

## From Liturgical Action to Devotional Act

Árpád Kovács, PhD

College Senior Lecturer

Hungarian Adventist Theological College, Pécel, Hungary

E-mail: arpikovacs@gmail.com

---

**ABSTRACT:** The Reformation, with his key role in many areas of the human life, had the greatest influence on spirituality. It changed the old fashioned, limited and priest centered medieval religiosity into a free, personal and joyful piety. It uncovered the forgotten, Christ initiates spirituality and prayer mode. This paper presents three major „novatio”s in terms of piety, more exactly in the relationship between God and men: 1. The Reformation abolished every mechanical practice, every „opus operatum” in prayer. 2. The second innovation consists of Luther’s advice to pray freely and personally. He led the people to a conscious supplication and meditation. 3. The third and the most important innovation is the ceasing of the priest’s mediating role. The believer can pray and confess directly to God without the help of any human confessor or priest.

**KEY WORDS:** Reformation, prayer, spirituality, mediation, clergy, free prayer, Bible-prayer, mechanical, indulgence, liturgical

---

*The Reformation is not a memory of the 16th century.*

*The Reformation is a cultural and historical heritage.*

*The Reformation is a thrilling dialog.*

*The Reformation is the push of innovation. (500 Reformacio 2017)*

During our twenty-first-century time of tech and Twitter, does Martin Luther still have anything relevant to say? (Lutheranreformation.org 2017) Does an event that occurred 500 years ago have any message or relevance? Does the influence it had more than half a millennium seem to be fading or getting old?

The huge influence the Reformation had on medieval history is a fact. According to a perspective of history, the Reformation was the beginning of the modern period. In the light of the changes brought by it, the term „Dark” Middle Ages doesn't really seem to be upsetting, especially looking at people's way of thinking and comprehending. To prove this, one only needs to look at the repulsion people had when embracing the Reformation, not only in the religious matters but the civil leadership as well, although its principles were bringing many advantages besides religion, as well as in economics, law, culture. The change was of such proportion, almost as it was in the days of ancient times with the work and teachings of Jesus.

The practice of spirituality after the Reformation has undergone a significant change. There were changes that brought a new perspective on how people could approach God, that's why the topic of this research is to present those medieval catholic prayer types, which were transmitted, changed or ceased into Protestantism. We will analyze the particularities of contemporary catholic prayer, as well as the particularities of approaching God, then we will present the innovations, actually the return to the biblical, Christ-like praying type that the Reformation brought.

If we want to be accurate: we will present the prayer types that the Reformation started spreading, and those that the generation succeeding Luther has developed or should have developed. These modifications have changed not only the personal or collective prayer type and character but have gone so far as to cease the interceding role of the clergy. The line between the priest and the lay member disappeared, in such a way that everyone could approach God personally without requiring the interceding of a priest. Anyone could receive pardon of sins without disbosom to a confessor (confessor priest).

In the medieval church, the following noticeable practice has developed, according to which the Christians could pray, but their prayers were not valid before God. The development of this practice is noted by Várnagy as it follows: in the first three centuries, the personal prayer was customary. While centuries pass by, this undergoes a great transformation, because later on, they would go to the basilica to pray three times a day: apart from this, they would have the morning and evening prayer, the laudes and the vigil. Back then the prayer was still in the spoken language and many were partaking in the prayer. With time the people would be left behind because the psalms were switched to antiphonal psalming (Várnagy 1999, 481). By the 13th century, the prayer had “developed” to the point where the supplication of the people was validated only by the priest. „What others prayed about or did during the mass, was worthless in terms of validation, only the priest could present it, „rite et valide” (Kunzler 2005, 248). The age of the Reformation was so clergy-centered, that the congregation was not partaking at all. Since the 13th century a certain private mass has developed, which had the purpose of blessing the congregation, but interesting enough, it could have been done in the absence of the congregation as well. „Despite every detail that was carefully prescribed the mass had to be the work of the priest, which was done in the form of the private

mass with only one aid" (Kunzler 2005, 255). Those partaking were the choir and the deacons. The people would partake only in the singing (Kunzler 2005, 254). These masses were done even when the congregation, for whom the service was actually conducted, was absent. Its role was to bring „peace and freedom from the powerful demon world" (Kunzler 2005, 247-248).

