

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN PRAYER

JOHN OWEN



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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A rigorous defense of the **Holy Spirit's indispensable role in prayer**, grounded in Zechariah 12:10 and Romans 8:26. Owen argues that the Spirit, promised as a "Spirit of Grace and Supplications," both **inclines believers' hearts** toward prayer and **gifts them with spiritual ability** to pray according to God's will. He refutes prescribed liturgical forms as a substitute for Spirit-led prayer, examines contemplative prayer traditions, and makes the case that **free, Spirit-assisted prayer** is the normative pattern of the New Testament, superior to human compositions and essential to the vitality of Christian worship.



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PREFACE TO THE READER



There is no need to say much here about the necessity, benefit, and use of prayer in general. Everyone will readily agree that without prayer there can be no religion at all, and that the life and practice of all religion consists mainly in prayer. Therefore, the religious tradition that gives the best directions for prayer, offers the most powerful motivations to pray, and is most faithful in practicing it, has the advantage over all others. It also follows that all errors which corrupt the nature of prayer or excuse neglect of it are harmful to religion, and that disagreements over any of its vital concerns cannot help but be dangerous with serious consequences. On every side, these positions claim to regulate Christian practice in a matter of the highest importance to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Since nothing in our religion is more essential than maintaining true understanding of prayer's nature and purpose, declaring and defending that understanding when it is attacked or misrepresented is not only justified but necessary.

This is the purpose of the following discourse. Scripture contains a promise that the Holy Spirit will be given to the church as a Spirit of grace and supplications. As such, particular operations are attributed to Him. Frequent mention is also made of the help

and assistance He provides to believers in and for their prayers. For this reason, believers are said to pray always, with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit. Some confess they have experienced the lack of this help and assistance in enabling them to pray according to God's will, as well as its power when they do receive it. Accordingly, they regulate their whole approach to this duty by expecting and making use of that help. Others, being supplied with different aids of a different nature for the same purpose, which they regard as sufficient, view the claim of an ability to pray through the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit as a mere empty pretense.

In handling these different views, those who disagree can barely understand one another, as if they were speaking different languages. They are determined not merely by ideas of truth and falsehood, but by the experience they have of the things themselves — an experience they cannot communicate to each other. For while spiritual experience of truth is, to those who have it, above all other arguments, it cannot be used as an argument to enlighten or convince those who do not have it. Therefore, those who plead for prayer through supplies of gifts and grace from the Holy Spirit find it baffling that the need for such supplies could be denied. They cannot understand what those mean who seem to deny that every person in every circumstance is obligated to pray as well as he can, and to make use of the Spirit's assistance in doing so. By prayer they mean what the word most properly and primarily denotes: vocal prayer. On the other side, some are so far from understanding these things or being convinced of their reality that they

despise and mock any such claim with great confidence. Praying in the Spirit is used as a phrase of scorn, the very idea being regarded as foolish and contemptible.

Moreover, in disputes like this, people tend to go to extremes — whether to support their own position or to undermine those who disagree. No dispute shows greater extravagance than the one under consideration. Some trace the origin of free prayer among us through the assistance of the Holy Spirit to an invention of the Jesuits — which amounts to making them the authors of the Bible. Others insist that all forms of prayer used in public worship among us are merely copied from the Roman breviaries and missal. These claims will be addressed later. They are mentioned here only to show the value of a calm inquiry into the truth — into God's mind on this matter — which is the purpose of the following discourse.

What should chiefly guide this inquiry is that it be carried out for spiritual benefit and growth, without strife or contention. This requires diligent and consistent attention to the two sole rules of judgment in this matter: Scripture revelation and the experience of believers. Although the latter must be regulated by the former, where it is so regulated, it is a safe guide to those who possess it. In this case, as in a mirror, face answers to face — so do Scripture revelation and spiritual experience correspond to one another. All other arguments from customs, traditions, and forced conclusions are useless here. The questions before us concern the nature of the Holy Spirit's work in the help and assistance He gives to believers in and for their prayers according to God's will, and also what the effects and fruits of that work are — that is, what spiritual abilities He communicates to them. Before that, one might ask whether any such thing exists at all, or whether it is merely a pretense invented

by some who are mistaken. But since answering that question depends entirely on the previous inquiry, it can be handled together with the rest and needs no separate treatment. Anyone who wants neither to deceive nor to be deceived in seeking these things must diligently attend to the two rules already mentioned: Scripture testimony and experience. He has no other safe guides. Yet it will also be granted that from natural light — from which this duty springs and on which it is founded, and from which it cannot vary in its essence — as well as from generally accepted principles of religion suited to it, and from the uncorrupted practice of the church of God in earlier ages, much direction may be given for understanding those testimonies and examining that experience.

The foundation of the entire following discourse rests on the consideration and exposition of some of those Scripture passages where these things are expressly revealed and presented to us — for to examine all of them would be endless. This is the main labor of this work, since the controversy must ultimately be settled by Scripture, and those who engage in it will be judged by Scripture for eternity. What is added concerning the experience of those who believe the truth here carries no argumentative weight for those who lack that experience, beyond what flows from and corresponds to those divine testimonies. But since the things belonging to that experience are of great importance to those who have it — containing the principal acts, ways, and means of our intercourse and communion with God through Christ Jesus — they are treated here at some length on all occasions, for the benefit of those whose only concern is the practice of the duty itself. Unless it can be proved that the Scripture testimonies produced and relied upon do not carry the meaning that the words plainly express — for that is

the only thing being claimed — or that some people have no experience of the truth and power of that meaning enabling them to live to God according to it, all other contests about this matter are empty and pointless.

Yet nothing pleaded here for the work of the Holy Spirit is meant to be absolutely incompatible with, or condemnatory of, all those outward aids to prayer through set composed forms, which are used in nearly every part of the church. The practice is ancient and has been received in various degrees throughout the Christian world — though a no less widespread departure from the rule of truth at the same time, by the same persons and in the same places, cannot be denied — and I will not presume to judge how much benefit it may have brought, or does bring, to people's souls, nor what acceptance they have found in it where it is not too greatly abused. The substance of what we plead from Scripture and experience is simply this: since God has graciously promised His Holy Spirit, as a Spirit of grace and supplications, to those who believe — enabling them to pray according to His mind and will, in all the circumstances and capacities they face or may be called to — it is the duty of those who are enlightened with this truth to expect those promised aids and assistances in and for their prayers, and to pray according to the ability they receive thereby. To deny this as their duty, or to deprive them of their freedom to fulfill it on all occasions, is to set oneself in direct opposition to the divine instruction of the sacred Word.

But beyond what was said before, there are some generally accepted principles which, though not always duly considered, cannot at any time be honestly denied, and which give direction to-

ward the right performance of our duty in this matter. They are as follows.

1. It is every person's duty to pray for himself. Natural light, numerous divine commands, and our necessary dependence on God and submission to Him all give life and clarity to this principle. To acknowledge a divine being is to acknowledge that this being ought to be prayed to, and that it is our duty to do so.

2. By virtue of natural relationships or of office, it is the duty of some to pray with and for others as well. So it is the duty of parents and heads of households to pray with and for their children and families. This also flows from the great principles of natural light: that God is to be worshipped in all societies of His own making, and that those in the relationships mentioned are obligated to seek the highest good of those entrusted to their care; and this is frequently commanded in Scripture. Likewise, it is the duty of ministers to pray with and for their congregations, by virtue of their particular calling. These things are not questioned by anyone, as far as I know; yet in practice the majority of people openly neglect their duty here. If this were diligently attended to — from the first instance of natural and moral relationships to the established office of ministers and public teachers — we would have far fewer disputes about the nature and manner of prayer than we do now. Holy practice must reconcile differences in religion, or they will never be reconciled in this world.

3. Everyone who prays — whether by and for himself, or with and for others — is obligated, as to all the purposes, qualities, and circumstances of prayer, to pray as well as he is able. By natural light, every person is obligated in every instance to serve God with his best. One purpose of the institution of sacrifices in the Old

Testament was to confirm and illustrate this. It was ordained in them that the finest and best of everything was to be offered to God. Neither God's nature nor our own duty toward Him will allow us to expect any acceptance with Him unless our intention is to serve Him with the best we have, both in substance and in manner. So God Himself declared through the prophet: "If you offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if you offer the lame and the sick, is it not evil? You brought what was torn, and what was lame and sick; should I accept this at your hands, says the Lord? But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and vows and sacrifices to the Lord a corrupt thing; for I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and My name is feared among the nations."

4. In our reasonable service, the best with which we can serve God consists in the sincere, intense exercise of the faculties and affections of our minds according to their respective powers, through the use of the best assistance we can obtain. If we omit or abandon the exercise of them according to our present full ability in any instance, we offer to God the sick and the lame. If men can take it upon themselves before God that the invention and use of set forms of prayer and other such outward modes of divine worship is the best that He has endowed them with for His service, they are exempt from the force of this consideration.

5. Every person, by using the aids God has prepared for this purpose, is able to pray according to God's will and as duty requires — whether praying by and for himself, or with and for others. By these means no one achieves perfection in any duty, nor can all attain the same measure and degree in the usefulness and manner of prayer; but everyone can reach the point at which he will be accepted by God and fulfill the duty he is obligated to,

whether personally or by virtue of a relationship to others. To suppose that God requires duties of people which they cannot perform acceptably by means of the aids He has prepared and promised for that end is to reflect dishonor on His goodness and wisdom in His commands. Therefore, no one is obligated to pray in any circumstance by virtue of any relationship or office unless he is able to do so according to what is required of him; and what he is not able to do, he is not called to do.

6. We are expressly commanded to pray, but are nowhere commanded to compose prayers for ourselves, still less for others. This is something added for supposed convenience, beyond the directions of natural light and Scripture institution.

7. Believers are promised assistance to enable them to pray according to God's will; there is no assistance promised to enable anyone to compose prayers for others. The first part of this assertion is explained and proved in the following discourse; the second part cannot be disproved. And even if it were granted that composing prayers for others is a good work that falls under the general assistance of the Holy Spirit required for every good work, those aids are not of the same kind and nature as His actual assistance in and for prayer, as He is the Spirit of grace and supplications. For in using that assistance through grace and gifts, every person who uses them is actually praying, and they cannot be used in any other way; but people do not pray in the making and composing of forms of prayer, though they may pray when reading them afterward.

8. Whatever forms of prayer were given to the church by divine authority and inspiration — such as the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms or prayers of David — have their enduring use in the church, according to what they were designed for. Whatever their

purpose and use may be, they provide no more warrant for human compositions to the same end, or for imposing their use, than other human writings provide for being added to Scripture.

These and similar principles, which are clear in their own light and truth, will serve to guide us in the argument at hand, as far as our present purpose is concerned. For the primary goal is the defense of our own principles and practice, not an attack on those of other people. Therefore, as was noted before, neither these principles nor the divine testimonies on which we shall more fully rely are intended to condemn all use of set forms of prayer as sinful in themselves, absolutely unlawful, or as so corrupting God's worship as to render it wholly unacceptable to those who choose to worship in that way. God will accept the persons of those who sincerely seek Him, even if through unavoidable ignorance they err in various things regarding the way and manner of His worship. How far this principle may extend to particular failures in practice, only He knows; no person, whatever they may claim, knows it. And where anyone worships God in Christ with evident holy fear and sincerity, and lives a life consistent with the rule of the Gospel — though they may have many corruptions in their manner of worship — I will never judge harshly either their present acceptance with God or their future eternal condition. This is a safe rule with respect to others; our own rule is to attend with all diligence to what God has revealed concerning His worship, and to comply with it fully — without which we can neither please Him nor come to enjoy Him.

I also acknowledge that the general prevalence of humanly invented set forms of prayer in Christian assemblies for many ages — more than any other argument urged for their necessity — calls for tenderness in judging the whole matter of them and the accep-

tance of those who use them in the duty of prayer. Yet no consideration of this practice, since it is not warranted by Scripture, is not of apostolic example, and is not supported by the practice of the earliest churches, should prevent us from discerning and assessing the evils and inconveniences that have followed from it, or from recognizing how far their imposition is unwarranted. These evils may be briefly considered here.

The beginnings of the introduction of humanly composed set forms of prayer into the church's worship are entirely uncertain. But that their reception was gradual, with new additions from time to time, is well known. For neither Rome nor the present Roman missal was built in a day. In that missal and the breviaries, the entire worship of the church in these parts of the world found its conclusion. No one is so naive as to suppose they were composed all at once, the work of one age, one man, or any assembly of men at the same time — unless they are so blindly devout as to believe the mass-book was brought from heaven to the Pope by an angel, as the Quran was supposedly brought to Muhammad. It is evident that the common people of the Roman communion, at least, believe it to be as much of divine origin as Scripture itself, and for the same reason: that it is presented to them by their church as the only means of divine worship. For them, therefore, it has become an idol. But it is well enough known how, from small beginnings and through various additions, it grew to its present form and standing. This gradual reception of devised forms of prayer in the church's worship brought with it several harmful consequences, which we may briefly consider.

1. Through the additions made to the original received forms, the superstitious and corrupt doctrines of apostasy in various ages were worked into the church's worship. That such superstitious and corrupt doctrines were gradually introduced into the church is acknowledged by all Protestants and is well known; this very assumption is the sole foundation of the Reformation. By this scheme of adding to received forms, they were admitted from time to time into the church's worship, and through that worship they have maintained their hold on people's minds to this day. Remove that foundation, and they would quickly collapse. By this means, the abominations of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass both infiltrated and poisoned the entire worship of public assemblies, imposing themselves on the credulity of the people. The speculative and subtle disputes of learned and superstitious men about these things would never have infected the minds of ordinary Christians, nor ever served as the means of that idolatry which finally spread over the entire visible church in these parts of the world, had this device of prescribed forms of prayer — in which those abominations were not only expressed but graphically represented and enacted, so powerfully affecting the carnal minds of superstitious and ignorant people — not imposed them on their practice and gradually hardened them into obstinate credulity. For although they could see no doctrinal ground or reason to believe what was proposed to them about transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass, and might easily have seen that it was contradictory to all the guiding principles of human and Christian thought — namely faith, reason, and the senses — yet they deceived themselves into a stubborn pretense of belief in ideas they had already admitted into their practice. Men of corrupt minds, I say, might

have disputed endlessly about wandering forms, accidents without subjects, transmutation of substances without accidents, and sacrifices bloody and unbloody, before they had corrupted the whole worship of the church with gross idolatry — had not this device been used to introduce it, and the minds of men drawn in through their practice. But when the entire substance and means of it were gradually worked into, and at last contained in, those forms of prayer which people were continually obligated to use in divine service, their whole souls became saturated with a trust in and love for these abominations.

As a result, the doctrines concerning the sacraments and the whole worship of God in the church — as they became gradually corrupted — were not presented all at once to the minds and consideration of men as doctrines to be received or rejected according to the evidence for their truth or error (which would have been a method suited to our nature), but were gradually worked into their practice through additional forms of prayer which they felt obligated to use. This was the gilding of a poisonous pill whose effect, once swallowed, was to rob people of their sense, reason, and faith, and to make them madly affirm as true what was contrary to all three.

Moreover, as was noted before, the very things that were the foundation of idolatry — namely transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass — were so acted out and represented in those forms of worship as to make a deep impression on the minds of worldly people until they were mad with their idols. For when all religion and devotion enters the soul through the imagination and

fancy, excited by outward spectacles, it will wreak havoc in the world, as it has done and continues to do. This will be addressed more fully in the next point.

It would therefore have been utterly impossible for an idolatrous worship to be introduced into the church in general, had the view of the necessity of devised forms of prayer not first been universally accepted. At least it would not have been so introduced and so firmly established as to cause the shedding of the blood of thousands of holy persons for refusing to comply with it. By this means alone was brought in that fatal engine of the church's ruin — from whose murderous power few escaped with their lives or souls. Had all churches continued in the liberty in which they were placed and left by our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles, many irregularities might have prevailed in some of them, and many mistakes admitted into their practice; yet this monster of the mass — devouring the souls of most and drinking the blood of many — would never have been conceived or brought forth, at least not nourished into the terrible form and power in which it appeared and acted for many ages in the world. On this account, it is not without reason that the Jews say Christians received their Tephilloth, or prayer books, from Armillus — that is, Antichrist.

It is true that when religious doctrine is determined and established by civil law, and the laws of the nation where it is professed serve as the rule governing all outward advantages, liturgies composed in compliance with those laws are not so subject to this evil; but this comes only from that external cause. Otherwise, wherever those who manage these things deviate from the truth once received — as most tend to do — forms of prayer reflecting those deviations would quickly be introduced. And the various liturgies ex-

isting among the many kinds of Christians in the world today serve little purpose beyond entrenching those Christians in their particular errors, to which they cling as articles of faith.

By this, God allowed contempt to fall on the supposed wisdom of men concerning His worship and the ways of it. They would not trust His institutions and His care of them; instead, they first put the ark in a cart and then, like Uzzah, put out a hand of force to hold it when it seemed to shake. It is certain that if not the first invention, then at least the first public recommendation and imposition of devised forms of prayer on the churches, was designed to prevent false opinions and corrupt modes of worship from creeping into public administrations. The fear was of heresy-infected persons who might make their way into the ministry. So the Orthodox and the Arians composed prayers, hymns, and doxologies against each other, inserting in them passages that confirmed their own positions and condemned those of their opponents. However well-intentioned this scheme may have been while it stayed within bounds, it proved to be the Trojan horse that brought all evils into the city of God. For the one who was then at work in the mystery of iniquity seized on this device and occasion to corrupt those prayers which the authority of those in power had obligated and confined the churches to. This took effect especially in the shaping of worship for the second generation of Christians — the nations converted to the Christian faith after they had destroyed the western Roman Empire. To speak plainly and briefly: it was by this means alone — the required use of devised forms of prayer in the church's assemblies — and by this alone, that the mass, with its transubstantiation and sacrifice, and all the idolatrous worship accompanying them, were introduced, until the

world, inflamed with those idols, drenched itself in the blood of the saints and martyrs of Christ who testified against those abominations. If it had been discovered sooner that no church had been entrusted by Christ with the authority to frame and impose devised forms of worship not warranted by Scripture, innumerable evils might have been prevented. For the demonstrative proof that there were no liturgies composed, and no imposed use of them, in the earliest churches for several centuries, rests on the very same arguments by which we prove they had neither the mass nor the use of images in their worship. Besides the complete silence on these in the apostolic writings and those of the immediately following ages — which is sufficient to dismiss any claim to such antiquity — those writings give such descriptions of the churches' worship as are inconsistent with and exclude these things; and the liturgies themselves present such a new face of divine worship, so different from the picture of it given in Scripture, as is hardly reconcilable with it, and therefore was not quickly embraced in the church.

I do not say that this terrible consequence of introducing humanly devised set forms of prayer into the church's worship — in the horrible abuse made of them — is sufficient to condemn them as absolutely unlawful. For where the opinions that led to such idolatrous practices are openly rejected and condemned, as was noted before, all the causes, means, and occasions of that idolatry may be removed from them and separated from them, as is the case in the liturgies of the Reformed churches whether imposed or freely used. But it is sufficient reason to weigh against the reverence that their widespread use over many centuries might invite or

produce. It is also sufficient reason to warrant the disciples of Christ to stand firm in the freedom with which He has set them free.

Another evil that either accompanied or closely followed the introduction of devised forms of prayer into the church was a supposed necessity of adorning their observance with various arbitrary ceremonies. This also, as all Protestants agree, ended up increasing superstition in worship, with various practices leading to idolatry. It is clear that the use of free prayer in church services can admit no ceremonies other than those either divinely instituted or naturally implied in the actions that make up worship. Divine institution and natural light are the rules of all the order and decency needed for it. But when these devised forms were introduced, on the assumption that they were necessary and alone valid in all acts of direct worship, people quickly found it necessary to dress them up with additional ornaments. As a result, there were gradually prescribed for constant observance so many outward postures and gestures — with vestments, music, bowings, cringes, crossings, acts of veneration, censings, altars, images, crucifixes, responses, alternations, and such a crowd of other ceremonies — as to render the whole worship of the church ridiculous, burdensome, and superstitious. The person officiating in divine service was required to learn and practice so many turnings of himself — eastward and westward, to the altar, to the wall, to the people; so many gestures and postures in kneeling, rising, standing, bowing both slight and deep, speaking softly and aloud, carefully observing the placement of crossings, moving from one location to another, managing vestments of varying colors, and attending to all the furnishings of their altars — that it was difficult to learn and foolishly theatrical

in practice, surpassing even the preparations of actors for the stage. Instructions for these and similar observances are the subject of the rubric of the missal and the rubrics of the mass.

That these things have not only no connection with the purity, simplicity, and spiritual character of evangelical worship, but were invented precisely to shut it out of the church and the minds of men, needs no proof for anyone who has ever read Scripture with due attention. Nor is the ministry itself any less corrupted and destroyed by it. For beyond a certain artful facility in this practice and the reading of some forms of words in connection with these rites, along with a basic intention to do what one is doing and not the opposite, little more was required to qualify any man — or woman, as at least once happened — to administer all of sacred worship.

Having utterly lost the Spirit of grace and supplications, at best neglecting all His aids and assistances, and being without any personal experience of the power and effectiveness of prayer through them, they found it necessary by these means to dress up and commend their lifeless forms. For the empty shell of their forms alone was no more fit to be called prayer than a log of wood was fit to be called a god before it was carved, fashioned, gilded, and decorated. By this means they taught the image of prayer they had made to speak and play a part to the satisfaction of the spectators. The bare reading of a form of words — especially as it was arranged in an unknown tongue — could never have given the slightest satisfaction to the common people, had it not been accompanied by this variety of ceremonies designed to create an appearance of devotion and sacred reverence. Yet even after doing their utmost, they could never equal the ceremonies and rites of the old temple worship in

beauty, glory, and order, nor those of the pagans in their sacred Eleusinian mysteries for number, solemnity, gravity, and the appearance of devotion. Having rejected the true glory of Gospel worship — which the apostle expressly declares consists in the administration of the Spirit — they substituted something in its place that debased the profession of the Christian religion below that of the Jews and pagans, especially considering that most of their ceremonies were borrowed or taken from those very groups. But I will never believe that their transformation of the holy prayers of the church — through open contempt for the whole work of the Spirit of God in them — into a theatrical and pompous observance of ludicrous rites and ceremonies can give even momentary satisfaction to anyone who has not been given over to strong delusions to believe a lie. The exercise of deeply rooted superstition will quiet a natural conscience; outward forms and representations of things believed will please the imagination and occupy the fancy; the variety and constant change of modes, gestures, and postures, with a kind of prayer always beginning and always ending, will engage present thoughts and outward senses, so that people, finding themselves greatly affected by these means, may suppose they are praying very well, when they are doing nothing of the kind. For prayer consists in a holy exercise of faith, love, trust, and delight in God, expressing our desires to Him through the aid and assistance of the Holy Spirit — and all of this can be absent where all those outward things are most effectively present.

This also produced all the pretended ornaments of their temples, chapels, and oratories — crucifixes, images, a multiplication of altars, with relics, candles, vestments, and other furnishings.

None of these corruptions and degradations of the Christian religion would ever have occurred to anyone, had not a necessity for their invention been introduced by establishing set forms of prayer as the only way and means of divine worship. And wherever they are retained, some such ceremonies must necessarily be retained as well, in proportion to the doctrinal principles people hold. I will not deny, then, that here lies the foundation of all our present differences about the manner of divine worship. Grant the necessity of confining the solemn worship of the church to set forms of prayer, and I will grant that various rituals and ceremonies may well be judged necessary to accompany their observance. For without them, those forms will quickly grow stale and unsatisfying. But if, on the other hand, free prayer in the church is permitted, it is clear that nothing more is required or can be admitted in divine service than the grace and gifts of the Holy Spirit, along with due regard for the natural circumstances of decency.

Yet this consequence — however inseparable it may seem from the sole public use of set forms of prayer in sacred services — is not being invoked here to prove that those forms are in themselves, or in their use, unlawful. The purpose of this consideration is only to show that they have been so greatly abused, that they are so readily subject to abuse, and that they always stand in need of being abused to achieve the ends sought by them — and all of this greatly weakens the argument for making their use mandatory.

Another evil has accompanied this invention. Church leaders, after a while, were not content merely to use humanly devised forms of prayer and confine themselves to them alone in all public services; they also judged it fitting to impose the same practice on all who were under their authority. In time they considered it law-

ful — even necessary — to enforce this with ecclesiastical and civil penalties, and ultimately with capital punishment. When this injunction first gained wide acceptance is very uncertain. For the first two or three centuries there were no systems of composed forms of prayer used in any church whatever, as has been proved. Afterward, when such forms began to be generally received — for reasons I will not detail here, but may address in a discussion of the nature and use of spiritual gifts, their continuation in the church, and an inquiry into the causes of their decline — the authority of some prominent figures recommended the use of their compositions to other churches, which were free to make use of them as they saw fit. But as for this scheme of imposing them — confining churches not only to their necessary use in general, but to a specific composition and collection — we owe all the so-called advantages received from it entirely to the Popes of Rome, among the churches of the second generation. For on their own initiative, by their own authority, without the counsel of councils or any claim to tradition — the two Gorgon heads by which in other matters they terrify people and turn them to stone — they obtained, by degrees, a pretended right to impose them, and proceeded to do so. Once the benefit and usefulness of these forms had been pleaded for a while, and from there the argument advanced to their necessity, it followed that they must be imposed on all churches and Christians by ecclesiastical authority. But when they had gradually worked into those forms and lodged within them the two great idols of transubstantiation and the unbloody sacrifice, not merely fines and personal penalties, but capital punishment was enacted and carried out to enforce their observance. This brought fire and execution into the Christian religion, devastating

the true church of Christ and shedding the blood of thousands. For the martyrdom of all who have been put to death in the world for testifying against the idolatries of the mass traces its origin entirely to this single spring: the mandatory imposition of a complete liturgical system of prayer. For this is the sole foundation of the Roman breviary and missal, which have been the destroyers of Christ's church in these parts of the world, and stand ready to be so again. Remove this foundation, and they all fall to the ground. It is worth considering what kind of principle it is that was so naturally developed into such harmful effects — which quickly proved to be a ready and effective instrument in Satan's hand to destroy and murder the servants of Christ.

Had the churches of Christ been left in their original freedom — under the required duties of reading and expounding Scripture, singing Psalms to the praise of God, administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and diligently preaching the Word, all of which were accompanied by prayer according to the abilities and spiritual gifts of those who presided — as they evidently were for several centuries, it is impossible for anyone to imagine what evils could have followed that would be in any way comparable to the enormous harms that resulted from the contrary practice. And as for all the inconveniences that are claimed might result from this freedom, the Gospel's constitution and the communion of all the true churches of Christ make sufficient provision for their prevention or correction.

But this was not the whole of the evil that attended this imposition. By this means, all spiritual ministerial gifts were caused to disappear from the church. For since such gifts are talents given to be put to use, or manifestations of the Spirit given to benefit and

build up the church, they will not remain in any person nor be retained by those who have received them if they are not continually exercised. We see every day what the contempt or neglect of them produces. When their exercise was restricted and shut out by this imposition, they were utterly lost in the church, so that it came to be regarded as a rare thing for anyone to be able to pray in the administration of divine worship — indeed, the very claim to such ability was treated as a crime, and its exercise as a nearly unpardonable sin; yet I do not find this reckoned among the faults for which a bishop or presbyter was to be deposed in any of the ancient canons. But that from this arose among those called to officiate in public assemblies a neglect of the gifts they had received for the edification of the church in divine worship — a neglect that has dealt a fatal blow to the church's light and holiness — is openly evident. For when the generality of those in that office had prayers provided for them, acquired at little effort or paid for at public expense, they were content to rest and be free from the labor and mental effort that the constant exercise and development of spiritual gifts requires. This imposition was the grave in which those gifts were buried. At length, as events plainly show, our Lord Jesus Christ — provoked by their sloth and unbelief — withheld the communication of such gifts from the generality of those who officiated in divine worship. In doing so, they also lost one great evidence of the continuation of His mediatorial life in heaven for the preservation of the church.

This is known to be the state of things in the Roman church with respect to its entire worship in public assemblies. And therefore, although that church has tolerated various enthusiasts whose supposed revelations and actions, claimed to be from the Holy

Spirit, served to confirm its superstitions — and some of them have ventured into notions about mental prayer which they themselves do not understand — yet as to free prayer by the assistance of the Holy Spirit, whether in church assemblies or elsewhere, the Roman church was the first and remains the fiercest opponent of it; and it is in their interest to be so. For shake this foundation — the imposition of an entire system of humanly devised prayers as the only way and means of the church's worship — and the whole fabric of the mass, with all the weight of their religion (if vanity and imagination can be said to have any weight) which rests upon it, will tumble into the pit from which it came. Therefore I must inform the reader here that the first occasion for writing this discourse was my reading of Mr. Cressy's preface to his Church History, in which, with the design of advancing the supposed mental prayer of some of his enthusiasts, he speaks with much contempt and reproach about the free prayer by the aids of the Spirit of God that we plead for. The reader will find that all his claims are examined in the latter part of this discourse.

