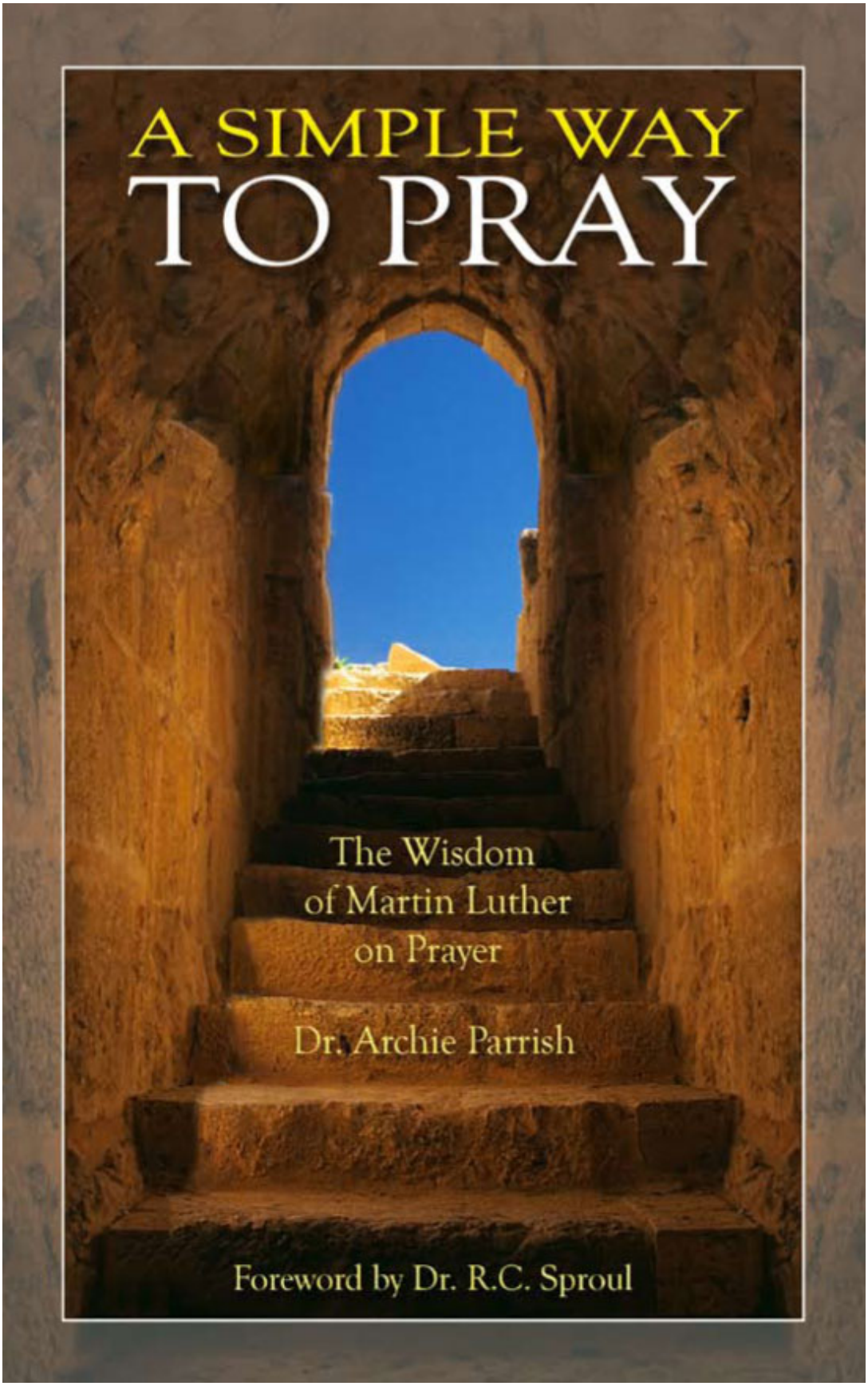
A SIMPLE WAY
TO PRAY
The Wisdom
of Martin Luther
on Prayer
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Foreword by Dr. R.C. Sproul

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Foreword

I like to think of Martin Luther as a personal friend. Of course, I never met him since he lived centuries before I was born. And even if I had been alive and living in Germany during his tenure there, it is certain that I would not have been worthy of being considered his personal friend. In the land of Luther, I would have been a Lilliputian in the midst of giants.

