

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

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David Gambrell is associate for worship in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship and editor of *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts*. He serves as a representative to the Consultation on Common Texts (the ecumenical body responsible for the Revised Common Lectionary), was an advisory member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (the committee responsible for *Glory to God*, the 2013 Presbyterian hymnal), and is a participant in the eighth round of the Roman Catholic/Reformed Dialogue (2012–2018).

Setting the Table

Scripture

Romans 8:26–27 The Holy Spirit enlivens and empowers our prayer so that we may join with the faithful of all the ages in seeking the will and way of God. Therefore, we rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit as we explore this ancient and abiding prayer of the church, the Great Thanksgiving.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to pray. Just as the disciples asked Jesus to help them learn to pray, we turn to you, Holy God, with eager minds and open hearts, ready to be shaped by your Word, ready to be moved by your Spirit. Speak to us this day through the words of the Scriptures, through the witness of the church, and through the voices of our neighbors. Open our lips, and reorder our lives until we learn to pray without ceasing and to glorify you in all things; through Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Amen.

Introduction

Our eyes are fixed on the table at the center of the sanctuary. The time has come for a joyful feast—a feast of gratitude for God’s grace. The pastor recalls how the risen Lord broke bread with his disciples. She invites those who trust in Christ to share the meal that he has prepared. Then she extends her hands, saying, “The Lord be with you.” We respond, “And also with you.”

Something important is happening here—something mysterious and ancient, yet familiar and always new. With a cloud of witnesses that spans millennia and circles the globe, we are joining in the great prayer of the church, the Great Thanksgiving. Around a common table, we praise God our Maker, proclaim the mystery of faith in Jesus Christ, and pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. What better way to celebrate the good news of our redemption than to break bread together as Christ taught? How else could we respond to all

God's goodness to us but to "lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" (Psalm 116:13)?

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving is the centerpiece of Christian liturgy, mysterious and ancient, familiar and always new. The Great Thanksgiving is *mysterious* because it draws us into prayerful communion with the triune God. It is *ancient* in that it originates in the worship of Israel and the earliest Christian communities and has been handed down through centuries by the people of God. The prayer is *familiar* because it is brimming with biblical themes and images, even as it is rooted in the everyday practices of common meals. The eucharistic liturgy is *always new* in that it beckons us toward the coming realm of God, that joyful feast at the end of the age.

"Lift up your hearts," the pastor continues, raising her hands in an ancient, prayerful gesture. With one voice, we respond, saying, "We lift them to the Lord." "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," the pastor then says, and we affirm, "It is right to give our thanks and praise."

The History of the Great Thanksgiving

Most scholars agree that the Great Thanksgiving has its roots in the worship of ancient Israel; however, experts differ over the details of the prayer's origins. One theory maintains that the Great Thanksgiving can be traced to prayers of thanksgiving that were made in the sacrificial offerings of temple worship. Another proposes that it comes from prayers of blessing at fellowship meals. Recent studies suggest no single point of origin but rather a richly woven fabric of sources, as multiple streams of influence converged in the liturgical life of the early church. One thing is certain—Jewish liturgy provided (and still provides) abundant resources for praising, thanking, and blessing God, and the first Christians inherited and adapted that vital tradition.

While the Bible offers little evidence about the *texts* of eucharistic prayers, a remarkably consistent pattern of *action* occurs whenever Jesus shares a meal with his followers: taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. This sequence of verbs may be found when Jesus feeds the multitude

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(Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:11); when he eats the Passover meal with his disciples (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19); when the risen Lord breaks bread with two followers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30); and in the worship of the early church as described by Paul (1 Corinthians 11:23–24). This fourfold pattern continues to shape what the church does around the Lord’s Table, “translated” into the liturgical elements of the Offering (taking), Great Thanksgiving (blessing), Breaking of the Bread (breaking), and Communion of the People (giving).

In the writings of early church leaders we have a few glimpses of the emerging practices of eucharistic prayer. The *Didache*, a manual for life in Christian community thought to date to the first century, includes brief prayers of thanksgiving over the cup and bread, as well as a prayer of thanksgiving after the meal. Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*, a defense of Christian faith and life in the second century, seems to suggest that early eucharistic prayers were variable and improvised: “Bread and wine and water are brought up, and the president [presider] likewise sends up prayers and thanksgivings according to the best of his ability, and the people assent, saying the Amen.”¹ The *Apostolic Tradition*, a third- or fourth-century manual for Christian life, provides a complete text for the Great Thanksgiving, including the introductory dialogue between presider and people (“The Lord be with you,” etc.).

In subsequent centuries, a number of “families” of eucharistic prayers developed. The Antiochene pattern (found in ancient liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox tradition) has been especially influential for the ecumenical liturgical movement and inspires the structure for the Great Thanksgivings included in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*. Another prominent tradition is the eucharistic prayer of the Roman Catholic Mass. It was the Roman rite to which sixteenth-century Reformers Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, and Cranmer responded, generating new streams of eucharistic prayer in Protestant tradition.

1. R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1987), 30.

The Liturgical Context of the Great Thanksgiving

The Great Thanksgiving exists not in isolation but as an integral part of the Service for the Lord's Day. Christians gather to worship on Sunday because the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week. According to Luke, the disciples' first encounter with the risen Christ took place on the evening of that same day, on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus revealed himself to them in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13–43). Similarly, in the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples while they are sitting around a table (Mark 16:14). John also reports two encounters with the risen Christ on the first day of the week (John 20:19–23, 26–29) as well as a breakfast of bread and fish (John 21:1–14).

