

Article

Prayer as Participatory Agency in Calvin's Doctrine of Sanctification: A Study of His Pastoral Correspondence

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Abstract

Scholars have increasingly agreed that, for John Calvin, the doctrine of sanctification cannot be reduced either to passive reception or to moralistic human effort. Calvin's theology of union with Christ and the work of the Spirit shows that sanctification is both a divine gift and a reality in which believers actively participate. However, less attention has been given to how this theological pattern appears in Calvin's pastoral theology, especially in his correspondence. This article addresses that gap by examining Calvin's letters to believers facing persecution, weakness, uncertainty, and the demand for perseverance. It argues that Calvin presents prayer as a form of participatory agency in sanctification: through prayer, believers actively seek from God what God alone can give. By analyzing Calvin's pastoral correspondence, this article shows how prayer allows Calvin to hold together divine agency and human responsibility in the lived process of sanctification.

Keywords: John Calvin; prayer; worship; sanctification; soteriology; Christian life; Holy Spirit; spiritual formation

1. Introduction

Prayer is a significant and yet underexamined topic within Calvin's understanding of sanctification. Scholars have shown that, for Calvin, the theology of grace does not reduce believers to passive recipients, but less attention has been given to how this grace-enabled human agency appears in Calvin's pastoral theology. With that gap in mind, this article asks how Calvin presents prayer as an active human response within the process of sanctification while still basing that response in God's prior and continuing work. By focusing on his pastoral letters, this article argues that Calvin offers prayer as a form of participatory agency.

This question belongs to a broader discussion concerning divine grace and human activity in Calvin's theology. If sanctification is grounded in God's initiative and received as a gift in union with Christ, what kind of activity can properly be attributed to believers? The exchange between John Milbank and J. Todd Billings is useful for framing this issue. Milbank's criticism of Reformation theology raises the question of whether Protestant understanding of grace can provide an adequate account of active reception (Milbank 2003, pp. 49, 77, 138, 160). Billings's response to him is significant because it argues that Calvin's theology cannot be reduced to the passive reception of unilateral grace (Billings 2005, p. 87).

This broader concern is not foreign to Calvin's own way of formulating sanctification. Calvin faced similar accusations in his own day, as the Roman Catholic opponents of the time charged that Calvin left insufficient room for active human works (Maas 2017, p. 530). However, according to the third book of his *Institutes*, it is clear that Calvin stresses the



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significance of believers' active good works.¹ Yet at the same time, for Calvin, sanctification is also given: "By partaking of him [i.e., union with Christ], we principally receive a double grace [i.e., justification and sanctification] . . . [which is] being reconciled to God [and being] sanctified by Christ's spirit."² Calvin's statement highlights the theological idea that is important for this article: sanctification is both a gift received in union with Christ and a reality in which believers are called to active obedience. To put the matter differently, sanctification is both received and pursued simultaneously.

Several Calvin scholars have clarified this theological grammar of grace-enabled human activity. Richard Muller emphasizes that, for Calvin, faith awakens the whole person, intellect and will, so that grace does not bypass human faculties. Instead, it renews and activates all parts of a person (Muller 2000, pp. 165, 172). Similarly, Paul Helm explains renewed human will as a Spirit-enabled response rather than autonomous initiative, explaining that, once the Holy Spirit renews the will of a believer, they receive true freedom in which their will becomes capable of properly ordered choices and decisions that accord with the commands of God (Helm 2004, p. 180). Furthermore, Billings brings this discussion closer to the present article by connecting participation, sanctification, and prayer, and presents prayer as a gift of the Spirit and an action by which believers seek the empowerment of the Spirit (Billings 2007, pp. 115–16).

This article builds on Billings's insight but asks a more specific and pastoral question: how does this "dynamic movement" (Billings 2007, p. 116) of believers' journey of holiness work in a more practical and specific way, and how does it appear in Calvin's pastoral counsel? As noted before, this article argues that, in pastoral letters, Calvin presents prayer as a form of participatory agency grounded in divine grace. Through prayer, believers participate in God's work of sanctification by actively seeking knowledge, strength, and constancy from God. Prayer, thus, allows Calvin to maintain both dimensions of sanctification: believers remain dependent recipients of grace, and yet they do not become inactive by that grace.³

In order to make this case, we will first briefly explore how Calvin understands the doctrine of sanctification in order to set the groundwork. After outlining Calvin's doctrine of sanctification, I will proceed to analyze Calvin's letters in depth in order to show how Calvin presents prayer as participatory agency in the process of sanctification. I will show through his letters that Calvin neither reduces sanctification to human effort nor treats it as a reality that renders human concern or participation unnecessary or irrelevant. Instead, he encourages the recipients of the letters to pray, so that both active and receptive aspects of sanctification can be preserved.

