

The Lutheran Herald

The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America

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Do We Need 'Another Synod'?

by The Rt. Rev. James D. Heiser

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Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church (Malone, Texas)

Another new synod? Don't we have enough of them already? Won't this just divide the Church even further?" These are questions which can be legitimately asked, and they deserve an honest answer.

There are plenty of people who believe that "more than one" is "too many" when it comes to the number of synods/fellowships/associations of Lutherans in this country. Such people yearn for the 'One Big Synod' (OBS) where all doctrinal differences are considered to be 'not divisive of fellowship'. The OBS has been the recurring dream of many 'Lutherans' in America; it was the goal of the General Synod in the early nineteenth century and it certainly seems to be the intention of the ELCA and its 'wannabes' in the LC—MS and WELS.

Appeals for the OBS are usually expressed in terms of a theology of glory: its proponents talk about all the glorious things which could be accomplished if only Lutherans would stop talking about, and dividing over, doctrine.

However, there are others who do not desire to be the OBS, but whose self-identification is inextricably connected to it: these are the Micro Synods (MS). The MS bodies define their existence over against the various candidates for, and advocates of, the OBS. The MS fellowships usually define themselves around documents such as the Brief Statement (1897 or 1932), or theologians of the 1930s and '40s as "the" expression of faithful Lutheranism in America (or, perhaps, the world, since they have great reservations about European Lutheranism, 'hyper' or otherwise). The MS leaders define their 'orthodoxy' over against the OBS crowd by dem-

onstrating *ad nauseum* that the OBS bodies don't teach what people were teaching in the 1930s. Such displays are usually amusing to everyone (since they are usually elaborate proofs of something which no one denies)—with the exception of the MS leaders, who use it as 'proof' that *they* are the legitimate heirs of the chair of Walther, Pieper (either Francis or August), Schaller, *et cetera*. From the perspective of the MS, there will never be enough such fellowships, because there will always be further division based on appeals to the latest *midrash* of a letter or sermon by Walther or Pieper.

The MS give the appearance of being the Synodical Conference in amber; there is the appearance of still being alive, but they are in fact simply preserving something which is long gone.

The MS bodies *need* the OBS groups because the MS define themselves *over against* the OBS. If the OBS bodies vanished tomorrow, the MS would be thrown into an identity crisis. The MS groups are like a bunch of 'Protestants' who define themselves as 'not Roman Catholic'—it gets very hard for them to tell you who they are and what they teach in the absence of the enemy over against which they define themselves.

For the OBS crowd, more than one synod will always be too many; for the MS, there will never be enough.

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“We Hold One Communion Every Holy Day” – Why?

by Pastor Michael R. Totten, Ph.D.
St. Laurence Evangelical Lutheran Church
San Lorenzo, California



f you're a Lutheran who winces at the above statement, you're hardly alone. The congregation in which I was raised, whose first pastor was a founding member of the LC-MS, held communion services only once a month. How could a church with such a pedigree have gotten one of chief parts of the Small Catechism so wrong?

It would take more space than this newsletter provides to explain the sad history of the real absence of the Real Presence among us. However unwittingly, some of those who put “Unaltered Augsburg Confession” on the cornerstones of their buildings altered the very practice of that Confession (specifically, article XXIV, the source of the quote in the title above) inside those same buildings. One of the many goals of our new association of Lutheran congregations is to restore the Lord's Supper to its biblical, historical, and evangelical status. Yet even the most obvious and beneficial change can generate various objections and practical concerns. Those still struggling with this practice may be able to benefit from the responses of those who have already adopted it.

1. “It's just like the Catholics.” So is baptizing infants, praying the Lord's Prayer, and singing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve. Scripture (e.g. Acts 2:42), not what some other denomination does, is the test of whether anything is appropriate for our worship.

2. “It makes the service too long.” Ask your pastor to preach for fifteen minutes instead of twenty-five (bonus: fewer members will fall

asleep during the sermon), your organist to play the hymns faster (bonus: they won't sound like dirges), and your ushers to follow the old custom of placing offering receptacles in the narthex rather than passing them out during the service (bonus: fewer people will feel coerced to donate).

3. “It won't be as special.” No one prays or reads the Bible less often in order to make these activities “more special,” and few men would dare use such an argument to justify not kissing their wives regularly. On the contrary, we do most frequently what we consider most essential.

4. “It will offend the visitors.” It will even more obviously show them what we believe biblical Christianity really is. Consider the witness we give now when flowers and dollar bills are on the altar more consistently than the body and blood of Christ!

