

**The Pictorial Rhetoric of the Reformation:  
Cranach's Woodcut Illustrations for the Lord's Prayer in the  
1529 Wittenberg Edition of Luther's Large Catechism**

This series of woodcuts seems to have something of a complex history prior to their being incorporated into the 1529 first edition of the Large Catechism, published by George Rhau in Wittenberg.

In these eight scenes we observe Cranach's deep reception of Luther's preaching and teaching that in 1529 was finally distilled in the Catechisms. The images and their arrangement 'join the dots' between Luther's teaching of the Christian life in the Large Catechism and the biblical narrative. It is therefore hard not to think that Cranach was himself well-acquainted with the available editions of the German Bible, given the rich imaginative texture of the biblical narratives he depicts. Both the Small and Large Catechisms are highly distilled and concentrated summaries of Luther's sermons, which Cranach would have heard. Luther's long-term friendship with Cranach and influence on him can only have deepened those insights further.

We see here in these panels, therefore, highly practical, but nevertheless, deeply theological reflection on Christian life and teaching. We only have to see Cranach's selection of visual narratives, and the details which are there to be read, to be led back into meditation on scripture, with its many-layered stories.

I would suggest that we can observe here very clearly the imprint of Luther's narrative theological mindset on the artist, in which, as in his preaching and writing, Luther 'collapses' or 'fuses' the hearer's immediate life experience into the biblical narrative. Cranach's images bring scripture forward as the stuff of 1529 contemporary Christian life in Saxony. In these woodcut images illustrating the Lord's Prayer we see the narrative of sixteenth century life fused with the characters and events of the Bible, through Cranach's depiction of biblical characters as sixteenth century people, reflecting the dress and social and economic order of the Renaissance world.<sup>1</sup>

The text of the catechism together with the images invite the learner to imitate and participate in the scenes depicted, as they pray, seeing in their heart's eye the coming of God's kingdom into their own lives and relationships.

There is then actually a *three*-way narrative fusion here: of catechetical teaching, scripture and Christian living. This reflects Luther's key aim for the catechism, which was to ground the biblical teaching of the Gospel in everyday life, at all levels of society and education, providing teaching resources for the pastor, congregation and Christian household. Here, as Cranach draws these narratives, the viewer finds herself sitting in church, listening to the preacher (in the bottom row, panel second from the left), or enjoying bread and fish (top row, second panel from the left). Here we see our own lives, drawn out of - or if you prefer - placed into the pages of scripture. In a deep sense, to meditate on these images dealing with the Lord's Prayer in the catechism is to begin to pray that prayer, in a spirit of receptive imagination.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The prime example is Cranach's depiction of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:21-35) on the bottom left hand panel, in which the characters are standing outside a banking house, dressed as 16<sup>th</sup> century merchants.

<sup>2</sup> This pictorial narrative technique is used in modern literature too. In the opening Chapter of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C S. Lewis (London: Harper Collins, 1955), the children are looking at a painting of a ship sailing on a high sea. As they meditate on it they fall into the painting and become part of its action and story.

## Theological Dynamics

Within the structure of the Catechisms, Luther sees the Lord's Prayer as the logical counterpart both of the Creed, which is dealt with immediately prior to the Lord's Prayer, and also the 10 Commandments. The Lord's Prayer gives an alternative aspect or view of the same reality; God's work of creation and redemption in the world, and in our very lives. Everything crosses over and interconnects. History, time, the biblical narrative, our own experience and God's redemptive action all intersect.

This comes out, for example, in Luther's lengthy preface to his explanations of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer:

*Before we explain the Lord's Prayer part by part, the most necessary thing is to exhort and encourage people to pray, as Christ and the apostles also did. The first thing to know is this: it is our duty to pray because of God's command. For we heard in the second commandment 'You are not to take God's name in vain'. Thereby we are required to praise the Holy Name, and to pray and call upon it in every need.<sup>3</sup>*

This integration is observable in a particularly sophisticated way in these 8 woodcut images. We see the reality that God answers our prayers through each another, as we fulfil our daily vocations and responsibilities, whether that be preaching and hearing the Word, providing food, or forgiving our neighbour. These activities are depicted here in terms of ordinary people engaged in the work of God, as he answers prayer.

Within the structure of the Christian life, God's ongoing prior action (katabasis) in his creation of the world and his redemption of this creation through his Son, is the initiating force that calls out the response of the believer's faith (anabasis), in a regenerate life of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, worship, love and obedience.

Cranach's images depicting the 8 parts of the Lord's Prayer (comprising the opening address to God the Father and the 7 petitions), incorporates both this divine initiative of grace and the human reception of it, and also the human response to it, and cooperation with it. This once again reflects Luther's comprehensively integrated catechetical scheme.

What then would we say these 8 images depict? One way to answer this question is to say that they show the petitions of the Lord's Prayer being answered. When God the Father answers our prayers, this is what it looks like. It involves creatures, most especially it involves human beings, as, in some situations, the agents of God's provision and in all cases, as recipients of it.

