

The Meaning of Prayer for the Reformers¹

The most conspicuous aspect of the prayers of the early Protestant reformers from 1520 to 1575 is a confident trust in God's providence: God is master of history. This trust is stronger than the belief that ultimately God will prevail; the reformers were convinced of the active participation of God in affairs of men *now*.

Martin Luther believed that he was an instrument in the hands of God, and this imbued his life with a fearlessness such as history has seldom witnessed. Trusting in God for guidance and strength, he defied the pope and hostile secular authorities, burned the papal bull that condemned him, hurled a sack of biblical promises before the Lord when his closest friend Melancthon appeared about to die, and at Worms said: "Here I stand, God help me; I cannot do otherwise." Luther once pictured himself as the ace trump which the Lord was holding in a game of cards with the pope. This was not an exaltation of himself but a statement of his trust in divine direction. This conviction is clearly visible in every prayer.

The same aspect is seen again and again in the prayers of John Calvin, Philip Melancthon, and the English reformers--so much so, for example, that Calvin's great doctrines of sovereignty and election have sometimes been interpreted as determinism. Calvin believed that plagues, wars, famines, and other distresses were the work of God, either to punish us for sin or to teach us through chastisement the ways of righteousness.

That we may not harden our hearts in these sufferings but turn with true repentance and obedience to God is a constant note in the prayers of Calvin. This belief in God's direct participation in this world's affairs is also that of Melancthon and of the English reformers. Their belief represents a broadening of the meaning of the first part of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty"—for "Father" meant Author, Creator, and Maker; and "Almighty" meant all-controlling and all-governing as well as all-powerful. Indeed, the Creed was often used as a prayer, a practice which Melancthon specifically mentions.

For sheer liturgical beauty and biblical conformity the prayers of the English reformers can hardly be equaled. Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Myles Coverdale, and many others who were influenced by the continental reformers, have left us a legacy of public and private prayers that have inspired trust throughout the world, for much of their work was embodied in the English *Book of Common Prayer*. Cranmer and Ridley sealed their invocations by giving their lives at the stake; Coverdale did much of his work in exile and lived through turbulent times to see the fruit of his Bible translations. Theirs was a trust in God upon which they wagered all they had.

Such belief in the providence of God gave the reformers an unusual dimension of life, a sense of history, and a feeling for the unreachable height and depth of God's care which is evident in their lives. In the twentieth century such trust may seem unsophisticated, but it is an interpretation of God's hand in history that inspired their prayers to profundity and assurance. They did not countenance the nebulous belief that men, or chance or a chain of causes might be the motivating force of history. The reformers did not pretend to understand everything about God's providence, but even the mystery of what they did not know was a means of glorifying God. With a trust that even death could not break, for the bonds of death had been shattered in Christ's resurrection, the reformers laid before God their every need. They did not believe all their petitions would be answered as they wished, but they prayed in trust that God would exceed their expectations and give what in his infinite wisdom and loving care would be best for them. While this trust in the providence of God is basic in the reformers' prayer-life, there are elements in their prayers which speak eloquently of their relationship to God. Luther's prayers reflect a warmth, beauty, and fierceness that remind one of Jeremiah, the psalmists, and Elijah. The background of Luther's struggle for salvation by faith alone, of his Tower experience in which he knew that his sins were forgiven not for what he had done but for the sake of Christ, is a part of every invocation. It breaks through as the theme of a symphony breaks through the orchestral variations to give form to the entire piece.

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For Luther prayer depends on the Word of God. Without this revelation man does not know what God has done in Christ; without the Word, by which the Holy Spirit illumines the heart of man, faith can hardly be nourished; and without faith, there can be no prayer. Using the word as his standard, Luther retained or rejected many of the ancient prayers and other liturgical forms of the church. If a form was true to the Word of God, then it could be freely used.

Luther was in this the reformer who wanted to purify and cleanse, rather than revolutionize and innovate. He did not crave something new; he sought only to restore the ancient collects and prayers to their proper and correct usage. Some of his prayers, and some of the prayers of the English reformers (for he strongly influenced them at this point), are very much like those which were used in the early and medieval church. But they have been carefully edited. One does not find invocation of the saints, nor injunctions to work righteousness, nor any suggestion that man's salvation is other than by faith, for Luther used the Word as his guide, and these things he did not find in Scripture.

Prayer for Luther is not counting many beads or pages, but fixing our minds upon some pressing need, desiring it with all earnestness and exercising such faith that we do not doubt that we shall be heard. Faith makes our position so acceptable to God that it will be granted, or something better will be given. "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will" (Mark 11:24). If we bring nothing before God and desire nothing from him, we engage not in prayer but in mockery. So, says Luther, speak specifically with God, mention some present need, command it to his mercy and doubt not that the prayer is heard, even as he has promised. We cannot prescribe how God shall answer our prayer, or when or where, but if we believe and trust, our heavenly Father will not give us a scorpion when we ask for an egg, nor a stone when we ask for bread (Luke 11:9ff).

