

The Project

§1. Why I Am Writing a Book I Am Unqualified to Write

For twenty years I have been a Christian, and I still feel like a stranger to prayer.

Oh, I have prayed. A lot, by the standards of my culture. I bow my head at church and gladly say “Amen” to the pastor’s Sunday morning prayers. I often open classes with prayers. My family gives thanks around the table at dinnertime. My wife and I pray with our kids after tucking them in at night. In the car or walking to work I sometimes intercede for my family, friends, students, and strangers. These litanies can last twenty minutes or more. (Some in my church consider that a sprint. With my family background, I consider it a marathon.) I speak out here and there during the day, a little like Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*. But prayer is still strange, because I refuse really to become familiar with it.

Instead I stick to what I know. This is a personality trait of mine. For two and a half years I taught in Santa Barbara but lived a hundred miles away in Pasadena. I knew the five streets from my freeway exit to Westmont College like the back of my hand, but everywhere else in Santa Barbara remained a mystery. Similarly, I can easily pray conventional prayers for every one of the occasions on which I am already used to praying. But these are stock pieces from my tiny repertoire, not the adventurous discourses that really make for a life of prayer.

Many are my weaknesses. I love my Foursquare Pentecostal Church in Los Angeles, but I cannot speak or pray in tongues. Beyond a small core of familiar psalms, I am a tourist in the Psalter that the Church Fathers memorized. The astonishing words of the Lord’s Prayer slip past me even as I recite them.

That last failing is the most embarrassing. Some Pentecostals may be ashamed of being dumb in the tongues of angels, but I am not; one cannot force a gift. It is one thing for a monk to

memorize a Psalter of 150 chapters (151 to some); as the father of four I have less time for such things. However, it is quite another thing for a professor of Christian theology not to have mastered five verses from the Gospel of Matthew (three in Luke!).

It is time to address the problem. Not by writing a commentary; those have been done by people far better equipped for the task. Not by developing a theology of prayer; for someone in my vocation that would just be an academic dodge. Not by writing a how-to guide for improving my “prayer-life”; not only do I obviously not know how to do that, but I am not sure a prayer-life is something we should have in the first place. Rather, it is time to pray.

Specifically, it is time to pray as who I am: a sinner, a struggling but tenacious believer, a fellow heir with Christ of his Father’s reign, a father and husband and friend, a no-longer-young white male Southern California evangelical, a scholar whose fondness for writing on the Internet has made him too habituated to casual style, and – be warned, reader – a professor of Christian theology who will take *any* opportunity to exploit a “teachable moment.”

My remediation involves praying the Lord’s Prayer. Because the Lord’s Prayer comprehends all of life, praying it properly involves facing God in all my life, and facing life in all my prayers. Because Christian theology is my life, that means praying theologically and theologizing prayerfully. Because teaching is my vocation, the audience for these meditations is anyone (especially myself!) who might find this project a chance to learn something about how to be a Christian in these times. Because no teacher is worthy of his or her subject, I set out with the same excited but queasy feeling I have teaching a class for the first time, hoping my qualifications as an authority will develop as I proceed.

§2. Why Prayer Does Not Come First (nor Last)

My format is deliberately odd, because prayer is odd.

Routine prayer might seem predictable, but in practice it proves to be the opposite. The Lord's Prayer acts as what liturgists call a "collect" (pronounced COL-lect). Like the middle of an hourglass, it very briefly draws together what has gone on so far in the worship service. It focuses and summarizes the past in order to transition to the future. An example is this collect for an Episcopal service that features a baptism:

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen (*Book of Common Prayer* 1979, 254).

That little request caps off the previous phase of the liturgy so worshippers can build upon it as they go on. The collects of the *Book of Common Prayer* are amazing prayers, conveying divine truth with concise rhetorical elegance.

A collect never changes. However, what it does changes every time we say it. While the Lord's Prayer has a place in both the daily office and the Sunday liturgy, as an all-purpose prayer it can be said any time of day. That means it does not just collect what comes before it in a structured worship service. It collects anything and everything. As Martin Luther put it:

Whatever needs are in the world, they are included in the Lord's Prayer. And all the prayers in the Psalms and all the prayers which could ever be devised are in the Lord's Prayer (*LW* 51:1, 162-193 in Dillenberger 1962, 226).

