

# Luther's Prayer Practice: Theology at Work

Luther's Prayer Developments as Natural  
Consequences of His Theological Insights

Written by J. Alberto Paredes

Submitted to:

Prof. Carl R. Trueman, Ph.D.

In July 2019

In Attendance of Those Requirements For  
The 03HT6315 Life and Theology of Martin Luther Course  
As the Assigned Research Paper  
At the Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.

## Luther's Prayer Practice: Theology at Work

Prayer has always been central in the life of the Christian throughout the centuries. And this was true also for the life of Dr. Martin Luther. *Oratio* (prayer) was of such significance for him, that it has been regarded as the starting point of theological reflection,<sup>1</sup> or even as the beginning of the making of a theologian.<sup>2</sup> Out of the three rules<sup>3</sup> of the Way of David to which he gives account on his Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's Theological Writings, he turns to prayer as a necessary condition even before studying Scripture, and gives his rationale:

*First, you should know that the Holy Scripture constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books to foolishness... Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding. [...] But kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.*<sup>4</sup>

However, a question may arise: How did Luther go from obligatory cold mechanical phrase repetitions in an Augustinian monastery to a view of prayer which embraced notions such as dependence, despair, humility, freedom and passion? That is precisely the question that we seek to answer in this work. My suggestion is that by understanding Luther's theological breakthroughs we may find an explanation to some of the major changes that he introduced in prayer practice.

In addition to the fact that prayer is important for every Christian in History, and that Luther held a high view of it, answering this question will help us understand as well why some of the major Luther Scholars have made the claim that "For Martin Luther, the Reformation was about how the church prays".<sup>5</sup>

In order to be aware of the significant changes Luther brought into prayer practice, we first need to consider two things: 1. How did prayer looked like in medieval monasticism? And, 2. Why is it that prayer was practiced in this way?

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, 3rd Ed. (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon L. Isaac, *Prayer, Meditation, & Spiritual Trial: Luther's Account of Life in the Spirit* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Oratio, meditation, and tentatio*; these are, prayer, meditation, and what Luther called in German, *Anfechtungen*, which some authors have translated as Spiritual Trials or temptations.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 41.

<sup>5</sup> William R Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," *Word & World* 22, no. 1 (2002): 54.

## Prayer Practice in Medieval Monasticism

From the Early Middle Ages, we find evidence that prayer started to be associated with discipline, monks, and works of perfection. At the beginning, only three specific hours for prayers are mentioned, these are: the *Matin* (00:00), *Terce* (09:00) and *Sext* (12:00). And only the *sacerdotes et perfectiores*<sup>6</sup> attended to these systematic prayer meetings which consisted mostly in the recitation of Psalms and the Lord's Prayer.<sup>7</sup> Later on, in the Carolingian Period (780-900 a.D), some writings that link monastic prayer with catechetical purposes began to appear in what we know today as Germany. These writings relate the practices of prayer to a previous confession of the common faith, thus establishing a didactical dimension of prayer practice.<sup>8</sup> By the time of the High Middle Ages, the prayer hours went from three to a total of eight through a normal day, adding to the previously mentioned the *Lauds* (at sunrise), *Prime* (06:00), *None* (15:00), *Vespers* (at sunset), and *Compline* (at bedtime). Different prayer books came to be known as *books of hours*, and new prayers were addressed not only to God but to the virgin Mary, her mother Anne, and many other saints as well.<sup>9</sup>

The development in monastic prayer was inevitably intertwined with some of the major changes that were taking place in Roman Catholic doctrine at the time. This is especially true in regards of the significance Roman Catholicism began to place in good works. In a historical survey of Monasticism, Greg Peters comments that, from the beginning, the motivation that gave birth to monasticism was not primarily a *response* to the work of God, but the idea of being able to *cooperate* with the work of God.<sup>10</sup> However, to be fair, we are to understand this statement only as monks' excessive prayers being counted for the lacking prayer of the rest of Christendom. This was yet far from the doctrine of the treasury of merits. So, how did they get there? We can answer with one word: Penance.

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<sup>6</sup> The priests and "more perfect souls".

<sup>7</sup> Josef A. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries*, ed. Christopher Irvine, 2nd ED. (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>8</sup> An example of this is a Prayer Book called *Glaube und Beicht* (Faith and Confession). See, *Ibid.*, 59–60.

<sup>9</sup> Karin Maag and John D. Witvliet, eds., *Worship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 28–30.

<sup>10</sup> Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 30.

The practice of penance has a long history in Roman Catholicism; but how the church is to understand penance has varied through ages. Even before the doctrine of justification by faith and works was officially established in Trent in 1547,<sup>11</sup> one thing was clear for the Medieval church: good works were needed for sins to be forgiven, and he who has not been forgiven cannot be perfect, and he who is not perfect cannot come closer to God, which was the whole point of monasticism. Thus, monks were actively practicing good works to come closer to God, and prayer was a mean towards that end. This was reaffirmed when penance was regarded as a sacrament by Peter Lombard in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and described as being conformed by three components: compunction, confession, and satisfaction. This last part, *satisfactio*, was referenced as the meritorious works one needed to perform to acquire forgiveness. One of this works was prayer.<sup>12</sup> The sacrament of penance took such relevance so quickly, that it was soon regarded as the most significant after baptism and the “bread”.<sup>13</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council made this view of penance and its relation to prayer official in 1215.<sup>14</sup> Soon after, in 1343, Pope Clement VI proclaimed the doctrine that the church was in possession of what he called *The Treasury of Merits*, and that it can give to one believer the excess merits of another (namely, the virgin Mary, and the Saints). Finally, Pope Sixtus IV proclaimed that these merits could be transferred to someone dead to shorten his time in purgatory.<sup>15</sup> Thus, monasticism practices of prayer as a meritorious life of continual satisfaction of penance aroused as a natural response to the theological developments of the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance.

The monastic prayer practices that Luther encountered in the Augustinian cloister in his pursuit of perfection consisted in recitations from the book of hours in seven out of the eight times stipulated

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<sup>11</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward ; Georgetown University Press, 1990), 671–676.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, trans. Giulio Silano, vol. 4, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation* 42–43, 45 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007), 88–93.

<sup>13</sup> After Baptism and the bread, penance was regarded as the most important sacrament of all. It was said that "without it...none of the other sacraments were of any use to sinners". See, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology: 600 - 1300*, Nachdr., vol. 3, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 210.

<sup>14</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume One: Nicea I to Lateran V*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward ; Georgetown University Press, 1990), 231,245.

<sup>15</sup> Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 264–265.

for prayer. And, when he couldn't make some of those hours, he could always up on weekends sometimes praying for two or three days without ceasing, eating or sleeping.<sup>16</sup>

About this time in the monastery he wrote:

*I was a good monk...if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. [...] If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayer, reading and other work.*<sup>17</sup>

But he was about to change that.

### Three Major Changes on Luther's Prayer Practice

Out of all the revolutions that can be pointed out from Luther's monastic prayer practices to what became his reformation on prayer, only three will be briefly discussed in this work: *The Shortening of Prayer Books*, *The Primacy of the Commandments*, and *The New Division of the Creed*.

#### *The Shortening of Prayer Books*

In the first place, one major change introduced by Luther was the shortening of the prayer books by removing every prayer directed to Mary or to the Saints. The only exception to this being the Hail Mary, which he explicitly denies being a real prayer, but commends it for meditation and as a template to remember God's work through Mary for the sake of human salvation in Christ.<sup>18</sup> However, in his major works on prayer, he consistently focus in the Ten Commandments, The Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

#### *The Primacy of the Commandments*

Secondly, Luther purposefully moves the place of the Ten Commandments to the beginning of almost every work on prayer. In the Middle Ages, the Creed was commonly placed before the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments.<sup>19</sup> This major change also finds an exception in *A Simple Way to Pray 1535* where he starts with the Lord's Prayer to which the Ten Commandments and the Creed follows. However, this is not significant for four main reasons: first, it could easily

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<sup>16</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, First edition. (New York: Random House, 2016), 42.

<sup>17</sup> Roland H Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2016), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, "Personal Prayer Book 1522," in *Luther's Works. 43: Devotional Writings: 2*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed., vol. 43 (Saint Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publ. House, 1968), 39–40.

<sup>19</sup> See notes 19-20 in, Martin Luther, *The Annotated Luther. Volume 4: Pastoral Writings*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2016), 167.

be explained as a variant due to contextual circumstances.<sup>20</sup> The second reason is that, while this work is one of the major treatises on prayer along with the *Personal Book of Prayer 1522* and *The Catechism of 1529*; for this one which seems to be inconsistent in structure, there are at least two other that repeat the same formula.<sup>21</sup> The third reason is that even when indeed the order has changed, Luther has not returned to what was the main Middle-Age practice of beginning with the Creed. Finally, and as we will soon see, if it is true that the order of this prayers is inconsistent in this lone work, the theology behind why Luther decided to make such a change is consistent throughout the whole treatise, and even from the opening lines.

### *The New Division of the Creed*

Finally, the third major change imposed by Luther was the reduction to the divisions of the Creed from twelve to three. Before this, the common practice was to divide the Creed in twelve assertions, linking each part to a particular apostle.<sup>22</sup> This new threefold division feature is consistent throughout all his works on prayer.

We have seen the common practices of Monastic piety regarding prayer and how did they get there. We have also established three major changes which Luther brought to prayer practice. But those this changes really correspond to his theological developments?

