



## **Why Go to Church?**

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### **Workshop on Lutheran Liturgy for Laypeople**

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Several years ago a Lutheran pastor from Michigan did his own study of religious tracts that dealt with the topic of my talk today: Why go to church? He ordered about fifty such tracts from various groups, Reformed and Lutheran. The tracts gave any number of good reasons to go to church including to learn God's word, to be spiritually enriched and strengthened, to enjoy Christian fellowship, to offer praise to God, etc. The primary reason for going to church, however, was entirely ignored by the Reformed tracts and barely mentioned by the Lutheran ones. I refer, of course, to the forgiveness of sins. We go to church for the forgiveness of sins. We go to church to get saved. We go to church so that we may find Jesus the Savior who gives us eternal life.

Martin Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles (III, XII), "Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd." And what does that voice give us? Let Jesus answer: "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28) The means by which Jesus gives eternal life to his sheep is his voice, his word. The Augsburg Confession gives us the biblical definition of the Church in these words: "The church is the assembly of saints [the German text uses the word "believers" for "saints"] in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." (AC VII) I have noticed in my reading of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions that the church is never defined simply as believers or saints. It is always defined as believers or saints who hear the voice of the Shepherd or among whom the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. There is no church nor are we the church except as God himself has called, gathered,

enlightened and sanctified us. Christ, the head of the church, sends the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63) There is no church without Christ, his Spirit, and his words. Through his word we are born again. Through his word God serves us. This he does in what we call the Divine Service.

We use the word "worship" in English. That's a good old English word meaning, literally, "worthship." To worship God is to ascribe to God his true worth. He is worthy to be feared, loved, and trusted above all things. This worship is our work. It cannot be offered unless and until God creates in us the faith and the will to do so. But worship is our duty to God. Worship is our service to God. God does not worship us; we worship him.

But God does serve us. In the German, a word that is often mistranslated as "worship" is the word Gottesdienst, which means literally Divine Service. The Divine Service is often called the Liturgy, which comes from the Greek word for service. The Divine Service is what has been going on on Sunday mornings for a long, long time. If I may restate my assigned topic, "Why go to church," I am really asking, "Why must we be served by God?" I am not asking why we should serve God. I would think that anybody could answer that question unless he were utterly ungodly and without any religious impulse whatsoever. Surely our consciences, our natural knowledge of God described by St. Paul as belonging even to the heathen, teaches us that we must serve God. But that's not the question I pose to you today. I want to know why you must be served by God. And that is not so easy to answer.

If you were to read the literature produced by the various Church Growth entrepreneurs whose vocation in life is to assist worship leaders in preparing more relevant and exciting worship services for their congregations, you will rarely find anything remotely resembling an understanding of Divine Service. Rather, you will find a concept of worship that argues, with some merit, that one style of worship is as valuable as another. For me to judge my neighbor's worship is a bit presumptuous of me, don't you think? Unless I can show that my neighbor's worship, rather than ascribing worth to God in fact blasphemes him or mocks him or tells lies about him, what gives me the right to stand in criticism of it, as if God appointed me judge and jury over the heart-felt offering of praise of my brothers and sisters in Christ? Or has God revealed in the New Testament a

kind of Levitical worship code designed for the New Testament Church? Have we not been set free by the blood of Jesus to offer up sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God? Do we really need extra-biblical rules imposed upon us by liturgically correct and often "High Church" self appointed experts who are bound and determined to curb our evangelical freedom as Christians?

If worship is all that happens on a Sunday morning, I think we can sympathize with the opinions of the Church Growth enthusiasts who make these and similar arguments against the conservative insistence on retaining the historic liturgy of the church. If the church service is essentially our offering to God, who is to say whose style of praying is any better than his neighbor's is? Is your music prettier? Is your voice sweeter? Is your poetry more compelling? Is your zeal more authentic?

But when we learn to look at the Sunday morning service as God's service to us, then the issue of what takes place becomes a matter of life and death. To put it bluntly, the way I worship God won't save me, but the way God serves me will save me.

