



Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers as Baptismal Spirituality

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IN TODAY'S MARKETPLACE, "SPIRITUALITY" CAN HAVE ALMOST ANY MEANING. EVEN a cursory look at the titles in a large bookstore will reveal that often there is no Christian content to the word. In fact, Christianity may be more frequently labeled negatively as a "religion" by today's seekers who desire the positively termed "spirituality." Seekers often want to avoid the institutional overtones of "religion," desiring instead the "spiritual," which is perceived by them as more experiential and therefore more genuine.

These seekers, as it happens, will sometimes be Christians, people with varying degrees of involvement in the life of the church. Some may have had a genuinely bad experience with the church, others may have failed to find the resources for their needs, still others may have missed a longed-for experience of God. In the course of their search, they may stay with the church or, perhaps more frequently today, they may abandon it as useless to them. Simultaneously, they may deliberately reject or neglect as passé traditional Christian prayer, including the one Jesus taught his own disciples.

My own passionate assertion is that the Christian church offers a wealth of resources for people who are hungering for a life with God, a wealth that is deeper and richer than what they have found, but a wealth often undiscovered and unexplored. The church needs to lift up and articulate its "spiritual" resources, so that

The Morning and Evening Prayers of Martin Luther provide a particular practice of baptismal spirituality that can carry Christians "joyfully" to work and "quickly" to sleep.

its own members, plus a hungry world, can know and experience God, the Father of Jesus Christ, in ways they may have been missing. The attempt of this essay is to articulate a powerful spiritual resource from within the Lutheran tradition of the catholic faith in which the Lord's Prayer is a vital element.

I. THE RADICAL EVENT OF BAPTISM

Martin Luther is reported to have said that Christians receive enough of Jesus Christ in their baptism to spend their whole life learning what this means. Clearly baptism is more than a simple childhood ritual. Baptism is a powerful bonding to Christ, dying with him to sin and rising with him to new life. In baptism, every Christian receives Christ as the sacramental *pro me* or "for me" and, in faith, is called to experience this same Christ through daily dying and rising.

In fact, Christians are called to the repeated faith discovery that in dying and rising with Christ, all that Christ is, all the gifts that Christ brings, belong to them. In Christ, death is in the past for the Christian, and life as a gift of God is their future. What happened with Jesus will happen to them. In the sacrament of Holy Baptism, God creates a binding union of Christ with the believer both to sustain faith and to be grasped by faith.

The spirit of Luther's understanding of the faith is observed in his deliberate remembrance of his baptism. In the dark and desperate days when he was being hidden in the Wartburg Castle, he defied the devil's power with the words, "I am baptized!" This heart-rending plea is a promise-grasping call to God that he (Luther) remain within the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. His baptism was not a deed closed in a dusty past but an event open to and contemporaneous with him in his most tortured moments. Despite all the raging terrors, God in Jesus Christ was for him and with him. Through Jesus, God was to Luther "Father," parent, "abba"; in Jesus, God was experienced as the one who prayed "our Father" with him. Even if that presence was not Luther's only experience in those moments, surely it was the basis of the faith that both embraced and surpassed his experience. In Christ, Luther died and rose; he died to the doubt that terrorized him with unbelief, and he rose to faith and the embrace of life. That is, he not only knew the gospel, he lived and experienced it.

Luther's Wartburg experience of baptismal faith was, I believe, neither so rare nor extraordinary as the Luther-lore approach to this event might lead us to believe. In fact, his Morning and Evening Prayers included in some editions of his *Small Catechism* are a distinct and clear echo of the same kind of "baptismal spirituality" that Luther himself lived, not only in Wartburg Castle but throughout his life. These prayers were his way to teach the Christians of his day to pray as much as the Lord's Prayer was Jesus' way to teach his first disciples. It should be no surprise that Luther includes Jesus' own teaching prayer within his Morning and Evening Prayers.

My attempt, however, is not to make my point by historical documentation,

but to highlight the Morning and Evening Prayers as an example of what I am calling “baptismal spirituality,” that is, the acts and attitudes for Christian practice arising out of God’s radical deed in baptism. In making this attempt, I want to include as a dialog partner not only Luther, but also, usually indirectly, the seekers who may not know the resources deep within Christian faith and history.

II. “IN THE NAME”

In the morning, as soon as you get out of bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say: “God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.”

In the evening, when you go to bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say: “God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.”¹

These prayers call Christians to begin their day by declaring the name and identity of their God. The world, after all, is not neutral territory but the realm where the powers contend. It is often *Dark Territory*, in the words of a movie title, a realm where we can surely wonder if we are beyond the reach of God. At the beginning of the day, though it be dark or hostile, Christians claim the day in the very name of the God who claimed them at their own beginnings in baptism. There is a confidence in knowing that, despite all appearances or in the midst of every grace, the day belongs to God.

