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—SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, senior minister of First
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Redeemer Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas

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“But if some of the names in the table of contents are already favorites of yours, you will enjoy this book even more. This is a valuable book, and I am very grateful for those whose work made it possible.”

—DON WHITNEY, associate professor of Biblical
Spirituality at The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

TAKING HOLD OF
GOD

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GOD

REFORMED AND PURITAN
PERSPECTIVES ON PRAYER

edited by

Joel R. Beeke
and
Brian G. Najapfour



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With heartfelt appreciation to prayer warriors
around the globe, including

Maurice Roberts from Scotland

Changwon Shu from Korea

Josafá Vasconcelos from Brazil

who have taught me by their example
what it means to take hold of God.

—JRB



With heartfelt appreciation to my dear mother,

Vergilia A. Golez

(also known as Mama Dhel),

for her *unceasing* prayers for me.

—BGN

Preface



Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me.

—ISAIAH 27:5

Take hold of my covenant. —ISAIAH 56:4

*There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up
himself to take hold of thee.*

—ISAIAH 64:7

Imagine that you have been invited into a nobleman's castle in ancient times. As the massive doors swing open before you, an involuntary shiver runs down your spine. You step into great marble halls guarded by strong warriors. But you need not fear: you have an invitation from the lord of the castle, stamped with his personal seal of authentication.

A knight escorts you into the great hall, where the regal lord himself warmly greets you. "Would you like to see my treasury?" he asks. Soon he is leading you into the most secure portion of the castle, hemmed in by massive stone walls. He turns a large iron key and opens a door into inky darkness. For a moment you see nothing. Then your host lights a torch on the wall and you gasp. Before you are hundreds of gold coins in open wooden chests. Silver cups of intricate craftsmanship grace the shelves. Diamonds, rubies, and emeralds shine like stars of many colors. On a table to your left is an ancient sword once used by a great champion to win a historic battle. Here on a stand is the diary of a queen whose courage saved

her nation from destruction. Hanging on the wall is a harp whose strings were once plucked by a famous musician. Your noble friend leads you from one discovery to another, pausing at each to explain its significance. You could spend hours in the treasury of this castle, so rich are its contents.

The church of Jesus Christ has such a treasury. Among its treasures preserved through the ages are the writings of the Reformers and the Puritans, which we would consider to be among the most valuable. Though sometimes forgotten like ancient gold lying in an underground vault, these writings shine with the glory of God in Christ. In this book, we invite you to enter and explore the contribution these writers made to the church's treasury of prayer.

The chief reason we consider the writings of the Reformers and Puritans to be treasures is that they are full of *biblical truth*. The treasures of the church are made of the gold, silver, and precious stones of divine wisdom revealed in the Bible. In a world in bondage to ignorance, error, confusion, and deceit, here is truth from God, and Jesus taught us that this truth will set us free. The truth about Christ is that the glory of God shines in Him with life-changing power. As you read these chapters, notice how much the Reformers and Puritans meditated on the Word of God and incorporated biblical truth into their writings. No wonder their writings are treasured by people who love the Word of God.

Another reason people delight in these old Reformed writers is that their books are rich in their exploration of *spiritual experience*. They do not merely dissect doctrines as a scientist dissects a frog. These men reveled in Scripture as a hungry man delights in bread, butter, and honey. They did not separate the Word from the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit is the life-giver. Again and again, you will find that their books have hands that grab you and feet that carry you to places you have never been before. Biblical doctrine is eminently practical and relevant to life.

Reformed experiential writers are authors in the Reformation tradition whose writings are biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical. These writers were also true men of prayer, who “took

hold of God” in secret and public prayer (Isa. 27:5; 56:4; 64:7). In these pages you will see how Martin Luther led the Reformation on his knees; John Calvin called men into fellowship with God; John Knox explained biblical principles of prayer; William Perkins unfolded the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer; and Anthony Burgess encouraged prayer by pointing to Christ’s mediatorial prayer for us. You will see how John Bunyan stood against formalism in prayer by advocating praying in the Spirit, and how the Puritans rejoiced in the Holy Spirit’s help in prayer. You will be shown how Matthew Henry offered methods for continual prayer that are both biblical and practical, while Thomas Boston linked prayer to our adoption by God, and Jonathan Edwards taught prayer as an experience of the divine Trinity. All together, these men, with the Spirit’s blessing, have much to offer that can make our prayer life more informed, more extensive, more fervent, and more effectual.

So welcome to the Puritan treasury of prayer. Take time to explore the riches of wisdom and insight gathered by our Reformed and Puritan forefathers in Christ, and then avail yourself of these riches as you seek to take hold of God in the way of Christian prayer.



We are grateful to Peter Beck, Michael Haykin, Johnny Serafini, and Stephen Yuille for contributing enlightening chapters to this book. We wish to thank Paul Smalley for his invaluable research and editorial assistance, and Michael Borg for his help on chapters 5 and 9. We also thank Kate DeVries, Annette Gysen, Ray Lanning, Stan McKenzie, and Phyllis Ten Elshof for their editing expertise; Gary and Linda denHollander for their proofreading and typesetting work, and Amy Zevenbergen for the cover design.

May this book whet your appetite to dig more deeply into the church’s treasury by reading the Reformers and Puritans for yourself. Most of all, may it lead us all into deeper communion with the God who hears prayer, to whom all flesh must come (Ps. 65:2), so that God will not have to complain of us, “There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee” (Isa. 64:7).

—Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour

Chapter 1

**Martin Luther on Prayer
and Reformation**

BRIAN G. NAJAPFOUR

Even in the busiest periods of the Reformation Luther averaged two hours of prayer daily.

