

“THE CHIEF EXERCISE OF FAITH”: JOHN CALVIN AND THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

by
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From time to time, opponents of Calvinism assert or at least imply that the theological system which takes its name from the famous Reformer makes prayer logically unnecessary and for all intents and purposes a waste of time. After all, if God is sovereign and his decree encompasses all that will ever come to pass, then why bother praying? For example, Michael Cox recently suggested that “prayer becomes practically meaningless for the true Calvinist, since, if he is consistent in his Calvinistic worldview, to him all things have been decided in advance.” He also claimed, “To the truly uniform Calvinist it would be absurd to pray for the salvation of the lost....” In light of these ideas about prayer and Calvinism, Cox concluded that “Calvinism has a lamentable prayer weakness.”²

Statements of this sort could be multiplied, and most people reading this article have probably encountered similar claims in conversation or print on more than one occasion. Reading assertions such as those made by Cox, one receives the impression that John Calvin (1509–1564) and his theological heirs have had little reason or motivation to engage in the practice of prayer, and such assertions would certainly lead one to assume that Calvin himself viewed prayer as a fairly unimportant topic. If such assumptions were accurate, then one would expect Calvin’s writings to contain only minimal references to prayer. Certainly, one would anticipate that the subject of prayer would not be a major theme in his theology or ministerial practice. But, in making those kinds of assumptions, one would be mistaken.

Even a cursory examination of Calvin’s writings will lead the reader to quite the opposite conclusion, for, in fact, prayer features very prominently in the Reformer’s corpus. For example, when Calvin produced the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536, he intended it to be a short introduction to the Christian faith. That modest volume contained just six chapters, and of those six chapters,

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²Michael Cox, *Not One Little Child: A Biblical Critique of Calvinism* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2009), 88.

one was devoted to the topic of prayer.³ As the *Institutes* grew over the years, so did the chapter on prayer so that in the standard English translation of the 1559 edition Calvin's discussion of prayer comprises just over seventy pages, making it one of the longest chapters in the entire work.⁴ Calvin's chapter on prayer in the *Institutes* is also, interestingly, longer than any discussion of prayer found in any modern systematic theology.⁵

³Both Alexandre Ganoczy and Ford Lewis Battles suggest that Calvin's chapter on prayer in the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* was heavily influenced by Martin Bucer's *Commentary on the Gospels* (1530). See Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 162–65; Ford Lewis Battles, introduction to *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1536 edition], by John Calvin, rev. ed., trans. and annot. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), l–li.

⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2:850–920. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Calvin's *Institutes* will be taken from this edition.

⁵In contrast to Calvin, most modern systematic theologies contain very brief discussions of prayer or, in some cases, no discussion of the subject at all. For example, prayer does not even appear in either the tables of contents or the indexes of Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) and James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1977; repr., Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006). More typical are the following works where prayer is only briefly mentioned: Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B & H, 2014); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008); Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962); Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (1947–1948; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993); Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Geanies House, UK: Mentor, 2005); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013); Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (1893; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989); William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003); Augustus Hopkins Strong, 8th ed., 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907); H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1949). Norman Geisler's *Systematic Theology* is a good example of this tendency to give little space to prayer in recent theological texts. In Geisler's 4-volume work that is comprised of more than 2,600 pages, outside of a 7-page discussion of "prayers for the dead," the indexes point to just six other pages where prayer is mentioned in passing. Geisler's mammoth work contains no general discussion of the topic of prayer.

The systematic theologies by Charles Hodge, Wayne Grudem, and Robert Reymond are exceptions to this general trend. Hodge's work contains an 18-page discussion of the subject; Grudem's includes a 21-page chapter on prayer; and Reymond's has a 10-page section on "Prayer as a Means of Grace" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 3:692–709; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 376–96; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 967–76). However, even the discussions by Hodge, Grudem, and Reymond combined are considerably shorter than that found in the 1559 edition of Calvin's *Institutes*.

This article will examine what Calvin said about the topic of prayer as well as his actual practice of prayer, and it will seek to demonstrate that prayer was a major component of Calvin's life, public ministry, and theology. As several writers have pointed out, in his *Institutes* Calvin was not so much interested in developing a theory of prayer, nor even a theology of prayer, as he was in presenting practical instructions about how to pray.⁶ Despite the common image of Calvin as an ivory tower theorist, Calvin was keenly interested in helping fellow believers learn to pray more effectively, and this desire comes through quite clearly in what he said about prayer. As it turns out, much of what Calvin said about prayer is still relevant and profitable for believers today.

SIX REASONS WHY BELIEVERS SHOULD PRAY

Echoing James 1:17, Calvin affirmed that every good gift comes from God the Father whom he described as "the master and bestower of all good things."⁷ Calvin viewed prayer as the divinely intended means by which believers can "reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father."⁸ The image of God as a benevolent Father is quite common in Calvin's writings. In fact, David Calhoun has suggested that "Calvin's favorite picture of prayer is that of God's adopted children calling upon him as their heavenly Father."⁹ Calvin saw God as a benevolent Father who sovereignly and graciously gives good gifts to his children in accordance with his eternal plan.

