

CHILDLIKE REVERENCE AND TRUST: CALVIN AND THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM ON PRAYER

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ABSTRACT: Prayer is a central theme in both Calvin's Institutes and the Heidelberg Catechism, although it is a neglected theme in present-day dogmatics. The present article compares Calvin's and the Heidelberg Catechism's stance on prayer in the context of the renewal of prayer as an effect of the Reformation of the 16th century. Both emphasise the experiential character of prayer and the importance of God's promise. The discussion of 'Amen' serves as a grand finale to the Heidelberg Catechism.

KEYWORDS: *Calvin; Heidelberg Catechism; prayer; promise; Reformation; experience.*

ABSTRAK: Doa adalah tema sentral dalam Institut Calvin dan Katekismus Heidelberg, meskipun hal itu adalah tema yang diabaikan dalam dogmatika masa kini. Artikel ini membandingkan posisi Calvin dan Katekismus Heidelberg tentang doa dalam konteks pembaruan doa sebagai efek dari Reformasi di abad ke-16. Keduanya menekankan karakter pengalaman doa dan pentingnya janji Allah. Diskusi tentang 'Amin' berfungsi sebagai *grand finale* bagi Katekismus Heidelberg.

KATA KUNCI: *Calvin; Katekismus Heidelberg; doa; janji; Reformasi; pengalaman.*

Introduction

In contemporary systematic theology, the theme of prayer does not receive ample attention. Prayer seems to be a theme for Christian ethics, or a matter of spirituality and devotion, both personal and ecclesial, but not a theme for

systematic-theological reflection.¹ Nonetheless, two important voices in the Reformed tradition emphasize the importance of prayer in the framework of Reformed doctrine: John Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism. In the present article, I compare the contributions by Calvin and the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, to mark common ground for further Reformed reflections on prayer, and to emphasize the importance of prayer for any systematic theology, also in the 21st century. Therefore, I read both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism against the background of current trends.

Prayer in Calvin

In Calvin's major work, *the Institutes*, prayer makes up far and away the longest chapter.² This is remarkable, since prayer is a topic that is lacking in most systematic theologies. This alone shows us that Calvin's dogmatics have real value: they are no dry, scholastic system, or an abstraction of a lived-out faith, from which all life has gone. On the contrary, in true theology we are concerned with a true practical knowledge of truly practical topics.

Developments

When examining the relevance of Calvin's theology, especially in our own time, there is every reason to focus on prayer. For it is in our time that we see a number of trends developing in relation to prayer. In this process of development, Calvin's theology can provide wholesome correction. I do not suggest that these developments deserve disapproval beforehand, as if Calvin's theology would be above criticism per se. However, standing in our own time, I do want to learn from what Calvin has to offer. I think of the following.

First, we note the present emphasis on emotion. In their prayers, people want to experience something. But what if you don't feel anything while you are praying? Has your prayer not been heard, then, or should you conclude that feelings don't really count? This desire for experience cannot be discounted.

Second, we observe that for many people prayer has taken on a less formal, more casual character than it once had. After all, our communion with God has become more personal and intimate. Rather than a sense of distance from a holy God, we experience the nearness of our Father. At the same time, the reverse of this tendency is to be more open about the more

¹ A notable exception is Robert W. Jenson, "The Praying Animal," *Zygon* 18 (1983), 311-325; republished in Robert W. Jenson, *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 117-131.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20 (OS 4:296-368). Parts of the present contribution have been published as "Calvin and Prayer," in: *Lux Mundi* 28/4 (2009), 94-97.

'difficult' aspects of faith in the Lord.

Third, we see a growing trend towards individualism: we are much more inclined to say 'I' in our prayers. It is my impression that communal prayers, such as those in some consistory rooms, also reflect this trend.

And now to Calvin. To begin with, we note that the reformation of the church in the 16th century was also a reformation of prayer. The set sequence of times of prayer, which followed the monastic rhythms, came to an end. People had to learn to pray for themselves. One of Calvin's contributions to the reformation of prayer was the institution of days of prayer.³ Actually, he had picked that up from Bucer (just as he had so much of his theology of prayer). Days of prayer were especially significant. They were the only weekday services in which Psalms were sung - other than this they were sung on Sundays only - and on these days Calvin even departed from his beloved *lectio continua* (his practice of preaching on the text, from beginning to end, of an entire Bible book).