The prayer meeting of the medieval liturgy was shaped in two directions: the "cathedral" and the "monastic" type. In these two types, the Christian prayer evolved during the ages. In the "cathedral" type the congregation would gather around the bishop and the presbytery. This was a "prayer meeting consisting of psalms, hymns and ritualistic acts" (Kunzler 2005, 427). The following elements were peculiar: "for the morning holy mass the psalms and canticle, Gloria in excelsis, supplication, blessing, forgiveness, and in the evening they would have light ritual and hymns, vespers, adulation, and perhaps more hymns and antiphonals, supplication, blessing and forgiveness" (Kunzler 2005, 427). The "monastic type" was focusing on the idea of continual prayer, in which the „*currentepsalterio*" psalming was central.

In the previously presented prayer types we can observe two particularities: temple centered and ritualistic. Obviously, it is not a bad thing to pray in a temple, since there is a need for the congregational prayer as well. But if the prayer only becomes valid there, that means that the possibility for the Christian to meet God disappears. Jesus taught the people in His time to talk personally with God: "*But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*" (Mat. 6:6). This is the real way for prayer: a personal talk with God, just like with a friend: "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend", (White 2000, 93) says E. White. The same thing was advised by Luther, who actually has revived the Reformation of Jesus, once

again. In his letter to John Frederick, the elector of Saxony, Luther was advising the following: „...your Highness should not leave the prayer to the monks and priests, as is customary and unfortunate nowadays to trust and build upon other’s prayers and neglect the personal prayer. (Yancey 2006, 61) But your Highness should be free, decided and brave and should not consider the uncertainty, but in his heart or in the inner room should talk to God. You should really use the key, and disturb Him with boldness with his own issues” (Csepregi 2011, 261). Luther’s advice proves the fact that until the Reformation the spirituality of men has decayed to the degree to which personal devotion was almost neglected, and was transferred to the priests and monks.

The second particularity of the Reformation’s time petition was the ritualized prayer mode. That means that the imprecants would not use their own words for the prayers, rather they had to read, recite prayers from a booklet, and this was only possible right before the Reformation, when they could use personal invocations. Also, the prayers spoken by the clergy on people’s behalf were following the prescribed formulae, not their own words, for this purpose they would use the hymnal and the breviary<sup>4</sup>. This type of prayer became so common, that even after the starting of the Reformation people would stick to the ritualistic prayer. According to Kunzler these church practices and teachings caused the displeasure of the Reformation. “The faithful people of the Reformation were driven by the dislikes of the mass, the mass sacrifice, as well as the priesthood and the catholic perception of it” (Kunzler 2005, 249). Despite this, in 1535, two decades after the Reformation, with the support of pope Clement the 7th, the Spanish Franciscan archbishop, Francisco de Quinones has issued a breviary which was advised to be used due to the following three arguments: “why is it mandatory for the priest to say a breviary prayer: he has to pray for and instead of the busy, working people; he has to set an example; and has to learn

every day by reading from the breviary. The breviary has become the church's official prayer in the fullest sense" (Kunzler 2005, 433).

Várnagy notes in his catholic liturgy that "in the first centuries the prayers were uttered freely", (Várnagy 1999, 484) only after the 4th century the written types appeared, but then it was not yet mandatory, as later on, to read them literally, rather they were used in a manner where the imprecant would prepare according to the written text and when he would pray he'd speak freely. In time, as we have mentioned before, it became customary to use the prescribed supplication, until the people were totally excluded from it, because the priest would pray instead of them. Another well-known prayer type, the rosary (the holy reading) is another way of putting the free petition to rest (Kunzler 2005, 468). We could say that the practice of piety has become more professional, even though nothing else happened except the distancing of man from God. It is true that there are other ways of connecting with God, still the prayer is the most fundamental and important tool in this matter, through which one can converse with his Creator.