—ANDREW W. KOSTEN

Not only was Martin Luther (1483–1546) the great Protestant Reformer,¹ he was a great man of prayer as well. As he explains, prayer was foundational for his soul’s well-being: “Prayer includes every pursuit of the soul, in meditation, reading, listening, [and] praying.”² Andrew Kosten suggests that “to know...Luther at his best, one must become acquainted with him as a man of devotion.”³ Thus, to some degree, to study Luther and his theology apart from his spirituality in general and his practice of prayer in particular is to miss the context of his whole personality both as a Reformer and theologian. After showing that prayer is an important key to under-

1. J. A. Morrison, *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer*, rev. and ed. Michael J. McHugh (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Christian Liberty Press, 1994).

2. Martin Luther, “Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 86 (hereafter only *LW* 31:86). I owe this reference to William R. Russell, “Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther’s Theology,” in *Let Christ Be Christ: Theology, Ethics, and World Religions in the Two Kingdoms*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, Calif.: Tentatio Press, 1999), 295.

3. *Devotions and Prayers of Martin Luther*, trans. Andrew W. Kosten (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 5.

standing Luther as a Reformer and theologian, this chapter will address Luther's basic theology of prayer, his trinitarian emphasis in prayer, and his personal prayer life.

Prayer: A Key to Understanding Luther

Prayer and Luther's Reform

The Reformation that Luther began was undertaken against that backdrop of spirituality, particularly of prayer. For example, when he nailed his Ninety-Five Theses (1517) on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, his intent was partly to reform the Roman Catholic Church's view of prayer in relation to indulgences.⁴ In the forty-eighth thesis, he said that the pope had become more interested in people's money than in their prayer.⁵ Likewise, from the eighty-second to the eighty-ninth theses, he questioned that if the pope, through his prayer "for a consideration of money" of the people, could take their loved ones' souls from purgatory to heaven, why did he not just empty purgatory "for pure love's sake"?⁶ Such a question implies that while at this time Luther "did not...yet deny the validity of indulgences or the sacrament of penance out of which they had grown,"⁷ he nonetheless felt something was wrong in the attitude of the church toward prayer.

Therefore, William Russell is not exaggerating when he asserts that "for...Luther, the reformation was about how the church prays." Russell argues, "The emphasis on prayer in the context of catechetical instruction is the heart of Luther's reformation theology."⁸

4. In these theses, "Luther applied his evangelical theology to indulgences.... [However, here] he did not even mention justification by faith..., although the implications of that doctrine are present and were not lost upon his enemies" (Introduction to "Ninety-five Theses," in *LW* 31:19).

5. *LW* 31:29.

6. *LW* 31:32.

7. *LW* 31:19.

8. William R. Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," *Word & World* 22, no. 1 (2002): 49.

Luther's *Small and Large Catechisms* (1529)⁹ were "part of [his]... longstanding attempt to reform the educational practices in the congregations of his day." They were, as far as prayer is concerned, intended not only to inform people about prayer but also to instruct them on how to pray. Luther desired to reform both their doctrine and their practice of prayer because, for him, "the act of Christian prayer 'enacts' doctrine, just as doctrine 'informs' prayer. They are inseparable in Luther's understanding of catechesis."¹⁰

Russell also points out that even before the birth of the Reformation on October 31, 1517, Luther placed an emphasis on prayer in catechesis in his Reformation agenda. "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. The reformer returned to this theme again five months later when he preached a series on the Lord's Prayer during Lent of 1517."¹¹

Moreover, as we can see from his 1529 catechisms, Luther's focus on prayer continued after the Reformation had begun. In December of 1518, Russell notes that "he preached another series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer...for children and 'simple lay people.'"¹² Afterwards, he published his *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* on April of 1519.¹³ Shortly after this publication, he "preached on prayer once again."¹⁴ This was followed by his treatise *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, a Short Form of the Creed, a Short Form of the Lord's Prayer* (May 1520),¹⁵ which "served to replace the Roman prayer book."¹⁶ Two years later came

9. See Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism" and "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 337–57.

10. Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," 50.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *LW* 42:19–81.

14. Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," 51.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Introduction to "Personal Prayer Book," in *LW* 43:6.

his *Personal Prayer Book* (1522),¹⁷ his Reformed version of the old personal prayer books “used in the medieval church for centuries.”¹⁸ In the introduction of this book, Luther notes that these old medieval prayer books “need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination.”¹⁹ He entreats “everyone to break away from using the Bridget prayers²⁰ and any other which are ornamented with indulgences or rewards and urge all to get accustomed to praying this plain, ordinary Christian prayer [The Lord’s Prayer].”²¹ And in 1535, Luther produced his treatise, *A Simple Way to Pray*,²² which “reveals a lifelong use of the catechism...as a daily resource for prayer.”²³

This survey shows that prayer was an essential element of Luther’s reform. Russell observes, “Prayer was the point of the theological reform program he envisioned for the church.”²⁴ “Indeed,” states Russell, “a, if not *the*, distinctive feature of the Lutheran Reformation program is its consistent emphasis on reforming the way Christians pray.”²⁵ Deanna Carr writes, “Friedrich Heiler has said that it was as a man of prayer that Luther became a great reformer and the ‘inaugurator of a new era in the history of Christianity.’”²⁶

17. *LW* 43:11–45.

18. *LW* 43:5.

19. *LW* 43:11–12.

