chapter 2

RECOUNTING THE PAST

Prayer for the Dead in the Historical Church

Turku Cathedral is the mother church of the Lutheran Church of Finland. In the sixteenth century the Cathedral, formerly Roman Catholic, became Protestant. Jenna and I are visiting it—along with Sarah, our daughter, who is in graduate school there. The funerary monuments are what grab my attention. Tombs in a church, the dead buried in the aisle floors. Why? Turku Cathedral was built in the thirteenth century, and in the fifteenth century side-chapels containing altars to various saints were added alongside the nave. These were subsequently converted into funeral vaults and graves were set into the floor as well. Among the figures buried in the Cathedral are several medieval and post-Reformation bishops and military commanders (those buried in cathedrals are uniformly of high social status—clergy, nobility, and gentry). But why is *anyone* buried there? What function of commemoration do cathedral tombs represent?

For centuries, Rob Moll points out, "church buildings were . . . graveyards." Christians were buried in a cemetery next to the church, under its floor, or inside its walls as an expression of the communion of saints that "integrated the community of the dead with that of the living." Such burials created a sense of the universal church across time—that "those who have died are still present with us as members of the body of Christ." Christians who sit in the pews each Sunday and entombed believers awaiting resurrection share one faith and one hope.[1] Burial of

1. Moll, *Art of Dying*, 40 and 166. Some churches today have memorial gardens with columbaria—where the cremated ashes of the dead are stored—on their property.

the faithful within cathedral precincts was also what historians call a "strategy of salvation." Nigel Saul explains that in the religious thought of the Middle Ages the dead were involved in a relationship of dependence on the living.

> The starting-point of medieval thinking on the afterlife was that, while the souls of the virtuous might well go straight to heaven and those of the damned straight to hell, the souls of most of us, neither wholly good or wholly bad, were likely to go to . . . purgatory—there to be tried and tested. And in the process of trying and testing, [God] would be swayed by the intercessory prayers of the living, most of all by the prayers of the clergy offered every day in the liturgy.

To be buried in a cathedral was to be close to where petitionary prayer is offered and to be in proximity to the saints; tombs also appeal to onlookers to pray for the dead person's soul. In short, funerary monuments and intercessory prayer go together—and burial in a cathedral helps in the salvation of the faithful departed.[2] To step into a medieval cathedral—Turku, the Domkerk in Utrecht, Hereford Cathedral in England—is to step back in history, and to encounter the tomb commemorations is to encounter prayer for the dead.

Christians have always prayed for the departed. The practice is not mentioned in Scripture, but in the ancient church remembrance of the dead began early and was widespread. Early Christians assumed the doctrine of the communion of saints—that there is one body of Christ in which *all* the faithful, both living and dead, are eternally united. This bond is not broken by death, and just as the living can be helped by our prayers, so can the dead. Prayer for the dead is rooted in the concept of spiritual interdependence. While Westerners are taught to value independence, in the church God gives us a family to help us in our pilgrimage to heaven; prayer for the dead is one of those helps.[3] The first prayers thanked God that believers are at rest in Christ and asked that they be brought safely to resurrection in God's eternal kingdom. Prayer for the dead gradually came to be associated with belief in a process of sancti-

These give a sense of the continuity of the church and a reminder of our own deaths (168).

2. Saul, "Living and Dead," 3. Burial beside the shrines of the saints and martyrs, with candles always burning, provided protection at the last judgment (see Brown, *Ransom of Soul*, 20–21, 77–79, 122).

3. I draw this language from Currie, *Born Fundamentalist*, 129–30.

fication after death—culminating in the medieval doctrine of purgatory. The idea that individuals suffering there can be helped by the works of the church on earth gave rise to abuses. The Reformers declared that believers are justified by faith alone and are made holy at death—so prayer cannot help the dead. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics pray for the faithful departed in both private devotion and public worship. While most Protestants do not, some ecumenical churches have added ancient prayers as part of liturgical renewal.

The Ancient Church: Prayer for Peace and Pardon

There is no evidence of prayer for the dead in the first century, but second-century tomb inscriptions contain both declarations (such as *in pace*—"he rests in peace") and petitions (like *vivas in pace*—"may you rest in peace").[4] These prayers express confident assurance that the departed are with God—and believers would at times visit their tombs to pray for them.[5]

Early Christian literature often mentions prayer for the dead.[6] In the second-century apocryphal text *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the female apostle Thecla prays for the salvation of the unbaptized Falconilla, who was dead. In the early-third-century story *The Passion of Perpetua and*

4. Roman *tricliae* were walled enclosures with kitchens and eating spaces standing in the midst of ancient tombs so the living could celebrate loved ones with funeral meals close to their burial places. The meal was a symbol of the feast of refreshment and rest of the soul. Graffiti was written on the walls of these banqueting enclosures. See Brown, *Ransom of Soul*, 36–39.

