



The Anatomy of a Prayer: Using the Collect in Worship
By [Patrick Bourckel](#) - August 10, 2015

There are many ways we can speak the language of prayer in our gathered worship. We can pray the words of Scripture back to God (especially the Psalms). We can voice extemporaneous prayers as individuals. We can use historic forms such as The Lord's Prayer, praying together as one voice. I believe that all of these methods of prayer in worship

have value, but I'd like to highlight a specific form of prayer – the collect – as a model and method for how we can pray together.

Though unknown in Eastern Orthodox churches, the collect as a prayer form dates back to at least the 5th century Roman church. As the other use of *collect* in English suggests, the root Latin word means “gather together.” The prayer was a means of gathering the faithful for worship, and was hence an opening act of the liturgy. It was also a *collective* prayer that brought all of the people's requests, petitions, and prayers into one focused expression. This ancient form endured in the English Reformation, as Thomas Cranmer curated and translated the prayers when compiling the Book of Common Prayer. The prayers were marked for specific use on certain holy days, occasions of common life, and for moments of worship within the service.

What makes the collect a unique gift is its pattern and style. We can see a specific structure to the language of the collect¹:

- I. **Address** – The prayer begins by naming the God of our worship, most often in the Person of God the Father.
- II. **Acknowledgement** – The quality or characteristic of God is mentioned upon which the prayer request is based.
- III. **Petition** – We ask for a specific thing that we need: guidance, forgiveness, faith, etc.
- IV. **Aspiration** – the result that we hope will come out of the granting of our petition.
- V. **“Pleading”** – the prayer is said through the mercy and merit of Jesus Christ our savior, who by his redemption and ascension is the mediator of our faith and worship.

The language of the collects can be distinctly poetic and beautiful in its economy of speech. Here is the Collect for Peace from the service of Evening Prayer. I have marked the sections described above:

(I) Most holy God, (II) the source of all good desires, all right judgments, and all just works: (III) Give to us, your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, (IV) so that our minds may be fixed on the doing of your will, and that we, being delivered from the fear of all enemies, may live in peace and quietness; (V) through the mercies of Christ Jesus our Savior. *Amen.*

The genius of this form is that we begin our prayer by focusing on God: who God is, what God is like, what God does. In the context of that praise, we ask specific things related to our context and situation. We demonstrate faith in the “aspiration,” trusting that God will bring about the fruits of our petition. And we keep Jesus at the center of our prayer life by acknowledging his mediation as the “funnel” for our prayers – all we pray, do, think, and say has its basis in the redemptive work of Christ.

So, using this basic form, we could now write any number of collects, and tailor them to the context of our community, and moment in history. Here are a few examples of what a modern collect might entail.

A collect for racial reconciliation might look like this:

“O God of peace, who has made us one and has broken down in the flesh of Jesus Christ the dividing wall of hostility, mercifully grant us the wisdom, patience, and courage to speak out against injustice, racism, and hatred, that we might be heralds of hope and ambassadors of reconciliation in our homes, neighborhoods, and cities, through the mercy of Jesus Christ our redeemer. *Amen.*”

Or one for the unemployed or under-employed in your church family:

“Gracious Father, who knows how to give good gifts to your children and provide for all our needs, we ask that you would comfort and strengthen all in our fellowship who are without employment, and keep their families in your tender care, that they might know your loving faithfulness and see your hand of guidance in all their seasons of life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

So by utilizing this simple structure, we are able to give voice to specific occasions for prayer, yet maintain a God-centered and communal response in our worship. I hope this article inspires you to dive into the treasure trove of ancient collects, or perhaps to pen a collect or two for your church community!

¹Taken from Barbee, C. Frederick., and Paul F. M. Zahl. Foreword. *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999.