Notwithstanding all this, those of the Roman church boast to this day of their devotion in public and private prayer, and have by this means drawn in many who are disposed toward compliance through their own guilt, ignorance, and superstition. The vanity of their claim has been well exposed by showing the idolatry by which all or most of their devotions are corrupted and rendered unacceptable. But this also weighs on me: the provision of the entire system and order of their devotion and its exercise is evidently designed and arranged to shut out the whole work of the Spirit of God in prayer. And yet they continue under an incredible delusion, opposing, ridiculing, and condemning the prayers of others who

are not of their communion, on the grounds that those others do not have the Holy Spirit or His aids, which they claim are all confined to their church. But if any society of people in the world, maintaining the outward profession of the Christian religion, can do more to exclude the Holy Spirit and all His operations in prayer and divine worship than their church has done, I will freely admit I am greatly mistaken. It is nothing but ignorance of Him and His whole work, and of all the ends for which He is promised to the church — not to say a hatred and detestation of them — that causes any to embrace their ways of devotion.

But to return. The things we are pleading for may be summarized under the following headings.

1. No persons, no churches are obligated by any divine constitution, command, or approved example to confine themselves in their public or private worship to set or humanly devised forms of prayer. If any such constitution, command, or example can be produced — which has not been done thus far — it ought to be complied with. And as long as others are left free in their use of such forms, this is sufficient to defeat all arguments for imposing them.

2. There is a promise in Scripture — many promises belonging to the church to the end of the world — of the communication of the Holy Spirit to it, with particular help and assistance in prayer. To deny this is to overthrow the foundation of the holiness and comfort of all believers, and to bring immediate ruin to the souls of people in distress.

3. It is the duty of believers to seek after and pray for those promised aids and assistances in prayer. Without this, all those promises are despised and treated as mere flourishes of words,

without truth, power, or effectiveness. But,

4. Believers are commanded to do this, and they have the blessed experience of success in it. The first is plain in Scripture, and the second must be left to their own testimony in life and in death.

5. Beyond the divine institution of all the ordinances of worship in the church — with the determination of the substance and form that are essential to them, as contained in Scripture — and due attention to natural light in outward circumstances, nothing is needed for the proper and orderly celebration of all public worship in its assemblies. If anything further is claimed, it is something Christ never appointed, the apostles never practiced, the earliest churches never used, and it carries no promise of acceptance.

6. For the preservation of unity in faith and communion among the churches, they may express their agreement — as in doctrine by a joint confession of faith, so also in a declaration of the material and substantial parts of worship, with their order and method — on which foundation they may in all things share fellowship with each other as churches, and in the practice of their members.

7. Since the differences about prayer under consideration concern Christian practice at the very heart of religion, great weight must be given to the experience of believers, where it is not obstructed and clouded by prejudices, sloth, or contrary principles and opinions. Therefore the substance of the greatest part of the following discourse consists mainly in the declaration of those aspects of prayer that relate to practice and experience. And from this it follows:

8. That the best means of resolving these differences among us is for every one to stir up the gift and grace of God that is in him, and for all of us to give ourselves to the diligence, frequency, fervency, and perseverance in prayer that God requires of us — especially in such a season as we now live in. A time when those, whoever they may be, who trouble others, may for all they know be near to trouble themselves. This will be the most effective means of leading us all into acknowledgment of the truth, and without it an agreement on opinions is of little use or value.

But I confess that hopes are weak concerning the proper application of this remedy to any of our evils and disorders. The opinions of those who deny all internal, real, and effective operations of the Holy Spirit on the souls of men, and who ridicule all their effects, have so widely spread and taken root in the minds of many, that little is to be expected from a return to those aids and reliefs. This evil in the profession of religion was reserved for these latter ages. For although the work and grace of the Holy Spirit in divine worship was much neglected and lost in the world, no examples can be found in past ages of such contempt cast upon all His internal grace and operations as now abounds. If the Pelagians, who were most guilty of this, fell into any such excesses, they have escaped the records and monuments that survive concerning their conduct. These are bold ventures of atheistic inclinations in men who openly declare their own ignorance and utter lack of all experience in things spiritual and heavenly. Nor do the person of Christ or His office receive any better reception from many; and by some they have been treated with scurrility and blasphemy. Meanwhile, disputes about communion with churches are loud and fierce. But where such opinions are received and approved, those who do not

live on a merely inherited faith will not forsake Christ and the Gospel, or renounce faith and experience, for the sake of communion with any church in the world.

But nearly all people have corrupted their ways. The power of religion and the experience of it in the souls of men being generally lost, the profession of it is of little value and will not long survive. Indeed, multitudes all over the world seem to be weary of the religion they themselves profess — so far as it claims to be divinely revealed, whether true or false — unless they have great worldly advantages from their profession of it. No church shows a greater outward appearance of flourishing than certain churches of the Roman communion, especially one at this day. But if the account given to us from within their own ranks is true, it is not much to boast of. Set aside the multitude of atheists, those who reject Scripture, and those who openly disbelieve the supernatural mysteries of the Gospel — and the remaining crowd, driven into a hatred and persecution of the truth by a combination of men maintaining themselves and their ways through extreme worldly interests and advantages, is not very impressive. Indeed, their present height seems to be on the edge of a precipice. What advances are made every day in various places by bold opinions concerning the authority of Scripture and its evidence, the person and office of Christ, the Holy Spirit and all His operations, and the promotion of a pretended morality in opposition to evangelical grace in its nature and power — this is known to all who pay attention to these things. And although the effects of this poison reveal themselves daily in the decay of piety, the increase of immorality of all kinds, and the abounding of shameful sins that expose nations to the high

displeasure of God, yet the security of most people in this condition, proclaiming itself through various fruits, can never be sufficiently mourned.

Since, therefore, one means of the church's preservation and deliverance from these evils is faithful attention to the duty of prayer, the declaration of its nature — with a defense of the sources and causes from which it derives its power, which is attempted in the following discourse — may, I hope through God's blessing, be of some use to those whose minds are sincere in their search for truth.

CHAPTER 1



The Use of Prayer, and the Work of the Holy Spirit therein.

The works of the Spirit of God toward believers are of two kinds: those that are general and not confined to any one duty more than another, and those that are particular, directed toward some specific duty. Of the first kind are regeneration and sanctification, which are common to all believers and serve as the general basis for all acts of grace and particular duties in them. But beyond these, the Holy Spirit has various specific works and operations in and toward the disciples of Christ, which, although they may be brought under the general heading of sanctification, deserve particular consideration on their own terms. One such work is the help and assistance He gives us in our prayers and supplications.

I suppose it will be granted that prayer, in its full scope and extent — comprising meditation, supplication, praise, and thanksgiving — is one of the most important duties of religion. Natural light in its most clear expressions, and its practical voice in human conscience, join with Scripture in affirming this. Both together witness not only that prayer is an important duty in religion, but that without it there is no genuine exercise of religion anywhere in the

world. No people who acknowledged a divine being ever lived without also, under the same conviction, believing that vows, prayers, and praises were incumbent on them as occasions arose. Even when they developed external ceremonial ways of expressing their devotion, it was the duty of prayer alone that served as their natural, necessary, and foundational acknowledgment of the divine being they owned. There are no significant historical records of the ancient pagan nations of the world in which — to the shame of a degenerate Christianity, it may be said — there are not more frequent accounts of their sacred invocations and supplications to their supposed gods than are found in any historical accounts of the actions of Christian nations in these latter ages. Prayer, therefore, is the most natural and most prominent way we have of communing with God; without it we have no present advantage over the beasts that perish, but only such advantage as will turn to our eternal disadvantage in a misery they cannot experience. It is the way by which we exercise toward God all the grace we receive from Him, and render Him an acceptable acknowledgment of the homage and tribute of glory which we are never able to offer in their full and proper measure. What benefit and advantage the proper performance of this duty brings to ourselves no one can fully express — everyone can add something from his own experience. But we need not press the commendation of prayer; for by whom was it ever spoken against?

I wish I could take comfort in that reply. For not only the practice of most people, but the declared opinions of many show that neither the excellence nor the necessity of this duty finds the acceptance and esteem in people's minds that is claimed. But since this is not my present concern, I will not pursue it further.

My purpose is not to write about the nature, necessity, properties, uses, effects, and advantages of this gracious duty as the vital breath of our spiritual life toward God. Its origin in the law of nature as the first and principal means of acknowledging a divine power — whose neglect is sufficient evidence of practical atheism, for he who does not pray says in his heart there is no God — its direction in Scripture as to the rule, manner, and proper object of prayer; the necessity of its constant practice both from express commands and from our condition in this world with the whole variety of inward and outward occasions that may befall us; arguments, motives, and encouragements to constancy, fervency, and perseverance in it; well-known examples of its mighty power and remarkable results; the certain benefits believers receive thereby in spiritual aids and supplies of strength, with peace and consolation — and many other aspects of it — although much written about already by many, might yet be further considered and expanded. But none of these is my present concern. The interest of the Holy Spirit of God, through His gracious operations in prayer, is the one thing I intend to inquire into.

It cannot be denied that the work and actings of the Spirit of grace in and toward believers with respect to the duty of prayer are more frequently and explicitly affirmed in Scripture than His operations with respect to any other particular grace or duty whatsoever. If this should be called into question, the following discourse will, I hope, sufficiently vindicate and confirm the truth. By this means believers are instructed both about the importance of the duty itself and about the need for the Spirit's aid and assistance in properly discharging it. For where frequent, plain revelations combine with multiplied commands and directions, together with con-

tinual experience — as is the case here — their instruction is firm and takes hold in the mind. This makes an inquiry into these matters both necessary and timely — for what could be more so than that which so deeply concerns the spiritual life and comfort of believers, and which displays such a gracious condescension of divine love and goodness? Moreover, the opposition that is made in the world against the work of the Spirit of God in prayer — above all His other operations — makes it necessary that something be said in its defense.

But this hostility seems to be peculiar to these latter ages — I mean among those who claim any acquaintance with these things from Scripture. It would be hard to find an example in earlier ages of anyone for whom the Spirit of God as a Spirit of grace and supplications was a source of reproach. But as the contradiction now is great and fierce, so there is no difference about any practical duty of religion in which the parties at variance are more confident and settled in their own views than those who disagree about the work of the Spirit of God in our prayers and supplications. For those who oppose what others ascribe to the Spirit here are not content merely to deny and reject it, or to refuse communion in the faith and practice of the work so attributed to Him; beyond that, with such confidence in their own thinking, they revile and contemptuously speak against what they oppose. As a result, the ability to pray — as is claimed — through the assistance of the Holy Spirit is far from being acknowledged as a gift, or a grace, or a duty, or anything of use to humanity; instead it is mocked and scorned as a petty faculty fit to be expelled from among Christians. And at last it is denounced as an invention and scheme of the

Jesuits — to the surprise and offense of many serious people; the foolishness of this insinuation will be demonstrated in the following discourse.

Others, by contrast, say that of all the privileges they have received in this world, of all the aids, assistances, or gifts they receive from or through the Spirit of God, that which He communicates and helps them with in their prayers and supplications is the most excellent and invaluable. In this they have, living and dying, in all troubles, distresses, temptations, and persecutions, such assurance and satisfaction in their minds that they are not in the least moved by all the scorn and contempt cast on their profession and practice in the exercise of the gift they have received; but rather judge that those who reproach this work of the Spirit bring great guilt upon themselves. I know of no religious difference that is managed with greater bitterness and worse consequences than this one about the work of the Spirit of God in prayer — which is in fact the hinge on which all other differences about divine worship turn and depend. It may therefore be well worth our while — indeed it is our duty — to inquire calmly and diligently into what Scripture teaches us in this matter, in which we must rest, and by which all experiences on either side must be tested and regulated. I therefore propose two things for the following discourse, concerning both of which I will plainly and briefly seek to satisfy fair-minded and unprejudiced readers. These are: first, to demonstrate that there is a promised and actually given special work of the Spirit of God in the prayers and praises of believers under the New Testament; and second, to declare the nature of that work — what it consists of, and how the Holy Spirit operates in it. And if in these things no impression can be made on the minds of those possessed by mighty prejudices

that reject even the proposal of them with contempt, this may still be useful to those who are not biased by misplaced love or hatred of parties, nor lifted up by high valuations of their own ideas above those of others whom they think they have reason, if not to hate, then at least to scorn — but who sincerely desire to live to God and prefer the performance of their duty to all other considerations, striving to bring their inclinations and affections into line with it. I ask nothing more of any reader than that he acknowledge he is dealing here with things that will have a bearing on his eternal account.

CHAPTER 2



Zechariah 12:10. Opened and vindicated.

The special promise of the administration of the Spirit of God to the end under consideration is what I will lay as the foundation of the following discourse: Zechariah 12:10. "I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplications." The Spirit here promised is the Spirit of God — the Holy Spirit — described with respect to the specific purpose for which He is promised. The manner of His administration in fulfilling the promise is expressed by the words "I will pour out." The same word is used to the same purpose in Ezekiel 39:29 and Joel 2:28, as are other words of the same import that we render as "pouring out," such as in Proverbs 1:23, Isaiah 32:15, Isaiah 44:3, and Isaiah 52:10.

Two things have been elsewhere stated concerning this expression as applied to the communication of the Holy Spirit.

(1) A plentiful dispensation of Him for the purpose for which He is promised, with respect to an especially high degree in His operations, is what is intended. The apostle expresses this word, or the fulfillment of what is promised by it, in Titus 3:6 as meaning that He has poured out His Spirit richly — or abundantly.

Therefore what is promised is not a mere grant and communication of the Spirit, but a plentiful outpouring of Him, which must have some notable effects as pledges and tokens of it. For it is absurd to speak of a plentiful, abundant outpouring of a degree beyond what was previously given, and yet have no certain ways or means by which it may be evidenced and demonstrated. The Spirit is therefore promised here so as to produce some remarkable and particular effects of His communication. (2) This promise is peculiar to the days of the Gospel — as is indeed every promise where mention is made of pouring out the Spirit on people, which may be shown by considering every passage where this expression is used. But in this passage it is most undeniable, since the immediate effect of it is looking to Christ as One who was pierced. It may further be observed that there is a tacit comparison here with some other time or season, or some other act of God in which He previously gave His Spirit, though not in that way, manner, or measure in which He now promises to give Him. Regarding all these observations, Dydimus gives us a brief account in *De Spiritu Sancto*, Book 1: "The word 'effusion' signifies a generous and rich abundance of the gift; and so when one person or two receive the Holy Spirit somewhere, it is not said, 'I will pour out my Spirit,' but rather when the gift of the Holy Spirit overflows upon all peoples."

(2) Those to whom He is thus promised are the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem — that is, the whole church, described by a division into the ruling family and the body of the people under their rule. The family of David, which was at that time in supreme authority among the people in the person of Zerubbabel, is expressly mentioned for three reasons: (1) because God's faithfulness to His promises was bound up with the preservation of that

family, from which the Messiah was to come, Christ Himself being thereby typified in an especially significant manner in the rule of the church; (2) because all the promises were first to be fulfilled in a particular manner in the person of Christ, so typified by David and his house — on Him the Spirit under the New Testament was first to be poured out in all fullness, and from Him to be communicated to others; (3) perhaps to indicate the special gifts and graces that would be given to those employed in ruling and guiding the church under Him, the King and Head of it. The phrase "inhabitants of Jerusalem" expresses the whole church, since Jerusalem was the seat of all their public worship ordinances. See Psalm 122:1-9. Therefore the whole spiritual church of God — all believers — are the object of this promise, as represented in the family of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

(3) The Spirit promised has two special qualifications: (1) He is a Spirit of grace. The Hebrew word that the Greek consistently renders as grace (from which the Latin *gratia* is derived) is related to a root meaning to be merciful, or compassionate, or gracious — as all the Hebrew words for God's gracious dealings with sinners include the sense of pity, compassion, free goodness, and bounty. It is used in various ways in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to the grace and favor of God as the fountain of all gracious and merciful effects toward us: Romans 1:7; Romans 4:4, 16; Romans 5:2, 14, 20; Romans 6:1; Romans 11:5; 1 Corinthians 1:3, and in countless other places. Sometimes it refers to the principal effect of that grace — the gracious favor of God by which He accepts us in Christ: Ephesians 2:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:12, which is the grace the apostle prays for on behalf of the church in Romans 16:20 and 1 Corinthians 16:23. Sometimes it refers to the favor of people and

acceptance with them, called finding grace or favor in someone's sight: Genesis 39:4, 21; Genesis 41:24; 1 Samuel 2:26; Romans 15:11; Esther 2:15, 17; Esther 5:2; Luke 2:52; Acts 4:33. Sometimes it refers to the free, effective power of grace at work in those who have it: Acts 14:26; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 11:9. Sometimes it refers to our justification and salvation by the free grace or favor of God in Christ: John 1:17; 1 Peter 1:13. It also refers to the Gospel itself as the instrument by which the grace of God is declared and communicated: 2 Corinthians 6:1; Ephesians 3:2; Colossians 1:6; Titus 2:11. It refers to the free gift of grace and the gifts of the Spirit: John 1:16; Ephesians 4:7. And it has many other meanings that are not relevant to our present purpose.

Three things may be intended in this description: "of grace."

(1) A reference to the sovereign cause of His dispensation, which is none other than the mere grace of God. He may be called a Spirit of grace because His giving is an effect of grace, with no consideration of any merit in those to whom He is given. This reason for the title is stated in Titus 3:4-6. The sole cause and reason — in contrast to our own works or deserving — for the outpouring of the Spirit upon us is the love and kindness of God in Jesus Christ; therefore He may rightly be called a Spirit of grace. (2) Because He is the author of all grace in and to those on whom He is poured out; just as God is called the God of all grace because He is the fountain and author of it. That the Holy Spirit is the immediate efficient cause of all grace in us has been proved elsewhere both in general and in the principal instances of regeneration and sanctification, and will be further confirmed in what follows. (3) The word is commonly used to express the grace or favor one person has with another, as in the instances already cited: "let me find

grace in your sight." In this sense the Spirit may also be called a Spirit of grace, because those on whom He is poured out have grace and favor with God — they are accepted in the Beloved: Ephesians 2:18. Since all three of these meanings apply wherever this Spirit is communicated, I see no reason not to regard them as all included here, though the second is especially intended. The Spirit is promised to work grace and holiness in all on whom He is bestowed.

As poured out in this way, He is also a Spirit of supplications — that is, of prayer for grace and mercy. The Hebrew word is formed from the same root as the previous word, meaning to be gracious or merciful; and as it expresses our act toward God, it can only properly mean supplications for mercy and grace. And the original word is never used except to express vocal prayer — either in the assemblies of God's people or by private persons. "Hear the voice of my supplications" is rendered in Hebrews 5:7 by the apostle Paul, where that Greek word appears alone in all of Scripture. Originally the image behind the word referred to a bough or olive branch wrapped with wool or laurel, which those who were suppliants would carry in their hands and hold up when seeking peace or asking that someone's anger not be turned against them. From this came the phrase to hold out such covered branches. So Livy on the Punic War writes: "Carrying olive branches and other coverings used by suppliants, they prayed that they might be received into grace and favor." This custom is also described by Virgil in his account of Aeneas addressing himself to Evander.

These were called branches of supplication, or prayer. The Romans also commonly called the solemn prayers they made to their gods *supplicia* and *supplicationes*; as Livy in Book 10

records: "That year there were many prodigies, and for averting them the Senate decreed supplications for two days." A form of such prayer is found in Cato, *De re rustica*, chapter 13: "Mars pater te precor quaesoque ut calamitates..." — "Father Mars, I pray and beseech you that calamities..."

Some render the Hebrew word as "lamentations" or "mournful cries" and interpret it as people bewailing themselves in prayer for grace and mercy, which in the end does not differ from the sense already given. But since it is derived from a root meaning to be merciful or gracious, and expresses our act toward God, it can properly signify nothing but supplications for mercy and grace. Nor is it used otherwise in Scripture. See Job 40:21; Proverbs 18:23; Daniel 9:3; Jeremiah 31:9; 2 Chronicles 6:21; Jeremiah 3:21; Psalm 28:2; Psalm 6:9; Psalm 116:1; Psalm 130:2; Psalm 140:7; Psalm 143:1; Daniel 9:18, 23; Psalm 46:1 — all the other places besides this where the word is used. In all of them it denotes deprecation of evil and supplication for grace, consistently in the plural number to indicate the earnestness of those praying.

These are properly supplications for grace and mercy, seeking freedom and deliverance from evil, but by a synecdoche they stand for all sorts of prayer whatever. We may therefore inquire in what sense the Holy Spirit of God is called a Spirit of supplication — that is, what is the reason for this attribution to Him. He must be so either formally or effectively — either because He is so in Himself, or because He is so to us. If in the former way, then He is a Spirit who Himself prays and, by the force of those Hebrew expressions, abounds in that duty. As a man of wickedness in Isaiah 55:7 — or a man of blood — means a man wholly given over to wickedness and violence, so a Spirit of supplication would mean a Spirit abounding

in prayer for mercy and the turning away of evil, as the word implies. Now the Holy Spirit cannot be a Spirit of supplication in this sense, either for Himself or for us. No such thought can be admitted with regard to Himself without the highest blasphemy. Nor can He in His own person make supplications for us. For besides the fact that any such intercession in heaven on our behalf is in Scripture entirely confined to the priestly office of Christ and His intercession, all prayer — whether vocal or merely inward — is the act of a nature inferior to that which is prayed to, and the Spirit of God has no such inferior nature. We cannot therefore suppose Him to be formally a Spirit of supplication without denying His deity. He is therefore so efficiently, with respect to us, and as such He is promised to us. Our general inquiry is therefore how, or in what sense, He is so. And there are only two conceivable ways in which this may be affirmed of Him: (1) by working gracious inclinations and dispositions in us toward this duty; (2) by giving a gracious ability for the discharge of it in a proper manner. These therefore belong to and comprise His efficiency as a Spirit of supplication.

Both are included in the apostle's words: "The Spirit itself makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:26). Those who can put any other meaning on this promise may try to express it. Every meaning consistent with the analogy of faith will be considered, provided we do not judge the words to be meaningless and empty. To deny the Spirit of God to be a Spirit of supplication in and to believers is to reject the testimony of God Himself.

By the two ways mentioned, we affirm that He is so — nor can any other way be proposed.

(1) He is so by working gracious inclinations and dispositions in us toward this duty. It is He who prepares, disposes, and inclines the hearts of believers to its exercise with delight and spiritual satisfaction. And where this is absent, no prayer is acceptable to God. He takes no delight in the cries that an unwilling mind is pressed and forced to offer by earthly desires, distress, or misery (James 4:5). By nature, we are averse to any intercourse and communion with God, being alienated from living for Him by the ignorance and emptiness of our minds.

There is also a hidden alienation continually working in us away from all duties of immediate communion with God. It is He alone who works in us the frame in which we pray continually, as is required of us — our hearts being kept ready and prepared for this duty on all occasions and opportunities, while in the meantime being directed and sustained by those graces that are to be exercised in it. Some call this the grace of prayer given to us by the Holy Spirit, which I think is an imprecise term, though I will not quarrel over it. For prayer, absolutely and formally speaking, is not a distinct grace separate from all other graces exercised in it; rather it is the way and manner in which we are to exercise all other graces — faith, love, delight, fear, reverence, self-abasement, and the like — to specific ends. I know of no grace of prayer that is distinct or different from the exercise of these graces; it is therefore a holy, commanded manner of exercising other graces, but not itself a distinct grace. Only where someone is particularly devoted and given to this duty, we may say, if we wish — though imprecisely — that he is especially gifted in the grace of prayer. I suppose this part of His work will not be denied by anyone, nor that it is intended in the promise. If any are so hostile to the other things at-

tributed to the Spirit, or so reluctant to allow Him any part or role in our supplications, as to refuse even this much — that we may in any sense be said to pray in the Holy Spirit, that this is the work of His grace, and that this grace is wrought in believers by virtue of this promise — they will oppose His other actings at too great a cost to themselves to gain anything by it.

(2) He is so by giving an ability for prayer — communicating a gift to the minds of people, enabling them to exercise all His graces in that specific way of prayer, benefiting themselves and others. It will be granted later that there may be a gift of prayer in use where there is no grace being exercised, and perhaps none present to exercise — that is, as some imprecisely put it, the gift of prayer where the grace of prayer is absent. But in explaining how the Spirit is a Spirit of supplication, we must take both into account. He both disposes us to pray — that is, to exercise grace in that specific way — and enables us to do so. And where this ability is entirely absent, or where it is rejected or despised, the Spirit may still act and exercise those very graces that are to be exercised in prayer — whose exercise in that way is commonly called the grace of prayer — and yet this work of His belongs to the general heading of sanctification in which He preserves, stirs up, and acts all our graces, not to this specific work of prayer, and He is not a Spirit of supplication in that respect. He is therefore properly a Spirit of supplication only as He communicates a gift or ability to people to exercise all His graces in the way and duty of prayer. This is what He is promised for here, and promised to be poured out for — that is, to be given in an abundant and plentiful manner. Wherever He is bestowed in the fulfillment of this promise, He both disposes the hearts of people to pray and enables them to do so. This ability He

communicates in great variety as to its degrees and usefulness to others in its exercise; but He communicates it to every one so far as is necessary for their own spiritual concerns or the discharge of their duty toward God and all others. Since this assertion contains the substance of what we are pleading for, its further confirmation must be the main subject of the following discourse.

That this is the meaning of the passage and the mind of the Holy Spirit in the words needs no demonstration other than the fact that it expresses their proper signification, and no other meaning can reasonably be attached to them. To deny that the Holy Spirit is called a Spirit of supplication because He inclines, disposes, and enables those to pray to whom He is promised and on whom He is bestowed as such, is to take far too great a liberty with sacred things.

A learned man of late, out of hostility to the Spirit of prayer — or prayer as His gift — has attempted to deprive the church of God of the whole benefit and comfort of this promise. (Amyraut, preface to Psalms.) He argues that it belongs not to the Christian church but to the Jews alone. Had he said it belonged to the Jews in the first place — to those who would be converted to Christ — he would not have strayed so far from the truth, nor from the view of other expositors, though he would have asserted more than he could prove. But to suppose that any grace, any mercy, any privilege through Jesus Christ is promised to the Jews with no share for Gentile believers — that they would not partake of the same in kind, however the degrees might differ — is foolish and impious. For if Gentile believers are also children of Abraham, if the blessing of faithful Abraham also comes upon them, if it is through them that he is the heir of the world — his spiritual seed inhabiting

it by right in all places — then all the promises made to him and his seed belong to them as well. And since most of the exceeding great and precious promises of the Old Testament are made to Jacob and Israel, to Jerusalem and Zion, to say that they are all confined to the Jews is at once to strip the church of God of all right and title to them — an impious sacrilege that some have attempted. But since all the promises belong to the same covenant, and all the grace contained and offered in them belongs to that covenant, whoever has a stake in that covenant through faith also has a stake in all its promises, with equal right to them as those to whom they were first given. To suppose that now that the Jews are rejected for their unbelief, the promises of God made to them while they stood in faith have ceased and are of no further use, is to overthrow the covenant of Abraham and indeed the whole truth of the New Testament. But the apostle assures us that all the promises of God are Yes in Christ, and through Him Amen, to the glory of God — that is, in their fulfillment in and toward us (2 Corinthians 1:20). He also positively affirms that all believers have received the promises originally made to Israel (2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 7:1). Moreover, he declares that even the promises made in earlier times to particular persons on special occasions — as to the grace, power, and love contained in them and intended by them — still belong to all individual believers and may be claimed by them in all their particular circumstances (Hebrews 13:5-6). And their right to, and interest in, all the promises of God is something those who are committed to the obedience of faith would not surrender for all that this world could offer them. This promise, therefore, is simply a particular instance of the work and effect of the Spirit as He is promised in general in the covenant. And as we

have stated, the promises of Him as a Spirit of grace and holiness in the covenant belong to Gentile believers as well. If they do not, they have no share or interest in Christ — which is a stronger argument for the Jew than any particular instance would afford. But this promise is only a specific declaration of what, in one case, this Spirit will do — the same Spirit who is promised as a Spirit of grace and holiness in the covenant. Therefore the author of this evasion, suspecting that its fraud and sacrilege would be exposed, has resorted to other subterfuges, which we shall encounter later so far as they concern us.

