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Luther on Prayer

David P. Scaer

I. Prayer and the *Anfechtungen*

A. Prayer as Deterent

In Luther's theology, prayer and *Anfechtungen* are intimately related. One of the effects of the *Anfechtungen* in the life of the Christian is the personal awareness of his total helplessness in the face of the affliction. Through this sense of helplessness, the Christian is taught to pray correctly. *Anfechtungen* add both depth and dimension to prayer. Prayer indicates that the Christian has not given up hope and his willingness to seek help from God. The praying Christian means that Satan has not yet conquered. If the afflicted refrains from relying on his own power as Satan has tempted him to do, he is brought by the affliction face to face with God. In his helplessness the afflicted can go no place but to God for aid and assistance.¹ Prayer is the plea for aid.

Through prayer the afflicted Christian acknowledges that there is help from the Holy Spirit. Prayer in the hands of a Christian becomes a weapon to defend himself against Satan and to fight him back. Throughout the *Anfechtungen* the Christian is on the defensive and retreats from Satan. With prayer he begins to hold his own ground and then to take the offensive against Satan. In the moment of the *Anfechtungen*, Luther says, praising God is the most effective poison in destroying Satan. Very effective, according to Luther, is clinching the fists against Satan. No remedy is more effective than praying the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer destroys Satan as water puts out fire.²

In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Luther utters some of his choicest words on prayer, placing it just one step lower than the office of the ministry (which is higher as it is entrusted with the tasks of preaching and teaching how Christians should live). Prayer must be part of every sermon.³ The sinful condition of the world which makes unbelief a constant reality for the Christian requires that he be constant in prayer:

He [God] also wants to indicate that because of all the temptations and hindrances we face, nothing is more necessary in Christendom than continual and unceasing prayer that God would give His grace and His Spirit to make the doctrine powerful and efficacious among us and among others.⁴

Even when the church's doctrine may be in order, the Christians will encounter offense and obstacles: "We battle against these continually with all our might, but the strongest shield we have is prayer."⁵ Even without a promise or command, the Christian in the middle of his *Anfechtungen* can find his own effective help through prayer. God, however, does not leave us in such a state that the only reason we pray is that no other solution presents itself. Prayer is motivated

not only by the desperate need of the Christian, but also by the father-son relationship which God has with Christians. God promises to hear the requests of Christians in the same way that a father does not give his son a serpent when he asks for a fish.⁶ By our needs God pushes us to prayer, and by His kind invitations and promises He invites us to pray.

B. Prayer and the Sense of Unworthiness

Right during the act of praying Luther himself was afflicted by sin, Satan, and his own conscience. Prayer was the occasion for *Anfechtungen*. As he prayed, Luther was afflicted with the thought that God was not hearing his prayer and that God was becoming angry with him. He asked himself during prayer why God should hear his prayers in distress if God Himself had sent that distress into his life. So troubled was Luther with the thought of his own sinfulness and his lack of worthiness to pray that all he could do was cry out, "Help, dear Lord." By bringing the Christian to the point where he can only cry out to God for help, God was accomplishing his purpose of saving the Christian.⁷

Luther would never understand prayer as an instrument in the hand of the Christian to manipulate God. Nevertheless, the Christian has to learn that God is near in the hour of need and that in answer to prayer He helps. Rather than seeing *Anfechtungen* as a hindrance to prayer, the *Anfechtungen* are themselves invitations to pray. God and Satan in "alliance" work in the life of believers to bring about God's will. If prayer became permissible only when a person was pious, then no one would ever be permitted to pray. The prayers of those afflicted in the *Anfechtungen* are indeed valid before God. The sense of our unworthiness does not make us ineligible to ask for God's mercy. It is in the very moment of the recognition of sin, the horrible and humbling sense of unworthiness, that the gracious hand of God becomes apparent. The personal recognition of sins provides the opportunity for prayer. Since the Christian's recognition of his sin and confession are imperfect, he does not know for what he should pray. The *Anfechtungen* have done their awful work and left him in distress and confusion. At that moment the Holy Spirit enters in with His help and in our stead offers up to God an acceptable prayer. This assistance provided by the Holy Spirit is above and beyond human comprehension. The concept that the Christian can pray only with the Spirit's aid again accentuates the centrality of God's grace in Luther's theology. Therefore, in prayer the only proper attitude is for the Christian to commit himself entirely into the hands of God. This committing of the self into God's hands means the willingness to suffer all weaknesses and *Anfechtungen* and at the same time never to give up hope that God will provide the necessary help. In this kind of situation the afflicted Christian is brought close to God. Prayer releases

him from his distresses and attaches him to God. It frees him from the power of the devil and places him again under the omnipotence of God. God's Spirit and Word again becomes effective in the life of the Christian and take the place of anxieties. This is the hour of salvation. Prayer and the *Anfechtungen* show what appears to be contradictory in Luther's theology. Prayer is the antidote against the *Anfechtungen* caused by Satan, but Luther will credit Satan in driving him to prayer.⁸

