

PRAYING ON TRINITY SUNDAY  
A Discussion Paper considering the Collect

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Some prayers for our consideration:

Book of Common Prayer traditional:

Almighty and everlasting God, who has given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity: We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see thee in thy one and eternal glory, O Father, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest, one God, for ever and ever.

Book of Common Prayer contemporary, 1977:

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father, who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God, for ever and ever.

Lutheran Book of Worship, 1978:

Almighty God our Father, dwelling in majesty and mystery, renewing and fulfilling creation by your eternal Spirit, and revealing your glory through our Lord, Jesus Christ: Cleanse us from doubt and fear, and enable us to worship you, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, living and reigning, now and forever.

Book of Alternative Services, 1985:

Father, we praise you: through your Word and Holy Spirit you created all things. You reveal your salvation in all the world by sending to us Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Through your Holy Spirit you give us a share in your life and love. Fill us with the vision of your glory, that we may always serve and praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

A New Zealand Prayer Book, 1989 (1 of 4): Eternal and glorious God, you dwell in a high and holy place, yet draw us near in your beloved Son; we humble ourselves before you and pray that we may know your loving presence, Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giver, our one true God for ever.

Book of Common Worship, 1993 (1 of 3):

O blessed Trinity, in whom we know the Maker of all things seen and unseen, the Savior of all both near and far: By your Spirit enable us so to worship your divine majesty, that with all the company of heaven we may magnify your glorious name, saying: Holy, holy, holy. Glory to you, O Lord most high.

Speegle Schmitt, Seasons of the Feminine Divine, 1993:

Womangod, You who make the ground holy, You guided and fed our ancestors with the flame that neither destroys nor can be extinguished. Catch us up in the vision of your power to make all things new: that we labor with You in bringing this universe into its fullness; Thou, Soil of our Rootedness, Bread of Heaven, Fiery Spirit, Lady Three-in-One.

Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours, ICEL, 1995 (1 of 4):

O God, your name is veiled in mystery, yet we dare to call you Father; your Son was begotten before all ages, yet is born among us in time; your holy Spirit fills the whole creation, yet is poured forth now into our hearts. Because you have made us and loved us and called us by name, draw us more deeply into your divine life, that we may glory you rightly, through your Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, CCT, 2002 (1 of 4):

God, whose fingers sculpt sun and moon and curl the baby's ear; Spirit, brooding over chaos before the naming of day; Savior, sending us to earth's ends with water and words: startle us with the grace, love and communion of your unity in diversity, that we may live to the praise of your majestic name.

ELCA's Renewing Worship project, 2004 draft (1 of 3):

Almighty Creator and ever-living God, we worship your glory, eternal Three-in-One, and we praise your power, majestic One-in-Three. Keep us steadfast in this faith, defend us in all adversity, and bring us at last into your presence, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

ELCA's Renewing Worship project, 2004, draft (1 of 3, after Julian):

O God, you are all power, all wisdom, all goodness. In you, holy Father, we have our being. Enclose us in the mercy of our mother Christ, and fill us completely with the gift of our Lord the Spirit. You live in endless joy and love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The contemporary church has inherited from the early medieval sacramentaries a short opening prayer, which by collecting the assembly into one group and collecting their many intercessions into one petition came to be called "the collect." Typical of Christian prayer, these collects followed the pattern of Nehemiah 9: first you offer thanksgiving, second you present your requests. Usually now termed "the prayer of the day," the rhetorical style of the collect was modeled after a formal petition to the

emperor. The petitioner addressed the emperor, praised him for some previous action, and asked for a furtherance of this action. The Latin language wastes no words, and presumably the emperor wasted no time, and so the prayer of the day became characterized by brevity and cohesion. This terseness contrasted with the lush rhetoric of prayer in the Eastern churches, in which repetition and metaphor were characteristic. Although many of the Latin collects are rather general and reflect the Westerners' fear of the encroaching northern tribes ("O God, without whom we are helpless, protect us from all danger now!"), at least at festivals the content of the collect was proper to the readings of the day.

Several recent worship resources have expanded the one-year medieval set of collects into a three-year set, to correspond with the three-year lectionary. This array of collects offers us plentiful material for study. Some of these collections have retained as much as possible a memory of their Latin predecessors. Others have replaced brevity with lyricism, or a rather cosmic request with one or two intercessions specific to the readings. In other ways the new prayers of the day may follow medieval patterns, for example, by addressing the first person of the Trinity, or may present a new pattern, for example, by addressing Christ, the Spirit or the Trinity. These prayers can be seen to be more or less pedagogical in tone or intent. Because of my interest in the Trinity, we will examine the prayers for Trinity Sunday, hoping to encounter the considerable variety of options being presented as contemporary collects. In considering the differences in the recently published Trinity collects, this paper will address one by one questions about the form and content of liturgical prayer, in hopes of achieving at least a clarity of categories, if not a convincing final proposal for this prayer in our time.

