

# Calvin's interpretation of "Hallowed be Thy Name"

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JOHN H. MAZAHERI

## Calvin's Interpretation of "Hallowed be Thy Name"

The First Petition of the *Lord's Prayer* (*Institution chrétienne* III, 20) is, in Calvin's French, "Ton Nom soit sanctifié". He calls it "La première *re-queste*" in the last edition of his work (1560), but in the 1541–1545 editions he uses the term "petition" instead. He begins his exegesis of this First Petition by implicitly reminding the reader of the *evil* that is rooted in man, *i.e.* the original sin. However, the reader might first expect, by way of introduction, a definition of the term "sanctifié" ("hallowed"). What is, indeed, "sanctification" in his view? But the theologian assumes that the reader's understanding of this term is the same as his. At any rate, we know that "sanctifier" comes from Latin *sanctificare*, from *sanctus* ("saint") and *facere* ("faire"). Furthermore, the word "saint" is the participle of *san-rire* (in French "consacrer"), which comes from *sancus*. The origin of the latter is the Sanscrit word *sac*, which one finds in the *Rigveda*, meaning "to adore" or "to worship". Though Calvin does not define the term "sanctifié", he from the start stresses man's evil spirit:

"La première requeste est : Que le Nom de Dieu soit sanctifié, la nécessité de laquelle nous doit bien faire *grand'honte*. Car que sauroit-on penser plus *vilain* que de voir la gloire de Dieu estre obscurcie, partie par nostre *ingratitude*, partie par nostre *malice* ? qui pis est, que par nostre *orgueil* et *furies* desbordées elle soit abolie, entant qu'en nous est?" (III, 20, 41)<sup>1</sup>

The evil in man, that is in everybody without exception, including Calvin himself, who rightly emphasizes the possessive "nostre" (our), this evil spirit is stressed by the enumeration of negative qualities: "vilain", "ingratitude", "malice", "orgueil", and "furies". Thus opposing God's will, we all somehow "obscure" His "glory". What is noteworthy is that this paragraph on the First Petition has been entirely rewritten for the last edition of the *Institutes*. It would then be interesting to compare it with the previous versions (1541–1557 editions) and try to find out the reason for the revision.

<sup>1</sup> CALVIN, Jean : *Institution de la religion chrestienne*. Livre Troisième. Editée par Jean-Daniel Benoit. Paris : J. Vrin, 1960, 384. "The first petition is that God's name be hallowed [Matt. 6:9]; the need for it is associated with our great *shame*. For what is more *unworthy* than for God's glory to be obscured partly by our *ungratefulness*, partly by our *ill will*, and so far as lies in our power, destroyed by our *presumption* and *insane impudence*?" (CALVIN, J.: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960, 903). I underline in the quotes.

We will at least be able to grasp the evolution which has taken place in the theologian's thought.

The paragraph on the First Petition in the 1541–1557 editions begins as follows:

“Le Nom de Dieu est icy mis comme il est renommé entre les hommes. Or comme ainsi soit que son Nom doibt estre correspondant à ses œuvres, nous entendrons par iceluy la renommée que méritent toutes ses *vertuz*, comme en sa *puissance*, sa *sapience*, sa *iustice*, sa *miséricorde*, sa *vérité*. Car voilà comment Dieu à bon droit est *grand et admirable*, d'autant qu'il est *iuste, sage, miséricordieux, puissant et véritable*. Nous requérons donc ceste *maiesté* de Dieu reluisante en toutes ses *vertus* estre sanctifiée.”<sup>2</sup>