C. *Prayer as Faith's Plea in the Anfechtungen*

Thus, *Anfechtungen* and prayer are necessary for the Christian, not in the sense that *Anfechtungen* and prayer are good works that justify the Christian before God or even in the sense that the *Anfechtungen* and prayer constitute faith. This type of equation would negate the concept of *sola fide* as pure passivity in relation to the activity of God's grace. *Anfechtungen* are necessary not as a contributory factor to faith, but as an environmental factor. Faith springs up not in a condition of sinlessness, but surrounded by the world, the devil, and the flesh. Faith is engendered unencumbered as a pure act of grace; but as soon as it begins to grow it encounters forces which are bent on its destruction. Whatever Christian progress may have taken place is thwarted, stunted, and in some cases destroyed in the *Anfechtungen*. Prayer becomes the signal that faith will no longer retreat in the face of Satan. Prayer is the cry of a faith that realizes its own personal helplessness in confronting the *Anfechtungen* and throws itself upon God alone for aid. The *Anfechtungen* describe faith in conflict. Prayer describes faith approaching God for aid in the conflict. Therefore faith, *Anfechtungen*, and prayer exist side by side in the Christian.

II. Types of Prayer

A. *Constant Prayer*

Prayer should be regarded as a constant activity of the Christian. There are, of course, the commands that Christians should pray without ceasing and the promises of God to hear continually the prayer of the Christians. God never becomes weary of listening to Christians' prayers and answering them. By prayer faith shows that it relies on God totally. The desparate situation of the Christian, however, also provides an adequate motivation for constant praying. Luther cites the example of Joseph who for thirteen years prayed to God for release from his slavery. The only result was that his plight became worse instead of better. It appears to us that, without an immediate answer to our prayers, they are to remain unanswered. Through this activity, however, God was strengthening Joseph for the position of lord of Egypt. As long as the distress and affliction last, the Christian is given no other choice than to pray to God continually for aid. The continual praying of the Christian indicates that his faith is still active in the midst of affliction.⁹

B. *Spontaneous Prayer*

Luther encouraged spontaneous prayer. While laying down special prayers for certain days and parts of each day, Luther urged that Christians pray spontaneously. For example, horrible and monstrous things should invoke a plea for God's help and mercy. When experiencing something good, the Christian should be prepared to thank God right at that very moment. Such prayers should be formed by the Christian right on the spot "without any prepared and prescribed words."¹⁰ There is no suggestion that Luther approved of unrehearsed prayers in the church service. His words are directed to the Christian life in its ordinary circumstances. The spontaneous prayer reflects the daily situation of the Christian as he at the same time experiences conflicts and God's help. Just as *Anfechtungen* come without warning, so Christians should be prepared to pray at any moment.

C. *Regulated Prayers*

Those acquainted with Luther's Small Catechism are also aware that along with spontaneous prayers, the Reformer prescribed a daily regimen of prayers, with the Lord's Prayer being given the most important position. Following Luther's rule, it should be prayed eight times a day, at rising, at bedtime, and before and after each meal. Luther's reason for such attention to the Lord's Prayer is that its petitions are the continual wishes of all Christians even if during the prayer the mind might wander.¹¹ In his personal life Luther added to the Lord's Prayer as essential parts of his personal piety the Ten Commandments and several Bible passages.¹² With spontaneous prayer and the discipline of daily prayers, Luther was accomplishing the same goal of keeping faith alive. The discipline of reciting the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer brought the sinner to an awareness of his sins and directed him to that place where help could be found.

III. *Absence of Prayer and Motivation to Pray*

Prayer, for Luther, served as an indicator of the presence of faith. *Anfechtungen* accomplished this service negatively in that they showed that the Christian was in the middle of the battle against Satan. Prayer in a more positive way showed that faith was present since God was being sought for help. Luther was concerned about the absence of prayer, not because prayer was the means through which salvation was accomplished in the life of the Christian and the lack of prayer cut off God's grace, but rather because the lack of prayer signified that Satan was accomplishing victory over God in the Christian life.¹³ The Christian must be concerned about every disinclination to pray. Luther is forever the practical theologian and lays down a procedure for the Christian who has no interest in prayer. First he should pray the Lord's Prayer and then he should be prepared to throw every possible slander against Satan. Where there is no desire to pray, there the heart is hardened against God.

