THESES ON PRAYER AND THE SACRAMENTS IN CALVIN

Thesis 1: For Calvin, prayer is what makes our knowledge of God in Christ beneficial rather than simply an intellectual exercise. Indeed, he provides six reasons why it is necessary for us to call upon God in prayer, and four rules for doing it correctly. (*Institutes*, 3.20.1-16)

Calvin opens his discussion of prayer by making a very strong point, namely, that prayer is the means by which the benefits of knowing Christ are conferred upon us. In our previous examination of Book Three, we saw two important things. First, we saw that the work of the Holy Spirit is what unites us to Christ as he is clothed with his benefits, thus changing the status of our salvation from ‘potential’ to ‘actual.’ Second, we saw that faith is the mode by which we receive this union with Christ and the twofold benefits that flow therefore, namely, justification and sanctification. What Calvin has not yet discussed – at least, until our present section – is that mode of human activity that, when characterized by faith, corresponds in a secondary and derivative fashion to the Holy Spirit’s work of uniting us to Christ. In other words, prayer is that human activity whereby we, by praying in faith, ratify the Spirit’s work within us. All this comes out in the following sentences: “But after we have been instructed by faith” – remember, faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, so that unity which the Spirit achieves between us and Christ is here presupposed – “to recognize that whatever we need and whatever we lack is in God, and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Father willed all the fullness of his bounty to abide so that we may all draw from it as from an overflowing spring, it remains for us to seek in him, and in prayers to ask him, what we have learned to be in him” (3.20.1). If we find ourselves with the time and inclination, if might be fruitful to discuss the relationship between this reading of how Calvin situates prayer, and what place it had for Barth.
Passing that by, however, we find that Calvin insists on prayer’s necessity. The inner logic of this necessity has already been discussed, and Calvin does not do much to tease that out further here. Rather, he unites it with the necessity of prayer which comes from divine precept. Thus, “we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So it is true that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon” (3.20.2). But, prayer is not only necessary; it is also beneficial, and Calvin gives us six reasons why: (1) because it heightens our love for God, (2) because it trains us not to want things we would be ashamed for God to know about, (3) because it reminds us that all the good things that we receive come from him, (4) because receiving things we’ve prayed for increases our awareness of God’s kindness to us, (5) because we appreciate more things we receive after praying for them, (6) because all this strengthens our faith in God’s providence.

Given that prayer is both necessary and beneficial, it should not surprise us that Calvin has some thoughts about what it means to pray correctly. The first rule (3.20.4-5) enjoins us to proper reverence in our prayer. This is rather self-evident: God, being God and our savior, deserves our full and earnest attention. Furthermore, we ought not to ask things that we are not allowed to ask; rather, we ought to bring our desires into accordance with his will. The Holy Spirit is our teacher in this, but we should not “drowsily wait until [the Spirit] overtake[s] our preoccupied minds” before we pray. Rather, ought to take the initiative and enter into prayer with confidence. Calvin’s second rule (3.20.6-7) reminds us of our need to pray for God to grant us his gifts, since we do not deserve such things. Furthermore, there is never a point at which we do not need to pray for such disposition. Indeed, Calvin goes so far as to suggest that we “take the person and disposition of a beggar” in prayer, although it would seem to me that this
undermines to some extent his strong emphasis on the believer’s status as a child of God as well as with his fourth rule. Third (3.20.8-10), we ought to pray humbly as those who are in need of forgiveness: “the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt” since God cannot “be propitious to any but those whom he has pardoned.” Any reference made in the recorded prayers of biblical characters or the great saints of the church are not made as an attempt to point out merits to God but by way of taking confidence from the fact that God has blessed them in the past, or are made as a way of distinguishing them before God from their enemies. Fourth and finally (3.20.11-14), “thus cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered.” None of this can occur outside of faith. Indeed, it is faith that makes our prayers acceptable before God and “it is faith that obtains whatever is granted to prayer.” Thus, united to Christ by faith and convinced of God’s fatherly concern for us, we can pray with confidence.

The implications of this last rule are further discussed in the following few sections. Calvin addresses the issue of how it can be that God appears to grant the prayers of the wicked and pagan. God does this to show believers how great his mercy is, and to encourage them to pray. Believers, however, are to pray with discipline and according to God’s revealed will. Again, such prayer does not have to be perfect, and “there is no prayer which in justice God would not loathe if he did not overlook the spots with which all are sprinkled.” The important point is that the praying believer is moving in the right direction. Finally, Calvin has a short paragraph in section 16 that seems to sum up his understanding of prayer nicely: “Prayer is an intimate conversation of the pious with God, yet reverence and moderation must be kept, lest we

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give loose rein to miscellaneous requests, and lest we grace 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.”

