

IS PRAYER REDUNDANT? CALVIN AND THE EARLY REFORMERS ON THE PROBLEM OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

CHRISTOPHER WOZNICKI*

Abstract: *Filling a glaring gap in Reformation studies addressing the problems of petitionary prayer, this essay turns to the work of John Calvin and his fellow reformers in order to fill that gap. I argue that despite rejecting a two-way contingency account of prayer, Calvin and most of his contemporaries make a case for prayer being a worthwhile and effective spiritual practice by appealing to something other than prayer's role in giving God reasons to act. These Reformers argued against the redundancy of prayer by appealing to the change that happens in the praying agent. The argument of this essay is carried out with special reference to contemporary analytic theology accounts of petitionary prayer.*

Key words: *analytic theology, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Martin Luther, petitionary prayer, prayer, Reformation*

“Do we receive an answer when we pray?” This question stands at the beginning of Karl Barth’s treatment of John Calvin’s theology of prayer. Barth goes on to conclude that, according to Calvin, God indeed does answer prayer. In fact, “God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence upon God’s action.”¹ But Barth’s view of Calvin’s theology of petitionary prayer could not be further from recent views put forth by both friends and foes of Calvin. One “friend” argues that given God’s nature and purposes, petitionary prayer may be redundant for Calvin.² One “foe,” on the other hand, claims that the theological system implied by Calvinism makes prayer logically unnecessary and for all intents and purposes a waste of time. Accordingly, “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.”³ So which is it? Does

* Christopher Woznicki is a Ph.D. student at Fuller Theological Seminary and member of the Analytic Theology for Theological Formation Project, 135 N. Oakland Ave, Pasadena, CA 91101. He may be contacted at christopherwoznicki@fuller.edu.

¹ Karl Barth, *Prayer: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 13.

² Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 133. According to Crisp, Calvin’s theology of petitionary prayer is redundant *only* if one presupposes two-way contingency in prayer.

³ Michael Cox, *Not One Little Child: A Biblical Critique of Calvinism* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2009), 88; as cited in John Aloisi, “‘The Chief Exercise of Faith’: John Calvin and the Practice of Prayer,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 19 (2014): 3. Aloisi cites Cox as an example of those hostile to Calvin’s account of prayer. It should be noted that this objection also bears much similarity to objections that can be made against the model of prayer that Terrance Tiessen calls the “Fatalist Model of Prayer.” See Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 271–85.

petitionary prayer influence God's action in this world or is it redundant? If those who argue that Calvin's understanding of the nature and purposes of God make petitionary prayer redundant are correct in their interpretation of Calvin, we may wonder, is Calvin concerned with the redundancy of prayer and does he attempt to find a solution to this problem? We may also wonder, if Calvin is in fact concerned about the redundancy of prayer, is Calvin unique in his concern or do other early reformers share this concern as well? As we will see, Calvin is aware of the problems of petitionary prayer and his concerns about petitionary prayer are not unique. However, the manner of his response to these same concerns differs from other Reformers' responses in interesting ways.

The plan of this essay is as follows. We shall begin by outlining some concerns that analytic theologians have raised about petitionary prayer—a survey that will help define petitionary prayer and bring clarity to the “redundancy problem of petitionary prayer.” With these contemporary concerns in mind, we can turn to three early reformers whose theology of petitionary prayer had significant influence on Calvin, namely Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger. These Reformers will illustrate the intellectual and theological climate in which Calvin wrote about prayer. Turning next to Calvin, we shall see that Calvin's theology of petitionary prayer is framed by the dual concepts of human frailty and dependence upon God, leading Christians to pray all sorts of petitions. These prayers are “not so much for his [God's] own sake as for ours.”⁴ We shall conclude by noting how our findings may affect the spiritual life of the church.

I. ANALYTIC THEOLOGY AND PETITIONARY PRAYER

Before turning our attention to early Reformation accounts of petitionary prayer, it will be helpful to define petitionary prayer and the problem of petitionary prayer. How shall we define petitionary prayer? One might define petitionary prayer as the type of prayer which takes the form of a desire being presented to God in the form of a request. But the category may be understood in three distinct ways.

PP1: A prayer directed at God that merely takes the form of presenting a request for some state of affairs, X, to God.

This type of prayer can be distinguished from other sorts of prayers, for instance: confession, praise, conversation, etc. By most accounts, however, petitionary prayer is more than the mere expression of a desire to God; rather, petitionary prayer seems to aim at getting things from God by asking for them.⁵ What does it mean to say that these types of petitionary prayers are effective? One might believe that a prayer is effective if the thing requested in prayer would not have come about had the prayer not be offered. This understanding of effective prayer “presupposes a personal God who can freely choose to do certain things even though

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.20.3.