5. “It's redundant; we've already been forgiven by the pastor at the beginning of the service.” Forgiveness of sins is not the sole purpose of the Eucharist, but also “life and salvation.” Ancient Christians in Jerusalem prayed that the Lord's Supper would be “to all who partake of them for receive remission of sins, for life everlasting, for sanctification of bodies and souls, for bearing the fruit of good works, and for the establishment of the holy catholic and apostolic church.” May we also seek and value these gifts as often as possible!

The 'Rhythm' of the Liturgy

by Pastor Kent A. Heimbigner, Ph.D.
Charity Lutheran Church
Burleson, Texas

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received . . .



he foregoing are the introductory words to Lutheran Worship. The weaknesses of that hymnal notwithstanding, the introduction provides one of the finest devotional reflections on the liturgy ever written. These opening three sentences, in particular, define the whole nature of the Divine Service: God gives, we receive, we respond with thanksgiving.

This outline serves as the basic structure for the Divine Service. Consider "TLH page 15." The first words are "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." It's not "we make our beginning in the name . . ." That would put "we" first, and the Lord has not given us to speak of "we". He gives us His name. He gives it to us first in Holy Baptism. His Name calls us to Himself in the Divine Service. He has drawn us to Himself, and poor miserable sinners such as ourselves dare to come into His presence only because we are those upon whom He has placed His name, along with the water, giving us forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and clothing us with the righteousness of Christ.

We have not lived up to the righteousness of that Name, and that's the first thing we confess. Then, in the stead and by the command of Christ, the Pastor speaks that good-news-Name to us again: "I forgive you . . . in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." His word of forgiveness bestows what it says. Faith acknowledges that gift with a single word: "Amen," this is most certainly true, gift received.

There follows the "Introit," usually (but not

always) taken from the Psalms. Invited by the Word of God to trust in His grace and mercy, faith cries out to receive the gift God offers: "Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us." The appeal is threefold: Lord (Father), Lord (Christ), Lord (Holy Spirit). This is not a repeat request for forgiveness. Rather, as the baptized and absolved of the Lord, we cry out to Him, like the sick and the lame and the blind and the lepers of the Holy Scriptures: Lord, mercifully regard all aspects of my life, and work Your gracious will in all facets of it.

The Lord answers our prayer, and we confess this with the words of the angels on the night of Jesus' birth: "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace . . ." Indeed, Jesus is the answer God gives to our every crying out to Him, and Jesus is God's all sufficient response.

The Collect "collects" the thoughts for the particular Sunday of the church year in which we find ourselves. Again, from the introduction to Lutheran Worship, "Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure." This begins with His Name, but now it continues by saying back to God what the Scriptures (especially the readings of the day) will give us to say. Faith is certain of these words, so again it speaks the "Amen."

The same pattern follows with the readings. God speaks to us, and then we say back to God what He has given us to say as we confess the words of the Nicene Creed. Then comes the "secondary high point" of the service: the Pastor proclaims the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Sometimes, the message is a great message, and touches us very personally. Sometimes, great though the message is, it seems to apply more to people in

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other stations in life than to ourselves (although the basics of repentance and forgiveness always apply). Sometimes, the Pastor misses completely. It is on those Sundays that we may be especially grateful for the liturgy: when the Sermon misses, the riches of the Word of God still speak a glorious message of the grace and mercy that are ours in Christ Jesus. Nevertheless, the Word of God is proclaimed, and receiving that message, we rejoice to petition the Lord to “create in me a clean heart, O God.” The Lord then receives our expressions of gratitude: offerings and prayers, with the prayers often going beyond thanksgiving and requesting still further divine aid.

The great high point of the service comes with the celebration of Holy Communion. In the words of the crowd on Palm Sunday, we shout out our greeting to the coming-among-us Christ: Hosanna, hosanna! The word means, “Lord, save (us) now!” And He does. As He went to the cross to atone for the sin of the world, so in the Divine Service He comes to us, in His own body and blood, for the forgiveness of all of our sins. But His body was not left in the tomb, so with His body now in us, we must surely be raised to life also! We can die in peace now! So we respond with the song of Simeon, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.” We have been bodied and blooded to the Lord: whether we depart to face life or death, we can face it calm and serene, knowing that we are in Christ and He is in us.

