Indwelling Word and Spirit: Luther and Calvin as Resources for an Ecological Theology

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Introduction

Over fifty years ago, Lynn White Jr. published an influential essay indicting Christianity for its role in the modern ecological crisis, prompting theologians to turn to the Christian tradition in search of the theological roots of environmental degradation.[1] Among those most frequently charged with dismantling a medieval sacramental sense of nature—and thereby inaugurating a dualistic worldview that legitimates domination of the earth—are Martin Luther and John Calvin. This charge, however, is unfounded. A careful reading of the reformers' doctrines of creation reveals neither a rupture between God and the natural world nor a separation of creation from redemption. On the contrary, both Luther and Calvin articulate theological visions grounded in their experience of God's indwelling presence in their own lives and in the world itself. Their theological aesthetics, their expansive creation–preservation–redemption motifs, and their shared emphasis on humility and service invite retrieval for contemporary ecological theology.

This article examines the similarities and distinctions between Luther's and Calvin's doctrines of creation in order to reassess the charge of dualism. Luther's theology of creation is fundamentally christological, identifying the Word as the source, center, and ongoing sustainer of the created order. Calvin, working within a distinctively pneumatological framework, offers a robust account of the Spirit's life-giving presence and activity in creation. Read together, the reformers challenge mechanistic and dualistic cosmologies that encourage exploitation of the earth and instead offer a relational vision of creation grounded in divine indwelling.

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The ecological problem and misreading of the reformers

One of the most pressing theological challenges of our time is the ecological crisis. This crisis is not simply a matter of public concern; it is a lived and pastoral reality. Increasingly, experiences of climate instability, species loss, and ecological degradation surface in congregational life as grief, anxiety, moral uncertainty, and a deep longing for hope. These lived disruptions and tragedies shape how individuals and communities understand their place in the world. Such experiences are not peripheral to the Christian faith; they touch directly on questions of meaning, vocation, and trust in God amid suffering and uncertainty.

The ecological crisis exposes the limits of inherited doctrinal frameworks that have often treated non-human creation as a passive backdrop for human salvation rather than as an active participant in God's redemptive purposes. Ecological devastation compels people of faith to reconsider long-held assumptions about divine presence, the relation between creation and redemption, and the scope of salvation itself. This urgency arises not from political agendas but from the church's confessional commitments: if the world is God's good creation, sustained by the Word and the Spirit, then its devastation raises unavoidable theological questions that demand a careful and faithful response.

At stake in this reexamination is not only what Christians believe about the natural world, but how God is imagined to relate

1. Lynn White Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

to it. The doctrine of God—how God is named, envisioned, and confessed–shapes Christian imagination and practice, orienting communities toward particular ways of seeing and inhabiting the world. This insight stands at the heart of Elizabeth Johnson's argument that speech about God functions formatively rather than merely descriptively.

As Johnson has persuasively argued, the ways in which Christians speak about God are never neutral.[2] The language, images, and symbols used to name God shape how communities understand the world and imagine faithful action within it. Conceptions of God orient both communal identity and individual moral discernment, influencing patterns of belief, choice, and practice, often implicitly rather than explicitly. For this reason, speech about God carries profound consequences. While some images of God have inspired life-giving ecological practices, others have had devastating effects. Chief among the latter are theological dualisms that place God over against the world, spirit over body, male above female, and humans over nature. These dualisms have not remained abstract; they have functioned in destructive ways, inciting and legitimizing the domination and oppression of other humans as well as the earth.

Ecofeminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Catherine Keller have traced the emergence of theological dualisms through Western intellectual history, identifying their intensification to Enlightenment rationalism, Cartesian metaphysics, colonial expansion, and industrial capitalism. Both also locate a decisive theological rupture in the Protestant Reformation itself. Ruether attributes the "dismemberment of the medieval sacramental sense of nature" to John Calvin, while Keller characterizes his cosmology as a "claustrophobic universe… inherently void of the spirit."[3] Such assessments fail to attend carefully to Calvin's pneumatology of creation.

Paul Santmire likewise traces the emergence of theological dualisms in part to the theological trajectories of Luther and Calvin. Although his analysis is more nuanced and balanced than those of Ruether and Keller, Santmire nonetheless identifies in the reformers' soteriological and anthropocentric emphases an inadequate theology of creation. His critique rests on what he perceives as an underdeveloped integration of creation into their theological frameworks.[4]

Such assessments, however, fail to attend carefully to Calvin's pneumatology of creation and to the depth and breadth of Luther's christological doctrine. Neither reformer envisions a God who withdraws from the world after creation, nor do they posit a sharp division between creation and redemption. Rather, both articulate doctrines of creation rooted in divine indwelling—Luther through the incarnate Word, Calvin through the vivifying Spirit. Properly understood, their theologies resist precisely the dualisms for which they have been blamed.