The Reformer's Prayers

Relatively little is known about the place which prayer took up in Calvin's personal life. After all, he was not inclined to talk much about himself.⁴ At the same time, you can sense his deep personal experience of prayer, such as when in his Commentaries on the Psalms he comments on the struggles and temptations in a life of prayer.

For Calvin, it was by no means just theory. It is moving to read what Calvin writes to his friend Farel, in April 1549, on the death of his wife. "Let us pray, she said, let us pray. All of you, pray for me." When Calvin came home, he spoke with his dying wife about the hope of eternal life, and then, he writes, "I devoted myself to prayer. She listened attentively and with a clear mind, both to my plea of prayer, and to the Word (*doctrina*)."⁵

Many of Calvin's public prayers have been passed on: his lectures on the books of the Old Testament were recorded in shorthand, including the brief concluding prayers. One of these prayers is included right before the conclusion of this article.

Rules for Prayer

Calvin's most comprehensive writing on prayer is to be found - as already

³ See Elsie McKee, "Calvin's Day of Prayer: Origins, Nature, and Significance," in: *Calvin und Calvinismus: Europäische Perspektiven*, ed. Irene Dingel & Herman Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 311-332.

⁴ Calvin, *Letter to Sadoleto*, CO 5:389.

⁵ Calvin, *Letter to Farel*, Letter 1171, April 1549 (CO 13:229).

mentioned - in his *Institutes*, Book 3, Chapter 20. This chapter focuses on two things: four rules for right prayer, and a discussion on the Lord's Prayer. In this article, we will confine ourselves to the rules for right prayer.

This implies, of course, that not all prayers can be considered as adequate. In particular, Calvin is critical of the Roman Catholic prayers to all kinds of saints, but he also has all forms of undisciplined, improper, and irreverent prayers in mind.

The first rule of prayer is that we, in mind and heart, assume the right attitude: an attitude that is fitting for people who are speaking to God. A reverence, writes Calvin, with which we not only devote ourselves completely to prayer, but also through which we, so to speak, are lifted above and outside ourselves.⁶ This is not so much an ecstatic experience, as one of deep reverence.

Then, according to the second rule, it is necessary that we acknowledge our own deep poverty, and our longing to receive our desires from God. Calvin stresses that it isn't sufficient, with a cold heart, to perform a set of obligatory rituals, and then to label this as prayer.⁷ It is necessary to yearn to receive, with a fervent heart, whatever we pray for. We note, therefore, that for Calvin not only the words that are spoken, but especially the disposition of the heart, desiring fervently to receive, is of the greatest significance.

The third rule: whoever prays to God must give up any thoughts of one's own worthiness, in the light of the glorious holiness of God: in short, deep humility. Calvin points out that in the Bible each of God's servants, "the holier he is, the more he is cast down when he presents himself before the Lord".⁸ For this reason, confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness must always belong to right prayer.⁹ For we come to God to plead for His grace.

Fourth: Our prayers are supported by a firm confidence that God will hear them. This is not diminished by our humility in coming to Him, or by our awareness of guilt; on the contrary, these are in inseparable unity with this confidence. The more deeply I become aware of my own unworthiness, the more I depend on God's word of promise. True prayer has faith as its guide, writes Calvin. "If we would pray fruitfully," he says, "we ought therefore to grasp with both this assurance of obtaining what we ask. For only that prayer is acceptable to God, which is born out of such presumption

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.4 (OS 4:300).

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.6 (OS 4:302-303).

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.4 (OS 4:305; Translation Ford Lewis Battles & John T. McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 859.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.9 (OS 4:306-307).

of faith, and is grounded in unshaken assurance of hope.”¹⁰

Oriented to the Promise of the Triune God

This brings us to the notion of the promise, which lies at the heart of Calvin’s view on prayer. Prayer is the exercise of “communion of men with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to Him in person concerning His promises, in order to experience that what they believed was not vain.”¹¹ Prayer orients itself to the promise, and the promise calls forth prayer.