One might wonder why believers should bother praying to their Father if he already knows and has predestined all things. Calvin affirmed both God's omniscience and the doctrine of predestination, but such beliefs in no way undercut his confidence in the value of prayer.¹⁰ As Calvin understood it, God has instructed his people to pray "not so much for his own sake as for ours."¹¹ In his commentary on the synoptic Gospels, Calvin explained,

Believers do not pray, with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray, in order that they

⁶Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 156; Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 234; Jae Sung Kim, "Prayer in Calvin's Soteriology," in *Tributes to John Calvin*, ed. David W. Hall (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 354.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.1.

⁸Ibid., 3.20.2.

⁹David B. Calhoun, "Prayer: 'The Chief Exercise of Faith,'" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 349.

¹⁰Charles Partee, "Prayer as the Practice of Predestination," in *Calvinus Servus Christi*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Budapest: Presseabteilung des Ráday-Kollegiums, 1988), 245–56.

¹¹Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from Him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.¹²

While prayer does not inform an omniscient God of anything, it is a gift that God has given to his people for their good and his glory. Expanding on this idea of prayer being good for God's people, Calvin offered six somewhat overlapping reasons why believers should engage in the practice of prayer.

The first reason Calvin put forward for why believers should approach God in prayer is so "that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor."¹³ In other words, Calvin saw prayer as having a sanctifying effect on those who pray. Prayer is an admission that God is greater than the person engaged in prayer, and it is a reminder of one's dependence upon God for all things. In prayer, one turns to God as the ultimate source of help in the difficulties of life.

The second reason Calvin suggested for prayer is "that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts" to God.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Calvin described prayer as "communication between God and us whereby we expound to him our desires, our joys, our sighs, in a word, all the thoughts of our hearts."¹⁵ If prayer is the expression of one's desires to God, then regular prayer should cause one to guard his desires lest they become a source of guilt and shame when poured out before a holy God. Frequent times of prayer help the believer to focus his longings on things that please God.

The third reason for prayer that Calvin proposed is "that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand."¹⁶ As Calvin affirmed, God generously blesses his children with good gifts, and regular times of prayer are a means of acknowledging that God is the source of all such gifts. God gives many good gifts to his children prior to and apart from their asking, but intentionally and specifically

¹²John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 1 (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 314.

¹³Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, trans. and ed. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 56–57. See also the discussion in Bruce A. Ware, "The Role of Prayer and the Word in the Christian Life according to John Calvin," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 12 (1982): 74–75.

¹⁶Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

praying for what one needs both pleases God and prepares the believer to praise God for the blessings that follow the prayer of faith. The act of praying prepares the believer to respond with thankfulness to the gifts that come from God's hand.

Calvin's fourth reason for prayer is closely related to the third. Calvin noted that "having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently."¹⁷ Answered prayer reminds the believer of God's character, especially his goodness and his generosity. And in turn, answered prayers stir up the believer to praise and thank God for what he has done in answer to prayer.

The fifth reason for prayer is that it causes God's people to "embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers."¹⁸ If prayer is a means by which God gives good gifts to his children, then the act of praying for such gifts causes those gifts to be appreciated all the more as one realizes that they have been granted by God in response to prayer. Gifts that have been received in answer to prayer are a source of greater delight as one ponders that the Creator of the universe has heard and granted the request that was offered up in prayer.

The sixth and final reason for prayer which Calvin suggests is "that use and experience may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm his providence, while we understand not only that he promises never to fail us, and of his own will opens the way to call upon him at the very point of necessity, but also that he ever extends his hand to help his own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help."¹⁹ Prayer reminds the believer that God providentially works in the world he has made. Any view of God's providence that leads one to think prayer is unnecessary is not true Calvinism. It is a false Calvinism that stands in direct contrast to the Reformer's thought. In fact, Calvin strongly rebuked those who used God's providence as an excuse not to pray when he wrote, "Therefore they act with excessive foolishness who, to call men's minds away from prayer, babble that God's providence, standing guard over all things, is vainly importuned with our entreaties."²⁰ For Calvin, prayer is a confession that God providentially rules over all things and that he is willing and able to act on behalf of his children.

These six reasons for prayer tell us a good deal about what Calvin believed prayer could accomplish and why the believer should give himself to the practice of prayer. However, over and above these six reasons, Calvin seems to have seen one overarching reason why Christians should pray. In the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*, Calvin began his

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

discussion of prayer with this telling statement:

From those matters so far discussed, we clearly see how destitute and devoid of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere.... After we have been instructed by faith to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him.²¹

Calvin rightly recognized that believers are not sufficient in themselves to live as they ought, and he viewed prayer as the divinely appointed means by which Christians may obtain from God the ability to obey his commands. To fail to seek from God the help that one needs and that God is able to provide, Calvin pointed out, is as foolish as neglecting a great resource that one knows about and desperately needs. As he put it, "To know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and not ask of him—this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him."²² Calvin's overarching motivation for prayer is simply that prayer is the divinely intended means of securing from God what the believer needs in order to live as he ought.