5. This overview draws from Boggis, *Praying for Dead* and Lee, *Christian Doctrine of Prayer for Departed*. Also see Plumptre, *Spirits in Prison*, chapter 9; Swete, "Prayer for Departed" and Toner, "Prayers for Dead." Beyond these older histories, there is significant recent scholarship on prayer for the dead—tracing rituals and liturgies from the early Christian era (every pagan religion of the ancient Mediterranean assumed that the dead needed the living) through post-Reformation periods. An overview can be found in McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 1–23.

6. McLaughlin (*Consorting with Saints*, 181–82 and 28) cautions: "while there is a great deal of evidence from the second, third, and fourth centuries to show that Christians remembered their dead in various ways, that evidence is fragmentary and often obscure. There has been considerable debate over the interpretation of individual texts and the ways in which those texts fit together. Most scholars are now agreed . . . that rituals for the dead had more than one meaning for the earliest Christians. Some were apparently performed in accordance with beliefs which Christians shared with many of their Jewish and pagan neighbors, while others carried meanings which were more specific to the Christian message."

Felicitas, Perpetua prays for her dead, unbaptized brother Dinocrates—who is brought from suffering to joy. But as Henry Swete points out, "no importance can be attached" to these tales since "in both accounts we are dealing only with private speculations, which cannot be taken to reflect the general belief of the Church."[7] In the third century, Arnobius of Sicca writes that the church prays two things: "*peace* and *pardon* are asked . . . for those still in life, and those freed from the bondage of the flesh."[8]

The earliest prayers were for *peace*—commemorations (thankful remembrances of the dead) and commendations (entrusting them to God's care). In the second century, Tertullian of Carthage indicates that at burials and annual commemorative services "we make offerings for the dead . . . to celebrate their birthday" of eternal life. He declares it a duty for surviving spouses to "pray for [their dead partner's] soul, and request refreshment for them."[9] In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage exhorts clergy to remember the dead by name annually during the Eucharist: "take note of their days on which they depart, that we may celebrate their commemoration among the memorials of the martyrs."[10] In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem reports that during Holy Communion "we commemorate . . . those who have fallen asleep before us . . . believing that it will be a very great benefit to the souls, for whom the supplication is put up."[11]

Prayers for *pardon* were soon added. In the Eastern Empire of the third century, Aerius of Pontus rejects intercession for the dead since it promotes moral laxity in this life: "if the prayer of the people here has benefited the people there, no one should practice piety or perform good works."[12] His objection is refuted by Epiphanius of Salamis: "as to naming the dead, what could be more helpful? . . . We pray for sinners, for God's mercy, and for the righteous."[13] John Chrysostom in the late third century states that the church "prays that God would be merciful to the sins of

7. Swete, "Prayer for Departed," 513.

8. Arnobius, "Against the Heathen," Book 4.36, 488; slightly modified and emphasis added.

9. Tertullian, "Chaplet," chapter 3, 237 and "On Monogamy," chapter 10, 67, slightly modified.

10. Cyprian, "Epistle 36," 315.

11. Cyril, "Catechetical Lecture 23," 154–55.

12. Aerius, summarized in Ephiphanius, *Panarion*, 506; cf. 411–12.

13. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 113 and 509–10.

all, not only of the living, but also of the departed."[14] He exhorts believers to pray for the dead in order to improve their situation—encouraging what will eventually become prayer for the baptized but sinful dead in purgatory.

> Not . . . in vain [do we] make mention of the departed . . .and approach God in their behalf, beseeching the Lamb who . . . takes away the sin of the world . . . that some refreshment may thereby ensue to them. . . . For if the children of Job were purged by the sacrifice of their father, why do you doubt that when we too offer for the departed, some consolation arises to them? . . . Why therefore do you grieve . . . when it is in your power to gather so much pardon for the departed?[15]

In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem reiterates that "we, when we offer to God our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, though they be sinners, . . . [are] propitiating our merciful God for them."[16] There are two categories of saved dead for whom prayer is made—the perfect who immediately enter heaven and the imperfect who require purification after death.

A common theme in the first three centuries concerns prayer for the unsaved who are rescued from hell.[17] The *Apocalypse of Peter*—an apocryphal document that some church fathers considered inspired scripture—refers to posthumous salvation brought about through prayer: "I

14. Chrysostom, "On the Priesthood," Book 6.4, 76.

15. Chrysostom, *Homily on First Corinthians*, Part 2, Homily 41.8, 592–93. Chrysostom is here giving an answer to a fictitious interlocutor concerned for a loved one who died in sin (a worry which assumes that if one dies in sin there is no remedy since salvation is impossible in the next life). Ramelli (*Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 554–61) argues that Chrysostom does not distinguish purgatory from hell; one either dies in grace or in sin. He thinks that prayer can purify those in hell who died in sin; God will grant them grace through the prayers of the church. Almsgiving on their behalf also extinguishes the furnace of hell and opens the gates of heaven, rescuing people from damnation in the world to come. The situation of the dead is improvable, thanks to the help of the church; it is not unchangeably fixed at death. "It is possible," Chrysostom says, "to put together forgiveness for the dead . . . with the prayers, with gifts offered on their behalf." It is unclear whether he limited posthumous salvation to baptized Christians or meant to extend it to all humanity.

