

Prayer as Familiar Conversation*

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While yet a child, Abba Ephrem had a dream and then a vision. A branch of vine came out of his tongue, grew bigger and filled everything under heaven. It was laden with beautiful fruit. All the birds of heaven came to eat of the fruit of the vine, and the more they ate, the more the fruit increased.

Ephrem the Syrian¹

In the Beginning Was the Conversation

In the years preceding the Protestant Reformation, the early humanist scholar, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, was deeply engaged in a project of translation that would be published just one year before Luther drew up his famous ninety-five theses and nailed them to the door of the Schlosskirche at Wittenberg. Following a fundamental tenet of the humanist movement, Erasmus had undertaken a systematic examination and new Latin translation of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.² The translation was destined to update and replace the more than one thousand year-old Vulgate of St. Jerome. Arriving at the Gospel of John, Erasmus made an unconventional but telling translation of the opening words of John's first chapter. Instead of the conventional translation of John's Greek into the Latin—*In principio erat Verbum*, Erasmus translated instead—*In principio erat Sermo*.³ John's gospel, according to Erasmus, thus opens not with, "In the beginning was the Word," but rather, "In the beginning was the Conversation." The shift is subtle, yet it modifies centuries of traditional assumptions and consequent theology. As this essay will demonstrate, it has profound implications, not only for the creation and the process of the very "coming into being" of the world, but also for prayer.

Erasmus's new and telling translation makes the act of creation not a unific spoken word that in its singular and isolated way brings the universe into being, but rather a communitarian event based on a dialogic process. The implication of Erasmus's translation is that the act of creation was, and in a very real sense continues to be, an on-going conversation.

* The following essay is from a current work in progress: *Trees of Life: Models of Prayer in Christian Faith and Practice*, to be published by Baker Academic Press. Five models of prayer are proposed in the book: (1) Prayer as Conversation; (2) Prayer as Relationship; (3) Prayer as Spiritual Journey; (4) Prayer as Transformation; and (5) Prayer as Divine Presence. Relevant to several points in the essay is the introductory chapter, "Prayer as a Way of Life."

With regard to prayer, it is certainly not false to say that prayer is, in part, an act of speaking. Words are indeed an essential component of prayer. But prayer, as a relationship between God, God's creation, and God's people, is multidimensional. It is not simply words spoken at the one true God. Erasmus's opening translation of the gospel of John touches on a richer, dialogical meaning of prayer. Prayer is discourse; it is a conversation which includes not only words but also silences, not only periods of listening but also hearing, not only times of resting in God but also times of responding to God.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Roman Catholic theologian of the mid-twentieth century, echoes Erasmus's insight. Finding "conversation" to be the most powerful, true, and evocative image of prayer, von Balthasar concludes that prayer as conversation has its own language, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and words. This language is God's language, yet it is completely reciprocal. Thus we participate in this conversation or we have no prayer at all:

Firstly, prayer *is* a conversation between God and the soul, and secondly, a particular language *is* spoken: God's language. Prayer *is* dialogue, not man's monologue before God. Ultimately, in any case, there is no such thing as solitary speech; speech implies reciprocity, the exchange of thoughts and of souls. . . . The better a man learns to pray, the more deeply he finds that all his stammering is only an answer to God's speaking to him. . . . God speaks to us from heaven and commends to us his Word, dwelling on earth for a while: "this is my beloved son: listen to him" (Matt. 17:5).⁴

More than simple words, prayerful conversation is spoken as well as silent, it issues as language from, as it were, God's lips, it is a dialogue, never a monologue, it is speech implying reciprocity. In prayer we participate in this conversation as "God speaks to us from heaven."

