The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

John D. Witvliet, Calvin Symposium on Worship, January 2017

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Thanksgiving (anamnesis) for God’s mighty acts in creation and throughout salvation history up to the advent of Jesus. . .

. . . . we join with the whole creation
to lift our hearts in joyful praise.

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Thanksgiving (anamnesis) continues for Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and for the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

The people are invited to “proclaim the mystery of faith”—a core Christocentric affirmation

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Thanksgiving (anamnesis) continues for the gift of the Holy Spirit, leading to prayers for Holy Spirit’s agency in the celebration of the supper (an epiclesis)

Amen.

As our Lord taught us, we now pray:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and forever. Amen.
In the past 40 years, many Protestant communions have recovered a robust, historically-oriented prayer of thanksgiving at celebrations of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Nearly every official denominational liturgical publication has featured strong examples of this practice.

Examples

Sing! a New Creation 249, 250
Lift Up Your Hearts 784-786, 810-811
Worship Sourcebook
Symposium Program Book

And many others from across the denominational spectrum: Methodist hymnal, Lutheran Worship, Book of Common Prayer, Catholic Eucharistic prayers for mass, Reformed Church in America constitutional liturgy—each featuring unique denominational theological emphases, but each dating back to models that predate theological disagreements.

Yet thousands of local congregations do not practice this for a variety of reasons, including concern over the length of the service, and—quite likely—not really understanding the spiritually formative power of this practice for the daily life and faith of Christian believers.

Other reasons?... fear of written prayers? fear that it appears to be “too liturgical”

Opting instead for... prescribed explanatory forms, extemporaneous explanatory or other forms

This might be one of the “least received” aspects of CICW-related teaching/conferences over the past 20 years...

This session will feature a robust testimony about the value of this ancient practice, deeply rooted in the Psalms,

- so that those who don’t understand it will come to understand and love it,
- those who use it regularly will be better equipped to help people enter into it more deeply,
- those who don’t use it will not only try it, but try it repeatedly over time

and present flexible and creative ideas for local communities in a variety of contexts to embrace this practice.

- See Samuel Wells and Abigail Kocher, Eucharistic Prayers (Eerdmans, 2016)
- Visual “timeline” prayer using multiple visual media
- Musical expansions of these prayers in every imaginable style..
Some excellencies of this approach...

**Tone**

1. It shapes the table celebration around a tone of gratitude...

2. It is both solemn (weighty) and joyful, “the extraordinary breaks into the ordinary,” avoiding a kind of “no big deal” approach

3. It’s poetic and evocative rather than primarily explanatory

**Theological Vision**

4. It practices telling the whole story, “the true story of the whole world,” stretching our time horizons back to creation, ahead to new creation (per N.T. Wright, and many others)

5. It orients us to God’s work in space and also “sets our minds on things above”

6. It is robustly Trinitarian and anti-deistic (in fact, it’s an ideal prayer to resist ‘moralistic therapeutic deism’ as well as Platonism, Arianism, Pelagianism and a cluster of other distortions...)

7. It symphonically weaves together the multiple biblical motifs associated with the Lord’s Supper
   - look up, look within, look around, look back, look ahead
   - Lord’s Supper as
     - Like a seal on a profoundly covenantal relationship
     - A meal of remembrance, communion, and hope
     - A foretaste of heaven
     - A joyful announcement of the revolutionary significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Wright)

**Formative Potential**

8. It is built around memorable phrases, excellence for kids of all ages
   - “Lift up your hearts”
   - “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”
   - “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might .”
   - “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord .”
   - “In Christ, we have been baptized”...

9. It can be contextualized into any language register or cultural context

10. It offers a beautiful summary of key themes in the Christian faith

Other excellencies?

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise,

O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe.

You established your people to be a light for the nations,

and called us to walk in your paths and follow your ways.

Even now, you are coming to bring justice and peace to the world.

You have been our shepherd and savior in every generation.

Though we turned away from you, you were always faithful.

In the fullness of time, you sent your only Son to be our Immanuel.

Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with choirs of angels

with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all the faithful of every time and place

who forever sing to the glory of your name:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

You are holy, O God of majesty,

and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.

