

## Church and Ministry Part 6: Divine Service

In this last session I propose to sketch out for you the biblical theology of worship. How we worship, what we say, what we do, how we conduct ourselves, who does what, and why – all these are matters of great importance for the Christian congregation. They take on even greater significance when churches otherwise enjoy unity in doctrine. How can we maintain and give expression to our unity in the gospel? How can our worship best teach and embody the true doctrine? We have already touched on the place of the divinely instituted rituals of teaching God's Word purely and administering the sacraments according to his divine Word. We have emphasized their divinely instituted place in the doctrine and life of the church. And we have spoken of the called and ordained minister of Christ as the one commanded by Christ to be the teacher and steward of these divine gifts.

Here, I will begin in the Old Testament to address matters of basic and foundational importance, and then, as time permits, I will add some further reflections concerning what is instituted in the New Testament.

Genesis 1 roots us firmly in the revelation of God as our Creator and man as his creature.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

God created man in his own image. There are many blessings bound up with this truth. Man was made with a soul. He was given the gift of speech, the gift of knowledge, the gift of reason. He was made to listen to God and to speak to God. He was made for communion with God. He was made to dwell with God and enjoy his divine presence forever. He was given the gift of dominion over the earth and all its creatures. He shares in the Creator's labors and is himself a sub-creator under God. All that man is, body, soul, mind, spirit – all are created to give glory to God and to serve as his image and representative in the world.

In Ephesians 4:24, the image or likeness of God is explained as "true righteousness and holiness." True righteousness is perfect conformity to the law of God, in body and soul, in disposition and actions. Justice is the virtue and the eternal law that belongs to righteousness. All sin or lawlessness is the violation of God's justice, provoking his just wrath and meriting eternal death as the satisfaction of justice.

Man, who was by nature righteous before God, was also holy. He lived before God in honor, without fear, without shame. He entered without penalty into the presence of God and was given free use of all the things that God had sanctified by his Word. He had access to God, to pray to him, to call upon him, to learn and grow in physical and spiritual stature before God. For in creating man and touching him and speaking his Word to him, making him in his own image, God had sanctified man as a holy creature in his sight. Man was truly like the holy God, glorious and awesome in the presence of all creation.

When God spoke to Adam in the Garden, giving him dominion over the earth and all its creatures and commanding him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he constituted Adam and Eve as the church. Adam's Divine Service was to meet with God at this tree, to hear and obey his Word, to speak with God, and to bring his prayers and hymns before him.

When Adam sinned, he violated the righteousness of God in his person, became guilty before God, and merited both sin and death for himself and for all his descendants. The decree of God's justice was death, the corruption and loss, pain and affliction, of death in this life, and eternal death. He could no longer stand before God but was driven from his sight, lest God destroy him immediately in his just anger.

Adam also desecrated the holiness of God in his person, because all sin, corruption, death, and evil are set against the holiness of God. When Adam sinned, God turned away from him, withdrawing his holiness and honor from man. Man was now polluted in his body and soul, in his conscience, and in everything that he touched. In his sin, he was clothed with shame. The Divine Service that was the joy and glory of his life was now destroyed.

But despite the judgment and inheritance of death that was passed on to Adam, God did not put him to death immediately or leave him without a remedy. Two passages in Genesis 3 reveal God's mercy to his guilty and desecrated creation. He set against the devil and all his works the promise of the woman's Seed. This promised Savior would shed his blood, but would emerge victorious over the devil, who would be destroyed forever with all his works and all his ways. God also sacrificed animals of his creation, shedding their blood, to clothe Adam and Eve and thereby cover their shame. The shedding of blood foreshadowed the satisfaction of God's wrath against sin in the suffering and death of the promised Savior. Adam and Eve's participation in that sacrifice by wearing their skins to cover their shame foreshadowed the full restoration of their holiness before God. Blood sacrifice now marked the new Divine Service of sinful man. So Noah's sacrifice after the Flood showed his faith in the atoning sacrifice of the woman's Seed and thereby pleased God for Christ's sake.

Moses reveals at the end of Genesis 4 that during the days of Seth, who was born after the death of Abel, "At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD." (Genesis 4:26) With this statement Moses records the revelation of God's most precious gift to man. God gave his name to his people. His name not only identified him and distinguished him from all the false gods – who are no gods, but also included all his works and all his words. Even more, his name gave his people access to him. To call upon the name of the Lord was to hold him as God alone and to trust in him for every good. To call upon the name of the Lord was to express this faith as a public confession, and in true worship, to pray to him and praise him for his blessings.