Luther has become my friend as a pen pal gets to know another person. By reading his works, his letters, his sermons, and so forth I have, as it were, eavesdropped on the man—if it is possible to eavesdrop by reading.

In his manifold writings, Luther revealed not only his thought but also himself. One thing screams through his pages: he was a man who not only delighted in prayer, but one who clung desperately to this means of grace. Luther lived daily exposed to what he called the *Anfectung*—the unbridled, vicious assault of Satan. At times, it seemed as if the whole world was against him, not to mention the flesh and the Devil.

In his penchant for bombast, Luther occasionally comes across like a child who whistles when he passes a cemetery in the dark. Beneath the Teutonic exterior beat the heart of a man who hung by his fingernails to the hope of the gospel.

A portion of the prayer Luther composed on the eve of his final meeting at the Diet of Worms is contained in this book. In this prayer, we observe Luther naked before God, enduring his private Gethsemane. His prayer reveals the man.

At many points in my own spiritual pilgrimage, the writings of Luther have brought me comfort and encouragement. When I am downcast, I think of Melanchthon's words: "Sing the 46th"—a call to sing Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," based on Psalm 46.

Yet, of all the writings of Luther, none has touched me more deeply than his *The Way to Pray*. It has been an *open sesame* for me. Of course, Luther was a Lutheran. But in this little book, he becomes for a season a true Methodist. He gives us a practical *method* for effective prayer.

By this method, this enriching approach to prayer, I am helped every day of my life. I love to pray through the Lord's Prayer, the Decalogue, and the Apostles' Creed. I love to use the Psalms to deepen my prayer life.

When we get on our knees, we are all simple men. As simple people, we need a simple way to pray. There is a huge, unbridgeable chasm between the simple and the simplistic. There is nothing simplistic about this spiritual endeavor. Rather it is a simple way to sound the deep things of God.

—R. C. Sproul
Orlando, Florida
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Chapter 1

Martin Luther, a Man of Prayer

We can find many examples of men who understood and enjoyed a life rich with prayer, but Martin Luther stands as a giant among them.

In his classic work on prayer, Friedrich Heiler declares, "After Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul, the German reformer is indeed the most powerful among the eminent men who had a genius for prayer."[1] Indeed, Luther spent much of his time in prayer; the historical records show that he prayed four hours each day. Helmut Thieliche wrote "Luther prayed this much, not despite his busy life, but because only so could he accomplish his gigantic labors. . . . To work without praying and without listening means only to grow and spread oneself upward, without striking roots and without creating an equivalent in the earth. A person who works this way is living unnaturally."[2] From these comments, we can begin to see the kind of prayer that was a vital part of Luther's life.

Before we discuss Luther's prayer life further, let me deal with a question that sometimes comes up: Is Luther a valid model of a praying believer for *all* Christians? Once, when I was leading a Kingdom Intercessors' Training event, a physician said: "I can't identify with Luther—nor do I identify with you. Both you and Luther are clergy. Clergy are not normal people who live in the same world that I live in. How does an *ordinary* person like me in the *real* world become a man of prayer?"

The doctor's question reflects a common tendency to place spiritual leaders in a category by themselves. The Bible does not do this. Consider Elijah: "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit" (James 5:17–18). Or consider the apostles Peter and John: although they were "uneducated and untrained men," they drew attention because of their courage, and it was noted that "they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). To the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

> For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (1 Cor. 1:26–29)

God usually chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. But Luther is an example of a man, wise according to the world, whom God chose for a specific purpose. Luther occupies a unique place in the history of the German people. Among the British, there is no one person like Luther. No Englishman had anything like Luther's range. In his book, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther,* Roland H. Bainton writes: "The Bible

translation in England was the work of Cranmer, the catechism of the Westminster divines. The sermonic style stemmed from Latimer; the hymnbook came from Watts. And not all of these lived in the same century. Luther did the work of more than five men. And for sheer richness and exuberance of vocabulary and mastery of style he is to be compared only with Shakespeare."[3]

The overwhelming majority of believers are ordinary people similar to the apostles. However, God still calls geniuses, and when He calls He expects them to serve with humility and acknowledge that He is the source of all their ability. If you, like Luther, are among the few wise human beings, I pray that God will keep you humble. Don't depend on yourself. My advice to all who read this book is *use Luther as an example in prayer, but don't try to be Luther*.