16. Cyril, "Catechetical Lecture 23," 154–55.

17. This paragraph draws on Ramelli, *Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 67–87. Thanks to my editor Robin Parry for making me aware of this work. *Apocalypse of Peter*, cited at 69; *Apocalypse of Elijah*, cited at 72; *Epistula Apostolorum*, cited at 72; *Sibylline Oracles*, cited at 73; *Apocalypse of Paul*, cited at 76.

will grant to my . . . elect all those whom they ask me to remove from punishment. And I shall grant them a beautiful baptism in salvation . . . , a sharing of justification with my saints." The *Apocalypse of Elijah* states that dead sinners "will take part in grace. On that day the righteous will be granted that for which they will often have prayed"—that is, the salvation of sinners from hell, including those who betrayed and persecuted them. Successful intercession for the unsaved is also described in a conversation found in the *Epistula Apostolorum*. The disciples express concern for sinners being punished, and Jesus encourages them to "pray to God and implore" on their behalf. "I shall listen to the prayer of the just, which they utter for sinners," he assures them. The *Sibylline Oracles* reaffirm this idea: "when [the righteous] ask . . . , God will grant them to save the human beings from the fierce fire . . . , and will do so after pulling them out of the unquenchable flame and removing them, destining them . . . to the other life" of heaven. The *Apocalypse of Paul* also suggests postmortem repentance, deliverance from hell and entry to *paradise* caused by intercession. In one of his poems Prudentius of Tarraconensis states that every Easter (and perhaps every Sunday) souls in hell experience respite from suffering.[18] These apocryphal texts concerning prayer for the salvation of those in hell indicate that many in the early church did not believe the fate of the unsaved to be fixed forever at death.

In the Western church, the funeral orations of Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century contain prayers for the deceased—including the unbaptized emperor Valentinian II.[19] In the fifth century Augustine of Hippo reports—in *Confessions*—that after her death he prayed: "I now petition you for my mother's sins . . . . Please forgive her her debts if she contracted any . . . after she received the water of salvation."[20] In one of his sermons he declares, "it is not to be doubted . . . that the dead can be helped by the prayers of the holy Church, and the Eucharistic sacrifice . . . so that God may deal with them more mercifully than their sins have deserved."[21] In *Enchiridion* Augustine anticipates the doctrine of purgatory by limiting prayer to those in a middle state of character between perfect holiness and complete evil.

18. Brown, *Ransom of Soul*, 112.
19. Ambrose, "On Death of Valentinian," Sections 56 and 78, 280 and 297.
20. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 9.35, 177–78.
21. Augustine, *Sermons*, Sermon 172.2–3, 252–53.

> There is . . . a kind of life so good as not to require them; and . . . one so bad that when life is over they render no help. . . . When . . . sacrifices . . . of the altar . . . are offered on behalf of all the baptized dead, they are thank-offerings for the very good, they are propitiatory offerings for the not very bad, and in the case of the very bad, even though they do not assist the dead, they are a . . . consolation to the living. And where they are profitable, their benefit consists either in obtaining a full remission of sins, or at least in making the condemnation more tolerable.[22]

In *City of God* Augustine resists the idea that those who live wicked lives after baptism can be helped beyond death: "if any [person] keep their heart impenitent up to their dying day . . . are we to suppose that the Church still prays for them . . . when they have departed this life? Of course not!"[23]

In the sixth century, Gregory the Great also asserts that prayers help the dead only if they die in a state of grace and with "minor faults that remain to be purged away." He continues: "deceased persons . . . can be absolved from sins through the Mass . . . . But remember, the benefits of the holy sacrifice are only for those who by their good lives have merited the grace of receiving help from the good deeds others perform in their behalf." Gregory recounts numerous examples of dead believers who were helped by prayer. A member of his monastery who had stolen three pieces of gold, for example, was—after death—"freed from punishment by the sacrifice of the Mass." Gregory's emphasis on a "cleansing fire after death" and his practice of the Mass as a private service of specific intention for individuals, rather than a community commemoration, influenced medieval developments.[24]

Beyond the writings of the church fathers, prayer for the departed is found in all ancient liturgies, both Greek and Latin. Prayers for peace and pardon occurred at several places—in funeral rites, in anniversary commemorations and during ordinary services of the church. In the *Liturgy of St. James*, composed in the fourth century, the priest prays "that our offering may be acceptable . . . for the rest of the souls that have fallen asleep." Later the *memento* is recited: "remember . . . the spirits . . . who are of the true faith, from righteous Abel unto this day: unto them do you

22. Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Chapter 110, 272–73.

23. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 21.24, 1003.