There follows a quick prayer of thanksgiving, and the Aaronic Benediction, which ends the service the same way it began: by placing the Name of the Lord upon us. With no chance to say a last “thank you” to the Lord, we are pushed on out the door. Does that seem rude? There is so much more “thank you” to be said, and we’ve hardly had a chance to say it! But that’s just the point: You’re not in church anymore. You’re back out in the world. If you want to say more “thank you” to the Lord (and you do!), you’re going to have to say it there, in the world, living your day to day life and conducting yourself in all of your vocations in a way that glorifies and honors and

gives thanks to God. You’ll be disappointed in how you do . . . your “thank you” will never measure up to the gift. And so it is that we, the forgiven saints, are drawn back to church again next week, rejoicing once again in the forgiveness that is ours, in the Name. Amen.

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Congregations served by Pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA)

Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church

Richmond, Missouri
Pastor C. D. Hudson
Phone: (660) 259-2728
Please call for service information

Saint Boniface Evangelical Lutheran Church

meeting at:
104 N. 3rd Street
Niles, MI
Sunday: Please call for service information
Pastor John Rutowicz
Phone: (269) 683-5169

Saint Laurence Evangelical Lutheran Church

meeting at:
16079 Via Harriet
San Lorenzo, CA 94580-1919
Pastor Michael Totten, Ph.D.
Phone: (510) 481-7018
Sunday: Bible Study 9:00 AM; Divine Service 10:15 AM

Saint Paul Lutheran Church, UAC

323 First Avenue SW
PO Box 535 (mailing address)
Taylorsville, NC 28681
Pastor Donald R. Hunter
Study Phone: (828) 632-2695,
Sunday: 9:45 a.m. Sunday School; 11:00am Divine Service

Salem Lutheran Church

718 HCR 3424 E
Malone, TX 76660
Pastor James D. Heiser
Study Phone: (254) 533-2330
Sunday: 9:30 a.m. Sunday School; 10:30 Divine Service

Worship: Our Meeting With God

Pastor Jeffrey A. Ahonen
St. John's Lutheran Church
Ladysmith, Wisconsin



Worship is a meeting with God." If you were looking for a simple, universal definition for worship, this statement might be a good candidate. It very simply describes the central purpose for the gathering together of men and women and children of a particular religious persuasion, in a particular place, at a particular time. They have gathered then and there for a meeting with God.

This simple definition helps us to discover a universal truth about worship. For any religious group, worship is a meeting with God; but how that meeting is carried out in a particular place depends upon that particular group's understanding of their particular god. How they worship shows what they believe about their god. What they believe about their god will be revealed in how they worship.

This is no less true for Lutheran worship. Orthodox Lutheran worship shows—or ought to show—what we believe about God. What we believe and teach and confess about God is revealed—or ought to be revealed—in how Confessional Lutherans worship.

What does—or what should—worship in the Lutheran Church reveal?

Lutherans worship is—and should reflect—nothing less than our meeting with the One True God, The Holy Trinity of Father and Son and Holy Ghost. In the Lutheran Church, we unholy ones dare not approach God; rather, God approaches us (sinful though we be) in mercy, just as He approached fallen Adam after he ate of the forbidden fruit. God called an ashamed man out of hiding in order to pronounce His unconditional forgiveness upon him, assuring Adam of eternal salvation on account of the Second Adam who would bear his sin and be his Savior, and granting new life to man for his remaining days on Earth.

In our meeting with God, it is God Himself who presides over the meeting. Yet this President calls upon Himself to be the servant of all. The Lutheran theology of worship is summed up marvelously in the German word *Gottesdienst*, which means "God's service." In the

Divine Service on the Lord's Day, it is God who does the serving. Christ Jesus Himself is the Servant, speaking and acting through His called and ordained minister, to baptize and absolve and feed His people with forgiveness and life and salvation. These are gifts, bestowed upon us solely by God's grace, without any merit or worthiness on our part. In all of this, God is the active giver; we are the recipients of His grace, grasping His gifts with the hand of faith—a faith that itself is a gift from God.


In our meeting with God, joyful Christians praise God for His service. This response of the faithful, which is often defined as "worship," is likewise entirely dependent upon God's own giving to His people. As expressed by the now-sainted Lutheran Bishop from Sweden, Olof Herrlin:

Everything comes from God, even the prayers and songs of praise in the devotions of the pious. The worship service is not a human work of art, a pious performance rendered to God to supplement his deeds and gifts; it rather has its origins, its reason for being, and its driving force in nothing other than the lavish grace of God Himself.