Hours later, the day will conclude, and Christians will again declare that it belonged to God, as will the coming night. Whatever machinations of principalities and powers, whatever the siren songs of false gods and goddesses, the truth of this particular God addresses Christians, facing both day and night and framing both.

The name of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is the sign that God in all fullness is the God with whom we begin the day. While the Bible has many names for God and more descriptions, the name that Christians use to begin their day is the Trinity: God in fullness of majesty and mystery, but at the same time, God revealed to us. The triune name of God declares that we know specifically who God is and that the God we know is completely with us in the world. Just as in baptism, the whole of our future is claimed in Christ who has put death behind us, so in the Morning and Evening Prayers we live the more modest truth that the immediate future of day or night is secure in God.

Perhaps this is the point to notice that Luther writes, “say, ‘In the name....’”² There is good reason not merely to think the words, or even to whisper them, but actually to do what Luther writes: to speak the invocation aloud! The God who is Word uses words once again to inhabit believers and their world. Surely, there is a psychological strength to speaking aloud, and this spoken word also “remembers”

¹Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 363.

²*The Book of Concord* (note 1) translates Luther’s German version of the prayers. The familiar “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” comes from the Latin version. See *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 521.

baptism; but the basic reason is that God is Word and this God employs words to create faith. To speak these words is to participate in God.

III. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The sign of the cross, Luther says, is to be made upon oneself while speaking the name of God. If beginning the day in the name of God claims time for God, surely the sign of the cross made by believers upon themselves claims them for God.

Very early, the Christian community began using the sign of the cross to mark their being claimed by Jesus Christ. These Christians were, of course, familiar with the common practices of marking cattle, slaves, or other possessions for ownership. It was an understandable, if not natural, move for Christians to begin crossing themselves as belonging to their Lord. In a world where many of the first Christians were poor, even slaves, the sign of the cross must have been genuinely liberating. No matter what their worldly masters said or did, these Christians belonged to Jesus Christ! That gift, that new status, was given them in their baptism, and forever after they would bear the mark of Christ. Amidst whatever suffering they endured in the course of their daily living, the cross was their sign of triumph. They who had died with Christ would also rise with him. They belonged to Christ, and Christ would assure their future.

In the movie *The First Wives Club*, the three feature actresses conclude with a rousing rendition of the song, “You Don’t Own Me.” In both that film and contemporary life, there is often a strong hunger for and sometimes loud cries from people to be themselves, free of restraint of society, spouses, the past, and so on. The Christian faith declares that the closer we are to Christ, the more we become our true selves. The claim that Christ makes on us in baptism as we are marked by the sign of the cross is not to be escaped from but yielded to, and in that yielding, which is dying, our true selves are given. If Christ did not love us, and if that same cross were not the one upon which he had died, then perhaps our escape would be desirable. The cross we make upon ourselves is, however, not just a sign of belonging to Christ, but a belonging to the very one who dies for us. This love, as the name of God itself reminds us, is at the center of God’s very life.

To make the sign of the cross is binding and liberating at the same time. It binds us to Christ who is victor over all the false powers that would have us and ruin us. It liberates us from the demonic powers that inhibit us from becoming the people we became, and were called to become, in our baptism. Only Christ owns us—not our country, not our family, not our job, not our possessions, nothing at all. That, of course, may not be the way we think and live, but it is the reality we have and yet don’t have at one and the same time. It is the reality we are dying for and rising into, and it becomes the home that overcomes our terrible alienation. It is the reality we have in Christ.

We need to restore the sign of the cross to piety or spirituality as a lived re-

membrance of our baptism and a step on our journey toward our true freedom, which can only be found in Christ. The very physicality of the sign—the touch of the sign-making hand on the body—makes our freedom in Christ tangibly real; it cannot be “spiritualized” out of existence. In fact, this touch of the cross is something like the eucharistic words “for you” accompanying the bread or wine: its direct application means there is no avoidance; the cross is specifically “for you.”

In a baptismal spirituality, the physicality of the sign of the cross would be underlined by the use of water at the same time. Even though Luther didn't suggest this, Christians could “let it soak in” as they make the sign at the bathroom sink or in the shower at the opening or close of the day. Our God is neither gnostic nor docetic, avoiding the things of earth for so-called higher matters. We don't get to God by being more “spiritual” than God, but as Luther himself indicated, we find God where God will be found, in word and sacraments. The realities of the touch of the cross and water live in baptismal spirituality.

