

# Lesson 1: Introduction to ‘Gottesdienst’

*Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week... the disciples came together to break bread.*

**The Sunday Service is the most constant thing in a Christian’s life.**

**Always there...**

The Sunday Service is the most constant thing in a Christian’s life. It’s always there... every Sunday. For 2000 years, the Sunday Service has been held every week, in times of prosperity and governmental approval, and in times of adversity, and even persecution. In ancient Rome, where Christians were vigorously persecuted and their deaths were at times a well-attended spectator sport, the Christians still met for the Service, meeting in Rome’s underground tomb-tunnels, the catacombs. In the Soviet Union, even under Communist oppression the Church of God faithfully met each Sunday—despite the fact that the government had long since taken away their majestic church buildings. The Sunday Service is always there.

So, too, the Christian: when the Sunday Service is available, the Christian is there. While, obviously, sickness and job requirements may at times make attendance impossible, if a Christian is at all able he or she will be present for the Sunday Service even if there is no time for other involvement with the Church during the week. If old age or disease brings a crippling affliction that doesn’t allow a person to be present for Bible Class and other congregational activities, it is an amazing tribute to what God does in the Service to note that many with these afflictions still struggle to faithfully attend it every week. (And isn’t it interesting to note that if their affliction is so severe that they absolutely cannot attend, the pastor goes to them with the most essential elements of the Service? In some areas, Papua New Guinea for instance, the whole congregation goes to the home of any member who was not able to attend the Service that morning and has the Service again!) The Sunday Service is utterly constant—and utterly dependable!

**The ‘liturgy’: a format for receiving**

The Service each Sunday repeats (basically) the same things. This is ensured by the use of a written format called a *liturgy*. ‘Liturgy’ comes from a Greek word that originally meant ‘to serve in a public office at one’s own cost, without pay’. (So used by Andocides, V/IV century B.C., Demosthenes, IV c. B.C.) The individual was to serve the government without thought of reward; yet, with the knowledge that a properly functioning state would give the individual the best environment for prosperity, the ‘public servant’ knew that benefits would in fact come to him through his ‘liturgy’ even though he was not directly compensated for his ‘work’.

The word *liturgy* was then applied to what a priest or religious leader did as a service to his god and his god’s people. This usage was adopted also by the Hebrews (the Old Testament Church) as they adopted the Greek language (after the conquests of Alexander the Great), and, consequently, by the New Testament Church. The idea is that, like the public official in 4th century B.C. Athens, the minister of God was not to profit from his services on

God's and the Church's behalf, although God and the Church would support the minister and take care of his needs as he did this work. (Titus 1:7; 1 Cor 9:9-14; Gal 6:6)

Finally, *liturgy* was used to describe the ritual or religious service of God's people in general. The basic idea, though, remains the same: in our use of the liturgy, we receive nothing for what we **do**... yet **through** the liturgy we **do** receive something that benefits us (as we shall see!).

### **Each week the same basic truths and teachings are repeated**

The liturgy we use gives us a format for receiving God's benefits and learning God's will toward us. Each week the same basic truths and teachings are repeated. Such repetition may initially be seen by some as 'boring' and unnecessary, but this is true only if we do not understand what we are repeating or merely mouth the words insincerely. In fact, as an ancient proverb states, 'repetition is the mother of learning'; if, through repetition and investigation, we understand the words and focus of the liturgy, its continued repetition will make its words and what those words teach, a 'part' of us, a part of what we think and feel, a part of how we view ourselves and the world around us.

### **The liturgy is Scripture summarizing Scripture**

If our liturgy is properly constructed, this will be a good thing; the liturgy we use in the Lutheran Church is constructed from God's Word, the Holy Bible. It is, basically, Scripture verses summarizing Scripture teachings. Various portions of Scripture are consistently spoken by the pastor and congregation to reinforce the fundamental teachings of the Bible on a weekly basis. (In this class we will be concentrating mainly on the Church's main Service, the Order for Holy Communion; yet, also in the other Services or 'liturgical offices' we use [Matins, Vespers, etc.], the same basic teachings are presented, although each particular office adds some nuances peculiar to its usage... ) Through this repetition, we are instructed and reminded of what God's message to us is in Christ Jesus, and our spiritual needs are addressed and met by the only One who can truly meet them for us. Even if a particular sermon doesn't 'hit home' with us, knowing that God's Word will address our needs each week in the liturgy makes the liturgy's repetition an experience of comfort and reassurance, just as we are comforted and reassured by our spouse or loving parent saying "I love you," not just once, but every time we need to hear it.

### **What is the focus of our Sunday Service?**

The focus of our Sunday Service in the Lutheran Church, then, is the teaching of God's message in connection with Jesus Christ taken directly from Holy Scripture. That is a message that focuses on our inability to perform up to God's standards, and on His graciously sending His Son to make up for our failure by living a perfect life and bearing the punishment for our sins by His suffering and death. Our Service must make this its focus, so that in it we see how we are unable to ascend to God and how He gathers us to Himself by grace. Both in its content and in its form, our Service does this, so that, from most ancient times it has been referred by terms such as that in common usage by the German fathers of the Reformation, *Gottesdienst* (literally, 'God's Service' or 'Divine Service')—a more felicitous term than they even knew, because its semi-ambiguity allows it to connote the true (and *correct*)