Worship is a meeting with God. Lutheran worship is a meeting with the God who lavishes such grace upon an undeserving people on account of Christ Jesus alone, who alone has fulfilled all of God's demands upon man by His life and who alone has atoned for the sins of the world by His death. Orthodox Lutheran worship is a meeting with the Risen Christ Jesus who puts us in remembrance of His baptizing of us and proclaims to us His absolution of us and feeds to us His very Body and Blood in His Supper. Confessional Lutheran worship is "confession from beginning to end, by which the church makes public its conviction concerning the truth of faith" (Olof Herrlin). Worship is *Gottesdienst*, God's marvelous work among us, and within each of us, to His glory, and for our salvation.

Traditional Liturgical Worship To Please God or Man?

Pastor C. D. Hudson
Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church
Richmond, MO

he way we worship is so boring! I'm tired of hearing and speaking the same words Sunday after Sunday, and even in the middle of the week during the holy seasons of Advent and Lent. Why can't we do something new and different? Why do we have to keep using words and phrases that are clearly 'old-fashioned'? The world has changed and we need to change the way we worship so that we can attract more people to our church."

There is little debate that the liturgical forms that tradition oriented pastors persist in using are old, but the question needs to be asked, "Is that one of the sources of the problem of the Church attracting new people in our time?" The initial response of many is, "Sure!" Then a second question needs to be asked, "When it comes to the form and content of a liturgy, does 'old' automatically equate to 'old-fashioned'?" And (more importantly), "does 'old-fashioned' inevitable mean no long useful and salutary?"

Just a few years ago, one of the most common phrases heard within the life of much of the Bride of the Christ was "worship wars." The phrase was intended to explain, in summary fashion, the fact that there was a widespread conflict going on in many denominations and congregations over "how" or "what form" Christian worship should take. That "war" is now for all practical purposes over, and to a large degree the "traditionalists" lost. As a consequence of this, the variety and forms of worship that Christians now engage go from the traditional to the truly ungodly.

But what was not often debated as that war raged was the key question of "why": Why had our liturgical forefathers formulated the various liturgies as they did? Why did they choose to use particular words for the saints to speak week after week, year after year in that which is properly called the "Divine Service"?

To at least begin to properly answer these critically important questions, we need to do what much of Latin Christendom at least appears to be no longer interested in doing: we need to go back to our roots, our catholic (that is to say ancient catholic —not Roman)

and apostolic roots and review what was the purpose of that which we know as the liturgy. Why did the "liturgical" form of worship come into being?

In relation to this question, the most appropriate place to start is not at the Reformation, but long before that time at one of the most important events in all of Christian history, in A. D. 313, when Christianity was finally officially recognized as a legal religion within the Roman empire.

Once it became legal to be a Christian, the faith could finally be publicly practiced and publicly lived. It was at that time, when the various persecutions—official and unofficial—finally ended, that the Church could turn its attention to clarifying and officially standardizing the proclamation of the true doctrine of the Church Catholic. This work was not without conflict and trouble, as Satan, having failed to stamp out Christianity through open persecution, began to work within the Church, not denouncing the doctrine of the Christ, but continually attempted to redefine the major doctrinal tenets of the faith. This is why the fourth and fifth centuries were marked by profound and intense doctrinal conflicts as the struggle continued regarding how the Christian was to rightly understand the relationship of the Three Persons within the Holy Trinity; what was the biblically revealed relationship between the incarnate only-begotten Son of God and God the eternal Father; were there two natures in the Christ, or one; two wills or one; two energies or one? What was the true relationship between God the Holy Ghost and the eternal Father and only-begotten Son? From whom did He proceed? While to many, these questions might well seem to be discussion topics engaged in by men who had too much free time on their hands, actually they were questions that had to be answered, if the saints were going to worship the one true God, the Holy Trinity, according to the truth, as the Most High reveals Himself in His eternally unchanging word.

One of the important byproducts of this supremely important struggle was the emergence of that

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This has been the cycle for Lutherans in America for many decades. I believe that the error of both the OBS and MS is that they lack true catholicity—catholicity in the sense in which that term is used in the Athanasian Creed and the rest of our Lutheran Confessions: neither the OBS nor the MS are truly interested in the unbroken unity of doctrine and practice in the one true Church.