It is especially in this orientation to the promise, that Calvin’s theology reaches its full Trinitarian flower: The riches of the Triune God are expressed in it. The promise points primarily to Christ, but also to God the Father and to God the Holy Spirit.

It points to Christ - the One who promises - the Mediator who has opened the way to the Father. Who would dare to enter the heavenly sanctuary, if it were not for the sake of Christ?¹² That is why we pray in His name, and the full and humble realization that we have no other way of approaching God removes completely any thought of the intercessory saints.

The promise points to the Father who promises. It is not for nothing, writes Calvin, that at the beginning of our prayer we address God as our Father: “Our Father in heaven.” He is a patient Father, One who does not mind if we should stumble over our words, or even if we should say something that is not quite right. But most of all, says Calvin, he is a Father like the father in the parable of the lost son, “the best and kindest of fathers, provided we cast ourselves upon His mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious and froward children.”¹³

The promise also points to the Holy Spirit, “our teacher in prayer”, as Calvin calls Him.¹⁴ The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express, Calvin quotes from Romans 8. At the same time, he immediately turns himself against the kind of mysticism that says we must wait until the Spirit somehow takes over our preoccupied minds. Instead, the Holy Spirit so acts upon our faith, that it is possible for the four rules of right prayer to find their proper expression.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.12 (OS 4:311; Translation Battles/McNeill, 865).

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.2 (OS 4:297; Translation Battles/McNeill, 851).

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.17 (OS 4:322).

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.37 (OS 4:347; Translation Battles/McNeill, 900).

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.5 (OS 4:300; Translation Battles/McNeill, 855).

The Praying Person

This brings us to the person who prays. Calvin portrays him as the prodigal son, who is returning to his Father. The one who prays is, in other words, a sinner. But the person who prays is also as a child who freely shares all his cares with his Father. Intimately, as in a family: Calvin frequently uses the term *familiaris*, especially in this chapter on prayer.¹⁵ It isn't as if man is some kind of independent being, who autonomously enters into certain agreement with God; no, he is continually placed before the face of God, and the only thing he can cling to is God's Word of promise.

This perspective on prayer leads Calvin to write in an impressive fashion about the struggles and temptations in our life of prayer. He does that, for example, in his sermon on the passage in II Samuel, where David prays for the life of the child that God had said would die. Here, Calvin departs from his usual homiletic style, and instead holds a thematic sermon about prayer in time of struggle and temptation. Calvin doesn't come up with a logical exposition. The assurance in David's prayer is not found in a rationality that something must logically be true, but in the certainty that God really does hear prayer. "Prayer always bears fruit," Calvin writes, "but we do not always know in what way. And since this surpasses our powers of observation, we must wait patiently and always persevere in our prayers."¹⁶ David perseveres in prayer, because God always cares for His children, even when it seems that He has turned His back to them. This is prayer in hope against all hope, a prayer that clings to the promises of God.

Emotion in Prayer

Here we see (and this is where we begin to bring in the harvest) how Calvin on the one hand gives room for human feelings and emotions, but on the other hand does not succumb to a one-sided culture of emotion, such as can be found in many cultures today. Prayer cannot come from a cold heart; it requires a living, heartfelt conviction of our own unworthiness, and a living communion with Christ. But this is not emotion only. The real experience of faith has its spark in God's word of promise. In his commentary on Psalm 119:107, "Preserve my life, according to Your word", Calvin observes: "We will pray coldly, or rather we will not pray at all, if God's promise does not inspire us with courage in our sorrow and distress."¹⁷ This experience of

¹⁵ For instance, Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.9, 11, 16 (OS 4:307, 310, 320).

¹⁶ Calvin, Sermon on 2 Samuel 12:15-23, in *Supplementa Calviniana: sermons inédits 1 1. Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis* (Neukirchen, Kreis Moers: Neukirchener Verl. der Buchh. des Erziehungsvereins, 1961), 342.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Comm. Ps. 119:107, CO 32:261*; "quia frigebit invocatio, imo nulla erit, nisi in moerore et

faith is more than just emotion, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, arising from God's Word of promise. Prayers are heard, not in the first place because of the sincerity of the feelings of the one who prays, but because of the promise of God. This is seen clearly in the example of David, who clings to God's promise, even when God appears to turn His back on him. This appears to be a healthy correction in a culture of experience, when something seems to be true only if it feels that way. A rediscovery of a life that rests on God's word of promise is vital in every segment of the Christian church.

Prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism

Now let us turn to prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism.¹⁸ It is the final theme discussed in the Heidelberg Catechism. Last, but not least. If we compare the Heidelberg Catechism to a piece of music, then the section on prayer is the grand finale in which many motifs are elaborated once more, albeit not always in the same key. Obviously, the reformed catechism the Heidelberg Catechism is, has been influenced by Calvin's writings; not only the Institutes, but also Calvin's Genevan Catechism.

Characteristics of Prayer

Like Calvin, the Heidelberg Catechism notes a number of characteristics of true prayer. See Q. & A. 117.

Q. 117 What is the kind of prayer that pleases God and that he listens to? A. First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, revealed to us in his Word, asking for everything God has commanded us to ask for. Second, we must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God's majestic presence. Third, we must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord. That is what God promised us in his Word.

Like Calvin's four rules, these three rules circle around the right attitude in prayer and the certainty that God hears our prayers. The right attitude is an attitude of utter dependence because of our misery. And the right certainty is grounded in God's promise.

Composition

The composition of the section on prayer bears resemblance to a

angustia promissio Dei fiduciam addat."

¹⁸ For this section, see also Arnold Huijgen, "Practicing Gratitude. The Spirituality of Prayer in the Heidelberg Catechism", in: Arnold Huijgen (ed.), *The Spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism. Papers of the International Conference on the Heidelberg Catechism Held in Apeldoorn 2013*, Refo500 Academic Studies 24 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 206-224.

classical-rhetorical *peroratio*: the closing of an address, which is typically short and aptly crafted.¹⁹ Moreover, there are several *inclusiones* (inclusions, correspondences in ring structures). The largest *inclusio* is the one comprising the beginning and the end of the entire catechism: the 'Amen' from the final answer corresponds to the theme of comfort in the first answer. Two smaller inclusions can be found in the section of prayer itself: in the outer ring of Q. & A. 120 and 129 "certainty of faith" is the central theme. The inner ring of Q. & A. 121 and 128 concerns God's majesty, which serves as a guarantee of Him hearing our prayers.

Various motifs return a final time at the end of the Heidelberg Catechism. This recapitulation also serves a rhetorical goal: such recapitulations were part of the orator's peroration. But its redundancy also serves a didactic and catechetical goal: in teaching, repetition is important. Moreover, this recapitulation has a theological meaning, primarily with respect to the threefold structure of guilt, grace and gratitude: while prayer is the most important part of gratitude, it also consists of a deeply felt sense of guilt. In the life of gratitude, an ongoing practice in the sense of misery and the living of forgiveness is necessary.

A second form of recapitulation with far reaching theological consequences is the trinitarian mode of the life of prayer. For Christ's sake, God the Father is my God and my Father (Q. & A. 120, 26), who rules everything (Q. & A. 128, 27f). Christ's threefold office also resounds in the section on prayer: as Prophet, Christ teaches how to pray (Q. & A. 118), as King he rules by His Word and Spirit and protects (Q. & A. 123), and as Priest He sacrifices Himself (Q. & A. 126) and prays for believers so that our prayer is being heard (Q. & A. 117). Also, the work of the Holy Spirit returns: it is connected to grace, Word and power (Q. & A. 116, 123, 127; compare Q. & A. 21, 49, 54). So, all what has earlier in the Heidelberg Catechism been said about the work of the Triune God returns and becomes object of prayer.

The most important characteristic of the composition of the section on prayer is that it is itself a prayer. The questions are short and rather formal. They can be left out, and only a prayer remains. Here, form and content are one. There is no explanation of prayer outside of the practice of prayer. To this end, the first person plural and the second person singular are used, which are rarely found outside the section on prayer. So, the pupil of the catechism is trained step by step to learn how to pray. The discussion between teacher and pupil opens up, so that God himself becomes the first in this

¹⁹ See Thorsten Latzel, *Theologische Grundzüge des Heidelberger Katechismus: Eine fundamentaltheologische Untersuchung seines Ansatzes zur Glaubenskommunikation*, Marburger Theologische Studien 83 (Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2004), 112, 128.

discussion. So, the discursive level is left behind for the actively engaged practice of prayer. The entire Heidelberg Catechism has a performative intention, and the section on prayer forms its high point: the pupil is drawn into the reality of this faith and of this prayer.

