

## The Sacramental Understanding of the Common Service

In the divine service God serves us with his good gifts of Word and Sacrament. But what constitutes the Divine Service? The Divine Service consists of Word and Sacrament. It is the Divine Service that constitutes the marks of the church: “the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ” (Ap VIII, 5, Kolb-Wengert, p. 174).

A series of rites and ceremonies have developed to introduce and connect the various elements of the Divine Service. These rites and ceremonies are usually derived from Scripture. Often they serve to illumine what is going on in the service: for example, the way the pastor faces during different portions of the common service illustrates whether God is talking to us, or whether we are responding to God.

Some seem to use the terms “Divine Service” and “common service” as though they were interchangeable, and even at times even conflate the two. By the common service we mean the Western rite, as corrected by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther’s liturgical reforms.<sup>1</sup> It is this service, the common service, which some equate with the Divine Service.

The common service is like one of those pretty blue Tiffany boxes. It is lovely to look at, lovely to hold, but its main purpose is to create anticipation for the gift inside. Many Lutherans forget that the common service is like a velvet box containing the precious gift of the Divine Service. They forget that the common service consists of rites and ceremonies of human origin and, in forgetting this, they end up raising the common service to a sacramental level---a Word from God with a promise attached. But we know the Gospel can be proclaimed outside the common service, and we know the sacraments can be administered apart from the common service. The common service is simply a wrapping around the Divine Service or, to use another metaphor, a tool used to aid in the Divine Service.

The ultimate definition of a sacrament is a Word of *Christ* with a promise attached, as in “this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” The lesser definition of a sacrament as a Word from *God* with a promise attached. This lesser sacramental definition is used of things like ordination, for example. (Among the fundamentalists, support for the nation of Israel also has this second-tiered sacramental understanding.) Through the Divine Service, instituted in Exodus 29, we receive the promise that God will meet with us, speak to us, and be our God. The raising of the common service to this second-tiered sacramental understanding requires Lutherans to equate the common service and the Divine Service. Therefore, if the common service and

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<sup>1</sup> Horn, E. T. *The Lutheran Sources of the Common Service*. The Lutheran Quarterly 21 (1891) no. 2:239-268. Retrieved on 3 May 2008 from <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/701>

the Divine Service are equivalent, we receive the promise of God in, under, and through the common service.

By raising the common service to the level of a sacrament, even a second-tiered sacrament, many Lutherans are playing a dangerous game. They are equating two things that are not equivalent. They are raising human inventions to the status of the divine. This is legalism at its worst and, as we know, the law kills. Also, by making the common service out to be the law of God, they are forcing people to address the issue of adiaphora, of things neither commanded nor forbidden. And as we know, if anyone commands an adiaphoron, the Lutheran Confessions require us to abstain from it.

Moreover, the insistence upon the traditional form of the common service, as corrected through the liturgical reforms of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, ends up being a form of cultural imperialism. This cultural imperialism is the insistence upon all things German (or Danish, or Norwegian, or Swedish, etc.) as though the church belongs to the Germans (or the Danes, or the Norwegians, or the Swedes, etc.) It is cultural imperialism to insist upon particular musical idioms---even if those idioms are culturally irrelevant today---and to insist upon certain instruments while forbidding others---even if the instruments commanded are both uncommon and prohibitively expensive.<sup>2</sup> In these cases the role of the church becomes the imposition and maintenance of a foreign cultural tradition---foreign in both time and space---instead of the role of the church being to confront the culture with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul states the following: “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake.” The intent of many Lutherans is far different than that of Paul, and could be stated this way: “All men are to be made as I am, for the sake of the western rite.”

I say this as someone who loves the common service. The common service is reverential; through the common service I am served His good and gracious gifts, which inspires and empowers me to the service of God. The common service can be as dramatic as any pageant, and be far more moving and meaningful than any contemporary service.

However, when performed in a perfunctory manner and using a culturally incomprehensible idiom, the common service loses its essential character and becomes a series of rituals, performed by rote, as dry as dust and devoid of meaning. As an example of this type of thinking, a Lutheran Kantor once told me that it is not a church if it doesn’t have an organ. This is a startling statement, given that the organ was not introduced into the church until the 9<sup>th</sup> century. If we take some Lutherans at their word, then what is written in the Acts of the Apostles doesn’t constitute the true church, as it had neither the common service nor the organ.

The imposition upon people of musical idioms and traditions from a land distant in both time and space has a stultifying effect. It cuts people off from the common service. The living words of scripture, found throughout the common service, become as dry as bones.

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, I know that the sound systems used for Contemporary Worship are expensive. But that is hardly germane to my point. Many churches today have both an organ and a piano, but no one who can play them. However, it does not take years of practice to run a soundboard.

“Can these bones live?” Yes, they can. But not by imposing a foreign culture upon people. The common service needs to be adapted to each culture, not superimposed upon it. (And by the way, the Roman Catholics have done an excellent job of this---while we Lutherans dither.)

The point of the common service is to direct us to God, for the common service contains the essential elements of the divine service. The common service must not be used to impose a culture upon unwitting peoples, for then God’s service becomes hidden under layers of human inventions which are then given sacramental significance. These human inventions not only *hide* the divine service, they take the place of it. The maintenance of the traditional form of the common service then becomes our service of God, not the means God uses to serve us with his good gifts. If some Lutherans have their way and impose the common service, then a true confessional understanding would require us to throw out the hymnals, abolish the common service, and start afresh.

Thanks be to God we have not yet reached that point. But the actions of a few well-meaning people to protect their (admittedly wonderful) cultural heritage are causing great harm to the church of God on earth. When we give to the common service a sacramental understanding and when we impose human traditions over scripture, aren’t we doing the very thing our Lutheran fathers accused the papacy of doing? We need to cool our passions, moderate our rhetoric, and put first things first---which is the proper proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.