not fall by some blind instinct of nature; “rather, such regularities reflect the ordering of the world in creation, and subsequent general influence of God through providence.”24

However, because of human sin, the cosmos became “subjected to corruption. Everything in the whole cosmos suffers violence against the purpose of nature and in opposition to it.”25 After the fall, nature was not nature as God had intended it to be. Furthermore, not only cosmos, but also human nature was marred by sin. In Alister McGrath’s words, nature was ontologically (that is, in terms of the structuring of the world) affected: “Disorder is not merely something that the human mind perceives within creation; it is something that exists prior to the human recognition of it.” Nature was also affected noetically, that is, “in terms of the capacities of the human mind in reflecting upon the ordering of the world.”26

Therefore, the knowledge of God cannot be fully realized by fallen human nature.27 Calvin maintains, “While experience testifies that the seeds of religion are sown by God in every heart, we scarcely find one man in a hundred who cherishes what he has received, and not one in whom they grow to maturity, much less believe human beings can attain a reliable, full knowledge of the will of God. Humans are nearly blind because of sin, and therefore fallen human reason prevents humans from perceiving the work of God in nature.

Calvin, however, does not believe human beings can attain a reliable, full knowledge of the will of God. Humans are nearly blind because of sin, and therefore fallen human reason prevents humans from perceiving the work of God in nature as caused by the fall (Gen 3:6). Only by faith can such human blindness be corrected and human reason enabled to reclaim creation as a reliable source for the knowledge of God.30 After the fall, the cosmos awaits its redemption and resurrection in hope:31 “No part of the universe is untouched by the longing with which everything in this world aspires to the hope of resurrection.”32

Although creation was in disorder after the fall, Calvin believes that humans still have two conceivable ways of arriving at the knowledge of God: universe and conscience.33 Although nature was corrupted as the result of pervasive sin, the providential purposes of God were not changed. So there is the continuation of nature in which the sun continues to shine, the seasons still change, and appointed times remain for planting and for harvest. God’s wisdom, glory, and providence are still reflected by the order in nature.34 Such natural knowledge, then, encourages humans to establish true worship of God and leads them to the hope of eternal life. Calvin urges humans to allow the knowledge to direct them to the God of nature.35 He continues, “Whenever any of us considers his own nature, let him remember that there is one God who governs all natures in such a way that he wishes us to look back to him and would have our faith directed to himself and would be worshiped and invoked by us”36

The conscience, according to Calvin, is the awareness of divine judgment and the sense of divinity that makes humans aware that there is a Maker who must be worshiped, honored, and obeyed:37

God, then, has let men run wild, and they are completely plunged into perdition; yet there has remained some seed in their hearts, and they have been convicted, so that they cannot say, “we do not know what God is, we have no religion whatever”; since no one can be exempt from it; for it has remained engraven on the conscience that the world was not formed by itself; that here was some heavenly majesty to which we must be subject.38

For Calvin, all humanity knows God, because he has set the knowledge of himself within their consciousness and keeps it permanently alive.39 “Hence the godless themselves illustrate the fact that the knowledge of God is always living in the human heart.”40 Faith is necessary for humans, and redemption is required for creation.

Natural law

According to Craig Boyd, contemporary natural-law41 morality maintains, “There are some basic truths about human nature which require the prohibitions of some values and the practice of others.”42 Historically, natural law was originated in Greek philosophy. Upon its completion by the Stoics, the concept of natural law was passed on to the Christian church through Roman jurists. The church in Rome (AD 534) regarded natural law as an important principle of the church law, the Corpus Iuris Civilis.43 Stoics believed that “living according to natural law and the su-
pernatural will of God means to live in accordance with nature." So they considered "nature or natural law to be 'the best guide (optimam ducem)" for lawful rule because they related this "not only to legal duty but also to divine piety."44 Thomas Aquinas held that within us was the natural law of morality, which could be obscured in particular cases, but never universally. With respect to common principles, the natural law is the universal law. Aquinas believed that natural law never can be abolished from the human heart, but can be obscured in particular cases because of concupiscence or some other passion.45

For Calvin, nature and natural law had a close conjunction: "Before the fall and rebellion of humanity, . . . the law existed as the 'constitution' of the universe. Nature was not opposed to God," and so "the law of nature was merely one way of expressing God's orderly will for both his creatures and his creation."46 Calvin, therefore, frequently referred not only to nature, but also to natural law, using expressions such as "the law of nature," "voice of nature," and "rule of equity."47 Harro Höpf also contends that Calvin gave neither serious examination to the idea of natural law nor a clear explanation of it. He simply referred to the "heart," "intellect," "conscience," "natural sense," or "reason."48 Höpf also points out that Calvin's use of natural law was not occasional or peripheral, but appears in most of the places where moral issues such as incest, murder, adultery, slavery, and the rule of one man were treated.49

