

Promises and Pleas

Luther on Prayer

By Mary Jane Haemig

Martin Luther sought to help and encourage people to pray. This essay offers a brief look at some key practical elements in Luther's attempts to teach evangelical prayer, focusing in particular on forms and language. According to Luther, God's command to pray and God's promise to hear are absolutely crucial for understanding and encouraging true evangelical prayer. This emphasis on command and promise has been ably discussed by other scholars.¹ This essay focuses on the forms, structures, and patterns that Luther recommended for prayer as well as the language he encouraged. In Luther's *Large Catechism* he gave three reasons to pray: God commands us

¹ See, for example, A. PETERS, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*. Bd. 3: *Das Vaterunser*, 1992, 22–28; O. BAYER, *Martin Luthers Theologie*, 32007, 315–323. (Cf. the equivalent Chapter »Promise and Prayer« in: IDEM, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 2008, 346–354.) Other works on Luther and prayer include: M. BRECHT, »und willst das Beten von uns han«. Zum Gebet und seiner Praxis bei Martin Luther (in: *Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland als Umbruch* [SVRG 199], hg. v. B. MOELLER, 1998, 268–288); CH.B. BROWN, *Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer* (in: *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture 1550–1675*, ed. by R. KOLB, 2008, 205–258); G. EBELING, *Beten als Wahrnehmen der Wirklichkeit des Menschen, wie Luther es lehrte und lebte* (in: *LuJ* 66, 1999, 151–166); M.J. HAEMIG, *Luther on Prayer as Authentic Communication* (in: *LuthQ* 30,3, 2016, 307–328); IDEM, *Praying amidst Life's Perils: How Luther used Biblical examples to teach prayer* (SRR 13,2, 2011, 25–40); IDEM, *Prayer as Talking back to God in Luther's Genesis Lectures* (in: *LuthQ* n.s. 23, 2009, 270–295); F. SCHULZ, *Die Gebete Luthers. Edition, Bibliographie und Wirkungsgeschichte*, 1976; T.J. WENGERT, *Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism* (in: *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luthers Practical Theology*, ed. by IDEM, 2009, 171–197).

to pray, God promises to hear us, and God gives us the words.² This essay primarily relates to that third element (the words) though discussion is not limited to the Lord's Prayer.

I Forms, Structures, and Patterns

Luther recommended a number of forms or patterns or structures for prayer. Though undoubtedly the Lord's Prayer ranks first in this—and the psalms probably second—he offered a number of possibilities. After the Lord's Prayer, these will be discussed without ranking their importance.

In looking at the forms, structures, and patterns that Luther recommended, without a doubt we must first consider the Lord's Prayer. Luther considered the Lord's Prayer the very best of all prayers. His published work on it extends from some of his earliest sermons and pamphlets, through the *Little Prayer Book* (1522),³ the *Catechisms* (1529),⁴ and a letter to his barber Peter (1535).⁵ While the Lord's Prayer was commonly included in medieval catechisms and prayerbooks,⁶ Luther saw it as the pre-eminent prayer, not simply one among many.

Luther expressed his high opinion of the Lord's Prayer in a number of places. In *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519) he wrote:

2 Cf. *The Large Catechism* (in: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. by R. KOLB / T.J. WENGERT, 2000, 440–444); *Luthers Katechismen* (in: BSELK, hg. v. I. Dingel, 2014, 1070–1080).

3 Cf. LUTHER, *Little Prayer Book* (in: *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4: *Pastoral Writings*, ed. by M.J. HAEMIG, 2016. Hereinafter: AL 4, 159–200. WA 10,2; 375–501 (*Betbüchlein*) = LW 43, 11–45.

4 See BSELK 841–1162. Cf. also WA 30,1; 239–425 (*Der Kleine Katechismus*) = AL 4, 201–252 (*The Small Catechism*), and WA 30,1; 123–238 (*Der Grosse Katechismus*). Furthermore LUTHER, *The Small Catechism* and *The Large Catechism* (in: *The Book of Concord* (see n. 2), 345–480, hereinafter: BC).

5 WA 38; 358–375 (*Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund*) = LW 43, 193–211 = AL 4, 256–281 (*A Simple Way to Pray*).

6 See for example DIETRICH KOLDE, *Mirror for Christians* (1480) (in: D. JANZ, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* [Text and Studies in Religion 13], 1982, 29–130).

Since our Lord is the author of this prayer, it is without a doubt the most sublime, the loftiest, and the most excellent. If he, the good and faithful Teacher, had known a better one, he would surely have taught us that too.⁷

In his *Little Prayer Book* (1522) he wrote:

And I am convinced that when Christians rightly pray the Lord's Prayer at any time or use any portion of it as they may desire, their praying is more than adequate [...].⁸

And herewith I urge everyone [...] to get accustomed to praying this plain, ordinary Christian prayer. The longer one devotes one's self to this kind of praying, the more sweet and joyous it becomes. To that end may this prayer's Master, our dear Lord Jesus Christ, help us [...].⁹

In his *Large Catechism* (1529) he commented:

[...] God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words we are to use. In this way we see how deeply concerned he is about our needs and we should never doubt that such prayer pleases him and will assuredly be heard. So this prayer is far superior to all others that we might devise ourselves. For in that case our conscience would always be in doubt, saying, »I have prayed, but who knows whether it pleases him or whether I have hit upon the right form and mode?« Thus there is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, for it has the powerful testimony that God loves to hear it [...].¹⁰

7 WA 2, 82, 23–26 (*Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunsers für die einfältigen Laien*): »Dan die weil dis gebet vonn unserm hern ein ursprung hat, wirt es an tzweyfel das hochste, edlste und beste gebeth seyn, dan het her ein bessers gewust, der frum, trew schulmeister, er wurd es uns auch geleret haben.« = LW 42, 21 (*An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen*).

