



UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6
 Forums usually with Canon Richard T. Nolan
retired philosophy & religion professor, editor of www.philosophy-religion.org
 Saturday, November 17, 2007

TOPIC:

"WHEN SHOULD ONE THANK GOD, OTHER HUMAN BEINGS, AND/OR ONESELF?"

led by Canon Richard T. Nolan

- If my house rather than my neighbors' survives a neighborhood fire, should I thank God?*
- If my child wins an award for achievement, should I thank God?*
- If I win an Academy Award, should I thank others?*
- If I overcome an illness, whom should I thank?*
- Do the various prayers of thanksgiving in the Prayer Book answer the question?*

A Prayer To Be Said In Unison

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your holy Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Philosophical theology is the disciplined employment of philosophical methods in developing or analyzing theological concepts. It examines the bases of theological assertions – often of particular religious traditions, such as Christianity.

I. The Christian Fatalist 's approach to giving thanks. (God directly controls everything.)

II. What does the Bible assert about giving thanks to God?

Preliminary assumptions:

a. *The Biblical God has provided human beings with freedom to make significant choices. However, when God chooses to do so, God "nudges" or inspires individuals/communities non-coercively.*

b. *The Bible does not propose fatalism.* [Fatalism is the belief that all events are irrevocably fixed, perhaps by God, so that human effort cannot alter them, though sometimes things appear otherwise. “What will be, will be.”]

c. from the *Eerdman’s Bible Dictionary*:

THANKSGIVING. In biblical usage the response due to God from his people. Specific grounds for thanksgiving to God are numerous and include God’s faithfulness to the covenant (Ps. 57:9–10 [MT 10–11]; 107:8; 138:2), and his protection and deliverance of his people from enemies (35:17–18; 44:7–8 [MT 8–9]; 54:6 [MT 8]), from prison (142:7 [MT 8]), from death (86:12–13; Isa. 38:18–19), and from those who would use the courts against them (Ps. 109:30). God is also thanked for the prospect of final judgment (Ps. 75), for his mercy toward sinners (Isa. 12:1), for miraculous healings (30:4–5 [MT 5–6]; Luke 17:16), and for his acts salvation (2:38). Reflection on God’s past acts of mercy lead to thanksgiving (Ps. 63:5–7 [MT 6–8]). The fundamental sin of the Gentiles is said to be their failure to “honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21).

Thanksgiving was the focus of Old Testament worship (1 Chr. 16:4; Ps. 42:4 [MT 5]), especially of pilgrimages to Jerusalem for feasts (100:4; 138:2). In the New Testament also thanksgiving is an activity that takes place in the community and with the focus of attention on the community (2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:3). The thanksgivings of God’s people are one means by which knowledge of God is spread (Ps. 57:9 [MT 10]), and increased thanksgiving is the result of a proclamation (2 Cor. 4:15).

True thanksgiving does not consist primarily of deeds, but of the disposition of the heart, and it brings persons nearer to God and enables them to see God’s salvation (Ps. 50:23). If a person gives thanks merely for that possessed within himself, then that person expresses self-exaltation and self-deception rather than responding to the grace of God (Luke 18:11–14; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7).

III. PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING in *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* (1979)

Do any of these prayers of thanksgiving assume that God controls anyone’s capacity to make choices? If so, it would seem that such a prayer is inconsistent with a fundamental biblical assertion. Do any prayers overstate God’s involvement in events? If so, on what basis?

****DURING THE FORUM WE SHALL CONSIDER ONLY A SAMPLING OF THESE PRAYERS, SO THAT SECTION IV (THE CONCLUSION) MAY BE ADEQUATELY COVERED.****

General Thanksgivings

1. *A General Thanksgiving*

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.

We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know him and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. *Amen.*

2. A Litany of Thanksgiving

For optional use on Thanksgiving Day, in place of the Prayers of the People at the Eucharist, or at any time after the Collects at Morning or Evening Prayer, or separately.

Let us give thanks to God our Father for all his gifts so freely bestowed upon us.

For the beauty and wonder of your creation, in earth and sky and sea.

We thank you, Lord.

For all that is gracious in the lives of men and women, revealing the image of Christ,

We thank you, Lord.

For our daily food and drink, our homes and families, and our friends,

We thank you, Lord.