In the historic Gospel Lesson for Maundy Thursday recorded in John 13, Jesus, the Lord, does the task of the servant, by washing his disciples' feet. When he comes to Peter, Peter objects. In response to Peter's objection, Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." (John 13:8) One need not insist that this washing is an allusion to baptism in order to make the more basic point: You must be served by Jesus or you have no part with him. You cannot be his disciple. You cannot be a child of God. You cannot know God. And you cannot worship God. Indeed, your worship will be a vain boast or failed bribe or useless discharge of meaningless words unless and until Jesus has served you. In fact, if God serves me, I get saved. If God doesn't serve me, I have no part of him at all.

Now those who teach that Jesus ascended up to heaven to remain there, far away from his church here on earth, are not the ones to teach us why we should go to church. Surely, if Jesus is ascended up on high, not to fill all things as the Bible says, but to keep his body off of the Altar and as far away from the sacramental bread as heaven is above the earth, as the Reformed teach, then obviously Jesus cannot be serving us every Sunday in the Divine Service. But

Jesus promised that he would be present with his church forever. It is utter folly for Lutherans to ask the Reformed to teach us how to do what needs doing on a Sunday morning. The Reformed don't believe that God saves you by serving you in the Divine Service. Lutherans believe that God most certainly does save us in the Divine Service. This is the difference. This is why the Reformed churches can easily discard the historic liturgy of the church. They don't need it. God isn't going to save them by means of it anyway. They may retain it for aesthetic purposes (after all, it is quite beautiful), but they don't particularly require it for spiritual purposes for the simple reason that whatever saving God is going to do God will do with or without the Divine Service that occurs on Sunday morning.

The Lutheran emphatically disagrees. The Lutheran goes to church to be served by Jesus and thus to be saved. Going to church won't make you a Christian, the popular American Evangelical argues. To which the Lutheran replies, If going to church won't make you a Christian then what will? If being served by God won't do it, what hope do we have?

And, of course, this is how we come to church. We come as those who have in themselves nothing in which to hope.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." (Luke 18:10) In this famous parable of Jesus, the Pharisee attends a praise service at which he thanks God for "gifting" him and thus making him better than his fellows. The tax collector attends the Divine Service. He cries out for mercy. The tax collector went home justified, Jesus tells us. That is, he went home forgiven of his sins. He received the mercy for which he pleaded. This plea for mercy is the presupposition of the Divine Service. If you cannot or will not sing the Kyrie, you cannot be served by God nor can you be saved.

This brings me to the handout that you all received entitled, The Seven-Fold Ordinary of the Divine Service. The Divine Service is comprised of the Ordinary and the Propers. The Propers are those portions of the Divine Service that are proper to a particular Sunday such as the Introit, the Collect, the Lessons, the sermon, the hymns, and so forth. The Ordinary of the Service is that which is ordinary. It stays the same. Week after week and year after year the Ordinary of the Divine Service shapes the faith of God's people by bringing to them God's

Service in the same words. The Ordinary of the Divine Service was not put together by any synodical entity. It wasn't designed by a committee of theologians and approved by any church convention. Nobody voted on it. It just came to be. St. Luke tells us that those who were baptized on Pentecost "continued steadfast in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42) This describes the origin of the Divine Service, including the Ordinary with which Christians have been familiar for over 1700 years.

I have left out of the Ordinary two very old canticles that really do belong to it: the Agnus Dei and the Nunc Dimittis. The Agnus Dei, "O Christ thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us . . . grant us thy peace" dates back into the Fifth Century and was made a part of the Divine Service in 687. It is based on Isaiah 53:7, John 1:29 and similar texts. The Nunc Dimittis or "Simeon's Song" is from Luke 2:29-32. It was also used very early in the history of the church. We sing the Agnus Dei before eating and drinking Christ's body and blood. We sing the Nunc Dimittis after eating and drinking Christ's body and blood. I chose not to include these wonderful songs in order to limit our consideration today to those portions of the Ordinary of the Divine Service that have been with us practically from the beginning. I omitted anything introduced after the third century. This leaves us with a seven-fold Ordinary. The number three is the number for God. The number four is the number for the world. The number seven is the number for God's relationship to this world, either in judgment or in blessing. Our gracious Father has preserved among us the treasure of the historic Ordinary of the Divine Service. Through this treasure he has bestowed untold blessing upon his holy Christian Church on earth.

### ***The Kyrie***

The first of the Ordinary is the Kyrie. "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." When we cry out to Jesus for mercy we join in the pleas of those who met Jesus as recorded for us in the Gospels. This cry for mercy means at least three things. It means first of all that we do not come to church to do something for God or for our neighbor. The blind beggars did not offer to do anything for Jesus. Neither did the woman from Canaan who was willing to be a dog if it would get her a few crumbs of mercy from Jesus. No, we come as beggars with nothing to offer.

