

Calvin's Interpretation of »Thy Kingdom Come«

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Calvin translates and publishes his *Institutes* in French for the first time in 1541, that is five years after the first Latin edition. His commentary of the second petition of the *Lord's Prayer* remains basically the same in the following editions (till 1557), but for the definitive version of his work, that of 1560, he rewrites it entirely. First, I propose a close reading of the 1541–57 text; then I compare it with the last one. Why did the theologian decide to rewrite his text? How has his theology evolved? Is there any basic change in his view? These are the questions I am asking in this essay.¹

¹ On our topic, see also the following studies: Donald K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought*, Atlanta 1988, 151–165; Gunter Zimmermann, *Die Vereinigung mit Gott und das Reich Christi nach Calvins »Institutio«*, in: *Zwingliana* 18/3 (1990), 193–212; Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics: A Comparison of Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism*, transl. by David Lewis, Edinburgh/London 1962, 292–301; J. H. van Wyk, *John Calvin on the Kingdom of God and Eschatology*, in: *In die Skriflig* 35/2 (2001), 191–205; I. John Hesselink, *Calvin on the Kingdom of Christ*, in: *Religion without Ulterior Motive*, ed. E. A. J. G. van der Borgh, Leiden/Boston 2006, 139–158; Theodore Plantinga, *Learning to Live with Evil*, Grand Rapids, MI 1982, 135–143; G. Brillenburgh Wurth, *Calvin and the Kingdom of God*, in: *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet. A Symposium*, ed. Jacob T. Hoogstra, Grand Rapids, MI 1959, 113–126; Timothy George, *John Calvin and Menno Simons: Reformation Perspectives on the Kingdom of God*, in: *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker, Kirksville, MO 1988 (*Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 10), 195–214.

1. The Institutes 1541–1557 (French) editions

Calvin starts by defining the notion of »Kingdom« with regard to God. He thus states that *His Kingdom* consists in two parts, both being readily observable, but of an abstract nature. 1. God rules through His Holy Spirit in the heart of every believer (»Car il règne premièrement en tant qu'il dirige et gouverne les siens par son S. Esprit«.²) The theologian uses three terms to define the role of the Heavenly King, since it is assumed that there is no kingdom without a king. Now the three verbs »règne« (rule), »dirige« (direct), and »gouverne« (govern) have specific meanings. *How* does He rule (»il règne«)? – The answer is that He *governs* (»il gouverne«), which means that He rules with *authority*. Indeed, one can rule but not necessarily govern, in which case he would be a king without authority. But God rules *with* authority. He also through His Spirit *directs* (»il dirige«) His children (»les siens«), i.e. He keeps them in »right order, controls, and governs their actions«.³ Implicitly, He does that to prevent them from being tempted by the Devil. Thus God shows through the believers' works and words His goodness and abundant mercy (»pour en toutes leurs œuvres ou parolles manifester sa bonté et les richesses de sa miséricorde«). Therefore, one sign of God's Kingdom is that He is ruling through one's good deeds and words. So whenever we do good, we ought to know that we are acting under the rule of God, and that we are His obedient subjects or children. 2. But God rules also over the unbeliever. His Kingdom can indeed be seen through the punishment of the ungodly, already here on earth. For God destroys the evil-doers (»abysme les réprouvez«). The reprobate (»réprouvez«) are the ones rejected or disapproved by God, for they are disobedient subjects, wrong-doers, people who do not care about His rule (»qui ne le reconnoissent point pour leur Dieu et Seigneur, et ne luy veulent être subiectz«). God, in this case, throws them into the »abysme« (abyss), in other words, the »infernall pit« or »hell«⁴. The

² Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, ed. Jean-Daniel Benoît, Paris 1960, III, XX, 42. In the earlier editions, this text is the paragraph 36 in chapter XV.

³ The Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 20 vols, Oxford 1989, under »to direct«, 3b.

⁴ OED, »abyss«, 1c.

Heavenly Father humbles the proud and arrogant people who refuse to recognize Him as their ruler (*»rabbat leur orgueil et arrogance«*). The metaphor explains the fact that God punishes evil-doers already in this world. One can witness His retribution every day, Calvin writes: *»ces choses se font tous les jours devant noz yeux«*. To sum up, God's Kingdom is revealed in two ways, through people's both good and evil deeds. That is how the Father shows His authority as the only King. Wrongdoing is punished, but is the opposite rewarded, according to the theologian? Yes, for even though it is not explicitly mentioned in his exegesis, the reward is perceived through God's goodness and mercy, which bring about happiness and joy.

