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# John Calvin on the Strength of our Weak Praying

Michael Parsons

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At one level, the sixteenth century Protestant reformations were explicitly pastoral movements. Peter Matheson suggests that 'the reforming process was not fundamentally about ideas in the mind or structures in church and state but indicated much more elemental changes in spiritual direction'.<sup>1</sup> He says, further, 'Biblical images are being reworked here, released and unleashed to emphasise gratuity, access, intimacy. From this perspective the Reformation can be seen as an infinitely varied, but coherent and extended, metaphor for the bountifulness of God's grace.'<sup>2</sup>

So, then, at the specifically pastoral level those involved in 'spiritual direction', those preaching, teaching and leading congregations, sought to draw people to a living relationship with a more intimate God through Jesus Christ, and sought, too, to enable believers to live more closely to that God on a day to day basis, calling for and experiencing 'the bountifulness of God's grace'. Small wonder, then, that the Word of God was continually emphasised and spoken, singling out for exposition among other things, biblical narratives,<sup>3</sup> the commandments and passages on prayer.

There was certainly no shortage of works on prayer—many of the reformers wrote on the subject, all of them preached upon it. The common emphases in these works, those we might term 'reformational emphases',

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1 P. Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 6.

2 Matheson, *Imaginative World*, 8.

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3 See Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives. Reformation Thought and Narrative Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen), 2004.

seem to have included the sovereignty of the God who answers prayer, the fatherhood of God, the importance of faith and hope in the supplicant, the central significance of Jesus Christ to the divine hearing and answering, the pivotal position of the Lord's Prayer for understanding, and so on. Naturally, the reformers had different perspectives on the theme and stressed different things, but on these key topics they seem to have agreed.

The following outlines some representative works on prayer by Zwingli, Luther and Melancthon. This will give a broader context for an examination of John Calvin's theology of prayer from the *Institutes*, stressing the pervasive idea in his thought that the strength of prayer is found in an honest and vulnerable acknowledgement of our inherent weakness before a sovereign Father.

## I Reformation prayer

### 1 Huldrych Zwingli

In the Swiss city of Zurich, Huldrych Zwingli wrote on the subject of prayer in the context of a self-conscious reformation. He speaks in *True and False Religion* of the prayers of former ecclesial practice as hypocrisy, as 'an insult to God', as mercenary ('hired prayers'), concluding, that previously 'the devotion of the heart has dared to sell itself as a work of merit'.<sup>4</sup> This, in itself, is part of Zwingli's repeated con-

trast between faith in the divine and faith in external things.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in his *Reply to Emser*, for example, he distinguishes between the faithful who depend on God, resorting to him alone, and the unfaithful who turn from God to creatures, hoping for aid from them.<sup>6</sup> A little earlier he had defined it at some length:

Prayer, therefore, is the conversation which as a result of faith you have with God as with a father and a most safe and sure helper. Prayer, then, is the uplifting of the heart, not of the breath or voice to God. We pray, therefore, when the heart draws near to God, when it speaks with him, when in sincere faith it seeks help from him alone.<sup>7</sup>

In discussing prayer as adoration towards God, Zwingli states, 'Adoration is... the devoting of the heart to God, that is, to the Lord who *can* do all things and to the Father who *will*'.<sup>8</sup> We notice in these quotations those reformational emphases mentioned above: God as sovereign and as Father, the importance of faith. However, it is also evident that he stresses above all that

<sup>4</sup> See Zwingli, *True and False Religion*, 3.279–83 in H. Zwingli, *Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, translated by S. M. Jackson (Philadelphia: Heidelberg, 1922).

<sup>5</sup> See W. P. Stephens, *Zwingli, An Introduction to his Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 141–2. Also, F. Büsser, 'The Spirituality of Zwingli and Bullinger in the Reformation of Zurich' in *Christian Spirituality. High Middle Ages and Reformation*, edited by J. Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 300–317.

<sup>6</sup> Zwingli, *Reply*, 3.383–8. Also, Zwingli, *Exposition*, 2.238–43; *True and False Religion*, 3.282.

<sup>7</sup> *True and False Religion*, 3.281.