20. “St. Bridget (1303–1373) was a Swedish saint and mystic who was canonized in 1391. Her literary works include four prayers, but in the flowering of legends around her captivating personality, a set of fifteen prayers was ascribed to her and used frequently in the spiritual exercises of the devout. Personal prayer books promised that the Bridget prayers would gain for the user a) the salvation of forty souls of the same sex as the person offering the prayers, b) the conversion of forty sinners, and c) the strengthening of forty-six righteous persons” (*LW* 43:12).

21. *LW* 43:12–13.

22. *LW* 43:193–211.

23. *LW* 43:190.

24. Russell, “Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther’s Theology,” 293.

25. Russell, “Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation,” 54.

26. Deanna Marie Carr, “A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, no. 10 (1971): 629.

Prayer is an important key to understanding Luther as a Reformer. He was a Reformer of prayer.

Prayer and Luther as a Theologian

While prayer is a significant factor for comprehending Luther as a Reformer, it also functions as a framework for interpreting him as a theologian. Russell says, “The theology of...Luther is a theology of prayer.” It is then advisable to approach Luther’s theology with the understanding that he thinks as a theologian of prayer. For Luther, prayer is “a central component of his theological reflections.” When he “considered the intellectual content of the Christian faith, he could not help but include prayer in his deliberations.”²⁷ This point is evident in his 1529 catechisms—Luther’s favorite tool in teaching the basics of Christian belief—which have a section on the Lord’s Prayer, along with the Decalogue and the Apostles’ Creed. In fact, the *Small Catechism* even contains two segments called “Morning and Evening Prayers: How the head of the family shall teach his household to pray morning and evening,” and “Grace at Table: How the head of the family shall teach his household to offer blessing and thanksgiving at table.”²⁸

It is also interesting to note that in his *Small Catechism*, Luther’s exposition of the Lord’s Prayer is sprinkled with prayers. Under the first petition (“Hallowed be Thy name”), Luther asks, “How is this done?” He answers, “When the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as children of God, lead holy lives in accordance with it. *Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!* But whosoever teaches and lives otherwise than as the Word of God teaches, profanes the name of God among us. *From this preserve us, heavenly Father!*”²⁹

Luther’s first published book was *The Seven Penitential Psalms* (1517).³⁰ Russell writes that this work concerns “a viable—and practical—theology of prayer, as expressed in the psalmist’s prayers.” He

27. Russell, “Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther’s Theology,” 293.

28. Luther, “The Small Catechism,” 352–53.

29. *Ibid.*, 346 (italics mine).

30. *LW* 14:ix, 137–205.

cites Gerhard Ebeling, who says that it “provides a key to [Luther’s] entire theology, and so to his literary work as a whole.”³¹ Luther’s other major works on prayer include *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession* (1519)³² and *Appeal for Prayer against the Turks* (1541),³³ which “includes instructions for suitable public worship services and a form for public prayer.”³⁴

As a practical theologian, Luther sought to share his theology in layman’s terms. This interest is best seen in his demonstration of his theology of prayer. Hence came his *Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) and *A Simple Way to Pray for a Good Friend* (1535). In his *Small Catechism*, he reminds his audience that the Lord’s Prayer has to be taught in understandable words: “in the plain form in which the head of the family shall teach it to his household.”³⁵ Carr is thus right to pronounce that “the hallmark of Lutheran prayer would be its simplicity.”³⁶

When Luther was asked to recant his theology at the Diet of Worms in 1521, his famous reply concluded with a short prayer:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, *may God help me, Amen.*³⁷

31. Russell, “Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther’s Theology,” 295.

32. *LW* 42:87–93. Rogation days were days of prayer to receive God’s pardon for sin, protection from danger, and prosperity in harvest.

33. *LW* 43:219–41.

34. *LW* 43:216–17.

35. Luther, “The Small Catechism,” 346.

36. Carr, “A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther,” 623.

37. Luther, “Luther at the Diet of Worms,” in *LW* 32:112–13 (italics mine).

Russell comments that “the way Luther prayed and the many differing circumstances in which he prayed—together with his extensive theological deliberations on prayer—form a comprehensive presentation of the reformer’s theology, in the form that was perhaps most significant to Luther himself.”³⁸

Therefore, for Luther, prayer and theology were woven together. Martin E. Lehmann also concludes, “It is clear that his understanding of prayer can in no way be isolated from the totality of his theology. Indeed, it can be said that prayer is an integral and significant part of his entire theology.”³⁹ Prayer is one important key to knowing Luther as a theologian, as it provides a background for his theology.

Luther’s Theology of Prayer

Having looked at how prayer operates as a key to understanding Luther both as a Reformer and as a theologian, we will now examine his theology of prayer. It must be remembered that Luther was not a systematic theologian. While he had several works on prayer, he did not write a single book or section of a book that could be considered his comprehensive theology of prayer; rather, it is scattered throughout his writings. In this section our aim is to provide an introduction to Luther’s theology of prayer.

