

Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 76:1-2

January/April 2012

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Fides Heroica? **Luther's Prayer for Melanchthon's Recovery from Illness in 1540**

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In June 1540, a tertian fever¹ seized Philip Melanchthon and brought him to the point of death.² Dr. Martin Luther was summoned to Weimar to see Melanchthon before he died. Luther prayed at Melanchthon's bedside, and Melanchthon subsequently recovered. Timothy Wengert calls Luther's prayer for Melanchthon, "the most famous example of Luther praying."³ One of the most vivid, frequently cited, and readily accessible accounts of this event is found in Julius Köstlin's *Life of Luther*. He writes:

Filled with fear, [Luther] said: "O God, how the devil has shattered this instrument for me!" Then the faithful and manly friend approached his God in prayer for his much beloved friend, by throwing, as he, himself afterwards said, "the sack before the door, and by rubbing his ears with all the promises from His own word." He exhorted and commanded Melanchthon to be of good cheer, because God did not desire the death of the sinner, but needed further services from him; told him that he himself would rather depart now; had food prepared for him when he was gradually becoming convalescent, and upon his refusal to eat, threatened: "You will have to eat, or I will put you in the ban." Gradually the patient improved in body and spirit. Luther could write to another friend: "We found him dead; by an

¹ A three-day fever "*febrim tertianam*." WA TR 4, 655. No. 5096; see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 54: 387 (hereafter AE).

² Melanchthon's bout with illness is well-documented. Luther's account of it can be found in Letter 290 to Mrs. Luther from Weimar, July 2, 1540. AE 50: 206-210 (WA Br 9, 168).

³ Timothy Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 171-197: 173. Wengert's essay was first published in Timothy Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004): 249-274.

undeniable miracle of God he lives."⁴

Köstlin's account is not the primary source of the incident but is certainly among the most cited secondary accounts. Subsequent secondary accounts provide further details not previously included.⁵ Another account concludes, "There seems to be no doubt that but for Luther's arrival and prayer, Melanchthon would have died."⁶ Quite a few biographies about Luther or Melanchthon published in the mid-19th century retell the story of Melanchthon's illness and healing after Luther's prayer.⁷ This incident of Melanchthon's grave illness and recovery because of the prayer of Martin Luther presents challenges regarding the historical accuracy of the accounts and the theological interpretation of the event.

I. The Historicity of the Accounts

The account of Melanchthon's illness and Lazarus-like resurrection as presented by Köstlin⁸ appears to be drawn primarily from *Ratzeberger's Handwritten History about Luther and His Times*.⁹ At the time of Melanchthon's illness, Matthew Ratzeberger was the physician of Elector John Frederick of Saxony. After Martin Luther's death in 1546, Ratzeberger

⁴ Julius Köstlin, *Life of Luther*, trans. John G. Morris (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1883), 440. Also see Julius Köstlin, *Luthers Leben*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1883), 546-547.

⁵ Joseph Stumpe, *The Life of Philip Melanchthon* (Reading, PA: Pilger Publishing House, 1897), 160. "Luther rode night and day to reach the bedside of his friend." Timothy Wengert calls friendship between Luther and Melanchthon a "pious myth" and suggests that they were close colleagues. See Timothy Wengert, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths," in *Liturgical Institute Conference Proceedings* (Valparaiso University, 2005), Paper 2, http://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/2 (accessed March 21, 2012): "I looked for the friendship between Luther and Melanchthon and discovered that they were colleagues not friends." This would stand in contrast to Köstlin's account. Ratzeberger, cited below, does not refer to Melanchthon as a friend in his account, but this may be as much for what transpired between him and Melanchthon after Luther's death as it is a reflection on what Luther felt about Melanchthon.

⁶ Stumpe, *The Life of Philip Melanchthon*, 160. Stumpe's version of Melanchthon's illness and recovery is nearly identical to Köstlin's account.

⁷ Charles Frederick Ledderhose, *The Life of Philip Melanchthon*, trans. G.F. Krotel (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1855), 173-174.

⁸ Köstlin is mentioned in particular because he is one of the main sources on Luther's life cited in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century including somewhat disappointingly by Martin Brecht. *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 209-210.

