

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 7

PRAYER WHICH IS THE CHIEF EXERCISE OF FAITH

In this chapter Calvin offers us an in-depth look at prayer. Though people often think of Calvin as a dry, intellectual theologian, he was in fact a man deeply devoted to prayer. His faith was not merely intellectual, but driven by a desire to personally connect with God. In this section Calvin discusses kinds of prayer: private and public.

**Summary:** Calvin previously examined prayers of confession and so here he turns to prayers of petition and thanksgiving. He sees these prayers working together. He says that *“In asking...we pour out our desires before God, seeking those things which make for...his glory...and those benefits which (work) to our own advantage”* (pg. 888). We do this because God is a generous God who *“...does not cease to heap benefit upon benefit in order to impel us...to gratefulness. In short we are so well-nigh overwhelmed by so great and plenteous an outpouring of...so many and mighty miracles...that we can never lack reason and occasion for praise and thanksgiving”* (pg. 888). It would seem a bit ungrateful, Calvin implies, if we were to receive and use all that God gives us in response to our prayers, without saying words of thanks. In addition, these prayers ought to flow out of a sense of love for God and not out of fear.

Calvin then turns to the *“necessity and danger of public prayer”* (p. 890). While Calvin believes firmly in private prayer he is somewhat reluctant to offer the same endorsement to public prayer in church. He doesn't, first because those prayers cannot be constant. Unlike an individual who can be in constant prayer, the church only meets at those times and in those places upon which the people agree, thus its prayers are intermittent. He doesn't, second because public prayer can either be for show, or can be an excuse for people to not engage in private prayer. Even so, churches can be *“...stirred up to more frequent use of prayer (especially if) it is alerted to some major need”* (pg. 891).

He expands on these ideas when he notes that prayer in the church should not be the kind of prayer that tries to wear God down with *“vain repetitions”* intended 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”* (pg. 891). For Calvin this was a constant source of irritation, that people offered up the *“same little prayers”* or used a *“great mass of words”* or prayed in such a way as to not *“miss the world's applause”* (pg. 891). Prayer, for Calvin, whether it be private or public, was supposed to come from *“...the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God”* (pg. 892).

Another form of public prayer for Calvin was singing. He strongly commended singing which flowed from the heart. *“Moreover since the glory of God ought 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 speaking”* (pg. 894). Calvin also pointed out that singing was part of the earliest worship practices of the Apostolic church. Even so, he warns that *“...our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds are to the spiritual meaning of the words”* (pg. 895)

Finally, Calvin expressed his desire that all prayer be in the language of the people, because prayer is for the edification of the whole church and not just for the leaders.

**Reflection:** Calvin's comments about prayer are as germane today as they were when he wrote them. Prayer has been and continues to be, more a private than a public matter. It is a conversation between ourselves and God; one born out of love and gratitude. Public prayer still tends to be problematic and prone to excess (excess words and pomposity). Even so, when properly done, public prayer can link the hearts and minds of a community into single heart and voice before Christ.

**Questions:**

1. For what “mighty miracles” do you give thanks to God?
2. How could you make, if you don't already, singing into a form of prayer?
3. What is your opinion of public prayer?