After this spiritual definition of the Kingdom, Calvin stresses once more the fact that the latter is already right here on earth (*»On peut veoir que ce Règne est mesmes en ce monde«*), and mentions the power of it. Implicitly expressed is the idea that good people suffer by evil-doers, but God's Kingdom is not weakend for all that, for no power is able to resist God's power: *»il n'y a nulle puissance qui puisse résister à la sienne«*. God's good children suffer indeed in this world, but they must accept life's challenges and bear their crosses.⁵ The good news is that the Lord gives them courage and does not forsake them: *»notre Seigneur donne force et vigueur à sa parolle, ainsi érigée comme un sceptre, et la fait fructifier et régner, mesme soubz la croix, contemnement et ignominie du monde.«* Two ideas are pointed out here: 1. He who follows the Word receives the power to resist all kinds of difficulties and miseries in this world, including the torture of the cross (*»croix«*), contempt (*»contemnement«*), and dishonor (*»ignominie«*); 2. The Word has a fructifying effect (Dieu *»la fait fructifier et régner«*). Another explanation is that, believing in the Word makes one powerful, for it is like a scepter (*»comme un sceptre«*), which symbolizes the King's authority and sovereignty.

In a third part of his commentary, the name of the Son is introduced: first God the Father was mentioned, then the Holy Spirit, and now Jesus-Christ. It is not that the Holy Spirit should come

⁵ Indeed, as Timothy George writes, *»The cross of Christ may in no wise be avoided, for the lamb will never be at peace with the wolf, the dove with eagle, Christ with Belial.«* (George, John Calvin and Menno Simons, 207).

before the Son – Calvin’s conception of Christ throughout the *Institutes* is very clear on this point. The Son is the Word of God, and so the Holy Spirit, being the power which instils the Word into one’s conscience, cannot precede it. So the reason why in this exegesis the Son’s name is mentioned after the Holy Spirit, is because the theologian first explains how the believer is *directed*. And now he points out that Christ has expressed the fact that the Kingdom is *within* us («Pourtant aussi Christ dit que le Royaume de Dieu est en nous»). Two other ideas are then put forth: 1. Christ sometimes calls the Church »Kingdom of Heaven«, (Il »appelle aucunesfois l’Eglise le Royaume des cieux«). This church, of which Jesus is the ruler («en laquelle vraiment il domine») is not explained, but one understands that it is a spiritual place. It is a metaphor, neither a congregation, nor a building, nor an institution in the concrete sense, but rather the community of believers. 2. He also sometimes calls the predication of the Gospel »Kingdom of Heaven« («aucunesfois la prédication de l’Evangile«). Christ rules by His Word («par laquelle il establist sa domination« – to be understood in the etymological sense, from *dominus*, »Lord«). We perceive that the »Kingdom of God« is both a metaphor and a metonymy: as a metaphor, it is like a place, though a spiritual one – it is in one’s heart. It could also be called »Eglise« (church) – from the Latin *ecclesia*, meaning »community of the faithful«. However, calling the predication or the spreading of the Word a »Kingdom« is a metonymy. The Kingdom is here the belief in the Word of God. If one does believe, one will preach the Gospel and spread it, and that is how it is related to the metaphoric kingdom. The citizens of this Kingdom consider themselves subjects of one king *only*, Christ. Indeed, the Kingdom without Him does not mean anything, for the Kingdom is his – it is where his Word rules and governs.

A fourth part of Calvin’s exegesis, in the 1541 edition, concerns the justification of the request made in the prayer. First, after stressing again the spiritual nature of God’s Kingdom («il est *spirituel* et consiste en choses *spirituelles*«), he mentions the qualities of it: incorruptible and eternal («il est incorruptible et éternel«). Second, the theologian explains the reason for this second petition, since God’s Kingdom is already here, has always been, and will always

be. Why, indeed, do we have to ask for its coming? There are two reasons for that, he asserts: 1. We pray for people who do not see God to be touched by His Grace; in other words we pray for the unbelievers to join the community of the faithful. We pray for the wrongdoers to become good. So we pray for the number of believers, who constitute the true church, to increase every day (»c'est à dire que de plus en plus tous les iours nostre Seigneur augmente le nombre de ses subiectz et fidèles«), and that God may be glorified in every way (»desquelz il soit en toutes manières glorifié«). 2. We pray for those, including ourselves, who *do* believe in Him to have our faith strengthened. We pray for receiving more and more of God's graces (»et qu'en ceux qu'il aura *désia* appelez en son Royaume il distribue et multiplie tousiours plus abondamment ses grâces«). I suppose that, since it is about the realm of spirit, the graces we are asking for must be of spiritual nature. We pray for everyone, therefore, to become some day united to God. We pray that God may live and reign in everyone's heart, and that He make everyone whole, or perfectly sound: that by his Grace, »de plus en plus continuellement il vive et règne en eux, iusques à ce que les ayant *parfaitement uniz à soy*, il les remplisse du tout«. This perfect unification of humanity with God somewhat reveals a mystical approach, but this requires a separate discussion, which is beyond the object of the present essay.