John Calvin and Familiar Conversation

Many people are surprised to learn that the longest chapter in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is his chapter on prayer.⁵ In these pages Calvin emphasizes God's "kindness"⁶ manifested in the gift of prayer and especially the essential nature of prayer as "intimate" or "familiar conversation." To enter into "familiar conversation" with God, the mind and heart, according to Calvin, must be properly disposed. In language reminiscent of patristic and medieval teachers on contemplation, Calvin describes this proper disposition as a heart centered on "right and pure contemplation of God" and a mind that, "so far as it is possible, is lifted beyond itself." His intention is clear: for Calvin, proper disposition of mind and heart are essential for "familiar conversation" with God:⁷

Now for framing prayer duly and properly, let this be the first rule: that we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter [familiar] conversation with God. This we shall indeed attain with respect to the mind if it is freed from carnal cares and thoughts by which it can be called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God, and then not only devotes itself completely to prayer but also, in so far as this is possible, is lifted and carried beyond itself.⁸

Calvin's Latin, here translated as "conversation," is *colloquium*, which can mean not only conversation but also a sharing of words, a discourse, or simple talk together. The deeper meaning of "familiar" conversation connotes acquaintanceship, intimacy, friendship, and ultimately the safe, shared, and loving conversation one might find within a family.⁹ "Conversation," as Calvin employs the term, implies two related ideas. First, it connotes turning around and toward some person or thing, and, second, abiding or living or dwelling with someone or simply passing one's life together with another.¹⁰ Prayer as familiar conversation carries both of these important meanings for Calvin. On the one hand prayer implies a turning around or revolution toward God, the world, or another. In this sense conversation means that we turn *from* ourselves *to* something else. This is not to say that we abandon ourselves. Prayer as conversation with God is the primary speech of the true self to the true God; in prayer we bring our *full selves* to God. But it does mean that we turn from narcissistic self-centeredness *toward* another. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly for Calvin, such prayerful conversation means that we come to live and dwell in a familiar, intimate, and loving way with God.

Brother Lawrence on Familiar Conversation

In Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century French Discalced Carmelite, we find an example similar to Calvin's own heart-felt sense of prayer. Brother Lawrence advocated life-long "familiar conversation" with God as a simple spiritual practice of the full self turned toward God. A simple cook and shoemaker, conversation with God for Lawrence evolved into a way of life:

The holiest, most ordinary, and most necessary practice of the spiritual life is that of the presence of God. It is to take delight in and become accustomed to his divine company, *speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him* all the time, at every moment, without rule or measure, especially in times of temptation, suffering, aridity, weariness, even infidelity and sin.¹¹

Brother Lawrence forgoes "formal" prayer with rules and set times. Instead he learns, as he says, to "converse lovingly with God all the time." His is not a

fleeting moment of divine awareness or revelation but a constant, simple conversation reflected in action and flowing from the center of the soul:

It is important, however to realize that this conversation with God takes place in the depths and center of the soul. It is there that the soul speaks to God heart to heart, and always in a deep and profound peace the soul enjoys God.¹²

As with John Calvin, prayer for Brother Lawrence is of a particular quality:

We do not always have to be in church to be with God. We can make of our hearts an oratory where we can withdraw from time to time to converse with him there. Everyone is capable of these *familiar conversations* with God.¹³

Brother Lawrence is, in fact, so habituated to Calvin's "familiar conversation" with God that for him, the simplest chores are prayer. In a concise statement of the intimate relations among prayer as conversation, daily activity, and awareness of the presence of God, he says:

We must continually apply ourselves so that all our actions become a kind of brief conversation with God, not in a contrived manner, but coming from the purity and simplicity of our hearts.¹⁴

Brother Lawrence, like Calvin, recognizes prayer as familiar conversation grounded in personal piety, liturgical celebration, or scriptural meditation. But for both men it is much more than that. Familiar conversation is a daily, even constant, devotion of a soul turned to God. Such prayer serves to destroy the false perception of an impregnable wall between the sacred and secular worlds. "God," as the seventeenth century spiritual director, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, puts it, "*speaks* to every individual through what happens to them moment to moment."¹⁵

