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Theme and Variation: Prayer, Enstrom's Grace, and Calvin

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Theme and Variation: Prayer, Enstrom's Grace, and Calvin

Abstract

Schaap's journey to and exploration of what prayer means.

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Comments

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2014: AS WE SEE IT

Theme and Variation: Prayer, Enstrom's Grace, and Calvin

by Howard Schaap

When I was in my early teens, my dad announced rather formally that he would no longer be praying before our family meals. Considering that, breakfast aside, he had prayed at virtually every family meal of my life up to that point, this was a significant announcement. Prayer could become just a rote exercise, went his explanation, and he didn't want to fall into the trap of the Pharisee in the parable, praying empty words. This did not mean, he went on, that his prayer life didn't remain fervent in other settings nor that we as a family wouldn't pray before meals, just that the task would fall to Mom or me or to individualized silent prayers before meals.

As a kid this logic satisfied me entirely — in fact, I saw it as somewhat noble. Now, as a parent myself who prays at the dinner table and who continues to wrestle with what exactly the nature of prayer is, my dad's explanation continues to echo through my life.

A generation further back, my grandparents had a copy of the painting *Grace* by Eric Enstrom and Rhoda Nyberg hanging in their dining room. *Grace* was first a photo by Enstrom — popular enough to be named the state photo of Minnesota — and then a painting by Nyberg, Enstrom's daughter. In it, a bearded, white-haired man sits with forehead resting on folded hands before a simple meal and a mammoth book with spectacles folded upon it. At that stage in my life, *Grace* captured what prayer was exactly. It was what old men did at the table, with predictable if weighty words about God's provision; our unworthiness and sin; and requests on behalf of missionaries, the sick, and sometimes the poor. Essential, too, was the posture of the old man in the picture: sitting, elbows on the table, forehead rested on tightly folded hands, eyes shut tight. The position presumed control of the self, of prayer uttered from the darkness of a mind focused on one thing, which is no doubt why it was also a primary teaching tool of my second-grade teacher.

Leaving home, I found a great big world of prayer. In college, I was introduced to that great evangelical prayer word just. For a time I was fascinated with the idea that work could be prayer, which seemed to solve my problems with a sustained prayer life. In recent months, I've been part of an ecumenical group in which people like to use other people's prayers to pray. A respected mentor of mine had us write down phrases from a meditative book on writing and then let those words become the prayer. Just the other day I came across the epigraph in the Denise Levertov poem "Wondering," which reads, "The very act of lighting the candle is a prayer."

BACK TO CALVIN

I've found several of these ideas about prayer stretching. Also foreign. I still gravitate toward that old, white-bearded man, clichéd or not. Ecumenism often sends us back whence we've started with new eyes; in my case it drove me to the internet and John Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. To my delight, I found a whole manageable section on prayer — Book III, Chapter 20. In turning to the *Institutes*, I suppose, I expected to find Enstrom's old man at the table.

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I did. And I didn't.

A key feature in Calvin's section on prayer is the posture he calls for, one that is predictably "abased" yet, paradoxically, "animated." This posture is because of the natures of "repentance and faith" themselves, "the one causing terror, the other joy" (Section 11). By comparison, Enstrom's old man is relatively comfortable, if somewhat earnest, and somewhat humble. Physically, Calvin doesn't argue for folded hands and closed eyes but for raising one's hands in prayer. "The ceremony of lifting up our hands in prayer," writes Calvin, "is designed to remind us that we are far from God, unless our thoughts rise upward" (Section 5).

I also wasn't ready for Calvin's language in the *Institutes*, which is weighty yet unpredictable. Of the promised riches that can be accessed in prayer, Calvin writes how "the generality of men prefer to wander up and down, forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out to themselves broken cisterns, rather than embrace the divine liberality voluntarily offered to them" (Section 14). The old-timey language of "hewing out broken cisterns" seemed to speak to me right from that old-timey picture — yet it feels alive and kicking.

Most helpful to me, however, was that in the *Institutes* I found both my dad's instincts regarding prayer and their antidote. Calvin distrusts "perfunctory" prayers and prayers uttered from "custom" that comes from "cold" minds (Section 6). On the other hand, Calvin doesn't underestimate the prayer uttered from sheer anxiety — for "it is by much anxiety that the fervor of prayer is inflamed" — though he warns against that greatest of foes to the prayer life, despair (Section 4), and urges prayer despite doubt, for though the faithful will never be "disencumbered of all hindrances, their attempts are pleasing to God" (Section 16). Pray on, it would have said to my father.

COMING HOME

Reading Calvin on prayer, I felt somewhat like I'd come home: here were both points of orientation and startling discoveries; here was a familiar road of prayer from which I might venture down crossroads. As with anything else, when it comes to prayer, it's important to recognize where we've come from to know where we're going.

Recently, a colleague had someone question his mealtime practices: Why did he pray before every meal? Why did he read the Bible and pray after every meal? In that query, in the practice I'm trying to establish in my own family, it's hard not to see that bearded man in Enstrom's *Grace*. Looking back, what I missed most in my dad's hiatus from prayer were the timbre of his voice, his patterns of speech, the practice itself that oriented me to the world. As I get older and my children grow in consciousness, I become aware of my own patterns and traps in pre- and post-meal prayers. Maybe now I'll try raising my hands. Maybe I'll try some increased terror and joy, just to mix it up a bit — to keep that point of orientation for our lives yet to create a theme and variation that may help our "thoughts rise upward."

Howard Schaap teaches English at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

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