

(Reference: John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ed McNeill. Trans. F L Battles, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Vol 2, 3:10, p850-901)

Most readers know that I do not uphold or consent to public prayers except for certain precise and scriptural reasons. I do not support the traditional idea of regularly-held prayer meetings, though they are a mainstay of the reformed position, but do support those rare prayer gatherings that echo those found in the New Testament. (For more information on this, see article A-001, 'Are Prayer Meetings Valid?'). This is *almost* reinforced by Calvin's views, which I document extensively.

In this paper we will see how John Calvin viewed private and public prayer, and make comment where necessary. I will not give the whole section, but only that which is pertinent to a brief discussion. (You will need to read the relevant parts of Calvin's 'Institutes' for comparison). Headings shown are those in the Institutes.

Chap.10, 'Faith and Prayer' (p850)

The sub-heading of this section says that prayer is "*the chief exercise of faith, and by which we daily receive God's benefits*". Both statements are consistent with scripture and so are accurate, though I would tend to place the word 'ordinarily' between 'daily' and 'receive', because God can give benefits even without prayer, as He wishes. (Calvin mentions this later).

As Calvin rightly says, man is devoid of everything that is good, "*Therefore*" he needs to seek benefits outside himself – from God and "in Christ". Hence the need for prayer. He sees these benefits as a treasure that most men do not bother to take advantage of... which is as much a sad truth today as it was in Calvin's day.

The necessity of prayer (p850)

We "*reach those riches (by prayer)*"; they are riches *already* laid up for us in Heaven by the Father, Who *expects* us to seek and use them.

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“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 vain, although he had promised it in word alone.”

Note that we *“appeal to him in person”*. We cannot do this in a group (that is, two or more), for each person must approach the Lord alone, with his own needs and pleadings. And we only ask of Him what He has already promised: *“concerning his promises in order to experience (them)”*

It is through this activity that we see we do not believe a delusion, but deal in very real truths – that God gives if we ask. We only ask because it has first been promised by Him!

“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.”

Prayer is the essential lifeline,

“through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us.”

Calvin thus acknowledges that we often approach the Lord in utter weakness, sometimes in panic, or personal turmoil. Yet, God gently keeps us in His hand, in spite of our evident lack of faith and the burdens of life upon us. The important factor is that we keep praying, maintaining contact with the divine, trusting even when all we see is storm and trial. Prayer IS the lifeline:

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

The saved man or woman will call upon God, perhaps in intense fear – but after we have

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spoken we should have peace, for we know God is listening and WILL work on our behalf. Some argue that there is no point in praying if God already knows what we will pray for (p851: ‘*Objection: Is prayer not superfluous?*’).

In this they show a lack of understanding, for prayer is for our sakes and not God’s. We must pray simply because God says we must pray. It is an act of obedience, and it proves our trust. As Calvin put it: “*He wills... that his due is rendered to him*”, and we must pray so that we can see that everything we have comes from Him. He says that the more the Church Fathers extolled God’s benefits, the more they prayed. Prayer, of itself, will not gain us anything, but prayer is still necessary because God says so; we thus gain benefits because we obey the call to pray. He can help us even when we do not ask, yet prayer remains the mainstay of heavenly contact and the receiving of benefits. Calvin speaks of four rules of prayer...

The rules of right prayer (p853) **‘Devout detachment required for conversation with God’.**

Have you been with a person, wishing to speak with him/her about something important in your life, and they keep looking at their watch? How does that make you feel? Well, most people pray to God with the same attitude! They want something from God and yet will not stand still long enough to talk to Him properly. Their mind is on other things, so they blurt out their ‘shopping-list’ demands.

Calvin says the first rule of prayer is that “*we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God.*” We cannot come before God superficially or with no real intention of standing still and discussing our needs fully, with one eye on the clock! We must be prepared to meet with the Creator of the universe, the Almighty Father Who gives us life.

Though we might come to Him with heavy burdens, we must not allow our minds and hearts to press upon us with such a heavy load of care, which must be left outside the door to the Sanctuary. Our discussion with God must solely be to do with Himself, a contemplation of Him alone. With Augustine, Calvin speaks of ‘familiar conversation’ with God – but we must never abuse this relationship with irreverent familiarity or casualness.

This does not mean we forget our woes, which bear down on us like mighty weights:

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“But 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, but rise to a purity worthy of God.”

As far as we are able, then, we must not allow our troubles to dictate the conversation with God. Indeed, as King David always shows us, the very first words should be praise for God. Yet, how many in public prayer meetings tend towards this kind of selfishness? And oh how this selfishness is multiplied by as many people as are in the prayer room! And multiplied manifold throughout the world in organised prayer-meetings

“whoever engages in prayer should apply to it his faculties and efforts, and not, as commonly happens, be distracted by wandering thoughts. For nothing is more contrary to reverence for God than the levity that marks an excess of frivolity utterly devoid of awe. In this matter, the harder we find concentration to be, the more strenuously we ought to labor after it. For no one is so intent on praying that he does not feel many irrelevant thoughts stealing upon him, which either break the course of prayer or delay it by some winding bypath. But here 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 just as if the discourse were between us and an ordinary man, amidst our prayers we neglect him and flit about hither and thither.”

Most public prayer meetings are evidenced by this mind-wandering, of vague thoughts and disjointed pleas, coupled to repeated popular phrases and supposed needs, so general as to be useless. They are the false prayers of laxity, seeking from God what we cannot be bothered to work out ourselves.

This happens because those present ought not be there, for they have nothing important to say, and when they say it they are outside of their closets, which Jesus commanded should be our place of prayer. It also happens when we are alone, and pray dutifully rather than with intent. It can often happen at night when we are laying in our bed... as can happen to myself. (Then, I stop myself, repent, and shut myself up, refusing the meanderings of my sleepy mind, floating between rest and need).

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“Let us therefore realize that the only persons who duly and properly gird themselves to pray are those who are so moved by God's majesty that freed from earthly cares and affections they come to it.”

Calvin says we must rise up above our woes, by *“stoutly wrestling with these hindrances”*, before coming to God with our petitions (p855). Today, those who give in to the woes develop a spiritually-destitute attitude that ruins their life – sometimes called ‘neurosis’, often in the guise of depression and anxiety.

“For even though he bids us pour out our hearts before him

[Ps. 62:8; cf. Ps. 145:19], he still does not indiscriminately slacken the reins to stupid and wicked emotions; and while he promises that he will act according to the will of the godly, his gentleness does not go so far that he yields to their willfulness. Yet in both, men commonly sin gravely; for many rashly, shamelessly, and irreverently dare importune God with their improprieties and impudently present before his throne whatever in dreams has struck their fancy.”