<sup>8</sup> *True and False Religion*, 3.279. See also, 3.282. Also, T. George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 130.

prayer is the individual believer reaching out of the heart in communion with the eternal God—that is, he speaks of prayer essentially as relational experience. Given the strongly theocentric character of Zwingli's theology, this existential element is quite remarkable.<sup>9</sup> And, indeed, G. R. Potter's estimate of the reformer in this respect is that his understanding (given that it was early on in the Reformation) 'was something almost original'.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 Martin Luther

Martin Luther evidences similar teaching on prayer and certainly echoes some of Zwingli's emphasis. In an early work, *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), he stresses that prayer is a 'spiritual good' and that the essence of true and acceptable prayer is 'a lifting up of heart or mind to God'.<sup>11</sup> Prayer from the heart is an inner longing, sighing, desiring. What comes across in Luther's exposition at this point is the relational aspect of prayer; believers need to move God to mercy, but their confidence resides in the fact that the

sovereign God is actually their Father ('a friendly, sweet, intimate, and warm-hearted word').<sup>12</sup>

Later, in 1528, we find the reformer again expounding the fatherhood of God for an understanding of prayer. In a sermon, preached in that year, he uses the metaphor of a sack that the faithful hold open before their Father, in which they receive more and more the longer they hold it open, for the Lord mercifully desires to give.<sup>13</sup>

Another emphasis is added in this work—that of prayer as obedience: Luther states, 'You should pray and you should know that you are bound to pray by divine command.' Again, 'This work I have been commanded to do and as an obedient person I must do it.'<sup>14</sup> In fact, Luther attaches the spiritual exercise of prayer to the second commandment; it is a requirement that believers use God's name in worship and adoration—that is the positive corollary to the negative commandment concerning the wrongful use of the Lord's name. This, in itself, gives added confidence to those who would call on the name of the Lord; as God has commanded it from them, he will answer their obedient petition.

In his later work, *A Simple Way to Pray* (1535), Luther singles out the Lord's Prayer as evocative of true supplication: 'To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, as an old man eat and drink from it and never get

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Stephens, *Zwingli*, 36, 69, 141–42; Stephens, 'The Theology of Zwingli' in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, edited by D. Bagchi and D. C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 80–89; G.J. Miller, 'Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531)' in *The Reformation Theologians. An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*, edited by C. Lindberg, 157–169 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 157–169, particularly, 160.

<sup>10</sup> G.R. Potter, *Zwingli*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1976), 114.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *Exposition*, LW 42.26, 25, respectively.

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<sup>12</sup> *Exposition*, 42.22.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Sermon*, LW 51.169–176, specifically 51.171.

<sup>14</sup> *Sermon*, 170. See also, *Tabletalk*, no. 5510, LW 54.439.

my fill.<sup>15</sup> Here the reformer is at his most practical, for example, advising believers of the importance of prayer, and of letting it 'be the first business of the morning and the last at night'.<sup>16</sup> However, the exceptional element in this work is that the reformer refuses to be tied to rules, and, noticeably, he allows space for an intimate experience of the Holy Spirit:

[I]f in the midst of such thoughts [on reading the Lord's Prayer] the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by *letting go of this written scheme*: be still and listen to him who can do better than you can.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps with an eye to Paul's words in Romans 8:26–27<sup>18</sup> and certainly in the context of his own relational theology, Luther himself moves and directs his readers away from an empty and idolatrous rote and towards an experiential piety.<sup>19</sup>

15 Luther, *Simple Way*, LW 43.200. See also, *Tabletalk*, no. 495, LW 54.85; B. Lohse, B. Martin Luther. *An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 106; T. Koch, 'Luthers reformatorisches Verständnis des Gebets' in *Das Gebet. Veröffentlichungen der Luther-Akademie*, edited by V. Ratzeburg, 47–66 (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 2002), 47–66.

16 Luther, *Simple Way*, 43.193.

17 Luther, *Simple Way*, 43.201–202, emphasis added.

18 This is likely because the apostle speaks of the Holy Spirit interceding for us and speaks of it in the context of the Spirit knowing our hearts.

19 See S. Hendrix, 'Martin Luther's Reformation of Spirituality' in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, edited by T. J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 240–260.

### 3 Philip Melanchthon

Philip Melanchthon examines the topic of prayer in his influential work, *Loci Communes* (1543).<sup>20</sup> In the reformer's theological system, according to Scheible, prayer was the second pillar of the church, next only to doctrine—though, interestingly, the reformer himself speaks of it as 'the chief bastion of the church' in this particular writing.<sup>21</sup> Characteristic of reformational theology, Melanchthon repeatedly argues that one should adore rather than investigate the mysteries of God<sup>22</sup> and it is within that context of adoration that prayer is found.