It might be more fairly objected that the Spirit of grace and supplication was given to believers under the Old Testament as well; and therefore, if there is nothing more here, if some extraordinary gift is not intended, how does this passage serve as a special promise with respect to the times of the New Testament? It might be supposed therefore that not the ordinary grace or gift of prayer which believers — and especially the officers of the church — receive, but some extraordinary gift bestowed on the apostles and the first converts to the church, is what is intended here. So the prophecies concerning the outpouring of the Spirit on all kinds of people in Joel 2 were interpreted by Peter and applied to the sending of the Holy Spirit in miraculous gifts on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

Answer: (1) I have elsewhere already addressed this objection in general by showing the absurdity of the idea that the dispensation of the Spirit is confined to the first age of the Gospel, of which this objection is a branch — with hostility to the subject at hand as its occasion. (2) We nowhere find grace and prayer — the very things promised here — listed among the extraordinary gifts of the

Spirit under the New Testament. Praying in an unknown tongue was extraordinary; but prayer itself was not, any more than grace was — and if grace were an extraordinary gift, the entire present church would be graceless. (3) The promise in Joel explicitly concerned the extraordinary gifts of prophecy and visions, and therefore had its principal fulfillment on the day of Pentecost. This promise is entirely different in nature. (4) What is necessary for all believers, and a duty for them at all times, is not an extraordinary gift given only to a few for a season. Now if there are those who think that grace and prayer are not necessary to all believers, or that believers may have ability and exercise it without any aid of the Holy Spirit, I will not at present contend with them, for this is not the place to debate with those who deny the first principles of the Christian faith. Divine commands are the rule of our duty, not human imaginations. (5) If this is not a special promise of the New Testament merely because the matter promised — or the grace — was enjoyed to some degree under the Old Testament, then there is no promise specific to the Gospel age at all; for the saints under the Old Testament were genuinely partakers of all the same graces as those under the New. Therefore (6) two things are intended in the promise with respect to the Gospel era: (1) An extension and broadening of this grace as to the range of its recipients. Under the Old Testament it was confined to a few, but now it will be given to many and spread throughout the world. It will be poured out so as to overflow and be imparted to many. What was before like watering a garden by a hand is now like clouds pouring themselves out over the whole face of the earth. (2) An increase in the degree of spiritual ability for its performance. Titus 3:5-6 tells us there is now a rich communication of the Spirit of grace and prayer

granted to believers, in comparison with what was enjoyed under the Old Testament. The very nature of the Gospel dispensation — in which we receive from Jesus Christ grace upon grace — confirms this. I consider it unnecessary to prove that as to all spiritual supplies of grace, Jesus Christ has brought in an abundant administration of it; the whole Scripture testifies to this.

Under the Old Testament there were indeed prayers and praises to God dictated by a Spirit of prophecy and received by immediate divine revelation, containing mysteries for the instruction of the church in all ages. These prayers were not suggested to those who offered them by the Spirit as a Spirit of supplication, but were dictated to them by the Spirit as a Spirit of prophecy. Nor did those who received them fully understand the mind of the Holy Spirit in them, but inquired diligently into them as into other prophecies given by the Spirit of Christ that was in them (1 Peter 1:11-12). An example of this is Psalm 22. It is a prayer with thanksgiving from beginning to end. Now although David, to whom it was given by inspiration, could find in his own circumstances things that had some low and distant resemblance to what the Holy Spirit intended in the words — since he was a type of Christ — the depth of the mysteries contained in it, and the principal scope and design of the Holy Spirit, were largely hidden even from him, and far more from others. It was given out to the church by immediate inspiration so that believers might search and diligently inquire into what was signified and foretold, and so be gradually led into the knowledge of God's mysteries as He was pleased graciously to communicate His saving light to them. Yet it was also revealed to David and the other prophets that in these things they were serving not themselves but us, for the mysteries were of a kind they could not and

were not meant to fully grasp. But since this gift has ceased under the New Testament, after the completion of the canon of Scripture, and no one claims it today, and since it was in former times confined to a very few inspired persons, it does not belong to our present inquiry; for we speak only of things common to all believers. And in every matter, preference must be given to those under the New Testament.

Even if it could be proved — which I know it cannot — that the generality of the church under the Old Testament made use of forms of prayers as mere forms of prayer, without any other end, use, or mystical instruction (all of which were present in the prophetic compositions), and did so for the sole purpose of prayer; even then it would not follow, whatever anyone may claim, that believers under the New Testament may do the same, still less that they may always be obligated to do so. For there is now a more plentiful and rich outpouring of the Spirit of grace and supplication on them than on those of old. And just as our duty is to be regulated by God's commands, so God's commands are suited to the dispensation of His grace. For those under the New Testament who are commanded to pray but are told not to make constant use of the gifts, aids, and assistance of the Spirit — which are specially dispensed and communicated under the Gospel — on the pretext of what was done under the Old Testament, is to reject the grace of the Gospel and to make themselves guilty of the highest ingratitude. Therefore, while we may and should bear with those who, having received nothing of this promised grace and assistance and not believing in any such thing, plead for the use of forms of prayer composed by some and read by themselves or others as the only way of discharging this duty, those who have been made partakers

of this grace and who acknowledge it their duty to constantly use and benefit from the promised aids of the Spirit of God, will be careful not to admit any such principles or practices as would plainly nullify the promise.

We may therefore take ourselves to have established from this testimony that God has promised under the New Testament to give to believers, in plentiful measure, the Spirit of grace and supplication — His own Holy Spirit enabling them to pray according to His mind and will. The way and manner of His work in doing so will be declared afterward. And it may suffice, in general, to set this one promise against the open reproaches and bold contempts that many cast on the Spirit of prayer — whose opponents, unless they can blot this text out of Scripture, will ultimately fail in their purpose. We will therefore not need to cite any other testimony to the same effect by way of promise. We may simply observe that since the Spirit's work as a Spirit of supplication is here expressly assigned as part of His gracious work as promised under the New Testament, there is not one promise to that purpose in which this grace is not included — and therefore the well-known abundance of such promises adds strength to our argument.

CHAPTER 3



Galatians 4:6. Opened and vindicated.

The next general evidence given to the truth under consideration is the account of the fulfillment of this promise under the New Testament, where also the nature of the Holy Spirit's operation here is generally expressed. This is found in Galatians 4:6: "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" As stated, this passage gives an account of the fulfillment of the promise explained above. Several things may be considered in the words.

First, the subjects on whom He is bestowed and in whom He works are believers — those who through the Spirit of adoption have been made children of God. We receive the adoption as sons, and because we are sons, He sends His Spirit into our hearts. This privilege of adoption we obtain by faith in Christ Jesus (John 1:12): "To as many as received Him, He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." Second, there is a special designation or description of the Spirit as promised and given for this purpose: He is the Spirit of the Son. That the original and eternal basis for this is His eternal relation to the Son, as proceeding from Him, has been shown elsewhere. But something

more particular is intended here. He is called the Spirit of the Son with respect to His communication to believers. Included in this, therefore, is that special regard to Jesus Christ the Son of God that is present in this work, as an evangelical mercy and privilege. He is therefore called the Spirit of the Son not only because of His eternal procession from the Son, but also: (1) because He was first given to Christ as Head of the church, for the anointing, consecration, and sanctification of His human nature — here He laid the foundation and gave an example of what He was to do in and toward all the members of Christ's body; and (2) because it is immediately from and through Christ that He is communicated to us, in two ways: (1) authoritatively, by virtue of the covenant between the Father and Christ, on the basis of which, after Christ accomplished the work of mediation in a state of humiliation, He received the promise of the Spirit — that is, the power and authority to bestow Him on whomever He would for all the ends of that mediation (Acts 2:33; Acts 5:31); and (2) formally, in that all the graces of the Spirit flow to us from Christ as Head of the church, as the spring of all spiritual life, in whom they were all stored up and laid in reserve for this purpose (Colossians 2:19; Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 3:1-4). Second, the work of this Spirit in general, as bestowed on believers, is partly included and partly expressed in these words. In general (which is implied), He enables them to conduct themselves suitably to the state and condition into which they have been brought through faith in Christ Jesus. They are made children of God by adoption, and it is fitting they be taught to carry themselves as that new relationship requires. "Because you are sons, He has given you the Spirit of His Son" — without which they cannot walk before Him as sons. He teaches them to bear them-

selves no longer as strangers and foreigners, nor as mere servants, but as children and heirs of God (Romans 8:15). He endows them with a disposition and inclination toward holy, filial obedience; for as He removes their distance — bringing near those who were strangers and far from God — so He also removes the fear, dread, and bondage that keep people under the power of the law. In 2 Timothy 1:7: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." Not a spirit of fear — or a spirit of bondage to fear, as in Romans 8:15 — that is, a spirit whose efficacy through the law fills the mind with dread and thoughts of God that keep people at a distance from Him. But in the sons on whom He is bestowed, He is a Spirit of power, strengthening and enabling them for all duties of obedience. This is the power by which we are enabled to obedience, for which the apostle gives thanks in 1 Timothy 1:12 — to Christ who enables him — that is, by His Spirit of power. For without the Spirit of adoption we have not the slightest strength or ability to conduct ourselves as sons in the family of God. He is also, as bestowed in this way, a Spirit of love, working in us that love for God and delight in Him that befits children toward their heavenly Father. This is the first genuine fruit of this relationship. Many duties may be performed toward God where there is no true love for Him — at least no love for Him as a Father in Christ, which alone is genuine and accepted. And finally, He is also a Spirit of a sound, sober mind. Even children tend to grow proud, wayward, and self-willed in their father's house; but the Spirit enables them to conduct themselves with the sobriety, modesty, and humility that befits the family of God. These three things — spiritual power, love, and sobriety of mind — constitute the whole deportment of the children of God in His family. This is the

state and condition of those who, through the effective working of the Spirit of adoption, have been freed from the spirit of bondage to fear, which the apostle discusses in Romans 8:15.

Those who are under the power of that spirit — or the effective working of the Spirit by the law — cannot, by virtue of any aid or assistance, make their addresses to God in prayer in a proper manner. For although the means by which they are brought into this state is the Spirit of God working on their souls and consciences through the law, yet formally, as they are in the state of nature, the spirit by which they are driven is the unclean spirit of the world — the influence of the one who rules in the children of disobedience. The law they obey is the law of the members mentioned by the apostle in Romans 7. The works they perform are the unfruitful works of darkness, and the fruits of those works are sin and death. Being under this bondage they have no power to draw near to God, and their bondage, which leads to fear, means they can have no delight in access to Him. Whatever other provisions or preparations such persons may have for this duty, they can never perform it to the glory of God or in a way that finds acceptance with Him. With those who are delivered from this state, everything is otherwise. The spirit by which they are driven is the Spirit of God — the Spirit of adoption, of power, love, and a sound mind. The law to which they submit in obedience is the holy law of God, written on the fleshly tablets of their hearts. The effects of this are faith and love, with all the other graces of the Spirit, whose fruits they receive in peace with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Third, an instance is given of His effective working of these things in the adopted sons of God in the duty of prayer: "crying, Abba! Father!" (1) The object of the specific duty intended is God

even the Father (Ephesians 2:18). "Abba" is the Syriac or Chaldean word for Father, in common use among the Jews at that time; and Father (*pater*) was the same word among the Greeks and Gentiles — so that the common interest of Jews and Gentiles in this privilege may be in view. Or rather, a holy boldness and intimate confidence of love is expressed in the repetition of the name. The Babylonian Talmud, in the tractate on blessings, has a saying: "Servants and handmaids — that is, bond-servants — do not call their master Abba or Imma" — referring to the freedom of status and right to adoption that they, as bondservants, lack. God gives to His adopted sons a free spirit (Psalm 51:12) — a spirit of gracious, filial openness. This is the spirit that cries "Abba" — the word by which those who were adopted first addressed their fathers, to express their affection and submission. For Abba means not only "Father" but "my Father"; the Chaldean Targum renders "my Father" in Hebrew simply as "Abba" — see Genesis 19:34 and elsewhere consistently. Chrysostom speaks to this effect: "Wishing to show the genuineness and intimacy of this relationship, he also uses the language of the Hebrews, and says not merely 'Father' but 'Abba Father,' which is a word proper to those who are truly and fully a son."

He accomplishes this in two ways: (1) by stirring up graces and gracious affections in their souls in this duty — especially those of faith, love, and delight; and (2) by enabling them to exercise those graces and express those affections in vocal prayer. The Greek word for "crying" denotes not only crying out, but an earnestness of mind expressed in vocal prayer. It is praying with a loud cry, as is said of our Savior in Matthew 27:50. The whole of our duty in our supplications is expressed in this word. We are not presently

concerned with, nor are we inquiring into, what course those take, what means they use, or what helps they employ in prayer who have not yet received the privilege of adoption — it is only those who have that the Spirit of God assists in this duty. The only question is what such persons are to do in cooperating with His assistance, or what they gain from it.

We may compare the different expressions the apostle uses in this matter, which will further clarify the general nature of the Spirit's work here. In this passage he says God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15); he says we have received the Spirit of adoption — the Spirit of the Son given to us because we are sons — by whom we cry "Abba! Father!" His acting in us and our acting by Him are expressed by the same word. The question is how, in the same duty, He is said to cry in us, and we are said to cry in Him. There can be no explanation other than that the same work is both His and ours in different respects. As an act of grace and spiritual power, it is His — it is worked in us by Him alone. As a duty performed by us through His assistance, it is ours — by Him we cry "Abba! Father!" To deny His working in our duties is to overturn the Gospel. And it is prayer formally considered — including the gift of prayer with its outward exercise — that is intended. The mere stirring up of the graces of faith, love, trust, delight, desire, self-abasement, and the other animating principles of prayer cannot be described as "crying," though they are included in it. Their actual exercise in prayer, formally considered, is what is attributed to the Spirit of God. And those who deal somewhat harshly with the church of God and all believers, refusing to allow that the work here expressly assigned to the Spirit of adoption or of the Son is sufficient for its purpose,

or for the discharge of this duty whether in private or in the assemblies of the church, would do well to reconsider. Nothing more is required for prayer in either setting than our crying "Abba! Father!" — that is, making our requests known to Him as our Father in Christ, with supplications and thanksgivings according to our state and circumstances. Is not the aid of the Spirit of God sufficient to enable us to do this? It was sufficient of old, and for all believers according as they were called to this duty, whether in respect of themselves, their families, or the church of God. If it is not sufficient now, it can only be because either God will not now communicate His Spirit to His children or sons according to the promise of the Gospel, or because this grace and gift of His is despised, neglected, and lost by people. The first cannot be asserted on any safe grounds whatsoever; the second is what we should take to heart.

This twofold testimony — concerning the promise of the communication of the Holy Spirit, or a Spirit of supplication, to believers under the New Testament, and its fulfillment — sufficiently establishes our general claim: that there is a special and gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the prayers of believers enabling them to pray. For we mean nothing more by this than that, as believers receive the Spirit by virtue of that promise which the world cannot receive, in order for His gracious work in the duty of supplication, so He actually inclines, disposes, and enables them to cry "Abba! Father!" — to call upon God in prayer as their Father through Jesus Christ. To deny this, therefore, is to rise up against the express testimony of God Himself, and through our unbelief to make Him a liar. And if we had nothing further to plead in this cause, this alone would be more than enough to rebuke the presumptu-

ous foolishness of those who mock and deride this work of the Holy Spirit, and the duty of believers on account of it to pray in the Spirit — if we may use the expressions of Scripture, however despised and blasphemed.

As for the ability in prayer that is thus received, there are some who know no more of it as exercised in the way of duty than its outward appearance — and that not from their own experience, but from what they have observed in others. Among these are not a few who confidently assert that it is entirely a work of fancy, invention, memory, and wit, accompanied by some boldness and fluency of speech, unjustly attributed to the Spirit of God, who has no concern in it whatsoever. And they may persuade many, no better acquainted with these things than themselves, that this is indeed the case. However, those who have any experience of the real aids and assistances of the Spirit of God in this work and duty, and any faith in the express testimonies God Himself has given to it, cannot but dismiss such fanciful notions. You might as easily persuade them that the sun gives no light, or the fire no heat, that they see not with their eyes or hear with their ears, as that the Spirit of God does not enable them to pray or assist them in their supplications. Some probability might be given to these pretensions — and to the total exclusion of the Holy Spirit from any concern in this matter — if those about whom and whose duties they thus judge were generally known to excel others in the natural endowments and acquired abilities to which this faculty of prayer is attributed. But will those who make this pretension allow that the people who, as they claim, pray through a spiritual gift are persons excelling in imagination, memory, wit, invention, and eloquence? It is well known they will allow nothing of the sort; on the contrary, they

portray them as dull, stupid, ignorant, unlearned, and brutish in every other respect. Only in prayer do they supposedly have the advantage of those natural gifts. These things are hardly consistent with basic honesty. Is it not remarkable that those who are so contemptible with respect to natural and acquired abilities in everything else — whether in learning or practical wisdom — should in this one duty of prayer so develop and improve those abilities as to surpass the imitation of those who despise them? For those critics do not pray as they do, and will not; and their own hearts tell them they cannot — which is the real reason they so spitefully oppose this praying in the Spirit, whatever pride or passion may pretend to the contrary. But things of this nature will come up again, and therefore need not be further pursued here. Having proved that God has promised a plentiful dispensation of His Spirit to believers under the New Testament to enable them to pray according to His mind, and that in general this promise is fulfilled in and toward all the children of God, what remains, in the second place, is to declare what the work of the Holy Spirit is in them to this end — that is, how He is to us a Spirit of prayer or supplication.

CHAPTER 4



The nature of prayer. Romans 8:26. Opened and vindicated. Prayer, as I take it at present, is a gift, ability, or spiritual faculty for exercising faith, love, reverence, fear, delight, and other graces through vocal requests, supplications, and praises to God. "In everything making your request known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

This gift and ability, I affirm, is bestowed by the Holy Spirit, and this work is produced in us by Him in the fulfillment of the promise examined above — so crying "Abba! Father!" in those who believe. This is what we are to give an account of; and in doing so we will assert nothing that Scripture has not plainly gone before us in, and that the experience of believers duly exercised in duties of obedience does not confirm. At the conclusion of our efforts, we will leave it to the judgment of God and His church whether what we are pleading for consists of ecstatic, enthusiastic, unaccountable raptures, or a real, gracious work and effect of the Holy Spirit of God.

The first thing we attribute to the Spirit in this work is that He supplies and furnishes the mind with a proper understanding of the matter of prayer — that is, what should be prayed for, both in

general and with respect to all our particular circumstances. Without this, I suppose it will be granted, no one can pray as he ought. For how can anyone pray who does not know what to pray for? Where this understanding is absent, the very nature and being of prayer is destroyed. The apostle's testimony is explicit on this point in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmities, for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

It is only that part of the verse I am now using: "We do not know what we should pray for as we ought." Most people assume the opposite — namely, that people know well enough what they ought to pray for; they are just wicked and careless, and will not pray for what they know they should. I will make no excuse for the wickedness and carelessness of people, which are without doubt abominable. But I must stand by the truth the apostle asserts, which I will further evidence immediately: without the special aid and assistance of the Holy Spirit, no one knows what to pray for as he ought.

But there is, it seems, another remedy in this matter, and therefore no need for any work of the Holy Spirit here. We would be considered presumptuous if we attributed anything to Him in a case where there is even the slightest plausible claim that it could be otherwise provided for — so great is the unwillingness to allow Him any place, work, or office in the Christian religion or its practice. Therefore it is claimed that although people do not of themselves know what to pray for, this deficiency may be supplied by a prescribed form of words, prepared precisely to teach them what they are to pray for and confine them to it.

We may therefore dismiss the Holy Spirit and His assistance from this aspect of prayer, since the proper matter of it may be set down and fixed in ink and paper so that even the least capable person cannot miss his duty in it. This, therefore, is what is to be tested in the following discourse: since it is plainly stated that we do not of ourselves know what we should pray for as we ought — which I judge to be universally true, for all persons, including those who prescribe prayers as well as those to whom they are prescribed — and since the Holy Spirit helps and relieves us in this, the question is whether we may or ought to abandon and neglect His assistance and rely only on such substitutes as are invented or used for the purpose for which He is promised. That is, plainly stated: whether the Word of God is to be trusted in this matter or not.

It is true that whatever we ought to pray for is declared in Scripture, yes, and is summarized in the Lord's Prayer. But it is one thing to have what we ought to pray for in a book; it is another thing altogether to have it in our minds and hearts — without which it will never become for us the true matter of prayer. It is from the abundance of the heart that the mouth must speak in this matter (Matthew 12:34). There is therefore a threefold deficiency in us with respect to the matter of prayer, which is supplied by the Holy Spirit and can be supplied in no other way and by no other means; and in this He is to us a Spirit of supplication, according to the promise.

For (1) we do not know our own needs; (2) we do not know the supplies for those needs that are expressed in the promises of God; and (3) we do not know the end to which what we pray for is to be directed — which I add to the previous two. Without knowledge

and understanding of all three, no one can pray as he ought; and we can come to know them in no way other than through the aid and assistance of the Spirit of grace. If these things are made clear, it will be evident how in this first instance we are enabled to pray by the Holy Spirit.

(1) Our needs, as they are to be the matter of prayer, may be grouped under three headings; and we do not rightly know any of them of ourselves in a way that would make them proper subjects for our supplications — and some of them we do not know at all.

The first category consists of our outward pressures, difficulties, and struggles, from which we desire deliverance, along with all other temporal concerns. In these matters it might seem remarkably clear that we know of ourselves what to pray for. But the truth is, whatever our sense of these things may be and whatever natural desires we have about them, we do not know how and when, under what conditions and limitations, with what frame of heart and spirit, and with what submission to God's pleasure they are to be made the matter of our prayers. For this reason God describes the prayers of most people about such things as howling, and not a crying to Him with the heart (Hosea 7:14). There is indeed a voice of nature crying out in distress to the God of nature. But that is not the evangelical prayer we are inquiring about. And people often miss the mark most where they think themselves most ready and prepared. To know our temporal needs in such a way as to make them the matter of prayer according to God's mind requires more wisdom than we ourselves possess. For who knows what is good for a person in this life, all the days of his fleeting existence, which he passes like a shadow? (Ecclesiastes 6:12). Believers are often never more at a loss than in knowing how to

pray rightly about temporal things. No one in pain, distress, or want of a kind that threatens his very existence should be without praying for deliverance — he may and should make deliverance the matter of his prayer. In that case he knows in some measure, or in general, what he ought to pray for, without any special spiritual illumination. But the circumstances of these things, and the way in which they relate to the glory of God and the supreme end or highest good of those involved — which is the only way in which they can be made the matter of prayer acceptable to God in Christ — is something they cannot understand of themselves. They need a share in the promise made to the church that they shall all be taught by God. This is even more true of things that relate only to the conveniences of this life, of which no one of himself knows what is good for him or useful to him.

(2) We have inward needs that are discerned in the light of a natural conscience — such as the guilt of sins it accuses us of: sins against natural light and the plain outward letter of the law. These things we know something of without any special aid of the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:14-15), and desires for deliverance are inseparable from them. But two things may be noted here. [1] The knowledge we have of these things on our own is so dim and confused that we are in no way able by it to bring our needs properly to God in prayer. A natural conscience awakened and stirred by afflictions or other providential visitations will reveal itself in genuine and severe self-accusations for guilt. But until the Spirit convicts of sin, everything is in such disorder and confusion in the mind that no one knows how to approach God about it in a proper way. And there is more required to deal rightly with God about the guilt of sin than a mere sense of it. As far as people could proceed under

that sole guidance, the pagans went in dealing with their supposed gods — without due respect to the propitiation made by the blood of Christ. Indeed, prayer about the guilt of sin discerned only in the light of a natural conscience is nothing but an abomination.

Besides, [2] we all know how small a part of the concerns of believers consists of things that fall under the light and determination of a natural conscience. For:

(3) The things about which believers primarily deal with God in their supplications are the inward spiritual frames and dispositions of their souls, along with the workings of grace and sin within them. For this reason David was not satisfied with confessing his original sin and all known actual sins (Psalm 51:5), nor yet with acknowledging that no one can know all his own wanderings — from which he desired cleansing from unknown sins (Psalm 19:12). Beyond all this, he begged God to undertake the inward search of his heart to find out what was right or wrong in him (Psalm 139:23-24), knowing that God principally required truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6). Such is the ongoing work of sanctification in the whole spirit and soul (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

The inward sanctification of all our faculties is what we need and pray for. Supplies of grace from God for this purpose, together with a sense of the power, guilt, violence, and deceit of sin in its inward workings in the mind and affections — and countless other things connected to these — make up the principal matter of prayer as formally supplication.

Add to this that the matter of prayer, taken broadly to include the whole duty so called, encompasses everything in which we have intercourse with God in faith and love. The acknowledgment

of the whole mystery of His wisdom, grace, and love in Christ Jesus — with all the fruits, effects, and benefits flowing from it — and all the stirrings and actings of our souls toward Him, with their faculties and affections; in short, everything and every thought of our minds that belongs to our spiritual access to the throne of grace, together with all the occasions and emergencies of spiritual life, are likewise included. And that we can have such an acquaintance with these things as to manage them acceptably in our supplications without the grace of spiritual illumination from the Holy Spirit, few are so ignorant or irreverent as to assert. Some, I confess, seem to be strangers to these things — which does not make them less weighty or important.

For some can see no necessity for this understanding of the grace and mercy in the promises for prayer, and suppose that people know well enough what to pray for without it.

But those who speak this way neither know what prayer is, nor seem willing to learn. For we are to pray in faith (Romans 10:14), and faith has regard to God's promises (Hebrews 4:1; Romans 4). If therefore we do not understand what God has promised, we cannot pray at all. It is remarkable what thoughts such persons must have of God and themselves — who, without a proper understanding of their own needs, and without understanding God's promises in which all their supplies are stored up, say their prayers, as they call it, continually. And indeed, among the many harmful effects of devised aids for prayer, this is not the least: they keep people from searching God's promises through which they might know what to pray for. Let the matter of prayer be so prescribed that people will never need either to search their own hearts or God's promises about it, and this whole work is done away with. But the soul is

truly prepared for this duty — and only then — when it understands its own condition, the supplies of grace provided in the promise, the suitableness of those supplies to its needs, and the means of their conveyance to us through Jesus Christ. That all this we receive through the Spirit and not otherwise will be declared immediately.

Third, to the matter of prayer I add the end we aim at in the things we pray for and to which we direct them. And here also we are at a loss in ourselves; and people may lose all the benefit of their prayers by setting wrong ends before them in the things they pray for. Our Savior says, "Ask and you shall receive"; but the apostle James says in chapter 4:3, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." To pray for anything without expressly directing it toward the end for which God has appointed it is to ask with wrong motives and to no purpose. And yet, whatever confidence we may have in our own wisdom and integrity, if we are left to ourselves without the special guidance of the Spirit of God, our aims will never be suited to the will of God. The ways in which we may fail, and do fail, in this regard — when not under the actual direction of the Spirit of God, that is, when our own natural and disordered affections mix themselves into our supplications — are countless. And there is nothing so excellent in itself, so useful to us, so acceptable to God as the matter of prayer, that cannot be corrupted and prayer itself rendered vain by directing it toward false or mistaken ends. What the work of the Spirit is to guide us in this, we shall see in its proper place.

CHAPTER 5



The work of the Holy Spirit as to the matter of prayer.

These are the things to consider with respect to the matter of prayer; and in all of them we do not of ourselves know what we should pray for, how, or when. The first work of the Spirit of God as a Spirit of supplication in believers is to give them an understanding of all their needs and of the supplies of grace and mercy in the promises — causing a sense of these things to settle and abide on their minds, so that, according to their measure, they are continually furnished with the matter of prayer. Without this people never pray; with it, in some sense, they pray always. For:

(1) He alone gives, and He alone is able to give, us such an understanding of our own needs that we are able to make our thoughts about them known to God in prayer and supplication. What is said concerning our needs applies equally to the whole matter of prayer by which we give glory to God, whether in requests or praises. This I will demonstrate through several examples, to which others may be related.

