Calvin Theological Seminary Forum

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Prayer
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Somebody once said that if we Christians are honest we'll admit that we're sometimes sick of our own prayers. You're at prayer, but you can't think of what to say. Or you tell God he's majestic but then you recall that the Subaru needs an oil change. You promise God that you'll fight the good fight, and doze off as you speak. You feel stagy and self-conscious at prayer. You try to confess your sins, but your shifty psyche won't come clean. C.S. Lewis fought his dishonest prayers by beginning like this: “May it be the real I who speaks; may it be the real Thou that I speak to.”

We've all struggled with what seems to be the ineffectiveness of our prayers. We ask, seek, and knock at the door of heaven, and all we seem to get out of it is a set of bloody knuckles and the sound of silence. And yet, remarkably, we keep at it. Even some atheists admit they pray.

A few years ago Philip Yancey published a nice little book on prayer in which he wonders about it a lot. Why would Jesus need to pray so much?

• What can we learn from the fact that Jesus prayed over the calling of his disciples and got Judas as one of the answers?

• The church’s hymnbook is the Psalter, and some of its psalms are not only exultant, but also angry and whiny. (Calvin criticized David for this.) What do we make of the raw prayers of the Bible—the ones that show so little serenity?

• Jesus taught his disciples that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” He then taught his disciples to ask for the same things God knows we need. Why?

Calvin Theological Seminary is, of course, named for John Calvin, whose longest chapter in the last edition of the Institutes is a chapter on prayer—on the practice of prayer. It’s marvelous. I know of nothing in Calvin that is warmer or more pastorally mature. Everything Calvin says reveals a Christian soul in the world, deeply aware of God, desperately thankful for God’s saving grace, utterly determined to live for God. So the brothers and sisters who have written on prayer for this issue are following an excellent precedent. And they do so in a winsome way.
Can prayer change things? Does talking to God have any effect whatsoever on what happens? If we are sick, does asking God to heal us make a difference in whether we get better? If a friend has rejected the Lord, is there any point in pleading for his salvation? These are not just theological questions. Our trust in God is at stake. On one hand, the Bible assures us that the Lord answers prayer. On the other, it teaches that God is the sovereign Lord who knows and rules all things according to his perfect will.

So we ask again: Can prayer really change God’s will? Does it really affect what happens in our lives and in the world? Or does it only affect us spiritually as we express our gratitude and dependence on God? Thoughtful Christians wrestle with this issue. Sometimes we conclude that prayer strengthens our souls but doesn’t change the world. What’s going to happen will happen whether we pray or not. Que sera sera.

Does prayer change things?

At first glance this is either a silly question or theological quicksand that could swallow our faith. Of course prayer is effective. The Bible says so repeatedly and gives plenty of examples. “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well…. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:15-16). Jesus himself says, “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it” (John 14:14). He assures us that our Father in heaven will give good gifts to those who ask him (Matt. 7:11). In Exodus 32 it seems the prayer of Moses even got God to change his mind (v. 14): God threatened to wipe out the Israelites, and Moses asked him not to. The Bible indisputably teaches that prayer can make a difference. So why do we still wonder?

Only if prayer is good enough.

One reason might be the conditions and qualities of prayer that Scripture lists. Apparently God doesn’t answer just any prayer. It has to be the right kind of prayer—prayer in Jesus’ name, or prayer according to God’s will, or the prayer of a righteous person, or prayer that is offered in true faith. If faith can move mountains and my prayers don’t even move the air, then perhaps I don’t really have faith. If the prayers of the righteous are effective and mine aren’t, then maybe I’m not righteous. Maybe I’m totally out of tune with God’s will. We fear that our prayers don’t matter because they aren’t good enough.

But Scripture assures us that God hears our prayers according to his grace and not our merit. Romans 8:26-27 is wonderfully comforting: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us … in accordance with God’s will.” God’s love in Jesus Christ is so wonderful that it not only takes away our sins, it also infuses our feeble and fallible prayers with quality and content that please God. Our prayers are perfectly acceptable to the Father through Christ and the Spirit. It does take the right kind of prayers to get through to God, and by his grace we regularly pray them. So self-doubt should not make us wonder whether prayer can change things.
Can Prayer Really Change Things?

But God’s will is sovereign.

A more profound reason to wonder whether our prayers make a difference is the biblical emphasis on God’s greatness and the power of his will. Reverence for God’s sovereignty in creation and redemption is a deep and pervasive characteristic of the (Reformed) Christian faith. God’s will ultimately ordains everything, including our eternal destiny. Ephesians 1 and Romans 8 teach that God has predestined and providentially governs “all things,” from before the foundation of the world to their final destiny in Jesus Christ. Theologians call this God’s eternal counsel. How can prayer possibly change what God has willed “from before the foundations of the earth” (Eph. 1:1)?

What’s more, Scripture emphasizes prayer according to God’s will. Paul repeatedly asked that his “thorn in the flesh” be removed, but God did not remove it (2 Cor. 12:7). Jesus himself, the night before he was crucified, prayed, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Apparently God does not answer our prayers if they are not according to his will.

