



BY TIMOTHY N. BOYD

THE CHURCHES' USE OF THE
Lord's Prayer



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IN HIS TREATISE “On Prayer,” the early Christian writer Tertullian called the Lord’s Prayer “a new form of prayer.”¹ According to Tertullian, Christ had passed on to the church a prayer that was uniquely Christian. This prayer appears in two Gospels (Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) with the version in Matthew being the more lengthy and complete. The slight variations in the versions are probably due to the disciples hearing Jesus utter the prayer with these differences on separate occasions. Christ likely repeated many of His teachings during His ministry.

Tertullian is correct that this prayer has a uniquely Christian tone although Christ borrowed from the

prayer life of Judaism. Jesus’ simple prayer became foundational for the prayer life of the early church and for all the succeeding generations of Christians. Today, you will find the Lord’s Prayer being sung in weddings, recited by congregations in worship, preached in numerous sermons, and analyzed in various articles and books. It is the best-known prayer in Christianity.

Not only has this prayer become the most widely known, but it has also been used numerous ways throughout church history. While detailing all of those usages would be impossible in this article, we can summarize some of the main ways that believers have used the prayer.

A Personal Prayer

Initially, it was a simple daily prayer, which believers repeated for their own benefit and for the benefit of the church community at large. The *Didache* (an early Christian writing for instructing believers) quotes the Lord’s Prayer and instructs believers to pray this prayer three times a

day. Obviously, early Christians saw great value in the personal repetition of the prayer.²

Tertullian, in the writing mentioned above, challenged all believers to use the Lord’s Prayer. Cyprian, a third-century martyr, also wrote a treatise that focused on this prayer. He is believed to be the first to call it the “Lord’s Prayer.”³ He borrowed from Tertullian, and his treatise paralleled the method of that writer. Both Tertullian and Cyprian echo the *Didache* in recommending that believers should offer the prayer at least three times a day. Origen, who was a Christian leader in Alexandria, Egypt, also wrote an exposition of the Lord’s Prayer. Like Tertullian and Cyprian, he saw the prayer as a vital part of the life of a believer.⁴

After Constantine legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, people continued to recommend the prayer for daily usage. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), writing to a woman named Proba, said, “if we pray rightly, and as becomes our wants, we say nothing but what is already contained in the Lord’s Prayer.”⁵

John Calvin (1509-1564) said of the prayer, “[Christ] puts words into our lips, and thus relieves our minds of all hesitation.”⁶ John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of Methodism, said of this prayer, “It contains all we can reasonably or innocently pray for. There is nothing which we have need to ask of God, nothing which we can ask without offending him, which is not included, either directly or indirectly, in this comprehensive form.”⁷

E.M. Bounds (1835-1913), a popular writer on prayer, said the prayer is “the universal prayer, because it is peculiarly adapted to all men everywhere in all circumstances in all times of need. It can be put in the mouths of all people in all nations, and in all times.”⁸

Page 57: A Christian stele from the Coptic period. The decoration of this stele, in very high relief, shows the figure of a man in Greco-Roman dress, with his hands upraised in an attitude of

prayer. He stands in a chapel whose pediment is supported by papyrus columns. Ancient Egyptian temples often were reused as churches after the advent of Christianity in Egypt.

Left: A stone relief depicts the Lord's Supper. The period is not identified, however the arches in the relief appear to be Byzantine in style. Augustine thought the recitation of the Lord's Prayer should be part of the Lord's Supper celebration.

Right: The ruins of the church at ancient Hippo, including the baptistery. In A.D. 391, the church at Hippo ordained Augustine into the priesthood. Augustine, who lived A.D. 354–430, served this church in the town of Hippo (now called Annaba, in Algeria, north Africa).

Below: Gold medallion of Constantine, who ruled about A.D. 307–337. Constantine encouraged believers to offer the Lord's Prayer on a daily basis.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/88/77)

Contemporary scholar R. T. Kendall said, “The Lord’s Prayer is verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore perfectly worded. . . . It cannot be stressed too much that Jesus Himself is the formulator of it—every single word—and if you want to know at least once that you prayed in God’s will, the Lord’s Prayer is for you.”⁹

A Church Prayer

Another way the church has used the prayer has been in the liturgy (meaning standardized worship service) of the church. The emphasis in the *Didache* on the repetition of the prayer a specified number of times each day opened the door for the liturgical use of the prayer. Tertullian and Cyprian, while recommending the prayer for a believer’s personal

use, also began to associate it with the rites of the church (baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Augustine, in the same vein, associated the petition in the prayer for daily bread with celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Augustine also associated the prayer with the rite of baptism and encouraged the candidates to understand the necessity of forgiving others in order to receive forgiveness.¹⁰