2. Calvin's Understanding of Sanctification

In some parts of his *Institutes*, Calvin describes sanctification in distinctly receptive ways. Perhaps the sixteenth chapter of the third book might be a good example. There, Calvin explains that Christ is the one to whom faith is directed and believers, through faith, "receive" (*accipit*) all the power.⁴ More specifically and importantly, Calvin insists that believers "seize" (*apprehendimus*) both the (external) righteousness of Christ (i.e., justification) and real sanctification, noting that the reception is both inseparable and holistic, as one receives Christ whole.⁵ He uses 1 Corinthians 1:30 as the evidence for this argument, and, in this verse, it is Christ who *became* sanctification *for* believers. With this exegetical reasoning, Calvin affirms that, in order to be declared justified, one must possess Christ, and one cannot possess Christ without "*being made* partaker in his sanctification."⁶ To sum up: for Calvin, sanctification is a "*gift*, first and foremost, that we receive from God" (Billings 2011, p. 46).⁷

However, as noted in the introduction, it is also true that Calvin distinctly emphasizes the active duties of believers. According to Calvin, presenting their bodies to God is Christians' duty, and they must strive not to be conformed to the manner of this world.⁸ In this line of logic, Calvin does not merely highlight what God does to believers but emphasizes the active obligations as well. Moreover, when he discusses the subject of "self-renunciation," Calvin does not fail to note that it is the individual Christians' duty to reject their sinful nature, will, and reason.⁹ This self-denial, then, is transcended to the level of cross-bearing, as Christians are "behoove[d] to climb still higher to the height to which Christ calls his disciples."¹⁰ This bearing of the cross then compels believers to discipline themselves, to accept God's chastisement, and to meditate on the future life (Leith 1991, pp. 78–79). Based on this analysis, Calvin clearly emphasizes the believer's active role in the process of sanctification, even while sanctification remains a gift received in Christ.

This doctrinal pattern provides the necessary background for the present study: for Calvin, sanctification is a gift given by God and, at the same time, a process in which believers actively participate. Calvin argues that sanctification is given by God and received through union with Christ, while also maintaining that believers ought to pursue holiness actively. In fact, Calvin does insist on the precedence of the divine gift. The title of Book Three indicates this primacy: "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow (*De modo percipiendae Christi gratiae, et qui inde fructus nobis proveniant, et qui effectus consequantur*)."¹¹ In this book, Calvin primarily aims to explain how Christians "receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son . . . that he might enrich poor and needy men (*quae Pater Filio unigenito contulit bona, non in privatum usum, sed ut inopes egenosque locupletaret*)."¹² For Calvin, believers' obligations are situated within the broader framework of God's divine providence. Christians can deny themselves better by relying more on God, because their works are *in* God's work (Leith 1989, p. 77). This idea of Calvin seems to be best described by later Reformed theologians: "God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of cooperation as if God did his part and we did ours. . . . God works in us, and we also work. But the relation is that, because God works, we work" (Murray 1955, p. 149; cf. Hoekema 1994, p. 202).

As discussed in the introduction, Muller and Helm offer a significantly helpful way to clarify the theological grammar of grace-enabled human activity in Calvin. Muller clarifies that, for John Calvin, faith engages the whole person, so that both intellect and will are renewed and activated by grace, which sets the foundation for believers' active participation in sanctification. Helm, in turn, offers a conceptual explanation of how this renewed agency operates and argues that the human will does not function independently but responds to desires already reoriented by the Spirit. Together, these interpretations clarify the doctrinal background assumed in this article: in Calvin's thought, divine initiative does not nullify human activity but establishes and enables it. Billings then brings this grammar especially close to prayer.

Nevertheless, the pastoral and epistolary form of this account remains underdeveloped. While prior studies explain how divine and human agency can coexist coherently in Calvin's theology, more attention can be given to how Calvin uses prayer to address specific aspects of sanctification: discernment of God's will, renewal of the heart, perseverance in obedience, and endurance under persecution.

This is what the present article means by participatory agency. Prayer is participatory because believers are not passive spectators of sanctification. Through prayer, they ask, seek, discern, struggle, and persevere before God. At the same time, this agency is not autonomous, because prayer does not generate sanctification from what believers have in

themselves. Instead, prayer is an act by which believers actively seek from God what God alone can give, such as knowledge of his will and renewal of the heart. In this sense, prayer is both active and receptive. It is active because believers truly pray, and it is receptive because the grace sought in prayer remains God's gift. Prayer is also grace-enabled because the movement of prayer depends on God's prior and continuing work.

