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Practical Theology

## **The Church's Place in Christian Piety**

Calvin's idea of piety doesn't stand apart from Scripture or from the Church. Rather, it is rooted in the Word and nurtured in the church. While breaking with the clericalism and absolutism of Rome, Calvin nonetheless maintained a high view of the church: "If we do not prefer the church to all other objects of our interest, we are unworthy of being counted among her members."

Augustine once said: "He cannot have God for his Father who refuses to have the church for his mother." To this Calvin added:

*For there is no other way to enter  
into life unless this mother  
conceive us in her womb, give us  
birth, nourish us at her breast, and  
lastly, unless she keep us under her  
care and guidance until, putting off*

*mortal flesh, we become like the angels.*

Calvin wrote, also, that apart from the church, there is little hope for forgiveness of sins or salvation. It is always disastrous to leave the church. For Calvin, believers are engrafted into Christ and His Church, for spiritual growth happens within the church. The church is the mother, educator, and nourisher of every believer, for the Holy Spirit acts in her.

Believers cultivate piety by the Spirit through the Church's teaching ministry, progressing from spiritual infancy to adolescence to full manhood in Christ. They do not graduate from the church until they die. This lifelong education is offered within an atmosphere of genuine piety in which believers love and care for one another under the headship of Christ.

Growth in piety is impossible apart from the Church, for piety is fostered by the communion of saints. Within the Church, believers "cleave to each other in the mutual distribution of gifts." Each member has his own place and gifts to use within the body. Ideally, the entire body uses these gifts in symmetry and proportion, ever reforming and growing toward perfection.

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