What I want to do in this book is put Luther to the test. I want to collect my recent life in the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer and offer them up in penitence and trust. I want to see what is gold, silver, and precious stones that last, and what is wood, hay, and straw that burns in the fire of God's judgment (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

The *Didache* advises Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day. That makes every morning an anticipation, every midday an examination, and every evening a celebration. In that spirit, every chapter begins with reflection on needs the prayer has awakened me to. Then at

the heart of each chapter is a meditation on the petition of the Lord's Prayer that answers them. Additional writings follow that put its lesson to fruitful use.

I really mean to put each petition at each chapter's *heart*, in a strong metaphorical sense. From a maze of capillaries a distant force draws blood together in larger and larger streams until the corpuscles are gathered in its chambers: *Our Father ... Amen*. Then the energized fellowship parts as its constituents embark again upon journeys to unpredictable and innumerable destinations. This endless circle of work literally keeps the body alive.

The distant force pushing us back meekly into God's presence for another meeting is of course the same pump that drives us out surging with enthusiasm. Some might think this organ's small size is inadequate for such a critical task, or that the monotony of its operation calls for embellishment. But we "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words" (Matt. 6:7). The little auricles and ventricles of these short phrases are enough to provide for a body of great size and vast needs.

Or, to change metaphors, the Lord's Prayer is a half-time activity. Football, not Christianity, is the indigenous religion in much of the United States. Its Holy Tradition prefaces games with a prayer (constitutional or not) at the outset. However, as a collect the Lord's Prayer is better said at the half. It presupposes a game already in progress – a life already in play. The team withdraws from field and fans to a place and a time for refreshment and renewal. It focuses back on the coach's training and learns new lessons from its prior experiences. It may be celebrating a good first two quarters but worried about giving back its gains in the last two: "deliver us from evil." Or it may be smarting from setbacks and wondering how to come back in the second half: "forgive us our sins." Or it may be disoriented and bewildered: "Your kingdom come, your will be done." Members gather, speak, listen, console, and reflect so that their past

can orient themselves toward their future. An observer who misunderstands the game might think halftime is just a break, a diversion, a way to sell concessions, or a lot of talk. But this little breather is a precious resource for changing the whole game – as long as it is not squandered on panic, surrender, retribution, or arrogance.

Fans of philosophical theology might appreciate that the structure of this book coincides happily with a recent movement in theology away from two popular visions of the theological task, one from the eighteenth century and one from the nineteenth, toward one reborn in the twentieth and rooted in the premodern way of practicing theology that dominated until the Enlightenment.

George Lindbeck created an influential typology of three popular conceptions of doctrine (Lindbeck 1984). The first he calls “cognitive-propositionalist.” It claims that our beliefs are like a philosophical system whose essence can be contained in valid or invalid logical statements. Such a scheme would make the Lord’s Prayer a resource for inferring qualities of God: The Father is our provider, our sovereign, our atonement, our judge, and so on. A sign that this approach is flawed is that the only line of the Lord’s Prayer that sounds anything like a proposition is the last: “for the Kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever.” And that line is missing from the earliest biblical manuscripts. It is an addition probably crafted from the lines in 1 Chronicles 29:11-13 with which David blessed YHWH (“Jehovah”) at the funding of Solomon’s temple. Even there it is not primarily a list of facts but the warrant for a grand act of praise. At any rate, beginning each chapter with a verse from which ‘principles’ are extracted or ‘applications’ derived might appeal to conservatives who tend to be loyal to this vision of doctrine, but would risk turning the prayer’s petitions into factoids – into things they

are not. I do not want to give readers the impression that principles or even worldviews are what it is to live in Christ, or even that they are what theology is about.

Lindbeck's second type, called "experiential-expressive," claims that our beliefs are basically expressions of a transcendence we feel at a level below human language. All our words are intrinsically limited and culture-bound attempts to give form to this elusive but universal experience of what Schleiermacher called "absolute dependence." This scheme would make the Lord's Prayer little more than an articulation of convictions we can root only in our own subjective experiences. Yet that gives the act of prayer much less to do than Jesus gives it. These petitions are demands, not feelings or attitudes. In Luke Jesus follows his prayer with a parable of a desperate host who comes to a neighbor and receives what he needs by sheer rudeness (Luke 11:5-8). Furthermore, the Lord's Prayer does *not* sum up my experience. More often, it interrupts, criticizes, and overturns it. Crafting chapters that begin in my own experience and culminate in the Lord's words might be popular among liberals who tend to be loyal to this way of living, but it would make Jesus my public relations guy, not my King. I do not want to give readers the impression that Christianity is just a name for one's mental attitude or outlook.