⁵ Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: SCM, 1984), 29.

he has the ability to do otherwise.”⁶ That is, petitionary prayer seems to presuppose that God is free to bring about X or not bring about X because Y prayed for X. That is, Y’s prayers are in a certain sense a reason for God bringing about (or not bringing about) X.⁷ We may call this sort of petitionary prayer, which appends a rationale to the petition, PP2.

PP2: A prayer directed at God that takes the form of presenting a request for some state of affairs, X, to God, with the intention of giving God a reason to bring about X.

Finally, we may distinguish these two types of petitionary prayer from a third type, which in scope of efficacy lies somewhere between PP1 and PP2.

PP3: A prayer directed at God that takes the form of presenting a request, X, to God, without the intention of giving God a reason to bring about X, but with the intention of creating a change in the praying agent.

These are the three principal ways of understanding petitionary prayer and its aims.

Petitionary prayer of the second sort, that is, a two-way contingency account, seems to run into the problem of redundancy, given God’s traditional attributes (e.g. impassibility, omniscience, and omnibenevolence) and God’s purposes. Analytic theologians have identified these problems:⁸

- (1) The Impassibility Problem of Petitionary Prayer: God is impassible, therefore God cannot be affected by anything external, e.g. petitionary prayers. Therefore, petitionary prayer is redundant.
- (2) The Problem of Omniscience: God is omniscient, therefore God knows what we desire and need before we pray. Therefore, petitionary prayer is redundant.
- (3) The Problem of Omnibenevolence: God is all good. Therefore, God will do what is best for everyone whether or not anyone offers petitionary prayers. Therefore, petitionary prayer is redundant.

⁶ Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, 33.

⁷ Here we ought to distinguish between reason and cause. To say that Y’s prayer for X is the cause of God bringing about X would make God’s response to Y’s prayer inevitable. This is the sort of prayer that Peter Geach calls a “magical view of prayer.” However, to say Y’s prayer is a reason why God brings about X, allows for God’s free response to Y’s prayer. See Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1969), 87.

⁸ See, e.g., David Bassinger, “Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?,” *RelS* 19 (1983): 25–42; Joshua Hoffman, “On Petitionary Prayer,” *Faith & Philosophy* 2 (1985): 21–29; Scott Davison, “On the Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer: Response to Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011): 227–37; Eleonore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1984): 81–91.

(4) The Divine Decree Problem: God has determined all that comes to pass, including prayers. Therefore, petitionary prayer cannot give God reasons to actualize one state of affairs over another.⁹

As one can easily see, the redundancy problem of petitionary prayer is not simply one problem but a constellation of problems. In the following discussion, we will notice these are not problems that occupy the minds only of contemporary analytic theologians. These problems also beset several Reformers. Like contemporary analytic theologians, some Reformers were concerned whether God's nature and purposes made petitionary prayer redundant and thus they attempted to provide reasons for why prayers are not uttered in vain.

II. LUTHER, BUCER, AND BULLINGER CONCERNING PETITIONARY PRAYER

As the title of this essay indicates, the focus is on Calvin's understanding of the apparent redundancy of petitionary prayer, the reason being that Calvin's response to the redundancy problem has received limited attention from analytic theologians and none from historical theologians. However, before turning our attention to Calvin's theology of petitionary prayer, we will set his theology of petitionary prayer in the intellectual and theological context in which he wrote. To do this we shall turn our attention to Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger's theologies of petitionary prayer.

1. *Martin Luther's theology of petitionary prayer.* Undoubtedly Martin Luther towered over the entire Reformation in terms of his influence. Luther's influence on Calvin extends beyond the typical Reformation doctrines; his influence on Calvin also extends into Calvin's theology of prayer. In an essay on the sources and development of Calvin's thought on prayer Elsie McKee claims that we can safely conclude that Calvin would have known and read Luther's works on prayer, thus Luther's works on prayer would have been part of the intellectual milieu in which Calvin would have been formulating his own theology of prayer.¹⁰ For this reason we now turn to Luther's theology of petitionary prayer.

What does petitionary prayer do? Luther's answer is not straightforward and is complicated by some passages indicating he holds to something like PP2 and others that indicate he holds to something like PP3.

⁹ It should be noted that most of these are problems that are especially strong for classical theism. Also, none of these problems really stand alone, they are related to one another, and cannot be easily separated. Because some of the Reformers examined below make distinctions along the lines I have made above, I have followed suit and distinguished between the various problems.

¹⁰ Elsie McKee, "John Calvin's Teaching on the Lord's Prayer," in *The Lord's Prayer: Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer* (ed. Daniel Migliore; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 89. McKee supports the likelihood of Calvin reading these works by citing the fact that Luther's *The German Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laity*, published in 1519, and his *Little Prayer Book*, published in 1522, were soon translated from German into French, and that his 1529 Catechism and a newer edition of the *Little Prayer Book* appearing in the Smaller Catechism were immediately available in Latin.

