

May 24, 2012
Maundy Thursday

What's Worship For?

On the night of His betrayal, our Lord Jesus Christ gave His disciples a memorial of His death by giving into their hands His own body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins. The memorial of His death is still given by Christ as a gift to His church. For He Himself commanded that we keep on doing this (1Co 11:24–25). If we neglect this gift, we neglect His command and His forgiveness. This is why the divine service is the center of the church's life. The worship centered on the altar of the Lamb is not optional but it is the Lord Christ graciously giving His body and blood for us Christians to eat and to drink. Thus the worship service of the church meets the deepest and most significant need of sinners; it gives sinners forgiveness. This decisively answers the question, "What is worship for?" It is for us poor sinners to receive the grace of God. What could possibly be optional (adiaphorous) about that? Nothing. From the night of His betrayal it has been so.

Our blindness about the grace of God is exemplified when our hardened hearts conceive the question, "What is worship for?" How depraved we are not to be able to see immediately that God conceived the divine service for us, for our good, for our benefit! While we are pondering the "what?" we are disbelieving of our state of depravity and forgetting that the Lord God has given us divine service. Therefore, the question really is not "what?" but "whom?" Whom is worship for? It is for me. A poor miserable sinner. It is for me, in desperate need to hear the Lord say on the lips of the servants of the Word, "I forgive you." It is for those who are hungering and thirsting for Christ's body and blood. The divine service is not, however, "for you" as though it should be molded to our depraved desire to be entertained. Much that is called worship is not about the gifts of God, but about our favorite alternative god: ourselves. Our Lord is calling us from such idolatry to the place where He is at the center dispensing His body and blood to sinners.

Much that is advertised as "praise service" is in praise of ourselves. It is insulting when people describe their unique mélange of "worship" as a "praise service" to distinguish it from what the rest of us poor benighted souls are having given to us in divine service. If they are praising God in their service, then what are the rest doing? Ah, of course, we are not praising God. And in the final analysis, this is because the praise service

crowd is not entertained by divine service. Yes, Virginia, words do mean things.

God offers Himself to us in the divine service. It is for us. It is for us because the divine service gives us the Word and Sacraments. The divine service is nothing else and nothing more than the divine self-giving. In our receiving we are part of the mystery of salvation with Him who offers Himself. By swallowing the body of the Lord the Body of the Lord swallows us. That's what worship is for.

"[We should] keep Christ in remembrance and assist in preserving such remembrance. This is done by preaching, praising, and thanking God for the grace of Christ shown to us poor sinners by his suffering. God instituted this sacrament [of the altar] chiefly for the sake of this remembrance, and this is the honor that he seeks and demands in it, for in Christ he wants to be acknowledged and regarded as our God. What great honor and glorious worship that the divine glory is upheld and God is made to be the true God. In return, God will doubtlessly bring that person to divine honor and as a result make him a god and a child of God.

"Who can even estimate what good things such honor and worship of God produce? For thereby a person thanks and praises not only God in Christ, which is the peculiar function of this divine institution, but he also confesses his Lord Christ openly before the world and confesses that he is a Christian and wants to be one. Simultaneously, he carries out the highest office of a true priest in a twofold way: By thanking, praising, and glorifying God he performs the most beautiful sacrifice, the supreme worship of God, and the most glorious work, namely, a thank offering. With his confession before men he does as much as if he preached and taught people to believe in Christ. Thereby he assists in augmenting and preserving Christianity, in confirming the gospel and the sacrament, in converting sinners and in assaulting the devil's kingdom. In short, he assists in whatever the teaching of the word accomplishes in the world and participates in the same work. But who can relate what great benefit results here?

"On the other hand, however, we should consider what unhappy people they are who despise the sacrament and are so lazy and sluggish in using it. For these people do the exact opposite of honoring God and, therefore, their vices can be enumerated and calculated. First, they dishonor God himself in his ordinance and regard him as a fool for ordering such unnecessary worship. Indeed, because they do not believe

that a worship service is his divine ordinance and gracious institution, in their unbelief they revile him as a liar and good-for-nothing. For unbelief is nothing other than blasphemy of God, according to which he is regarded as a liar. In addition, they also despise the remembrance of Christ which God has instituted in this sacrament and which is preserved in it. They fail to give honor to the suffering of Christ; they do not thank him for it at all; rather, they commit the most horrible sin of ingratitude.

“Besides, what is even worse, they act as if they dislike hearing about giving thanks for and honor to Christ’s suffering or as if they do not like to be present when honor and thanks are given for it. In this way they take from God his divine glory and impede and check it so that he can neither be their God nor be acknowledged as God in Christ. If they had their way they would desire that both Christ’s suffering and all divine glory would count for nothing in the world and would be completely nullified and devils themselves would become our gods. For they do not inquire how Christ’s suffering might be honored, his remembrance preserved, his word preached, or God known. This is much worse than if someone would throw dirt at God’s image or would dishonor Christ himself.” (Martin Luther, Luther’s Works, 38:111–12)

Prayer: O Lord, in this wondrous Sacrament You have left us a remembrance of Your passion. Grant that we may so receive the sacred mystery of Your body and blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Collect for Maundy Thursday)

Today’s Prayer Needs:

- ✘ For Mary Beth Ehrke, who will be undergoing surgery on an ankle injury that she might receive healing for her body
- ✘ For all those taken in by the philosophy of materialism by thinking it impossible that Christ could say that bread is His body, that they might confess the truth by God’s Spirit
- ✘ For the faithful that they might not be enticed into participation in worldly entertainments during the three days of the Triduum, but commit themselves to meditation on the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ

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Matthew 26:26-30

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.