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TITLE The Role of Prayer and the Word of
God in John Calvin's Theology of the
Christian Life

IN 칼빈논단, No.2001 (2001)

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I. Prolegomena

An extensive section in Book III of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is devoted to his theology of the Christian life. In the *Institutes*, Calvin proposes to examine "the sum of religion in all its parts"¹⁾ and this necessarily involves an examination of the practice of piety. Although his major concern is with a systematic presentation, the depth of Calvin's own personal spiritual life is also clearly reflected in these chapters. The Christian life is thus of central importance to Calvin's larger theological endeavor, and the topic has recently elicited a considerable body of literature.²⁾ But one facet of his doctrine regarding the diverse, yet complementary, roles of prayer and the Word of God has not been sufficiently developed. This article will examine Calvin's treatment of the role of prayer, the role of the Word of God, and it will then focus upon the relationship between these as they find expression in the life of a Christian.

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- 1) John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles: Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), "John Calvin to the Reader," 1559. Hereafter, *Institutes*.
- 2) See, for example, L. J. Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974); E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, Tome IV, *La pensée religieuse de Calvin* (Geneve: Slatkine Reprints, 1969) 237-348; R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 140-58; W. E. Stuermann, *A Critical Study of Calvin's Concept of Faith* (Tulsa: University of Tulsa, 1952) 234-366; D. Willis, "The Benefits of Prayer," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 15(1981) 116-24; J. Hall, "John Calvin on Christian Living," *Presbyterian Journal* 36, no. 29(1977) 9, 18-19; L. J. Richard, "John Calvin and the Role of the Church in the Spiritual Life," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11(1974) 477-500; R. D. Loggie, "Chief Exercise of Faith-An Exposition of Calvin's Doctrine of Prayer," *The Hartford Quarterly* 5(1965) 65-81; J. Cadier, "Calvin's View of the Christian Life" *International Reformed Bulletin* 18(1964) 2-5; J. A. K. Zimmerman, "The Christian Life in Luther and Calvin," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 16(1964) 222-30; and J. G. Matherson, "Calvin's Doctrine of The Christian Life," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2(1949) 48-56.

II. Prayer on the Christian Life

1. The Importance and Definition of Prayer

For Calvin, there is no more important expression that enables personal piety than that of prayer. It is simply impossible to live a spiritual life apart from apprehending from God the resources necessary to live such a life; and such divine resources can be gotten only by prayer. As Calvin writes, "It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father."³⁾ Apart from prayer, then, all the wealth that is available to the believer for living a godly life remains, as it were, unspent.

In a fine article on Calvin's doctrine of prayer, R. Loggie has demonstrated that prayer is a central concern of Calvin's thought. Calvin dealt with prayer in his earliest edition of the *Institutes* in 1536, and the section on prayer in the final edition of 1559 was essentially an elaboration on what he had earlier written.⁴⁾ As Loggie states, "Prayer is deeply related to the central doctrines of Calvin's theological systems; the doctrine of Christ, faith, grace, the Spirit, election, etc."⁵⁾ It is evident, then, that Calvin does not view the topic of prayer as superfluous to theology or to the Christian life but rather as of supreme importance to both.

Calvin defines prayer as "a communication between God and us whereby we expound to him our desires, our joys our sighs, in a word, all the thoughts of our hearts."⁶⁾ Prayer is not a ritual or a formality, as it was so often practiced in the church of Calvin's day. Rather, prayer is part of a living, vital relationship between two persons in which the human seeks from God that for which his or her inner soul yearns.

In expounding to God "all the thoughts of our hearts," we find that this takes place in two primary ways: through entreaties and thanksgiving.⁷⁾ Calvin deals more extensively in the

3) *Institutes*, III. xx.2. Cf. Niesel, 152-53.

4) Loggie, 67.

5) Loggie, 67.

6) John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949) 57. Cf. Niesel, 152-53.

