

# "Praying with the 16th Century Reformers"<sup>1</sup>

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How does one learn to pray? What are the biblical and theological foundations of prayer to be discovered in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*? What is the content of prayer, according to Luther? These questions originate in the request of the disciples who asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray . . . "

This paper is a study of the biblical and theological foundations and pedagogy of prayer to be found in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*. In addition to Luther's pedagogy and instruction on how to pray, which includes thirteen "Christian prayer exercises," the contribution to the literature on prayer by such 16th century notables as Philip Melancthon, John Calvin, Archbishop Thomas Cramner and Thomas Becon<sup>2</sup> is acknowledged, though insufficiently, I regret to say.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspiration for this paper comes from reading a remarkable essay by Clyde Leonard Manschreck, "The Meaning of Prayer for the Reformers." The original essay was included with a selection of prayers for all times and seasons of the 16th century Reformation as the conclusion of *Prayers of the Reformers*, compiled by Manschreck. The book of selected prayers and Manschreck's essay was published by Muhlenberg Press, 1958.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Becon (c. 1513-1567) is not a well-known figure in Reformation history. A native of Norfolk, Becon was educated at Cambridge, perhaps at St. John's College. He studied with Hugh Latimer, and was ordained a priest in 1533. About 1540, he was arrested for preaching Protestant doctrines a Norwich, and forced to recant.

He retired to Kent, but began an active writing career, taking the name of Theodore Basille. The succession of King Edward VI (1547) brought him an appointment as Chaplain to the Lord Protector. He was made by Archbishop Thomas Cramner one of the Six Preachers of Canterbury, and was a chaplain of Cramner's own household. During this time Becon was invited to contribute to the "Book of Homilies." Under King Henry VIII, the Six Preachers were commissioned to represent the new learning, that is, Protestant teachings.

Unfortunately, with the accession of Queen Mary (1553), he was expelled, and went to Strasbourg (1554) and later to Frankfurt (1555). From 1556 to 1559, he appears to have taught at Marburg University. After that date, he returned to England soon after the accession of Elizabeth I, and was installed as Canon of Canterbury Cathedral in 1559. In his last years, Becon held a succession of benefices.

His writings enjoyed a wide popularity. When he began to write, his writing "was moderate in tone, devotional in intent, and much under Lutheran influence." During and after his exile, a Zwinglian note enters his work. He appears as willing to compromise on less important points, perhaps under the influence of Cramner.

For information on Thomas Becon, I acknowledge my debt to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F.L. Cross. London: Oxford University Press, 1958,147.

However, while the focus of this study remains on the prayers of the Reformers, nevertheless, based on Luther's teaching about how one learns to pray, is foundational for reading, thinking and praying the prayers of the Reformers of the 16th century.

The reason for studying Luther's teaching on how to learn to pray is simple: Luther's pastoral interest was to instruct adults and children on the biblical and theological foundations of faith. Furthermore, it was Luther's strong belief and contention that old and young should learn thoroughly the sound principles of prayer. Why?

He wanted them to offer prayers that would be at once biblically and theologically sound whether the prayers were said in private or within the family or during the worship of the church.

In order to achieve this commendable pedagogical and devotional goal, Luther mined the great treasury of Christian devotion and prayer, some from Early Church and even the Middle Ages until he came to this time in the 16th century.

Luther, consistent with his understanding of Scripture and prayer, often edited prayers taken from many sources. But Luther's editing of the material was conservative and not innovative for innovation's sake. In the editing process, Luther erased any medieval Roman Catholic reference to the Mass in worship or prayer. As a former Augustinian monk, trained in theology and a priest of the church, Luther understand the theology behind the sacrifice of the Mass. The idea of sacrifice was to be avoided in Luther's estimation, because it did not reflect the finality of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Luther believed the sacrifice of the Mass was unbiblical.

Indeed, one contribution to the history of Christian prayer and worship of Luther as well as the other Reformers was their insistence on utilizing an ancient and powerful Christian vocabulary, based on scripture. In the process of deploying a thoroughly biblical vocabulary in which to voice their prayers, they reclaimed the concept of faith through scrupulous study of the Scriptures and the early Church fathers and fitted faith for many tasks in Christian life and worship.

In retrospect, one can say they renewed the role of prayer for Christian life and worship. For example, though the Lord's Prayer was a familiar prayer to congregations during the Middle Ages, it was Luther and the other Reformers who renewed the prayer by teaching its meaning phrase-by-phrase in order for the common or ordinary Christian to understand the meaning of the words.

