

Lesson 1: Introduction to ‘Gottesdienst’

Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week...the disciples came together to break bread.

The Sunday Service is the most constant thing in a Christian’s life.

Always there...

The Sunday Service is the most constant thing in a Christian’s life. It’s always there... every Sunday. For 2000 years, the Sunday Service has been held every week, in times of prosperity and governmental approval, and in times of adversity, and even persecution. In ancient Rome, where Christians were vigorously persecuted and their deaths were at times a well-attended spectator sport, the Christians still met for the Service, meeting in Rome’s underground tomb-tunnels, the catacombs. In the Soviet Union, even under Communist oppression the Church of God faithfully met each Sunday—despite the fact that the government had long since taken away their majestic church buildings. The Sunday Service is always there.

So, too, the Christian: when the Sunday Service is available, the Christian is there. While, obviously, sickness and job requirements may at times make attendance impossible, if a Christian is at all able he or she will be present for the Sunday Service even if there is no time for other involvement with the Church during the week. If old age or disease brings a crippling affliction that doesn’t allow a person to be present for Bible Class and other congregational activities, it is an amazing tribute to what God does in the Service to note that many with these afflictions still struggle to faithfully attend it every week. (And isn’t it interesting to note that if their affliction is so severe that they absolutely cannot attend, the pastor goes to them with the most essential elements of the Service? In some areas, Papua New Guinea for instance, the whole congregation goes to the home of any member who was not able to attend the Service that morning and has the Service again!) The Sunday Service is utterly constant—and utterly dependable!

The ‘liturgy’: a format for receiving

The Service each Sunday repeats (basically) the same things. This is ensured by the use of a written format called a *liturgy*. ‘Liturgy’ comes from a Greek word that originally meant ‘to serve in a public office at one’s own cost, without pay’. (So used by Andocides, V/IV century B.C., Demosthenes, IV c. B.C.) The individual was to serve the government without thought of reward; yet, with the knowledge that a properly functioning state would give the individual the best environment for prosperity, the ‘public servant’ knew that benefits would in fact come to him through his ‘liturgy’ even though he was not directly compensated for his ‘work’.

The word *liturgy* was then applied to what a priest or religious leader did as a service to his god and his god’s people. This usage was adopted also by the Hebrews (the Old Testament Church) as they adopted the Greek language (after the conquests of Alexander the Great), and, consequently, by the New Testament Church. The idea is that, like the public official in 4th century B.C. Athens, the minister of God was not to profit from his services

on God's and the Church's behalf, although God and the Church would support the minister and take care of his needs as he did this work. (Titus 1:7; 1 Cor 9:9-14; Gal 6:6)

Finally, *liturgy* was used to describe the ritual or religious service of God's people in general. The basic idea, though, remains the same: in our use of the liturgy, we receive nothing for what we **do**...yet **through** the liturgy we **do** receive something that benefits us (as we shall see!).

Each week the same basic truths and teachings are repeated

The liturgy we use gives us a format for receiving God's benefits and learning God's will toward us. Each week the same basic truths and teachings are repeated. Such repetition may initially be seen by some as 'boring' and unnecessary, but this is true only if we do not understand what we are repeating or merely mouth the words insincerely. In fact, as an ancient proverb states, 'repetition is the mother of learning'; if, through repetition and investigation, we understand the words and focus of the liturgy, its continued repetition will make its words and what those words teach, a 'part' of us, a part of what we think and feel, a part of how we view ourselves and the world around us.

The liturgy is Scripture summarizing Scripture

If our liturgy is properly constructed, this will be a good thing; the liturgy we use in the Lutheran Church is constructed from God's Word, the Holy Bible. It is, basically, Scripture verses summarizing Scripture teachings. Various portions of Scripture are consistently spoken by the pastor and congregation to reinforce the fundamental teachings of the Bible on a weekly basis. (In this class we will be concentrating mainly on the Church's main Service, the Order for Holy Communion; yet, also in the other Services or 'liturgical offices' we use [Matins, Vespers, etc.], the same basic teachings are presented, although each particular office adds some nuances peculiar to its usage...) Through this repetition, we are instructed and reminded of what God's message to us is in Christ Jesus, and our spiritual needs are addressed and met by the only One who can truly meet them for us. Even if a particular sermon doesn't 'hit home' with us, knowing that God's Word will address our needs each week in the liturgy makes the liturgy's repetition an experience of comfort and reassurance, just as we are comforted and reassured by our spouse or loving parent saying "I love you," not just once, but every time we need to hear it.

What is the focus of our Sunday Service?

The focus of our Sunday Service in the Lutheran Church, then, is the teaching of God's message in connection with Jesus Christ taken directly from Holy Scripture. That is a message that focuses on our inability to perform up to God's standards, and on His graciously sending His Son to make up for our failure by living a perfect life and bearing the punishment for our sins by His suffering and death. Our Service must make this its focus, so that in it we see how we are unable to ascend to God and how He gathers us to Himself by grace. Both in its content and in its form, our Service does this, so that, from most ancient times it has been referred to by terms such as that in common usage by the German fathers of the Reformation, *Gottesdienst* (literally, 'God's Service' or 'Divine Service')—a more felicitous term than they even knew, because its semi-ambiguity allows it to connote the

true (and *correct*) emphasis of our liturgy: it is not so much a matter of *us* serving *God*, but of *God* serving *us*.