Luther sees value in the *Anfechtungen* in stimulating prayer in the life of the Christian. First, he suggests that the Christian should examine his own life and the lives of other Christians. There he will find all sorts of vices. This result will drive him to prayer. Secondly he should look at the condition of the church and the world, which are in shambles.¹⁴ These will get worse and, therefore, there will be more reason for the Christian to pray. Prayer finds its origin in the Christian faith surrounded by the *Anfechtungen*. God uses the misery of the human condition to direct the believer to come to Him in prayer.

IV. The Problem of Unanswered Prayer

A. *The Response of Faith*

In commenting on Romans 8:26, "For we do not know how to pray," Luther sees a more positive attitude in God when our prayers are not answered than when they are. "It is not a bad sign, but a very good one, if things seem to turn out contrary to our requests, just as it is not a good sign if everything turns out favorably for our requests."¹⁵ The correlation between Luther's view on prayer and the *Anfechtungen* is unmistakable. From a human point of view, God's refusal to act makes Him appear as if He is angry with the suppliant. Luther's favorable views on God's apparent negative attitude to the prayer of the Christian comes from his understanding of God and man. Divine wisdom is superior. Humanity is so sinful that each individual must be torn down to remove what is objectionable to God.¹⁶ God's ways are simply far above ours. When He begins to work for our benefit, He does it in a way which we simply cannot understand or recognize. Luther's attitude to unanswered prayer reflects his major themes of grace and faith. God works effectively in the life of the Christian by His grace, but before this grace can become operative, the Christian must become passive. He can no longer rely on himself. When the Christian is in a state of helplessness, God Himself begins to adjust our prayers and starts answering them. The Holy Spirit Himself prays and makes it possible for us to tolerate God's working in us. Luther writes:

Therefore, when everything is hopeless for us and all things begin to go against our prayers and desires, then those utterable groans begin. And then "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Rom. 8:26). For unless the Spirit were helping, it would be impossible for us to bear this action of God by which He hears us and accomplishes what we pray for.¹⁷

With the aid of the Spirit, Christians do not give up hope and confidence even when it appears at first that God is ignoring them.

The Christian's ability to accept from God what seems to be His disfavor flows in Luther's thought, not only from the Christian's acknowledgement of God's superior wisdom, but also from the hiddenness of God. Luther writes, "For the work of God must be hidden and never understood, even when it happens."¹⁸ The conception

of Jesus by virgin birth and His suffering and death before His glorification are cited as examples of how God's ways appear both as hidden and contrary to what human beings expect.

Luther briefly puts forth two examples of how people receive from God the exact opposite of what they are asking. The man praying for chastity receives more temptations and the one praying for strength is besieged by more weaknesses. Nevertheless, as the Christian bears up under these stresses, God is answering the prayer more effectively than the man could have ever imagined.¹⁹

B. The Response of Unfaith

Discontent with God's response to prayer indicates essential unbelief. Here Luther goes right to the heart of the matter in accusing those discontented with God of placing themselves above Him by putting more value on their wisdom than His. At this point the Reformer is very severe:

But they want to be like God, and they want their thoughts to be not beneath God but beside Him, absolutely conformed to His, that is, perfect, which is as possible, or rather, as little as possible, as that clay which by nature is suitable for a pitcher or some kind of vase can in its present form be like the form or the model which the potter has in mind, into which he intends to shape the clay. They are foolish and proud over this and know neither God nor themselves."²⁰

While salvation can only be received by the pure passivity of faith, the entire salvation process within the individual is slightly more complex as it involves *Anfechtungen*, prayer, and God's response to prayer. Faith engendered solely by God is never without the struggle of the *Anfechtungen*. Unless the Christian pleads to God for aid in the *Anfechtungen*, he can eventually be lost in this struggle between God and Satan in his life. Finally, his attitude to God's response to his prayer will show whether in his faith he really relies on God alone. Thus, the Christian who says that he relies solely on God but in actuality denies it, by refusing to accept how God is directing his life and by asserting his own will, makes the *sola gratia* inoperative.