Allied to this tendency is the way men call upon God, daring to put forward their own schemes, hoping He will then ‘rubber stamp’ what their minds and hearts have devised. *“This is the confidence we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us”* [I John 5:14]. In this way Calvin reinforces my own view that we must only pray when God prompts us to do so, and what we pray for must be within His will.

God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us in this (p855: *The Holy Spirit aids right prayer*): *“God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and temper our emotions. For, “because we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit comes to our help,” and “intercedes for us with unspeakable groans” [Rom. 8:26]; not that he actually prays or groans but arouses in us assurance, desires, and sighs, to conceive which our natural powers would scarcely suffice.”*

**Second Rule of Prayer: p 856:
We pray from a sincere sense of want, and with penitence.**

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Few Christians pray like this in organised prayer meetings. Mostly, they pray with other hearers in mind, and many 'pray' because they are expected to. What does Calvin say about this (By 'want' he means our modern 'need')?

He says that a sense of need *"excludes all unreality"*.

"Let this be the second rule: that in our petitions we ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest—nay, burning desire to attain it."

Are you honest enough to admit that this is NOT how prayer meetings are held? Indeed, if this really was our attitude we would not want others to hear our petitions.

It is not enough to just 'pray' when we have nothing of note to pray about. You might object and say that we must always pray. This is true – when our hearts are attuned to the Lord. If they are not, then we just prattle on and on, with vague and useless words of no consequence. Or, we repeat everything every day, *ad nauseum*, which makes it worthless. The kind of prayer referred to by Calvin is genuine prayer, prompted by God in the first place, and cannot be quenched by a quick call to God in between meaningless activities! Calvin puts it this way:

"For many perfunctorily intone prayers after a set form, as if discharging a duty to God. And although they admit it to be a necessary remedy for their ills, because it would be fatal to lack the help of God which they are beseeching, still it appears that they perform this duty from habit, because their hearts are meanwhile cold, and they do not ponder what they ask."

Indeed, a general and confused feeling of their need leads them to prayer, but it does not arouse them, as it were in present reality, to seek the relief of their poverty."

In weekly group prayers we find this kind of worthless activity in abundance! And the hearers, like voyeurs, love to listen to the supposed woes of others, as they proclaim to the world what is wrong in their lives. This is not the same as being humble or honest – it is a kind of self-exposure, a psychological release, or even a secret wish to let everyone know how sinful

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we have been. The discipline of true prayer in our closet is simply not there! Prayers are just rambling confessions and oddities. Calvin says:

“Now what do we account more hateful or even execrable to God than the fiction of someone asking pardon for his sins, all the while either thinking he is not sinner or at least not thinking he is a sinner? Unquestionably something in which God himself is mocked! Yet, as I have just said, mankind is so stuffed with such depravity that for the sake of mere performance men often beseech God for many things that they are dead sure will, apart from his kindness, come to them from some other source, or already lie in their possession.”

And what is worse than being in a meeting and then called upon suddenly to pray, by those in the diaconate or pastorship, or by a small number of friends? Some love to be called upon, for then they can show off their prowess as ‘prayer warriors’. Or, what of being in a prayer meeting, knowing that you have to wait until the others in the circle have their turn? If you are at the end of the line, did you not ask yourself what you can possibly pray for, when just about everything has already been said by the others? All of it is false! All of it is worthless! These kinds of prayers are not genuine, but are forced upon us by the expectations of others. If we are not prompted by the Holy Spirit to pray, then we should be silent.

“A fault that seems less serious but is also not tolerable is that of others who, having been imbued with this one principle—that God must be appeased by devotions—mumble prayers without meditation. 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. Indeed, even though in those things which we seek only to God's glory we do not seem at first glance to be providing for our own need, yet it is fitting that they be sought with no less ardor and eagerness. When, for example, we pray that "his name be sanctified" [Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2], we should, so to speak, eagerly hunger and thirst after that sanctification.”

Calvin then asks *“Is prayer at times dependent upon our passing mood?”* Definitely yes! He accepts that sudden cheer or woe can send us running to God in prayer, but even then we must pray only if we are prompted to do so by the Spirit, for otherwise we allow emotions to rule our hearts and heads, though they are notoriously labile in character. Paul says we must pray at all times – but this does not mean babbling idiocies or irrelevancies that have no purpose. Also, the more we yearn for God and live holy lives, the less likely we are to pray irrelevancies. Rather, the more seriously we take life, the more likely we are to be genuine in prayer:

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“For however much after our heart's desire affairs may prosperously flow and occasion for happiness surround us on all sides, still there is no point of time when our need does not urge us to pray. A certain man has abundant wine and grain. Since he cannot enjoy a single morsel of bread apart from God's continuing favor, his wine cellars and granaries will not hinder him from praying for his daily bread. Now if we should consider how many dangers at every moment threaten, fear itself will teach us that we at no single time may leave off praying.” (p857)

Yet, how many pray at set times? How many ‘set aside’ time to pray? In doing so they show that prayer is more of an hindrance than a help, that they pray out of duty rather than necessity. Pray should be always, not sometimes. This is a life reality, not just one choice out of many! Prayer is an integral part of our attitude, life and activity, not something to be allocated time as a segment equal to all others. How can we allocate a particular ‘quiet time’ when God might speak to us at other times, and not during the ‘quiet time’? Prayer, then, arises spontaneously from a continuous state of mind and heart resting entirely in God.

Perhaps one large problem is how people see prayer as a formal activity. In truth, prayer is talking to God. This can take many forms, from ‘chatting’ to him as we walk through town, to musing with Him when we sit at home, to being on our knees (if we are able!), to asking a question, to complaining about our lot... we cannot stop ourselves thinking, and neither can we stop ourselves praying!

“When do temptations yield us a truce from hastening after help? Moreover, zeal for the Kingdom of God and his glory ought so to lay hold on us, not intermittently but constantly, that the same opportunity may ever remain ours. It is therefore not in vain that constancy in prayer is enjoined upon us.” (p858)

“By this rule, hypocrisy and wily falsehoods toward God are debarred from prayer—indeed, are banished far away! God promises that “he will be near to all who call upon him in truth” [Ps. 145:18], and states that those who seek him with all their heart will find him [Jer. 29:13-14]. (p858)

And those who are unsaved cannot expect God to hear their ‘prayers’. Prayer is a lifeline given only to those who are saved. God does not listen to the prayers of the wicked, the ungodly, and those who are not His through salvation.

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“For this reason, they who delight in their own foulness aspire not at all. Lawful prayer, therefore, demands repentance.

Hence arises the commonplace in Scripture that God does not hearken to the wicked [John 9:31], and that their prayers[cf. Prov. 28:9; Isa. 1:15]—just as their sacrifices [cf. Prov. 15:8; 21:27]—are abominable to him. 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. In Isaiah he threatens in this way: "Even though you multiply your prayers, I will not listen; for your hands are full of blood" [Isa. 1:15, cf, Vg.]. Again, in Jeremiah: "I cried out... and they refused to listen; . . . they will cry out in return, and I will not listen." [Jer. 11:7, 8, 11.].