In Luther's case, he situated the Lord's Prayer at the apex of prayer and catechism, using it as a teaching model. It also became a model prayer in explaining the catechism, in observing home devotion, during worship and whenever and wherever one prayed. As we shall see later, the solitary Christian, as in the case of Master Peter, his barber, could learn to pray but

Luther did not encourage exclusively individual prayer. That must be borne in mind.

Quite surprising, though we separated by almost 500 years in time, many of the prayers of the Reformers, and the doctrinal basis that supports those prayers, remain relevant for 21st century Christians, because the prayers are biblical and touch the heart of theological subjects and identify human aspirations and needs.

Of course, minor changes in words or phrasing may be necessary, but the essential biblical vocabulary and theological concepts abiding in the words and guidance contained in the prayers are, or remain almost common currency among contemporary Evangelical Christians, who hold the Bible to be the Word of God. The Reformers' cry at every turn was *ad fontes* ("back to the sources"). And that should be our cry, too.

Therefore, how does one learn to pray? What are the biblical and theological foundations of prayer to be found in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*? And, finally, what is the content of prayer?

First, how does one learn to pray?

In the Forward of *Dr. Martin Luthers kleiner Katechismus mit Erklarung* (1529) or the *Small Catechism*, Luther speaks directly and firmly regarding the pattern of prayer and the formation of a Christian life. Luther states univocally,

Prayer, belief [doctrine], "Our Father" [Lord's Prayer], baptism and Lord's Supper are given to us, that our sin, O Mankind, shall be known and [we] learn well as [we] shall move [or know what is] right.<sup>3</sup>

Luther further explains, "The five [chief] parts covering the whole of Christian doctrine"<sup>4</sup> - prayer, doctrine, Lord's Prayer, Sacraments of Baptism and Altar - - are indispensable in the formation of a life of prayer.

But one may ask, What is the role of faith in learning how to pray? Indeed, does Luther's bold rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by

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<sup>3</sup> From the Foreward of *Dr. Martin Luthers . . . 7*. In connection with a study of *Luther's Small Catechism*, I recommend interested and serious readers find M. Reu's *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*. It is guided by the author's conviction that "any explanation of *Luther's Small Catechism* should merely lead the pupil into the wealth of evangelical truth contained in the Reformer's own words." See M. Reu, *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*. Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1943 [5th printing], 3.

<sup>4</sup> Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms*. Saint Louis: Concordia Academic Books, 2000. Arand's estimation of the importance of Luther's catechism is correct. "The simplicity of the *Small Catechism's* language and the brevity of its words may initially conceal from the catechumen the profound world of thought that lies within. Like a small inlet of water that leads to the ocean, so Luther's catechism opens up the entire world of biblical thought. The doctrine of faith, far from being an isolated teaching limited to the article on salvation, provides the key for centering the Christian life upon all the gifts of God in every sphere of human life. In doing so, it becomes the narrative theme of Christian existence and living." *Ibid.*, 183.

faith, transmitted through his reading of the Apostle Paul and Augustine (354-430 A.D.), possess any relevance for prayer or perform any indispensable function in Luther's theology of prayer?

The answer is, Yes. The doctrine of justification by faith in Luther is decisive for his understanding of prayer and in the formation of the Christian life. But Luther's understanding of justification by faith has implications for worship and its conduct and for prayer, too.

The other Reformers joined Luther in the affirming the Reformation definition of faith and they saw implications of the doctrine of justification by faith for development of a doctrine of prayer.

Charles P. Arand has drawn the different understanding of the role of faith in the writings of the Reformers and the Roman Catholic theologians of medieval Christendom most helpfully.

Arand, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and chairman of the department of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary and a former pastor, discusses the role of faith in Luther's theology and its wider implications for prayer and contrasts Luther's understanding with the prevailing Roman Catholic understanding.

Arand writes,

Luther's focus on faith signaled a paradigm shift<sup>5</sup> for the Christian view of life. The Middle Ages regarded faith as an important component of faith of the Christian life, but would never put it at the center. At best, faith was seen as knowledge of history and its events. Faith alone was only an initial intellectual assent to the data of revelation made by one who was still far from pure and godly. "*Sola fides*, all agreed, was a *fides informis*, even a *fides mortua* - - an unformed, dead faith which even the demons could have . . . Love, not faith, was the religious glue."<sup>6</sup> Faith as historical knowledge could not provide confidence of salvation.