V. Prayer and the Holy Spirit

A. *The Spirit's Prayers as Actual Reflections of Individual Christian Prayers*

Luther assigns to the Spirit an important role in the formation of prayers. Luther uses the illustration of an artist looking at rough material from which he will eventually shape his work of art. God is the artist who sees in us things which even we do not recognize. God takes our innermost feelings and desires and shapes us according to His design. Prayer for Luther involves the Christian's putting himself at the disposal of God for His purposes. The Holy Spirit refashions the Christian and his prayer.²¹

The Holy Spirit is not for Luther the great leveler so that the prayers of all Christians are essentially the same. This kind of

approach would make individual prayers mere formalities so that, through some type of mass production, God by the Holy Spirit would make all individual prayers conform to one sort of heavenly model. By using the illustration of the rough material to be fashioned into a work of art, Luther recognizes that not only that the individual remains important to God, but also that the individual in the depths of his being actually provides (in a passive way, of course) the rough material from which the Holy Spirit's prayers are made. The prayers of the Holy Spirit are not some kind of *creatio nova* or *creatio ex nihilo* so that the prayers have little or nothing to do with what we really are, what we really think, or what we really want. Quite to the contrary, the prayers prayed for us by the Holy Spirit are the kind of prayers we would pray if we were not burdened by the limitations of our human existence.

B. *The Holy Spirit and the Christian's Weakness*

The Spirit gives a new and larger dimension to our prayers. Luther makes the wise observation about Paul's words "we do not know how to pray" that they do not mean that Christians are praying for foolish or harmful things, but that they have not realized the full dimension of what God intends to give them because of their prayers. He astutely notices that Christians are described as praying out of "weakness" and not "iniquity." A prayer for anything foolish or wicked would not really be a prayer because it would not flow out of a converted will. Thus it is not that we ask for the wrong things, but rather that we do not ask for enough. Luther writes, "Therefore in heeding our prayers and coming to grant our requests God destroys our weak thinking and our still too humble ideas, and He gives us what the Spirit demands for us."²² It is as if a son wrote a letter to his father asking for silver and the father disregarded the letter and prepared to give the son gold. Since the son did not receive the silver which he requested, he was concerned that the father had disregarded the letter.²³

The co-praying of the Holy Spirit with the Christian demonstrates not that the Christian is getting stronger but that he is still weak. Our weakness prevents us from receiving the good which God intends for us. We would continue to flee from the good which God wants to give us if the Spirit did not prevent us. Luther says that we deserve to be called fools who should receive God's terrors so that these terrors could be received with joy.

VI. *The Substantive Nature of Prayer*

In commenting on Romans 12:12, Luther distinguished among three substantive ingredients which characterize prayer: the material or sensual; the intellectual; the spiritual or emotional.²⁴ While all three ingredients can and should be present within one prayer, it seems that for Luther a prayer can possess just one of these characteristics and in some sense still be a prayer.

A. *Material Nature of Prayer*

Material or sensual prayers consist mainly in mouthing words without any participation of the heart.²⁵ Such prayers are said to offend God and give the offerer of such prayers a false sense of security because he believes wrongly that such prayers are really acceptable to God and beneficial to himself. Luther's barbs are directed against the clergy who said their canonical hours without feeling and, to make matters worse, received money for it.²⁶ Also guilty of mouthing useless prayers are the lay people who say the Lord's Prayer without any understanding. This kind of praying is called material prayer because, although the outward substance or material is present, what Luther calls the real thing, the personal participation, is missing.²⁷

What is amazing is that Luther seems to reverse himself and does see some value in such rote material prayers and urges that they be not despised. Luther should at this point speak for himself:

To pray in this way is merely to perform an act of obedience because in addition to this, that it is a work of obedience, it is good in many other ways. First, because it drives away the devil, even if the prayer is only recited in the simplicity of the heart, that is, if "it is sung in the spirit" (I Cor. 14:15) and thus brings the Holy Spirit to us. This is symbolized in David's playing the harp before Saul.²⁸

Several reasons are adduced for not despising what Luther calls material prayers, those prayers which are not sincerely intended by the one who prays or hears them. First "the devil cannot even endure having the word of God read." Secondly, the word of God affects the soul even if it is not understood. Thirdly, the emotions and intellect are given an occasion to hear God's message. The fourth reason seems unclear at first glance. Luther says that "although many people who pray this way do not have the full emotional effect of these words, yet they often have a common and elevated spirit toward God." The Reformer is referring, it seems, to people who sincerely engage in worship forms in order to pray to God, but whose thoughts are inappropriate to a particular prayer.