In Christ Jesus, you drew near to us for our salvation, teaching us to live in faith and to seek the good of all.

Through his dying and rising, you brought life to the world.

Baptized by John, Christ came to deliver us from sin, and to pour out the Holy Spirit upon your church.

By our faith in Christ, we have the hope of eternal life.

Therefore we celebrate with joy:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us,

that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.

By your Spirit, unite us with Christ and with your church in all the world.

Keep us faithful and alert for the hour of Christ’s coming.

Let us live honorably as children of truth and light,

so that we may eat and drink together in your eternal realm.

Fill us with wisdom and understanding, knowledge and power,

and grant that we may live in harmony with one another

as we await the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

Help us to grow in faith and love, as your people in Christ.

Strengthen our hearts and teach us patience

as we watch and pray for the coming of the Lord.

Give hope and strength to those who call upon your name.

Feed us with the bread of life and fill us with the spirit of joy

so that we may share your grace and peace with all the world.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

all glory and honor are yours, almighty God, now and forever. Amen.

. . . . . the Lord’s Supper orients us in every possible relational direction. It orients us and re-orient young children, seekers, new and lifelong worshipers to the riches and depths of a “4-dimensional” biblical worldview. The meaning of this embodied action brims over, layer after layer, week after week, year after year. . . . inexhaustible, boundless . . . like a jar of oil that is poured out, but is ways full.
The Delights of Improvisation on Extremely Well Chosen “Chord Patterns”

A Sampling of Patristic Source Documents

- **Apostolic Tradition**: “Let the bishop give thanks in the manner we indicated earlier. It is not necessary, however, that he repeat the same words we provided, as though he had to try to say them from memory in his thanksgiving to God. Let each one pray according to his ability. If he is capable of praying at length and offering a solemn prayer, well and good. But if he prays differently and pronounces a shorter and simpler prayer, he is not to be prevented, provided his prayer be sound and orthodox.”

- **Origen**: “when praying, we must abide by what is agreed upon... If it seems good to you, let these conventions be in force” ([*Conversation with Heraclides* 4—see Bouley, 140])

- **Gregory of Nazianzus**: Basil was gifted at “arrangements of prayers” ([*Funeral Oration for St. Basil*, 43]; See also Basil, [*On the Holy Spirit*, 27, 66].

Improvisation as a Metaphor in Liturgical History

Note the metaphors in these titles:

- Allen Bouley, [*From Freedom to Formula: The Evolution for the Eucharistic Prayer from Oral Improvisation to Written Texts*] (Catholic University of America, 1981)


- John Fenwick, [*Fourth Century Anaphoral Construction Techniques*] (Grove Books, 1986), which ends “We have in recent years used the ‘scissors-and-paste’ and ‘back-of-an-envelope’ techniques of liturgical revision, but the thought of Basil the Great slicing up sheets of parchment or scribbling in the margin of his manuscripts takes a little getting used to . . .” (37).

Philosophical Voices

- Charles Taylor: “Much of our intelligent action in the world... is carried on unformulated. It flows from an understanding that is largely inarticulate” (170)... we live all the time by inherited patterns... without them “we need an infinite number of thought in our heads even to follow the simplest instructions. Plainly this is crazy” (166). [“To Follow a Rule,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 165-180].

- Pierre Bourdieu, [*Outline of a Theory of Practice*] (Cambridge University Press, 1977): “the habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” closely linked with “a community of dispositions” (78)

Compare with recent uses of the improvisation metaphor among theologians:


- Sam Wells, [*Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*] (Brazos).

The grace of almighty God and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

All say together: And with your spirit.

The bishop: Up with your mind.

All: We have it with the Lord.

The bishop: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

All: It is fitting and right.

The bishop: It is truly fitting and right to praise you before all things, essentially existing God, existing before created things, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named, alone unbegotten, without beginning, without lord or master, lacking nothing, provider of all good things, greater than every cause and origin, always being in one and the same mode, from whom all things came into being as from a starting-point. For you are knowledge, without beginning, eternal vision, unbegotten hearing, untaught wisdom, first in nature, alone in existence, too great to be numbered.