Second, the Kyrie is an acknowledgement, a confession, that Jesus, the Christ, is present with us. The citations listed in the handout you have received has those who beg for mercy confessing that Jesus is the Christ by calling him the Son of David. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. The Lord to whom we are crying is here to help and to meet our plea with his mercy.

Third, the Kyrie sets the tone and context for everything that follows in the Divine Service. The Gloria in Excelsis makes no sense all unless it is sung in response to the Kyrie. The instruction of the lessons and the sermon, the doctrinal authority of the creed, the anticipation of the communicants to receive the body and blood of Jesus all flow from the Kyrie. What kind of instruction are we seeking? Sound principles for successful living? This is not what the Kyrie cries out for. What should the sermon actually be? The Kyrie sets the foundation of our need.

Why do you “get involved” in church? Why do you attend services? Why do you attend a workshop like the one that is being hosted for us here today? Why do you need the Divine Service and regard attendance at this weekly event to be the most precious time of your life? You need mercy from God. You need that love you do not deserve. You need grace to cover all your sin. You need Jesus, and you need him with you, and you need him to give you the peace with God that comes only from his blood shed on Calvary.

### ***The Gloria***

And so the Gloria is sung. “Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” The angels speak from the presence of God and they speak for God and they speak to us. The shepherds simply stand there for us. The angel’s sermon is for us, and it is the foundation for everything that follows in the Divine Service. If the Kyrie sets the foundation of our need, the Gloria sets the foundation for how God meets our need. The Gloria has been a part of the Divine Service since the third century. It teaches us that the love of God’s glory must be overshadowed by the glory of God’s love. Islam is a lie and so is Judaism, Mormonism, Paganism, every form of animism, and every other ism that teaches men what they must do to secure peace with the deity. Those who plead for mercy can do nothing to gain the goodwill of God. But when they plead for it, the angels preach their sermon once again. This sermon teaches us that the glory of God is in making peace with sinners. And just as the manger sends

Jesus to the cross, the singing of the Gloria will, before the Service has ended, send us to the Altar.

### ***The Creed***

One of the most emotionally laden issues to confront the church in our time is the issue of authority. Who has it and who can use it and how? I don't believe in voter supremacy. I'm not quite sure I believe in voters at all. But I most certainly believe that I, the preacher, am accountable to the people to whom I am preaching. I may not preach to them anything I choose to preach. The people and the preacher are bound together by and require of one another allegiance to the standard of doctrine taught by the apostles. The account cited earlier from the Acts of the Apostles says, "They continued steadfast in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers." (Acts 2:42) What does this mean? It means that the laity, male and female, young and old, are required by God to hold their preachers to the standard of teaching that is set down in the writings of the apostles. Confessional Lutherans have a tremendous advantage in this respect over other Christians. We have clearly written statements of the faith that are entirely Scriptural. Indeed, the agreement of the Creeds and Confessions of the church with the Bible is so very clear and compelling that we have no problem at all in requiring our preachers to preach nothing at all in opposition to those statements of faith.

When you confess the Creed you are telling the pastor what to do. And he had better do it. He is being told that he must teach you the apostolic doctrine. He must preach to you the apostolic gospel. He must give to you the gospel of Jesus without any additions or subtractions. He isn't there to motivate you, to manipulate you, to get you to do something, to inspire you, or to raise money to meet bills. He is there to teach you that heavenly doctrine that will give you the mercy your sinful heart desires and needs. His sermon is to be an absolution because it is to be the words that reveal Christ. "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15) If the preacher does not preach Christ you shouldn't be listening to him. He should portray Christ as the Creed portrays him. He should say those words that tell you that your sins, which damn you to hell, are forgiven because of the vicarious living and dying of Jesus. And this gospel must not simply be a few crumbs tossed out as the preface to a long moralizing lecture that pretends to be the goal of the gospel. This gospel must be the very essence of every sermon he preaches. Doctrinally sound preaching must be gospel preaching and that means Christological preaching that extols and bestows the