We immediately notice a radical change in the tone and the way the Reformer presents the petition. In the earlier editions, instead of the evil in man, he emphasizes God's glory; instead of a series of negative terms, making us ashamed of ourselves, he uses words that are God's attributes, because he wants for us to feel good about our magnificent world: “*puissance*” (power), “*sapience*” (wisdom), “*iustice*” (justice), “*miséricorde*” (mercy), “*vérité*” (truth). Furthermore, after this enumeration, he stresses even more the positive feeling by listing the adjectives that go with those nouns, such as “just”, “wise”, etc. The sole purpose of redundancy is to incite the readers to get closer to God and also feel better about themselves. In spite of this important difference, the main theme in both beginnings (the 1560 vs the previous editions) is God's glory. On the other hand, we note, speaking of the latter, that the theologian uses the phrase “*la gloire de Dieu*” in 1560, whereas in the previous versions he wrote “*maiesté de Dieu*”. This may be a minor point, but let us now closely examine the differences between these editions in the description of the parallel God/-man, which is present in every edition.

## I. THE 1541–1557 EDITIONS

“Nous requérons donc ceste *maiesté* de Dieu reluisante en toutes ses *vertus* estre sanctifiée. Et estre sanctifiée non pas dedens Dieu mesme, lequel en soy ne peut avoir aucune augmentation ne diminution, mais à ce qu'elle soit estimée sainte, c'est à dire vrayement recongneue telle qu'elle est, et magnifiée comme elle appartient.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “The Name of God is used here as He is renowned among men. Now since His Name must be associated with His works, we will understand by that the reputation which all His virtues deserve, such as His power, His wisdom, His justice, His mercy, His truth. For that is how God is rightly great and admirable, all the more so since He is just, wise, merciful, powerful and true. We request therefore that this majesty of God, which shines in all His virtues, be hallowed.” (All the translations from the 1541–57 French editions are mine.)

<sup>3</sup> “Therefore, we request that this God's majesty, which shines in all of His virtues, be hallowed. And not be hallowed within God Himself, who in Himself neither increases nor

Calvin is implicitly saying that God's majesty is not recognized by people in general. So we pray that we might see that and love the heavenly Father. And firstly, "que son Nom soit selon ses œuvres, tellement que nulle œuvre de laquelle sa grandeur mérite d'estre exaltée, ne soit cachée ou obscurcie par ingratitude ou mescongnoissance des hommes."<sup>4</sup> It is then through His Works that one may realize God's greatness. Now some people intentionally hide the Father's works, and others "obscure" them by ignorance. Therefore we pray for these people to convert, and we also pray for others not to be influenced by the evil doers or by the ignorant. In sum we pray to have faith in God, we pray for deserving His Grace.

Calvin focuses on God's conspicuous works, insofar as they are concrete things anyone can see and feel, things whose beauty and magnificence are truly uplifting:

"Davantage que quelque chose qu'on voye qu'il face, toutes ses œuvres apparoissent glorieuses, comme vrayement elles le sont, à fin que la sentence du Prophète soit pleinement accomplie, où il est dict: Seigneur, selon que tu es renommé, ta louënge est manifestée par toute la terre."<sup>5</sup>

The theologian refers to Psalm 48, which celebrates the beauty of Mount Zion, but the latter place is not mentioned in his text, because he sees it as a symbol. In fact, he praises the whole earth, even the whole universe, for his conception is that of a universal and not of a national religion. What matters most, anyway, is the fact that both the author of Psalm 48 and Calvin admire the beauty of our natural world, emphasize the concrete visible things surrounding us, and see God through it.<sup>6</sup> The verse that has particularly inspired the Reformer is the one he quotes: "Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth" (Psalm 48:10).<sup>7</sup>

The next point he makes is that whatever God does, whatever his work, we must consider it right and keep praising Him,

"Tellement que s'il punit, il soit recongneu iuste, s'il pardonne, miséricordieux ; s'il tient ce qu'il a promis, véritable. Brief, qu'il n'y ayt chose en

diminishes, but that His majesty be holy, that is truly recognized as it is, and glorified as it is appropriate."

<sup>4</sup> "That His Name be according to His works, so that none whose majesty deserves to be exalted, be hidden or obscured by men's ungratefulness or ignorance."