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Martin Luther: Creation and the indwelling Word

Although Luther affirms the classical Trinitarian axiom that the external works of the Trinity are undivided, his doctrine of creation is articulated within a distinctly christological framework.[5] This orientation is especially evident in his exegetical writings, particularly the *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), where Luther grounds creation in the concrete, relational activity of the *Logos,* or Word.[6] Creation, for Luther, is not merely an originating act located in the distant past but rather an ongoing event sustained

2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4.

3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 192. Catherine Keller, "The Lost Fragrance: Protestantism and the Nature of What Matter," in *Visions of a New Earth*, ed. Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 79-93, at 81.

4. H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 132.

5. While this essay emphasizes the christological framework of his doctrine of creation, Luther understands the Holy Spirit as inseparably bound to the Word. The Spirit is not an independent source of revelation but the living agent who reveals, vivifies, and makes efficacious the Word. On this point, see Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), and Jeffrey G. Silcock, "Luther on the Holy Spirit and His Use of God's Word" in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 294-309. Silcock underscores that for Luther, the Spirit works in, with, and through the Word rather than alongside it, creating faith by external means.

6. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther's Works*, vols. 1–8, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–1966), esp. *LW* 1:3–6; *LW* 2:136–38.

by God's continual self-communication in the Word.

For Luther, creation is fundamentally a divine speech-act. God creates by speaking, and that speech is not merely instrumental but personal. The Word through whom all things are made is the eternal Son, who continues to address and sustain the created world.[7] As Luther repeatedly insists, were this divine speaking to cease, creation itself would fall back into nothingness. Creation is therefore not a closed system set in motion once and left to run on its own, but a reality continually upheld by God's gracious and faithful Word. This emphasis on *creatio continua* enables Luther to resist deistic accounts of the world without collapsing Creator and creation. God remains distinct from the world, yet intimately present to it, sustaining its existence moment by moment through the Word who gives life.

This christological grounding leads Luther to affirm a robust doctrine of divine indwelling. Christ is not only the origin of creation but its present sustainer, dwelling *in, with, and under* created realities. Luther's sacramental realism, most often discussed in relation to the Eucharist, thus reflects a broader theological conviction about God's presence in the material world as such. Just as Christ is truly present in the bread and wine, so Christ is genuinely present within the world, permeating ordinary material life. The earth is thus the sphere of God's active and sustaining presence, through the indwelling Christ, who creates, preserves, and redeems.

Luther's theological aesthetic reinforces this vision of creation as the site of God's ongoing self-communication. His is not a detached appreciation of beauty, but a way of seeing the world shaped by faith—one in which nature bears witness to God's goodness and generosity and thereby forms the hearts of humans. In his sermons and exegetical writings, Luther frequently speaks of the natural world with the language of delight and praise, describing it as ordered toward wonder, thanksgiving, and faithful humility rather than mastery or control. Reflecting on Genesis, he insists that God "has most beautifully adorned heaven and earth and filled them with innumerable good things," so that non-human creation, through its beauty and abundance, might draw humans into trust and dependence upon God.[8] In this way, the natural world functions not merely as the backdrop of human life but as a formative context that shapes how human beings live before God and with one another.

Luther's theology of the cross further deepens this vision of divine immanence by situating creation's suffering within the suffering of Christ himself. In his interpretation of Romans 8, Luther understands the created world's groaning, its subjection to futility, and its longing for redemption as more than metaphorical language. Both human and non-human creation experience daily the labor pains of life in a world disordered by sin yet that is being reordered toward divine life and hope. Luther insists that creation does not suffer alone. The crucified Christ is co-sufferer with the world, bearing not only human sin but the pain of the whole created order. Creation's groaning is thus taken up into Christ's own suffering, and its hope is bound to the promise of resurrection.[9] Redemption, in this framework, is not an escape from materiality but the healing and fulfillment of embodied life.

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Luther locates the restoration of creation in the *promissio* of the Word, which stands as the eschatological culmination of his creation–preservation–redemption motif. The same Word that calls the world into being does not abandon it to decay but promises its renewal and future transformation. For Luther, God's promise is an active, trustworthy Word that sustains hope amid the fragility of the present order. The earth's future rests not in human mastery or technological progress, but in God's faithful promise to redeem what God has made. This eschatological hope frees humans from the illusion that they must secure the world's future themselves and reorients them toward gratitude, care, and patient hope grounded in God's Word.

