

A LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER

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Editor's note: Rohrbough's article is an edited version of the homily she presented at Seminary Chapel, Andrews University, on April 13, 1999. On that occasion she was given the Andrews University President's Medallion in recognition of "exemplary professional achievement," specifically in connection with her leadership role in the Adventist-Lutheran dialogue.

*The Lutheran-Adventist conversations took place in four separate sessions, from 1994 to 1998. Both sides were represented by scholars and church leaders. A joint declaration was published in the Adventist Review (June 25, 1998) and is available on the world wide web (adventikirkko.great.fi/opetus/advluth.htm). Some three-hundred pages of papers presented to the commission, edited by Sven Oppegaard of the Lutheran World Federation, are slated for publication by Pacific Press later this spring, under the title *Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation*.*

A homily presented on the occasion of Rohrbough's recognition for denominational service may seem, at first glance, out of place in a research journal. We decided, however, to publish it in AUSS because it points to aspects of religious scholarship that may go unnoticed. Scholars who teach at denominational schools spend enormous amounts of research time in the service of their community, yet these papers are not considered "scholarly" enough for publication. Further, the topic of Rohrbough's homily points to the faith dimension so much a part of the lives of those who spend their time studying the Bible and the church. Finally, recognition of the Lutheran-Adventist conversations allows us to note the participation of Andrews University scholars: University president Niels-Erik Andreasen, professors Miroslav Kiš, Hans LaRondelle, and William Shea, as well as AUSS editor Nancy Vyhmeister and consulting editor Jon Paulien.

We are awash in prayer today. There are prayer groups, prayer chains, prayer breakfasts: for business persons, for politicians, for homemakers. We have organized prayers for peace, for hunger, for Christian unity, for the first day of hunting. We pray before football games, political banquets, and business luncheons.

Yet there is also a sense that for many prayer is a last-ditch stand when all else seems to fail, rather than the place where we begin. The

Russian playwright Anton Chekhov points this out with his ironic description of a man who goes to a meeting to pray for rain, but does not bother to take his umbrella along. We laugh at the joke about the great aunt that everyone had forgotten to invite to the garden party. When the mistake was realized, the invitation was issued with many excuses. But it was too late. "Thank you for your invitation," was the stiff reply. "But I am afraid I cannot come. I have already prayed for rain."

Yet prayer is central to our Christian belief. It is often the first step that churches take ecumenically. The act of praying together is essential to the process of discussing theology together.

For Lutherans the key facilitator to prayer is the Lord, who causes us to pray. In Rev 3:20 we read: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me."

When we pray, it is always in response to Jesus' knocking, never the other way around; he is the motivating factor in moving us to pray. There are four modalities of prayer for Lutherans: the command, the promise, the words, and faith. These elements are summarized in Luther's famous letter: "How One Should Pray, for Master Peter the Barber":

Dear God, Heavenly Father, I am a poor, unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to lift up my eyes or hands to thee in prayer. But inasmuch as thou hast *commanded* us all to pray, hast *promised* to hear us when we pray, and through thy dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, has taught us *both how and what to pray*, at this thy command I come before thee obediently, rely on thy gracious promise, and in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ pray with all thy saints or Christians on earth as he hath taught us, "Our Father which art in heaven."¹

The command, the promise, the words, and faith.

God Commands Us to Pray

Numerous passages in Scripture tell us to pray: "Ask, and it will be given you" (Matt 7:7-8); "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you" (John 15:2); "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:6); and the best-known, where we are simply told, "Pray then like this" (Matt 6:9).

Luther points to the commandment, "You shall not take God's name in vain," as the command to pray or call upon God. He states: "It is our

¹Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. Library of Christian Classics, vol. 18, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 126. Emphasis added.

duty and obligation to pray if we want to be Christians.² We are, then, first and foremost commanded to pray. Our only response can be obedience and acceptance of the command, along with the determination to fulfill it.

It is important that the command is unequivocal and without exception. It is not dependent upon our feelings. Modern individualism claims that I must “feel” like praying or the action is false or invalid. However, Christ’s command to pray has nothing to do with our subjective feelings.

Second, the command has nothing to do with feeling a need. We are told to carry all our needs to God in prayer, but feeling the need is not the reason to pray. It is actually in prayer that we first become conscious of our many needs. As we stand helpless before God, our needs are most evident.