(1) The principal matter of our prayer concerns faith and unbelief. So the apostles prayed in a particular way, "Lord, increase our faith"; and so the distressed man prayed, "Lord, I believe; help my

unbelief." I cannot think that those ever pray rightly who never pray for the forgiveness of unbelief, for its removal, and for the increase of faith. If unbelief is the greatest of sins, and if faith is the greatest of the gifts of God, we are not Christians if these things are not a principal part of the matter of our prayers. To this end we must be convinced of the nature and guilt of unbelief, as also of the nature and use of faith; without that conviction we know neither our greatest need nor what to pray for as we ought. That this is the special work of the Holy Spirit, our Savior expressly declares in John 16:9: "He convicts the world of sin, because they do not believe in Me." I do and must deny that anyone is or can be convicted of the nature and guilt of that unbelief — either fully or in any remaining measure — which the Gospel condemns, which is the great condemning sin under the Gospel, without a special work of the Holy Spirit on his mind and soul. For unbelief as it concerns Jesus Christ — not believing in Him, or not believing in Him as we ought — is a sin against the Gospel, and it is only by the Gospel that we may be convicted of it, and only as it is the ministry of the Spirit. Therefore neither the light of a natural conscience nor the law will convict anyone of the guilt of unbelief with respect to Jesus Christ, nor instruct them in the nature of faith in Him. No innate notions of our minds, no doctrines of the law can reach this far. To think to teach people to pray, or to assist them in praying, without a sense of unbelief — or of its remaining guilt and power — and without understanding faith's nature, necessity, usefulness, and effectiveness, is to say to the naked and hungry, "Be warm and filled," and not give them what the body needs. This therefore belongs to the work of the Spirit as a Spirit of supplication. And let people wear themselves out day and night with many prayers — if

a work of the Spirit of God in teaching the nature and guilt of unbelief and the nature, effectiveness, and use of faith in Christ Jesus does not accompany them, all will be lost and come to nothing. And it is remarkable how little mention of these things appears in most of the compositions that have been published as forms of prayer. They are generally omitted as if they were matters of little concern to Christians. Yet the Gospel positively and frequently determines the present standing of people with God — their obedience or disobedience — and their future salvation or condemnation, according to their faith or unbelief, since their obedience or disobedience follows inevitably from it. Now if the things of the greatest importance to us — on which all other things concerning our spiritual state depend — are not part of the subject matter of our daily prayer, I do not know what deserves to be.

Second, the matter of our prayer concerns the corruption of our nature and our needs on that account. The darkness and ignorance in our understanding, our unfamiliarity with heavenly things and alienation from the life of God because of it, the secret workings of the lusts of the mind under the cover of this darkness, the stubbornness and perverseness of our wills by nature with their resistance to and dislike of spiritual things, and the countless hidden dangers arising from all of this — all of which keep the soul from true conformity to the holiness of God — are things believers pay special attention to in their confessions and supplications. They know this to be their duty, and find by experience that the greatest issues between God and their souls, as to sin and holiness, lie in these things. And they are never more watchful over themselves than when they find their hearts least affected by them. To stop dealing with God about these things — seeking mercy for their for-

giveness, grace for their removal, and the daily renewal of the image of God in them — is to renounce all religion and all intention of living to God.

Therefore, without knowledge, a sense, and a proper understanding of these things, no one can pray as he ought, because he is unacquainted with the matter of prayer and does not know what to pray for. But this knowledge we cannot attain of ourselves. Human nature is so corrupted that it cannot understand its own depravity. Hence some absolutely deny this corruption, removing the need to seek its cure and the renewal of God's image in us. In doing so they overthrow the prayers of all believers, which the ancient church continually pressed against the Pelagians. Without a sense of these things, I must confess I cannot understand how any person can pray. And this knowledge, as was said, we do not have of ourselves. Nature is blind, and cannot see these things; it is proud, and will not own them; it is numb, and has no feeling of them. It is the work of the Spirit of God alone to give us a proper conviction of, a spiritual insight into, and a sense of their importance. This I have proved so fully elsewhere that I will not repeat the argument here.

It is not easy to imagine how people pray, or what they pray about, who do not know the condition of their own hearts. Indeed, this ignorance — this lack of light into, or conviction of, the depravity of human nature and its ongoing remains even in those who are renewed, along with its fruits, consequences, and effects — is the principal cause of people's poverty in this duty, so that they can seldom go beyond what has been prescribed for them. From this same source they can satisfy themselves with a set frame of well-composed words that, if they were acquainted with their own

condition, they would easily see does not express it at all. I do not presume to set limits for other people, nor to define the extent of their understanding. I will only take the liberty of saying for my own part that I cannot conceive or understand how any person knows what to pray for as he ought — throughout the whole course and scope of that duty — who has no spiritual illumination enabling him to discern in some measure the corruption of his nature and the inward evils of his heart. If people judge the faculties of their souls to be uncorrupted, their minds free from vanity, their hearts from guile and deceit, their wills from perverseness and carnality, I do not wonder that they despise the prayers of others — but I would expect real humiliation and fervency to be very difficult to find in their own.

To this I may add the irregularity and disorder of our affections. These, I grant, are discernible by natural light, and the rectifying of them — or the attempt at it — was the principal aim of ancient philosophy. But its chief concern with them was as they disturb the mind or break out in outward expressions by which people are defiled, dishonored, or distressed. Natural light will go this far, and through the working of conscience, as far as I know, people may be prompted to pray about these things. But the chief corruption of the affections lies in their aversion to things spiritual and heavenly.

The affections are indeed sometimes ready on their own to be drawn to spiritual things under false representations of them, and to divine worship under superstitious ornaments and enticing outward forms — which is why they are the spring and life of all the devotion found in the Church of Rome. But take heavenly and spiritual things as they are in themselves, with respect to their proper

ends, and in all our affections, as corrupted, there is a dislike of them and aversion from them, which variously manifests itself and leads our souls into vanities and disorders in all holy duties. No one knows what it is to pray who is not exercised in supplications for the mortifying, changing, and renewing of these affections as spiritually irregular. Yet it is the Spirit of God alone who reveals these things to us and gives us a sense of our involvement in them. The spiritual irregularity of our affections, and their aversion from spiritual things, is discernible in no light other than that of supernatural illumination. For if without that light spiritual things themselves cannot be discerned — as the apostle assures us they cannot in 1 Corinthians 2 — it is impossible for the disorder of our affections with respect to them to be discernible either. If we do not know an object in its true nature, we cannot know the workings of our minds toward it. Therefore, although there is in our affections an innate universal aversion from spiritual things, since by nature we are wholly alienated from the life of God, this aversion cannot be discerned by us in any light other than that which first reveals those spiritual things to us. Nor can any person become sensitive to the evil and guilt of that disorder who does not also have a love implanted in his heart for those things which he finds obstructed by it. Therefore, since the mortification of these affections and their renewal with respect to spiritual and heavenly things is no small part of believers' prayers — being a special part of their duty — they have no acquaintance with or sense of these things except as they receive them through the light and conviction of the Spirit of God. Those who lack this will inevitably be strangers to the life and power of the duty of prayer itself.

As it is with respect to sin, so it is with respect to God and Christ, and the covenant, grace, holiness, and privileges. We have no spiritual understanding of them, no right conception of them, no insight into them, except what is given us by the Spirit of God. And without familiarity with these things, what are our prayers, and what do they amount to? Without them, people may keep saying words to the world's end without giving any glory to God or gaining any benefit for their own souls.

This I place as the first part of the work of the Spirit of supplications in believers, enabling them to pray according to God's mind — which of themselves they do not know how to do, as is affirmed by the apostle in the passage already referred to. When this is done — when a right understanding of sin and grace, and of our involvement in them, is settled on our minds — then we have in some measure the matter of prayer always in readiness, and words and expressions will easily follow, though the Holy Spirit's aid is necessary for that too, as we shall declare afterward.

And it is here that the duty — as it is performed with respect to this part of the Spirit's aid and assistance — has recently been vilified and reproached by some. Formerly their objections all concerned some expressions or weaknesses in certain people's free prayer that they disliked. But now scorn is being poured out on the very matter of prayer itself, especially the humble and deep confessions of sin which, in the light of the discoveries mentioned, are made in the supplications of ministers and others. The things themselves are denounced as absurd, foolish, and irrational — as all spiritual things are to certain kinds of people. Nor do I see how this disagreement is capable of any resolution. For those who have no light to discern those aspects of sin and grace that we have de-

scribed cannot help but find it strange to have them continually made the matter of people's prayers. And those on the other side who have received light into these things and familiarity with them through the Spirit of God are troubled by nothing more than their inability to sufficiently abase themselves under a sense of them, or to fully express in any words the impression put on their minds by the Holy Spirit, or to clothe their desires for grace and mercy in words sufficiently significant and emphatic. Therefore this difference is irresolvable by any but the Spirit of God Himself. While it persists, those who attend only to what is discernible by natural light or a natural conscience in their prayers will keep to general expressions and outward things in words prepared for that purpose by themselves or others — do what we will to change it. For people will not be led beyond their own light, nor is it fitting they should be. And those who do receive the Spirit's supplies in this matter will, in their prayers, be principally occupied with the spiritual, internal concerns of their souls in sin and grace — let others despise and reproach them as they please. It is useless to contend much about things that are governed not by arguments but by principles. People will irresistibly hold to what their own light can reach. Nothing can end this difference but a more plentiful outpouring of the Spirit from above, which according to the promise we wait for.

Second, we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Holy Spirit acquaints us with the grace and mercy prepared in God's promises for our relief. That knowledge of this is necessary to enable us to direct our prayers to God in a proper manner I declared before, and I suppose it will not be denied. For what do we pray for? What outcome do we aim at in our supplications? What

do we desire to receive? Praying only by saying or repeating words of prayer whose meaning those who use them perhaps do not understand — as in the papacy — or resting in the mere saying or repetition of them without any specific aim to obtain something made known in the supplications, is unworthy of the disciples of Christ, indeed of rational beings. "Deal thus with your governor — will he be pleased with you or accept your person?" (Malachi 1:8). Neither a ruler, a friend, nor a neighbor would accept it if we constantly made solemn addresses to them with no specific purpose; we must pray with our understanding, that is, understand what we pray for. And these things are nothing other than what God has promised; if our supplications are not regulated by them, we ask with wrong motives. It is therefore indispensable to prayer that we know what God has promised — that we have an understanding of the grace and mercy of the promises. God knows our needs, what is good for us, what is useful to us, what is necessary to bring us to the enjoyment of Himself, infinitely better than we do; indeed, we know nothing of these things but what He is pleased to teach us. These are the things He has prepared for us, as the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 2:9. And what He has so prepared, He declares in the promises of the covenant. For they are the declaration of the grace and good pleasure He has purposed in Himself. From them therefore believers may learn what is good for them and what they need, more clearly and certainly than from any other source whatsoever. From them, therefore, we learn what to pray for as we ought. And this is another reason why people are so poor in their supplications and are forced to repeat the same requests in confusion — their ignorance of God's promises and the grace offered in them. Our inquiry therefore is, by what way or means we come to an acquaint-

tance with these promises, which all believers have in some measure — some more fully and clearly than others, but all in a sufficiency that is useful. And we say this is through the Spirit of God, without whose aid and assistance we can neither understand the promises nor what is contained in them.

I admit that some people, through frequent Bible reading and a good memory, can recite God's promises in their prayers without any real spiritual understanding of those promises — supplying words for others rather than drawing on something genuinely their own. But that kind of memory work is not what the Holy Spirit does when He supplies believers' hearts and minds with the matter of prayer. What the Spirit does is this: He opens their eyes, gives them understanding, and enlightens their minds so that they perceive the things God has prepared for them and that are contained in the promises of the Gospel — presenting those promises in all their beauty, glory, suitableness, and desirableness to their souls. He enables them to see Christ in those promises, along with all the fruits of His mediation, all the effects of God's grace and love, the excellence of mercy and pardon, of grace and holiness, of a new heart with renewed principles, dispositions, inclinations, and actions — all as they are set forth in the truth and faithfulness of God. When the mind and heart are continually filled with understanding and proper appreciation of these things, a person is always furnished with material for prayer and praise to God, which they draw on according to the actual assistance and expression given to them. And because the Holy Spirit, along with this knowledge, also implants love for these things in the hearts of believers, they are not only directed what to pray for but are stirred up to seek after those things with earnest affection and effort — which is

what it means to pray. Among those in whom these things have not been implanted, some may — as noted before — imitate prayer by reciting the words of God's promises from memory. But for the most part they are not able to pray in any genuinely useful way themselves, and they either marvel at or look down on those who are so enabled.

But someone might say: where there is a deficiency in this area, it can easily be supplied. If people are not acquainted with God's promises in the way described, and therefore do not know what they ought to pray for, others who do understand them can compose prayers for their use — prayers shaped by their own understanding of God's mind — which those people can read, giving them the matter of prayer always ready at hand.

I answer: first, I do not know that anyone has been commanded or promised divine assistance to compose prayers to be read by others as their own prayers. I therefore expect little of real value from whatever anyone does in that kind. The Spirit of grace and supplication is promised — as I have shown — to enable us to pray, not to enable us to compose prayers for others.

Second, it reflects some unfamiliarity with God's promises and the duty of prayer to imagine that the matter of prayer, suited to the varied conditions of believers, can be contained in any one form of human devising. Much of what we are to pray about may in general terms be included in a form of words — as in the Lord's Prayer, which gives direction and sets boundaries for our requests. But to think that those words can be prepared and suited to the specific condition and needs of every person who prays is a foolish notion.

Third, there is a vast difference between objectively presenting good things to be prayed for to the consideration of those who are to pray — which human beings can do — and actually implanting understanding of and love for those things in the mind and heart, which is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, when things are arranged into a form of prayer, those who use such forms understand them no better than if they had never been put into that form — unless the Spirit of God gives them understanding, and a composed form is not a means God has sanctified for that purpose. And where the Spirit does give that understanding, the form is unnecessary.

Fifth, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to give believers such a grasp of promised grace and mercy that they can consistently direct their minds, in a particular and fitting way, to those things that match their present daily needs, circumstances, and the current frame of their souls. This is what gives prayer its spiritual beauty and order — the matching of needs with their corresponding supplies, of a thankful heart with praise, of love and wonder to the excellencies of God in Christ, all by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. But when a person is directed by a prayer guide to pray for things that, though good in themselves, are not suited to his present condition, frame, inclinations, needs, and desires, the result is spiritual confusion and disorder, and nothing more.

What has been said about God's promises must also be applied to all of God's commands. These likewise form the matter of our prayers, both in confession and supplication. Without a right understanding of them, we cannot fulfill any part of this duty as we ought. This is evident in the approach of those who recite the words of the Ten Commandments and then add acknowledgments

of failure to keep them, along with requests for mercy and for hearts inclined to obey. But the law and all of God's commands are spiritual and inward, and we cannot gain a truly useful acquaintance with their full meaning and extent without the enlightening and instructing work of the Spirit of grace. When the Spirit does this work, the mind is greatly furnished with the true matter of prayer. When the soul has learned the spirituality and holiness of the law — its reach into the inward frame and disposition of the heart as well as outward actions, and its demand for absolute holiness, righteousness, and conformity to God at all times and in all things — it sees its own failure to measure up, even when its outward conduct appears blameless. From this come the confessions of sin found in the best and most holy believers, which those who do not understand these things mock and deride. This, then, is one way the Holy Spirit helps us to pray — by supplying us with the proper matter for supplication through acquainting us with the spirituality of God's commands and moving our hearts with a sense of how far we fall short in our dispositions and in the frequent disordered workings of our minds and affections. Whoever is instructed in these things will always have an abundance of material for confession and humility, as well as a sense of the grace and mercy we need in light of the obedience required of us.

Third, the Holy Spirit alone guides and directs believers to pray for things with right and proper ends in view. There is nothing so excellent in itself, so useful to us, or so acceptable to God as the matter of prayer, that cannot be corrupted and prayer itself rendered worthless by directing it toward false or mistaken ends. That the Holy Spirit relieves us in this is clear from the passage under consideration. In helping our weaknesses and teaching us what to

pray for as we ought, He makes intercession for us according to God — that is, according to God's mind and will (Romans 8:27). Origen explains this well: just as a teacher taking on a student who is learning to read must stoop to the student's level and first speak the name of the letter so that the student learns by responding, becoming in some way like the beginner in speaking and thinking what the beginner must speak and think — so also the Holy Spirit, when He sees our spirit troubled by the assaults of the flesh and not knowing what it ought to pray as it should, goes before as Teacher with a prayer that our spirit (if it desires to be a disciple of the Holy Spirit) may follow, offering groans by which our spirit learns to groan, so that it may win God back to itself. Damascene and Augustine say the same thing, as collected by Bede in his commentary on this passage. The Spirit does this in us and through us, or enables us to do it. For the Spirit Himself, apart from us, has no office to perform directly toward God, nor any nature inferior to the divine in which He might intercede. Everything of that kind, with respect to us, is the role of Christ alone — He alone in His own person does what must be done with God on our behalf. What the Spirit does, He does in and through us. He therefore directs and enables us to make supplications according to God's mind. In this, God is said to know the mind of the Spirit — that is, the Spirit's purpose and design in the requests He prompts. God knows — that is, approves of and accepts — this. So it is the Spirit of God who directs us as to the purpose and end of our prayers, so that they may find acceptance with God.

Yet there may be — and I believe there is — more in that expression: God knows the mind of the Spirit. For He works such high, holy, and spiritual desires and purposes in the minds of be-

lievers during their supplications that God alone fully knows and understands their extent and depth. That we ourselves are apt to fail and go wrong in this has been shown from James 4:3.

I will not go into particulars here, but will mention two general ends in prayer that the Holy Spirit keeps believers' minds focused on in all their requests — wherever He has supplied them with the matter of prayer according to God's mind. For He not only makes intercession in them according to God's mind with respect to the matter of their requests, but also with respect to the end they are aiming at, so that it may be accepted by God. The Spirit therefore guides them to aim for the following.

First, that the fulfillment of all their petitions and prayers would directly tend to the glory of God. It is the Spirit alone who enables them to subordinate all their desires to God's glory. Without His particular help and assistance, we would aim at self alone and ultimately in everything we do. Our own benefit, comfort, satisfaction, blessings, peace, and deliverance would be the final end to which we would direct all our supplications — and that would corrupt them entirely, making them abominable.

Second, He also keeps them to this aim: that the result of their supplications would be the growth of holiness in them, and through that, their conformity to God and their drawing nearer to Him. Where these ends are absent, the matter of prayer may be good and in accordance with God's word, and yet our prayers remain an abomination. We may pray for mercy and grace and the best promised fruits of God's love, and yet for lack of these right ends find no acceptance in our supplications. Keeping us to these ends is the Spirit's work, because it consists in driving out all self-centered aims and bringing all natural desires into submission to

God — which He works in us, if He works anything in us at all. This is the first part of the Spirit's work toward believers as a Spirit of grace and supplication: He furnishes and fills their minds with the matter of prayer, thereby teaching them what to pray for as they ought. Where this has not been worked in some measure and degree, there is no praying according to God's mind.

CHAPTER 6



The proper manner of prayer and what it consists of.

After the Holy Spirit has given the mind a proper understanding of the things we ought to pray for — furnishing it with the matter of prayer — He also works on the will and affections, producing a fitting sense and appreciation of those things along with genuine desires for them. This is where the proper manner of prayer lies. These two things are separable. The mind may have light to discern what to pray for while the will and affections remain dead to those things and unconcerned with them. A person may even have a gift for prayer built on this mental understanding without the soul truly engaging with God in the exercise of it. For light is the foundation of all common gifts. Through a temporary illumination a person may develop a gift in prayer that is useful for building up others. As Paul says, the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. Yet for the one who prays this way, it is not much different from what Paul describes when speaking of the one who prays in an unknown tongue — his spirit prays, but his heart is unfruitful. He prays by virtue of the light and gift he has received, but his own soul is not benefited or built up by it. Though sometimes God does use a

person's own gifts as a means to bring grace into his own soul. But prayer, properly speaking, is the obedient engagement of the whole soul toward God.

So where the Holy Spirit completes His work in us as a Spirit of grace and supplication, He acts on the will and affections to move them in obedient response toward God in and through the matter of prayer. When He is poured out as a Spirit of supplication, He fills those to whom He is given with mourning and godly sorrow, to be expressed in their prayers as the subject matter calls for (Zechariah 12:10). He does not merely enable them to pray — He works in them the affections that suit what they are praying about. In this work of the Spirit lies the source of that inexpressible fervency and delight, those expansive strivings of mind and desire that mark the prayers of believers — especially when they are under the power of more than ordinary influences from Him. These things flow from the Spirit's work on their wills and affections, stirring them up and carrying them out toward God in and through the matter of their prayers in a way that no intense natural emotion can match. This is why Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26-27). Earlier in the passage Paul expressed the Spirit's work in general terms as one who helps by working alongside us, carrying us forward in this duty beyond our own strength — for He helps us under our weaknesses. Here, his specific action is described as interceding: like an advocate stepping in for his client, pleading what the client cannot plead for himself. Once this word is used in an opposing sense. Speaking of Elijah's prayer, Paul says he interceded to God against Israel (Romans 11:2) — just as the word commonly used for bringing good news of peace is once applied in a contrary sense to

bringing news of disaster (1 Samuel 4:17), where the man who brought news of the army's destruction and the capture of the ark is described by that same word. But the proper use of the word is to intercede for grace and favor. Believers themselves are said to groan (Romans 8:23) — that is, to desire humbly, mournfully, and earnestly. Here the Spirit is said to intercede for us with groans, which can be nothing other than His working in us and acting through us that disposition of heart and those fervent, striving desires which are expressed this way — desires of such depth and inward labor that they cannot be put into words. This He does through the work now described.

Having truly moved the whole soul — enlightening the mind to perceive the truth, beauty, and excellence of spiritual things; engaging the will in choosing them and in a prevailing love for them; stirring the affections to delight in them and desire them — the Spirit produces in the actual performance of the duty of prayer, through the power and efficacy of His grace, such an inward striving of heart and spirit, such a holy and supernatural desire and effort after union with the things prayed for in the enjoyment of them, as no words can fully express or completely describe. That is the meaning of the passage.

To escape the force of this testimony, some — at least one — would have this intercession of the Spirit refer to Christ's intercession for us at the right hand of God, so that no work of the Spirit in believers is intended. People will sometimes resort to such irrational evasions to escape the convincing power of light and truth. For this interpretation would describe Christ's intercession at the right hand of God in terms that can hardly be reconciled with the analogy of faith. It is well-established Christian belief — and I have

stated it elsewhere — that Christ's intercession is not a humble, verbal supplication but a blessed presentation of His atoning sacrifice, by which its efficacy is continually applied to all the particular needs of the church and of individual believers. But here the intercession is described as the Spirit laboring in Him with unutterable groans — the highest expression of humble, burdened, anxious striving. Nothing could be less suited to the present glorious condition of the Mediator. It is true that in the days of His flesh He prayed with strong cries and tears in humble pleading against suffering (Hebrews 5:7). But humble prostration and praying with unutterable groans is altogether inconsistent with His present state of glory, His fullness of power, and His authority to dispense all the grace and mercy of the kingdom of God. Beyond this, the interpretation is as contrary to the context as anything could be. In verse 15 Paul says we have received the Spirit of adoption, by which we cry, 'Abba, Father' — which Spirit God sends into our hearts (Galatians 4:6). The blessed work of this Spirit in us is further described in verses 16 and 17. Then in verse 23, having received the firstfruits of this Spirit, we are said to groan within ourselves — to which Paul adds that, not knowing of ourselves what we ought to pray for, that very Spirit who has been given to us, received by us, and working in us, makes intercession for us with groans that cannot be uttered. Without forcing the context, there is no place here to introduce Christ's intercession in heaven — especially under a description that contradicts its very nature. Christ's intercession is mentioned afterward by the apostle in its proper place, as a result and fruit of His death and resurrection, in verse

34. There Paul simply says Christ intercedes. But here the Spirit is said to intercede in a way that implies an added supply beyond what is in us ourselves.

Yet to give support to this strange interpretation, the opening of both verses 26 and 27 is forced into an unnatural meaning. The word Paul uses consistently throughout Scripture to denote any kind of weakness — spiritual or physical — is claimed here to mean bodily diseases with troubles and dangers, a meaning it carries nowhere else. On this reading the sense would be: in conditions of illness and danger we do not know what to pray for — whether for wealth, health, peace, or the like — but Christ intercedes for us. And the word Paul uses for helping must then carry the meaning of simply assisting us in such conditions, whereas the text plainly indicates help and assistance given to our weaknesses in the discharge of the duty of prayer itself, as both the words and the following reasoning make clear. Therefore neither the grammatical sense of the words, nor the context, nor the analogy of faith will support this novel and strange interpretation.

Similarly, if this interpretation were correct, Paul's statement that He who searches the heart knows the mind of the Spirit — which plainly refers to some great and hidden work of the Spirit within the human heart — would have to be explained away. All that is offered is this paraphrase: 'God, who by searching hearts knows our needs exactly, also understands the desire and intention of the Spirit of Christ.' But these two ideas are unrelated and have no logical connection to each other. There was also no need to mention the searching of hearts in order to introduce God's approval of Christ's intercession. But to return to the main point.

What is worked in the hearts of believers during this duty is known to none but Him who searches the heart. This inward frame is what we should aim for in all our supplications — especially in times of distress, trouble, and temptation, the very seasons this passage most directly addresses, when we are most acutely aware of our own weakness. Where we fall short of this in any degree, it is due to our unbelief or carelessness and negligence, which God abhors. I will acknowledge that there will naturally be more earnestness and intensity of mind and natural spirit in this duty at some times than at others, depending on outward circumstances or other motivating factors that stir them up. So our Savior in His agony prayed more earnestly than usual — not with a higher exercise of grace, which always acted in Him in perfection, but with greater intensity in the working of His human faculties. So it may also be with us at particular seasons. But we are always to press after the same aids of the Spirit and the same actings of grace in every individual exercise of this duty.

Third, the Holy Spirit gives the believer's soul a delight in God as the object of prayer. I will not go into detail here about how the Spirit stirs up, moves, and activates all the other graces required in the exercise of this duty — faith, love, reverence, fear, trust, submission, patience, hope, and the like. I have proved elsewhere that the exercise of all these graces in all duties flows from Him, and I will not repeat that argument here. But this particular delight in God as the object of prayer deserves special attention. Without it, prayer is ordinarily not accepted by God, and it becomes a barren, burdensome task for those who perform it. Now this delight in God as the object of prayer is, in essence, included in Paul's description of prayer as crying, 'Abba, Father.' This cry implies a childlike, holy

delight in God — the kind of delight children have in their parents when they come to them in their most affectionate moments, as has been described. We need to inquire what this delight in God as the object of prayer actually consists of, and what is required for it. It involves the following.

First, it involves seeing God on a throne of grace — not through carnal imagination, but through spiritual illumination. By faith we see Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27), for faith makes its proper object evident and present to those who believe. Such a sight of God on a throne of grace is necessary for this delight. Under this understanding He is the proper object of all our approaches in prayer, as Paul urges: 'Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:16). Prayer is here described by its subject matter — mercy and grace — and by its one true object: God on a throne of grace.

This throne of grace is further represented to us by its location, which is in the Most Holy Place. When we come to God as on that throne, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19). By this Paul shows that his description alludes to the mercy seat on the ark, covered by the cherubim, which had the form of a throne. Because God made Himself especially known there, it was called His throne. It was a representation of Jesus Christ, as I have shown elsewhere.

God on a throne of grace, then, is God ready through Jesus Christ to dispense grace and mercy to sinners who come to Him. When God comes to execute judgment, His throne is represented very differently (Daniel 7:9-10). When sinners consider God as He is in Himself — and as He will be to all who are outside of Christ —

it produces nothing but dread and terror, along with foolish attempts to escape Him or His displeasure (Isaiah 33:14; Micah 6:7-8; Revelation 6:16). All these passages testify that when sinners seriously contemplate the nature of God and what they can expect from Him, their thoughts end in dread and terror. That is not a frame of soul in which anyone can cry, 'Abba, Father.' If people are delivered from this fear and bondage, it is usually by something worse — a careless boldness and presumption that springs from the deepest contempt of God and His holiness. When people give themselves over to the routine performance of this duty — or rather the mere saying of prayers — driven by some vague sense of obligation, without any real consideration of who God is and how He regards them, they do nothing but provoke Him to His face by taking His name in vain. Whatever satisfaction they feel, they have no true delight in God as they approach Him.

