

Pearls and Leaven

An Excerpt on Prayer from Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*

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The first volume of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* is divided into two books: I. Humanity before Conversion; II. Converted Humanity. In Book II, after chapters on “Life in the Spirit,” “The Shape and Maturation of the Christian Life,” and “Persevering in the Christian Life,” Bavinck devotes the lengthy chapter 11 to the pathologies and diseases of the spiritual life. These include pathologies of the mind (gnosticism, intellectualism, doctrinalism, rationalism), of the heart (mysticism, Quietism, antinomi-anism), and of the will (Pietism, Methodism, fanaticism, moralism). Bavinck spells this out in terms of distinct ecclesial pathologies: (a) in the intellectual school or group: confessionalism leading to separatism and idolatry of a denomination; (b) in the emotional school or group: indifference, dismissal of the church, eschatological excess; (c) in the school of the will: rejection of the church as it is in favor of a different and better church, leading to donatism. Bavinck summarizes this as follows:

Accordingly, we have three major illnesses of the spiritual life: aridity, which has a confession but no life; morbidity in the narrow sense of the word: false mysticism and false experiential faith; and lethargy in which energy for action is lacking.

Bavinck then goes on to explore the roots of these pathologies with a thorough biblical-theological examination of the struggle between “flesh” and “spirit” even in believers, temptation, and spiritual abandonment.

This is the background and lead-up to chapter 12, “Restoration and Fulfillment of the Christian Life.” Here he explores the spiritual disciplines that provide remedy to the diseases and help prevent further

spiritual disorder. He considers eight means toward personal renewal: prayer, spiritual meditation, reading the Word of God [lectio verbi divina], hymn singing, solitude, fasting, vigils, and vows. Prayer takes up most of the attention, considering the essence of prayer as a duty and a good work, biblical teaching on prayer, the subject and object of prayer (human beings and the triune God), the content of prayer, the manner of prayer, and answers to prayer.

Bavinck derives the essence of prayer from biblical teaching which he develops through an extensive word-study of the key Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek terms for prayer. He examines seven New Testament terms and, after listing the first six, our excerpt begins with the last one, Εὐχαριστία. It is included because it showcases Bavinck’s method. Readers of the *Reformed Dogmatics* know—and will find confirmed in the *Reformed Ethics*—that Bavinck valued and used the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. All one has to do is check the 70-page “Combined Name Index” for the four volumes (*RD*, 4:825–94) and see the numerous references to names like Petrus van Mastricht, Bernhard de Moor, Amandus Polanus, Francis Turretin, Campegius Vitringa, and Gisbert Voetius. In fact, one need go no farther than this brief excerpt to see evidence of it. At the same time, however, Bavinck became acquainted with modern biblical scholarship during his study years at Leiden University, and while he kept his distance from its more critical postures, he did on the whole believe it had been a positive development.¹ His questioning of the way in which orthodox theologians like De Moor applied the fourfold Greek terms for prayer in 1 Tim. 2:1 to dogmatic/theological categories warrants speaking of his “cautious sympathy” for the tradition of Protestant orthodoxy.

Aside from this little biographic nugget, the excerpt demonstrates Bavinck’s wonderful combination of clarity in making elementary distinctions and pastoral concern to answer real questions that Christians

1. E.g., Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 22–24.

have about prayer: Do unbelievers have a duty to pray? Is God pleased when unbelievers pray? Does God answer the prayers of unbelievers?

Herman Bavinck on Prayer

New Testament Greek Terms for Prayer

Αἴτημα, τό:

Ἐρωτάω:

Ἐπιθυμέω:

Δέομαι:

Προσευχή, ἡς, ἡ:

Ἐντευξις, εως, ἡ:

Εὐχαριστία, ας, ἡ: thankfulness, gratitude, giving honor and praise to God (Eph. 5:4). In 1 Timothy 2:1 we therefore find (?)² reference to prayers for averting evil [δέησις], petitioning for the good [προσευχή], intercession for others [ἐντευξις], and thanksgiving [εὐχαριστία]. Calvin also judges that this text refers to different kinds of prayers.³

In general prayer consists of people who know and sense their dependence upon the true God—trusting his promises, for Christ’s sake (in Christ’s name)—and calling on him for help for physical and spiritual

