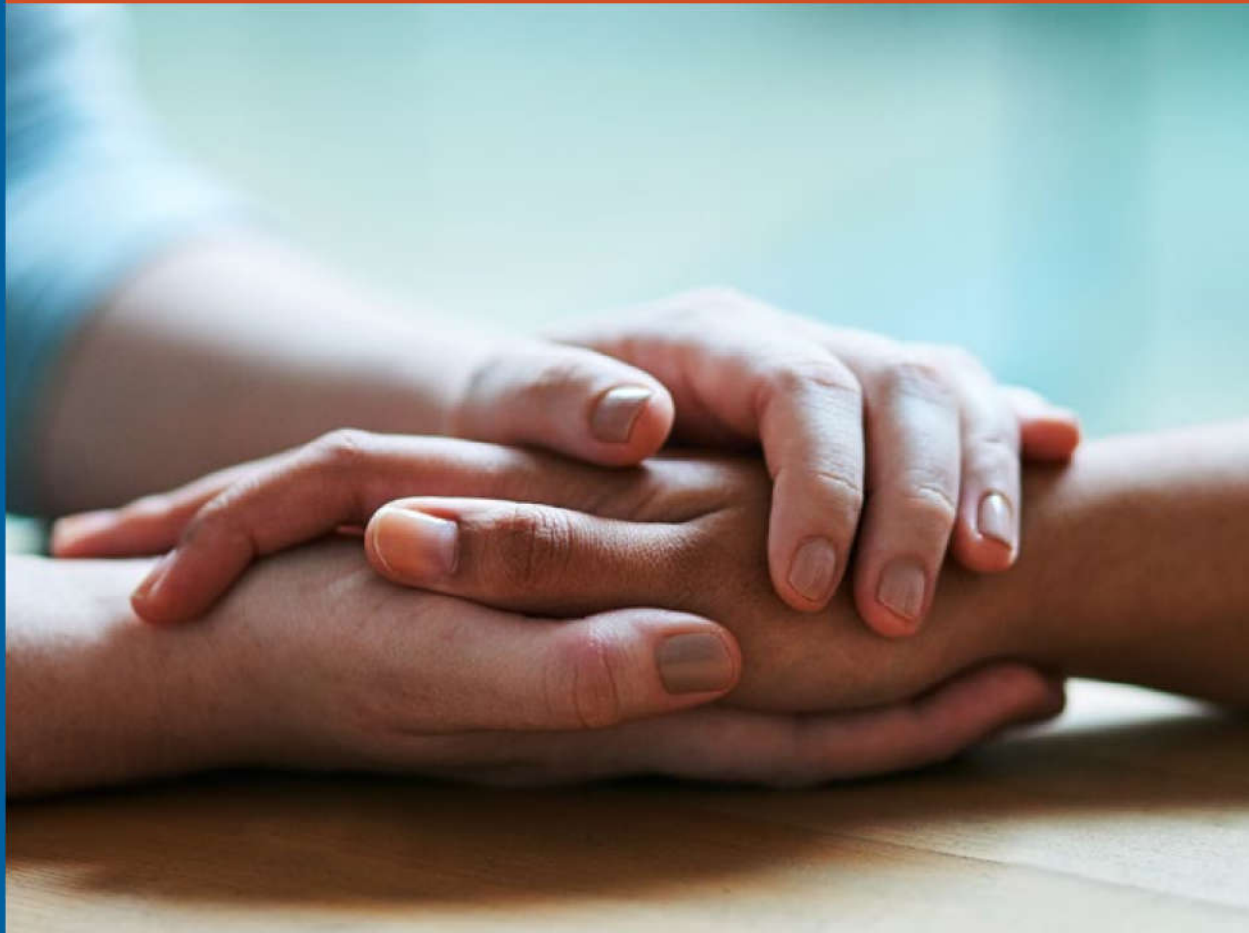


Caring Connections

An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling



Practices of Prayer

The Catechism as a Tool for Prayer¹

John Pless

“... a Christian without prayer is just as impossible as a living person without a pulse.”²