FOUR GUIDELINES FOR PRAYER

If prayer is a great resource available to all Christians, and Calvin certainly believed that it was, then it should not be approached carelessly or without proper consideration. In prayer, one addresses the omnipotent and infinitely holy God based on the merits of Christ. Calvin rightly viewed prayer as a very serious activity. In addition to the six reasons for prayer discussed above, Calvin proposed four rules or guidelines for proper prayer. These guidelines were not intended to be hard and fast rules that guaranteed one was praying correctly or that one's prayers would be answered. Rather they represented a general attitude that should characterize the believer as he approaches God in prayer.²³ These guidelines, Calvin believed, could help keep one from sinning in the very act of praying and could direct the believer's prayers so that they would bring much glory to God.

Calvin suggested, first, that those who pray "be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God."²⁴ In other

²¹Ibid., 3.20.1.

²²Ibid. See also Ware, "The Role of Prayer and the Word," 76–77.

²³François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (1963; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 254.

²⁴Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.4.

words, in view of God's majesty believers should approach God reverently or in a proper state of mind. Elsewhere, Calvin described prayer as "an intimate conversation of the pious with God," but he warned believers that such intimate conversation must still be marked by "reverence and moderation."²⁵ The fact that believers enjoy the privilege of addressing God in prayer does not mean they should approach God casually. God is not one's peer. Although God has invited his children to call him Father, the difference between believers and God is infinitely greater than that between children and their earthly fathers. God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Therefore, the believer's prayers should never be marked by irreverence or a casual attitude as if one was talking over the fence to a neighbor.

When approaching God in prayer, Calvin said, the believer should seek to rid his mind of all "alien and outside cares."²⁶ Such cares might distract the believer from the greatness of God and the seriousness of addressing one's Maker. Calvin acknowledged the common struggle of wandering thoughts that believers often face while engaged in prayer. He admitted that "no one is so intent on praying that he does not feel many irrelevant thoughts stealing upon him, which either break the course of prayer or delay it by some winding bypath."²⁷ Calvin believed that the harder one found it to focus on prayer, the more one needed to pursue such a focus. Focused prayer requires significant effort, but it is an effort worth making.²⁸

Calvin further noted that in bringing requests to God, one must concentrate on asking for things that are in keeping with God's majesty and will. He lamented the fact that in prayer people often ask God for whatever comes to mind regardless of how appropriate or inappropriate the request might be.²⁹ In his commentary on Matthew 17:19, Calvin stated, "As nothing is more at variance with faith than the foolish and irregular desires of our flesh, it follows that those in whom faith reigns do not desire every thing without discrimination, but only that which the Lord promises to give."³⁰ When praying, one must remember who is being addressed, and one should only pray for things that are pleasing to God.

Calvin confessed that "because our abilities are far from able to match such perfection, we must seek a remedy to help us."³¹ That

²⁵Ibid., 3.20.16.

²⁶Ibid., 3.20.4.

²⁷Ibid., 3.20.5.

²⁸D. B. Garlington, "Calvin's Doctrine of Prayer: An Examination of Book 3, Chapter 20 of the Institutes of the Christian Religion," *Baptist Review of Theology* 1 (1991): 24.

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.5.

³⁰John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2 (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 326–27.

³¹Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.5.

remedy, Calvin believed, was to be found in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin admitted that “to pray rightly is a rare gift.”³² And yet he believed that “praying rightly” is something that every believer should seek to do in the power of the Spirit. In this life, no one will ever pray apart from the vestiges of sin. “But,” Calvin noted, “God tolerates even our stammering and pardons our ignorance whenever something inadvertently escapes us; as indeed without this mercy there would be no freedom to pray.”³³ Fallen sinners will never pray perfectly, but those who know God should seek to approach him with a reverent attitude.

Second, Calvin said that when we pray we should “ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest—nay, burning—desire to attain it.”³⁴ Believers should not pray out of mere habit or sense of duty. Rather, God is most pleased when his children pray to him out of a profound sense of need recognizing their complete dependence upon him. As Stephen Matteucci has pointed out, “We are not praying to an equal for a little help to get us through, we are praying to the sovereign and holy God to sustain us in everything.”³⁵

Calvin was greatly disturbed by the fact that people often approach God in prayer “for the sake of mere performance” and that in doing so they often ask for things they either already have or know will come to them apart from prayer.³⁶ According to Calvin, prayers of that sort are an expression of depraved indifference rather than an evidence of dependent faith. A believer’s prayers should be marked by urgency and a realization that the one praying is completely dependent on God for the things being sought in prayer. Ronald Wallace helpfully summarized Calvin’s understanding of prayer when he wrote, “Prayer is the genuine cry of the human heart for help in the midst of circumstances that cannot be met by merely human resources.”³⁷ When Christians approach God in prayer they are talking to the one who can do what no one else can do, and their prayers should reflect their confidence in God’s gracious omnipotence. Little prayers suggest little faith in the God who answers prayer.

