

Treasure in plain sight

Prayer in John Calvin's theology

Barry Murr

In my childhood home, daily life was punctuated with prayer. Prayer at mealtime was no mere thanksgiving for our food but, it seems to me in retrospect, covered every conceivable biblical and theological topic. Prayer at bedtime had special importance, because one could never be sure what would happen during the hours of sleep. The night might even bring death, so everything had to be made right with God. My prayer became mechanistic, legalistic, and—like so much of my early Christian life—motivated by fear and duty. Prayer was something you were to do, needed to do, and did.

Later, when I had been professionally trained for ministry and was armed with theological degrees, ordained, and prepared to

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teach and preach, I was reasonably sure I understood how this prayer thing was supposed to work, but occasionally something cropped up that made me wonder. One day a parishioner asked me to visit her husband, a patient in the local hospital who was scheduled for surgery the next day. I stood by the man's bedside making small talk, which usually comes easy for me. But this man was a tough customer. He didn't converse, and he let me know that he didn't want me in his room. After a long five minutes, I decided to

bow out by using the standard ministerial exiting tool. I remember reaching for his hand and asking perfunctorily if it would be OK if I offered a prayer. With an emphatic "Absolutely not! I don't believe in that stuff!" he jerked his hand away. I awkwardly made my departure, feeling angry, confused, and inadequate. How dare he reject my good intentions and refuse something as simple and helpful as prayer?

Eventually I accepted a call to a church in upstate New York. Soon after I arrived, I was informed that I was expected to pray with the high school football team on Friday evening. Just before I refused the invitation, I told the coaches I wasn't sure which team I should ask God to favor. They didn't appreciate my humor and probably missed the theological nuance.

Theology informs practice

Most Christians agree that prayer is an integral part of spiritual life, but so many misconceptions surround prayer that separating an appropriate practice from these distortions is no simple matter. Somehow it all gets muddled in ways that may make us uncomfortable, or may make us so comfortable that we no longer care to differentiate a worthy discipline of prayer from the misunderstandings. When prayer is associated with and even defined by its ritual use in our sporting events, graduation ceremonies, legislative sessions, and other societal events, it becomes a self-serving practice, directed by us to God and legitimizing our civic observances by lending them a religious aura. I have no wish to propose a laundry list detailing what is appropriate or inappropriate for prayer. But I do question the validity of cursory and perhaps sentimental prayer that invokes God's blessing on whatever we want to do.

The misconceptions are evident when our petitions suggest that God must provide whatever we think we need at the moment, or that we deserve divine blessing because we are American Christians¹—Mennonites, Presbyterians, Baptists, nice people, the good guys—so God will automatically grant us a win in football, success in a business venture, or victory in whatever cause we favor.

Although my childhood and youth were spent in United Methodist circles, I am now a member of the Presbyterian church. John Calvin, who bequeathed to the Reformed tradition its theological character and confessional orientation, would have embraced the notion that all should be done “decently and in order.” Calvin is known primarily through his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. A glance at this carefully crafted work leaves little doubt that Calvin was concerned with order and decency. But if one invests a bit more time in reading and reflecting

on it, one begins to see the ardor and pastoral passion in the *Institutes*. More than seventy pages of this theological treatise are devoted to the topic of prayer, under the rubric, “Prayer, which is the chief exercise of faith, and by which we daily receive God’s benefits.” Take a moment to savor these words from the first part of the section on prayer:

But 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 [cf. Col. 1:19, John 1:16] so that we may all draw from it as an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayer to ask of him, what we have learned to be in him. Otherwise, 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.”²

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The majesty and praise of God

When we have recognized the worth of prayer, our prayer language may emerge naturally, but a sound theological framework can inform the ways we express ourselves in prayer. In his introduction to *Reformed theology and practice*, John Leith describes the tradition’s ethos. His outline begins with “The Majesty and the Praise of God.”³ Because God is sovereign, holy, and majestic, prayer is to be undertaken with reverence and adoration. God created the world and everything in it and beckons us into the awe-inspiring presence of the divine. Approaching this powerful, all-knowing, holy God can inspire trepidation: What will I say? What will I do?