Word and Silence in Prayerful Conversation

While conversation involves elements of listening, waiting, attention, hearing, connection, communication, presence, and response, the two primary modes of prayerful conversation are word and silence. As has been noted, word and silence are not oppositional, but rather relational and dialogical. They are partners in the play of conversation. A seventeenth-century German pietist, Philipp Jakob Spener, captures this partnership well when he notes that:

Prayer always occurs before those to whom the basis of our heart is open. Prayer is not only heard by those to whom we speak with our mouths, but also those to whom we open our hearts (Ps. 19:15). . . . Whenever we pray

with our mouths God looks at the same time not only upon our tongues but also on the base of our hearts out of which the tongue speaks.¹⁶

Put another way, for Spener, the words of the tongue speak the silence of the open heart.

In the context of prayer, silence and word have many shades and nuances of meaning. Silence, for instance, can be “heard” in a number of ways: as the silence of God; as the silence of the one praying; as a referent of mystery; as the real inability to find words for the divine reality in its fullness. It can be “heard,” as well, as an unfortunate reality of men, women, and communities who, through economic disadvantage or political repression or pathological, physical, or emotional challenges, have no voice. The silence of speech is the fundamental form of silence, but there are other silences as well. There is silence in the beauty of nature, silence in the kinetic body, and silence in the beam of a loving gaze. Silence comforts and refines the will and the senses. It gives wing to imagination, illuminates the memory, tempers judgment, and ignites longing and desire. Silence is a cousin to reason. Silence seldom takes place in a vacuum. Even the rhythms of our heart, the chemistry of our bodies, and the neurological wave patterns of our brain create an ever-present background “noise” within silence. All these forms of silence enfold the soul in prayer. In a similar manner word and language, in their own way, give compass to conversation in prayer. As language, “word” can be oral, written, spoken, signed, sung, and danced. It is most sought by the ear and voiced by the mouth, but can be seen with the eye, felt by a touch, or implied in a smell. “Word” can be spoken and heard by all, or it can be heard by many, or by few, or heard by none at all. It can dream through the years as a story, color and structure a memory, or give wing to hope. You are reading a word. A word can be translated, redefined, or given new life. In the same manner that silence can represent a form of oppression to the voiceless of the world, so too can word oppress, control, abuse, confine, prejudice, and even destroy. But words can also build up, free, empower, transform, guide, and give. As with silence, the gift of words can bestow empathy, compassion, or love. They write the “book of nature,” the “book of experience,” and the “book of the spirit.” And, as we are accustomed to thinking, word is also that which is from the beginning (John 1:1).

These represent the identifying natures of silence and word. But, of course, while identifiably independent, they are never functionally so. In prayer, word and silence are like partners in a dance. Scripture is full of images that evoke this necessary partnership between silence and word. Jesus’ disciples, for example, beg him to teach them how to pray, and he does so in words so keen and sharp that they have penetrated into our very bones and marrow to this day. The Lord’s Prayer is a prayer of words. Yet at the same time, Jesus models long

periods of desert silence, solitude, and listening. The Hebrew Bible is full of prophets, priests, and kings praying verbally to God; the Psalms are themselves 150 verbal prayers. Yet at the same time the Hebrew Bible also instructs us in silence, stillness, and waiting. We are urged to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10), while the Lord is in his holy temple, Habakkuk proclaims, “Let the earth keep silence before him” (2:20), and the voice of wisdom from Ecclesiastes says sagely, “There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (3:7). Scripture and Christian traditions insist that this dance of word and silence involve the whole person. It is not just a matter of ear, mouth, and tongue. Prayerful conversation is inclusive of gesture, posture, breath, mind, heart, body, and spirit.