Lindbeck's third type sees doctrine as a "cultural-linguistic" system. It claims that what we say is what we do. Doctrine works in all the ways language works, which is to say that our words of faith are firmly embedded in all the ways we live and perform an unlimited variety of tasks. (These of course include naming facts and putting words to experiences, which is why this "postliberal" third approach is as much an umbrella over the first two approaches as it is a radical alternative to them.) This scheme sees the Lord's Prayer as, well, what I think it really is. Ludwig Wittgenstein said our concepts "arise out of the middle of" life (*Remarks on Color*, 302). So it is with this prayer's petitions. They come at the center of this exercise, the literal middle.

The text does not begin each chapter because prayer, like the Bible itself, is not a foundation in the philosophical sense of a point of departure for all our disciplined thinking. We *come* to prayer, as we come to all things Christian; or rather prayer comes to us with the Holy Spirit's inspiration, finding us where we already are and taking us alongside Christ to the Father's throne. We do not let go of our baggage or strip away our faults and then approach God. We come unaccustomed, impatient, needy, marred, hardened, harried, chastened, and resigned.

The text is not at the end of each chapter because prayer, like the Bible itself, is not merely an articulation of what we already experience. It is a radical challenge that disorients and even shocks us, but that also sends us away renewed, transformed, and empowered. Tertullian called the Lord's Prayer "the foundation of further desires." He was saying that a community at prayer should begin with this standard text, and only then append requests of its own; but his point applies more broadly to prayer itself. It always finds us unprepared and somehow leaves us readied. That is testimony to its saving power.

I don't know if writing chapters that pause in the middle to focus on the petitions Christ gave us will be popular with anyone, but I think it rings true to Scripture, true to the liturgy, true to theology, and true to life. In Matthew the Lord's Prayer comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke it is in an apparently random spot in the travel narrative between the Transfiguration and the Triumphal Entry. In Sunday services it is almost always used before or after the breaking of Eucharistic bread, in daily services between the creed and the concluding prayers. (That makes it more of a seventh-inning stretch than a halftime.) In theology a longstanding axiom holds that "the law of prayer is the law of belief" (*lex orandi lex credendi*), meaning that we believe and teach according to the way we pray. The Lord's words structure the theological agenda, not the other way around. They determine the setting, the doctrines, and the

lessons of each chapter. I intend to show that faithful prayer, like all good theology, brings integrity to our complex, incoherent, and inconsistent lives, that it redeems our unholy acts and orders our holy acts into a living sacrifice of praise.

§3. Shortcomings I Am Not Sorry For

Thus I make no apologies that the beginning of each chapter is messy. My life is messy. Perhaps it is messier than yours. My desk is cluttered and my thoughts are scattered. On a typical writing day there are minor crises at home, a smattering of e-mails from students waiting for me in my inbox, the guilt of older, unanswered ones, stacks of tasks left undone from yesterday (okay, last month), music on my stereo, a barrage of advertising, the constant lure of Internet weblogs and news sites, classes to prepare, daunting parental challenges, friends and family in need, and a growing pile of books I wish I had time to read. That is how a disorganized American like me lives. That is the state I am in when God meets me; that is the chaos that faces the Holy Spirit who blesses me with his mysterious intercession. What you see is what he gets. Can the Lord's Prayer bring order to it?

I also make no apologies if the middle of each chapter is jarring. God is surprising. In fact, God is downright shocking. Sometimes I think Luke has it backwards: God is the persistent and unwelcome solicitor knocking at my door while I hide in the bedroom. Yet the greater part of the shock of the divine owes to the abruptness of encounter with God. God has often broken into our worlds like a Fellini character who walks suddenly into the foreground of a long shot: Abraham's visitors at Mamre, Moses' burning bush, the visions that sweep Isaiah and Daniel into the heavenly throne room, Mary's angelic visitation, the stranger who comes to John the Baptizer, and the power that leaves Simon the fisherman terrified in his sinfulness. So it is also with prayer: One moment we are scurrying through the things that fill our day. The next moment

we stop, quiet ourselves, and utter “Our Father” – and suddenly we are in the Spirit, like John the Prophet on the isle of Patmos.

