

# Lord, Teach Us to Pray

BY JOHN ESSICK

The journey on which Christ's model prayer takes us is a dangerous adventure. Our teacher, after all, was crucified for living out its petitions. Praying in the way Jesus taught does not simply make us better people; praying in this way makes us Christian.

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A student visiting the Abbey of Gethsemane once asked Thomas Merton (1915-1968) why he had chosen to waste his life by living in a Trappist monastic community. Merton responded politely and profoundly: "I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation."<sup>†</sup> His gentle response to the student's question highlights the relevance of prayer in an otherwise busy and bustling world. The utter commitment to the life of prayer apparent in Christians such as Merton suggests not only that prayer matters, but also that it is a practice that must be inculcated through long repetition if it is to become something resembling a vocation.

The Gospels consistently present Jesus as an effective teacher. His friends (and opponents) often address him as "Teacher" or "Rabbi." It is not surprising, then, that his disciples would request a lesson on the critical subject of prayer. Since he rarely responded in expected ways to queries directed to him but routinely challenged the motives and assumptions of the questioners, it is a bit surprising that Jesus answered the disciples' enquiry regarding prayer with such straightforward instructions. The model prayer he taught his disciples to pray, or "the Lord's Prayer" as it is more commonly known, is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13. A slightly shorter version is found in Luke 11:2-4. The three books under review here—N. T. Wright's *The Lord & His Prayer*, William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas's *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, and Kenneth W. Stevenson's *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*—provide complementary approaches to learning, praying, and living this prayer.



N. T. Wright's *The Lord & His Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996, 89 pp., \$10.00) is an excellent introduction to the petitions of the Lord's Prayer and their practical import for the life of the Church. Wright argues that the prayer Jesus taught his disciples "sums up fully and accurately...the way in which he read and responded to the signs of the times, the way in which he understood his own vocation and mission and invited his followers to share in it" (p. 2).

Contextualization is the overwhelming strength of Wright's treatment of the Lord's Prayer. In six brief chapters, he explores the ways in which the prayer calls for justice, bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. He elucidates the prayer's petitions by locating phrases such as "Our Father" and "Forgive us our trespasses" in their biblical, historical, and cultural contexts. Where forgiveness of trespasses is concerned, for example, Wright calls attention to the image of a father running to welcome his son home in Luke 15:11-32 (often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son) as an image of what it means to be about the business of forgiveness: "We need shocking stories like the Running Father, because our generation has either forgotten about forgiveness or trivialized it" (p. 50). Wright observes that in Matthew's version of the prayer, in addition to "trespass" imagery (6:14) the idea of "debt" is prominent in the forgiveness petition (6:12). In explaining this feature of the prayer, Wright reminds us that the first act of those Jewish revolutionaries who took control of the Temple at the beginning of the war against the Romans was to destroy the debt records housed there. The point Wright makes with this historical example is that Jesus is connecting forgiveness with justice and peace, "the great old biblical command of Jubilee" (p. 55).

This book is the product of a series of sermons Wright delivered in 1995, and as such, its publication is intended to impact the Church's worship and witness. Wright's conversational writing style is on full display in this quick read. He avoids academic jargon and scholarly quotations. For those interested in practical ways of incorporating the Lord's Prayer into their daily lives, Wright suggests three habits. First, use the prayer as an outline for daily prayer by focusing on particular situations or needs associated with each petition. Second, repeat the prayer slowly, meditatively, intentionally, and rhythmically until it becomes a habit of spiritual breathing. Third, consider adopting one petition each day and make it a "lens through which you see the world" (p. 9). In so doing, Wright believes, Christians will learn to pray and live in the way Jesus taught.



*Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* by William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 112 pp.,

\$11.00) portrays the Christian faith as a prayer that must be learned. Like Wright, the authors explore the petitions of the prayer individually in brief chapters. While they occasionally delve into the historical and cultural context of the prayer, Willimon and Hauerwas primarily focus on how praying this prayer will bring Christians into conflict with the prevailing assumptions and teachings of contemporary North American culture.

Instead of reducing Christianity to a set of doctrines or beliefs, Willimon and Hauerwas employ language of “journey” throughout the book as a way of speaking about the radical, odd, and altogether unique nature of God’s kingdom: “The prayer names the danger you will face as well as providing the help—the necessary skills—you will need for negotiating the dangers of the journey” (p. 15).

Another theme in this study is that praying this prayer is first and foremost a communal act. “Our Father” is a reminder that one prays this prayer with friends and that one never prays alone. Indeed, saints from ages past pray with us, “leaning down from the ramparts of heaven to join their voices with ours...” (p. 29). “Our Father” also reveals that God has a face and a name. This means, among other things, that “God stands as judge against all human fatherhood” (p. 31). Thus, praying “Our Father” redefines social and familial relations in light of the God who creates, saves, and redeems through the person of Jesus.