In the first centuries, Christians would pray at home and in the church. "*And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.*" (Acts 2:46) Tertullian (after 220) suggested the third, sixth and ninth hour for personal prayer time. Hippolytus (170-235) presents a whole schedule of worship: personal prayer when waking up, the third, sixth and ninth hour prayer, before going to bed, at midnight and when the rooster sings. Beside these, the Christians in the first centuries would partake in the morning and evening prayers at the temple (Kunzler 2005, 426). It seems that the passing of time, just as in the case of Israel, has brought decay rather than evolution. The direct connection with God from the first centuries was replaced with a substitute, a human mediator. Even though Paul the apostle puts it so clearly: "*For there is one God,*

*and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;*" (1 Tim. 2:5). This astronomical separation from the prescription of the word, the denial of the Bible from the people, the misuse and opulence of the priests were the Reformation's main motives.

Michael Kunzler, a catholic university professor, notes that Luther boldly spoke against this kind of prescribed hymn-like worship, which he has called a "piffle". He spoke against the canonic prayer hours as well. In his opinion, the whole system is a doubtful legalism.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the Reformation, the hymn-like prayer became divine service, bible study, which served the purpose of reading the Bible and singing psalms. The reading of the Bible was advised not only for church use but after the spreading of the translated Bible, it should be used at home as well. That's how, on Luther's advice the catholic prayer hours have turned to divine services in the church including sermons and songs (Kunzler 2005, 459).

The liturgical aspect of the confession of sins is worthy to be remembered. The biblical form of that is the confessing of sins to the only mediator, Jesus Christ, personally, in a secret prayer, with no bonds, using one's own words, without any prescribed formulae. This was to be always followed by the sincere repentance of sin and the intent of positive change. In the first century, the Christians have practiced this type according to the apostle's pattern. As time passed by regression came in this field. People would confess their sins to a priest not to God within the confession or holy confession, a practice that was sanctified by the 4th Lateran synod in 1215 (Hungarian Catholic Encyclopedia). The fact that the liturgy was solely the priest's activity also brought the idea that the people would come to a priest and not to God with their personal, individual requests in prayer, so that he would ask that from God on behalf of the people. This is how the "private" mass idea was developed, which has its roots in the Celtic spirituality (Várnagy 1999, 494). In what manner happened the "resolution" of sins in the medieval church?

A 1439 papal bull called “Exsultate Deo” notes the following: “The fourth holiness is the repentance, its topic is the repenting person’s deeds, in three aspects. The first is the repentance of the heart, which is to be sorry for the committed sin, and decide not to commit it again in the future. The second is the confession of the mouth, which is for the sinner to confess entirely every committed sin that he remembers to the priest. The third is the gratification for the sin, which is censured by the priest: that happens through prayer, fasting and alms” (Denzinger 2004, 345). Truly there is nothing wrong with the construction of repentance, since there is regret over sin and intent of not committing it again. However, this process has two problems: regarding the one to whom confession is addressed, since one should tell God, not human being, and regarding the resolution and erasing of the sin. Prayer and fasting are not the tools of erasing sins, those can only be forgiven by the blood of Christ, and that is totally absent from this holiness. The list of lacking elements doesn’t end here because in the following 100 years this holiness has degraded a lot due to political, economic and others interests, also they gave up on the requirement for penance and intent of change. This is how the promise of forgiveness came around for those who partake in the crusades, those who buy indulgences, or those who do something that is worthy. We will deal with these hereinafter elaborately. Naturally, these abuses have prepared the way of the Reformation.