If believers find their prayers marked by indifference or apathy, Calvin said, they must “wrestle with their own coldness.”³⁸ Calvin believed that God has instilled in his creatures the knowledge that prayer

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 3.20.16.

³⁴Ibid., 3.20.6.

³⁵Stephen Matteucci, “A Strong Tower for Weary People: Calvin’s Teaching on Prayer,” *Founders Journal* 69 (Summer 2007): 22.

³⁶Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.6.

³⁷Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 280.

³⁸Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.16.

should flow from an uplifted mind, and in keeping with this, Calvin encouraged the practice of praying with uplifted hands. He noted that the practice of physically lifting up one's hands in prayer has been common in all ages and among all people, including those of his own day.³⁹ Calvin thought such an expression rightly reflected the believer's sense of dependence.

In his third guideline, Calvin suggested that in prayer believers should put away all pride and self-assurance.⁴⁰ Calvin believed that "the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt."⁴¹ He further argued that no one should "hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to him."⁴² Rightly ordered prayer is filled with and predicated upon sincere repentance.⁴³ For Calvin, presumption is a great enemy of God-honoring prayer. God does not owe his fallen creatures anything. In prayer, believers must always approach God as those begging for mercy, not those demanding what they are due.

And fourth, Calvin explained that having been "cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered."⁴⁴ Believers should pray with a confident hope that God will hear and answer their prayers. Those who pray without expecting God to answer actually provoke God to anger.⁴⁵ Discussing Calvin's view, Ware rightly noted that prayer is the "acid-test" or the real proof of one's faith. "In other words, without prayer, faith simply cannot be genuine or real."⁴⁶ Prayer must be combined with faith in God, and that faith should be rooted in the promises of God revealed in Scripture. As Calvin explained, "Our prayers depend upon no merit of ours, but their whole worth and hope of fulfillment are grounded in God's promises, and depend upon them."⁴⁷ Although God does not owe humans anything, he is a good Father who graciously gives good gifts to his children. Therefore, as Calvin put it, "we should deplore our distresses before him, as children unburden their troubles to their parents."⁴⁸

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 3.20.8.

⁴¹Ibid., 3.20.9.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 3.20.16.

⁴⁴Ibid., 3.20.11.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ware, "The Role of Prayer and the Word," 79.

⁴⁷Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.14. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, vol. 1 (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), xxxvii.

⁴⁸Ibid., 3.20.12.

According to Calvin, believers must approach God reverently, earnestly, and humbly, but they should also approach him confidently—not confident in themselves, but fully confident in the fact that God is good, wise, and generous. Calvin did not view God as a stingy miser who only grudgingly answers the prayers of his people. Rather, he saw God as a good and generous Father ready to hear and answer his children when they call out to him.

Although Calvin laid out these four rules or guidelines for prayer, he confessed that God is not obligated to answer prayer based on conformity to such rules, nor is he prevented from answering prayers that are offered up imperfectly.⁴⁹ In fact, Calvin admitted that “even ungodly wailings sometimes do some good.”⁵⁰ And yet, God’s ability to answer prayers based on his sovereign will does not mean that believers should pray carelessly. Whether praying in private or publicly in the church, the four rules which Calvin put forward were intended to help Christians pray in a way that pleases God.⁵¹ Whatever their station, believers should pray “surely persuaded that, although not freed of all hindrances, their efforts still please God and their petitions are approved, provided they endeavor and strive toward a goal not immediately attainable.”⁵²

THE LORD’S PRAYER AS A MODEL FOR BELIEVERS

In his *Institutes*, Calvin followed up his discussion of the four rules for prayer with an extended discussion of the Lord’s Prayer as a model to be followed. Calvin believed that “we cannot even open our mouths before God without danger unless the Spirit instructs us in the right pattern for prayer.”⁵³ This God-honoring pattern for prayer, Calvin thought, could be found in the example which Jesus gave in reply to the disciples’ request, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

Calvin viewed what is commonly called the Lord’s Prayer as consisting of six main petitions.⁵⁴ The first three he described as having to do with God’s glory, and the last three he saw as concerned with the care of ourselves or with things that God would want the believer to ask for his or her own benefit.⁵⁵ These things requested for the believer’s benefit have primarily to do with one’s spiritual welfare rather than with

⁴⁹Ibid., 3.20.16.

⁵⁰Ibid., 3.20.15.

⁵¹Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 2013), 238.

⁵²Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.16.

⁵³Ibid., 3.20.34.

⁵⁴Ibid., 3.20.35. See also Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:316.