2. Ed. note: The question mark was inserted by Bavinck himself. Apparently he was less than fully convinced about the dogmatic categories applied to the terms in 1 Tim. 2:1 by the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy represented here by Bernhardus de Moor, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, 7 vols. (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek, 1761–71), 5:23. Here is De Moor’s Latin exposition of the four Greek terms: δέησις = ad malorum Deprecationem; προσευχή = bonorum Petitionem; ἐντευξις = pro aliis Intercessionem; εὐχαριστία = denique *Gratiarum Actionem*. We have here solid evidence for Bavinck’s cautious sympathy for the tradition of Protestant orthodoxy. Sympathy, because he does, after all, pass on to his Kampen students orthodoxy’s traditional categories here. At the same time he shows hesitation that undoubtedly reflected the more modern biblical scholarship he had encountered at the University of Leiden. His own exegetical practice is more sophisticated and less dogmatic.

3. *Institutes* III.xx.28.

hardship or giving thanks for received benefits.⁴ These can be divided in several ways;⁵ according to form, for example, distinguishing proper, formal prayers⁶ from quick prayers.⁷ The latter are expressed without any preparation, suddenly, caused by one or the other thing, accident, disaster and so on. Some pious people for example constantly say, “O Lord!” “O my God!” or “Have mercy on me!” These outbursts are usually very brief, consisting of one or two phrases or sentences. On such occasions Roman Catholics may use the Lord’s Prayer or only make the sign of the cross, thereby expressing all the virtues of faith. We can distinguish mental prayer from spoken prayer.⁸ There are different prayers for different occasions: ordinary times and extraordinary times. Prayers differ according to content: there are prayers of petition and prayers of thanksgiving. Prayers of petition can be further divided into those asking for something good to happen and those that pray for evil to be averted.⁹ These prayers apply to spiritual as well as physical benefits. Finally, the subject can be an individual person in private or public as well as corporate/communal prayer in the home or the church. One can pray for oneself by oneself or intercede for others.

The Human Subjects of Prayer

Only humans pray. Animals do not pray since they cannot know God’s majesty and are unable to know and acknowledge their dependence on him. When Scripture speaks of birds and animals calling out to God (Ps. 147:9; cf. 104:27; Joel 1:18; Jonah 3:7–8), it is speaking figuratively. It is

4. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* III.xx.2; Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 45.

5. Gisbert Voetius, *De praktijk der godzaligheid: τα ασκητικά sive Exercitia pietatis* (Gorichem: Paul Vink, 1664), 115.

6. “schiegbeden”

7. “preces ejaculatoriae”; see Voetius, *Ασκητικά*, 125–34.

8. “orationes mentalis” and “orationes vocales (orales)”

9. “toebidden” and “afbidden”

an idle question whether prayer is situated more in the will or in the mind.¹⁰ Just like faith, prayer is an act of the entire human being: it is a longing, desire, sighing, lamenting (situated in the will) but also asking, speaking, knowing, and so on (in the mind).¹¹ Prayer is an act of our consciousness, lifting up our spirit or mind to God¹² to which we are driven by an act of the will (we desire something or want to give thanks for something). Furthermore, the subjects of true prayer are regenerated people;¹³ they alone possess “a Spirit of grace and pleas for mercy” (Zech. 12:10); they alone can worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23).¹⁴ “In spirit” means spiritually, inwardly, not in all kinds of ceremonies and outward appearances, bound to place; “in truth” means in accordance with God’s being, in accordance with the true God. In fact, even the Christian does not know how to pray properly (Rom. 8:26), neither what to pray or how,¹⁵ because of weakness and lack. Therefore the “Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

The duty to pray, as with all good works, is also required of unbelievers even if they cannot pray correctly and truthfully.¹⁶ Moreover, the same law that obligates them to pray also enjoins them to pray correctly and well in spirit and in truth. If they are unable to do this, it is their own fault. It is therefore not correct to say that this obliges unbelievers to

10. The former view is held by William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. and trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim, 1968; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 258 (II.ix): “Prayer is a devout presentation of our will before God so that he may be, as it were, affected by it.” The latter view by Gisbertus Voetius, *Ασκητικά*, 94.

11. Johann Franz Buddeus, *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis* (Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1727), 319.