The reformer speaks of prayer as 'this highest of all virtues', even if it remains 'only a brief groan'.<sup>23</sup> The writing is at once pastoral and personal.<sup>24</sup> For example, he encourages prayer in times of trouble, saying, 'In my own case I know that by the help of God many calamities have been mitigated.' The broader context and some of the emphases can be deduced from the following short paragraph of pastoral advice,

Let your prayer be in the Spirit, that is, not in hypocrisy, not in babbling of words, but in godly emotion of the heart, and let it be in truth,

20 P. Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (1543), translated by J.A.O. Preus (St Louis: Concordia, 1992).

21 *Loci Communes*, 196a.

22 See H. Scheible, 'Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560)' in *The Reformation Theologians. An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*, edited by C. Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 80.

23 *Loci Communes*, 196a, 204a, respectively.

24 *Loci Communes*, 200b.

that is, in true recognition of God. Let it be directed to the true God and to the mediator.<sup>25</sup>

Together with these emphases on true prayer as spiritual, genuine, from the heart, in recognition of God and Jesus Christ, comes a stress on confidence, obedience and faith,<sup>26</sup> and on the gospel, specifically, and on the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

The scaffolding upon which he builds his theology of prayer is a list of five points that he enumerates to help his readers' understanding. The five points act like rules for what Melanchthon considers true prayer, or what he terms 'a well-expressed form of prayer'.<sup>28</sup> The five points are as follows:

- The supplicant must consider what God they are invoking.<sup>29</sup>
- It is 'a very great sin' not to render worship, gratitude and requests to God.<sup>30</sup> That is, similarly to Luther, Melanchthon ties his understanding of prayer to the second commandment, but he appears to make less of it than his Wittenberg colleague.<sup>31</sup>
- We must remember the importance of the promises of God—particularly, his promises to be reconciled to us through Christ,

and to supply all our needs.<sup>32</sup>

- Though he recognises that faith is stronger and more evident in some than in others, faith must be added to prayer. He says, for instance, 'Faith must shine forth', or again, 'We must always in every petition present this faith to God'. We must believe that God's desire is to give.<sup>33</sup>
- It is of central importance that we hold that 'Prayer is the worship of God, because worship attributes this honour to God—that in our great miseries He will bring help to those who call upon Him. His name is not an empty thing.'<sup>34</sup>

This last point reminds us that the reformers, generally, speak of prayer in the context of our weakness. Zwingli, Luther and Melanchthon recognise that believers cry from a position of weakness to a strong, capable and merciful God. Indeed, Melanchthon says a great deal about it. He employs the following prolonged image, for instance,

[T]hose who have tasted our common miseries judge far differently and understand that this whole life is filled with troubles, like a city which is besieged on all sides and attacked sharply by its enemies, which now on this side and now on that side is attacked by the enemy who starts fires, tears down buildings, and can scarcely be held in check. It is a certainty that all wise

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25 *Loci Communes*, 205a.

26 For example, *Loci Communes*, 196a, 196b. Elsewhere, he says that 'God wants our faith to be increased by these exercises of piety', 204a.

27 For example, *Loci Communes*, 198a.

28 *Loci Communes*, 204b.

29 *Loci Communes*, 197a. Also, 207a.

30 *Loci Communes*, 197a–b.

31 *Loci Communes*, 196a.

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32 *Loci Communes*, 198a.

33 *Loci Communes*, 198b, 199a, respectively.

34 *Loci Communes*, 201a.

men wonder why this present and still weak nature of men is burdened down with such great evils, which our nature *by its own powers* cannot endure.<sup>35</sup>

The italicised words indicate the image as the context for prayer: we supplicate God because without his aid we are unable to sustain life against all that would trouble us. Melanchthon returns to the image later, saying, '[W]henever you think you are living in a besieged city which is being sharply attacked on all sides, these very circumstances should instruct you to seek help.'<sup>36</sup>