We are most accustomed to think in terms of studying the Small Catechism or learning it by heart but rarely do we hear Luther’s language of praying the Catechism.³ The Catechism functioned, for Luther, as a book of prayer. Albrecht Peters captures Luther’s intention: “Praying the catechism is not merely for children and the simple; it is no less the duty and the joy of the mature Christian. Because the triune God Himself is the true teacher of the basic mysteries of the faith, all Christians are His pupils. Prayerful meditation on those basic central texts of our Christian faith draws our inner man into the dynamic of the Spirit of God. These texts and the light of faith from them pull us out of evil thoughts, still and diffuse unrest of our hearts, and form a sturdy protective barrier against demonic temptations.”⁴ Such praying is serious business; it is not mindless meditation or wordless impulses to connect with a higher spiritual power. Prayer learns how to listen to the Word of the Lord and out of that listening to speak to Him. In so doing, prayer is the Christian’s engagement in battle against the Satan. There is no neutrality here; one is either aligned with the Triune God or is positioned with the devil.⁵

Positively, to pray the Catechism is to learn how to speak to God the Father in the name of the Son through the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in the Gospel. It is based on God’s command and promise. Negatively, this same prayer is directed against the devil as he would pull us away from the Father through distrust of the Son, causing us to doubt the promises of the Gospel. Prayer for Luther involves spiritual warfare and catechism is both a weapon and armor.

By teaching the faith, the Catechism also teaches us how to pray. Not only does the Catechism teach us how to pray, but it can be prayed. Luther demonstrated how the catechism is to be prayed in his celebrated letter, *A Simple Way to Pray*,

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1 This article is adapted from the author’s *Praying Luther’s Small Catechism* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2016), 1–13.

2 Luther, cited by Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms Volume III: Lord’s Prayer*, trans. Daniel Theis (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 29.

3 Kenneth F. Korby observes that “The *Small Catechism* (1529), intended to be prayed, made a lasting impression on evangelical prayer. In that catechism, in addition to prayer instruction by means of the exposition of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father ... Luther gave simple instructions for family prayer which became a kind of ‘house.’”—Kenneth F. Korby, “Prayer: Pre-Reformation to the Present” in *Christians at Prayer*, ed. John Gallen, S.J. (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1977), 123.

4 Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms Volume I: Ten Commandments*, trans. Holger Sonntag (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 33.

5 Note the observation of Peters: “Studying and praying the catechism takes place on the battlefield between God and anti-god; there is no neutrality here. Nobody stands for himself here.” Peters, *Ten Commandments*, 31.

addressed to Peter Beskendorf, the town barber in Wittenberg written in 1535. Here Luther utilizes catechesis for the life of prayer demonstrating that there is both discipline and freedom in the praying of the Catechism.⁶ Rather than constraining and confining, the texts of the catechism serve to anchor the praying Christian in God's Word as the "breathing space of the Holy Spirit" to borrow language from Oswald Bayer so that the believer is ushered into the expansive vistas of God's mercy and grace in Christ. Here the Christian is freed to confess and praise, to be taught by God and guided with His truth.

Before coming to the catechetical texts, Luther provides Peter with some preliminary instruction on prayer. Recognizing that both the flesh and the devil incessantly attempt to derail the practice of prayer, Luther counsels the barber out of his own experience: "when I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other thoughts (for the flesh and the devil always impede or obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or if it be day and hour for it, to church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and if I have some time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do."⁷ Luther sees this verbal meditation as kindling the heart for prayer.

"The evil one tempts us not to pray."

A daily routine of prayer is recommended to Peter as a salutary discipline: "It is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night."⁸ Establishing set times for prayer does not contradict the biblical dictum to prayer without ceasing (Luke 11:9–13; I Thessalonians 5:17; Psalm 1:1). Nor does the practice segregate prayer from daily life as Luther asserts that prayer and work go hand in hand. For faith, work is prayer. For unbelief, work becomes the opposite of prayer—that is—it becomes cursing.

The evil one tempts us not to pray: "Yet we must be careful not to break the habit of true prayer and imagine other works to be necessary which, after all, are nothing of the kind. Thus at the end we become lax and lazy, cool and listless toward prayer. The devil who besets us is not lazy or careless, and our flesh is too ready and eager to sin and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer."⁹ Therefore, Luther sees it necessary to help Peter and other Christians learn how to pray according to God's command and promise.

Luther gives a "model prayer" that serves as a preface to the Lord's Prayer. This prayer includes a confession of unworthiness on account of sin. It then moves

6 Note the observation of Martin Brecht: "Nowhere is the connection between order and freedom in Luther's practice of prayer so clearly demonstrated as in his advice for Master Peter"—Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.

7 American Edition (AE) of Luther's Works Vol 43:193. Edited by Gustav Wiencke. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968.