What is required here, then, is a sight of God by faith as on a throne of grace — exalted in Christ to show mercy to sinners. This is how He is represented in Isaiah 30:18: 'Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you.' Without this we cannot draw near to Him or call on Him with the delight that belongs to children crying, 'Abba, Father.' And by whom is this sight given to us? Is it the product of our own fancy and imagination? It may be so for some, to their ruin. But it is the work of the Spirit, who alone reveals God to us in and through Christ, and enables us to perceive Him rightly. This is why Paul prays for the Ephesians, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, would give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, so that the eyes of their hearts being enlightened, they might know what is the hope of His

calling and what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints (Ephesians 1:17-18). All the knowledge we have of God in the way of grace comes from the revelation made in us by His Spirit (Colossians 2:1-2). Through Him God says to us that wrath is not in Him, and that if we lay hold of His strength, we will have peace (Isaiah 27:4-5).

Second, this delight requires a sense of God's relationship to us as Father. The Lord Christ Himself has taught us to address God under that name and in that relationship in all our prayers. And though we may use other titles and names in speaking to Him — even those He has given Himself in Scripture or their equivalents — what most deeply shapes our souls and minds is the truth that God is not ashamed to be called our Father, that the Lord Almighty has said He will be a Father to us, and that we shall be His sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6). As Father, He is the ultimate object of all gospel worship and all our prayers. Paul expresses this in his glorious description of it in Ephesians 2:18: 'Through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.' No tongue can express and no mind can fully grasp the heavenly calm and soul-satisfying delight that these words contain. To come to God as Father, through Christ, by the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit who reveals Him as Father and enables us to go to Him as Father — how full of sweetness and satisfaction this is! Without a proper understanding of God in this relationship, no one can pray as he ought. And we have no real sense of this, no true acquaintance with it, except through the Holy Spirit. For we are not considering God in the general sense in which He may be called the Father of all creation, but in the particular and distinguishing relationship in which He makes us His children by adoption. And just as it is the

Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16) — giving us the highest assurance of our status as sons in this world — so it is by Him alone, as the Spirit of adoption, that we have any real acquaintance with our share in that privilege.

Some may think these things have little to do with the duty of prayer and the Spirit's help in it, or that the connection is only a distant one. But the truth is, anyone who thinks this way really does not understand what prayer is or what it requires. Nothing is more essential to this duty than that in its performance we address ourselves to God as Father — the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in Him is our Father also. Without this we cannot have the holy delight in this duty that is required of us, and the absence of it ordinarily undermines the entire purpose of prayer. And we can have no genuine spiritual sense of this except what we receive by and from the Spirit of God.

Third, this delight also requires the boldness we have in entering the Most Holy Place, or approaching the throne of grace. Paul writes: 'Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith' (Hebrews 10:19, 22). Where a spirit of fearful bondage rules over people, they can never have any delight in approaching God. This bondage is removed by the Spirit of grace and supplication, as Paul says in Romans 8:15: 'For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, Abba, Father.' These two spirits stand in opposition: the one is only removed by the other. Where the spirit of bondage and fear remains, we cannot cry 'Abba, Father,' or pray in the right way. But where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:18). This

freedom, as expressed in Paul's words, consists of two things: first, liberty in prayer, and second, confidence of being heard. First, it includes an enlarged freedom and liberty of speech in praying to God. That is what the word means — a freedom to say everything that needs to be said, a confidence that allows people to speak openly according to the urgency of their situation, condition, and cause. The word is commonly used this way, as in Ephesians 6:19. Where slavish fear and dread hold sway, the heart is bound up and cramped, not knowing what it may or may not say, troubled about the outcome of every thought and word — or unable to pray at all beyond what has been prescribed for it to repeat, whether it wants to or not. But where this Spirit of liberty and boldness is present, the heart opens up with genuine, natural readiness to lay all its concerns before God as a child before its father. I am not saying that those who have this aid of the Spirit always exercise this liberty with equal fullness. It may be variously hindered by temptations, spiritual heaviness, times of spiritual withdrawal, and our own negligence in stirring up the grace of God. But believers always have it at the root and in principle — all who have received the Spirit of adoption — and are ordinarily assisted in making use of it. By this they are able to follow Paul's blessed counsel in Philippians 4:6: 'Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' The whole of our concerns in this life is to be committed to God in prayer, so that we do not hold on to any dividing anxieties in our own minds. Here Paul calls us to use holy freedom and boldness in speaking to God on every occasion, as to One who is genuinely concerned with all of it — hiding nothing from God, which is what we effectively do when we fail to bring

something before Him in prayer, and instead using open-hearted, plain-spoken liberty with Him: 'In everything let your requests be made known to God.' He is ready to hear everything you have to bring before Him. And as a result, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7) — which is the ordinary experience of those who diligently obey this command.

Second, this freedom also includes confidence of acceptance — the assurance of being heard in prayer, the assurance that God is well pleased with our prayers and accepts both our worship and our persons in Jesus Christ. Without this we can have no delight in prayer or in God as its object, which corrupts the entire duty. When Adam believed there was no acceptance with God for him, he had no confidence to approach God. Instead, as the first act of foolishness that followed sin's entrance, he went and hid himself. All those who have no grounds for spiritual confidence of acceptance in Christ do nothing in their prayers but try to hide themselves from God through the very act of performing them. They throw up a kind of fog around themselves to obscure their sight from their own convictions — imagining that God's view of them is limited to what their conscience accuses them of. But in such a state there is neither delight nor openness, neither liberty nor true prayer at all.

This confidence and boldness in prayer that the Holy Spirit gives to believers does not concern the answer to every specific request, especially as they themselves understand it. Rather, it consists in a holy persuasion that God is well pleased with their prayers, accepts their persons, and delights in their approaches to His throne. Such people are not terrified by the thought that God

might say to them, 'What right do you have to take My name on your lips, or what is the point of all your supplications? When you make many prayers, I will not listen.' Job expressed this confidence well: 'Will He plead against me with His great power? No, surely He would pay attention to me' (Job 23:6). These believers are assured that the more time they spend with God, the more constantly they abide with Him, the more fully they are accepted. For just as they are commanded to pray always and not to give up, so they have a firm warrant from Christ's own encouragement and invitation to come frequently in spiritual approach to Him. As He speaks to His church: 'O my dove, let me see your form, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your form is lovely' (Song of Songs 2:14). This confidence also includes a proper understanding of God's goodness and power — that He is in every circumstance ready to receive them and able to help them. The natural voice of sinners — whatever presumption and superstition may claim to the contrary — is that God is harsh and incapable of condescension or compassion. And the characteristic act of unbelief is to limit the Most Holy, asking, 'Can God really do this or that which our need calls for? Is it even possible with God?' As long as either of these attitudes holds any controlling influence over us, it is impossible to have any delight in calling on God. But we are freed from both by the Holy Spirit through His revealing the committed goodness and power of God in the promises of the covenant, which gives us boldness in His presence.

Fourth, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer to keep the souls of believers focused on Jesus Christ as the only way and means of acceptance with God. This is the fundamental direction for prayer now under the Gospel. We are now to ask in His name,

which was not done explicitly under the Old Testament. Through Him we exercise faith toward God in all our supplications. Through Him we have access to the Father. We enter the Most Holy Place through the new and living way He has opened for us. The various ways that faith relates to Jesus Christ as Mediator in prayer is a topic worthy of its own study, but it is not our present focus, which is to describe the work of the Spirit alone. This is one part of that work: the Spirit keeps our souls fixed on Christ as required — as the way by which we approach God, the means of our admittance, and the cause of our acceptance. Where faith is not actually exercised in this way, all prayer is empty and unprofitable. Whether this duty is really fulfilled by a few words in which His name is mentioned with little real spiritual regard to Him is worth asking.

Enabling us to do this is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who glorifies Jesus Christ in the hearts of believers (John 16:14), and He does this when He enables them to exercise faith in Him in the right way. Paul states this directly in Ephesians 2:18: 'For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.' It is through Jesus alone that we have access to God, and that access is through faith in Him. We have this access for our persons in justification: 'Through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Romans 5:2). And through Him we have our actual access to God in our supplications, when we draw near to the throne of grace. But this is by the Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables us to do this by keeping our minds spiritually fixed on Christ in all our approaches to God. This is a genuine effect of the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son — in which particular role He is especially given to us to enable us to pray

(Galatians 4:6). Believers have a refreshing experience of this in themselves. And nothing leaves a better taste or impression on their souls than when their hearts and minds have been kept close in the exercise of faith on Christ the Mediator in their prayers.

I could continue with more examples in describing the Holy Spirit's work in believers as a Spirit of grace and supplication. But my aim is not to say everything that could be said, but to say what must not be left out. Much more could be added, but what has been said is enough to give a clear understanding of this work to those who have any spiritual experience of it — and those who have no such experience will not be satisfied by volumes on the subject.

Something more may be added here to clear away any reasonable objections. Some may think these things are beside the point, since our present aim is to describe the nature of the duty of prayer and the assistance we receive from the Spirit of God — and that this assistance relates only to the words we use in prayer, not to the spiritual delight and confidence that have been discussed, which, along with other graces, belong to a different category. First, it may be that some think this way, and it is very likely that some who talk about these things are completely ignorant of what it means to pray in the Spirit and of the whole nature of this duty. Not knowing the thing itself, they hate even the name of it — as indeed it cannot help but seem strange to all who have no share in the grace and privilege it describes. The objections of such people are like the blows of blind men: however much force and energy they carry, they always miss the mark. Such are the fierce arguments that most people make against this duty — full of heat and energy, but never touching the thing they aim at. Second, my goal

is to describe the nature of praying in the Spirit generally in such a way that I can also show what promotes it and what hinders it. For if there are ways of praying that people use or bind themselves to — ways that do not align with, are not suited to encourage, are unrelated to, or do not express those workings of the Holy Spirit that are so clearly assigned to Him in the prayers of believers — then all such ways are simply means of quenching the Spirit, frustrating the work of His grace, and making the prayers themselves, used in that manner, unacceptable to God. And it is evident — at the very least — that most of the modes and methods of prayer used in the papacy are inconsistent with and effectively exclude the entire work of the Spirit of supplication.

CHAPTER 7



The nature of prayer in general, with respect to set forms of prayer and vocal prayer. Ephesians 6:18, explained and defended.

The duty I am seeking to describe is the one commanded in Ephesians 6:18: 'With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.' Some have boldly put forward the foolish notion — and what will hostility to the holy ways of God not lead people to? — that praying in the Spirit refers only to praying by virtue of an extraordinary and miraculous gift. But the command here is given to all believers without exception, men and women alike, and surely not every one of them possessed that extraordinary miraculous gift they imagine the expression to mean. The duty is to be performed always — at every right and fitting season that duty and our circumstances call for. But Paul explicitly limits the exercise of extraordinary gifts to certain occasions where, under specific circumstances, they might be needed or useful for edification (1 Corinthians 14). There is therefore a praying in the Spirit that is the constant duty of all believers, and it is a great reproach to the Christian faith where that very name is treated with contempt. If there is anything foolish, presumptuous,

or fanatical in this expression, the holy apostle must answer for it — indeed, He by whom Paul was inspired must answer for it. But if this is God's own expression for a duty He requires of us, I would not want to be numbered among those who mock it, whatever their pretexts may be. Moreover, in the text, all believers are commanded to pray in the Spirit at all times, and with all prayer and supplication — that is, with every kind of prayer suited to their own particular needs and circumstances. A person living under this rule can hardly consider himself bound to confine his prayer to a fixed form of words. Since a variety in our prayers — matching the varied occasions of ourselves and of the church of God — is here commanded, I do not know how anyone can comply with this by constantly using a single fixed form. Those who do are left to their own liberty. And we are obligated to diligently watch over this very matter, so that our prayers may be suited to our circumstances. Anyone who can cut this text to fit and dress up set forms of prayer with it will show remarkable skill in the handling of Scripture.

Yet I do not conclude from this that all such forms are unlawful — only that a different way of praying is commanded here, which I think is beyond question for any impartial seeker of truth. Those who strive to comply with this command are certainly not to be blamed. But if people are able, through the daily constant reading of any book whatever — a purely human composition — to rise to the standard of this duty of praying always, with all kinds of prayer and supplication in the Spirit, exercising the aid and assistance they have received from Him, and pressing on in the holy stirrings

He produces as a Spirit of grace and supplication, striving and laboring and watching toward that end — I will say only that they have achieved what I cannot understand.

The only remaining question is how those in whose minds the Holy Spirit thus works as a Spirit of grace and supplication are enabled to pray. My answer is this: those who are so moved by Him will never lack a gracious ability to address God in vocal prayer, to the degree that their circumstances, calling, situation, and condition require. This is what is called the gift of prayer. I speak of ordinary cases, for there may be such intrusions of temptation and spiritual withdrawal that the soul, overwhelmed by them, may for the moment be capable only of moaning like a dove or chattering like a crane — that is, of not expressing its inner sense clearly and distinctly, but only of mourning and groaning before the Lord in brokenness of spirit and word. But even this is sufficient for acceptance in that condition. And there are few believers who have not had more or less experience of this at one time or another. As for those whose devotion discharges itself in the formal repetition of the same words — as must be the case in the papacy, where for the most part people do not even understand the words they are using — they are strangers to the true nature of prayer, or at least to the Spirit's work in it. Supplications that are not variously shaped by the varying spiritual conditions of those who make them, in response to the variety of their spiritual experience, are like a single unvarying tone that has no harmony or music in it.

I say, then, first, that the things described are in some degree necessary for all acceptable prayer. Scripture assigns them to this end, and believers find it so by their own experience. For we are not discussing prayer as it is the instinct of human nature in times

of distress reaching out to the God of nature, expressing dependence on Him and acknowledging His power — in which sense all people in one way or another, under one concept or another, come to God. Nor are we discussing the cries that legal conviction wrings from those who fall under its power. We are discussing only prayer as it is required of believers under the Gospel, as they have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father. Second, those in whom this work has been done by the Holy Spirit in any degree will not, in ordinary circumstances, lack the ability to express themselves in this duty to the degree that is needed. It is acknowledged that this ability will grow greatly through practice — not only because exercising any moral faculty is the natural way of strengthening and developing it, but chiefly because God has appointed and commanded the exercise of grace as the very means of its growth, and He gives His blessing in response to what He has instituted. But the nature of the thing itself requires that the duty be performed in a way that suits the condition of the one called to it. If people do not grow to higher degrees of ability through practicing the duty itself and stirring up the gifts and grace of God within them, it is their own sin and failure. Third, it follows from this that although set forms of prayer may be lawful for some, as is claimed, they are necessary for none — that is, for no true believer as far as acceptable evangelical prayer is concerned. But whoever has been made a partaker of the Spirit's work in this area — which He infallibly produces in everyone through whom He is enabled to cry 'Abba, Father,' as every child of God is — will be able to pray according to the mind and will of God, if he does not neglect the aid and assistance offered to him for that purpose. Therefore, to argue that set forms of prayer are necessary for believers, beyond what may be

doctrinal or instructive in them, is the fruit of partisan loyalty, or of ignorance, or of a failure to pay proper attention to one's own experience.

What use set forms of prayer may be for those who are not regenerate and have not received the Spirit of adoption does not directly belong to our inquiry. Yet I must say that I do not clearly see the benefit of them to such people — unless a device to relieve them in that condition without any real effort toward being delivered from it can be counted a benefit. These persons fall into two categories. First, those who are openly under the power of sin, whose minds have not been effectively moved by any conviction. These people rarely pray, except under danger, fear, trouble, pain, or other distress. When struck, they will cry out, and to the Lord they will cry — but not otherwise. Their intent is to deal with their immediate situation and the present weight of it on their minds. How can anyone suppose that set forms of prayer could supply them with expressions that accurately capture their own sense, thoughts, and feelings in their particular circumstances? And how absurdly they may deceive themselves by reading prayers that are in no way fitted to their condition is easy to imagine. A form given to such people may prove little better than a charm, diverting their minds from the kind of prayer that even natural light would prompt them to. Jonah's sailors in the storm each cried to his own god, and Jonah's captain called on him to do the same (Jonah 1:5-6). The substance of their prayer was that God would think of them and spare them from perishing. People in such situations, if not diverted by this so-called help, which is in fact no help at all, will not lack words to express their minds as far as there is anything of genuine prayer in what they are doing. And beyond that, whatever

words are supplied to them are of no use or value. It is possible that when left to move naturally toward God — however unskilled and rough their expressions — a deep impression may be left on their minds, with a reverence for God and a remembrance of their own failure, which may prove useful to them. But constraining and directing the workings of natural religion through a form of words — often ill-suited to their circumstances and entirely disconnected from their feelings — tends only to suppress the workings of an awakened conscience and to return them to their former careless security.

Second, there are those who, through upbringing and the power of conviction from the word by one means or another, have been brought to enough of a sense of God's authority and their own duty that they conscientiously attend to prayer, as to other duties, according to their light. The case of these people will be addressed more fully later, when the whole question of the usefulness of set forms of prayer is taken up. For now I will only say that I cannot believe, without further persuasion, that anyone whose duty it is to pray is unable to express his requests and petitions in words, to the degree that he is genuinely affected in his mind by what he is praying about — and whatever he adds beyond that through some external aid does not belong to prayer. People may, through laziness and other corruptions of mind — especially through neglecting to get their hearts and consciences genuinely moved by the matter and object of prayer — keep themselves in a real or imagined inability in this regard. But since prayer in this kind of person is an effect of common illumination and grace, which also come from the Spirit of God, if such people genuinely and sincerely seek to feel the weight of what they pray for and

about, the Spirit will not fail to help them express themselves to the degree that is needed — whether in private or in their households. But those who will never get in the water without floats and supports under them will hardly ever learn to swim. And it cannot be denied that the constant, unvarying use of set forms of prayer can become a significant means of quenching the Spirit and preventing all growth in gifts or grace. When everyone has done his best, that best will be accepted — for it is given according to what he has, not what belongs to someone else.

CHAPTER 8



The duty of external prayer by virtue of a spiritual gift, explained and defended.

Everything discussed so far concerning the work of the Spirit of grace and supplication in enabling believers to pray — to cry 'Abba, Father' — has been chiefly about the internal spiritual nature of the duty and the exercise of grace within it. We have touched on the matter of words and the use of set forms, whether freely adopted or imposed, only in passing. And what has been established from Scripture testimony on this subject makes any further dispute largely unnecessary. For if the things described are required for all acceptable prayer, and if they are truly produced in the minds of all believers by the Holy Spirit, it is evident how little room remains for such so-called aids.

But prayer also comes under another consideration — its outward performance, and how, when one person leads in prayer for a smaller or larger group, the others' participation, their communion in the duty, and consequently their edification, all depend on his words and expressions. It is God's will that in gatherings He has appointed — churches, households, and occasional meetings of two or three or more in Christ's name — one person should pray

on behalf of himself and all who join with him. In this way ministers lead prayer in church gatherings, other Christians lead in occasional meetings of disciples in Christ's name, parents lead in their households, and in private every believer prays for himself.

The Holy Spirit gives people a spiritual ability to express the matter of prayer — as it has been taught and revealed in the manner described — in words fitted and suited to carry both their own minds and the minds of others into holy communion in the duty, to the honor of God and the edification of all. I do not limit this ability to group settings. Every person may, and generally should, use it according to the measure he has received, for himself as well. For if a man has no ability to pray in private and alone, he has none to pray in public or in groups either. Therefore, take prayer as it is vocal — without which it is not complete — and this ability belongs to the very nature and essence of it. And this too comes from the Spirit of God.

This is what many contradict and oppose, and what they set other things against — even to the exclusion of it from households and private rooms as well. What those alternatives are we will examine later. Some judge this ability to be not only separable from the work of the Spirit of prayer but to have no connection to it at all. They say it is a product of natural wit, imagination, memory, eloquence, and fluency of speech — claiming this even about people in whom, by their own admission, none of these natural gifts are present in any significant degree. For a time they defended their low view of this ability by claiming that all who pray in the Spirit in this way do nothing but babble and talk nonsense. But those with any sobriety and honesty are convinced that the great majority of those who pray according to the ability they have re-

ceived do use words of truth and good sense in doing so. And it is a poor defense to pick at certain expressions that, though perhaps sound and wholesome in themselves, do not suit their taste — or that may appear to fall short of proper order and refinement, when the failures in such cases are not to be compared with the excesses of some who use supposedly polished and elegant language in this duty. So they fall back on this claim: that this ability is nothing more than the natural endowments just mentioned, displayed with a boldness and confidence that they consider barely distinguishable from unbearable presumption. This, it seems, is what is said of all who desire to pray as God enables them — that is, according to His mind and will — if natural light, the common voice of mankind, scriptural examples, and clear testimonies and commands tell us anything about what that means. I will therefore make way for the declaration and confirmation of the truth by the following observations.

First, every person is to pray or call on God as he is able, according to his own condition, relationships, circumstances, and duties. Certainly there is no one in the world who has not surrendered all reason and understanding to atheism, or buried their operations entirely under the force of animal passions, who is not convinced that it is his duty to pray to the God he acknowledges, in his own words, as best he can. For this — and nothing else — is the genuine and natural meaning of prayer. It is planted in the human heart; people do not need to be taught it or directed to it. The artificial help of fixed forms is an arbitrary invention. And I would hope that there are few in the world, especially among those called Christians, who do not at one time or another pray in just this way. Those who for the most part turn to other substitutes — such as

reading prayers composed with some good general purpose, though not fitted to their particular circumstances, the present state of their minds, or the specific things they want to pray for (which is absolutely impossible) — cannot but sometimes be aware not only of the weakness of what they are doing, but of their neglect of the very duty they profess to be performing. And as for those who, through deep ignorance, the power of prejudice, and the delusion of superstition, are turned from the promptings of nature and the directions of Scripture to say a Pater Noster, or perhaps an Ave Maria or a Creed, as their prayer — intending it for this or that purpose, for the benefit of this or that person, or to obtain something not mentioned or contained in what they are saying — there is nothing of prayer in it at all. It is nothing but a taking of God's name in vain and a terrible profaning of a holy ordinance.

People bound to such rules and forms never truly pray in their lives, except in spontaneous brief prayers that break from them almost by surprise. And there has been no more effective means of bringing ungodliness and an unholy manner of life into the Christian world than this one practice of teaching people to satisfy themselves in this duty by saying, reading, or repeating the words of others — words they may not even understand and certainly are not genuinely moved by. For it is this duty above all that shapes our whole way of life. Whatever people may say, our walk before God — which chiefly concerns the frame and disposition of our hearts — is shaped and governed by how we attend to and perform this duty. The person whose prayers are hypocritical is a hypocrite in his whole life; and the person who is merely negligent in prayer is equally negligent in all other duties. Since our whole obedience

to God is to be our reasonable service (Romans 12:1), how can we expect it to be so when the foundation is laid in such an irrational assumption — that people should not pray in their own words as best they can, but should read others' forms instead, which they do not even understand?

Second, all the examples of prayer by holy men in Scripture — whether under the Old Testament or the New — were the product of their own ability to express the gracious thoughts of their minds, wrought in them by the Holy Spirit in the way previously described. I call it their own ability, in contrast to all external aids from others or the prior prescription of a set form of words. Not one exception can be found. Sometimes they spread out their hands, sometimes they lifted their voices, sometimes they fell on their knees and cried out, sometimes they poured out their hearts when overwhelmed — all according to their present circumstances and occasions. The solemn priestly blessing instituted by God — like the current forms used in the administration of the sacraments — belongs to a different category, as will be shown. And as for those who by direct inspiration spoke and wrote discourses in the form of prayers — which were partly symbolic and partly prophetic — an account of them has already been given. Some argue that the Jewish church under the Second Temple had several fixed forms of prayer in use, even during the time when our Savior was present in the temple and their synagogues. But they claim what they cannot prove, and I challenge any scholar to produce even a reasonable case for this assertion. What is found on this subject among the Talmudists is mixed with such ridiculous fables

— the first one matching the number of prayers to the number of bones in a man's spine — that it entirely undermines its own credibility.

Third, the commands given to us to pray according to our own ability are exactly the same as all the commands in Scripture to pray at all — no more and no less. Not one of them makes any reference to outward forms, aids, or helps in prayer. And the manner of prayer itself is so described, bounded, and defined that no other kind of prayer can be intended. We are commanded to pray in the Spirit, to pray earnestly and fervently, with the mind and understanding, continually and with all manner of prayer and supplication, to make our requests known to God in such a way that we are freed from anxiety about our present concerns, to pour out our hearts to God, to cry 'Abba, Father' through the Spirit, and the like. I do not see how any of these things are suited to any kind of prayer other than that which flows from the ability people have received for the full discharge of this duty. For these commands and directions clearly presuppose such varied and occasional workings of our minds and spirits, and such expressions of gracious affection, as will not fit with the constant use of a fixed form of words.

Fourth, when we speak of a person's own ability in this matter, we include in that the conscientious and diligent use of all the means God has appointed for conveying this ability to them, or for helping them to use, exercise, and develop it. Such means exist, and people are to attend to them.

The first such means is diligent examination of our own hearts — their frames, dispositions, inclinations, and workings — so that we may be in some measure acquainted with their condition before God. The human heart is utterly unsearchable to anyone but God

Himself, at least in terms of complete and perfect knowledge. This is why David prayed that God would search and test him, and lead and guide him by grace according to what He found — not leaving him to act entirely on his own self-assessment (Psalm 139:23-24). Yet where we honestly inquire into our hearts by the help of the spiritual light we have received, we may see enough to guide us rightly in this duty and all others. If this is neglected — if people live in self-ignorance or content themselves only with what an accusing conscience will not let them ignore entirely — they will never know how to pray or what to pray for in a proper way. The neglect of this duty, which we ought to practice continually — especially given the extraordinary variety of spiritual changes we are subject to — is the cause of that barrenness in prayer that is found in most people, as we have observed. Anyone who wants to abound in all manner of supplication as commanded, whose prayers are to be fitting, useful, and fervent, must be diligent in examining his own heart — its dispositions and inclinations, and the various secret guilt it accumulates.

Second, constant and diligent reading of Scripture is another duty that this ability greatly depends on. From God's commands in Scripture we can learn our own needs, and from His promises the relief He has provided for them. These things, as has been shown, supply us with the matter of prayer. Furthermore, from Scripture we learn what words and expressions are fitting and proper to use when approaching God. No words or expressions are fitting or acceptable in prayer, in themselves or in their meaning, except as they correspond to those in Scripture which are God's own teaching and direction. Those who are deeply familiar with God's word

will always be ready and well supplied with fitting expressions of their desires to God. This is one means by which they can become so, and other aids of a similar nature could be mentioned.

Fifth, natural abilities of thought, memory, and expression also have a place here. Why should people not use in the service and worship of God what He Himself has given them, so that they may be better able to serve and worship Him? In fact, it is one of the commendable features of this spiritual gift that in its exercise we use and employ our natural abilities and endowments, as they are sanctified by grace — something that the alternative approach set up against it cannot accomplish. The more the soul is engaged in all its faculties and powers, the more intensely it is focused on the duty.

Nor do I deny that this gift may vary in degree and in various features according to these natural abilities, even though it has its own distinct nature and power apart from them. Even in the extraordinary gifts — such as receiving and conveying direct revelations from God — there was a variety in outward manner and circumstance that reflected the diversity of natural ability and qualification in those employed in that work. Far more may such differences exist and show themselves in the exercise of ordinary gifts, which do not govern and regulate the mind's faculties as absolutely as the extraordinary ones did.

We see this difference by experience among those endowed with this spiritual ability. Not all who have the gift of prayer pray alike, whether in the matter of their prayers or the manner of their praying. Some greatly excel others — some in one respect, some in another. This is partly owing to differences among them in natural abilities of thought, judgment, memory, and expression, especially

as these are developed through practice in this duty. But neither is this the whole explanation, nor does the observable difference depend on it alone. For if it did, then those who, having received this spiritual ability, also excel others in natural endowments would consistently excel them in exercising the gift itself — but this is not the case, as everyone who has paid any attention to the matter knows. Rather, the exercise of these abilities in prayer depends on the particular assistance of the Spirit of God. For the most part, the gift — like a graft inserted into a stock — transforms those natural abilities into itself and shapes them according to its own power and virtue, rather than being transformed by them. What most clearly makes a difference in how this duty is discharged — in terms of the edification of others — is the frequent and conscientious exercise of the gift received. Without this, however much natural ability the gift may be planted in, it will neither thrive nor grow.

Sixth, spiritual gifts are of two kinds.