<sup>5</sup> "In addition, that whatever He does and which is visible to us, that all of His works may seem glorious, as they truly are, so that the Prophet's word be fulfilled, where he says: Lord, considering your reputation, your praise is manifested by all the earth."

<sup>6</sup> See also Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Translated by James Anderson. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005, 216–233.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Edited by Bruce METZGER/Roland MURPHY. New revised standard version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. In the French edition, translated by Segond (*La Sainte Bible. Alliance Biblique Universelle*, 1993), it is Psalm 48:11.

laquelle sa gloire ne reluyse; et qu'ainsi ses louenges soient engravées en tous cœurs, et raisonnent en toutes langues."<sup>8</sup>

If one recognizes God's holiness, in other words if one has faith in Him, one ought to praise him in everything He does, for He is always right and good. Furthermore, the prayer is said in behalf of everyone in the world. Calvin insists indeed on the universality of the Lord's Prayer, underscored by the phrases "*tous cœurs*" (every heart) and "*toutes langues*" (every language). Nationalism has no place in the religion of Christ, according to Calvin.

The last point the theologian makes is that by saying "Hallowed be Thy Name", we are praying for the destruction of impiety and immorality:

"Finalement que toute impiété, laquelle pollue et déshonore ce saint Nom, c'est à dire qui obscurcit ou diminue ceste sanctification, périsse et soit confondue; en laquelle confusion aussi de plus en plus la maiesté de Dieu soit esclarcie."<sup>9</sup>

I point out the fact that Calvin does not blame anyone in particular, but criticizes impiety in general. Every time one overcomes the latter, or whenever God punishes the impious, his glory becomes more visible. That is what we pray for. To conclude, this First Petition is not only a request, but also an act of praising the heavenly Father:

"Ainsi en ceste pétition est contenue l'action de grâces. Car d'autant que nous requérons le Nom de Dieu estre sanctifié, nous luy attribuons la louenge de tous biens, advouons tout estre de luy, et reconnoissons ses grâces et bénéfices envers nous, par lesquelles il mérite d'estre estimé Saint."<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, Calvin's exegesis of the First Petition in all the editions of the *Institutes* prior to 1560 (1559 for the Latin edition) contains the following: 1) "Hallowed be Thy Name" is not only a word of request but also of praise; 2) We ask God to have mercy upon us and make us see Him in order to be happy; 3) We praise Him for everything we have; 4) Calvin, inspired by Psalm 48, puts the emphasis on the beauty that surrounds us; 5) We pray that the whole earth see the majesty of God;<sup>11</sup> 5) Finally, from a positive

<sup>8</sup> "So much that if He punishes, He may be considered just, if He forgives, merciful, if he keeps His promise, true. In short, that there may be nothing in which His glory does not shine; and thus, may His praises be engraved in every heart, and reason in every language."

<sup>9</sup> "Finally, may every impious act, which desecrates and dishonors his holy Name, perish and be confounded, and by its destruction, may the majesty of God be more conspicuous."

<sup>10</sup> "Thus in this petition is comprised the act of thanksgiving. For, inasmuch as we request that God's name be hallowed, we praise Him for all the good we receive from Him, admit that everything comes from Him, and recognize his grace and goodness towards us, for which he deserves to be considered Holy."

<sup>11</sup> Compare this interpretation to that of Augustine, who thus comments the First Petition by referring to Psalm 76.1: "For, because it is said, 'In Judah is God known; His name is great in Israel,' we are not to understand the statement in this way, as if God were less in one place, greater in another; but there His name is great, where He is named according to

point of view, he stresses God's greatness rather than Man's sinfulness. Let us turn now to the revision of his text in the last edition.