Most churches contain an unholy mix of saved and unsaved, and the unsaved will join with the saved in their prayer meetings, making matters much worse, for they ‘pray’ aloud before those who are saved, and thus taint what is said during the meeting. They take up time with their unheard prayers, pretending to be heard, and the saved allow them this time, thus devaluing whatever they say themselves. Pastors do not help, when they tell unsaved people to pray to the Lord for help, even though God does not listen to, let alone help, the unsaved.

“It is indeed true, as we shall again see a little later, that the prayers poured out by the godly do not depend upon their worthiness; yet John's warning is not superfluous: "We receive from him whatever we ask because we keep his commandments" [I John 3:22], while a bad conscience closes the door to us.” (p858).

“From this it follows that only sincere worshipers of God pray aright and are heard. Let each one, therefore, as he prepares to pray be displeased with his own evil deeds, and (something that cannot happen without repentance) let him take the person and disposition of a beggar.” (p458-9).

**‘Third Rule’ of prayer (p859):
We yield all confidence in ourselves and humbly plead for pardon.**

“To this let us join a third rule: that anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory completely to God, abandon all thought of his own glory, cast off all notion of his own worth, in fine, 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. We have repeated examples of this submission, which levels all haughtiness, in God's servants; each one of whom, the holier he is, the more he is cast down when he presents himself before the Lord.

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Thus spoke Daniel, whom the Lord himself commended with so great a title: "We do not pour forth our prayers unto thee on the ground of our righteousnesses but on the ground of thy great mercy. O Lord, hear us; O Lord, be kindly unto us. Hear us, and do what we ask . . . for thine own sake . . . because thy name is called upon over thy people, and over thine holy place" [Dan. 9:18-19]. (p859)

By dwelling on our woes and needs we can inadvertently make a glory of them. This is why David always praised the Lord before seeking His face and asking for God to intervene. What does this prove? That our minds are firstly on what we require and not on the holiness and glory of God! Then, His glory becomes just something we add-on to our own requirements, making it of secondary importance. For this reason Calvin says that repentance and a plea for forgiveness is *"the most important part of prayer"* (p860).

"To sum up: the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to him; nor can God chance to be propitious to any but those whom he has pardoned. Accordingly, it is no wonder if believers open for themselves the door to prayer with this key, as we learn from numerous passages of The Psalms. For David, asking for something else than remission of his sins, says: "Remember not the sins of my youth, and my transgressions; according to thy mercy remember me, for thy goodness' sake, O Lord" [Ps. 25:7]. Again: "See my affliction and my toil, and forgive all my sins." [Ps. 25:18]. Also, in this we see that it is not enough for us to call ourselves to account each day for recent sins if we do not remember those sins which might seem to have been long forgotten."

I do not believe Calvin is telling us to always parade our past (and forgiven) sins before God, but that we must be mindful of our past sins so that we remain humble. We should not 'beat ourselves up' over them, but must never rise above our positions as saved persons, as objects cleansed by the Potter, Who could so easily have smashed us to the ground into little pieces.

"Now the saints sometimes seem to shout approval of their own righteousness in calling upon God for help. For example, David says: "Keep my life, for I am good" [Ps. 86:2]; and similarly, Hezekiah: "Remember . . . O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth . . . and have done what is good in thy sight" [II Kings 20:3 p.; cf. Isa. 38:3]. By such expressions they mean 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. He teaches through the prophet, as we have already seen, that his eyes "are upon the righteous, his ears toward their prayers" [Ps. 34:15; cf. 33:16] (p861).

This text does not say we obtain answers to prayer because of our merits or works. It says that God requires us to be holy and repentant, and when we are, He listens. We should bear in mind that when God refers to 'sinners' it includes the saved who have not repented (p862).

Therefore, it is foolishness and arrogance that says "God accepts us as we are"! This is very commonly heard in our churches, though it is vain. It is true that God calls us in our unsaved state as we are (unsaved), but He does not accept us until we are born again and saved! In particular, God does NOT 'accept us as we are' when we are saved and we sin. He demands that we repent before He will listen to our pleas. Otherwise, we stand no more opportunity to have our prayers answered than we do if we are unsaved.

Fourth Rule: We pray with confident hope (p862)

"The fourth rule is that, thus cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered. These are indeed things apparently contrary: to join the firm assurance of God's favor to a sense of his just vengeance; yet, on the ground that God's goodness alone raises up those oppressed by their own evil deeds, they very well agree together. For, in accordance with our previous teaching that repentance and faith are companions joined together by an indissoluble bond, although one of these terrifies us while the other gladdens us, so also these two ought to be present together in prayers."

On many occasions David mentions joy and fear in the same breath. They are both compatible and genuine. In my book about miracles I speak of the way I knew joy that God had intervened in my life, but this quickly led to fear, that Almighty God should bother with such as me, a sinner saved by grace. God is to be feared, for He is great and can do with us whatever He wishes. Even His many helps do not remove this fear. Yet, it is a fear that sits well with joy (p863).

Calvin then offers a useful note on assurance:

"But "assurance" I do not understand to mean that which soothes our mind with sweet and perfect repose, releasing it from every anxiety. For to repose so peacefully is the part of those who, when all affairs are flowing to their liking, are touched by no care, burn with no desire, toss with no fear. But for the saints the occasion that best stimulates them to call upon God is when, distressed by their own need, they are troubled by the greatest unrest, and are almost driven out of their senses, until faith opportunely comes to their relief. For among such tribulations God's goodness so shines upon them that even when they groan with weariness under the weight of present ills, and also are troubled and tormented by the fear of greater ones, yet,

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relying upon his goodness, they are relieved of the difficulty of bearing them, and are solaced and hope for escape and deliverance. It is fitting therefore that the godly man's prayer arise from these two emotions, that it also contain and represent both. That is, that he groan under present ills and anxiously fear those to come, yet at the same time take refuge in God, not at all doubting he is ready to extend his helping hand. It is amazing how much our lack of trust provokes God if we request of him a boon that we do not expect." (863).

Christians think that once they have prayed, God will remove all anxiety. This is not so, as Calvin correctly points out. Disquiet of soul is often necessary for us to reach out to God! Thankfully, the Lord DOES give us respite from continuous fears, but it is an error to think that all will be a 'bed of roses' when we have prayed. Rather, the very troubles we continue to experience strengthen our souls enormously, just as a seasoned warrior gains in ability and strength the more he fights.