8 WA 10, 2; 376, 1 f (*Betbüchlein*): »Und bynn des gewissz, das eyn Christlich mensch ubirflussig gepetet hatt, wenn er das vater unszer recht betet, wie oft er wil und wilchs stuck er wil.« = AL 4, 166 (*Little Prayer Book*). Luther here implicitly rejected the imposition of monastic prayer practices on the laity. Such attempts manifested themselves, for example, in attempts to encourage lay people to pray in accordance with the canonical hours. In KOLDE, *Mirror* (see n. 6), 88–90, laypersons were given a prayer for each canonical hour.

9 WA 10, 2; 376, 5–10: »Bitt hie mit, yderman wolle sich der Brigittischen gepett und aller ander die mit ablasz odder tzusagung ausz gemalet sind, entwehnen und widderumb auff disz gemeyne eynefeltige Christliche gepett gewehnen, wilchs der art ist; yhe mehr und lenger man es treybt, yhe susser und lustiger es wirt. Datzu helff uns der meyster solchs gepetts unszer lieber herr Jhesus Christus gebenedeyet yn ewigkeyt.« = LW 43, 12 f (*Little Prayer Book*) = AL 4, 166.

10 BSELK 1076, 28–36; 1078, 1: »[...] das Gott neben dem Gebot und verheissunge zuvor kömpt und selbst die wort und weise stellet und uns in mund legt, wie und was wir beten sollen. Auff das wir sehen, wie hertzlich er sich unser not annimpt, und je nicht daran

A focus on the Lord's Prayer as the primary and paradigmatic prayer became typical of Luther's movement.¹¹ This contrasted sharply with medieval catechesis which typically included many prayers, such as the Hail Mary and the monastic hours. Rather than trying to shape lay piety to conform to monastic patterns, Luther focused on the prayer Jesus taught and its relationship to everyday lives.

In 1535 Luther wrote movingly of his own use of the Lord's Prayer but also criticized its misuse:

To this day I suckle at the Lord's Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill. It is the very best prayer, even better than the psalter, which is so very dear to me. It is surely evident that a real master composed and taught it. What a great shame that the 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 letter or one stroke of a letter of it! In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (along with the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.¹²

zweifeln, das im solch Gebete gefellig sey und gewisslich erhöret werde, welchs gar ein grosser vorteil ist für allen andern gebeten, so wir selbst erdencken möchten. Denn da würde das gewissen immer im zweifel stehen und sagen: Ich habe gebeten, aber wer weis, wie es im gefellet oder ob ich die rechte mas und weise troffen habe? Darumb ist auff Erden kein edler Gebete zu finden denn das tegliche Vater unser, weil es solch trefflich zeugnis hat, das Gott hertzlich gerne höret [...].« = BC 443.

11 G. Caravale details the efforts of the Roman Catholic church to control prayer, devotional, and liturgical materials in sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy. Vigilant defenders of Roman Catholic orthodoxy regarded the mere fact that a work focused on the Lord's Prayer as evidence that it was a vehicle of Lutheran content. Cf. G. CARVALE, *Forbidden Prayer: Church Censorship and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy*, 2011.

12 WA 38; 364,17–27 (*Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund*): »Denn ich noch heutiges tages an dem Pater noster sauge wie ein kind, trincke und esse wie ein alt mensche, kan sein nicht satt werden, und ist mir auch über den Psalter (den ich doch seer lieb habe) das aller beste gebete. Fur war, Es findet sich, das es der rechte Meister gestellt undgeleret hat, Und ist jammer über jammer, das solch gebet solchs Meisters sol also on alle andacht zu plappert und zu klappert warden inn aller welt. Viel beten des jars vileicht etlich tausent Pater noster, Und wenn sie tausent jar also solten beten, so hetten sie doch nicht einen buchstaben oder tüttel davon geschmeckt noch gebetter. Summa, das Pater noster ist der grösseste merterer (so wol als der name und wort Gottes)

Luther saw the Lord's Prayer not as something to be chattered and repeated mindlessly but as a key expression of the human side of the conversation between God and humans. It provided words for that conversation and implicitly taught that God is a God of conversation. The catechism begins with God's commands and promises. Human speech to God (prayer) then comes in response to these commands and promises. This prayer is, as Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, prayer for »faith and the fulfillment of the 10 commandments.« In other words, the one praying asks in this prayer that all those matters described in the commandments and the creed might be true for him, that God might continue and complete his work in him.

Second, Luther offered prayers to frame the believer's day. He included in his *Small Catechism* not only the Lord's Prayer but also morning and evening prayers and mealtime prayers. The *Small Catechism* with its progression from command to promise to human response and then to God's assurance of salvation framed the entire life of the Christian. Then it offered prayers to structure the believer's daily existence. The catechism has taught the believer why she needs to pray and Luther offered words to help her respond. Both the Lord's Prayer and the daily prayers petition the life of the catechism into the life of the Christian. The catechisms became primers on prayer rather than just collections of beliefs and prayers.