The Meaning of Prayer

1. Prayer as a duty.

Before Luther proceeded to explain the Lord’s Prayer in his *Large Catechism*, he first emphasized that “it is our duty to pray.”⁴⁰ Luther understood prayer, first and foremost, as a duty. Prayer is obligatory because “God has commanded it.”⁴¹ Luther attests that “we were

38. Russell, “Prayer: The Practical Focus of Luther’s Theology,” 295.

39. Martin E. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), x.

40. Luther, “The Large Catechism,” 420.

41. *Ibid.*

told in the Second Commandment, 'You shall not take God's name in vain.' Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and pray or call upon it in every need. For to call upon it is nothing else than to pray. Prayer, therefore, is as strictly and solemnly commanded as all other commandments, such as having no other God, not killing, not stealing, etc."⁴²

Here, Luther equates the divine duty to pray with the other duties in the Decalogue. He uses the second commandment to sustain his thesis that prayer is a command. Thus, he could say that not to pray is a sin, just as much as committing murder. The sin of prayerlessness is no less heinous than the sin of adultery. They carry the same weight of criminality, for they both violate God's law. Luther writes, "From the fact that prayer is so urgently commanded, we ought to conclude that we should by no means despise our prayers, but rather prize them highly."⁴³

Similarly, he writes, "Now from the fact that we are so solemnly commanded to pray you must conclude and reason that on no account should anyone despise his prayers. On the contrary, he should think much and highly of them."⁴⁴ The Reformer exhorts his readers further:

You are to look closely at this command and stress it that you do not consider prayer an optional work and act as if it were no sin for you not to pray. You should know that praying is earnestly enjoined, with the threat of God's supreme displeasure and punishment if it is neglected. It is enjoined just as well as the command that you should have no other gods and should not blaspheme and abuse God's name but should confess and preach, laud and praise it.⁴⁵

42. *Ibid.*, 420–21.

43. *Ibid.*, 422.

44. Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1076.

45. *Ibid.*, 1075.

Then he bluntly adds, “He who does not do this [i.e., pray] should know that he is no Christian and does not belong in the kingdom of God.”⁴⁶

2. Prayer as “the hardest work of all.”

For Luther, this command to pray is “the hardest work of all...a labor above all labors, since he who prays must wage a mighty warfare against the doubt and murmuring excited by the faintheartedness and unworthiness we feel within us.”⁴⁷ Luther knew how spiritually demanding it was to pray. He confesses, “There is no greater work than praying.”⁴⁸ Indeed, for him it is even more laborious than preaching: “Prayer is a difficult matter and hard work. It is far more difficult than preaching the Word or performing other official duties in the church. When we are preaching the Word, we are more passive than active; God is speaking through us, and our teaching is His work. This is the reason why it is also very rare.”⁴⁹

Moreover, for Luther, prayer as “the hardest work of all” is “the work of Christians alone; for before we are Christians and believe, we know neither for what nor how we are to pray.”⁵⁰ He emphasizes that unbelievers “cannot pray at all.”⁵¹ He explains,

And even though [an unbeliever] prays most devoutly, the spirit of grace is not there; for the attitude of the heart is simply this: Dear Lord, take into consideration how well I live and how much I suffer; or the merit of this and that saint, the intercession and good works of pious people, etc. There is no faith in the divine grace and mercy through Christ, and the heart always remains uncertain, unable to conclude that it is heard without fail. It wants to deal with God only in the

46. *Ibid.*

47. Cited in Carr, “A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther,” 621–22.

48. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1088.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 1077.

51. *Ibid.*, 1089.

basis of its own or other people's holiness, without Christ, as though God should humble Himself before us and let us actually oblige Him to grant us grace and help and thus become our debtor and servant. This does not merit grace but wrath; it is not praying; it is mocking God.⁵²

3. Prayer as calling upon God's name.

Noteworthy also is Luther's plain perception of prayer. For him, to pray is simply to call upon God's holy name.⁵³ On one occasion, he avouches that "to speak to God means to pray; this is indeed a great glory that the high majesty of heaven should stoop to us poor worms and permit us to open our mouths to him...but it is still more glorious and more precious that he should speak to us and that we should hear him."⁵⁴

Luther argued that prayer is a command on the basis of the second commandment (not taking God's name in vain).⁵⁵ The positive aspect of this law is that God is commanding us to call upon His name accordingly. Or, in Luther's mind, God is requiring us to pray, since calling upon His name is praying to Him. And when we pray or call upon God's name as He requires, His name "is glorified and used to good purpose."⁵⁶

The Motive of Prayer

If one asked Luther why he prayed, his immediate answer would be because it is a command. This is his main motive in prayer: "On this commandment, on which all the saints base their prayer, I too, base

52. *Ibid.*, 1077.

53. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 420.

54. Cited in Carr, "A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther," 622.

55. Unlike the Reformed, Lutherans consider the prohibitions against other gods and against worshiping idols to be one commandment, and they find two commandments under "Thou shalt not covet." Thus the Lutheran second commandment is the Reformed third commandment.

56. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 421.

mine.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, he adds, “Let this be the first and most necessary point to consider: All our prayers must be based and rest on obedience to God, regardless of our person, whether we be sinners or saints, worthy or unworthy.”⁵⁸ Luther perceived prayer primarily as a duty. As such, to those who make an excuse not to pray, his response is simple—no matter what happens, “everybody should always approach God in obedience to this command.”⁵⁹ It is our duty to pray; therefore, we ought to pray!

That Luther’s vital ground for prayer is God’s command is also obvious when he gives reasons to pray:

They are as follows: first, the urging of God’s commandment, who has strictly required us to pray; second, His promise, in which He declares that He will hear us; third, an examination of our own need and misery, which burden lies so heavily on our shoulders that we have to carry it to God immediately and pour it out before Him, in accordance with His order and commandment; fourth, true faith, based on this Word and promise of God, praying with the certainty and confidence that He will hear and help us—and all these things in the name of Christ, through whom our prayer is acceptable to the Father and for whose sake He gives us every grace and every good.⁶⁰

Friedemann Hebart, however, claims that “Luther always bases prayer on God’s command to pray and on his promise to hear prayer.” In other words, Luther’s motivation to pray is twofold—command and promise. Hebart maintains that in Luther’s thinking “both command and promise serve the *one* end, as both Catechisms make clear. Both command and promise provide the assurance that our petitions are heard by our Father.”⁶¹ We therefore pray to respond not only to God’s precept but also to His pledge that He will hear

57. *Ibid.*, 422.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1075.