B. *Assessing Luther's View on Material Prayer*

Some comment must be made on Luther's positive assessment of the material use of prayers—that is, those prayers prayed in which the intellect is not actually attuned to the message of the words used. First of all, there is no reason to be embarrassed by the reversal of Luther's position from regarding such prayers as offensive to seeing in them no small value. It is quite Luther-like for him to do battle with himself and come to the same issue from what appear to be opposing positions. The "Protestant" side of Luther, if we dare employ a 'Protestant-Catholic' distinction, finds material prayer offensive because for all practical purposes faith, the accompanying *Anfechtungen*, and struggling with the answer

to prayer are missing. Then steps the "Catholic" Luther to the fore, who must see some value to the objective words of God regardless of the attitude of the one who speaks them. There is some value in mouthing God's Word even if such obedience is extrinsic and superficial and does not really reflect the exact intentions of the one speaking them. Regardless of the attitude of the speaker of the Word of God, Satan cannot tolerate this Word. Whether Satan was driven out of Saul by the Word of God sung by David or whether the Satanically troubled soul of Saul was soothed by David's music might be exegetically debatable. Nevertheless, Luther sees the Word of God as a sharp defense and assault against the devil.

Luther's positive assessment of material prayer as giving an opportunity for the proclamation of the Word of God really reflects Luther's understanding of the objectivity of the Word. Certainly Luther would not want his followers to support financially or otherwise monastic or cathedral services just so that there might be constant prayer, but neither does he urge their destruction. The practices of Rome continue into our day. In addition, the Anglican Church within a more Protestant setting has morning and evening services where prayers are offered by those who have no known Christian convictions. Still such material prayers are not without value in God's total purposes. Luther's references to lay people who intend sincerely to worship God, but who do not really understand what they are saying, speak very appropriate and uncomfortable words against all of us who pray in terms acceptable to God and to the theologians but without real meaning to those who listen to us.

C. The Intellectual and Spiritual Natures of Prayer

Strangely enough, Luther says little about the intellectual ingredient in prayer. There is only the suggestion that those who are intellectually gifted must give strict attention to the meaning of prayer. Luther seems to say that he can live with the fact that many really do not and will not understand the words of prayer.²⁹ The intellectual meaning can exist with or without the spiritual participation. The imperative to "be constant in prayer" applies specifically to prayer in its intellectual and spiritual senses. This distinction between praying intellectually and praying spiritually is taken by Luther from I Corinthians 14:15, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the mind also." Praying "with the spirit" means the use of words—that is, the sensual and material ingredients—without any apparent meaning. This practice apparently is carried out by lay people and devout nuns who sincerely place their trust in God but who do not understand the words which they are using. Prayer at its best involves the use of words, intellect, and

spirit. Luther writes, "The mental prayer is the ascent of the mind, as well as the spirit, to God. This is the prayer of which he [Paul] is speaking when he says, 'Be constant in prayer.'"³⁰

VII. An Assessment of Charismatic Prayer

We would be somewhat remiss if we did not comment on the current charismatic use of the phrase "praying in the spirit" taken from I Corinthians 14:15 as a reference to the nonintellectual or unintelligible use of tongues. Without commenting on the original situation in the Corinthian congregation, Luther applies this passage to the situation at his time where the words of prayer did not really reflect the thoughts of the pious people praying them. In fact, they had little idea of what the words meant. Was Luther doing an injustice to the original setting of these words applying them to a situation which was almost the exact opposite of the situation in the Corinthian congregation? I think not. In the sixteenth century, prayers were recited by rote, and in the first century Corinth they were unregulated. Luther understood the exegetical application as involving first finding the principles and not merely looking for superficial similarities. Tongue-speakers in Corinth, monks praying in Latin (which they did not know), and lay people praying in the vernacular but without intellectual comprehension of the words all share a common desire to approach God with the emotion of their inner being but with the words coming out of their mouths not really conforming to what they are thinking.

FOOT NOTES

1. Paul Buehler, *Die Anfechtungen bei Luther* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1942), p. 200.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
3. *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955-1972), 21, p. 228.
4. *LW* 21, pp. 228-229.
5. *LW* 21, p. 229.
6. *LW* 21, p. 230.
7. Buehler, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
9. Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), II, p. 1090.
10. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1086.
11. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1091.
12. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 1083-1084.
13. *Ibid.*, II, p. 1079.
14. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 1084-1085.
15. *LW* 25, pp. 364-365.
16. *LW* 25, p. 365.
17. *Loc. cit.*

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18. *LW 25*, p. 366.
 19. *LW 25*, p. 367.
 20. *LW 25*, p. 366.
 21. *LW 25*, p. 367.
 22. *LW 25*, p. 369.
 23. *Loc. cit.*
 24. *LW 25*, p. 459.
 25. *LW 25*, p. 458.
 26. *Loc. cit.*
 27. *LW 25*, p. 459.
 28. *Loc. cit.*
 29. *LW 25*, p. 460.
 30. *Loc. cit.*