Finally, Luther articulates an ethic of faithful humility grounded in his Christology. To be a Christian is to become "little Christs" to one another. To imitate Christ is to serve God *and* one another faithfully within the material world.[10] Such service is shaped by

7. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, *LW* 1:17–18. See also Luther, *Large Catechism*, *LW* 37, ed. Robert Kolb (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 57–58.

8. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5* (1535–1536), in *LW* 1: 3.

9. Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, *LW* 25:364–366; *Heidelberg Disputation*, *LW* 31:40–41.

10. Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *LW* 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 367. See also *Sermon for Christmas Day* (1521), *LW* 52, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (Philadelphia:

gratitude and care rather than possession or control. As Luther insists in the *Lectures on Genesis*, "the world was made so that it might be used in faith and thanksgiving, not abused through greed or pride."[11] When extended to humanity's relationship to the earth, this Christ-shaped posture resists domination and exploitation and calls forth gratitude and humble service toward the created world entrusted to human care by God.

Contemporary Lutheran ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda develops this Christ-shaped ethic through a constructive retrieval of Luther's doctrine of divine indwelling, bringing its ethical and ecological significance into focus. In *Healing a Broken World,* she emphasizes that Godself, in the form of Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, is given to indwell the faithful in order to transform them and to create communion marked by love and service. Drawing on Luther's account of *incurvatus in se,* Moe-Lobeda argues that it is the indwelling Christ and Spirit who turn believers outward, empowering them—gradually but never perfectly—to love with the love of Christ within them. The Spirit in this framework functions primarily as the agent of moral transformation, forming believers to be agents of Christ's love. Moe-Lobeda concludes that an understanding of Christ's indwelling presence and the moral power that flows from it opens "wellsprings of moral agency," particularly in response to ecological devastation and the call to heal a broken world.[12] She develops this further in her 2013 book, *Resisting Structural Evil*. Citing Luther, she underscores that, as gracious gift, Christ dwells not only within human beings, but in the whole of creation: "Christ. . . fills all things. . . Christ is around us and in us in all places. . . He is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water."[13] Moe-Lobeda's interpretation of Luther clarifies that Christ's indwelling is not a static metaphysical claim but a dynamic, transformative presence that grounds human responsibility in communion, love, and participation in God's own life.

John Calvin: Creation and the indwelling Spirit

Among sixteenth-century reformers, John Calvin has been widely recognized as "the preeminent theologian of the Holy Spirit."[14] Scholarly attention has rightly emphasized the Spirit's role in relation to the Word, in the work of salvation, and in engendering faith. Far less attention, however, has been paid to Calvin's doctrine of the *Creator Spirit*. Yet for Calvin, the doctrine of creation is not a secondary locus but the very point of departure for his pneumatology. The Spirit's divinity is identified precisely with the Spirit's mission to creation. At the beginning of the final (1559) edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argues that it is through the Spirit's work in creation that one recognizes the Spirit as truly divine:

> It is the Spirit who, *everywhere diffused,* sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and in earth. Because he is circumscribed by no limits, he is excepted from the category of creature; but in *transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them* essence, life, and movement, he is indeed plainly divine.[15]

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Paradoxically, Calvin argues, it is the Spirit's profound immanence in creation that testifies to divine transcendence. The Spirit's nearness does not diminish God's otherness; rather, it reveals a God who freely gives life while remaining uncircumscribed by it.

This passage does not represent an isolated claim. Across Calvin's theological corpus—his *Institutes*, biblical commentaries, sermons, letters, and tracts—the Holy Spirit is consistently portrayed as the bond of communion between God and the world. The Spirit is the point of contact through which the divine life is communicated to creation and through which creation is drawn into participation in God. Calvin's theology is thus marked by a radical relationality: the created world exists not alongside God but *in radical relation to God*, sustained moment by moment by the Spirit's indwelling and life-giving presence.

Against the history of interpretation that reads Calvin as emphasizing divine transcendence at the expense of immanence, this pneumatological vision reveals a God who is intimately involved in the life of the world. The Spirit indwells creation, vivifying, sustaining, and preserving it, while at the same time drawing it toward its eschatological fulfillment. Calvin's insistence on divine sovereignty does not result in distance or detachment; rather,

Fortress Press, 1974), 40.

11. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, *LW* 1:83.

12. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 99.

13. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 140-141. Other feminist Lutheran theologians have similarly argued that the current ecological crisis demands a more radical account of God-world relationality. See, for instance, Lisa Dahill's article, "Addressing God with Names of Earth," in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43:3 (July 2016), 27-31.

14. B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 484-487.

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.13.14. Emphasis added.

it grounds the Spirit's continuous and intimate activity within creation.

To describe this dynamic, I have proposed the term *panenpneumatism*: the co-inherence, or mutual indwelling, of the Spirit and the world, in such a way that God and creation remain distinct yet radically related. The etymology of the term conveys Calvin's insistence that all things (*pan*) are in (*en*) the Spirit (*pneuma*), and the Spirit indwells all things. Intentionally, this definition foregrounds the orientation of the creaturely to the divine. Although there is mutual participation in one another, the relationship is not commensurate.[16] The creature's finite being is grounded in God's infinite being. Temporal, earthly entities participate in the eternal life of the triune God, eschatologically and pneumatologically, through the Spirit who resides in the earth, renews it, and yet transcends it, drawing the human and non-human community more and more into the life of God. As such, Calvin's theology is neither pantheistic nor deistic. The Spirit does not collapse into creation, nor does God withdraw from it. Instead, creation exists by virtue of the Spirit's continual inspiration and its ongoing reception of divine life.

A theology of panenpneumatism—or the Spirit's indwelling—illuminates the interconnectedness of all creation in the Breath of God. On the one hand, Calvin implies that this understanding incites believers to praise God "for the manifestation he has made of himself."[17] On the other hand, it bears ecological consequences for today: Bound in the Spirit, humans and other species are to be respected and cared for as ones in whom the Spirit dwells. According to a panenpneumatic cosmology, all creatures are "bodies of the Spirit."[18] Therefore, the dignity of all bodies of the earth is rightly reclaimed as God's intention for creation.

Calvin's commentary on Genesis more fully reveals his pneumatological vision. Rejecting interpretations that reduce the *ruach* of Genesis 1:2 to a mere wind, Calvin insists that the *ruach* is the Spirit of God hovering over the primordial chaos. Before the Word brings order, the Spirit "moves and agitates" the waters, cherishing the formless mass and preserving it from dissolution. Calvin likens the Spirit to a mother bird brooding over her young—an image that conveys care, protection, and generativity rather than control. Even in its wild and unordered state, creation is sustained by the Spirit's "secret efficacy," rendering chaos fecund rather than threatening.[19]

Calvin describes the natural world as a "mirror" of God, a "theater" of divine glory, and a "school" where non-human creation teaches human creation about the glory of God. As a mirror, creation reflects the beauty of the divine not through static representation but through the Spirit's ongoing work of revelation, making God's goodness, wisdom, and power perceptible in the material world.

This moment is not incidental. Calvin lingers over the Spirit's activity in primordial disorder, suspending the reader with the Spirit over the wild waters of creation. Only after dwelling on this pneumatological vision of the earth's creation and preservation does he turn to the ordering work of the Word. The implication is clear: creation's stability, both before and after its ordering, depends upon the Spirit. If the Spirit's inspiration is visible in chaos, Calvin concludes, it is no less evident in the ordered world. Creation in its present form continually derives its vitality from the *Vivificantem*, the life-giving Spirit.

This pneumatological doctrine of creation is reinforced by Calvin's theological aesthetics, in which the Spirit functions as the divine agent of animation, beauty, and renewal within creation. Calvin describes the natural world as a "mirror" of God, a "theater" of divine glory, and a "school" where non-human creation teaches human creation about the glory of God. As a mirror, creation reflects the beauty of the divine not through static representation but through the Spirit's ongoing work of revelation, making God's goodness, wisdom, and power perceptible in the material world. As a theater, creation becomes the living arena in which the diversity of flora and fauna vibrantly reveal God's glory. Finally, as a school, creation functions pedagogically through the Spirit's formative presence, training humans in gratitude, restraint, and dependance upon God.

These metaphors express Calvin's conviction that creation is suffused with meaning because it is suffused with the Spirit. Creation is not a backdrop for human salvation but an arena of divine self-revelation and participation. The Spirit awakens human perception to this reality, enabling creatures to see the world as a gift rather than possession.