61. Friedemann Hebart, “The Role of the Lord’s Prayer in Luther’s Theology of Prayer,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 18, no. 1 (1984): 7.

our prayers (always according to His will). No wonder, then, that in his list of reasons to pray, Luther put God's promise just after God's command, indicating that the two are intertwined. Luther also highlighted the weaving of these two in his *Large Catechism*. As he encourages his readers to pray, he says to them:

We should be all the more urged and encouraged to pray because God has promised that our prayer will surely be answered.... This you can hold up to him and say, "I come to thee, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord or because of my own worthiness, but at thy *commandment and promise*, which cannot fail or deceive me." Whoever does not believe this promise should realize once again that he angers God, grossly dishonoring him and accusing him of falsehood.⁶²

The Manner of Prayer

With respect to the manner of praying, Luther addressed the question of whether one should pray spontaneously or use a prescribed form and what posture one should use in prayer.

1. Spontaneous prayer.

In one of his conversations later recorded as *Table Talk*, Luther expressed his negative feeling toward the manner of prayer the pope had obligated him to perform. He reflects, "Prayer under the papacy was pure torture of the poor conscience and only blabbering and making of words; no praying, but a work of obedience."⁶³ He goes on:

The pope commands a threefold manner of praying. The material prayer, in which a person recites words he does not understand, as the nuns do with the psalter. This was merely a prayer to satisfy the pope. The other, the formal prayer, in which one does understand the words. The third, the effectual prayer, the prayer of devotion and meaning. The third is

62. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 423 (italics mine).

63. Cited in Leonhard Ludwig, "Luther, Man of Prayer," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy*, ed. Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 164.

the right essence and quality of prayer. But on this there is no insistence, but only on the material prayer, that the words were recited and read, as a parrot talks. From this sprang a desolate ocean full of hours of prayer, the howling and shouting in convents and monasteries in which the psalms and lections were sung and read without spirit, in a manner that a person neither understood nor retained either words or sentences of meaning.⁶⁴

Later, from Romans 12:7–16, he explains that “prayer must come from the heart spontaneously, without any prepared and prescribed words. It must speak its own language according to the fervor of the heart.”⁶⁵ He even rebuked “those who simply read the Psalms in a perfunctory manner without putting their heart into it.”⁶⁶ “Oral praying is not effective unless it corresponds to the desire of the heart.”⁶⁷ The essence of true prayer, then, comes naturally from the heart: “All teachers of Scripture conclude that the essence and the nature of prayer are nothing else than the raising of the heart, it follows that everything which is not a lifting up of the heart is not prayer.”⁶⁸ What matters is not the quantity of our prayer but the quality of it: “For God does not ask how much or how long you have prayed, but how good the prayer is and whether it proceeds from the heart.”⁶⁹ In fact, he proposes that “our prayer must have few words, but be great and profound in content and meaning. The fewer the words, the better the prayer; the more words, the poorer the prayer. Few words and richness of meaning is Christian; many words and lack of meaning is pagan.”⁷⁰ He also holds that “a person should pray ‘not only in the spirit but also with the mind.’”⁷¹ In

64. *Ibid.*

65. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1086.

66. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 5.

67. Kosten, *Devotions and Prayers of Martin Luther*, 50.

68. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1085.

69. Cited in Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 17.

70. Luther, “An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen,” in *LW* 42:19.

71. Cited in Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 4.

short, Luther wanted prayer to proceed not only from the heart but also from the mind—that is, to pray with understanding.

2. Scripted prayer.

While Luther promoted extemporaneous prayer, he also recommended the use of written prayers. For instance, in his section from the *Small Catechism* called “Grace at Table: How the head of the family shall teach his household to offer blessing and thanksgiving at table,” he gives these instructions:

When children and the whole household gather at the table, they should reverently fold their hands and say:

“The eyes of all look to Thee, O Lord, and Thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest Thy hand; Thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing.”

Then the Lord’s Prayer should be said, and afterwards this prayer:

“Lord God, heavenly Father, bless us, and these Thy gifts which of Thy bountiful goodness Thou hast bestowed on us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!”⁷²

Here Luther provides his readers with set forms of prayers.

Likewise, in *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther advises Master Peter (his barber to whom he has dedicated this book):

When your heart has been warmed by such 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 or 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 towards thee or to pray. But because thou hast com-

72. Luther, “The Small Catechism,” 353.

manded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ has taught us both how and what to pray, I come to thee in obedience to thy word, trusting in thy gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all thy saints and Christians on earth as he has taught us: Our Father who art, etc., through the whole prayer, word for word.⁷³

As Luther fleshes out one by one the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, he supplies his barber with prescribed prayers at the end of each of these petitions. However, not wanting Peter to think he must pray only these words, Luther reminds him:

You should also know that I do not want you to recite all words in your prayer. That would make it nothing but idle chatter and prattle, read word for word out of a book as were the rosaries by the laity and the prayers of the priests and monks. Rather do I want your heart to be stirred and guided concerning the thoughts which ought to be comprehended in the Lord's Prayer. These thoughts may be expressed, if your heart is rightly warmed and inclined toward prayer, in many different ways and with more words or fewer.⁷⁴

For Luther, the recital of written prayers is not wrong as long as one does not enslave or confine himself to the set forms. Luther permitted the use of forms of prayer, though he seems to prefer free prayer. Luther went on to admonish Master Peter, using his own experience, which shows his attitude toward this matter:

I do not bind myself to such words or syllables, but say my prayers in one fashion today, in another tomorrow, depending upon my mood and feeling. I stay however, as nearly as I can, with the same general thoughts and ideas. It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas on one petition that I forego the other six. If such an abundance of

73. Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," in *LW* 43:194–95.