If faith is weak and we cannot fully trust, comments Luther, we are to pray anyway, and in humbly confessing our weakness to God we will be strengthened more and more. Even the apostles prayed, "Lord, increase our faith." Rather than despair over our little faith, we should thank God that he has revealed this to us. Furthermore, we are to pray without ceasing, not that we must speak continuously, but that in our attitude and daily living we are to express our abiding trust in God. We may also feel that we are too unworthy to pray, but we must remember that God has commanded us to call upon him and has promised to hear us, not because we are worth, but because he is gracious, for giving us our iniquities. We begin prayer not with pride in our works and ourselves but with faith and trust in God's favor. If our sin is to be cured, we must not run from God but to him. We would be in a terrible plight if we felt worthy before God and recognized no need or trouble. God refuses to hear only those who are unwilling to be in need of his grace (*Treatise on Good Works*).

Because of the great depth and turmoil of Luther's spiritual experience, his prayers pulsate with all the inner emotion and conviction of one whose sins have been forgiven, whose burden has been lifted by the mercy of God in Christ. This personal element gives his prayers freshness and yet an age-old appeal as universal and as strong as the desire of men to be freed from sin and death. His trust in God's care rests on faith, and faith rises from the Holy Spirit revealing God's mercy in Christ.

With all that Luther said about prayer Calvin would agree. Trust, for example, is so essential to prayer that where it is lacking there is no divine worship and favor cannot be found with God only alienation. This trust comes not so much from Calvin's system of thought runs the fundamental presupposition that God is sovereign. It gives his prayers a remarkably intellectual ring. Calvin usually began his lectures with a set prayer and ended them with an extemporaneous invocation. Yet every single spontaneous prayer fits into his outlook with an amazing consistency, for each is controlled by the idea of God's sovereignty. His prayers are heartfelt outpourings of a man imbued with the Holy Spirit, full of confidence and trust in the majesty and power of God.

While faith and the Word cannot justly be separated, Calvin centralizes the Word rather than salvation by faith alone. It was in the Word that he found sovereignty and faith. For Calvin, as for Luther, the Word is the only foundation of prayer. "No prayer is genuine which does not spring from faith, and that comes by the Word of God" (see Romans 10:17). Calvin adds that "none can invoke God save those who have been taught by his Word to pray." Mere reading of the Word is not enough; the Holy Spirit must open the meaning so that true faith and trust in God

can be ours. Without the Word we cannot know God, and without knowing and trusting him we cannot pray, for God and God alone is to be invoked.

Although at times we may feel too unworthy to pray, we have the commands, the promises of God, and Christ as our Mediator “who opens up a way for us so that we are not at all anxious about obtaining favor.” We ought always to pray in Christ’s name, not that we must specifically say “in the name of Christ,” but rather that we must ask according to the revelation which is made in Christ.

Calvin considered the Lord’s Prayer the model for all invocation. We may pray with other words, but this is the only right standard of prayer. This form, prescribed by the Lord himself, tells us all that it is lawful to desire of him, all that is beneficial to us, and all that it is necessary to ask.

It would be disappointing if in his theological masterpiece Calvin did not discuss prayer. But he knew the intimate place of prayer in the public and private life of every Christian, so he could not and did not omit a formal discussion of prayer. It will be found in Book III, Chap. 20, of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It is not a section that was added to the *Institutes* as Calvin revised and enlarged it over a period of twenty-five years, but one that was included in the first edition which contained six chapters on law, faith, prayer, the sacraments, spurious sacraments, and Christian liberty.

In his discussion of prayer as the “principal exercise of our faith and the medium of our daily reception of divine blessings,” Calvin lays down four major rules which are as applicable today as they were in the sixteenth century.

First, the heart and mind must be properly composed for entering the conversation with God. We must apply all our faculties and attention to it, not allowing our minds to wander. It is an indignity, when God admits us to his presence, for us to become inattentive and to take mental excursions. We must rid our minds of all impediments and concentrate on our conversation with him. If achieving such composure for conversation with God seems impossible to us in view of our weakness and sin, we are not to be discouraged, for “God gives us the Spirit to be the director of our prayers, to suggest what is right, and to regulate our affections.” This does not mean that we are to wait in indolent supine-ness till he calls our minds from other engagement and draws us to himself, but rather that we, recognizing our sloth, may implore the assistance of the Spirit.