The reformer, then, speaks of 'our great weakness'.<sup>37</sup> By this he affirms both a weakness of nature and a weakness in behaviour. 'We have often fallen,' he says, 'we deserve punishments, we are unworthy of the blessings of God.' He speaks of the weakness 'that attaches both to our mind and our body', the fact that we are guilty, ungrateful, and he speaks also of 'the stupidity of the human mind as it flees from God' (by which he refers to doubts that besiege our thinking).<sup>38</sup> The world, too, is full of difficulty, impinging upon us as 'miseries and troubles of this life'.<sup>39</sup>

The church itself is presently subject to sin and to physical miseries, 'to public and personal calamities'. Indeed, Melanchthon reminds his read-

ers of the principle that 'the church must be subject to the cross',<sup>40</sup> in which image he seems to include 'physical torments' and the present wrath of God (noticeably, he specifies the occurrences of the plague).<sup>41</sup>

Behind much of this lies the work and deception of Satan, himself, of course. The reformer speaks of 'the tyranny of the devil',<sup>42</sup> warning believers that Satan seeks to trap them in ways that cannot be described in words. Using a pertinent Old Testament narrative, Melanchthon likens the church to Daniel and his friends surrounded by lions; the church always lives in the centre of trouble, in the face of Satan's attacks.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, this last image implicitly speaks of escape through the sovereign help of God. As Daniel received divine assistance in that hour, so does the church. There is in this a recognition of the wider context of prayer and this introduces, on the one hand, Melanchthon's emphases on the nature of the giving God, the importance of the gospel, of Christ, of the divine promises and on providence; and, on the other hand, his stress on the believer's faith, confession, gratitude and hope. We cannot deliver ourselves. Yet, he assures us that deliverance is not an accident, it comes from our Father in response to our requests and pleading.<sup>44</sup>

35 *Loci Communes*, 202a, emphasis added.

36 *Loci Communes*, 203a.

37 *Loci Communes*, 209b.

38 See, *Loci Communes*, 197a, 201b, 208a–b, 198a. Also, 197b, 209b.

39 *Loci Communes*, 207a.

40 *Loci Communes*, 199a. See also, 203a.

41 See, for example, *Loci Communes*, 198b, 200a–b, 202b, 207a.

42 *Loci Communes*, 207a.

43 *Loci Communes*, 202a.

44 *Loci Communes*, 200a, 203b. See also, 201a.

## II John Calvin on prayer

### 1 Intimate conversation

Calvin's ideas on prayer were already formed in 1536, though there are one or two minor revisions in later editions of the *Institutes*. According to the reformer there are six purposes of prayer:

- to fly to God with every need,
- to set all our petitions before God,
- to prepare us to receive God's benefits with humble gratitude,
- to meditate upon God's kindness,
- to instil the proper spirit of delight for God's answers in prayer,
- to confirm his providence.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the fact that elsewhere he writes concerning prayer, 'I lay down laws for no-one',<sup>46</sup> it is, of course, well known that Calvin posits four rules for governing true prayer:

- a heartfelt sense of reverence,
- a sense of need and repentance,
- a surrender of all confidence in self and a humble plea for pardon,

<sup>45</sup> *Inst* III.xx.3. These are listed here in the words of J.R. Beeke, 'Calvin on Piety' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, edited by D. K. McKim (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 139.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin to the French church in London, Geneva 27 September, 1552, in *Letters*, 2.362. The complete quotation runs into what appears to be a general rule: 'I lay down laws for no-one, but it were much to be desired that the sobriety of our prayers should show the reverence we feel for the name of God.' (*Letters of John Calvin*, 4 volumes, edited by J. Bonnet. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, 1858)

- a confident hope.<sup>47</sup>

According to Calvin the chief part of worship 'lies in the office of prayer'. The closest that he gets to defining prayer is perhaps where he claims that it is 'properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts'.<sup>48</sup> He teaches that God desires that we 'descend into our heart with our whole thought' and to 'enter deeply within'.<sup>49</sup>

That is, prayer for Calvin is something that causes us to focus within, into the heart, because it is there that the Lord looks for 'a sincere and true affection', one that dwells in the 'secret place of the heart'. His reasoning appears to be straightforward enough, 'For since we ourselves are God's temple,' he says, 'if we would call upon God in his holy temple, we must pray within ourselves.'<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, we will note below de Kroon's words that for Calvin prayer is

<sup>47</sup> See *Inst* III.xx.4, III.xx.6, III.xx.8, III.xx.11, respectively. Again, summarised by Beeke, 'Calvin on Piety', 140.

