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Liturgy & Life: How the Divine Service Connects with the Rest of the Week

Benjamin Janssen

On vicarage, I was blessed to spend many hours with a faithful member named Ginger, who, alongside her husband Walter, runs and operates the congregation's robust food and clothing distribution center. This center is completely run by volunteer efforts out of the undercroft of the church and successfully feeds and clothes 150 families a month. This work both serves the neighbor in need and brings the congregation into contact with many of those living in the immediate community. In short, it is a blessing to the congregation and the surrounding community. Therefore, at the end of each service day, I would personally thank the many volunteers, including Walter and Ginger, for their wonderful work and loving service toward their neighbors. Upon hearing my thanks, Ginger always responded with a statement similar to, "Oh Vicar, I don't want any thanks. All of the credit goes to Jesus." With this simple statement, Ginger proclaimed the scriptural truth that God's work of grace, mercy, and love found in the weekly Divine Service pours out and continues in her everyday life and the lives of those around her. This is why St. Paul implored the baptized believers to be "ambassadors for Christ" in their daily vocations (2 Cor 5:20). Everything the reborn Christian does is rooted in and flows out of the work first done to him by God, namely, redemption from sin (Eph 1:7–8; John 3:16). Therefore, Confessional Lutherans teach that God serves His people daily by feeding their body and souls in Word and Sacrament located in the weekly Divine Service.

First, time must be taken to define what is meant by the term, "Divine Service." Translated from the German word *Gottesdienst*, the "Divine Service" is the public worship of God's people where God Himself forgives the sins of His people with His Holy Word and blessed sacraments. This definition of public worship provides a needed corrective to the reigning view of Christian worship in America which believes that going to church is merely a work the Christian does for God. By using the title "Divine Service," Lutherans proclaim that public worship is not merely the work of Christians in rendering thanks and praise to God, but that it is also and primarily the work of Christ, who gathers Christians in His name to receive the forgiveness of sins won by Him on the cross. Having received this forgiveness, Christians return to their various vocations and share that forgiveness with their neighbors. The introduction to *Lutheran Worship* states, "Our Lord gives us His

body to eat and His blood to drink. Finally His blessing moves us into our calling where His gifts have their fruition.”¹ Lutherans understand public worship as the place where our divine Lord serves His people. This begins at the font, altar, and pulpit and pours out into the community each week where God continues His work of extending His kingdom through His people. Martin Luther summarizes this well in his hymn *These are the Holy Ten Commands* which states,

You shall observe the worship day
That peace may fill your home, and pray,
And put aside the work you do,
So that God may work in you.
Have mercy Lord!²

The Divine Service connects with everyday life as our Lord Jesus Christ carries out His will through Christians in their various vocations. But this is not merely a teaching of the Lutheran church, rather, this is taken directly from God’s Holy Word. In fact, the Scriptures have a few things to say about Christian worship and how God uses it both to forgive sins and to extend His kingdom into the world on a daily basis.

First, the baptized believer receives the forgiveness of sins in the Divine Service (Eph 1:7–8). It is here where the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are delivered to His people. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, individuals are baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38), receive the absolution of their sins (John 20:22–23), and the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:26–29). This is the foundation and rooting for the Christian.



Then, having been served by God and receiving His grace given for us in the Divine Service (1 Cor 10:16), the Christian carries the Divine Service into their everyday life. On these grounds, they present themselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1–2) and members of the body of Christ (Rom 12:3–8) who engage their neighbors with the love won for all on the cross and delivered to them first through Word and Sacrament in the Divine Service (Rom 12:9–21; 1 Cor 13).

Second, being rooted in the Divine Service, God's work extends into the daily life of the Christian. Each and every day, the will of God is fulfilled in the Christian as God the Father defends His children from all danger and guards and protects them from all evil. Then having received this protection, Christians respond with prayer and thanksgiving, even if they are not in public worship (Dan 6:10). St. Paul even reminds us to "rejoice in the Lord always," and bring everything before God by "prayer and supplication with thanksgiving." For in all times and places, St. Paul reminds the Christian to "let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:4–7).

Lastly, the Holy Scriptures teach that God's Work continues in our lives throughout the week. For through His Word and Sacraments, God grants His peace (Num 6:26), continuously guides His children (Ps 119:105), and permeates all daily vocations (Luke 10:38ff). All of these things force the Christian to remember and take to heart how God is both faithful to His promises and continues to deliver His people through all affliction. Consequently, this remembrance brings the Christian back to the source of it all, the Word and Sacraments given out in the weekly Divine Service. The Christian never graduates from this cycle of receiving, going out, and returning to the Divine Service. Rather, the Christian is conformed by this cycle into the image of Jesus (Rom 8:29; Col 3:10). For this reason, the Divine Service is carried out in the daily life of the Christian and the life of their neighbor as they continuously gather together with others in Jesus' name to receive God's forgiveness (Heb 10:25). In summary, the Christian, having been made righteous by the forgiveness of sins received in Word and Sacrament, lives by faith (Rom 1:17).