Dietrich Kolde's catechism provides an excellent example of the uncertainty that had been considered essential. In the conclusion of his *Mirror of a Christian Man*,<sup>7</sup> Kolde writes, "There a three things I know to be true that frequently makes my heart heavy. The first troubles my spirit, because I have to die. The second troubles my heart more, because I do not

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 183. Arand's definition of a paradigm is this: "A paradigm is the conceptual framework, presuppositions, or underlying pillars of a person's point of view of the world so firmly in place that a person doesn't have to think about it. The catechism is an excellent summary of the paradigm shift that took place in the Reformation."

<sup>6</sup> Steven E. Ozment, *Age of Reform: an Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*. New Haven: Yale University, 242.

<sup>7</sup> This manual was printed in 1470, and was one of many manuals in use in the Roman Catholic Church in Germany during this time.

know when. The third troubles me above all. *I do not know where I will go* [Italics added]."<sup>8</sup>

Arand continues,

The reason for this uncertainty was that life was anything but certain. Fellowship with God could only happen when the sinner becomes 'like God' since God cannot have fellowship with the unrighteous. This is based on the premise that like attracts like. Since God is love, human beings must become like God, that is, love. Ozment has pointed out that for the medieval theologian the central religious concept was '*caritas* - - love - - not faith.'"

But for this to happen, the heart must be purified through love,<sup>9</sup> and this could only be through the habitual practice of love. And so salvation was a process that took place '*within* us as we perfect ourselves.'<sup>10</sup> Thus the answer given to the uncertainty expressed by Kolde was 'When I doubt, try harder!' Ironically, though, that answer was at the same time the cause of much anxiety, because it raises the question, 'Have I done my best?'

Luther makes faith the central theme of the catechism because he identifies it as the locus of our relationship with God. This is due to his radically different understanding of faith from the way the Middle Ages understood it. Faith is no longer conceived merely in terms of intellectual knowledge. Faith is instead defined as the reception of God's gifts.

Furthermore, as Arand explains:

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<sup>8</sup>Arand, op. cit., 148-149. Original citation to be found in Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran*. New York: Edward Mellin Press, 1982, 127.

<sup>9</sup>Arand, op. cit., 149. Original citation and comment in Ozment: "Ozment notes that Luther was criticized for permitting 'a foul and dirty bride to enter spiritual matrimony with Christ. When faith and trust alone are the agents of union, righteousness and iniquity intermingle and embrace. The man who is still *peccator in re* [sometimes in sin] becomes one with Christ.'" Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Viator: Luther and Late Medieval Theology*, in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*. Ed. with introduction by Steven E. Ozment. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971, 151.

<sup>10</sup>Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 63

Luther announces this new definition of faith in his Short Form of 1520. In his introduction to the Creed, he distinguishes between believing something *about* God and believing in God. He calls the former *Wissenschaft* (cognition, knowledge, scholarship) or *Merkung* (observation, taking notice of something, maybe even memorizing). The latter by contrast involves not only believing that what the Creed says about God is true, but it means to trust and 'without any doubt believe God will be to me . . . as it is being said' he will be. In other words, faith trusts that God is my Father and acts toward me as a father acts. It means to trust that God is our Father regardless of the external circumstances in which I may find myself -- regardless whether I live or die.<sup>11</sup>

If Arand's interpretation of Luther is correct, and I believe it is, then, Luther's definition of faith becomes decisive for his understanding of prayer, too. The clearest exposition of faith and prayer is to be found in the *Small Catechism*. This assertion leads to the second question, namely, "What are the biblical and theological premises of Luther concerning prayer?"

In Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* (1529),<sup>12</sup> the Reformer demonstrates how learning to pray requires the discipline of regular prayer, an organized mind and a sense of order in the teaching the catechism in the formation of a Christian. The goal of learning to pray is not only the formation of a Christian but a Christian who will live a life of authentic faith and prays several times each day.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 149. (1) Quotation from Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*. New Haven: Yale University, 1980, 242.

With respect to Luther's and the other Reformers' understanding of faith, one late 20th century Roman Catholic evaluation of Luther is worth quoting. "In Luther," the writer of the essay in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "were clearly reflected the two central themes of the Reformation: the renovation of the fundamental message of the gospel and the establishment of a more practical means of presenting it." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, VIII. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, 1091.