We reach the last part or the conclusion of Calvin's exegesis, which is about eschatology, first in the modern theological sense of the word, or eschatology pertaining to things of this world, then to eschatology in the traditional sense. In the last phase of human mental development, according to Calvin, the Devil will be destroyed. What is noteworthy is that this happens *gradually* in this world, according to the theologian. He thus repeats the expression »de plus en plus« (more and more); he means to emphasize the fact that there is an evolution in the human moral advancement. So one should not think of a sudden radical magical change at some vague point in the future, but consider a gradual process. Therefore, eschatology is being realized little by little.⁶ It is in the here and now.

⁶ Donald K. McKim points out that »While Calvin can say that »the Kingdom of God increases, stage upon stage, to the end of the world«, he does not believe in a gradual, evolutionary growth of the kingdom of God through the structures of the

We pray that »que *de plus en plus* il veuille illustrer sa lumière et sa vérité. Parquoy les ténèbres et mensonges du Diable et de ses suppostz s'évanouyssent, soient déchassées, confondues et annéanties«. ⁷ We pray for the progressive realization of the Kingdom, so that God's light (»lumière«) and truth (»vérité«) be revealed to everyone, and the Devil (or the evil principle) and its followers gradually vanish (»s'évanouissent«), be thrown out (»déchassées«), unmasked (»confondues«), and annihilated (»anéanties«). The evil will eventually completely disappear from this world. We pray for that and believe that it is happening a little more every day. This is certainly a happy and optimistic vision of humanity.

But Calvin also believes in eschatology in the traditional sense, and so in the following way he ends his interpretation: »En priant que le Règne de Dieu advienne ainsi, *pareillement* nous prions qu'il soit finalement consommé et accompli, qui sera *au iour de son Jugement*, quand toutes choses seront révélées. Auquel iour lui seul sera exalté et sera tout en tous, après avoir recueilly les siens en gloire, et avoir déprimé, subiugué et ruyné tout le règne du Diable.« Therefore, this concrete world on earth will end for the humans at some point in time. This last part of the exegesis, concerning the Day of Judgment, shows of course a theologian who also believes in a world after this material one, which is not surprising, since this idea is present in the Bible. Calvin, as a faithful reader of the latter, believes that in that Day everything will be revealed and that God alone will be exalted. On that day, everybody will *only* see Him (»sera tout en tous«), referring to the First Corinthians 15:28. ⁸ That means that only the believers will re-

present world. The kingdom is not ours to win; it's God's to give [...]. The present reign of God is found where people both by denial of themselves and by contempt of the world and of earthly life, pledge themselves to God's righteousness in order to aspire to a heavenly life.« (McKim, *Theological Turning Points*, 163).

⁷ As John Hesselink puts it, »Calvin also makes clear what was only implied before, namely, that God reigns in two ways: in the renewal of the lives of believers and in the overcoming of Satan and all God's enemies. The goal in both cases is to restore order in a confused and disordered world, for ›disorder (*ataxia*) and confusion‹ are the ›opposite of the kingdom of God.« (Hesselink, *Calvin on the Kingdom of Christ*, 158).

⁸ »When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all« (New Revised Standard Version).

main. In the other world, the Devil will have no place at all, for his fragile kingdom (»le règne du Diable«) will have disappeared: it will be knocked down (»déprimé«), subdued (»subjugué«), and ruined (»ruiné«). It is noticeable that this last part, devoted to eschatology in the traditional sense, is but a small section of the exegesis, which is understandable insofar as nobody knows about the life beyond this one, but one can talk about the progressive eschatology in the present material world. So the main part of the commentary on Matthew 6:10 is about one's earthly life, i.e. on eschatology in the modern or, if I may say, existentialist sense of the word. Hope is the fundamental idea, for the Kingdom of God is being realized before our eyes on a daily basis; it is at our own hand. Our prayer helps us to appreciate it more and more as we see ourselves changing into better individuals and enjoying life better, and as we see others joining the community of the faithful. Although not explicit, these ideas are somehow suggested in Calvin's commentary.