Third, Luther used individual elements of the catechism—elements that were not in themselves prayers—to encourage and shape prayer. As Johannes Wallmann has noted, it is striking that Luther's 1522 *Prayerbook* (*Betbüchlein*) is not a collection of prayer texts. Rather it included direction and advice concerning prayer.¹³ Luther shaped that direction and advice cat-

auff erden. Denn jderman plagts und misbrauchs, wenig tröstens und machens frölich im rechten brauch.« = AL 4,266f (*A Simple Way to Pray*).

- 13 J. WALLMANN, Zwischen Herzensgebet und Gebetbuch. Zur protestantischen deutschen Gebetsliteratur im 17. Jahrhundert (in: Gebetsliteratur der Frühen Neuzeit als Hausfrömmigkeit [Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 92], hg. v. F. VAN INGEN / C.N. MOORE, 2001, 13–46), 18f: »Auffällig, daß es überhaupt keine Gebete enthält. Irgendwelche formulierten Gebetstexte, wie sie später im Katechismus mit seinem Abend- und Morgengebet und den Tischgebeten stehen, sucht man vergeblich. Von seinem Inhalt her gehört das *Betbüchlein* eigentlich gar nicht in die literarische Gattung der Gebetbücher, wie sie vom Mittelalter her vor allem in den Niederlanden und in Deutschland so weit verbreit-

echetically, with reflection on the commandments and the creed leading to prayer.

Luther's 1535 letter to Peter the Barber sought to shape prayer by using catechetical elements. Luther set out a method for praying the commandments:

I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four entwined strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God so earnestly demands of me. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer(request).¹⁴

Fourth, Luther encouraged the use of psalms as prayers.¹⁵ In his preface to *Cruciger's Summer Postil* (1544) he applauded the rejection of »the shameful, false, slanderous prayer books« and called the Psalter »the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of all.«¹⁶ In his *Little Prayer Book*

tet waren. Luthers *Betbüchlein* gibt Rat und Anweisung zum rechten Beten. Verglichen mit den anderen Gebetbüchern der Zeit ist es geradezu ein Ant Gebetbuch.«

¹⁴ LW 43,200 = AL 4,267. WA 38; 364,28–365,4: »Wenn ich aber zeit und raum habe fur dem Pater noster, so thu ich mit den Zehen geboten auch also und hole ein stück nach dem andern, damit ich ja gantz ledig werde (So viel es müglich ist) zum gebet, Und mach aus einem jglichen Gebot ein gevierdes oder ein vierfaches gedrehetes krentzlin, Als: Ich neme ein jgliche Gebot an zum ersten als eine lere, wie es den an jm selber ist, Und dencke, was unser Herr Gott darinn so ernstlich von mir fordert. Zum andern mache ich eine dancksagung drauf, Zum dritten eine beicht, Zum vierden ein gebet [...].«

¹⁵ Recent literature includes D. NGIEN, *Fruit for the Soul: Luther on the Lament Psalms*, 2015, and M. MIKOTEIT, *Theologie und Gebet bei Luther. Untersuchungen zur Psalmen-vorlesung 1532–1535* [TBT 124], 2004.

¹⁶ WA 21; 201,25–30 (*Crucigers Sommerpostille*, Vorrede Doctoris Martini Luthers): »So sind auch die schendlichen, falschen, lesterlichen Betbüchlin, der die Welt voll war, ausgereumet, dafür reine Gebot und gute Christliche Gesenge ausgegangen. Und sonderlich der Psalter, das aller feinst und köstlichst Betbüchlin und Gesangbüchlin, des sich zu unser zeit kein Theologus rhümen thurst, das er einen einigen Psalm also wol und gründlich verstanden hette, als itzt die Leien, Man und Weib, verstehen.« = LW 77,9 (*Preface to Cruciger's Summer Postil*, 1544): »So also the shameful, false, slanderous prayer books, of which the world was full, have been cleared out, and in place of them pure prayers and good Christian hymns have been published, especially the Psalter, the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of them all, concerning which no theologian of our

(1522) he included eight psalms and designated possible uses for each, for example Psalm 12 »To be prayed for the exaltation of the holy gospel«, Psalm 20 »For good government and for earthly authorities« and Psalm 10 »To be prayed against the Antichrist and his kingdom.«¹⁷

In his *Summarien ueber die Psalmen* (1531–1533)¹⁸ Luther divided the Psalms into five categories,¹⁹ one of which was »Prayer psalms«²⁰ in which, he explained, »one calls upon and petitions God in all sorts of trouble. And among these belong all psalms which complain and lament, and cry out to God concerning enemies.«²¹

In the *Summarien*, Luther linked each of the first 31 psalms to parts of the catechism, more specifically, to the commandments and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. So, for example, he saw Psalm 3 as a »prayer psalm« in which the example of David shows how he prayed in his need and was heard. Luther linked this to the first commandment »for God wants to be our God and to help« and to the seventh petition in the Lord's Prayer »in which we ask for deliverance from all evil.«²² The fifth psalm he linked to the second and third commandments and to the first two petitions of the Lord's Prayer.²³ Psalm 20, a prayer for all those in positions of earthly authority, is linked to the third petition »that God's will and not that of the

time could boast that he had understood a single psalm as well and as thoroughly as the laypeople, men and women, understand them now.«

¹⁷ AL 4,194.

¹⁸ Cf. WA 38; 1–69.

¹⁹ The others were 1) Psalms that prophesy of Christ, 2) Psalms that teach, 3) Psalms of consolation, and 5) Psalms of thanksgiving. Cf. WA 38; 17,24–18,6.