Calvin's use of natural law

Scholars have disagreed on Calvin's use of natural law. Some believe that Calvin's understanding of natural law departed from that of his predecessors. I. John Hesselink argues that Calvin's understanding of nature was different from that of the Stoic-classical tradition: Calvin understood the law as ordered by the living will of God the Creator. The law was the divine justice determined by the conception of God's order of creation. On the other hand, the Stoics, Cicero, and the classical tradition posited independent, abstract concepts of eternal law and order.50 Therefore, although Calvin and Cicero often speak of natural law in the same way, their concepts of natural law are different.51 Irena Backus argues that Calvin's definition of natural law was also very different from the definitions of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval thinkers. For example, Thomas defined natural law as "participation of the law of God in every rational creature or the rational guidance of all creatures." Because of natural law, all creatures were able to "derive an inclination to those actions and ends that are proper to their natures." Natural law for Thomas also included natural instincts. Thomas metaphysically defined natural law, and thus allowed human reason a certain amount of autonomy in the moral realm. However, Calvin's ideal of natural law did not carry this metaphysical idea.52

Wilhelm Niesel believes that Calvin's natural law has to do with the Decalogue: "Those things which we have to learn from the two tables of the law reflect to some extent and enable us to understand that inner law which is written and as it were impressed upon the hearts of all."53 For Calvin, humans have not merely a dark surmise of the will of God, but, by the law of nature, are sufficiently instructed how to live rightly.54 Further-

more, instruction is carried out by the voice of conscience. A seed of religious awareness is implanted in the human heart so that we may recognize and honor our Lord, and conscience is given that we may sufficiently distinguish between right and wrong.55 The insights of conscience are the language in which the law of nature is couched.56 For Calvin, "The end of natural law, therefore, is that man may be rendered inexcusable."57

Guenther Haas also understands that Calvin's use of natural law is not metaphysical, but biblical. Appealing to Romans 2:14–15, Calvin believed humans have moral law imprinted upon their hearts. God has sustained the conscience as the faculty that judges between good and evil, though this knowledge is always imperfect. For Calvin, this knowledge was only on the second table of the Decalogue, the final six commandments. Humans could not comprehend the first table, "regarding worshiping God, by natural reason and conscience." Natural law concerned only the second table, which humans understood better, "because of their natural instinct to foster and preserve civil society."58

On the other hand, Stephen Grabill suggests that widespread influence of the Barth-Brunner debate in Calvin studies set parameters that have remained relatively unchallenged until the last several years. The general consensus was that Calvin's use of natural law only served a negative function—that is, it merely rendered people inexcusable for breaking the moral law. They contend Calvin's view of natural law was discontinuous with the older tradition. Most recent commentators maintain, however, that Calvin also espoused an affirmative use of natural law, particularly with respect to civil, social, and economic affairs.59 For instance, Peter Leithart reiterates the influence of Stoicism on Calvin's thought. According to Leithart, Cicero, who was a great influence in the sixteenth century, contributed to informing Calvin's monistic cosmology and psychology, which Stoicism advocated.60 Calvin insisted that the knowledge of God and his law by the unregenerate never led them to a life of true virtue. Yet, by closely following the Stoic and Ciceronian idea, Calvin assumed that a universal consensus of morality was generally consistent with biblical norms.61

Stephen Grabill also insists that Calvin followed the scholastic tradition in general. It is evident that Calvin emphasized "the conscience as an intellectual habit that grasps and acts upon the precepts of the moral law, either apprehending them inwardly from the law written on the heart (lex naturalis) or outwardly from the written law (Decalogue)." For Calvin, conscience was far more than merely distinguishing between right and wrong, but also carried an immediate awareness of divine judgment for wrongdoing. Despite humanity's corrupted mental capabilities, Calvin believed that human nature still functioned competently in matters related to the earthly sphere (such as politics, economics, and ethics). For him, the created order continued to reflect God's wisdom, goodness, and power.52

Some scholars believe that Calvin's understanding of natural law was distinguished from the Stoic, Ciceronian idea of natural law or from the idea of Thomas Aquinas.63 Natural law for Calvin did not concern abstract impersonal power, but the living God who speaks to all people through human conscience. For Calvin, natural law was a "divinely given" law and was "common to all
people and [was] engraved by God on the minds or consciences of all human beings.”64 Others insist that Calvin's understanding of natural law continued the natural law tradition in the Middle Ages. In either case, however, Calvin believed that there was natural law, which he believed was not metaphysically, but biblically oriented. He was confident that one can know God's ordained order before the fall through “conscience” or “reason.”