74. *LW* 43:198.

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.⁷⁵

3. Suggested postures in prayer.

Luther's counsel to his barber implies that he prays either standing or kneeling with hands folded and eyes toward heaven. However, Luther says plainly, "It is of little importance whether you stand, kneel, or prostrate yourself; for the postures of the body are neither forbidden nor commanded as necessary. The same applies to other things: raising the head and the eyes heavenward, folding the hands, striking the breast."⁷⁶

In his "Morning and Evening Prayers: How the head of the family shall teach his household to pray morning and evening," Luther also suggests making the sign of the cross, which later reformers rejected: "In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, 'In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.'"⁷⁷

Note also Luther's prescription to end every prayer with the word "amen." Luther says to his barber:

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.⁷⁸

75. Ibid.

76. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1087.

77. Luther, "The Small Catechism," 352.

78. Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," in *LW* 43:198.

For Luther, saying “amen” is important because it indicates that you really believe that God will indeed hear your prayer. It is a token of confidence in God that He will answer your petition according to His will.

Music and Prayer

Those who are familiar with Luther know that he was a musician. As a composer and singer, he utilized music in prayer. In this regard, Carr contrasts him with Zwingli, who “rejects as humanly impossible the use of music as prayer (maintaining that no man can pray properly and sing properly at the same time).”⁷⁹ Luther held that prayer can be expressed through singing. Here are some selected stanzas from Luther’s hymns that show him to be a singer of prayer:

“From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee” (Psalm 130)

1. From depths of woe I cry to Thee,
Lord, hear me, I implore Thee.
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,
My prayer let come before Thee.
If Thou rememberest each misdeed,
If each should have its rightful meed,
Who may abide Thy presence?

“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” (Luke 2:1–18)

12. And thus, dear Lord, it pleaseth Thee
To make this truth quite plain to me,
That all the world’s wealth, honor, might,
Are naught and worthless in Thy sight.
13. Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

79. Carr, “A Consideration of the Meaning of Prayer in the Life of Martin Luther,” 624.

“We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost” (John 16:13)

We now implore the Holy Ghost
 For the true faith, which we need the most,
 That in our last moments He may befriend us
 And, as homeward we journey, attend us.
 Lord, have mercy!

“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word” (John 8:31)

1. Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word;
 Curb those who fain by craft and sword
 Would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son
 And set at naught all He hath done.

3. O Comforter of priceless worth,
 Send peace and unity on earth.
 Support us in our final strife
 And lead us out of death to life.

“Our Father, Thou in Heaven Above” (The Lord’s Prayer)

1. Our Father, Thou in heaven above,
 Who biddest us to dwell in love,
 As brethren of one family,
 To cry in every need to Thee,
 Teach us no thoughtless word to say,
 But from our inmost heart to pray.

9. Amen, that is, So shall it be.
 Confirm our faith and hope in Thee
 That we may doubt not, but believe
 What here we ask we shall receive.
 Thus in Thy name and at Thy word
 We say: Amen. Oh, hear us, Lord! Amen.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ The Lutheran Hymnal Online, http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/online/tlh_online.html (accessed November 23, 2010).

The Marrow of Prayer: The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer has a crucial place in Luther's theology of prayer. Hebart asserts: "In speaking of the nature of prayer, Luther accordingly reverts again and again to the Lord's Prayer; and conversely, whenever he expounds the Our Father he explains the nature of prayer as such. Furthermore, many of his own prayers are developed on the basis of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. It is therefore not surprising that Luther is able to develop his entire theology of prayer on the basis of his understanding of the Lord's Prayer."⁸¹

Luther called the Lord's Prayer "the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to... [him]."⁸² "Thus, "there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth [than the daily Lord's Prayer], for it has the excellent testimony that God loves to hear it."⁸³ It was one of his encouragements in prayer. He knew that if he prayed it, God would be pleased because God Himself gives it: "We should be encouraged and drawn to pray because, in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words we are to use. Thus we see how sincerely he is concerned over our needs, and we shall never doubt that our prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might ourselves devise."⁸⁴

Furthermore, in his *Table Talk*, Luther speaks of the Lord's Prayer as "a prayer above all prayers, the very highest prayer taught by the very highest master. In it is contained all spiritual and physical need; and it is the most excellent comfort in all trials, distress, and in the last hour."⁸⁵ No wonder then that Luther repeatedly used it both as the basis of his praying and as his own prayer. He asserts, "I am convinced that when a Christian rightly prays the Lord's Prayer at any time or uses any portion of it as he may desire, his

81. Hebart, "The Role of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Theology of Prayer," 6.

82. Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray," in *LW* 43:198.

83. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 423.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Cited in Hebart, "The Role of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Theology of Prayer," 6.

praying is more than adequate.”⁸⁶ Thus, he urges “all to get accustomed to praying this plain, ordinary Christian prayer.”⁸⁷

The Lord’s Prayer is so close to Luther’s heart that he laments when people defile and spoil it:

What a great pity that prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! How many pray the Lord’s Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot, of it! 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.⁸⁸

Prayer and the Trinity

Luther accentuated the Trinitarian dimension of prayer. Prayer is addressed to God the Father, in the name of Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit. The triune God commands us to pray, helps us to pray, and hears and answers our prayers.

