



# Liturgical Thought

## EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY<sup>1</sup>

---

### The Liturgy

“Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God.

“Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is His Name, which He put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are His. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service [in the invocation]. Where His Name is, there is He. Before Him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim Him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words He has used to make Himself known to us.

“The rhythm of our worship is from Him to us, and then from us back to Him. He gives His gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us His Body to eat and His Blood to drink. Finally, His blessing moves out into our calling, where His gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from His Word and from the way His Word has prompted His worship through the centuries. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, [God’s children of today are connected with the Church of all time.]”<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Liturgy draws upon the rich traditions and experiences of the faith and devotion of God’s people throughout the history of the Church. The Word of God has created the language of faith, which we express in the greetings, responses, canticles, psalms, hymns and prayers. The Liturgy is the language of the Church because it arises from the Word of God and the culture of Christian faith. As such, Christian worship is more than a simple meeting of people; it is more than a program; it is more than an observance of practical rules and order; it is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Much 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.

<sup>2</sup> *Lutheran Worship*, The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Concordia Publishing House, (St. Louis, MO.), 1982. Text in the brackets is mine.

vehicle or means through which God serves His people. Therefore, it is quite literally, “**God’s Service,**” or as our Reformation Fathers called it, “**Gottesdienst**” (pronounced, GOT tes deenst). Through the Divine Service, God is with His people, serving His people, bestowing on them the gifts of forgiveness and salvation through His Word and blessed Sacraments. The response of God’s people is nothing less than faith in action.

The Holy Liturgy is distinctive because the Church, the gathering of true believers in Jesus Christ, is itself distinctive. Perhaps at no other time since the founding of the first infant Christian congregations by our Lord’s apostles, has this been more markedly illustrated than in the world we see around us today where it seems the Church is under constant attack on all sides—even from within. Truly, the Church on earth is a stranger in a strange land, a sojourner passing through on its way to its true home with God in paradise.

The Church and her worship are formed around a permanent community of believers who follow a common rule of faith and life. God’s people are born, baptized, live, worship, and grow old in this community, and are finally called home to be with their Lord. Throughout this cycle of life, the congregation of the saints ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes, but our God is timeless, everlasting, and unchanging—the same yesterday, today, and forever. As He is timeless, so too is His Church and her worship, against whom the gates of hell and the whims and wisdom of men shall not prevail.

“Like the planets go about the sun, so the congregation in its services, full of loveliness and dignity, moves about her Lord... pure confession has no lovelier form, no more attractive manner, than when it is engaged in adoration and praise.”<sup>3</sup> Our faith and confession is not a product of a code of ethics or a struggle against social and moral decay. It is the fruit of God’s Word, preached and taught purely, and administered to God’s people in His blessed and holy Sacraments administered rightly according to the Gospel (AC VII, The Church).

“These are the two priestly offices, viz., to hear God speak and to speak to God who hears us. Through the benediction, through the sermon and the distribution of the Holy Sacraments, God comes down to us and talks with [us]; there [we] listen to Him and again [we] go up to Him and speak in the ears of God who hears [our] prayer.”<sup>4</sup> This is worship, this is Gottesdienst, and this is the purpose of our Holy Liturgy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books Concerning the Church*, translated by Edward T. Horn, 1908, pp. 196-97, as quoted in *The Lutheran Liturgy*, by Luther D. Reed, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1947, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, “*Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church at Torgau*,” 1544, *Luther’s Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe, Bd. 49, p. 594, as quoted in *The Lutheran Liturgy*, by Luther D. Reed, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1947, p. 8. Text in the brackets is mine.