⁹ Matthäus Ratzeberger, *Die Handschriftliche Geschichte Ratzeberger's Über Luther und Seine Zeit*, ed. Christian Gotthold Neudecker (Jena: Friedrich Mauke, 1850), 102-105.

became the guardian of Luther's children.¹⁰ He also accused Melanchthon of departing from Luther's teachings.¹¹ Because he was an eyewitness of the event, one would assume that Ratzeberger's account has credibility, yet its credibility has been questioned. Theodor Kolde, the extraordinary church historian of the 19th century, finds Ratzeberger's account of Luther's life "disappointing" due to its "meager and anecdotic character" and considers it "valueless as history."¹² Ratzeberger's account received broad scholarly circulation in 1836 as an editor's note in the "Annals of Philip Melanchthon's Life 1540" in the *Corpus Reformatorum*.¹³ Via the *Corpus Reformatorum* Archdeacon Hare brought Ratzeberger's account of Luther's prayer for Melanchthon into English in his attempt to defend Luther from the attacks of the Tractarians and other Anglicans.¹⁴ In light of the anecdotal nature of Ratzeberger's "handwritten history" and the heavy indebtedness of most other sources from the 19th and 20th centuries to him, it would be unwise to grant his account uncritical acceptance.

Luther's personal account of Melanchthon's illness and recovery omits the majority of the detail provided by Ratzeberger's handwritten history. Luther's account focuses less on his personal faith or actions and more on the Lord's mercy.¹⁵ In Luther's letter to his wife he described the event, "Master Philip truly had been dead, and really, like Lazarus, has risen from death. God, the dear father, listens to our prayers."¹⁶ Table Talk records that the cause of Melanchthon's illness was the effect his grief over Philip of Hesse's bigamy¹⁷ had on his "soft disposition."¹⁸

¹⁰ Johann Jakob Herzog, Philip Schaff, and Samuel Macauley Jackson, eds., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1911), 9:404. Kolde, writing for Schaff, notes that Ratzeberger, "after the Reformer's death was one of the guardians of his children."

¹¹ "In 1550 he removed to Erfurt, where he watched with increasing dissatisfaction the growth of Philippism." Herzog, *The New Schaff-Herzog*, 404.

¹² Herzog, *The New Schaff-Herzog*, 404.

¹³ Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, ed., *Philippi Melanthonis Opera*, vol. III (Halle, Saxony: C.A. Schwetschke Et Filium, 1836), CR 3, XVII. Bretschneider lists his source for the account as Ratzeberger's *Die Handschriftliche Geschichte. Corpus Reformatorum III* appeared in 1836. The publication of Ratzeberger's *Die Handschriftliche Geschichte* was in 1850 (hereafter CR).

¹⁴ Julius Charles Hare, *Vindication Of Luther Against His Recent English Assailants*, 2nd ed. (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), 265-266.

¹⁵ Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," 174.

¹⁶ AE 50: 208.

¹⁷ "Melanchthon was almost beside himself with mortification, and a serious illness into which he fell on his way to Hagenau, in the summer of 1540, was attributed by him

Melanchthon was greatly troubled over Philip of Hesse's bigamy. Melanchthon not only formulated the pastoral recommendation that a secret marriage could be permitted for the sake of Philip's salvation,¹⁹ but, also along with Bucer, was a witness to the public (not private) marriage between Philip and Margaret von der Sale on 4 March 1540.²⁰ Melanchthon feared the negative effects on the Reformation that both his and Luther's involvement in the matter might entail. Luther apparently believed he had acted with the best of intentions in providing a pastoral rather than a legal answer and was not terribly troubled by the matter²¹ or what people thought about it, especially since he felt deceived by Philip of Hesse. Luther noted in his letter to John Frederick that he gave his counsel under the seal of confession and that he was not ashamed of his counsel even if the entire world should come to know it.²² While Melanchthon fretted over it, Luther committed the matter into the Lord's hands confident the Lord would work good from it.²³

When Melanchthon became ill, Luther was lecturing on Genesis in Wittenberg, and stated,

But if help is delayed, one should not for this reason stop praying. Nevertheless, a time or something similar can be suggested, with a condition: "Lord God, if at this time or at this place it could be done as I would want it, I pray Thee not to fail me now," just as we are now praying for Philip, who is away from us and lies seriously ill at Weimar, that God would restore to him his strength and health and

and his friends over his part in the unsavory affair." Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (New York: The Century Company, 1912), 365.