⁵⁵Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.35.

temporal comfort.⁵⁶ Calvin saw this twofold division among the six petitions as somewhat parallel to the two tables of the law.⁵⁷ Calvin did not think that the Lord's Prayer was given in order to specify the exact words which believers should use. As he put it, when the believer prays "the words may be utterly different, yet the sense ought not to vary."⁵⁸ According to Calvin, the Lord's Prayer was intended to guide the believer's desires so that he might offer up petitions that are pleasing to God.⁵⁹

In the Lord's Prayer, Christ begins by addressing God as "our Father in heaven" (Matt 6:9).⁶⁰ Calvin noted that this form of address acknowledges both God's fatherly love and his infinite power.⁶¹ As a model for believers to follow, it expresses great confidence in the access that God's children have to the Father through Christ and in the boundless power of the one addressed. The title "Father" suggests that the believer—the one praying—has been made a child of God and a brother of God's eternal son.⁶² In keeping with this, Calvin asked, "Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? He, while he is the true Son, has of himself been given us as a brother that what he has of his own nature may become ours by benefit of adoption if we embrace this great blessing with sure faith."⁶³ According to Calvin, this father-son relationship means that the believer cannot seek help elsewhere lest he imply that his heavenly Father is either unable or unwilling to provide what his children need.⁶⁴ Addressing God as one's Father in heaven declares the believer's confidence in God's greatness and his goodness. In short, it acknowledges both his ability and his readiness to answer the cries of his children.

The first petition of the Lord's prayer is that God's name would be hallowed or sanctified (Matt 6:9). According to Calvin, this petition is an expression of the believer's desire to see God's name magnified as it deserves to be.⁶⁵ He explained,

We should wish God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence. To this is opposed the profanity that has always been too common and even today is

⁵⁶Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:316.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.49.

⁵⁹Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:316.

⁶⁰Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are taken from the NIV.

⁶¹Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:317.

⁶²Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.21 and 36.

⁶³Ibid., 3.20.36.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:318.

abroad in the world. Hence, the need of this petition, which ought to have been superfluous if even a little godliness existed among us.... Here we are bidden to request not only that God vindicate his sacred name of all contempt and dishonor but also that he subdue the whole race of mankind to reverence for it.⁶⁶

This petition is both an expression of the believer's desire to see God glorified and a request that God would suppress all impiety and cause his glory to shine forth more brightly.

Calvin understood the second petition of the Lord's Prayer ("your kingdom come") as an extension of the first so that the two are similar but somewhat complementary. Calvin defined God's kingdom as the reign of God in the lives of his people. He saw this reign as having two parts, namely, the correction of all desires of the flesh which are contrary to God's will and then the shaping of all thoughts in obedience to his will.⁶⁷ This petition, therefore, is a request that God bring men's hearts and minds into conformity to his own desired will. As Calvin saw it, this request has universal implications. Calvin explained what such a rule entails: "God sets up His kingdom by humbling the whole world, but in different ways. For he tames the wantonness of some, [and] breaks the untamable pride of others."⁶⁸ This is a request that God will save and sanctify the elect while crushing his enemies and frustrating their rebellious efforts. Such a request, Calvin thought, would necessarily tend to cause the one praying to pull back from worldly corruptions and all that stands opposed to God's rule in this world.⁶⁹

The third petition concerning God's glory is a request that God's will be done on the earth even as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). Again this petition is not far removed from the first two, for the honoring of God's name and the spread of his kingdom are surely a part of seeing his will done on the earth. The reference to God's will here is not a reference to his secret will but rather his declared will.⁷⁰ It is a request that God so move his creatures that they gladly obey and submit to him.⁷¹ Calvin explained, "It is a prayer, that God may remove all the obstinacy of men, which rises in unceasing rebellion against him, and may render them gentle and submissive, that they may not wish or desire any thing but what pleases him, and meets his approbation."⁷² While Calvin recognized that the entire world would not be brought into full submission to God's will in this age, he still felt that it was appropriate to make a general request that God's declared will be fulfilled on the earth. Such a

⁶⁶Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.41.

⁶⁷Ibid., 3.20.42.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., 3.20.43.

⁷¹Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:321.

⁷²Ibid.

prayer expresses the believer's desire to see all rebellion against his Lord suppressed and, in fact, transformed into glad obedience.

The second half of the Lord's Prayer—petitions four through six—have to do primarily with requests that concern the needs of God's people. The fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer is that God would "give us today our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). Likely influenced by a number of church fathers, Calvin's contemporary Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) interpreted this "bread" figuratively as referring to "the bread of [God's] heavenly teaching."⁷³ Calvin rejected this interpretation in favor of a more literal view that interprets this as a request for temporal sustenance.⁷⁴ Calvin viewed this request for "daily bread" as a synecdoche pointing to "all that is necessary for the present life."⁷⁵ He explained, "By this petition we ask of God all things in general that our bodies have need to use under the elements of this world [Gal. 4:3], not only for food and clothing but also for everything God perceives to be beneficial to us, that we may eat our daily bread in peace."⁷⁶ Calvin believed that by entrusting one's temporal welfare to God, one is prepared to look to God for the greater needs of the soul as well.

The fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer is that God would "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12). The debts mentioned here are not pecuniary of course, yet they do indicate the liability to punishment that follows transgression against a holy God. Calvin explained this monetary-like language, when he wrote, "In Matthew, sins are called *debts*, because they expose us to condemnation at the tribunal of God, and make us *debtors*; nay more, they alienate us

⁷³Erasmus paraphrased this petition as "Nourish, Father, what you have begotten. Provide for us so that we might not lack the bread of your heavenly teaching, in order that, by its daily consumption, we might be strengthened and become mature, and invigorated to fulfil your commands" (Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew*, trans. and annot. Dean Simpson, in *Collected Works of Erasmus* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008], 45:117–18). See also Hilmar M. Pabel, *Conversing with God: Prayer in Erasmus' Pastoral Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 138–42. Dean Simpson implies that Erasmus may have been following the interpretative lead of Cyprian, Jerome, and Augustine, each of whom saw multiple meanings in this request for "bread" (Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Matthew*, 45:118, n. 28). See also Tertullian who interpreted this request as referring to Christ the "Bread of Life" (Tertullian, *On Prayer*, ch. 6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:683).

Generally speaking, during the Medieval period Catholic interpreters followed the western church fathers in attributing multiple meanings to this "bread." Luther initially interpreted this "bread" as having multiple meanings, but by the time he produced his catechisms he had come to understand this "bread" as referring primarily, if not exclusively, to the means of physical nourishment. Calvin, along with Melancthon, Bucer, Beza, and several other Protestant Reformers, consistently viewed this bread as referring to whatever is necessary for physical sustenance (Pabel, *Conversing with God*, 138; Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Lord's Prayer* [Saint Louis: Concordia, 2011], 117–44).

⁷⁴Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:322–23.

⁷⁵Ibid., 1:323.

⁷⁶Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.44.

entirely from God, so that there is no hope of obtaining peace and favour except by pardon.”⁷⁷ In another place Calvin wrote that these sins are called debts “because we owe penalty for them,” which penalty we are completely unable to pay on our own.⁷⁸ This petition is a request that God would forgive the debts that we owe to the Father because of our rebellion against him. To this request for forgiveness, a certain condition is also added: “as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). As Calvin pointed out, “No one may presume to approach God and ask forgiveness, who is not pure and free from all resentment.”⁷⁹ Our forgiveness of others is in no way the cause of our own forgiveness, but we should not ask God to forgive us while we refuse to forgive those who have committed offenses against us.⁸⁰

The sixth and final petition in the Lord’s Prayer is a request that God would not “lead us into temptation” but rather would “deliver us from the evil one” (Matt 6:13). Calvin acknowledged that some interpreters have split this petition into two distinct requests. He rejected that view, noting that “the nature of the subject makes it manifest, that it is one and the same petition.”⁸¹ Calvin interpreted this petition as a confession of our weakness and a request that God would shelter us from the assaults of Satan.⁸² Calvin noted that the word “temptation” is often used in Scripture to describe any kind of trial.⁸³ The request here is not asking that one be sheltered from every kind of trial, including those trials that God uses to help produce godly character. Instead, it is a request that God protect the believer from inward temptations that may encourage the commission of sin. The “evil one” mentioned in this prayer could be a reference to Satan, as Chrysostom took it, or it could be a reference to sin in general. Calvin did not have a strong leaning one way or the other.⁸⁴ Instead he observed that the end result was essentially the same. Apart from God’s deliverance, God’s people are in constant danger from Satan and the deceitfulness of sin.⁸⁵

Calvin saw the Lord’s Prayer as the perfect model for believers to follow as they seek to conform their prayers to God’s will. He did not think that it was given in order to be mindlessly repeated as some kind of mantra, though under his direction it was frequently recited in French during Genevan worship services.⁸⁶ Instead of a mantra, Calvin

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:326.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.45.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:327.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.45.

⁸¹ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:327.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1:328.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.46.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:329.

⁸⁶ According to Robert M. Kingdon, the Lord’s Prayer was sometimes recited twice

viewed the Lord's Prayer as providing an example of how believers should approach God and what kinds of petitions they should bring to their "Father in heaven."

CALVIN'S PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Calvin's personal prayer life. In fact, apart from the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin said very little about himself in general. Based on what Calvin taught about prayer, it is clear that Calvin considered prayer a very important part of the believer's walk with God. But the details of his own private prayer life remained just that—private.

We do know somewhat more about Calvin's public prayer life, particularly as it was exercised in the church in Geneva. Although Calvin affirmed the sovereignty of God in salvation, he also believed that God uses means to help bring people to himself. And he held that alongside the Scriptures and the sacraments, public prayer plays an important role in drawing people to God.⁸⁷ For this reason, under Calvin's direction, prayer was a prominent part of the worship services in Geneva.