At this point, Calvin's pastoral letters become especially useful, not as the primary doctrinal foundation for his theology of sanctification, but as evidence of how that theology is applied in concrete pastoral situations. His pastoral correspondence with believers facing persecution, weakness, uncertainty, and the demand for perseverance reveals how the relation between divine gift and human responsibility could be worked out in practice. Thus, this study turns to his pastoral letters in order to examine how Calvin presents prayer as a concrete practice through which believers participate dependently in the sanctifying work of God (Benoît 1966, pp. 67–70).¹³

3. Prayer and Sanctification in Calvin's Letters

Although the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, among many of Calvin's works, has undoubtedly received abundant attention from historians and theologians, it is difficult to argue that his letters have been neglected. No one has presented a systematic analysis of the whole body of more than four thousand letters,¹⁴ but many have attempted to make use of his correspondence to reconstruct Calvin's life and thought.¹⁵ For instance, by analyzing Calvin's letters to noblewomen, Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell argues that Calvin sought to advance the Reformation by using correspondence as a political tool (Blaisdell 1982, p. 84). Also, a number of scholars have tried to establish Calvin's pastoral theology in the light of his correspondence (Potgieter 2014, pp. 1–9; Benoît 1991; Stauffer 1964, p. 32; Parsons 2018, p. 2; Ha 2026, pp. 76–93). Despite the number of works that deal with Calvin's letters, relatively little attention has been given to the specific relationship between prayer and sanctification in his pastoral correspondence.¹⁶

The present study is based on a close reading of Calvin's correspondence. However, it does not attempt to offer a catalogue of every occurrence of prayer in all of the letters. Calvin's letters are often occasional documents, many of which concern ecclesiastical politics, institutional problems, controversy, and strategy. This article, therefore, analyzes all of the letters in which Calvin explicitly connects prayer with believers' growth in holiness. These letters are not isolated examples chosen apart from the larger corpus. Rather, they are theologically significant pieces that emerged from a broader examination of Calvin's correspondence.

On the one hand, at first glance, the way Calvin mentions prayer in letters seems rather superficial and merely courteous. In a letter of encouragement (1550) to Francis Dryander (1518?–1552), who was a classicist and fellow reformer, Calvin ends with these words: "I pray (*precor*) for all joy and prosperity to your wife wherever she is" (CO 13:536; Calvin 1858, 2:252). Here, the word "pray" can easily be substituted with "hope" or "wish." This sentence appears to be another way of saying "I wish you well" or "I hope you will stay healthy." Sometimes he would be somewhat more elaborate: "I will pray (*je prieray*) our good Lord to have you always in his holy keeping, to govern you by his Holy Spirit, to bless and to help you in every way" (CO 12:594; Calvin 1858, 2:132). It would be unreasonable to doubt this remark's sincerity, but as it comes at the end of a letter, it seems to function more as a salutation than a theologically charged statement on which we can build his theology of prayer and sanctification.¹⁷

Sometimes prayer is described as the last resort, when there is nothing else to be done: "you might at least aid them with your prayers (*precibus*)" (CO 14:177; Calvin 1858, 2:303). "All we can do is to pray (*precibus*) . . . that he [God] may not permit his Church

to be utterly overwhelmed” (CO 14:583; Calvin 1858, 2:397). Again, there is no reason to believe that these words are empty or redundant, and that Calvin wrote these remarks merely to say that “one might as well just pray,” as there was nothing to be done. However, as noted above, these statements do not provide much insight into what Calvin thinks of prayer either.

On the other hand, his pastoral letters make it possible to observe how Calvin connects prayer with sanctification in concrete pastoral practice. In a number of letters, Calvin exhorts his readers to do good and obey the word of God in order to give due glory to God.¹⁸ When he does so, the believer’s duty to live righteously (i.e., sanctification) is clearly tied to prayer in Calvin’s letters. Calvin does not simply say that “a Christian ought to do this” or that “holiness has already been given.” Instead, in these letters, he presents prayer as one important way believers participate in God’s sanctifying work for and in them. We now turn to examine several ways in which this takes place.

First, Calvin insists that, through prayer, believers come to *know what is right and holy*. In other words, this is a noetic function of prayer for Calvin. In order to do good, one needs to know what is good. For Calvin, this is exactly where prayer plays a significant role. In a letter (1553) to a young woman who fled her hometown to go to Geneva in order to avoid religious persecution but was arrested on the way, Calvin strongly encourages her not to give in and to have even more courage than she already displayed (Calvin 1858, 2:412).¹⁹ In doing so, Calvin does not tell her that she ought to decide what to do on her own regarding how she can act righteously in such a difficult situation. Nor does he tell her to passively wait for God to teach her what should be done. Instead, he tells her to pray so that God “would bestow on you a spirit of counsel and prudence, to decide what is right and fit for you to do; a spirit of discretion, that you may not be deceived and take evil for good” (Calvin 1858, 2:413). In other words, prayer is taught as a means for discernment of right and wrong.