Concerning answers to prayer, Calvin mentions what scripture says (under the sub-title: 'Prayer and faith'):

"Therefore nothing is more in harmony with the nature of prayers than that this rule be laid down and established for them: that they not break forth by chance but follow faith as guide. Christ calls this principle to the attention of all of us with this saying: "I say unto you, whatever you seek . . . , believe that you will receive it, and it will come to you" [Mark 11:24]. He confirms the same statement in another place: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believing . . . ," etc. [Matt. 21:22]. James is in accord with this: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men simply and without reproaching. . . . Let him ask in faith, with no wavering" [James 1:5~6]. There, opposing faith to wavering, he most appropriately expresses the force of faith. Nonetheless, what he adds must also be noted: that they who in doubt and perplexity call upon God, uncertain in their minds whether they will be heard or not, will gain nothing [cf. James 1:7]."

This demands far more than saying 'yes, I believe'. Anyone can say they believe something to be true, when all is going well! And even more say they believe, just because it is the right thing to say. When your pleading appears not to be answered and you know of no sinful impediment, and yet the problem continues untouched... faith is battered and in danger of being crushed.

When it seems God has not heard and has not answered, it is then that hope may be lost. But, that is the very point at which to believe, for it is the weakest link in our spiritual life. If we give in

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at that crucial juncture, we will never know the answer of God. I can assure readers that I have come to this kind of juncture many times and God has always answered at the very last moment. Why? Probably because I am hard to convince! Calvin underscores this truth of faith...

"Hence, in another passage, James calls what is right and proper "the prayer of faith" [James 5:15]. Then, since God so often affirms that he will give to each one according to his faith [Matt. 8:13; 9:29; Mark 11:24], he implies that we can obtain nothing apart from faith." (p864)

This faith need not be large – Jesus Himself said that even if it is the size of a mustard seed, we will see an answer to our prayer.

"To sum up, it is faith that obtains whatever is granted to prayer. Such is the meaning of Paul's famous statement, which the unwise too little regard: "How will anyone call upon him in whom he has not believed? And who will believe unless he has heard?" [Rom. 10:14]. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the Word of God." [Rom. 10:17]. For, deducing step by step the beginning of prayer from faith, he plainly asserts that God cannot be sincerely called upon by others than those to whom, through the preaching of the gospel, his kindness and gentle dealing have become known—indeed, have been intimately revealed." (p864)

Here I must add to Calvin's definition, for it is not faith itself that gains anything in prayer. Rather, faith is given by God when we go towards Him, and we go towards Him because He prompts us to do so. Ultimately, it is God Who gives the answer to prayer THROUGH the faith we exhibit BECAUSE He calls us and equips us to be obedient to the call. Though Calvin is incomplete in his definition, yet he is correct, for faith is the obedience required of God for us to obtain the answer. Otherwise, it could be argued that faith is gained by works.

"... when we enjoin believers to be convinced with firm assurance of mind that God is favorable and benevolent to them, they think we are saying the most absurd thing of all." (p864).

I teach Christians time and again that God answers prayers, but it can jar with doubts placed there either by others, or by their own inability to understand what true prayer is. So, they agree superficially and make the outward professions they think others wish to hear, not realising that these others probably have the very same doubts. In this way Christians bolster each other with a false hope... or no hope, and reinforce the idea that God does not *really* answer prayer. Their

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prayers are typically as Calvin illustrates:

"Now what sort of prayer will this be? "O Lord, I am in doubt whether thou wilt to hear me, but because I am pressed by anxiety, I flee to thee, that, if I am worthy, thou mayest help me." This is not the way of all the saints whose prayers we read in Scripture. And the Holy Spirit did not so instruct us through the apostle, who enjoins us to "draw near to the heavenly throne... with confidence, that we may receive . . . grace" [Heb. 4:16]; and when he teaches elsewhere that we have boldness and access in confidence through faith in Christ [Eph. 3:12]. If we would pray fruitfully, we ought therefore to grasp with both hands this assurance of obtaining what we ask, which the Lord enjoins with his own voice, and all the saints teach by their example. 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." (p864-5).

Many claim to have this assurance, but few actually prove it in their prayers or in their attitudes. True prayer is dynamic – it flows from God to man and man to God in one action. But, doubts tend to push the assurance away so that prayer becomes 'academic' rather than real... the right words but the wrong heart. And so...

"... we conclude that prayers are vainly cast upon the air unless hope be added, from which we quietly watch for God as from a watchtower. Paul's order of exhortation agrees with these: for before he urges believers "to pray at all times in the Spirit" with watchfulness and perseverance [Eph. 6:18], he bids them first take up "the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" [Eph. 6:16-17]. (p865).

This kind of hope or faith means we believe God is going to help even as the ship sinks under our feet. We believe even when the water rises around our chest, and even when it is up to our neck. He WILL answer, but we must wait for His own good time, no matter how afraid we become in the process.

"Here let my readers recall what I said before: that faith is not at all overthrown when it is joined with the acknowledgment of our misery, destitution, and uncleanness. For however much believers may feel pressed down or troubled by a heavy weight of sins, not only bereft of all things that might obtain favor with God, but laden with many offenses that justly render him terrifying, nevertheless they do not cease to present themselves; and this feeling does not frighten them from betaking themselves to him, since there is no other access to him. For prayer was not ordained that we should be haughtily puffed up before God, or greatly esteem anything

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of ours, but that, having confessed our guilt, we should deplore our distresses before him, as children unburden their troubles to their parents. Moreover, the boundless mass of our sins should amply furnish us with spurs or goads to arouse us to pray, as the prophet also teaches us by his example: "Heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee" [Ps. 41:4]." (p865).

I have studied prayer for a number of years and am still not a 'doctor of prayer'! I am neither ashamed of this nor exalted by it – it is just a fact. The deeper I delve the more I find, and I have many more miles to run yet! So, I am the last person to criticise people praying badly. Yet, I DO know that we must not just have faith, but we must also have endurance. Some do not pray because they fear their sins are too much for God to look past. God says that if we repent, He will listen. As Calvin says, the sins should spur us on rather than hold us back.

I often tell Christians that we should only pray what God prompts us to pray (otherwise they are empty words). Calvin also taught this:

"First, bidding us pray, by the precept itself he convicts us of impious obstinacy unless we obey. Nothing could be commanded more precisely than what is stated in the psalm: "Call upon me in the day of tribulation" [Ps. 50:15; 49:15]. But because among the duties of godliness the Scriptures commend none more frequently, I need not dwell longer on this point. "Seek," says the Master, "and you will receive; knock, and it will be opened unto you." [Matt. 7:7] However, a promise is here also added to the precept, as is necessary; for even though all admit that the precept ought to be obeyed, still the majority would flee from God when he calls if he did not promise to be easily entreated and readily accessible." (p866).