But even if they conform to his will, do they make any difference? If God’s will is fixed, how can anything change his mind or alter his plans? And if nothing can alter God’s plan, then prayer can’t alter God’s plan. So we might conclude: “No. Prayer does not change things. Talking to God has no effect on how things turn out.”

See the bigger picture.

Is this where Reformed theology brings us? Does it force us to deny one teaching of Scripture (that prayer is effective) to affirm another (that God is sovereign)? Does our doctrine undercut assurance that the Lord hears and answers us? Can we trust that prayer is real communication and not just a pointless ritual? Or must we disbelieve that God would change things because we ask him to?

No human theology can capture, harmonize, and fully explain everything that Scripture teaches. But sound and tenable theology strives to get as close as humanly possible. The best of Reformed theology does provide a way to affirm both God’s sovereign will and the genuine communication and effectiveness of his children’s prayers. But in joyful reverence we acknowledge we can’t explain how: “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.”

God’s plan for history includes everything that happens from the beginning to the end of the world. He knows and providentially sustains the sequences, connections, causes, and consequences of all things and all events. God wills them in the sense that these are the things that happen in the world he has chosen in Christ to create, redeem, and fulfill. So “not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my heavenly Father,” as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches. (God does not will all things in the sense of approving of sin and evil, however; rather, he permits them.) Our prayers and the things about which we pray are part of this history.

But does God really hear and answer prayer? Do we really connect with him? God’s providence does not make him a distant impartial observer. In fact, just the opposite is true. God is eternal and omnipresent—“present everywhere.” Every creature and every event at all times and places are fully present to God. He is “nearer than hands and feet” throughout our lives, including when we pray. God does not listen merely as an empathetic human would—first learning our needs and then deciding how to help. His knowledge, love, understanding, and response are real long before we whisper our prayers, real while we pray, and real long after we’ve forgotten them.

But does prayer make a difference—effect outcomes? Of course. If God knows and wills all things, then he knows and wills the prayers of his people and the circumstances in which we pray them. In God’s plan, our prayers can be crucial links in the chain of events. If I get sick, pray for healing, and then get better—this sequence is part of God’s plan. Why can’t it be his plan to heal me because I pray? God can decide that my prayer is the reason he heals me just as God can will that medical treatment is the cause he uses. God could have healed me if I didn’t pray or not healed me if I did. But it is God’s eternal will that I become sick, that I pray, and that I am healed because I prayed. My prayer did not heal me; God did—a real answer to prayer. God’s will and effective prayer are not contradictory. They go together. Our prayers really do matter!

But do they change anything? Can we change God’s mind? Not in one sense, but yes in another. God’s eternal counsel—his providential plan for history—is not altered. If God’s plan does not include my healing, then he will not heal me. If Christ’s return is scheduled for 2020, no amount of prayer will make it sooner. But from our human point of view, things can take unexpected turns because we pray. If my doctor says my illness is terminal, I might not expect healing. But God might heal me miraculously because of prayer. God told Moses that he intended to destroy the Israelites, Moses interceded, and the Lord did not punish them. The interaction was real. Moses’ plea is the reason God relented. But the Lord always knew and willed that this would happen. God is not a human we can talk into improving his strategy.

Our prayers and deeds can make a difference! We can even pray for the salvation of someone who does not love the Lord. God might answer by giving that person a new heart—spiritual rebirth. He might even use our words and deeds as means of change! Salvation is due to God’s sovereign grace alone, not our prayers, words, or deeds. But surely God wills to use them to build his church and bring his kingdom. Predestination does not render our prayers and actions pointless. If God wills the end, he also wills the means.

Our prayers and our deeds do make a difference! May the Lord teach us to pray effectively, according to his will.
My testimony about getting through my battle with acute leukemia in the Spring of 2008 is that my wife, Sugar, and I knew, felt, and experienced that we were “upheld by the prayers of many.” There is no question that one of the strengths of our Christian community at Calvin Seminary, at La Grave CRC in Grand Rapids, and at Third CRC in Denver, as well as with friends near and far, is prayer. We were held up, sometimes carried when we could barely walk, by the prayers of people known and not known who called on God in intercessory prayer on our behalf. No question. We will forever be thankful for those prayers. But what exactly happens when we are held, cared for, remembered in prayer by others? What happens in our relationships to God, and what happens with us?

There are parts of my story that I barely remember. For just shy of a month I lay in a hospital bed at St. Mary’s Hospital’s Lacks Cancer Center, sometimes so very ill that it was work to open my eyes. Though I was conscious, leaving my eyes closed was just easier. The less I moved, the quieter the room, the slower the day, the smoother things went. “Just breathe… that’s enough… just breathe,” I would say to myself, heated up and sweating with fever from powerful antibiotics. One night they used eleven bags of ice to cool my body down. Yes, there were times when I could not pray and others carried me in prayer. When days got better I still couldn’t watch television because I couldn’t think, I couldn’t follow a sentence, much less a plot line in a story. A thoughtful friend lent me the eight-hour video of “Planet Earth.” In the course of that month I watched it through three times. As I was “neutropenic”—that is, very low on white cells and very susceptible to infection—I had few visitors; only family and pastors kept watch over me. But I never felt alone… upheld to God by the prayers of many. God never left the room.