Institutes with the first kind of prayer, namely, entreaties or requests. Of this type of prayer, he writes, "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."⁸⁾ Requests are to be made for those things that glorify God and those which bring blessing to us, his children. What is of special interest here is that Calvin sees no conflict between those entreaties whose goal is the glory of God and those requests which aim at personal benefit or blessing. Our prayers may seek both at once, and we must not suppose that seeking one precludes the other.

Further, we are to expound to God our praise and thanksgiving. Calvin states, "In giving thanks, we celebrate with due praise his benefits toward us, and credit to his generosity every good that comes to us."⁹⁾ Thanksgiving flows from us, then, as a result of seeing God's blessing and benefits which he showers upon us. For Calvin, these two kinds of prayer together constitute the full expression of biblical prayer, and it is imperative that we pray in both ways. As Calvin simply writes:

We must assiduously use both kinds of prayer, for we are pressed by such poverty and indigence that even the most perfect have sufficient matter to sigh and groan continually, and in voke the Lord with all humility. On the other hand, the liberalities which our Lord by his goodness pours forth upon us are so abundant, and wherever we turn our eyes the miracles of his works appear so great that we can never lack matter for praise and thanksgiving.¹⁰⁾

Prayer is a two-faceted art of communication, one side of which (petition) is primarily a response to our human depraved condition, while the other (thanksgiving) is a response to the goodness of God.

7) *Instruction*, 58-59.

8) *Institutes*, III. xx.28.

9) *Institutes*, III. xx.28.

10) *Instruction*, 58-59.

2. The Necessity of Prayer and Rules for Right Prayer

The primary reason why Christians must pray is that, due to their depraved natures, they find in themselves no ability to live the kind of life which God commands. Through prayer, however, they are enabled to take to themselves a divine and supernatural ability which provides all the resources necessary to live godly lives. Calvin introduces his major discussion on prayer in the institutes (Book III, chapter xx) by writing: "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."¹¹⁾ As the discussion continues in chapter xx, we see that in God, and in particular in Christ, we lay hold of that which fills our need. Only when Christians learn that whatever they need and whatever they lack can be found in God, and that by prayer alone do they gain from God what alone can fill that void, will they experience the victory of spiritual living.

At this point Calvin expresses his seeming disbelief concerning those who know this truth concerning prayer but who refuse to go to God in prayer. He writes:

Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and to ask of him-this would be as of little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it has been pointed out to him.¹²⁾

The main reason to go to God in prayer is to gain from him what is lacking in oneself to live the Christian life, and to neglect prayer or to refuse to pray is nothing other than foolishness.

In addition to this main reason for prayer, Calvin lists a number of other purposes involved in prayer. These purposes are: (1) our hearts may become fixed with a desire to serve God as

11) *Institutes*, III, xx.1.

12) *Institutes*, III, xx.1.

we see him meet our every need through prayer; (2) we may learn to desire only what is right as we place all our desires before God; (3) we may be thankful as we see every blessing as coming from God in response to our pleas; (4) we may meditate more on his kindness as we obtain what we have asked; (5) we may appreciate more what we have obtained by prayer, and (6) we may trust more in his promises regular to meet our needs because we see him always answer our prayers.¹³⁾

A lengthy section of Calvin's teaching on prayer is devoted to explaining four rules for right prayer. First those who approach God in prayer must do so with reverence. Calvin writes:

Now for framing prayer duly and properly, let this be the first rule: that we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter conversation with God. This we shall indeed attain with respect to the mind if it is freed from carnal cares and thoughts by which it can be called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God, and then not only devotes itself completely to prayer but also, insofar as this is possible, is lifted and carried beyond itself.¹⁴⁾

This kind of prayer cannot be entered into lightly: rather, one must endeavor to apply oneself totally, avoiding all distractions and wandering thoughts. Concentration must be sought after: one must learn to discipline one's mind in prayer.¹⁵⁾

Second, prayer must be exercised from a deep-felt sense of need and a desire to attain from God that which supplies that need. "Let this," says Calvin, "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."¹⁶⁾ As one perceives one's totally depraved state-that he or she has no good-and then as one contemplates

13) *Institutes*, III, xx.3.