The OBS teachers essentially maintain that there is no true doctrine; doctrinal differences are irrelevant. It appears that the OBS are largely beholden to the higher critical mentality, and having dispensed with belief in an inerrant and inspired Holy Scripture, and yet still desiring to ‘be Church,’ they seek to gain such assurance not by adherence to the one, holy catholic and apostolic faith, but through unionism. I believe that their practice maintains the notion that if only they can merge the Church to be ‘one,’ *then* they will know that they are in ‘the Church.’ This explains the drive to establish the OBS, and it explains the frantic ecumenical activities within the OBS toward Rome, which bore its most humiliating fruit to date in the tragic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

However, the plight of the MS is just as tragic. Although maintaining that they adhere to the one true faith, in fact they seem more concerned with maintaining the peculiarities of the private teachers and writings of late 19th and early 20th century Lutherans. They pine for a past that probably never was, and which we may be quite sure will not come again.

History does not stop: for good or for ill, it will never be pre-World War II America ever again. I believe that the way of the MS groups is the path which leads to despair because they labor for something which can never be. Their adoration of theologians who were and are, frankly, obscure simply heightens the tragedy of the situation.

In every generation from the resurrection until the return of the Christ in glory, the Lord God’s people are a pilgrim people who lack an enduring city until the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven. The faithful in each generation seek to stand with the one true Church divided among the generations and nations of men. There is a tendency toward obscurantism among MS leaders which ignores 1,900 years of Christian teachers *unless* they happen to say (or can be ‘interpreted’ to say)

what MS folks want *them* to say. Needless to say, such a mentality is not catholic.

We need to truly listen to the Church of past ages. We should begin by cultivating an openness to the listen once again to 500 years of Lutheran teachers. There is a great deal which we can learn from these theologians—and one of the things which we could learn is their eagerness to listen to the faithful teachers of even earlier generations. Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Martin Chemnitz and other orthodox theologians saw themselves as the students—not the masters—of the earlier fathers. We need to learn such a spirit again.

We began with two questions: “Don’t we have enough fellowships/synods/etc. already? Won’t this just divide the Church even further?” Actually, these were the questions of the Reformation. Certainly, both the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox maintained that the Lutherans (and others) were simply dividing the Church. The Reformation is only defensible if one maintains (as Scripture does) that it is necessary to separate from false teachers, and we observe that the teachings of neither the OBS nor the MS conform to that of the Holy Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions. In fact, both groups tend to look upon Scripture and the Confessions with a suspicious eye, and a need to ‘adjust’ the interpretation of them to fit the doctrinal particularities of their specific visions of the pined-after Synodical Conference.

We have no desire to participate in the OBS/MS dichotomy; they are too much like binary stars, destined to orbit round and round each other forever and ever. We desire to hear the voice of our fathers in Christ’s holy catholic and apostolic Church; but above all we desire to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd.

In short, we believe that it is not a question of whether there are ‘too many’ or ‘too few’ Lutheran synods. It is a matter of whether those who are truly in agreement with Holy Scripture and the Book of Concord (1580) will acknowledge the unity which is established by the Holy Spirit, and work together in that fellowship.

Some of the pastors of our diocese have waited for years before taking this step. Far from being ‘too hasty,’ we have waited for others to take this step and lead, so that we might have followed. The decision to begin a new diocese was not an easy one, but we believe it is necessary, and that to continue to wait would not best serve the congregations entrusted to the care of the pastors of

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the diocese. We are not interested in the political squabbles of the OBS/MS groups and we do not, and will not, define ourselves over according to their controversies.

We have organized ourselves as a 'diocese' because this is the traditional structure of the church throughout most of her history. A 'diocese' is an administrative area which is overseen by a bishop. As we observe on our website (www.eldona.org):

We recognize that the term "diocese" has not often been used among Lutherans in North America; but we found that the other terms which are being used are inadequate or misleading. A "synod" is a meeting of bishops—not an organization. Terms such as 'fellowship' or 'association' seem too vague, or have too often been misused. And for a man-made organization to usurp the name 'Church' to itself seems presumptuous, at best. We are a diocese: our bishop serves his fellow pastors, even as he serves the congregation which the Lord of the Church has placed into his care.

The congregations are not members of the diocese—each congregation is overseen by her pastor; it is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to oversee the pastors of the diocese. As we seek to go about the work to which the Lord of the Church has called us, it is my prayer that we would keep one another in prayer, and be built up through the Word.

Salem Expands Effort to Support Missions

The members of Salem-Malone decided in early 2006 to establish a Confessional Lutheran Mission Fund, setting an initial July 1st goal of \$5,000. Lord-willing, the congregation now hopes to reach a total of \$10,000 by December 31st. The mission fund board voted in July to begin using some of the funds to secure resources which will be needed by future mission congregations.