And yet Cranach is doing more than inviting the viewer to reflect at this basic level. He is calling us to a deeper meditation. See, for instance, the top right-hand corner panel, depicting Christ carrying his cross, which interprets the petition 'Your will be done here on earth as in heaven'. To any reader of New Testament passion histories, the deeper connections Cranach is provoking are obvious. 'Your will be done' is Christ's final prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:39; Luke 22:42), in which he finally throws himself onto his Father's will. That will is precisely what Cranach has drawn here: Christ's brutal torture and death, in which he must carry his cross to Golgotha. This, the artist is telling us, was God's plan, that his son suffer for all people. But, Cranach asks us, what might this picture teach us about what it means for *us* to pray

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<sup>3</sup> *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert) 441.

with Jesus 'Your will be done'? God's will is not only that Christ's suffering and death redeem and save us, but that we too bear Christ's cross as we suffer in faith and hope.

As Luther says in his explanation to this third petition, when we hallow God's name by hearing and believing his Word (as in the first petition), and the kingdom comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit (second petition), the next thing that follows is the cross and suffering, since the enemies of God's kingdom are always ready to attack the believer and her faith in Christ.<sup>4</sup> He says:

*Therefore we who would be Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies, and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's word is preached, accepted and believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind.*<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, we see in Cranach's woodcut images here the experiential flow and progression of Christian life and prayer. Looking more closely at the theological links between the panels depicting the preacher of the word (bottom row, second from the left) and the panel depicting the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost (bottom row, third from the left) also enlightens the petitions with which they are coupled: 'Hallowed be your name' and 'Your kingdom come'. We hallow God's name and use it rightly when we speak and hear his word. How does the kingdom of heaven come to us? Luther, in his explanation, answers: *To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to deliver this to us [the Gospel of Christ who comes to rule as our gracious king] through his Holy Word, and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power.*

Here in these two adjacent panels Cranach depicts the Holy Spirit's work, which is to deliver the inspired word which works faith in the hearer's heart. Each Christian who hears and believes the preached Word of God receives the kingdom of God in its fullness, just as the 12 apostles did when they received the Spirit at Pentecost, which enabled them to proclaim the Word of God to all nations.

The sophisticated nature of Cranach's visual narratives in these eight images is shown, I suggest, most richly in the panel showing Jesus the good shepherd (top row, third from the left). There are immediate textual links with biblical narratives, and layers of implied teaching flowing out from them. Cranach brings together two biblical texts which interpret one another: John 10:7-18 (Jesus the Good shepherd who protects and lays down his life for the sheep) and 1 Peter 5:8 (the warning that the devil prowls like a hungry lion seeking someone to devour). In Cranach's illustration here, Jesus is engaged in disputation with the devil, defending his sheep from the gaping jaws of the lion<sup>6</sup>, who roars menacingly at the devil's feet, ready to pounce. When the Christian prays 'Lead us not into temptation' he prays that Christ will protect him from the attacks and lies of the evil one, just as he promises in his word. A third biblical passage is even implied here as well; the temptation of Christ in the wilderness in Matt 5, hinted at by the way Jesus is obviously engaged in disputation

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<sup>4</sup> This of course is the very same pattern of spiritual formation Luther outlines in his preface to his 1539 German Works, namely *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*. LW 34:285-86 (WA 50:659).

<sup>5</sup> *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert) 448-449.

<sup>6</sup> This creature is hard to recognise as a lion because Cranach had never seen one, and was going by the sketchy descriptions he had heard of what the animal was like.

with the devil, and by the wilderness landscape Cranach has drawn in the background.

This kind of composite commentary on biblical texts draws the viewer into a deeper hearing of those very texts, and a deeper imagining of their fulfilment in her everyday life, 'joining the dots' between the biblical narrative and the Christian's life-narrative.

One final observation about the theological dynamic of these eight images: as they reflect and illustrate Luther's theology of the Christian life, they also reflect its Trinitarian shape. This is perhaps the reason that Cranach and Luther have included here a picture to accompany not only the seven petitions but also the opening address to God, the Father, in the top left corner panel. God the Father is depicted as creator and benefactor of the cosmos, the earth and all its creatures, circled by a rainbow, symbolic of his redemptive promise (Genesis 9:13). We see Christ, the Son in no less than five of the other panels, and the Spirit, powerfully and explicitly shown in the panel depicting the day of Pentecost, though his work is implicit in almost all the other scenes shown as well. Here again, Cranach's pictures show us the deep integration of Luther's theology in the Catechism; in the explanations and illustrations of this one section of the Catechism, on the Lord's Prayer, the viewer learns over again the creed and its three articles. When we pray as Christ teaches us to, we live into and out of the creative and redemptive gifts of the Triune God.

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