

C A L V I N ' S D O C T R I N E O F
P O S T U R E

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The last issue of "The Record" (Spring 1989, No 20) opened with the Editor's reminiscence of a funeral in the Outer Hebrides where an officiating minister, standing to pray, further intimated the customary nature of this posture when speaking to God and requested that the congregation should also stand for prayer. By contrast, the Editor, who was invited to take part in this service, unashamedly professes his custom to kneel when addressing the Almighty. Such divergence raises the question of posture in prayer, and since further contributions on this subject have been invited, an analysis of Calvin's "Doctrine of Posture" might be an appropriate response. What does Calvin teach about posture in prayer? Is there a preference for standing, or a prescription for kneeling?

We may attempt to answer these questions by reiterating Calvin's general principle whereby, irrespective of how we approach God, it must be in a spirit of humility and reverence. This is clearly stated in his sermon on Ephesians 3:13-16 (1979, 283), where he declares that when we pray to God,

*"We are to come to him in fear and reverence,
considering his majesty which is infinite".*

This principle is further expounded while preaching on Ephesians 3:14-19 (1979, 286):

*"We must come to listening, not to what men bring
us out of their on brain, but to what God commands*

us. So then, we must use modesty and sobriety, and not to speak at random when we pray to God, but simply obey his Word".

When speaking to God in prayer, there must be an atmosphere of humility and reverence, modesty and sobriety. The matter of posture inevitably assumes a measure of importance, and becomes a corollary of the spirit of reverence upon which Calvin uncompromisingly insists.

For Calvin, however, kneeling is the significant posture in prayer, rather than standing. This is strikingly evidenced from his comments of Acts 9:40 (1979, 281):

"Kneeling in prayer is a sign of humility, and it has a twofold benefit, that all the parts of our bodies are directed to the worship of God, and that the outward exercise of the body helps the weakness of the mind. But as often as we go down on our knees we must see that the inward submission of the heart corresponds to the ceremony, so that it may not be false and ineffectual".

Here, Calvin allies "kneeling" with his principle of "reverence", and recognises this posture as a means of channelling energy of body and mind into the worship of God. In kneeling, we thus find a fusion of the physical and the mental. One condition presides : the heart must be sincere, otherwise kneeling is null and void.

The correlation between "kneeling" and "reverence" is unveiled in the Institutes (3-20-33), where this gesture is unambiguously interpreted as a spiritual exercise:

"As for the bodily gestures customarily observed in praying, such as kneeling and uncovering the head, they are exercises whereby we try to rise to a greater reverence of God".

Furthermore, the practice of kneeling has Pauline permission (Institutes 4-10-30) in 1 Corinthians 14:40:

"Let us take, for example, kneeling when solemn prayers are being said. The question is whether it is a human tradition, which any man may lawfully repudiate or neglect. I say that it is human, as it is also divine. it is of God in so far as it is a part of that decorum whose care and observance the apostle has commended to us".

Kneeling at prayer thus has human and divine sanction. Divine sanction does not, however, render the practice madatory. The Church itself must be the final judge, and in a spirit of charity exercise the freedom of choice with which Jesus Christ has vested it. Thus Calvin states (Institutes 4-10-30):

"because he (i.e. Christ) did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in these general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these".

In other words:

"because he (i.e. Christ) has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to change into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe".

To conclude, we may be sure that Calvin finds the posture of kneeling perfectly consistent with his general appeal for

"reverence" in prayer. Kneeling in itself engenders concentration by welding both body and mind in union with the Eternal. While kneeling enjoys Scriptural sanction, the heart must nonetheless be sincere, otherwise posture is irrelevant. Ultimately, however, the principle of aedificatio ecclesiae must prevail: Christ has not dictated specific instructions on posture and each Church must freely decide what is most suitable for its growth in grace. No particular practice, neither kneeling nor standing, is essential to our salvation.

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