At present, the balance of the mission fund stands at over \$7,000.

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Colloquium Presentations Now Available on DVD!

On June 5, 2006, Salem Lutheran Church hosted the Theological Colloquium in conjunction with the congregation's 120th anniversary. The six presentations are now available on four DVDs. To receive the DVD collection, please send \$25 to:

Salem Lutheran Church
718 HCR 3424 E
Malone, TX 76660

(Proceeds will support the work of the ELDoNA.)



What benefits does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. On Trinity Sunday (June 11th), the Holy Trinity bestowed these benefits in the Holy Sacrament to Sheldon Scott Kurtzziel and sons Samuel Christian, Eli Joseph, and Luc Alexander. (Renee Kurtzziel [also pictured] had already been baptized.) The Kurtzwiels are now members of St. Boniface Lutheran Church (Niles, MI).

*Lutheran Colloquium
June 5, 2006*

*Salem Lutheran Church
Malone, Texas*

Pictured: Pastors Totten, Stefanski, Galler, Wagner, Henson, Ahonen, Heiser, Rutowicz, Hudson, Hunter, Heimbigner, Schey



Once again, we were blessed to have a number of laity in attendance for the colloquium, and several lay elders in attendance for the pastoral conference. Pictured: Rick Grogan, Bill Kope, Chris Clubine, Don Schnell, Carl Payne



120th Anniversary of Salem Lutheran Church—Several members of Salem (Tina Schnell, Morris Kruger, and Weldon Reinke) provided music at the meal following the anniversary service.



On June 4th, Salem Lutheran Church celebrated its 120th anniversary. Pr. John Rutowicz was the guest preacher for the occasion, while Salem's pastor, James Heiser, led the Vespers service.



Salem's Anniversary—Texans know how to throw a party! The BBQ dinner following the service had all the trimmings. The evening provided time for hours of reminiscing, and fellowship among the brethren.

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which we know as the “liturgy.” The use of a liturgy was formalized during the intense and protracted ongoing doctrinal struggles of the Bride of the Christ, for catechetical purposes. This is the legacy, the roots of that most unusual phrase, that many of you have often spoken, found in the first order of the Divine Service in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, **read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.** . . .” This is what the ancient liturgies were intended to do: to *continue* catechetical instruction, through the teaching of that which has become a naughty word in much of Christendom in our time, “right doctrine,”—and that not to “visitors,” but *to the faithful*; to assist in the ongoing orthodox (right teaching) spiritual development of the children of the Most High, thereby enabling them to be aware of the proper interpretation and application of Holy Scripture in relation to controverted doctrinal questions.

As the intense doctrinal conflicts of the fourth and fifth centuries raged, the orthodox bishops (those who steadfastly refused to compromise the doctrine confessed as Godly and right and thus “Catholic” at Nicea in A.D. 325) used virtually every component of the liturgy to continue instructing the faithful and maintaining the one true faith and doctrine among the faithful. Bishop Hilary of Poitiers in Gaul wrote and taught hymns which confessed the Nicene understanding of the proper, biblically defined relationship between God the eternal Father and *incarnated* only-begotten Son. Think of it: these were some of the words your brothers and sisters sang in confessing the very same faith you confess each time you speak the words of the Nicene Creed: “O Thou, Who dost exist before time and art ever the Son, as He is ever the Father. . . .” The hymn continues: “. . . Dear Offspring of God, in Whom is born all the glory of the Father! Nothing needed to be given Thee after birth, but whatever was of God, was born with Thee at the same time.” We can hear so clearly the words of the Catholic confession in the following words: “. . . Light shown from Light and Very God existed from Very God, the only-begotten Son, having nothing else but what the unbegotten Father had.” The teaching which Hilary was contending against was that the only-begotten Son was not of the same essence as God the Father, and that He has not “always” existed, as had the Father. In like fashion, Marius

Victorinus also wrote hymns, as did Ambrose among a multitude of other faithful bishops, all in the struggle to preserve the true orthodox understanding of the Holy Trinity, and thereby the one true and saving faith among the saints of their time, and ours.