**Significance of natural law**

The opinions of contemporary scholars are divided sharply not only on the function and purpose of the law of nature, but also on whether natural law plays a positive or negative role in Calvin's thought. According to Hesselink, those who believe natural law plays little role in Calvin's theology are Wilhelm Niesel, Peter Barth, Peter Brunner, Marc-Édouard Chenevière, François Wendel, Thomas F. Torrance, Hans H. Wolf, Werner Krusche, Thomas H. L. Parker, Arthur Cochrane, and Harro Höpfl. The scholars who believe Calvin relied upon natural law are Gilbert Beyerhaus, Émile Doumergue, Josef Bohatec, Wilhelm Kolfhaus, Edward A. Dowey, Ronald S. Wallace, David Little, Benjamin Milner, and William Klempa. Scholars who believe his view of natural law so significant it amounts almost to a natural theology are Hans Engelland, Günter Gloede, and John T. McNeill.65

Höpfl thinks that Calvin always treated natural knowledge as an inferior adjunct to the written divine law and as unreliable in matters of moral conduct for Christians. He suggests that the main purpose for which Calvin appealed to natural knowledge for moral law was perhaps to defend the justice of God's reprobating and punishing those who have no access to Scripture: they are condemned in their own consciences in that, knowing what is good, they do what is evil.66

Grabill believes that the commentators who regard the influence of natural law as positive misunderstand Calvin's view of natural law, for Calvin spoke little about “natural” in comparison to his medieval predecessors. Furthermore, Calvin never intended to formulate a systematic doctrine of natural law, although Grabill admits that Calvin employed natural law extensively in the realms of law, politics, economics, and ethics.67 In his view, Calvin perceived that both natural law and the Bible might function as legitimate means for discerning morality. Yet, Calvin preferred the written law because it provided “a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law.”68

More recently, Boyd also asserts that natural law was not essential to Calvin's theology. Calvin as well as Luther emphasized God's commands and human love more than a system of natural law. They thought that the fall of Adam destroyed the capacity for human goodness and deeply damaged the *imago Dei*. While Thomas Aquinas believed that stained image of God still retained the capacity to know the basic precepts of natural law, Calvin thought that the image was so deeply flawed and darkened that it could barely understand even the most basic rules for civic cooperation. Therefore, "Calvin makes little use of the natural law.”69

On the other hand, some scholars believe that Calvin's view is divorced from the traditional natural law theory, yet they recognize its positive influence on his thought. For example, François Wendel thinks that Calvin refuted the medieval notion of natural law, which assumed natural knowledge of divine law by reason. Nevertheless, Calvin's idea shows "a very clear recollection of the Stoic idea of an organic unity in human society," for he believed humans had ability to reason and administer in civil life, despite their sinful nature. For Wendel, holding another law alongside the Decalogue also is foreign and unjustifiable to Christian theology.70 Calvin, as a humanist, appreciated the past and the intellectual legacy of both Greece and Rome, as well as the church Fathers. Therefore, Wendel believes that Calvin continued the tradition of Christian humanists and tried to use ancient thought in its highest expression if it agreed with the Gospel message.71

David Little believes that Calvin saw natural law as secondary and “suggestive” to his theology. According to Little, natural law for Calvin was a companion theory which was seen in relation to, and complementary with, the norms of Christian revelation and remained minimal or “vestigial” in Calvin's words. His natural law had a very strong empirical ingredient such as rational, scientific investigation in ethical discourse, for “Calvin’s notion of humanity was never . . . simply derived from theological assertions.”72

S. Elizabeth Schreiner also suggests that Calvin's theology of the natural order “heavily” rests upon medieval and patristic sources. Schreiner argues that, for Calvin, natural law taught humans how to live in a fallen world. By drawing from traditional medieval and patristic arguments, Calvin developed his view of the existence of natural law and of conscience and natural reason, which together contribute to the maintenance of human order.73 Calvin did not formulate a doctrine of natural law, but he “used the principle of natural law as an extension of his doctrine of providence.”74

Still others believe there is a close link between Calvin's use of natural law and his concern for political government. According to John McNeill, “natural law theories prevailed in discussions of law and government throughout the West from Augustine to Gabriel Biel (d. 1495).” Natural law theory passed over virtually unchallenged into the sixteenth century.75 For example, Luther did not hold reason in high esteem, but still regarded it as something indestructible in the original divine gift. He believed that natural law was essential to the government of non-Christians by a Christian ruler. Luther consciously used the theory of natural law to aid the Protestant cause during the years of anxious tension, before the outbreak of the Schmalkald Wars (1546–1547).76