Third, the command is not dependent upon feelings of worthiness. Luther writes: “God does not regard prayer on account of the person, but on account of His word and the obedience accorded to it.”³ Only in prayer do we truly become conscious of how unworthy we are.

Fourth, the command is not dependent upon the feeling of whether a prayer is answered or not. We may experience a certain emptiness or loneliness because we feel that our prayers have not been answered, often because we have already decided what the answer should be. However, the command to pray has nothing to do with answered prayer.

Prayer is not effective because of us, nor its effectiveness dependent upon our not being distracted. Sinfulness or sinlessness has little to do with its effectiveness. We are never told to come to God in prayer after we have put our lives in order. We are commanded to come to God exactly as we are—unworthy, distracted sinners.

We pray because we are commanded to. Our response is obedience. To overcome the natural slothfulness of our human nature, it is preferable that we give ourselves the discipline of regular prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his introduction to daily meditation from *The Way to Freedom*, speaks of this discipline:

I need a firm discipline of prayer. We are fond of praying as our fancy takes us, for the short time, for a long time, or even not at all. That is willfulness. Prayer is not a free offering to God, but the bounden duty that He requires. We are not free to carry on as we wish. Prayer is the day’s first service to God. God claims our time for this service.⁴

²*Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer*, par. 8, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 421.

³*Ibid.*, par. 16, 422.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 57-58.

We have been commanded to take our cares, needs, hopes, and fears to God in prayer. God has promised to answer us. How can we do other than respond in joyful obedience to the command?

God Gives Us the Promise

The second aspect of prayer, echoing Rev 3:20b, is promise: "I will come to them, and eat with them, and they with me."

God has not only commanded us to pray; God has promised to hear us when we pray. This is not an empty solicitude; God promises to hear and to act. The command and the promise are never isolated from one another: "Ask, and then it will be given you" (Matt 7: 7-8); "Ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7); "If you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in my name. . . . Ask, and you will receive" (John 16:23-24). In every instance the promise to respond follows the command. The promise is unconditional. Our only duty is to ask.

Luther states: "To be sure, the good and gracious will of God is done without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also be done by us." He continues: "To be sure, God provides daily bread, even to the wicked, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that God may make us aware of His gifts and enable us to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving."⁵

The promise is future-oriented. We are not in control; God is in control. We partake of the future because it is God's future, thus making the promise eschatological. Nonetheless, the promise is also for now. Ask, and it will be given you; you will receive, and it will be done. These words do not mean: only after you die, only when Christ comes again, or only at the end of the world. It is clear that we are to ask for today's needs and expect an answer today.

Just after the magnificent "Ask, and it will be given you, seek and you will find" passage, Jesus used the example of the father who gives his son bread and fish to eat when he is hungry. Clearly the father is answering his son's needs here and now. He is not speaking of eschatological answers, but of daily bread. In comparing God to this kind of father, Jesus is stressing that God is concerned about our daily needs.

God's promise is that all things may be brought to him. We have the privilege of praying for ourselves and others; of bringing our requests to him for salvation, as well as for our daily bread. We pray for others not because of our worthiness or because of our merit, but to God's honor

⁵*Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer*, par. 10, 13, Tappert ed., 347.

and glory. It is because of the promise that we dare to pray; it is because of the command that we do not dare to not pray. The promise without the command is meaningless, as is the command without the promise. Together they form the basis of our communication with God.

God Gives Us the Words

In Matt 6:9 we find the third element of prayer: the words. Luther states that “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.”⁶

Prayer is not a new religious practice introduced by Jesus. Prayer is a central part of the Jewish religion. What is new about the concept is *what* we are to pray. We are given the very words with which we are to speak to God. We are not left merely to guess what to do; we are told what is pleasing to God.