In the fifth century the Vandals, who were Arian by faith, invaded and conquered much of north Africa. The Nicene Christians who were there suffered terribly at their hands, as the Vandals were determined to stamp out what they determinedly believed was the false doctrine established by the council of Nicea. In the midst of this persecution, a number of faithful Nicene bishops including one named Fulgentius, the bishop of a community named Ruspe, persisted in confessing the true doctrine and faith. What is of significance about the work of bishop Fulgentius is that he is one of the first to use the “Collect” to catechize in contending against false doctrine through the use of the Collect in the Divine Service. The Vandals, like all Arians, rejected vehemently the teaching that the only-begotten Son was “Consubstantial” with God the Father, that is to say, of the same essence or substance. Thus we find in Fulgentius’ Collects such phrases as: “. . . by the consubstantial light of your Word” (#17); “. . . the Word, Your consubstantial Son.” (#55); “. . . so that, healed by Your consubstantial Word...” (#106) and “. . . the grace of Your consubstantial and coeternal Word.” (#118).

In addition, the problem of “Pelagianism” was also widespread. This false teaching is still prevalent within Christendom today. It teaches that man has the “natural” ability to do that which is good; he has “free will” even in the spiritual realm. To contend against this false teaching, Bishop Fulgentius wrote such as the following: “. . . in your power, make us quickly extinguish all the arrows of evil, made safe by the justice of your grace by which we have been saved by no preceding merits of our own” (#10). Again, “We are useless because of our sin; there is no one who does good, there is not even a single one. Therefore, Lord, raise up Your grace in us, so that our bones may not please themselves” (#52). He also formulated the use of selected Psalms in the Divine Service for the same catechetical purpose.

Dear saints, contrary to popular conception, some words must remain unchanged, for they are not the words of man, but words given to man by the Creator of mankind, the most holy and divine Trinity. Thus it is with Holy Scripture. We have been so blessed to

have been freely given the only faith that saves, the one faith that continually beckons us to the cross of Golgotha and He who suffered and died upon it and rose again on the third day to atone for the sins of the world, Jesus of Nazareth, the enfleshed only-begotten Son. This is He whom Bishop Fulgentius rightly declares is truly consubstantial with God the eternal Father. As the elect of our particular time, we are facing one of the greatest challenges and opportunities that Christians have had since the beginning of New Testament times.

Our high privilege is to be able to speak that which we believe, rightly, in a fashion that brings honor, glory and praise not unto ourself but to the God who created us, redeemed us and is even now sanctifying us, the Holy Trinity. We know who the true Christ is, He who is revealed in the pages of an unchanged Holy Scripture and He who freely dispenses His saving grace through that Word and His unchanged Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We know this because it is a divine revelation freely given to us. This is what is happening, this is what we are learning to do each time we participate in the liturgy of the Divine Service. As we "read" the word, we continue to "mark" the word, and that same word "marks" our heart and soul, as God the Holy Ghost unfolds to us that which He would have us understand of Himself! Thus we learn what it means to be not only a *creation* of the Holy Trinity, but far more importantly, a *child* of the Holy Trinity's kingdom of saving and unending grace, and we "inwardly digest" the only saving Word, and particularly as we repentantly receive the true Body and Blood of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth in the holy Lord's Supper. As our confession rightly declares, the Lord's Supper is the "visible" Gospel!

This new sanctified life we have been divinely elected to live does not come from us, but is created in us, and again, only through the unchanged *Means of Grace* and thus primarily through the Divine Service. We assemble together for the Divine Service at the continual prompting of God the Holy Ghost to learn from God what we are to think of God, because we only know about Him that which He has revealed about Himself, through Holy Scripture, and we affirm and confessed this eternal truth *in the liturgy*. Thus what one learns in the Divine Service through the use of the liturgy is either proper "God talk," or it is the sin-stained opinion of what fallen mankind *thinks* God should be! This is why the ancient

and truly catholic liturgies are overwhelmingly composed of quotes from Holy Scripture. It is normal that we struggle to properly confess that which we believe, even though we doubt not what we believe, because transcendent and eternal truths have been revealed to us sinful human beings! In the Divine Service the infinite touches and spiritually changes the finite, but only when the *Word and Sacraments* remain unchanged. This is one of the timeless and continuing transformations of the Biblical Christian. Not so with the Cultural Christian, the person whose faith and life are formed by words used in worship from here below.

Dear fellow redeemed: The liturgy which you use, the words which you speak, the hymns which you sing and the prayers which you hear will form not only your worship practice, but also how you conceive of God! It's not an issue of simply saying, "well, old is better"! A question of supreme importance is, "What is being used to replace the 'old' in the Divine Service?" Are the words of the liturgy the changing and spiritually empty words of fallen mankind, or the eternally unchanging and grace dispensing Word of the one true and eternal God, the most holy and divine Trinity?