In the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi, for example, enlightened his followers with a whole new metaphor for “word” in prayer. In fact Francis’s solution to the difficulty of communicating the depth of speech is so true to the verbal construction of prayer that it is not really a metaphor at all. As one of Francis’s followers, Thomas of Celano, describes it, Francis “made his whole body a tongue”:

He edified his listeners by becoming a living example of what he taught: He edified his listeners by his example as well as his words; “he made his whole body a tongue; more than someone who prayed, he had become prayer.” That is, his whole person had become the message he was trying to communicate.¹⁷

Francis *lived* speech; he *lived* silence. In the act of making “his whole body a tongue,” he *became* prayer.

Other images from the Christian spiritual tradition evoke the power of prayer as conversation in word *and* in silence. St. Bonaventure, also writing in the thirteenth century, reflects on prayer as a “fountain of fullness,” a language given by God inviting us to share in the abundant waters of divine conversation.¹⁸ In this image words are like droplets of water rising from a baptismal font of conversation with God. The words, like water, rise and fall continually back into the mother fountain of silence. In the fine mist of the fountain seen against a brimming sun, Bonaventure shares a glimpse of a rainbow, which he also equates with prayer, a rainbow with one arch rising from the gold of silence, the other from the gold of words. Mutually regenerating, baptismal, purifying, sacramental, covenantal, even Christological, in the image of the “fountain,” word and silence, for Bonaventure, partner the depths and the heights, the earth and the sky, our loss and our joy, our God and our selves.

Silence in Conversation

Of course the fact that silence is by its very nature immune to verbal representation has not stopped Christian writers from attempting to “communicate” its essence to the world. It seems that nothing loosens the tongue or sharpens the quill quite as much as an encounter with silence. Volumes and volumes, words upon words, have been devoted to the look, feel, taste, smell, sensuality, or experience of that which is wordless or ineffable. Simone Weil, a twentieth-century friend of God, comes *close* to capturing silence in words, however, when she says:

Everything happens as though, by a miraculous favor, our very senses themselves had been made aware that silence is not the absence of sounds, but something infinitely more real than sounds and the center of a harmony more perfect than anything which a combination of sounds can produce. Furthermore there are degrees of silence. There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is like a noise when compared with the silence of God.¹⁹

But of course silence cannot be completely captured; it is not the “absence” of sounds. There are instead “degrees of silence,” and even the beauty of the universe is “like a noise when compared to the silence of God.” We can feel Simone Weil inviting us through her words to absorb silence and through its degrees to give praise to God.

Simone Weil’s degrees of silence also hint at implicit degrees of language. Silence and language both offer life through prayer in various and often contradictory ways. Corresponding to the silence of beauty, the silence of humanity, the silence of cosmos, and the silence of God are the voices of beauty, the voices of humanity, the voices of the natural world, and the voices of God.²⁰ To which silence are we listening? To which words do we respond? Whose voice do we hear? How do we decipher a language of silence? While these questions are ultimately questions of discernment, we should also be aware that the answers depend on the individuals, situations, and particular communities of conversation from which they arise.

Thomas Merton has said that scripture is like a lake that has no bottom. The same can be said of Christian prayer: it is as a lake that has no bottom. Today, in addition to the richness of the Christian verbal prayer,²¹ many have been blessed by the contemporary retrieval of various “communities of conversation” within the Christian contemplative tradition. Interestingly, the Christian contemplative tradition relies on body, gesture, posture, mind, heart, and spirit to practice and maintain an attitude of silence just as the verbal tradition relies on the same to maintain an attitude of speech with God. This essential complementarity of

verbal prayer and contemplative silence form a circle of conversation – a circle of intimate conversation with God.