Similarly, in a letter to the Duchess of Ferrara (1541), Calvin emphatically teaches her to pray, so that God “would instruct us in the doing of his will (*qu’il nous enseigne à faire sa volonté*)” (CO 11:331; Calvin 1858, 1:305). Sometimes he would use the metaphor of eyes in order to discuss this particular role of prayer: “It is at the same time our office to pray him (*C’est aussi nostre office de le prier*) to be pleased to open our eyes (*ouvrir les yeux*), that as soon as he gives us some sign we may immediately follow it” (CO 15:653; Calvin 1858, 3:188).

However, for Calvin, the intellectual benefit of prayer is not merely limited to the knowledge of right/wrong or good/bad. The cognitive benefit of prayer is also distinctly christological. In 1559, as Henry II died and Francis II became the new king of France, the new degrees of “arrests and executions” of the Protestants took place in France (Gordon 2009, p. 311). Thus, it became necessary for Calvin to write a letter to comfort and exhort the persecuted Protestants in France. In a letter written to the persecuted Protestants in the same year, he expounds a number of issues in relation to the persecution that they faced. At the end of the letter, Calvin emphasizes the importance of prayer in the midst of persecution. What is significant in it is the fact that he does not urge them to pray for the circumstances to change. Instead, Calvin’s priority is on prayer to “make manifest that he [Christ] is seated on the right hand of God his Father” (CO 17:687; Calvin 1858, 4:87). Prayer is taught as a means through which the person of Christ is communicated and manifested. The oppressed ones were to pray that they would see and *know* that Christ was ruling, being placed next to God the Father. According to Calvin, this is what the suffering Christians ought to pray for “[s]ur tout” (above all) (CO 17:687).²⁰ The knowledge of Christ which is given through prayer is, for Calvin, what those persecuted believers needed the most in their time of struggles.

Second, Calvin contends even more emphatically that, through prayer, believers are *able to do* what is right. In other words, for Calvin, prayer has a volitional function. Calvin repeatedly highlights that humans are frail and weak, and, because of that, they cannot do good even if they know what is good. It is not merely a matter of knowledge, but of will. Here again, prayer plays a central role. Calvin writes to the persecuted Protestants in France (1547) that, because “you know well from experience how frail we are,” prayer is essential so that God can “sharpen and confirm you more and more” (CO 12:562; Calvin 1858, 2:117). The French expression employed here (*pour vous exercer, esquisser et conformer de plus en plus*) brings out more clearly how prayer is a means used to exercise, sharpen, and conform praying believers. Here we see Calvin explaining that believers are fortified to do good through prayer.

In order to discuss this role of prayer, Calvin uses the language of the heart. In a letter to Mathieu Dimonet (1553), a Protestant who was arrested for his faith in Lyon, Calvin urges him to “sacrifice/dedicate [his] life to him [God] (*remettez vous à lui*)” (CO 14:468; Calvin 1858, 2:368). In doing so, Calvin does not tell him to “do his best” or to maximize his willpower. Nor does he compel him to stay passive and simply wait for God to intervene, saying that sanctification has already been given. Instead, he writes, “although this [sacrificing his life to God] be difficult to the flesh . . . you must pray . . . so to imprint it upon your heart (*imprimer en vostre coeur*)” (CO 14:468; Calvin 1858, 2:368). In other words, for Calvin, praying is the way through which believers continue to maintain faithful hearts. According to Calvin, “the duty of believers is ‘to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him,’”²¹ and this dedication is enabled by their prayer.

In a related sense, prayer is also firmly associated with constant and long-lasting sanctification in Calvin’s thought. The volitional benefit of prayer is not simply that believers are able to do good once or twice. Rather, Calvin argues that, in order to live righteously consistently and until the end, a proper prayer life is positively imperative. In a letter to Madame de Coligny (1559), Calvin highlights the significance of prayer in relation to “fortify[ing] our constancy” (CO 17:459; Calvin 1858, 4:30).²² Believers have a duty to practice what the Bible commands, and they can only obey these commands continually and faithfully through the power of prayer. Similarly, in a letter to the Duke de Longueville (1559), Calvin exhorts him to pray “to increase in you the gifts of his Spirit, in order that your faith may remain victorious even to the end (*afin que vostre foy demeure victorieuse jusques à la fin*)” (CO 17:553; Calvin 1858, 4:45).

Now, it may be possible to question the argument so far by questioning whether prayer is, in fact, a *significant* theme for Calvin’s theology of sanctification and by asking whether all these words of Calvin are merely incidental. Could it be that prayer is simply one of many topics that Calvin uses in relation to sanctification? Because Calvin wrote so many letters, how can we know Calvin happens to emphasize prayer in the letters that we analyzed, and not in other letters? If this is the case, the contention that Calvin builds a significant relationship between prayer and sanctification may not hold.