First, there are those that are entirely distinct from all other abilities, having their whole foundation, nature, and power in themselves alone. Such were the extraordinary gifts of miracles, healing, tongues, and the like. These were complete in themselves, not built upon or joined to any other gifts or graces. Second, there are those that are attached to, or dependent on, other gifts or graces without which they would have no place or use. The gift of expression, for instance, depends on wisdom and knowledge. For expression without knowledge — anything other than a means of conveying sound understanding to benefit others — is foolishness and babbling. The gift of prayer belongs to this second kind, at

least under our present discussion as it concerns the role of words in this duty. We affirm this to be a special gift of the Holy Spirit, and we will now prove it further. For this reason:

First, it is an inseparable accompaniment of the Spirit's work as we have described it, and therefore comes from Him who is its author. For whoever is the author of something in its being is also the author of all that inseparably belongs to it. That the work of enabling us to pray is the Spirit's work has been demonstrated, and it takes extraordinary presumption for anyone to deny it while still claiming to be a Christian. And He is the author not of one part of this work but of the whole — everything by which we cry 'Abba, Father.' The expression of our souls' desires in words suited to the working of our own graces and the edification of others belongs inseparably to this. When we are commanded to pray, if our need, condition, and the edification and benefit of others require the use of words in prayer, then we are to pray using words. For example, when a minister is commanded to lead in prayer in a church assembly, going before the congregation in the discharge of that duty, he is to use words. Yet in such cases we are not required to pray in any way other than as the Spirit is promised to enable us — so that we can still be said to be praying in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to pray in this way falls under both the command and the promise and is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The very nature of the duty of prayer itself makes this clear. Everything the Spirit of God works in our hearts with respect to this duty is directed toward its expression in prayer, for what He does is enable us to pray. If He does not give that expression, everything else He does may be lost as far as its chief end and use are concerned. Indeed, everything He works in us where this expres-

sion is lacking — or where, in certain special cases, sustained meditation takes the place of it — rises no higher than the condition David describes by his keeping silence: a state of trouble in which he had not yet been freely brought to deal with God about it in prayer, as he was afterward and found relief.

The only objection with any semblance of reason to what has been said — namely, that not just a part but the whole duty of prayer as we are commanded to pray is an effect in us of the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of grace and supplication, or that the grace of prayer and the gift of prayer (as some distinguish them) are inseparable — is that two unsound conclusions are thought to follow from this. First, that everyone who has the grace of prayer, as it is called — in whom the Holy Spirit works the gracious disposition described — also has the gift of prayer, since these things are inseparable. Second, that everyone who has the gift of prayer — who has the ability to pray with expression, to the edification of others — also has the grace of prayer, or the working of saving grace in prayer, which is the thing in view. But these conclusions, it will be said, are plainly wrong and contrary to all experience.

In answer: first, regarding the first of these conclusions, I grant it follows from the premises, and therefore affirm that it is completely true under the following qualifications. We are not speaking of what is called the grace of prayer in its settled habit or principle, but in its actual exercise. In the first sense, it is present in all who are sanctified, even in those infants who are so from the womb. It does not follow from this that they must also have the gift of prayer, which relates only to grace in its active exercise. Our meaning, then, is this: all those in whom the Spirit of God gra-

ciously acts through faith, love, delight, and desire in the way of prayer to God have from Him an ability to express themselves in vocal prayer.

Second, it is required that such persons be living in the path of duty, and thus be in a position to receive the Spirit's ongoing assistance. Whoever would use or benefit from any spiritual gift must himself, by diligent and frequent practice, actively stir up the ability in which the gift consists. Paul says, 'Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you' (2 Timothy 1:6). Where this duty is neglected — and such neglect must be accounted for — it is no wonder if people who may have what is called the grace of prayer nonetheless lack the ability to express their minds and desires in prayer through their own words. Some people believe no such ability exists in anyone, and therefore never look for it in themselves, but despise whatever they hear said about it. What assistance such people may receive in their prayers from the Spirit of grace I cannot say — but it is unlikely they receive much of His aid in a matter where they despise Him. Others are so accustomed to and deceived by so-called prayer aids — using or reading prayers composed by others for them — that they never attempt to pray for themselves. They always think they cannot do what in truth they simply will not do. It is like a child raised entirely among people who walk on crutches, who as he grows up refuses to try his own strength and decides to use crutches too. Some good instruction, or a sudden shock of fear that removes his prejudice, and he will throw away this unnecessary support and make use of his own strength. Believers who have been raised where set forms of prayer are the norm may have a genuine spiritual ability to pray of their own, but never know it or try it because their upbringing has

formed their thinking — to the point where they believe it impossible to pray any other way. But when teaching frees them from this prejudice, or a sudden burst of fear or affliction throws them into their first exercise of their own ability in this area, their former aids and props quickly fall into disuse.

Third, the ability we attribute to all who have the Spirit's gracious assistance in prayer is not absolute, but suited to their circumstances, condition, duties, calling, and the like. We do not say that everyone who has received the Spirit of grace and supplication must necessarily have a gift enabling him to pray as befits a minister before a congregation, or any person in a similar formal setting — nor even, perhaps, to lead prayer in a household or in company, if his life and calling do not require it. But everyone has this ability according to his need, circumstances, and calling. The person who is only a private individual has it, the head of a household has it, and the minister of a congregation has it also. And as God expands people's circumstances and calls, He will expand their abilities — provided they do what is their duty toward that end. The lazy, the negligent, the fearful, and those under the power of prejudice will have no share in this mercy. This, then, is the sum of what we affirm on this particular point. Every adult person who has received and is able to exercise grace in prayer — any saving grace, without which prayer itself is an abomination — if he does not neglect the growth of the spiritual aids given to him, will share in this gift of the Holy Spirit to the degree that enables him to pray according to his own needs and calling. The person who needs mercy for the forgiveness of sin, or supplies of grace for the sanctification of his life and the like — if he is genuinely aware of his needs and has

gracious desires for that supply worked in his heart — will be enabled to ask these things from God in an acceptable way, provided he is not woefully and sinfully failing in his own duty.

Second, as to the second conclusion — that if this ability is inseparable from the Spirit's gracious assistance in prayer, then whoever has this gift and ability must have in its exercise that gracious assistance, or have received the Spirit of grace, with saving graces active in him — I answer: this does not follow from what has been asserted. For although wherever there is the grace of prayer there is also the gift in some measure, it does not follow that wherever the gift is found, the grace must also be present. The gift exists for the sake of the grace, not the other way around. Grace cannot be expressed without the gift, but the gift can exist without grace.

Second, we will acknowledge that this gift grows in another soil and does not have its root in itself. It follows from, and arises out of, one specific aspect of the Holy Spirit's work as a Spirit of supplication, from which it is inseparable. That aspect is His work on the mind, acquainting it with the things that are to be prayed for — a work He does both through inward conviction in a person's own soul and through what is declared in Scripture. Now this may in some people be only a common work of illumination, from which the gift of vocal prayer may flow and which it accompanies, even when the Spirit of grace and supplication does not work more deeply in them. It is therefore acknowledged that people in whom the Spirit of grace has never dwelt or worked in a saving way may still have the gift of expression in prayer, for their own and others' edification. For they have the gift of illumination, which is its foundation and from which the gift of expression is inseparable. Where this spiritual illumination is not granted in some measure, no nat-

ural talent or diligence can produce the gift of expression in prayer to edification. Spiritual light is the substance of all spiritual gifts, which in all their variety are simply various exercises of it. To suppose a person has a gift of prayer without it is to suppose he has a gift to pray for what he doesn't know — the kind of real or pretended enthusiasm we reject entirely. Therefore, wherever this gift of illumination and conviction is present, there is such a foundation for the gift of prayer that it is not ordinarily absent in some measure where the gift is properly used and exercised.

In addition to what has been said: the duty of prayer is ordinarily not complete unless it is expressed in words. It is called pleading with God, filling our mouths with arguments, crying to Him, and causing Him to hear our voice — expressions that are given not because they are in any way necessary for God, but because they are necessary for us. It may be said that all of this can be accomplished in prayer through inward meditation, without the use of the voice or words — as it is said of Hannah that she prayed in her heart but her voice was not heard (1 Samuel 1:13). I grant that in some cases this is appropriate, where the circumstances of the duty do not require it to be otherwise, or where the intensity of suffering — which sometimes makes people cry out — does not permit it. But I also say that even in this kind of prayer by meditation, the substance and matter of prayer must be formed in the mind into a sense and into sentences that could be expressed — and the mind can conceive no more in this kind of prayer than it could express. So we read that when Hannah prayed in her heart, out of the abundance of her meditation (as she herself said in verse 16), her lips moved even though her voice was not heard. She not only formed the sense of her supplications into petitions but

silently expressed them to herself. And the obligation of any person to prescribed forms is just as destructive of prayer by inward meditation as it is of prayer that is conceived and spoken aloud — for it takes away the freedom and prevents the ability to form petitions or any other part of prayer in the mind according to the person's own sense of them. Therefore, if the expression of prayer in words necessarily belongs to the duty itself, it is an effect of the Holy Spirit — or else He is not the Spirit of supplication to us.

Second, expression is a special gift of the Holy Spirit — it is mentioned as such in 1 Corinthians 1:5; 2 Corinthians 8:7; Ephesians 6:19; and Colossians 4:3. This gift has two aspects, or two duties to be fulfilled by virtue of it. First, the ability to speak to people in the name of God in the preaching of the word. Second, the ability to speak to God for ourselves or in the name and on behalf of others. The same principle of expression applies in both these duties, and in each of them it is equally a special gift of the Spirit of God. The word used in these passages refers to expression — well translated as 'utterance' — meaning the ability and freedom to speak out the things we have conceived. Paul speaks in Ephesians 6:19 of utterance in opening the mouth boldly, or more precisely, with freedom of speech. In sacred matters — in praying and preaching — this is the gift of the Holy Spirit. As such, we are commanded to pray for it, that it may be given to us or to others as the edification of the church requires. Although some may despise this gift, the entire edification of the church depends on it. The church's very foundation was laid through it, as an extraordinary gift, at Pentecost (Acts 2:4), and its ongoing building is carried forward by it. For expression is the sole means of public and formal communication between God and His church. It is so, that is, if

there is such a thing as the Holy Spirit, if there are such things as spiritual gifts — their substance is spiritual light, and the way they are exercised is through expression.

This gift or ability — like all others of a similar kind — may be considered either in its settled habit or in its outward exercise. Those who have received it in habit still experience considerable variety in its exercise, which does not usually appear in natural or moral habits where the same conditions consistently precede it. For just as the Spirit of grace is free and acts as He chooses with respect to the persons to whom He gives the gift itself — dividing to each one as He wills — He also acts as He pleases in the exercise of the gifts and graces He bestows. Therefore believers sometimes find greater evidence of His gracious working in them in prayer, or greater help in praying, along with greater freedom in expression, than at other times — for in both He breathes and acts as He pleases. These things are not their own, not entirely within their own control. Neither the habitual grace they have received will enable them to pray graciously, nor will their gift of expression enable edification, without His actual stirring of that grace and His assistance in exercising that gift. Both the forming and the expression of our desires in an acceptable manner come from Him, as do all spiritual expansions in this duty. Vocal prayer — whether private or public — is the uttering of our desires and requests to God, which Paul calls making our requests known to Him (Philippians 4:6). This expression is a gift of the Holy Spirit, as is prayer itself with respect to the manner of its performance in words of supplication. If anyone says he cannot so pray suited to his own particular needs, he is only saying that he is a stranger to this gift of the

Holy Spirit — and if anyone will not, he despises it. And if these things are denied by any because they do not understand them, we cannot help that.

Third, it is the Holy Spirit who enables people to fulfill every duty required of them in the right way, so that without His enabling we can do nothing as we should. This has been sufficiently established in other treatments of this subject, and we will not always keep arguing with those who deny or question such foundational principles of Christianity. He enables us with respect to all kinds of duties — whether those required of us by virtue of a particular office and calling, or on the more general basis of living a holy life according to God's will. Vocal prayer is a duty under both of these considerations.

First, it is the duty of gospel ministers by virtue of their particular office. Supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving are to be made in the gatherings of the church (1 Timothy 2:1). In this it is the office and duty of ministers to go before the congregation and to be, as it were, the mouth of the church to God. The nature of the office and its proper discharge, together with what is necessary for the public worship of assembled congregations, make this clear. The apostles, as examples for all who followed, gave themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). Therefore it is the gift of the Holy Spirit by which ministers are enabled to do this, for of themselves they are not able to do anything. This is one of those good gifts that comes from above, descending from the Father of lights (James 1:17). These gifts are given for equipping the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). Therefore, expression

in praying and preaching is in ministers a gift of the Holy Spirit with respect to their office. Those who are entirely without this gift cannot discharge their office to the edification of the church.

Whatever pretexts people may offer, if a spiritual ability in praying and preaching does not belong necessarily to the office of ministry, no one can say what does belong to it or what the office means in the church. For no other ordinance can be administered without the word and prayer, nor can any aspect of church oversight be properly exercised. To deny that these are gifts of the Holy Spirit is to deny the continuation of His dispensation to and within the church, which at once overturns the whole truth of the Gospel and the sole foundation on which its ministry is built.

Second, the same can be said regarding duties that belong to our general calling as Christians. Such are the duties of parents and heads of households. I do not know how far any have gone in the ways of irreverence, but I hope none have gone so far as to deny it is the duty of such persons to pray with their families as well as for them. Families that do not call on the name of the Lord are under His curse. And if this is their duty, its performance must be by the aid of the Spirit of God, by virtue of the general principle we are proceeding on.

Fourth, the benefit, profit, advantage, and edification of individual believers, of families, and especially of the church in its gatherings, through the use and exercise of this gift, are so great that it would be impious not to ascribe them to the work of the Holy Spirit. People are not of themselves, without His particular aid, the authors or causes of the chief spiritual benefit and advantage that the church receives in the world. If they could be, or might be, what need would there be for the Spirit or His work for

the preservation and edification of the church? That this gift has these blessed effects and fruits, we appeal to the experience of all who desire to walk sincerely before God, and we leave the final determination of the question to the judgment of God Himself. Nor will we, in making our case, refuse to consider the difference in godly living between those who consistently give this testimony both in their lives and at their deaths, and those by whom it is opposed and denied. None of us is to be ashamed of the Gospel of Christ or of any effect of His grace. It must therefore be said that the experience believers of all kinds have of the spiritual benefit and advantage of this ability — both in themselves and in others — is not to be moved or shaken by the objections or contempt of those who openly claim to be strangers to it.

Fifth, the observed facts of experience may be cited as evidence of the same truth. For if the ability to pray were not a gift from Him who distributes to each one as He wills, there would not be such visible and open differences in the world among those who all profess the same faith, in how much they share in this ability. And if it were purely a matter of natural abilities, it would be impossible for so many people — for whom having this ability is of the highest importance — to be so unfamiliar with it, so unacquainted with it, and so unable to exercise it. They say it is nothing more than the improvement of natural ability through confidence and practice. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that at least some of them have sufficient confidence for such a task — and let them try what mere practice will produce. In the meantime, I maintain that without the illumination of the mind that is a special gift of the Holy Spirit, this ability in prayer is not attainable by anyone. And it will be very difficult to persuade any thoughtful

person that the differences they observe or may observe among people in this gift and ability are due solely to differences in natural and acquired abilities — especially when, as is energetically claimed, those with the most natural ability are often the most deficient in this particular gift.

Some may perhaps say they know there is nothing in this gift but the exercise of natural endowments with boldness and eloquence — and they say this because they themselves were once skilled in it and found nothing else in it, which is why they have left it for something they consider better. For clear reasons, however, we are not bound to accept the testimony of such people, though those reasons need not be spelled out here. In the meantime, we know that from the one who does not have, even what he once had will be taken away. It is no wonder that people who were once endowed with a gift of prayer proportionate to their light and illumination, and who improved neither the one nor the other as they ought, have lost both their light and their gift as well. And so, in keeping with my design and purpose, I have given an account of the work of the Holy Spirit as a Spirit of grace and supplication — promised to and bestowed on all believers — enabling them to cry 'Abba, Father.'

CHAPTER 9



Duties that follow from the preceding discussion.

The point of all inquiry into these things is how we may put them into practice in our life with God. If we know them, we are blessed only if we do them — and not otherwise. Our practice in this area falls under two headings: first, giving due and continual glory to God for His grace in this free gift whose nature we have examined; and second, constant attention to the duty this grace enables us to perform. These are as follows.

First, we ought to continually bless and give glory to God for this great privilege of the Spirit of grace and supplication granted to the church. This is the chief means on our part of all holy communion with God and of giving Him glory. How does the world, which is without this gift of divine generosity, grope in the dark and wander after vain ideas — not knowing how to deal with its own convictions, or how to approach God about its concerns at all? That world which cannot receive the Spirit of grace and truth can never have any true dealings with God. There are those who despise this gift of God, who mock it and speak against it, hiding themselves under many pretexts from the light in doing so. But they do not know what they are doing, or by what spirit they are

being driven. Our duty is to pray that God would pour out His Spirit even on them — which would quickly cause them to look on Him whom they have pierced and mourn.

How great a mercy it is to enjoy and use this privilege is shown in two ways. First, both the psalmist and the prophet pray directly, in a spirit of prophecy and without qualification, that God would pour out His wrath on the families that do not call on His name (Psalm 79:6; Jeremiah 10:25). Second, the whole work of faith in obedience is named after this very duty of prayer: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Romans 10:13). For calling on God in prayer, through the power of the Spirit of grace and supplication, is an unmistakable evidence and fruit of saving faith and obedience — which is why the promise of salvation is so emphatically attached to it. Or, by a figure of speech, it stands for the whole worship of God and the obedience of faith. It would take forever to describe all the benefits that the church of God and every member of it receives through this privilege. No heart can conceive the treasury of mercies that lie in this one gift — the freedom and ability to approach God at all times according to His mind and will. This is the relief, the refuge, the weapon, and the certain refreshment of the church in every condition.

Second, it is a special reason for praise and glory to God that He has expanded this privilege under the Gospel. The Spirit has now been poured out from above and enlarged in His dispensation — both in depth and in breadth. Those on whom He is bestowed receive Him in greater measure than they did under the Old Testament. From this comes that freedom and boldness in approaching the throne of grace and crying 'Abba, Father' — which Paul counts among the great privileges of the dispensation of the

Spirit of Christ, privileges that were not previously enjoyed. If the difference between the Old Testament state and the New consisted only in outward rules and their administration, it would not be so easy to see where the advantage lies — especially, it seems, for those who appear to genuinely prefer the outward splendor of the old legal worship over the simplicity of the Gospel. But whoever understands what it means not to receive the spirit of slavery leading to fear, but to receive the Spirit of adoption by which we cry 'Abba, Father' — and what it means to serve God in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter — understands the difference well enough. I cannot help being surprised that some will use arguments, or the pretense of arguments, for forms and aids of prayer that seem inconsistent with the work of the Spirit of supplication as described, drawing them from the Old Testament and the practice of the Jewish church before the time of our Savior — even though they can prove nothing from these sources. Do they not acknowledge that there is a more plentiful outpouring of the Spirit on the church under the New Testament than under the Old? To deny it is to remove the principal difference between the law and the Gospel. And should not the performance of our duties be regulated according to the grace supplied to us? If we were to suppose that the people then, being spiritually immature and bound to outward ordinances, needed forms of prayer at that time — which in fact they did not, for there is no evidence they had any forms in the way being argued — does it follow that believers under the New Testament, who unquestionably have a larger portion of the Spirit of grace and supplication poured out on them, should either need or be bound to them? And it is pointless to claim a different dispensation of the Spirit for them and for us while refusing

to acknowledge different fruits and effects. The person who has been under the power of the law and has been set free by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus knows the difference, and will be thankful for the grace it contains.

Furthermore, the Spirit's dispensation has been expanded in breadth, in that it is now given to multitudes, whereas formerly it was confined to a few. In former times the dew of His presence watered only the land of Canaan and the physical descendants of Abraham; now the showers of it fall on all nations — on all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, theirs and ours. In every assembly of Mount Zion throughout the world that is gathered according to the mind of Christ, prayers and supplications are offered to God through the effective working of the Spirit of grace and supplication — unless He is despised. This is the fulfillment of the great promise of Malachi 1:11: 'For from the rising of the sun to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations.' The prayers and praises in the assemblies of the saints are the pure offering and the sacrifice God promised would be brought to Him. And this offering cannot be kindled without the eternal fire of the Spirit of grace. Under the old covenant, no sacrifice was to be offered except with fire taken from the altar. Whatever was offered with unauthorized fire was an abomination. All the offerings were therefore called the Lord's fire offerings. This was a picture of the Holy Spirit. From this Christ is said to have offered Himself to God through the eternal Spirit. And in the same way we must offer our prayers. In the fruits and effects of His work lies all the glory and beauty of our gatherings and worship.

Remove them and they become contemptible, dead, and fleshly. And He carries this work into the households of believers. Every family individually is enabled to pray and serve God in the Spirit, and those that do not live in darkness all their days. He is the same to believers everywhere in the world — in their private rooms or their prison cells. Wherever they are, they all have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). And for this expansion of grace, God rightly expects from us a return of glory.

Third, it is certainly our duty to make use of the gift of the Spirit, which has been purchased for us by Christ and is of immeasurable benefit to our souls. There are two ways people may be guilty of neglecting this heavenly gift. The first is when the gift itself is not valued, sought after, or earnestly pursued. This happens under various pretexts: some imagine it is not a gift of the Spirit at all and despise it; others think it is either unattainable for them, or that even if attained it would not justify the effort and diligence it requires, and so they settle for another approach which they know to be easier and hope will be just as useful. Many despise the whole duty of prayer and consequently despise all assistance in performing it. None of those are who I am addressing at present. The second way of neglecting this gift is when we do not constantly and diligently make use of it on every occasion for the purpose for which it is given — when we do not abound in its exercise. You have been freely given by the Holy Spirit an ability to pray always — why do you not pray always, in private, in your household, according to every occasion and opportunity that presents itself? Everyone will acknowledge how important prayer is to the glory of God and to our life with Him. It is the one duty in which every grace is active, every sin is opposed, every good thing is obtained,

and every aspect of our obedience is engaged. The difficulties that stand in the way of praying well, the discouragements that rise against it, our inability of ourselves to perform it rightly, the deep aversion in our fallen nature to it, the distractions and weariness that overtake us in it — all of this is well known to those who are at all practiced in these things. Yet the blessedness of our present and future condition greatly depends on it. To relieve us against all these obstacles, to help our weaknesses, to give us freedom, liberty, and confidence in approaching the throne of grace, to enable us as children to cry 'Abba, Father' with delight and satisfaction — this is why the gift of the Spirit of grace and supplication has been given to us by Jesus Christ. Who can express how great a folly and sin it is not to be found constantly exercising it? Can we grieve the Holy Spirit more deeply or damage our own souls by any other means? Has God given us the Spirit of grace and supplication, and shall we be lax, careless, and negligent in prayer? Is this not the very worst way of quenching the Spirit, against which we are so solemnly warned? Can we go from day to day neglecting opportunities, occasions, and proper seasons of prayer? How will we answer for our contempt of this gracious aid offered to us by Jesus Christ? Do others go from day to day neglecting this duty in their private rooms and homes? Do not judge them too harshly — or at least they are far less to blame than we are. They do not know how to pray; they have no ability for it. But for those who have received this gift of the Holy Spirit enabling them to pray, making it easy and pleasant to the inner person — how greatly does their neglect aggravate their sin? Shall others, at the ringing of a bell, rise and rush off to say or sing prescribed prayers in which they can have no spiritual interest, only to pacify their consciences and comply

with the habits of their upbringing? And shall we be found neglecting the spiritual aid so graciously given to us? How will the blind devotion and superstition of multitudes, with all their diligence and effort, rise up in judgment against such negligent people? We can observe in the papacy how, at the ringing of a bell or the raising of some symbol of superstition, some will rise at midnight, others will fall on their knees in their homes or even in the streets in their devotions — having lost the Spirit of God's guidance toward performing duty in its proper seasons, they have invented their own ways to maintain frequent exercise of this duty in their own manner, and they are faithful and punctual to it. And shall those who have received the Spirit whom the world cannot receive be unfaithful and disobedient to His promptings, to what He constantly inclines and enables them toward? Apart from every other harm this neglect will cause to our souls, who can describe the terrible ingratitude of such a sin? I press this point all the more — and for all kinds of prayer, private, in households, and in assemblies gathered for that purpose — because the temptations and dangers of the times we live in call for it in a particular and urgent way. If we would talk less and pray more about them, things would be better than they are in the world — or at least we would be better equipped to bear them and endure our share in them with greater steadiness. To be negligent here, in such a season, is a sad sign of the kind of careless security that comes before destruction.

Fourth, those who have received this gift of the Holy Spirit should know that it is their duty to cherish it, to stir it up, and to develop it. It is freely given, but it must be carefully preserved. It is a Gospel talent given to be put to use and thereby increased. This gift comes in various degrees and measures to those who receive it,

but whatever measure any person has — from the greatest to the least — he is obligated to cherish, preserve, and improve it. We do not describe a gift of prayer that makes our own diligence unnecessary or renders the exercise of our natural abilities useless. On the contrary, the very purpose of this gift is to enable the diligent exercise of our soul's faculties in prayer in the right way. Therefore, just as it is our duty to use this gift, it is also our duty to improve it. This is one reason against the restraint of set forms: they allow too little exercise of our mental faculties in the worship of God. Since this is our duty, it may be asked by what means we can stir up this grace and gift of God — at the very least so that, if through some weakness or infirmity of mind we do not grow much in the outward aspect of it, we at least do not decline and lose what we have received. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are the fire that kindles all our sacrifices to God. The fire on the old altar first came down from heaven (Leviticus 9:24), but once it was there it had to be kept alive with care and diligence, for otherwise it would have gone out like any other fire (Leviticus 6:12-13). This is why Paul urges Timothy to kindle afresh the gift of God within him (2 Timothy 1:6) — blowing away the ashes and adding fuel to the fire. Many things are helpful toward this end.

First, there is the constant observation and examination of ourselves, our own hearts, and our spiritual state and condition. From here the material for our petitions in prayer is to be drawn (Psalm 16:7). Our general condition — given the depths and deceitfulness of our hearts and our blindness in spiritual things — is such as will provide us with matter for continual search and examination all the days of our lives, as expressed in these prayers: Psalm 19:12 and Psalm 139:23-24. And we are subject to various

changes and shifts in our spiritual frames and workings every day, as well as to temptations of every kind. These things, according to our circumstances and needs, are what we are to bring to God in our supplications (Philippians 4:6). How can we be in readiness for this, prepared with the right material for prayer, if we neglect constant and diligent self-observation and attention to the state of our own souls? Since this is the food of the gift, where it is neglected the gift itself will decay. If people attend only to the outward shape of things in a routine way, they will quickly reduce themselves to a routine of words.

Helping us in this self-examination, giving us light into our condition and needs, and making us genuinely aware of them — this is part of the Spirit's work as a Spirit of grace and supplication. If we neglect our duty toward Him in this, how can we expect Him to continue His aid in the outward part of the duty? Therefore, though a person may pray with the eloquence of men and angels, to the great satisfaction and perhaps the real edification of others, yet if he is negligent — if he is not wise and watchful in examining the condition, workings, and temptations of his own soul — he has only a fading, decaying shell of this gift of the Spirit. Those who do attend to this self-examination and self-judgment will ordinarily thrive in the power and life of this duty. By this means we come to know the early stirrings and approaches of temptation, the deceptive workings of indwelling sin, the rise of particular corruptions along with the circumstances that give them opportunity and power, and the daily supplies of grace and paths of deliverance. The person who prays without proper attention to these things prays aimlessly — fighting uncertainly, like one beating the air. But the person whose heart is filled with a sense of them will always

have the right material for prayer ready at hand, and will be able to fill his mouth with pleas and arguments — by which the gift itself is nourished and strengthened.

Second, constant searching of the Scripture for the same purpose is another supporting duty that feeds the gift of prayer itself. Scripture is the mirror in which we may best see ourselves, because it at once shows us both what we are and what we ought to be — what we are in ourselves and what we are by God's grace, what our frames, actions, and ways are, and how they fall short in God's sight. No higher instruction in what to pray for or how to pray can be given us (Psalm 19:7-9). Some imagine that searching Scripture to collect forms of speech and expressions fitted to all the parts of prayer, and then arranging or memorizing them, is a great help to prayer. Whatever that may be, it is not what I am pressing for here. It is certainly true that if a person is well-versed in Scripture — deeply familiar and practiced in it, rich in its meaning and expressions, and aided by a good memory — this can greatly further and assist him in exercising this gift to the edification of others. But this collection of phrases and expressions, where the mind may remain empty of the Scripture's actual meaning, I do not know what use it is. What I am pressing for is a diligent inquiry into the Scripture for the things revealed in it. For there our needs are laid out before us in all their depth and consequences, as are the supplies of grace and mercy God has prepared for us — the former with authority to make us aware of them, and the latter with such evidence of grace and faithfulness as to encourage us to ask for them. The word is the instrument by which the Holy Spirit reveals to us our needs when we do not know what to ask, and so enables us to intercede according to God's mind (Romans 8).

