

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
To the Leader	4
Session 1. Setting the Table	5
Session 2. Giving Thanks to God	10
Session 3. Remembering Jesus Christ	15
Session 4. Praying for the Holy Spirit.....	20
Session 5. Do This.....	25
Session 6. Extending the Feast.....	30

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Setting the Table

Scripture

Romans 8:26–27

Main Idea

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving is the centerpiece of Christian liturgy, mysterious and ancient, familiar and always new. It is an integral part of worship, a joyful prayer in the presence of the risen Christ, who invites us to feast with him at the Lord’s Supper.

Teaching Points

This session invites participants to:

1. The historical roots of the Great Thanksgiving, extending from the worship of ancient Israel, the table prayers and practices of Jesus, and the worship of the early church.
2. How the Great Thanksgiving is related to the other parts of a worship service.
3. The Trinitarian structure of the Great Thanksgiving: thanksgiving to God, remembrance of Jesus Christ, and invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s books

Christ candle and lighter

Loaf of bread and cup

Large basket or box

Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
(at least one copy)

Several copies of “A Great Thanksgiving for Children” (pcusa.org/resource/eucharistic-prayer-children/), the Apostles’ Creed, and the Nicene Creed (save for use in later sessions)

Newsprint and markers

Leader Prep

Prepare for leading each session by reading the participant's book and highlighting important points. Obtain a copy of the *Book of Common Worship*, and familiarize yourself with the Great Thanksgiving prayer, perhaps using parts of it in your personal devotions.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle), a loaf of bread, and a cup or chalice on a small table in the center of your meeting space. The bread and cup will reinforce the connection between the Great Thanksgiving and the Lord's Supper. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture. Place a box or basket for collecting canned goods near the table. Arrange to deliver the cans to a local food pantry at the end of the six-session study.

For Head, be prepared to read the opening of the Great Thanksgiving. Place a sheet of newsprint so that it is clearly visible to all. Have markers handy. Make sure there are enough Bibles for all participants.

For Heart, participants will continue to use Bibles. Be prepared to share a personal experience of encountering Christ in worship if needed to start the discussion. For background on the Lord's Supper and a comparison of the Reformed tradition with other traditions, read the two articles at presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/communion/. Be prepared to talk about the practices of your own congregation in celebrating the Lord's Supper and what might be helps or barriers to encountering Christ.

For Hands, download copies of "A Great Thanksgiving for Children" (pcusa.org/resource/eucharistic-prayer-children/). Also, get copies of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed from a hymnal or the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions* (download at pcusa.org/resource/book-confessions/). Be sure you have enough copies and markers for the number of small groups you anticipate. Be prepared to discuss your understanding of prayer. Review the final section of the Great Thanksgiving, paying particular attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in preparing us to be disciples in the world.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves by sharing something for which they are thankful.
- Draw attention to the bread and cup on the table. Explain that you will not be celebrating communion during this study but that you will be learning about and praying the prayer of thanksgiving that precedes the Lord's Supper in worship.
- Invite participants to bring fresh-baked bread or other foods to eat together during the next five sessions as expressions of God's abundant grace.
- Encourage participants to bring canned goods to share with hungry people in the community.
- Light the Christ candle. Read Romans 8:26–27.
- Invite participants to be open to the Holy Spirit, and invite them to pray the prayer at the beginning of session 1 in the participant's book.

Head

- Say the first six lines of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, inviting the participants to chime in if they know the responses. Ask: *Are these words familiar? Where have you heard them?*
- Review the introduction in the participant's book. Ask: *How can the Great Thanksgiving be both "mysterious" and "familiar," both "ancient" and "always new"?*
- Draw a circle in the middle of a sheet of newsprint. Inside the circle write, "Great Prayer of Thanksgiving." Ask participants to name the various origins of the prayer mentioned in the section about the prayer's history (participant's book, p. 5). Write these on lines radiating out from the circle. Review the history section, asking participants to give examples of thanksgiving prayers in Jewish liturgy (i.e., psalms), the practices of Jesus, and the worship of the early church.
- Look up some of the Bible passages in the history section, noting the recurring pattern: *taking, blessing, breaking, giving*. Ask: *What does this pattern reveal about how we should celebrate the Lord's Supper?*

Heart

- Compare some of the Gospel passages cited in the section on liturgical context (participant's book, p. 7). Note how the disciples encountered the risen Christ (around a table, in the breaking of bread). Ask: *How do you encounter Christ in worship?*
- Note the connection between encountering Christ in Scripture and in the Lord's Supper (Word and Sacrament). Ask: *What does it mean that "Jesus Christ is truly and spiritually present in the feast that he prepares"?*
- Compare the Reformed tradition with other traditions: Reformed Christians don't believe the bread and juice are transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus, but we do believe the elements are more than mere symbols or remembrances; they help us experience the presence of Christ.
- Discuss: *Why is the liturgical setting of the Great Thanksgiving important? What does this context (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 do you think about Calvin's assertion that churches would benefit from celebrating the Lord's Supper "at least once a week"?*

Hands

- Have participants form groups of three to five. Give each group a copy of "A Great Thanksgiving for Children" and the Apostles' and Nicene creeds and markers in three different colors. Note the Trinitarian structure of each. Ask them to circle the sections on each sheet relating to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, using a different color for each.
- Gather and discuss: *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?*
- Examine the final (Holy Spirit) section of the Great Thanksgiving. Ask: *How does this apply to us as we go out to live our lives the rest of the week?*

Depart

- Light the Christ candle.
- Invite anyone who has tried the spiritual practice to share his or her eucharistic haiku.
- Pray a closing prayer. You may want to use the final section of the Great Thanksgiving, which begins, “In union with your church in heaven and on earth. . . .”
- Remind participants to bring canned goods, and ask if anyone would like to bring food to share at the next session.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	2
Introduction to <i>Great Prayer of Thanksgiving</i>	3
Session 1. Setting the Table.....	4
Session 2. Giving Thanks to God.....	11
Session 3. Remembering Jesus Christ.....	19
Session 4. Praying for the Holy Spirit	27
Session 5. Do This	34
Session 6. Extending the Feast	41
Suggestions for Further Study.....	48
Appendix: A Worksheet for Composing a Great Thanksgiving.....	49

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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.

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.

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?