12. “mentis elevatio ad Deum”

13. B. de Moor, *Comp. Theol.*, 5:27; Buddeus, *Institutiones*, 321v.

14. “ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ”

15. “τί; καθὸ δεῖ”

16. Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (1901; repr. Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2001), 662–68 (III.41, “Prayer of the Uncovered”). Ed. note: Bavinck’s original source was *De Heraut* 580 (February 3, 1889).

sinful prayer, to sinning in their prayers, and that it is therefore better simply to let it go. Besides, while unbelievers may lack spiritual awareness they nevertheless have a rational natural awareness of their own dependence and of God's greatness and goodness.¹⁷ "And it is certainly much better that unrenewed men should pray to God in some manner, with a natural conviction of their wants, and an acknowledgment of the Majesty and goodness of God, than that they should not pray at all. The mere fact of their praying, so far as that is concerned, is not displeasing to God, though the sin which cleaves to it is justly condemned."¹⁸ This is true even when the way someone prays is wrong as we can see in the case of Ahab whose self-abasement pleased God (1 Kings 21: 27–29) and the Ninevites (Jonah 3:8–10). "To do a good thing in a defective manner is a smaller evil than to omit it altogether."¹⁹ It is therefore "the duty of parents to instruct and habituate their children, from their earliest childhood, to prayer, and not to wait till they can discover in them the marks of regeneration. For who knows at what time, and by what means, the Spirit will first exert his saving influence? One thing is certain, while believers alone can pray aright, their faith was bestowed on them for the express purpose that they may continue in prayer."²⁰

17. Ed. note: cf. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:241–43.

18. Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1839; rpt. Escondido, CA: 1994), 56 (Dissertation II), <https://app.box.com/shared/j394fosmof>.

19. "Minus malum est bonum facere cum defectu quam prorsus omittere"; Witsius, *Lord's Prayer*, 56; Latin original: Witsius, *Exercitationes in Orationem Dominicam*, in *Exercitationes in Symbolum quod Apostolorum dicitur*, 2nd ed. (Franeker: Johannes Gyselaar, 1689), II.xx., <https://app.box.com/shared/j394fosmof>.

20. Witsius, *Lord's Prayer*, 56; cf. B. De Moor, *Comp. Theol.*, 5:27.

Are these prayers of unbelievers answered?²¹ Old Testament Wisdom provides a negative answer: “If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, / even their prayers are detestable” (Prov. 28:9). In John 9:31 the man blind born says to the Jews: “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person²² who does his will.” This expression is true in this context, namely, concerning someone who asks God for a miracle. However, other passages in Scripture affirm this saying in much more general terms: “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, / the Lord would not have listened” (Ps. 66:18); “The Lord is far from the wicked, / but he hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29); “When you spread out your hands, / I will hide my eyes from you; / even though you make many prayers, / I will not listen; / your hands are full of blood” (Is. 1:15); “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working”²³ (James 5:16; cf. 4:3: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions”); “The Lord is near to all who call on him, / to all who call on him in truth. / He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; / he also hears their cry and saves them” (Ps. 145:18, 19); “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?” (Rom. 10:14); “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6–8).

God therefore sometimes does grant the wicked what they pray for, but actually he is then not answering their prayer but enforcing his

21. Ed. note: We have broken up Bavinck’s very long original paragraph, which might give the mistaken impression that he is starting an altogether different topic here. The Scripture passages he now goes on to discuss come directly from the beginning of Witsius’ Dissertation III, “On the preparation of the mind for right prayer” (*The Lord’s Prayer*, 57). The content is thus intimately connected with the questions about the prayers of unbelievers that closes Dissertation II (p. 56).

22. “θεοσεβής” = “God-worshipper.”

23. “Πολὸν ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη.” Buddeus, *Institutiones*, 321.

counsel, showing his benevolence.²⁴ Here is what belongs to a prayer “that truly pleases God and that he listens to”:²⁵ we must truly know our need and misery so that we humble ourselves before the presence of God’s Majesty; “God opposes the proud / but shows favor to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5; quoting Prov. 3:34). God does not answer the proud pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). The wicked do not pray to the true God, or they do not pray about the right things, or they pray feigningly, or simply out of habit, or without trusting God’s promises, or apart from Christ the Mediator, or with persistent sin, or with distrust and doubts, without faith.²⁶

24. Buddeus, *Institutiones*, 322.

25. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 117.

26. Ursinus, *Commentary*, Q. & A. 117.