Irena Backus also suggests that natural law was very important in Calvin's political thought. Calvin, according to Backus, used the law in order to relativize the importance of the Bible in matters terrestrial and thus to include pagans in God's plans. Calvin believed that natural law was God's love expressed in civil law. Being implanted in the consciences of humans, natural law promoted understanding of right and wrong sufficient to remove any excuse for sin.77

In summary, many scholars observe that Calvin extensively used natural law, but opinions vary as to how significant a role it played in his theology. Most agree that Calvin preferred the written law, the Bible, over natural law. Nonetheless, the fact that Calvin frequently referred to natural law indicates his familiarity
with it and the credit he gives to it along with the Bible. Calvin studied widely on humanism in Law Studies until around 1533. Since natural law was accepted in the political code for orderly government in Calvin’s time, it is likely he considered natural law a reliable source to guide his interpretation of the Bible, specifically when he understood the role of women. In other words, Calvin relied upon natural law as he drew upon the tradition and legacy of the Middle Ages, often using it when he interpreted the Bible, as when appealing to conscience. However, “natural law” has a hermeneutical problem when used to interpret a text: natural for whom?

The problem of natural law

Clearly, what Calvin overlooked is that what he considered natural for him and his contemporaries may not be so to people in different places and times. While he does not specify for whom certain things should be “natural,” Calvin’s application implies that he had either himself or his contemporary readers in mind. When Calvin says that certain things are natural, it might have been convincing for his contemporaries. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily reflect the universal reality that can be applied to all people, at all times, and in all places.

This hermeneutical tendency of Calvin is also seen in his use of “common sense.” For example, he uses “common sense” in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:34 to establish that women’s leadership role is not acceptable: “And common sense tells us that the rule of woman is improper and defective.” In other places, he also comments, “It is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly.” Or, “that law of nature which common sense declares to be inviolable” His use of “common sense” again raises the same question as “natural” does: common to whom? It also raises the question of the tension between this and his other sophisticated readings of the Bible.

“Natural” and “common” as arguments had been long applied by lawyers, specifically by Cicero, as an instrument of legal argumentation. They were a means to convince people and win the outcome. The terms were intended to be rhetorically effective when heard by contemporary hearers. While natural, common arguments appeal to a homogeneous culture, tending to reflect only the cultural feelings of each time. Jean Porter, though an advocate for contemporary natural law, believes that “a neutral interpretation of the natural givens is not possible,” John Finnis, also a prominent contemporary advocate of natural law, insists that natural law acknowledges a certain set of standards, necessary for specific human societies to function:

A theory of natural law claims to be able to identify conditions and principles of practical right-mindedness, of good and proper order among men and in individual conduct. Unless some such claim is justified, analytical jurisprudence in particular and (at least the major part of) all the social sciences in general can have no critically justified criteria for the formation of general concepts, and must be content to be no more than manifestations of the various concepts peculiar to particular peoples and/or to the particular theorists who concern themselves with those people.

Boyd also suggests the cultural implications of natural law when it is applied: “The natural law prescribes minimal obligations that all human agents have,” prohibiting “lying, murder, and infidelity which we find prima facie prohibitions in any culture. Yet natural law requires particular application in specific contexts as what constitutes specific violations of these acts will vary from place to place and time to time.” When Calvin used natural law, he believed that certain things were self-evident, sharing God’s will for humans. Nonetheless, his view of nature as God-assigned purpose was destined to reflect “nature” in the current tendency or structure of his time. Accordingly, his view of the role of women reflected the cultural view of his time.

The role of women in Calvin’s time

In the Middle Ages, theological ideas about the role of women reflected longstanding misogyny. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), in his Summa Theologicae, believed that both men and women possessed the image of God, which was their mind and intellect. Nevertheless, in a secondary sense, the image of God existed only in men as a reflection of their Creator. Recalling Paul’s words, Thomas concluded that man was both the beginning and end of woman, and that woman was created with the express purpose of serving man. Thomas viewed woman as a being made for the purpose of the perpetuation of the human nature manifested in man. For Thomas, woman was naturally subservient because reason predominated in man.