God Serves Us?

This is the great mystery of the Christian faith—that while we should be serving God as our Creator, Lord, and King, God desires to serve us. He does so because He knows that this is necessary for us; we, who are by nature sinful and unclean, are totally unable to please God, unable to serve Him. For this reason He sent forth His Son, as Jesus Himself said: “The Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (St. Mark 10:45). This, St. Paul writes, is the mystery of godliness (1 Tim. 3:16): He who is Lord came to serve us, to give us the life and salvation that we could never win because even the best of our works fall short of winning God’s praise—indeed, as Isaiah writes, they are “as filthy rags” (64:6) before the holy God. As Jesus made clear when Peter objected to his Lord’s attempt to wash his feet, we must be served by God or we will never be able to enter or remain in His Kingdom: “If I do not wash you,” Jesus said, “then you have no part in Me” (St. John 13:8).

If we recognize that we need God’s service, His gift of grace in Christ, we will surely realize that receiving this grace must be the focus of our life, our congregation, and, therefore, of our Sunday Service. It must be Gottesdienst, ‘God serving us’, or we can in no way have His salvation and in no way serve Him.

A Spiritual Pilgrimage

The historic liturgy of the Lutheran Church is an acknowledgment of this fact: it is the reason that the Divine Service is so ordered that God Himself—through His Word in the service—leads us on a spiritual pilgrimage from the depths of our sin and despair to the glorious and blissful heights of His presence. Indeed, in the Service of Holy Communion we do not merely encounter ‘God’s grace’ in some abstract way, but we encounter God Himself—actually come into contact with Him both spiritually and physically.

This fact poses an interesting question: What would you feel, or what would you do, if you knew that the Lord Himself were about to appear before you, that, body and soul, you would shortly be in the presence of the God who is not only ‘Love’, but ‘Holiness’, the Creator and Judge of all mankind?

The ‘holy prophet’ Isaiah, thus thrust into the Lord’s holy presence, confessed: “I am a man of unclean lips...woe is me, for I am undone!” Yet, God did not destroy Isaiah for his uncleanness, but rather did what was necessary to prepare Isaiah to be in the Lord’s presence. Touching Isaiah’s lips with a coal from the Lord’s altar, a messenger of the Lord told Isaiah that his lips were now clean and his sin was taken away. Now Isaiah could stand in God’s presence, and could even proclaim the Lord’s Word to the rest of his ‘unclean’ nation.

Prepared for His Presence

We also need God to prepare us to come into His presence, and this is what the liturgy, week by week, is designed to do. In the Lord’s Supper, we are brought into the presence of God, into direct contact with the very body and blood of God’s Son, and—as Isaiah feared—that contact can be for our ill as well as for our good. In 1 Corinthians 11, St. Paul relates

that some people—believing, Christian people!—were getting sick and even dying after receiving the Lord's Supper because they weren't properly prepared for the Lord's presence. It is for this reason that our Lutheran churches practice 'Closed Communion'. That is, as Christ and the Apostles did, we offer the Lord's Supper only to those who are able to give 'informed consent' to being exposed to such a potent contact with the Lord by joining us in our unanimous confession of what the Bible teaches.

The specific purpose of this course is to prepare you to make that very confession, to prepare you for that most intimate contact with God in such a way that it will always and only be to His glory and to your good. More generally, this course is designed to help you receive to the utmost God's grace every week for the rest of your life. To do this, it will show you how God serves you in the Divine Service, how He seeks to build you up in His Son, affirming the chief teachings of the Bible week after week, focusing you especially on the sacrifice of Christ that purchased your salvation. As you hear His Word to you in the lessons to come—and if you will be faithful to attend the Services of His House—he will unlock for you, week by week, the treasures of His Son, treasures that ever and abundantly flow from the Gospel He serves you through His *Gottesdienst*.

Ceremonies, however, ought to be observed both to teach men Scripture, and that those admonished by the Word may conceive faith and fear [of God, and obtain comfort], and thus also may pray (for these are the designs of ceremonies).

Defense of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:3

Faith is the [worship] which receives the benefits offered by God...God wishes to be worshiped in this way, that we receive from Him those things which He promises and offers.

Defense of the Augsburg Confession II:49 (IV:49)

The woman came with the opinion concerning Christ that with Him the remission of sins should be sought. This worship is the highest...Nothing greater could she ascribe...To seek from Him the remission of sins was truly to acknowledge the Messiah.

Defense of the Augsburg Confession III:33 (IV:154)

Lo, here you have the meaning of the true honor and worship of God, which pleases God, and which He commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart know no other comfort or confidence than in Him.

The Large Catechism I:16

The chief worship of the Gospel is to wish to receive remission of sins

Defense of the Augsburg Confession III:189 (IV:310)

Begin reading one chapter each morning and evening of the Bible books of Genesis and Exodus, in preparation for our discussion of these books in a few weeks.