*To whom is the prayer formally addressed? Father, Son, Spirit, or Trinity?*

Twentieth-century Western liturgical reformers have been directed by the historical work of Joseph Jungmann in assuming that correct liturgical prayer is addressed to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Jungmann admits that occasionally liturgical prayer was addressed the Son, e.g. the Agnus Dei, or the Spirit, e.g., the Veni Creator Spiritus. But Jungmann stipulates that these are the exception, and in the case of the Agnus Dei, originated in ill-informed popular piety. Nearly all Latin collects are addressed to “Deus,” with or without attending adjectives, but the text of the prayer and its Trinitarian conclusion make clear that “Deus” is the Father. Yet much Eastern prayer is addressed to the Trinity, with the prayer texts intermingling the three persons of the Trinity, and one must wonder to what degree Jungmann’s dictum represents a Germanic scholar’s pension for prescription, rather than a rule for crafting new liturgical texts.

Many contemporary collects retain the historic address to the first person of the Trinity, although often now the title “Father” is avoided, probably in the interests of inclusive language, rather than in deference to the Latin “Deus.” In the examples presented, most address God, which the prayer makes clear is the Father. This adherence to Jungmann’s principle is especially interesting considering that these prayers are all appointed for Trinity Sunday, when prayer addressed to the Trinity might be appropriate. The BCW prayer does address “O blessed Trinity,” yet it speaks of “your Spirit” in a way that recalls traditional address to the Father. Indeed, the BCW prayer does not specify what “your glorious name” is.

In her most engaging [The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church](#), Carmen Renee Berry categorizes each considered Christian denomination as to its “Trinity

Affinity,” that is, which person of the Trinity most occupies that community’s imagination. For example, the Trinity Affinity of Methodists is the Father, of Lutherans the Son, and of Nazarenes the Spirit. Those Western churches that struggle to replace repeated Fathers with other addresses may find themselves, like Eastern churches, more and more addressing the entire Trinity. It is instructive how many feminist Christians (Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Ruth Duck, Gail Ramshaw, to cite a few), like Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena, articulate an affinity with the entire Trinity, finding in the triune threeness an antidote to the male language of the duo Father/Son.

*To whom is the prayer really addressed? God, or the assembly?*

Last year in this seminar Brian Wren and I engaged in a conversation that I found most instructive. Brian had submitted for our consideration liturgical prayers he had crafted which I suggested were too pedagogical. I said that liturgical prayer must flow from the people: the assembly must join in the prayer because they recognize it as their own. However, Brian asserted that as a Reformed clergyman he is obligated to instruct the minds of the faithful, for example through a preacher’s prayer, by crafting prayer language that leads the worshippers to a place different from where they were. This discussion brings us to our second point: to whom is the prayer really addressed? That is, is the prayer addressed to God by all the people, or is the prayer, more than less, addressed by the preacher to the people, to form their faith and practice? Many Latin collects ask God to grant the intercession to the church termed “them,” not “us,” as though the presider is not included in the prayer. Although we ought not think of these

tendencies as mutually exclusive, prayers will lean in one direction or the other. We might summarize this complex question with the terms “doxological” or “pedagogical.”

One of the options presented in the *Renewing Worship* draft exemplifies doxology. The prayer attempts to recast the historic creedal form of the Trinity prayer into praise: the petition that we would “acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity” becomes “we worship your glory, eternal Three-in-One.” This technique hopes to turn the focus of Trinity Sunday from doctrine to praise.

I would categorize the ICEL collect as pedagogical. Phrases such as “yet we dare to call you Father” sound to me as though they are instructing the people, rather than praising God, as if the people are listening to the presider, rather than God is listening to the assembly. Like many of the collects in the ICEL proposal, this prayer reads like a doctrinal or biblical summary of the feast or readings of the day. This prayer strikes me more excellent as a guide for the homilist than as the people’s prayer of the day.

In addressing our prayer to God, we try to believe that God will act in the future as God has acted in the past. Yet at least since the Enlightenment, Western Christians have been culturally formed by deism, the philosophical idea that the Creator is no longer active in human affairs: if the poor are to be fed, it is we who will do the feeding. Deist prayers, whatever their formal address, are actually aimed toward the people, since it is the people, not God, whose action is evoked. Again, we ought not imagine these two tendencies as mutually exclusive, but a prayer will lean in one direction or the other. Official church publications evidence far less deist prayer than one encounters in contemporary extempore prayer, where it is rife, but we see a trace of it in the New

Zealand prayer. The primary petition, “that we may know your loving presence” focuses not on God’s action but on ours as the fruit of the prayer.

