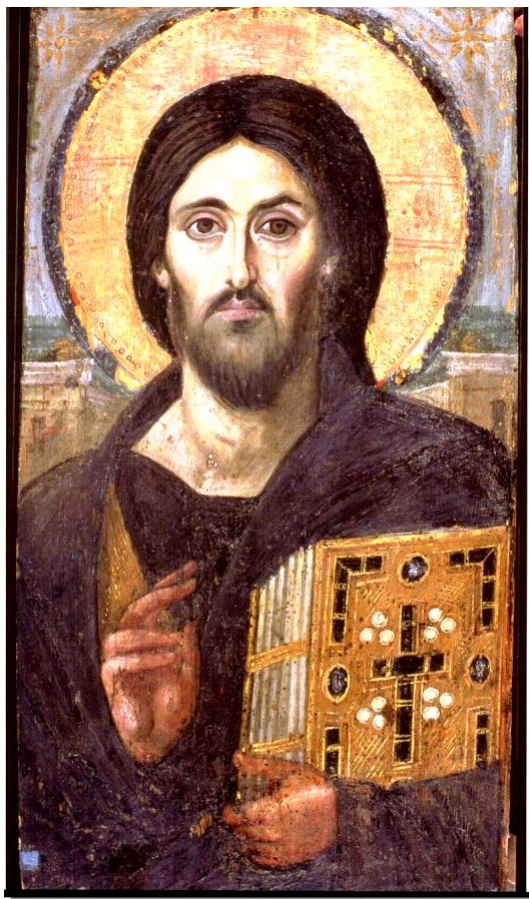


# THE DIVINE SERVICE

WHY HAVE LUTHERANS PREFERRED THIS TERM, AND  
WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT WHY WE GO TO CHURCH?



But let us speak of the word **liturgy**. This word **does not** properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 4, 1: *Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e., of the Gospel and the Sacraments.* And 2 Cor. 5, 20: *We are ambassadors for Christ, as 81] though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God.* Thus the term *leitourgia* agrees aptly with the ministry.

**Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV.79-81**

## THE DIVINE SERVICE:

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In the Gospel according to St. Luke, just after the account of our Lord's institution of the Holy Supper of His body and blood, the following is told to us by the inspired Evangelist:

24 Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. 25 And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' 26 But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. 27 For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? **Yet I am among you as the One who serves.** 28 "But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. 29 And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, 30 that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."  
[Luke 22:24-30]

This is certainly a strange teaching when compared to the natural religious thoughts of us human beings! This is not the way we are used to thinking of our relationship to God. **God stoops down to serve us!** In the context of the First Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood there is a dispute about greatness. And in this moment our Lord takes the opportunity to teach them a profound mystery: *He is among us as the One who serves, especially in the context of the Sacrament of the Altar.*

Although we may draw a moral lesson from this and note that we ought to serve and love one another after Christ's love, however we need first understand what Jesus is revealing about Himself. **This text is primarily proclaiming the Christ rather than the Christian.** He is revealing Himself as the Divine Servant and Liturgist for us in the fellowship of the Church gathered around the Word and Sacraments. As our Lord said elsewhere, *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many"* [Mark 10:45].

This suffering Servant (see Isaiah 53) comes to give His life for us, indeed, for the life of the world (see John 6). He has done this for our justification by grace alone, once and for all in His death on the cross and in His glorious resurrection from the dead to win for us eternal life in body and soul. And so we are indeed justified (made right) before God by grace (pure gift) through faith (trust) in Him alone. This is the core of the ancient Scriptural

message, the Christian creed, and the confessional Lutheran Church. In Hebrews 8:2 Jesus is literally called a liturgist.