24. Gregory, *Dialogues*, Book 4.52–59, 269–72 and Book 4.41, 248. See Atwell, "From Augustine to Gregory."

give rest there in the land of the living, in your Kingdom, in the joy of *paradise*, in the bosom of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, our holy fathers; whence pain, and grief, and lamentation have fled: there the light of your countenance looks upon them, and enlightens them for ever." The prayers of the congregation ask for "the rest of our fathers and brethren who have fallen asleep.'"[25] The *Liturgy of St. Mark*, also from the fourth century, contains this petition: "give peace to the souls . . . who have fallen asleep in Jesus . . . . Especially remember those whose memory we this day celebrate." The deacon then reads a name-list of the departed and lays it on the altar, and the priest concludes "graciously bestow upon them in your Kingdom your promised blessing."[26] The *Liturgy of the Blessed Apostles*, which is among the oldest services, includes an element during the Eucharist called "At the Commemoration of Saints," where God is asked to "spare the offenses and sins of the dead."[27]

The *Liturgy of John Chrysostom* was developed in the fourth century and became the most common rite in the churches of the Byzantine Empire. It includes a litany in which the people "supplicate for the repose of the souls of the servants of God . . . who are fallen asleep, and that every offense . . . be forgiven them. That the Lord bestow their souls where the righteous are at rest." After reciting a list of the fathers and patriarchs, the priest continues, "remember all those who have fallen asleep in hope of the resurrection of life eternal." He then commemorates the departed by name, ending with "give them rest . . . where the light of your countenance watches over them." After the people have communed, he prays: "wash away . . . the sins of those who have here been commemorated."[28] The *Liturgy of St. Gregory of Nazianzus*, after naming the departed, asks God to grant them "a place of refreshment, light and peace."[29] The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth-century manual on worship and doctrine, gives instructions regarding the "Bidding Prayer for Those Departed." Commemorations are limited to the faithful—"for our brethren that are at rest in Christ, that God . . . may forgive him every sin . . . ,

25. *Divine Liturgy of St. James*, 538, 540, 543, 546 and 542.
26. *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark*, 556.
27. *Divine Liturgy of the Blessed Apostles*, 564–65.
28. *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, 29, 46–47 and 59.
29. *Liturgy of St. Gregory*.

and give him his lot in the land of the pious;" prayers "do not at all profit the ungodly who are dead."[30]

In the early Christian era prayer for the dead was a well-established rite. Its subjects were the faithful; those who died outside the church were typically not remembered. Its purpose was intercessory and twofold—asking God for peace and refreshment and for pardon and forgiveness. In these centuries prayer for the dead did not presuppose purgatory.[31] But, as a Church of England report points out, "the spread of a belief that in the intermediate state the souls of the departed were subjected to a process of punishment and purification in purgatory, and, therefore, were in pain, altered the character of prayers for the dead, and made them to a large extent supplications for the delivery of the souls of the departed from suffering."[32]

The Medieval Roman Catholic Church: Prayer for Release from Purgatory

The fate of the dead in the afterlife, Peter Marshall says, "was the hub around which the theology of the [medieval] church revolved."[33] There was a change, first, in the *quality* of prayer for the dead. In the ancient church such prayer was consoling; there was no reference to a place of pain. While this remained true in the East, it gradually changed in the West.

30. *Constitutions of Holy Apostles*, Book 8.41–43, 497–98. Prayers for the dead are found in each of the early rites printed in Hatchett, *Seven Pre-Reformation Eucharistic Liturgies*.

31. In addition to prayer, almsgiving was an important afterlife ritual and a part of Christian funerals. Brown (*Ransom of Soul*) traces how fear of hell and last judgment motivated rich Christians to donate substantial wealth to the church as a form of *remedium*—healing and protection for the safety of the soul, to bring to heaven themselves and their loved ones (166). Money spent by the living could benefit the dead, purging sins not expiated in this life. These financial gifts stored up treasure in heaven (Luke 12:23; cf. Prov 19:17) and ransomed the soul by wealth (Prov 13:8; Dan 4:27); they provided funds for care of the poor and creation of magnificent works of art and architecture. Augustine taught that the rich could atone for sin (63, 91–96) and transfer earthly wealth to heaven through almsgiving. Acts of mercy by the rich to the poor reflected (and motivated) God's mercy to sinners (43). The links between fear of hell, atonement for sin, and almsgiving greatly increased the wealth of the church—by the eighth century, monasteries and convents serving as "powerhouses of prayer for the dead" had proliferated in Western Europe (20, 197, 205).