<sup>48</sup> *Inst* III.xx.29. See also, *Inst* III.xx.5, III.xx.31, *Comm. Acts* 10:2, *CNTC*, 6.284–5. G.J. Spykman, (*Reformational Theology, A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 505), speaks of the heart, in this context, as 'the religious unifying center of our entire personhood', and prayer as 'the disturbing of the heart before God'.

<sup>49</sup> *Inst* III.xx.29.

<sup>50</sup> *Inst* III.xx.30. The comment made by Chul-Ha, 'A comparison', 68, that Calvin defines prayer as petition 'in a literal sense, viz. "to obtain something" from God' appears too simple to convey the reformer's complex understanding, (H. Chul-Ha, 'A Comparison between Calvin and Karl Barth on Prayer'. *ATA* 1 (1993), 65–76.)



‘a back-and-forward movement’, and so it does not simply stop at focusing inwardly to draw out that affection and true piety of the heart, as important as that is. Prayer is ultimately to be described as the heart (or mind) ‘lifted and carried beyond itself’. Significantly, Calvin adds ‘in so far as this is possible’.<sup>51</sup>

In this immediate context the reformer employs a telling image, which he picks up several times in his exposition of prayer. Indeed, his first rule (in his own words) is that ‘we should be disposed in mind and heart as befits *those who enter conversation with God*’. Later he speaks of God’s generosity in admitting us into what he calls ‘intimate conversation’ with him.<sup>52</sup> Later still, he has this to say by way of pastoral advice:

I have said that, although prayer is an intimate conversation of the pious with God, yet reverence and moderation must be kept, lest we give loose rein to miscellaneous requests, and lest we crave more than God allows; further, that we should lift up our minds to a pure and chaste veneration of him, lest God’s majesty become worthless for us.<sup>53</sup>

The metaphor of conversation with God is useful, but the reformer does not want those who read his work to get the wrong idea. God is God, after all. To him belongs glory and honour, and it is proper that we enter into conversation

with him humbly and with considerable thought and care. (See his four rules.) But, then again, as John Kelsay writes, the image does suggest ‘a relation in which the thoughts of at least two parties are shared’,<sup>54</sup> and that is an important factor in Calvin’s thinking.

## 2 The person and disposition of a beggar

Two further images that Calvin employs indicate that relationship of shared thought—both convey, in different ways, a sense of weakness and vulnerability in the supplicant and a sense of strength and capability in the God to whom they turn. The first is the image of a beggar approaching someone who is immersed in riches; the other is of a child drawing near to their father. The former he uses sparingly, the latter forms a large part of what he has to say about prayer.

The image of a beggar appears explicitly only once, but is surely implicit in the following representative statements: ‘It is... by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us’; ‘So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel’, and, ‘[S]o He will cause us to possess abundance in poverty’.<sup>55</sup> Explicitly it appears in the following.

[I]t follows that only sincere worshippers of God pray aright and are heard. Let each one, therefore, as

51 *Inst* III.xx.4.

52 *Inst* III.xx.4—emphasis added, *Inst* III.xx.5, respectively.

53 *Inst* III.xx.16.

54 J. Kelsay, ‘Prayer and Ethics: Reflections on Calvin and Barth’, *HTR* 82 (1989), 173.

55 *Inst* III.xx.2, III.xx.52, respectively. He speaks of ‘the weight of our poverty’, (*Inst* III.xx.28). See also, *Inst* III.xx.44.

he prepares to pray be displeased with his own evil deeds, and (something that cannot happen without repentance) let him take the person and disposition of a beggar.<sup>56</sup>

The image is a conventional one, of course—Calvin uses it elsewhere,<sup>57</sup> as does Zwingli, for example.<sup>58</sup> But it is noticeable here that the reformer speaks of what appears to be a self-conscious decision, the believer has to ‘take the person and disposition of a beggar’ before God. This is the position of faith. It is an acknowledgement of one’s own poverty, together with recognition of divine riches which are found only in Christ.

