

Little Prayer Book

1522

MARY JANE HAEMIG

INTRODUCTION

Luther's *Betbüchlein* (*Little Prayer Book*) was first published at the end of May 1522.^a Luther had returned to Wittenberg from the Wartburg in early March 1522. The Reformation had advanced rapidly in Wittenberg, and not always in ways that Luther found helpful and evangelical. He clearly saw the need to reform worship and devotional practices but rejected enforced measures (such as the destruction of images or compelling people to receive both kinds), and instead desired a reformation embodying evangelical freedom based on the proclaimed word and faith. His *Invocavit Sermons*^b expressed his vision of such reform.

The events of the first half of 1522 illustrate key theological insights. Luther believed that God deals with humans first outwardly, then inwardly. The external word—the speaking of the gospel, baptism, and the Lord's Supper—precedes and causes the inward experience of the Holy Spirit and faith. God gives the inward only through the outward. Faith then produces outward

^a Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 119 (hereafter Brecht 2).

^b See above, pp. 7–45.

1. Luther later went into great detail on his differences with Karlstadt. See *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525) (LW 40:79–223; TAL 2:39–125). For more on Karlstadt in this volume, see the introduction to the *Invocavit Sermons*, pp. 7–14.

expressions. Decisions on outward matters of Christian practice, matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God, follow in evangelical freedom from faith. Luther complained that Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541) and his followers had, in both cases, reversed the direction.¹ Luther's *Betbüchlein* can be seen as a continuation of his message in the *Invocavit Sermons* and elsewhere; it provided both another proclamation of God's word and the resources for the life of faith and its outward expressions in practice that follow from that proclamation of the word. It did not mandate certain prayers and practices but provided resources for Christians to use in exercising their faith in freedom.

Luther's efforts in these months aimed at reorienting the reforming movement to its central message. In late April and early May 1522, Luther undertook a preaching tour to other cities in Electoral Saxony.^c He was also revising his translation of the New Testament for its publication in September. It was this flurry of activity that may have prompted his comment that he "did not have the time" for a basic and thorough reformation of prayer books. Nevertheless, this work continued Luther's efforts to reform prayer practice. Already published were his sermons on the Lord's Prayer and on Rogation prayer.^d The *Betbüchlein* reveals how profoundly Luther's Reformation insights affected the most ordinary aspects of Christian practice.

Medieval monastic prayer practices, patterns, and materials often set the pattern or ideal for lay prayer. The daily routine of monks and nuns included set times for prayer. Prayer was systematically taught even in mendicant orders.^e The Franciscans, for example, developed a rich literature to instruct novices and friars in proper prayer practice. While they considered vocal prayer, and particularly the Lord's Prayer, as important, they also sought to reach beyond vocal prayer to mental or spiritual prayer, viewed as more advanced because it involved the human soul rising to God and attaining insights into divine secrets. Prayer was also shaped by confessional practices. It was part of

^c Brecht 2:67.

^d See above, pp. 147–57.

^e See, e.g., Bert Roest, "The Discipline of the Heart: Pedagogies of Prayer in Medieval Franciscan Works of Religious Instruction," in Timothy J. Johnson, ed., *Franciscans at Prayer* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 413–48.

the “satisfaction” stage in penance, in that saying prayers after proper contrition and confession to a priest helped satisfy the penitent’s remaining temporal penalty for sin. Pastoral and devotional materials made clear that prayer was an activity that gained merit for the one praying, but that such merit depended on the fulfillment of the proper conditions.²

In the late Middle Ages, Books of Hours also became popular,^f many being designed for and used by laity. Some are known to us today as finely bound and richly illuminated books used by nobility. With the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, such books were available to a broader audience. These books centered on a cycle of prayers to the Virgin Mary (the Hours of the Virgin), designed for recitation throughout the day. The books offered materials and patterns that paralleled monastic practices but were aimed at a lay audience. Commonly, such books included calendars with feast days and commemorations of saints, Gospel lessons touching on major events in the life of Christ and often supplemented by John’s account of Christ’s passion, the Hours of the Virgin (eight separate hours including psalms, hymns, prayers, and lessons), the Hours of the Cross, the Hours of the Holy Spirit, specialized prayers to the Virgin, the seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143), the office of the dead, and prayers to the saints. The books

2. As Guido of Monte Rochen wrote in a popular pastoral manual in his discussion of the Sacrament of Penance: “For prayer to be entirely meritorious and effective as satisfaction, it is required to have thirteen conditions, namely, that it be faithful, untroubled,



A scene from an illustrated Book of Hours printed in the fifteenth century depicts prayer and the Holy Spirit as dove.

^f Roger S. Wieck, “Prayer for the People: The Book of Hours,” in Roy Hammerling, ed., *A History of Prayer: The First to the Fifteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 388–416.

humble, discrete, shameful, devout, secret, pure, tearful, attentive, fervent, painstaking, and constant.” Guido of Monte Rochen, *Handbook for Curates: A Late Medieval Manual on Pastoral Ministry*, trans. Anne T. Thayer, with an introduction by Anne T. Thayer and Katharine J. Lualdi (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 247.