It is no coincidence that the mysteries and paradox of Christian doctrine function formationally in a way similar to that of the paradox and mystery of conversational prayer. Both, in their refusal to fall to the axe of reason, compel us in experiential, sapiential ways to know ourselves in relation to God and world.²² The formational function of prayer is predicated not on human effort alone, but on the gift of divine grace. As it conjoins human effort and divine gift, formational prayer begins a reign of mystery, it enters into “the secret places of divine incomprehensibility”²³ where prayer moves easily and naturally from lofty pinnacles beyond our knowing to simple conversation between intimate friends. It moves from a prayer of mystery and paradox:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
On them light has shined.

to a prayer of simple attribute and grace:

For a child is born for us,
a son is given to us,
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
(Isa. 9:2, 6)

Breath in Conversation: The Spirit of Word and Silence

From the early history of the church, teachers on prayer have recognized the unique position of breath in prayer. Searching for something as a kind of starting point for constant prayer, something that we all do without ceasing, yet over which we have some control, early fathers and mothers of the church focused on breath.²⁴ Breath is the essential mechanism in speech; without it there would be no words. Likewise, in silence breath is an aid to contemplative concentration and focus. In the former, breath links us to God’s initial acts of creation. In the case of silence the rhythm of breath unites us to other internal and external rhythms: heartbeat, brainwave, waves on shore, waves of various spectrums of light, seasons, music, the orbits of the heavens, birth and death.

Breath is so important to sustaining life that in many cultures it has been linked to the Spirit or life force. One contemporary writer has pointed out, “The divers

meanings of the word *ruah* in the Old Testament, which include “wind,” “breath,” “life,” “courage,” “mind,” as well as human and divine “spirit,” find their unity in the concept of divine action.”²⁵ The diversity of these elements in the context of the unity of divine action all empower life in that they make possible, even necessary, human response to divine action through prayer and action in the world. Breath in this sense is crucial to the existence of both word and silence; it is the very spirit of prayer and the life-force of awakening and transformation.

In the anonymous, nineteenth-century *Way of the Pilgrim*,²⁶ a godly pilgrim in search of “constant prayer” encounters and learns the Jesus Prayer (also commonly known as the Breath Prayer, the Prayer of the Heart, and by its technical name, Hesychasm, which means stillness). This prayer begins in learning how to coordinate one’s prayer to the rhythm of one’s breath. The pilgrim’s most treasured book, after the Bible, is the *Philokalia*, a book of instruction on this way of prayer. The *Philokalia* is full of advice and teaching on watchfulness in prayer, on proper prayer postures, on impediments to prayer, and of course instructive advice on coordinating the breath with prayer in a way that “cycles” the mind into the heart. It is instructive to learn from some of these ancient teachers the place of breath in a form of prayer at once verbal and silent.

St. Gregory of Sinai, for instance, gives detailed instruction on the Jesus Prayer. His teaching includes counsel on concentration of breath, which for St. Gregory helps to disperse distracting thoughts:

Sitting on a chair, bring your mind from the head into the heart and hold it there; from there call with your mind and heart, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!” Regulate your breathing also because rhythmic breathing can disperse distracting thoughts. When you are aware of thoughts do not pay attention to them regardless of whether they are good or not. With your mind enter the heart and call on the Lord Jesus often and patiently and in this way you will soon overwhelm and destroy these thoughts through God’s name.²⁷

Another teacher, Nicephorus the Solitary, does not have his anatomy correct, but while the body is certainly essential in this prayer of the heart, perfect anatomical knowledge is not. These writers, in accessing the whole person, body, mind, and spirit (symbolized in a very concrete way by breath), touch the image of God within, leading to an embodied tranquility in prayer. Nicephorus says:

You know that breathing brings air into the heart. And so sit quietly and take your mind and lead it by the path of breathing into the very heart and hold it there; do not give it freedom to escape as it would wish to. While holding it there do not leave your mind

idle but give it the following holy words to say: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!" And let the mind repeat them day and night. When it gets used to it, the mind will be happy and joyful to be there and it will want of itself to stay there.

Other writers from this tradition simply teach that the rhythm of breath is the simple key to prayer. Hesychius of Jerusalem says, "If you wish to cover the confusion of distracting thoughts and to guard your heart, let the Jesus Prayer be attuned to your breathing." And John Climacus phrases his advice in the form of a prayer, a prayer that culminates in adoration of Jesus as it links Christ, memory, and breath. Climacus says simply, "May the remembrance of Jesus be one with your breathing."