For minds to think, and hearts to love, and hands to serve,

We thank you, Lord.

For health and strength to work, and leisure to rest and play,

We thank you, Lord.

For the brave and courageous, who are patient in suffering and faithful in adversity,

We thank you, Lord.

For all valiant seekers after truth, liberty, and justice,

We thank you, Lord.

For the communion of saints, in all times and places,

We thank you, Lord.

Above all, we give you thanks for the great mercies and promises given to us in Christ Jesus our Lord; To him be praise and glory, with you, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

See also The General Thanksgiving on pages 58 and 101.

Thanksgivings for the Church

3. For the Mission of the Church

Almighty God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to yourself: We praise and bless you for those whom you have sent in the power of the Spirit to preach the Gospel to all nations. We thank you that in all parts of the earth a community of love has been gathered together by their prayers and labors, and that in every place your servants call upon your Name; for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours for ever. Amen.

4. For the Saints and Faithful Departed

See also the prayer "O God, the King of Saints," page 489 and 504.

We give thanks to you, O Lord our God, for all your servants and witnesses of time past: for Abraham, the father of believers, and Sarah his wife; for Moses, the lawgiver, and Aaron, the priest; for Miriam and Joshua, Deborah and Gideon, and Samuel with Hannah his mother; for Isaiah and all the prophets; for Mary, the mother of our Lord; for Peter and Paul and all the apostles; for Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene; for Stephen, the first martyr, and all the martyrs and saints in every age and in every land. In your mercy, O Lord our God, give us, as you gave to them, the hope of salvation and the promise of eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, the first-born of many from the dead. Amen.

Thanksgivings for National Life

5. For the Nation

Almighty God, giver of all good things: We thank you for the natural majesty and beauty of this land. They restore us, though we often destroy them.

Heal us.

We thank you for the great resources of this nation. They make us rich, though we often exploit them.

Forgive us.

We thank you for the men and women who have made this country strong. They are models for us, though we often fall short of them.

Inspire us.

We thank you for the torch of liberty which has been lit in this land. It has drawn people from every nation, though we have often hidden from its light.

Enlighten us.

We thank you for the faith we have inherited in all its rich variety. It sustains our life, though we have been faithless again and again.

Renew us.

Help us, O Lord, to finish the good work here begun. Strengthen our efforts to blot out ignorance and prejudice, and to abolish poverty and crime. And hasten the day when all our people, with many voices in one united chorus, will glorify your holy Name. *Amen.*

6. For Heroic Service

O Judge of the nations, we remember before you with grateful hearts the men and women of our country who in the day of decision ventured much for the liberties we now enjoy. Grant that we may not rest until all the people of this land share the benefits of true freedom and gladly accept its disciplines. This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Thanksgiving for the Social Order

7. For the Diversity of Races and Cultures

O God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Thanksgivings for the Natural Order

8. For the Beauty of the Earth

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, now and for ever. *Amen.*

9. For the Harvest

Most gracious God, by whose knowledge the depths are broken up and the clouds drop down the dew: We yield thee hearty thanks and praise for the return of seed time and harvest, for the increase of the ground and the gathering in of its fruits, and for all other blessings of thy merciful providence bestowed upon this nation and people. And, we beseech thee, give us a just sense of these great mercies, such as may appear in our lives by a humble, holy, and obedient walking before thee all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost be all glory and honor, world without end. *Amen.*

Thanksgivings for Family and Personal Life

10. For the Gift of a Child

See also the Thanksgiving for a Child on page 444.

Heavenly Father, you sent; your own Son into this world. We thank you for the life of this child, *N*, entrusted to our care. Help us to remember that we are all your children, and so to love and nurture *him*, that *he* may attain to that full stature intended for *him* in your eternal kingdom; for the sake of your dear Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

11. For the Restoration of Health

Almighty God and heavenly Father, we give *thee* humble thanks because *thou hast* been graciously pleased to deliver from *his* sickness *thy* servant *N*, in whose behalf we bless and praise *thy* Name. Grant, O gracious Father, that *he*, through *thy* help, may live in this world according to *thy* will, and also be partaker of everlasting glory in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*.

Thanksgivings for the departed are on pages 487-489 and 503-504.