The doctor I mentioned above said he couldn't identify with clergy, but Scripture makes it very clear that *God expects the clergy to be examples for all believers* (see 1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:6–8). Pastors must be men of high spiritual and moral character (see 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9) so that when they multiply after their kind, they will be the kind that should be multiplied. Godly pastors produce godly followers. In this way, God helps parents, politicians, professionals, business leaders, shop workers, secretaries, plumbers, carpenters, and all believers in the marketplace, home, and school to minister as godly men and women in the particular realms where His providence places them.

The bottom line is this: Luther as a man of prayer is a valid example for all Christians.

As you proceed with this study, you will receive insights that will transform your ability to pray. Then you will be more able to commune with the Father, conform to the Son, and combat the forces of evil. In response to your prayers, the Holy Spirit will enable you to minister with greater boldness and power. Using this biblical prayer model will result in increased blessing for you, your family, your church, and the people in your circle of influence.

Luther's Birth and Early Years

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, in what is now Germany, to good but humble parents. As a child, he dealt with his share of bullies and hard times. Like so many school children in that austere age, he had to earn his livelihood by singing in the streets or by begging from door to door for alms and bread. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, so he was schooled at Mansfeld, Magdeberg, and Eisenach. At age seventeen, he entered the University of Erfurt, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1503 and his master's degree in 1505. Through hard work in school, Luther advanced rapidly.

Then came a turning point in his life. On July 17, 1505, much against his father's wishes, Luther entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. Luther himself preserved complete silence as to his motive, but various legends have arisen to account for this sudden decision. According to one account, on July 2, he was walking with his best friend, Alexis near the village of Stotternheim when a thunderstorm came up and a bolt of lightning struck Alexis dead at his feet. Shocked by his friend's death and suddenly

conscience-stricken by the thought of his youthful sins, he was constrained to devote himself to life as a monk.[4]

Prayer in the Time of Martin Luther

The sixteenth-century monastic life in the Church of Rome buried biblical prayer beneath layers of institutional, mystical, and theological error. The Roman Church was centered in the clergy. It taught that the grace of God was dispensed *only* by the Roman Church through priests who were ordained in the succession of Peter. This teaching turned prayer into an institutionalized ritual, making a priest's prayer more valuable than the prayers of laymen. Rome believed that the high and holy God could not be approached directly by average sinners. Rather, the common people must approach God through the priests, who held a privileged position, and the saints, who were exceptionally holy. The Roman Church taught that those who desired to develop lives of holiness should enter monasteries or convents to escape from the wicked world through contemplative prayer. This was the life Luther undertook.

For most monks in the sixteenth century, prayer was a mechanical religious rite, requiring little thought. The faithful confessed their sins and the priest told them what penance they must render, such as how many "Our Fathers" or "Hail Marys" to say. Thus, prayer was a legalistic work that, according to the Roman Church, had merit in itself.

In 1517, Leo X was pope of the Roman Church; Maximilian I, of Austria, governed the Holy Roman Empire; and Frederick, surnamed the Wise, ruled over Saxony. Luther became a monk in the Order of Eremites of St. Augustine. He then became a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, which Frederick had established.

Luther was a gifted, hard-working, and eloquent professor. He preferred the truth in the Holy Scriptures and sound reason over any human authorities or opinions. Luther's quest for truth moved to a new level when he nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the church door at Wittenberg. The Ninety-five Theses were theological issues Luther desired to debate, but nailing the Theses to the church door began what eventually grew into a holy war between Luther and the pope. With dauntless courage, he almost entirely alone opposed the power structure of the Roman Church. Many applauded his courage and heroism, but no one, not even Luther, anticipated his success. No one expected that this lightly armed warrior could harm a Hercules whom so many heroes had assailed in vain.