14) *Institutes*, III, xx.4.

15) *Institutes*, III, xx.5.

16) *Institutes*, III, xx.6.

the one who gives all good liberally, "nothing therefore remains but that the man seek unto God and ask him in prayer what he has known to exist in God."¹⁷⁾ Right prayer, then, is the cry of the humble, a cry that finds its inspiration in a deep-felt sense of human weakness and need.¹⁸⁾

Beyond this, afflictions are used by God to cause people to see their lack of sufficiency and thus drive them to prayer. Scripture teaches and illustrates that "the more harshly troubles, discomforts, fears and trials of other sorts press us, the freer is our access to him, as if God were summoning us to himself."¹⁹⁾

As R. Wallace suggests in his insightful work in Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life, prayer is given by God so that man himself never need shoulder the burden of any affliction or sorrow. Rather, all of these burdens are God-sent as opportunities to fellowship with God over the need.²⁰⁾

Third, right prayer demands that come before God in complete humility and submission. Calvin writes:

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 full up, and perish at his presence.²¹⁾

In the Psalms, David illustrates such an approach to God(e.g., Ps 25:7, 18; 51:5); and Daniel, along with many others in Scripture, shows us that man must recognize his low and subservient position before the almighty and holy God. Only as one approaches God with this

17) *Instruction*, 56.

18) Richard, *Spirituality of John Calvin*, 121.

19) *Institutes*, III, xx.7.

20) *Wallace*, 282.

21) *Institutes*, III, xx.8.

attitude and prays "from God's mercy alone"²²⁾ will one be assured of God's listening ear.²³⁾

Finally, right prayer is expressed with genuine confidence that God will answer. "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."²⁴⁾ The question then arises concerning what basis we have for such a confidence. Calvin responds by explaining that our sure hope is founded not on our own merit, nor on our right approach in prayer, but strictly upon the goodness of God. We can be confident that God will answer because he acts in kindness toward his people; as Calvin states, "without that firm sense of the divine benevolence God could not be rightly called upon."²⁵⁾ This theme of the "divine benevolence" is a major one in Calvin's overall thought, but particularly in relation to prayer, for only if God is in fact benevolent can he be trusted to provide for the needs of his people; and since he is good, there is no doubt but that he will do what is best. In his last section on the rules of right prayer, Calvin summarizes his overall thought in the form of a warning:

But whatever pretenses unbelievers present, when they do not flee to God whenever necessity 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.²⁶⁾

3. Faith, the Holy Spirit, and Intercession

For Calvin, faith and prayer are inseparable; neither can be genuine without the other. In the opening to Book III, chapter xx, we read this title: "Prayer, Which is the Chief Exercise of Faith, and by Which we Daily Receive God's Benefits."²⁷⁾ Immediately the reader is

22) *Institutes*, III, xx.9.

23) *Institutes*, III, xx.10.

24) *Institutes*, III, xx.11.

25) *Institutes*, III, xx.12.

26) *Institutes*, III, xx.14. For a good discussion of these four rules, see E. Doumergue, IV, 329-31.

introduced to the vital relationship between prayer and faith, and throughout his examination, Calvin elaborates on this relationship.

Prayer, for Calvin, is the acid-test, the proof of genuine faith. In other words, without prayer, faith simply cannot be genuine or real.