The *Stabat Mater*. Mary, the mother of Jesus, stands by Christ’s cross along with the apostle John. Painting by Roger van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464).

also exhibited a wide variation in other content. Some contained Masses, that is, the prayers said by the priest or sung by the choir; some contained a variety of other prayers, including the *Stabat Mater* and prayers to one’s guardian angel. Some prayers were accompanied by indulgences that provided the user with extra merit.

In Germany, beginning at the end of the fifteenth century, the most popular and widely disseminated prayer books were known as the *Hortulus animae* (“Garden of the Soul” or “Garden of the Spirit”). While including the typical contents of the Books of Hours, these shifted the focus of prayer away from the monastic routine and toward the personal and devotional use of prayer. They included prayers for arising and going to bed, prayers for leaving the house and for entering the church, prayers (often from the church fathers) to gain indulgences, prayers while receiving the sacraments of penance and the Lord’s Supper, and prayers while attending Mass.^g

Other extant works offer insight into the practice of prayer in the late medieval period. One prayer book for laity, probably dating from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, contained a hymn of praise to Mary, three prayers to one’s personal angel, two prayers to an apostle chosen to be one’s patron saint, and three prayers to Saint Erasmus.^h

The lines between catechism, prayer book, and breviary were not strictly drawn in the Middle Ages, nor were lines between materials meant for communal worship and those meant for private devotion. The Ten Commandments, Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and Hail Mary (*Ave Maria*) were common elements of medieval catechisms. Typically, these catechisms also con-

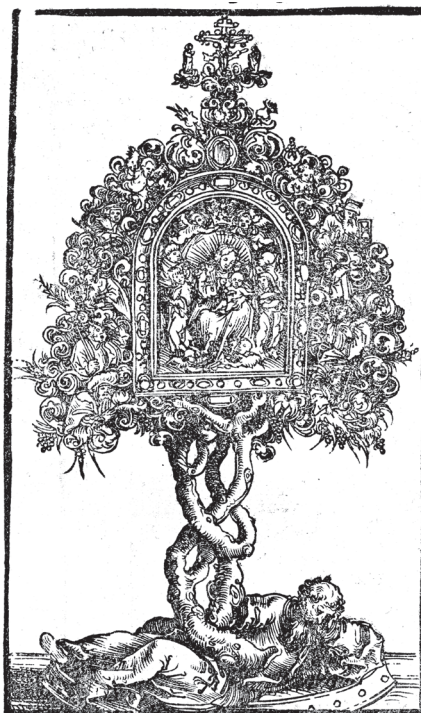
^g Traugott Koch discusses the *Hortulus animae* in *Johann Habermanns “Betbüchlein” im Zusammenhang seiner Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 12–13. For more on these prayer books, see Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The Ars Moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 40–45.

^h Peter Matheson, “Angels, Depression, and ‘The Stone’: A Late Medieval Prayer Book,” *Journal of Theological Studies* (NS) 48, no. 2 (October 1997): 517–30.

tained other materials designed to guide conduct, educate the Christian in the faith, and teach prayer.ⁱ As most people were illiterate, they would have learned their prayers by hearing them spoken and repeating them.

Luther sought to reform both the theology and practice of prayer. He realized that unless his insights were conveyed on a popular, understandable level, they would not succeed in changing longstanding, strongly rooted ideas and practice. Medieval prayer books and practices had left people with many ideas that undermined God's mercy received in faith. Luther sought to encourage simple direct prayer to God, who had promised to hear the one praying, rather than to the Virgin Mary and the saints. Luther stressed that God hears prayers, despite unworthiness, because God has promised to listen to prayer. Prayer is not a good work and does not earn indulgences³ or anything else from God; it is honest communication with God. Mindless repetition of prayer is not helpful; instead, Christians should contemplate the meaning of each petition and boldly, honestly, and persistently present their needs to God.

The *Betbüchlein* gave laypeople an evangelical counterpart to the problematic prayer books that Luther saw in use. In its effort to shape lay piety by focusing on the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, and Lord's Prayer, the work is decidedly catechetical and reflects what would later become the structure of his catechisms.⁴ Luther thought that the best way to teach prayer was to introduce people to the faith and thereby to incite them



This illustration from a *Hortulus animae* published in 1550 depicts the branch springing from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11). As Jesse, the father of David, lies on the ground a tree grows from his side at whose center is the Madonna and child.

ⁱ See for example, Dietrich Kolde's "Mirror for Christians" (1480), in Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 29–130 (hereafter Kolde).

³ Indulgences purported to remit a certain number of years that the Christian had to serve in purgatory.

⁴ See Luther's reflections in the *Prayer Book's* introduction (below). See also his comment in the preface to the *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass), 1525 (LW 53:64–66; TAL 3:142–46), where he emphasizes the need for a catechism and suggests using the *Betbüchlein* as a basis for evangelical catechisms.

5. Commenting on Strassburg, Miriam Usher Chrisman writes, “The most popular prayerbook, of which five editions were printed between 1560 and 1591, was Luther’s own *Betbüchlein*.” Miriam Usher Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strassburg, 1580–1599* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 88.

