

This Is the Word of the Lord

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"This is the Word of the Lord" says the pastor at the conclusion of each reading from Scripture. The congregation receives the gift of the Lord's words in thanksgiving as it responds "Thanks be to God." With this simple exchange between pastor and people, the Scripture is confessed for what it is, the very Word of God and it is acknowledged as bearer of the Lord's gifts of spirit and life to be embraced with thanksgiving. In an age such as ours where many church bodies no longer affirm the total trustworthiness and authority of the Scriptures, the liturgy confesses the Scriptures to be "the Word of the Lord."

The liturgy is permeated with Scripture. From the Lord's name given us in Holy Baptism (Matthew 28:19) to the words of the Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26), the liturgy is genuinely biblical. All of the great canticles of the Divine Service (the Gloria, "This is the Feast," the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, the Nunc Dimittis, "Thank the Lord"), the introit, the offertory, verses and responses, and the words of institution are drawn from the Scriptures. Indeed the Swedish Lutheran churchman, Olof Herrlin is correct when he states "The liturgy of the Church, like its preaching, is the assertion of Scripture as God's Word" (*Divine Service-Liturgy in Perspective*, 3).

Central to the Service of the Word is the reading of the Holy Scriptures and preaching that is governed by these Scriptures. At this point we may observe the continuity of the Christian liturgy with that of the synagogue. In the synagogue service there were readings from the torah, the prophets, and the historical writings. The torah, considered the most important portion of the Old Testament, was given a place of prominence. It was read first. The reading of the torah was followed by readings from the prophets and the historical writings and then a sermon. In New Testament times, the Christian liturgy follows a similar pattern with readings from the Old Testament, an apostolic letter (epistle), and a Gospel followed by preaching. We do note one important reversal. The Gospel is given the place of prominence in that it is read last. In a very real sense both readings from the Old Testament and epistles lead to the Gospel are brought to fulfillment in it. The early church confessed the writings of the apostles and evangelist as inspired Scripture, on par with the Old Testament by including them in the divine service. Before the doctrine of biblical inspiration or issues of canonicity were fully articulated by the church, these writings were recognized as God's Word in the liturgy.

In the liturgy, the first reading is generally from the Old Testament although the three-year lectionary provides readings from the Book of Acts throughout the Great Fifty Days of Easter. The gradual, a verse or verses taken from the Scriptures and reflective of the theme of the day or the season of the church year serves as something of a bridge between the first reading and the epistle. The second reading is from an epistle, a letter of an apostle. The reading of the Holy Gospel is anticipated with the "alleluia verse" based on John 6:68. In the Lenten season, a verse from Joel 2:13 is substituted. The Holy Gospel is the chief reading. Here Christ himself speaks to his congregation imparting to his people words of blessing and salvation. The first two readings function as the voice of John the Baptist, preparing us to hear in repentance and faith, the living voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. The Holy Gospel is rightly seen as the summit of the Service of the Word. This we recognize by surrounding the reading of our Savior's words with acclamations of glory ("Glory to you, O Lord") and praise ("Praise to you, O Christ") and by standing to receive these gracious words.

The place of the reading of the scriptures in the liturgy is reflective of the high view of the Bible's inspiration and authority. In the liturgy, the Scriptures are honored as the Word of God. The Word who became flesh to be our Savior does not disdain words. As he came to us in the lowliness of our flesh, so he

comes to us in human words, the words given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Timothy 3:14-17). Through these God-breathed words, God himself is at work to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

The Scriptures are read not to make us better "Bible trivia" players or even to give us principles for Christian living or moral instruction, but to give us Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins and raised to life for our justification. The Scriptures are the very Word of God, not only as "rule and norm" to use the language of the Formula of Concord, but also as words of the Spirit, words of truth and life, that reveal to us Jesus and create saving faith in him. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17) writes the Apostle Paul. God gave us his Scriptures to be read and preached. Through the reading and proclaiming of his Scriptures, God is at work creating faith, bestowing the peace of sins forgiven, strengthening his people in the struggle against sin, and enlivening in them the hope of eternal life. In his speaking in and through the Scriptures, God is serving his people. The worshiping congregation does not live by a word that comes from within itself, but by the words that come from the Lord himself. The purpose of the Scripture readings in the divine service is concisely stated by the Apostle John near the end of his gospel narrative, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

God serves us in and through his words, the words of Holy Scripture. The reading of the Scriptures and their proclamation in the sermon go together. The exhortation of the Apostle Paul to Pastor Timothy, "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching" (I Timothy 4:13) is fulfilled as the Scriptures are read and sermons are preached in conformity with these holy texts. In this reading and preaching, Christ speaks and we listen. From his words we receive life and salvation.

The gift of the Holy Scriptures prompted Thomas Cranmer to pen a collect that has found its way into our hymnals. His prayer aptly summarizes the place of the reading of God's Word in the divine service: "*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, that by the patience and comfort of Thy holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us, in our Savior Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end*" (The Lutheran Hymnal, 14).

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