The reason faith needs prayer to be real is because prayer is the means of taking a dormant, listless faith and giving it life and vitality; by prayer alone is faith activated and thereby made functional. As Wallace states, "Prayer is nothing else but the expression of a living faith."²⁸⁾

Calvin provides for us a picture of the interrelationship of faith and prayer:

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.²⁹⁾

We see here a definite progression from promise, to faith, to prayer. That is, God first provides a promise in his Word, but this promise remains ineffectual until faith sees the promise. But for Calvin, even this is not enough, for the promise is still ineffectual, even after faith has "gazed upon" it, until prayer quickens the faith by putting the faith to work. This point can hardly be stressed too much, for the Christian life—a life of faith—must include perpetual prayer to activate that faith which perceives the promises of God. Prayer, then, is the agent which seizes or acquires what faith has discovered in the Word.³⁰⁾

27) *Institutes*, III, xx. For and elaborate treatment of the relation between faith and prayer in Calvin's theology, see Stuermann, 295-314.

28) Wallace, 271.

29) *Institutes*, III, xx.2.

30) Loggie, 72; Niesel, 154-55; and Stuermann, 297-302. It is important to note here that Calvin is not suggesting that in prayer we add something of our own to God's work of faith within us. In responding to this synergistic reading of Calvin, Niesel writes: "On the contrary, the faith which is grounded in the work of Christ and supported by the word of promise does not spring up from the depths of our own hearts. Its springs from the operation of the Holy Ghost within us."(p.155) See

Calvin takes his thoughts concerning faith and prayer one step further and states that without the Spirit of God to instruct us in our prayer, we still would not be able to pray in faith because we in ourselves are not able to know God's will; thus, we cannot know what to pray until the Spirit of God intervenes.

As we must turn keenness of mind toward God, so affection of heart has to follow. Both, indeed, stand far beneath; any, more truly, they faint and fail, or are carried in the opposite direction... 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.³¹⁾

Calvin's thrust is that the ability to engage in true prayer is, at the heart, a gift of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is responsible for framing both the thoughts of our minds and the feeling of our hearts.³²⁾ Without his regulation, we would never be able to think or feel as we must in order to pray according to the mind of God.³³⁾

Here, Calvin is quick to anticipate a question would arise, namely, "Does the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer eliminate the need for human effort in prayer?" To this question, Calvin responds:

These things are not said in order that we, favoring our own slothfulness, may give over the function of prayer to the Spirit of God, and vegetate in that carelessness to which we are all too prone... But rather our intention is that, loathing our inertia and dullness, we should seek such aid of the Spirit.³⁴⁾

also. L. d. Sharp. "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine." *The Evangelical Quarterly* 52(1980) 86-89.

31) *Institutes*, III, xx.5.

32) Wallace, 287.

33) Loggie, 76. See also, R. Gaffin, "The Holy Spirit," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43(1980) 58-78.

34) *Institutes*, III, xx.5.

Waiting on the Spirit is essential for prayer to be in accord with God's will, but this does not remove the need for discipline, substantial effort, and perseverance in prayer. The mind needs to be alert and active in order to be sensitive to the Spirit's direction.³⁵⁾ In the final analysis, the Spirit is responsible for framing the thoughts and feelings of right prayer, but he will only accomplish this in those who are attentive and who actively seek his guidance.

In regard to intercession in prayer, Calvin speaks both of Christ's intercession for his people, and of a believer's intercession on behalf of others. His main thrust, however, is that apart from Christ's intercession, believers' prayers for others would be of no value.

Now, since he[Christ] is the only way, and the one access by which it is granted us to come to God[cf. John 14:6], to those who turn aside from this way and forsake this access, no way and no access to God remains... Thus Christ is constituted the only mediator, by whose intercession the Father is for us rendered gracious and easily entreated.³⁶⁾

Our sin and unworthiness keep us from God, but because Christ stands between God and us, interceding for us, therefore we can boldly approach his throne of grace. Further, because Christ intercedes, we not only are assured that we can approach God but also that we will have what we request—not because we request it, but because Christ takes our Spirit-directed requests and presents them to the Father; and “nothing can be denied to[Christ] by the Father.³⁷⁾”

Beyond this, the intercession of Christ not only makes our personal requests possible, but it also forms the basis for our intercession for others. Calvin warns against self-centered prayer. We must not become engrossed in our personal sorrows and neglect the needs of others. But it is just as wrong to remember the needs of others in prayer while forgetting that only by Christ's intercession will those prayers for others be harkened to by God. Christ's intercession,

35) Wallace, 287.