6. See Luther’s preface to Casper Cruciger’s *Summer Postil* (1544) (LW 77:9; WA 21:201): “So also the shameful, false, slanderous prayer books, of which the world was full, have been cleared out, and in place of them pure prayers and good Christian hymns have been published, especially the Psalter, the finest and most precious prayer book and hymnal of them all, concerning which no theologian of our time could boast that he had understood a single psalm as well and as thoroughly as the laypeople, men and women, understand them now.”

7. The title “*Betbüchlein*” literally means “Little Prayer Book.” The “-lein” is a diminutive in German. This translation is based on the German text in WA 10/2:375–501 and the translation by Martin H. Bertram in LW 43:11–45.

to prayer. Here, as in other places, he focused his discussion of prayers on the Lord’s Prayer. As he did frequently in later works, he also advocated the use of biblical texts, here the Psalms, as prayer for Christians. Luther and his followers saw clearly that in order to shape faith and practice, accessible materials had to make his insights available and usable at the popular level.

It is striking that this work is not a collection of prayers. For this reason, one scholar has called it an “anti-prayer book.”^j It actually is not a “prayer book” as that literary genre had been understood, for it contains no written prayers (such as the morning, evening, and table prayers that his *Small Catechism* later included) but, rather, direction and advice concerning prayer. Luther encouraged the use of biblical texts—particularly the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms—as something the Christian could use to pray meditatively and in so doing bring his or her own situation before God.^k Luther’s prayer book exhibits both Luther’s reforming insights and his pastoral insights into how to convey them. He used familiar elements, common in medieval prayer books but now understood in an evangelical way, to convey Reformation content. The absence of other elements indicated that they did not fit his theology.

The work has a complicated publication history, as Luther himself—and those after him—modified its contents. Ironically, the same thing happened to it that happened to many medieval prayer books: while the basic core (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer, and Hail Mary) remained intact, various elements were added to and subtracted from it. Luther sometimes included translations of various books of the New Testament, psalms, and relevant sermons. Subsequent editors of the work also added various elements—for example, forms for use in confessing sin, instruction for the dying, short explanations of the Lord’s Prayer, and the like. One of the more thorough revisions, probably done under Luther’s supervision, took place in 1529, when the printer added a set of fifty woodcuts depicting the basic story of salvation from the creation, through the fall,

^j Johannes Wallmann, “Zwischen Herzensgebet und Gebetbuch. Zur protestantischen deutschen Gebetsliteratur im 17. Jahrhundert,” in *Gebetsliteratur der frühen Neuzeit als Hausfrömmigkeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), 19.

^k See the discussion in *ibid.*, 18–21.

the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, to the second coming, ending with the spreading of the gospel throughout the world.

Luther's *Betbüchlein* became popular immediately. It was printed at least seventeen times between 1522 and 1525 (in Augsburg, Erfurt, Grimma, Wittenberg, Jena, and Strassburg) and at least forty-four times by the end of the century.¹ In some areas, it was the most popular prayer book.⁵ Writing in 1544, Luther claimed success for all evangelical efforts, including his own, to reform prayer practice.⁶



LITTLE PRAYER BOOK⁷

TO ALL MY DEAR MASTERS and brothers⁸ in Christ, grace and peace.

Among the many harmful books and doctrines by which Christians are misled and deceived and countless false beliefs have arisen, I regard the little prayer books as by no means the least objectionable. They drub into the minds of simple people such a wretched counting up of sins⁹ and going to confession, such un-Christian foolishness about prayers to God and the saints! Moreover, these books are puffed up with promises of indulgences¹⁰ and come out with decorations in red ink and pretty titles; one is called *Hortulus animae*, another *Paradisus animae*,¹¹ and so on. These books need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination. And I would make the same judgment about those passionals¹² or books of legends into which the devil has tossed his own additions. But I just don't have the time and it is too much for me to undertake such a reformation alone. So until God gives me more time and grace, I

8. Luther prefaced his new prayer book with a letter of explanation addressed to "herrn" and "brudern." *Herrn* ("sirs") could refer to *Pfarrherrn* (parish pastors) or to *Ratsherrn* (civil officials) while *brudern* could refer to monks or others in ecclesiastical positions. Their opinions about Luther's bold supplanting of the old traditional prayer books would be solicited by many people. The support of these authorities for the new book and their recommendation would help greatly Luther's effort at reforming the forms of personal piety among the laity.

9. Numbering types of sins was common in late medieval Europe. So, for example, the seven deadly sins, the nine alien sins, the six sins against the Holy Spirit, and the five commandments of the church were all discussed in Kolde's catechism and other devotional works.

10. In medieval Roman Catholicism, certain prayers were thought to earn indulgences, that is, remission or reduction of the time one was obligated to spend in purgatory because of one's sins.

11. *Hortulus animae* ("Garden of the Soul" or "Garden of the Spirit") and *Paradisus animae* ("Paradise of the Soul") were titles for popular late medieval prayer books.

12. Passionals were histories of Christ's passion, often an amalgam of the scriptural accounts. Often other things were added to these works as well, for example, other Bible stories, stories concerning Mary, and stories concerning saints. Medieval prayer books sometimes contained one or more of these.