<sup>12</sup> *Dr. Martin Luthers kleiner Katechismus mit Erklärung (1529)*, pp. 172-177. I confess that I am a novice in learning Luther's Small Catechism. However, any person who spends time with Luther's Small Catechism will benefit immensely. I urge readers to spend time with Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms*. Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 2000.

In this important work, Arand, who has spent many years to reading and thinking about the role of the *Small* and *Large Catechism*, demonstrates these catechisms have played such an important role in the development of and maturation of Christians. The nuggets of insight Arand offers cause the pure gold of Luther's Small Catechism to the surface and tumble along the rippling stream of theology. Any wise prospector, who intentionally pans for theological gold, will be amply rewarded with a "poke" of pure gold if he reads Luther's *Small Catechism*. The *Large Catechism* is merely an expansion of the *Small Catechism*.

But discipline, an organized mind and a sense of order in the teaching of the catechism are only beneficial if one is prepared to build a life of prayer on the foundations of the Scripture and the hearing of the Gospel or the Word of God.

Because Scripture and the Gospel or the Word of God are formative for Luther, he naturally speaks to the substance of learning how to pray in a section of the *Small Catechism*, the "Christliche Gebetsübung" ("Christian prayer exercises"). But this section comes toward the end of the *Small Catechism*, as one would expect, but the first order of business is to understand what Luther teaches about prayer. A catechumen must master the essential sections of the *Small Catechism* in order to learn to pray well.

In the First Book of the *Small Catechism*, Luther presents in this order the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Altar (Lord's Supper). This is the short form. It acts as a first round, an introduction to what follows, and is the first Main Point.

In the Second Book or Second Main Point of the *Small Catechism*, Luther plunges the reader or communicant into deeper water where the communicant learns to swim in the biblical and theological waters. These deeper waters become the foundation for belief and prayer. As in the First Book, in the Second Book, Luther restates the questions he originally asked, but in the Second Book, he expands the answers by including more scripture and interpretation. It is in this section, the Second Main Point, Luther sets the pedagogical table with an abundance of meat, milk, potatoes and bread to build strong Christians.

For instance, the meaning of each one of the Ten Commandments, utilizing a question and answer format<sup>13</sup> in order to teach young and old alike, including the household servants or guests the foundation elements of Christian faith.

Once the Ten Commandments have been presented for a second time and strengthened with additional biblical and theological resources,<sup>14</sup> Luther turns to a brief exposition of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed.

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<sup>13</sup> Luther is not the first in church history to utilize the question and answers of catechetical instruction. Even before the Christian era, the Greek philosophical schools used the question and answer method to teach followers their basic tenets. In due course, the early Christian leadership followed the example of the Greek philosophers and instructed Christian communicants in Christian beliefs.

<sup>14</sup> The father of the household (der Hausvater), be he prince or pauper, is expected to lead the family, including wife, children, guests, servants and any who are present, in these daily exercises and rounds of prayer and service. These services are no substitute for the worship in the parish or castle Church. As the father and household work their way through the sections and pages of the *Small Catechism* time and time again, individually and collectively, their understanding of the meaning of the questions and the answers must surely increase.

The three articles of the Apostles' Creed are explained separately, of course, and illustrated by Luther's biblical commentary and theological comments. The Creed is Trinitarian in nature - - God the Father, Jesus Christ the only Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In the article on the Holy Spirit, the Creed also mentions briefly "the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and the life everlasting. Amen."

Now, Luther is prepared to instruct the communicant in prayer, using the Lord's Prayer as a model prayer and a teaching device.

As Luther begins to interpret the Lord's Prayer, he engages the learner with a repetition of - - "Was ist das?" or "What is that?" This little question becomes yet another entrée on the table that offers theological cuisine a la Luther.<sup>15</sup>

After breaking the Lord's Prayer into an address, there follows of seven (7) requests and a closing. The seven requests cite one phrase of the Lord's Prayer, ask the question, "What is that?" and conclude with these words about prayer, according to Luther's teaching.

Then follows a rather detailed explanation of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Altar (Lord's Supper).<sup>16</sup>

A series of prayers are then offered and presumably these prayers, to be offered or said daily, will be learned by heart. Thus, the daily repetition of prayers in the home or in the worship of the church will recall the remembrance of God's grace and mercy and lodge it permanently in the mind and heart of the hearer and believer.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The form of address (die Anrede) is straightforward, "Vater unser, der du bist im Himmel." And for reasons that will become clear, the question prefacing each of the three sections is identical: "Was ist das?" or "What is that?"