Note that it is God Who convicts us not only to pray, but also what to pray for. We must not pad it out, invent words, or use flowery language – just plain talk. It is the Master Who tells us to seek. And see how many flee from God "when he calls" (proving that it is He Who prompts, not us). In the editions of 1536 and 1539, the wording in the same section is far more direct and compelling:

"To this sting [aculeum] by which the consciousness of our unhappy state continually pricks us, our most gracious Father has joined two things: a command bidding us to pray and a promise by which he undertakes that we shall obtain whatever we ask."

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See how, in this 1539 edition, we see that the Father gives “*a command bidding us to pray*”. This includes the content of the prayer. Calvin continues:

“It would be rashness itself to burst into God's sight if he himself had not anticipated our coming by calling us. Therefore he opens a way for us in his own words: “I will say to them, ‘You are my people’; they will say to me, ‘Thou art our God’ ” [Zech. 13:9]. We see how he precedes those who worship him, and would have them follow him, and thus not to fear for the sweetness of the melody that he himself dictates.” (p866-7).

See how the command from God is mirrored by those who pray, God using words from His perspective, and the people using their own words, but taken from what God says to them. Thus, the words TO God come FROM God. And when we pray we must “*pray confidently, without terror but with reverential fear.*” (p867).

“Scarcely one man in a hundred is moved to approach God. He himself proclaims through Isaiah: “You will call upon me and I shall hear you. Nay, before you call, I will answer you” [Isa. 65:24]” (p868)

Notice the order? When we call upon God He hears us – but this is preceded by God choosing, in advance, what we call for. The calling is from Him, as is the answer; both are predetermined. Thus, when we pray for what God has already entered into our heads and hearts, we MUST have an answer. This is the cause for our confidence, and yet fear for the Lord Who deals with us so greatly.

“ “The Lord is near to all who call upon him, who call upon him in truth” [Ps. 145:18; cf. 144:18]. It is the same with the words we have quoted from Isaiah and Joel, with which God assures us that he is attentive to our prayers, and is even pleased as by a sacrifice of sweet savor when we “cast our cares upon him” [cf. I Peter 5:7; also Ps. 55:22; 54:23]. We receive this singular fruit of God's promises when we frame our prayers without hesitation or trepidation; but, relying upon the word of him whose majesty would otherwise terrify us, we dare call upon him as Father, while he deigns to suggest this sweetest of names to us.” (p868)

We have every reason, then, to lay hold of God's promises when we pray. And if God has

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promised something, we can come to Him with utter reliance and an expectation of hearing His answer. We do this not out of arrogance or delusion, but as a testimony to His promises, which cannot be broken:

"The Lord is near to all who call upon him, who call upon him in truth" [Ps. 145:18; cf. 144:18, Vg.]. It is the same with the words we have quoted from Isaiah and Joel, with which God assures us that he is attentive to our prayers, and is even pleased as by a sacrifice of sweet savor when we "cast our cares upon him" [cf. I Peter 5:7; also Ps. 55:22; 54:23]. We receive this singular fruit of God's promises when we frame our prayers without hesitation or trepidation; but, relying upon the word of him whose majesty would otherwise terrify us, we dare call upon him as Father, while he deigns to suggest this sweetest of names to us." (p869)

And

"Hence arises David's way of praying, to which I have recently referred: "Behold, Lord, thou hast promised thy servant... therefore thy servant has today taken heart and found what he might pray before thee. And now, O Lord God, thou art God, and thy words will be true. Thou hast spoken of these benefits to thy servant. Now begin and do it" [II Sam. 7:27-29]. (p869)

Note the confidence, and the reminder to God that whatever we pray for is based on what He Himself has promised. And yet, as we know from reading David's words, he had a reverential fear of the same Lord. Time and again we read reference to praying for what God has already determined: *"Grant unto thy servant according to thy word."* [Ps. 119:76]. Here I must warn that all of these things ONLY apply if we pray according to His will, and we know His will not only by what He says in His word, but also by the testimony in our minds and hearts, given by the Holy Spirit.

Mostly, Christians pray for whims, or for their own ends, and do not listen for God's prompting. Therefore, they do not 'pray aright' and so will not receive an answer. We receive answers ONLY when we pray according to God's will, as marked by the testimony of the Spirit to our own spirit. We do not hear this evidence in group prayers, because everyone comes to be heard by other people present, rather than by God! Above all else we must obey...

"But whatever pretenses unbelievers present, when they do not flee to God whenever necessity

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presses, do not seek him, and do not implore his help, they defraud him just as much of his due honor as if they made new gods and idols, since in this way they deny God is the author of every good thing. On the other hand, nothing is more effective to free the godly from every misgiving than to be fortified with this thought: there is no reason why any delay should hinder them while they obey the commandment of God, who declares that nothing pleases him more than obedience.” (p869).

Sometimes I receive pleas from people who feel they have not obtained an answer because of their wrong or bad prayers. Yet, God is mindful of our ability to do what is wrong and, in His mercy, replies nevertheless!

“... the prayers that God grants are not always pleasing to him. But in so far as example is concerned, what Scripture teaches is revealed by clear proofs: that he helps the miserable and hearkens to the groans of those who, unjustly afflicted, implore his aid; therefore, that he executes his judgments while complaints of the poor rise up to him, although they are unworthy to receive even a trifle.” (p870).

The ‘complaints of the poor’ do NOT include prayers from the unsaved, such as true Arminians. According to prayerfoundation.org (an Arminian website), Arminians say that humans are “naturally unable to make any effort towards salvation”. The second statement degenerates a little: “Salvation is possible by grace alone”. Possible? No, it is *certain*, if we are elect. The third statement is again close to the mark: “Works of human effort cannot cause or contribute to salvation”.

But, this is followed by: “God’s election is conditional on faith in Jesus Christ.” No, it is not. This says that we are elected when God sees we have faith in Christ. What nonsense – how can we have faith when faith is a gift to those who are elect? No, God elects whom He will and rejects all others because He wishes to – not because we choose faith... which is impossible. Then comes another failed statement: “Jesus’ atonement was potentially for all people”. No, it was not. It was, and is, only for those who are elect.

What about “God allows his grace to be resisted by those unwilling to believe”? This is nothing but nonsense, a meaningless humanistic statement. By God’s grace is meant the supposed ‘offer’ of salvation – which is unscriptural. When God elects a person, he WILL be saved, so the statement is spurious.

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This error is added to yet another: "Salvation can be lost if a believer later rejects Christ, as continued salvation is conditional upon continued faith in Christ." This statement is vastly erroneous and man-made! Salvation CANNOT be lost for ANY reason – this is the blessed assurance of God's word. A true believer cannot reject Christ – this is the province of pseudo-believers. Our salvation is solely based on God's election of us, and He does not make mistakes, nor can He ever lose those who are saved. Jesus said He keeps them all in His hand! According to the site, these are the original beliefs of Jacobus Arminius. It is correct!

