

The Privilege and Practice of Prayer

By: Professor Joel Gerlach

“Lord, teach *us* to pray.” When the disciples addressed that prayer to Jesus, they were giving expression to a deeply felt need. Those who lived in daily association with Jesus came to know Him as a man of fervent prayer. If the sinless Jesus Himself was so keenly aware of the need to pray, how much greater ought not we to feel that need? So intense, so frequent, so different from His disciples’ praying was the praying of Jesus that it left them with a feeling of inadequacy. That feeling of inadequacy prompted the petition, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

We wish to begin this study with the same petition on our lips. Our need is precisely the same as theirs. Your request for a conference essay on the privilege and practice of prayer has been presented by the Holy Spirit in the throne room of God as an earnest petition, “Lord, teach *us* to pray” too.

Before we discuss the privilege and practice, we wish to say something more about the need. I doubt that there is anyone in this assembly today who feels that his prayer life is what it ought to be. If you are like me, you are often distressed by the thought that your prayers are an attempt to take advantage of God, or that there is too much petitioning and not enough praising, or that they just are not very intense. We pray perfunctorily. We do not pray like people who belong unashamedly to Jesus Christ. Our prayers are not suggestive of the love affair between us and our Lord. And not only does our private praying lack something, so does our public praying in the classroom. Who of us has not had the nagging feeling after leading others in prayer that the prayer failed of its purpose? It did not get the children involved. Heads were bowed, hands folded, but hearts . . . ?

That is a desperate feeling, is it not? My guess is that it may have had something to do with the choice of the theme for the essay for this conference. Because my own prayer life is so often, even at its best, a faltering, fumbling thing, I am grateful that your invitation has necessitated that I give thought to this subject. Like Luther, I must say, “At times I, who teach this and prescribe it to others, have learned from my own example that praying comes close to being the most difficult of all works.”ⁱ Thus may He who invites us to pray use this effort to make us all better pray-ers, especially in our classrooms where our children are learning from us the art of Christian prayer.

Charles Whiston, professor of Systematic Theology at the Berkeley Divinity School of the Pacific and author of a book just published by Eerdmans’ entitled *Pray*, asks some pointed questions in his introductory paragraphs. After asserting that “we may be churchmen without prayer, but we cannot be Christians without a life of prayer,”ⁱⁱ Whiston goes on to ask, “Where could we have learned to pray? From clergy? What leads us to believe that the clergy know any more about prayer than we do? How many clergy make us believe that they are truly men of prayer?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Let us frankly and candidly (and ashamedly) admit that as Lutherans we do not have the enviable reputation of being the world’s most avid practitioners of prayer. Why not? For a number of reasons which we shall enumerate and consider later. But I wonder if one of the chief ones is not to be found in our approach to Christian education. Think of all the semester hours we spend on Christian doctrine, Christian education courses, isagogics, and on lower levels, Bible history and the catechism. But how much teaching is offered in response to the petition, “Teach us to pray?” It almost seems as though we are taking it for granted that a child of God

can learn to pray without being taught to pray. If so, we are presuming something we ought not to presume.

With this in mind, this study is offered to teachers to whom the Lord has entrusted the lives of His lambs, to feed them *and* to teach them how to pray. Jesus wants you not only to be capable, competent teachers of His Word, but also to be devout, disciplined examples of the art of prayer. Settle it in your heart then that if you want your children to become disciplined pray-ers, you will have to be one yourself,--the kind of person your students will remember in later years as being frequent and fervent in prayer. To that end we take up our study of (I) the privilege and then (II) the practice of prayer. Both are delineated in the Word of God.

I. Origin and Definition

When we think of praying and the Bible, we usually think of the book of Psalms, the prayer book of old Testament Christians. Prayer, however, is by no means confined to the pages of the Psalms. All Scripture is replete with prayer. The publisher's forward to Herbert Lockyer's *All the Prayers of the Bible*^{iv} notes that exclusive of Psalms, "the Bible records no fewer than 650 definite prayers, of which no less than 450 have recorded answers." That is a lot of praying. Obviously the Lord intends to impress on us that Bible people are praying people.