Arand suggests the function of "What is that?" does not anticipate an esoteric meaning. Rather the purpose of "Was ist das?" is the answer to the question and the question and its accompanying answer are linked inseparably. Why?

"The question and the answer look backwards and forwards" simultaneously, Arand claims. The word '*Antwort*' indicates that the text which follows (namely, Luther's explanation) is a statement that is not open for discussion.

Luther's 'answer' is less an explanation in the modern sense than a restatement of what was just said. What follows in the text, according to Luther, is intended as the response the catechumen is to give without deviation. By so doing, the response of the catechumen takes on the characteristics of a confession.

<sup>16</sup> The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper play major roles in Luther's theology and pastoral understanding, because he saw them as means of grace. But Luther also claimed preaching, prayer, worship and other resources to strengthen Christian faith was equipment of the saints and means of grace. Until his death in 1546, Luther preached frequently on the meaning of these sacraments, especially the Lord' Supper. Luther preached and taught that the formation of a Christian life required at least weekly and more frequently (if possible) participation in and understanding of the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper and reception of both kinds, that is, bread and wine. See *The Holy Week and Easter Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther*. Translated by Irving L. Sandberg, annotated with an introduction by Timothy J. Wengert. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Teaching the catechism is essential if one expects children and youth to mature or grow up as intelligent Christian folk. But, in Protestantism, we have neglected or ignored the teaching role when it comes to the instruction of children, youth and adults in

The Third Book of the *Small Catechism* opens with a reminder of the grace of God and the Word of Christ. In this section, Luther again rehearses the five main points that he presented earlier in the *Small Catechism*. The five points are, in this order, the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, the holy Baptism and the sacrament of the Altar (Lord's Supper).

Once again, a receptive and responsive communicant is guided through the repetitive five points of Luther's outline. In the process, the communicant is imparted the essential biblical and theological foundations of prayer. The importance of Luther pedagogical method benefits the communicant indirectly but intentionally.

By following Luther's rigid and rigorous method, an eager communicant understands what he or she believes, the foundations of Christian faith and why one prays.

Moreover, Luther's pedagogical strategy is sound. The repetitive nature of the learning the substance of the *Small Catechism*, and the faith it presents, is guided learning toward an end or goal. In the process of teaching catechism, one learns to pray, to worship and to live the pattern of a Christian life by thinking and knowing what ones believes and why and thus this leads to what and how one is to pray.

If one truly understands the message of or perhaps masters the concepts or ideas contained in the *Small Catechism*, section by section,<sup>18</sup>

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the basic fundamentals of the Christian message, and now the consequences are upon us, as the Albert C. Outler explains.

"The sin for which we may not be forgiven (since we are so far unrepentant of it!) is that, in such a time and amidst all the heroic struggles to make the Christian message relevant to a world in convulsion, we have despised, as indoctrination, the task of grounding the people in our churches in the substance of historic Christianity. It could scarcely be more ironic that just when we have come to be so clear and emphatic about the urgency of the Church's 'witness' in and to the world, more and more Christians know less and less about the historic content of that 'witness.' When someone says that traditional Christianity has had it, there is a hearty assent (and book buying!) by people with only the foggiest notion of what it is they are 'discarding.' And so they are more and more inclined to the thesis that, in the beginning, man created God to serve the human cause." Albert C. Outler, *Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Though memorization or rote memorizing is generally believed offensive and generally not recommended in modern educational circles, yet one recognizes the benefits of memorizing scripture, quotations, prayers, psalms, poetry or any worthwhile material has. Learning by rote the multiplication table is a practical and useful exercise. One does not always have a handheld computer or calculator handy and memorization is valuable for two other reasons.

First, as the body and its muscles need exercise, so does the brain and memory.

Second, if Christians expect their young master the catechism by heart, it means those same children will have the opportunity, as adults, to call upon their early training in seasons and times of praise and greatest need.

It is interesting to this reader to note that in the contemporary German edition of *Dr. Martin Luthers kleiner Katechismus mit Erklarung*, "Das Ein mal Eins [One times One]" is printed on the inside page of the back cover.

one is sufficiently prepared to pray and, more importantly, to pray rightly.<sup>19</sup> That, of course, does not mean that one who prays cannot pray well before mastery, but it suggests that if one begins early in life, as Luther did in his humble Roman Catholic home, the life of prayer becomes woven into the fabric of life itself. But there are other resources available to aid in formation of authentic Christian prayer?