John Hus (c. 1369–1415) was a contributor to the Protestant movement and was one of the figures who influenced the thoughts of Luther. Hus’s misogyny is revealed in his understanding of Eve:

Oh Eve, you faithless rib! What were you doing there at Adam’s side? Why did you strike down the sons of Adam, stripping from them the garment of virtue? Oh children of Adam, why do you chase after this rib, to the destruction of your other bones, when you could live as well without it? You let yourself be robbed, destroyed, murdered and eternally damned for its sake!

The general views of theologians in the Middle Ages tended to be that women were their husbands’ possessions, dependent on men for everything. As Thomas Aquinas commented, the general status of women was not only lower than that of men, but was in some ways below that of the slave. The view that women had a lower status than men and were dependent on men was carried into the Reformation period. Luther regarded man and woman as equal, sharing the same qualities of the body and mind. He regarded a woman’s subjection to her husband as due to the fall. Luther comments on Genesis 2:18:

But Moses wanted to point out . . . that this sex was to be useful for procreation. Hence it follows that if the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects. For the punishment, that she is now subjected to the man, was imposed on her after sin and because of sin, just as the other hardships and dangers were . . . Therefore Eve was not like the woman of
today: . . . she was in no respect inferior to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind.94

Luther continued the idea that women are inferior to men. He believed that woman was the weakest part of human nature and that, if Adam had been tempted rather than Eve, he would have prevailed:

Satan's cleverness is perceived also in this, that he attacks the weak part of the human nature, Eve, the woman, not Adam the man. . . . Just as in all the rest of nature the strength of the male surpasses that of the other sex, so also in the perfect nature the male somewhat excelled the female. Because Satan sees that Adam is the more excellent, he does not dare assail him; for he fears that his attempt may turn out to be useless. And I, too, believe that if he had tempted Adam first, the victory would have been Adam's. He should have crushed the serpent with his foot and would have said: “Shut up! The Lord's command was different.” Satan, therefore, directs his attack on Eve as the weaker part and puts her valor to the test, for he sees that she is so dependent on her husband that she thinks she cannot sin.95

Although Luther claimed that, in all respects, man and woman were equal before the fall, his idea of equality of woman to man was still limited.96 Robert Bast also believes that this teaching depends heavily on the late-medieval catechetical tradition and that there are “extraordinary parallels between Reformation catechisms and their medieval and late-medieval predecessors.”97

According to Susan Karant-Nunn, a growing number of scholars today believe that, in both theology and social outlook, the Protestant and Catholic Reformations owed much to that which preceded them.98 In Calvin's time, it was believed that women had secondary status and were dependent on men. Women were to be subject to men and were not to play any public roles or leadership roles over men.

Calvin's view of the role of women

Calvin, like Luther, considered woman equal to man as the image bearer of God in some sense. Woman was a perfect companion to man who was to be treated with respect and honor to the same degree as man. More than Luther, Calvin emphasized the complementary relationship between man and woman.99 Nonetheless, just as Luther, he regarded woman as weaker.100 Woman, for Calvin, was only an image bearer of God “in the second degree,”101 and she was a splendid adornment created for the express purpose of greatly enriching the man's life.102 Unlike Thomas Aquinas, Calvin did not believe that the purpose of woman was only reproduction. Yet, like Thomas, Calvin believed woman existed not as a fully independent person, but as a secondary and dependent sex—a complement to man.

Calvin held a view of women very similar to that of his predecessors and contemporaries: that women were subordinate to men and were to stay in a domestic domain. Because Calvin appealed to nature/natural argument, which tends to reflect one's culture, his view of the role of women reflected the ideology of his time. For Calvin, who lived in the time when breastfeeding was the only way to nurse a baby, bottle feeding might never be seen as also natural, as it is today. Respecting parents was considered natural in Calvin's time, but today may need to be taught. Social ranking among people in Calvin's time was seen as natural in his culture, but is becoming less acceptable in the contemporary Western world. In his interpretation of the term “helper” in Genesis 2:20, Calvin understood Eve as subordinate and secondary to Adam, while people today increasingly do not interpret it in the same way.103 What Calvin thought was “nature” as God-ordained purpose was, then, merely custom, a “nature” as the current tendency or structure of his time supposed it to be.

W. Balke argues that the work of the Holy Spirit was so essential in Calvin's interpretation that he attached great value to experience in his theology. Calvin repeatedly appealed to experience along with his appeal to the Bible. Thus, he was committed to continually seeking to “relate truth and reality” (or always reforming his practice)—though always weighing that against the teaching of Scripture—so that he might not detach his theology from reality.104 If this is the case, it appears that Calvin's nature/natural argument played an important part in dictating his theology from his so-called “natural” experiences.

