

The Present Situation

It is true that many present-day Lutherans do not include the faithful departed in their prayers. In fact, some literature printed under Lutheran auspices has even stated that we do not pray for the dead. But this opinion is largely due to the influence of non-Lutheran denominations on the Lutheran Church. In general, the Reformed believe that prayers for the dead are wrong. And through the centuries, Lutherans have inadvertently copied some of the ideas of these denominations and have eventually come to believe that such opinions are Lutheran. Because of such outside influences, some Lutherans have been led to believe that prayers for the faithful departed are wrong. But official Lutheran teaching has never condemned prayers for the faithful departed.

Perhaps the best way to explain how and why we pray for the dead is to parody the Small Catechism of Martin Luther:

God gives peace to the faithful departed indeed without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that he would lead us to know it and to acknowledge it with thanksgiving."

May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace and may perpetual light shine upon them. Amen



Pray For The Dead?

“Pastor, do Lutherans pray for the dead?” If you were to ask many Lutherans this question, they would answer with a plain and simple “No!” What is more, they would firmly believe that they were right. But the fact is that this answer is wrong. Lutherans do pray for the dead.

The Lutheran Position

As far as Martin Luther and his fellow reformers were concerned, the question of prayers for the faithful departed was not a major issue. They took for granted that Christians everywhere remembered their departed loved ones in prayer.

For example, Luther in his Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper summarizes his Christian faith, and in this confession he includes prayers for the dead.

The official book of Lutheran doctrine, the Book of Concord, mentions that a certain fourth-century heretic named Arius said that prayers for the dead were useless. The Book of Concord makes it clear that “we do not agree with Arius” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV, 96).

Many of the great theologians during the period following the Reformation, such as Martin Chemnitz and John Gerhard, and many official Lutheran service books from this period give approval to prayers for the faithful departed.

In our century in the United States, both the official service book of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*Lutheran Agenda* p. 84, 88, 91) and of the National Lutheran Council (*Service Book and Hymnal* p. 8) include the faithful departed in their prayers. It is only in a few unofficial and semi-official Lutheran books that prayers for the dead are condemned.

Why Do We Pray?

There are those Lutherans who have disapproved prayers for the faithful departed. Perhaps one reason why they have felt justified in doing so is because they have forgotten what prayer is. We do not pray, as many believe, in order to “change God’s mind” or to make Him remember something that He has forgotten. Rather we pray in order that we might remember that all things come from God. And in the case of intercessions for the dead in particular, we pray in order that we might remember that God has in His keeping our departed loved ones.

As Lutherans we do not pray the departed out of purgatory, nor do we believe that our prayers change the state of the dead. Rather our intercessions are a declaration of our faith that God is giving the faithful departed peace and rest.