32. Church of England, *Report of Royal Commission*, 1.

33. Marshall, *Belief and Dead*, 7.

"The thought of the Church in regard to death passed," Richard Tollinton says, "from glad and confident serenity . . . into the somber theology of legalism and judgment."[34] Geoffrey Rowell agrees: "Easter joy and hope . . . characterized the funeral liturgies of the early church"—but by the Middle Ages had been replaced by "notes of fear and punishment."[35] The central hymn of the *Requiem* (Latin for "rest") Mass emphasized *dies irae* ("day of wrath and doom impending") and *lacrimosa* ("day of tears and mourning [which] man for judgment must prepare"). Joseph Ratzinger contrasts "the early Christian invocation *maranatha* [in which] there is a joyful hope for the Christ who will come soon" with the medieval *dies irae* where "we hear only of the fear of judgment."[36] This shift in the quality of prayer for the departed followed the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the period of persecution, the Fathers assumed "Christian universalism"—that salvation was guaranteed to all baptized church members no matter how sinful their lives. But, Megan McLaughlin explains,

> as the Church found a recognized place in society and attracted a growing number of converts, a new pessimism became evident in the writings of the Church leaders and in the prayers of the liturgy. Awareness of the sin to be found within a larger and . . . more worldly church grew, and as a result confidence in the salvation of the faithful slowly began to give way to anxiety about the fate of individual Christians after death.

By the Middle Ages "it was no longer assumed that those who died in the faith deserved to be welcomed into heaven. Only if their faults were forgiven or purged away could they . . . enter the company of the elect."[37] Prayers of hope for the dead became prayers of fear.

In addition to a change in quality, there was tremendous increase in the *quantity* of prayer for the dead. This was the result of two ideas, Marshall says: first, belief "that the majority of the faithful dead did not proceed immediately to the beatific vision of God in heaven, but underwent a painful purgation"—and second, the conviction that, in the

34. Tollinton, "Prayer for Departed," 630 and 637.

35. Rowell, *Liturgy of Christian Burial*, 102. Think of the ancient Easter refrain: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down Death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life" (Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer*, 500).

36. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 5.

37. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 29 and 34; cf. 66 and 104.

communion of saints, "the living had the ability (and the duty) to ease the dead's suffering."[38]

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas explained the logic of medieval prayer for the dead. The doctrine of the communion of saints implies that "one man can be assisted by the merits of another"—and "hence the suffrages [Latin for 'supplication'] of the living profit the dead." Prayer cannot help unsaved adults in hell or unbaptized children in limbo—"we must not believe that the suffrages of the living . . . change their state from unhappiness to happiness." Nor can prayer benefit the blessed: "as the saints in heaven are free from all need, being inebriated with the plenty of God's house . . . , they are not competent to be assisted by suffrages." Prayer only assists those in purgatory, where "punishment . . . is intended to supplement the satisfaction which was not fully completed in the body. . . . The works of one person can avail for another's satisfaction . . . [and] the suffrages of the living . . . profit those who are in purgatory" by removing punishment and shortening time there.[39]

The first official pronouncement of these doctrines came at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. The sinful baptized "are purged after their death, by purgatorial or purificatory penalties. . . . For the alleviation of these penalties, they are served by the suffrages of the living faithful." These teachings, elaborated in 1439 at the Council of Florence and reaffirmed in 1563 at the Council of Trent, became the defining doctrines of the late Middle Ages.[40]

Purgatory, McLaughlin says, was "an extension of the penitential system into the next world."[41] The idea was that while original sin is cleansed by baptism, post-baptismal sin is forgiven through absolution and penance. Penance has three parts: contrition (sorrow for sin), confession (to a priest who determines what punishment is owed), and satisfaction

38. Marshall, *Belief and Dead*, 7.

39. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Vol. 3, Supplement to the Third Part, Q 71, 2843–58. The Supplement was compiled after Aquinas' death by his close associate Fra Rainaldo da Piperno and draws from Aquinas' earlier writings, especially his commentary on Book 4 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, written some twenty years earlier.

40. Second Council of Lyons, cited in Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 285 and Roman Catholic Church, Council of Trent, Session 25, "Decree Concerning Purgatory."

41. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 234 and 220. See Walls, *Purgatory*, 62–64. The Archbishops' Commission (*Prayer and Departed*, 35) points out that the shift in late antiquity from *public* confession and absolution *after* penance to *private* confession and absolution *before* penance led to the medieval idea of purgatory where incomplete penance was worked off.

(acts that pay that debt). The concept of satisfaction assumes a distinction between guilt (which is forgiven when we repent) and punishment, of which there are two kinds: eternal (which is entirely removed) and temporary (which we must endure in proportion to our sins). Purgatory was the theological solution to the problem of *deferred* penance. Robert Eno notes that in the Middle Ages "more and more people simply put off penance until their death beds. . . . The idea of purgatory as the 'locus' for satisfying temporal punishment due to sins emerged from this impasse."[42] Medieval prayer for the dead also assumed *tariffed* penance (that specific sins had set penalties and that every sin could be removed by a certain number of spiritual works) as well as *vicarious* penance (that satisfaction could be made as an act of charity by anyone on behalf of others).[43]