In Calvin's day, church services of one type or another took place nearly every day of the week. Daily attendance was not required, but Genevans were expected to attend church services at least twice a week, on Sunday and then again on Wednesday. Wednesday, especially, was set apart as a day of prayer.⁸⁸ Wednesdays were considered a partial holiday in Geneva, and most businesses did not open until after worship services had concluded.⁸⁹

Although Genevan church services in the years preceding Calvin's reform included prayer, such prayers were typically spoken in Latin, a language which many parishioners did not fully understand.⁹⁰ After the implementation of Calvin's reforms, public prayer was spoken in the vernacular and became not only a means by which the preacher addressed God but also a part of the service intended to instruct those listening in the pews. Under Calvin's direction, public prayer took on a new didactic function.

during the course of a Sunday worship service (Kingdon, "The Genevan Revolution in Public Worship," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* n.s. 20 [1999]: 276, 328).

⁸⁷Wulfert de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 97.

⁸⁸Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 135; Kingdon, "Genevan Revolution in Public Worship," 274.

⁸⁹Elsie Anne McKee, ed. and trans., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 157; Thomas A. Lambert, "Preaching, Praying and Policing the Reform in Sixteenth-Century Geneva" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998), 306.

⁹⁰Karin Magg and John D. Witvliet, eds. *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 49–50, 55; Robert M. Kingdon, ed., *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 194.

On Sundays just prior to the sermon in a Genevan church, the preacher typically offered up a prayer for illumination asking God to help him preach the word faithfully and accurately.⁹¹ Then after the sermon, the preacher would offer a lengthy prayer of intercession on behalf of his listeners, and he would exhort them to pray along with him. This prayer typically was ended with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer or an expanded paraphrase of the same.⁹² Wednesday prayer services were similar though the prayer of intercession was often replaced by a general exhortation for the hearers to turn from their sin. However, even this additional exhortation was usually followed by another, more general, prayer by the preacher.⁹³

Many of Calvin's public prayers were recorded and have been preserved in the published texts of his sermons as well as in his commentaries. In keeping with his preference for "lucid brevity," most of Calvin's prayers are substantial but not overly long. Not surprisingly, they cover a wide range of topics. In addition to describing the work of God, Calvin frequently prayed for four groups of people: civil officials, church leaders, church members, and those outside the church.

From time to time, Calvin offered up prayers for the civil officials in Geneva. He interpreted 1 Timothy 2:1–2 as an exhortation for believers to engage in public prayer for kings, magistrates, and other government officials.⁹⁴ Calvin understood civil government as appointed by God for the preservation and promotion of both peace and godliness.⁹⁵ He thought that even if government officials were not providing such benefits, believers were still obligated to pray for them, and in fact, he suggested that believers should pray that such unjust officials would "begin to impart to us those benefits of which they formerly deprived us."⁹⁶ He himself prayed that the civil officials in Geneva would be endowed with God's Spirit, would acknowledge Christ's lordship, and would seek to serve Christ by exalting his reign within their sphere of influence.⁹⁷ While teaching through the book of Micah, Calvin offered up the following prayer:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, inasmuch as it pleases you for the image of your justice to shine in princes and magistrates, whom you have armed with the sword that they may rule in your name, grant us the grace that this blessing might also shine openly among us, that by this sign

⁹¹Lambert, "Preaching, Praying and Policing," 326.

⁹²Ibid., 326–27.

⁹³Ibid., 327.

⁹⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 21 (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 49–53.

⁹⁵Ibid., 51–52.

⁹⁶Ibid., 52.

⁹⁷See, e.g., the "Prayer after the Sermon" recorded in Calvin's *Sermons on the Beatitudes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2006), 83–84.

you might witness that you are not only favorable toward us, but also have cared for our salvation, and have watched over our welfare and well-being. And may you so enlighten us by your Word, that it may never become obscured among us because of any depraved or inordinate cupidity, but may it ever retain its pure clarity, that we might walk in the right path of salvation, which you provide and ordain, until at last being gathered in your heavenly kingdom, we might enjoy this eternal inheritance which you have acquired for us though the blood of your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.⁹⁸

In addition to praying for civil authorities, Calvin also prayed for those who served as church leaders in Geneva. He prayed that church leaders would be led by the Holy Spirit and would be faithful ministers who admonish the wayward while feeding the hungry.⁹⁹ He asked God to enable those who preach to be filled with divine power for the good of God's people. For example, as he taught from Micah chapter three, Calvin prayed,

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, since you have willed for us to be governed by the preaching of your Holy Word, grant that those who are charged with fulfilling this office may be increasingly endowed with your heavenly power, that they might not attempt anything of their own, but with all their power truly employ themselves in service to you and to us, and that we might truly become the temple of your majesty, all the days of our life, that we might finally one day come into your heavenly sanctuary, to which you daily invite us, since you have opened that door, once and for all, through the blood of your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Calvin prayed for the churches in Geneva to be "delivered from the mouths of ravening wolves and hirelings."¹⁰¹ More specifically, he prayed for the people in the churches to be controlled by the Spirit of God and wholly submitted to his Word. Calvin prayed that God's people would have an appetite to hear and obey the Scriptures. Such obedience would ultimately lead to the glory of God.¹⁰²

Calvin's public prayers frequently included strong expressions of grief over sin. He confessed that apart from God's abundant grace, God's people would be lost and worthy of divine condemnation.¹⁰³ For this reason, he often asked God to forgive his people for their sin against him.¹⁰⁴ For example, Calvin prayed,

⁹⁸John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 153.