8 AE 43: 193.

9 AE 43:194.

to ground the prayer in the command and promise of God echoing the language of the *Small Catechism* even as it implores the Father in the name of Jesus and in communion with “all thy saints and Christians on earth.”¹⁰

Each petition is used as a foundation and platform for praying. Luther shows Peter how to unpack each petition for supplication and intercession while providing model prayers as well as pastoral instruction along the way. For example, see Luther’s parenthetical admonition in regard to the person unable to forgive his neighbor under the fifth petition.

Faith is essential for prayer. The great word of prayer is “Amen.” It is the word of faith that binds us together with all Christians: “Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the Amen firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say ‘yes’ to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, ‘Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.’ That is what Amen means.”¹¹

“Faith is essential for prayer. The great word of prayer is ‘Amen.’”

Praying the Lord’s Prayer does not bind us to “words or syllables” but focuses attention on the thoughts comprehended therein. “It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forgo the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.”¹² There is no need to rush through the Lord’s Prayer for Luther. One can be drawn into the depth of its richness as it compasses all things for which the Christian is authorized to pray.

That the Lord’s Prayer may be prayed at such a leisurely pace does not mean that it is prayed mindlessly. Just as a barber has to pay attention to how he uses his razor so must the Christian attend to his prayers with “concentration and singleness of heart.”¹³ Therefore Luther concludes: “This in short is the way I use the Lord’s Prayer when I pray it. To this day I suckle at the Lord’s Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master

10 AE 43: 194–195.

11 AE 43:198.

12 AE 43:199.

13 AE 43:199.

composed and taught it. What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world!...In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (as are the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use."¹⁴

Along with the Lord's Prayer, Luther teaches Peter how to pray the Decalogue offering a fourfold template for praying the Ten Commandments: "I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession, and fourth, a prayer."¹⁵

"When it comes to prayer, sometimes less is more."

Luther then provides model prayers. For example with the First Commandment, Luther sees these four parts: (1) Instruction—God teaches and expects us to have faith in no one or nothing other than God Himself; (2) Thanksgiving—God is our God. He has provided us with all that we are and all that we have; (3) Confession—We acknowledge our "countless acts of idolatry" and our ingratitude (4) Prayer—Preserve us from unbelief and ingratitude.¹⁶ According to this pattern of instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer, Luther says we see the Ten Commandments "...in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book."¹⁷

The Apostles' Creed is also suggested as a text to kindle prayer using the same template: "If you have more time, or the inclination, you may treat the Creed in the same manner and make it into a garland of four strands."¹⁸ Luther then shows how this is to be done with each article of the Creed.

When it comes to prayer, sometimes less is more. Peter is cautioned to beware of attempting too much: "Take care, however, not to undertake all of this or so much that one becomes weary in spirit."¹⁹ Luther did not want to overburden the laity with ponderous exercises which would discourage perseverance and singleness of heart in prayer. The texts of the catechism provided both depth and simplicity providing the Christian with space for reflection and meditation.

14 AE 43:200.

15 AE 43:200.

16 AE 43:200–201.

17 AE 43:209.

18 AE 43:209.

19 AE 43:209.



The Rev. John T. Pless is assistant professor of pastoral ministry and missions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne where he also serves as director of field education. Prior to joining the faculty, he served for seventeen years as campus pastor at University Lutheran Chapel at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. From 1979 to 1983, he served on the staff at the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University. Since 2009 he has served as a visiting lecture at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pretoria, South Africa.

*Prof. Pless is the author of *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross-A Study in Luther's Pastoral Theology*, *Mercy at Life's End*, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today*, *A Small Catechism on Human Life*, *Word: God Speaks to Us*, *Confession: God Gives Us Truth*, *Praying Luther's Small Catechism* and numerous chapters in other books published in both the United States and Germany. With Matthew Harrison he is editor of *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*. He served on the *Agenda Committee for the Lutheran Service Book* and is a member of the *Catechism Revision Committee*. He is book review editor for *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* and a member of the editorial council of *Lutheran Quarterly*. A regular lecturer at various conferences both in the United States and overseas, Prof. Pless is a fellow of the *Luther Academy for Madagascar* where he coordinates theological conferences each year. He served two terms as co-president of the *International Loehe Society*, is a member of the *International Bonhoeffer Society* and the *LCMS Committee on the Sanctity of Human Life*. Prof. Pless is chairman of the *LCMS Commission on Doctrinal Review*. In 2013, his former students recognized his 60th birthday with a festschrift, *Theology is Eminently Practical: Essays in Honor of John T. Pless* edited by Jacob Corzine and Bryan Wolfmueller.*