Indeed, who is there who, reading Scripture with proper reverence and submission of conscience to God, does not regularly have some particular matter for prayer or praise effectively prompted within him? And Christians would find no small benefit — on many grounds too numerous to go into here — if they would frequently, if not constantly, turn what they read into prayer or praise to God. This would confirm the instructions of faith and obedience more deeply in their minds and engage their hearts more fully in practicing them. We have an example of this in Psalm 119, where every consideration of God's will and our duty is turned into petition.

Third, proper meditation on God's glorious excellencies greatly tends to cherish this gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. In every example of prayer we have in Scripture, the entrance into it consists in expressions of God's name and usually of some other glorious titles of His, to which the remembrance of some of His mighty acts is commonly added. The nature of the thing requires it. For besides the fact that God has revealed His name to us for this very purpose — that we might call on Him by the name He owns and takes for Himself — it is necessary that by some outward description we fix our minds on the One to whom we are making our approach, since we cannot form any image or idea of Him. The purpose of this is twofold. First, it produces in us the reverence and godly fear required of all who draw near to this infinitely holy God (Leviticus 10:3; Hebrews 12:29). The greatest encouragement to boldness in prayer and to access to God is found in Hebrews 10:19-22 and Hebrews 4:16 — we may approach the Most Holy Place with confidence and come to the throne of grace. And God in Christ is represented to us as enthroned on a throne of grace. But

it is still a throne, where majesty and glory reside — and God is always to be considered by us as enthroned. Second, faith and confidence are stirred up and brought to a right posture by this meditation. For prayer is our taking refuge in God as our shield, our rock, and our reward (Proverbs 18:10). Therefore a prior consideration of those holy attributes of His nature that encourage and assure us in so doing is necessary. And since this is so great a part of prayer — the great foundation of supplication and praise — frequent meditation on these holy excellencies of the divine nature must be an excellent preparation for the whole duty, filling the heart with a sense of the very things the mouth is to express, and readying those graces for their exercise that prayer requires.

Fourth, meditation on the mediation and intercession of Christ, for our encouragement, is of equal importance and leads to the same end. For this purpose He is set before us in His ongoing priestly office (Hebrews 4:15-16; Hebrews 10:19-22). And this is not only an encouragement to prayer and within it, but a means of increasing and strengthening the grace and gift of prayer itself. For the mind is thereby prepared to engage with the effective intercession of the Lord Christ at the throne of grace on our behalf — which holds a central place in the prayers of all believers. By this we may also most accurately test our faith — what kind it is, whether truly evangelical or not. It is said that the eagle tests the eyes of her young by turning them toward the sun, and if they cannot look steadily at it, she rejects them as not genuine. We may truly test our faith in the same way, by direct looking at the Sun of Righteousness. Direct faith to act immediately and directly on the incarnation of Christ and His mediation, and if it is not of the right kind, it will turn its eye aside to anything else. It can bear a fixed

consideration of God's essential attributes, His commands and His promises — but it cannot fix itself on the person and mediation of Christ with steadiness and satisfaction. There is indeed much profession of Christ in the world, but little faith in Him.

Fifth, frequent exercise is the direct and immediate means of developing and improving this gift. All spiritual gifts are given to be used and exercised, for 'to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good' (1 Corinthians 12:7). God requires that His talents be put to use and His gifts be employed and exercised, and He will also call us to account for how faithfully we have discharged the trust committed to us in them (1 Peter 4:10-11). The exercise of this and similar gifts tends to their growth on two grounds. First, since they reside in the mind in the nature of a habit or faculty, it is natural that they should be increased and strengthened by exercise, just as all habits grow through the accumulation of acts produced by them. By disuse they will weaken, decay, and ultimately be entirely lost. This is what happens with many people regarding the gift of prayer. They were known to have received it in a good measure, to their own and others' edification. But through neglect of using and exercising it — in public and in private, which neglect seldom goes alone without some secret or open failures — they have lost all their ability and can no longer open their mouths in prayer on any occasion beyond what has been prescribed or composed for them. But the just hand of God is at work in this as well, taking from them what they had, in response to their inexcusable neglect of His grace and generosity. Second, increase will also be added by virtue of God's blessing on what He Himself has appointed. Having given gifts for that purpose, where people are faithful in discharging the trust committed

to them, He will graciously add to what they have. This is the eternal law governing the distribution of gospel gifts: 'For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away' (Matthew 25:29). It is not the mere having or not having of gifts that is in view, but the using or not using of what we have received, as the context makes plain. I am not saying that a person may or ought to exercise himself in prayer merely with the design of preserving and improving his gift. This may in some cases be a legitimate consideration, but not the only one. For instance, where a head of household has someone in his family who is able to lead prayer and can attend to it, he will still find it wise not to omit doing so himself — unless he is content to let his own gift, as far as his family is concerned, wither and decay. All I am contending is this: the person who conscientiously, with regard to all the proper ends of prayer, abounds in exercising this gift, will assuredly thrive and grow in it — or at the least preserve it, in keeping with the measure of Christ's gift to him. I do not claim that through diligent use of these means every person will continually grow in that aspect of the gift that consists in expression and eloquence. For every person has a measure of Christ's gift assigned to him beyond which he will not pass (Ephesians 4:7). But in these paths and ways, the gift they have received will be preserved, kept alive and fruitful — and from the smallest beginnings of sharing in it, they will be carried forward to their own proper measure, which is sufficient for them.

Sixth, constant fervency and intensity of mind and spirit in this duty works directly toward the same end. People may multiply prayers in terms of outward performance and yet gain not the

slightest spiritual benefit from them. If they are dull, lifeless, and sluggish in them — if they are under the power of routine and mere formality — what fruit can they expect? Fervency and intensity of mind quicken and expand the faculties, leaving deep impressions of the things addressed in our supplications. The whole soul is shaped by the substance of our prayers and is thereby prepared and made ready for fresh spiritual engagement with them. The fervency intended here does not consist in the loudness or vehemence of the voice, but in the intensity of the mind. Earnestness and loudness of voice are appropriate in only two cases: first, when the size of the congregation requires it, since a large gathering cannot hear unless a person raises his voice; and second, when the force of one's affections cannot be restrained (Psalm 22:2; Hebrews 5:7). All of these things are means by which the gift of prayer may be cherished, preserved, and improved — and they are also all ways in which grace exercises itself in prayer, having therefore equal bearing on the whole work of the Spirit of supplication within us.

Fifth, it is our duty to use the gift of prayer for the ends for which it is freely given to us. It is given with respect to two things: first, for the benefit of those who receive it, and second, for the benefit and advantage of others. With respect to those who receive it, it is a blessed means and help for stirring up, awakening, and actively engaging all those graces of the Spirit by which they have communion with God in this duty — graces such as faith, love, delight, joy, and the like. First, under the leading of this gift, the mind and soul are directed to the proper objects of those graces and fixed on them, along with the appropriate occasions for their exercise. When people are confined to a fixed form, they can exercise grace only in connection with the things expressed in that

form, which — whatever anyone may think — is narrow and limited compared with the breadth of the divine communion with God that believers need in this duty. But in the exercise of this gift, no concern of faith or love or delight is left unaddressed — all are presented to the soul, and it is stirred to exercise them rightly. This is therefore one of the purposes for which the gift is to be used: as a means of stirring up and actively engaging those graces and holy affections whose working and exercise constitute the life and power of prayer. Second, although the exercise of the gift itself ought to be nothing other than the way those graces express themselves toward God in this duty — for words are given only to clothe and express gracious desires, and when words outrun those desires entirely they are of no value — yet as the gift enables the mind to grasp and engage with the things about which those graces and gracious desires are to be exercised, so in the act of expressing them they are quickened and drawn more deeply into those things. For just as a person who has heard of a pitiful object is moved with compassion, but when he actually sees it his own eyes affect his heart — as the prophet says (Lamentations 3:17) — and his compassion is actually stirred and increased; so, even though a person already has a mental grasp of the things of prayer and is affected by them, his own words will also affect his heart, and by this reflection will stir up and inflame spiritual affections. In this way many people, even in private prayer, find benefit in the use of their own gift beyond what they can attain in purely mental prayer — which must be addressed separately.

Furthermore, this gift also has regard to others and is to be used for their benefit. Since it is appointed by God to be exercised in households, church assemblies, and occasional gatherings for

the good of any who are present, it is designed for their edification and profit. For the gift includes the ability to express the needs, desires, and prayers of others. And since this discharge of the duty falls in a particular way on gospel ministers, as well as on heads of households and others as they are occasionally called to it, they are to attend to four directions. First, they are to draw on their own experience. If such persons are themselves believers, they have experienced in their own souls all the general concerns of others in the same condition. As sin works in one, so it works in another. As grace is effective in one, so it is in another. As the one who prays longs for mercy and grace, so do those who join with him. Their hatred of sin, their love of Christ, their striving after holiness and conformity to God's will — these are the same in kind as those of every other believer. This is why, when someone prays in the Spirit according to their own experience, every person in the congregation often supposes the prayer to be expressing their own condition rather than the one who is praying. And so it will be as long as the same corruption in kind and the same grace in kind, with the same kinds of workings, are present in all of them. But this does not extend to particular sins and temptations, which are left for each person to deal with between themselves and God alone.

Second, they are to draw on Scripture's light. Scripture vividly expresses the spiritual state and condition of all kinds of persons — both those who are unconverted and those who have been brought to God. Whatever it says concerning either group may safely be pleaded with God on their behalf. From Scripture, therefore, an abundance of material for prayer on every occasion may be drawn. This is especially true in a particular way from the holy summary of the church's desires to God given to us in the Lord's

Prayer. Everything we can rightly understand, spiritually grasp, and draw out of that mine and heavenly treasury of prayer may safely be used in the name and on behalf of the whole church of God. But without understanding what is intended, the use of the words profits nothing.

Third, they are to draw on observation of the ways and walk of those they pray for, along with whatever they can visibly discern of their condition and temptations. The person who is constantly to serve as the mouth of others before God is not to pray aimlessly, as though all persons and conditions were the same to him. No one is regularly called to pray for others by virtue of a particular duty without also being called to watch over them and observe their ways. In doing so he may know things about their condition that can greatly guide his supplications with them and for them. Without this, no one can ever discharge this duty rightly on behalf of others in such a way that they find their own particular concerns addressed in it. And if a minister is obligated to consider the ways, understanding, knowledge, and walk of his flock in his preaching so that what he teaches is fitted to their edification, he is no less bound to the same consideration in his prayers with them and for them, if he intends those prayers to be useful and beneficial. The same applies to others in their respective roles. The wisdom and caution required in this are too extensive to go into here.

Fourth, they are to draw on the account given to them by those they pray for, concerning their needs, their state, and their condition. In some cases people are obligated to give such an account to those whose duty it is to help them through prayer (James 5:16). And if this duty were more consistently practiced, many minds might receive extraordinary relief through it.

Sixth, we must take care, first, that this gift not be isolated — that is, present without saving grace — and second, that it not be exercised in isolation from grace at any time. When the gift is isolated — when the gift of prayer is in the mind but there is no grace to exercise in prayer in the heart — it is at best only part of that outward form of godliness that people may have while denying its power, and is therefore consistent with all manner of secret lusts and abominations. It would be easy to show that whatever benefit others may receive from this gift in those who lack saving grace, those people themselves are in many ways harmed by it. For it lifts them up with spiritual pride — the ordinary consequence of all un-sanctified light — and they use it to justify themselves against the accusations of their consciences about other sins, resting in and pleasing themselves with their own performances. But in all my observation, of all the spiritual gifts that may for a time be given to un-sanctified minds, this one decays and withers the soonest. Whether God takes it away judicially, or whether such people are themselves unable to sustain its exercise because it is directly contrary to the lusts they indulge — for the most part it decays quickly and visibly, especially in those whose continued possession of it, in the face of open sin and apostasy, might become a source of danger or stumbling to others. Second, let this gift not be exercised in isolation from grace. People who have a principle of spiritual life and grace, and who are endowed with those graces of the Spirit that ought to be active in all our supplications, may still neglect to stir those graces up and engage them even while using and exercising this gift. And there is no greater evidence of a weak, sickly spiritual condition than to be frequently caught in this failure. This happens when people in prayer engage only their understanding,

creativity, memory, and eloquence without any particular exercise of faith and delight in God. The person who watches his soul and its workings can easily discern when he is sinfully negligent in this matter, or when outward circumstances and occasions have caused him to attend more to the gift than to grace in prayer — for which he should be humbled. These are the things I thought it fitting to add concerning the proper use and improvement of this gift of the Spirit of God.

CHAPTER 10



On mental prayer as taught by some in the Church of Rome. Having described the gift of prayer, its use in the church of God, and the nature of the Spirit's work in it, it will now be necessary to briefly consider what some have put forward as a more excellent way of prayer in competition with it. First among these is mental prayer, as described by certain devout persons in the Church of Rome, who prefer it above all other forms. They call it pure spiritual prayer, or a quiet rest of contemplation — one that excludes all images of the imagination and, in time, all perceptible movements of the understanding, and is exercised in simple elevations of the will without any effort at all, yet with remarkable effectiveness. To prepare the soul for such prayer, a complete calm and even death of the passions is said to be required first, along with perfect purity in the spiritual affections of the will and a complete detachment from all created things (Cressy, *Church History*, Preface, paragraphs 42-43).

First, the truth is that I am so deeply opposed to the merely external, formal practice of reading or singing prayers in use in the Roman Church — which, whatever its reputation as a seemingly sort of conversation with God, is in fact accompanied by the greatest

contempt of His infinite purity and all divine excellencies — and I so much more abhor the near-magical incantation many among them use when repeating words they do not understand, or applying what they repeat to some end entirely different from what the words mean (such as saying so many prayers for a given purpose when the prayers themselves contain not a single word about it) — that I would welcome any genuine search for real inward communion of soul with God in this duty. But in this pursuit, people must be careful about two things. First, they must assert only what they have some actual experience of, not what they can merely imagine. For people to speculate about what others experience — which is all they can do — and from that to form rules and examples of duty is always risky and may prove harmful to those who follow such guidance. On this point the author under discussion fails, offering nothing but his own imaginings of others' supposed experience. Second, what they claim to have experienced must be confirmable by Scripture rule or example. If it is not, we are left with no guide other than the unbounded imaginations of anyone who claims spiritual experience. Follow these rules, and I will acknowledge in prayer every way the soul and its faculties can rationally direct themselves toward God in a holy and spiritual manner. But if you extend prayer to kinds of action that our nature is not capable of — at least not in this life — it is the plain product of a deceived imagination, and it casts just suspicion on everything else offered from the same source. Such is the claim that this prayer operates in the will and its affections without any movement of the mind or understanding. I grant that the clinging of the will and affections to God through love, delight, contentment, rest, and satisfaction in prayer belongs to the fullness of this duty. But to imagine that

these are not guided, directed, and moved by the understanding in its contemplation of God's goodness, beauty, grace, and other divine excellencies is to make our worship and devotion irrational and brutish — whereas it is and ought to be our reasonable service.

That this very description of prayer is a mere product of fancy and imagination — not something the author arrived at through the guidance of spiritual light and experience — is evident from the fact that it is borrowed from those contemplative philosophers who, after the Gospel spread through the world, sought to refine and elevate paganism into agreement with it, or at least is imagined in imitation of what they ascribed to a perfected mind. One of them will serve as an example, and a single passage will suffice. Plotinus, in the *Enneads*, Book 6, chapter 9, section 10, writes: after many other descriptions of a soul that has attained union with the highest Good, he adds that a mind thus elevated is in no way moved; there is no anger in it, no desire for anything — a perfect rest of the affections. Nor is reason or understanding at work; and if I may say so, not even the self. Being transported and filled with God, it enters a quiet, still, and unmovable repose, declining by no perceptible movement from its own essence, exercising no reflective act upon itself, wholly at rest, as having attained a perfect state — to this effect, with much more to the same purpose. The substance of our author's idea is easily found in these words, and the reader may see it more fully laid out in the final chapter of Plotinus's *Enneads*. And all his companions of that school at the time speak to the same end.

Second, the intense spiritual fixing of the mind through contemplation on God in Christ — until the soul is, as it were, overwhelmed in wonder and delight, brought to a kind of bewilder-

ment by the boundlessness of the excellencies it admires and adores, only to return to a deep sense of its own lowliness in view of its infinite distance from what it would wholly and eternally embrace — together with all the inexpressible rest and satisfaction the will and affections receive as they approach the eternal fountain of goodness: these are things to be aimed at in prayer, and through the riches of God's condescension, they are frequently enjoyed. The soul is thereby lifted and ravished — not into trances or unaccountable raptures, not moved by powers beyond its own understanding and will — but through the effective workings of the Spirit of grace and the living impressions of divine love, with a sense of God's relationship and kindness, all its faculties and affections are filled with rest, 'with joy inexpressible and full of glory.' These spiritual acts of communion with God — of which I may say with Bernard, 'rare is the hour, brief the stay' — may be enjoyed equally in mental or vocal prayer. But the description given here of mental spiritual prayer has no support from Scripture. In fact, things are said of it that are expressly contrary to Scripture, such as the requirement of perfect purity. It cannot be confirmed by the rational experience of any person, and it in no way removes the necessity and usefulness of vocal prayer, which it is set in opposition to. For the use of words remains necessary in this duty from the very nature of the duty, the command of God, and the edification of the church. And it has unfortunately happened for those who exalt the supposed excellence of this mental prayer that our Lord Jesus Christ not only taught His disciples to pray using words but did so Himself — consistently, as far as we know (Matthew 26:39, 42). Indeed, when He was most intensely engaged in this duty, instead of the stillness and contemplation being advocated, He

prayed with a loud cry (Hebrews 5), which Psalm 22 calls 'the voice of His roaring.' All the reproaches this author levels against fervent, earnest vocal prayer — calling it tedious, loud, impetuous, and an uncivil conversation with God, a mere artificial ease and technique — can with equal justice be directed at the outward manner in which our Lord Jesus Christ prayed, which was often long, sometimes loud and intense. And to the examples of their Lord and Master we may add the prophets and apostles, who mention nothing of this supposed elevation, but consistently made use of their voices and asked God to hear their cry and words in their supplications — the words of many of them having been recorded for us accordingly. Words that are fitting, prompted by the Spirit of God, and drawn directly or analogically from Scripture, help the mind and expand it in supplication. As Augustine wrote to Proba: 'Sometimes we arouse ourselves to devotion more powerfully by the use of our own voice.' The use of such words — first led to by the desires of the mind — may and does lead the mind on to express further desires, and increases those already expressed. It is from God's institution and blessing that the mind and will in prayer lead to the words of prayer, and the words of prayer lead the mind and will forward, expanding them in desires and supplications. Without this aid, many would often be cramped in directing their thoughts and affections toward God, or would become distracted or diverted from them. And we have experience that an obedient, holy persistence in the use of gracious words in prayer has prevailed against violent temptations and assaults of Satan that the mind in its silent contemplation was not able to resist. Holy affections are also stirred up in this way. The very words and expressions the mind chooses to declare its thoughts, conceptions,

and desires about heavenly things reflect back on the affections, increasing and awakening them. It is not only the things themselves that move the heart, but also the words of wisdom and sobriety by which they are expressed. There is a kind of rebound of power, if I may put it that way, in the deep impression on the affections made by the very words used to express those affections. But we are speaking of prayer chiefly as it is to be performed in households, societies, assemblies, and congregations — settings where mental prayer would promote roughly the same kind of edification as the silent meetings of the Quakers.

Because this so-called prayer is not only commended to us but is preferred above all other ways and methods of prayer — and is held up as a showcase of Roman Catholic devotion to attract others to it — I will examine it a little more carefully. On the best examination I can make of it, it appears to be altogether useless, uncertain, a product of and entertainment for idle curiosity — by which people intrude themselves into things they have never seen, inflated by their own imagination. For in practical matters of religion, no one can understand anything of which he has no experience. By this rule, nothing is rightly dismissed merely because some people, through their own failure, lack experience of it — but anything of which no person pursuing his duty can attain any experience is rightly set aside. Anyone who speaks of such things to others — if any such things belonging to our condition in this world could even exist — must be unintelligible to them. And since he also speaks of things in which his own reason and understanding have no share, he must be unintelligible to himself as well. For no person, however advanced in spiritual light, can understand by reason such acts of the soul — in himself or in others — as involve

no exercise of reason or understanding, which is what these supposed trances are claimed to consist in. So when one of them says, 'the ground of my soul touches the ground of God's essence,' it would certainly have been better for him to keep his fancy to himself than to express himself in words which, taken at their plain meaning, are blasphemous, and whose best defense is that they are unintelligible. And whether or not it is unlawful, it is certainly unwise for anyone in religious matters to utter what it is impossible for anyone else to understand — with the only defense being that they do not understand it themselves, since they received it without any exercise of their own understanding. To tolerate such claims is the ready path to introducing confusion into the church and exposing religion to contempt. I have known some among us who claimed such trances, and for a time they stirred up the admiration of weak and credulous people — but through a little observation of what they did, said, and claimed, and through testing it all by the unfailing rule of Scripture, they quickly fell into contempt. All I intend at present is this: whatever may be said for this claim, it is entirely useless for edification and its promotion therefore deserves no place in the church of God. If the apostle would not permit the use of words that were miraculously given to those who spoke them, without an immediate interpretation of their meaning, what would he have said about words and experiences incapable of any interpretation that any living person could understand? For those who currently praise and commend these things to us speak aimlessly — like blind men describing colors — for they do not claim to have any personal experience of these things themselves. And it is a rather strange approach to enhancing the appeal of their church and inviting others to join it, by claiming that there

are some among them who enjoyed spiritual ecstasies that neither they themselves nor anyone else could understand. For nothing can be genuine where there is no exercise of reason or understanding. Therefore the old question — what good is it? — is enough to dismiss this claim from serious consideration by thoughtful people in religious matters.

Furthermore, just as this whole kind of prayer is useless for the benefit and edification of the church or any of its members, so there can never be any certainty about the trances in which it is claimed to consist. They must forever remain a matter of controversy and dispute. For who can assure me that those claiming these experiences are not simply pretending? Anyone alive, if he chooses to, can say such things or use such language about himself. If someone claims and declares that he does or enjoys what the word of God sets forth as a duty or privilege for believers — things acknowledged by all to be real and genuinely attainable — he is ordinarily to be believed in his claim, unless he can be shown to be lying by something inconsistent with such duties or privileges. Nor do I see any great harm in our believing him, even if we happen to be mistaken about the person, since he is speaking of nothing more than what everyone acknowledges to be their duty to pursue. But when someone claims spiritual experiences and enjoyments that are neither prescribed nor promised in Scripture, nor can be examined by the light of reason, no one is obligated to believe them on that bare claim alone. And no one can predict what harm his doing so might produce. For when people once leave the solid ground of Scripture and their own understanding, setting themselves adrift on the uncertain waters of fancy and conjecture, they do not know how they may be tossed or where they may be

driven. If it is argued that the holiness and integrity of those who claim these special privileges is sufficient reason to believe them, I answer: it would be in good measure, if they did not claim things contrary to reason and unsupported by Scripture — which is enough to undermine the credibility of any person's integrity. Nor can their holiness and integrity be shown to be so perfect as to make them entirely impervious to all temptation, which was the prerogative of Christ alone. Nor is there any more force in this argument than what reduces to the claim that there are no hypocrites in the world who could escape people's detection. For if such there may be, some of these claimants might be among their number, despite their apparent holiness and integrity. Besides, if the holiness of the best of them were examined by the standard of the Gospel, perhaps it would be so far from lending credibility to other claims that it would not be able to defend its own reputation. And it is not lack of charity that makes people doubtful and skeptical in such cases. It is that godly caution and Christian wisdom which require them to take care not to be deceived or deluded — and these not only justify them in staying on guard but make it their necessary duty. For it is nothing new that claims of trances, ecstasies, revelations, and extraordinary experiences of God should be put to corrupt ends, indeed abused to the worst imaginable purposes. The history of the church — both under the Old Testament and the New — testifies to this, as Peter declares (2 Peter 2:1). Among the people of old, there were multitudes falsely claiming visions, dreams, revelations, and spiritual ecstasies. Some of them wore rough garments to deceive — which never traveled alone but was accompanied by all such outward austerities as might create an impression of holiness and integrity. When the

general population had grown corrupt and superstitious, these men carried more credibility with the people than the true prophets of God, and yet they mostly showed themselves to be hypocritical liars. We are abundantly warned in the New Testament about such spirits, and foretold that there would be those by whom many would be deceived. And we are commanded to test all such claimants to extraordinary communion with God by the unfailing rule of the word — and we ask for nothing but the freedom to do so.

But suppose that those who assert these devotional experiences of God are not intentional frauds — that they are not trying to deceive, but are genuinely persuaded of the reality of what they try to describe. Even this gives us not the slightest assurance that they are telling the truth. For it is well known that there are many ways — some natural, some diabolical — by which people's imaginations can become so gripped by false images and perceptions of things, and with such force as to give them complete confidence in their reality, that no assurance can be drawn from a person's apparent sincerity. And there are so many ways by which people are disposed to such states and experiences, or are made vulnerable to such delusions — especially where they are prompted by superstition and doctrinally encouraged to expect such experiences — that it is a far greater wonder that more people have not fallen into the same extremes than that any have done so. Experience shows that some people's imaginations have been so fixed on evil and harmful things by satanic delusion that they have confessed crimes against themselves that made them liable to capital punishment, crimes of which they were never actually guilty. Therefore, since these claimed acts and experiences of devotion are said to involve no

perceptible movement of mind or understanding, and so cannot be rationally accounted for or made intelligible to anyone else, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are nothing but foolish imaginations of deluded minds — which superstitious and credulous people have gradually worked themselves up to, or to which they have made themselves vulnerable through a baseless, unwarranted desire for or expectation of them.

But whatever may be said for this so-called contemplative prayer at its highest, it neither is prayer nor can rightly be called prayer. We have already said that we allow mental prayer and all exercises of the mind in holy meditation. Nor do we deny the usefulness or necessity of those other things — the mortifying of the affections and passions, the entire yielding of the whole soul to God with delight in Him — so far as our nature is capable of them in this life. But it is the supposed incomparable excellence of this form, in the silence of the soul and the pure adherence of the will apart from any movement of the understanding, that we are examining. Whatever else may be found in it, it does not have the nature of prayer and is not to be regarded as such, even though it is recommended to us under that name. Prayer is a natural duty, and the basic understanding of it is common to all mankind. The universal voice of human nature does not deceive. Whatever is not consistent with it — and especially what directly contradicts it — is not to be counted as prayer. In the common understanding of all people, this duty consists in the soul's engagement with God wherein, from an acknowledgment of His sovereign being, self-sufficiency, rule, and dominion, along with His infinite goodness, wisdom, power, righteousness, omniscience, and omnipresence, and from a sense of their own total dependence on Him — on His will

and pleasure — for their existence, life, happiness, and all their concerns, people address their desires in faith and trust to Him according to their state and condition, or ascribe praise and glory to Him for what He is in Himself and what He is to them. This is the general concept of prayer that all human reason converges on, and no one can conceive of it under any other description. The Gospel directs the performance of this duty in an acceptable way with respect to the mediation of Christ, the aid of the Holy Spirit, and the revelation of the spiritual mercies we all desire — but it does not change the general nature of prayer. The Gospel does not introduce a duty of a completely different kind and call it by the name of something already known by the light of nature, as though it were something entirely different. But all people, in whom the first innate principles of natural light have not been extinguished or severely corrupted, understand well enough this general nature of prayer. This can happen among some through long familiarity with an atheistic and brutish way of life. But as broad and extensive as are people's convictions about the existence and being of God, so are their instincts about the nature of this duty. For the first natural movement of a person toward a divine being is invocation. Jonah's sailors knew how, each man, to call on his god when they were in the storm. And where there is no trust or confidence in God — by which people glorify Him as God — and where desires or praise are not offered to Him, neither of which can occur without the explicit action of mind and understanding, there is no prayer, whatever else there may be. Therefore this contemplative devotion, in which — as it is claimed — the soul is swept up into an advance of the will and affections above all movement of the mind or understanding, has not a single feature of prayer as the nature of it

is revealed by the light of nature and the universal agreement of mankind. Prayer without an actual acknowledgment of God in all His holy excellencies, and without the exercise of faith in fear, love, confidence, and gratitude, is a monster of nature or a product of imagination that has no real existence. These people had better find some other name to recommend this kind of devotion to our admiration — for from the whole domain of prayer and calling on the name of God, it is completely excluded. What place it may have in any other aspect of the worship of God we will inquire into immediately.