In the 11-13 century, in the time of the Crusades, through the doctrine of indulgences “the pope promised full remission of sins, past, present, and future, and release from all the pains and penalties incurred, were promised to all who would enlist in the pontiff’s wars to extend his temporal dominion, to punish his enemies, or to exterminate those who dared deny his spiritual supremacy” (White 1911, 59).

Another aspect of this practice is what characterized the 14th century's institution of the orders of mendicant friars. The Reformation's morning star, John Wycliffe has already fought against these. „The pope had bestowed on these monks the power to hear confessions and to grant pardon. This became a source of great evil. Bent on enhancing their gains, the friars were so ready to grant absolution that criminals of all descriptions resorted to them, and, as a result, the worst vices rapidly increased (White 1911, 83). This became doubtful not only to the reformers but to the educated and simple men too. „ Discussion and inquiry were awakening. As the monks traversed the country, vending the pope's pardons, many were led to doubt the possibility of purchasing forgiveness with money, and they questioned whether they should not seek pardon from God rather than from the pontiff of Rome. Not a few were alarmed at the rapacity of the friars, whose greed seemed never to be satisfied” (White 1911, 84).

The papal power has come up with an invention for the forgiveness of sins during the Reformation that was believed even by Luther. „By a recent decretal an indulgence had been promised by the pope to all who should ascend upon their knees “Pilate's staircase,” said to have been descended by our Saviour on leaving the Roman judgment hall and to have been miraculously conveyed from Jerusalem to Rome. Luther was one day devoutly climbing these steps when suddenly a voice like thunder seemed to say to him: “The just shall live by faith.” (Rom 1:17) He sprang to his feet and hastened from the place in shame and horror” (White 1911, 125).

Finally, the last blow that started the Reformation, relating to the forgiveness of sins is described by E. White as it follows: „Under the plea of raising funds for the erection of St. Peter's Church at Rome, indulgences for sin were publicly offered for sale by the authority of the pope. By the price of crime, a temple was to be built up for God's worship—the cornerstone laid with the wages of

iniquity! But the very means adopted for Rome's aggrandizement provoked the deadliest blow to her power and greatness. It was this that aroused the most determined and successful of the enemies of popery, and led to the battle which shook the papal throne and jostled the triple crown upon the pontiff's head." (White 1911, 127). The prominent personality of indulgence commerce was the Dominican monk Johann Tetzel, who was "selling the indulgences just like a market dealer. ... According to information from his time Tetzel was offering confession for the sins of dead people as well. Tetzel's motto was: "*Wenn das Geld im Kasten klingt, die Seele in den Himmel springt*", that is, "when the money falls on the bottom of the box, making a sound, the soul immediately ascends to heaven" (<http://www.luther.hu/anschlag.html>).

The selling of indulgences, which was the replacement for confession, the buying of spiritual salvation, was wronged by Luther. He believed with strong conviction that everyone has to live by trusting God's grace. (<http://www.luther.hu/anschlag.html>) "Luther, though still a papist of the strictest sort, was filled with horror at the blasphemous assumptions of the indulgence mongers. Many of his own congregation had purchased certificates of pardon, and they soon began to come to their pastor, confessing their various sins, and expecting absolution, not because they were penitent and wished to reform, but on the ground of the indulgence. Luther refused them absolution, and warned them that unless they should repent and reform their lives, they must perish in their sins" (White 1911, 128). Finally, the consequence of fighting against indulgences was the famous 95 theses that he pinned on the gate of the Wittenberg church.

