

Pray without Ceasing:

The Lord's Prayer as a Model for Christian Unity
and accompanying prayer for Christian unity with explanation

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National Workshop on Christian Unity

2008 Essay Contest

24 January 2008

Essay

Time and again throughout scripture we are told that we live in a broken world where we are guaranteed to experience hardship, pain, and trial. In the face of this sobering truth, there is genuine hope to be found in the promises of God. Jesus did not wear blinders to the suffering of humanity two thousand years ago. He healed the sick and uplifted the downtrodden. He met people in the midst of their darkest hours of grief and sickness. So too does God abide with us now. We have been given the promise that Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age.¹ In addition to that abiding present hope, Jesus gave us the hope of an eschatological kingdom of God. Such a vision is impossible for us to comprehend fully. There is however a foretaste of that kingdom we can share with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the prayer Jesus gave us which has the power to both unify all Christians and grant us a glimpse of the eschaton. That prayer is the Lord's Prayer.²

Prayer – broadly speaking – is one of the single greatest unifying activities of Christians, and consequentially, one of the most compelling motivators for ecumenical discussion. Even when we cannot agree on the finer points of theological interpretation, when the structures of our various church bodies seem foreign and nonsensical, and when Sunday morning worship services of a neighbor bear little resemblance to our own sanctuary, prayer lets us see our own essential unity as the body of Christ. Regardless of theological disposition, denominational polity, or liturgical fiat, we share Christ as the head of our body, the cornerstone of all we believe. Prayer lets us see through adiaborous distractions and focus on that fundamental truth.

¹ Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV). “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

² Presented by Jesus in two of the synoptic gospels: Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4

Of all the prayers that have been uttered, from one-word pleas of desperation to the extended petitions of a community, none stands out more than the Lord's Prayer. Even if the prayer were no more than a single breath, it would still be unique in its power to unify all Christians as children of God because of its direct derivation from Jesus, but indeed the Lord's Prayer is a rich theological statement that both implores Christians to unity now and gives us a foretaste of the kingdom of God. The second and third petitions of the prayer are where this concern for the kingdom is presented most explicitly.³

God's kingdom is, on the one hand, the eschatological promise of a time when God will reconcile all things to Godself, a time when there will be no more sorrow or tears, when the brokenness of our world and the fallen nature of humanity will come to pass and a new harmony of all the world with God will be realized. On the other hand, God's kingdom exists even now and all Christians can experience that kingdom individually and corporately through prayer. As one theologian puts it, the present kingdom of God "is not a spot on the map, but an activity; it can be a realm, but not a geographical place. In that realm the word and works of God are swirling and generating. It is 'sovereign,' meaning that it is entirely the work of God, who originates and sustains it..."⁴

Characterizing the kingdom as "swirling and generating" paints a picture of the radical dynamism of God at work. This is not an image of stagnancy or stratification that divides low church from high church or Catholic from Protestant. God's activity is ever moving and ever reaching out in love and inclusion to the world, a remarkable model for how Christians can relate

³ Matthew 6:10 (NRSV). "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

⁴ Martin Marty, *Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 148.

with each other ecumenically and with all of humanity. It is fitting then that petitions regarding the kingdom of God are followed by petitions asking for assistance with earthly affairs.⁵

Perhaps the most striking dimension of the Lord's Prayer, and likewise with all prayers, is the ongoing nature of prayer. Just as the image of the kingdom of God is one of constant engagement and reinvigoration, so too are prayers activities of engagement with God and with each other through our communal petitions and praise. The theme of the 2008 NWCUC recognizes this, through the exhortation to "pray without ceasing."⁶ In his *Large Catechism* exposition of the Lord's Prayer, Martin Luther underscored the importance of continual prayer, saying that "nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith..."⁷ The drumming that Luther talks about indeed honors the relationship of us as children to God our parent, for the Bible tells us time and again of how God wants to be the focus of our attention. But beyond that, the incessant drumming of our prayers further binds us as the created to our creator, and in doing so we will be further drawn to love and serve those around us.

Prayer *without ceasing* is the most important part of prayer. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, saying "your kingdom come," it is not a petition isolated in time and space. Our prayer serves to connect the present foretaste of the kingdom of God with its eschatological fruition and in doing so we experience oneness in Christ. We are strengthened by that connection to God and unity with each other to go and be the body of Christ in a world full of pain and sorrow. Even as we do so, in the face of the brokenness around us, we are on our way rejoicing. The prayer for

⁵ Matthew 6:11-12 (NRSV). "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NRSV).

⁷ Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 440.

the coming kingdom of God resonates in our hearts and we leap for the excitement of it all. In that excitement, we are moved to join hands and hearts to continue our ceaseless prayers.

Prayer

Dear God, we come before you as people living in a broken world. Faced with this harsh truth, we stand in reverent awe of your mercy and grace. Through Christ, you gave us freely the salvation we do not deserve. You have given us a glimpse of the future coming of your kingdom, when all will be reconciled to you; when there will be no more tears of sorrow, only tears of joy. We praise you for this abundant hope, and we also praise you for the gift of unity you have given us now. Raise up within us the promise of wholeness for all parts of the body of Christ, that we may be moved by the dynamism of your present kingdom among us. Kindle within our hearts the hope of a time when there will be no more need for our earthly church denominations. Grant that we would be strengthened in our faith and ever stirred to pray without ceasing. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer.

Explanation of Prayer

There are several aspects of this prayer that reflect theology in the Lutheran tradition (which I am a part of), as well as my own points of emphasis within Lutheran theology. The prayer begins with a humble acknowledgment of the fallen state of humanity and the world followed by praise for the salvation bestowed through the grace of God. These points are in harmony with the doctrines of original sin and justification as found in articles two and four respectively of the *Augsburg Confessions*.⁸ Their inclusion here shows my own inclination toward the classic tensions of Lutheran theology, most notably the need to be aware of one's movement between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross. By beginning the prayer with an admission of human frailty, I call the reader to the attention of cross-centered grace.

⁸ Ibid., 36-40.

The prayer continues with praise for the glimpse of the eschatological kingdom of God and the joy it will bring. This too follows Lutheran theology, as the systematician Ted Peters puts it, “The promise of the future completion of God’s master act permits us to think holistically [...] hence appropriately called from our point of view ‘continuing creation.’”⁹ This emphasis on the continuing nature of God’s creation is further reflected in subsequent petitions for dynamism in the present kingdom of God among us.

Next, the prayer makes a request for the movement beyond the need for earthly denominationalism. This too is classically Lutheran in the respect that Lutherans have long seen themselves as a confessional movement within the church catholic.¹⁰ Our theology recognizes that “the ecclesiastical, organizational structures of Lutheranism are interim measures, ready to go out of business as soon as their provisional aims are realized.”¹¹ While we continue to pray that those aims are realized through ecumenical accord in the present age, we boldly declare that in the eschaton those aims will undoubtedly be brought to fruition.

Finally, the prayer ends with a petition that Christians would be moved to pray without ceasing. As evidenced by the citation to the *Large Catechism* in the above essay, this too is strongly supported in Lutheran tradition and has been integrated deeply into my own theology and practice.

⁹ Ted Peters, *God--the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 146.

¹⁰ Carl Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

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