Several examples of passages indicating he holds to PP2 can be found in his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. Here he recounts the story of how violence broke out, with people wielding swords and loading their guns, at the Diet of Augsburg. Luther says he and his companions prayed, and as a result were delivered. Luther's own words are instructive here: "But through our prayers God came to our aid and made it possible for those screamers, with their scratching and threatening to get what was coming to them."¹¹ This story seems to indicate they were delivered because they had prayed. In these same sermons, he recounts the story of King Hezekiah under siege in Jerusalem. Recognizing the dire straits in which he was, King Hezekiah went up to the temple, fell down, and prayed. Luther says that "soon he was heard and helped."¹² The answer to prayer seems to come precisely because Hezekiah petitioned for God's help. One final passage which seems to indicate PP2 comes immediately after the Hezekiah story. Here Luther says that Satan "snatches us from our prayer and makes us so dizzy that we do not even think of praying." The reason he does this is because "he is well aware of what prayer achieves and can do."¹³ One wonders, why would Satan be concerned about what prayer can achieve if prayer were merely thought of in terms of PP1? Satan's concerns about the prayer of believers seems to make sense primarily under PP2.

Other passages in Luther's works indicate he is aware of the problem of petitionary prayer and thus does not hold to PP2. For example, he notes the Problem of Omniscience, saying, "Since he [God] knows and sees all our needs better than we do ourselves, why does he let us bring our petitions and present our need, instead of giving it to us...? ... Why does he tell us to ask for these things?" His answer indicates he holds another account of petitionary prayer. Luther says,

The reason He commands it is, of course, not in order to have us make our prayers an instruction to Him as to what He ought to give us, but in order to have us acknowledge and confess that He is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that He can and will give us still more. By our praying, we are instructing ourselves more than we are him.¹⁴

Prayer in this passage does not seem to have any sort of effect on God; rather, as an expression of our desires, prayer has the primary effect of instructing ourselves.

A second passage seems to indicate Luther holds to PP3. In his sermon "On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession," Luther says two things are necessary for a prayer to be answered: a promise from God and faith. The condition of faith would seem to indicate there is contingency in prayer. However, this is not the case in this passage. Luther says that no one obtains anything from God by virtue of his own prayers but solely by reason of the mercy of God who "by anticipating all our pray-

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21: *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 233.

¹² *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

ers and desires, induces us through a gracious promise and assurance to petition and to ask so that we might learn how much more he provides for us.”¹⁵ Once again, this passage implies petitionary prayer is not about convincing God to answer our needs; rather, it is meant to teach us something about God’s goodness toward us. But what should we make of the condition of faith that Luther puts upon prayer? Does this condition imply two-way contingency? It does not. Luther says that the reason why we need faith to have our prayers answered is that this teaches us to have faith in God. Thus, faith is not a condition for prayer being answered; rather, faith is necessary for prayer because if it were not necessary, then we would not learn to have faith in God’s promises.¹⁶

Another passage highlighting Luther’s theology of prayer is seen in his Large Catechism. Here Luther wonders why we ought to pray if God, being benevolent, promises to answer “Yes” to whatever we pray. His answer is that we pray because the promise has the power to “awaken our hearts and set them on fire to pray with desire and love.”¹⁷ Thus our petitionary prayers seem to have a greater effect on us than they do upon God. Our petitionary prayers do several things: they teach us about God’s goodness, they increase our faith in God, and they incite a desire within our hearts to pray more.

Having briefly surveyed Luther’s theology of petitionary prayer, we see Luther vacillating between the language of PP2 and PP3. Thus, it is difficult to place him under any one particular account. It is also difficult to say that the problem of petitionary prayer was a pressing concern for him. He notes some of the problems of petitionary prayers that contemporary analytic theologians have highlighted, such as the Problem of Omniscience and the Problem of Omnibenevolence, but only treats them in passing. Perhaps the problems will be a greater concern for other first-generation Reformers. To see whether this is so, we shall now turn our attention to Martin Bucer’s theology of petitionary prayer.

2. *Martin Bucer’s theology of petitionary prayer.* Even though Luther’s explanations of the Lord’s Prayer were the most influential in the early Reformation, apparently they were not the most critical for Calvin.¹⁸ That honor goes to Martin Bucer. Given his close relationship with Bucer and his time at Strasbourg (1538–1541), it is natural that Bucer would have much influence on Calvin’s theology of prayer.¹⁹ In fact, Bucer’s influence is most notable when it comes to Calvin’s understanding of the Christian’s petition for “daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer.²⁰ Given the fact that

¹⁵ Martin Luther, “On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession, 1519,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 42: *Devotional Writings 1* (ed. Martin Dietrich; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1969), 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Spirituality* (ed. and trans. Philip Krey and Peter Krey; New York: Paulist, 2007), 201.

¹⁸ McKee, “John Calvin’s Teaching on the Lord’s Prayer,” 90.

¹⁹ For more on the influence of Bucer on Calvin in areas besides prayer, see Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (Kindle ed.; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), Kindle loc. 1288–1354.