The idea that sins not atoned for in this life could be forgiven after death was accompanied by an instrumental view of the Mass as the most effective form of intercession, especially masses of special intention done with a particular purpose, such as assisting those in purgatory. Masses became what McLaughlin calls "intercessory 'units'" which were understood "in essentially mechanical terms. Each Mass . . . performed for the dead [was] seen as a unit of force which could push against the weight of sin until the soul was finally released from its sufferings." Since each Mass had a defined value, "the number of 'units' accumulated determined how quickly the soul would be freed from purgatorial torment."[44] Both clergy and laity were obsessed with securing as much prayer as possible. Single rituals became whole series of Masses for the dead—and where early Christians commemorated the departed collectively, medieval prayer was often performed in private services held apart from regular Sunday

42. Eno, "Fathers and Cleansing Fire," 200–201.

43. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints*, 11, 154, and 219. In the ancient church, Brown (*Ransom of Soul*, 125–26) says, "major sins that affected the community as a whole [were] subject to public penance. But there were so many other sins committed by so many other, small-time sinners . . . . [Once] Christianity became a majority religion and the Church was filled with average . . . sinners . . . the early Christian system of public penance became unworkable" and was replaced by private confession and penance. Sin came to be seen as a monetary debt which, like money, can be calibrated in precise amounts—and God came to be seen as a debt manager who could set harsh or lenient repayment schedules or remit debts entirely. Constant daily sin required regular confession and tariffed—precisely measured—penance for each offence (97, 191). Depending on their different mix of sins, souls moved through purgatory to heaven at different speeds, like runners spread out in a marathon, not like passengers grouped together in an airport waiting room (13).

44. Ibid., 234–35.

liturgy at side-altars in a church by hired clerics. Chantries—endowments which supported chapels and paid priests to say Mass for the souls of the founders—became common. Henry VII of England, for example, provided in his will for 10,000 Masses and built a chapel at Westminster Abbey to house monks who would pray for him.[45] Marshall explains that less affluent individuals established temporary chantries requiring prayer "for a specified period, most commonly a year" or "for a specific number of masses, usually the series of thirty known as a trental," made over thirty days. Gifts to a parish church meant inclusion in the "bede-roll"—a name-list "recited at least once a year in full, and in a shortened form during . . . weekly Sunday Mass."[46]

Funerals included the *placebo* (vespers on the evening before) and *dirge* (matins on the morning of Mass and burial) as well as processions from home to church to graveyard. These services were repeated four weeks later at "month's mind" and on the anniversary at "year's mind." From early times the church had celebrated the saints and martyrs on All Saints Day, November 1. All Souls Day, commemorated on November 2, was instituted in eleventh-century France as a day of prayer for those in purgatory. The practice spread across Europe, becoming an official feast in the fourteenth century.[47]

The Reformation Church: Prayer for the Dead Rejected

The medieval church, Marshall says, was a purgatorial institution—an "intercessory industry" focused on praying for the dead. Financial and clerical abuses created by Masses, invoking saints, and selling of indulgences were the precipitating cause of the Reformation. Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Anglicans all opposed purgatory and the "flood of intercessory prayer" that it generated—arguing that they are not found in Scripture but are part of a larger system of beliefs and practices that undermine justification by faith alone.[48] The Reformers also denied an intermediate state of imperfect bliss, since this encouraged prayer to improve the condition of the dead. They taught instead that the dead are either unconscious between death and resurrection (soul-sleep, sug-

45. Griffiths, "Purgatory," 442.
46. Marshall, *Belief and Dead*, 312.
47. Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 125.
48. Marshall, *Belief and Dead*, 81 and 25; cf. 312, 63, and 73.

gested by Martin Luther and some Anabaptists) or that they immediately enter heaven or hell (as John Calvin claimed). In either case praying for those in the next life is pointless since it has no effect on their state.

Lutheran Protestantism

Luther rejected any practice that undermines confidence in salvation; a person who thinks "I . . . must render satisfaction for my sins; therefore I shall make a will and shall bequeath a definite amount of money for building churches and for buying prayers and sacrifices for the dead by the monks and priests" dies with "a faith in works."[49] In *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper* he accepts a kind of minimal, private prayer for the dead. "Since Scripture gives us no information on the subject, I regard it as no sin to pray . . . in this . . . fashion: 'Dear God, if this soul is in a condition accessible to mercy, be thou gracious to it.' And when this has been done once or twice, let it suffice. For vigils and *requiem* masses and yearly celebrations of *requiems* are useless."[50] In other writings Luther seems to reject the practice entirely: "funeral ceremonies . . . are to be retained . . . , not that there should be prayers for the dead."[51] The *Smalcald Articles* state that "when [Roman Catholics] have abolished the traffic in masses for purgatory . . . , we will then discuss with them . . . whether the dead should be remembered at the Eucharist."[52] In *Preface to the Burial Hymns* Luther writes, "we have . . . completely abolished . . . vigils, masses for the dead, processions, purgatory, and all other hocus-pocus on behalf of the dead."[53] In *Table Talk* he argues that early church practice "proves nothing;" instead, "it is necessary to stick to the clear Word of God."[54] He even objects to praying that "refreshment, light, and peace" be given to those "who have gone before us . . . and repose in the sleep of peace"—since they are already at rest "why should you pray for them?"[55]