Frequently Genesis 4:26 is cited as the first reference in Scripture to prayer. The verse records the birth of Seth's son, Enos, and then adds, "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord." We do not agree that the reference in this verse is to prayer. Some editions of the King James Version have a marginal reading which renders the verse, "Then began men to call themselves by the name of the Lord,"-suggesting that in Enos' day the faithful of God wished to distinguish themselves from the godless as God-fearing people with a desire to do His will. We think that too misses the point. The passage actually says, "Then began men to call *out with* the name of the Lord." Thus it points to the beginning of preaching, not praying.

In my opinion the first reference to prayer in Scripture is found in chapter 2 in the words Adam spoke after Eve had been created. "This is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Assuming that Adam was not in the habit of talking to himself, who but to God could he have addressed these words?

It is generally true that the first reference to a truth in Scripture epitomizes that truth in its further presentation or development. If that is true in this case, then Adam's words are helpful in establishing a proper definition of prayer. Prayer is communication with God. It is man telling God in an uninhibited fashion what he thinks. It is thinking in the vertical rather than the horizontal dimension. "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, unuttered or expressed." (Hymn 454). It may be "the words of my mouth" or "the meditation of my heart" Ps. 19:14. It may even be nothing more than the unarticulated "desire of the humble" Ps. 10:17.

It was a natural thing for Adam to address his thoughts God-ward. It was likewise natural for God to be interested in Adam's reaction to this new thing God had created to be Adam's mate. My mind boggles at the thought that God should ever be interested in anything man has to say. Adam before the fall? Yes, but man in sin? That's another matter entirely.

It has often been noted that the Greeks call man *anthropos*, a word compounded from the preposition upward and the verb turn suggesting that man is the one creature in the universe who is turned upward. Our orientation is heavenward while the orientation of the rest of God's creatures is earthward. Prayer is the activity of that heavenward orientation. As Samuel Zwemer notes in his classic study of prayer, "Prayer is instinctive. The wing of the bird seeks flight, the fin of the fish demands water, the instinct of the heart is for God." Later he concludes,

“Therefore, even as a wingless bird or a finless fish would be a monstrosity in nature, so in the realm of the spirit is the prayerless man. We are never so natural as when we pray. ‘Rise my soul and stretch thy wings,’ for man is born to prayer.”^v

The familiar story of Jacob’s Ladder has long impressed me as being wonderfully illustrative of God’s communion with man and man’s communion with God. What better way to teach us that communion with Him is a two way communication. “Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath,” says the hymnist. Breathing involves inhaling as well as exhaling. When God breathed into man’s nostrils the breath of life, man became a living soul. When he breathed out again he was doing what came naturally. Spiritual life is like that too, and that is what impresses itself on me when I conjure up the vision of Jacob’s ladder. The angels were descending and ascending the ladder. We could call them sacramental angels and sacrificial angels,—angels bringing messages from the throne room of God to Jacob, and angels taking messages from Jacob back to the throne room of God. “Vital breath” is, therefore, an appropriate phrase. For who can live without exhaling. Or like Zwemer says, a prayerless man is like a finless fish.

Prescriptions for Praying

Christians are not the only people who pray. Practitioners of other world religions likewise pray. In fact some of the religions of the Near East and of the Far East seem to place more of an emphasis on the activity or prayerfully contemplating God than we do. But God solemnly declares that He does not hear such prayers, Micah 3:4; Is. 59:2. Even Christians are warned about praying prayers which God will not answer. “Ye ask, and receive not because ye ask amiss,” James told the Christians of the Diaspora, 4:3. So we need to ask what rules for praying the Scriptures prescribe lest we also ask amiss and abuse our privilege by our practice. What then are the prescriptions for praying.