This pattern is rapidly established in Genesis following the promise to Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) The Lord appeared to Abraham and spoke to him, and Abraham built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord (Genesis 12:7-8). The descendants of Abraham did the same. Those places became churches, where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would gather their households with those who believed in the promise of Abraham's Seed, and there the patriarchs would teach God's Word, offer sacrifices at the altar, and call upon the name of the Lord.

In Genesis 15:6, where God repeated to Abraham his promise of the Seed, we hear, "And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." On that occasion, Abraham performed the ritual of making a covenant with God by sacrificing animals, dividing them, and passing through the midst of them with God. But in Genesis 22, God revealed to Abraham that his wrath against sin and the establishment of an eternal covenant with him would require a human sacrifice, the shedding of a man's blood. God commanded the sacrifice of his only son Isaac, and Abraham, in true faith toward God, was fully prepared to obey. But, of course, Isaac was neither a blameless nor an adequate sacrifice to fulfill God's justice for all men. On that occasion, God himself provided a substitute for Isaac, thus revealing the doctrine that God would provide for man a substitute – his own Son, upon whom he would pour out his wrath, and thus redeem man from sin and death.

In Genesis 28, when the patriarch Jacob fled from his brother Esau and dreamed of the ladder that stretched between earth and heaven, upon which the angels of God were ascending and descending, God spoke to Jacob in the dream and gave him, as his inheritance from the Lord, the promise he had given to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob's response to the speaking of God's Word in that place was to exclaim in words that teach us how to think about this basic element of the Divine Service.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."  
(Genesis 28:16-17)

First, we learn from this text that God is present where his Word and name are being rightly used. Second, God wishes to be worshipped in his Word, that is, by hearing, believing, and keeping his Word. Third, it is the Word of God that hallows a place and makes it his dwelling place, his house. Fourth, the Word of God, where it is taught and believed, makes that place the entrance to heaven, thus sanctifying the hearer, restoring God's favor and honor to him, and granting him access to God in prayer now and, in the end, to life eternal. In John 1 Jesus reveals himself to be the ladder from earth to heaven, joining the two in his person through the union of his divine and human natures. In the union of his person, God's Word is fulfilled, and a sacrifice is prepared which will satisfy the wrath of God against all men, by which their sins are forgiven, they are sanctified, and they are granted eternal access to God through his blood.

This deep doctrinal history in Genesis lays the foundation for the Divine Service that God gave to his people Israel by the hand of his holy prophet Moses. Exodus tells how God took his people, who were sold under the slavery of sin and death, made satisfaction for their sin through blood, constituted them as a righteous and holy people, and sustained their spiritual and physical life with spiritual food.

The plagues which God visited upon Egypt revealed God's wrath against sin and unbelief, but also prepared for the blood sacrifice by which Israel would be set free. By God's command, Moses announced Israel as God's own son, demanding that Pharaoh let his son Israel go free from slavery (Exodus 4:22-23). God did not require the sacrifice of Israel his son, but again provided a substitute, the Passover lamb, whose blood redeemed the Israelites from the judgment and execution of the death angel, and whose flesh fed them for the journey from slavery to the promised land (Exodus 11-13).

God then brought them through the waters of the Red Sea. By water they passed from slavery to freedom. By water they left behind their old way of life and entered into a new life as God's own people. By water their enemies were drowned, but they were drawn up alive. By the cloud that led them and defended them, God simultaneously revealed his gracious and saving presence while concealing himself and his holiness from the sin-polluted eyes of his people. As Paul teaches, "They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." (1 Corinthians 10:1-5; see Exodus 14-15)

When they arrived at Mount Sinai, God explained the meaning of his actions in delivering them from Egypt through the Red Sea, demanded of them their faithful obedience to his Word, and introduced to them the basic terms of his covenant. God spoke to Moses from the holy mountain and gave him these words to say to the children of Israel (Exodus 19:3-6):

Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles'

wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

In these words God announced that this people, which he obtained and won for himself by a mighty hand, was his kingdom and he was their King. By the terms of this covenant, they were his priests, offering sacrifices to God and having access to him through blood. They were holy, for God himself cleansed them of their sin and sanctified them. Thus they became a nation upon the earth, with laws provided by God himself—just, holy, and good laws.