Cloister at the Church of the Paternoster (Latin for "Our Father") in Jerusalem has over 60 tile plaques inscribed with the Lord's Prayer, each in a different language.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (32/5/5)

Pope Gregory I (the Great; lived 540–604) set the liturgical pattern for the Roman Catholic Church by standardizing where the prayer was to be placed in the saying of the Mass. He also added to the ritualistic nature of the usage of the prayer by insisting that only the priest would repeat the prayer, not the congregation.¹¹

Although his actions brought about the Reformation, Martin

Luther continued use the Lord's Prayer when the church observed the Lord's Supper or baptized someone.¹² Another reformer, John Calvin, in both his Strasbourg and Geneva liturgies, included the prayer as a part of the service of the Lord's Supper.¹³ In the mid-1500s, the Church of England standardized Anglican worship by establishing *The Book of Common Prayer*,

which included the Lord's Prayer as a part of the liturgy as well.¹⁴ Later Wesley and the Methodists incorporated the prayer as a standard part of Methodist worship.¹⁵

These liturgical uses of the Lord's Supper continue to the present day. You will also find Baptists and others reciting the Lord's Prayer during their worship services although such usage



Martin Luther, the German theologian, translated the New Testament

into German and was considered the father of the Protestant Reformation.



John Calvin, who lived 1509-1564, lived in Geneva, Switzerland. He was one of the

leaders during the reformation. Calvin included the Lord's Prayer in his Lord's Supper services.



John Wesley, who along with his brother Charles Wesley, founded the Methodist

Church. Wesley continued using the Lord's Prayer as part of the church liturgy.

is not necessarily part of a formal or set liturgy.

A Teaching Prayer

Another use of the prayer in church history is as a teaching tool for the practice of prayer. In their writings Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen included detailed expositions of the Lord's Prayer, which in essence used it to teach the practice of prayer. Augustine also wrote of the prayer, "Ye have not first learnt the Lord's Prayer, and after that the Creed; but first the Creed, where ye might know what to believe, and afterwards the Prayer, where ye might know whom to call upon."¹⁶ Augustine then gave a detailed interpretation of Jesus' words to teach his hearers the meaning of prayer.

Calvin also used the Lord's Prayer as a teaching tool. In one of his writings, the *Institutes*, he devoted a large section to a thorough exposition of this prayer.¹⁷ Wesley saw in the prayer a pattern of every topic worthy of prayer.¹⁸

R. C. Sproul, a contemporary writer, has written that in

this prayer, "Jesus was providing us with an outline of priorities or those things that *ought* to be priorities in our prayer life."¹⁹ Another contemporary Christian scholar, J.I. Packer, wrote, "The Lord's Prayer should be put to service to direct and spur on our praying constantly. To pray in terms of it is the sure way to keep our prayers within God's will."²⁰

This brief survey shows that the Lord's Prayer has enriched personal devotion, deepened Christian worship, and provided ample instruction to believers in the practice of prayer. It is indeed the greatest of prayers. **B**

1. Tertullian, "On Prayer" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 681.

2. *Didache* 8.

3. Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*.

4. Origen, *On Prayer* 12.

5. Augustine, "To Proba," Letter 53 in *Letters of St. Augustine in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 466.

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1863), 3.20.34 (p. 183).

7. John Wesley, "Sermon 26: 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount,'" *Global Ministries* [online; accessed 7 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: new.gbpm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/26/.

8. E. M. Bounds, *E. M. Bounds On Prayer* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 85.

9. R. T. Kendall, *The Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2010), 29.

10. Kenneth W. Stevenson, *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 79, 82-83.

11. Gregory the Great, *Epistle 12: To John, Bishop of Syracuse*.

12. Stevenson, 161-62.

13. John T. Dyck, "Calvin and Worship," *WRS Journal* no. 16 vol. 1 (February 2009): 33-40. See chart.

14. "The Supper of the Lord and Holy Communion, Commonly Called the Mass," *Virginia Theological Seminary* [Online; accessed 13 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: <http://virginia.edu.anglican.org/logue/bcp-1549.htm>.

15. "To Remember and Celebrate," *General Commission on Archives & History* [online; accessed 13 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: <http://www.gcah.org/atf/cf/%7B9FFCD624-0CB2-4EB6-9D68-68E9775A36DA%7D/To%20Remember%20and%20Celebrate.pdf>.

16. Augustin, *Sermon VI in Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 274.

17. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.34-49.

18. John Wesley, "Sermon 26: 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount,'" *Global Ministries* [online; accessed 7 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: new.gbpm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/26/.

19. R. C. Sproul, *Following Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1991), 127.

20. J.I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 157.

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