²⁰ These Psalms were classified as prayer psalms: 3.5–7.10–13.17.20.25 f.28.31.35.38.40–44.54–57.59 f.63 f.69–71.74.79–81.83.85 f.88.94.102.109.119 f.123.130.132.137.140–144 (54 total).

²¹ WA 38; 17,34–18,2: »[...] Bet Psalmen, darinnen man Gott anruft und bettet jnn allerley not, Und hie her gehören alle Psalmen, so da klagen und trauren, und uber die feinde schreien.«

²² WA 38; 19,7–10: »Er gehöret jns erste gebot, da Gott wil unser Gott sein und helffen, Und wird jnn der siebende bitte im Vater unser begriffen, da wir von allem ubel erlösung bitten.«

²³ WA 38; 19,34–20,2.

devil should be done.«²⁴ In relation to Psalm 10 he notes »it belongs to the second commandment and in the first petition just like all prayer psalms«²⁵ and repeats later that all prayer psalms belong to these »for they honor and call on God's name.«²⁶

In the *Summarien*, Luther pointed to particular psalms as appropriate prayers for particular situations. Psalm 63 is named as one that can be prayed by »those suffering under tyrants and wanting to hear God's word.«²⁷ On Psalm 56 Luther noted »We may pray it against our tyrants, who without pause persecute God's word and us and leave no one in peace.«²⁸ He designated Psalm 74, a prayer against enemies, as one to be prayed against Islam.²⁹ Luther saw Psalm 80 as a prayer against »everyday enemies« of Israel and drew a parallel to such enemies in his own time.³⁰ In a number of psalms he named »false teachers« as the enemies. In Psalm 143 he noted that false prophets and teachers were common in ancient Israel and have been in the church from the beginning. For this reason, many psalms pray against these and ask God to protect us from such.³¹

Luther identified several psalms with particular offices or people. Psalm 61 was not only a prayer against enemies but also a prayer for »[...] king and

24 WA 38; 24,33 f: »Und ist inn der dritten bitte, das Gottes wille und nicht des teuffels geschehen solle.«

25 WA 38; 21,18 f: »Es gehöret aber jnn das ander gebot und jnn die erste bitte wie alle bet Psalmen.«

26 WA 38; 27,31 f: »[...] die bet psalmen hören inn das ander gebot und inn die erste bite, den sie ehren und ruffen an Gottes namen [...].«

27 WA 38; 41,13 f: »Nu aber mögen diesen Psalm betten, die unter den Tyrannen Gottes wort gern hetten und müßens doch beraubt bleiben [...].«

28 WA 38; 38,15 f: »Wir müßen jn beten wider unser Tyrannen, die on auffhören Gottes wort und uns verfolgen und nirgend keinen friede lassen.«

29 WA 38; 44,29–32.

30 WA 38; 46,19–22.

31 WA 38; 65,14–21: »Darumb ist nicht wunder, das viel Psalmen wider solche falsche Propheten und lerer gemacht sind, weil es so gar gemein gewest ist, Und inn der Kirchen von anfang auch immer dar geübt ist, das wol Gott bittens darff, fur falschen lerern und ijrhum zu behüten. Die geschicht zur zeit Elias und König Ahab und Jesabel zeigt ein fein Exempel an dieses Psalmen, da alle Propheten sich musten verstecken und verkriechen, Und zu Arrius zeiten auch alle rechtgleubigen Bischöve musten weichen, Denn der Teuffel wil Gottes wort und seine Diener nicht leiden.«

earthly authority, that they may fear God and reign well for a long time, and that good government not be destroyed by enemies and war.«³² Others addressed particular situations in the life of the believer, such as Psalm 38 where Luther understood the one praying as one bemoaning his sin which makes him only see God's anger, threat, death, and hell and causes a despair which consumes the whole person. In prayer the believer relies on God's promise and receives consolation. »So we should also pray and not fall into despair, even though we are sinners and suffer under the weight and storm of sin.«³³ Psalm 6 bewailed the suffering in conscience of the one praying but also showed that this prayer is heard »as a consoling example for all who are in such trials [anfechtung], that they will not remain in it.«³⁴

Fifth, Luther recommended other Biblical prayers, particularly Old Testament prayers. Already in 1521, in the afterword to his commentary on the *Magnificat*, Luther praised Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 3:5–14 as a model for princes and lords.³⁵ In his treatise *On War Against the Turk* (1529), he mentioned several biblical prayers:

In exhorting to prayer, we must also introduce words and examples from the Scriptures which show how strong and mighty a man's prayer has sometimes been; for example, Elijah's prayer which St. James praises [Jas. 5:17]; the prayers of Elisha and other prophets; of kings David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat,³⁶ Jesias, Hezekiah, etc.; the story of how God promised Abraham that he would spare the land of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of five righteous men. For the prayer of a righteous man can do much if it be persistent, St. James says in his Epistle [Jas. 5:16].³⁷

32 WA 38; 40,19–21: »Ist ein Betpsalm wider die feinde und sonderlich fur den König und Obrigkeit, das sie Gott fürchten und lange wol regiren, und auff das gut Regiment durch feind und krieg nicht zerstöret werde [...].«

33 WA 38; 32,19–21: »Also sollen wir auch beten und inn keener angst verzweiveln, ob wir gleich sunder sind und der sunden last und sturm hefftiglich fñlen.«

34 WA 38; 20,8–10: »Aber am ende zeigt er an, das solch gebet erhöret werde, zum tröstlichen Exempel allen, die inn solcher anfechtung sind, das sie nicht drinnen sollen sollen bleiben [...].«

35 Cf. WA 7; 602,30–604,9 = AL 4,383 f.

36 Jehoshaphat's prayer was used by sixteenth-century Lutherans. Cf. M.J. HAEMIG, *Jehoshaphat and His Prayer Among Sixteenth-Century Lutherans* (in: CH 73, 2004, 522–535).

