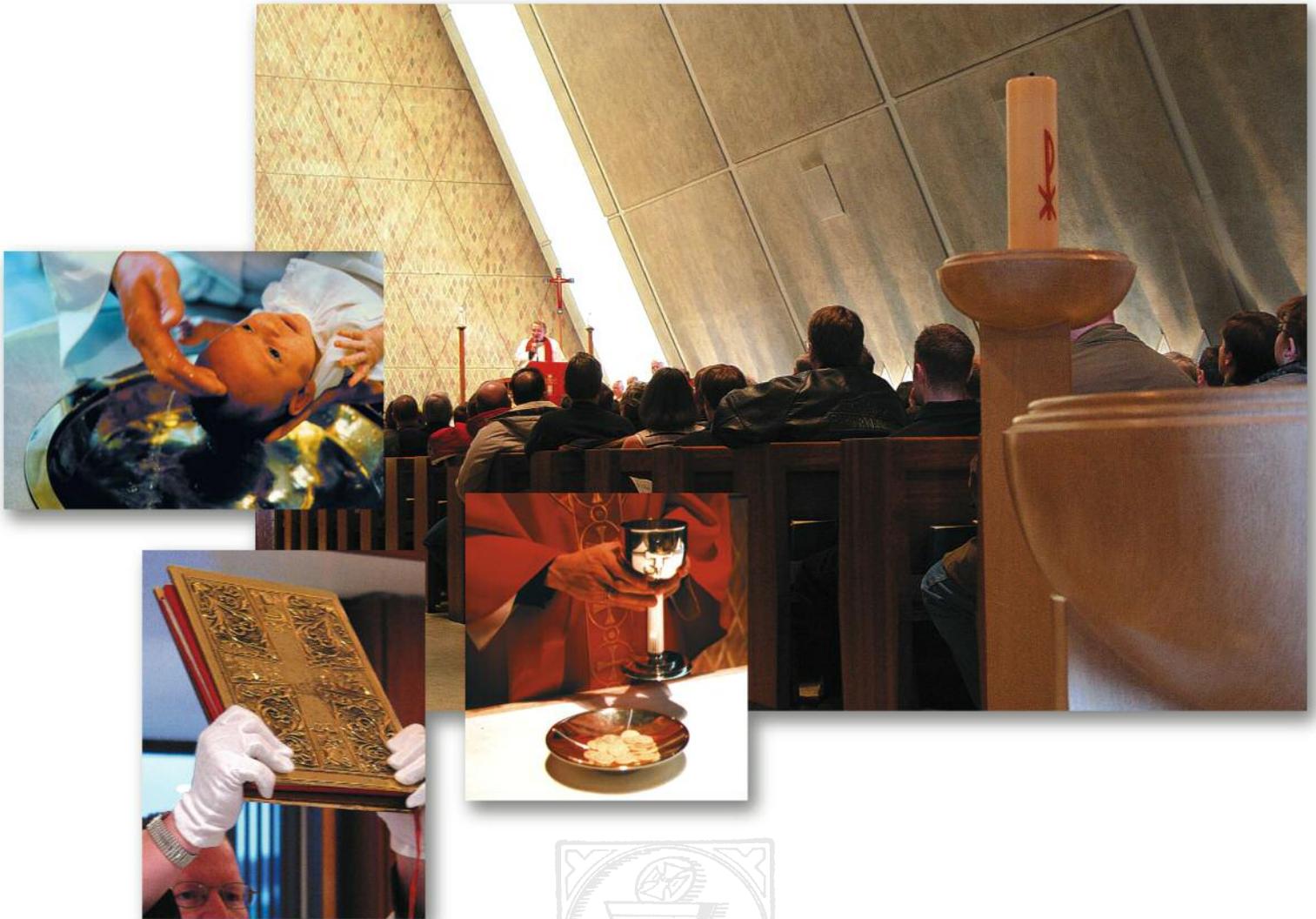


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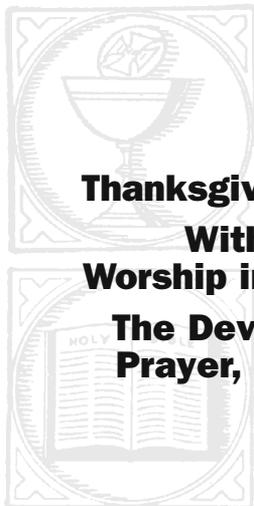
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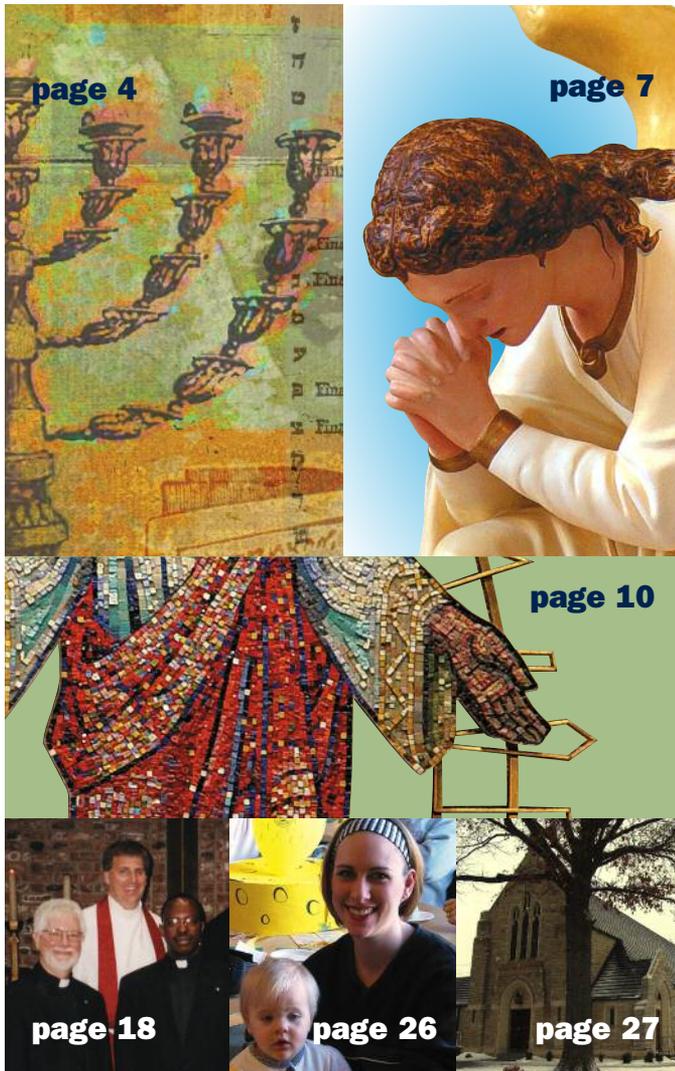
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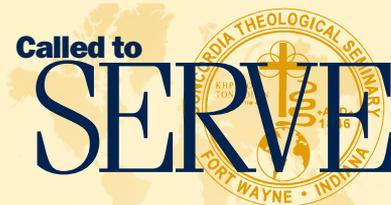
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# Thanksgiving Old

For far too frequently one gets the impression—especially from certain types of so-called “praise songs”—that God is thanked mainly by showering Him with flattery, going on and on about what a great, awesome, strong God He is. To be sure, such adjectives accurately describe God. But, biblically and historically, has the Church given thanks to God mainly or merely by applauding Him in this way?



# in the Testament

By the Rev. Chad L. Bird

**W**e don't get very far into the Scriptures before God breaks the silence with a four-word speech: "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). After that, we continually encounter the God who speaks. He calls out to Adam, He instructs Noah, He makes promises to Abraham. Whatever the words, to whomever they are spoken, these nouns and verbs are evidence that God is not a mute deity. Rather, He is a heavenly Father who desires to reveal Himself to man in words.

Of all the words God speaks, however, there are two words that are never found on His lips—the words "thank you." It is not, mind you, as if God is unthankful or ungrateful. No, that would be to miss the point. What does it mean to thank someone? Is it not to acknowledge that you have *received* something from them? Is it not to say of yourself, "I have been *given to*." That, however, is something God cannot say, for God only gives. "The earth is the Lord's and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it." (Ps. 24:1) What can you really give to Him who owns everything? Nothing. So God is neither thankful nor unthankful. God is God. He doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving.