IV. THE APOSTLES' CREED AND LORD'S PRAYER

Then, kneeling or standing, say the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer.³

If the invocation names God, then the Creed serves to direct the Christian to what God has done and continues doing. God is known in words and story, by acts that can be described and talked about. The Creed is a summary of the contents of the whole of Scripture, the stories which have become ours in Jesus Christ. To recite the Creed—again, aloud—is to do more than recite ancient history: it is to know our life described in the words we are saying and hearing. The story of the Father, Son, and Spirit becomes our story. In fact, in faith we are drawn up into the very life of God. What mystery! Our verbal remembering in the Creed resonates throughout our body, mind, and spirit as we hear the wind move over the waters in creation, as we walk through the slush-bottomed Red Sea, as we repent at the call of John the Baptizer, as we die and rise with Jesus. As we remember, we are formed and shaped by the stories encapsulated in the ancient Creed.

The coupling here of Creed and Prayer by Luther makes clear the direction of the baptismal spirituality that I see demonstrated, if not modeled, for us. It may be possible, even if wrongheaded, for Christians to recite the Creed as past or distant. After all, it is a rather spartan formulation compared to the drama of the Scriptures. The placement of the Lord's Prayer immediately following, however, compels the believer to prayer, that is, to enter into dialog with God, the Father of Jesus, the same God described in the Creed. It is as if the Creed drives one to stumbling humility and awesome gratitude before God and then the Lord's Prayer is offered by Jesus as a way to pray for those who have no words of their own.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gives us a way to the Father, through Jesus himself, that we might enter into the life and love of God. When we pray, “Thy kingdom

³“The Small Catechism,” 363.

come,” we are recognizing that our Lord must take us where we cannot go alone, to a realm where we shall love, for example, as the Father and Son love each other. When we continue, “Thy will be done,” we know as our companion Jesus, the one who did God’s will like no other human. This Jesus, who died and rose, holds us in his grasp in the terror and liminality of our own dying and rising. By ourselves, we would only stumble and fumble, but in Jesus—who is ours as we are his—we have received all that we need. In Creed and Prayer, we have received the fullness of the story of God and the gracious avenue by which we might enter the life of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A baptismal spirituality has content. That content is not what we decide it to be—by mysticism or rationalism, for example—but that content is given as we are formed by the Christ of the Scriptures. That means knowing the Bible’s stories—knowing them as our stories. It means knowing our Lord’s Prayer as gift-words from Jesus that open unique directness to the heart of God. It means grace-filled intimacy, being able to use Jesus’ own words, the words of the “beloved Son,” to approach God.

V. LUTHER’S PRAYERS

Baptismal spirituality moves closer to its goal in the specific Morning and Evening Prayers that Luther himself wrote for the Christian’s use. After reciting the awesome expanse of God’s works in the Apostles’ Creed and then being humbly drawn close to the Father’s heart in Jesus’ prayer, Christians are led by Luther’s words into personal, down-to-earth prayer. It is not enough to know *about* God nor even to enter into the heart *of* God. In prayer, believers, who belong to Christ and are in union with Christ, reenter the daily dying and rising with Christ that is the staple of their spirituality.

Thanksgiving, of course, is the doorway of Luther’s prayer, both morning and evening, reflecting especially upon protection. One is reminded again of all that is so ordinary: the things that could have gone wrong that didn’t, the things we worried about that thereby wasted our time and warped our spirit. Thanksgiving, being response to God’s initiative, is always baptismal spirituality.

I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today, and I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.⁴

The Evening Prayer models and enacts the dying and rising pattern of our lives. Luther prays God “to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong.” The ways that Christians have missed the mark, whether through omission or commis-

⁴Ibid., 364.

sion, need to come to an end, be forgiven, and die. How the past holds and binds us! How we are gripped by sin, either by never letting it go or by never acknowledging it. Here, however, is just the straightforward confession—no dwelling on sin, no detailing of it. Here is Luther's typical unselfconscious faith that focuses on Christ alone and, in that very focus, becomes death to sin. In the very next sentence, the future becomes the focus: protection during the coming night, recognition of being in God's hands, safety from evil's powers. The past is forgiven. The future is in God's hands. Clearly, rising—be it in the morning or in the resurrection of the dead—is in God's hands.

I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me through this night from all harm and danger, and I ask you that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you completely. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.⁵

Luther's Morning Prayer has an expanded thanksgiving for protection through the night just past. One might expect this, since that protection was a granted request. The dying and rising takes a different shape in this prayer, for Luther is fully aware of all the ways our human "thoughts, words, and deeds"⁶ can be caught up in sin and evil. Consequently, Christians are not directed to pray to be just a little better than yesterday. Rather, they are directed to pray that everything "please you [our heavenly Father] completely." That sounds like death, being tossed back on the mercy of Christ, for what do we do that pleases God completely—especially after we have pridefully convinced ourselves that we have pleased God!

