

8-1-1941

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Recommended Citation

Kretzmann, P. E. (1941) "A Suggestion for a Lutheran Compline Service," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 12 , Article 51.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol12/iss1/51>

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A Suggestion for a Lutheran Compline (Late Evening) Service

At the risk of appearing to introduce what might at first blush seem to be an irrelevant thought, we feel constrained to refer once more to some of the doctrinal considerations which must ever be paramount in our attitude toward liturgical questions and liturgical problems.

The first of these considerations, quite obviously and necessarily, is that connected with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the corner-stone of all Christian theology and the shibboleth of Lutheran dogmatics. If we desire to observe the implications of this doctrine in our public worship, we must obviously abstain from any acts which would place the works of man in the foreground. Our Lutheran worship fundamentally represents only one thing: It introduces the poor sinner to the grace of God in Christ, gives him the assurance of God's unmerited love and mercy in Word and Sacrament, and then dismisses him with the injunction, stated or implied: "Go thy way; sin no more. Let the love of Christ constrain thee in thy whole life." The only response to this sacramental part of the Lutheran form of worship on the part of the worshipers is that of the sacrificial acts of supplication, prayer (including intercession), and giving of thanks—the sacrifices or fruits of the lips. The highest and best response of the Lutheran Christian to the blessings received during the church service is that of his whole life, with his body, in all situations of life, presented to the Lord as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is the Christian's reasonable service.

The second doctrinal consideration which must govern the Lutheran liturgical thinking is that pertaining to the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist. We keep in mind, in the first place, that these are the *only* means of grace, understanding fully that, strictly speaking, the Sacraments receive their power or efficacy only from the Word. As Luther puts it: "Baptism is . . . the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word." And again: "It is not the eating and drinking that does them, but the words here written." Only by and through these means of grace, as the *Verbum audibile* and the *Verbum visibile*, does God dispense the fruits of the redemption wrought by our blessed Savior. Hence the means of grace are to receive the chief, the most prominent place in our Lutheran worship. We indicate their importance by placing them in the chancel, as the sanctuary of our church-buildings, or so near to the chancel as to make their position obvious. For we know that they are truly means of *grace*, that

through them only does God dispense the blessings of salvation. Prayer in itself is not a means of grace, the instrument by and through which God dispenses His grace, although it may rightly be called, on the part of the worshipers, a means toward this grace, inasmuch as prayer rests upon the promises of the Gospel and makes use, as much as possible, of the very words of Holy Scripture. Yet the sacramental element of our Lutheran worship, not the sacrificial, must receive prime consideration and be given chief emphasis.

The third doctrinal consideration which must be kept in mind by all Lutheran liturgiologists is that pertaining to the Church and the Christian ministry. According to the Word of God, the pastors or ministers of the Church do not represent a separate class or station; they are called servants of the Word, and although the scope of their office is given in the Scriptures, they function only by virtue of the call extended to them by the Christian congregation. Although they are to excel in certain priestly functions, especially in that of intercession for their parishioners and all those who come within the scope of their ministrations, they do not hold a separate priestly office which differs from the position held by all believers, all of whom, according to Scripture, 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6, have been made priests before God and the Father. The Church, the Christian congregation, is in possession of all the blessings which have come to men through the redemption wrought by Christ, and the minister, or pastor, merely administers or applies the means of grace in public (*von Gemeinschafts wegen*) when he preaches and teaches, when he administers the Sacrament and pronounces the absolution, whether publicly or privately. A true conception of Lutheran liturgics, therefore, requires that the church-building itself, with all its parts and appointments, including also the arrangements of the chancel and the vestments of the clergy, shall in no way represent a false conception of the ministry. For example, a Lutheran congregation should not permit the installation of a Communion railing so as to form a permanent barricade between the nave and the chancel, as in the Roman Catholic Church; for the believer must at all times have direct access to the altar, symbolical as it is of the Throne of Grace. It should also be remembered, in agreement with the considerations offered above, that the pastor, when not on official duty in the chancel proper, has no more right to occupy a special chair or cathedra there than any other member of the congregation. He is to be in the chancel only when officiating *von Gemeinschafts wegen*; if not so occupied, he should either withdraw to the sacristy for prayer or occupy one of the sedilia placed at the entrance of, but not within, the chancel. Finally, we ought to give this matter

some very serious consideration, whether a Lutheran pastor should ever wear garments, as in the Roman Catholic and in the Anglican Church, which have a specific priestly character, according to the symbolism attached to them after centuries of use. It will be well for every one concerned to study the various *dicta* of Luther on the question of vestments as worn by the clergy. Extracts from the Reformer's remarks on questions regarding the liturgy were published in this periodical a few years ago.

And still we have not concluded our preliminary remarks on the general subject of Lutheran liturgics. The Formula of Concord found it necessary, almost four hundred years ago, to raise its voice in warning against a possible abuse of Christian liberty in the field of liturgics. The main points of the argument will bear repeating even at this late day, and perhaps with peculiar emphasis. The framers of that masterpiece of clear-cut statements wrote: "In like manner, too, such ceremonies should not be reckoned among the genuine free adiaphora, or matters of indifference, as make a show or feign the appearance, as though our religion and that of the Papists were not far apart. . . , when a reentering into the Papacy and a departure from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and true religion should occur or gradually follow therefrom. . . . Likewise, when there are useless, foolish displays, that are profitable neither for good order nor Christian discipline nor evangelical propriety in the Church, these also are not genuine adiaphora, or matters of indifference." (*Concordia Triglotta*, pp. 1053, 1055.) No Lutheran congregation, no Lutheran pastor, can afford to risk the suspicion that we have no solid foundation for our Lutheran liturgics and that we should make concessions in the interest of a repristination which may endanger confessional standards. Even if we should attempt to do so, we cannot set aside certain historical facts which have influenced liturgical (and confessional) attitudes in the past and will most certainly continue to do so also in the future.