At the heart of their laws, as the expression of God's eternal will and as the very template of man's own existence as man, God gave the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:1-21). He spoke directly to the people from Mount Sinai out of the cloud of his divine presence, the cloud now accompanied by “thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking.” (Exodus 20:18) In their terror the people asked for a mediator between God and man (Exodus 20:18-21; Deuteronomy 5:22-33, 18:15-19). God gave them Moses as a mediator, as well as Aaron and his sons as priests, all of whom foreshadowed Jesus Christ, the great prophet and the great high priest, our Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), who fulfilled and superseded their offices.

This old and provisional covenant was established in Exodus 24 with solemn and formal ritual.

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” (Exodus 24:3)

Moses wrote the words down as an abiding covenant, to be remembered by future generations. He built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up 12 pillars to stand as witnesses for the 12 tribes of Israel. Burnt offerings and peace offerings of bulls were offered on the altar.

And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Exodus 24:6-8)

Then Moses records that he and Aaron, Aaron's sons, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up on the mountain of God, that they saw the God of Israel, they ate and drank before God, but he did not lay his hand on them.

Here in this event, as well as in the events and rituals which we will examine briefly, the Christian sees the pattern and the way in which God institutes his Divine Service also in the New Testament. The institution of the Lord's Supper in the body and blood of Jesus are clearly the greater Testament (or Covenant), eternal and all-sufficient. The Epistle to the Hebrews is a beautiful manual for teaching Christ and his work to us in light of the Old Testament, but there are many other places found in prophecy in the Old Testament and in fulfillment throughout the New Testament.

Exodus 25–40 records in detail the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the institution of the daily Divine Service. In Leviticus we are taught the various sacrifices, the ordination of Aaron and his sons, the various feasts, and many of the laws of clean and unclean. Exodus 32–34 records an event at length that shines a bright light on the meaning and purpose of the Old Testament Divine Service.

When the children of Israel made and worshipped the golden calf, God sought to kill them all in his just wrath, but Moses interceded, and God relented. But God announced that he could not dwell in the midst of his sinful people and that he would not lead them up to the promised land. Again Moses interceded, and God revealed that he had provided the tabernacle with its Divine Service as the means by which he could dwell in their midst, so that he could be their God and they could be his people. “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Exodus 33:14)

Here is the outline of the daily Divine Service, which took place every day, morning and evening. The priest took a yearling lamb, slaughtered it, and splashed its blood upon the great bronze altar in front of the tabernacle. Then he took incense into the holy place and offer it upon the golden altar of incense located in front of the most holy place, which contained the ark of the covenant with the mercy seat on top. In the holy place he ate of the most holy bread of the Presence from its golden table. He also trimmed the lamps on the golden candelabra. When he had finished offering the prayers of the people, he came out, cut up the lamb for the burnt offering, and placed it on the great bronze altar, together with flour, incense, salt, oil, and wine. The cloud of smoke that arose was a sweet smelling aroma to God, with which God was well pleased, and which also revealed the presence of God the king in the midst of his people. The priests would blow the silver trumpets to announce his presence among them. The priest then came down from the altar, faced the people, and spoke the Aaronic Benediction.

Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to

you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:23-27)

Here at the institution of the benediction, as well as at the basic institution of the Divine Service, God explained what he was doing in the Divine Service.

It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:42-46)

At the heart of the Divine Service is the burnt offering, the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Sin is man's chief problem, alienating him from God, keeping him from the holy presence of God and all his blessings. God gave the sacrifices of atonement as the provisional and foreshadowing remedy to this evil. Jesus fulfilled these innumerable sacrifices by the shedding of his own blood and the offering of his body for the sins of the world, once and for all.

In this service God met with his people to forgive their sins, sanctify them, hear their prayers, and bless them. There he spoke to his people, to teach them his Word. In Chronicles we learn in detail how God appointed the Levites to sing God's Word at the Divine Service at the entrance to the court of the tabernacle. The priests, and especially the Levites, were the daily teachers of God's Word, corresponding to the office and duty which God gave to fathers in the household and to pastors in the New Testament church.

We also see in this passage that God sanctified the tabernacle by his glory, that is, by his presence. Only God is holy in himself: "Thou only art holy; Thou only art the Lord," as we sing in the *Gloria in Excelsis* in our historic Divine Service. His sanctifying presence is mediated to us through his most holy Word and through those things that are sanctified as most holy according to his institution. In the New Testament, the most holy things are first of all the Word of God, and then also the sacraments. Here are the means by which sinners are cleansed of their sins, made holy by the blood of Christ, and gathered into the church as the new people of God. These are the marks of the church, which is the temple of God, a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit. By these means the holy God dwells in the midst of his people and blesses us. In the Aaronic benediction, the pastor puts God's name upon us, as was done at our baptism, and in this way God himself blesses us.