Cards kept coming, people kept calling, pastors kept informed and sometimes literally in touch as they held my hand while they prayed. While their eyes were closed, while they were praying, I was sometimes weeping. Why? Why the emotions that build till a dam breaks in your heart and you just fall apart for a moment, only half aware of what hurts and why it hurts? I wept because I was terrified, hardly the strong-looking, put-together “person of faith” who cognitively manages life and takes what’s coming with assurance. Hardly the ordained Minister of the Word, now Seminary Professor of Pastoral Care, who would model an unmoved confidence about facing death. No, I was much more like the Jesus of Luke 22, whom I love, who wept tears of almost blood in Gethsemane, so truly human was he, scared to death himself. He prayed for a reprieve he never got. I wept because I imagined leaving, leaving Planet Earth, sailing off through the clouds to heaven soon, with only a quick hospital word of good-bye to Sugar and our boys, their mates, and Elsie and Jess, our two-year-old grandkids whom we love so dearly. God knew me, and he knew I did not want to do that. My prayers, like those of Jesus in the garden, were pleas for reprieve. Life is so precious when it almost ends.

But there was another reason that I wept. I remember reading cards, just reading cards, sometimes over and over again; reading and experiencing the “power of prayer” in prose. People usually struggle, trying to say the right thing and trying not to say the wrong thing; this is the challenge of spiritual self-expression. Their cards brought me into the presence of God by telling me that I was in their prayers, sometimes every morning.
God Hears the Prayers of Many

along with toast and coffee. Many people were praying, many people were pleading with God on our behalf, and letting us know that we mattered to them, that our lives were held before God in prayer. Many people were being the Body of Jesus Christ to us; we never felt alone, left by them or left by God. Their prayers and our prayers that we would be sustained, held closely by God, were answered loudly. When we are being the Church, doing it right, we weep together. When one weeps we all weep, as Paul reminds us in Romans 12:15. The Holy Spirit was busy, like the gentle wind that passes by when you sense that God is smiling in your direction. The prayers of many were much of the grounds for our deep sense of security … no matter what. God never left the room.

God heard our prayers and God saved my life; God certainly gave me a reprieve from my own death. But what if I had died? My leukemia may still return and it may take my life, as it has for others I’ve known with the very same illness. They also prayed for remission. God did not add up the number of prayers that were prayed and accede to a popular vote on extending my life. Certainly I could have died in the hospital; half of people my age do. Ultimately, as we believe, in some timeless, eternal way, this is God’s decision. “Food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27). But, within the parameters of human history, we pray, we wrestle, we plea, we lament, we beseech, and we sometimes struggle with the living, listening God. The prayers of many did not save my life; God did. But God did so because his heart was moved by our prayers. And the prayers of many also changed me, comforted me, strengthened me, and held me up when I was down. We will forever be thankful to all of you who prayed for us. The prayers of many availed much. In life and in death, whenever it happens, we belong to a Lord who hears them.

A School of Love and Prayer

In my second year of college, I decided to attend church off-campus with some friends. Our weekly drive downtown took us past run-down storefronts, and one of them in particular caught my attention. The sign over the top of one of the stores announced it as a school, but it looked to me like it could be a church. “School of Love and Prayer” read the large white letters of the hand-painted sign. As a double major in Philosophy and Greek, I snickered at the school. I wondered aloud if most people majored in love or in prayer, or if perhaps there were some double majors. One of my fellow passengers suggested that I could use some schooling in love, and I’m sure that I still could. No one, however, seemed inclined to even consider schooling in prayer. Who needed that? Prayer was simple and we already knew how to pray, before meals, in church, and when desperate situations called for it.

One of my acquaintances once remarked that Christian Reformed people only pray when they run out of ideas, and even today we seldom run out of ideas. Consequently, I came out of seminary twenty-five years ago not fully realizing the importance of prayer. I knew how to crack open a biblical text and coax it into a sermon. I remembered how to run a council meeting and felt marginally competent to diagnose spiritual problems when they appeared in my study, but I only learned the importance of prayer over time. I suppose that if I had attended chapel more regularly, or accepted an invitation to a weekly prayer group, I might not have left seminary so clueless. But leave I did, not realizing how much prayer was part of what a pastor did day to day. Now that I am back here teaching where I once studied, I’ve noticed how much we continue to value ideas. These—on balance—are a good thing, and it doesn’t look like we will run out of them anytime soon. But I like to think that prayer no longer takes a back seat to ideas. Prayer seems to have become a greater part of the place, and this place sometimes
almost has the feel of a church. Each weekday morning a small group of faculty, staff, and students meets for prayer at 7:45. *Matins* (a Latin name for one of the ancient offices of prayer), they call it. Prayer in *matins* follows a set pattern of responsive liturgy, psalm, silence, and Scripture. In addition, most Tuesdays at 7:30 a.m. a group of faculty and staff meet together for prayer—prayer for personal matters, prayer for the school, and prayers for the world.