36) *Institutes*, III, xx.19.

37) *Institutes*, III, xx.17.

then, does not limit our intercession; rather, his intercession makes ours effectual. "Christ does not by his intercession hinder us from pleading for one another by prayers in the church. Si, then, let it remain an established principle that we should direct all intercessions of the whole church to that sole intercession."³⁸⁾ Finally, Calvin wants to affirm that our intercession in no way perfects or makes better Christ's intercession. Rather, when we pray for others, as directed by the Holy Spirit, we simply echo his intercession and thereby take part in what he already is requesting of the Father, We participate, by the Holy Spirit, in Christ's already perfect intercession.³⁹⁾

4. Perseverance in prayer

Calvin stresses the importance for the Christian to develop a habit of prayer, to persist in it despite contrary feelings and distressing outward circumstances. He encourages his readers to make no excuses, but to continue in prayer when it is easy and when it is not.⁴⁰⁾ He then suggests that the believer set aside certain hours specifically for prayer and prayer alone. Of that time, he writes, "Those hours should not pass without prayer, and during them all devotion of the heart should be completely engaged in it."⁴¹⁾ So as not to let the reader wonder what are the best hours in the day for prayer, Calvin continues, "These[best hours for prayer] are: when we arise in the morning, before we begin daily work, when we sit down to a meal, when by God's blessing we have eaten, when we are getting ready to retire."⁴²⁾ Only as Christians set their minds to prayer and make it their firm resolve that they will pray consistently will they find the blessing of this chief exercise of faith.

Next, Calvin warns of the danger of demanding of God what we are not sure is his will for us. No matter how we may persist in prayer, God will never change his will; rather we

38) *Institutes*, III, xx.19.

39) Wallace, 289.

40) *Institutes*, III, xx.5.

41) *Institutes*, III, xx.50.

42) *Institutes*, III, xx.50.

submit our wills to his. Calvin writes:

Accordingly, in this prayer we are taught not to make any law for him[God], or impose any condition upon him, but to leave to his decision to do what he is to do, in what way and what time, and in what place it seems good to him... We subject our will to his in order that, restrained as though by a bridle, it may not presume to control God but may make him the arbiter and director of all its entreaties.⁴³⁾

When we pray in this way—with perseverance while remaining subject to the will of God—then we may be certain that God will answer, in his own time and way; but he will answer.⁴⁴⁾

With this, then, we see the major thrusts Calvin has made in regard to prayer as it relates to the Christian life. We turn next to the complementary and equally essential role of the Word of God in Christian living.

III. The Word of God in the Christian Life

1. The Importance and Use of the Word of God

Although Calvin devotes a major portion of the Institutes to a discussion of Scripture as God's Word, he has comparatively little to say about how the Word of God relates to the Christian life; and when compared with his discussion on prayer, the portions devoted to the role of the Word in the Christian life are few. However, though he may have less to say, what he does say is nonetheless important and ties in beautifully, as we shall see, to his major thrusts in relation to prayer.

For Calvin, Scripture is the sole source of authority and power in the Christian life. Apart

43) *Institutes*, III, xx.50.

44) *Institutes*, III, xx.51.

from the Word of God we would be left with no instruction to enlighten us and no power to transform us.⁴⁵⁾ As J. G. Matheson explains, because of our great weakness, we need much assistance and stimulation in order to guide and regulate our new spiritual lives. But, such stimulation and assistance is not produced in regeneration; rather, it is found in Scripture. The new life in Christ must be developed in accordance with the guidance of the Word. Scripture, then, is the source material for the Christian life.⁴⁶⁾

J. A. K. Zimmerman comments that for Calvin, the spiritual life is like a pilgrimage—a pilgrimage to a more accurate imitation of Christ. But in this journey, the Christian is not left to one's own imagination or fancy so that one must guess what Christ is like. Rather the Christian finds in the Word of God the understanding of Christ and of God's will that enables him or her to progress toward and accurate imitation of the Lord.⁴⁷⁾

For Calvin, then, Scripture is the sole authority for doctrine and living, and the Christian must recognize this and submit to it.