Official Lutheran statements denounce purgatory but not prayer for the dead. *Defense of the Augsburg Confession* states that "no testimony

49. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21–25*, 316.
50. Luther, *Word and Sacrament III*, 369.
51. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37*, 273–74.
52. Luther, *Smalcald Articles*, Part II Article II: "Of the Mass," Sections 12–15.
53. Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, 326.
54. Luther, *Table Talk*, 259–60.
55. Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, 322.

concerning the praying of the dead is extant in the Scriptures"—and yet does not condemn such prayers. "We know that the ancients speak of prayer for the dead, which we do not prohibit . . . . [Instead] we . . . are contending with you who are defending a heresy . . . , namely, that the Mass justifies . . . , that it merits the remission of guilt and punishment."[56] Once separated from belief in purgatory, praying for the dead—while not encouraged—is permitted.

Reformed Protestantism

Calvin, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, condemns both purgatory and intercession for the dead. "When my adversaries . . . raise against me the objections that prayers for the dead have been a custom for thirteen hundred years, I ask them . . . , by what Word of God . . . is this done? . . . Since the entire law and gospel do not furnish so much as a single syllable of leave to pray for the dead, it is to profane the invocation of God to attempt more than God has bidden us." Even if the early church was right to make such prayers, Calvin says, "there is a wide difference" between praying "in memory of the dead" and praying for deliverance of souls from purgatory. Finally, the saved dead already possess blessedness: "all godly men . . . immediately after death enjoy blessed repose. If such is their condition, what [benefit] . . . will our prayers confer upon them?"[57]

Ulrich Zwingli, in his sixty-seven theses on reform, rejects purgatory, but allows prayers for the dead: "that mankind earnestly calls to God to show mercy to the dead I do not condemn."[58] Reformed doctrinal standards deny both purgatory and prayer for the departed. The *Second Helvetic Confession* declares that "the faithful, after bodily death, go directly to Christ, and, therefore, do not need the . . . prayers of the living for the dead. . . . Likewise . . . unbelievers are immediately cast into hell from which no exit is opened . . . by any services of the living."[59]

The Reformers also rejected the Roman Catholic interpretation of the communion of saints as the whole family of God—living and dead. Instead of being the spiritual union of all Christians, it is a fellowship

56. *Defense of Augsburg Confession*, Article 21, "Of the Invocation of Saints" and Article 24, "Of the Mass: Of the Mass for the Dead."

57. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3.5.10, 681–84.

58. Zwingli, *Articles*, Articles 57 and 60.

59. *Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter 26.

between living believers, not with the departed. Luther restricts the communion of saints to "the whole Christian Church on earth," and the *Augsburg Confession* defines it as "the congregation of saints and true believers."[60] Calvin, too, identified the communion of saints with the visible and invisible church in this life. While acknowledging that "we are in fellowship with the holy patriarchs, who [are] dead," he denies that this includes prayer for them: while "believers . . . offer prayers before God for the brethren . . . this is inappropriately applied to the dead."[61] The *Heidelberg Catechism* states that the communion of the saints is the bond of fellowship between living "believers, all and everyone," but not between the living and the dead.[62]

The Church of England

The *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*—written under Thomas Cranmer's direction—declares that "the Romish doctrine concerning purgatory . . . is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture." The preliminary draft of this article also condemned "prayer for the dead," but these words were removed.[63] The *Homily on Prayer* denies that prayer can help the departed: "Scripture teaches . . . that the soul of man passing out of the body, goes straightways either to heaven, or else to hell, whereof the one needs no prayer, and the other is without redemption. . . . Let us not therefore dream either of purgatory, or of prayer for the souls of them that be dead."[64] Parliament closed all chantries and monasteries founded to pray for the dead and banned indulgences—as well as practices like bede-rolls, intercessory Masses, and ringing of bells for the repose of the dead on All Souls Day.[65]

The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* included petitions for the departed, both at Holy Communion and the burial service. These were eliminated in the 1552 revision—where prayer is for the living church

60. Luther, *Small Catechism*, Section II (The Creed) Article 3; *Augsburg Confession*, Article 8.

61. Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 3.25.6, 997 and Book 3.20.27, 887. Also see Book 4.1.3, 1015.

62. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 55.

63. Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer*, "Thirty Nine Articles," Article 22. Also see Hardy, "Blessed Dead," 172.