Next, as stated above, this is not only a biblical teaching, but is a teaching upheld by the Lutheran Confession. Therefore, it is appropriate to analyze how the Lutheran Confessions expound upon these texts. According to the Augsburg Confession,

It is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and

righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in His sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21–26] and 4[:5].³

Expounding on this article, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession explains that seeking the forgiveness of sins is the “highest way to worship Christ.”⁴ The AC then continues by confessing, “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when He wills, in those who hear the gospel.”⁵ In the Lutheran Confessions, just as in Holy Scripture, the forgiveness of sins and its distribution to God’s children is the foundation for God’s Work in the daily life of the Christian. It is only after laying this foundation that the AC continues into Article VI which confesses,

It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do good such good works as God commanded for God’s sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as Christ Himself says [Lk 17:10]: “When you have done all [things]... , say, ‘we are worthless slaves.’” The Fathers also teach the same thing. For Ambrose says: “It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.”⁶

Therefore, the Lutheran Confessions follow the same trajectory as Holy Scripture. First, Jesus Christ conquered and defeated sin, death, and the devil through His death and resurrection. Then, Christ instituted the Office of preaching to deliver this salvific work to His people. And finally, the faith given to us yields good works and fruit. All of this is the Divine Service being carried out in the everyday life of the Christian.

Even today, the congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are blessed to confess this reality on a weekly basis. In the *Lutheran Service Book*, the post-communion collects reads as follows,

We give thanks to You, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one

God, now and forever.⁷

Each week, after having orally received Jesus' crucified and resurrected body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, Lutherans both confess and pray that God would not only continue to daily forgive their sins, but also strengthen them to love and forgive their neighbor as Christ first loved and forgave them (1 Jn 4:19).

In commenting on the post-communion collect, John Pless writes, "The post-communion collect has a pivotal place in the liturgy. It is the hinge that connects God's service to us in the sacrament with our service to the neighbor in the world."⁸ The Divine Service permeates the daily life of Christians and their neighbors who receive the same love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ won by His death and resurrection. Pless hits on this relationship between the weekly "Divine Service" and the ongoing Divine Service in the life of the Christian when he writes,

Thus we see an ongoing rhythm between liturgy and vocation. Served with Christ's gifts in the liturgy, we are sent back into the world to live sacrificially as His royal priesthood. This is not a life that is lived by our own energies or resources but by the gospel of Jesus Christ alone. It is a life that is lived by the daily return to baptism in repentance and faith. It is a life sustained by Jesus' words and nourished with His Body and Blood.⁹

Martin Luther also summarized the daily ongoing aspect of Christ's salvific work in the life of the Christian when he wrote,

For it is necessary for each one to know that Christ has given His body, flesh, and blood on the cross to be our treasure and to help us to receive the forgiveness of sins, that is, that we may be saved, redeemed from death and hell. That is the first principle of Christian doctrine. It is presented to us in the words, and His body and blood are given to us to be received corporally as a token and confirmation of this fact. To be sure, He did cause this only once, carrying it out and achieving it on the cross; but He causes it each day anew to be set before us, distributed and poured out through preaching, and He orders us to remember Him always and never forget Him. The second principle is love. It is demonstrated in the first place by the fact that He has left us an example. As He gives Himself for us with His body and blood in order to redeem us from all misery, so we too are to give ourselves with might and man for our neighbor. Whoever knows this and lives accordingly

is holy, and has not much more to learn, nor will he find anything more in the whole Bible.¹⁰

Following the Biblical text, Luther sheds light on the beauty found in God utilizing the Christian to perform His loving will in the lives of others. Therefore, having been forgiven, the Christian is freely motivated by the Gospel to daily receive Christ's forgiveness, love God, and love their neighbor (Matt 22:37–39).

In conclusion, Holy Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, Martin Luther, and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod teach that in the Divine Service, Christians receive the forgiveness of sins. Then, Christians carry this forgiveness with them out into the world where they serve their neighbor. The cycle repeats every week in the Divine Service, confessing the truth that God works in us each and every day according to His will. Thanks be to God, that the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation won by Jesus' atoning death and resurrection are provided to the Christian weekly in Word and Sacrament. For by this, God daily serves His people in their various vocations.

Endnotes

- 1 *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 6.
- 2 *Lutheran Service Book*, Prepared by the Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis, Concordia, 2006), 581.
- 3 AC IV.
- 4 Ap IV 154.
- 5 AC V 1–2.
- 6 AC VI.
- 7 LSB, 201.
- 8 John T. Pless, “Vocation: Fruit of the Liturgy,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 11, no. 3 (2002): 4.
- 9 Pless, “Vocation,” 7.
- 10 AE 36:352.