But here the question may be raised, in view of all the considerations which have been offered: Why a suggestion for a Lutheran service of compline? In reply we should like to state that the completorium or compline in its original form was not a specific Roman Catholic service, no more than the service of matins or vespers or any other of the canonical hours was distinctly papistical. That development came later. During the Canono-Catholic period of the Church, and especially during the centuries before so many flagrant and subversive errors were introduced into the Church, the various services of the canonical hours served a very excellent purpose. Matins, for example, celebrated just before dawn, looked forward to the coming of a new day

under the guidance of the Lord. If some of the ideas of Lauds were added to the liturgy of matins, the praise of God for His works of creation and regeneration is the most prominent feature of the service. At vespers, which marks the close of the working day, the purpose is to look back upon the blessings of the day with a grateful heart and to praise God's providence and grace. The four psalms with their antiphons, as in use from early days, the lection with its responsorium, the Magnificat, the litany, and the Lord's Prayer, fitly combined to express the thoughts which move the heart of a Christian before darkness descends. The completorium, or late evening service, looked back once more upon the entire day, just before the faithful retired for the night. The believer turned to the grace of his Lord and pleaded for forgiveness and mercy; he admonished his soul to be vigilant during the night season and commended his spirit into the hands of his Redeemer. In the early period of the Church the service of compline included three psalms without antiphons, a hymn, a lection with antiphon, the litany, and the Benediction. Later the canticle *Nunc Dimittis* was introduced as being the most perfect and all-embracing prayer of commendation.

Viewed from its practical side, the service of compline is really more appropriate for an evening service after nightfall or immediately before the normal hour for retiring than is the service of vespers. The custom of conducting vespers, or evensong, at about five o'clock in the afternoon is gaining favor, and in that case the service of vespers may well be retained. But for those congregations and pastors who have an evening service in addition to the evensong services in the late afternoon, or those who desire an order which is really most appropriate for the close of the day, the service of compline may be most welcome. Naturally we go back to Canon-Catholic times, eliminating the additions and excrescences which are found in the Roman Catholic missal, just as Luther did in retaining the services of matins and vespers. We find some fairly good models in a few Lutheran agendas and church orders, and the Protestant Episcopal Church in U.S.A. offers the service of compline in a very acceptable sequence, which can easily be adapted to Lutheran principles.

What are the factors which must be kept in mind by the Lutheran liturgiologist in selecting a logical and meaningful service of compline? Naturally the confession of sins at the close of day will be represented. Then we must have an appropriate psalmody. An admonition to maintain vigilance during the night season and to commend one's soul into the hands of the heavenly Father must be included. And we should certainly want the *Nunc*

Dimittis, which so fittingly and comprehensively establishes the right relation between the believer and his God before he retires for the night. The following order of service embraces all the elements referred to, as in use in the Church from early times.

THE INTRODUCTION

V. Our help is in the name of the Lord:

R. Who made heaven and earth.

V. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost:

R. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

THE CONFITEOR

Pastor: We confess to God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to one another, and to the whole Church of Christ; that we have sinned exceedingly, in thought, word, and deed, and by omission, through our fault, our own fault, our own grievous fault. Wherefore we pray God to grant us forgiveness.

Pastor (and Assembly): Almighty God, be gracious unto us and forgive us all our sins; deliver us from all evil, confirm and strengthen us in all goodness and holy conduct, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

Pastor: May the gracious and merciful Lord grant us pardon for all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then shall be sung a

HYMN

THE PSALMODY

Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord:
Which by night stand in the house of the Lord.

Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord:
The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.

(Or:)

O God, my God, early will I seek Thee:

My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is.

Because Thy loving-kindness is better than life:

My lips shall praise Thee.

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness:

And my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips;

When I remember Thee upon my bed:

And meditate on Thee in the night watches.

Because Thou hast been my Help:

Therefore in the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice.

V. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost:

R. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

THE ADDRESS

THE LITTLE CHAPTER

V. Thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by Thy name; leave us not, O Lord, our God:

R. Thanks be to God.

V. Into Thy hands I commend my spirit:

R. Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of truth.

V. Brethren, be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary, the devil, walketh about seeking whom he may devour; whom resist steadfast in the faith.

Then may be sung a

HYMN

THE NUNC DIMITTIS

V. Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace:

R. According to Thy Word;

V. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation:

R. Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

V. A Light to lighten the Gentiles:

R. And the Glory of Thy people Israel.

V. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to Holy Ghost:

R. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

THE KYRIE

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Christ, have mercy upon us.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

V. Vouchsafe, O Lord:

R. To keep us this night without sin.

V. O Lord, let Thy mercy be upon us:

R. According as our hope is in Thee.

V. Lord, hear our prayer:

R. And let our cry come unto Thee.

THE COLLECT

Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of Thine only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Or:)

Hear us, O Lord, and deliver us from all adversity and error, that we and Thy whole Church may serve Thee in the freedom of peace and truth, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

V. Bless we the Lord:

R. Thanks be to God.

THE BENEDICTION

This is the suggested order for compline. It is short, but comprehensive. It seems to meet all the requirements of Lutheran principles and of logical order. It should serve the purpose of a Lutheran completorium.

P. E. KRETZMANN