Maundy Thursday or Good Friday observance comes to mind as examples that Luther would approve of, because the biblical and historical events, recorded in Scripture, warrant their use.

In the interest of understanding Luther's rationale for including the Christian year or the Church year in learning how to pray, one must listen carefully to Luther's explanation. "The great acts of God," expressed in the days and Sundays of the calendar of the church year, can be deployed to teach one how to pray and instruct one in the substance of prayer, as the "Christliche Gebetsübung" clearly demonstrates.

"Christliche Gebetsübung" or "Christian prayer exercises"<sup>20</sup> consist of thirteen questions and answers that move the communicant toward learning how to pray. In these questions and answers reveal Luther's heart and mind on the subject of prayer.

**Question 1. "Is it also important that we learn the prayers?"**

**Answer 1. "Prayer is necessary; for are by nature not inclined to offer prayer, but prayer is a delicate and holy art of the children of God."**

**Question 2. "How do we learn to pray?"**

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Obviously, contemporary German ecclesiastical authorities believe that memory work or rote learning has value for school and also in mastering Luther's *Small Catechism*. No doubt some clever German lads and lassies continue to learn verbatim the *Small Catechism* even yet, but most students or adults will be content, as Luther foresaw in *The Larger Catechism*, that they would need frequent refresher courses in basic Christian doctrine and instructions in prayer. So Luther prescribed for himself and presumably others who fell into that category of frequent updates that one could read two pages or so each day to brush up on what, why and how one believes the Christian message. The result of reading or memorizing the words of the catechism, so Luther taught, is that it leads to the focus of prayer and becomes, also, another act of devotion in and of itself. The value of prayer and devotion, to say nothing of reading the Bible daily, is that one makes deposits in a memory bank on which one may later draw funds of faith and devotion in times of need or crisis.

Memory work or rote learning, as an old friend once remarked, is like a shaggy dog walking through a cockle-burr patch and getting covered with those cockle-burrs. The late Dr. Stuart Curry, Professor of New Testament, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, contributed this charming thought during a conversation several years ago.

<sup>19</sup> The reader will profit greatly from reading Manschreck's essay, "Praying with the Reformers." The range of prayers in the Reformers' vocabulary of faith is truly astonishing, but hardly surprising, as Manschreck's essay makes clear. The Reformers were learned men whose firm knowledge of scripture and theology supported their conviction and sense of pastoral duty and obligation.

<sup>20</sup> See *Dr. Martin Luther's kleiner Katechismus*, op. cit., 172-174. My translation is rough but adequate enough to get to the heart of Luther's teaching on prayer.

**Answer 2. We learn to pray "through the Holy Spirit, when we let him rule over us; but [our role] however [is] we must live and practice prayer."**

**Question 3. "Where does one learn to prayer and its practice prayer?"**

**Answer 3. "We begin with our desire to pray in our daily life and we must seize fixed orders of prayer" in order to learn to pray.**

**Question 4. "Where do we learn these fixed orders of prayer?"**

**Answer 4. "In the morning and evening prayers [and] also in the table prayers of the catechism."**

**Question 5. "How shall we be bound in this training [practice or exercise] in our Christian homes?"**

**Answer 5. "Through the service of God [Gottesdienst] in the home, in which the father of the house daily gathers the family<sup>21</sup> together to make a knowledge of the prayers and the Word of God known, so that they [one and all] are built up into a godly and spiritual dwelling."**

**Question 6. "How does the Church organize all the days [of the year] in a holy order of prayer and exercise in godliness/piety/devoutness?"<sup>22</sup>**

**Answer 6. "She [the Church] divides the day and hallows it by means of the bell calling [the faithful] to prayer, though the Lord's Day and a number of [observances of] the week's<sup>23</sup> worship, the year through the celebration of the Lord's great deeds for our redemption,<sup>24</sup> according to the other days of the ecclesiastical year."**

**Question 7. Luther asks, "What then is the church year?"**

**Answer 7. "It is the procession of the Sunday and Festival days and in the annual observance of the festival days that begin with the First Sunday in Advent [the first of four Sundays before Christmas Day] to the last Sunday of the Festival of the Trinity."<sup>25</sup>**

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<sup>21</sup>Elsewhere in the *Small Catechism*, Luther states those who gather for the prayers in the home include the servants and any houseguests who may be present. Of course, the members of what we call the nuclear family are expected to be present except for illness perhaps, but the father is to lead the prayers or "Gottesdienst" in the home.