37 WA 30,2; 119,27–120,1 (*Vom Kriege wider den Türken*): »Inn solcher vermanung zum gebet mus man auch der schrifft sprüche und Exempel einfuren, darynn man findet, wie starck und mechtig zu weilen eines menschen gebet ist gewesen, als Elias gebet, Davon

Sixth, Luther also thought that classical rhetoric could offer some helpful guidance in structuring prayer. Luther praised the three-part structure of Lot's request in Genesis 19 and linked it to classical models. »The first requirement of a good prayer is that it give thanks to God and recall in the heart and in words the benefits you have received from God.«³⁸ Luther noted that »In the rules of rhetoric this is called gaining good will, which is best brought about by praise and giving thanks.«³⁹ The second part is »either the complaint or the mention of the need.«⁴⁰ The third is to request what you want. Luther seemed pleased that Lot not only does this but »enlarges on this request in an excellent manner by giving particulars.«⁴¹

The first part corresponds to the *exordium*⁴², the purpose of which is to make hearers attentive, receptive and well-disposed. Though Luther does not reference the ›rules of rhetoric‹ for parts two and three, one could see part two as the ›narration‹⁴³ and part three as the ›conclusion‹.⁴⁴

S. Jacobus rhümet, Item Elisens und ander Propheten, Der Könige David, Salomon, Assa, Josaphat, Jesaias, Hesechias, etc. Item wie Gott Abraham verhies umb Fünff gerechter willen verschonung des lands Sodom und Gomorra etc. Denne ins gerechten gebet vermag viel (Spricht S. Jacobus ynn seiner Epistel) wenn es anhelt.« = LW 46, 173 f (*On War Against the Turk*).

38 WA 43; 81,32–34: »Prima conditio bonae orationis est, Deo gratias agere, et beneficia, quae divinitus acceperis, repetere animo et verbis.« = LW 3,288.

39 WA 43; 81,37 f: »Haec igitur in Rhetoricis praeceptis vocatur benevolentiae captatio, quae optime fit per laudem et gratiarum actionem.« = LW 3,288.

40 WA 43; 81,39: »Secundo loco est vel querela, vel commemoratio necessitates.« = LW 3,288.

41 WA 43; 82,5 f: »[...] pulchre autem circumstantiis hanc petitionem amplificat [...].« = LW 3,289.

42 E.g. CICERO, *On Invention*. Cicero has six parts in his system of rhetoric: exordium, narration, partition, confirmation, refutation, and conclusion. As G. Kennedy explains: »The exordium (1.20–26) prepares the audience to receive the speech and should make each listener *benevolus, attentus, docilis*; that is, well-disposed to the speaker, attentive, and receptive.« G. KENNEDY, *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 21999, 103.

43 Loc. cit., 104, again referring to CICERO, *On Invention*: »The narration (1.27–30) should set forth the case and the reason for the dispute [...]. A narration should have three qualities [...] it should be brief, clear, and probable (1.28).

44 Loc. cit., 106: »The *conclusio* (1.98–109), more often called *peroration* by Roman writers, has three parts; summoning up, or enumeration; the inciting of indignation against the

Seventh, Luther also used and recommended prayers from the tradition. Luther used prayers from the tradition in his reform of the mass. He kept some of the received prayers and omitted others. In the *Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Vuittembergensi* (1523) he advocated retaining the collects in their »accepted« form, »if it is evangelical (and those for Sunday usually are).«⁴⁵ Most of the collects Luther used were translations of Latin collects.⁴⁶ Luther valued the contribution of traditional forms to the prayer life of the Christian. On the other hand, he omitted prayers which mentioned the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the saints.

Eighth, Luther encouraged the use of prayers in the form of hymns. This is not really a different pattern for prayer, rather a different form of expression: sung rather than spoken. Luther knew the power of poetry and music to shape and lift up prayers and to make them memorable. While many have noted that Luther's hymns are »singing sermons« or another form of oral proclamation,⁴⁷ one cannot ignore that some hymns are in fact prayers. One need only consider hymns such as *Aus Tiefer Not* (1523) or *Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist* (1524) to appreciate these sung prayers that Luther offered. In doing so, he created prayers that Christians could pray or sing in public worship as well as in household or personal devotion. Those who could not read could commit to memory these sung prayers.

Ninth, Luther recognized that prayers may have no structure or pattern but simply may be a cry to God. As Luther noted in his Jonah lectures:

For God cannot resist helping him who cries to Him and implores Him. His divine goodness cannot hold aloof; it must help and lend an ear. All depends on our calling and crying to Him. We dare not keep silent. Turn your gaze upward, raise your folded hands aloft, and pray forthwith: »Come to my aid, God my Lord! Etc.,« and you will immediately find relief. If you can cry and supplicate, then there is no longer any reason

opponent; and the *conquestio*, or arousing of pity for the speaker.«

45 WA 12; 209,14f: »[...] sequens Oratio illa seu collecta, modo sit pia (ut fere sunt, quae dominicis diebus habentur) [...]«. = LW 53,23.