⁹⁹Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes*, 84.

¹⁰⁰Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, 183.

¹⁰¹Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes*, 84.

¹⁰²Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, 48.

¹⁰³John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 3, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum*, trans. John Owen (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 114.

¹⁰⁴Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes*, 83.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, seeing that since antiquity it has always pleased you to extend your grace toward your people, as perverse and rebellious as they were; and that you have never ceased to exhort them to repentance, but have always taken them by your hand through your prophets; grant us also your grace today, that your same Word may resound in our ears; and, if at first we should not profit from your holy teaching as we ought; nonetheless, do not reject us; but by your Spirit subdue and so reign over our minds and affections, that being truly humbled and brought low, we give you the glory that your majesty is due; so that being clothed by your love and fatherly favor, we may submit ourselves totally to you, while at the same time embracing that goodness which you have provided and offered us in our Lord Jesus; that we might never doubt again that you alone are our Father, until that day that we rejoice in your heavenly promise, which has been acquired for us by the blood of your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.¹⁰⁵

At times, Calvin also offered up more general prayers for “all men everywhere.” Despite the oft-depicted caricature of Calvin as a man who believed in predestination at the expense of evangelism, Calvin actually expressed great interest in seeing the lost converted.¹⁰⁶ From the pulpit in Geneva, Calvin prayed for the lost to be enlightened by God’s Spirit and brought to saving faith in Christ. He prayed that such would take place for the good of those converted and so that they might worship God within the body of Christ. For example, as part of a longer prayer, Calvin said,

Next we pray, most gracious God and merciful Father, for all men generally. Since you desire all men to acknowledge you as Saviour of the world, through the redemption won by our Lord Jesus Christ, may those who do not know him, being in darkness and captive to ignorance and error—may they by the light of your Holy Spirit and the preaching of your gospel, be led into the way of salvation, which is to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. May those whom you have already visited with your grace, and enlightened by the knowledge of your Word, grow in all goodness, enriched by your spiritual blessing, so that together we may all worship you with heart and voice, giving honour and homage to Christ, our Master, King and Lawgiver.¹⁰⁷

Calvin offered up thousands of public prayers over the course of several decades, and the content of such prayers surely ranged further than can be fully summarized in a few pages. However, among those prayers that have been preserved, one most frequently finds Calvin acknowledging God’s power and goodness and praying for the spiritual good of civil authorities, church leaders, church members, and ultimately all people in general. In addition to teaching about prayer in the

¹⁰⁵Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, 48.

¹⁰⁶For a helpful discussion of Calvin’s missionary vision, see Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffrey Robinson Sr., *To the Ends of the Earth: Calvin’s Missional Vision and Legacy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014).

¹⁰⁷Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes*, 84–85.

Institutes and elsewhere, Calvin used the pulpits of Geneva to provide believers with a model of healthy prayer that glorifies God by acknowledging him as the source of spiritual vitality and the giver of all good gifts.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the claims of some opponents of Calvinism, a Calvinistic worldview does not make prayer “practically meaningless.”¹⁰⁸ Calvin himself was very interested in encouraging believers to pray and in teaching them how to pray in a way that would glorify God. Calvin spent a significant section of the *Institutes* explaining why believers should pray to God with the overarching reason being that prayer is the means God has ordained for believers to receive help to live as they ought. Calvin believed that the importance of prayer calls for serious thought to be given as to how one should pray, and so he suggested helpful guidelines drawn from Scripture to help a believer pray in a way that will please God.

Calvin viewed the Lord’s Prayer as a model of how believers should approach God in prayer. As he saw it, the Lord’s Prayer encompasses the kinds of petitions God’s people should bring to their heavenly Father. Although Calvin did not think the Lord’s Prayer should be mindlessly repeated, he did think it was quite proper to recite the Lord’s Prayer in public worship. Often, in his public prayers, Calvin would conclude by repeating the Lord’s Prayer. Thankfully, many of Calvin’s public prayers were written down in texts that have survived to the present day. A quick survey of his public prayers suggests that Calvin often prayed on behalf of various groups of people including government officials, church leaders, church members, and even “all men in general.” Calvin’s prayers were certainly directed to God, but they also served as a means by which Calvin endeavored to teach the people of Geneva how to pray to their Father in heaven. Despite the claims of some, Calvin was a pastor-theologian who was keenly interested in seeing God’s people learn to pray, for he believed that when God’s people fail to pray they are as foolish as a man who neglects a treasure hidden in the earth after it has been pointed out to him.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Cox, *Not One Little Child*, 88.

¹⁰⁹Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.1.