We continue to have chapel midmorning on Wednesday and Friday too. Those who lead characteristically gather up concerns of the seminary community and present them in prayer—thanks for a new child, concern for a sick professor, comfort for a grieving friend—prayers for each other and for those across the world. On Mondays prayer groups organized by our Dean of Students meet to pray for one another and the seminary community, and a student-organized group meets weekly to pray for each person in the seminary community over a period of time. They meet in a prayer room that was redecorated by students to create a quiet place for prayer and meditation. And this spring the seminary chapel was decorated for Lent in a way that intentionally encouraged prayer and meditation.

Prayer also happens in less formal ways. When a student and professor meet to discuss some academic or personal matter it is not unusual for the meeting to end with or even begin with prayer. I’ve concluded discussions with colleagues in prayer, and have had the same done for me. Years ago I had never prayed with my professors at the seminary, which may say more about me than about the faculty back then; but to see and foster this impulse to prayer strikes me as both healthy and right.

Unlike when I was a student, prayer now also comes as a conscious part of the seminary curriculum. The new Formation for Ministry mentoring groups have upped the prayer quotient here at the seminary. In these groups, M.Div. students gather weekly for their entire three years of study at the seminary to talk, think, and pray together. M.A. students meet together over two years. The extended time with the same professor or local pastor and group of students allows God to develop deepening relationships with and among them. As someone who has had the opportunity to lead and participate in one of these groups, I see them as a huge step forward in making Calvin Seminary into a school of love and prayer.

In addition to participating in these ongoing formation groups, early in their education students take a course that introduces them to prayer and other prayer-enhancing disciplines. Students read about *lectio divina* and then get an opportunity to put this meditative approach to reading Scripture into practice. A rhythm of study and practice encompassing such disciplines as fasting and prayer, silence and solitude, meditation and memorization, keeping a journal, and writing a personal rule of life, attempts to provide a variety of personal pathways into a deeper relationship with God. This course underscores our conviction that ministry flows out of a relationship with God in Jesus Christ energized and mediated by the power of the Holy Spirit. This conviction also characterizes the essence of prayer—fostering, maintaining, and luxuriating in a growing and attentive relationship with God, our senior partner in ministry.

I don’t suppose that we are ready to tear down the signs announcing the location of Calvin Theological Seminary and replace them with hand-painted signs announcing a “School of Love and Prayer.” But my prayer for the seminary—and I hope it is yours as well—is that we will become more and more a school that has the feel of a church, a place where people turn to God in prayer way before they run out of ideas, a place where prayer becomes almost an instinctive impulse. Calvin Theological Seminary: A School of Love and Prayer—I think God would like the idea.
Well, we are up to “Amen” in our series on the Lord’s Prayer.

One word. One little word at the end of the entire prayer. “Amen.”

How can anyone talk for an entire chapel on one word?

I mean, seriously, isn’t “Amen” just the period on the end of the prayer? Isn’t this word just the cue that the prayer is over? Isn’t this the cue in some of our families that it’s time to eat? Isn’t this the cue in some of our churches that it’s time to wake up? Isn’t “Amen” just a formal version of the timer ringing, the buzzer going off, the liturgical version of “Game Over”?

Well, the guys who wrote the Heidelberg Catechism didn’t think so. The Heidelberg Catechism is a teaching tool that was written in 1563 in Heidelberg, Germany. As the Protestant church was getting underway, pastors needed a way to teach new believers about the faith. So two young guys in their mid to late twenties named Caspar and Zachary wrote this question-and-answer book as a way to help pastors. I call them Caspar and Zach.

And one of the things they answered questions about was the Lord’s Prayer. And about the word “Amen,” they wrote this:

Q. What does that little word “Amen” express?

A. “Amen” means, This is sure to be! It is even more sure that God listens to my prayer, than that I really desire what I pray for.

And when I read that, I think, “Really?” Really? It is even more sure that God listens to my prayer than that I really desire what I pray for? Really?

Because it sure doesn’t feel that way to me, and I’m guessing that it sure doesn’t feel that way to you. I have prayed for things that I desired and it has felt like God isn’t listening at all. You have prayed for things you desired and it has felt like God isn’t listening at all.

Maybe you prayed that your parents would stay married, and they didn’t. Maybe you prayed for someone to live, and the person died. Maybe you prayed for direction and didn’t seem to get any. Maybe you’ve prayed for healing, and the healing hasn’t come. Maybe you’ve prayed for a friend who is far from Jesus to come back, and she seems to be going further away.

Maybe you’ve prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed for something, and it seems like God is reading the newspaper. It seems like God is on another line. It seems like God is in another room. It seems like God is far, far away.

“It is even more sure,” Caspar and Zach wrote, “that God listens to my prayer than that I really desire what I pray for.” Really?

How could they write that? These two twenty-something’s living in the 1500s. How could they write that? Things all around them were in turmoil, Catholics and Protestants fighting, Protestants fighting with other Protestants. On the personal level, one of them lost several friends in a boating accident and had spent time in jail, the other one grew up very poor and wasn’t very healthy.

How could these two guys, at the very end of their book, write that “Amen” means that it is even more sure that God listens to my prayer than that I really desire what I pray for? Were they ignorant of the troubles around them? Were they walking around with blinders on their eyes, wool stuffed in their ears? How could they write these things while living in the real world?