The words "thank you," then, are reserved for someone else's lips—the lips of the Church and her children, those who are *given to*. For believers to say "thank You" to their Father is for them to say "Amen" to His gifts, to confess that "it is He who has made us and not we our-

selves" (Ps. 100:3). God makes, we are made. He gives, we receive. And having tasted and seen that the Lord is good, the tongue of faith responds, "Amen. Thanks be to God."

But how *specifically* do the Church and her children thank God, especially in the Divine Service? Here, sadly, the waters are often muddied. For far too frequently one gets the impression—especially from certain types of so-called "praise songs"—that God is thanked mainly by showering Him with flattery, going on and on about what a great, awesome, strong God He is. To be sure, such adjectives accurately describe God. But, biblically and historically, has the Church given thanks to God mainly or merely by applauding Him in this way?

The liturgy of Israel gives us the answer. For when Israel gave thanks to the Lord, she did so not by showering Him with flattery but by confessing *who God is* and *what God does for His people*.

Indeed, the Hebrew word commonly translated "to thank" (*yadha*) frequently means something more akin to "confess" than "thank." This way of confessing the truth about God is pervasive in the hymnal of Israel, the book of Psalms.

Psalms 136 is a premier example of how the church of old gave thanks to God, that is, confessed Him in her liturgy. This psalm begins with a verse that was frequently part of the hymns of Israel. Indeed, the words are still prayed after the meal of Holy Communion in the Church and after family meals in the home: "O give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good and His mercy endureth forever" (136:1). *O give thanks unto the LORD*, the psalm begins. The Hebrew word "LORD" is Yahweh, the personal, covenant name of God. Thus Israel did not begin her praise with the words, "O give thanks *unto whom it may concern*." They were not thanking a nameless deity but the true God who had revealed Himself to Israel as Yahweh and constantly placed His saving name upon His Church via His priests (Num. 6:22-27). So Israel began by thanking God by name *for who He is*.