As a matter of fact, Calvin is strikingly decisive and explicit about the *chief* role prayer plays in this regard. Indeed, he does underscore the fact that prayer must be accompanied by God’s word (Calvin 1858, 2:92).²³ Nevertheless, that did not stop Calvin from using strong expressions when addressing Madame de la Roche-Posay in 1549: “the *chief* thing (*Mais le principal*) is to pray God that he would lead you, as well to guide you as to uphold by his strong arm, in order that as he has begun a good work in you, he would continue it until he has brought you on to that perfection” (CO 13:295; Calvin 1858, 2:217) [emphasis mine]. He also writes, in his letter to the Seignury of Geneva (1543), that “the *chief* thing (*le principal*) is to pray to him that he would assist us in the doing of his work” (CO 11:603;

Calvin 1858, 1:394) [emphasis mine]. Similarly, when he exhorts Monsieur de Budé in 1547 to seek to do what is good and right, he expressly affirms that “seeing that the very beginnings are difficult, and perseverance still more so, the *best* resource is to pray God that he would stretch out his hand to you, and give you courage to surmount all obstacles” (CO 12:543; Calvin 1858, 2:107).²⁴ The same exhortation occurs in other letters as well.²⁵

Perhaps what has been observed so far can be summarized in an excerpt from the letter written by Calvin to Madame de Falais (1543): “For this reason I shall conclude this letter, after having commended me affectionately to your kind favour, and having *prayed* our Lord that he would carry forward his work in you, *leading* you even by his Holy Spirit, both to the *knowledge* and the *obedience* of his good will” (CO 11:630; Calvin 1858, 1:400).²⁶ Here, as my emphasis shows, Calvin connects prayer with knowledge of what is holy and righteous obedience.

Throughout this analysis, we see Calvin holding together the receptive and active dimensions of sanctification in pastoral practice. He does not merely say that it is a gift given and received passively or that it is something that believers strive for on their own. By introducing prayer into the picture of sanctification, he keeps the nature of divine gift and human obligation in balance. Prayer is active in that it is an action that humans do, but it is also receptive in that it is an action in which one asks for God to work in and for believers. It is also an intrinsically grace-enabled action because it is enabled by the grace of God.²⁷ In Calvin’s thought, through prayer, believers remain humble recipients of God’s grace and also participate actively in the sanctifying work of God. In this sense, what we saw in Calvin’s salutations at the end of the letters does not appear to be merely formal. They seem to reflect his distinct understanding of the relationship between prayer and sanctification.

Having examined the relationship between prayer and sanctification in Calvin, we now turn to several possible objections to this account and argue that Calvin’s own letters provide resources for answering them.

4. The Primacy of the Divine Gift in Prayer

The first possible concern about this article’s interpretation of Calvin’s theology of prayer would be this: whether or not this theology of prayer can be in harmony with his teachings on the primacy of grace. In other words, does the analysis so far challenge Calvin’s insistence on the danger of merit theology,²⁸ by seeing prayer as a kind of merit through which believers earn sanctification? If Christians progress and grow through prayer, what happens to the nature of sanctification that is a gift?

Although Calvin would not have anticipated such inquiries, we find letters where he deals precisely with this issue. In relation to this issue, Calvin uses the metaphor of a seed. In 1557, Calvin wrote a letter of comfort and exhortation to the women who were imprisoned in Paris because of their Protestant faith. One of the principal instructions in the epistle, as one can imagine, is a call to prayer. However, here, there is a unique additional element to it: “praying him [God] that the incorruptible seed (*la semence incorruptible*), which he has sown in you . . . may bring forth its fruit (*produise ses fruits*)” (CO 16:632; Calvin 1858, 3:364). To put it differently, prayer does not create something *ex nihilo* but simply aids the preexisting seed to grow and bear fruit. The way Calvin understands and explains the role of prayer, then, can and does coexist with his logic in the *Institutes*. Yes, for Calvin, one cannot undertake any good works unless God creates in them a capacity to do so.²⁹ It is imperative that God give the faithful a seed before there can be any fruit. Even when there is a seed, it does not simply follow that believers must work on their own to turn this seed into fruit. Even in this growing process, the primacy is in the gift because it is the Holy Spirit who does the renewing work. However, Calvin also adds in this letter

that prayer can be a means by which a believer can actively participate in the process of sanctification (CO 16:632; Calvin 1858, 3:363–64).