46 Cf. loc. cit., 129.

47 E.g. CH.B. BROWN, *Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer* (in: *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture 1550–1675* [Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 11], ed. by R. KOLB, 2008, 205–258), 222: »Unlike Calvin, who regarded the metrical psalms sung by the Genevan congregation chiefly as a form of prayer addressed to God, Lutherans regarded the hymns as being a mode of proclamation of the gospel, of a piece with the sermon.«

for worry to abide. Even hell would not be hell or would not remain hell if its occupants could cry and pray to God.⁴⁸

Tenth (and last), Luther recognized that some prayers may not use words. In *Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well* (1542) Luther discussed this:

Whatever Christians sincerely pray, especially in the unexpressed yearning of their hearts, becomes a great, unbearable cry in God's ears. God must listen. As God said to Moses in Exodus 14[:15], »Why do you cry out to me?« And Moses had not even whispered a word, because his great need made him so anxious and shaky. His groans and the deep cry of his heart divided the Red Sea and dried it up, led the children of Israel across, and drowned the Pharaoh with all his army, etc. This and even more can be accomplished by a true, faithful longing. Even Moses did not know how or for what he should pray – not knowing how the deliverance would be accomplished – but his cry came from his heart.⁴⁹

II Language, tone, and persistence

Luther thought that the language of prayer should be child-like, bold, forthright, blunt, and even foolish. It should contain an accurate description of our need but not use too many words. While he rejected mindless repeti-

48 WA 19; 222, 11–17: »Denn das kan Gott nicht lassen, er mus helffen dem der do schreyet und rufft. Seyne göttliche guete mag sich nicht endhalten, sie mus hören. Es ligt nûr daran, das man ruffe und schreye zu yhm und schweyge ja nicht. Den kopff nûr auffgericht und die hende auffgehoben und flux geruffen: Hilff Gott meyn herr! Etc. So wirstu als bald fulen, das es besser wird. Kanstu ruffen und schreyen, so hats freylich keyne not mehr. Denn auch die helle nicht helle were noch helle bliebe, wo man drynnen rieffe und schrye zu Gott.« = LW 19, 71.

49 WA 53; 206, 16–25: »Was er ernstlich bittet, sonderlich mit dem unausprechlichen seufftzen seines hertzens, das ist ein gros unleidlich geschrey fur Gottes Ohren, Er mus es hören, wie er zu Mose spricht Exod. xiiij: ›Was schreiestu zu mir?‹ So doch Moses fur sorgen und zittern nicht wol kûndte zisschen, Denn er in der hõhesten not war. Sõlch sein seufftzen und seins hertzen gründlich schreien zureiss auch das Rote Meer und machets trocken, furet die Kinder Israel hindurch und erseuffet Pharaon mit aller seiner macht u. Das und noch mehr kan thun und thut ein recht geistlich seufftzen, Denn Mose wuste auch nicht, was und wie er beten solt, Denn er wuste nicht, wie die Erlösung solt zugehen, und schrey doch von hertzen.« = AL 4, 424.

tion of prayers, he encouraged persistence in prayer. Persistent prayer was preferable to what he called »murmuring.«

In the Lord's Prayer's first words Luther understood the human relationship to God in terms of a child-parent relationship. The child's request to the father springs not from fear but rather from full confidence in the goodness of the father. So the first words »Our father« are God's encouragement to pray. As Luther wrote in the *Small Catechism*:

With these words God wants to entice us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.⁵⁰

Luther encouraged honest, bold language in prayer. When he commented on Genesis 15, the story of God coming to Abram and re-assuring him that he will have his own son, Luther noted that Abram »began to have doubts as to the protection and the kindness of God.«⁵¹ Luther described Abram as doubting the fulfillment of God's promise. He lamented his childlessness with »words of profound grief and sorrow.«⁵² Luther did not criticize Abram for his despair or his doubt, rather he found it good and proper that Abram took his complaint to God. Abram was an example of what Christians should do in times of trial—pour out their complaints to God, and commend their cause to God.⁵³ Honest questions and doubt get an honest response from God. Luther emphasized God's unchanging faithfulness to his promise. Luther was confident that »Eventually He comes and encourages the humble.«⁵⁴

Another example of bold language comes in Genesis 18, where Abraham petitions God to spare Sodom. Luther did not criticize Abraham for

50 BSELK 874,5–7: »Gott will uns damit locken, das wir glauben sollen, Er sey unser rechter Vater und wir seine rechte Kinder, auff das wir getrost und mit aller zuversicht ihn bitten sollen, wie die lieben Kinder ihren lieben Vater.« = BC 356,1 f.

51 WA 42; 557,12 f: »Genus igitur habemus, quod coeperit Abraham dubitare de protectione et beneficentia Dei [...].« = LW 3,12.

52 WA 42; 557,18–20: »Non enim haec verba risus aut laetitiae: sed ingentis doloris et luctus sunt [...].« = LW 3,12.

53 WA 42; 559,7 f.19 f: »Ad hunc modum effundit coram Deo quaerelam suam: et perturbatissimi animi cogitationes. [...] Hic nihil aliud est, quod faciamus, quam ut commendemus causam nostram Domino.« = LW 3,15.