Wherein lies the poverty? Calvin seems to distinguish three areas of weakness or poverty. First, external to the believer, are the circumstances in which they find themselves. He speaks of ‘the weight of our present ills’, the ‘troubles, discomforts, fears and trials’, the ‘dangers [that] at every moment threaten’.<sup>59</sup> He mentions the resultant misery<sup>60</sup> and, particularly, the anxiety<sup>61</sup> associated with these tribulations<sup>62</sup>—these indicate the

fallen-ness of the world in which we dwell, they impinge upon the believer’s wellbeing and certainly ought to drive them to prayer. He speaks, too, of Satan in all of this.<sup>63</sup>

Second, the reformer speaks of our nature—he understands weakness to be inherent in fallen humanity. Throughout his lengthy exposition on prayer Calvin characteristically accumulates a list of the faults: we are feeble, blind, stupid, inert and dull, insufficient, lazy, hypocritical, proud, unclean, guilty, ignorant, doubting, ungrateful, unworthy, presumptuous, impudent, and so on. His conclusion appears to be that we are ‘destitute and devoid of all good things’, for only what is corrupt comes forth from us.<sup>64</sup> So, naturally, we approach God in ‘great shame’.<sup>65</sup>

Third, he is conscious that believers are still sinners—he knows the poverty of our behaviour and depicts us as ‘miserably burdened with sins’<sup>66</sup> and ‘oppressed by [our] evil deeds’.<sup>67</sup> But in warm pastoral application Calvin urges his readers to be assured that ‘prayers poured out by the godly do not depend upon their worthiness’.<sup>68</sup> What are believers to depend on?

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56 *Inst* III.xx.7.

57 See, for instance, Calvin’s sermon on Galatians 1:6–8 where he says that ‘We should approach God as miserable beggars, if we would be justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’, (*Sermons*, 37).

58 Zwingli, *True and False Religion*, 3.281, ‘Our praying to God is nothing else than a begging for aid.’

59 See *Inst* III.xx.11, III.xx.7, respectively.

60 See *Inst* III.xx.3, III.xx.12, III.xx.15, III.xx.47.

61 See *Inst* III.xx.4, II.xx.5, III.xx.11, III.xx.34.

62 See *Inst* III.xx.11, III.xx.28. He recog-

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nises in these some who are ‘unjustly afflicted’ and others ‘wrongly oppressed’, (*Inst* III.xx.15).

63 *Inst* III.xx.46.

64 *Inst* III.xx.1.

65 *Inst* III.xx.41.

66 *Inst* III.xx.2. See also, *Inst* III.xx.7, III.xx.37.

67 *Inst* III.xx.11.

68 *Inst* III.xx.7. K.W. Stevenson, *Lord’s Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004), 165, speaks of Calvin’s writing on prayer lacking Luther’s pastoral zeal. That is certainly not evident in this chapter.

### 3 'If he seeks resources ... he must go outside himself'<sup>69</sup>

As we have already seen, other reformers affirm that prayer is a means of acknowledging our dependence upon God. Melancthon particularly stresses our weakness and the weakness of our situation as context for faithful prayer. However, it seems to me that Calvin, while clearly continuing the tradition, brings this relationship together in a more theologically explicit manner at the opening of his lengthy chapter on prayer in the *Institutes*. Affirming how destitute man [sic] is, he comments, 'Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, *he must go outside himself* and get them elsewhere.' He continues,

For in Christ [the Lord] offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures... [W]hatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ... [I]t remains for us to seek in him, and *in prayers to ask him*, what we have learned to be in him.<sup>70</sup>

These comments imply several things. They are reflective of the fact that Calvin's theological thought and his teaching on prayer, in particular, is essentially grounded in the complex matrix of the divine-human relationship.<sup>71</sup> In Marijn de Kroon's words,

[P]recisely in this connection [of prayer] the bipolarity of God and man will assume a vivid form. Prayer is the mutual orientation of God and man in practical experience. Existential communion between God and man finds its expression in prayer.... It is a back-and-forth movement ... of the mutuality of God and man.<sup>72</sup>

They also imply the radical difference that the Reformer posits between God and humanity, together with the relationship that exists, formed by the gracious initiative of God. Men and women have nothing *in and of themselves* to sustain life and faith—we are utterly devoid of such things, but God is not.

It is Calvin's understanding, anthropologically, that human beings by nature are *dependent beings*.<sup>73</sup> That is so simply because we are contingent creatures; but this fact itself has been underlined by the presence of sin since

<sup>72</sup> M. De Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation. Calvin's Theology According to his Institutes* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 122, 123. Later, he defines prayer as 'dialogue with God, the space in which the bipolarity of God and man is experienced,' 125. Similarly, P.A. Moeller, *Calvin's Doxology* (Allison Park: Pickwick, 1997), 130, 132, speaks of prayer as 'the fundamental dialogical relationship between us and God.' 'Prayer,' she says, 'functions as a microcosm of the dialogue of relationship.'