The point is this - no true Arminian (one who believes he has been saved by his own choice... something the site omits to mention, and also omits that Methodism is part of this) is saved. Therefore, his prayers will not reach God and God will not answer them, no matter how 'poor' they are. This is why Spurgeon (in a sermon entitled 'Free Will – A Slave') gave an illustration of an Arminian 'prayer':

"Lord, I thank thee I am not like those poor presumptuous Calvinists Lord, I was born with a glorious free-will; I was born with power by which I can turn to thee of myself; I have improved my grace. If everybody had done the same with their grace that I have, they might all have been saved. Lord, I know thou dost not make us willing if we are not willing ourselves. Thou givest grace to everybody; some do not improve it, but I do. There are many that will go to hell as much bought with the blood of Christ as I was; they had as much of the Holy Ghost given to them; they had as good a chance, and were as much blessed as I am. It was not thy grace that made us to differ; I know it did a great deal, still I turned the point; I made use of what was given me, and others did not-that is the difference between me and them."

That is a prayer for the devil, for nobody else would offer such a prayer as that. Ah! when they are preaching and talking very slowly, there may be wrong doctrine; but when they come to pray, the true thing slips out; they cannot help it. If a man talks very slowly, he may speak in a fine manner; but when he comes to talk fast, the old brogue of his country, where he was born, slips out. I ask you again, did you ever meet a Christian man who said, "I came to Christ without the power of the Spirit?" If you ever did meet such a man, you need have no hesitation in saying, "My dear sir, I quite believe it-and I believe you went away again without the power of the Spirit, and that you know nothing about the matter, and are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity." Do I hear one Christian man saying, "I sought Jesus before he sought me; I went to the Spirit, and the Spirit did not come to me"? No, beloved; we are obliged, each one of us, to put our hands to our hearts and say-

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"Grace taught my soul to pray,

And made my eyes to o'erflow;

'Twas grace that kept me to this day,

And will not let me go."

I believe Calvin was wrong to say that God does at times listen to the prayers of the ungodly (p870-1), in order that the failing godly might be encouraged all the more to pray. It would be more apt to say that God may at times help the ungodly, that the godly may be judged or shown that all men likewise share common blessings (shelter, food, sun, etc), for if God answers the prayers of the ungodly as a full blessing, then the prayers of the godly are devalued. Having said that, it is more likely that this is what Calvin meant; there is no way to check with him.

"This is also perfectly clear from the history of the Judges: whenever the Israelites wept, even though their tears were false, yet they were rescued from their enemies' hands [cf. Judg. 3:9]. Just as God causes his sun to shine alike upon the good and the evil [Matt. 5:45], so he does not despise the weeping of those whose cause is just and whose distresses deserve to be relieved. Meanwhile, in listening to the prayers of the evil, he no more grants them salvation than he supplies food to those who despise his goodness." (p871).

The real fact here is that God rescued the Israelites NOT because of their tears, but because the tears were necessary as an act of obedience. Calvin cannot, in truth, claim that ALL their tears were false. He cannot possibly know that from such an historical distance and without proof in scripture. The fact that they quickly reverted back to sin is what men do – including ourselves today. It does not mean we were shedding false tears, or that such falsity is evidenced by going back to sin so quickly. It is how we are as people! We sin one minute and repent the next! The latter statement, however, is correct – while God might give common blessings to the unsaved, this does not give them salvation.

"Augustine somewhere wisely states: "How do the saints pray in faith when they seek from God

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what is against his decree? They pray according to his will, not that hidden and unchangeable will but the will that he inspires in them, that he may hearken to them in another way, as he wisely decides” (p871).

What this tells us is that even when we pray without a genuine wish to repent, God may respond (because of His Son). This has nothing to do with the actual prayer, which might indeed be loose and unfounded, but has everything to do with what God has in mind as His will, which MUST come about whether or not our prayers are absolutely true. Such mercy on God’s part should not be taken as proof that we may normally pray unwisely or without repentance. It is only proof that God is gracious to His errant people. Calvin upholds this idea:

“For he 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. But this ought no more to be held as a valid example for imitation than as excusing the saints themselves;” (p872)

Calvin goes on to say *“Our prayers can obtain an answer only through God’s forgiveness.”* (p872). Followed by (p872):

“I have said that, although prayer is an intimate conversation of the pious with God, yet reverence and moderation must be kept, lest we give loose rein to miscellaneous requests, and lest we crave more than God allows; further, that we should lift up our minds to a pure and chaste veneration of him, lest God’s majesty become worthless for us.

No one has ever carried this out with the uprightness that was due; for, not to mention the rank and file, how many complaints of David savor of intemperance! Not that he would either deliberately expostulate with God or clamor against his judgments, but that, fainting with weakness, he finds no other solace better than to cast his own sorrows into the bosom of God. But God tolerates even our stammering and pardons our ignorance whenever something inadvertently escapes us; as indeed without this mercy there would be no freedom to pray. But although David intended to submit completely to God’s will, and prayed with no less patience than zeal to obtain his request, yet there come forth—sometimes, rather, boil up—turbulent emotions, quite out of harmony with the first rule that we laid down.”

We see from this that God can answer prayer even when our intentions are not fully pious, or

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when our prayers are intemperate. Jesus said that so long as our faith is as small as a mustard seed, He will answer our prayers. This is not a standard requirement, but an extreme, showing that what gives the answer is not the quality of our prayer but the sureness of God's promises: grace not works.

At all times our minds should be filled with a "*chaste veneration of him*", but, God knows our sinful frame and knows that we will not always come to Him with the best of intentions or with a humble heart. That is why, always and ever, we must be mindful that answers to our prayers are NOT caused by the prayers themselves or even by their content, but solely by the will of God. And,

"All prayers marred by these defects deserve to be repudiated; nevertheless, provided the saints bemoan their sins, chastise themselves, and immediately return to themselves, God pardons them."

So, take heart! We are never what we ought to be, but God always is! Fortunately, the grace of God does not depend on our own righteousness, but on that of Christ, Who is perfect. It is *His* righteousness that gives us God's mercy and grace.

"With regard to seeking forgiveness of sins, although no believers neglect this topic, yet those truly versed in prayers know that they do not offer the tenth part of that sacrifice of which David speaks: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a contrite and humbled heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" [Ps. 51:17]. Accordingly, men should always seek a twofold pardon because they are aware of many offenses, the feeling of which still does not so touch them that they are as much displeased with themselves as they ought to be, but also

because, in so far as it has been granted them to benefit by repentance and fear of God, stricken down with a just sorrow on account of their offenses, they pray that the wrath of the judge be averted." (p873).

"... and although Satan tries to block all paths to prevent them from praying, they should nonetheless break through, surely persuaded that, although not freed of all hindrances, their efforts still please God and their petitions are approved, provided they endeavour and strive toward a goal not immediately attainable." (p874).