Breath in prayer then, at least in the Hesychastic tradition of stillness and peace, signifies and accomplishes a number of things. Breath is the spirit within the human person uniting mind and heart. It is our constant compass and thus the most precise instrument for mastering constant prayer. It is rhythmic, in tune to other rhythms of the body, nature, and the cosmos. It is a strongly incarnational element, especially when used, as John Climacus does, as the element which unites us to Jesus, the incarnated presence of God. It recognizes the presence of the Holy Spirit within, the "spirit of God [that] dwells in you" (Romans 8:9), who intercedes when we do not know how to pray as we ought "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Breath makes word possible, yet as an image of God's spirit within it also communicates with sighs too deep for words.

The Creation of Word in Silence

Conversation, like breath, has its rhythm; it cycles through word and silence. In the beginning was the conversation. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke imagines the act of creation as a song out of which animals, forests, humans, the cosmos are "created by silence." In the poem "Sonnet One to Orpheus," Rilke writes, "It turned out the reason they were so full of silence/was not cunning, and not terror,/it was listening."²⁸ The Creator, in the poet's memorable phrase, has created "a temple for them [the creatures] deep inside their ears," a temple for "hearing" their Creator both in word and silence. A contemporary writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, asks key questions of silence and words, questions that pierce to the heart of conversational prayer. She inquires, "How shall I break the silence? What word is more eloquent than the silence itself?" She answers in a tone not unlike Rilke's, saying that "in the moments before a word is spoken, anything is possible."²⁹ Prayer is born of silence, a silence out of which anything is indeed possible, from the pure growing of a "temple deep inside the ear" to expressions of ordinary needs, to divine grace, to utterances of beauty and eloquence. Prayer, meditation, and contemplation linger gently in those moments where anything is possible, even a word.

The fact is that every word is bracketed by silence. Our words are not only born from silence, they also die back into silence in perpetual rhythm. Having asked her questions about the eloquence of silence, Taylor finds a kind of answer in this very rhythm, saying, "Silence and speech define each other. One is the inhale. The other is the exhale."³⁰ Prayer in conversation with God is as close as the air we breathe.

The infinite possibilities of silence affect the form and nature of silence for the various "participants" in conversational prayer. In conversation, we ourselves can remain silent. God's silence can be very real. Or we may be forced into silence by the "unsayability" or mystery of God. That is, the truth we wish to utter to or about God may be too profound for words. All these color the silences of conversation that give birth to words.

Living in prayer guides us, over time, into each of these silent modalities out of which "all things are possible." William Johnston, in surveying the variety of forms of Christian meditation today, recognizes this guiding hand of prayer that leads us into silence. His examples are of the practice of silence woven deeply into conversational prayer:

For the fact is that everywhere we see Christians of all ages and cultures sitting quietly in meditation. Some sit before a crucifix or an icon in one-pointed meditation. Others sit and breathe as they look at the tabernacle. Others practice mindfulness, awareness of God in their surroundings. Others recite a mantra to the rhythm of their own breath. Others simply open minds and hearts to the presence of God. Others just talk to God.³¹

All these forms of prayer are intended to quiet the soul. Yet still, many people rely almost exclusively in prayer on words or, if words cannot be found, assume that they are not praying at all. The model of conversational prayer, again, teaches us otherwise. Silence is a natural part of prayer, as natural as breath. It is dynamic, organic, wide-ranging, and singularly appropriate. Thelma Hall equates silence in prayer with deepening love of the lover for the beloved:

There is an inner dynamic in the evolution of all true love that leads to a level of communication "too deep for words." There the lover becomes inarticulate, falls silent, and the beloved receives the silence as eloquence.³²

For many of us, silence lacks this "eloquence" because we simply have not listened to silence as closely as we have listened to and spoken our words. Yet

silence in prayer is vast, multidimensional, and polyvalent: it is the equal partner to word in the language of love; it is received as eloquence by God.