Calvin's pneumatology of creation also has significant sote-

16. I am drawing here on Elizabeth A. Johnson's identification of the God-world relationship in panentheism as "non-hierarchical and reciprocal" but at the same time also "not strictly symmetrical, for the world is dependent on God in a way that God is not on the world." *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (St. Mary's College: Notre Dame, 1993), 43.

17. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms,* Psalm 104:29. Translations of Calvin's commentaries are from the series of twenty-two volumes originally published by the Calvin Translation Society (1845-1856) and reprinted by Baker Book House in 1989.

18. This designation comes from Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud's illustrative work on the Spirit, *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 208.

19. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis.* Genesis 1:2.

riological and eschatological implications. His creation–preservation–redemption schema is oriented toward communion rather than escape from the material world. The Spirit who creates and preserves the earth and everything in it, is the same Spirit who redeems, reorders, and draws all things toward their consummation in God. Redemption, therefore, is not a purely spiritual affair nor a narrowly anthropocentric one. It is the renewal of relational integrity within the whole created order.

At the same time, Calvin's theology is not without tension. While his doctrine of creation affirms the Spirit's indwelling of all things, his soteriology often privileges humanity as the principal locus of the Spirit's redemptive work. This anthropocentric emphasis does not negate his broader vision, but it does invite further constructive development.

Word and Spirit: Complementary accounts of divine indwelling

When read together, Luther's and Calvin's doctrines of creation reveal a striking convergence amid real difference. Luther begins with the incarnate Word, grounding creation in Christ's ongoing address, presence, and promise. Calvin begins with the Spirit, emphasizing the life-giving, sustaining, and indwelling pneumatological activity through which creation participates in God's life. These are not competing accounts but complementary perspectives on the God-world relationship, each presupposing the unity of Word and Spirit while attending to distinct modes of divine presence.

Luther secures the depth of divine immanence, or nearness, by anchoring it in the incarnation. God is present *for us* in the flesh of Christ, who continues to sustain creation through the Word and who bears creation's suffering in the cross. Calvin broadens the scope of divine immanence by attending to the Spirit's pervasive activity throughout the cosmos. God is present *with* and *within* creation, animating and preserving all things through the Spirit's continual inspiration.

Together, these perspectives resist the dualisms that inspire ecological domination and exploitation. In Luther's and Calvin's visions, creation is neither autonomous nor abandoned, divine nor disposable. It is continually sustained by the Word and the Spirit and ordered toward communion with God. For an ecological theology seeking to articulate divine immanence without collapsing Creator and creation, this Reformation pairing offers a robust and nuanced resource.

Limits, open questions, and constructive possibilities

Despite their rich resources, neither Luther nor Calvin offers a fully articulated ecological theology. Luther's emphasis on human vocation and service, while ethically generative, risks overshadowing the integrity and agency of nonhuman creatures. Calvin's vision of creation as a theater of God's glory raises the question of whether creation exists primarily for human spectatorship rather than for its own participation in divine life. Moreover, both reformers operate within intellectual horizons that predate modern ecological awareness. Concepts such as biodiversity, ecological interdependence, and environmental sustainability are not explicitly thematized in their work. Yet these limitations should not obscure their fundamental challenge to dualistic and mechanistic cosmologies.

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The theological dualisms that dominate modernity arise less from the Reformation than from Enlightenment metaphysics and modern conceptions of divine omnipotence. When read carefully, Luther and Calvin resist these developments by affirming divine indwelling, relationality, and humility before creation. Their theologies therefore invite constructive retrieval rather than rejection. By bringing Calvin's pneumatology into conversation with feminist and ecological theology, and by rereading Luther's Christology through an ecological lens, contemporary theology can build upon their insights while addressing their limitations.

Conclusion

In Martin Luther and John Calvin we find not a theology of divine withdrawal but of divine indwelling, not a dualistic separation of God and world but a relational vision of creation sustained by the Word and the Spirit. Luther's christological doctrine of creation affirms God's immanence through incarnation, co-suffering, and promise. Calvin's pneumatological doctrine of creation affirms God's immanence through the Spirit's life-giving, sustaining presence in all things.

Together, these Reformers invite a theological imagination that resists the dualisms that have contributed to ecological degradation. Their insights remind the church that non-human creation is neither spiritually void nor morally expendable. It is a world continually addressed by the Word, animated by the Spirit, and drawn toward communion with God. In retrieving these visions for an ecological age, the church need not invent a new theology of creation. It need only learn again to see the world as Luther and Calvin did: as a living, Word-spoken, Spirit-filled creation, sustained by God's abiding presence and held within God's promise of renewal and communion.