“Prayer in the Name of Jesus” (p874)

Many ask me what name we ought to pray under. My answer is always ‘the name of Jesus’. Calvin concurs with this, because only His own Son is righteous and holy enough to come before the Father with petitions.

“Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself, to free us at once from shame and fear, which might well have thrown our hearts into despair, has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate [I John 2:1] and mediator with him [I Tim. 2:5;

cf. Heb. 8:6 and 9:15], by whose guidance we may confidently come to him, and with such an intercessor, trusting nothing we ask in his name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to him by the Father. And to this must be referred all that we previously taught about faith. For just as the promise commends Christ the Mediator to us, so, unless the hope of obtaining our requests depends upon him, it cuts itself off from the benefit of prayer.” (p874).

In many local churches are groups of well-meaning people who call themselves ‘intercessors’ or ‘mediators’. Though well-meaning, they are erroneous, for no mere mortal can be a mediator or intercessor! This can only be undertaken by the Lord Jesus Christ Who alone is worthy. To stand in His place is to be a Romanist!

“... we have the promise made that we shall obtain what we have asked in his name. “Hitherto,” he says, “you have asked nothing in my name; ask and you will receive.” [John 16:24] “In that day you will ask in my name” (John 16:26), and “whatever you ask . . . I will do it that the Father may be glorified in the Son” [John 14:13]. 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” [II Cor. 1:20]. That is, they are confirmed and fulfilled.” (p875).

“Christ is the only Mediator, even for the mutual intercession of believers.” (p876).

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Of those who claim to mediate or intercede on behalf of others, Calvin has this to say: *"This babbling of the Sophists is mere nonsense: that Christ is the Mediator of redemption, but believers are mediators of intercession."*

In this Calvin echoes Augustine:

"Augustine similarly explains it when he says: "Christian men mutually commend one another by their prayers. However, it is he for whom no one intercedes, while he intercedes for all, who is the one true Mediator." (p877).

Calvin further underlines this important fact (p878):

"One who takes refuge in the intercession of saints robs Christ of the honor of mediation."

This means that 'intercession' prayer groups are as invalid as weekly prayer groups.

I know that the intercession Calvin refers to is that of supposed 'saints' created by Rome. But, this is just as true of those in free churches who claim to intercede on behalf of others. Only last week two ladies came around the doors; they were sent by the local church at the end of my street. Before this, the pastor, who I used to know very well, sent out a leaflet saying that if anyone wanted prayers, they could make them known to the visitors, and the prayers would be raised by a special prayer group. It is all so reminiscent of charismatic sin!

This saddened me immensely. How can a complete stranger possibly pray intelligently for another complete stranger? This is nothing but 'community led' Christianity. Prayer must come from God, not from total strangers, whose persons may be steeped in gross wickedness! And, God does not listen to unbelievers, so how can Christians come in between and offer prayers God will not answer, because they are invalid?

Private Prayer (p888)

"In asking and beseeching, we pour out our desires before God, seeking both those things which make for the extension of his glory and the setting forth of his name, and those benefits which conduce to our own advantage. In giving thanks, we celebrate with due praise his benefits toward us, and credit to his generosity every good that comes to us.

David, therefore, has combined these two functions: "Call upon me in the day of need; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" [Ps. 50:i5]. Scripture with good reason enjoins us to use both constantly. For as we have stated elsewhere, the weight of our poverty and the facts of experience proclaim that the tribulations which drive and press us from all sides are so many and so great "that there is reason enough for us all continually to groan and sigh to God, and to beseech him as suppliants." (p888)

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Calvin is saying that prayer should involve two elements – praise of God, and an eye for the benefits our prayers are meant to attract. Why pray if God does not give benefits after prayer? What if the one praying appears to be as righteous as he can be? Nothing changes, for he is still assailed by many temptations, doubts and fears, making prayer a necessity: *“For even if they be free of adversities, the guilt of their transgressions and the innumerable assaults of temptations ought still to goad even the holiest to seek a remedy.”* (p888).

It is my view that no true child of God is free from adversities – indeed, we are promised to know them. Calvin, then, is speaking rhetorically. Where are these benefits you may ask? They are everywhere, says Calvin!

“God does not cease to heap benefits upon benefits in order to impel us, though slow and lazy, to gratefulness. In short, we are well-nigh overwhelmed by so great and so plenteous 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.” (p888)

I often teach fellow Christians that if they miss God’s provisions, then they cannot be noticing them! If we tend to disregard everything that happens to us as ‘just life’ then we will not see what God has done for us. This is not a case of seeing what is not there, but of opening our spiritual eyes to see what is heavenly in our midst. God works in our lives. He intervenes all the time. The danger, as I have noted in my own life, is that if we dare to miss what God has shown us, then He may not come back again with the same provision for a very long time. Calvin continues:

“And to explain these things somewhat more clearly, since, as has already been sufficiently proved, all our hope and wealth so reside in God that neither we nor our possessions prosper unless we can have his blessing, we ought constantly to commit ourselves and all that we have to him [cf. James 4:14-15]. Then whatever we determine, speak, do, let us determine, speak, and do under his hand and will—in a word, under the hope of his help.” (p888).

It is, then, futile and possibly insulting to predicate our prayer on the merest whisper of God helping us, using such feeble terms as “If it be your will”. We either pray strongly as those directed by the Spirit, or we guess everything, never knowing if He will answer. This is to pray with doubt, not firm resolve. If it really is God’s will, then He will tell us what to pray in the first place, so why negate this by asking and yet doubting? If we pray without this prompting from God then we do not pray aright.

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For all are declared accursed by God who, placing confidence in themselves or someone else, conceive and carry out their plans; who undertake or try to begin anything apart from his will, and without calling upon him [cf. Isa. 30:1; 31:1].” (p888-9).

Sadly, too many Christians fall into this trap, of determining what they will do and then going to God to agree with their decision. This is entirely the wrong way round. Such prayers usually centre not on God but on the ideas the person wishes God to commend. They are, then, ‘wicked’:

“... we must understand Paul's statement that all entreaties not joined with thanksgiving are wicked and vicious. For he speaks thus: "In all prayer," he says, "and supplication with thanksgiving let your petitions be made known to God"

[Phil. 4:6]. For since many by peevishness, boredom, impatience, bitter grief, and fear are impelled to mumble when praying, he bids believers so to temper their emotions that while still waiting to obtain what they desire, they nonetheless cheerfully bless God.” (p890).

We now come to a section Calvin identifies as the:

Necessity and Danger of Public Prayer. (p890)

Calvin says this:

“This constancy in prayer, even though it has especially to do with one's own private prayers, still is also concerned somewhat with the public prayers of the church.” (p890).