²⁰ McKee, “John Calvin’s Teaching on the Lord’s Prayer,” 90. McKee also argues that Bucer’s influence is seen upon Calvin in the fact that he does not divide the Lord’s Prayer into seven petitions, like Luther, but divides it into six, like Bucer. Also like Bucer, Calvin groups the six petitions into two parts,

Bucer was not simply part of the intellectual and theological milieu in which Calvin was operating but was a direct influence on Calvin, we ought to inquire into the substance of Bucer's theology of petitionary prayer. To do this, we shall examine his exposition of the Lord's Prayer in *Enarrationes Perpetuae in Evangelia*.²¹

What does Bucer believe is accomplished in the lifting up of petitions to God? Does he note any of the problems of petitionary prayer we have mentioned above? If so, how does he respond to these problems? The only indication that he sees a potential problem with petitionary prayer comes in his discussion of Jesus's instruction that Christian prayer ought to be free of the vices of the "hypocritical Pharisees" and the "Gentiles." The vice of the Pharisees is praying for "the sake of men's applause," whereas the vice of the Gentiles is summed up as the "futile heaping up of words."²² Bucer subdivides the Gentile vice into two categories. The first is that Gentiles think they will be heard because of their repetitions. The second is that they do not feel a necessity to pray because they believe that God already knows our necessities before we pray.²³ It is not clear why Bucer thinks this is an example of the "Gentile vice," but he sees this approach to prayer as problematic. His comments on this manifestation of this "Gentile vice" is the only indication he gives that he is concerned with the problem of petitionary prayer. This is an instance of the Problem of Omniscience. Bucer notes this problem, but gives no indication it concerns him, nor does he give any indication he feels the need to refute this error. However, just because he does not give indications about his concern for this problem, this does not mean he does not show his hand regarding what petitionary prayer accomplishes.

According to Bucer, what does petitionary prayer accomplish? Simply, it "kindles the heart." Bucer uses the language of kindling the heart three times in his treatment of the prayer in *Enarrationes Perpetuae in Evangelia*.²⁴ First, he states that God bestows the answers to our prayers in order that our heart would be kindled with thanksgiving. Second, he says when we pray and are reminded of the Father's bounty toward us, our hearts are kindled to declare God's goodness and bounty toward us over and over. Finally, when believers are taught that they may be confident in God's help, their hearts are kindled to ask more of God. In addition to having the function of kindling our hearts, petitionary prayer serves a therapeutic function. When believers express their afflictions to God and make a request to God, their anguish is relieved because they know that in his "manifest goodness and kindness to all seeking" God will bring relief to them.²⁵

each containing three points. Finally, unlike the early Luther, Calvin does not spiritualize "daily bread" but understands it to refer to physical needs.

²¹ Bucer's exposition of the Lord's Prayer in this work has been translated by Ford Lewis Battles as "Martin Bucer on the Lord's Prayer" in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1536* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 343–62.

²² *Ibid.*, 344.

²³ *Ibid.*, 345.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 346–47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

When it comes to discussing what sort of effect petitionary prayer has, Bucer avoids language implying PP2 and is consistent with something like PP3, in which the primary effect is upon the person doing the praying. Thus, much like Martin Luther, Bucer shows awareness of some of the problems involved in petitionary prayer but does not seem to be especially concerned by these problems. As we turn to the theology of Heinrich Bullinger in the next section, we shall see that he deviates significantly from these two Reformers.

3. *Heinrich Bullinger's theology of petitionary prayer.* Although there is no evidence that Bullinger had a direct influence on Calvin's theology of prayer, Bullinger influenced Calvin's theology in other areas and is therefore a part of the intellectual context in which Calvin worked out his theology of prayer.²⁶ In order to discern the contours of Bullinger's theology of petitionary prayer, we shall examine his section on prayer in his *Common Places of Christian Religion*.²⁷

Does Bullinger note any of the problems mentioned above? He does. Bullinger is unique among these first-generation Reformers for being the only one to explicitly address the problem of prayer. In fact, Bullinger places his responses to the problem of petitionary prayer at the beginning of his section on prayer. He treats the problems of petitionary prayer even before he defines prayer!

In the section titled, "That We Must Pray, And that the Prayers of the Faithful are not Vain and Unprofitable," Bullinger addresses the fact that "there are many things wherewithal men are discouraged from prayer or invocation, as if it were vain, unprofitable."²⁸ In order to show why Christians should not consider prayer an unprofitable task, Bullinger gives four reasons why some people refuse to pray. The first is that prayer is made redundant by the doctrine of predestination:

There are some that do gather that those things must necessarily come to pass which are decreed by God's eternal and infallible predestination. And therefore that God, if he have determined anything, cannot by prayer be removed from it. ... for as much as all things which God had once decreed, must of necessity come to pass.²⁹

Here Bullinger puts forth a hypothetical objection which resembles the Divine Decree Problem. Bullinger's response to this objection is to say that even though all things come to pass by God's decrees, it does not follow that prayers are superfluous because (1) they are accounted for in God's decrees; and (2) they are commanded by God as profitable.