RELATED BRIEF ARTICLES FROM AN *EPISCOPAL DICTIONARY OF THE CHURCH*: *A USER-FRIENDLY REFERENCE FOR EPISCOPALIANS*

“*THANKSGIVING (PRAYER)*”

The Catechism identifies thanksgiving as one of the seven principal kinds of prayer (BCP, p. 856). We offer thanksgiving to God "for all the blessings of this life, for our redemption, and for whatever draws us closer to God" (p. 857). The eucharistic prayer, from the *Sursum corda* through the people's Amen, is known as the Great Thanksgiving (see BCP, p. 361). The BCP provides a variety of thanksgivings, including general thanksgivings, and thanksgivings for the church, national life, the social order, the natural order, and for family and personal life (pp. 836-841).

“*GENERAL THANKSGIVING*”

The BCP includes two prayers of General Thanksgiving. The traditional prayer of General Thanksgiving was composed by Edward Reynolds (1599-1676), Bishop of Norwich. It was possibly inspired by a private prayer of Queen Elizabeth that was issued in 1596. Prior to the 1604 revision of the Prayer Book, Puritans complained that there were not enough prayers of thanksgiving in the Prayer Book. This prayer was added to the Prayer Book in 1662 under the heading, "A General Thanksgiving." It preceded other prayers of thanksgiving for particular benefits. This prayer asks God to "give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days" (BCP, p. 101). The first American Prayer Book (1789) required use of this prayer at every Daily Office. In 1892 its use became optional, except on Sundays when the litany or eucharist did not follow immediately. The prayer appears as "The General Thanksgiving" in the 1979 BCP. It precedes "A Prayer of St. Chrysostom" and the dismissal at the close of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer (BCP, pp. 58-59, 71-72, 101, 125). Its use is optional. The General Thanksgiving is said by the officiant and the people.

The 1979 BCP also includes "A General Thanksgiving" among the Prayers and Thanksgivings found near the end of the BCP (p. 836). This new occasional prayer of thanksgiving was composed by the Rev. Charles P. Price. It thanks God for the splendor of creation, for the blessing of family and friends, for tasks which demand our best efforts, for disappointments that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on God, for Jesus, and for his resurrection that raises us to the life of God's kingdom, and for the gift of the Spirit through whom we give thanks to God in all things.

“*GREAT THANKSGIVING*”

Title used by the BCP for the eucharistic prayer, the central prayer of the Eucharist. It is also known as the prayer of consecration. It begins with the dialogue called *Sursum corda* and continues through the *Great Amen* at the end of its doxology. It gives thanks for creation, redemption, and sanctification. The bread and wine are consecrated in the context of giving thanks over them in the eucharistic prayer. The

institution narrative, oblation (*anamnesis*), invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*), intercessions, and the angelic hymn *Sanctus* are included in the eucharistic prayers of Rite 1 and Rite 2.

Eucharistia is Greek for "thanksgiving," and the Great Thanksgiving distinguishes the thanksgiving over the bread and wine from other thanksgivings, such as that over the baptismal font or the chrism. This ancient title was restored in Prayer Book Studies 19 and succeeding trial rites leading up to the 1979 BCP. The Greeks call this prayer *anaphora* (offering), and the traditional Latin title is *Prex* (Prayer). Canon is not a generic name for the eucharistic prayer, but the proper name of the *canon Romanus*, also called the *canon missae*, or *canon actionis*, the present Eucharistic Prayer 1 of the Roman Sacramentary. It was so called because, unlike the eucharistic prayers of other rites, it was always the same, an inflexible rule, or canon. The eucharistic prayer had no title in the 1549 BCP. The Scottish Prayer Book of 1637 introduced the title "Prayer of Consecration," which was used through the 1967 Liturgy of the Lord's Supper. This focuses on the consecration of the bread and wine but neglects the wider eucharistic aspects of the prayer.

“THANKSGIVING DAY”

A national holiday and day of thanks. Thanksgiving Day is celebrated in the United States on the fourth Thursday in Nov. This custom is based on the celebration of three days of prayer and feasting by the Plymouth, Massachusetts, colonists in 1621. There was also a Thanksgiving celebration with prayer by members of the Berkeley plantation, near what is now Charles City, Virginia, in 1619. The first national Thanksgiving Day was celebrated in 1789. Under President Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving Day came to be celebrated annually on the last Thursday of Nov. Thanksgiving Day was celebrated on the third Thursday of Nov. in the three years 1939-1941 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, the Thanksgiving Day commemoration was moved back to the fourth Thursday in Nov. by Congress in 1941.