54 WA 42; 560,19 f: »Qui tandem venit, et humiles confirmat [...].« = LW 3,17.

bargaining with God. Luther remarked that Abraham seemed to be speaking foolishly.⁵⁵ But he also called it a praiseworthy prayer,⁵⁶ and praised Abraham for pleading for others. He also called the prayer »bold«⁵⁷ and »a forceful and impulsive prayer as if Abraham wanted to compel God to forgive.«⁵⁸

Bold, honest language may remind God to be faithful to his promises, or it may ask God to change what seems to be his will. An example of the latter, stated in bold and honest language, is found in Genesis 19, in the story of Lot fleeing Sodom. Directed to flee to the mountains, Lot asks for a different destination, a nearby city. Luther noted »Let us, therefore, pray boldly and with confidence.« He reminded his listeners, »If He does not give what we are asking for, He will nevertheless give something else that is better; for prayer cannot be in vain [...].«⁵⁹

In these examples, Luther rejected formal or polite language. Instead his language can be called »familial«—starting with the »Our father« and ranging through the various biblical prayers in which the human honestly and boldly voices his needs to God. The human is free to storm God in heaven and hold him to his promises. God's promise to hear prayer implicitly allows the human to ask God to change his will.

Luther advocated that prayers contain an accurate description of need, as well as an accurate description of one's request for change. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther summarized the contents of prayer: We pray for »faith and the fulfillment of the ten commandments.«⁶⁰ That is, we pray for everything named in what has preceded this in the catechism—we pray that we might live as God intends (according to the Ten Commandments)

55 WA 43; 43,6: »[...] videatur quasi stulte loqui.« = LW 3,234.

56 WA 43; 43,11: »Dura oratio est in speciem, sed laudatissima [...].« = LW 3,234.

57 WA 43; 44,6: »Oratio debet esse improba.« = LW 3,235.

58 WA 43; 43,21: »Est violenta oratio et impetuosa, quasi cogens Deum ad ignoscendum.« = LW 3,235.

59 WA 43; 84,18–20: »Si enim hoc, quod petimus, non datur, dabitur tamen aliud melius, non enim oratio potest frustra esse [...].« = LW 3,292.

60 BSELK 1070,13–16: »[...] ist nichts so not, den das man Gott immerdar in ohren lige, ruffe und bitte, das er den Glauben und erfüllung der zehen Gebot uns gebe, erhalte und mehre und alles, was uns im wege ligt und daran hindert, hinweg reume.« = BC 440–441,2.

and that we might trust—in all situations of life—the God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies us. Luther's explanations of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer clearly describe spiritual needs—the need for the Word of God to be taught clearly and purely among us, that the kingdom of God not come merely in the abstract but that it may come to us, that God would break and hinder every evil scheme and will of the devil, the world, and our flesh. Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer also honestly names physical and social needs. Rejecting medieval interpretations that related the fourth petition (»Give us today our daily bread«) to the bread of the Lord's Supper,⁶¹ Luther in his *Small Catechism* yanked this petition firmly back into the realm of daily life, describing it as encompassing »Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies [...]« and then providing a long list of those necessities.⁶²

Luther also advocated that people pray concerning very specific matters. In his *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks* (1541)⁶³ Luther spent considerable space telling his readers that they, in fact, deserved God's judgment in the form of the Turks. Then he went on to tell them—in just as much space—that they had every right to call upon God for deliverance from the Turks.

Honest, forthright prayer stood in sharp contrast to »murmuring.« Luther distinguished Lot's disagreement with God and clear request for change from what he called »murmuring.« »It is murmuring, however, when we have been offended by a perplexing situation and ask God why He does this or that in such a manner.« In such a situation we should not be asking God why he is doing something but rather »if anything in His actions offends us, we must pray.«⁶⁴ Luther pointed his listeners away from contemplating or

61 Cf. P.W. ROBINSON, *Luther's Explanation of Daily Bread in Light of Medieval Preaching*, (in: *LuthQ* n.s. 13, 1999, 435–447).

62 BSELK 878,8–12: »Alles was zur leibes narung und notdurfft gehöret als essen, trincken, Kleider, Schuch, Haus, Hoff, Acker, Vieh, Gelt, Gutt, from Gemahel, frome Kinder, from Gesinde, fromme und treue Oberherrn, gut Regiment, gut Wetter, Friede, gesundheit, Zucht, Ehre, gute Freunde, getreue Nachbarn und desgleichen.« = BC 357,14.

63 Cf. WA 51; [577–585] 585–625 (*Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken*) = LW 43,219–241.

64 WA 43; 83,24–28: »Est autem murmur, quando offensi cruce quaerimus ex Deo, quare hoc aut illud sic faciat. Sed, ut dixi, non debemus esse Quaristae, qui ad Deum dicamus:

questioning—or even being overawed by—the mysteries of God and rather encouraged them into active interaction with God—interaction that can include pleading with God and boldly asking him to change his will. Luther called on his listeners to »direct our attention to promises and examples like those recorded here about Lot. For these things were not written for Lot's sake; they were written for our sakes.«⁶⁵

While Luther rejected lengthy prayers and mindless repetition, he encouraged persistence in prayer. Writing to his barber in 1535, Luther recommended that prayer »be the first business of the morning and the last at night.«⁶⁶ He went through the meaning of each petition of the Lord's Prayer but then warned

You should also know that I do not want you to recite all these words in your prayer. That would make it nothing but mere chatter and idle prattle, read word for word out of a book as were the rosaries by the laity and the prayers of the clerics 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.⁶⁷

And he commented later: »a good prayer should not be lengthy or drawn out, but frequent and ardent.«⁶⁸

Luther advocated persistent prayer but not mindless repetition. In the *Large Catechism* Luther wrote that we should »Call upon God incessantly [...], drum into his ears our prayer«⁶⁹ but at the same time rejected the »kind of babbling and bellowing that used to pass for prayer in the church

quare hoc sic facis? Parere debemus voluntati eius, et si quid nos offendit in factis eius, debemus orare.« = LW 3,291.