¹⁸ WA TR 4, 655. No. 5096; AE 54: 387. *Ego novi ingenii teneritatem.*

¹⁹ WA Br 8:636 – 644. See "To John Frederick of Saxony, 10 June 1540," in Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore Tappert (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishers, 1960), 288–291.

²⁰ Brecht, *The Preservation of the Church*, 207.

²¹ Table Talk records Luther saying, "I have developed a thick skin. I'm a peasant and a tough Saxon when it comes to such filthy things." WA TR 4, 655. No. 5096; AE 54: 387.

²² See Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, where he states, "All of this took place and was negotiated under the seal of confession" (290) and "I am not ashamed of the counsel I gave even if it should become known throughout the world" (291).

²³ WA TR 4, 655. No. 5096; AE 54: 390. "'I don't want to do the devil and all the papists the favor of worrying about it,' he said. 'God will make it turn out well. To his keeping I commit the whole business.'"

preserve him longer for the church and the university.²⁴

On July 7, 1540, Justus Jonas provided John Bugenhagen with his account of Melanchthon's illness and recovery. Jonas notes that Melanchthon was on the path of death but the prayers of the church were answered and he was restored to life.²⁵ Melanchthon, in a letter to Bugenhagen on July 8, 1540, wrote that God had restored him from death to life.²⁶

What is known without doubt is that Melanchthon fell ill and was near death. Luther came to him and prayed. Melanchthon recovered. As for the exact words Luther prayed, the only source is the handwritten history of Ratzeberger. His account of Luther's life is generally considered to be unreliable. The familiarity and popularization of Luther's example of prayer over Melanchthon seems to correspond with 19th century publications related to Luther and the Reformation. Although Ratzeberger's handwritten notes were compiled during his life in the middle of the 16th century, general familiarity with them did not occur until their publication in the middle of the 19th century. Ratzeberger's account may or may not reflect Luther's actual words. Even if Ratzeberger's account portrays Luther's words accurately for the most part, the lens through which they are interpreted must be examined. Considering that most of the comment on Luther's prayer for Melanchthon has not occurred prior to the 19th and 20th centuries, a reasonable conclusion is that what Luther prayed was unknown, was considered unremarkable, or perhaps did not occur in the way it was presented by Ratzeberger. If Ratzeberger's account is taken at face value, his account can be interpreted in harmony with Luther's theology or in a way that is alien to his theology. In any case, a *hapax legomenon* by Luther should not be allowed to create novel interpretations that stand in conflict with his overall theology.

II. Interpretation of Luther's Prayer for Melanchthon

Timothy Wengert states that Luther's "chutzpah toward God" in the prayer recorded by Ratzeberger should not be seen as a "sign of hubris" but rather "of faith."²⁷ Yet some have taken the prayer recorded by Ratzeberger as a sign of Luther's hubris. William Hamilton, responding to Julius Hare's *Vindication of Luther*, understands "the most famous example

²⁴ AE 4: 266; WA 43, 326: 21–26. The *Weimar Ausgabe* references Melanchthon's letter to Luther dated June 16, 1540 in Julius Köstlin and Gustav Kawerau, *Martin Luther: sein Leben und seine Schriften*, Vol. 2 (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs), 1875.

²⁵ CR III, 1060. *hic e media morte . . . oratione Ecclesiae et piorum revocatus est ad vitam.*

²⁶ CR III, 1061. *me divinitus ex ipsa morte in vitam revocatum esse.*

²⁷ Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," 174.

of Luther praying²⁸ as part of a claim that Luther raised Melanchthon from the dead.²⁹ These “appalling” expressions were also seen as confirmation that Luther believed nothing could be denied him in prayer.³⁰ The Anglicans were not alone in struggling to interpret Luther’s “most famous prayer.” This prayer lent itself to doctrinal discussions about the nature of prayer.