1. In all seriousness God declares that He is a jealous God. He cannot abide our flirting with other gods. So He insists, “Thou shalt worship (of which prayer is a form) the Lord Thy God and Him only shalt thou serve” Mt. 4:10. No Hail Marys, no invocation of saints. They insult God. They rob Him of His honor. Only prayer addressed to the God of Biblical revelation elicits a hearing.

2. Nothing that inheres in us insures to us the privilege of prayer. In fact of and by ourselves we are completely out of place in the company of saints and angels,—as out of place as the guest in the parable who had not on the wedding garment. It is preposterous to think that God should ever want to hear what insolent kids have to say who are forever insulting His holiness. That is why Jesus says, “Whatsoever ye ask in My name, He will give it you,” Jn. 16:23. He means to say, “When you go to my Father with something on your mind, tell Him I sent you. Then He will listen.” A pupil doesn’t go barging into the principal’s office saying, “Hey, give me some chalk for our classroom.”—at least not if he wants chalk. He knocks first and prefaces his petition with an explanation. “My teacher sent me for some chalk.” A Christian takes that same approach to the Father’s office. He enters the Holy of Holies only in Jesus’ name.

3. Baal’s prophets hoped to induce Baal to comply with their requests by their endless repetition. Elijah suggested that if they cried louder, maybe they could arouse him from his nap. Jesus, however, asks us not to employ such vain repetitions citing that as a heathen practice, Mt. 6:7. He wants the motion of the mouth to be connected with the meditation of the heart, Mk. 7:6. Thus thoughtless recitals of the Lord’s prayer and of table prayers from cold hearts do not warm the heart of God. Perhaps we ought to give a second thought to our tendency

to employ the Lord's prayer as a handy thing with which to close a faculty or a board of education meeting.

4. The prime prerequisite of prayer is faith. No faith, no prayer. For without faith it is impossible to please God, Heb. 11:6. According to the Scripture, faith is essentially trust and confidence in God, Heb. 11:1; Eph. 3:12; Rom. 4:19-21. Thus we are to approach God in the full confidence that He has every intention of hearing and answering us. Such confidence is particularly characteristic of the prayers of God's Old Testament saints. How those holy men of old could storm the battlements above: They were confident that the God who had made heaven and earth would never be hard put to solve any of man's puny problems. We are to pray like that too, "in faith, nothing wavering," James 1:6-7. The stuttering stammerer who sticks his head in the door and says, "God, I-I-I hope this isn't asking too much of you, but"—"let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." As Luther says, come with all boldness and confidence asking Him as dear children ask their dear father. "Thou art coming to a King. Large petitions with thee bring." Piddling prayers get piddling results.

5. Some prayers are to be prayed conditionally, some unconditionally. Jesus in Gethsemane teaches us how to pray conditionally. And John assures us that we will get what we ask for whenever we "ask anything according to His will," I Jn. 5:14. Some things we know are His will for us (spiritual things), and some things we don't (material things). It certainly would be inappropriate to pray, "Lord, increase my faith, if it be Thy will," or, "Father, forgive me if you have a mind to." You can make all the demands you want on the riches of His forgiving grace, but you let Him decide what is best for you in all other matters.

6. Thus far most of what we have said has to do with prayer in a one-on-one situation,—you personally in intimate communion with your God. God, however, does not expect us to do all our praying in isolation. He expects us, like the mother-church Christians, to continue steadfastly together in prayer, Acts 2:42. He also wants us to congregate to bless His name in prayer and praise, Ps. 26:12. But He is careful to prescribe with whom and under what circumstances. Promiscuous prayer arouses His wrath no less than when Israel practiced it. The basis for praying together is a continuing together steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine. While not explicit, this truth is certainly implicit in the words of Jesus. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father," Mt. 18:19. Our God is a God of peace and harmony, not of discord; of symphony, not cacophony. Thus He does not want us to join in prayer with others if the resultant chorus is going to be a discordant one. It would be incongruous for me to enter God's concert hall to confess humbly, "I can't believe you did the whole thing," and then join together with another who is there merely to say, "Thanks, Lord, for the boost; I can make it on my own now."