2. The last version of the Institutes (the 1560 French edition)

We notice first that a few lines have been added to the beginning of the exegesis. In this introduction the commentator asserts that this second petition does not bring anything really new to the first. There is, however, a reason for the redundancy: »Car si nous pensons bien à nostre tardiveté et rudesse, il est besoin que nous ayons les oreilles battues souvent de ce qui doit estre tant et plus notoire«.⁹ Two nouns are here stressed: »tardiveté« (slowness, dullness of intellect or comprehension) and »rudesse« (ignorance, or even absence of virtue)¹⁰. Because we are slow and ignorant, we need more explanation and repetition. We have ears but we do not hear, Calvin thinks, so we need to hear the Word of God over and

⁹ »[f]or if we consider our languor in the greatest matters of all, it behooves us to extend our discussion in order to drive home something that ought to have been thoroughly known of itself« (Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles, Louisville, KY 1960, III, XX, 42).

¹⁰ See OED, »rudeness«, 2b.

over again («il est *besoin* que nous ayons les oreilles battues souvent de ce qui doit estre tant et plus notoire»). If we understand the first petition, it is »notoire« (from *notorius*, from *noscere*, »to know«), or »it ought to have been thoroughly known of itself«, that »Hallowed be Thy Name« includes »Thy Kingdom Come«, but we still need to say it again in a different way. Therefore, after we pray that God destroy all that stain his holy name («Après doncques qu'il nous a esté ordonné de prier Dieu qu'il abbate, et finalement destruisse tout ce qui souille son *sacré Nom* [...]»¹¹), we pray for the coming of His Kingdom. We see that from the outset the theologian's tone is more critical in this last edition. Then he states that one can talk about God as one's King only when one renounces the material world and aspires to live spiritually by devoting oneself to God's justice: »Dieu est tenu pour Roy, quand les hommes, renonçans à eux mesmes et mesprisans le monde et ceste vie terrestre, s'addonnent à la justice de Dieu pour aspirer à la vie céleste«.¹² He also mentions the fact that he is repeating what he has already discussed elsewhere – referring to the *Institutes* III, III, 19. We realize that repetition is deliberate and has a didactic reason for Calvin. Repetition is also used by Jesus, as Calvin contends, in the Lord's Prayer.

From here the theologian goes back to his 1541 version and rewrites it, thus expressing in a new way the main idea of the kingdom on earth as being manifested through God's retribution. In the earlier editions, he had divided the kingdom into two parts, mentioning first God's goodness and mercy through his deserving children, then his punishment of the sinners. In the last edition, however, he uses a bitter tone saying: »Ainsi il y a deux parties de ce règne: c'est que Dieu corrige et abbate par la vertu de son Esprit toutes cupiditez de la chair, lesquelles se dressent à grand foulle pour batailler contre luy. Secondement, qu'il plie et forme tous nos sens pour les assuiettir à son empire«.¹³ The emphasis is put on

¹¹ »Therefore, after we have been bidden to ask God to subject and finally completely destroy everything that casts a stain upon his holy name [...].«

¹² »God reigns where men, both by denial of themselves and by contempt of the world and of earthly life, pledge themselves to his righteousness in order to aspire to a heavenly life.«

¹³ »Thus there are two parts to this Kingdom: first, that God by the power of his Spirit correct all the desires of the flesh which by squadrons war against him; second, that he shape all our thoughts in obedience to his rule.«

»correction«, and the distinction between reward and punishment, or good people and evildoers, is not made here. Everyone is equally concerned. The two following stages are indicated: 1. The destruction of evil tendencies and thoughts in humans. 2. The »the rule« of God.

Another point the theologian makes is that, in order to become a good subject of God as King, is to start with oneself. Before we wish to change the society, we must change ourselves: »Pourtant, quiconque veut tenir bon ordre en ceste requeste, il faut qu'il commence par soy, désirant d'estre purgé de toutes corruptions qui troublent en son cœur l'estat paisible du règne de Dieu, et en infectent la pureté.«¹⁴ Self-criticism is an essential feature of the new version. In the 1541 version of the *Institutes*, the prayer stresses more God's action, whereas in the last edition, the theologian asks for more effort from humans. The human will and responsibility are, indeed, more strongly expressed in this edition. The fact that *all* are sinners is also better articulated here. Everyone, he insists, must follow His Word, which is like a scepter: »Au reste pource que la parole de Dieu est comme un sceptre royal, il nous est ici ordonné de prier qu'il assuiesst les esprits et les cœurs de *tous* à une obéissance *volontaire* d'icelle.«¹⁵