Because they knew that this world wasn’t the only one that mattered. Because they knew there was more to this life than this life. In a world where their beliefs could get them killed, and did later get them run out of town, they knew what was most important.

The only way they could write this “Amen” at the end of their catechism is because of what they wrote at the beginning. The very first question and answer in their catechism goes like this:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven. In fact,
all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

“Amen” doesn’t mean game over. “Amen” doesn’t mean time’s up. “Amen” means this is sure to be! This is really going to happen, this is reliable, the real deal, rock solid, certain. This is sure to be.

These two men had seen the turmoil around them, they felt it within themselves, and in the middle of all of that they knew that what people needed most was comfort. The deep comfort that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

What does that have to do with the word “Amen”? Everything. Listen to what the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. (1:19-20, NIV)

Through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

I have prayed for things that haven’t happened. And so have you. And it is hard to believe sometimes that God is really listening.

And that’s why we need Jesus. We need the deep comfort of belonging to Jesus. Not because once we have comfort in Jesus we care less about our prayers, but because in belonging to Jesus we know that our prayers matter to God, just as we matter to God. And God is working, working, working even when we cannot feel him, and even when we cannot see him, and even when we cannot hear his voice.

We know that because of Jesus. For centuries people were crying out for a Messiah. They were praying for the Messiah, pleading with God for the Messiah. The Old Testament is a chronicle of people who are waiting and waiting and waiting for God to show up, to follow through, to make good on his promises.

And then, Jesus showed up. Babe in a manger, boy in the temple, rabbi in the synagogue. Jesus showed up. Jesus showed up and he was the big “Yes” to the promises of God. Jesus was the answer to the Old Testament’s “Amen.”

“Amen” is a Hebrew word, is coming from the Hebrew people. “Amen!” they would say in response to the law. “Amen!” they would say in response to the priest. “Amen!” they would say in response to the prophecies about the Messiah. “Amen!” This is sure to be!

For no matter how many promises God has made, Paul writes, they are “Yes” in Christ.

And so we are here, two thousand years after the Old Testament’s “Amen,” and we are waiting again. We are praying again. But we are not praying without hope.

Because we can look to Jesus. We can look to Jesus not only as the answer to the Old Testament’s “Amen,” but also as the answer to ours. We can look to Jesus not only as the fulfillment of ancient longings, but also as the fulfillment of our deepest desires, the answer to our deepest questions, the source of our greatest comfort.

That little word “Amen” is a statement of faith. It is a statement that says, “Regardless of what I may see or not see, regardless of what I may feel or not feel, I believe that God is working, working all things together for my salvation. I believe that Jesus Christ is alive. I believe that the Holy Spirit is taking my prayers and bringing them to the Father in ways that I never could. I believe that, because of what I have seen in Jesus Christ, this is sure to be.”

“Amen” is a word that looks back and looks ahead. “Amen” is a word that lives in the confidence of Jesus’ first coming and in the hope of his second. “Amen,” tucked at the end of our Lord’s Prayer, reminds us that every promise of God is “Yes” in Christ.

“Amen,” wrote Caspar and Zach, “means, This is sure to be!”

The holiness of God is sure to be. The will of God is sure to be. The provision of daily bread is sure to be. The denial of temptation is sure to be. Deliverance from evil is sure to be. The kingdom, the power, and the glory of God are sure to be.

Because of Jesus Christ, who was, and who is, and who is to come, this is sure to be. Amen!

For readers who would enjoy listening to this meditation, a link to the audio file can be found at www.calvin.edu/president/spoelhof. It was delivered on the day that Calvin College’s former president, William Spoelhof, died, and is posted on a webpage created in his memory.
Praying Around the World

On March 19, 2009, six CTS students discussed the various experiences they have had with prayer. Moderator Anne Zaki is an M.Div. student from Cairo, Egypt, who grew up in a very small Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the inner city there. Adam Stout is an M.Div. student from a small town in Illinois and now attends a Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. Yvette Lau is an M.A. in Worship student from one of the largest Christian and Missionary Alliance churches in Hong Kong, with about six thousand members.

Carmen Bautista, an M.A. student focusing on Youth and Family Ministries, is from Mexico. She was not a Christian as a child, but has been attending a three-hundred-member Reformed Presbyterian Church in Mexico for the last ten years. John Eigege is an M.Div. student from Nigeria, where he began attending a Free Evangelical Church at age thirteen. Sung-Joon Moon is from South Korea. He is finishing the M.T.S. program and pursuing a Th.M. in Philosophical and Moral Theology. He belongs to one of many Presbyterian churches begun by missionaries after the great revival in Pyongyang more than a century ago.
Anne: What place has prayer had in your life, and what shaped it as part of your journey?

John: My family was very influential in helping me see the importance of prayer. We lived with a lot of my cousins, aunts, and uncles; and my dad had a family altar in the morning at 6:00 and another in the evening at 8:00. As long as you were living under his roof you had to commit to prayers at those times, so prayer is something I did in a context of community. We would begin to sing praise songs and clap; then we’d go into the Bible and either my dad would lead a devotion, or someone else—even a six-year-old—could read Scripture and give us thoughts about it. Then we prayed together as a family and made our prayers very comprehensive. We prayed for our family, for our community, but also for other countries and the world.