In Leviticus 10 Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were presiding at the Divine Service. When they entered the holy place to offer incense, they did not take coals from the great bronze altar as God commanded but from a common source. Because they used unauthorized fire, that is, not the holy fire from God which had kindled the wood under the great bronze altar in Leviticus 9, God killed Nadab and Abihu. They had profaned his holiness in a major violation, with death as the penalty (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-32). As a consequence, God established a rule for the priesthood that also applied to all the people and still applies to us today regarding the Divine Service of the New Testament.

You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses. (Leviticus 10:10-11)

There are four spiritual categories named here. We have seen what “holy” is, that it is the realm of God in his honor and glory, righteous and pure, and set apart from all that is common. That which is “common” is in the realm of daily use. It has not been set apart or sanctified for use in the Divine Service or to appear in God's presence. For example, bread and wine are common in the daily use of our tables at home. But when the pastor speaks the words of Christ's institution upon them in the Lord's Supper, they become holy, the true body and blood of Jesus, the Holy Communion. Indeed, they are “most holy,” because by them God forgives us our sins and sanctifies us in body and soul, thus cleansing us spiritually and communicating his holiness to us.

The realm of the “unclean” is the spiritual realm of sin, death, corruption and decay, the devil and hell. God gave the tabernacle laws of clean and unclean to Israel to teach them this spiritual realm and protect them from its pollution and evil. Although the Old Testament cultic regulations have passed away with the institution of the New Testament, the distinction still stands. Sin and all vice, the oppression or possession by demons, the guilty or even the violated conscience are all unclean and are characteristics of the devil's realm.

“Clean” is the spiritual status of those things or those people who have been purified from all that makes them unclean. They have been delivered from the realm of darkness and uncleanness. That which is clean can then be sanctified, made holy by the Word of God and the most holy things of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. The rituals of the Old Testament were given by God to accomplish this purpose. In the New Testament this cleansing is most closely identified with the justification of the sinner, the forgiveness of sins, which always entails the application of the blood of Christ by God's Word and sacraments. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Hebrews 9:22) Through the blood of Christ we are both



cleansed of our sin and all uncleanness and sanctified before God, thereby giving to us all the blessings of our status as holy priests and children of God.

Our Divine Service in the New Testament is drawn completely from the Word of God. God instituted the confession of sins and the absolution spoken by the pastor, in the stead and by the command of Christ. We sing Psalms, canticles, and hymns, as the Holy Spirit teaches us in Ephesians and Colossians. The pastor reads Holy Scriptures publicly to the congregation, as God instituted and commanded. The pastor teaches God's doctrine to the people in the sermon, according to Christ's institution and command. The offerings are gathered as God has commanded and are used for the Lord's Supper and other provisions of the Divine Service, for the care of the church and of the pastor and his family, the preaching of the gospel in other places, as well as for works of mercy in the congregation and in the community. Prayers are offered for kings and all in authority and for all people in their need, as the Scriptures instruct us. The Lord's Supper is celebrated with all solemnity, with holy canticles from God's Word, and with thanksgiving. In practicing "closed communion," we obey the Word of God in distinguishing between the baptized who have been examined and found prepared in doctrine and life to share in this most holy sacrament, and those who are unprepared because of youth or error, or are unworthy on account of unbelief or impenitent sin. In receiving the Aaronic benediction at the end of the service, we enjoy continuity with the Christian Church of the Old Testament in the service that was instituted to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh who is now the Tabernacle of God in our midst.

The divine worship of God in the Christian congregation is at the heart of the Christian faith and life. Pastors are called and ordained by God's command to deliver and lead Christians in the hearing of God's Word, reception of the holy sacraments, and in the prayers and praise of God (AC 5, 14). The church itself is constituted by these same means (AC 7, 8). By these same means justifying faith is obtained by sinners, who by nature and by deed are under the wrath and condemnation of God (AC 5). And in the end, it is through the means distributed to sinners in the Divine Service of the church that God delivers to sinners the atoning, life-giving, justifying work of our God and Brother Jesus Christ (AC 4). In the New Testament, the "ministry of the Spirit...has but one sacrifice of Christ which makes satisfaction for and is applied to the sins of others...It presents the gospel and sacraments to others so that they may thereby receive faith and the Holy Spirit, be put to death and be made alive" (Ap 24.59)

Rev. John E. Hill, President  
Wyoming District, Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod