

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF PRAYER: AN EXAMINATION OF BOOK 3, CHAPTER 20 OF THE INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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Anyone who undertakes an examination of Calvin's theology soon discovers that the subject of prayer looms large in his thinking. This is due to the fact that prayer is not simply another of the divisions of theological study; it is, rather, of the essence of Christian existence. Thus, Calvin's consciousness of being a teacher of the church finds frequent expression in his exposition of this doctrine, both systematically in the *Institutes*¹ and more fragmentarily in the sermons and commentaries.² Calvin's estimation of the importance of prayer is best expressed in his own words: "The principal exercise which the children of God have is to pray; for in this way they give a true proof of their faith."³ Prayer, then, is *the* distinguishing mark of the believing person, because he instinctively casts his burdens upon the Lord.⁴

The purpose of this article is to make Calvin's teaching on prayer in book three, chapter 20 of the *Institutes* as accessible as possible, particularly to those who find the unabridged *Institutes* to be formidable reading.⁵ I have sought to let Calvin speak for himself with a minimum of comment, since his own words can hardly be improved upon.

1. *The Necessity of Prayer*

In Calvin's discussion of prayer in the *Institutes*, it is indeed significant that he begins with a transitional statement which looks back to those previous sections of his work concerning Christian soteriology and forms a natural bridge to the subject at hand. At the beginning of book three Calvin commences his explanation of the way in which we receive the grace of Christ. In addition to providing theological expositions of such matters as regeneration, justification and election, Calvin is concerned to inculcate upon his readers a proper estimation of themselves as respects the grace of God in the gospel. As T. H. L. Parker comments:⁶

Let us remind ourselves of Calvin's purpose: he was writing a compendium of the Christian faith to teach those hungering and thirsting after Christ the way of salvation. The sum of what he has said so far is that in Christ God has set before us, who in ourselves are empty and poor, the treasures of his grace. We must turn to him, begging him to supply our needs. The argument therefore demands the chapter on prayer.

Thus, his discussion is replete with exhortations for Christians to be clothed with a humility which befits those who have been rescued from the present evil age. Accordingly, it is no surprise that he initiates his teaching on prayer with a reminder of our natural destitution and perennial dependence upon that grace which the Lord willingly and freely offers in Christ. Again in his words:⁷

From those matters so far discussed, we clearly see how destitute and devoid of all good things man is and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere.

So the stage is set by the statement of a general principle which is basic and essential to the believer's invocation of God. This principle can hardly be overestimated, for the same awareness of one's own lack of spiritual resources which drives a man to the cross to implore God's mercy provides the orientation from which the redeemed sinner now entreats at the same throne, that overflowing spring which provides every benefit necessary to sustain our believing existence.⁸ With a reference to Rom 10:14-17, Calvin epitomizes the matter: "Just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God's name."⁹ From the foregoing it is clear that there is a necessity for prayer on the part of the saints because there is a need of communion with God, a need which is occasioned by the fundamental facts of human weakness and dependence upon the Creator. For this reason Calvin enters into a consideration of the necessity of prayer in sections two and three of chapter twenty.

It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the heavenly Father. For there is a communion of men with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to him in person concerning his promises in order to experience, where necessity so demands, that what they believed was not in vain, although he had promised it in word alone. Therefore, we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.¹⁰

It is of considerable importance that this statement be appreciated. The necessity of prayer is due to the fact that it is by communion with God that we lay hold of the promises. Apart from prayer, the promises of God remain locked up in his Word; and although for the believing mind the promises are sure and irrevocable, *prayer is the divinely appointed means by which the faithful experience the benefits of their salvation*, which otherwise would simply reside in the treasure house of heaven. But we should not forget the factor of human need, for in receiving the promised blessings we are enabled successfully to bear up under the burdens of our present condition in the midst of a world alienated from God and find rest for our souls.

Hence comes an extraordinary peace and repose to our conscience. For having disclosed to the Lord the necessity that was pressing upon us, we ever rest fully in the thought that none of our ills is hid from him who, we are fully convinced, has both the will and the power to take the best care of us.¹¹

The terms in which Calvin replies to those who detract from the necessity of prayer provide a significant insight into its institution by God. He reiterates that prayer is a divine appointment, but adds that the benefits of this appointment are essentially focused on *man*. Granted, he says, that our invocations serve to display our recognition of the heavenly

origin of those blessings which we receive, nevertheless, prayer is specifically designed to bring profit to *the petitioner* of those blessings. We pray, in other words, not to aid God but to aid ourselves. Hence, the omniscience of God in no way serves to make prayer needless verbiage on our part.

Yet Calvin is not content to let matters rest with such a general statement. He proceeds to enumerate six specific reasons for prayer. In the next section he will proceed to give us his rules for prayer, but before he does so he wishes to impress upon us that one *must* pray.

First, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as a sacred anchor. Secondly, that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayers remind us come from his hand. Fourthly, moreover, that having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently. Fifthly, that at the same time we embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers. Finally, that use and experience may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm his providence, while we understand not only that he promises never never to fail us, and of his own will opens the way to call upon him at the very point of necessity, but also that he ever extends his hand to help his own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help.¹²

The natural conclusion is that although God seems to be slumbering and unattentive to our condition, he purposely appears thus to make us entreat him and to experience the benefits of prayer.

2. The Rules of Right Prayer

Having argued forcefully for the necessity of prayer on the part of the needy people of God, Calvin now proceeds to lay before his readers his "rules" for effectual prayer. However, as F. Wendel rightly observes: "In reality, it is a question of the general attitude required of the faithful rather than of precise and clearly distinguishable rules."¹³

a. First Rule: Reverence

This first directive has as its aim a proper disposition of mind, one which consists in a freedom from those worldly cares and desires which detract from the pure contemplation of God and results in a devotion of oneself to prayer which rises above the mundane affairs of this life. This, however, does not mean that the saints are not to bring their troubles before God, but rather that we are to lay aside those extraneous elements which are not *the proper subjects of prayer*.

I say that we are to rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind, itself a wanderer, is borne about

hither and thither, drawn away from heaven, and pressed down to earth. I mean that it ought to be raised above itself that it may not bring into God's sight anything our blind and stupid reason is wont to devise, nor hold itself within the limits of its own vanity.¹⁴

Two conclusions follow from these words. First of all, an effort is required on the part of the one who prays to avoid all frivolity and irrelevant thoughts which tend to steal in and disrupt the prayer which alone is acceptable to God. Calvin states: "Let us recall how unworthy it is, when God admits us to intimate conversation, to abuse his great kindness by mixing sacred and profane; but as if the discourse were between us and an ordinary man, amidst our prayers we neglect him and flit hither and thither."¹⁵ He observes that the way to avoid this type of prayer is to lift our minds to behold and contemplate the majesty of God as the one who is far removed from us. Thus, Scripture characterizes the prayer of the godly in terms of the lifting up of the hands or the soul.

In short, the more generously God deals with us, gently summoning us to unburden our cares into his bosom, the less excusable we are if his splendid and incomparable benefit does not outweigh all else with us and draw us to him, so that we apply our minds and efforts zealously to prayer. This cannot happen unless the mind, stoutly wrestling with these hinderances rises above them.¹⁶

The second conclusion concerns the indiscriminate petitioning of God with respect to whatever may enter our hearts. To be sure, we are bidden to lay our needs before the Lord and to empty our hearts before him. Nevertheless, he does not accommodate those wicked emotions which issue in rash and improper request, which are not honouring to himself and which cannot benefit the one who prays. Calvin observes that in antiquity even certain profane authors derided those who thus addressed themselves to the deity. Then he makes the following application: ¹⁷

"Even so today, as I have just suggested, men in their prayers grant more license to their unlawful desires than if equals were jestingly to gossip with equals, yet, God does not allow his gentle dealing to be thus mocked, but claiming his own right, he subjects our wishes to his power and bridles them. For this reason, we must hold fast to John's statement: "this is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us."

In spite of the demand Calvin has placed on praying saints, he does not naively assume that we can simply conform to this rule of right prayer at will, "because our abilities are far from able to match such perfection, we must seek a remedy to help us."¹⁸ The power required to direct our thoughts wholly towards God and think that which is acceptable in his sight is entirely lacking in the sinner. "Therefore, in order to minister to this weakness, God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and temper our emotions."¹⁹ After citing Rom 8:26, Calvin remarks that the apostle does not mean to say that the Spirit prays for us, but that he:²⁰

arouses in us assurance, desires and sighs, to conceive which our natural powers would scarcely suffice. And Paul,

with good reason, calls "unspeakable" these groans which believers give forth under the guidance of the Spirit; for they who are truly trained in prayers are not unmindful that, perplexed by blind anxieties, they are so constrained as scarcely to find out what is expedient for them to utter.

It is a rare gift to be able to pray rightly. Nevertheless, this provides no excuse for sloth, nor does it mean that one is idly to wait for the Spirit to come and fill the mind.

Loathing our inertia and dullness, we should seek such aid of the Spirit... The Spirit empowers us so to compose prayers as by no means to hinder or hold back our own effort, since in this matter God's will is to test how effectively faith moves our hearts.²¹

b. Second Rule: We Pray from a Sincere Sense of Want and with Penitence

Having spoken with clarity about the sinner's inability to pray rightly, it is not surprising that Calvin's second rule concentrates on the need for a sense of destitution on the part of the petitioner. Nothing is more ineffectual than a prayer uttered from habit or mere duty without an accompanying disposition of mind which renders the heart contrite and causes it to implore the help of God. When for the sake of mere performance prayer is offered to the Lord, he is unquestionably mocked.

A second error in this regard has to do with the "meditations" which supposedly appease God but which are devoid of necessity and urgency. Says Calvin: "Now the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they yearn for it with sincere affection of heart, and at the same time desire to obtain it from him."²² Clearly, the import of Calvin's second rule is that our utter lack of resources ought to cause us to seek God's mercy in providing our needs. Just as the punitive function of the law does not stand as an end in itself but serves a gracious purpose, likewise the Spirit stirs in us an awareness of our own emptiness and leads us by means of prayer to be filled. The same principle holds true in those prayers which apparently relate only to the honour of God apart from our personal good. For example, when we pray that God's name be sanctified, we should ourselves strive after sanctification.

In section seven of chapter twenty, Calvin proceeds to answer the objection that "we are not always urged with equal necessity to pray." The reply is twofolds. First, quoting the words of Jas 5:13, he concedes that there is a certain sense in which this is true: "Common sense itself dictates that, because we are too lazy, God pricks us the more sharply, as occasion demands, to pray earnestly."²³ This is David's "seasonable time" in which discomforts and trials press us, when God summons us to himself. Then, there is another truth which must be taken into account. In two places Paul bids Christians to "pray at all times" [Eph 6:18; 1 Thess 5:17]. This applies even in times of happiness and prosperity, because "there is no point of time when our need does not urge us to pray."²⁴ The pious mind recognizes that whatever bounty there is comes from the hand of God. In addition, considering the many dangers and threats which surround us, "fear itself will teach us that we at no single time may leave off praying."²⁵

If fear of material disaster compels us to remain steadfast in prayer, how much more does this apply to spiritual matters, because a consciousness of sin will not permit the

believer to be lax in his supplications for pardon. When this is fully realized, then it becomes apparent why we are so frequently admonished in Scripture to "pray constantly." Calvin rightly discerns that there is an implicit rebuke in this depiction of our sloth. It is our very inattentiveness and lack of constancy which occasions the Biblical writers to direct their admonitions towards us. In light of this he can say that right prayer demands repentance.²⁶ That is to say, the very fact that the Word of God condemns intermittent prayers and commends constant prayer as the means of imploring forgiveness naturally involves the petitioner in a renunciation of those inadequacies which are characteristic of hypocritical prayer. Hence, the Scriptures declare that God does not hear the prayers of the wicked: "For it is right that they who bar their hearts should find God's ears closed, and that they who by their hardheartedness provoke his severity should not feel him conciliatory."²⁷ Calvin rounds off his exposition of this rule by saying, "Let each one, therefore, as he prepares to pray be displeased with his own evil deeds, and...let him take the person and disposition of a beggar."²⁸

c. Third Rule: We Yield all Confidence in Ourselves and Humbly Plead for Pardon

This third word of counsel exhibits a further progression of thought. The preceding paragraphs placed emphasis on the spiritual conditions of the praying believer; this rule, accordingly, deals with a resultant state of mind based on the previous directive. In other words, we are to approach God in prayer only after we have put away all self-assurance, "lest if we claim for ourselves anything, even the least bit, we should become vainly puffed up, and perish at his presence."²⁹ Thus, the essence of this third rule is that of submission to the holiness of God and a dependence on his provision which accords with a proper estimation of oneself. Such a procedure entails a confession of sin. By means of a "devious figure of speech," Calvin illustrates that the Christian is not as a man who mingles with the crowd in an attempt to hide himself, but he "confesses his guilt as an individual, and as a suppliant takes refuge in God's pardon."³⁰

In Calvin's conception, prayer has no meaning apart from the plea for sin's forgiveness. "To sum up," he writes, "the beginnings, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt."³¹ Involved in this is a remembrance of daily sins along with others which might seem to have been long forgotten. But it would be a mistake to aim our supplications at release from punishment apart from God's pardon of our offense.

We must guard against imitating foolish sick folk, who, concerned solely with the treatment of symptoms, neglect the very root of the disease... He [i.e., Christ, in Matt 9:2] thus arouses our minds to that which we ought especially to desire: that God may receive us into grace: then in aiding us he may set forth the fruit of reconciliation.³²

He concedes that in Scripture the saints sometimes "shout approval of their own righteousness in calling upon God for help." But these ways of speaking must, first of all, be understood in terms of God's own dealings with an individual: "By such expressions they meaning nothing else but that by their regeneration itself they are attested as servants and children of God, to whom he promises that he will be gracious."³³ Secondly, such prayer is seen to be in accordance with 1 John 3:22: "We shall receive... whatever we ask if we keep his commandments," i.e., God responds to those who maintain themselves in purity and uprightness as all believers should. Thus, when the Psalmist cries, "I am good,"

he simply states that he has been conscientious in the performance of his duty as God's servant. Calvin concludes:

No heart can ever break into sincere calling upon God that does not at the same time aspire to godliness. To such promises, then, correspond the saint's attestations in which they mention their purity or innocence in order that they may feel, what all God's servants should hope for, made manifest to themselves.³⁴

d. Fourth Rule: We Pray with Confident Hope

A final rule concludes the progression of thought in this segment of Calvin's exposition of prayer. One would be tempted to infer from his emphasis on our helplessness and unworthiness that we may expect nothing at all from God. But this is why he counterbalances his remarks with the words: "We should be, nonetheless, encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered."³⁵ Thus, in a very real sense our assurance is tied to an awareness of God's justice toward wrongdoers. Calvin admits that this is apparently contradictory. Yet he resolves the problem by reminding his readers of the discussion concerning the relation of faith and repentance.³⁶ The two are bound together inseparably: the one terrifies us, but the other gladdens. Hence, when these two are applied to prayer, the result is that we are held in fear by the majesty of God; but, on the other hand, faith lays hold of the promise that although in ourselves we merit nothing, we are given all for the sake of Christ. In other words, "God's goodness alone raises up those oppressed by their own evil deeds."³⁷

The place of faith occupies Calvin's attention in the discussion of this rule.³⁸ By faith in prayer Calvin means that the petitioner believes that God hears his prayers. Thus, he can state: "They who in doubt and perplexity call upon God, uncertain in their own minds whether they will be heard or not, will gain nothing."³⁹ Hence, faith is the indispensable condition of right prayer, "for only that prayer is acceptable to God which is born, if I may so express it, out of such presumption of faith, and is grounded in unshaken assurance of hope."⁴⁰ This, however, does not overthrow the fact that believers call upon the Lord when they feel quite miserable and downcast. It is important to keep this particularly in view, for "prayer was not ordained that we should be haughtily puffed up before God, or greatly esteem anything of ours, but that, having confessed our guilt, we should deplore our distresses before him, as children unburden their troubles to their parents."⁴¹ Nevertheless, the man of faith realizes that even in the midst of trial God is listening to his prayer and he is able to grant what is asked.

3. *Defective Prayer*

We have seen thus far that Calvin has pressed upon us the necessity of prayer and has given certain "rules" to shape our attitude in prayer. Now he turns to consider the problem of inadequate prayer. Citing the example of certain Old Testament personages, believers and unbelievers alike, he demonstrates how God hearkened to prayers which were not framed according to the rule of his Word. However, Calvin is careful to qualify that a "universal law is not abrogated by individual examples." This means that the normally expected procedure is for one to pray in accordance with the rules already observed. Nevertheless, there are times when prayer is, for some reason or the other, perverted from

the standard of what God requires in his Word. As has been intimated, faulty prayer is uttered by both believers and unbelievers alike. In the latter instance there are those supplications which demonstrate the same intensity of necessity and sincerity as those of the godly. For this reason God is ready to prove his graciousness towards them by granting them their requests. But no one should conclude that these prayers in themselves are acceptable to God. "Nay, it is by this circumstance to emphasize or illuminate his mercy whenever the prayers of unbelievers are not denied to them; and again to incite his true worshippers to pray the more, when they see that even ungodly wailings sometimes do some good."⁴² Yet not all prayers of unbelievers are uttered out of sincere destitution. In the case of Ahab's feigned repentance God was pleased to respond favourably. But even this type of prayer is answered for the purpose of manifesting God's grace, "in order to prove by this evidence how easily entreated he is toward his elect when they come with true conversion to appease him."⁴³

With respect to those defective prayers offered by Christians, we are confronted with more difficult problems. Abraham prayed for Sodom apart from a word from God on the subject. Likewise Joseph prayed for the deliverance of a certain city from divine retribution. But, says Calvin, it is not as though these men were without faith: "Relying upon the general principles by which God bids bestow mercy even upon the unworthy, they did not utterly lack faith, although in this particular instance their opinion deceived them."⁴⁴ Then, citing the words of Augustine, he notes that the saints in question were not endeavouring to obviate God's decretive will, but rather based their supplications on that which had been revealed to them as being right in principle. In response to such an attitude, God "so tempers the outcome of events according to his incomprehensible plan that the prayers of the saints, which are a mixture of faith and error, are not nullified."⁴⁵ All of this, however, does not excuse the saints, neither is it an example for imitation. The conclusion is that "where no certain promise shows itself, we must ask of God conditionally."⁴⁶

These observations lead Calvin to reflect further on forgiveness and prayer. With a glance backward to the four rules, he reminds us that reverence and moderation must be observed in order to keep us from that type of prayer which requires repentance and forgiveness. Even David, in Calvin's opinion, expresses at times intemperance in his cries to God.⁴⁷ The lesson to be learned is that in the midst of trial the saints often utter prayers which are not entirely consonant with the Word of God.⁴⁸ "All prayers marred by these defects deserve to be repudiated. Nevertheless provided the saints bemoan their sins, chastising themselves, and immediately return to themselves, God pardons them."⁴⁹

4. *Christ the Intercessor*⁵⁰

In logical fashion, Calvin passes to a discussion of Christ, the intercessor of our prayers to the Father. His burden in giving Christ the preeminence is twofold. For one, the believing heart, as soon as it contemplates the majesty of God, becomes fearful and reluctant to call upon him for anything. Hence, Calvin commends Christ to the saints that they may be encouraged. Secondly, he is jealous to maintain the honoured position of Christ as the only mediator between God and men. After citing several texts from John's Gospel to establish Christ's right to this position, he concludes: "Hence it is incontrovertibly clear that those who call upon God in another name than that of Christ obstinately flout his commands and count his will as nought - indeed, have no promise of obtaining anything. Indeed, as Paul says, "all God's promises find their yea and amen in him." That is, they are confirmed and fulfilled."⁵¹

In Calvin's discussion of this point it is the exalted Christ who is portrayed as the intercessor on behalf of his people's prayers. He notes that in John 16:26 Jesus points to a future time (after the ascension) when he will begin his mediatorial activity. But before pursuing this line of thought, he is careful to qualify that from the beginning of prayer itself Christ was the one for whose sake alone the godly were heard. It was particularly the Mosaic regulations that were used by God to teach his people the truth that only by means of an intercessor could any supplication be brought into his presence. But why, then, does the mediator assign a new time in which prayer is offered in his name? Calvin answers by intimating that the grace of Christ is more resplendent among us today. Then he explicitly affirms that on the basis of his work Christ now stands as "a surer advocate of the church than he had been before."⁵² The disciples are bidden to pray in Christ's name for the first time not because they hitherto had been ignorant of the doctrine of the Messiah, but because until then they had been unaware that their prayers were to be heard through the intercessory work of the man Jesus Christ. Calvin relates: "To console their grief at his absence with some uncommon benefit, He takes upon himself the office of the advocate, and teaches that they had hitherto lacked the peculiar blessing that will be given them to enjoy when, relying upon his protection, they more freely call upon God. Thus the apostle says that the new way is consecrated by his blood."⁵³

This phase of the discussion is rounded off by a consideration of the intercessory activity of believers. After again making it clear that there is no other access to God except through Christ the mediator, Calvin affirms that the mediating ministry of Christians is dependent on that of the Head. Thus, the relation of Christ's people in one body dictates that all individual prayers of intercession be channelled, as it were, through Christ the one great intercessor. So it is that all our petitions on behalf of others are directed to Christ, who in turn intercedes with the Father. "Our own praying is nothing other than our uniting ourselves with the prayer of Christ; and we have no hope of being heard unless he precedes us with his prayer."⁵⁴

5. Public and Private Prayer

After pausing to rebuff the Roman doctrine of the intercession of the saints, Calvin proceeds to unfold the two basic types of prayer, private and public.

a. Private Prayer

Taking up private prayer first, he explains that although prayer is essentially composed of entreaties and supplications, thanksgiving should also be included.⁵⁵ Scripture enjoins both petition and thanksgiving because, by the very nature of the case, the two are practically inseparable. The realities of life drive us to invoke God's mercy in prayer. In turn, God heaps upon us such benefits that "we are well-nigh overwhelmed by so great and so plentiful an outpouring of benefactions, by so many and mighty miracles discerned wherever one looks, that we never lack reason and occasion for praise and thanksgiving."⁵⁶ It may be reasonably inferred from Calvin's treatment that all prayer consists of both entreaty and thanksgiving, since the former inevitably results in the latter. According to Wallace: "We can pray aright only if our hearts are pervaded by a true sense of gratitude to God, since prayer must arise from a feeling of love. Otherwise the heart will not unburden itself with true spontaneity before God."⁵⁷ One assumes that Calvin would have endorsed the principle that our thanksgiving ought to be as frequent and specific as our supplication.

b. Public Prayer

The transition to public prayer is made by urging upon the church the same constancy which had been commended in private prayer. However, owing to the nature of public assemblies, public prayer cannot be so constant as it is in private. The common consent of all involved is the determining factor as to the hours and other considerations which determine the specifics of public prayer. The rule is that everything must be done "decently and in order." This, of course, does not "preclude each church from being both repeatedly stirred up to more frequent use of prayer and fired by a sharper zeal if it is alerted by some major need."⁵⁸ Indeed, patient perseverance in prayer must characterize the church at prayer.⁵⁹ However, what is prohibited is the sort of vain repetition forbidden by Christ (Matt 6:7) which seeks to "wrest something from God by beating upon his ears with a garrulous flow of talk, as if he could be persuaded as men are."⁶⁰ Such prayer ranks us among the hypocrites. A related danger in public prayer concerns the hypocritical practise of panting after many witnesses in order to secure their applause and approbation. For this reason private prayer is commended by the Lord as being the most proper expression of the nature of prayer, because "the essentials of prayer are set in the mind and heart, or rather...prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God the searcher of hearts."⁶¹

In so saying, however, Calvin does not intend in the least to question the propriety or usefulness of public prayer. Quite the contrary, he cites several texts which bid us pray in the assembly of the church: "We must consider that whoever refuses to pray in the holy assembly of the saints knows what it is to pray individually, or in a secret spot, or at home." In addition, long ago God taught that "the chief part of his worship lies in the office of prayer;" and in designating the temple as the "house of prayer," Scripture signifies the centrality of public prayer.⁶²

From the consideration that public prayers are ordained of God and necessary for the life of the church Calvin draws the inference that public buildings are both useful and necessary. These are the "public temples...in which those who spurn fellowship with God's people have no occasion to give the false excuse that they enter into their bedroom to obey the Lord's command."⁶³ Nevertheless, the Christian church must not commit the mistake of both Jews and Pagans by considering the building itself to be God's proper dwelling place, "for since we ourselves are God's true temple, we must pray within ourselves."⁶⁴ Because believers in their own persons are the temple of the Spirit, and since we are to call upon God in Spirit and truth without distinction of place, we must avoid cleaving to any material building as if it were indispensable to the rightful worship of God. This relation of prayer and building has been the common understanding of the people of God from the beginning, even under the law.⁶⁵

The discussion at this point turns to a matter related to prayer, singing in public worship. Calvin warns against either prayer or song which comes "only from the lip and from the throat," i.e., words taken upon the lips without the accompanying affection of the heart. Such activity arouses God's anger against us, "seeing that this is to abuse his most holy name and to hold his majesty in derision."⁶⁶ He is careful to state, however, that he is not condemning but commending singing and prayer, because such acts of worship are especially suited to the human constitution. "Since the glory of God ought, in a measure, to shine in the several parts of our bodies, it is especially fitting that the tongue has been assigned and destined for this task, both through singing and through talking. For it was peculiarly created to tell and proclaim the praise of God."⁶⁷

The Biblical mandate for singing is provided by 1 Cor 14:15 and Col 3:16. In the first passage we are taught that singing should be done with voice and heart; in the second spiritual songs are commended for the mutual edification of the godly. Yet Calvin's attraction to public singing does not blind him to the fact that the practice can be abused and thereby become more dangerous than profitable. Singing is to be "tempered with that gravity which is fitting in the sight of God and the angels." When this is done, our song lends both dignity and grace to our worship and "has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray."⁶⁸ Though, he hastens to add, "we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words."⁶⁹

As a historical note, Calvin's preference was to *reform* the singing of the Roman Catholic church, not to eliminate it, as Augustine before him was also inclined. The effect of Calvin's reform is a moderation which is to be maintained in the use of songs of praise, because "such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight to the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree."⁷⁰ Finally, public prayer should be in the language of the people.

It plainly appears that public prayers must be couched not in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English, as has heretofore been the custom, but in the language of the people, which can be generally understood by the whole assembly. For this ought to be done for the edification of the whole church, which receives no benefit whatever from a sound not understood.⁷¹

6. The Lord's Prayer

Calvin prefaces his exposition of the Lord's Prayer with a brief treatment of its purpose and structure. This prayer commended by Christ to his Church provides the form or format according to which Christians are to pray. In other words, the Lord's Prayer is a resumé or abstract of the content of prayer. As Calvin explains, God both warns and urges us to seek his aid, as children who take refuge in the protection of their parents. But, as always, the factor of sin must be accounted for. Thus it is that the Lord's Prayer directs us in right supplication by providing the guidelines of our invocation of God. This prayer, in other words, expresses the mind of God himself as respects the substance of prayer.⁷² This is necessary, because by nature we are so concerned with ourselves that the glory of God, not to mention what is really good for us, is lost in those petitions which seek our own advantage apart from the Lord's will.

As to the division of the prayer, Calvin distinguishes six petitions.⁷³ He observes that the prayer in its entirety gives the chief place to God's glory, though the first three petitions are especially devoted to the consideration of that glory. In the other three, believers pray for themselves and the care which God bestows upon them. He emphatically affirms that this order of the petitions teaches us that regardless of our need or affliction, the honour of God must be regarded as of foremost importance. Even so, God is gracious, and the second set of petitions expresses that grace by being a promise of God's provision for all the needs of his people. Thus, for Calvin any benefit from the Lord must be looked upon as an act of grace, and our own needs - pressing though they may be - must be subordinated to a higher good.

An exposition of the prayer, too lengthy to be reproduced here, follows.

Afterwards Calvin further stresses its importance for the praying Christian with the remark that this is the *only* prayer to be uttered by the believer.

We have everything we ought, or are able to seek of God, set forth in this form and, as it were, rule handed down by our best master, Christ, whom the Father has appointed our teacher and to whom alone he would have us harken... And this prayer is in all respects so perfect that any extraneous or alien thing added to it is impious and unworthy to be approved by God. For in this summary he has set forth what is worthy of him, acceptable to him, necessary for us - in effect, what he would willingly grant.⁷⁴

In addition, those who go farther and add anything: (1) desire to add to God's wisdom, which is tantamount to blasphemy; (2) do not content themselves with God's will, but hold it in contempt; (3) never obtain what they request, since they pray without faith. But Calvin hastens to add that we are not bound to the very words of the prayer, for, as he observes, many prayers of Scripture are composed by the same Spirit yet differ greatly in wording. Therefore, it is not the form but the *content* of the prayer which we are to reproduce.

As a sensitive pastor, Calvin concludes his exposition of the Lord's Prayer by giving some directions for our prayer lives and by exhorting us to continued constancy in prayer. He would have us set aside certain hours of the day for prayer: "Those hours should not pass without prayer, and during them all the devotion of the heart should be completely engaged in it."⁷⁵ He specifies four times: "When we arise in the morning, before we begin our daily work, when we sit down to a meal, when by God's blessing we have eaten, when we are getting ready to retire."⁷⁶ This procedure, however, should not degenerate into a superstitious observance of hours, but rather provide a "tutelage" or disciplined routine as a counteraction to our laziness or weakness.

To correct any misunderstanding of the programme outlined above, two further cautions are appended. In the first place, our prayers are not necessarily to be confined to the proposed schedule. This particularly applies to those times of special adversity or prosperity when our hearts are exercised either to implore God's mercy or to express joyful thanks for benefits received. A second caution concerns the temptation to bring God's working into conformity with our peculiar circumstances. In formulating this principle, Calvin supplies a needed word of counsel for our own practice of prayer.

In all prayer we ought carefully to observe that our intention is not to bind God to particular circumstances, or to prescribe at what time, in what place, or in what way he is to do anything. Accordingly, in this prayer we are taught not to make any law for him, or to impose any condition on him, but to leave to his decision to do what he is to do, in what way, at what time, and in what place it seems good to him. Therefore, before we make any prayer for ourselves we pray that his will be done. By these words we subject our will to his in order that, restrained, by a bridle, it may not presume to control God but make him the arbiter and director of all its entreaties.⁷⁷

7. Concluding Counsel

The last words on the subject of prayer are written with a view to two perennial problems: perseverance in prayer and unanswered prayer.

a. Perseverance in Prayer⁷⁸

If we are committed to the conception of God's providence just depicted, we will allow ourselves to be ruled by the laws of this providence. If we patiently wait for the Lord, "then we shall be sure that, even though he does not appear, he is always present to us, and will in his own time declare how he has never had ears deaf to the prayers that in men's eyes he seems to have neglected."⁷⁹ Not to approach prayer with this frame of mind is to commit the error of so many: unless God hears their first prayers, they conclude that he is angry and hostile toward them. Such is not the pattern of the Ps in particular, because in Scripture we see that David and others are almost worn out with praying and seem to have beaten the air with their prayers, and yet they do not cease to pray; "for, unless the faith placed in it is superior to all events, the authority of God's Word does not prevail."⁸⁰

If this rule is not followed, it is possible that we can tempt God with our depravity, provoking him against ourselves.

This is usual with many who covenant with God only under certain conditions, and, as if he were the servant of their own appetites, bind him to laws of their own stipulation. If he does not obey them at once, they become indignant, grumble, protest, murmur, and rage at him. To such, therefore, *he often grants in wrath and fury what in mercy he denies to others to whom he is favorable.*⁸¹

b. Unanswered Prayer⁸²

Prayer, as every Christian knows, often seems to go unheard. Furthermore, our inherent sinfulness causes us to complain and protest against God because he does not respond according to our timetable. But, says Calvin, prayer which remains unanswered in the present teaches us that we are to submit to God's providence in believing expectation that our wishes do not fall on deaf ears and that God is willing to grant our requests if, as we have seen, they are formed according to the rule of the Lord's Prayer. Hence, prayer which is not immediately answered develops patience.

Believers need to be sustained by this patience, since they would not long stand unless they relied upon it. For the Lord proves his people by no light trials, and does not softly exercise them, but often drives them to extremity and allows them, so driven, to lie a long time in the mire before he gives them any taste of his sweetness... What could they do here but be discouraged and rush into despair if they were not, when, afflicted, desolate, and already half dead, revived by the thought that God has regard for them and will bring an end to their present misfortunes? Nevertheless however they stand upon the assurance of that hope, they do not meanwhile cease to pray, for unless there be in prayer a constancy to persevere, we pray in vain.⁸³

¹Citations are from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), hereafter referred to as *Inst.*, and cited by book, chapter, and paragraph.

²See the copious references in Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1959) p.271-295; W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p.152-158.

³*Sermon* on 1 Timothy 2:1-2, quoted by Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.271.

⁴*Commentary* on Ps 88:2, cited by Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.282. According to F. Wendel, "Just as Luther had done, Calvin therefore presents prayer as a sort of verification of the faith" [*Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), p.253].