These are the directives God graciously gives us in His Word for our prayers. To heed them is to insure an open "hot-line" into the control room where He sits who rules and upholds all things with the word of His power.

Content—Or, More About Exhaling

As the messenger angels ascend the prayer ladder to the throne of God, what messages shall we place into their hands for delivery to the Father? If we read the words of Adam's response to the creation of Eve as a communication addressed to God, a communication in which Adam gives expression to his recognition of the creative genius and the goodness of God, then we have an indication of the kind of messages our Father is expecting us to transmit to Him.

He makes His creative genius and His goodness known to us too, just as He did to Adam, and in countless different ways. If our eyes are open to His ways and His wonders, we, like Adam, are always discovering pleasant little surprises. Even though we pollute God's world with our sin, yet "the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord," Ps. 33:5. Faith's eyes recognize that goodness. When we respond to God's goodness, His never-ending stream of pleasant little surprises, with a word of recognition, He is delighted. It may be nothing more than an unarticulated feeling which translates out as, "Hey God, You're the greatest." That may not be as sophisticated as Adam's response, but it produces the same results on the other end of the open line. The Listener's face is wreathed in smiles.

The Biblical word for it is praise. It can take a variety of different forms. It may take the reverent and polished form of a King James style prayer offered at the altar in a formal service of worship. It may be nothing more than a two year old's halting and indistinct "Abba Father." In fact, it may be nothing more than a smile and a warm feeling that overcomes us in some lone spot when an awareness of God's loving-kindness rises from the recesses of the subconscious to the conscious mind. That too is something the Spirit can translate on our behalf into a beautiful paean of praise, Rom. 8:26. Every thought aimed in God's direction reaches His ears as a prayer.

It is this kind of praying, praise-praying, if you will, that is so characteristic of the Psalm prayers of God's Old Testament people. How they could talk about their God: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein. For He hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" Ps. 24:1-3. Their prayers are thoroughly theocentric rather than egocentric. They are not prayers that use God or that impose on Him. They magnify Him and make His name great. "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness," Ps. 48:1.

The Psalms of praise are prayers which suggest an intense personal relationship between pray-er and hearer. It is obvious that those who prayed these prayers thought of God as personal, and that they lived with the thought of Him constantly at their side. To them God was both immanent and transcendent. It delighted them to find ever new ways to say nice things about Him, particularly about His tender mercies and His loving-kindness. Their psalms of praise make wonderful patterns for our prayers of praise.

When the Psalmists were not praising God they were petitioning Him, pleading with Him for everything from personal needs to a life of piety to a vindication of God's justice on His enemies (the imprecatory Psalms). Sometimes the boldness of their petitions sounds almost like effrontery,--as though they are making demands of Him. "Yea for Thy sake we are killed all the day long: we are counted as sheep for the slaughter. Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off forever. Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face, and forgettest our affliction and oppression?" Ps. 44:22-24. Insolence it was not; boldness it was,--boldness born of confidence in a God who had revealed Himself to them as a loving Father, and who never regards the pleas of His people as impositions.

Thus the exhalations of a Christian originate in the heart and terminate in heaven. Some are praises, some are pleas, some are petitions. What we ought to ask of God will be considered later.

The Efficacy of Prayer

It was Luther who once said that prayer is a powerful thing, for God has tied Himself down to it. Think about that a moment. When we fail to pray, God's hands are tied so that in a sense He cannot do for us what His love purposes to do. But when we pray, we untie God's

hands of blessing enabling Him to act on our behalf. It seems incredible that this should be so, but Scripture assures us that it is. Prayer is efficacious. It changes things. "Call upon me in the day of trouble," is His invitation. "I will deliver thee," is His promise, Ps. 50:15. "Ask," Jesus says, and He adds a guarantee, "it shall be given you." Mt. 7:7.

