

# IN RESPONSE - "SEEKING," THE BIBLICAL RECORD

by Dennis Prutow

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Does Seeking Evangelism have biblical support and historic precedent? I think it does. My objective is to take four steps in the direction of showing this is true. First, I shall briefly lay out the biblical record with regard to the concept of seeking. Second, I shall trace the concept through Augustine and Calvin. Third I shall look at the chief advocates of this doctrine among the Puritans and how this doctrine undergirds the Westminster Standards, themselves Puritan documents. Finally I shall take a brief look at Jonathan Edwards as the chief American exemplar of the eighteenth century.

At the outset, I maintain the concept of seeking is a creation ordinance. It is a central purpose of God for humankind in creation. The apostle Paul realized this and preached the same to unbelieving philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens.

He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

From the beginning, God's intent for humanity was that men, women and children should seek Him. J. A. Alexander says we have here, "A further statement of the end for which this one race was created and established on the earth."<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce adds, "And what was God's purpose in thus arranging the time and place so providentially for the well-being of man? It was, says Paul, in order that men might seek God..."<sup>2</sup> Howard Marshall says, "God's purpose in all of this [creation and ordering of life] was that men might seek after him in the hope of touching him and finding him."<sup>3</sup> Sin does not obviate the purposes of God. Calvin

rightly expounds the text and sets the record straight regarding God's purpose and human responsibility. He says with regard to Acts 17:27,

This sentence has two parts; vis, that it is man's duty to seek God, and, secondly, that God himself comes to meet us and makes himself conspicuous by such clear signs, that there is no excuse for our ignorance. Therefore let us remember that all those who do not bend their energies to seeking God, are gravely abusing this life, and do not deserve to dwell on the earth; as if the separate kinds of brute beasts revolted from the inclination given them by nature, and that quite rightly would be considered monstrous.<sup>4</sup>

Seeking God is therefore essential to humanity. Failure to seek God is sin. It would seem appropriate that the command to seek God should be issued regularly to men and women. The issuing of such a command would seem to be good. In addition, since we are speaking of a creation ordinance, the command now includes both unbelievers and believers alike. Let's look at two examples. The first is from the Old Testament

Asa did good and right in the sight of the Lord his God, for he removed the foreign altars and high places, tore down the sacred pillars, cut down the Asherim, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers and to observe the law and the commandment (2 Chronicles 14:2-4).

Asa reigned in Jerusalem from 913 to 873. He did what was right and good. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord. The Bible says this was *good*.

The kingdom was divided in 922 B.C. with Rehoboam ruling Judah and Jeroboam ruling in Israel. What of Rehoboam? "He did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the Lord" (2 Chronicles 12:14). This was the same criticism leveled against the people of God who

died in the wilderness. This was "A stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart, and whose spirit was not faithful to the Lord" (Psalm 78:8).

Abijah followed Rehoboam in Jerusalem. "He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God" (1 Kings 15:3). What was the answer to Judah's general decline into idolatry? Asa commanded Judah to seek the Lord.

The second example is from the New Testament and gives one of the purposes for the continuation of the church and the inclusion of the Gentiles. When the Jerusalem Council met to discuss the propriety of receiving Gentiles into the church, Acts 15:16-17 records James', argument in favor. He quotes Amos 9:11-12.

After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord.

God promised to revive the kingdom of David under David's greater Son. Why? "So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord" (Acts 15:17). The church and the means of grace must be present in the world so Gentiles as well as Jews may seek the Lord. Here is the clear teaching of Scripture giving the purpose for the church advancing throughout the world.

Is the concept of seeking biblical? Yes it is. We stand with Isaiah who cries, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). We stand with Jesus who exhorts, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). We stand with Paul who is astonished God reveals Himself to those who do not seek Him. "Isaiah is very bold and says, 'I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me'" (Romans 10:20).

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Alexander, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 156.

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 358-359.

<sup>3</sup> I Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 288.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, John W. Fraser, trans., David W. Torrence and Thomas F. Torrence, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 2: 118

# IN RESPONSE - “SEEKING,” AUGUSTINE AND CALVIN

by Dennis Prutow

We now look at Augustine and Calvin with regard to the idea of seeking. The idea appears often in Augustine although it may not be a developed method of evangelism as among the Puritans. However, the idea is present and comes directly from Scripture. For example, we look at Augustine’s exposition of David in Psalm 83:16, “Fill their faces with dishonor, That they may seek Your name, O Lord.”