Prayer to God the Father

In the preliminary section of his *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer*, Luther broaches his subject: “The best way to begin or introduce the prayer is to know how to address, honor, and treat the person to whom we submit our petition, and how to conduct ourselves in his presence, so that he will be gracious towards us and willing to listen to us.”⁸⁹ Then he comments on the name of God the Father, to whom prayer is to be addressed: “Now, of all names there is none that gains us more favor with God than that of ‘Father.’ This is indeed a friendly, sweet, intimate, and warm-hearted word. To speak the words ‘Lord’ or ‘God’ or ‘Judge’ would not be nearly as gracious

86. Luther, Introduction to “Personal Prayer Book,” in *LW* 43:12.

87. *LW* 43:13.

88. Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray,” in *LW* 43:200.

89. Luther, “An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen,” in *LW* 42:22.

and comforting to us. The name 'Father' is of our nature and is sweet by nature. That is why it is the most pleasing to God, and why no other name moves him so strongly to hear."⁹⁰

"With this name," explains Luther, "we likewise confess that we are the children of God, which again stirs his heart mightily; for there is no lovelier sound than that of a child speaking to his father."⁹¹ This name "refers to a confidence that we can place solely in God. No one can assist us to get to heaven than this one Father." In fact, Luther regarded the simple utterance "our Father" "to be the best prayer, for then the heart says more than the lips."⁹² This is not startling because, as discussed previously, for Luther to call upon God's name is nothing but to pray. Even if we just say "our Father," we have already prayed.

Luther also stressed that in calling upon God as Father, we must not be selfish. That is, prayer ought not to be egotistic. He pointed out that Jesus "does not want anyone to pray only for himself, but for all mankind. He does not teach us to say 'My Father,' but 'Our Father.'" Luther explains further, "Since prayer is a spiritual good which is held in common by all, we dare not deprive anyone of it, not even our enemies. For since God is the Father of us all, he also wants us to be like brothers to each other, who love each other dearly and who pray for one another as each does for himself."⁹³

Prayer in the Name of God the Son

Prayer is addressed to the Father and is offered in the name of Jesus, as this name is "the prime factor and foundation on which prayer is to stand and rest."⁹⁴ In other words, no prayer can come to God that is not offered in the name of Christ. Here Luther applied the Reformation principle of *solus Christus* to prayer: "that apart from

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. *LW* 42:23.

93. *LW* 42:26.

94. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1076.

Christ no one is able to pray a single letter that is worth anything before God and acceptable to Him.”⁹⁵

Jesus is “our only Mediator and High Priest before God.” When we pray in Christ’s name, our prayer becomes “pleasing to God and is heard by Him ‘as surely as the name of Christ, God’s own dear Son, is pleasing to Him, and as surely as God must say yea and amen to all that Christ asks for.’”⁹⁶ In his exposition of John 15:7, Luther further insists: “Christians do not base their prayer on themselves but on the name of the Son of God, in whose name they have been baptized; and they are certain that praying in this way is pleasing to God because He has told us to pray in the name of Christ and has promised to hear us.” Hence, Luther writes, “Asking in the name of Christ, really means relying on Him in such a way that we are accepted and heard for His sake, not for our own sake.”⁹⁷ Therefore, “Our prayer must be centered in Him alone.”⁹⁸

Prayer with the Help of God the Holy Spirit

Prayer is to be addressed to the Father, through the Son, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Luther was convinced that though unbelievers may pray, “the spirit of grace is not there,”⁹⁹ and consequently their prayers will not be heard by God, because it is the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of grace and supplication,” who “urges them to cry to God in every need; and in their hearts...assures them that their prayers will be heard.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, prayer is impossible without the Spirit. Luther shares his own experience about this matter. He says that before his conversion, he prayed but felt no assurance that God would answer his prayer: “We used to pray much every hour in all

95. *Ibid.*, 1077.

96. Cited in John Peter Pelkonen, “Martin Luther’s Theology of Prayer, Its Systematic Structure and Its Significance for Michael Agricola” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1971), 123.

97. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1077.

98. Cited in Pelkonen, “Martin Luther’s Theology of Prayer,” 123.

99. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1077.

100. Cited in Pelkonen, “Martin Luther’s Theology of Prayer, Its Systematic Structure and Its Significance for Michael Agricola,” 147.

the churches and cloisters, yet our prayers were never answered. We could not hope for God's grace, and we felt no assurance that He would grant our requests. We said: 'It is my duty to chant my canonical hours and to count my beads in this way, but I do not know whether God is pleased with this, takes delight in it, and will hear my prayers.'¹⁰¹

Therefore, for Luther, a person needs to be regenerated before he can truly pray to God. And who can effect this regeneration but the Spirit, who also moves and helps us to pray. As Thomas Smuda notes, "[The Spirit] actively and ceaselessly vivifies and moves man's heart in prayer. Even as the Christian carries out his normal, everyday chores, even as he sleeps, the Holy Spirit is always engaged in prayer within the Christian's heart. Whether the Christian is aware of it or not, prayer continues." Then Smuda cites the Reformer: "Luther compares it to man's pulse: 'The pulse is never motionless; it moves and beats constantly, whether one is asleep or something else keeps one from being aware of it.'¹⁰²

So for Luther, prayer is offered to the Father, in the name of the Son, with the guidance and help of the Spirit. But does that mean that prayer cannot be addressed to Jesus or the Spirit? Here is Luther's opinion:

When you call upon Jesus Christ and say: O my dear Lord, God, my Creator, and Father, Jesus Christ, Thou one eternal God, you need not worry that the Father and the Holy Spirit will be angry on this account. They know that no matter which Person you call upon, you call upon all three Persons and upon the One God at the same time. For you cannot call upon one Person without calling upon the others, because the one, undivided divine Essence exists in all and in each Person. Conversely, you cannot deny any Person in particular without denying all three and the One God in His entirety, as 1 John

101. Cited in *ibid.*, 148.

102. Thomas E. Smuda, "The Effectual Nature of Confident Prayer Expressed in Selected Writings of Martin Luther" (M.Div. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1980), 11.

