

A pattern for prayer

Collective wisdom

by John D. Witvliet

THE STUDY OF ANCIENT liturgical materials is a potent antidote to the cultural captivity of Christianity in this or any other culture, for liturgies embody ancient wisdom. One of the most robust veins of wisdom lies in the structures and patterns of ancient prayers.

At first blush, structures and patterns seem to have more to do with order than mystery—the charism of the early church that is so attractive to postmodern audiences. Form seems to be what systematic theology thrives on and what the emerging church doesn't thrive on. But as with the Old Testament Psalms and the New Testament Pauline letters, early church liturgical texts are improvisations on established patterns which are full of theological and pastoral significance.

As one modest case study, consider what is arguably the most recognizable of traditional liturgical prayer forms, the

The form of the collect helps us know what to pray for.

collect. The collect form, based on some scriptural prayers (see Acts 4:24-30), dates back to fifth-century Roman texts. It became a staple of 16th-century Anglican prayers. Today collects are found in hundreds of prayerbooks for personal and public use and are published for nearly every Christian tradition, including for evangelicals who otherwise might resist the use of set prayers in worship.

This simple form gives us some of the most recognizable prayers, such as this collect for purity:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Here is an example of a fourth-century mealtime prayer that follows the same form:

Blessed are you, O Lord, who nourish me from my youth and who give food to all flesh, fill our hearts with joy and gladness, that having always what is sufficient for us, we may use what is over for every good work, in Christ Jesus our Lord, through whom glory, honor and worship be to you for ever. *Amen. (Apostolic Constitutions)*

Many of us hear several collect prayers every week in worship, including prayers of adoration, invocation, confession, illumination and dedication. Yet for some people these prayers are simply a wash of words, a part of the worship-on-auto-pilot religious-speak that they are eager to set aside in favor of language that seems more spontaneous, innovative and immediate. For all of us, it might be helpful to reflect on what exactly is going on in these little prayers so that we can more deeply appreciate and participate in them.

Many liturgical manuals and textbooks describe the simple outline of a collect, which is composed of:

- a) a statement of address to God,
- b) a description of God in terms of a specific attribute or action,
- c) a petition for divine action,
- d) a statement of result, what some sources call "the aspiration," and
- e) a statement of mediation, such as "through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Millions of Christians have offered prayers in this form. Some have so internalized this form that when they pray extemporaneously they end up improvising a collect. While this form is frequently used and described, little attention has been given to what it means, what it highlights and what it obscures.

Consider some of the quiet wisdom embodied in this basic structure. First, prayers in this form address God in personal terms, reflecting what theologians Emmanuel Levinas, Ninian Smart and Graham Ward would call the "vocative dimension of worship." This is not a form of

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prayer as introspective contemplation or impersonal assertion. It is a prayer of personal address that most often conveys a sense of divine transcendence.

Second, prayers in this form usually give significant attention to divine attributes and mediation. A lot of time in the prayer is spent simply getting it started and ended, naming God (parts a and b) and naming the mediation (part e) on which the prayer depends. People who replace a typical five-minute extemporaneous prayer with a set of five or so collects often remark on the experience of spending that much time in prayer thinking about God rather than about their own needs.

The concluding statement of mediation, "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (or its longer trinitarian version "through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever"), is particularly significant as a source of trinitarian piety and formation. This statement offers explicit acknowledgment of a trinitarian theology of worship as a graced event, much discussed in the recent renaissance of trinitarian theology. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are active agents in our prayer and worship, prompting and perfecting our prayers, and making prayer less an act of heroic self-confidence and more an act of gracious participation in God's own action.

Third, collect prayers **balance and interconnect** praise and petitions. **Parts b) and c)** are almost always about **the same length**. And they are almost always **shaped in response** to each other. The **genius of the collect lies** in the apt pairing of attribute and petition, with the **acknowledgment** of a past action of God grounding the petition for similar future action. Thus this prayer form is an expression of divine constancy: God is trusted to act in ways that are consistent with past divine activity. The form is an outworking of the logic of Psalm 68:28: "Show us your strength, O God, as you have done before."

In contrast, some other prayer forms—including those shaped by the formula of the acronym ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication), so popular in some traditions—may serve to balance elements of prayer, but not necessarily in a way that helps us think about the flow or connections between the elements.

The logical correlative of this linkage is that some intercessions simply don't fit. Those who pray collects are not likely to pray for God to do something for which no precedent can be found. In the words of Swiss liturgical theologian J. J. von Allmen, "Christian prayers must not express any statement or wish, but should be controlled by what we

know of God's will revealed in Jesus Christ." Or as Scott Bader-Saye has argued more recently: "Keeping providence figuratively grounded in Scripture and practically grounded in the liturgy can help constrain our distorted appeals to divine favor." Petition is always grounded in praise. Prayers for God's future work begin with a look back to the past.

For prayers based on specific biblical texts and events, this pattern of interconnections also fosters a theocentric hermeneutic which resists any supersessionism. That is, the pattern draws our attention to what God is doing in the

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text with the assumption that what God has done in a particular scriptural account, God may well do again. The pattern resists setting up a wall between God's actions with Israel and God's actions in Jesus, between God's actions in the Bible and God's actions today.

For this reason, preparing a collect around a preaching text is one of the most clarifying actions a preacher can make. That simple action interprets the text with an awareness of God's activity in both past and present and in the context of an eschatological trajectory. The sermon text of the week may actually help fill in some parts of the prayer:

"Gracious God, with great prophetic urgency your Son cast money changers out of the temple. So now help us to keep our worship and church life free from ulterior motives and self-serving practices, so that your holiness may be pervasive in this place." (The content of the second sentence could vary quite widely depending on how the text is interpreted and applied.)