<sup>73</sup> W.J. Bouwsma, speaks of 'total dependence' (W.J. Bouwsma, 'The Spirituality of John Calvin' in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, edited by J. Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 322-3. Stevenson, *The Lord's Prayer*, 165, speaks of 'an Augustinian sense of dependence on God.'

<sup>69</sup> *Inst* III.xx.1.

<sup>70</sup> *Inst* III.xx.1, emphasis added.

<sup>71</sup> For an extended treatment of this subject, see M. Parsons, *Calvin's Preaching on the Prophet Micah: The 1550-51 Sermons in Geneva* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2006), 27-94.

the fall. Yet, says Calvin, God has given us all we need in his Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, we need to *go outside ourselves*; not in any secondary, random direction, for creatures cannot supply our needs, but solely in the direction of the God who *offers* 'all happiness in place of our misery', and *offers* 'all wealth in place of our neediness'.<sup>74</sup> That is, for Calvin, the strength of our weak praying is not so much God strengthening us; but the strength we look for is in God himself, or (more exactly) God in Jesus Christ.

The reformer does not posit a simple linear model: we are weak; we need God to strengthen us. For the reformer it is somehow more complex than that: it is inherent in a faithful relationship with the Lord that we acknowledge *our* weakness and find *his* strength in Christ. Notice, in this context, the following words from Calvin's conclusion on prayer.

By this ['for thy name's sake'] the saints not only express the end of their prayers but confess themselves unworthy to obtain it unless God seeks the reason *from himself*, and that their confidence of being heard stems *solely from God's nature*.<sup>75</sup>

We might say that prayer 'works' because God is God, because the dynamic and logic of prayer is somehow inherent in the nature of the triune

God, not in the first instance in the human-divine relationship itself. It is, therefore, the picture not so much of a father holding the child's hand as hesitatingly he learns to walk, but of the father lifting and carrying the child off the ground. The former would imply some ability in us; the latter indicates where Calvin believes strength really to be.

Having put it in this way, however, we need to be cautious. Calvin does not entirely deny the believer's own effort which springs from faith and hope. Indeed, he insists that in prayer 'all the devotion of the heart should be completely engaged'.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, even a cursory reading of Calvin suggests that it is the Holy Spirit who prompts this effort or engagement.

#### 4 'To embrace God's generosity'<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, of course, Calvin's theology is theocentric,<sup>78</sup> but he paints God as a Father who interacts with and accommodates to his children because his desire is to bless them from his inexhaustible riches. Jon Balserak rightly insists that Calvin affirms 'God's willingness to lower himself to the simplicity of his children' and speaks of his 'lavish love' and even his indulgence.<sup>79</sup> As we have already

<sup>74</sup> Later, Calvin speaks of God giving hope to 'the utterly miserable', *Inst* III.xx.14, and says that 'he will cause us to possess abundance in poverty, and comfort in affliction', *Inst* III.xx.52.

<sup>75</sup> *Inst* III.xx.47, emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> *Inst* III.xx.50.

<sup>77</sup> *Inst* III.xx.14—'*Dei liberalitatem*'.

<sup>78</sup> See P. Bolonesi, 'L'Héritage Théologique du Calvinisme et les Protestants d'Europe', *EJT* 4 (1995) 121–29 particularly 125.

<sup>79</sup> J. Balserak, 'The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's Understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with his People', *WTJ* 62 (2000), 185, 186, 194 respectively.

noted, whatever in our poverty we lack is to be found 'in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, for instance, the reformer links prayer and the divine fatherhood in the following manner, 'We should have no doubt but that God has a mind to welcome us kindly, is prepared to hear our prayers, and is readily inclined to help us.'<sup>81</sup>

It is Calvin's teaching that the divine riches are 'laid up for us with the Heavenly Father'<sup>82</sup> and by this he is able to personalise the riches (they are put aside *for us*), to recognise them as gift and to associate them fully with our adoption by God. Indeed, that the Lord speaks of himself as Father and allows us to address him as such is indicative of tremendous love, 'since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father'.<sup>83</sup>

Though we are unworthy of such a father,<sup>84</sup> he shows his kindness, grace, mercy and abundant goodness to us in the context of prayer. He promises to help his children and urges them to call, anticipating their coming.<sup>85</sup> More than that, though, he works in them by the Holy Spirit stirring them up to pray, by attracting them,<sup>86</sup> by prompting, empowering and even by composing prayer.<sup>87</sup>

But there is yet more to it, and it is here that we come to the crux of Calvin's understanding of prayer.