Desperate pleas—Help me, God! Come to my rescue!—may convey strong emotion and be heartfelt. And there is comfort in

knowing that our entreaties do not go unheard. But we do well to ask ourselves if we have let our prayers regress to the level of crude appeal, at the expense of an appropriate gratitude and reverence. Do we neglect adoration and praise of the God who is sovereign, holy, and majestic?

We scramble through life, rushing from one thing to the next, speaking in the clipped and pragmatic language of our computer age. The media is saturated with sound bites and thirty-second commercials aired at a volume that threatens to make politeness passé. Can you remember the last time you showered someone with words of adoration or respect? When someone offered you authentic praise or a thank-you that was more than a reflexive response? Marriage counselors often advise couples to start the day with a warm touch or a few words of appreciation. Kevin

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Anderson, a clinical psychologist, marriage therapist, and spiritual director, goes so far as to suggest a slight bow of respect to the other before one takes up one's cup of coffee and morning newspaper. Respect, adoration, and appreciation, when offered humbly to the other, sustain our human relationships; how much more fitting are these gestures in our approach to the Almighty!

Prayer that begins with adoration and reverence turns our focus on God, and focus on God moves us to empty our minds and hearts of clutter, to clear out the mundane.

For Calvin, to mix the sacred and the profane is to abuse the great kindness that God extends in inviting us to pray. Intimate conversation with God not only warrants one's full attention but also means taking care to begin with God.

All too often, conversations between people become one-sided, dominated by the more outgoing and verbal partner, whose agenda seems to be all that needs discussion. We have all been on the receiving end of such conversations and, if we would admit it, have also been guilty of inflicting them on others. Yet they are rare friends who give us the gift of their full attention, who sincerely want to hear all about what we are doing, reading, feeling, needing. They are truly interested, and they listen.

In a healthy prayer life, as the Reformed tradition conceives of it, God is such a listener, even a great shoulder to cry on. However, God also commands respect and reverence, and we ought to use care in speaking to God. Thanksgiving and appreciation for who God is and what God does are starting points that reflect a theology that is ordered correctly. If our theology begins with God, our prayer should follow suit. This order requires a certain discipline, a discipline important to the sixteenth-century Reformers.

Many years ago, Malcolm Boyd, Episcopal priest and activist, wrote a book of prayers that bore the title *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* As a young, busy pastor struggling to find time for prayer and meditation, I got the sense that I could keep running, pushing, working, doing, and if Jesus was having trouble keeping up, that was Jesus' problem, not mine. At times I still expect God to run with me. But Calvin's *Institutes* reminds me once again that a good prayer life means taking time to be quiet despite my inclination to babble on and on. Of course God can keep

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up with us; the more important question is, can we slow down long enough to know God is there, to recognize God and acknowledge God's presence? Perhaps we need to follow the advice of marriage counselors in our relationship with God. Is setting aside time for prayer, in some disciplined way, as important as our other rituals—the morning paper, the stop at the coffee shop, the afternoon run, or the evening television show?

Petition as opportunity and responsibility

Having begun with adoration and praise of God, we turn to Calvin's other component of prayer, petition. We come before God only because God has first moved toward us, and with the realization that we stand in the shadow of the Holy One through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Christ's sacrifice, we have been forgiven and have hope, and now we can share our needs with God. If, after thanking God, we fail to offer our concerns, we have neglected Christ's invitation to "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

In the liturgy for Reformed worship, after prayer of adoration, prayer of confession, and prayer for illumination come the prayers of the people. In these prayers the needs of the world and the needs of the gathered community are held up before the God of love and grace. In the *Presbyterian Book of Common Worship*, the commentary on these prayers reminds us that the community of faith has both the opportunity and the responsibility to pray for the needs of others.

In response to the word, prayers are offered. In these prayers, we acknowledge God's presence in the world and in daily life....

Across the ages the church in its worship has prayed for the church universal, the world, all in authority, and those in distress or need. At no other time in its worship is the community of faith more conscious of the needs of the life of the world.