Not to take too long, let us remember here, as in all religious doctrine, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety: not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters anything except what has been imparted to us by God's Word.⁴⁸⁾

As Wallace comments, "The Christian life is for Calvin a life lived under the influence and guidance of the Word of God."⁴⁹⁾ The believer can only please God by submitting totally to Scripture.

For Calvin, the primary method of approaching the Word in the Christian life is meditation. He sees meditation as essential, because by it, the believer is enabled to see life from God's

45) *Institutes*, I, vi. 1.

46) Matheson, 48.

47) Zimmerman, 225.

48) *Institutes*, I, xiv. 4.

49) Wallace, 215.

perspective, to turn from the folly of the present life, and to seek after God with all one's heart. Although all of the Scripture is potential source material for meditation, Calvin urges his readers: in the reading of the Scripture we ought ceaselessly to endeavor to seek out and meditate upon those things which make for edification.⁵⁰⁾

In his treatment of meditation in Calvin's view of the Christian life. Wallace points out where Calvin, in many of his commentaries and sermons, has emphasized specific areas of meditation within the Word. Some of the most frequent emphases that Calvin makes are first, the importance of meditating on the future life as Scripture reveals it. The present world appears less attractive when we see what God has for us in the future. Second, we need to meditate on the great love of Christ in order to engender deeper confidence and trust in God. Third, we should ponder the cross and Christ's passion to strike fear in our hearts at God's judgment against sin. Last, we need to consider the character of God that we may know better the one in whose care we are, and from whom we receive every good thing.⁵¹⁾

Besides having our overall thinking affected by meditation on God's Word so that we are enabled to think about life from God's perspective, Calvin also notes that in the Word, we have a true and sure standard for self-examination. Wallace quotes Calvin to this effect: "The only way of pleasing God is for us to be severe critics of ourselves."⁵²⁾ Calvin's view of the human depravity of man comes to play in his treatment of this topic. Humans cannot depend on their conscience as the standard by which to judge their thoughts and actions. Our consciences are so warped that they will pass over even the grosser sins, even more the subtle ones of ignorance and misbehavior. Therefore, we must present ourselves to God and "examine ourselves not according to our own standards but according to the teaching of the Word as to what is sin in the sight of God."⁵³⁾

50) *Institutes*, I, xiv. 4.

51) Wallace, 219-223.

52) Wallace, 225.

53) Wallace, 226-27. See also. J. P. Pelkonen. "Teaching of John Calvin on the Nature and Function of the Conscience." *Lutheran Quarterly* 21(1969) 74-88.

2. Faith, the Holy Spirit, and the Fruit of the Word of God

As with his view of faith and prayer, Calvin's conviction is that faith and the Word are intimately related; however, the relationship between faith and the Word is different from that of faith and prayer. For Calvin, as we saw, prayer is the chief exercise of faith; that is, by prayer, faith is made alive. But in relation to the Word, Calvin says that faith is learned by the Word; that is, the content of faith is to be derived from Scripture. In commenting on the apostle Paul's linkage of faith and the Word, Calvin states, "First, we must be reminded that there is a permanent relationship between faith and the Word. He[Paul] could not separate one from the other any more than we could separate the rays from the sun from which they come."⁵⁴⁾ The illustration used here shows that as rays of light come from the sun, so faith comes from the Word. Again, the same idea is expressed when Calvin writes, "faith needs the Word as much as fruit needs the living root of a tree."⁵⁵⁾ Without Scripture, there would be no way for faith to take on substance or content. Therefore, the Christian must look to the Word to find there, and there alone, the substance of the faith that he or she then must exercise through prayer.