blood and righteousness of Jesus the only Savior we sinners need or have. If the preacher's doctrine is not sound, you mustn't listen. You must not even attend. You must mark and avoid any preacher who doesn't preach to you the truth. This is what God's word requires. It doesn't require that you politick against a pastor or a congregation or a synod. It doesn't require you to become active in this or that church-political movement to promote this or that church-political leader who will do something to help you clean up or purify your church. No! When you confess the Creed during the Divine Service you are also confessing that the doctrine of the Apostles will be the only doctrine to which you will ever be bound, and you won't listen to any other. Jesus said that his sheep run away from the hireling. They don't stay and argue with him for months and years and decades. They avoid him. You have no right to receive instruction from a pastor who teaches false doctrine. If you cannot say "Amen" with a sincere heart after the sermon your pastor preaches, then you had better find yourself another pastor. This is what it means to confess the creed before the sermon at every Divine Service.

### ***The Sanctus***

The Sanctus is one of the most brilliant liturgical compilations ever produced, and it is very early, having assumed its present form by the end of the first century or early in the second. It is a combination of Isaiah 6:2-3 with Matthew 21:9. Of course, its meaning is lost unless it is joined back to the cry for mercy with which the Divine Service began as well as to the Gloria that promised God's peace and goodwill. The Christian hopes to see God. But he cannot see God. He cannot bear to see God. "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory." So we sing as we are brought back to Isaiah's vision of the Holy Trinity. The room was shaken, the house was filled with smoke, and Isaiah cried out in stark terror: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 9:5) One thinks of the line in the hymn verse that is sometimes used as a replacement for the Sanctus, "Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see." But please don't replace the Sanctus with that hymn! Because, you see, that particular hymn doesn't say what the Sanctus says. It gives you the law, but precious little gospel. Look at Isaiah as he averts his eyes in shame, fear, and self-loathing. And then listen to the song of Palm Sunday: "Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He, Blessed is He, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest!" How can you be afraid of God now? Look at him. He is a humble king, riding a beast of burden. Don't avert your eyes anymore, you don't have to turn away. He means you no harm. He comes to you in a humble way. The man on the donkey is your God. He has not

come to punish you. He has come to die for you. He has come to be rejected and mocked and humiliated and nailed to a cross by sinners and there to die as the atoning sacrifice to bear God's wrath and make true the angels' sermon to the shepherds. Here is the God you can see and not turn away.

And this same God who rode the donkey into the holy city so that he might become her King did indeed become her King. It was on the cross as he bore her sins. But where is he now? Here we come to a fundamental difference between the reason we Lutherans go to church and our friends in the various Reformed Protestant traditions go to church. It is a question of where Jesus really is and what he is actually doing. Now the Reformed who still hold to the convictions of John Calvin certainly do hold to the vicarious atonement of Jesus and the doctrine of justification by faith alone. They believe, however, that Jesus, in his human nature, is simply not here. He is in a place called heaven and this place called heaven is not anywhere near here. Calvin reasoned that the very idea that Jesus could be in more than one place at one time destroyed his human nature because everyone can plainly see that the human body has a certain form and location. Thus Jesus does not come to us in this meal. Rather, we go to him. In defending his insistence that Jesus cannot be both in heaven at God's right hand and also here on the Altar, in the pastor's hand, and in our mouth, Calvin wrote: "Allow him to remain in his heavenly glory and aspire thou thither." According to Calvin and the Reformed, as we eat and drink only bread and wine with our mouths, we aspire by faith to ascend into heaven, there to commune with Christ.

But we can't do it. Our faith cannot take us up to heaven to commune spiritually with Christ's body and blood. Our faith can only receive the Service that Jesus provides, because that is all faith is: the reception of Christ's Divine Service. The Sanctus prepares us for this reception. It prepares us for the Jesus who comes to us in the bread and the wine and gives to us his real body and his real blood, not merely emblems or signs of his body and blood, but his real body and his real blood. He who came on the donkey to go to the cross will shortly come to us to give to us the same body that bore our sins and the same blood that has washed us clean.

### ***The Lord's Prayer***

He will come to us. Not just to me as an individual and to you as an individual but to us. This Supper is never given only to individuals. It is given to the church

corporately. There is no such thing as private Communion. It is not for nothing that Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father" and is it not for nothing that this prayer has always, from the very beginning, been used in the Divine Service in connection with the consecration of the elements by the Words of Institution. Praying "Our Father" together is the best antidote to the "Me and Jesus Syndrome" expressed so succinctly in the words of that popular Country Western song of a couple of decades ago: "Me and Jesus, we got a good thing goin', me and Jesus, we got it all worked out. Me and Jesus, we got a good thing goin', we don't need anybody to tell us what it's all about."