### Luther's Theology in Relation to Changes on Prayer Practice

The principle of *Sola Scriptura* must be the starting point for the following considerations. If it is true that Luther did not held a radical view of the authority of Scripture over against the Pope and Councils at the very beginning of his days as a Scholar and Priest, it is also truth that while his theology matured, his view of Scripture as the only authority for the Christian and the Church grew

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<sup>20</sup> When he was asked to provide a work on this topic by his barber, he returned to the topic of the Lord's Prayer from the pulpit. It is probable that he had preached an exposition on the Lord's Prayer shortly before writing this work, so the Lord's prayer was fresh in his mind. See, Erich Lund, "Introduction to A Simple Way to Pray 1535," in *The Annotated Luther. Volume 4: Pastoral Writings*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2016), 253.

<sup>21</sup> This formula, Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, may be found also in: *A Short Form of the Ten Commandments, a Short Form of the Creed, a Short Form of the Lord's Prayer; Booklet for Laity and Children*. See, Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation." 50

<sup>22</sup> See note 42 in, Luther, *The Annotated Luther. Volume 4*, 4:178.

stronger,<sup>23</sup> until it became a hallmark of his theology and of the Reformation. Connected to his high view of Scripture as authoritative, he developed in his response to Erasmus the doctrine of perspicuity, or clarity. This clarity stated that, in one way or another, whether through the preaching of the Word (external clarity) or through the enlighten of the Spirit (internal clarity) God plainly revealed his will to the people who came by faith to Scripture.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is God himself, through his Word, and not the Church, council or popes, who is to determine what prayer is, and how shall it be done.

Therefore, to give an example, Luther writes in the Smacald Articles:

*The invocation of saints is also one of the abuses of the Antichrist [the Pope] ... It is neither commanded nor recommended, has no precedent in Scripture...Although the angels in heaven pray for us, and in the same way also the saints on earth and perhaps in heaven pray for us, **it does not follow from this that we ought to invoke angels and saints; pray to them; keep fasts and hold festivals for them...This is idolatry.***<sup>25</sup>

Luther states again his adversity to what prayer is in his introduction to his Personal Prayer Book:

*Among the many harmful books and doctrines which are misleading and deceiving Christians and give rise to countless false beliefs...They drub into the minds of simple people **such a wretched counting up of sins and going to confession, such Un-Christian tomfoolery about prayer to God and his saints!***<sup>26</sup>

Having thus the Scripture as unique authority and seeking to encourage simple direct prayer to God,<sup>27</sup> Luther may take out of prayer books all prayers to saints and Mary. Yet, he also needs to preserve the catechetical role of prayer in its practice. Population still was mostly illiterate and prayer repetition and meditation was a good tool to teach Scripture. Thus, having analyzed what is necessary for the Christian to know, Luther decides to keep the Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer as foundational to every prayer work.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: It's Historical and Systematic Development*, Reprint. (Lanham: Fortress Press, 2011), 187–188.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. James I. Packer, 11. print. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 73–74.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 347.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, "LW. 43: Personal Prayer Book 1522," 11.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Jane Haemig, "Introduction to A Little Prayer Book 1522," in *The Annotated Luther. Volume 4: Pastoral Writings*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2016), 163.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," 50.

Moving forward, many other of Luther's changes on his understanding of prayer and its practice need to be seen through the lenses of a complex system of theology that comprehends from the nature of sin, going through justification, and finally on how does the gospel is to be communicated to Christendom.

For instance, Luther understood sin not only as a simple *fomes*, but as corrupting the whole nature of the human being even from birth. Indeed, he grasp the idea that, without Christ, we are dead in our sins.<sup>29</sup> This notion of sin has a consequence on the place of self-righteousness and good works:

*The whole purpose and intention of the apostle in this epistle [Romans] is to break down all righteousness and wisdom of our own... to blow (sins) up and magnify them, and thus to show that for breaking them down Christ and His righteousness is needed for us.*<sup>30</sup>

Next to this, comes Luther's theology of justification. Since sin has radically corrupted the whole man, there is no way in which the sinner can be justified by his own good works. Even further, good works, so-called, are not possible without previous justification. This was all contrary to the Middle-Age understanding of justification through *pactum*. This *pactum* doctrine, outlined by Gabriel Biel, stated that God would not deny grace for those who were doing what was in them.<sup>31</sup> This view implied the human addition of good works as a necessary compliment to the grace of God for justification.<sup>32</sup> In the other hand, Luther's doctrine of justification stated that justification was God's declaration of righteousness upon any human being that has accepted by faith the good news of the Gospel of Christ. In the *Freedom of the Christian Man*, Luther states clearly that we are justified by faith alone and not by any works; that true obedience to God comes not by any accomplishment of good works, but by faith alone; and that works may only glorify God if faith is previously present, this is, if they come as a result of faith. Furthermore, for us to see our sinfulness, we first needed to look to the requirements of the Law. The law would show our utter inability of accomplishing justification by works; and, as a result, would prepare our hearts to receive the Gospel of Christ righteousness imputed to us by faith alone.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*, Theologians on the Christian life (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 248.