This idea is present in other letters as well. When consulting Monsieur de Crussol regarding the recipient's theological and moral concerns through a letter (1563), Calvin writes as follows: "But I entreat you . . . to pray God to . . . clothe you with the armour which he has given you (*vous revestir des armes qu'il vous a données*)" (CO 20:113; Calvin 1858, 4:328). Calvin does not encourage him to hammer together an armor or tell him to sit tight because he already has an armor. Instead, even though he has already been given armor, Calvin exhorts him to pray to God to clothe him with it. In a considerably similar manner, when writing to Monsieur d'Andelot (1558), Calvin connects gift and prayer: "And because perseverance is a singular gift from on high (*la perseverance est ung don singulier den hault*), cease not to call upon this kind Father that he would strengthen you" (CO 17:194; Calvin 1858, 3:421). Here, Calvin encourages and urges the recipient to press on in the life that is worthy of the gospel and writes that such persistence is a gift, and yet it needs to be asked for. The theme of asking for what has already been given seems sufficiently prevalent across his letters.

In this sense, Calvin still seems to emphasize the primacy of the divine gift. As we have explored above, prayer is only efficacious when the sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit is already at work. Thus, for Calvin, prayer is an active human action that appreciates God's sovereignty while acknowledging the primacy of God's salvation. Union with Christ is the primary cause and beginning point of sanctification. Prayer works as an enhancing and secondary instrument given by God for the sanctification that has already begun in a believer, although it is indeed seen as a participatory and active human action on the believer's part.

5. Prayer and Human Responsibility

The second likely concern that some may have regarding this article's suggestion would be this: if prayer is the key to sanctification, does Calvin's strong emphasis on prayer eliminate the human responsibility that he stresses in his *Institutes*? In other words, does Calvin's theology of prayer, as articulated in this article, diminish the importance of human agency? Calvin's letter to Antoine, King of Navarre, in 1558, helps address this concern.

In this writing, Calvin's primary aim is to encourage and ask the king to be gracious towards a minister (who was sent by Calvin to the king so that those who were hungry for the truth may be relieved from their spiritual starvation) who seems to have offended the king by opposing the king's chaplain, Peter David (CO 17:69; Calvin 1858, 3:487–88).³⁰ However, in this letter, we gain a valuable insight into Calvin's understanding of the relationship between prayer and human responsibility. Although Calvin acknowledges here that the king faces numerous evil temptations and thus many outward hindrances to his sanctification, Calvin nevertheless charges him to use all his strength (CO 17:70; Calvin 1858, 3:490). At the same time, Calvin gently admonishes him to pray, so that God can give him what is lacking in his quest for holiness (CO 17:71; Calvin 1858, 4:491).

What is noteworthy in this letter is that, for Calvin, prayer and human responsibility are not separate. Calvin places them side by side and affirms that believers must do their utmost best *and* pray at the same time. Prayer does not diminish the importance of human duty, and vice versa. This is why Calvin declares that "[f]or when the honour and service of God are at stake, there is no excuse for timidity (*il n'y a nulle excuse de timidité*)" and also that believers ought to pray to God "who is abundantly rich and liberal to supply what is wanting to us (*qui supplée à ce qui nous default*)" (CO 17:70–71; Calvin 1858, 4:490–91).

The balance with which Calvin maintains both human responsibility and prayer is also observed in his farewell address to the magistrates of Geneva in 1564, the year of

his death.³¹ In this discourse, Calvin emphasizes the importance of human action to a considerable degree. The exhortations are not light at all; they are serious and weighty, if not a little burdensome. Calvin tells them to serve God “in purity” and warns them by saying that every one of their conduct is seen by God himself (Baum et al. 1863–1900, CO 9:889; Calvin 1858, 4:371). He goes on to insist that they have to know and embrace their imperfections and that it is their duty to scrutinize and fight against them. Calvin even lists and explains a few imperfections as examples (CO 9:889; Calvin 1858, 4:371). In this section of the address, Calvin is unequivocally underscoring the significance of human responsibility. However, that is not the way the address ends. As soon as he urges them to fight diligently against their imperfections and surrender their self-interest, he immediately switches the topic from human responsibility to prayer, insisting that they have to pray, so that God can lead them by the Holy Spirit (CO 9:890; Calvin 1858, 4:372).

Here we see that, for Calvin, prayer and human responsibility are not divorced at all. In some of his very last words for the seigneurs of Geneva, imperatives to strive to do good and to pray for God’s guidance and governance constitute the two pillars of the whole discourse. Human duty is to be understood in the context of prayer and vice versa. The discourse itself ends with Calvin’s own prayer: “[Calvin] prayed God to conduct and govern us, continually increasing his grace in us” (CO 9:890; Calvin 1858, 4:372).

6. Prayer and Groaning

The final possible concern that might arise is that Calvin may be depicting prayer as a facile way out. For some, exhortations to pray in the face of dangers of exile and executions may sound naïve and appear to be a convenient option among many other courses of action. However, as a matter of fact, Calvin never describes prayer as an easy choice. Instead, prayer is to be done with groaning and tears, says Calvin.