Probably the classic passage of Scripture dealing with the efficacy of prayer is James 5:13 ff. James is speaking specifically in this section of his letter about prayer for the sick, but then broadens out his remarks making a general observation about the unique and effective power of prayer. "Is any among you afflicted, let him pray . . . Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him." And what good will that do? It will loosen God's hands. "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." It is really a tragedy that in this age of enlightened sophistication we sometimes tend to put more stock in the effectiveness of modern medicine than we do in the healing power of prayer. Has it ever occurred to you that the discoveries of Sir Alexander Fleming or Dr. Jonas Salk might properly be regarded as discoveries God allowed because of the prayers of His people for the healing of the sick?

James concludes his observations about the power of prayer with a broad and sweeping statement. "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Prayer does change things, in spite of what modern cynics say. But not just any prayer. In order to be effective, James says, it must be prayed by a righteous man. It is not his fervency but his righteousness that makes his prayer effectual. Only he is righteous who believes that Christ's righteousness makes men right with God. In effect, then, James is telling us that the effectual fervent prayer of a man who prays in Jesus' name avails much.

Prayer power loosens God's hands only on one condition, and Jesus tells us what that condition is. When He was speaking about the vine and the branches, He said, "If ye abide in Me and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you." Notice, Christ's words must abide in us,--they must live and dwell in us,--then when we ask Him something the power that looses His hands is released. The entrance that Christ's words are allowed to have in my life will be the measure of the power of my words with Him. Or to put it another way, the more I listen to Him, the more He will listen to me. If sometimes then my prayers are weak and ineffective, perhaps it is because the Word of Christ is not abiding in me and possessing me wholly. I need, then, to give Him more of a chance to speak to me.

When God promises something, He keeps His promises. And He promises that when you approach His throne in the proper way, you can move Him to action. James uses the story of Elijah and the drought in Israel as an example. What an inducement to pray:

According to James the power of prayer does more than just loosen the hands of God's blessings for us. It also works to loosen our own inner tensions. In the same verse in which the Apostle says that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much, he also says, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another that ye may be healed." (Another promise, incidentally, that prayer is efficacious.)

At first thought one wonders why this strange coupling together of confessing and praying. There does not appear to be any real connection between the two parts of the verse. But God did not inspire His Word that way. A second thought reveals a marvelous connection between the two. Confessing and praying do go together.

The things we ought to be confessing to one another as faults are the very things which cause tension in our lives. If there were no sin, there would be no tensions. Confessing our faults to one another and praying about them provides an amazing release from life's tensions. Modern

psychiatry has gained an insight into human personality something like this. It applies that insight in group therapy sessions, and more recently in sensitivity training sessions which have become the “in” thing on college campuses, at retreats and clinics. They aim at erasing a person’s inhibitions so he can relate better to his fellowman. Supposedly this will ease his tensions by eliminating their cause. Behavior scientists hail this as a great new discovery. Actually it is nothing new at all. It is a cheap, imitation copy of the therapeutic value of confessional prayer.

Perhaps an example would help to explain the connection between the two things James links together in this passage. Picture to yourself a husband and a wife discussing a matter of disagreement. Emotions are becoming supercharged. Irrationality is injected into the discussion. The longer they discuss the issue the farther apart they get. Suppose that both are Christians who love their Lord and respect His Word. Can you imagine what would happen if the husband were suddenly to say, ‘let’s stop arguing and pray about the matter instead,’? And if at that moment both would remember the words of James, what a difference that would make. “Confess your faults one to another that ye may be healed.” How much of that do we do within the faculty circle? Are we big enough to admit how small we are? And does such candid acknowledgment of our faults find expression in our faculty prayers?--in our classroom prayers? Our students are surely aware of our faults. Do they ever hear us confess them?

We live our life today at a hectic pace. It simply is not possible to secure spiritual power for inspired living while on the run. God says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” That is the answer to the tensions of modern living. We need more quiet time with God. What a difference it would make if when a teacher comes home with frayed nerves from a tough day at school, he would go for a quiet time with his God instead of the evening news on channel 4 or whatever.