Just as prayer cannot be uttered aright without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, so the Word cannot be understood apart from the Spirit's illumination. Calvin writes:

And this bare and external proof of the Word of God should have been amply sufficient to engender faith, did not our blindness and perversity prevent it. But our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God; and it has such a dullness that it is always blind to the light of God's truth. Accordingly, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.⁵⁶⁾

Here some claim that because Calvin emphasizes the necessary role of the Holy Spirit, that

54) *Institutes*, III, ii. 6.

55) *Institutes*, III, ii. 31. See also, G. Gordh, "Conception of Faith," *Review and Expositor* 50(1953) 209-12.

56) *Institutes*, III, ii. 33.

he is placing the Spirit above Scripture as of revelation could be accomplished by a subjective encounter with the Spirit apart from the Word. But such a position directly violates Calvin's teaching.

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.⁵⁷⁾

As L. Richard states, "although Calvin stressed the importance of the Spirit (much more than Luther did), he did not separate it from the Word."⁵⁸⁾ The role of the Spirit in relation to the Word for the Christian is not to reveal new truth, but only to illumine what has already been revealed in the Bible.⁵⁹⁾ In the Christian life, then, the believer does not look to the Holy Spirit to provide direction or Guidance which would come independently of the Word of God. Rather, the Spirit always uses the Word, and only the Word, to give counsel and create faith within the heart of the submissive believer.

When the Word of God is sued correctly, and is made understand able by the Holy Spirit within the life of the believer, there is one primary result: the Word enables the believer to live a life of humble and selfless self-denial.⁶⁰⁾ The faith that Scripture engenders produces this fruit.

One may wonder why self-denial should be the fruit of a correct understanding of the Word. For Calvin, this is simply because at the heart of self-denial is an utter obedience to the commandments of Scripture. In other words, we need to see what God commands of us before we can submit ourselves before him, and we learn of his demands in the Word of

57) *Institutes*, I. ix. 3.

58) Richard, *Spirituality of John Calvin*, 154.

59) F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 157.

60) *Institutes*, III, vii. 1-3.

God. Thus, when believers deny themselves in total submission to the will of God, they then live "the sum of the Christian life."⁶¹⁾

IV. Relation between Prayer and the Word of God in the Christian Life

As now can be observed, Calvin views prayer and the Word as working harmoniously in the Christian life with faith joining the two. This relationship is best seen in its progression: we begin with the Word which contains, in particular, the promises of God to his people. As the believer is moved by the Holy Spirit and is enabled to respond to those promises in the Word, faith is created in the heart of the believer. But we must be quick to point out that this faith that is created or given its substance by the Word is dormant and ineffectual. Then, when the believer moves into Spirit-directed prayer, he or she activates that faith in the promises of the Word, and thus receives from God what the Word promised. This progression from the Word to faith to prayer is, for Calvin, the key to apprehending from God all that is necessary to live the Christian life. As Wallace states, the promises in the Word serve as God's invitations to pray in faith.⁶²⁾ Therefore, it becomes imperative for the Christian, first, to know and meditate on the promises of God in Scripture, and then second, to activate, by prayer, the faith that produced through those promises.

For Calvin, the Word of God controls the content of our prayers. Scripture, not our imaginations or worldly affections, informs our prayers of what is appropriate. In responding to Calvin's commentary of Psalm 35, Wallace writes, "It is necessary not only that the Word of God should precede and inspire the approach to prayer but also that in its direction and in all its details our prayer should be governed and restrained by the same Word."⁶³⁾ The Word,

61) *Institutes*, III, vii.

62) Wallace, 276-77.

63) Wallace, 277.

then, has this further relationship to prayer, that it provides the exact content and boundaries for right prayer.