²⁶ For an important essay outlining Bullinger's influence on Calvin's theology of the Eucharist, see Wim Janse, "Calvin's Eucharistic Theology: Three-Dogma Historical Observations," in *Calvinus Caerarium Literarum Interpres* (ed. Herman Selderhuis; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 37–69.

²⁷ This work was originally dedicated in 1556 by Bullinger to Lord William, Landgrave of Hesse, the son of Philip the Magnanimous.

²⁸ Heinrich Bullinger, *Common Places of Christian Religion* (trans. John Stockwood; London: Thoshaft & H. Middleton, 1572), 163. Spelling and punctuation in all citations from this translation have been modernized.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The second objection Bullinger notes is that prayer is made redundant by God's omniscience. Bullinger states, "Others say, God who knows all things, knows also what things we stand in need of before we in our prayers declare them unto him."³⁰ How does he respond to the Problem of Omniscience? He says that even though God knows what we need before we pray, God has "nevertheless taught us how we should pray, and exhorts us for to pray."³¹ His response to this problem is simply to say that we are commanded to pray and would be disobedient if we did not make petitionary prayers.

The third objection Bullinger addresses is the objection that states that "God is not moved with our prayers."³² This is the Problem of Impassibility. His response to the problem is rather curious. He says God is indeed moved by prayers. In a rather surprising passage, Bullinger says, "That God is moved, it appears both in all places of the Psalms, and especially in the hundredth and forty-fifth Psalm."³³ This apparent denial of impassibility seems to contradict his response to the Divine Decree Problem, but it is still a way to address the problem of impassibility.

The final objection Bullinger addresses is the problem of sin. Accordingly, some say that "God hears not sinners, and that therefore because all men are sinners, our prayers are unprofitable, forasmuch they are not heard of God."³⁴ He responds to this objection by saying there are two kinds of sinners. First, there are those who are "altogether ungodly," do not "care for God," and do not "seek him aright." On the other hand, there are sinners who "are grieved that they are such, and call with for God's grace." God hears the latter kind of sinners because he has taught them to pray.

Only after providing responses to objections to petitionary prayer does he move on to discuss the reasons why we ought to pray. Interestingly, he does not say that we ought to pray because it gives God reasons to act (PP2). Rather, Bullinger says that we ought to pray because God commands us to do so and because "the faithful in all ages have prayed."³⁵ These two reasons for prayer do not commit him to PP2. Everything indicates that Bullinger holds to something like a PP3 account of prayer.

4. *The first-generation Reformers' theology of petitionary prayer.* Although the scope of our investigation has been limited to first-generation Reformers influential on Calvin, we have come to see some important aspects of thought concerning petitionary prayer in this period. We have seen that Luther and Bucer display some awareness of the problems of petitionary prayer, but they did not address the problems in any significant way. Bullinger, on the other hand, explicitly addresses the problems of petitionary prayer, placing the problems at the beginning of his chapter on prayer and even devoting an entire section to the problem of petitionary prayer. We

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 164.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 165.

have also noted differences regarding what petitionary prayer does. Luther seems to vacillate between a PP2 and PP3 account of prayer. Bucer and Bullinger have a PP3 account of prayer.

With these preliminary observations in place, we can now move on to Calvin's theology of petitionary prayer and answer the questions: (1) Does Calvin notice the redundancy problem of petitionary prayer? (2) Does the problem concern him? (3) How does he address the problem?

III. CALVIN AND PETITIONARY PRAYER

Much has been written concerning Calvin's view that prayer is the chief exercise of faith.³⁶ For instance, Lucien Richard, in his classic text *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, writes that even though Calvin believed the best external sign of authentic piety is found in love of neighbor, prayer is both an inward and outward sign of faith. It is the principal exercise of a person who knows he has nothing before God.³⁷ "All prayer, therefore, is really the expression of an inward attitude before God which can be expressed outwardly, as in speech, or in a posture of humility."³⁸ Authors such as Richard rightly turn to Calvin's theology of prayer in order to develop a better understanding of Calvin's piety. However, there is a glaring absence of authors who focus on Calvin's theology of prayer from the angle of the so-called problem of prayer. To this date only one theologian has explicitly brought attention to this problem in Calvin's theology in a substantive way.³⁹ This is not to say that Calvin's theology of prayer in the context of his piety is irrelevant for understanding Calvin's response to the problem of prayer. Rather, it is important because it is within the context of Calvin's piety that the need for petitionary prayer becomes apparent.