Second, in our supplications we should be conscious of our needs and ardently expect them to be filled. “God promises that he will be near to all who call upon him in truth, and declares he will be found by those who seek him with their whole heart.” In the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, Calvin says that we must feel our want and misery with grief and anxiety, and burn with an earnest and vehement desire to obtain God’s grace when we come before him in prayer, for otherwise we do not show proper honor to God. But our anxiety and misery must not obscure the trust that God shall hear us and obtain whatever is expedient for us, even as the Scriptures indicate (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24). Prayer is the means whereby “we penetrate to those riches which are reserved with our heavenly Father for our use.”

Prayer “digs out those treasures which the gospel of the Lord discovers to our faith.” Even though God knows beforehand what we need and desire, we are still to petition, for by doing so we acknowledge him as the Author of all that is desired and found useful by men, and in ourselves nourish our faith through seeing what God does for us.

Third, in presenting ourselves to God we must renounce every idea of our own glory, our own merits, and relinquish all confidence in ourselves, giving all glory entirely to God. Not because we are righteous are we to put out our prayers and ask mercy of God, but because God is merciful and has promised to have mercy upon us. Our prayer should begin with a supplication for pardon and a humble confession of guilt. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9).

Fourth, although prostrated with humility, we should nevertheless fervently pray with a certain hope of obtaining our requests. God visits his displeasure upon sin, but this must not deter us or cause us to seek refuge other than in God, for God is propitious and benevolent as well as just. Only the prayers that arise from faith and are founded on an undaunted assurance of hope are acceptable to God.

Calvin continues his discussion with comments on some of the common difficulties of prayer. If we are indolent and wavering in our decision to pray, let us remember that God

commands us to petition. If we do not ask God to help us in our extremities, we are defrauding him of his due honor and denying him to be the Author of all blessings. If we cannot abide by the rules of prayer and consider that perfection in prayer is utterly beyond us, then let us remember that no man is perfect and that God bears with our lisping and pardons our ignorance, if only we be sincere and humble. None of us are free from doubt and unbelief, but with God's grace we can push on, correcting ourselves, striving to surmount obstacles.

To deliver us from shame and fear before majesty of God we have been given a Mediator, the only Son of God and he is the only way of access by which we are permitted to approach God. To invoke saints is to be in idolatry. If we do not have facility of speech, let us remember that God is not pleased with vain repetitions. He does not forbid us to pray long and frequently, but we must not feel that with garrulous loquacity of human persuasion we are influencing God. Nor are we to continue our supplications to either private or public occasions. Both are needed. For the sake of fellowship, we are to pray in public; but since we are ourselves the true temples of God we must also pray within ourselves.

And finally, we are to persevere in prayer, despite trials, temptations, suffering, and various kinds of extremities which God may visit upon us, for we must not abandon the certain hope that God regards us with favor and will put an end to our present evils. "Without constant perseverance in prayer, we pray to no purpose.

Philip Melanchthon was one of the most devout men of his day, so much so that Byron centuries later referred to him in *Don Juan* as the "saintly Melanchthon." When the sixteenth-century woodcut artists sought to suggest the character of the lovable Evangelist Luke, they drew the unmistakable likeness of Melanchthon. Even those who took issue with him did not impugn his piety. That this leader of the Protestant Reformation is no more widely known is not due to any lack of greatness of thought or of character in Melanchthon but to a quirk of history which saw him twisted and torn by contending factions, both of which claimed him in part, but neither of which could altogether claim the truths he expounded.

Melanchthon's prayers mirror his character and thoughts, more so than is the case with Luther and Calvin. As Melanchthon addresses the Searcher of all hearts one sees revealed the heart of Melanchthon. And one glimpses here the essence of his thought on the church, the Trinity, the necessity of faith, the ministry, ecumenicity, sin, and the providence of God.

When Karl Barth said that to be a Christian and to pray are one and the same, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is the source of both, he could not have made a more trenchant statement of Melanchthon's views of the relation of the Christian to prayer. With an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and the church, Melanchthon declared that true prayer can come only from those on whom the Spirit has descended—the church. Others may attempt to pray, but unless the Spirit is within them revealing the mercy of God and imbuing them with the assurance that his mercy is for *them*, they only mumble.

Melanchthon's emphasis on the Trinity gives his prayers a certain majesty, stateliness, and universalism that one does not find in other contemporary prayers, not even in the prayers of Calvin. Melanchthon characteristically includes in his opening address a supplication directed to all three persons of the godhead, but because he considered Father, son, and Holy Spirit equal and co-eternal, he also addressed only one member of the Trinity. This awareness of the Trinitarian idea which permeates all of Melanchthon's invocations immediately stamps his prayers with a flavor of historicity and ecumenicity, for the Trinity emerged out of the early church and is expressed in the age-old creeds, and it was one doctrine that both Protestants and Roman Catholics of the century accepted.