64. Church of England, *Homily on Prayer*, chapter 19.3.

65. See Kreider, *English Chantries*.

on earth, not for the whole of Christ's church (which includes the dead); the funeral Eucharist was also removed.[66] The 1545 *Primer*—a book of private devotions for laypeople—declared that the intercessions of the living "avail . . . to purge away sin and make [the departed] partakers of thy redemption." The 1559 revision replaces prayers for forgiveness with petitions for "peace and rest."[67] Books of prayer by Lancelot Andrewes and John Cosin, however, contain petitions for the departed.[68] The *Westminster Confession of Faith*—an official standard of Presbyterian churches—rejects purgatory and declares that "prayer is to be made . . . for all sorts of men living . . . , but not for the dead."[69]

The mainline Reformers were not alone in denying the doctrine of purgatory and dismantling the structures of prayer for the dead. Anabaptists, too, rejected such rituals. These sixteenth-century Radical Reformers opposed both Roman Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism—from which the practice of praying for the dead had already been jettisoned. The *Schleitheim Confession* simply condemns "all Catholic and Protestant works and church services."[70]

Concluding Remarks

Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics continue to pray for the departed—Protestants remain opposed to the practice. Only in Anglicanism has it been cautiously accepted.[71] While the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century divines condemned intercession to release souls from purgatory,

66. Marshall, *Belief and Dead*, 110 and Rowell, *Liturgy of Christian Burial*, 87.

67. Rowell, *Liturgy of Christian Burial*, 89–90.

68. See Archbishops' Commission, *Prayer and Departed*, 74; Boggis, *Praying for Dead*, 219; Hardy, "Blessed Dead," 163.

69. *Westminster Confession*, chapter 32, 81–82 and chapter 21.4, 58.

70. *Schleitheim Confession*, Article 4. Currie (*Born Fundamentalist*, 22) points out that "at the time of the Reformation there were two very different groups of Protestants. The Lutherans, Calvinists and others rejected only those doctrines of the Catholic Church they believed directly contradicted Scripture. Everything else remained. Anabaptists, on the other hand, rejected all doctrines . . . that they could not directly support from Scripture. This was much more radical. The changes were far more extensive."

71. This section draws on Bennett, "Prayer for Departed"; Cocksworth, *Prayer and Departed*, chapter 2; Plumptre, *Spirits in Prison*, chapter 9; and Welsby, "Prayers for Dead." For a collection of writings in Anglicanism since the sixteenth century, see Archbishops' Commission, *Prayer and Departed*, Appendix 2.

some—such as James Ussher and Jeremy Taylor—accepted remembrance of the Christian dead as practiced by the early church. In the 1662 Prayer Book, commemoration was added to the Eucharistic prayer.

John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement but remained within the Anglican Church, prayed for the dead. His *Collection of Forms of Prayer* includes this ancient petition: "grant them to rest in the region of the living . . . and . . . give them . . . a happy resurrection."[72] In defending the practice against dissenters, Wesley asserts that "in this kind of general prayer . . . for the faithful departed, I conceive myself to be clearly justified, both by the earliest antiquity, by the Church of England and by the Lord's Prayer. . . . Praying thus for the dead, 'that God would shortly accomplish the number of God's elect and hasten God's Kingdom,'" he concludes, "you will not easily prove to be any corruption at all."[73]

The nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic movement sought to recover the Roman Catholic roots of the Church of England. John Henry Newman argued that, rightly understood, various practices—including prayer for the dead and funeral Eucharists—are compatible with the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Many churchmen, while rejecting a punishing purgatory, accepted a sanctifying process after death and prayer for the increased bliss of the Christian dead. The evangelical Church Association, on the other hand, opposed such practices. They repeated the arguments of earlier formularies, condemning all prayer for the departed as unscriptural, incompatible with salvation by grace, inseparable from belief in purgatory, and rejected in Anglican tradition. In 1873 a guild was founded to promote celebration of All Souls Day with Masses of intercession for those in purgatory, practices that a 1906 commission declared inconsistent with Anglican teaching.[74]

During World War I, with its massive deaths, praying for the dead as acts of pastoral care became common. Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, observed that "the abuses of [past practice] need not now, four centuries onward, . . . hinder . . . the absolutely trustful prayer . . . for him whom we shall not greet on earth again, but who, in his Father's loving keeping, still lives, and . . . still grows from strength to

72. Wesley, cited in Chapman, "Rest and Light Perpetual," 40.

73. Wesley, cited in Holden, *Wesley in Company*, chapters 10 ("Of the Communion of Saints," 82–83) and 11 ("Of Prayers for the Dead," 84–87).

74. See Russell, "Intermediate State and Prayer for Departed" and Church of England, *Report of Royal Commission*.

strength . . . in deepened reverence and love."[75] The 1938 Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine studied the matter and concluded: "if there is any such fellowship of living and departed as Christians have always believed, and if the thought of growth and of purification after death is not to be dogmatically excluded, there is no theological objection in principle to prayer for the departed."[76]

There is no obvious mention of prayer for the dead in Scripture—but by the third century commemoration at the Eucharist was well-established. The nature of prayer for the dead changed over time; where the ancient church prayed with hope (for peace and pardon of those in God's presence), the medieval Western church prayed with anxiety (for release of souls from suffering in purgatory)—and Protestants abandoned the practice almost entirely. The next chapter examines the current practice of prayer for the dead in the three main branches of the Church—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant.

75. Davidson, cited in Bell, *Randall Davidson*, 823.

76. Archbishops' Commission, *Doctrine in Church of England*, 216.