



# Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation<sup>1</sup>

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*In Memory of Heiko A. Oberman<sup>2</sup>*

## I. A CONSENSUS

**I**N THE CONTEXT OF THE REFORM MOVEMENTS OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE, most scholars interpret Martin Luther's interest in catechesis from the standpoint of his academic theology. In this regard, the Lutheran reform proposal began in a university setting with the call for a scholarly debate about indulgences. Questions were raised and church officials and theologians got involved. Disagreements became heated and polemics raged at the highest academic and ecclesiastical levels. When these technical and scholarly issues made their way to the streets, the western church was torn asunder. Parish education is thus seen as a way for Luther to translate the controversies in which he found himself embroiled into terms that illiterate lay folks could understand. In late 1528, when the reformer served as a

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revision and synthesis of papers presented at three academic meetings: "Luther and Prayer" at the Upper Midwest Regional American Academy of Religion Meeting at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota (spring 2001), "Luther's Catechetical Strategy" at the Triennial International Meeting of the Frühe Neuzeit Interdisziplinär at Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (spring 2001), and "The 'Heart' in Luther's Theology" at the Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference, Denver, Colorado (fall 2001).

<sup>2</sup>In the spring of 2000, Professor Oberman invited me to address the topic of catechetical strategies in the Lutheran Reformation at the then upcoming Frühe Neuzeit Interdisziplinär. His illness and untimely death in April, 2001, however, prevented him from attending that meeting. Through his work and his personal support, he exercised an important influence on my scholarly life, for which I remain profoundly grateful. *Requiescat in pace.*

*For Martin Luther, the reformation was about how the church prays. The emphasis on prayer in the context of catechetical instruction is the heart of Luther's reformation theology.*

“visitor” to evangelical parishes in Saxony, he saw that this translation effort was not working very well, if at all. Luther was appalled by what he called the “deplorable, wretched deprivation” of knowledge with respect to the basics of Christian teaching (i.e., “the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments”).<sup>3</sup> He then published his small and large catechisms in 1529,<sup>4</sup> so this scenario goes, to address the ignorance he had encountered during those visitations of the late 1520s.

## II. A REVISION

Such an account of the Lutheran Reformation, however, misses the heart in Luther’s theology and his overall reformation program. This conventional depiction does not accurately place the catechism in its original historical or documentary context. Luther’s initial reform activity did not take place in the lecture hall, but in the parish hall. The catechism of 1529 was part of the reformer’s long-standing attempt to reform the educational practices in the congregations of his day. Indeed, Luther’s catechetical initiative began early in his career and continued well beyond the publication of the catechism. Before, during, and after the biggest events of what we have come to call the “Reformation,” Luther set out to reform catechesis. Throughout his adult life, he wrote and revised and published catechetical works. The reformer made sure that these kinds of educational resources were available to the church. At the heart of the Lutheran Reformation was catechesis— theological education for all people.

And this heart of the Lutheran Reformation beats with two chambers. In addition to the informational dimension of the Lutheran reform of catechesis, there is a second, intimately related aspect of Luther’s reform strategy. This aspect of Luther’s work has likewise been neglected or devalued by common interpretations of Luther’s life and work. In addition to the educational content of Lutheran catechesis, there is an experiential and practical aspect. This other chamber of the heart in Luther’s theology cannot be separated from the informational dimension of the catechism. The second chamber is the emphasis on the interplay between theology and practice, between ideas and ritual. Specifically, Luther sought to reform how the church prays. For Luther, the act of Christian prayer “enacts” doctrine, just as doctrine “informs” prayer.<sup>5</sup> They are inseparable in Luther’s understanding of catechesis. Indeed, for Luther, informed prayer is the goal or purpose of catechesis.

## III. THE SOURCES

From his earliest public statements and writings onward, Luther makes a

<sup>3</sup>Luther’s Preface to “The Small Catechism” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 347. Hereafter, SC.

<sup>4</sup>For our purposes here, these two catechisms of 1529 make up the “catechism.”

