



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why do we sing Alleluia before the reading of the Gospel?

The Hebrew word **Hallelujah** means “**Praise God,**” and is carried into the **Latin** tongue without translation as “**Alleluia.**” Its use in the medieval Roman Church was restricted to **Easter tide**, as an expression of the Church highest **joy**. It was sung with long **melismata** or **neumes** (long musical phrases on a single syllable even as we sing them today), as an **expression of joy too deep for words, the joy of the resurrection of Christ.**

Our use of the **Alleluia** before the **Gospel** is a related use, since we know that our hearing of the words of Christ in the Gospel is nothing less than a hearing of the **Resurrected One speaking among us**. Such knowledge gives abiding joy, and thus it is fitting to rise in anticipation of the Gospel and to sing Alleluia.

In the **Western Church** we omit the **Alleluias** from **Septuagesima Sunday until Easter** as a kind of aural fast in keeping with the **penitential and preparatory** nature of the season. There is even an ancient hymn for Septuagesima which bids farewell to the Alleluia. This serves to make the anticipation for **Easter**, and the joy of Easter, all the greater. **The joy of Christ’s resurrection can scarcely be better expressed than by simple Alleluias.**

The **verse** or **tract** appended to the Alleluias provide a responsive “**bridge of praise**” that links the **Epistle to the Gospel**. It is **seasonal**, changing content depending on the **Church season** and the **theme of the Gospel** and day. The **verse** or **tract** prepares the hearers by implicitly **reminding them that the Gospel is tied to the year, and the year to their lives, and their lives to God, who is Himself the “Ancient of Days.”**

✠ ✠ ✠ **Soli Deo Gloria** ✠ ✠ ✠

¹ Much of the content of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman’s Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.