Francis Pieper states in *Christian Dogmatics* that Luther’s prayer over Melanchthon falls into the realm of “*fides heroica* and is not subject to the general rule.”³¹ According to Pieper, Luther’s prayer does not fit the general rule because he asked “unconditionally for temporal blessings,” which in this case was the “prolongation of Melanchthon’s life.” Pieper then quotes a portion of Luther’s famous prayer, “There our Lord God had to give in to me; for I threw down the sack before His door and rubbed into His ears all His promises that He would hear prayer which I could enumerate from Scripture, saying that He would have to hear me if I were to trust His promises.” Pieper gives Köstlin’s *Luther’s Life* as his source for the story. Since “unconditional prayer” does not fall into the general category of praying that the Lord’s will be done, Pieper proposes the argument that, “It is the business of the Holy Spirit to direct the prayer of the individual Christian in special, exceptional circumstances.”³²

Pieper seems to entertain the possibility of a heroic prayer because the Holy Spirit guides the person to pray in such a way. Ironically, Pieper’s example of “heroic prayer” comes from Quenstedt, who mentions heroic examples of prayer that should not be rashly imitated. Quenstedt’s example is of Elisha cursing the children of Bethel in the name of the Lord for calling him a baldhead (2 Kings 2:23–24). From Pieper, the story passes into J.T. Mueller’s *Christian Dogmatics*.³³ Mueller states, “The heroic prayer

²⁸ Wengert, “Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism,” 173.

²⁹ William Hamilton, *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform: Chiefly from the Edinburgh* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1866), 513. “Melanchthon had fallen ill at Weimar from contrition and fear for the part he had been led to take in the Landgrave’s polygamy; his life was even in danger. Luther came; and Melanchthon is one of the three persons whom the Reformer afterwards boasts of having raised miraculously from the dead.”

³⁰ Hamilton, *Discussions*, 514. “For Luther believed that nothing could be refused to his earnest supplication and accordingly he declares, that it required only that he should sincerely ask for the destruction of the world, to precipitate the advent of the last day.”

³¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 83.

³² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3: 83.

³³ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 433.

should not be attempted unless the believer is fully assured that he has heroic faith (cp. Luther's supplication for the restoration of Melanchthon's health)."³⁴ Mueller shifts the focus away from the prayer itself to the faith of the person praying. What Christian would claim to have a "heroic faith?" Surely not Luther, after whom supposedly the prayer is patterned. Unfortunately, the dramatic and vivid description of Luther's prayer for Melanchthon continues to be held up as an example of bold prayer.³⁵ While those who cling to Luther's prayer for Melanchthon as a bold prayer are on shaky ground, they are not entirely to blame due to the paucity of scholarly research on prayer among 16th century Lutherans.³⁶

A better and more personal example, but a sadder story, of Luther's prayer life can be found in the accounts of the death of his daughter, Magdalene, on September 20, 1542. As his daughter's illness progressed, Luther said, "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee."³⁷ For his own dear daughter he prays that the Lord's will be done, not an unconditional prayer of "heroic faith." Luther asked his daughter if she is glad to go to her Father in heaven. Magdalene replied, "Yes, dear Father, as God wills."³⁸ Now, the rationalist might argue that when Luther commended his daughter to the Lord's will, her illness had progressed so far that it was obvious she was going to die. However, the same rationalist should note that Melanchthon was on the threshold of death, at least according to various accounts. Had he not been, Hamilton would not have been able to accuse Luther of miraculously raising Melanchthon from the dead.³⁹ Magdalene died in Luther's arms.⁴⁰ Luther is reported to have said, "I'd

³⁴ Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, 433.

³⁵ Reed Lessing, *Jonah* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 338. "Luther put this theology of prayer into practice in his own life. At one point when Philip Melanchthon was gravely ill, Luther prayed that God would restore Melanchthon to health and prolong his life." Lessing then quotes the story from Pieper and concludes with this comment, "God answered Luther's prayer by sparing Melanchthon's life." This discussion is based upon his earlier work in Reed Lessing, "Pastor, does God really respond to my prayers?" *Concordia Journal* 32 (2006): 256-273, 271-272.

³⁶ Mary Jane Haemig, "Jehoshaphat and His Prayer Among Sixteenth-Century Lutherans," *Church History* 73, no. 3 (2004): 522-535, 525. "The scholarship on prayer among sixteenth-century Lutherans is relatively sparse."

³⁷ Table Talk, No. 5494; AE 54: 430.

³⁸ Table Talk, No. 5494; AE 54: 430.

³⁹ Hamilton, *Discussions*, 513.