According to Calvin, we petition God because we are weak and frail creatures created to be in a relationship of communion and dependence upon God. Michael Parsons argues that Calvin's theology of prayer stresses the notion that "the strength of prayer is found in an honest and vulnerable acknowledgment of our

³⁶ E.g. Joel R. Beeke, "John Calvin on Prayer as Communion with God," in *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer* (ed. Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 27–42; David B. Calhoun, "Prayer: 'the Chief Exercise of Faith,' Institutes 3.20," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 347–67; Nouhoum Coulibaly, "Calvin's Teaching and Practice of Prayer" (Master's thesis, Tyndale Seminary [Toronto], 2009); John Hesslink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 129–39; Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 154–65.

³⁷ Lucien Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974), 121.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See "John Calvin and Petitioning God," in Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010). Paul Helm has also contributed to Calvinist reflections on the problem of petitionary prayer, though not specifically treating Calvin himself. See Paul Helm, "Prayer and Providence" in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology* (ed. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom, and Marcel Sarot; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 103–15.

inherent weakness before a sovereign Father.”⁴⁰ He argues that Calvin uses two primary images in order to describe the task of prayer. The first is that of a beggar approaching someone immersed in riches. The second is that of a child drawing near to their father. Both images convey “a sense of weakness and vulnerability in the supplicant and a sense of strength and capability in the God to whom they turn.”⁴¹ Similarly, Ronald Wallace says Calvin understood prayer to be “the genuine cry of the human heart for help in the midst of circumstances that cannot be met by merely human resources.”⁴² John Aloisi confirms the sense of dependence upon God necessary for prayer when he notes that “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.”⁴³

The observation that prayer is the chief exercise of faith and that human beings are completely dependent upon God makes sense in light of Calvin’s belief that humanity’s *telos* is communion with God. Julie Canlis calls this Calvin’s “dependent anthropology.”⁴⁴ She describes her understanding of “dependent anthropology” by saying,

For Calvin, being creaturely (and, as we shall see, being *imago Dei*) is to accept gratefully our status as created—with its accompanying conditions of finitude [...] Although at times Calvin’s rhetoric degenerates into an obsession with creaturely limitation, what needs to be remembered is this: human “lack” is part of its fundamental need for a divine partner. At times this may come across as rubbing our noses in our own finitude, but it is more true to Calvin to understand that this interpretive pressure is to glory in our unique status as dependent, loved, even *participating* in God.⁴⁵

Our weakness, frailty, and finitude lead necessarily lead to dependence upon God. Not only do humans need to ask God to take care of them in their shortcomings, they need to have faith that God will in fact care for them. This is the logic behind saying that prayer is the chief exercise of faith. To say this, however, is to say *why* we ought to pray, and not *what* prayer actually accomplishes. To this topic, we now turn.

1. *The problem of petitionary prayer.* After explaining why we ought to pray, Calvin immediately addresses the problems of petitionary prayer. The first problem Calvin addresses is the Problem of Omniscience. Calvin states the problem this way:

Does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem in a sense superfluous

⁴⁰ Michael Parsons, “John Calvin on the Strength of our Weak Praying,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36 (2012): 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴² Ronald Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), 280.

⁴³ Aloisi, “Chief Exercise of Faith,” 10.

⁴⁴ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65. Italics original.

that he should be stirred up by our prayers—as if he were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until he is aroused by our voice?⁴⁶

Calvin responds to this problem in two ways. First, he says that those who make such an objection are ignorant of the fact that the Lord has commanded his people to pray.⁴⁷ Second, he says that God “ordained it [prayer] not so much for his own sake as for ours.” Calvin then proceeds to outline six reasons and benefits connected to petitionary prayers. The first reason we pray is so that “our hearts are fired with a zealous and burning desire to seek, love, and serve God.” That is, prayer has a sanctifying benefit upon the Christian. The second reason we pray 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.” Prayer has the benefit of purifying a Christian’s desires. The third reason is “that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving.” In other words, when believers pray they become more disposed to have an attitude of thanksgiving toward God for the bounty he has given to them. The fourth reason is that “having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently.” When believers pray, they are reminded of God’s generous character and his goodness. The fifth reason is that when believers pray, “we embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers.”⁴⁸ Prayer leads believers to appreciate the things they have because they realize they have not randomly acquired such things; rather, God himself has heard and granted their requests. The sixth and final reason why they pray 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 that he ever extends his hand to help his own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help.” Here Calvin reminds Christians that petitionary prayer serves to confirm their finitude and God’s providence.

Given these six responses, it becomes clear that Calvin’s method for responding to the Problem of Omniscience is to outline the benefits that prayer brings to believers.⁴⁹ However, Calvin is not satisfied with responding to just one problem of petitionary prayer. He also addresses two other problems.