Notice how the following centralises Christ himself in the midst of our poverty and need.

Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself, to free us at once from shame and fear... has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate... [W]e can confidently come to him, and with such an intercessor, trusting nothing we ask in his name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to him by the Father.<sup>88</sup>

Later, he speaks of Christ, 'by whose intercession the Father is for us rendered gracious and easily entreated'.<sup>89</sup> No wonder that he affirms the divine compassion to be 'incomparable'.<sup>90</sup> Not only are the riches that we plead and experience to be found *in* Christ, but also they will not be denied to us because, as Calvin remarks, the Father *cannot* deny the Son.<sup>91</sup>

According to Calvin, it is solely because of Christ that God looks favourably upon us as his children. Indeed, it is because of his relationship with his own Son that he 'tolerates even our stammering and pardons our ignorance;... as indeed without this mercy there would be no freedom to pray'.<sup>92</sup> He is generous to us, even indulgent.

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80 *Inst* III.xx.1.

81 *Comm. Mt.* 6:9, *CNTC* 1.206.

82 *Inst* III.xx.2.

83 *Inst* III.xx.36.

84 *Inst* III.xx.37.

85 *Inst* III.xx.13.

86 *Inst* III.xx.14.

87 *Inst* III.xx.5.

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88 *Inst* III.xx.17.

89 *Inst* III.xx.19.

90 *Inst* III.xx.12.

91 This assertion stems from what the reformer calls 'the presumption of faith,' *Inst* III.xx.12. See also, *Inst* III.xx.9, III.xx.11.

92 *Inst* III.xx.16.

For he warns and urges us to seek him in *our every need*, as children are wont to take refuge in the protection of the parents whenever they are *troubled* with any *anxiety*. Besides this, since he saw that we did not even sufficiently perceive how straitened our *poverty* was, what it was fair to request, and what was profitable for us, he also provided for this *ignorance* of ours; and what we had been *lacking* to our capacity he himself supplied and made sufficient from his own.<sup>93</sup>

Notice here the italicised words, indicating our poverty and need, and the image emphasising the Lord's sovereign ability and willingness to help us in our difficulties.

### III Reflections

There is a great deal more to say on Calvin's understanding of prayer, of course—his chapter on the subject covers seventy pages of the Battles' English translation. Yet enough has been said to indicate the following brief reflections in line with the intention of this present volume.

First, it is clear that, together with the other leading reformers, Calvin sees humanity in desperate need. Whether we agree in detail with his somewhat negative thesis or not is not really the point. But it is worth reflecting on the fact that men and women

demonstrate dependence and a lack in the face of personal and universal problems that face them. Though this makes us vulnerable, we recognise and acknowledge our weakness and poverty.

Second, Calvin is very clear that only by prayer to a God who has already proven himself in Christ to be faithful and capable can we truly seek to have any strength and influence. However, he is also insistent that we draw near to a Father who longs to give, from his riches in Jesus Christ.

According to Calvin, then, our task is to recognise the truth that it is *only* in Christ that we find our strength—and *never* in ourselves. We are poor, yet he is rich. We are bankrupt, though his treasures are abundant. The reformer says, '[I]t remains for us to seek in him, and in *prayers to ask him*, what we have learned to be in him.'<sup>94</sup> That last phrase is so significant. Calvin insists that we have already learned through experience that this is the nature of the relationship we have with our generous God. Calvin's pastoral encouragement concludes with this thought,

And so [God] will cause us to possess abundance in poverty, and comfort in affliction. For though all things fail us, yet God will never forsake us, who cannot disappoint the expectation and patience of his people.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Inst* III.xx.34, emphasis added. See also, *Inst* III.xx.36.

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<sup>94</sup> *Inst* III.xx.1, emphasis added.

<sup>95</sup> *Inst* III.xx.52, emphasis added.