The concept of church is also differently conveyed in the new edition. The theologian is less abstract here and talks of church not as much as Jesus does, which corresponds more to the spirit of the first edition, but rather as Paul does. The church has become a more concrete group of Christians. The idea of mission is then conspicuous in the last edition. After we have reached – although not explicit, this idea is presupposed – a certain degree of maturity in our faith, we must go and rescue others: »Après nous pourrons descendre aux meschans qui résistent à son empire avec obstination et fureur désespérée,«¹⁶ and »Nous avons à désirer que cela [God's retributive justice] se face chacun iour, afin que Dieu re-

¹⁴ »Therefore, no others keep a lawful order in this petition but those who begin with themselves, that is, to be cleansed of all corruptions that disturb the peaceful state of God's Kingdom and sully its purity.«

¹⁵ »Now, because the word of God is like a royal scepter, we are bidden here to entreat him to bring all men's minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it.«

¹⁶ »Afterward we should descend to the impious, who stubbornly and with desperate madness resist his authority.«

cueille des églises de toutes les parties du monde, qu'il les multiplie en nombre, qu'il les enrichisse de ses dons, qu'il y établisse bon ordre [...]"¹⁷

The following ideas are already clearly presented in the 1541 edition, but in 1560 they are simply rephrased: the perfect world will come with the coming of Christ, one must patiently bear one's Cross, etc. The idea of evolution, a gradual improvement of humans' understanding of God and morals, is also present. The ending is hopeful and somewhat similar to the first edition. I note, however, that the term »Antechrist« is used in 1560, instead of »Diable«, which is actually the last word of his commentary in 1541 – the Devil who will be completely destroyed. Moreover, in the first edition, Calvin calls the ending of our material world the Day of Judgment (»jour de son Jugement, quand toutes choses seront révélées«), whereas in 1560, the ending is presented as the Day when Antichrist is destroyed and that God has eliminated »toute impiété par la clarté de son advènement.«¹⁸

3. Conclusion

First, the fact that Calvin needed to write anew his text is significant. His interpretation has not changed so much, although a shift from Jesus' view of the church to Paul's view of it is in my opinion rather important. But, one might argue, since Jesus is being vague on this issue, it is hard to prove that there is a real difference between Paul and him. Furthermore, it seems that Calvin has psychologically changed: he is less optimistic, and needs to blame ourselves more for our shortcomings. He does not exclude himself of course. It is self-criticism at the same time. Finally, the fact that the theologian wants to say in a different and longer way basically the same things, justifies what he considers redundancy in Jesus, since,

¹⁷ »We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth; that he spread and increase them in number; that he adorn them with gifts, that he establish a lawful order among them [...].«

¹⁸ »at last he slays Antichrist with the Spirit of his mouth, and destroys all ungodliness by the brightness of his coming.« He thus refers to II Thess. (2:8): »And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.«

according to Calvin, the first petition should also make the second one obvious (»notoire«).

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Abstract: In this article I compare Calvin's exegesis of the Second Petition of The Lord's Prayer in the 1541–57 editions of the Institutes with the one he offers in the last edition of his work (1560). My close reading is based on the French editions only with a rhetorical approach. First, it is interesting to note that for the last edition Calvin rewrote his paragraph on the Second Petition entirely, which he had also done with the First Petition. Second, the formal structures as well as the content are somewhat different. In the 1541–57 editions, the paragraph is divided into two parts: (1) He explains the reason why we pray that God be considered our only king – implicitly no other (earthly) ruler should be accepted. (2) He explains why right here on Earth already we are punished, if we do not accept this principle and follow another ruler. Therefore, »Thy Kingdom come« is not only about the future, but also about now. It is an existential issue. In the 1560 edition, Calvin divides his paragraph into three parts: (1) He claims that the First and the Second Petitions say basically the same thing. So the reason for the repetition is just because we are too slow to understand God. Besides, if we believe in Him, we have to deny ourselves and despise our earthly life, and consider the Lord our only ruler and king, right here and now. (2) We pray that God destroy the Evil that is in everyone. (3) We pray that we live according to God's rule alone. To conclude, two important differences are stressed: (1) In the last edition, Calvin puts more emphasis on the evil spirit in humans. (2) Although in all the editions of the Institutes the crucial role of the Holy Spirit is mentioned, it is only in the last edition that the name of Christ appears, the Son without whom we cannot live in God's Kingdom.

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