First, he addresses the Divine Decree Problem. He does this by responding to those who “babble that God’s providence, standing guard over all things, is vainly importuned with our entreaties.”⁵⁰ He responds to this problem by quoting Ps 145:18 from the Vulgate, “He is near ... to all who call upon his name in truth.”⁵¹ Then he addresses the Problem of Omnibenevolence: “Others prate: that it is su-

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Listing the benefits of a particular doctrine is a common way that Calvin shows the practical import of a doctrine. For example, he lists three benefits of baptism in *Institutes* 4.15.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* It is not apparent how this is a solution to the problem.

perfluous for them to petition for things that the Lord is gladly ready to bestow.”⁵² He responds to this problem by saying that “the eyes of God are therefore watchful to assist the blind in their necessity, but he is willing in turn to hear our groanings that he may better prove his love towards us.” In other words, God can and does grant all good and necessary things to us regardless of our prayers; however, he allows us to pray for these things so that we may come to recognize his providence and love for us. Like his answer to the Problem of Divine Omniscience, Calvin’s response is grounded in the benefits prayer has for the believer’s piety.

The fact that Calvin is aware of and concerned by the redundancy of petitionary prayer is evidenced by the fact that he places responses to these problems right at the beginning of his treatment of prayer. Quite simply, his response to these three problems is to say that God has ordained prayer “not so much for his own sake as for ours.” By saying this, a version of PP3, he undercuts the problems brought about by God’s omniscience, omnibenevolence, and his divine decrees. These three problems are only problems under a PP2 account of prayer, but given the fact that prayer is not intended to give God a reason to bring about X, the problems simply fade away.⁵³

2. *What does petitionary prayer do?* So far, we have seen that Calvin’s account of prayer is more about bringing our will into line with God’s will than it is about changing God’s purposes. Does this make prayer a merely “therapeutic account?”⁵⁴ Certainly not; it does more than serve a merely therapeutic function. It affects the faith of the person praying. Among other things, the person praying grows in their zeal for God; their desires come more into line with God’s desires; they grow in thankfulness toward God; and they grow in their awareness of God’s goodness and providence.⁵⁵ As an example of this kind of petitionary prayer which is a version of PP3 but more than just therapeutic, we might consider the type of prayer outlined in David Wells’s essay “Prayer: Rebelling Against the Status Quo.”⁵⁶ Wells argues that petitionary prayer is a way to express rebellion against the world in its fallenness. Prayer in this account is a refusal to accept the status quo, the expression of a desire to see God’s justice put all wrongs to right. If David Wells is right in noting that prayer has a “rebellious function,” transforming the agent of prayer, helping them to desire the justice that God desires, then this would be an example of PP3. Yet this would be a prayer that is more than just therapeutic because the change in the praying agent is not merely emotional. This sort of prayer affects the faith and practice of the person praying and would not have occurred in the agent had the prayer not been made.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ One might worry that Calvin’s fifth reason for prayer undercuts my claim that Calvin denies PP2. However, as we will see in the following section, there is a way to affirm that we obtain certain goods through prayer while simultaneously denying PP2.

⁵⁴ By “therapeutic account” I simply mean a PP3 account of prayer in which the primary intention is to bring some sort of comfort to the emotional life of the person praying.

⁵⁵ The effects listed here are the sort of effects which are included in prayer which has a “kindling” effect. We could call this a “kindling account” of prayer.

⁵⁶ David Wells, “Prayer: Rebelling Against the Status Quo,” *CT* 17.6 (November 2, 1979): 32–34.

The fact that prayer changes the person praying may satisfy some objectors' concerns that prayer is redundant for Calvin; however, this response to the problem of prayer may seem rather unsatisfying to some, given the phenomenological observation that our prayers are somehow related to God's actions which come after our prayer. This observation is not only born out of our experience of prayer, it also seems to be an observation that can be made with scriptural warrant. Biblical theologian David Crump notes that "we may not be able to twist God's arm, but we can catch his eye and prompt a reply."⁵⁷ He proceeds to argue that the NT makes clear that "the sovereign Lord does some things precisely *because* we pray for them; furthermore, had we not prayed as we did, God would not have acted as he did."⁵⁸ This observation is based on his extensive study of petitionary prayer in the twenty-seven books of the NT. All this to say, in our experience and in Scripture there appears to be a causal relationship between our prayers and God's actions. A satisfying account of the theology of petitionary prayer needs to be able to account for this appearance of causal efficacy. Does Calvin have a story for why it seems our prayers are causally efficacious, despite his belief in a PP3? Oliver Crisp and Paul Helm suggest Calvin's theology allows for such a story to be given.

In his article "Asking God," Helm observes that Christians are convinced God brings about certain events *because* people ask him. He indicates that the word "because" is puzzling. He proceeds to provide what "because" might mean. He does this by suggesting that there may be cases where prayer is efficacious if God indicates that certain events will take place *only if* people pray.⁵⁹ If the prayer had not been made, the thing would not have come about. This view fits well with Calvin's view of divine decrees in which God has ordained all events, allowing the Calvinist to say that "God who ordained certain ends ordained also the means to accomplish those ends, and in some cases, in his wisdom, the means include people asking him to do certain things."⁶⁰ Helm uses an example of praying for rain to show how this account of petitionary prayer might work. He asks the reader to suppose

that one took the "all-decreeing" view of petitionary prayer. In the case of the prayer for rain one would have to say that God did not only ordain "from the beginning" the meteorological sequence that included rain on Thursday, but that he also ordained at least one phase of the sequence (the "rain on Thursday" phase) was to follow prayer for rain on Thursday, and also that he ordained the rain *because of* the prayers.⁶¹

⁵⁷ David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 289.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 290 (italics original).