They continued their thanks by describing *what He does for His people*: *He is good and His mercy endureth forever*. How is Yahweh good and His mercy everlasting? The rest of the psalm tells us by confessing, verse after verse, what Yahweh has done and still does for His Church. He created the heavens, the earth,

the sun, moon, and stars (136:5-9); He redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt and destroyed all their enemies (136:10-20); He brought them into the holy land (136:21-22); He still remembers them and acts to save them from their adversaries (136:23-24); and He provides for all their physical needs (136:25). Following every verse, every confession of how the Lord creates and redeems, is the refrain: “for His lovingkindness is everlasting.” Because Yahweh *is* good, He *does* good for His people. Because His lovingkindness never stops, He never stops demonstrating that love toward the Church. In good times and bad, whether hungry or enslaved, Israel can count on Yahweh because He is who He is—a good and merciful Father.

Take note of this: In the very act of confessing who God is and what He does for His people, Israel is thanking God. There’s no need to multiply words: “we thank You . . . we appreciate You . . . we are grateful to You . . . we just wanna praise you for . . .” Their thanksgiving is therefore fundamentally *creedal*, that is, they confess that Yahweh is the Creator of heaven and earth (First Article), the One who redeemed them from servitude in Egypt (Second Article), and the same One who enables them to confess and believe this (Third Article). To sing this “creed” is to say “thanks be to God.”

Thanksgiving in Israel’s liturgy, however, was not just expressed in the pouring out of song. It was also expressed in the pouring out of blood. In fact, the two—singing and sacrificing—usually occurred simultaneously in the temple liturgy (2 Chron. 7:5-6). On unique occasions—such as at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:62-64)—as well as perpetually in the liturgical life of Israel, the nation and individuals gave thanks to God by the sacrifice of oxen, sheep, lambs, and other animals. This, no doubt, seems rather odd to many people today. How could slaughtering an animal equal “thanks be to God”?

King David directs us toward an answer to that question. After having gathered material for the temple which his son, Solomon, would build, David prayed, “[O Lord], all things come from You, and *from Your hand we have given to You*” (1 Chron. 29:14). So it was with sacrificial

animals as well. Every bull, every lamb, every beast belonged to God. To confess this fact, and to confess that God in grace had given these animals (and all blessings) to His people, Israel would offer some of these animals back to God. Just as in her hymnody, Israel thanked God by confessing His gifts to the nation in creation and redemption, so in sacrifice the Church confessed, “This animal is Yours not ours. You have made it. From Your hand we have given it to You.”



**Thanksgiving in Israel’s liturgy was not just expressed in the pouring out of song. It was also expressed in the pouring out of blood. In fact, the two—singing and sacrificing—usually occurred simultaneously in the temple liturgy (2 Chron. 7:5-6). But there was even more to these sacrifices of thanksgiving. For not only was God thanked by this confessional act of sacrifice; He also provided for His people the gifts of forgiveness and peace in the shedding of the animal’s blood, for this blood pointed forward to the shedding of the Messiah’s blood.**

But there was even more to these sacrifices of thanksgiving. For not only was God thanked by this confessional act of sacrifice; He also provided for His people the gifts of forgiveness and peace in the shedding of the animal’s blood, for this blood pointed forward to the shedding of the Messiah’s blood. The thanksgiving sacrifices were known as peace or *shalom* offerings (Lev. 7:11-15). What was unique about the peace offering was where the sacrificial meat was consumed—not on the

flames of the altar but in the mouth of the worshiper. For example, if a lamb was offered “by way of thanksgiving” (Lev. 7:12) in a peace offering, the body of the lamb was cooked and eaten by the worshipers in a holy meal. What they had offered to God as a confession of thanksgiving, God gave back to them as a meal of forgiveness, peace, and blessings. They ate the flesh of the One who was sacrificed for them—the very price of their redemption!

The parallels in the Church today are remarkable. At the beginning of the liturgy of Holy Communion we sing, “Let us *give thanks* unto the Lord our God . . . It is meet and right so to do.” Here we offer up “a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15) by confessing who He is and what He has done for us (the Proper Preface). Our sacrifices of thanksgiving, however, are just words. What the Father gives us afterward is far from “just words”; He gives us *His justifying Word*, His Word made flesh (John 1:14), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He feeds us the flesh of that Lamb who offered up Himself as a crucifixion sacrifice. We eat the flesh of the One who was sacrificed for us—the very price of our redemption! And being thus filled with the peace, forgiveness, and blessing from our heavenly Father, we sing, “Oh, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good and His mercy endureth forever.”

The Church, the new and better Israel, gives thanks to God by placing a pronoun before His name. He is not just “God” but *our* God, not just “Lord” by *our* Lord. He tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, that we might, in faith, always receive His gifts with thanksgiving. So the Church sings,

We give Thee but Thine own,  
 Whate’er the gift may be;  
 All that we have is Thine alone,  
 A trust, O Lord, from Thee.  
 (*The Lutheran Hymnal* #441)

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