Melanchthon's prayers clearly express the conviction that man is unable to initiate or to consummate conversion. Were it not for the Holy Spirit, reconciliation in Christ, the divine gift of faith, sinful man would be lost in the "mad sea of human errors," frustrated, sees a confidence born not of man's seeking God but of God's seeking man with such love that "he gave his only begotten Son," and again with such love that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Melanchthon's confidence is not in man but in God, for not because of what we do but "for Christ's sake the guilt of the one who repents is freely forgiven."

For Christians today one of the puzzling characteristics of Melanchthon's view of prayer is his injunction to pray for material things, a belief which he shared with Luther and Calvin. This is born of his belief in divine Creation and Providence. "All things come of God" was for

Melanchthon not merely a liturgical response but a belief that Father gives us both material and spiritual nurture. God and not man is the source of all we have. Not to petition God and not to thank him for his gifts bestowed would be for Melanchthon an admission that man thinks he is the source of that which he hews and draws.

Melanchthon begins his essay on prayer by saying, "True prayer must be directed to the God who has revealed himself in his given Word and in his son Jesus Christ whom he sent into the world." Since this revelation is impossible without the faith that is engendered by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit becomes the moving force behind all true invocation. True prayer does not come from natural reason, even though natural reason might be aware of God and the promises of God, can find no personal assurances that prayers are heard. Without this living relationship, prayer is for Melanchthon nothing more than empty monologue, psychological introspection, or vain babbling.

Every Christian, therefore, should have a prayer which reminds him of revelation and the promise. This can be best accomplished, says Melanchthon, if we remember five things:

First, the God we invoke. We must think about the revelation in Christ, for Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." In the Word and in the Word alone we behold the mercy of the God who loved so much that he sent his only-begotten Son.

Second, the command to pray. God himself commands us to pray. Not to honor God, not to beseech him, not to except help from him in time of trouble, and not to offer thanks for benefits received is to commit sin as surely as to murder, to steal, or to commit adultery. If we waver, let us remember the commandments.

Third, why God hears us. We are heard not because we are sinners, for God does not hear sinners, but because our sins have been forgiven in Christ. This forgiveness or reconciliation must precede everything. All other blessings are secondary. Although we may and should ask for material things, we should "seek first the kingdom of God." Without forgiveness we stand before God naked and condemned. Melanchthon reiterates this again and again. "Before any other thing we should ask for reconciliation, for all asking is in vain if we are not in faith reconciled."

Fourth, the practical need to stimulate faith. One reason for asking God for material gifts is that by seeing material gifts bestowed we may be stimulated to believe that our sins are truly forgiven and that death has been conquered for us. The heart calling on God in time of need learns by faith to rest in God, expecting all things, heavenly and earthly, from him.

Fifth, the things we desire in prayer. Before all other gifts we should ask for reconciliation. "Faith asking forgiveness and assuring us that we are accepted for Christ's sake must light the way for all other petitions." Then we should petition God for all those things necessary to our vocations and permitted by the commandments of God. And God wishes us to ask specifically "that we may know that God is not only good in himself but also that he is good to us." Material gifts do not come by mere chance or accident: they are given by God in his own way to sustain life and preserve the church.

After giving examples of prayers embodying the views he sets forth, Melanchthon speaks of the utter sincerity that must be present in prayer and of the obedience that must accompany our words of thanksgiving. "Let the heart and tongue agree." Melanchthon rises to a climax of trust, which he acknowledges is difficult and often incomprehensible, and then concludes with a simple expression of gratitude to the Giver of all blessings and a plea that God will rule us with his Holy Spirit now and forever.

There is a depth of feeling in Melanchthon's prayers that hauntingly suggests man's final limitation-death. This is especially apparent after Augsburg in 1530, when Melanchthon began to realize as poignantly as a human being can that men do not order affairs, that the counsels of men are not final, that all flesh is as grass, and yet that all things are possible with God, even the conquest of death. From this time on a deep sense of personal worship, thanksgiving, and reliance on God for the completion of his kingdom and fulfillment of his promises become manifest. Without God, the fruit of man's wisdom and effort is ultimately nothing. Abandoned by God, man flounders in a sea of frustration. But with God all things are possible. In Melanchthon's prayers beats the heart of a man who trusts in the providence and ultimate triumph of God.

Melanchthon's prayers have much of what one would expect to find in Luther and Calvin, but one misses in Luther "the Lord high and lifted up" and in Calvin the Christ "who loved us

while we were yet sinners.” Luther’s great contribution to prayer flows from his personal anxiety and discovery of “salvation by faith alone”; Calvin’s stems from his magnificent intellectual keystone “the sovereignty of God.” Melanchthon joins both, not because he sought to do so in a conscious, rational synthesis, but because it was the experience of his life.