John Calvin on Silence as Conversational Prayer

Following Augustine, who had taught that prayer “consists more in groaning than in speaking, in tears rather than words,”³³ John Calvin is, perhaps surprisingly, clear that the best prayers are sometimes unspoken. Crucial to Calvin’s support of silence in prayer is his reference to Elijah, who “prays with his head between his knees.”³⁴ Calvin uses this image to illustrate the importance of body, posture, and gesture in prayer. All of the human person in any situation can be caught up in prayer. Body, gesture, and silence, as well as words, all participate in the “language” of conversational prayer.

Calvin then sketches his insights on silence in prayer by first listing three “rules of right prayer.” These aids to right prayer include: (1) reverence; (2) prayer with a sincere sense of want and with penitence; and (3) prayer in which we yield all confidence in ourselves and humbly plead for pardon.³⁵ Throughout his discussion on prayer Calvin also emphasizes a mind, body, and heart correctly focused upon God so that we might “meditate upon God’s kindness” and be led into a “right and pure contemplation of God.”³⁶ Meditation on God’s kindness and right and pure contemplation then lead into a disposition to “enter into conversation with God.” This is, again, for Calvin that very “familiar conversation” which integrates mind, heart (or “inner feeling”), word, silence, and gesture in intimate prayer:

We should hold that the *tongue is not even necessary for private prayer*, except in so far as either the *inner feeling* has insufficient power to arouse itself or as it is so vehemently aroused that it carries with it the action of the tongue. For even though *the best prayers are sometimes unspoken*, it often happens in practice that, when *feelings of mind* are aroused, unostentatiously the tongue *breaks forth into speech*, and the other members into *gesture*.³⁷

“The tongue is not necessary,” and the “best prayers are sometimes unspoken.” Conversational prayer, for Calvin, includes the body. It is of the heart as well as of the mind; it is at times spoken, and it is justifiably, at times, unspoken. In other words, for Calvin, the whole person prays. Packed into those two short sentences from Calvin’s *Institutes* is commentary enough to instruct and form a lifetime of prayer.

ENDNOTES

¹*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1984), 59.

² The Greek edition and accompanying Latin translation was published as *Novum instrumentum omne* by Froben of Basle in 1516. As a critical edition it would today be considered a “clunker,” but the translation was solid if at times idiosyncratic. Most importantly, with Erasmus’s approval, the Latin was translated and dispersed widely in various vernacular languages.

³ The Greek word Erasmus translates as “*sermo*” is λόγος.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 14-15.

⁵ Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III, XX, 1-52, 850-920.

⁶ Calvin goes out of his way to assure us that, while our prayers depend on no merit of our own, the God who hears and responds to our prayers is a God both “gentle and kind.” Cf. *Institutes*, III.XX.4, p. 852; 5, p. 854; 11, p. 864; 13, p. 868.

⁷ This does not mean, however, that Calvin believes that God listens and responds only to prayers of “pure intention,” which theologically and psychologically would account for precious few prayers indeed. Calvin recognizes our fallen nature yet exhibits his overriding pastoral compassion, noting that God “harkens to perverted prayer” as well. Cf. *Institutes*, XX.III.15, pp. 870-72.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.XX.4, pp. 853-54. See also *ibid.*, III.XX.5, p. 854, where through “great kindness” God invites us into “intimate conversation.”

⁹ Of course family conversation does not always reflect love. It can be self-centered, angry, confused, and full of bile and distrust. But so can prayer. Calvin’s essential point remains: openness and trust implied in the image of prayer as “familiar conversation” is prayer focused not only on self, neighbor, and world but also on God.