If you sometimes despair over the fact that your life is not being ordered the way it ought to be, maybe it is because your prayer life is deficient. Maybe you are not starting out your day by untying God’s hands of blessing first. Someone has observed that just as a symphony orchestra always tunes up at the beginning of a concert, not at the end, so too, if you want to live your life in tune with God, the time for tuning up is in the morning, at the beginning of the day. Then you are prepared to live in harmony with Him the rest of the day. And when you come to the end of a day lived in concert with Him, then again take time to take the tension off the strings by spending a quiet time in prayer with Him. The man who lays out his heart before God can always lay his head on his pillow in peace.

Prayer then is efficacious. It is made effective from God’s end by His promises. It is made effective from our end by the righteousness He has imparted to us in Christ.

Who For—What For?

God’s love for the world is a universal love. He includes everyone as objects of His care and concern. He wants them all to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. And He makes His sun to shine and His rain to fall on the unjust as well as the just. As children of God our love and concern are to extend to everyone to whom our Father extends His love and concern. So in answer to the question: for whom should we pray, Scripture replies: all men.

“I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men,” I Tim. 2:1. Following that general statement, Paul adds specifically, “For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” We do that in the general prayer on Sunday morning, and when we sing,

“God save the state,” but how regularly otherwise do we remember all those that are in authority over us in government?

In His discourse on the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that our enemies too are to be included in our prayer circle. “Pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you,” He insists, Mt. 5:44. It is no great thing to love them that love you. Even publicans do that. Or to salute our brethren. Then we are doing no more than others. But Christians go beyond that in an attempt to be like their Father.

Special objects of our prayer concern are our fellow Christians in the communion of saints. “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit...for all saints,” Eph. 6:18. And last but not least we pray for ourselves and for those who are closest and dearest to us, for family and friends, for pastors and teachers who serve us in the Word. Scripture suggests no priority of importance, but the Lord’s prayer surely teaches the importance of beginning inclusively and concluding exclusively. That is just the opposite of the way in which we usually pray. We do not usually take our place at the end of the line in our praying. I want to be sure I get *my* daily bread before I concern myself with whether *you* get yours.

Just as the answer to the question, “Who for?”, is all-inclusive, so the answer to the question, “What for?”, is all-inclusive. If no one is too insignificant to pray for, neither is any thing. The Lord’s prayer contains seven petitions, the Scriptural and symbolical number which combines 3 and 4 and suggest completeness. The seven petitions properly understood include everything a Christian could ever pray for, both spiritual and material. Recall all the things Luther includes in his answer to the question, “What, then, is meant by daily bread?” Significantly, the ratio is six to one in favor of spiritual things over material things. My prayers do not usually turn out that way. When I compare my way with His way, I can understand what prompted His disciples to say, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Everything considered, we will certainly have to agree that prayer is some privilege.

II. The Practice of Prayer

If prayer is such a priceless privilege with such far reaching consequences for ourselves and for others, why are we so deficient in the practice of prayer? Oscar Feucht in a treatise on “The Practice of Prayer” suggests that perhaps the main reason is because “we have been strong on exhortation and weak on guidance.”^{vi} He observes that “we are drenched in stimuli throughout the day which are not conducive to prayer. We live in a world that magnifies human intellect and thinks it can operate on its own power.”^{vii} As leaders in the church, not only will we want to give due attention to the practice of prayer in our own lives, we will also want to help others, particularly our children, to overcome the problems that stand in the way of a prayer practice pleasing to God.

Scripture has much to suggest:

- about a place to pray, Mt. 6:6, I Tim. 2:8, Jn. 4:20-24
- about a time to pray, Mt. 1:35 morning; Mk. 6:46 evening; Lk. 5:15 solitary prayer; Lk. 6:12 all night; Lk. 22:41f in crises
- about prayer posture, Lk. 22:41 and Eph. 3:14 kneeling; Ex. 4:31 bowing; Mt. 26:39 Jesus on His face; Lk. 18:11 standing
- about the frequency of prayer, Lk. 18:1 always; I Thess. 5:17 without ceasing
- and about variety in prayer, Eph. 5:19 Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; Mk. 9:24 ejaculatory prayer; Lk 1:46ff polished; Lk. ;8:t3 unpolished; Acts 4:23 relevant to a particular situation.