Calvin wrote a letter to the persecuted Protestants in France in 1559 to comfort and exhort them in a time of intensifying crisis. In this letter, we see Calvin pairing prayer with groaning and tears. For Calvin, prayer is not an action that is done lightly. Instead, believers must pray to God while “groaning because of [their] infirmity, which holds [them] back from doing [their] duty (*priez Dieu qui l’y mette, gemissans à cause de vostre vice*)” (CO 17:686; Calvin 1858, 4:86). Christians are not to pray while sitting back or considering a more convenient option, as if saying a few words to God is sufficient. Conversely, they are to humble themselves in the face of trials “with tears and prayers (*vous humiliez avec larmes et prières*)” (CO 17:687; Calvin 1858, 4:87). According to Calvin’s theology of prayer, prayer must be a genuinely committed and fully focused action that involves dissatisfaction with one’s shortcomings and longing for God’s inspiring and strengthening intervention, to the point of groaning and tears.

This notion of prayer and groaning as a pair is also featured in a letter that Calvin wrote to “a persecuted church” in 1556 (CO 26:110; Calvin 1858, 3:261). By reading this letter, we can infer that the recipients were in immediate danger of severe persecution and execution. The situation was so distressing that Calvin used a vivid image: the recipients were described as being “in the jaws, as it were, of the wolf” (CO 26:110; Calvin 1858, 3:261). Under these devastating circumstances, Calvin does not merely suggest that they should do everything they can to preserve their lives. Indeed, he does console them by telling them that their lives are precious to God, but goes on to urge them to “strive to strengthen yourselves and put in practice, in time of need, that which you learned in the Scriptures, and of which you are daily put in mind” (CO 26:110; Calvin 1858, 3:262).

In this context, Calvin emphasizes the importance of prayer and groaning: “We can only groan in prayer to God that he would be graciously pleased to preserve you” (CO 26:110; Calvin 1858, 3:262). On the surface, it may seem that Calvin is only talking about

their physical protection. That aspect is indeed included in this remark. However, there is no dichotomy of physical protection and spiritual survival in this letter. They are woven together in the way that God works for his children. The English translation renders *conserver* as “preserve,” which sounds closer to physical protection, but this translation seems to narrow down the sense more than Calvin intended. Instead, considering the context of the letter as a whole, it would be more appropriate to maintain the broader meaning of the word *conserver* and translate it as “uphold” or “keep” (Cotgrave 1611, p. 228).³² Thus, Calvin is highlighting the importance of groaning in prayer in relation to the Christian life in this letter as well. For Calvin, the mode of prayer must be that of tears and groaning.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued that, in Calvin’s pastoral correspondence, prayer functions as a form of participatory agency within sanctification. The letters examined here show that Calvin does not reduce sanctification to passive reception, nor does he frame it as autonomous human effort. Instead, he presents prayer as the practice through which believers actively seek the empowerment of the Spirit: to know what is right, to do what is good, and to have the power to continue in holiness.

This pattern reveals a distinctive quality in Calvin’s pastoral advice. Throughout numerous letters, Calvin insists on divine primacy in prayer, but is equally emphatic about human responsibility to act upon that gracious foundation. Moreover, for Calvin, effort and prayer were not presented as two matters in opposition. Instead, he maintained that the two should persist side by side. Finally, according to Calvin, prayer is not an easy alternative to reality; instead, it is marked by groaning and struggle.

Perhaps this article could encourage further research on the topic in the following ways. First, the same method could be applied to Calvin’s commentaries, and more importantly, his sermons. Both of these genres have received less attention than his *Institutes*, and it would be meaningful to explore how Calvin addresses this topic in them. Second, reconsideration of the role of prayer within the later Reformed discussions of means of grace might be fruitful. While the continental Reformed tradition has typically emphasized Word and sacraments as the primary means, this study raises the possibility that prayer may operate as a divinely given instrument through which believers participate in the process of sanctification. Further investigation could thus clarify whether, and in what sense, prayer may be understood as a secondary or dependent instrument of sanctifying grace within the broader Reformed tradition.

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Notes

¹ John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis* 1559, 3. 7. 1, 3. in (Barth et al. 1926–1952). The English translation is from (Calvin 2011).

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3. 11. 1. In Latin: *cuius participatione duplicem potissimum gratiam recipiamus . . . ut eius innocentia . . . reconciliati . . . ut eius Spiritu sanctificati*.