<sup>5</sup>Martha Ellen Storz, “Practicing Christians,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 57. Storz also notes Reinhard Hütter’s work, which “regards practices ‘as the other side of dogma’” (ibid.).

strategic move to integrate instruction in the basics of Christian doctrine with the basics of Christian prayer.<sup>6</sup> There is an early and sustained theological connection between catechesis and prayer in Luther's reformation program. For example, already in October of 1516, fully a year before he posted the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther preached on the Lord's Prayer and published both a Latin and German exposition of it.<sup>7</sup> The reformer returned to this theme again five months later, when he preached a series on the Lord's Prayer during Lent of 1517. These sermons were transcribed and published by Johann Agricola in early 1518.<sup>8</sup> Luther, however, was dissatisfied with Agricola's version and he urged Nicholas von Amsdorf to revise it. Luther was apparently so intent on providing an accurate edition of his work on prayer, however, that the reformer preempted Amsdorf's work and reworked those 1517 sermons himself, publishing his *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* in April of 1519.<sup>9</sup> In between he preached another series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer in December, 1518, for children and "simple lay people."<sup>10</sup> He then "wrote two additional explanations of the Lord's Prayer" in early 1519, and in May he preached on prayer once again.<sup>11</sup> This homiletical and literary focus on prayer in the early reformation led to the publication, in May, 1520, of *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, a Short Form of the Creed, a Short Form of the Lord's Prayer*.<sup>12</sup> Even during the tumultuous late teens of the 1500s, Luther focused his reformatory efforts on the theme of prayer—and specifically on the Lord's Prayer—a text that was to become one of the chief parts of the catechism.

Beyond these early works, three writings in particular emerge as programmatic in Luther's mission to use catechesis to reform the prayer life of the church: the 1522 *Personal Prayer Book*,<sup>13</sup> the 1529 catechism, and the 1535 treatise, *A Simple Way to Pray for a Good Friend*.<sup>14</sup> When these three additional documents are interpreted together as part of Luther's overall reformation strategy, catechesis and prayer can be seen as the "heart" in Luther's theology.<sup>15</sup>

Luther clearly wrote *Personal Prayer Book* with an eye toward reforming late medieval books on prayer, which had been quite popular among those whom Mar-

<sup>6</sup>Gottfried Krodel has catalogued Luther's catechetical work up to mid-1520s. Gottfried Krodel, "Luther's Work in the Catechism in the Context of Late Medieval Catechetical Literature," *Concordia Journal* 25/4 (1999) 364-404.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 372.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>In *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986) 42:15-81. Hereafter, *LW*.

<sup>10</sup>Krodel, "Luther's Work," 373.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>In *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-1980) 7:204-229. Hereafter, *WA*.

<sup>13</sup>*LW* 43:5-45; "Betbüchlein" (1522), *WA* 10/2:339-406.

<sup>14</sup>*LW* 43:187-211; "Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund," *WA* 38:351-375.

<sup>15</sup>For some reason mainline Luther and reformation scholarship have tended to miss this practical dimension of Luther's reformation program. It is as if scholars have not seen what seems, from this vantage point, to be rather obvious in the sources.

tin Bertram calls the “devout and literate.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Luther wrote this in the cover letter he published with this 1522 document:

These [medieval prayer] books need a thorough reformation if not total extermination....But I just don't have the time to undertake such a reformation; it is too much for me alone. So until God gives me more time and grace, I will limit myself to the exhortation in this book. To begin with, I offer this simple Christian form of prayer and mirror for recognizing sin, based on the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments.<sup>17</sup>

It is ironic, perhaps, that the “thorough reformation” which Luther thought he did “not have the time to undertake in 1522,” was to become his life's work.

In his *Personal Prayer Book*, Luther reused the structure and main content of his 1520 *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*,<sup>18</sup> as the title of the short form displays the outline of *Personal Prayer Book*. Clearly this document is a catechism of sorts—a conclusion further attested to by the way he reuses the structure and content of *Personal Prayer Book* in the 1525 *Booklet for Laity and Children*<sup>19</sup> as well as in the 1529 catechism.

And this structure is important for Luther. In the preface to *Personal Prayer Book*, Luther explains his rationale:

Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself to be a sinful and wicked person. The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine—grace—which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments everything will be given him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible.<sup>20</sup>

*Personal Prayer Book* was widely popular. It went through nine editions in 1522 alone. It was reprinted four times in both 1523 and 1524, twice in 1525, and once each year through 1530.<sup>21</sup> It is vital to our understanding of Luther's reform proposal and methodology that we see what he has done here. Luther puts catechetical material into a prayer book. Put another way, Luther puts prayer as the core feature of catechetical material. Certainly by 1522, for Luther catechesis and prayer are inseparable—like two chambers of a single heart working together to give life to his understanding of evangelical theology.

This inseparability shows up again in 1535, when Luther published *A Simple*

<sup>16</sup>LW 43:5. Bertram is the editor and translator of *Personal Prayer Book* in LW 43.