But those who call God "Father" together are those who commune at the Altar together. They are one body just as they receive the one bread. They confess the one faith. Another of today's speakers will talk about closed Communion, so I will limit my comments on this topic. Suffice it to say that closed Communion isn't a rule of God's law. It is a necessary element of the proclamation of the Gospel. Those who commune together aren't merely all agreeing to say something together; they are actually joined as one body at the Altar. This is God's doing, not ours. This is God's service.

### ***The Words of Institution and the Distribution and Reception of Christ's Body and Blood***

And so Jesus comes as he has promised. We cried out in our need. We heard the promise of the angels who speak to us for God. We heard the preaching of the apostolic doctrine that reveals Jesus to us. We could not face God's holiness unless God covered himself up in humble flesh, and so he did and so he came and so he died. But he did not stay dead. He rose. As the crucified and risen Lord Jesus he now feeds us with the very same body and blood which secured our salvation.

Brother, are you saved? Yes, I am saved. Praise the Lord! When were you saved? Just last Sunday, my friend. Praise God! Tell me about it. How did it happen? Well, I was kneeling at the Altar when Jesus Christ put into my mouth his body and his blood and he told me that this body and blood were given and shed for me. Friend, that's what saved me. And do you know what? I'm going to go on back and get saved next Sunday and the Sunday after that!

The Divine Service included the Lord's Supper from the very beginning. The "breaking of bread" mentioned in Acts 2:42 is clearly a reference to the distribution of the Lord's Supper during the Divine Service. The Lutheran Church retained this apostolic custom up until the latter part of the Eighteenth Century. It is likely that the influence of Rationalism – which taught that everything in religion must be perfectly reasonable, something that the Lord's Supper is not – deprived many people of a hunger and thirst for this holy meal. It was no longer offered every Sunday. Christians who later rejected the false notions of Rationalism were nevertheless stuck with the change in custom. Folks generally believe that there is a good theological reason for whatever customs they have. I suspect that many Lutherans who grew up communing only once a month or so have simply assumed that this custom of not having Communion every Sunday is to teach us how special this Sacrament is and how it ought not to be taken for granted. Well it is special and it shouldn't be taken for granted. This is a precious gift that gives us eternal treasures, and we should never attend without examining ourselves and taking to heart the promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that Christ's body and blood pledge to us. But there was good theological reason for the Supper to be a part of the Divine Service. There is no forgiveness of sin without the body and blood of Christ. No, the reception of the Sacrament is not necessary for salvation as baptism is. If it were, we had better begin communing infants even as we presently baptize them. But Jesus' words, "This do, in remembrance of me," direct us to what saves us in the here and now. Our faith is not in an idea that God may forgive. It is not in a doctrinal abstraction. Our faith is in Christ's body and blood. This is why Jesus gave us this Sacrament. He wants our faith to be grounded in what actually saves us. Only Christ's body and blood can save us. This is why the Sacrament is such a treasure. It saves us. Because of what it is. God serves us in the Divine Service by saving us in the Divine Service.

### ***The Benediction***

The goal of the gospel is the salvation of souls. The goal of the Divine Service is to set us at peace. It is to put into our hearts and minds and very bodies the peace of God. No words express the gospel so purely as do the words that God gave to Aaron to say as recorded for us in the familiar Benediction. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." And the people say, "Amen." They say amen to the Divine Service they have received. They prayed the Kyrie and God answered with the promise of the Gloria. The pastor preached the saving apostolic doctrine and they met the holy

God under the humble forms of bread and wine. God gave them the peace for which they came. The Benediction makes this quite clear.

Now is the time for worship. The Divine Service has made it possible. The worship we offer in return is the life that God has given us to live in our vocation to which he has called us. As David P. Scaer once put it in his inimitable way, "Let's get the good works out of the church and into the world where they belong!" I say amen to that. And of course, those good works turn out to be filled with sin, don't they? So we keep on coming back to the Divine Service, to be served and saved by our gracious God and to find in that Divine Service the only heaven there is on this earth.

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