At this place, it is useful to elaborate what was highlighted earlier; namely, that the Heidelberg Catechism is an ‘analytical’ document: the central theme of ‘comfort’ resounds throughout the entire catechism.²⁰ We see this once again in the relation between prayer and keeping God’s commandments. The discussion of the Ten Commandments is placed under the header of gratitude, which is remarkable in itself, since ‘gratitude’ was the term that was normally used for prayer. But keeping God’s commandments is also a form of gratitude, though prayer is the most important part of gratitude.

Note how in Q. 114 the meagre results of believers are highlighted: “even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.” Therefore, believers will pray ever more for God’s grace and the Holy Spirit (Q. 115), for God will definitely give these to those who pray Him for these gifts (Q. 116). So, our meagre results in keeping God’s commandments lead to prayer. On the other hand, prayer itself has been commanded by God: He “requires” prayer (Q. 116). In this way, God’s commandment forms the basis for prayer: we would lack any boldness in prayer if God had not commanded us to pray.

This tension between our limitations and guilt on the one hand, and God’s promise on the other hand returns in the way the Heidelberg Catechism discusses the characteristics of true prayer in Q. & A. 117. Because the question is: how can someone who is unable to keep God’s commandments the way he should, conform to the demands set for true prayer? The believer just admitted that he cannot keep God’s commandments the way he should, but this stimulates him to pray ever more. But what then if this prayer is also guided by commandments? With a variation of the formulations of Q. & A. 115: Why does God command prayer if nobody can pray the way he should? Ultimately, the discussion of “Amen” addresses these questions, which are questions of certainty and of obedience. For not only our keeping of God’s commandments and our prayers are imperfect; even our desires to be heard by God are imperfect. But this does not mean that our prayers go unheard by God. God’s listening is not dependent on the

²⁰ The ‘analytical’ method, as opposed to a synthetic method, means that a central theme (in this case: comfort, *Trost*) is elaborated throughout the Catechism. See Otto Weber, “Analytische Theologie: Zum geschichtlichen Standort des Heidelberger Katechismus,” in: *Warum wirst du ein Christ genannt? Vorträge und Aufsätze zum Heidelberger Katechismus im Jubiläumsjahr* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 25.

perfection of our prayers or on the heart-felt desire to be heard by Him. Rather, God's listening to our prayers depends on God's gracious promise alone. Our prayers are listened to. This is even more sure than that I really desire what I pray for. So, salvation lies entirely outside ourselves, *extra nos*, based on the gracious promise of God who justifies the ungodly. The believer falls short and does not conform to any demand for prayer and the Christian life; even his desires are only imperfect. Still, God's faithfulness to His promise remains!

The structuring way God's commandments have an effect on the discussion of prayer shows also in the various questions and answers. God "did command us" to pray for "everything we need, spiritually and physically" (Q. & A. 118) and Christ "did command us to call God 'our Father'" (Q. & A. 120). Also, the exegesis of the first petition, "Hallowed be your name," calls into remembrance the discussion of the third commandment in Q. & A. 99-100.

Q. 120 Why did Christ command us to call God "our Father"?

A. To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer what should be basic to our prayer— a childlike reverence and trust that through Christ God has become our Father, and that just as our parents do not refuse us the things of this life, even less will God our Father refuse to give us what we ask in faith.

Q. 99 What is the aim of the third commandment?

A. That we neither blaspheme nor misuse the name of God by cursing, 1 perjury, or unnecessary oaths, nor share in such horrible sins by being silent bystanders. In summary, we should use the holy name of God only with reverence and awe, so that we may properly confess God, pray to God, and glorify God in all our words and works.

Q.100 Is blasphemy of God's name by swearing and cursing really such serious sin that God is angry also with those who do not do all they can to help prevent and forbid it?