¹⁰ *Conversatio* has the dual meaning of frequent use and conversation; *conversio*, a turning around or revolution; the verb *converso* also carries the dual meanings of to turn around as well as to abide, live, or dwell with someone or to pass one’s life with.

¹¹ *Spiritual Maxims*, 2.6 in Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, OCD, *Writings and Conversations On the Practice of the Presence of God*, critical ed. Conrad De Meester, trans. Salvatore Scieurba (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1994), 36. Italics are mine.

¹² Brother Lawrence, *Letter 2* in *ibid.*, 53.

¹³ Brother Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God* in *ibid.*, 107

¹⁴ Brother Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God* in *ibid.*, 105.

¹⁵ Cited from Introduction by Richard Foster to Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), xiii.

¹⁶ “God-Pleasing Prayer,” in *Pietists: Selected Writings*, ed. Peter C. Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 90.

¹⁷ Cited from William J. Short, OFM, *Poverty and Joy: The Franciscan Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 31.

¹⁸ The phrase, “generous fecundity,” is from Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 256-62. The phrase, “fountain fullness,” is from St. Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium in Mentis Deum* and is a translation from the Latin of “*fons plenitudinis*,” found throughout the *Itinerarium*. Cf. Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey Into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹⁹ Simone Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, Inc, 1977), 490.

²⁰ Certainly scripture does more than hint at all of this. The God of Hebrew Scriptures is alternately vocal and (seemingly) progressively silent. Jesus of course both speaks and seeks periods of silence, solitude, and solace. Even creation alternates between wilderness quiet and, in its capacity as a “book of nature,” is in constant praise of the glory, goodness, and beauty of God.

²¹ The later portion of the chapter on prayer as conversation in *Models of Prayer* will focus on verbal prayer as it is commonly practiced, including prayers of adoration, confession, petition, lament, etc.

²² Cf. Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19 and elsewhere for an enlightening reassessment of the sapiential and what Charry calls “aretegenic” formational quality of doctrine.

²³ Richard of St. Victor, *De arca mystica* IV.vi, *Patrologiae Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 196. For a discussion of mystery and the role of divine grace in prayer and contemplation see Steven Chase, *Angelic*

Wisdom: The Cherubim and the Grace of Contemplation in Richard of St. Victor (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

²⁴ Other “autonomic” functions, such as heartbeat or neurological activity are constant but by definition are self-regulating and beyond our “control.” Breath is semiautonomic: it can be controlled to a point yet also functions on its own. In the deep quiet of contemplative prayer, one can become conscious of one’s heartbeat, but again it cannot be stopped or started at will.

²⁵ Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, 268.

²⁶ Cf. *The Way of the Pilgrim*, trans. Helen Bacovcin (New York: Image Books, 1978).

²⁷ The quotes that follow on the Jesus Prayer can be found in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, volumes I-IV, compiled by St. Nicodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. Ware, et al. (London: Farber and Farber, 1979-1999). The *Philokalia* was compiled in the eighteenth century from Greek texts from the fourth through fifteenth centuries.

²⁸ “Sonnet One to Orpheus,” *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: Harper and Rowe Publishers, 1981), 195.

²⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), 3.

³⁰ Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 96.

³¹ William Johnston, *Mystical Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 134.

³² Thelma Hall, R.C., *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 7. Hall’s title refer of course to Romans 8:26: “For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

³³ Cf. *Letters of St. Augustine, Letter CXXX.19* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 465: “To use much speaking in prayer is to employ a superfluity of words; but to prolong prayer is to have the heart throbbing with continued pious emotion towards God to whom we pray. For in most cases prayer consists more in groaning than in speaking, in tears rather than words.”

³⁴ *Institutes*, III.XX.3, p. 852. From I Kings 18:42.

³⁵ *Institutes*, III.XX.4-10, pp. 853-62.

³⁶ *Institutes*, III.XX.3; 4, pp. 852; 853.

³⁷ *Institutes*, III.XX.33, pp. 396-97. Italics added.