- ³ In this article, sanctification is defined as the real transformation and renewal of the whole person, whereby believers are progressively formed in holiness according to the image of Christ. Unlike justification, which is more forensic and declarative, sanctification has to do with authentic change in a believer.
- ⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3. 16. 1.
- ⁵ See Note 4 above.
- ⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3. 16. 1. [Emphasis mine, to highlight the passive tone].
- ⁷ David Fergusson captures this aspect of sanctification by using the language of determinism: Christians are “determined for a life of sanctification” “by virtue of [their] union with Christ” (Fergusson 1999, p. 383).
- ⁸ *Institutes*, 3. 7. 1. His exegetical evidence is found in his interpretation of Romans 12:1–2.
- ⁹ *Institutes*, 3. 7. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Institutes*, 3. 8. 1.
- ¹¹ *Institutes*, 3 [emphasis mine, indicating the priority of believers’ passivity]. In a similar sense, Herman Selderhuis, having recognized Calvin’s passive understanding of sanctification, argues that sanctification is an *effect* which is *caused* by the grace of justification (Selderhuis 2007, p. 195).
- ¹² *Institutes*, 3. 1. 1. There are, indeed, many more places in which Calvin stresses the passivity of a believer’s sanctification. For example, even the event of mortification and vivification occurs by virtue of participation in Christ through faith. *Institutes* 3. 3. 9. (Cf. Cunningham 2012, p. 243).
- ¹³ In a sense, it is unsurprising to find this hint in his letters. According to John Leith, Calvin’s occasional writings often revealed how he applied his theology in the *Institutes* and his biblical commentaries (Leith 1991, p. 11).
- ¹⁴ This prolific number of extant letters is, though, according to Benoît, only a fraction of the entire corpus of Calvin’s correspondence.
- ¹⁵ According to William Naphy, although the reliability of Calvin’s letters for the history of Geneva may be debatable, their value as a source to understand Calvin himself cannot be questioned (Naphy 1995, p. 89).
- ¹⁶ Michael Parsons acknowledges that prayer appears as one of many themes that Calvin discusses in his letters, but his interest stops there (Parsons 2018, p. 126).
- ¹⁷ As we will find out below, however, this statement is not without any theological significance. Although these salutations cannot be the sole basis of his theology of prayer and sanctification, we will later show that they *show* the very theology.
- ¹⁸ One example of many appears in (Calvin 1858, 2:193).
- ¹⁹ Calvin wrote this letter to a woman whom he did not know personally. There is no information in the letter regarding her identity or status.
- ²⁰ Calvin does stress the importance of praying for the strength to do what is right and for enemies to be subdued, but, in this particular letter, christological knowledge is front and center: “*Sur tout [le priant] quil se declare estre assis a la destre de Dieu son pere, pour maintenir, tant lhonneur de sa maieste, que le salut des siens.*” The phrase “make manifest” in the English translation has a sense of action (showing by doing something). However, in Old French, the sense of “declare” has more to do with telling, explaining and letting someone know (Cotgrave 1611, p. 247).
- ²¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3. 7. 1.
- ²² Perhaps a better translation of *nous fortifier de constance* would be “to strengthen us with constancy.”
- ²³ It is not surprising to see Calvin encouraging the recipients to rely on the word of God and prayer, since Calvin scholars tend to argue that Calvin is clear on the dual means of grace (of the word and sacraments) (Wallace 1982, p. 160). His letters show how important the word of God is for him. However, as we argue here, Calvin gives the title *chief* to the role of prayer.
- ²⁴ Emphasis is mine. The sense in French is even more striking: “there is nothing better than to pray to God (*il n’y a rien meilleur que de prier Dieu*).”
- ²⁵ Most notably, in the letter to Madame de Grammont (1559), Calvin affirms that “the most important point is to pray to God to guide you with all prudence and the uprightness of his Spirit, so that you undertake nothing which may not be approved of and agreeable to him” (Calvin 1858, 4:72).
- ²⁶ The French text brings out the divine actions more clearly by using verbs that describe God’s doing: *qu’il luy plaise de vous ouvrir de plus en plus les yeux pour pouvoir contempler ce desir il vous a donné en partie, vous donnant aussi la force et constance de suivre la voye qu’il vous monster.*
- ²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 3. 20. 1.
- ²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3. 15. 2.
- ²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3. 2. 41.
- ³⁰ For a broader historical context regarding the relationship between Calvin and the King of Navarre, see (Gordon 2009, pp. 307–10).
- ³¹ The genre of this writing is difficult to determine. It is difficult to place it in the usual genres such as sermon, lecture or theological treatise. Strictly speaking, it is not a letter either, but its letter-like nature is easily detectable. Because of its letter-like tone and content and because it is included in the collection of his letters in Calvin, *Letters*, we will use this farewell discourse in this paper.

- ³² According to Cotgrave, *conserver* can mean have the sense of preservation, but is not limited to that concept alone. Its meaning can be as broad as keeping, maintaining, defending and upholding.

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