## II. THE 1560 EDITION

As I described it before, the paragraph on the First Petition starts with a criticism of humans in general, insofar as they are ungrateful and obscure the Name of God. The theologian's tone gets harsher as he curses the unjust: "Vray est que la sainteté du Nom de Dieu reluit en despit des iniques, voire et deussent-ils crever avec leurs desbordemens pleins de sacrilège."<sup>12</sup> Here, he refers to Psalm 48:11, with a slightly different translation: "O Dieu selon que ton Nom est cogneu, aussi ta louange est estendue sur toutes les fins de la terre!" In the previous editions we had: "Seigneur, selon que tu es renommé, ta louënge est manifestée par toute la terre." The emphasis is put in both cases on the ending, which expresses the idea that the entire world ought to know God and admire his works. The specific geographic places of Mount Zion and Jerusalem, highlighted throughout Psalm 48, are deliberately omitted.

To go back to the criticism of men, I notice that in the last edition Calvin has in mind ungodly people, "les iniques" (the unjust), whom he curses and wishes for them to die ("deussent-ils crever") – a pretty crude language indeed! – whereas in the previous editions he wished for the perishment of ungodliness ("que toute impiété... périsse"). It is neither the same tone, nor the same idea. For criticizing impious individuals presupposes the idea that some people are pure, but criticizing impiety concerns certain acts, and so applies to everybody. Besides, if we prayed for people who commit sin to die, then everyone should perish. Calvin did not mean that, obviously, but the way he expresses his dissatisfaction in the last revised edition of the *Institutes* may imply such an idea. At any rate, in this Petition, according to Calvin, we pray first for everyone to see God's majesty, to see his greatness, his virtues, "assavoir puissance, bonté, sagesse, iustice, miséricorde, vérité."<sup>13</sup> Since the world is deeply defiled, and

the greatness of His majesty. And so there His name is said to be holy, where He is named with veneration and the fear of offending Him" (*Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew*. Translated by William Findlay. Revised and annotated by SCHAFF, D. (ed.): *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. VI. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888, 40.) It is noteworthy that his commentary ends by mentioning the Name of Christ: "And this what is now going on, while the gospel, by becoming known everywhere throughout the different nations, commends the name of the one God by means of the administration of His Son." On the other hand, the name of Jesus is not mentioned in the commentary of the First Petition by Calvin.

<sup>12</sup> "Though all ungodly men should break out with their sacrilegious license, the holiness of God's name still shines." Note that "break out" is not as strong as "crever", which means "to die" or "to perish".

<sup>13</sup> Namely "might, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth."

"God's holiness is so unworthily snatched from him on earth, if it is not in our power to assert it, at least we are bidden to be concerned for it in our prayers."<sup>14</sup>

Another new point made in this revision is that people have always sinned, but today more than ever. Thus profanation is a "vice" which "a toujours esté par trop commun au monde, comme encore aujourdhuy il y a trop la vogue."<sup>15</sup> One of the meanings of the last word, "vogue", is, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, "the highest point."<sup>16</sup> Calvin does not make any exception, and believing in the original sin, he emphasizes the ungodliness which characterizes every human being. If there was only just a little piety in us, he points out, the First Petition would not be necessary: "Et c'est dont vient la nécessité de faire ceste requeste, laquelle seroit superflue s'il y avoit en nous quelque piété."<sup>17</sup> This reminds us of Jesus saying even to his disciples, even to Peter, "You of little faith" (Mat 8:26 and 14:31.) Therefore, the Name of God is not "hallowed" as it *ought* to be. It has never been so, even by the Apostles. So Calvin insists on the adverb, "deument" (repeated twice) and its synonym "comme il appartient". Before he had used the expression, "comme il seroit à désirer". We can never honor enough His word (allusion to the Scripture) and His actions, therefore we need to pray for doing better. On the other hand, God may reward or punish us – see "rigueur" (severity, harshness) vs "clémence" (kindness) – according to His will, but whatever He does, we must keep His name "holy", love Him, and praise Him:

"[...] que nous embrassions tout ce qui procède de luy, et que sa rigueur ne soit pas moins prisee et louée entre nous que sa clémence, veu qu'en la diversité de ses œuvres il a par tout imprimé certaines marques de sa gloire, lesquelles à bon droit doyvent tirer louange de toutes langues."<sup>18</sup>