Finally, the Word of God has a direct relationship to prayer in the Christian life by inspiring both boldness and confidence in prayer. Calvin writes:

It remains for us, provided with such inducements, to know that we have from this enough evidence that he will hearken to us, inasmuch as our prayers depend upon no merit of ours, but their whole worth and hope of fulfillment are grounded in God's promises, and depend upon them, so that they need no other support, nor do they look about up and down, hither and thither. We must therefore make up our minds that, even though we do not excel in holiness like that which is praised in the holy patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, yet because we and they have a common command to pray and common faith, if we rely upon God's Word, in this we are rightly their fellows.⁶⁴⁾

Although we have no merit of our own by which we come to God, because we pray in accordance with the Word, we can have confidence before him.⁶⁵⁾

Because the Word produces such a confidence in prayer, Calvin recommends meditation on the Word to provide thoughts for our prayers, and he also suggests quoting prayers of the Bible that are similar in content to our own requests. To use the actual words of Scripture itself should draw us closer to the heart of God and thus direct our own desires as we seek to align them with his will.⁶⁶⁾

We have explored Calvin's teaching in regard to the roles of prayer and the Word of God, as they function separately and together, in the

64) *Institutes*, III, xx. 14.

65) Cf. Niesel. 153. where he writes: "We sinful and mortal men are able to come before God and to speak with Him because He has first spoken to us and has given us His promises. Calvin repeatedly emphasizes this aspect of things. God Himself has invited us to call upon Him. Hence we must honour His Word by relying upon it implicitly. We ourselves cannot by our own resources make a way to God. It is God Himself who prepares for us the way of approach. In His Word we draw near to Him. It gives us the certainty that our prayer will be heard by Him."

66) Wallace, 278-79.

V. Epilegomena

We have explored Calvin's teaching in regard to the role of prayer and the Word of God, as they function separately and together, in the Christian life.

Although much more could be said, we have seen the major thrusts Calvin makes in regard to these topics. And here, some conclusions may be drawn from our study.

First, it is clear from this investigation that Calvin's own teachings on prayer and the Word in the Christian life belie, in part, the all-too-common objection that Calvin so emphasized the sovereignty of God that man's involvement makes no real difference to God's workings in the world. It was surely Calvin's perspective that prayer, for example, does make a difference to the work of God. While prayer never coerces God to act other than his infinite wisdom has willed, it nevertheless is one important and necessary condition which must be present for certain aspects of God's work to be carried out. Prayer, then, is not contrary to divine sovereignty but a divinely ordained instrument functioning within the sphere of God's sovereign wisdom and power in carrying out his will.

A second important conclusion from our study is that Calvin's general conceptions of the natures of humanity and God are fundamental to his doctrine of the Christian life. It is because humanity is sinful, in dire need, and totally incapable of meeting inherent inadequacies, and because God is almighty, all-wise, and especially benevolent that Calvin sees the need to emphasize humanity's utter dependence on God for living the Christian life. This sense of dependence is reflected in Calvin's treatments of prayer and the Word. In both cases, it is God who works in the believer to make a person's understanding of the Word and subsequent faith truly effectual, Calvin's perspective on the roles of prayer and the Word in the Christian life, then, are coherent extensions of his understandings of humanity and God.

Last, it seems appropriate to reaffirm that Calvin viewed the believer's active and serious involvement in prayer and study of the Word as the heart of a Christian's whole occupation in life. Perhaps the point that shows this most forcefully is the progression Calvin sees from the Word, to faith, to prayer. True faith is a faith informed by and conformed to the content of the Word and then put to work, so to speak, in the active exercise of prayer. If walking

by faith capsulized what it is to live as a christian, then study of the Word and prayer become central as the very substance and enlivening force of true faith. Hopefully, we can learn from this great thinker and servant of Christ who, in his own life, practiced the principles he so convincingly taught. By God's grace, may we discipline ourselves to persist in knowing God's Word, responding to it in faith, and then exercising that faith in Spirit-guided prayer. With Calvin, we affirm that to live such a life is to please our God from whom we receive, through prayer and the Word, all that is necessary for its accomplishment.

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