After singing a hymn perhaps (for example, one on the Ten Commandments) or whatever else may serve your devotion, you are to go to your work joyfully.⁷

The actual formation of Christ in Christians' lives, our rising in Christ, may again be anticipated in Luther's prayer, but the singing of the hymn that follows is the way Christians praise God for the new life in Christ. The fact that Luther may be considering the shape of this life set free in Christ is indicated by his suggestion that the hymn be "one on the Ten Commandments."

VI. DOING THE DYING AND RISING

Unless we engage the last line of Luther's full orders of prayer, I would contend, we still may miss the point. In the Evening Prayer, he simply concludes,

⁵Ibid., 363.

⁶"Thoughts, words, and deeds" is the familiar phrase used in the 1959 *Book of Concord* edited by Theodore Tappert (p. 352) and in Responsive Prayer 1 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (p. 163). *The Book of Concord* of 2000 translates Luther's "mein Tun and Leben" as "my life and actions" (p. 363).

⁷"The Small Catechism," 363.

“Then you are to go to sleep quickly and cheerfully.”⁸ In those simple words we find the practice of the whole order of prayer, for here Christians actually practice dying! The time after prayer is not the time to do one more thing, to lie awake over a troubling sin, or to worry about tomorrow. Now, after commendation to the hands of God, it is time to die. That is, it is time to trust the Father of Jesus, to allow to perish the old self’s managing of the world’s problems, and to fall asleep. Period.

The Evening Prayer is a marvelous example of baptismal spirituality not only because it recalls great baptismal themes, but even more because it calls forth the dying and rising with Christ that is foundational to life. Simply falling asleep in peace is real dying for the old self, who is never done with the world, who is sure that God cannot handle it alone. Every aspect of life, every vocation to which we are called, will have its own kinds of dying. In fact, Luther was so sure of this that he said Christians would not need to seek opportunities to die. They would be provided them aplenty.

Morning Prayer ends on a different note, of course: specifically, that “you are to go to your work joyfully.”⁹ In baptism, every Christian receives a calling into a life that is being formed by Christ and his Spirit in kindness, patience, gentleness, courage, and much more. Work is the exercise of part of that calling, though by no means all of it. To go to work may require, at least on certain days, a dying to self. In other words, Christians might rather stay in bed or go fishing, but instead, they arise to repair engines and prepare food and thereby the neighbor is served. A dying may have occurred, even a rising in Christ, however much the world may only see the same old person.

To go to work “joyfully” often is a challenge, but beneath that word the believer recognizes a promise larger than human emotions and personalities. Joy is the proper note sounded by Christians who know the deep and powerful truth that, in Christ, our dying is turned into rising. This joy is not a bubbly or giddy delight that “everything is wonderful,” but an abiding in the confidence that Christ will have the day no matter what unique turns it may take.

VII. A TIMELY SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality of Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers is not a remote and pious relic of the past, but a model addressing the hunger of people, even Christians, yearning for an authentic life with God. The path to truth is not found in a new amalgam of spiritual truths from many sources, put together by either individual whim or wisdom, but in deep immersion in unique and particular faith. Here that particular is a Christian practice lived out knowledgeably and faithfully. The spiritually hungry persons who immerse themselves in Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers stand to gain many things:

- a participation in the mystery of the holy and Triune God

⁸Ibid., 364.

⁹Ibid., 363.

- an involvement of the physical body as well as the spirit
- a sense of belonging both to God and to God's people
- a life rooted in stories of God and people
- a recovered intimacy in praying the Lord's Prayer with Jesus
- a uniquely personal trust in dying and rising
- an authenticity of faith experience.

The point of this short list, created in a dialog with my readings about the spiritual hungers of our time and attempts to meet them, is not to accommodate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the marketplace, but to underline the truth that the church possesses resources for effective ministry that we simply have not used. One of these resources, Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers, echoes a baptismal spirituality as rich and powerful as the sacrament to which I have indicated it is connected. Ministers—especially, but not only, Lutheran ones—can offer this to congregations, to individuals, and to families as a solid spiritual resource for regular practice. We need to renew its practice, because it connects us with faith's primordial experience: dying and rising, becoming a new creation in Christ. In a time when people hunger for adventure, openness, stability, relationship, and the new and novel in many and varying ways, these prayers of Martin Luther deserve a recommendation for the journey. ⊕

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