

Prayer as 'intimate conversation' with God – the centre of worship

Michael Parsons, Vose Seminary, Perth, Western Australia

1. Introduction

According to the sixteenth century reformer, John Calvin, the primary or central part of worship lies in (what he calls) “the office of prayer”. And there might still be some truth in that, for whether in the context of individual or of communal worship genuine prayer takes us to the very heart of what it is to be human before the divine – to be a creature in acknowledgement of our Creator, a child at the out-stretched arms of our Father.

Calvin’s ideas on prayer were already formed in 1536, though there are one or two minor revisions in later editions of his major theological work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. According to the reformer (*Inst* III.xx.3) there are six purposes of genuine prayer: to fly to God with every need; to set all our petitions before him; 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 (Beeke 2004:139). It is encouraging to see how positive these purposes are.

Despite the fact that elsewhere he writes concerning prayer, “I lay down laws for no-one” (*Letters* 2.362) 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; a confident hope (Beeke 2004:140).

2. What is prayer?

The closest that Calvin gets to a definition is where he claims that prayer is “properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts”. God desires that we “descend into our heart with our whole thought”; that is, to “enter deeply within” (*Inst* III.xx.29). Prayer is an exercise 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” (*Inst* III.xx.30). This might give the impression that the reformer is only interested in the anthropological aspect of prayer; that it’s about *us*. However, even a cursory reading of Calvin would dispel that conclusion. Nevertheless, it is not insignificant that prayer begins with the heart and our sanctified emotions.

Though prayer begins with the heart looking inward, the reformer describes it ultimately as the heart (or sometimes the mind) “lifted and carried beyond itself”. Significantly, Calvin adds “in so far as this is possible”. 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 (*Inst* III.xx.4, 5). 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 (*Inst* III.xx.16).

The metaphor of conversation with God is useful, but the reformer doesn’t 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, the image does suggest a relationship in which at least two parties are relevant, and that is a very important factor in Calvin’s thinking.

3. 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.

In fact, 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” (*Inst* III.xx.2, 52). And, 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 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 (*Inst III.xx.7*).

The image is a conventional one, of course — Calvin certainly uses it elsewhere. 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 active, self-conscious, self-chosen position of faith. It is an acknowledgement of one’s own poverty, together with recognition of divine riches which are found only in Christ.

If we’re poverty-stricken, as Calvin suggests, wherein lies the poverty? The reformer seems to distinguish three areas of poverty (or weakness). First, there is that which is external to the believer; 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” (*Inst III.xx.11, 7*). He mentions the resultant misery (*Inst III.xx.3, 12, 15, 47*) and, particularly, the anxiety associated with these tribulations (*Inst III.xx.11, 28*) — these indicate the fallen-ness of the world in which we dwell, they impinge upon the believer’s wellbeing and certainly ought to drive believers to prayer. Not surprisingly, he speaks, too, of Satan in all of this (*Inst III.xx.46*).

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 (*Inst III.xx.1*). So, naturally, we approach God in “great shame” (*Inst III.xx.41*).

Third, he is conscious that believers are still sinners — he knows the poverty of our behaviour and depicts us as “miserably burdened with sins” and “oppressed by [our] evil deeds” (*Inst III.xx.2, 37, 11*). Whatever we think of the reformer’s rather negative view of humanity, it is worth noting that in warm pastoral application Calvin urges his readers to be assured that “prayers poured out by the godly do not depend upon their worthiness” (*Inst III.xx.7*). So, what are believers to depend on?

4. Prayer: our dependence on God

Those who have read anything of the reformer will know that Calvin explicitly affirms how destitute and abject humanity is before God. He comments in this context, for example,

“Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, *he must go outside himself* and get them elsewhere” (*Inst* III.xx.1). 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 (*Inst* III.xx.1).

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 a very complex matrix of the divine-human relationship (Parsons 2006:27–94). 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 (de Kroon 2001:122, 123).

These comments 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 that human beings by nature are *dependent beings*. That is so simply because we are contingent creatures; but this fact itself has been underlined by the presence of sin since 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 other creatures cannot supply our deepest 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” (*Inst* III.xx.14, 52). That is, for Calvin, the strength of our praying is not so much God strengthening *us* as we pray; but the strength we look for is in God himself, or (more exactly) God in Jesus Christ. It is inherent in a faithful relationship with the Lord that we acknowledge *our* weakness and find *his* strength in Christ; *our* poverty and *his* riches in the Lord. Notice 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* (*Inst* III.xx.47).

Notice that 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, and *not* in the first instance in the human-divine relationship itself. It is, therefore, in the first instance 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 certainly 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” (*Inst* III.xx.50). Nevertheless, even a superficial reading of Calvin suggests that it is the Holy Spirit who prompts this effort or engagement.

5. Prayer is to “embrace God’s generosity”

Ultimately, of course, Calvin’s theology is theocentric — God takes the priority — but he paints God as a Father who interacts with and accommodates to his children because the reformer sees that the divine desire is to bless us from his inexhaustible riches. Jon Balsarak (2000:185, 186, 194) 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 of his indulgence. As we have already noted, whatever in our poverty we lack is to be found “in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Inst* III.xx.1). Elsewhere, for instance in his commentary on Matthew 6:9, 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” (*CNTC* 1.206).

It is Calvin’s teaching that the divine riches are “laid up for us with the Heavenly Father” (*Inst* III.xx.2) 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” (*Inst* III.xx.36). Though we are unworthy of such a father (*Inst* III.xx.37), he shows his kindness, grace, mercy and abundant goodness to us in the context of prayer. He promises to help his children and, through the Spirit, urges them to call, anticipating their coming (*Inst* III.xx.13). More than that, though, he works in them by the Holy Spirit stirring them up to pray, by attracting them (*Inst* III.xx.14), by prompting, empowering and even by composing our prayer (*Inst* III.xx.5).

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 (*Inst III.xx.17*).

Later, he speaks of Christ, "by whose intercession the Father is for us rendered gracious and easily entreated" (*Inst III.xx.19*). God's grace comes to us through Christ's intercession. No wonder that he affirms the divine compassion to be "incomparable". 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 (*Inst III.xx.12*).

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" (*Inst III.xx.16*). He is generous to us, even indulgent.

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 (*Inst III.xx.34*).

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.

6. Reflections

There is a great deal more to say on Calvin's understanding of prayer, of course — his chapter on the subject covers 70 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 journal issue.

First, it is clear that Calvin sees humanity in desperate need. Whether we agree in detail with his negative thesis on humanity or not is not really the point. But it is worth reflecting on the fact that men and women today demonstrate dependence and a lack in the face of personal

and universal problems that face them. This makes us vulnerable — it should also make us humble before the God on whom we depend; we should recognise and acknowledge our 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 confidence, 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 first to recognise the truth that it is *only* in Christ that we find our strength and our hope — 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” (*Inst* III.xx.1). That last phrase is so significant. Calvin insists that we have already learned through our 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 (*Inst* III.xx.52).

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7. Bibliography

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