⁵A full discussion of prayer in Calvin is provided by Wallace, *Christian Life*. Of particular note is Wallace's section on intercession (*Christian Life*, p.287-290), an aspect of prayer not dealt with in the *Institutes*.

⁶*John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) p.41. Niesel likewise remarks that the chapter on prayer demonstrates how practical is the purpose of Calvin's whole theology (*Theology of Calvin*, p.156). "It is impossible to think theologically and to discuss God and His revelation in Jesus Christ if we do not realize that every moment we are thrown back upon prayer."

⁷*Inst.* 3.20.1. "Prayer, to which Calvin devotes the whole of the twentieth chapter of Book III, is presented there as the intended result of the sufferings we undergo, and of repentance" (Wendel, *Calvin*, p.253).

⁸"No one can give himself cheerfully to prayer until he has been softened by the Cross and thoroughly subdued" [*Commentary* on Ps 30:9, (quoted by Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.280)].

⁹*Inst.* 3.20.2.

¹⁰*Inst.* 3.20.2.

¹¹*Inst.* 3.20.2.

¹²*Inst.* 3.20.3.

¹³*Calvin*, p.254.

¹⁴*Inst.* 3.20.4.

¹⁵*Inst.* 3.20.5.

¹⁶*Inst.* 3.20.5.

¹⁷*Inst.* 3.20.5.

¹⁸*Inst.* 3.20.5.

¹⁹*Inst.* 3.20.5.

²⁰*Inst.* 3.20.5.

²¹*Inst.* 3.20.5.

²²*Inst.* 3.20.6.

²³*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁴*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁵*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁶*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁷*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁸*Inst.* 3.20.7.

²⁹*Inst.* 3.20.8.

³⁰*Inst.* 3.20.8.

³¹*Inst.* 3.20.9.

³²*Inst.* 3.20.9.

³³*Inst.* 3.20.10.

³⁴*Inst.* 3.20.10.

³⁵*Inst.* 3.20.11.

³⁶*Inst.* 3.3.1-5.

³⁷*Inst.* 3.20.11.

³⁸See further Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.271-274.

³⁹*Inst.* 3.20.11.

⁴⁰*Inst.* 3.20.12.

⁴¹*Inst.* 3.20.12.

⁴²*Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁴³*Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁴⁴*Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁴⁵*Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁴⁶*Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁴⁷*Inst.* 3.20.16. No references are cited. Calvin's point is to be accepted in principle. However, in the case of David it is arguable that his cries to God were entirely appropriate for the occasion (e.g., Ps 3:4). Much more drastically than Calvin, C. S. Lewis once proposed that in Ps 23:5 ("Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies") David assumes an attitude of "pettiness" and "vulgarity" which is "hard to endure" [*Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1968) p.21].

⁴⁸*Inst.* 3.20.16.

⁴⁹*Inst.* 3.20.16.

⁵⁰See further Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.274-276.

⁵¹*Inst.* 3.20.17.

⁵²*Inst.* 3.20.18.

⁵³*Inst.* 3.20.18.

⁵⁴Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, p.154.

⁵⁵Wallace relates that "though Calvin can often treat thanksgiving as an aspect of prayer, he nevertheless can view it at other times as an important aspect of the Christian life worthy of independent treatment apart from anything we may say about prayer. Thanksgiving is 'the chief exercise of godliness' in which we ought to engage during the whole of our life" (*Christian Life*, p.284).

⁵⁶*Inst.* 3.20.28.

⁵⁷Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.285.

⁵⁸*Inst.* 3.20.29.

⁵⁹See section 51.

⁶⁰*Inst.* 3.20.29.

⁶¹*Inst.* 3.20.29.

⁶²*Inst.* 3.20.29.

⁶³*Inst.* 3.20.30.

⁶⁴*Inst.* 3.20.30.

⁶⁵*Inst.* 3.20.30.

⁶⁶*Inst.* 3.20.31.

⁶⁷*Inst.* 3.20.31.

⁶⁸*Inst.* 3.20.32.

⁶⁹*Inst.* 3.20.32.

⁷⁰3.20.32. One wonders (though one can probably guess) what Calvin would have thought of various forms of contemporary Christian music.

⁷¹*Inst.* 3.20.33.

⁷²See Wallace's discussion of prayer as controlled by the Word of God, *Christian Life*, p.276-279.

⁷³In this he differs from both Augustine and Luther, who regarded the clause "but deliver us from evil" as the seventh petition.

⁷⁴*Inst.* 3.20.48.

⁷⁵*Inst.* 3.20.50.

⁷⁶*Inst.* 3.20.50.

⁷⁷*Inst.* 3.20.50.

⁷⁸For further discussion of this aspect of prayer, see further Wallace, *Christian Life*, p. 293-295.

⁷⁹*Inst.* 3.20.51

⁸⁰*Inst.* 3.20.51.

⁸¹*Inst.* 3.20.51. Italics mine.

⁸²In more detail, see Wallace, *Christian Life*, p.290-293.

⁸³*Inst.* 3.20.52.