Willimon and Hauerwas describe the Lord’s Prayer as a political act: in praying for “Your kingdom” to arrive, “politics has crept into our Christian praying” (p. 50). It is natural, then, that the Church has an opinion on how one will vote, have sex, and spend money. Thus, in praying for God’s reign and daily bread and forgiveness, the Church engages in a power struggle against the kingdoms of this world, kingdoms that do not relinquish power easily.

One of the authors’ most interesting observations is the utterly outrageous nature of the prayer. Could any human act be more outrageous than forgiveness? Prevailing logic on forgiveness might assume that radical forgiveness creates doormats and victims who refuse to speak or act against injustice. Turning such logic on its head, however, Jesus commands his followers “to take charge, to turn the world around, to throw a monkey wrench in the eternal wheel of retribution and vengeance” (p. 84).

In *Lord, Teach Us*, Willimon and Hauerwas offer a compelling introduction to the repercussions of praying the Lord’s Prayer. The journey on which this prayer takes us is a dangerous adventure. Our teacher, after all, was crucified for living out its petitions. Praying in the way Jesus taught does not simply make us better people; praying in this way makes us Christian.



Kenneth W. Stevenson’s *The Lord’s Prayer: A Text in Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004, 304 pp., \$22.00) is a fascinating

examination of the biblical, historical, and liturgical theology of the Lord's Prayer. It is a treasure trove of useful commentary, interpretations, and contextual analysis by Christians who have used the prayer over the centuries.

After explaining the scope and method of his study, Stevenson surveys the early history of the prayer. In the first century the prayer evolved as a liturgical text. Theologians like Tertullian (d. ca. 225), Cyprian (d. 258) – the earliest known writer to refer to the prayer as the *dominica oratio* (the "Lord's Prayer") – and Origen (d. ca. 254) commented on the prayer. Apart from these authors, the prayer received little attention in treatises during this era.

Due to the wealth of commentary and extensive liturgical utilization of the prayer beginning in the fourth century, Stevenson devotes two chapters to the prayer's place in the eastern and western churches. Matthew's version of the prayer became the standard text used in daily prayer and at significant liturgical moments such as baptism and celebration of the Eucharist. Prominent eastern authors like Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), and western writers including Jerome (d. 420), Augustine (d. 430), Isidore of Seville (d. 636), and Bede (d. 735) wrote extensively about the prayer. The western sources are more numerous and varied than those from the East, which leads to a terrain of interpretation that Stevenson describes as "rich and plentiful" (p. 94).

Stevenson touches on later eastern writers before moving to a comprehensive study of the Lord's Prayer in the medieval West. Three major changes in writings on the prayer stand out. First, diverse genres emerged as writers produced commentaries, meditations, and allegories of the Lord's Prayer. Second, sermonic expositions on the prayer became more relevant to all parishioners rather than focusing solely on catechumens and the newly baptized. Third, vernacular translations of the prayer became increasingly necessary as a means of instructing the faithful.

After the medieval era, Stevenson's treatment focuses largely on the reception of the Lord's Prayer in the English-speaking world. During the Renaissance and Reformation, the prayer retained an important liturgical function for Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans (p. 184). All three groups benefited greatly when the printing press made possible wide distribution of vernacular translations of books of worship (e.g., *Book of Common Prayer*) that included the Lord's Prayer. A final chapter on the prayer's use in "Modernity and Beyond" brings the discussion into the present.

*The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition* is a wonderful introduction to the textual history and history of interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. Stevenson's command of the vast amount of material is matched by his ability to distill the information in an interesting and user-friendly format. One need not be a liturgical theologian to make use of this resource. More importantly, it is clear that the Lord's Prayer has always resided at the heart of Chris-

tian worship. As much as this prayer is prayed by individuals in various contexts, Stevenson's study underscores the Church's liturgical tradition of praying this prayer corporately and routinely.



These three books—*The Lord & His Prayer, Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, and *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*—form a nucleus of historical context, theological commentary, and practical application for teachers interested in guiding others through the nuances of the Lord's Prayer. All three works attest that learning to pray the Lord's Prayer does not simply shape our Christian vocation. Praying it is our vocation. Nowhere is the intersection of praying and believing more evident than when the Church, doing as Jesus taught, dares to pray "Our Father."

#### **NOTE**

† E. Glenn Hinson, a personal friend of Merton, recounted this story in a lecture "What I have Learned in Fifty Years of Teaching" at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky on March 6, 2009.

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