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do so in the presence of the risen Lord, who continues to share this meal with us. Reformed Christians believe that Jesus Christ is truly and spiritually present in the feast that he prepares. Therefore, the Great Thanksgiving is intended to be a joyful prayer in the presence of Christ, who is risen indeed!

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Jesus Christ—the Word of God—is also present to us through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. When we gather each week to listen and respond to the words of the Bible, we proclaim the message of the gospel and celebrate the mystery of faith—that Christ who died is now risen and is coming to reign in glory. We come to hear and believe the good news—in Christ, all creation is redeemed, sin is forgiven, and death's dominion is destroyed forever.

Since Christ is present in our worship particularly through Word and sacrament—the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the Lord's Supper—Reformed Christians have long insisted that these things belong together in the Sunday service. John Calvin wrote, “Let it be regarded as a settled principle that the Sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.”² Calvin taught that the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.14.17.

of the covenant and seals of faith, confirming the promise of the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. The sacraments should not take place apart from the Word but in concert with it. Therefore, in Presbyterian worship the proclamation of the Word must always precede the celebration of the sacrament.

The fourfold order of worship—Gathering, Word, Eucharist, Sending—provided in the *Book of Common Worship* reflects this understanding. Though many Presbyterian congregations do not celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day, in recent years more churches are discovering the spiritual benefits of more frequent communion. Calvin himself believed the Supper could be celebrated best “if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week.”³

The Shape of the Great Thanksgiving

Christian worship is a thoroughly Trinitarian event—from beginning to end, an expression of blessing and honor and glory to the triune God. In its classic formulations, liturgical prayer is Trinitarian in nature, offered to God (the Father) through Jesus Christ (the Son) in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the Great Thanksgiving is expressed in direct address to God, offered “through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.” Furthermore, like the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds, the Great Thanksgiving has a threefold, Trinitarian structure: thanksgiving to God, remembrance of Jesus Christ, and invocation of the Holy Spirit. As indicated above, this shape accords with the ancient Antiochene model of eucharistic prayer, now widely practiced across the ecumenical church.

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In each of the three sections of the Great Thanksgiving, it is possible to identify a primary theme. The emphasis of the first section of the prayer, between the introductory dialogue (“The Lord be with you”) and the Sanctus (“Holy, holy, holy”), is praise and gratitude to God for the gifts of God’s grace in creation and the

3. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

events of salvation history. The second section, between the Sanctus and the Memorial Acclamation (“Christ has died”), focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, as well as his death, resurrection, ascension to reign, and promised return; this section sometimes includes the institution narrative of the Lord’s Supper. The third and final section, between the Memorial Acclamation and the concluding Doxology, is principally a prayer for the Holy Spirit, who nourishes us with Christ’s presence, unites us as Christ’s body, and sends us out to feed others in Christ’s name. The Great Thanksgiving ends with a summary statement of praise to the triune God (the concluding Doxology), to which the people respond with their Great Amen. The Lord’s Prayer follows.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Directory for Worship outlines a similar structure in its description of the eucharistic prayer:

The one presiding is to lead the people in the prayer,

- (a) thanking God for creation and providence, for covenant history, and for seasonal blessings, with an acclamation of praise;
- (b) remembering God’s acts of salvation in Jesus Christ: his birth, life, death, resurrection, and promise of coming, and institution of the Supper (if not otherwise spoken), together with an acclamation of faith;
- (c) calling upon the Holy Spirit to draw the people into the presence of the risen Christ so that they
 - (1’) may be fed,
 - (2’) may be joined in the communion of saints to all God’s people and to the risen Christ, and
 - (3’) may be sent to serve as faithful disciples; followed by an ascription of praise to the triune God, and
- (d) the Lord’s Prayer.⁴

While the Directory for Worship does not prescribe a specific *text* for the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper—allowing for a great degree of freedom within form—it is evident that the kind of prayer it commends corresponds closely to the classic ecumenical model of eucharistic prayer.

4. *Book of Order*, Part II of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), W-3.3613. Used by permission.

Spiritual Practice

Explore the Trinitarian shape of the Great Thanksgiving by writing a “eucharistic haiku.” The first line (five syllables) names a gift of God’s grace, something you’re thankful for; the second (seven syllables) is a related biblical story or image of Jesus; the third (five syllables) is a prayer in the Spirit. (You don’t necessarily have to follow the syllable pattern.) Here’s an example:

God of love and loaves,
manna in the wilderness,
be my daily bread.

Questions for Reflection

Examine some of the Bible verses provided in the second paragraph of the section titled “The History of the Great Thanksgiving,” which describes the fourfold action of Jesus’ meals (taking, blessing, breaking, giving). What does this pattern reveal about how we should celebrate the Lord’s Supper? What might it suggest about the shape of Christian life?

Why is the liturgical setting of the Great Thanksgiving important? What does this context (the Service for the Lord’s Day) imply about the way we ought to celebrate the Lord’s Supper? How does this compare or contrast with your experience of the sacrament?

What does it mean to pray “through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ”? What does it mean to pray “in the unity of the Holy Spirit”? How do these affirmations affect your understanding of prayer in general and of the Great Thanksgiving in particular?