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VOL. XXXIV

June 1963

No. 6

A STUDY ON "INTERCESSORY PRAYERS FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SOULS OF THE DEAD" PROVIDED BY THE JOINT THEOLOGICAL FACULTIES OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

At its 28th delegate convention, June 20 to 29, 1956, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod resolved "that the joint theological faculties of the Synod provide appropriate studies on . . . 'the Moment of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper' and 'Intercessory Prayers for the Benefit of the Souls of the Dead.'" The Synod also resolved "that we recommend that these studies be published in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY" (*Proceedings of the Forty-Third Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . . 1956*, p. 551). At the next convention the Synod resolved "that the substance of the above-mentioned studies be published also in the *Lutheran Witness* and *Der Lutheraner* in such form as the discretion of the editors may suggest" (*Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . . 1959*, p. 194). On May 2, 1959, the joint theological faculties of the Synod adopted a statement on "the Moment of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper." This statement appeared in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXX (July 1959), 530 f. In their meeting held March 29—30, 1963, the joint theological faculties of the Synod adopted the following study on "Intercessory Prayers for the Benefit of the Souls of the Dead."

Intercessory Prayers for the Benefit of the Souls of the Dead

Though the Synod's resolutions calling for this study and its publication do not define the terms of the subject "Intercessory Prayers for the Benefit of the Souls of the Dead," it

appears that they are designed to combat a theological tendency which takes concrete form, e. g., in the Roman Catholic error of praying "for the souls in purgatory."

(For an example of Roman Catholic teaching on this point see *The Confraternity Edition Revised Baltimore Catechism*, No. 3 by Rev. Francis J. Connell. New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1949, Qu. 478: "For whom should we pray?" Answer: . . . "for the souls in purgatory." The catechism quotes 2 Maccabees 12:46).

That this has been the Synod's concern in the past is reflected in the change of the answer to Qu. 214 in the former Synodical Catechism: "For whom should we pray?" from "For ourselves and for all men; but not for the dead" to the wording in the answer to Qu. 210 in the revised catechism, which says: "We should pray for *ourselves* and for *all other people*, even for our enemies; but *not for the souls of the dead*."

Holy Scripture knows nothing of intercessory prayers for the benefit of the souls of the dead. The Roman Catholic Church quotes 2 Macc. 12:42-46 in support of its practice of offering masses and prayers for the dead. However, quite apart from the issue of the authority of 2 Maccabees as an apocryphal book, the cited passage clearly shows that Judas Maccabaeus was not contemplating the intermediate state of the Jews who had fallen in battle with Gorgias but their status in the resurrection. 2 Tim. 1:16 to 18 and 4:19, quoted by some in support of prayers for the dead, describe St. Paul's deep concern for Onesiphorus and his household. Exegetical opinion is divided on the question whether Onesiphorus was dead or alive when St. Paul wrote 2 Timothy. Hence it would be precarious to cite St. Paul's words as a sure example in Holy Scripture of prayer for the faithful departed. It is significant in

any case, however, that St. Paul desires that "the Lord grant him [Onesiphorus] to find mercy from the Lord on that Day" (RSV). St. Paul's words may be regarded as his fervent hope that Onesiphorus will on that day stand on the right hand of the King (Matt. 25:31-40), for Onesiphorus, too, as he ministered to the apostle, had given to the King food and had come to Him in prison.

Whatever the only valid interpretation of 2 Tim. 1:16-18 and 4:19 may be, it is clear that these passages do not teach purgatory. Holy Scripture knows nothing of a purgatory where the souls of the dead could be benefited by the intercessory prayers of the living. The evident teaching of Holy Scripture is that at death believers are with Christ; that unbelievers are at death doomed to eternal punishment; that therefore man's eternal destiny is determined at death. (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:1-13; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:19 to 31; 23:43; John 3:16-18, 36; 5:24-29; 8:24; Acts 7:59; 60; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 9:27; 12:23; Rev. 14:13)

The Lutheran Symbols have nothing to say specifically about "intercessory prayers for the benefit of the souls of the dead," but they do state the following:

"We know that the ancients spoke of prayers for the dead. We do not forbid this, but rather we reject the transfer of the Lord's Supper to the dead *ex opere operato*. . . . (Apology, XXIV, 94)"

"Our opponents also misapply against us the condemnation of Aerius, who they say was condemned because he denied that in the Mass there was an offering for the living and the dead. They often use this dodge. They cite ancient heresies and by falsely comparing them with our position they try to crush us. Epiphanius testifies that Aerius believed that prayers for the dead were useless. This he rejects. We do not support Aerius either. But we are at suit with you for wickedly defending a heresy that clearly conflicts with the prophets, apos-

les, and holy Fathers, namely, that the Mass justifies *ex opere operato* and that it merits the forgiveness of guilt and punishment even for the wicked to whom it is applied, if they make no objection. We reject these wicked errors which rob Christ's suffering of its glory and utterly destroy the doctrine of righteousness by faith." (Ibid., 96)

Accordingly, the Apology does not forbid prayers for the dead or declare them useless, but it neither mentions any specific prayers of the ancients as examples of prayers which may be permitted, nor does it define such prayers. However, purged of the abuses of the Mass, these prayers must be regarded as prayers of commemoration and thanksgiving. In any case, the statements on prayer in the Apology may not be cited to justify any intercessions which "rob Christ's suffering of its glory and utterly destroy the doctrine of righteousness by faith."

Therefore, the Lutheran Symbols explicitly reject (a) purgatory (Smalcald Articles, Part Two, II, 12); (b) the opinion that the Holy Eucharist is an expiatory sacrifice which can be applied on behalf of the dead *ex opere operato* (Apology, XXIV, 64 and 92); (c) the opinion that our prayers or other acts of devotion possess merit which can be transferred to the departed for the forgiveness of their sins or for their salvation. (Apology, XXIV, 34-36)

Though we do not approve of *intercessions* for the *benefit* of the souls of the dead, we nevertheless declare that the church may not object to such prayers offered by Christians as:

- a) supplications for the rest of the body in the grave;
- b) thanksgivings:
 - 1) for temporal and spiritual blessings which God in this life bestowed on deceased believers;
 - 2) for the deliverance of deceased believers from all temptations and tribulations;

3) for all the glorious blessings which God promised to those who by His grace persevered in faith to the end of life.

Aside from the prayers of thanksgiving for divine blessings bestowed on the deceased and the petitions for the peaceful rest of the

body in the grave and a joyful resurrection, the Synod's *Liturgy* and *Agenda* contain no other intercessory prayers for the dead. Nor does Holy Scripture, the final authority of our church in matters of doctrine, contain commands, promises, and certain examples of prayers for the dead.