We pray for the world because God loves it. God created the world and cares for it. God sent Jesus, who died for it.... To abide in God's love is to share God's concern for the world. Our prayers should therefore be as wide as God's love and as specific as God's tender compassion for the least ones among us.⁴

Prayer, especially in common worship, can become an opportunity for theological discourses, while concerns for the world and for self trail behind or are absent. As Calvin reminds us, we ought never forget that we come to prayer as sinners in need of grace, so after confessing our sins and being assured of pardon, the community of faith can offer our concerns to the God who already knows what lies within our hearts. Naming our concerns aloud is difficult for Presbyterians, and perhaps for others. Keeping a private prayer journal or a congregational prayer list may be a way to remind us of the needs of others as we pray in public or private. This discipline is so simple, yet it is a powerful tool in helping us remember the needs of the community and the world. Theologian Karl Barth has reminded us that one good way to preach is with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other; perhaps we should sometimes pray in this way, too.

“An anatomy of all the parts of the soul”

Many years ago, a member of the congregation I was serving gave me some wonderful advice: If I wanted to read something beautiful about prayer, I should go to the author’s preface to Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms. Those words still stand for me as a reminder not only of the importance of the Psalms for the sixteenth-century Reformers but also of how the Psalter continues to provide good models for prayer for twenty-first-century believers: “I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,’ for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”⁵

John Calvin is sometimes characterized as a Reformer preoccupied more with dogma, law, and the doctrine of predestination

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than with prayer, forgiveness, and the gospel. Perhaps he will never be accused of being warm and fuzzy, but his rules of prayer were significant in the *Institutes* and in his pastoral work. His reference to the Psalter as a mirror of the soul reminds us that nothing is too personal or emotional to bring to God. But while the psalms express anger, hurt, disappointment, and depression, they are also reminders of the majesty and holiness of Almighty God. As the psalms illustrate,

prayer is a wonderful combination of adoring God, thanking God, and crying out to God from the depth of one’s soul. The latter can even manifest itself in expressing anger at or to God.

Some people understand prayer in ways defined by their tradition. Others pray without benefit of a tradition, in times of crisis and especially at defining moments of life. People sometimes pray the Lord’s Prayer with reverent attention and at other times out of obligation or pressure to conform. God will be the final judge of the prayers of the people. Those of us who write journal articles will, at best, offer a few theological reflections on prayer so that Christians may continue to learn how to pray in behalf of

ourselves, our communities of faith, and the global community. At a time when the world seems to trivialize many things, perhaps a few centuries-old rules can still bring us some benefit.

John Calvin is one among many who can instruct us about prayer and the Christian life. Perhaps my favorite of all Calvin's teachings (borrowed from Cyprian of Carthage) is his comparison of the church to a loving, nurturing, nursing mother: "There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her guidance."⁶

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"Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples said to Jesus. His response was a relatively short and simple prayer. Yet within this prayer, we find a model for our prayer. Calvin includes in his treatment of prayer in the *Institutes* a sustained commentary on the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.⁷ For as much as Calvin spoke

out against books of common prayer, he was concerned that prayer, and public prayer in particular, be theologically sound and practiced with some sense of order.

But even for Calvin, order and discipline exist to serve ardor. Humanity's reason for being, the main purpose of our life, according to a classic Reformed catechism rooted in Calvin's theology, is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.⁸ If we clear away our misconceptions and our sense that it's all about us, if we begin our theology with God and open our prayer with adoration and praise, our needs and our petitions will find their rightful place, and we will discover in plain sight the treasure that is prayer.

Notes

¹ I speak out of my own national context; Canadian and other readers will need to translate to theirs.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, H. P. Van Dusen; trans. F. L. Battles, J. Baillie; Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.1.

³ Chapter 3 in *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, by John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 67–85.

⁴ *Book of Common Worship*, prepared by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 40.

⁵John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4, *Joshua, Psalms 1–35*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 36.

⁶Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 102.

⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.34–49.

⁸Article 1, Westminster Shorter Catechism. Printed in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 175; available online at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>.

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