⁴⁰ Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546*, 3: 237. Table Talk, No. 5496. AE 54: 431. "When his daughter was in the agony of death, he [Martin Luther] fell on his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed that God might will to save her. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the

like to keep my dear daughter because I love her very much, if only our Lord God would let me. However, his will be done! Truly nothing better can happen to her, nothing better."⁴¹ Luther thought that the Christian should boldly dare and defy death.⁴² In the case of his daughter, Luther defied death and "rubbed the promises" of God in "His ears with His Word" when he said at the coffin, "Close it! She will rise again on the last day" and, at the burial, "There is a resurrection of the body."⁴³ For Luther a heroic prayer in the face of death is the clinging to the promises of God that as Jesus was raised from the dead, so too, shall we.

III. Luther on Prayer

Luther's understanding of prayer can only be treated briefly here. Luther was very concerned with correct teaching about prayer. This prompted him to produce many works on prayer. In the Little Prayer Book (*Betbuchlein*) of 1522 Luther calls for a thorough Reformation of the personal prayer book, which he considers among the many books that are harmful and misleading because they give rise to false beliefs about prayer.⁴⁴ For Luther the Reformation was about how the church prays and teaching the church to pray.⁴⁵ One of the last things that Luther would desire is for an account of his prayer life to introduce false or misleading beliefs to other Christians.

Luther's teaching and writing on prayer centered in and was a reflection of the catechism: the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed.⁴⁶ To say that Luther rooted prayer in the catechism does not

same room, but farther from the bed on account of her grief. It was after the ninth hour on the Wednesday after the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity in the year 1542."

⁴¹ Table Talk, No. 5497. AE 54: 432.

⁴² Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 130. "In view of this we human beings should boldly dare and defy death. In all of Luther's writings on death no other words recur so often as the words 'to venture joyously' (*fröhlich wagen*)."

⁴³ Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546*, 3: 238.

⁴⁴ AE 43: 11-12. "Among the many harmful books and doctrines which are misleading and deceiving Christians and give rise to countless false beliefs, I regard the personal prayer books as by no means the least objectionable. . . . These books need a basic and thorough reformation if not total extermination."

⁴⁵ William R. Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," *Word & World* 22, no. 1 (2002): 54. "For Martin Luther, the reformation was about how the church prays. And in this connection, the primary goal of catechesis was to teach believers to pray. Luther sought to instruct parishioners regarding the one to whom they were to pray, to know what to pray, and to know how to pray."

⁴⁶ Haemig, "Jehoshaphat and His Prayer Among Sixteenth-Century Lutherans," 523. "Luther centered his discussion of prayer on the Lord's Prayer. This is evident in

mean Luther is unwilling to pray using examples from the Bible. In "On War Against the Turk" (1529), he wrote:

In exhorting to prayer we must also introduce words and examples from the Scriptures which show how strong and mighty a man's prayer has sometimes been; for example, Elijah's prayer, which St. James praises [Jas. 5:17]; the prayers of Elisha and other prophets; of kings David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jesias, Hezekiah, etc.; the story of how God promised Abraham that he would spare the land of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of five righteous men. For the prayer of a righteous man can do much if it be persistent, St. James says in his Epistle [Jas. 5:16].⁴⁷

Luther thought that prayer based on the examples found in the Scriptures provided an opportunity to proclaim the Word of God. Such prayer nearly always is steeped in affliction, trial, and suffering. The examples from the Scriptures are full of the Lord's people facing affliction. Their prayers served for Luther as examples and models of how we should pray when facing similar afflictions. Prayer is a plea for aid in the face of helplessness.⁴⁸ Faith clings to the promises of the Lord in the face of contrary evidence. For example, faith clings to the promise that the Lord will hear our prayer as a father hears the request of his child, that he will provide us with our daily bread, that he will deliver us from evil, etc.

his explanations of the Lord's Prayer not only in the Small Catechism (1529) and the Large Catechism (1529), but also in earlier works such as his 1519 sermons published as 'An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen.' In 1522 his *Betbuchlein* or 'Personal Prayer Book' appeared. Republished many times in the sixteenth century, it was not a collection of prayers but rather a reflection on the ten commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer because "everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and adequately comprehended in these three items.' In other works—pamphlets, sermons, and biblical commentaries—Luther taught and modeled what evangelical prayer was."