The prayer concerns the whole world, and concludes on the primordial importance of the Bible, without which one could not understand God fully. The authority of the holy book is something that has not been respected in the Catholic Church, thinks Calvin, who only implicitly mentions it here. If God's Name is hallowed, then "l'Escriture obtiendra pleine autorité

<sup>14</sup> "Parquoy, d'autant qu'on ravit ainsi outrageusement à Dieu sa sainteté en terre, si nous ne la pouvons maintenir comme il seroit à désirer, c'est pour le moins que nous ayons soin de prier Dieu qu'il la maintienne."

<sup>15</sup> "To this is opposed the profanity that has always been too common and even today is abroad in the world."

<sup>16</sup> The term "vogue" comes from Italian *voga*, "reputation". The basic meaning is something that has reached its climax. It also means "fashion", already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> "Hence the need of this petition, which ought to have been superfluous if even a little godliness existed among us."

<sup>18</sup> "[...] and so embrace all that proceeds from him. And his sternness no less than his leniency should lead us to praise him, seeing that he has engraved marks of his glory upon a manifold diversity of works, and this rightly calls forth praises from every tongue."

envers nous” (“Thus it will come about that Scripture will obtain a just authority among us”). The Reformer alludes to those, in the traditional church (i.e. the Roman Catholics) who do not read the Bible or do not let others read it. He who does it is impious, he says. Others – allusion to atheists and “libertines” in general – mock or vilify religion and God. And still others – allusion to heretics – deviate from the Scripture, and so are detractors of the Word. He prays that all this impiety perish. The conclusion is indeed a kind of prayer addressing this issue:

“La requeste aussi tend à ce but, que toute impiété, laquelle pollue ce saint et sacré Nom, périsse, que toutes détractions et murmures, et aussi les moqueries qui obscurcissent ou diminuent ceste sanctification, soyent exterminées, et que Dieu, en réprimant et mettant sous le pied tels sacrilèges, face que sa maiesté croisse iournellement en plus grand lustre.”<sup>19</sup>

This conclusion, in spite of the positive ending words, is mainly bitter and sad, as we compare it with the previous editions of the *Institutes*.

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First, we can be surprised by the fact that Calvin needed to change completely his text. Then, by comparing the two versions, we realize that the essence, theologically speaking, is the same. Besides, in both versions, a reference to the same verse of the Psalm helps the interpreter to develop his explanation of the First Petition. However, we notice the following about the last version as opposed to the previous editions: 1) It is longer. 2) The theologian insists more on the evil in man. The previous versions started and ended by highlighting God’s glorious name and majesty, whereas the last version starts and ends by insisting on man’s evil mind. 3) His language is harsher, and in his prayer – because by explaining the petition he implicitly prays himself – he would like to see, not only impiety, but also the impious perish.

In a word, I do not see a change in Calvin’s theology, but rather a change in psychology or his attitude towards humans and the future of humanity. It is rather dark. Is it somehow due to his health conditions, to some more disappointment about the society, or some other psychological reason? It is difficult to know.

<sup>19</sup> “But the petition is directed also to this end: that all impiety which has besmirched this holy name may perish and be wiped out; that all detractions and mockeries which dim this hallowing or diminish it may be banished; and that in silencing all sacrileges, God may shine forth more and more in his majesty.”



*Abstract*

*For the last edition of the Institution de la religion chrétienne, J. Calvin rewrites entirely his analysis of the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer (Inst. III, 20). This article proposes an explanation for the change. Comparing the two French versions of 1541-57 and 1560, the author sees no real theological difference, but notes the following: 1) The text of the last edition is somewhat longer, for it is more repetitive; 2) Calvin insists more on the evil in man; 3) His language is harsher. J. Mazaheri believes that Calvin had become more disappointed by men, but also supposes that his darker vision was also caused by his bad health condition.*