However, Calvin warns that no such prayers ought to be convened unless all members agree to them taking place. Nor may such public prayers be undertaken continuously (e.g. weekly)

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(p890-1). Calvin then partly agrees with my own position, that public prayers are only for particular and urgent matters:

“This I grant you. For this reason, certain hours, indifferent to God but necessary for men's convenience, are agreed upon and appointed to provide for the accommodation of all, and for everything to be done "decently and in order" in the church, according to Paul's statement [I Cor. 14:40]. But this 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.” (p891).

Here I believe Calvin is mixing two distinctly different matters – that public prayers should be organised, and yet, paradoxically, that they should only be made for urgent matters. One tends to contradict the other. I can agree that if a matter is urgent and ALL are called by the Spirit to pray together for a very urgent thing, THEN we may accept that a time and place is needed so that people can meet together. But, even then, proximity of persons is just the same as proximity of desire to God!

If God is truly calling a group to pray urgently, then they can do so without being physically together, because the matter is spiritual. In this text Calvin appears to accept the ‘need’ for regular prayer meetings, but gives no actual biblical evidence for the proposition. I see this as an error, the first I have come across thus far in his statements concerning prayer.

“... that vain repetition which for a similar reason is in vogue today in the papacy. While some pass the time in saying over and over the same little prayers, others vaunt themselves before the crowd with a great mass of words. Since this talkativeness childishly mocks God, it is no wonder that it is forbidden by the church in order that nothing shall resound there except what is earnest and comes forth from the depths of the heart.” (p891).

This kind of repetition is ‘in vogue’ in almost all local churches! The same people repeat the same vague prayers, and others, ‘prayer warriors’, give long flowing prayers that say everything and nothing. Between them they make the public prayer meeting a thing of nought value, insulting to God. It seems the medieval reformed churches banned such irrelevant ‘prayers’, but who today sees the “earnest” prayers Calvin speaks of, that come “forth from the depth of the heart”? Hardly ever!

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Thus far, the basis for a regular prayer meeting has not been proved to be biblical by Calvin. Even so, he bemoans the existence of hypocrites, who love for others to hear their prayers in public. (p891-2). He therefore quotes Christ (p892):

“... the Heavenly Teacher, when he willed to lay down the best rule for prayer, bade us enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray to our Father in secret, that our Father, who is in secret, may hear us [Matt. 6:6]. For, when he has drawn us away from the example of hypocrites, who grasped after the favor of men by vain and ostentatious prayers, he at the same time adds something better: that is, to enter into our bedroom and there, with door closed, pray.”

Calvin, with honesty, does not claim that his idea of public prayer is from scripture, but is of his own thoughts (“as I understand them”):

“By these words, as I understand them, he taught us to seek a retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within. He promises that God, whose temples our bodies ought to be, will be near to us in the affections of our hearts [cf. II Cor. 6:16].” (p892).

Note that this is how Calvin understands the words; they are how he interprets them. This may, or may not, be the reason why Christ told us to pray alone in our closets. Therefore, the reason may simply be that this is how we ought to pray, and not in a group (except for valid and urgent needs). In this, then, I will differ from Calvin. After all,

“... he shows that prayer is something secret, which is both principally lodged in the heart and requires a tranquillity far from all our teeming cares. The Lord himself also, therefore, with good reason, when he determined to devote himself more intensely to prayers, habitually withdrew to a quiet spot far away from the tumult of men.” (p892).

I see no reason to uphold public prayer meetings held regularly, for they have nothing to say of value, and they contradict the command of Christ. In this portion, Calvin does not, to my mind, prove his case. But, he again steers back to the right track when talking about ourselves being the temple of God, and not buildings (p893). But, even then, he supports the idea of regular public prayers.

'Patient perseverance in Prayer' (p918)

Calvin now deals with a very important matter all Christians must attend to.

"If, with minds composed to this obedience, we allow ourselves to be ruled by the laws of divine providence, we shall easily learn to persevere in prayer and, with desires suspended, patiently to 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. This, then, will be an ever-present consolation: that, if God should not respond to our first requests, we may not faint or fall into despair. Such is the wont of those who, carried away with their own ardor, so call upon God that unless he attends upon their first act of prayer and brings them help at once, they immediately fancy him angry and hostile toward them and, abandoning all hope of being heard, cease to call upon him."

This is exactly what happens! And the alternative is also true: they continue in prayer but place no real power in its efficacy. Both are equally unbelieving. Calvin urges us to pray all the more, but in real expectation:

"Rather, by deferring our hope with a well-tempered evenness of mind, let us follow hard upon that perseverance which Scripture strongly commends to us. For in The Psalms we can often see that David and other believers, when they are almost worn out with praying and seem to have beaten the air with their prayers as if pouring forth words to a deaf God, still do not cease to pray [Ps. 22:2]. For, unless the faith placed in it is superior to all events, the authority of God's Word does not prevail." (p918-9).

Calvin had a rare wisdom, hardly seen in modern days! But, what of unheard prayers? Are there such things? (p919).

"But if finally even after long waiting our senses cannot learn the benefit received from prayer, or perceive any fruit from it, still our faith will make us sure of what cannot be perceived by sense, that we have obtained what was expedient. For the Lord so often and so certainly promises to care for us in our troubles, when they have once been laid upon his bosom. And so he will cause us to possess abundance in poverty, and comfort in affliction. For though all things fail us, yet God will never forsake us, who cannot disappoint the expectation and patience of his

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people. He alone will be for us in place of all things, since all good things are contained in him and he will reveal them to us on the Day of Judgment, when his Kingdom will be plainly manifested."

We have all prayed and seemingly not had a response from God. And this sets in motion a train of thought that slowly erodes the belief that God will ever answer. So, every prayer thereafter is tainted by an expectation that He will *not* answer. Then, prayer is not true prayer, but vain repetition. And so...

"Besides, even if God grants our prayer, he does not always respond to the exact form of our request but, seeming to hold us in suspense, he yet, in a marvelous manner, shows us our prayers have not been vain. This is what John's words mean: "If we know that he hears us whenever we ask anything of him, we know that we have obtained the requests we asked of him" [1 John 5:15]. This seems a diffuse superfluity of words, but the declaration is especially useful because God, even when he does not comply with our wishes, is still attentive and kindly to our prayers, so that hope relying upon his word will never disappoint us." (p919).

The counsel is very clear: even if God seems not to answer, we must continue in fervent prayer, for God IS answering, but in a way we do not yet know.

"... 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 sweet ness. And, as Hannah says, "He kills and brings to life; he brings down to hell and brings back" [1 Sam. 2:6]. 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." (p919-20).

In our spiritual paucity we imagine God is not with us because we do not get an answer straight away, when, in reality, it might be we are central in His thoughts. Like small children, if we cannot see something, then we think it does not exist. We MUST know God is with us, and that He WILL bring our trials to an end, and He WILL answer us fully, in some way or another.

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I hope this study will help and bless you.

(Note: Perhaps you should also read our other articles on Prayer. See Publications' List).

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