

Prayer (proseuche)

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It is interesting to compare the ways the verb "to pray" is used in the New Testament with the way the noun "prayer" is used.

The verb suggests an intimate association, the noun a formal action. "To pray" suggests intensity of communication; "to continue in prayer" suggests persistence. These are used together in Luke 6:12, "In those days he went into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God." The noun is used only twice of Jesus' activity. In addition to Luke 6:12, there is Luke 22:45 where the writer says, "And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow."

Jesus, who used the verb often, is quoted as using the noun only three times: Matthew 21:22; Mark 7:29; and Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, and Luke 19:46, the description of the Temple as a house of prayer. It is perhaps significant that Jesus' disciples did not ask him to teach them a prayer but asked him to teach them to pray. His response, therefore, was not a formula but an example.

The Book of Acts contains the greatest number of references to prayer of any book in the New Testament. It shows the young church devoted to prayer (1:14; 2:42; 6:4). It indicates that special places (16:13,16) and times (3:1) were set aside for prayer. All of this indicates the corporate nature of prayer. Generally, the New Testament urges individuals to pray, while it urges groups to engage in prayer.

Ministers and Prayer

While the activity of praying engages all Christians equally, prayer involves the minister rather more formidably than it involves the laity. In the act of corporate worship, the minister most often is the one who packages the holy

commerce of ecclesiastical hope and delivers it formally to God. The congregation depends on its ministers for the adequacy of its expression and the validity of its import. As ministers energizing the word "prayer" in our local settings, we need to respond to certain aspects of the word and the reality it expresses.

Prayer is speaking with God. It is not an opportunity for ministers to rehash sermons, denounce social ills, or describe personal defects. It is conversation with God. In the Lord's Prayer, which is a model for us in our praying and in our prayers, there is not one word which is aimed at anyone but God.

The great advantage of a minister using the printed prayers of the liturgy rather than offering free prayer is that the printed prayers express concerns of all the congregation. Sometimes even pastors who are completely aware that they are speaking for all to God are betrayed by their grammar or by being thoughtlessly specific. To say, "We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves" is one thing. To say, "We have not given our children the love and attention they need" is another matter entirely. It excludes all members of the congregation who are not parents, including all the children! In describing existing conditions, ministers should be specific in the pulpit, but general in the prayers. Even qualified specifics ("Some of us...") should be used sparingly.

The audacity of prayer has paradoxical effects. Conversation with God gives us both humility and courage, both awe at the majesty of the creator of the universe whom we address and joy at the presence and accessibility of the Father who loves us. But we do not pray in order to receive humility and courage, awe and joy. We pray because God has first communicated with us and wants us to respond. The effects

are not our concern. We may enjoy them but we do not seek them.

Words of Institution

The words of institution in Holy Communion should not be part of a prayer.

This is probably the greatest theological defect of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. The Lord's Supper is not the Sacrifice of the Mass. It is not something which we offer to God; it is a gift from God to us. The movement is from God to us, not from us to God. The words of institution should, therefore, be clearly pronounced as God's Word to us. They should not be made a part of our words to God. To read any Scripture to God is to confuse communication with reverberation. God wants to hear from us the weak voice of our infirmity, not the echo of his sonority.

Prayers should be part of praying. The formal prayers of the church should be part of the individual communication between members of the congregation and God. The prayers of the liturgy should concentrate and captivate the spiritual longings of the saints. They should articulate to God the state of the souls of the congregation. Where the individuals, including ministers, have groped throughout the week for ways to hear God and be heard by God, the prayers of the church should affect that communication. Praying may be completely informal and at times inchoate, sometimes just a sense of the interested presence of God in our lives. The formality of prayer focuses the feeling and reality of God's imminence so that we see and are seen, we understand and know that we are understood. Praying is essential to the Christian life; prayer is constructive.

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