Thesis 2: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Jesus Christ” – 1 Timothy 2.5. (Institutes, 3.20.17-27)

I defined prayer in the above thesis as the mode of human activity that, when characterized by faith, corresponds in a secondary and derivative fashion to the Holy Spirit’s work of uniting us to Christ. We have already seen Calvin emphasize the role of forgiveness of sin in establishing our confidence in prayer. Here Calvin goes one step further and grounds our prayerful access to the Father solidly in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ. “Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself…has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate and mediator with him.” As far as Calvin is concerned, Christ’s mediation of prayer has been in effect since the beginning, and is symbolized by the high-priest in Israel’s Day of Atonement ritual, which reminds us that our prayer must be sprinkled by Christ’s blood if it is to be acceptable to the Father. Christ’s ascension establishes the perpetual character of this mediation. But, in this eternal session of Christ at the right hand of the Father, he does not intercede for us before the Father in a beggarly way, but bears our petitions to the Father in the power of his saving work on our behalf.

This centrality of Christ’s intercession for believers’ prayer has two important implications, the first of which supports the second. First, it means that all prayer of mutual intercession is only properly performed if it is vectored through Christ’s mediatorship. Although the various members of the body of Christ rightly pray for one another, they can do so only as
members of the same head, namely, Jesus Christ. This reinforces the point that all ecclesial mediation is secondary to and derivative from the Mediator, even at the level of prayer for one another. Second, it means that prayer to the saints is improper. The principle involved in the first point applies here: the saints have no access to the Father independent of the Son, so why not just take a shortcut and pray directly to the Son? Furthermore, and undermining the activity of dead saints in continuing mutual intercession even when vectored through Christ, Calvin writes that “when the Lord withdrew them from our company, he left us no contact with them, and as far as we can conjecture, not even left them any with us.” Calvin suspects that the desire to pray to the saints stems from a deep-seated lack of faith in Christ’s sufficiency, and he further accuses the practices’ supporters of confusing “dead saints with angels,” that latter of which do have a legitimate ministry to believers. As far as Calvin is concerned, we should not pray to the saints but follow their example in prayer to Christ.

**Thesis 3: Prayer is not simply a private activity of individual Christians; it is also a corporate activity of the church. As such, it must be regulated.** *(Institutes, 3.20.28-33, et al)*

Calvin’s discussion of private prayer here recapitulates in brief form much of what he said in his rules for prayer: we never lack a reason to pray to praise God or request his help, if we fail to do so it is an offense to God’s loving-kindness, etc. Newer, here, are Calvin’s point that “praises that do not flow from [the] sweetness of love will never please God,” and his admonition to temper our emotions so that we can “cheerfully bless God.” All this carries over into public prayer, of course. However, public prayer has the added difficulty of scheduling. Calvin wants to avoid taking the Roman Catholic route here, namely, binding believers’ consciences to certain prayers at certain times, etc. Still, structure is necessary. Calvin’s solution? “Certain hours,
indifferent to God but necessary for men’s convenience, are agreed upon and appointed to provide for the accommodation of all, and for everything to be done ‘decently and in order’ in the church.” Two things ought to be ruled out of such considerations. First, the establishment of structure to public prayer has “nothing to do with vain repetition.” While we are not to attempt to hound God into granting our requests, we are certainly permitted to persist in them with faith’s confidence. Second, public prayer must not become an occasion for hypocrites to put on a show of piety with extravagant prayers and the like.

What, then, is the relation between public and private prayer? For Calvin, they are mutually implicated: either they are found together or they are not found individually. There is no ordering principle as far as I can tell: “We must consider that whoever refused to pray in the holy assembly of the godly knows not what it is to pray individually, or in a secret spot, or at home. Again, he who neglects to pray alone and in private, however unremittingly he may frequent public assemblies, there contrives only windy prayers, for he defers more to the opinion of men than to the secret judgment of God.”

Finally, why does Calvin discuss singing here? The simple answer is that Calvin views church singing as a form of public prayer. To briefly discuss this question, we will set aside the Institutes and briefly consider Calvin’s forward to the Genevan psalter. Here Calvin writes, “As for…public prayers, there are two kinds: the first are made with the word only, the others with song.”² Now, we must begin by noting that in each case the words used must be in the vernacular so that the congregation can understand them and receive edification. The mind must be able to understand if the sure and certain knowledge of our faith is to be nourished. It is also important to remember that Calvin is quite the innovator in his promotion of congregational

singing, and especially insofar as he included women. But, Calvin had a very high view of the
power of song and music, and he wanted to turn that power to good use: “And in truth we know
from experience that son has great force and vigor to arouse and inflame people’s hearts to
invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal,” and further, music “has a secret
and almost incredible power.” Calvin was coupling this musical power with
edifying content, for if a melody is joined with an unworthy letter, “it pierces the heart…and
enters into it; just as through a funnel wine is poured into a container, so also venom and
corruption are distilled to the depth of the heart by the melody.” Calvin’s solution was to use
the Psalms as the “letter,” and to be careful that the melody joined thereto carried a “gravity and
majesty appropriate to the subject.”