In conclusion, let's summarize which are the innovations of the Reformation regarding the personal or collective practice of spirituality:

1. I picked the first innovation from the writings of Csiky Lajos, according to whom the Reformation has **erased every mechanical practice**, every „opus operatum” from this field. It did the same when it comes to prayer (Csiky 1886, 85). Such a change was needed since the prayer of that time has lost every personal and direct characteristic. It was not a communication with God anymore, but rather other people’s formulae, mechanical requests, merit gathering or penitential deeds. The problem is not that someone says a written prayer. In the time of the Old and New Testament, the psalms were prayed, as well as the Lord’s Prayer and other invocations. If one says it as its own prayer there is nothing wrong in that. Luther also translated and explained Bible-prayers: he translated and explained the 7 repentance psalms (Psalm 7, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), the Magnificat prayer *Mary’s thanksgiving song* (Lk 1:46-55), the Lord’s Prayer and many other prayers from Scripture. (Csepregi, 2011: 25, 206, 555). Since people didn’t know how to pray he advised them, to put aside their old prayer booklets and pray only the psalms and the Lord’s Prayer. (Csepregi 2011, 379). What really reduced the medieval supplications was the penitentiary prescribed prayer. If you have sinned, you should say 10 Lord’s Prayers, 5 Hail Mary. This was not the original purpose. The prayer should not be a punishment, an expiation, nor the propitiation of God. The God of the Bible doesn’t need to be expiated! He is a loving God, who forgives the sins of a sincere soul free of cost, by mercy.
2. The second innovation consists of Luther’s advice to **pray freely and personally**. He led them to a conscious prayer and meditation. He taught them the following: “You have to know also that I don’t want you to always repeat the same prayers word after word. Because in this way you will only babble, and utter meaningless words, as if you’d be reading from a book. ...I am not very fond of these words and expressions, therefore today in one way, tomorrow the other, I will speak as the zeal takes ahold of me. Still, I will adhere to the same thoughts, way of thinking” (Csepregi

2011, 662). Csiky Lajos, living in the 19th century, argues the same way about the free prayer. His argument is the following: " ...there were mandatory prayers and litanies that had to be read, which were the Anglican church and the Lutheran agenda's books, as that were supposed to be read by the liturgist, but looking from another standpoint, we have stronger arguments against those than those protecting them, so we take the free prayer under our protection" (Csiky 1886, 102). Further on, he states that these collective prayers must fulfill the church's needs and have an actual role (Csiky 1886, 102).

If the words of Csiky Lajos, Calvinist theologian, are true, who thinks that the Reformation has erased every machine-like activity on the field of this cult, shouldn't we move forward Luther's Reformation on the topic of prayer as well? Could the church prayer also become formal and mechanical? Is the prayer offered collectively as part of the liturgy in our divine service, true and sincere even if that is Calvin's repentance prayer?

3. The third and most important innovation of the Reformation regarding prayer and repentance is the **ceasing of the priest's mediating role**. Starting from the reforming principle of the universal priesthood the line between the priest and the lay member is no more. One of the "five solas" of the Reformation is the "solus Christus", which thought the baptized universal priesthood, and was later modified by the Lutheran way of thinking and the classical protestant theology to "every believer's clergy", laying aside the "sacerdos" the distinct use of the priest in the clergy ([www.reformatus.ro/admin/data/file/20130620/ii-helvet-hitvallas](http://www.reformatus.ro/admin/data/file/20130620/ii-helvet-hitvallas)). From this point on, the confession would no longer take place at the priest but directly with God in simple and personal prayer. The believer was not even required to go to church since the "true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Regarding the practice of prayer, this meant that instead of the medieval, reading practice the

personal prayer came up front. Based on this, not only the priest prays for the sinner, but the sinner can do it himself, or they can stand together in front of God. This is how the liturgical act became an act of piety. This is one of the most important realignments of the Reformation.

Is it through the genius, the theological research and discovery that Luther accomplished all this? From where did his inspiration come, and how did he have the power to stand against the world ruler of his time, the roman pope? The answer comes from the „ref500.hu” website: „Martin Luther was a passionate praying person. Otherwise, he couldn't have finished the magnificent work of the Reformation. The holy spirit taught him, led him and gave him power” (<http://www.ref500.hu/kiadvanyok/500-nap-imadsag-reformacioert>). The same can be said about Calvin, and the proof of that is the “fine patterned carpet” (Bolyki 1985, 6), that was in front of his bed. Only after his death, they have discovered that „in the middle there were two spots of fraying, ... the marks of the reformer's knees, who prayed on that carpet during his night struggles and his daily silent requests before God.” (Bolyki 1985, 6) Prayer sowed his whole life, but these were not ritualistic, formal prayers, but free and fervent supplications. They were not the only “continually praying people”, but we could prove with the example of the following reformers that the key of the further development of the Reformation was the same tiresome and praying attitude.