We find these words in Matt 6 and its parallel, Luke 11. In the Lucan passage the disciples ask for instruction in prayer. They have witnessed Jesus’ praying; they know that John the Baptist has taught his followers to pray. They now ask Jesus to do the same for them. His instruction is not some theological disquisition on prayer. He gives them, rather, the very words they are to use. We have so often assumed that praying is a natural attribute of human nature; that all we need is the command that we should pray, calling on God in our every need. The disciples saw clearly that there was more to prayer than that. They had been praying previously. They knew what prayer was. Still they came to Jesus and said: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

The Lord’s Prayer, then, becomes the basic instruction for all Christian prayer. Praying the Lord’s Prayer can, however, easily become an empty repetition of phrases. Luther urged his barber to return to the petitions of the prayer and meditate on each individually. This is the way we take the words that have been given to us and make them a part of ourselves. Luther not only urged this on others; he regularly practiced this himself:

This, in short, is the way in which I am myself accustomed to use the Lord’s Prayer and to pray. To this day I am still suckling on the Lord’s Prayer like a child and am still eating and drinking of it like an old man without growing weary of it. I regard it as the best of prayers—superior even to the Psalter, which I am very fond of.⁷

We are given the command; we are given the promise, we are given the very

⁶*Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer*, par. 22, Tappert ed., 423.

⁷*Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, Tappert ed., 128.

words which we are to use. And we pray these words knowing that they are pleasing to God.

Paul, in Rom 8:26-27, reiterates that we do not know how to pray as we ought. Rather than prayer being natural to human nature, our very nature keeps us from seeing our needs. But because God has given us the words of the Lord's Prayer and the Spirit to intercede for us, as Paul mentions in Rom 8, we are not dependent upon our own discovery of our needs. The Lord's Prayer shows us what our needs are.

Second, Rom 8 reveals to us that we do not know how to express our needs properly. Because our words are too limited, God has given us the words in the Lord's Prayer, as well as the Spirit to intercede for us. It is the sighs of the Spirit that truly express our needs (Rom 8:26).

Third, Paul explains in Rom 8 that the words we use to pray are summed up in the term "Abba" (v. 15). The translation of "Abba" comes closer in meaning to "daddy" than to "father." It is the kind of personal word that is used only in the bosom of the family. It implies more than a generic relationship; it signifies a close personal relationship. When we cry, "Abba, Daddy," we are like small children calling on a parent who loves and knows us better than we know ourselves.

God Gives Us Faith

The story is told of a little girl whose parents overheard her reciting the alphabet in a very reverent tone just before bedtime. Asked what she was doing, she replied, "I'm saying my prayers, but I can't think of the exact words tonight, so I'm just saying all the letters. God knows what I'm thinking, and God will put the letters together for me." This childlike faith, this assurance that we will be heard, is the basis of our relationship with him. The Bible passage that best expresses our faith in the power of prayer is Phil 4:6, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

King Claudius in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* attempts to pray as he sees his world crumbling around him. He arises from his knees totally frustrated: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to Heaven go."⁸ Claudius has been merely mouthing words. He no longer believes that prayer can help him. His prayer has no meaning because he has no faith in it himself. It is this fourth element of prayer—faith—that must be present for the command, the promise, or the words to have meaning. If we do not believe that our prayers will be heard, if we do not trust in the promise, then it is all to no avail. For

⁸*Hamlet*, Act III, scene 3.

Luther, faith is summed up in our willingness to say “Amen” and to leave the rest to God. He writes:

But the efficacy of prayer consists in our learning also to say “Amen” to it—that is, not to doubt that our prayer is surely heard and will be granted. This word is nothing else than an unquestioning affirmation of faith on the part of one who does not pray as a matter of chance but knows that God does not lie since He has promised to grant his requests. When such faith is wanting, there can be no true prayer.⁹

It is human nature to want to have some part in the process. It seems necessary that we must have some means of acceptance. Certainly God gives the command, the promise, even the words, but surely something is required of us. By what right can we take all of this without some action, some response on our part? Nevertheless, faith, which is so important to our prayers and to our lives as a whole, is given to us by God. It is never our gift or our response to God, only our acceptance of what God gives to us. Because we can rely on God, we do not have to rely on our own faith; we truly can have confidence. Any other understanding of faith places limits on God, making divine action dependent upon us. God gives us the faith to believe that our prayers will be answered.

In conclusion, prayer is never our creation. It is always a gift of God. It has the four modalities, which God gives—the command, the promise, the words, and faith. This is our true piety: to obey God’s command, to believe God’s promise, to use the words God offers, and to express the faith God gives us. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them, and will eat with them, and they with me” (Rev 3:20).

Soli Deo Gloria

⁹*Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer*, par. 119-120, Tappert ed., 436.