The Confrontation

One of the most significant events in what would become the Protestant struggle took place at Worms, Germany, in 1521. Luther was called to appear before an imperial diet, or court, to answer charges that his teaching was heretical. Luther knew the journey to Worms would be very perilous. His friends urged him not to go, and even the elector, Luther's prince, refused to let him go until he obtained safe passage from the emperor. When he came to the territory of Worms, he would still be in great danger. Luther replied that he would go there even if the devils outnumbered the tiles on the roofs. He was determined to go.

On April 17, 1521, the marshal of the empire escorted Luther, wearing his monk's robes, from his lodgings to the diet. The archbishop of Treves asked him two questions: Would he acknowledge the books that were laid upon a bench before him to be his productions, and would he recant the opinions contained in them? Luther was on the verge of answering "Yes" to the first question when Dr. Jerome Schurf, a jurist of Wittenberg, reminded him that he should first see if there were any books that were not his. After hearing the titles read, he answered that the books were all his. However, at the suggestion of his counselor, he requested that he be allowed until the next day to consider his answer to the second question.

That night in his room, Luther prayed:

> The bell has been already cast, judgment has been pronounced. Ah God, ah God, O You, my God. Stand by me; do this, You must do it, You alone! The matter is not mine, it is Yours. O God, do You not hear? My God, art Thou dead? No, You cannot die; You only hide Yourself. Stand by me. Lord, where do You tarry? Where art You, O my God? Come, come! I am ready, even to forsake my life for this, submissive as a lamb, for righteous is this cause which is Yours. And should my body perish for this cause, should it fall to the ground, yea, be broken to fragments, yet Your Word and Your Spirit are enough. And all this can happen only to the body; the soul is Yours and belongs to You and will remain forever with You.[5]

In the quiet of his room, Luther might have thought about John Hus of Bohemia, who had been burned at the stake for seeking reforms similar to those that he now sought. The words of his prayer show that Luther knew that what he said to the diet the next day might result in a similar sentence for him.

Luther's heart turned to God in Psalm 46, which the psalmist wrote at a time when he saw the world falling apart. At this time of Luther's great crisis, this psalm became a major source of encouragement to him. Psalm 46 reads:

> *God is our refuge and strength,*
> *A very present help in trouble.*
> *Therefore we will not fear,*
> *Even though the earth be removed,*
> *And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;*
> *Though its waters roar and be troubled,*
> *Though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah.*
>
> *There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God,*
> *The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.*
> *God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;*
> *God shall help her, just at the break of dawn.*
> *The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved;*
> *He uttered His voice, the earth melted.*

The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Come; behold the works of the LORD,
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;
He burns the chariot in the fire.

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!

The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

At some point, Luther put the truth of this psalm into what became the "Battle hymn of the Reformation":[6]

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe—
His craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He—
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him—
His rage we can endure,

For lo, his doom is sure:
One little word will fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also—
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still:
His kingdom is forever.[7]

Fervent prayer through the night was not a new experience for Luther. Before his heart was liberated by the truth of the gospel, he had spent long, solitary night watches in prayer and fasting. These were efforts to gain the favor of God by good works. But when the Spirit set him free, he was free indeed: he became a grace-driven, disciplined soldier of the cross.

On April 18, Luther reappeared before the diet. The question was repeated. Luther answered:

> Some of my writings treat the Christian faith and life, others are directed against the papacy; still others are against private individuals who defend the Romish tyranny and assail holy doctrines. As for the first I cannot renounce them because even my enemies admit that they contain much good matter; nor can I renounce the second because that would help support the papal tyranny. In the third group, I freely admit I have often been too vehement, yet I cannot renounce them unless it can be shown to me that I have gone too far.[8]

The examining official demanded that Luther give a categorical answer. Luther replied, "I cannot [recant] unless I am convinced of error from Scripture and reason."[9]

The official told Luther he must be wrong, because he contradicted the pope and the ecclesiastical councils. Luther answered, "The pope and the ecclesiastical councils have often erred and contradicted themselves." Then he closed with the declaration, "Here I stand: I can do no more: God help me. Amen."[10]

On May 8, 1521, a bill declaring Luther to be an outlaw was drawn up. This bill declared that after twenty-one days of safe conduct, no man might harbor or conceal Luther on penalty of treason. Luther became a public enemy, wanted throughout Europe dead or alive. Whoever might find him in any place was ordered to apprehend and deliver him to the emperor. All his followers were to be seized wherever they might be found, stripped of all their goods, and imprisoned.