Prayer was more than just talking to God, or laying out a petition, or a means of opening the storehouse of God’s blessings. In the African context prayer is an important weapon against turmoil, strife, suffering, and poverty, and is more important than legislation as the solution to government corruption and a way to bring healing for society. Prayer is an act of defiance against what people believe to be spiritual forces working in the systems and in the government and in people, but prayer is a balm of healing as well. God doesn’t heal us just from our condition of sin, but also from physical infirmities. We really believe that when you pray, you can get healing from God.

Sung-joon: The Korean church is quite big, perhaps one-fourth of the population, including Catholic and Protestant believers. Most of the churches have an early morning worship service at 5:00 or 6:00, based on Mark 1:35: “Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed.” That’s why at Calvin Seminary some students gather together in the early morning to take turns preaching and then praying all together. Many Korean churches also gather together on Friday night—based on Luke 22:39-46, when Jesus prayed at Gethsemane on the Friday of Easter week.

We seldom pray in silence; we speak out and express what we feel and what we want to say. We have a strong faith because God is a personal God. He is lovely and can console us and help us, and that’s why we call him “Father.” I think this has been the pattern since the great revival in Pyongyang in 1907, when one night a Western missionary confessed his sin by saying, “I looked down on you. Please, forgive me, brothers and sisters”; and then the people also said, “Forgive us, missionary, because we didn’t trust you.” And then a Korean church leader confessed, “When my friend passed away, he asked me to keep some money for his daughter, but I kept the money for myself.” That was a huge confession. It was during the Japanese colonization, and even a Japanese policeman who was watching the people confessed and repented at that place. People came together from thirty or forty miles away and it became a huge revival of morality and prayer. That’s why one hundred years later in 2007 a lot of people prayed together that it would happen again.

Carmen: The first church I attended had prayer meetings on Friday nights. Most who attended were young people or teenagers. Then I moved to another church and joined some activities with missionaries who organized evangelistic events and prayed before them, after them, and during them. They showed me the importance of prayer. Then a missionary organization asked us to host two missionaries in our church and I was excited about sharing time with these girls. They taught me to have personal devotional time. I enjoyed the conversations and watched them writing in their journals. It showed me their experience with God. So I learned to do that by myself as I was growing up. I had a calendar to pray every day for a specific thing.

My parents started a new prayer ministry in our church. Every Sunday after the worship service they gathered with people who needed prayers. We have also small groups and youth groups that pray together. The worship team I was in prayed too. All of us were young people with a lot of struggles. Before playing instruments, everyone wanted to share what was happening in their lives. We spontaneously prayed for each other at every worship team rehearsal before practicing.
Praying Around the World

Yvette: The family altar was also important to me, where the whole family would gather regularly, but not every day at 6:00 a.m. We shared Scripture and then we prayed together. The prayers I experienced in my church are very different from here. At most of the worship services or gatherings someone is leading. We just sit silent and listen, and then we say “Amen” together. In the church there are different units, such as fellowships or service groups. They all have different schedules for praying. The church encourages us from time to time to have a prayer companion so you can develop a friendship and prayer trust.

In recent years, my church has been influenced more or less by the Pentecostal movement and the Korean churches in its prayer ministry. We wanted to learn more about praying, so some people were sent to the prayer mountain in Korea to see how the Korean Christians pray. Then they shared that experience and tried to engage the congregation more in the prayer ministry. My church now has quarterly morning prayer meetings. Every three months we have one week when we meet every morning from 7:00 to 8:00, followed by a light breakfast, and then everyone goes to work or home.

The church has included in its bulletin every week a prayer guidance that is rather comprehensive for the congregation to use in their personal prayer and quiet time. So we have some kind of expectation and direction for which aspect of our spiritual life we are praying. The primary prayer meeting of the whole church is on Thursday evenings—a night reserved for prayer and nothing else. The meeting has two sections. In the first part every member of the congregation can send in their prayer items. Someone will collect them and will generate those prayer items for every participant of the prayer meeting. Then we will use various methods to divide into groups; for example, “You go over there and pray for these four items.”

My church also encouraged a campaign called “Prayer Grouping Three.” Three people, or three couples, register to meet and pray on their own schedules. They are encouraged to meet at least one particular Thursday night during the month, because many of the Hong Kong people are too busy to come weekly; but then some groups are praying every week. I think my church is praying more and more every year than when I was very small. I think the Korean church has had a very positive influence on us.

Sung-Joon Moon: We seldom pray in silence; we speak out and express what we feel and what we want to say.

Sung-Joon: In our meetings prayer and the Bible are very important. Whenever we have prayer meetings, the sermon is very important. The pastor will preach, and then we will pray together. And also in our personal devotionals, the Bible and prayer always go together. That is what happened in the revival at Pyongyang. It was officially a Bible study meeting, and then it became a great revival of prayer.