*How much echoing of traditional collects is helpful? Much, or little?*

One decision perpetually before those who craft liturgical language is whether we repeat the tradition or, on the other hand, design innovative forms and phrases. Each tendency has its value: a religion is indeed a tradition of speech, but Christianity asserts its obligation to translate its past into the vernacular. The BCP traditional collect exemplifies one extreme of this choice: the prayer faithfully repeats its historic antecedent, with only grammatical alterations. The prayer concludes with the classic Trinitarian doxology, citing God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and retaining the image of monarchy in the verb “reign.” The late medieval worldview represented by the prayer’s theology and intercession remains unchanged for contemporary use.

The Trinity prayer in Schmitt’s Seasons of the Feminine Divine exemplifies the opposite choice. The initial address “God” is elided with the word “woman,” and the Trinity called “Lady Three-in-One,” to force the mind of the assembly far from the tradition. The classic titles for the Godhead are replaced with “Soil of our Rootedness, Bread of Heaven, Fiery Spirit,” a set of metaphors that would strike some assemblies as a merciful gift and others as an in-your-face affront. It is unclear why the author uses the archaic “thou,” a second-person singular pronoun that was falling out of use even when the King James translation of the Bible was completed. Perhaps the author means to make the rather elitist distinction between the singular “Thou” and plural “You.”

Schmitt's metaphors for God, Soil of our Rootedness, Bread of Heaven, Fiery Spirit, and Lady, as well as those in the New Zealand collect, Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giver, raise a second question concerning traditional collect style. In Western medieval prayer, the praise of God uses verbs and gerunds. Several of the prayers cited above carry on this tradition, by praising God for giving us grace, dwelling, renewing, fulfilling, revealing, creating. Such Christian prayer maintains the pattern of Psalm 136, in giving thanks for all that God has done. But some psalms, for example 18, rely on metaphor to describe God. God is stronghold, crag, haven, rock, shield, horn of my salvation, refuge, lamp. Many newly composed prayers of the day are using metaphoric nouns as well as verbs in the ascription. Perhaps the twentieth-century's re-immersion of many churches into the psalms accounts for this stylistic change.

*What are the sources of the vocabulary? The Bible, theology, tradition, imagination?*

The classic Trinity collect is an excellent example of prayer by theology. God is praised using the fifth century's creedal language of Trinity and Unity. Even the phrase "the confession of a true faith" is included. Similarly, we hear the Nicene Creed echoed in the Book of Common Worship's phrase "the Maker of all things seen and unseen."

Yet even though it is understandable that on Trinity Sunday, the assembly's liturgical language will be marked by theological categories, most of the newly composed prayers prefer biblical imagery. For example, the prayer from the Book of Alternative Services speaks of creation through the Word, incarnation through the Word made flesh, and "the vision of your glory," all recognizable biblical terminology. Even the radical Schmitt prayer cites biblical language in its description of God: the burning bush, the

journey through the wilderness, and divine labor in bringing forth a new creation. Our current uneasiness with archaic theological categories finds its refuge in literal or metaphorical use of biblical language.

The second example cited from the ELCA's Renewing Worship project attempts an innovative use of the tradition. About twenty of the three-year set of collects proposed for church publication are formed from famous prayers in the Christian tradition. For example, a collect crafted from Francis's prayer for peace coordinates with the gospel about loving one's enemies, and a prayer formed from Augustine's beloved "our hearts are restless until they rest in you" coordinates with Christ's promise, "I will give you rest." For Trinity Sunday, the words of Julian of Norwich are recalled. In a close quotation of chapter 54 of her Revelations of Divine Love, the prayer calls God "all power, all wisdom, all goodness," and repeats Julian's petitions to God as Father, mother Christ, and the Lord Spirit. It remains to be seen whether this reuse of the Christian prayer tradition will resonate within the church.

An example of prayer marked by the author's imagination is the CCT option. In the Bible, God has hands, but not fingers; yet here the Creator's "fingers sculpt sun and moon." God's fingers also "curl the baby's ear." The question is whether such an idiosyncratic clause intensifies or disrupts the people's prayer. (I for one find myself thinking: curl the baby's ear? shape the baby's ear? curl the baby's hair?!) God is asked to "startle us," the verb itself startling the language of prayer in the West.

In conclusion, we must admit that as we craft prayers of the day for contemporary use, we find ourselves bending an iron rod into a circle. Recall that during medieval times

most of the people would have understood not a single word of a Latin collect: audible accessibility of this prayer was not considered a liturgical value. Moving on to Thomas Cranmer, we find an expert at what we might call “a deep vernacular” crafting collects as religious instruction. Cranmer’s elegantly balanced rhetoric effected a Protestantizing of the faith, for example, in the recurring medieval *mereamur*, “that we may merit,” replaced with repeated references to grace. What do we in the twenty-first century want? The prayer of the day is a short presider’s prayer toward the opening of the liturgy that praises God and presents a single petition reflective of the gospel reading, the style and vocabulary of which can both embrace the assembly in the prayer and draw it into deeper faith. To craft some two hundred of these is not easy. Good luck to us all.