A. Yes, indeed. No sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than blaspheming his name. That is why God commanded it to be punished with death.

The petition "Your Kingdom come" is explained as a prayer for submission to God's rule and commandments (Q. & A. 123). Also, the link with the Ten Commandments is clear in the petition: "Your will be done." The petition for our daily bread leads to giving up our trust in creatures and trusting in God alone, a formulation that hints at the explanation of the first commandment in Q. & A. 94: "that I give up any creature rather than go against God's will in any way." The willingness to forgive one's neighbor mirrors aspects of the explanation of the sixth and ninth commandments: "to love our neighbors as ourselves" (Q. & A. 107), "I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbor's good name" (Q. & A. 112). And: the petition "Do not lead us into temptation" (Q. & A. 127) is related to the daily

struggle with the evil works, that were also mentioned in the explanation of the fourth commandment: “I rest from my evil ways [and] let the Lord work in me through his Spirit” (Q. & A. 103).

Certainty

Certainty is an important theme in the Heidelberg Catechism’s discussion of prayer.²¹ This accent is also far from alien to Calvin’s theology: his entire doctrine of predestination is often misunderstood as an attempt to grasp the eternal realities of God, but it rather is an answer to the anxious question whether God can forsake those that are His.²² The question of certainty plays a major role with respect to prayer. In the Heidelberg Catechism, as in Calvin, the question is not so much whether God exists, or any sort of theoretical doubt. Rather, it is about the practical question of the certainty of faith, the appropriation of salvation. In the Heidelberg Catechism, the believer does not doubt God half as much as he doubts himself. One’s conscience accuses; devil, world and one’s own flesh wage war against the work of God, but certainty lies in God’s promise.

Let us look once more at the “Amen”, in which certainty and comfort reach their high point. As already said, this final answer of the Heidelberg Catechism returns to the first question and answer on our only comfort. Note that in Q. & A. 129, the high tension shows when faith is localized in the believer’s heart. This raises the question, whether one really believes with one’s entire heart and longs enough for God’s listening ear in prayer. This obviously is a modern way of doubt, of which the Heidelberg Catechism shows some awareness. Exactly at this point, the “Amen” is important, because it is surer that God listens to my prayer than I feel in my heart that I desire that God would do this.

Let us note that this explanation of “Amen” means a shift vis-à-vis the tradition, particularly Calvin. Although Calvin’s catechisms had a major influence on the Heidelberg Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism chooses another route than Calvin had done before. In his 1537 catechism, Calvin stresses that, in prayer, the most important is a “clear feeling of the heart”. In the Genevan Catechism of 1545, he states that prayer with the mouth only is in vain; it should be done with a heart-felt trust. In neither of these

²¹ It is also an important theme in the Heidelberg Catechism as such. See Michael Beintker, “Glaubensgewißheit nach dem Heidelberger Katechismus,” in: *Certitudo Salutis. Die Existenz des Glaubens zwischen Gewißheit und Zweifel. Symposium aus Anlaß des 75. Geburtstages von Hans Helmut Eßer*, Studien zur systematischen Theologie und Ethik (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996), 55-69, 56.

²² For an overview of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, see Wilhelm H. Neuser, “Predestination”, in: *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 312-323.

catechisms, Calvin discusses the “Amen”, although he pays attention to the various petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Calvin seeks the center of attention for the certainty of faith primarily in praying in the Name of Jesus Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism provides an innovation at this point, also in comparison to Ursinus’ Smaller Catechism, in which he stated that “amen” means that I know for sure that God hears my prayers as sure as I really desire this.²³ The Heidelberg Catechism goes one step further, and shows to take the nature of temptation even more serious: for one can be tempted to think that one’s desire is too imperfect for his prayers to be heard. But even when I can doubt my desires, I should not doubt the nature of God’s promise, for He hears my prayers even more than I desire them to be heard. In a sense, this explanation of “Amen” is the very opposite of the accents found in Ursinus’ Smaller Catechism, although the differences should not be overstated. For in other places, the Heidelberg Catechism itself stresses the importance of heart-felt and child-like trust and confidence in God. Still, the really eschatological character of faith shows here: faith reaches higher than it actually can, because it trusts God’s promise. This accent on God’s promise is typical for Calvin. Note his “definition” of faith:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.²⁴

Comparison of Calvin and Heidelberg Catechism

In fact, we were already comparing Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism in the explanation of the “Amen”. Now, let me add two more points of comparison, which I will link directly to present challenges for the Christian Church.