Some contemporary natural law theorists assert that "all human societies know the natural law precepts to be true regardless of particular cultural contexts since they all require peace as a basic good for communal life . . . specific principles which ground various prescriptions and prohibitions can be discovered by all people without regard to cultural or religious diversity."105 Nonetheless, when the cultural norm is stripped away, it is difficult to determine how to discover such universal principles. Calvin regarded the pre-fallen state as ideal, perfect nature, which humans were to strive to recover. However, such a state of nature may no longer be so possible for fallen humans to perceive. Or, it may be the case that the God-intended nature may still be fully realized in the process of redemption.106 According to Willis DeBoer, Calvin did not compellingly answer the question of whether there are "creation ordinances regarding women that are clear from Genesis."107 Yet, DeBoer contends, Calvin spoke of the roles of women confidently, believing that they are the “God-ordained and God-revealed order for life in this world.”108 It appears to be the case, then, that, apart from cultural norms, Calvin was not able to claim sufficiently that God's ordinances for the role of women were in Genesis. Werner Jeanrond suggests that, in interpretation, one needs some questions to which the Bible can give answers: “without any question [one] cannot structure [one’s] own acts of reading or seeing.”109 Calvin's culture did not seem to challenge him to question the role of women, so he apparently did not do so.

Conclusion

Calvin frequently referred to the concept of nature, by which he distinguished pre-fallen nature and fallen nature. After the fall,
the natural world and human nature were both significantly distorted to the extent that it is almost impossible for human nature to perceive the will of God. Faith and the redemption of creation are required to attain true knowledge of God. Yet, because of God’s providential concern and grace, order in creation and conscience in the human heart were preserved. Thus, people are left accountable to God for their moral decisions.

Calvin was confident that one could know God’s established order before the fall by natural law. Although Calvin preferred the Bible to natural law, he frequently used natural law to form his views, mainly on moral affairs. Natural law appeared to have earned Calvin’s confidence from his legal training and from the political code of his time. Calvin’s exegesis of the Bible was often in conformity with what he saw as the order of natural law, although he intended to put precedence on the Bible’s revelation.

Nevertheless, because the perception of natural law tends to reflect one’s culture, when Calvin considered the role of women, his interpretation inevitably reflected the view of his culture: that women were subordinate to men and were to stay in a domestic domain. Simone de Beauvoir points out that the natural law tradition has emphasized the inferiority of women since Aristotle.110 The examination of Calvin’s use of nature and natural law may explain how that might have happened.

Merry Wisner suggests that a consciousness of gender is a social as well as a natural construct. Gender tends to be considered in natural terms, but it actually has become social.111 The case of Calvin is not an exception. Today, some think that gender roles are determined “by nature,” although we do not explicitly refer to natural law. Yet, just like Calvin, we may be envisioning the current cultural structure or tendency as God-ordained purpose, resulting in a view of certain roles as God-ordained when, in reality, they have been culturally determined.

Notes


3. Jones suggests the importance of the concept of creation and law in Calvin’s thought. He states that, when people think of themes that mark Calvinism, they surprisingly and almost invariably fail to include two doctrines that Reformed Christians have long considered foundational: creation, the vast, living world that God has created and continues to sustain; and law, God’s intentions for the right ordering of the world. That these are important themes can hardly be disputed. She argues that Calvin’s emphasis on these themes is evident in his Institutes, in which he devotes much in-depth discussion to creation and law. Serene Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” in Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics, ed. Plantiga Nunez, et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 20.

4. Harro Höpfl, The Christian Polity of John Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 180. Höpfl lists extensive examples of what Calvin thought “nature,” “natural sense,” or “reason” teaches: “the authority of fathers over wives and children, the sanctity of monogamous marriage, the duty to care for families, breast-feeding, primogeniture (albeit with qualifications), the sacrosanctity of envos and ambassadors, the obligation of promises, degrees of marriage, the need for witnesses in murder trials, the need for a distinction of ranks in society, the duty to award honors only to those qualified, respect for the old, equity in commercial dealings and that religion must be the first concern of governors.”


8. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, some of the meanings of the term “nature” are “senses relating to physical or bodily power, strength, or substance,” “senses relating to mental or physical impulses and requirements,” “senses relating to innate character,” or “senses relating to the material world.” For more definitions of nature, see, for example, Without Nature?: A New Condition for Theology, ed. David Albertson and Cabell King (New York: Fordham University, 2010). Lisa S. Cahill, one of the authors, states that nature is “polyvalent” and “equivocal.” “Nature, Change, and Justice,” in Without Nature?, 283.


16. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 14:34.