You brought all things from non-existence into existence through

- your only-begotten Son,
- the Word, God,
- living wisdom,
- the firstborn of all creation,
- the angel of your great purpose,
- your high-priest [and notable worshipper],
- king and lord of all rational and sentient nature,
- who was before all, through whom are all.

For you, eternal God, made all things through him and through him you vouchsafe a fitting providence over everything. Through him you granted existence, through him also a good existence; O God and Father of your only-begotten Son, through him before all things you made [the heavenly powers], the cherubim and the seraphim, the ages and the hosts, virtues and powers, principalities and thrones, archangels and angels; and through him after all these things you made this visible world and all that is in it.

For you are he who set out heaven as a vault, and stretched it out as a screen, and established the earth on nothing by your sole intent; you fixed the firmament, and arranged night and day; you brought light out of your treasures, and by its contraction you brought on darkness (to give) rest to the living things that move in the world. You appointed the sun in heaven to begin the day and the moon to begin the night, and you inscribed the chorus of the stars in heaven to the praise of your magnificence.

You made water for drinking and cleansing, life-giving air for breathing in and out, and for the production of sound through the tongue striking the air, and for hearing which is aided by it to receive the speech which falls upon it. You made fire for comfort in darkness, for supplying our need, that we should be warmed and given light by it. You divided the ocean from the land, and made the one navigable, the other fit to be trodden by our feet; you filled the one with creatures small and great, the other tame and wild; you wove it a crown of varied plants and herbs, you beautified it with flowers and enriched it with seeds. You constructed the abyss and set a great covering on it, the piled-up seas of salt water, and surrounded it with gates of finest sand; now you raise it with winds to the height of the

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A deft touch
here–to give praise

for the goodness of

very contemporary

SOTERIOLOGY

This sounds like a
snakes before
references to

LAw /

FALL

OLD
TESTAMENT

HISTORY

Note all the
references to

LAW / COMMANDMENT

mountains, now you level it to a plain; now you drive it to fury with a storm, now you soothe it with a
calm, so that it gives and easy journey to travelers in ships. You girdled the world that was made by
you through Christ with rivers and flooded it with torrents, you watered it with ever-flowing springs and
bound it round with mountains as an unshakable and most safe seat for the earth. For you filled the
world and adorned it with sweet-smelling and healing herbs, with many different living things, strong
and weak, for food and for work, tame and wild, with hissing of reptiles, with the cries of variegated
birds, the cycles of the years, the numbers of months and days, the order of the seasons, the course
of rain-bearing clouds for the production of fruits and the creation of living things, a stable for the winds
that blow at your command the multitude of plants and herbs.

And not only have you fashioned the world, but you have also made man in it, the citizen of the world,
displaying him as the ornament of the world. For you said in your wisdom, “Let us make man in our
image and likeness, and let him rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air.” So also you
made him from an immortal soul and a perishable body, the one from what is not, the other
from the four elements. And you gave him in respect of the soul, logical reason, discernment
between godliness and ungodliness, observance of right and wrong, and in respect of the body, the
five senses and the power of motion. For you, almighty God, planted by Christ a garden eastward in
Eden with adornment of every kind of plant for food, and in it, as in a costly home, you placed man;
and in making him you gave him an inborn law that he might have in himself and of himself the seeds
of the knowledge of God. And when you had brought him into the paradise of delight, you allowed him
authority to partake of everything, and forbade him the taste of one thing alone, in the hope of better
things, that, if he kept the commandment he should receive immortality as a reward for that.

But when he neglected the commandment and tasted the forbidden fruit, by the deceit of the serpent
and the counsel of the woman, you justly drove him out of the paradise; but in your goodness you did
not despise him when he was utterly perishing, for he was the work of your hands, but you subjected
creation to him, and granted him to provide food for himself by his own sweat and labors, while you
caused everything to shoot and grow and ripen. And in time, after putting him to sleep for a short while,
you called him to rebirth by an oath; and after destroying the limit of death, you promised him life after
resurrection.

Nor was this all, but you poured out his descendants to a countless multitude; you glorified those who
remained faithful to you, and punished those who rebelled against you; you accepted the sacrifice of
Abel as being a righteous man, and rejected the gift of Cain, who slew his brother, as being a man
accursed; and in addition you received Seth and Enosh, and translated Enoch.