⁴⁷ AE 46: 173–174.

⁴⁸ David P. Scaer, "Luther on Prayer," *CTQ* 47:4 (1983): 305–315. "One of the effects of the *Anfechtungen* in the life of the Christian is the personal awareness of his total helplessness in the face of the affliction. Through this sense of helplessness, the Christian is taught to pray correctly. *Anfechtungen* add both depth and dimension to prayer. Prayer indicates that the Christian has not given up hope and his willingness to seek help from God. The praying Christian means that Satan has not yet conquered. If the afflicted refrains from relying on his own power as Satan tempted him to do, he is brought by the affliction face to face with God. In his helplessness the afflicted can go no place but to God for aid and assistance. Prayer is the plea for aid" (305).

IV. Conclusion

The evidence for what Luther prayed over Melancthon derives from a single source that is not regarded as a reliable account of Luther's life. Both the evidence for the prayer and the time in which it became popularized should prompt us to regard accounts of it critically and not use it as the basis of doctrinal points that are unsubstantiated in other writings of Luther. Ratzeberger's account of Luther's prayer presented as a "heroic prayer" fits into the *zeitgeist* of the 19th century which saw Luther as a "heroic" figure.⁴⁹ The idea of a heroic prayer also corresponds to the natural tendency toward enthusiasm that lives within each of us and satisfies our inclination towards saint worship.⁵⁰ As knowledge of teaching and doctrine decreases, hero worship increases.⁵¹ The idea of "heroic prayer" in the 19th century also appears to be influenced by Søren Kierkegaard's leap of faith and account of Abraham's faith in God.⁵² That Pieper could be influenced by the 19th century's Luther as hero movement and Kierkegaard is plausible. Even if the account of Ratzeberger is accepted without critical reflection, its interpretation should not contradict Luther's life's work of teaching to "reform how the church prays."⁵³ Once instance of a prayer of Luther outside his ordinary character should not become a norm for theological discourse.

Ratzeberger's account can be interpreted in a way that is both consistent and inconsistent with Luther's teaching on prayer. For instance, Luther's statement of rubbing into God's ears the promises found in his Word is very consistent with Luther's teaching on prayer. What the Ratzeberger account omits, but seems to be supplied by others, is *what*

⁴⁹ Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, tr. Theodore Tappert, (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 31-35. Sasse discusses this in his chapter, "The Heroic Interpretation of the Reformation."

⁵⁰ Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 31. "It is in this way that the traditional, popular picture of the Reformation, as the life and work of the Reformer, came into being. All the demand for hero-worship, all the unexpressed longing for saint worship, finds its satisfaction in this interpretation of the Reformation."

⁵¹ Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 35. "The more Luther's teachings fade from the consciousness of the church, so much the more foolishly the cult of his person is promoted."

⁵² Robert D. Preus, "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," *CTQ* 45:3 (1981): 163-184. "Søren Kierkegaard made faith a condition for justification, not by teaching such an aberration—he was too good a theologian for that—but by an emphasis, by stressing always the *fides heroica*, the *fides activa* in the Christian life, in answer to the question 'How can I become a Christian?' rather than stressing the *fides passiva* which does nothing, but is pure receptivity" (176-177).

⁵³ Russell, "Luther, Prayer, and the Reformation," 50.

promises Luther rubbed into God's ears. Nowhere in Scripture did the Lord promise to heal from every illness or to deliver from death. Luther would not have been rubbing into the Lord's ears healing for Melanchthon, as that had not been promised in the Scriptures. No doubt, Luther prayed for Melanchthon's healing but not unconditionally. It is far more likely that Luther prayed for the Lord's will to be done as he did while holding his dying daughter, Magdalene, in his arms. Remaining consistent with Luther's teaching on prayer, the promises rubbed into God's ears during Melanchthon's illness would be the promises of the forgiveness of sins and of the resurrection of the dead. When one considers that Melanchthon felt guilty for his participation in the matter of Philip of Hesse's bigamy, it makes all the sense in the world that Luther would be comforting Melanchthon with the promises of the Gospel and rubbing those into the Lord's ears. Rather than being drawn to the fantastic and vivid account of Luther's prayer over Melanchthon, we ought to direct our attention toward the catechism as a way to pray.