Adam: Your mention of the prayer mountain reminded me that my Korean friend and his dad took me to a prayer retreat, but it was at a golf course in Palm Springs! It was the same concept, though, about intentionally putting yourself in an isolated context. Also, I went with a few Calvin Seminary students and Professor Tuit to the retreat center at Three Rivers, Michigan, and that was a good experience—we were all seeking God together in community, but also there was a lot of individual time.

There’s a small group of us meeting weekly to pray for the seminary community. It has been helpful for me to know that when I come to pray, it’s not going to be about me. Sometimes prayer groups end up being a lot like self-help groups, so it’s been refreshing to go to pray, knowing that the focus will be on other people.

I also had a good reminder recently that there’s no place for prayer snobbery. I tend to think that certain kinds of prayer—like intercessory prayer or praying while fasting—are better than others. But prayer still includes even the littlest cares in our life. Last week I was frustrated because I’d lost my glasses. I’d checked everywhere, so, I was lying in bed thinking, “God, I know this is stupid, but I really want to find my glasses. Would you help me?” Just then it occurred to me that they might be under my bed. I got up and looked, but there was nothing there. “It’s O.K., God,” I thought. But then I remembered that I’d been sitting on the couch, and sure enough—they were under the cushions in one piece, even after people had been sitting on the couch for the past week! I really felt that God heard my prayer and was leading me to find my glasses.
**John:** Prayer sometimes creates an awareness of our dependence on God for our daily needs—both physical and spiritual.

**Anne:** Like the Korean Church, my church in Egypt also pairs up prayer and Scripture closely. Our prayer meetings are saturated with Scripture through reading passages and singing scriptural songs, especially from the Psalms. Mostly, people pray Scripture from memory, since we continue to be an oral culture. Often in public prayers, you hear Scripture making up 90 to 95 percent of one’s prayer.

Fasting is closely paired with prayer for us also. There is a strong focus on confession and pleading with God for the peace and growth of our churches, for wisdom and justice for our government, and for protection from external attacks. Scripture reminds us that peace and justice and sovereign protection always go hand in hand with a spirit of humility and repentance before the face of God. So in my church, all the members practice fasting together the first Friday of each month, where we gather at church for a structured time of prayer from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and then we all break the fast together over a potluck. We also have two weekly prayer meetings, one early in the morning and one in the evening, to encourage many people to participate in the corporate prayer life of the church.

In corporate worship, every week the pastor allows a ten-minute open time of prayer, where members are invited to offer public prayers as the Spirit leads them. Sometimes pastors or worship leaders call on members of any age to lead in prayer without advance notice. Already in Sunday school, children as young as five are expected to pray out loud using Scripture verses.

Believers in Egypt are quite comfortable asking each other about their personal devotional life. My youth leaders would ask me how my prayer life was going, and if I was regularly reading the Bible—what passage I was memorizing and what it meant to me. Adults too would hold each other accountable in similar open conversations about how God reveals himself to them in prayer.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Egypt has recently experienced a revival in prayer, with more and more churches organizing all-night prayer vigils and prayer retreats. Some of our conference and retreat centers have even built prayer cells to enhance the prayer life of the church. This is one of the most positive influences the Charismatic movement has had on the mainline churches in Egypt.

**Sung-Joon:** I have a ministry of preaching to the preschoolers and teaching them to pray by repeating kid-version prayers after me word by word. I believe that small kids have spirituality on their level, and I think I help them sense and feel God’s presence. In Christian lives of new or weak believers, imitation leads to habit, and habit leads to real communication with God.

I had some hard times of spiritual depression from working hard and struggling with many issues in churches. At that time I really needed vivid signs which showed that God was with me, would lead me, and would eventually give the best things for me and my church families. I asked God for some dramatic and miraculous signs, such as praying in tongues or a visual vision. God never answered, just as he did not answer Paul’s prayer three times. But, thanks be to God! His natural revelation guided me, and whenever I refer back to my personal life, I become sure that he has been with me.

**Adam:** I have never spoken or prayed in tongues, but I think for many people it’s a beneficial part of their prayer lives. It doesn’t happen to be an active part of my prayer life. I have actually had someone pray that I would speak in tongues, and it didn’t happen. I thought about it and I decided there is nothing I can do. I am not going to try and pretend or force it.

**Sung-Joon:** I am never disappointed by what God has done for me. God works in many ways in a person.
Prophecy, prayer, healing, and spiritual warfare and deliverance were subjects of debate recently at Calvin Theological Seminary. Students in Professor John Bolt’s “Holy Spirit, Church, and Kingdom” course were assigned to read a report coming to the CRC’s synod in June 2009 about Third Wave Pentecostalism and the biblical, confessional, theological, and pastoral dimensions related to it. Outside of class, they met in groups to discuss the report and, as if they were advisory committees at a synod meeting, they made recommendations based on that report.

On March 25, 2009, Bolt’s two classes held “mock” synod sessions to debate and vote on the recommendations. The discussion was energized as they argued for affirming all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and yet expressed caution about excessive emphasis on dramatic expression of those gifts. The conversation was enriched by “delegates” from several countries beyond North America, including Egypt, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Russia. These international students spoke from experiences in their home countries.