<sup>22</sup>I am indebted to Herrn Klaus W. Rubenstrunk, of Fulda, Germany, for this marvelous translation.

<sup>23</sup>The German word is "Andachten." This word means devotions. What did Luther have in mind with these presumably written guides or devotions?

<sup>24</sup>Philip Melancthon's "Rede uber das Gebet" (1522). *Melancthon deutsch* Band II, "Theologie und Kirchenpolitik," Herausgegeben von Michael Beyer, Stefan Rhein und Gunther Wartenberg. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, 1997, pp. 102-115. In conjunction with this question, Melancthon's first point in his essay on prayer is to celebrate the great acts of God in prayer. If one reads just a few prayers of Melancthon, the reader sees what those great acts of God are.

**Question 8. "How is the Church year divided?"**

**Answer 8. "After the high festival of Christmas Day and the Resurrection of the Lord and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit [the Day of Pentecost], which together with the other festivals and the Sundays of the year, these together shape the holy time of the Church year."**

**Question 9. "But how shall we deviate from the laws regarding Sunday and the festival occasions?"**

**Answer 9. "We live under the New Covenant, in which the acts of God in Christ have become our festivals and no one, for conscience sake, may make [or command] us [to] drink or eat, [or worship] as on a New Moon or Sabbath, which is a shadow of the old [covenant], but recall [we are] the Body of Christ [Colossians 2]."**

**Question 10. "What is the meaning of all of this?"**

**Answer 10. Praying "is well done when we have opportunity in all our work and in life to pray and to practice as [God's] people in order to build up ourselves and others and our whole life into a holy life."**

**Question 11. "What do we take as instructions for this?"**

**Answer 11. To accomplish this, we rely on "the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God<sup>26</sup> and since a spirit of pray is in his Church, the Spirit weaves and teaches us in the art of prayer."**

**Question 12. "How shall we learn to pray?"**

**Answer 12. By praying "the Lord's Prayer, that is the Christian foundation and model [for prayer], and also for all times and under all circumstances [and] is a blessing."**

**Question 13. "How shall we prayer according to Christians custom."**

**Answer 13. "The following prayers show how prayer is done."**

**It is at this point, the answer to the third question - - "What does one pray?" - - unfolds in the *Small Catechism*. Luther prescribes a set order of learning how to pray.<sup>27</sup>**

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<sup>25</sup> See *Small Catechism*, "Christliche Gebetsubung," p. 173.

<sup>26</sup> "According to Luther's understanding, the Word of God is not simply to be equated with the written text of the Scriptures, for it goes much deeper than historical description or moral precept. Rather, it is a uniquely life-imparting power, a message communicated to men in whom the Scriptures had become alive. The church, therefore, is for Luther 'not a pen-house but a mouth-house,' in which the living Word is proclaimed." *Luther's Works*, 35 "Word and Sacrament." Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1958, xi. Introduction to Word and Sacrament. The expression "not a pen-house but a mouth-house" is taken from the German original and is listed as WA 10A,2, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Small Catechism*, op. cit., 174.

1. "Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."
2. Creed "I believe . . ."
3. Lord's Prayer.
4. Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer.

At other appropriate times and in addition to morning or evening prayers he commends heartily mealtime prayers. Some of these prayers are printed as Table Prayers,<sup>28</sup> and there are numerous other prayers covering a variety of occasions in which prayer is appropriate. These prayers are scattered throughout his voluminous writings.<sup>29</sup>

What of an adult who comes to the Christian faith? In response to a question from Peter, his barber, Luther explains, "an ordinary person could pray without being disturbed by worldly thoughts and occupations."

Peter, Luther writes, should pray "the Lord's Prayer, read or recite the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed."<sup>30</sup>

Further illumination on praying is offered in this lengthy pastoral letter.

Dear Master Peter: I tell you as best I can what I do personally when I pray. May our dear Lord grant to you and to everybody to do it better than I. Amen.

First, when I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts (for the flesh and devil always impede and obstruct prayer), I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled, and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do.