⁵⁹ Paul Helm, "Asking God," *Them* 12.1 (1986): 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Terrence Tiessen makes a similar point in *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 233. Here he says that God has planned not only the outcomes but the means by which those outcomes are achieved: "God has thus given petitionary prayer an effective role in the outworking of his purposes."

⁶¹ Helm, "Asking God," 24 (italics original).

This causal account, in which both the prayer and the event prayed for are decreed by God, makes sense of what the “because” might mean when people say that God brings about certain events “because” people ask him. Quite simply it means that the prayer is part of the sequence necessary for the event prayed for to obtain, that is, certain events “obtain *because* I have prayed for them to happen.”⁶² This response might not be satisfying for some, especially those who assume an interventionist account of prayer; however, it is sufficient for giving a story about how Calvin might account for the fact that our prayers appear to be causally efficacious despite divine omniscience, divine omnibenevolence, and God’s divine decrees.⁶³

IV. CONCLUSION

Having surveyed some early Reformation responses to the redundancy problem of petitionary prayer, we can determine Calvin’s place among other Reformers on this subject. In many ways, Calvin’s theology of petitionary prayer resembles Bullinger’s more than Luther’s or Bucer’s. This is surprising given Luther and Bucer’s ostensible influence on Calvin. Calvin’s similarity to Bullinger comes out in at least two ways. First, we can say that Calvin, like Bullinger, displays a concern about the apparent redundancy of prayer. It is of such concern for these two Reformers that they both devote a specific section of their treatment of prayer to the problems of prayer and both place their section responding to objections at the beginning of their treatment of prayer. This level of concern is not shared by Luther and Bucer who barely note the problem and provide very brief responses. Second, we observe that Calvin, like Bullinger, explains the causal efficacy of petitionary prayers in light of God’s decrees. Bullinger says that prayers are “comprehended in the providence and will of God.”⁶⁴ In other words, prayers are a part of God’s divine decree and play some role in how answers to prayer come about. Bullinger does not develop this idea fully but nonetheless it is there. Calvin’s understanding of divine providence, according to Helm and Crisp, also allows for the development of an account in which prayers play a role in how the answer to prayer comes about.⁶⁵ Given these similarities, we can say that in some very important ways Calvin’s theology of petitionary prayer looks more like Bullinger’s than Luther’s or Bucer’s. However, Calvin shares at least one important similarity with Luther and Bucer. Calvin—like Luther and Bucer—indicates that prayer serves the function of “kindling the heart.” This “kindling” function of prayer is closely related to another important feature of Calvin’s theology of petitionary prayer, namely that prayer is primarily for the sake of ourselves rather than for God. Given our findings, we can conclude

⁶² Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine*, 151 (italics original).

⁶³ Helm, “Asking God,” 24 (italics original).

⁶⁴ Bullinger, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, 163.

⁶⁵ For more on divine providence and God’s decrees in the theology of John Calvin see Charles Partee, “Calvin and Determinism,” *Christian Scholars Review* 5 (1975): 123–28; Paul Helm, “Calvin and Stoicism,” in *Philosophie der Reformierten* (ed. Günter Frank and Herman J. Selderhuis; Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012), 169–81; Paul Helm, “Reformed Thought on Freedom: Some Further Thoughts,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (2010): 185–207.

that PP3 is the most common account of prayer among these magisterial Reformers in this period.⁶⁶

Our finding that the PP3 account was a common account of petitionary prayer among these magisterial Reformers is not insignificant for the practical and spiritual life of the church. Most laypersons would assume that petitionary prayer is a worthwhile task only if it gives God reasons for changing the state of affairs in the world. Yet Calvin and a chorus of Reformers make a case that prayer does not need to give God reasons to act in order to avoid being redundant. According to Calvin and some of these early Reformers, prayer really does make a difference. It makes a difference in at least two ways. First, prayers which are decreed by God may be a part of the sequence necessary for certain events to obtain. Second, prayer creates manifold changes in those who pray. These two features of petitionary prayer allow Calvin and his contemporaries to say to those who are concerned about the redundancy of prayer that “your prayers are not redundant, they really matter.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ One important exception is Martin Luther, who as we noted above vacillates between PP2 and PP3 accounts of petitionary prayer.

⁶⁷ I would like to thank John Thompson, Oliver Crisp, James Arcadi, J. T. Turner, Jordan Wessling, and Jesse Gentile for their helpful feedback on this essay.