2:23 says: “Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father.”¹⁰³

Luther’s Prayer Life

Ludwig describes Luther as a man of prayer: “When it comes to prayer, Luther was not a theoretician, but a practitioner. He does not furnish a speculative treatment of a topic but the powerful demonstration of a life steeped in prayer.”¹⁰⁴ He practiced what he believed. He taught his students how to pray and showed them as well. Veit Dietrich, Luther’s friend, reported that Luther used to pray at least three hours a day: “I cannot sufficiently admire the singular steadfastness, the happy attitude, the faith and hope of this man in serious times. But he nurtures this without surcease by diligent occupation with the divine Word. There is not a day on which he does not devote at least three hours, the very ones most suitable for studying, to prayer.”¹⁰⁵

This is amazing, for Luther was preoccupied with many things as a husband and father, pastor, teacher, and writer, and yet he was still able to give so much time to prayer. “Even in the busiest periods of the Reformation,” notes Kosten, “Luther averaged two hours of prayer daily.”¹⁰⁶ Undoubtedly, an essential part of the Reformer’s triumph and achievement was prayer. He accomplished much because he prayed much. For Luther, everything must be attained through prayer:

Let this be said as an exhortation to pray that we may form the habit of praying with all diligence and earnestness... Moreover, prayer is in truth highly necessary for us; for we must, after all, achieve everything through prayer: to be able to keep what we have and to defend it against our enemies, the devil and the world. And whatever we are to obtain, we must seek here in prayer. Therefore prayer is comfort, strength, and

103. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1082.

104. Ludwig, “Luther, Man of Prayer,” 163.

105. Cited in *ibid.*, 166.

106. Kosten, *Devotions and Prayers of Martin Luther*, 5.

salvation for us, our protection against all enemies, and our victory over them.¹⁰⁷

As previously mentioned, Luther, as a man of prayer, was not self-centered. He did not spend his two or three hours praying only for himself. In fact, he says that “a man who prays for himself only does not offer a good prayer” and that praying for Christendom “is better than praying for ourselves only.”¹⁰⁸ Luther prayed for his family, his congregation, and for other Christians. As a pastor, he was especially concerned with the conversion of sinners, which can be seen in his sermons: “You would be doing real Christian works if you interested yourself in sinners and went into your private room and earnestly implored God, saying: O my God, this is what I hear of so-and-so; that man is lying in sin, and that other one has fallen; O Lord, help him to rise, etc.—In this way you would assist him and would serve him.”¹⁰⁹

In his exposition of John 17:9, Luther also admonishes his readers to pray even for the salvation of their enemies: “So far as the person is concerned, we should pray for everybody; our prayer should be general and should embrace both friend and foe. We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends and, if not, that their doing and designating be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ.”¹¹⁰ However, Luther admits that when he thinks of his antagonists, he cannot pray without cursing them at the same time:

I cannot pray without cursing at the same time. If I say: “Hallowed be Thy name,” I must thereby say: May the names of the papists and all who blaspheme Thy name be accursed, condemned, and dishonored. If I say: “Thy kingdom come,” I must thereby say: May the papacy, together with all king-

107. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 1094.

108. *Ibid.*, 1099.

109. *Ibid.*, 1100.

110. *Ibid.*

doms on earth that are opposed to Thy kingdom, be accursed, condemned, and destroyed. If I say: “Thy will be done,” I must thereby say: May the plans and plots of the papists and of all who strive against Thy will and counsel be accursed, condemned, dishonored, and be brought to naught. Truly, thus my lips and heart pray day in, day out; and all who believe in Christ are praying in this way with me.¹¹¹

One should not be quick to judge Luther, because his imprecatory prayer was intended to protect God’s glory from His adversaries. It grieved Luther’s heart to see people profane God’s holy name. This shows Luther’s concern for God’s glory, which is the ultimate end of his prayer. This is why, for him, when the first petition (“Hallowed be Thy name”) is prayed wholeheartedly, “God becomes everything and man becomes nothing.”¹¹² In short, by treating God’s name as holy, we give God all the praise and glory. Contrarily, when we defile His name, we make God nothing and ourselves everything. In this light one can understand that Luther, when thinking of those who blaspheme God, could not pray for them without cursing them.

What is noteworthy here is Luther’s consistent prayer life. He prayed regularly, day and night. His life revolved around prayer. Even when he worked, he prayed. Kosten comments, “His daily work was a prayer and prayer was his daily work.”¹¹³ Luther’s life was infused with prayer. He was a man who simply could not live without prayer; he was a true prayer warrior. When he prayed, he prayed as if God had already answered him. His prayer life also displays how much he depended on the grace of God. He prayed to God because he knew that only God could help him. In return, the Lord blessed Martin Luther tremendously, and, even though he is long dead, his life, labors, and prayers still continue to be a blessing to many throughout the world.

111. *Ibid.*, 1101.

112. Cited in Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 37.

113. Kosten, Preface to *Devotions and Prayers of Martin Luther*, 5.