**Thesis 4:** Calvin characterizes the Lord’s Prayer as a “form” and / or “rule” for Christian
prayer and, apart from an extended discussion of its six petitions, offers further reflection
on prayer in general. (*Institutes, 3.20.34-52, et al*)

Although Calvin’s exposition of the Lord’s Prayer certainly both deserves and rewards attention,
I am going to pass it by here and attend to the way in which Calvin understands it to function.
However, I do want to say something about Calvin’s method of exposition. This method is set
out explicitly in his exposition of the Decalogue, and – if one is watching – it can be found here
as well. Calvin writes, “the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is
expressed in words” (2.8.8), and thus must be amplified in exposition. To undertake this
amplification means “to ponder why [a commandment] was given to us.” Finally, we can distill
such considerations into a more practical rule, which I will call the ‘rule of opposites’: “if this

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pleases God, the opposite displeases him; if this displeases, the opposite pleases him; if he commands this, he forbids the opposite; if he forbids this, he enjoins the opposite.” An example of this method in action during Calvin’s exposition of the Lord’s Prayer can be found in the fourth petition (3.20.44), where we are instructed to pray for our daily bread. Calvin amplifies this, explaining how our daily bread includes “all things in general that our bodies have need to us,” and even goes so far as to include “everything that God perceives to be beneficial to us.” Then, paying attention to the intention of the commandment and employing the rule of opposites, he argues that those who ask for more than their daily necessity are overstepping their bounds: “Yet those who, not content with daily bread but panting after countless things with unbridled desire…supplicate God with this prayer are but mocking him.”

Now, what does Calvin mean when he calls the Lord’s Prayer a “form” and “rule” for our prayer? These two terms refer to the double aspect of the Prayer as a pattern for Christian prayer. While the Lord’s Prayer and its exposition was included in the Genevan catechism and had a place within Genevan worship, Calvin is not interested in restricting prayer to the specific words of this prayer. However, the church is bound to the content of the prayer. As Calvin explains it, no one “should ask form, expect, or demand anything at all except what is included, by way of summary, in this prayer; and though the words may be utterly different, yet the sense ought not to vary” (3.20.49), or, “this prayer is in all respects so perfect that any extraneous or alien thing added to it, which cannot be related to it, is impious and unworthy to be approved of God. For in this summary he has set forth what is worthy of him, acceptable to him, necessary for us—in effect, what he would willingly grant” (3.20.48). Thus, we can venture an explanation for why and how Calvin uses both terms, ‘form’ and ‘rule.’ The Lord’s Prayer has a teaching function in the church, instructing us how to pray and what to pray for. In this regard, it is called
a ‘form’ for our prayer. However, the Lord’s Prayer also has a normative or critical function in the church, whereby it calls all our prayers to account and judges them. In this regard, it is called a ‘rule’ for our prayer.

**Thesis 5:** Before moving on to highlight a few points in Calvin’s treatment of the sacraments in general, three formal points must be made. They pertain (1) to the dogmatic location of this material, (2) the warrant for a section such as this, and finally (3) its relation to prayer.

Given that we have all been reading through Gerrish’s instructive volume, *Grace and Gratitude*, I am not going to give a thorough treatment of Calvin on the sacraments in general. Rather, I will highlight a few points that are especially interesting to me. But, first, I want to make some formal points. I’m building on Gerrish for the first two of these points, and I’m taking my cue from Barth and our syllabus for the third.

(1) Calvin is often said to advance two marks of the true church, proper preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacrament (4.1.9). I personally think Calvin has more like 2.5 marks once church discipline is factored in, but that need not detain us now. The present point is that while Calvin gives us three chapters of positive teaching on the sacraments (4.14-16), he does not give us an account of the preaching of the word. This is strange not only because of the emphasis that Calvin everywhere puts on preaching, doctrine, and the noetic aspect of faith, but it is even more strange since – as Gerrish rightly points out – the Genevan catechism provides a treatment of the Word and admonishes both its public and private use. Only then does it move on to speak of the “symbols or mirrors” that serve as an “outward attestation of the divine

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benevolence towards us.”