In pastoral care settings, the context may generate a petition that sends the pray-er on a search for other parts of the prayer: "Almighty and loving God, your son Jesus Christ promised to give rest to the weary. In the face of this anxious situation, we now claim your promise, longing for a deep peace that only you can give, a peace that will set us free to minister to those in our care. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

Fourth, the form generates a kind of eschatological momentum in prayer, giving attention to ultimate results or outcomes. We are forced to say precisely why we want so-and-so to be cured from disease, or what the ultimate purpose of our church building campaign really is. We find ourselves adding clauses like "so that they may build your kingdom" or "so that we may truly be a blessing to those with whom we work." The prayer doesn't feel complete until the "so

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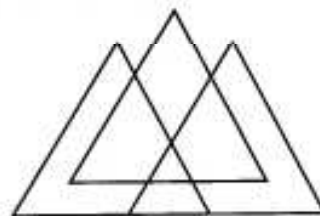


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that" is filled in—a beautiful remedy to prayers that otherwise end up being a bit self-serving.

In sum, preparing collects challenges us to draw on nearly the whole range of theological themes and motifs:

- The doctrine of God or theology proper prepares us for the address.
- The doctrines of revelation, incarnation and atonement help us resist the tendency to name divine attributes and actions in fulsome and imbalanced ways.
- The doctrine of sanctification helps us make sure that our petitions are far-reaching enough.
- The doctrine of eschatology helps us clarify our ultimate aspirations.
- The doctrine of the Trinity helps us end the prayer with a vivid awareness of the activity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit that make prayer possible.

We could express this same wisdom in proverb form: "Wise is the congregation who prays with a vivid awareness of divine splendor and of the trinitarian dynamics of prayer. Wise is the congregation who perceives past and potential future divine action to be of a single, united whole. Wise is the congregation whose prayer is filled with explicit longing for the coming kingdom of God." Such is the quiet patristic wisdom embodied in these prayers.

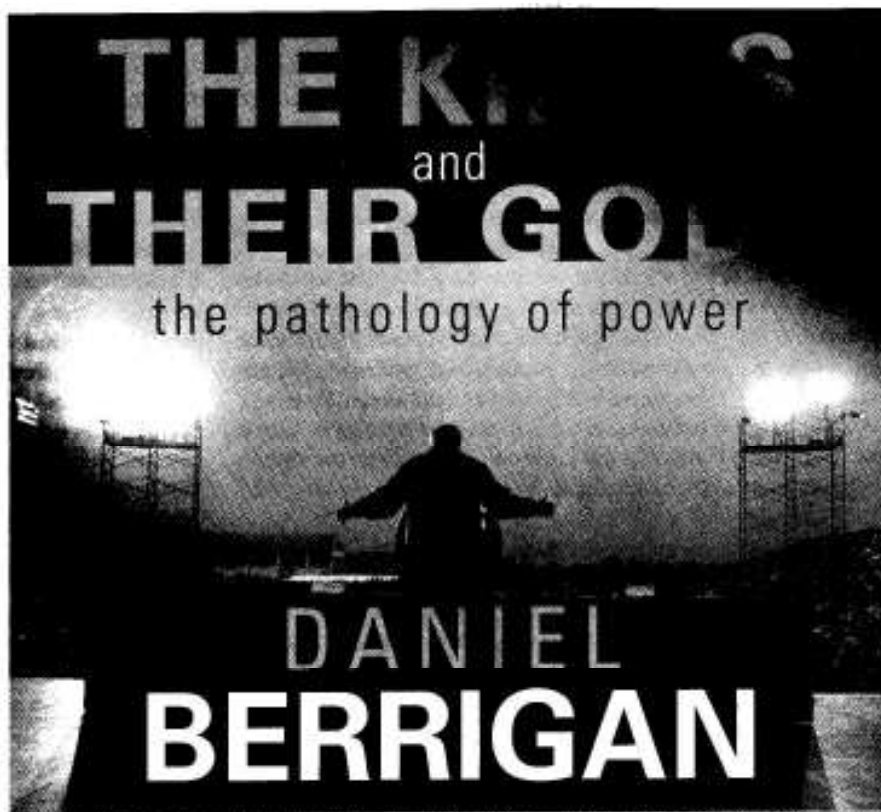
The collect form is certainly not the only exemplary prayer form. It may also have some weak spots. It can become arguably a bit too neat and tidy. And it could potentially be stronger if it were a bit longer. For example, praising God by naming both an attribute and action of God would avoid the mistaken dualism that sometime creeps into Christian piety and prayer when divine actions and attributes are separated. Still, these prayers embody wisdom that, apart from their regular use, few Christian communities arrive at on their own.

How might contemporary Christians learn from and embody this wisdom? The answer will vary among Christian traditions. Churches in liturgical traditions that regularly use collects can begin by simply becoming aware of the particular wisdom they practice. The value of these patterns is not limited to the fact that they happen to be ancient.

Churches that don't typically use collects can benefit from thoughtful experimentation with them. With new awareness of their theological and pas-

toral value, preachers in these churches might practice the discipline of preparing an apt collect to follow each sermon, and youth leaders and church educators might generate innovative ways to teach this form to children and youth. **Worship leaders** in places that resist set or written prayers of all kinds might consider using this form as a basis for jazz-like improvisation.

In a world that questions the very possibility of divine action and stifles much talk of God's future, these ancient prayers offer rich pastoral wisdom for all who have ears to hear. **CC**



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