Classroom Application

When your program committee assigned this essay, the committee indicated that the essay should be inspirational and practical,--with special consideration to be given to application in the classroom. A rhetorical question was asked: We teach many prayers, but do we really teach prayer? The implication of that question is quite apparent. It implies that we do not and asks: why not, and what can we do about it.

I do not claim to have the answers, but I do have some theories. First of all, I agree that in general our people do not know how to pray freely, easily and in an uninhibited manner. Many of our people would be petrified if they were asked to offer a prayer in a group situation. They may have attended a Christian elementary school all eight years and still feel uncomfortable about leading others in prayer. We sometimes act as though our prayer life like our sex life is not for public exhibition.

The attitude of some people toward prayer is suggestive of a complex. In a sermon consultation with one of my students, we were discussing the reluctance of some of our people to talk unashamedly about Jesus. He agreed that this was true within his own family. In further comment he said that he could not remember ever hearing his father refer to the deity except as "the good Lord." He wondered if it would be possible for his father to speak the name of Jesus or to designate Him as "my Savior" in ordinary conversation. I would like to think that such people are the exception, but I fear that they are not.

What is the problem? There is of course no single simple answer. For one thing, there is the possibility that we formalize things too much. We treat our religion like a thing apart. We approach it with a soberness that suggests somberness rather than sobriety when really a happy, joyful, even carefree, spirit ought to characterize our faith-life. This formalization is a pervasive thing. It can influence our classroom devotions and our classroom prayers in a way that we do not want. We are probably guilty of it if we simply read devotions without venturing away from the printed word and perhaps without much eye contact, and if we regularly read prescribed prayers rather than offer *ex corde* prayers.

Doubtless we have all heard words of caution about the use of free prayers. I doubt that Luther would have had much sympathy for such words of caution. In a sermon on Romans 12, he offered this comment in connection with the words, "continuing instant in prayer" v. 12. "Out of a book you will never pray anything good. To be sure, you may read from the book and learn how and what you should pray, and you will kindle your devotion; but a prayer must come from the heart spontaneously, without any prepared or prescribed words; it must speak its own language according to the fervor of the heart."^{viii} To that I add a hearty Amen.

It may also be that some in our circles are perpetuating the attitude of the orthodox over against the pietists. Pietism as a religious phenomenon in Germany and Scandanavia was once a real problem to our forefathers. It threatened Reformation principles just as the pietistic neo-Pentecostal or charismatic movement is doing in our day. Our fathers, some of them, overreacted in defense of orthodoxy, and we are still living with some of the consequences. While we recognize the danger of a pietistic, experiential approach to the faith, yet at the same time we need to be aware of the opposite extreme which would inhibit the free expression of our faith and all but smother our prayer life.

There are additional factors which affect our prayers and our praying. We could cite the influence of our German temperament which still predominates in our circles. The emphasis we place on teaching and right doctrine, sometimes at the expense of doing, may also result in a lack of sufficient emphasis on prayer.

It may also be that the language we use is unnatural to those whom we want to teach to pray. It need not be 17th century English to be reverent. (One of the Lutheran Collegian inner city project workers last summer began a prayer at the conclusion of evening chapel with the words, “Oh God, I’m so tired,--we’re all so tired from this day’s work,...”) Addressing God as the one who “restorest to the right way them that err, who gatherest them that are scattered, and preservest them that are gathered” may have a ring of elegance about it, but not of relevance. This is not the kind of language to suggest easy access to God. It hinders rather than incites. In our circles we are guilty of this outside the classroom as well as inside it. I must confess that many of the prayers I hear in worship services, chapel services, conferences and meetings do not impress me.