But this evaluation of mental prayer by the light of nature will be seen as absurd and beside the point. For if we must test all matters of spiritual communion with God — including those that wholly depend on divine supernatural revelation — by the light of nature, our measurements will be false and distorted. And I say, without doubt they would be. Therefore we are bringing to this test only that aspect of prayer whose true meaning is acknowledged to be fixed in the light of nature. Without extending that standard beyond its proper limits, we may by it take an accurate measure of what is prayer and what is not — for in this area it cannot deceive or be deceived. This is all we are engaging with at present. And in the same line of inquiry we may also bring it to the test of Scripture, where it will be found just as foreign as it is to the light of nature. For as this prayer is described, so far as anything intelligible can be drawn from the description, it surpasses or departs from everything Scripture says about prayer — even in those passages where its grace and privileges are most emphatically expressed, and as exemplified in the prayers of the Lord Christ Himself and all the saints recorded in it. Therefore the light of na-

ture and Scripture together, by common agreement, exclude this practice from being prayer in any form. Prayer as Scripture presents it is the soul's access and approach to God through Jesus Christ by the aid of His Holy Spirit, to make its requests known to Him with supplication and thanksgiving. And what recommends prayer to us consists in its outward characteristics and its inward grace and power. Of the first kind, earnestness, fervency, persistence, constancy, and perseverance are the principal ones. No person can attend to these, or any of them, in a dutiful way except through the exercise of his mind and understanding. Without this, whatever resembles any of these is nothing but brutish intensity or stubbornness.

As for the inward form of prayer, as Scripture describes it, it consists in the specific exercise of faith, love, delight, fear, and all the graces of the Spirit as the occasion requires. And in that exercise of these graces — in which the life and being of prayer consists — a continual regard is to be had to the mediation of Christ and the free promises of God, through which He presents Himself to us as a God who hears prayer. All of these things are plainly and frequently mentioned in Scripture, and all are exemplified in the recorded prayers of the holy persons found there. But for this contemplative prayer as described by our author and others, there is neither command for it, nor direction about it, nor motivation toward it, nor example of it anywhere in the whole of Scripture. And it cannot but seem remarkable to thoughtful people that whereas this duty of prayer and all its aspects are more extensively treated in Scripture than any other Christian duty or privilege, this supposedly supreme form of it — in comparison with which all other

kinds of prayer and all movements of the mind and soul in prayer are dismissed as inferior — should not receive even the slightest hint of mention anywhere in Scripture.

Indeed, if we look at all the specific passages in which the nature and excellence of this duty are described, together with the grace and privilege that accompany it — such as Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Hebrews 4:16, and Hebrews 10:19-22 — there is nothing that is compatible with this contemplative prayer. Neither in the prayers of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor those of His apostles, nor those of any holy person from the beginning of the world — whether for themselves or for the whole church — is there anything that gives the least support to it. Nor can anyone explain what the work of the Holy Spirit in this kind of prayer would be, as He is the Spirit of grace and supplication — nor is any gift of His mentioned in Scripture that could have even the smallest role in it. In no sense, therefore, can it be that praying in the Holy Spirit which is commanded of us. There is therefore no example set before us for imitation, no goal marked out, and no guidance given for attaining this supposedly supreme excellence and perfection. Whatever is imagined or said about it, it is utterly foreign to Scripture and must owe itself to the deluded imagination of a few individuals.

Furthermore, Scripture does not present any other kind of access to God under the New Testament, nor any nearer approach to Him, than what we have in and through the mediation of Christ and by faith in Him. But in this claim there seems to be aimed at such an immediate enjoyment of God in His essence as is independent of Christ and leaves Him entirely behind. Yet God will not be all in all immediately to the church until the Lord Christ has fully

delivered up the mediatorial kingdom to Him. And indeed the complete silence about Christ throughout everything attributed to this contemplative prayer — or rather, the exclusion of Him from any role in it as Mediator — is sufficient for any thoughtful person to demonstrate that it has not the slightest connection to the duty of prayer in either name or reality.

Nor does this notion belong any more rightly to any other aspect or exercise of faith in this life — and yet in this life we universally walk by faith, not by sight. Everything belonging to it may be reduced to two heads: what we do toward God and what we enjoy of God in it. As for the first: all the soul's actings toward God belong to our reasonable service (Romans 12:1). Nothing more is required of us in the way of duty. But what our minds and understandings have no part in is no part of our reasonable service. Nor is it any part of our enjoyment of God in this life. For no such thing is promised to us anywhere, and it is by the promises alone that we share in the divine nature or receive anything communicated to us from God. It seems, therefore, that there is nothing in the grandeur of these inflated expressions but an attempt to imagine something above every attainment possible in this life — while falling immeasurably short of the glories of the life to come. It is a kind of purgatory of devotion — somewhere outside this world and not yet in the next, above the earth and beneath heaven — where we may leave it in clouds and darkness.

CHAPTER 11



Prescribed forms of prayer examined.

There are also strong arguments made for the use of prescribed and fixed forms of prayer, in opposition to the spiritual ability in prayer that we have described and shown to be a gift of the Holy Spirit. Where these forms are contended for by people with respect only to their own use and practice — as suited to their experience and as their best way of serving God — I will take no notice of them nor of any disagreement about them. But since a conviction not merely of their lawfulness but of their necessity in being used toward other ends and purposes — in ways that significantly affect the peace and edification of believers — it is necessary that we examine the matter. I say it is only with respect to that understanding of their nature and the necessity of their use, which provides grounds or supposed justification for people to oppose, deny, and speak against the way of prayer and its causes and ends that we have described — it is only in that sense that we will consider these forms of prayer and their use. For I know well enough that it is not my place to judge or condemn the persons or acts of religious worship of those who choose a form as their best and hope to be accepted in it — unless it is expressly idolatrous. For short of such cases — or similar ones that are plainly condemned

by either the light of nature or Scripture — it is a foolish notion, tending toward atheism, that God does not require all people to regulate their approach to Him according to the ruling light He has placed within their own minds.

What these forms are, how they are composed, how used, and how in some cases imposed, are things so widely known that there is no need to describe them. Prayer is God's institution; the reading of these forms is what people have made and set up in its likeness, or in compliance with it. For it is said that since the Lord Christ has provided the matter of prayer and commanded us to pray, it is left to us or others to compose prayers as to the manner of it, as we see fit. But besides the fact that this inference is clearly unfounded — indeed, the opposite conclusion actually follows from the premise — it rests on the assumption that beyond providing the matter of prayer and commanding the duty, the Lord Christ has not also promised to communicate to His church such spiritual aids and assistance as will enable them, without any other outward so-called helps, to pray according to God's mind. This we cannot admit if we intend to be Christians. Similarly, He has provided the whole subject matter of preaching and commanded all His ministers to preach. But it does not follow from this that they may all compose one sermon and read it constantly in every Christian assembly without variation — unless we also grant that He has ceased to give gifts to people for the work of the ministry. Our inquiry therefore will be: what place or use these forms may have in our duty as performed by the grace described — which may be stated in the following observations.

First, the Holy Spirit, as a Spirit of grace and supplication, is nowhere — as far as I know — promised to anyone to help or assist them in composing prayers for others. We therefore have no grounds to pray for Him or His assistance for that particular end, nor any foundation for faith or expectation of receiving Him for it. Therefore, He is not involved in that work or endeavor in any special or gracious way. Whether this falls under His care as One who generally gives gifts for the edification of the church will be examined later. What we are contending at present is that He is nowhere particularly promised for that end, and we have neither command nor direction to seek His assistance in it. If someone says He is promised for this purpose wherever He is promised as a Spirit of grace and supplication, I answer — beyond what has already been argued at length in explaining and defending the proper meaning of that promise — that He is promised directly to those who are to pray, not to those who compose prayers for others, which those same people would not themselves call praying. But assuming it is in general a duty to compose prayers for one's own use or the use of others, it is lawful and proper to pray for the Holy Spirit's aid and guidance in doing so — not as relating to His particular assistance in prayer, not as He is to believers a Spirit of supplication, but as He is our sanctifier, the author and effective cause of every gracious work and duty in us.

Perhaps the prayers composed by certain holy men under the Old Testament by the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit for the use of the church will also be appealed to. But the inspiration or assistance they had in that work was of an entirely different kind from anything ordinarily promised or anything anyone can now

claim. Furthermore, whether those prayers were dictated to them by the Holy Spirit to be used afterward by others as mere fixed forms of prayer may be further inquired into.

One consideration entirely removes the main argument for some of these external prayer aids. It is said that some of these prayers were composed by great and holy men — some of them perhaps martyrs for the truth of the Gospel and the testimony of Jesus. And indeed, if any men in the world had a promise of particular assistance from the Spirit of God in such work, I would not dispute that the persons in question were as likely to share in that assistance as any others in these later ages. But they did not have extraordinary supernatural inspiration. And the holy apostles, who were always under its influence and guidance, never used it for any such purpose as prescribing forms of prayer for the whole church or for individual persons. Therefore, since no such particular promise is given to anyone, the work of composing prayers stands apart from the duty of prayer as far as any share in the gracious assistance promised for prayer is concerned — however much it may be a general duty and fall under God's help and blessing in a general way. So some people — through their familiarity with the matter of prayer above others, attained through spiritual light, knowledge, and experience, and through their understanding of the arguments Scripture directs us to use and plead in our supplications — may write out and express a prayer, that is, the substance and outward form of it, that presents the things to be prayed for in a way far better suited to the conditions, needs, and desires of Christians than those who have not been so clearly enlightened and have not had the same experience could produce. For those prayers, as they are called, which people without such light and ex-

perience compose by collecting phrases and expressions from others — drawn from Scripture or invented by themselves — and arranging them into a structure they suppose suited to prayer in general: however well-worded, however polished and elegant in expression, they are so hollow and thin that they can be of no real use to anyone, except to keep them from ever truly praying. We have plenty of books filled with such compositions, easily produced by those who have never in their lives prayed according to the mind of God. From the better kind of compositions — those by people of genuine light and experience — much may be learned, since they set out doctrinally the substance and arguments of prayer. But the composing of them for others to use as their own prayers is something for which no one has any promise of particular spiritual assistance with respect to prayer in particular.

Second, no one has any promise of the Spirit of grace and supplication to enable him to compose a form or forms of prayer for himself. The Spirit of God helps us to pray — not to write prayers in that sense. Suppose that in composing such prayers, as before, people may have His assistance in general, as in other studies and endeavors — yet they do not have that particular assistance He gives as a Spirit of grace and supplication, enabling us to cry 'Abba, Father.' For people do not compose forms of prayer — however they may use them — through the immediate exercise of faith, love, and delight in God, along with those other graces that He stirs up and activates in supplications that are according to God's will. Nor is God the immediate object of the soul's faculties at work in such a task. Their creativity, memory, and judgment are immediately focused on the composition before them, and there they rest. Therefore, since the direct exercise of grace toward God in

Christ — under the proper character of prayer — is no part of a person's work or aim when composing and writing out forms for themselves or others, if anyone does so they are not under a promise of particular assistance in the manner previously described.

Third, just as no assistance is promised for the composition of such forms, so this practice is not an institution of the law or the Gospel. Prayer itself is a duty of natural law, and being of such singular and indispensable importance to all persons, the commands for it in Scripture are more numerous than those for any other single duty. And since prayer has reference to Jesus Christ and to several ordinances of the Gospel to be performed in His name, it falls under a new divine institution. Commands are therefore given to pray, to pray continually without ceasing, to pray and not give up, to pray for ourselves, to pray for one another — in private, in our households, in the assemblies of the church. But as for the making and composing of forms of prayer for ourselves to use as prayers — there is no command, no institution, no mention of this anywhere in the Scriptures of the Old Testament or the New. It is a work of human origin and invention, and nothing can be expected from it except what flows from that source. There may possibly be a blessing on it, but not one that flows from the Spirit of God's particular assistance in it, nor from any divine appointment or institution. But the reader should note that I am not urging these things to prove that the use of set forms of prayer is unlawful — I am only at this point describing their nature and origin with respect to the work of the Holy Spirit as we have described it.

Fourth, since this is the origin of set forms of prayer, the benefit and advantage of their use — which is the only thing that can be argued in their favor — comes next under consideration. This may

be examined with respect to two kinds of people: first, those who have the gift or ability of free prayer given to them or who have attained it; and second, those who are limited and weak in this ability and therefore unable to perform this duty without that aid and assistance. Set forms of prayer are argued to be of use and benefit to both kinds.

First, it is argued that there is so much good and benefit in the use of set forms that even those who can pray otherwise, to their own and others' edification, ought sometimes to use them. What exactly this benefit is has not been clearly stated, and I do not know and cannot imagine what it would consist of. Sacred things are not to be used merely to demonstrate our freedom. And there appears to be in this a neglect of stirring up the gift — if not also the grace of God — in those who have received them. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. To forgo exercising it on any proper occasion seems unjustifiable. We are bound at all times in the worship of God to serve Him with the best we have. And if we have a fine animal in the flock and sacrifice something that by comparison is defective, we are deceivers. Free prayer — for those who have the ability for it — is more consistent with the nature of the duty in the light of nature itself, and with scriptural commands and examples, than the use of any prescribed form. To leave aside the exercise of a spiritual ability in this and voluntarily turn to another substitute — which is in any case no real aid — does not readily present any benefit to careful reflection. And the reader should note that I am not at present examining what people or churches may agree upon by common con-

sent, judging it best for their own edification — that is a different matter. I am speaking only of the duty of believers as such in their respective stations and conditions.

Second, it is generally assumed that the use of such forms is of special benefit to those who are limited and weak in their ability to pray on their own. I put it this way because I cannot grant that anyone who sincerely believes there is a God, is aware of his own needs and absolute dependence on Him, is utterly unable to make requests to God for help without any aid but what comes from the natural working of his own soul's faculties. What people willfully neglect is one thing; what they truly cannot do when they sincerely apply themselves to their duty is another. Nor do I believe that anyone who has been instructed enough in the knowledge of Christ through the Gospel to use a composed prayer with understanding is also unable in some measure to call on God in the name of Christ with regard to what he feels within himself and is concerned about — and beyond that, no one's prayers need to reach. I am therefore speaking of those who have the least and lowest degree of this ability, since no one is entirely without it. For this kind of person I do not know what use these forms are, unless it is to keep them limited and weak for the rest of their lives. For both in the state of nature and the state of grace — one of which every person is in — there are certain sparks suited to each condition, and the chief duty of all people is to stir them up and increase them. Even in the remnants of fallen human nature there are small heavenly sparks — an inner awareness of good and evil, accusations and defenses of conscience. No one will deny that these ought to be stirred up and increased, which can only be done through their diligent exercise. And there is no more effective way to exercise

them than when the soul applies itself to God with reference to them — which happens in prayer alone. But as for those whom we most have in view here — professing believers in Jesus Christ — there is not one of them who does not have principles of spiritual life, and through them principles of all obedience to God and communion with Him, which — when developed and exercised under the continual supplies of the Spirit they receive from Christ their Head — will enable them to discharge every duty required of them in every condition and relationship in an acceptable manner. Among these duties is the ability to pray. To deny that they have it, assuming they are true believers, is to directly contradict the apostle, who declares that because we are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, by which we cry 'Abba, Father.' But this ability, as I have shown, can only be developed through constant exercise. Whether the use of the forms under discussion — which certainly turns people away from exercising what ability they have — does not tend directly to keep them permanently limited and weak in their abilities is not hard to determine.

But suppose those we are speaking of are not yet true believers, but only those who profess the Gospel without being sincerely converted to God, whose duty it is also to pray on all occasions — these have no such principle or ability to develop, and so this advantage should not be neglected by them. I answer: the substance of all spiritual gifts is spiritual light. Therefore, according to their measure in the light of knowledge of the Gospel, such is their measure in spiritual gifts as well. If they have no spiritual light, no insight into the knowledge of the Gospel, prayers framed and composed

according to it will be of little use to them. If they have any such light, it ought to be developed through exercise in this duty, which is of such indispensable necessity to their souls.

Fifth, it is further argued that all kinds of people may benefit from having the matter of prayer prepared and presented to them. Those who have sincere desires to pray, and whose hearts will respond to what is set before them, may greatly lack this material. And this would carry significant weight as an argument, except that God has appointed other means to this same end — means that are sufficient for it under the guidance, direction, and assistance of the blessed Spirit, whose work must be acknowledged in every part of this duty, unless we intend to frame prayers that will be an abomination to the Lord. These means include: people's diligent and careful consideration of themselves, their spiritual state and condition, their needs and desires; diligent attention to Scripture or to the doctrine of it in the preaching of the word — by which they will be instructed in the whole matter of prayer and made aware of their own share in it — along with all other helps for coming to know God and themselves. All of these things must be attended to by those who intend to pray rightly. To supply people with prayers to be read by them, and so to satisfy their consciences while they live in neglect of these things, is to deceive them, not to help or instruct them. And if they do conscientiously attend to these things, they will have no need of those other so-called helps. For people to live in the world without once inquiring into their own ways, or reflecting on their own hearts — unless stirred by some accusation of conscience accompanied by fear or danger — never attempting to examine or compare their condition with Scripture, scarcely considering either their own needs or

God's promises, yet having a book ready from which they may read a prayer and thereby suppose they have discharged their duty: this is surely a way of life they ought not to be encouraged or confirmed in. Nor is the endless repetition of the same words and expressions suited to instruct or advance anyone in the knowledge of anything. It rather diverts the mind from proper consideration of the things intended, and therefore commonly ends in mere formality. And even where people have words and expressions prepared and presented to them that genuinely express the things they are concerned about, if the light and understanding of the underlying principles of truth — from which those expressions are derived and to which they point — is not in some measure settled and active in their minds, they cannot be greatly benefited or built up by repeating them.

Sixth, experience is also appealed to in this matter — and for me, where people are plainly sincere, experience carries more weight than a hundred theoretical arguments that cannot be put to that test. Some therefore say that in the use of such forms they have had spiritual benefit, the exercise of grace, and holy communion with God, and that their hearts have been warmed and significantly improved by them. They take this as clear evidence that these forms are not disapproved by God — indeed, that they are of great benefit, at least to many, in prayer. In answer: whether they are approved or disapproved by God, whether they are lawful or unlawful, is not what we are considering. We are asking only whether they are for spiritual benefit and advantage — for the good of souls and the edification of others — when set in competition with the exercise of the gift previously described. And in this I am

very reluctant to oppose the experience of anyone who seems to be walking in even the smallest ray of Gospel light. I will only ask them to consider a few things.

First, do they properly understand the difference between natural devotion occasionally stirred up, and the genuine exercise of evangelical faith and love, along with the other graces of the Spirit, in a way directed by divine appointment? All people who acknowledge a God or divine power they revere — when they seriously set themselves to perform some act of religious worship in their own way, whatever that may be — will find their affections moved and stirred in keeping with their conception of what they are worshipping, even if the particular object of worship has no existence beyond their own imagination. For these feelings follow from the general idea of a divine power, and not from the particular idols to which they are directed, which are in reality nothing at all. Such people will experience dread, reverence, and fear — as some among the pagans experienced unspeakable horror when they entered the temples and the merely imagined presence of their gods, the whole experience beginning and ending in their own minds. And sometimes great joy, satisfaction, and delight follow from what they do. For since what they do is suited to the best light they have, and people naturally take pleasure in their own inventions — as Micah did (Judges 17:13) — and since deep-seated prejudices guide most people in religion, their consciences find relief in the performance of their duty. These things, I say, are found in those who hold the highest and most dangerous forms of superstition in the world — heightened to inexpressible agitations of mind, with horror on one side and rapture or ecstasy on the other. They are all shaped and colored by the particular mode and manner of worship

people are engaged in, but in themselves they are all of the same nature — natural — being effects and impressions upon human nature. This is true of Muslims, who excel in such devotion, and it is true of idolatrous Christians who place the glory and excellence of their faith in the same kind of experience. Therefore such devotion and such emotions will be stirred by religious practices in all who are sincere in their observance, whether those practices are divinely appointed or not. But the exercise of faith and love toward God through Christ according to the Gospel — according to the terms of the new covenant — and the effects produced thereby in the heart and affections, are things of an entirely different kind and nature. Unless people know how to genuinely distinguish between these things, it is pointless to argue for spiritual benefit and advantage in the use of such forms, since what they experience may be nothing more than what all false worshippers in the world have or may have experience of.

Second, let them carefully inquire whether the effects on their hearts they are appealing to do not proceed from prior preparation, a good intention, and sincere purposes that have been occasionally stirred up. Suppose that those who use and argue for set forms of prayer — especially in public settings — properly prepare themselves for it through holy meditation, endeavoring to bring their souls into a holy frame of fear, delight, and reverence toward God. Suppose also that they have a good aim and purpose in the worship they are engaging in — namely, the glory of God and their own spiritual benefit. In that case, the prayers themselves — even if irregular in some respects — may give occasion to exercise those acts of grace for which they were otherwise already prepared. And I would add further:

Third, while these forms of prayer are clothed with the general character of prayer — that is, while they are regarded as prayer in the minds of those who use them, accompanied with the motivations and ends of prayer, expressing nothing unlawful to include in prayer, directing people's souls to none but the lawful objects of divine worship and prayer: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — and while people make use of them with the true intention of prayer, seeking the proper aid for prayer, I do not judge there is any such evil in them that God will communicate no grace to anyone in their use, so that they should have no holy communion with Him in and through them. Still less will I say that God therefore disregards their persons or rejects their praying as unlawful. For the persons and duties of people may be accepted by God when they walk and act in sincerity according to their light, even though in many things — and those of no small importance — various irregularities are found both in what they do and in the manner of doing it. Where people walk before God in integrity and practice nothing contrary to their light and conviction in His worship, God is merciful to them, even though they do not order everything according to the rule and measure of His word. So it was with those who came to the Passover in the days of Hezekiah — they had not cleansed themselves but ate the Passover contrary to what was prescribed (2 Chronicles 30:18). For them the godly king offered a solemn prayer suited to their situation: 'May the good Lord pardon everyone who prepares his heart to seek the Lord God of his fathers, even though not in accordance with the purification rules of the sanctuary.' And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people (2 Chronicles 30:18-20). Here was a duty appointed by God in its substance, but there was a failure in the manner of its perfor-

mance — they did not do it as it was written, which is the sole standard for all religious duties. God was displeased with this, yet He graciously passed over the offense and accepted those whose hearts were sincere in what they did. At the same time, I still judge that the use of set forms is in itself an obstacle to all the principal ends of prayer and sacred worship. Where they are used exclusively, they stand against the edification of the church, and where they are imposed to the complete exclusion of all other prayer, they are destructive of the church's freedom and render a significant part of what Christ purchased of no effect.

With matters thus stated, the question of whether the use of such forms of prayer is lawful will be raised. A brief answer will be given to this inquiry, and with it an end will be made to this discussion. I say the following.

First, to compose and write forms of prayer as directive and instructional helps to others — guiding them as to the matter and method to be used in rightly discharging this duty — is lawful and may in some cases be useful. It might be better, perhaps, if the same purpose were achieved in another way suited to giving guidance in the matter, rather than casting it in the form of a prayer, which tends to divert the mind from properly considering prayer's true end and purpose. But this kind of instruction is not to be considered unlawful simply because of the form and method in which it is presented, provided its true use alone is kept in view.

Second, to read, consider, and meditate on such written prayers with respect to the matter and arguments of prayer expressed in them — composed by people from their own experience and the light of Scripture's direction — or to make use of expressions found in them where the hearts of those reading them are

genuinely moved, because they find their state and condition, their needs and desires, expressed in them: this is not unlawful and may be of real benefit to some. I must honestly say I have never heard anyone express great benefit received in this way — but it is possible that some may. For no such freedom in prayer is being asserted as would make it unlawful for people to use any fitting means to help themselves pray better. Nor is any such ability in prayer claimed as would make it unnecessary to use means for its growth and improvement.

Third, to establish and prescribe the use of such forms universally, in opposition to and to the exclusion of free prayer by the aid of the Spirit of grace, is contrary not only to the many divine commands previously discussed, but to the light of nature itself — which requires every person to pray and in some circumstances compels them to do so. But whatever the practice of some people may be, I am not aware that anyone is actually arguing for such a position, and so I will not oppose it further.

Fourth, the question is not whether set forms of prayer — especially those designed and used for other ends and not to be read as substitutes for prayer — have anything intrinsically evil in their composition. It is granted that they do not. The question is whether, in their use as prayers, they are not hindrances to the right discharge of the duty of prayer according to God's mind, and whether they may therefore be unlawful in that respect. For I take it as established that they are nowhere appointed by God for such use and nowhere commanded to be used in that way — from which an argument against their having any place in acceptable divine worship could be formed, but this is not our present concern. For if, on the grounds already discussed, they do not appear contrary

to, inconsistent with, or used in a way that excludes the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer as we have described it from Scripture, and are not reducible to any divine prohibition — then while I may enjoy my own freedom in this matter, I will not quarrel with anyone about them. Nor will I now engage with the many arguments put forward in their favor, which some have greatly multiplied — to little advantage of their cause, I think. For in matters of religious practice, one clear scriptural testimony rightly explained and applied, with the experience of believers confirming it, carries more weight than a thousand uncertain arguments that cannot be traced back to those foundations. Therefore a few additional considerations will bring this discussion to a close.

First, some note that forms of prayer were composed and prescribed to be used in both the Old Testament and the New. Such, they say, was the form of blessing prescribed to the priests on solemn occasions (Numbers 6:24-26), the psalms of David, and the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament. First, if this is so, it proves that set forms of prayer are not intrinsically evil — which is granted. Yet their use may still be unnecessary. Second, the argument cannot be extended as far as it usually is. That God Himself prescribed certain forms of prayer to be used by certain persons on certain occasions does not therefore mean that human beings may invent — and even impose — forms for common and constant use. The God who forbade all images or their use in sacred things also appointed the making of the cherubim in the tabernacle and temple. Third, the argument from Old Testament practice in this matter — even if any argument could legitimately be drawn from it — has already been disproved, since it moves from a period when the people were immature and bound to outward ordinances to the

duty and practice of believers under the New Testament and a more plentiful outpouring of the Spirit. Fourth, the words prescribed to the priests were not properly a prayer but an authoritative benediction — an appointed sign of God's blessing on the people. As the explanation of that ordinance adds: 'So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them' (Numbers 6:27). Fifth, David's psalms were given by direct inspiration, were mostly symbolic and prophetic, and were appointed to be used in the church as all other Scripture is — some of them in a particular way, namely, by singing, with that manner also determined by divine appointment. Sixth, that any form of prayer is appointed in the New Testament to be used as a fixed form is neither granted nor can be proved. Seventh, produce prayers composed by divine inspiration with a command for their use, specifying the time, manner, and form of their use — which is what these examples would need to establish if they prove anything in this case — and there will be no argument about them. Eighth, each and every example of prayer we have in the whole of Scripture — by any of God's people, men or women — was suited to their present circumstances and offered in the freedom of their own spirit. Every one of these gives testimony to free prayer, if not against the use of fixed forms in this duty.

Second, it is observed that when anyone prays, his prayer is in effect a fixed form for all who join with him — whether in households or church assemblies. Some lay great weight on this, though I am unable to see its force in this case. First, the question is solely about the one who prays and his discharge of duty according to God's mind — not about those who join with him. Second, the joining of others with the one who prays according to his ability is an

express command of God. Third, those who join are free when it is their own duty to pray. Fourth, what is not a fixed form in itself is not a form to anyone. More is required to make it such than merely that the words and expressions were not invented on the spot by those who join. To those who join with someone praying according to his ability, it is the benefit of a gift given for their edification, being exercised in the present moment according to God's mind. Only what a person himself uses as a form is a form of prayer to him — for its nature depends on its use. Fifth, the argument is invalid: God has commanded some to pray according to the ability they have received, and others to join with them — therefore it is lawful to invent forms of prayer for ourselves or others to be used by them or us as prayers.

Third, what those who claim to take a moderate position on this matter argue is that prayer itself is a commanded duty, but praying by or with a prescribed form is only an outward circumstance and manner of it — one that is indifferent and may or may not be used as occasion calls for. If a general rule to this effect could be rightly established, it would be of great importance. But first, it is an easy thing to invent and prescribe outward forms and manners of outward worship that leave nothing of the commanded duty but the empty name. Second, praying before an image, or worshipping God or Christ by means of an image, is also merely an outward mode of worship — yet it is one that renders the whole act idolatrous. Third, any outward mode of worship whose observance is harmful to the proper performance of the duty it is attached to is inadvisable. How much this applies in the present case must be judged from the preceding discussion.

End.

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