*Yet, Jesus is not only our saving Servant for us in His death and resurrection but also in sending the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments to create and sustain faith in our hearts and keep us connected to Himself.* Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches grafted into Him. In the liturgy, Jesus is and continues among us as the One who serves. Through the apostolic ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Church (Acts 2:42), the Lord Jesus continues to do and teach here on earth by the means He designated and in which He promised to be present and at work with His mercy and forgiveness (Acts 1:1-3). Long ago, on the cross of Calvary salvation was purchased in-full, once and for all, but by means of the Lord's Supper, the proclaimed Gospel, Holy Baptism, and the spoken Holy Absolution salvation is distributed or given-out here and now according to Jesus command and promise.

Truly, in the Divine Service of the Word and the Holy Supper, the Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, is among us as the One who serves us sinners with forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. It is His divine liturgy for us. There we come into the presence of the Holy Triune God, the only true God and enter into the heavenly, royal throne room (see Isaiah 6:1-7; Revelation 4,5). There, gathered by Him, in His Triune name put upon us with the waters of Holy Baptism, we receive all the blessings and privileges that come along with being a member of the royal family, and call upon that holy name. God is present in and through His name for us. There we have access into His mercies and life for us. And all this comes from outside of us from Him by His Word that we hear (Romans 10:17).

This is why we call the main service of church 'the Divine Service.' There we meet the Lord who has committed Himself to be present for us with His salvation. He gathers His flock to be at the receiving end of all His bountiful grace. It is also 'Divine Service' because after receiving the Lord's blessing we respond. The liturgy is a dialog or rhythm of from God to us and then from us back to Him. **As it is truly said in Scripture, "We love Him because He first loved us," so it is true that, "We serve Him because He first serves us."** 'Divine Service,' then, is simply *sola gratia* (grace alone) said in a liturgical way. Sadly, when many European Lutherans came to America, they old terminology wasn't often translated very carefully in the first couple of generations of speaking English in North America. But historically

Lutherans did know this terminology of 'Divine Service' in other languages. We see this in the various historic "Lutheran languages" - for example German (*der Gottesdienst or der Hauptgottesdienst*), Norwegian (*Gudstjeneste*), Swedish (*Gudstjänst*) and Finnish (*Jumalanpalvelus*). All of these terms may be legitimately translated in literal fashion as "God's service" or "God's liturgy" or "Divine Service" (Latin: *servitium dei*; Greek: *theia leitourgia*). "Worship service" is not a good translation and puts the emphasis back on what we are doing just as "praise service" does. "Worship" comes from the term "worth-ship" and is a term that expresses action from us to God. This is only the response part of the Divine Service. "Worship service" can also be a rather generic term. As Luther notes in the Large Catechism, discussing the Sacrament of the Altar, *"for we always have this obstacle and hindrance to encounter, that we look more upon ourselves than upon the Word and lips of Christ."*

Therefore we prefer the term 'the Divine Service' for what is going on in the liturgy on Sunday mornings or whenever it is celebrated. **Technically, we usually refer to the Holy Communion service as "the Divine Service" because it is the main one of both Word and Sacrament. In this case we simply refer to the other services as Matins, Vespers, Evening Prayer, etc. But all these services are 'divine service' in a general way (Romans 10:17).** The liturgy belongs to God and He is chiefly the One who is doing the work in the liturgy. And so also for this reason we gladly maintain and use the gifts of the Church's historically received liturgical orders and all other sound rites and ceremonies that go along with them. Cleansed from unorthodox and works-righteous practices elements from the Middle Ages, our liturgy is both evangelical and catholic in the best sense and expresses what Jude 3 calls, *"the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."*

**The Divine Service is not about spiritual entertainment but about forgiveness, life and salvation in Christ alone.** Through Baptism and catechesis (instruction) we are brought into the mysteries and fellowship of the Divine Service in the Church (Acts 2:42). There too the Lord is at work as the One who serves in His Word and Supper (Rev. 3:20). This allows us to receive all the blessings of being nurtured in the green pastures of the Lord's means of grace (Psalm 23) to restore our soul. This gives us a far different picture of why we "attend church." It is not chiefly about what we do for God but about what He does for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. "Divine Service" is "salvation by grace alone" (*sola gratia*) said in a liturgical way.