<sup>31</sup> Ltn: *Facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*. See, Matthew Barret, "Can This Bird Fly?: Repositioning the Genesis of the Reformation on Martin Luther's Early Polemic against Gabriel Biel's Covenantal, Voluntarist Doctrine of Justification.," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21, no. 4 (2017): 96.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–70.

<sup>33</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 405, 407, 409, 411.

This theology of justification, along with this Law-Gospel dialectic, would also shape Luther's prayer practices. For instance, since prayer is not required for salvation, but a response of God's redemptive act in our hearts, we are free from the obligatory hours and mere repetition:

*Prayer in Popedom is mere tongue-threshing; not prayer, but a work of obedience. Thence a confused sea of Horæ Canonicae, the howling and babbling in cells and monasteries, were they read and sing psalms and collects without any spiritual devotion, understanding neither the words, sentences, nor meaning. [...] Though I have done no more but only freed people from that torment, they might well give me thanks for it.*<sup>34</sup>

We are to be confident in God's promises of attending to our prayers, since they are not founded in our merits.<sup>35</sup> And we are also free to pray led by the Spirit<sup>36</sup> and using Prayer Books as a template, but not in a recitative manner, or at any particular time.<sup>37</sup> This theological insights allow also to move the Ten Commandments to the beginning in an attempt to be consistent with Law-Gospel dialectic:

*Three things a person must know in order to be saved. First, he must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when he realizes that he cannot measure up to what he should do or leave undone, he needs to know where to go to find the strength he requires. Third, he must know how to seek and obtain that strength. [...] Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness... The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine-grace-which will help him to... keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfilment of God's commandments everything will be given to him. In this three are the essentials of the entire Bible.*<sup>38</sup>

Even when this order is not fulfilled in *A Simple Way to Pray*, we are able to find this same Law-Gospel dialectic early on in this work:

*First, when I feel that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts ... I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself*

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<sup>34</sup> Entry 330 in, Martin Luther, *The Tabletalk of Martin Luther: Luther's Comments on Life, the Church and the Bible*. (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus : Christian Heritage (imprint), 2003), 244.

<sup>35</sup> John Nicholas Lenker, "Fifth Sunday After Easter (Rogate) or Prayer Sunday," in *Sermons of Martin Luther. Volume 3: Sermons from Gospel Texts for Pentecost*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 178.

<sup>36</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> In *A Practical Way to Pray*, Luther writes: "[I]f in the midst of such [prayer] the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can." See, Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," 53.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, "LW. 43: Personal Prayer Book 1522," 13–14.

*and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do.*

*[...] 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 toward thee or to pray. But because thou hast commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ hast 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...<sup>39</sup>*

Thus, we can see not only a written consistency in the instructions Luther gives to his Barber, but also, we see that the first acknowledgement before the Lord's prayer is his utter unworthiness and dependence upon God even to pray.

Also, as he clearly states from the *Heidelberg Disputation*, since there is no sense in centering one's attention into human actions, but in God's, Luther defends that all those who centers in their own good works do not deserve to be called theologians, because all they seek is their own glory. Thus, he baptizes them as theologians of the glory. In the other hand, thus who are humble and find their confidence in Christ's Cross and in the humility displayed therein, are true theologians: theologians of the Cross.<sup>40</sup> This way of thinking is consistent with the simplification of the Creed's division. The twelve-division system was centered in human's actions, even when they were apostles; whereas the threefold division is centered in God's action, and more specifically, in the actions of each person of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup>

## Final Observations

Whereas Luther's prayer practice stands in radical opposition to that of his former monastic piety in matters such as motivation, freedom, the nature of prayer itself, and the guidelines for praying,

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<sup>39</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 33–34.

<sup>40</sup> Theses 19, 20 and 21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. See, *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> See note 42 in, Luther, *The Annotated Luther. Volume 4*, 4:178.

we also need to note that he kept some of the monastic tradition such as the use of prayer books (though with modifications), and this catechetical use of prayer for Christendom. However, there is evidence that shows how Luther's theology is consistent with the major changes he introduced in prayer practice. In some cases, this is not only consistent, but we find profound theological statements on justification, grounds for good works, law-gospel dialectic, and Scripture authority hand in hand with prayer teaching. Thus, showing how Luther's prayer practice was not isolated from his doctrine, but that it indeed was his theology at work.

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