Through his private struggles in prayer at Worms, Luther received from the Lord that unshakable strength, assurance, and confidence that enabled him to defy a world of enemies. God used this man of prayer to begin a great Reformation, a new era in the history of Christianity.[11]

What might it be like to pray with Luther? A study of Luther's prayer reveals a childlike simplicity and love for God blended with streams of joyful trust and surrender to Him. His prayers exude a hot passion that seems to pour from his heart without reserve. He simply, fervently expresses the needs of his heart and conscience. He earnestly cries out to God for comfort, help, and grace.

Veit Dietrich, a friend of Luther, describes what it was like to watch him pray:

> What a spirit, what faith, was in his words! He prayed so devoutly, as one who talked with God with the hope and belief of one speaking to his Father. . . . When I heard him at a distance praying in clear tones, my heart burned within me for joy because I heard him speaking in so friendly and reverent a manner with God; chiefly, however, since he leaned so hard upon the promises in the Psalms, as if everything must certainly come to pass which he desired.[12]

The Reformation focused on correcting doctrine and purifying the church, but these achievements could come only after a reformation of prayer. In contrast to the Roman Church of his day, Luther emphasized the priesthood of *all* believers. This biblical prayer empowered the proclamation of the gospel that could purify the church and transform the world.

In the preface to his *Larger Catechism,* Luther writes:

> We know that our defense lies in prayer alone. We are too weak to resist the devil and his vassals. Let us hold fast to the weapons of the Christian; they enable us to combat the devil. For what has carried off these great victories over the undertakings of our enemies which the devil has used to put us in subjection, if not the prayers of certain pious people who rose up as a rampart to protect us?
>
> Our enemies may mock at us. But we shall oppose both men and the devil if we maintain ourselves in prayer and if we persist in it. For we know that when a Christian prays in this way: "Dear Father, Your will be done," God replies to him, "Dear child, yes, it shall be done in spite of the devil and the whole world."[13]

The clarion call of the Protestant Reformation was, "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). Faith is, in Luther's judgment, "prayer and nothing but prayer." "He who does not pray or call upon God in his hour of need, assuredly does not think of Him as God, nor does he give Him the honor that is His due."[14]

God, in His sovereign providence, gave Luther extraordinary gifts. And Luther was faithful to use these gifts for the body of Christ. We, as part of the body of Christ,

continue to grow in grace from his life work and his disciplined example, which is best seen in his words on prayer.

[1] Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 130.
[2] Helmut Thieliche, *The Waiting Father* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1939), 65.
[3] Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, div. of Penguin Books, 1977), 34
[4] William Stevenson, *The Story of the Reformation* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1959), 30–31. Also see Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1989), 92
[5] Heiler, *Prayer*, 262.
[6] "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" has been called the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation" for the effect it had in increasing the support for the Reformers' cause. John Julian records four theories of its origin (*A Dictionary of Hymnology: Setting forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of all Ages and Nations*, 2nd revised edition, 2 vols., n.p., 1907). It was written sometime between 1527 and 1529. Ironically, this hymn is now suggested for Catholic masses, appearing in the second edition of the Catholic Book of Worship, published by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.
[7] *Psalter Hymnal, Centennial Edition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959), 516–517.
[8] Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the* Devil, 38–39.
[9] Bainton, *Here I* Stand, 144.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Heiler, *Prayer*, 118.
[12] Ibid., 281.
[13] Karl Barth, *Prayer According to the Catechism of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 9.
[14] Heiler, *Prayer*, xiii.