17. Calvin, Sermons of M. Iohn Coluin, on the Epistles of S. Paule to Timothie and Titus, 212.


20. Calvin, Institutes (Latin), 419, as quoted by Hesselink, Calvin’s Concept of the Law, 79 n 37.


22. Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory, 4.


26. Diew, La Création et la Providence, 118–119, as quoted by McGrath, A Scientific Theology, 174–75.


30. David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 1995), 26–30. Steinmetz compares Calvin's view of the revelation of God with those of other reformers and suggests that Melanchthon, Bucer, and Calvin all agree that "the created world demonstrates God's existence and that human beings without exception know by nature that there is a God." Melanchthon asserts that "the natural knowledge of God is implanted in the human mind by God," for "reason would not be marvel at the works of God in nature if it did not already have an innate, proleptic knowledge of God." However, while the first two agree that "human beings have a reliable, if rudimentary, knowledge of the will or essence of God," Calvin does not. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 28, 30.

31. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 97–99. Schreiner observes that, for the present disorder of the creation, Calvin emphasizes the importance of the hope of redemption in Christ. In his exegesis of Rom 8:20, Calvin stresses the need for reordering of the world and a restoration of the world to its primal ordering. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 79–111.


33. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought*, 17.

34. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory*, 79; Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Ps 96:10.

35. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.10. According to Niesel, this self-disclosure of God in nature and history is "not imperfect or of slight significance," and its goal is pure and true religion, which is bound up with the earnest fear of God. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1956), 43.


40. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.2.

41. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of the term "natural law" is "the law as it applied before the Fall of [humanity], based supposedly on natural reason," or "the law as it is naturally or immediately interpreted; . . . the principles of morality, held to be discernible by reason as belonging to human nature or implicit in the nature of rational thought and action; such principles as the basis for man-made laws."

42. Craig Boyd, *A Shared Morality: A Narrative Defense of Natural Law Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 11. Natural law theorists, according to Boyd, "believe that they can discern in human nature—and its various inclinations and desires—a basic orientation to the goods that all people pursue. These inclinations, when rightly understood and ordered, direct us to some activities and away from others. There is, on the natural law perspective, a basic desire to seek peaceful coexistence with others since peaceful communal life is a necessary condition for pursuing other goods. Prohibitions on murder, lying, and adultery are all seen as violations of the ideal for 'human nature' since they thwart the peaceful coexistence of humans in community." However, some argue that "natural law does not offer particular norms that are immediately compelling to all rational persons." William C. Mattison, "The Changing Face of Natural Law: The Necessity of Belief for Natural Law Norm Specification," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 1 (2007): 270.


44. Moon, *Christ the Mediator of the Law*, 49.

45. Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 247; Knud Haakonseen, in *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), s.v. "Natural Law." Thomas synthesized Aristotelian metaphysics and Christian theology. He taught that the world was ordered by God's eternal reason or the law, which was appropriate to the nature of the world God created. Being created in his image, humankind had free will and reason. Order in human life (moral order) was therefore to be dependent on the rational understanding of natural law. The content of natural law derived from an understanding of human nature and of what is good order in humans.


47. Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law*, 57.


50. According to Porter, "the idea of a universal reason that is equivalent to universal nature, the law of nature, fate, and even to God, is Stoic in origin. . . . The Stoics taught that [humans] ought to live in accordance with nature or equivalently with right reason or the universal law." However, "there was no room for a transcendent deity in the materialistic Stoic universe, and very little room, if any, for human freedom." To live "in accordance with nature, or with reason" almost meant "willing acceptance of fate or providence." Porter, *Natural and Divine Law*, 68.


54. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.22.

55. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.22.


57. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.22.


63. According to Pasnau, Thomas Aquinas meant by nature "the essential features of human beings, the things that make us human, or (as Aristotle often puts it) what it is to be a human being." But *nature* has a complex range of meanings such as the following: (1) "the generation of living things; in this sense it serves as the abstract noun for the verb nascor (to be born)"; (2) "the inner principle of any generation or birth"; (3) "any inner principle of movement or action"; (4) "the ultimate end of the process of generation, which Aquinas identifies as the essence of the species." Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 6.

64. Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law*, 57.


68. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.1; Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law*, 73. According to Grabill, "Broadly put, Calvin follows the realist tradition in its affirmation of the ontological status of moral knowledge, meaning that moral precepts are objective, universal, and stable, but differs with it epistemologically, meaning in the degree to which unaided reason can adequately apprehend precepts of the natural moral law. In attributing greater weight to the post-lapsarian conscience over the pre-lapsarian reason as the hallmark of his natural law doctrine, Calvin may be attempting to modify the realist tradition to accord more fully with Reformation teaching on the epistemological consequences of sin and the opaqueness associated with the natural knowledge of God."