[H]e would not prophesy thus, unless there were even in that company of the enemies of God’s people, some men of such kind that this would be granted to them before the last judgment: for now they are mixed together, and this is the body of the enemies, in respect of the envy whereby they rival the people of God.... [I]t is the same body, even in those who out of this number shall believe and pass into another body (for the faces of these are filled with shame, that they may seek the name of the Lord)... For those are not vexed for ever and ever who seek the name of the Lord, but having respect unto the shame of their sins, they are vexed for this purpose, that they may seek the name of the Lord, through which they may be no more vexed.<sup>1</sup>

Shame and conviction produce seeking.

Augustine reflects on His own life. What kept Augustine from deeper sin?

Nor did anything recall me from a yet deeper abyss of carnal pleasures, but the fear of death and of Thy future judgment, which, amid all my fluctuations of opinion, never left my breast.<sup>2</sup>

What propelled him to seek the Lord?

What torments did my travailing heart then endure! What sighs, O my God! Yet even there were Thine ears open, and I knew it not; and when in stillness I sought earnestly, those silent contritions of my soul were strong cries unto Thy mercy.<sup>3</sup>

How did Augustine seek the Lord? Seeing, then, that we were too weak by unaided reason to find out the truth, and for this cause needed the authority of the holy writings, I had now begun to believe that Thou wouldest by no means have given such excellency of authority to those Scriptures throughout all lands, had it not been Thy will thereby to be believed in, and thereby sought.<sup>4</sup>

God’s intention was that sinners should seek Him in and through His word. We have seen this scenario before.

Calvin had a close affinity to Augustine. We therefore expect to find the similar idea of seeking the Lord. I begin by noting Calvin does not hesitate to speak of seeking grace. He does so in the context of Ephesians 1:7, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.” Paul “explains how we are reconciled to God through Christ....”<sup>5</sup> How does Calvin apply this teaching? “Therefore we ought always to direct our minds to the blood of Christ, if we are seeking grace in Him.”<sup>6</sup>

Calvin works out this theme in his *Institutes*.

If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him” [I Cor. 1:30]. If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing.... If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross....<sup>7</sup>

Why would men and women seek the Lord? Speaking of the sense of deity present within unbelievers, Calvin says,

In tranquil times they wittily joke about God, indeed are facetious and garrulous in belittling his power. If

any occasion for despair presses upon them, it goads them to seek him and impels their perfunctory prayers.<sup>8</sup> Providence, constraining men and women, presses them to seek the Lord.

How should sinners seek the Lord? Calvin sees a twofold work of God.

God works in his elect in two ways: within, through his Spirit; without, through his Word. By his Spirit illuminating their minds, and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his Word, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal.<sup>9</sup>

God works by His Spirit illuminating and regenerating. God works by His word to stimulate men and women *to seek this renovating work*.

Calvin begins the *Institutes* with this theme saying at the end of Chapter One, Paragraph 1,

For what man in all the world would not gladly remain as he is—what man does not remain as he is—so long as he does not know himself, that is, while he is content with his own gifts, and either ignorant or unmindful of his own misery? Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.<sup>10</sup>

Augustine begins his *Confessions* with the theme of seeking. Book One, Chapter One has this heading: “He Proclaims the Greatness of God, Whom He Desires to Seek and Invoke, being Awakened by Him.”<sup>11</sup> In this chapter Augustine cries, “Let me seek Thee, Lord, in calling on Thee, and call on Thee in believing in Thee; for Thou hast been preached unto us.”<sup>12</sup> So both Augustine and Calvin pick up the idea of seeking the Lord coming from Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol 8, Augustine: Exposition of Psalms* (Albany: OR, Sage Software, 1996), 868.

<sup>2</sup> Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1948), 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 78.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians Philippians and Colossians*, T.H.L. Parker, Trans., David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeil, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1: 527.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:322

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:37

<sup>11</sup> Oates, 1:3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

# IN RESPONSE - "SEEKING," THE PURITANS AND WESTMINSTER

by Dennis Prutow

It goes without saying that the Puritans were Calvinists and the Westminster Divines were Puritans. We therefore expect to find the idea of seeking salvation perpetuated among both the Puritans and the Westminster Divines. For example, the Geneva Bible, popular among the Puritans, contained notes written by the Reformers including John Calvin and John Knox.<sup>1</sup> These notes frequently speak of seeking the Lord. The statement giving the argument for Exodus says, "Wherefore God visited them with sharp rodde and plagues, that by his corrections they might seeke to him for remedy against his scourges...."<sup>2</sup> The note on Exodus 8:8 and Pharaoh's calling for prayer on his behalf says, "Not love but feare causeth the very infidels to seeke unto God."

The Puritans seemed to formalize the idea of seeking as an evangelistic procedure. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is probably the most famous example. The whole purpose of the story is to lay out a picture of one who seeks God for salvation from sin. Bunyan tells us this is the case in *The Author's Apology*.

This Book it chalketh out before thine eyes/The man that seeks the everlasting prize;/It shews you whence he comes, whither he goes,/What he leaves undone; also what he does:/It also shews you how he runs/Till unto the gate of glory comes.<sup>3</sup>

Other Puritan preachers and authors speak frequently of seeking the Lord using the means of grace. Thomas Watson, famous for his exposition of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, wrote a short volume, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, expounding Matthew 11:12, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." The preface to the first American edition begins,

At a period when so many appear to be influenced by a strong desire to seek the way to Zion, it will no doubt

be acceptable to those who have their faces turned thither, to have in their hands and before their eyes the writings of so eminently pious a minister of the gospel as was the Reverend Thomas Watson.<sup>4</sup>

When the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the God of the Bible, it adds these telling words, God is "the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."<sup>5</sup> How are men and women to seek God? The Westminster Divines commend the use of the means of grace. "The Sum of Saving Knowledge" says, "The outward means and ordinances, for making men partakers of the covenant of grace, are so wisely dispensed, as that the elect shall be infallibly converted and saved by them...."<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Goodwin, himself a member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, gives this instruction,

In a word, either a man seeks salvation in subordination to free grace or not; if not, it is just to deny him, because his endeavors, if they speed, would derogate from God's grace. If he seeks salvation subordinately to free grace, then however it falls out, he will have his end; for if he obtains, he says, not unto my endeavors, but to thy grace, be the glory; and so he magnifies grace.<sup>7</sup>

Richard Baxter emphasizes the use of the means of grace in seeking conversion. "That thy understanding may be enlightened, and thy heart renewed, be much and serious in reading the word of God, and those books that are fitted to men in an unconverted state, and especially in hearing the plain and searching preaching of the word."<sup>8</sup> We therefore see the bibli-

cal doctrines underlying the idea of seeking are present in the Puritans and the Westminster Divines. This includes the idea of conviction and awakening. The Directory for the Publick Worship of God gives direction for visiting the sick.

If it appear that he hath not a due sense of his sins, endeavor ought to be used to convince him of his sins, of the guilt and desert of them... to awaken his conscience, and rouse him out of a stupid and secure condition, to apprehend the Justice and wrath of God, before whom none can stand, but he that, lost in himself, layeth hold upon Christ by faith.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. John Gerstner indicates there is an unpublished Puritan dynasty in America carrying on the doctrine of seeking.

It goes from Hooker's *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*, through his son-in-law's (Thomas Shepard's) *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, to Jonathan Edward's *Religious Affections*.<sup>10</sup>

What does Thomas Hooker see as the souls' preparation for Christ? It is the law work, conviction of sin. This is a John the Baptist type work. John preached a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). "It was a baptism of *preparation*."<sup>11</sup> The preparation was coming to grips with sin and the need of forgiveness. "[T]he soul must be so far kept to the consideration of sin, that it may seek out pardon for sin."<sup>12</sup> Hooker tells individuals regarding their sins, to "so far see them, that they may drive you, and compel you to seek unto Christ for mercy: and this is all God looks for, all the Lord requires and cares for in this preparative work...."<sup>13</sup> So we see the Puritans and Westminster build on Calvin, Augustine and the Bible.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Confession of Faith*, 389.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hooker, *The Soul's Preparation for Christ* (Ames, IA: International Outreach, Inc., 1994), iii.

<sup>11</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), 91.

<sup>12</sup> Hooker, 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>1</sup> *The Geneva Bible, A Facsimile of the 1599 Edition* (Ozark, MO: L.L. Brown Publishing, 1995), ii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Second Book of Moses, Called Exodus, The Argument."

<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, Joel R. Beeke, ed. (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992), iii.

<sup>5</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 2:1.

<sup>6</sup> *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms together with The Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988), 324.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith, Works, Vol 8* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 551-552.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 4 vols. (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 1:15.

