



**AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter**  
Global Thought Leader  
Real Insights & Authority



## THE LORD'S PRAYER

There was a controversy created by the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Harry Jenkins MP, when he called for debate over whether the Lord's Prayer, read at the opening of Federal Parliament each day, should be replaced. There could instead, for example, be an acknowledgement of the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land of Australia.

The Lord's Prayer has been said since the 1901 and so it is one of the oldest features of the national parliament. It is also recited in some other Commonwealth parliaments. Coincidentally there was a similar move in the Canadian federal parliament to scrap the Lord's Prayer.

The argument is that Australia is no longer a specifically Christian country and so the religious diversity needs to be recognized – including the fact that many Australians have no religious faith at all. The Lord's Prayer seems irrelevant to many Australians.

In the United States the debate has been going the other way. Under the 1787 Constitution (which still remains in operation) the country wanted to avoid the religious wars that had been such a feature of Europe's history. There is a strict division between "church and state" so that the government can have nothing to do with religious matters.

On a trip to Australia a few years ago President Bush had a meeting with church figures to learn about how Australian and state governments have financed Christian (and other religious) welfare organizations. He has had great difficulty in getting similar funding schemes through the US Congress – "faith-based initiatives" - because of the opposition to a government having anything at all to do with any religion.

It is even illegal in the US to say the Lord's Prayer (or any other prayer) before an event held on a sports ground financed by government money. Religious conservatives are campaigning to have the Lord's Prayer said at public events.

The Lord's Prayer got publicity just under a decade ago from a very different source when it got banned by some British radio stations and the BBC's pop music radio channel (Radio 1). Christian singer Cliff Richard recorded the prayer's words to the music of "Auld Lang Syne". It was called the "Millennium Prayer" and it was released in November 1999 in time for the year 2000.

Some radio stations refused to play it claiming that the song lacked a broad musical appeal. Britain they claimed was now no longer a Christian country and so there was no market for Christian music.

Christians responded by buying additional copies of the single. Some non-Christian observers of the music scene were outraged because they saw all this as a manipulation of the charts. Entertainment celebrities joined in the controversy for and against the song. It was easily one of the most controversial episodes in the singer's long career.

All the controversy was a great help to the "Millennium Prayer". It sold over a million copies, reaching number one in Britain, where it stayed for three weeks. It gave Cliff the unique achievement of having had number one hits in five consecutive decades. It also raised about a million pounds for the charity Children's Promise.

The Lord's Prayer is the best known prayer in Christianity. It is the only prayer Jesus is recorded as saying. Since it was taught by Jesus himself, it has always been regarded by Christians as uniquely sacred.

The prayer has two purposes. First, Jesus was asked by his disciples how they should pray and so the prayer is in the format that he thought was best. His disciples had often seen him at prayer and so they wanted to know what to do. The prayer contains provisions glorifying God and then going on to make requests for the chief physical and spiritual needs of humanity.

The prayer's second purpose was as a specific prayer. It is now the most commonly used Christian prayer in the world. International religious services are notable for the way in which Christian gatherings say the prayer simultaneously in their own languages. It is therefore a unifying factor in an increasingly diversified faith.

The prayer opens with "Our Father". This was a startling approach to God, who was seen by the contemporary Jews as a distant, judgemental figure rather than an intimate parental figure. It also emphasised the community nature of the new faith because it suggests all followers have a common father and so are in fact linked together as brothers and sisters.

During the European Middle Ages, when most people could not read or write in any language, "Our Father" was taught by rote as the Latin phrase – "Pater noster". Lay members in the monasteries who knew no other Latin were told to recite the Lord's Prayer a certain number of times per day (perhaps as many as a hundred) as an alternative to the other Latin prayers being recited by the monks.

To count these repetitions they made use of pebbles or beads strung upon a cord. This string of beads was then called "pater noster". It then became the basis of counting "Hail Marys" and saying the rosary.



The Lord's Prayer opening words are currently controversial in some Christian circles because of the depiction of God as father. Feminists would prefer to see some gender-neutral phrase, such as "Our Creator".

Keith Suter