They do not speak my language. They sometimes suggest only a half-hearted effort. Finally it may be that devotional exercises exercise only us and not our children because we neglect to involve them as active participants. I know of no passage in Scripture which would restrict a 6th grader from leading his (or her) classmates in prayer,--or a second grader either, though I do recall a passage that says, “a little child shall lead them,” Is. 11:6. I know a teacher who through the years has involved her students most successfully. She recently shared her thoughts with me, and perhaps in our discussion period I can share them with you.

In summary, I think it is safe to say we all recognize a problem,--a problem summed up quite appropriately in the question of the chairman of your program committee. “We teach children prayers, but do we teach them to pray?” We have tried to point up some of the causes and to suggest some solutions. In the final analysis it narrows down to this that before we can teach effectively we must learn ourselves what we wish to teach. That is not easy in this case. Indeed, Luther insists that there is no harder work than praying. He called it a very difficult task, *der Kunst* (art) *über all Künste*. “Prayer is a difficult matter and hard work,” he said. “It is far more difficult than preaching the Word” which he said was more passive than active “because our teaching is His work,” God speaking *through* us, while praying is a matter of our speaking to God.^{ix}

In the book *Pray* to which we referred previously, author Whiston entitles one of his chapters, “The Christ-izing of Life and Work,” I like that. As an example of what he means, Whiston says, “A school teacher can take a few moments before her pupils arrive to sit at her desk and thank Christ for entrusting the students to her ministry for the day.”^x That is a suggestion suggestive of the spirit of him who once prayed, “Here am I, send me,” Is. 6:8. If we all pray earnestly for more of that spirit, that will be an indication that God is in the process of answering that other petition with which we began, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

In conclusion, may I offer this prayer as an example of a prayer that speaks in contemporary fashion the language of God’s people. Its author is Prof. John Jeske of the Seminary.

Our faithful God, we are here to pray for Your help because we are men and women in trouble. We hurt each other, we lie to ourselves, and we run away from You. We are often lazy, and we are sometimes strong, but in the wrong cause. We confess this with shame.

Again today You have cheered us with the message of the fullness which Your Son won for us by His perfect life and His willing death in our place. As often as we have stumbled or strayed, You have called us back and picked us up and dried our tears and healed our wounds and drawn us into Your loving embrace. We thank You, Father, for

putting meaning and joy into our lives, for restoring our identity as members of Your eternal family.

Build us up through Your Word, so that from day to day we may more and more get to resemble what You had in mind when You designed man out of the dust of the earth.

Work on our personalities to make us more Christlike. Let Your Word do its work in our hearts so that when You look into them You recognize true faith, not just a facsimile of faith, and so that when You look at our life, You see that we are not just playing at being reborn children of God.

Help us to realize not only our identity as Your children, but also our responsibilities as Your servants. Forgive us for so often living our day-to-day life with a frown on our face instead of a smile, for acting as though our Christian faith has been giving us a headache instead of putting a song into our heart. Teach us to treasure the down-to-earth joy of facing our problems with the Lord, of surrendering our will to the Lord, of tasting the goodness of the Lord. And then help us to channel this joy to aching hearts around us, especially to those who have not learned to call Jesus “Savior” and who therefore cannot call You “Father”. We pray this for the sake of Him who has invited us and taught us and even commanded us to pray. Amen

ⁱ Plass, Ewald. *What Luther Says*. Concordia, V. II, 1081, 3451.

ⁱⁱ Whiston, Charles. *Pray*. Eerdmans, 1972. p. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 10

^{iv} Lockyer, Herbert, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1959, Foreward.

^v Zwemer, Samuel, *Taking Hold of God*, Zondervan, 1936, pp. 13-14.

^{vi} Feucht, Oscar, *The Practice of Prayer*, Concordia, 1963, p.7.

^{vii} *ibid.* p. 8.

^{viii} Plass, II, 1086, 3467.

^{ix} *Ibid.* II. 1088, 3487.

^x Whiston, *op. cit.* p. 115.