# IN RESPONSE - "SEEKING," JONATHAN EDWARDS

by Dennis Prutow

Thomas Shepard was a dissenting Puritan who sailed to Boston, in New England, in October of 1635, where he took up a pastorate in Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> His exposition, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, delineates the difference between common and saving grace. It also manifests, the Puritan doctrine of seeking. Regarding sinners, Shepard says,

[Y]et you shall ever find this, if ordinary means awaken them not, terrible flashings and lightnings of wrath do; and in their afflictions, and terrors, and wounds of conscience, (Hos. v. 15.) "They shall seek the Lord early."<sup>2</sup>

Once again, what is the procedure for seeking the Lord? Shepard is plain. He quotes 1 Chronicles 16:11 and Psalm 105:4 and makes comment. "'Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his face evermore;' in all means, at all times, but seek his strength then."<sup>3</sup> Use the means of grace. They are talents.

Look but upon this next parable of the talents, [Matthew 25] verse 25. One of them was cast off and cast out. Why? Because he had no talent? No; but because he had no mind nor list to use his talent; he did not make his gain out of it to attain his end. All ordinances of God, and all time we have under them are talents.<sup>4</sup>

The venerable Solomon Stoddard preceded his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, as pastor in Northampton. While we acknowledge the errors of Stoddard, he stands in the line of the Puritans. His little volume *A Guide to Christ* is an example. Don Kistler hopes the reprinting of this volume "will help the church rediscover the doctrine of 'seeking'...."<sup>5</sup> He adds, "What once was widely accepted as Reformed evangelism has now largely been lost, except for a few who have helped keep it alive."<sup>6</sup>

Stoddard quotes Isaiah 55:6, "Seek the Lord while He may be found." Then he

reminds us, "Men who are seeking salvation must not allow themselves to go in a way of damnation."<sup>7</sup> Rather, they should avail themselves of the means of grace.

The prodigious Jonathan Edwards became pastor in Northampton upon the death of his grandfather in 1729. *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* was published in 1746. John Smith, Editor of the Yale Edition says,

To the revivalist in our time, Edwards has a sobering word, one that is best expressed by biblical paraphrase: "Test the affections and see if they are of God, for many false affections have gone out into the earth."<sup>8</sup>

A proper understanding of seeking evangelism will help us be discerning in contemporary evangelistic work. Smith also indicates, "Edwards quoted more from Shepard than from any other writer, depending chiefly upon *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*."<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan Edwards gives a beautiful outline of what it means to seek the Lord.

By what means is God to be sought? Perhaps there may be some that, having heard that in seeking God we seek his reconciliation, love, communion, and eternal enjoyment, may be ready to hear with a listening ear how God is to be sought. I answer,

*First.* The first thing to be done, is the clearing ourselves of all hindrances and impediments in all works to be performed.... God and sin are the most irreconcilable things in the world....<sup>10</sup>

Biblically, this is the first step. "Seek the Lord while He may be found.... Let the wicked forsake his way" (Isaiah 55:6-7).

*Second.* The second step is to [make] inquiry after God. When we have taken our leave of our sinful courses... we are to set out on our search after God by inquiring after him....

*Third.* By calling after him in prayer: "Ask and receive, knock and it shall be opened unto you, for he that asketh receiveth.".... There must not only be public and family prayer, but secret prayer....

*Fourth.* God is to be sought in those ways where he used to be found, and where he often discovers himself. And what are those ways wherein God used to be found? They are his ordinances: the very end for which God has instituted ordinances, is that in them the children of men may meet with him and find him.

God is wont to be found in these ways; God is wont to command life forevermore upon the mountains of Zion; Christ walks in the midst of his golden candlesticks, and there you may find him. These are the golden pipes by which grace, as precious oil, is conveyed into the soul; these are the breasts of holy and heavenly consolation....

You see that Christ commands us to go by the footsteps of the flock, in the common path, wherein believers have gone before us and found him, in the way where Christ used to be found. And where is that? Beside the shepherds' tents; that is, in the way of God's ordinances. This is a way which God himself has marked out, and which has been found successful by thousands. We need not wander in the wilderness, where there is no way, but we have a track; yea, a plain path to be a direction to us, and what we have to do is to run on with all our might in this path.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of seeking is Scriptural. It is a creation ordinance. There is an impressive train of interpreters who take the idea of seeking seriously. We easily follow a trail through Augustine to Calvin, from the Geneva Bible to the Puritans and Westminster Divines to the American Puritans, Hooker, Shepard and Edwards. Yet the doctrine is little seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Stoddard, *A Guide to Christ* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), v.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, John E. Smith, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1720-1723*, Wilson H. Kimnach, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 379.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 380-381