Both CTS “synods” agreed with much of the study committee’s report, including a recommendation to “be fervent in prayer and expect God to do great things as a result.” But they both also ended up recommending the appointment of a new committee to clarify the nature of prophecy in Scripture and what this means for our understanding of prophecy today.

Along with debating an important current issue in the church, a side benefit of the discussion for students was learning about synodical procedures—how to make motions and amend them. Afterward one student commented, “I never realized how important every little word in a recommendation can be!”

**Distinguished Alumni Awards, 2009**

At its meeting on February 13, 2009, the Trustees of CTS named two recipients of the Seminary’s Distinguished Alumni Award for 2009. The award is given annually to persons who have brought unusual credit to their alma mater by their effectiveness in Christian ministry. For 2009 the recipients are The Reverend James R. (Jim) Kok, a pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, and The Reverend Dr. John Timmer, pastor emeritus of Woodlawn Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Reverend James R. Kok

An ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Jim has served as Chaplain of Gowanda State Hospital in Gowanda, New York; Home Missionary at Trinity CRC in Iowa City, Iowa; Chaplain of Pine Rest Christian Hospital, Cutlerville, Michigan; and, since 1984, as Executive Pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, California.

Jim Kok is a marvelous provider of pastoral care. Blessed by God with very high emotional and social intelligence, Jim serves people with mental illness or cancer, the elderly and the grieving, as well as clergy, seminarians, and ordinary people simply trying to cope. To all of them Jim brings a remarkable combination of understanding, compassion, and sheer common sense.

He has published six books of wisdom, including *The Miracle of Kindness* and *90% of Helping Is Just Showing Up*, numerous articles, and, for many years, a column in *The Banner* memorable enough to be clipped and saved. In 1996 Jim and several volunteers at the Crystal...
I never thought about it from this perspective before!” was a frequent comment at Trinity Christian College’s first symposium on “The Psalms, the Arts, and Worship.” The day of learning and fellowship was held in March for faculty, students, and community church leaders in the Chicago area. Attendees delved into various art forms. They appreciated the exposure, and many said, “Thank you for giving me a deeper understanding of what it means to worship.”

The day began with celebrative worship based on psalms of thanksgiving. Trinity chaplain Bill Van Groningen’s meditation “Room Enough, and Galaxies More” was highlighted by Trinity choir members singing “By the River, By the Stream,” based on Psalm 137. Theologian and author Marva Dawn’s keynote address focused on Psalm 147 as an example of how our worship and engagement through the arts should always hold personal and cosmic tensions together as if we had two hands interlocked, pulling on each other with all our strength.

Attendees then chose from a variety of sectionals on the Psalms and visual arts, music, prayer, oral presentation, and theatre. Presenters included Emily Brink, Betsy Steele Halstead, and Greg Scheer of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship; John Steven Paul of Valparaiso University; and Dayton Castleman, Craig Mattson, Mark Peters, Aron Reppmann, John Sebestyen, and Yudha Thianto of Trinity Christian College.

The closing festival, held in Ozinga Chapel, was organized around Walter Brueggemann’s identification of three key movements in the Psalms: orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. The service was a rich tapestry of song and music, prayer, spoken word, and visual imagery centered on Psalms 145, 130, and 65.

The Church Connection Initiative at Trinity sponsored the event in partnership with Calvin Theological Seminary, the Center for Excellence in Preaching, and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

Cathedral launched the annual Care and Kindness Conference there, an event that has inspired similar ministries across the United States, and in Canada and Australia.

Jim Kok is a leader of the church, and a worthy recipient of the 2009 Distinguished Alumni Award of Calvin Theological Seminary.

The Reverend Dr. John Timmer

The Reverend Dr. John Timmer, a native of The Netherlands till he was 23, nonetheless mastered the English language, acquired several others including Japanese, and went on to minister in them as missionary, author, and church minister until his retirement in 1995.

John Timmer is a superb reader, thinker, and student of the Bible. A graduate of Calvin College and Seminary, of Hartford Theological Seminary (S.T.M., New Testament), and of the Free University of Amsterdam (Th.D., New Testament), he served the Christian Reformed Church for thirty-six years as missionary to Japan and as pastor of Ridgewood CRC (New Jersey) and Woodlawn CRC (Grand Rapids). His sermons are legendary for their freshness, depth, and verbal economy. They have been used as models for seminarians, and The Center for Excellence in Preaching at CTS offers a number of them online as resources for working preachers.

Besides numerous essays and articles, John has published nine books, including God of Weakness and The Kingdom Equation. He has also published two books of story sermons for children. Like his preaching, John’s writing shows a fine mind at work with the Bible, mining its treasures and displaying them with uncommon grace and truth.

John Timmer is a leader of the church, and a worthy recipient of the 2009 Distinguished Alumni Award of Calvin Theological Seminary.
At Calvin Theological Seminary we are deeply invested in the personal and spiritual formation of every student. Rooted in Reformed theology, our Master of Divinity program is designed for developing pastors and nurtures the individual growth and development essential to this important calling.

We like to think of the M.Div. program as the thread that brings together all the pieces of a biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing ministry. Our new M.Div. curriculum integrates these dimensions through innovative learning and teaching methods and can be customized to ensure a formative and meaningful experience.