65 WA 43; 84,9–11: »[...] et intueamur in promissiones et exempla, quale hic de Loth scribitur, non enim propter ipsum Loth haec scripta sunt, sed propter nos [...].« = LW 3,291 f.

66 WA 38; 359,4 f: »Darumb ist's gut, das man frue morgens lasse das gebet das erste und des abends das letzte werck sein.« = AL 4,257.

67 WA 38; 362,37–363,4: »Auch soltu wissen, das ich nicht wil diese wort alle im gebet gesprochen haben, Denn da würde doch zu letzt ein geplepper und eitel ledig gewesch aus, aus dem buch oder buchstaben daher gelesen wie die Rosen krentze bey den Leien und die gebet der Pfaffen und Mönche gewest sind, Sondern ich wil das hertz damit gereitzt und unterrichtet haben, was es fur gedanken im Vater unser fassen sol [...].« = AL 4,263.

68 WA 38; 372, 29–31: »Item ein gut gebet sol nicht lang sein, auch nicht lange auffgezogen werden, sondern offft und hitzig sein [...].« = AL 4,278.

69 BSELK 1070,13: »[...] ist nichts so not, denn das man Gott immerdar in ohren lige, ruffe und bitte [...].« = BC 440,2.

[...].⁷⁰ In his lectures on 1 John (1527) Luther complained »In the past [...] we did not know how to pray but knew only how to chatter and to read prayers. God pays no attention to this.«⁷¹

Luther was trying to create a new evangelical prayer practice, one that encouraged persistent thoughtful bold prayer in contrast to the mechanical recitation of prayers, done largely by a ›praying‹ (monastic) class. In his commentary on Psalm 118 (1530) he warned:

You must never doubt that God is aware of your distress and hears your prayer. You must not pray haphazardly or simply shout into the wind. Then you would mock and tempt God. It would be better not to pray at all, than to pray like the priests and monks.⁷²

Rather than using prayer as a device to gain God's favor, rather than repeating and repeating a prayer with the thought that repetition itself would please God, the Christian rests in the confidence that God has created a new relationship and encouraged all to call upon him within that relationship. Luther held that people can with boldness and confidence address God—and wanted them to be persistent in such boldness and confidence.

III Some concluding thoughts

What does this variety of form and encouragement of honest language tell us?

Luther thought prayer indispensable to the life of the Christian and therefore had an intense desire to teach prayer. In his desire to encourage Christians to call on God, he provided many alternative forms and encouraged bold, honest, everyday language. The variety of forms offered a variety of possibilities for expressing troubles and needs to God.

70 BSELK 1072,6f: »Das ist aber je war: was man bissher für Gebete gethan hat, geplerret und gedönet in der Kirchen, etc., ist freilich kein Gebete gewesen [...].« = BC 441,7.

71 WA 20; 793,35f: »Hoc nobis hactenus accidit, quod nescierimus orare sed tantum garrire et legere orations, quod Deus non curat.« = LW 30,324.

72 WA 31,1; 97,3–7: »Du must aber auch nicht zweiveln, das Gott deine not sehe, und solch dein gebet erhohe Und must nicht so auff ebentheur und ynn den wind dahin beten, Denn da mit spottestu und versuchest Gott, das besser were gantz und gar nichts gebettet, wie der pfaffen und munche gebet ist.« = LW 14,61.

Luther set priorities in teaching prayer. For him, the Lord's Prayer was the most important prayer and the paradigmatic prayer. But it was not the only prayer.

While Luther moved away from medieval forms—and, for example, did not compose prayers for specific occasions («when traveling», «when receiving the Lord's Supper», «when in childbirth» etc.)—he sought to provide models that Christians could use on any occasion to give voice to their troubles, needs, and hopes. Primarily, he thought that the biblical models already available could be sufficient. Just as the biblical stories tell of God's work among humans and the human response, so the words of human prayer describe real human need and God's response. As scripture bears Christ to us, so also biblical prayers bear our needs to Christ.

Luther did not automatically reject received forms. In prayer, as in other matters, he valued Christian tradition but did not feel bound to it. The mature Luther moved easily between forms of prayers offered by scripture, those offered by tradition (including catechetical and liturgical forms), and those that were spontaneous or without form. Though he used and taught varied forms, he was not bound by any form (except the Lord's Prayer).

Robert Kolb has noted that Luther continually struggled for appropriate language to articulate his insights.⁷³ Similarly, Luther strove to suggest appropriate forms and language for prayer, never content with only one way of articulating human need. In many and various ways, he sought to help people find words to pray.

Luther grasped the connection of teaching prayer to teaching the basics of the Christian faith and also to deepening understanding. Prayer is not merely one element or *locus* among other theological *loci*. It is crucial in the life of faith as it is the human's part of the ongoing relationship and conversation with God. Prayer is conversation, not the gaining of merit or the performance of satisfactions. Prayer is the conversation of faith. Luther believed that as many resources as possible should be used to shape and enhance that conversation, to offer ways for Christians to voice their fears, troubles, needs, and hopes to God.

73 Cf. R. KOLB, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Christian Theology in Context), 2009.