Nearness and Exaltation

Both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism stress both God’s nearness (as a Father) and His exaltation (as a King). Both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism keep these closely together. On the one hand, the exalted glory of God compels us to recognize our own unworthiness. On the other hand, God is near to us with His grace, as a loving Father - a Father who nonetheless

²³ Ursinus, *Catechesis Minor*, Q. & A. 108. See Lyle D. Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History and Theology: With a Translation of the Smaller and Larger Catechism of Zacharias Ursinus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 162.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7 (OS 4:16; Translation Battles/McNeill, 551).

at times also chastises.

Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism offer a balance that is especially instructive for our time. The more so, because this balance does not remove all the tension between the two; it leaves a ‘grey area’, so to speak. On the contrary, Calvin lets both stand, and he leaves the tension where it is: God’s exaltation and His nearness, God’s loving care and his discipline. With all the emphasis in our time on the nearness of God, it would be healthy to remember that it is the nearness of the exalted God, the One who always will be exalted.

Individually and in Communion

In this way, there will also be a good balance between the individual and the community. “We pray our Father”, writes Calvin, “and not my Father”, so that we may be filled with a great sense of brotherly love.²⁵ The Heidelberg Catechism says that we call God “our Father” “to awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer what should be basic to our prayer—a childlike reverence and trust” (Q. & A. 120). Prayer is about me, but it isn’t just about me. In Christ, who was not ashamed to call us brothers, our prayer takes on a communal tone. This added value leads me to believe that we, in our communal prayers, should use “we” rather than “I”. And to realize that our personal prayers also are not just about ourselves.

For ultimately, we are praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God. This is clear from the prayers with which Calvin concluded his lectures, many of which have been preserved. His prayer was always directed towards the coming of the kingdom of Christ. This is what keeps Calvin’s prayers from becoming some kind of escape from this world; rather, they stand right in this world, in full expectation of the kingdom of Christ, in communion with all the saints.

A striking example of this character of prayer is found in the prayer which concludes one of Calvin’s lectures on Hosea:

Grant, Almighty God, that as we now carry about us this mortal body, yea, and nourish through sin a thousand deaths within us; O grant that we may ever by faith direct our eyes toward heaven, and to that incomprehensible power, which is to be manifested at the last day by Jesus Christ our Lord, so that in the midst of death we may hope that thou wilt be our Redeemer, and enjoy that redemption which he completed when he rose from the dead, and not doubt that the fruit which he then brought forth by his Spirit will come also to us when Christ himself shall come to judge the world; and may we thus walk in the fear of thy name, that we may be really gathered among

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.38 (OS 4:348; Translation Battles/McNeill, 901).

his members, to be made partakers of that glory which by his death he has procured for us. Amen.²⁶

Conclusion

Prayer was the point of comparison between Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism in the present article. The experiential orientation, the pneumatological breadth, and the thorough study of Scripture in Calvin's theology show particularly in this longest of all chapters in the *Institutes*: the chapter on prayer. The right personal attitude for prayer is important, but most important are the promises of God to which the believer clings in prayer. God is a Father and wishes to be called a Father by his children. What the Heidelberg Catechism offers in addition, is a beautiful explanation of the word "Amen", which once again shows the character of faith, which is certain not because of its own worth, knowledge or feeling, but because God wishes to hear our prayers even more than we feel that we wish these prayers to be heard.

So, Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism are in agreement on many points, while differing only in minor points. Both emphasize the importance of prayer for the Christian life, and also for the theologian: Calvin by devoting his longest chapter to prayer, the Heidelberg Catechism by making prayer the high point of the entire catechism. The existential yet sober, promise-oriented and heartfelt character of prayer are as important today as they were in the 16th century. Present-day cultures in both West and East can benefit from the wisdom of the Reformer Calvin and the Reformed confession from Heidelberg.

²⁶ Calvin, *Praelectio Hos.* 13:14-14:3, CO 42:499.