For it is you who fashion human beings and provide life and fill need and give laws and reward those
who keep them and punish those who break them; you brought the great flood upon the earth because
of the multitude of the ungodly, and saved righteous Noah from the flood in the ark with eight souls,
the end of those who dwell there, but the beginning of those who were to be; you kindled the terrible
fire against the five cities of Sodom, and turned a fruitful land into salt for the wickedness of those who
dwell in it, and snatched holy Lot from the burning.

It was you who rescued Abraham from the godlessness of his forefathers and made him inheritor of
the world; and revealed your Christ to him; you chose Melchizedek to be high-priest of your service;
you declared your long-suffering servant Job to be the victor over the serpent, the origin of evil; you
made Isaac the child of promise; you made Jacob the father of twelve sons, and his descendants to
become a multitude, and brought him into Egypt with seventy-five souls. You, Lord, did not despise
Joseph but, as a reward of his chastity for your sake, gave him the rule over the Egyptians. You, Lord,
because of your promises to their Fathers, did not despise the Hebrews when they were oppressed by
the Egyptians, but you rescued them and punished the Egyptians.

And when men destroyed the law of nature and taught that the Creation had created itself, or honored
it more than they should, making it equal to you, God of all, you did not allow them to go astray,
but revealed your holy servant Moses and through him gave them the written law in aid of nature you
showed that the Creation was your work and expelled the error of polytheism. You glorified Aaron
and his descendants with the honor of priesthood, you punished the Hebrews when they sinned, and
received them when they turned back.

You avenged them on the Egyptians with the ten plagues, you divided the sea and led the Israelites
through, you drowned and destroyed the pursuing Egyptians. You sweetened the bitter water with wood, you poured water from the precipitous rock, you rained manna from heaven, and quails as food from the air. (You set up) a pillar of fire for light by night and a pillar of cloud for shadow from the heat by day. You declared Joshua to be leader, you destroyed through him the seven nations of the Canaanites, you parted Jordan, you dried up the rivers of Etham, you laid walls low without machines or human hands. For all things glory be to you, almighty Lord. You are worshipped by unnumbered armies of angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, virtues, eternal armies. The cherubim and the six-winged seraphim with two wings covering their feet, with two their heads, and with two flying, together with thousands of thousands or archangels and myriads of myriads of angels say unceasingly, never resting their voices:

**All the people say:** Holy, holy, holy (is the) Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of his glory; blessed (is he) for ever. Amen.

**The bishop continues:** Truly you are holy and all-holy, most high and exalted above all forever.

Holy also is your only-begotten Son, our Lord and God Jesus the Christ, who ministered to you, his God and Father, in all things, in the varieties of creation, and in appropriate forethought. He did not despise the race of men as it perished; but after the law of nature and the warnings of the Law and the reproofs of the prophets and the guardianship of the angels, when they were violating the natural and written law and casting out of memory the Flood, the burning (of Sodom), the plagues of the Egyptians, and the slaughter of the Palestinians, and were all about to perish as never yet, by your counsel it pleased him who was MAKER OF MAN TO BECOME MAN, the LAWGIVER TO BE UNDER THE LAW, the HIGH-PRIEST TO BE THE SACRIFICE, the SHEPHERD TO BE A SHEEP.

And he propitiated you, his own God and Father, and reconciled you to the world, and freed all men from the impending wrath. He was born of a virgin, God the Word made in the flesh, the beloved Son, the firstborn of all Creation, according to the prophecies spoken beforehand by him concerning himself, from the seed of David and Abraham, of the tribe of Judah. He WHO FASHIONS ALL WHO ARE BEGOTTEN WAS MADE IN A VIRGIN’S WOMB; the FLESHLESS BECAAME FLESH; he WHO WAS BEGOTTEN OUTSIDE TIME WAS BEGOTTEN IN TIME.

He lived a holy life and taught according to the law; he drove away every disease and every sickness from men; he did signs and wonders among the people; he WHO FEEDS THOSE WHO NEED FOOD AND FILLS ALL THINGS LIVING WITH PLENTIOUSNESS PARTOOK OF FOOD AND DRINK AND SLEEP; he made known your name to those who did not know it; he put ignorance to flight; he re-kindled piety; he fulfilled your will; he accomplished the work which you gave him.

And when he had achieved all these things, he was seized by the hands of lawless so-called priests and high-priests and a lawless people, by betrayal through one who was diseased with wickedness. He suffered many things at their hands, endured all kinds of indignity by your permission, and was handed over to Pilate the governor. The Judge was Judged and the Savior was condemned; he who cannot suffer was nailed to the cross, he who is immortal by nature died, and the giver of life was buried, that he might free from suffering and rescue from death those for whose sake he came, and break the bonds of the devil, and deliver men from his deceit.

And on the third day he ROSE FROM THE DEAD, and after spending forty days with his disciples, he was taken up into heaven and sits at your right hand, his God and Father.

Remembering therefore what he endured for us, we give you thanks, almighty God, not as we ought but as we are able, and we fulfill his command

For in the night he was betrayed, he took bread in his holy and blameless hands and, looking up to you, His God and Father, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “This is the mystery of the new covenant: take of it, eat; this is my body which is broken for many for forgiveness of sins.” Likewise also he mixed the cup of wine and water and sanctified it and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood which is shed for many for forgiveness of sins. Do this for my remembrance for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim my death, until I come.”

Remembering then his Passion and death and resurrection from the dead, his return to heaven and his
future second coming, in which he comes with glory and power to judge the living and the dead, and to reward each according to his works, we offer you, King and God, according to his commandment this bread and this cup, giving you thanks through him that you have deemed us worthy to stand before you and to serve you as priests.

And we beseech you to look graciously upon these gifts set before you, O God who need nothing, and accept them in honor of your Christ; and to send down your Holy Spirit upon this sacrifice, the witness of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus, that he may make this bread body of your Christ, and this cup blood of your Christ;

• that those who partake of it may be strengthened to piety,
• obtain forgiveness of sins,
• be delivered from the devil and his deceit,
• be filled with the Holy Spirit,
• become worthy of your Christ,
• and obtain eternal life, after reconciliation with you, almighty Master.

Further we pray to you, Lord, for your holy Church from one end of the world to the other, which you redeemed with the precious blood of your Christ, that you would guard it unshaken and sheltered until the consummation of the age; and for all bishops who rightly divide the word of truth.

• And we entreat you also for my worthless self who offer to you, and for all the priesthood, for the deacons and all the clergy, that you would instruct them all and fill them with Holy Spirit.
• And we entreat you, Lord, for the Emperor and those in authority and all the army, that they may be peace able towards us, that we may live the while of our life in quietness and concord, and glorify you through Jesus Christ our hope.
• And we offer to you also for all those saints who have been well-pleasing to you from ever lasting: patriarchs, prophets, righteous men, apostles, martyrs, confessors, bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, readers, singers, virgins, widows, laymen, and all whose names you know.
• And we offer to you for this people, that you would make them a royal priesthood, a holy nation, to the praise of your Christ; for those in virginity and chastity, for the widows of the Church, for those in holy marriage and child-bearing, for the infants among your people, that you may make none of us a castaway.
• And we ask you on behalf of this city and those who live in it, for those in illness, those in bitter slavery, those in exile, those whose goods have been confiscated, for sailors and travelers, that you would become the help of all, their aid and support.
• And we entreat you for those that hate and persecute us for the sake of your name, for those who are outside and have gone astray, that you would turn them back to good and soften their hearers.
• And we offer to you also for a mild climate and an abundant harvest, that we may partake of the good things from you without lack, and unceasingly praise you, who give food to all flesh.
• And we entreat you also for those who are absent for good cause, that you would preserve us all in piety, and gather us without change, without blame, without reproach in the kingdom of your Christ, the God of all sentient and rational nature, our King.

For [through him] (is due) to you all glory, worship, and thanksgiving, [and through you and after you to him in] the Holy Spirit honor and adoration, now and always and to the ages of ages, unfailing and unending.

And all the people say: Amen.