Too extravagant a comparison? Consider a more mundane metaphor: the moment you first hear the phone ring. You stop what you are doing, cut off whatever conversations are in progress as politely as possible, pick up the receiver, and enter a whole different space. From the first word of the voice at the other end, you begin to learn whether a loved one got home all right, a faraway friend was just thinking of you, the thing you had been dreading is true after all, or your number just came up again on a telemarketer’s screen. All the while your prior life remains in suspension. Such interruptions break into our lives so many times every day that we think nothing of them. Yet there are phone calls I will always remember: my father’s death, getting a house and falling out of escrow, last-minute news of a scholarship, a scare hours after my daughter’s birth, September 11. Of course prayer is jarring. Sometimes it leaves us terrified and sickened like the prophet Daniel, sometimes wildly rejoicing like the heavenly host, sometimes dumbstruck like Zechariah the priest – but usually unmoved and apparently unaffected, resuming our normal lives as if nothing had just happened. (I wonder if it jars in the heavenly realms too.)

Or consider Sunday mornings at the Work home. We parents pull our sluggish children out of bed, hurry them past the dresser and the bathroom, and shove them into our minivan in order to get one of the scarce parking spaces within a block of our church. The kids are surprised when we *aren’t* doing eighty on the freeway offramp while they munch the Eggo waffles that pass for breakfast. After parking and making nametags for the kids and herding them into their different places we enter the sanctuary. There the presence of the risen Christ hits us, like the first blast of cold air that greets entrants into an office building on a hot day.

We only stay oriented through such transitions because we have learned to take the shock for granted. *Of course* he is here receiving our praise. Of course this is his body and blood. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

This acclimation is not a bad thing. In fact, acclimation to God is the end of a life of ceaseless prayer, and the will of God for our perfect sanctification (1 Thess. 5:16-24). The space prayer creates is eschatological. The shift that goes on between the hubbub of common life and the petitions of common prayer is a move from absence to presence, from promise to fulfillment, from there to here, from then to now. That means prayer time is Kingdom time. N.T. Wright says,

Jesus didn't come simply to offer a new pattern, or even a new depth, of spirituality. Spiritual depth and renewal come, as and when they come, as part of the larger package. But that package itself is about being delivered from evil; about return from exile; about having enough bread; about God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. It's the Advent-package. Jesus was taking the enormous risk of saying that this package was coming about through his own work. All of that is contained in the word 'Father,' used in this way, within this prayer (Wright 1996, 17).

This theme will come up again and again in the following pages. The Lord's Prayer begs for salvation to come – right here, right now. Its tropes portray the fundamental vision of radical Christianity, what James Wm. McClendon, Jr. calls the “baptist vision” of

the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In other words, the church now is the primitive church and the church on the day of judgment is the church now; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is *our* liberty, *our* obedience (McClendon 1986, 31).

As an artifact of authentic Christian life, the Lord's Prayer fuses present things, the last things, and the first things. It joins heaven and earth into a community that realizes the purposes of both.

With these words we follow behind the enfleshed Word who tabernacles with the people of God. We join the Israel of God that participates in both the afflictions of the Anointed One and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with whom he is anointed. We crowd around the throne

with the multitudes from every nation and cry out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb! Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:10, 12). By all means, let us become acclimated to that!

Finally, I make no apologies if the end of each chapter is unsatisfying. No one performance of the Lord’s Prayer can be comprehensive. Let whatever happens here be a challenge for readers and writer alike to return to prayer for something more, infinitely more, than what is on these pages. “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:11-13).

Besides, it may be wrong to expect the Lord’s Prayer to bring order to our willy-nilly lives. A disruptive God might just as often bring *disorder* to the habits of vice I have worked meticulously into “my Christian life.” It may be the end of each chapter, not the beginning, that is most chaotic. If that disorientation comes from the Holy Spirit uprooting and plowing before he replants, then there is no use apologizing for that either. Holy disruptions leave us right where the Lord’s Prayer leaves Jesus’ audience in Luke: suspicious that his power is bogus, worried that his mighty works are demonic, appreciative for all the wrong reasons (Luke 11:14-28), but aroused and unsettled. In other words, finally fallow for the good news.

I have one more non-apology to offer for the rough edges that follow. As I have already said, I am not very good at all this. Prayer is, after all, an exercise that takes practice. Following Jesus is both harder and easier than anyone expects at the outset. Fatigue, frustration, and dissatisfaction are to be expected, if not celebrated. They show we have room to grow. Let these

meditations drive dissatisfied readers to offer projects of their own, or at least to suit up and work out alongside me.

Let us pray!

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