Thanksgiving Day is a major holy day and a national day in the Prayer Book calendar of the church year (pp. 16-17, 33). The Proposed Prayer Book of 1786 included "A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God, for the Fruits of the Earth, and all the other Blessings of his merciful Providence." The first American Prayer Book (1789) replaced the four national days of the 1662 English book with propers for Thanksgiving Day. The collect for Thanksgiving Day gives thanks to God the Father for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. It asks that we may be faithful stewards of God's great bounty, providing for our own necessities and the relief of all who are in need (BCP, p. 246). Hymns for Thanksgiving Day in The Hymnal 1982 include "Praise to God, immortal praise" (Hymn 288), "Come, ye thankful people, come" (Hymn 290), and "We plow the fields, and scatter" (Hymn 291). The Hymnal 1982 Accompaniment Edition, Vol. 1, provides musical settings for a Litany of Thanksgiving for a Church (S 391; see BCP, pp. 578-579) and a Litany of Thanksgiving (S 392; see BCP, pp. 836-837). The Litany of Thanksgiving may be used on Thanksgiving Day in place of the prayers of the people at the eucharist, or at any time after the collects at Morning or Evening Prayer, or separately.

“THANKSGIVING FOR THE BIRTH OR ADOPTION OF A CHILD”

The BCP (p. 439) states that after the birth or adoption of a child, the parents and other family members should come to the church to be welcomed by the congregation and give thanks to God. It is desirable that this be done at a Sunday service. The BCP provides a form for A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child (pp. 440-445). It may follow the prayers of the people preceding the offertory at the eucharist. At Morning or Evening Prayer, it may take place before the close of the office. At the proper time, the celebrant invites the parents and other family members to present themselves before the altar. The BCP provides forms of address for the celebrant that are appropriate for the birth of a child or for an adoption. The form for an adoption also includes a formal inauguration of the new relationship. In response to a question by the celebrant, the parents take the child for their own. If the child is old enough to answer, the child accepts the woman and man as mother and father. The service continues with an Act of Thanksgiving, which includes the Magnificat, or Ps 116, or Ps 23. After a prayer of thanksgiving for the blessing bestowed on the family in the gift of a child (BCP, p. 443), the celebrant may add one or more additional prayers, including a prayer of thanks for a safe delivery, a prayer for the parents, a prayer for a

child not yet baptized, or a prayer for a child already baptized. This form concludes with a threefold blessing of the family. This trinitarian blessing recalls that God the Father adopts us as his children by baptism, that God the Son sanctified a home at Nazareth, and that God the Holy Spirit has made the church one family (BCP, p. 445). A shorter form of this service may be used, especially in a hospital or at home. If the shorter form is used, the celebrant may begin with the Act of Thanksgiving, or with the prayer of thanksgiving for the blessing bestowed on the family in the gift of a child. A passage of scripture may first be read. The BCP identifies Lk 2:41-51 and Lk 18:15-17 as appropriate readings for this service. The service also includes a rubric that calls upon the minister of the congregation to instruct the people concerning the duty of Christian parents to provide for the well-being of their families and for all persons to make wills to arrange for the disposal of their temporal goods, including bequests for religious and charitable uses if possible (BCP, p. 445).

Historically, there were prayers of ritual purification for women who had been through childbirth. This purification was also known as the "churching" of women. The service of purification was done at the entrance of the church in the Sarum rite. Similarly, the 1549 Prayer Book included "The Order of the Purification of Women." This rite was known as "The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called the Churching of Women" in the 1552 BCP, and in subsequent Prayer Books through the 1928 BCP. The 1979 BCP focuses on thanksgiving for the gift of a child, and suggests no ritual impurity associated with childbirth. with childbirth.

IV. CONCLUSION

If my house rather than my neighbors' survives a neighborhood fire, should

I thank God?

If my child wins an award for achievement, should I thank God?

If I win an Academy Award, should I thank others?

If I overcome an illness, whom should I thank?

Do the various prayers of thanksgiving in the Prayer Book answer the question?

What assumptions provide a framework for my answers?