Why did Calvin not follow a similar pattern in his *Institutes*? This might have gone some distance in clearing up the ambiguity in Calvin’s thought that everywhere plagues his sacramentology, as Gerrish now and then rightly points out. One wonders if this was a conscious decision on Calvin’s part as a stratagem for maintaining a mediating position between Wittenberg and Zurich.

(2) Thinking more specifically about Chapter 14 on the sacraments in general, Gerrish points out – rightly, I think – that “there is no general concept of a sacrament in the Bible… and the attempt to create one before discussing Baptism and the Lord’s Supper individually makes honest exegesis that much harder.”

The correct intuition expressed in this comment is that it is not at all clear – or, at least, not self-evidently or incontrovertibly clear – in Scripture that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are similar sorts of activities. Such a notion persists throughout the history of theology. For instance, while the elements of bread and wine in the Supper are everywhere said to have a unique sacramental relationship to the body and blood of Christ, a similar point is seldom argued about the element of baptism – water.

A further aspect of this difficulty is introduced insofar as the Lord’s Supper has attracted the bulk of theological disagreement throughout history as far as the sacraments are concerned. As a result, discussions of sacraments in general are usually concerned with heading off potential difficulties in treatments of the Lord’s Supper. We see this even in Calvin with reference to his definitions of “sacrament” and in the way he speaks of how the sacraments “sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith” (4.14.7). These last terms are precisely those in which Calvin speaks of the

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Supper, and it is unclear how a number of them could be used in a direct fashion with reference to Baptism.

(3) What can be said of the relationship between prayer and the sacraments? This question occurred to me by the simple fact that the two topics were put together in the syllabus. At first I thought that this was done simply on a whim of fancy, or perhaps by the necessity introduced by a shorter semester since the last time this course was offered. But then, as I looked at it more closely, I started to see further reasons. Textually speaking, both the 1536 Institutes and the Genevan catechism move from the Lord’s Prayer into the sacraments. This move is direct in the former, and mediated in the latter only by a discussion of the Word. Speaking materially now, I said above that prayer is the mode of human activity that, when characterized by faith, corresponds in a secondary and derivative fashion to the Holy Spirit’s work of uniting us to Christ. In other words, prayer is that human activity whereby we, by praying in faith, ratify the Spirit’s work within us. Understanding prayer in this way forces us to ask the question of how prayer relates to the sacraments since it corresponds so closely to Calvin’s definition of a sacrament, and especially to the last bit: “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him” (4.14.1). All this compels me to wonder whether sacraments should be considered, at least in their human aspect, to be corporate – and, because corporate, also individual – prayers. Indeed, Barth gives us something like this in his doctrine of baptism, but Calvin does not – at least explicitly.

NB: Aware that I am running out of time, and that this paper is already of abundant length, I will refrain from providing full explanations for my concluding three theses, although the theses themselves will be somewhat longer. We can discuss these points further if anyone is interested.
Thesis 6: Calvin is surely right when he defends the sacraments as God’s accommodating of himself to us in strengthening our faith. Calvin is wrong, however, to treat this accommodation as a capitulation to our sinful weakness. Rather, he should have simply stuck with the notion that “by this means God provides...for our weakness,” meaning not sinfulness but the relative limitation of human being when compared to divine being. More concretely, physical existence is inextricably bound up with what it means to be human, and so it makes perfect sense that God would provide a way for the confirmation of our faith that takes that physicality into account. *(Institutes, 4.14.3)*

Thesis 7: The sacraments are not magic. They exercise no causal power of their own in the communication of grace. Furthermore, grace is not a substance or some “divine vitamin” that flows through the sacraments and into us. That is to say, sacraments are not “means of grace,” although Calvin can sometimes use this language. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit provides the sacraments with their virtue, and the grace available therein is no other than Christ himself. That is to say, sacraments are “instruments of the Spirit,” and this is Calvin’s dominant mode of talking about such things. Finally, just as we saw in Book 3, Chapter 1: faith is the mode whereby the Spirit’s presentation of Christ to us in the sacraments is received. *(Institutes, 4.14.7-17)*

Thesis 8: While it is certainly true that the Old Testament cult and covenant activities provide the context out of which we are to understand the work of Christ and, therefore, the church and its sacraments, it is not the case that we can simply map over the meaning of the OT “sacraments” to those of the church. Calvin finally does too much of this, at least with reference to circumcision and baptism, and the Reformed scholastics would carry this line of argument further until, in a very real sense, the meaning of the church’s sacraments was already basically determined by their OT counterparts. It would be better if we stuck with Calvin’s other and more fruitful intuition that the sacraments are concerned with “the communicating of Christ” (4.14.7), and first look to him as we explicate their meaning. From there we can better see how that meaning was prefigured in the OT and remembered in the NT (to put it in an overly simplistic fashion). *(Institutes, 4.14.18-26)*