<sup>17</sup>LW 43:12; WA 10/2:339-406.

<sup>18</sup>Krodel, “Luther's Work,” 373.

<sup>19</sup>Timothy Wengert calls this booklet “an important forerunner” to the Small Catechism, in the introduction to his translation of the *Booklet* in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 2.

<sup>20</sup>LW 43:14.

<sup>21</sup>Bertram in LW 43:7.

*Way to Pray for a Good Friend*. This work was a public response to his barber, Peter Beskendorf, who had asked Luther for advice on how to pray. *A Simple Way to Pray* is essentially an explanation of how Luther himself prays the catechism. In this document, he makes use of the same basic texts that were the primary content of the short form, picked up in *Personal Prayer Book* in 1522 and reused in the catechism of 1529: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and Lord's Prayer.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to making an inseparable connection between parish-based theological study and prayer, *A Simple Way to Pray* offers three pieces of practical guidance about how to pray (i.e., how to use the catechism most effectively). One cannot help but be struck by the specificity of Luther's instruction here. It is as if the reformer presents this material with a first-hand knowledge of the subject at hand. First, he encourages Peter to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Luther does not offer the model prayers of this book as examples to be followed word-by-word; the prayers are simply suggestive of how any particular Christian might pray at any given time. Each individual, as he or she engages in the practice of prayer suggested by Luther, ought to be open to the Holy Spirit. Luther writes, "[I]f in the midst of such [prayer] the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can."<sup>23</sup>

Second, Luther offers some specific practical tips about the posture and method of prayer. He writes, "[K]neel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven and speak or think...as you can."<sup>24</sup> The reformer seems more interested in furthering the relational dimensions of Peter's faith in God than making sure the barber follows a prescribed pattern. This is why Luther encourages his student to "speak or think...as you can."

Third, Luther even recommends the best time of day to pray:

It is a good thing to let prayer be the first business of the morning and the last at night. Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas, which tell you, "Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that." Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs, which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.<sup>25</sup>

In *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther uses the catechism of 1529, as he turns the various parts into prayers. For Luther, the content of catechesis is also the content of Christian prayer. Ultimately, then, the primary goal of catechesis is to instruct Christians in the basics of prayer.

From Luther's perspective, prayer is the response of the faithful to the relationship initiated by God in Jesus Christ. This relational dimension of Luther's understanding of prayer is evident in the metaphors the reformer uses to describe

<sup>22</sup>Krodel, "Luther's Work," 374.

<sup>23</sup>LW 43:201-202.

<sup>24</sup>LW 43:194.

<sup>25</sup>LW 34:193.

prayer, the majority of which are personal in character. For example: God is the physician, the believer is the patient; God is the King, the believer is the subject; God is the groom, the believer is the bride; and, preeminently, God is Heavenly Father, the believer is child. With this in mind, Luther apparently sought to reach at least two interrelated goals with respect to his catechetical emphasis on prayer. His first goal was to teach believers about the one to whom they were to pray. This goal would involve a proper theological understanding of the basics of Christian theology, summarized in the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

Second, Luther taught believers what and how to pray. He therefore chose a catechetical strategy that delineated the basics of theology in a manner that could be grasped by what he called "the simple laity"<sup>26</sup>—and had informed prayer as its end result. This emphasis, evident throughout Luther's life and career,<sup>27</sup> led him to develop a catechetical approach that stressed a vital interplay between theology and piety.

For Luther, catechetical instruction was intended to communicate more than mere intellectual knowledge or right information about God. He also sought to assist the student with the practice of prayer as a fundamental feature of the Christian life. This emphasis on prayer in the context of Lutheran catechetical instruction is the heart of Luther's reformation theology.

For Martin Luther, the reformation was about how the church prays. And in this connection, the primary goal of catechesis was to teach believers to pray. Luther sought to instruct parishioners regarding the one to whom they were to pray, to know what to pray, and to know how to pray. In order to attain this goal, he developed a rather unique educational strategy. Both this goal and the strategy used by Luther to reach it are at the theological core of the Lutheran Reformation. Indeed, a, if not *the*, distinctive feature of the Lutheran Reformation program is its consistent emphasis on reforming the way Christians pray. ☩

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<sup>26</sup>"Die einfältigen Laien." See note 9 and WA 2:74-130.

<sup>27</sup>See my essay, "Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther's Theology," in *Let Christ Be Christ: Theology, Ethics, and World Religions in the Two Kingdoms*, ed. Daniel Harmelink (Huntington Beach, CA: Tentatio, 1999) 293ff.