You might have not realize this, but when you join your voice in the liturgy, you are actively and publicly confessing that the doctrine confessed in the words and that Creed and that hymn—are yours, and as such you will be judged by that standard, at the end of days.

The truth is, the day is now gone when a Christian may walk into a particular building on a given day at a specific time and safely assume that what they will be confessing in the Divine Service is godly and right simply because that congregation holds membership in a particular Lutheran church body. Contending for the one and truth faith is not the role of the pastor alone, but of every one of the saints, for all should be moved by thankful and love for what the Christ has done for us, and freely given to each one: the complete forgiveness of all sins, both here in time and in eternity.

What each of you are now being privileged to do is quite possibly new to you, but it is not unique to our time in the life of the saints of the Bride of the Christ. Spiritual complacency and indifference now plagues the life of so many who contend they are Christian. You have not been called to spiritual complacency and doctrinal

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indifference, but to be the voice of the unchanged Gospel amidst multitudes who are perishing, both in body and soul! Make no mistake about it: the “new” and “different” Gospel being promoted and accepted so widely in the Christian community of our time is no Gospel at all! With this sad reality in mind, I conclude by sharing with you an extended quote from another early church father, Leontius, a faithful Nicene bishop of Jerusalem in the fifth century. He was an avid defender of the orthodox doctrinal “definition” of the Council of Chalcedon (that there are two separate natures, divine and human, in the Christ). He wrote the following words in regard to being knowledgeable about the faith one confesses:

The apostle, who says of the Jews that they *displease God, crucified the Lord, drove out the apostles, and disobey all men*, likewise gives the following testimony against them, for he somewhere goes on to say: *I bear witness against them that they have zeal for God, but not according to full knowledge*. It’s necessary, then, not just to be zealous, but to be zealous in full knowledge of the doctrine on behalf of which one is zealous, for every irrational and lawless tradition, both of nations and of heresies, supposes it’s doing something good. Such is the case of the Scythians, who show their piety toward God by human sacrifices! What’s needed, however great ones power, is not to be careless, but to seek the truth, and *testing all things, to have the right mind*. We don’t accept a silver coin or buy a piece of cloth, unless we fully test it by assays and tests by fire, by paring it, and by proofs in the presence of others. How sensible, then, would it be if we are careless about accepting divine doctrine? The apostle opposes the great thoughtlessness in these matters involved in our thinking that the grace and truth of Christ’s faith aren’t anything worthy of note— through which all the divine things *that pertain to life and the very great promises have been given to us, as is said, and, quite simply, participation in the divine nature*. How great a good the purest orthodoxy is, and how great an evil impiety is— for the latter is the sole reason why were abandoned by God to every sin— is something he makes clear when he says: *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge*

God, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to doing what is not right, which things he went on to enumerate.

The struggle to maintain pure doctrine and practice is as old as the Church itself, and it is not optional, but a necessity. It is not sought by the faithful, but is most often thrust upon them. To hear the leader of a large denomination declare that the members and congregations need to stop their incessant internal purification’ (struggle for the pursuit and/or maintenance pure doctrine) is to teach contrary to the clear teaching of Holy Scripture and a public acknowledgment of a lack of both recognition and understanding of one of the primary privileges and responsibilities of every saint of the church Catholic, of every generation unto the end of time. This is what ancient Lutheranism teaches, because this is what Holy Scripture teaches!

It is my prayer that by the continuing work of God the Holy Ghost through an unchanged Word and Sacraments, the liturgy you use will continue to do the work our forefathers intended it to do, continue to enable you to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” not the words of man, but the words of the God of all mankind, the most holy and divine Trinity!

For further reading:

The quotes cited above from Fulgentius of Ruspe are taken from the following volume which I strong commend to you for further reading: “*Visita nos, Reception, Rhetoric, and Prayer in a North African Monastery*” by Thomas A Ferguson. American University Studies Series VII Theology and Religion, Vol. 203. Peter Lang Publishing, 1999. (ISBN 0-8204-3911-8)

Also for your consideration:

ASPECTS OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR IN CAPPADOCIA (325-430) by Jill Burnett Comings. Patristic Studies Vol. 7 Peter Lang Publishing, 2005. (ISBN 0-8204-7464-)

Leontius of Jerusalem Against the Monophysites: Testimonies of the Saints and Aporiae, edited and translated by PATRICK T. R. GRAY. OXFORD EARLY CHRISTIAN TEXT, Oxford University Press 2006. (ISBN 0-19-926644-1)