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 the first hour; first I must attend to this or that." Such thoughts get you away from prayer into

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 175. Table prayers include a prayer before eating and a prayer following the meal.

<sup>29</sup> But Luther was unwilling to prescribe prayers and leave it at that. To learn how to pray rightly and faithfully required for more of him as a pastor than leaving a catechism for reading did. In a conscientious fashion, Luther preached sermons on a variety of practices and subjects that deal with liturgy, worship, prayer, the Lord's Supper, Baptism and other pertinent topics that dealt with the life of his parishioners.

Luther was a preacher, educator, pastor, musician, university professor, prolific writer, talker, conversationalist, letter writer, biblical commentator, a husband, father, confident, and friend to countless hundreds and perhaps thousands.

<sup>30</sup> *Luther's Prayers*, ed. by Herbert F. Brokering. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967, reprint 1994, 41-41.

**other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.**

**It may well be that you have some tasks which are as good or better than prayer, especially in an emergency. There is a saying ascribed to St. Jerome that everything a believer does is prayer and a proverb, "Those who work faithfully pray twice." This can be said because believers fear and honor God in their work and remember the commandment not to wrong anyone, or to try to steal, defraud, or cheat. Such thoughts and such faith undoubtedly transform their work into prayer and a sacrifice of praise.**

**On the other hand it is also true that the work of unbelievers is outright cursing and so those who work faithlessly curse twice. While they do their work their thoughts are occupied with a neglect of God and violation of his law, how to take advantage of their neighbors, how to steal from them and defraud them. What else can such thoughts be but out-and-out curses against God and humanity, which may such persons' work and effort a double curse by which they curse themselves. In the end they are beggars and bunglers. It is of such continual prayer that Christ says in Luke 11, "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17. See Luke 11:9-13), because one must unceasingly guard against sin and wrong-doing, something one cannot do unless one fears God and keeps his commandment in mind, as Psalm 1[:1,2] says, "Blessed are those . . . who meditate on his law day and night."**

**Yet we must be careful not to break the true habit of 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 besets us is not lazy or careless, and our flesh is too ready and eager to win and is disinclined to the spirit of prayer.**

**When your heart has been warmed by the recitation to yourself [of the Ten Commandments, the words of Christ, etc.] and is intent upon the matter, kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven and speak and think as briefly as you can:**

**O heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward you or to pray. But because you have commanded us all to pray and have promised to hear us and through your Son Jesus Christ have taught us both how and what to pray, I**

come to you in obedience to your word, trusting in your gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all saints and Christians on earth as he taught us: Our Father in heaven . . .

In conclusion, the three questions with which the inquiry began -- "How does one learn to pray? What are the biblical and theological foundations of prayer in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*? What is the content of prayer? -- originate in the request of the disciples of Jesus who asked, "Lord, teach us to pray . . . Luther's answer is found in the *Small Catechism*.

Why pray? German Lutheran Pastor Hans P. Ehrenberg answers the question in an essay in *Luther Speaks*.<sup>31</sup> "Luther was a man of prayer because first of all he was a man of faith," Pastor Ehrenberg explains.

How does one learn to pray? As Luther demonstrated in his *Small Catechism*, the pattern of prayer, learning how to pray and the formation of a Christian life hinge on these necessities:

Prayer, belief [doctrine], "Our Father [Lord's Prayer], baptism and Lord's Supper are given to us, that our sin, O Mankind, shall be known and [we] learn well as [we] shall move [or know what is] right.<sup>32</sup>

Luther never thought prayer was an end in itself because he remembered that he was *simul iustus et peccator* ("at once righteous and a sinner"), and so with every man or woman in any century, sixteenth or twenty-first. That is at the center of the human condition.

In light of the human condition, however, Luther and the Reformers of the 16th century discovered prayer to be a means of grace that strengthened the soul for the daily bout with sin.

As Luther observed, each day is a day for repentance and confession, because the human condition is so powerful and so strong that only God can provide the strength necessary to sustain the one who is declared and remains simultaneously both righteous and a sinner.

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This paper and other papers relating to the Reformation of the 16th century may be accessed at this site.

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<sup>31</sup> *Luther Speaks: Essays for the fourth centenary of Martin Luther's death written by a group of Lutheran ministers from North and Central Europe at the present in Great Britain*. London and Redhill: Lutterworth Press, 1947, 41.

<sup>32</sup> See page 3 of this essay for the source.