„The Reformation is not a memory of the 16th century. The Reformation is a cultural and historical heritage. ... The Reformation is the push of innovation.” Renewal regarding doctrine, renewal regarding spiritual practice, renewal in prayer. This spirit must characterize the following centuries of Protestantism, because in the process of renewal according to the “semper reformandi” there is no stopping. That is why I launch this study with an open question:

If Luther, Calvin, Zwingli would be alive today what would their Reformation subject be?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Breviary: 1. In the Roman Catholic Church a book containing all the daily psalms, hymns, prayers, lessons etc. necessary for reciting the office. (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/breviary>). 2. (Latin: *breviarium*) is a book in many Western Christian denominations that “contains all the liturgical texts for the Office, whether said in choir or in private.” (Palazzo, E., *A History of Liturgical Books from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century*, 1998: Liturgical Press, 169).

<sup>2</sup>Goltzen, H.: *Der tägliche Gottesdienst. Die Geschichte der Tagzeitengebetes, seine Ordnung und seine Erneuerung in der Geg. Enwart: Leiturgia III*, Kassel: 1956, 99-294, in Kunzler M., *op. cit.*, 458.

## References

### *Literature Used*

Bolyki, János. 1985. *Azimádkozó Kálvin (The praying Calvin)* Budapest: Református Zsinati Iroda.

Csepregi, Zoltán (ed.). 2011. *Luther válogatott művei 5. Bibliafordítás, vigasztalás, imádság (Luther's selected works 5. Bible translation, consolation, prayer)*. Budapest: Luther Kiadó.

Csiky, Lajos. 1886. *Imádságtan (Euchetika) (The doctrine of prayer)*. Debrecen: A szerzokiadása.

Denzinger, Heinrich and Peter Hünemann. 2004. *Hitvallások és az Egyház Tanítóhivatalának megnyilatkozásai (Creeds and The Church Teaching Office's statements)*. Budapest: Szent István Társulat.

Kunzler, Michael. 2005. *Az Egyház Liturgiája (The Liturgy of the Church)*. Szeged: Agape.

Várnagy, Antal. 1999. *Liturgika (Liturgics)*. Abaliget: Lämpáskiadó.

White, Ellen G. 1911. *The Great Controversy*. Mountain View: Pacific Press P.A.

White, Ellen G. 2000. *Steps to Christ*. Mountain View: Pacific Press P.A.

White, Ellen G. 2002. *Prayer*. Mountain View: Pacific Press P.A.

Yancey, Philip. 2006. *Prayer. Does It Make Any Difference?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

#### *Internet*

„500 Reformacio”. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://reformacio2017.hu/>

„Lutheranreformation.org”. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://lutheranreformation.org/theology/reformation-remembered/>.

*Magyar Katolikus Lexikon (Hungarian Catholic Encyclopedia)*. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/>

Accessed April 28, 2017. <http://www.luther.hu/>

Accessed April 28, 2017. [www.reformatus.ro/](http://www.reformatus.ro/)

Accessed April 28, 2017. [www.ref500.hu/](http://www.ref500.hu/)

#### *Literature consulted*

Diós, István (ed.). 2000. *A II. Vatikáni Zsinatdokumentumai (The Documents of the II. Vatican Council)*. Budapest: SzentIstvántársulat.

*A Katolikus Egyház Katekizmusa (The Catechism of the Catholic Church)*. 2002. Budapest: SzentIstvántársulat.

Hasting, James (ed.). 1915. *The Christian Doctrine of Prayer*. Edinburg: Charles Scribner's Sons.