71. Wendel, Calvin et l'Humanisme, 9, as quoted by C. P. Marie, “Calvin's God and Humanism,” in Our Reformational Tradition: A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation (Transvaal: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), 354. Hesselin also suggests that, in Calvin's time, all classical scholars still assumed that “[c]ertain standards, values, and virtues were common to all humanity.” Hesselin, Calvin's Concept of the Law, 70.
73. According to Schreiner, Calvin believed that, as God’s providence, the ordering and controlling power of God protects the human world from the continual threat of chaos and gives stability as continuance of creation. Therefore, Schreiner suggests, Calvin’s emphasis on the natural order partly was a reaction to Epicurean tendency that removed God from involvement with the world. Schreiner, The Theater of His Glory, 35.
75. John T. McNeill, “Natural Law in the Thought of Luther,” Church History 10, no. 3 (1941): 215. McNeill states, in Luther’s generation, figures such as John Major, Erasmus, Guillaume Budé, François Conno, Christopher St. German, and Johannes Oldendorp stood over against Machiavelli as exponents of the doctrine of natural law.
76. McNeill, “Natural Law in the Thought of Luther,” 227. According to McNeill, whenever Luther uses a theoretical argument for a judgment or for an attitude affecting secular politics, “he confidently makes his appeal to” natural law. McNeill asserts, “Insofar, then, as he puts forward any political theory, that theory marches under the ensign of natural law, considered as a part of the law of God, the author of man’s reason.”
77. Backus, Calvin's Concept of Natural and Roman Law,” 12, 15, 26.
79. In his natural law critique, O’Connor argues that, when a certain “proposition is self-evident, it must always be self-evident to somebody. . . Propositions will seem self-evident to the skilled mathematician which to the schoolboy are difficult or unintelligible.” D. J. O’Connor, Aquinas and Natural Law (London: Macmillan, 1967), 67.
80. According to Brauner, Luther also argued that reason is “by no means entirely corrupt. In its natural state, it has two positive components”: the common sense for peasants and the divine knowledge for prophets. Sigrid Brauner, Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1995), 62.
81. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 11:34.
82. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 14:36.
89. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, Ia. 9.22
90. Hus, Dat Bokeken van Demne Rep, Oh$^1$ col. 2, 32—Oh$^1$ col. 1, 4, as quoted by Robert James Bast, Honor Your Fathers: Catechisms and the Emergence of a Patriarchal Ideology in Germany, 1400–1600 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 76.
92. Ruth Tucker, Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 164. Tucker believes that Thomas Aquinas argued that a woman is dependent on the man for everything in life, whereas he depends on her for procreation only.
95. Luther, Commentary on Genesis, Gen 31.
96. Michely L. Mattox, Defender of the Most Holy Matriarch: Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrations in Genesis, 1535–45 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 19. Mattox argues that Luther read so widely in patristic and medieval theology and exegesis that one could say that he read the Scriptures in the company of his predecessors, particularly the church Fathers. It is said that Luther appealed to Scripture alone as a theological court of last resort. Yet, the continuity between his exegesis and those of his predecessors should not be obscured.
97. Bast, Honor Your Fathers, 87. See Bast for the references that discuss the parallels between Reformation catechisms and those of the Middle Ages.
100. Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, 1 Tim 2:15.
102. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, 1 Cor 11:7; Calvin, Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, Gen 2:18.
103. Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1978), 73. Trible argues that most of the traditional interpretations of male superiority and female inferiority are “simply not present in the [creation] story itself.”
104. W. Balke, “The Word of God and Experientia According to Calvin,” in Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor, ed. H. von W. H. Neuse (Uitgeversmaatschappij: Kampen, 1978), 20–21. Balke states, “that which experience would teach us is for Calvin of extraordinary importance.” Calvin’s commentaries are full of expressions such as experientia docet, ostendit, clamat, confirmat, demonstrat, convincit, testatur, also ipsa experientia satis docemur or usi ipso docemur.
106. James C. Peterson, Genetic Turning Points: The Ethics of Human Genetic Intervention (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 189. Peterson suggests that some early church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nazianzus believed that God intentionally created the world “less than [it] should eventually be.”
107. Willis P. De Boer, “Calvin on the Role of Women,” in Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin, ed. David E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 272. DeBoer argues that Calvin does not prove that the creation story speaks of the roles of women because Calvin interprets the roles through what he considers to be Paul’s interpretation. DeBoer argues that Calvin’s interpretation appears circular.