Biblical Christianity for Thoughtful People: RLG415

Worship Service Attendance and Reflection paper

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Some Date, Some Year

**Introduction**

On July 17, 2016, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Montevideo, Minnesota gathered together for the divine service. The pastor remarked at the beginning of this service that this date marked the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost. During this particular service, the people of the congregation gathered together in the church sanctuary to hear Biblical readings and a sermon, to read and respond with the pastor from a set order of service, to sing hymns from their hymnal, and to participate in Holy Communion. In the following pages, this paper will explore how the things done and said in this service, and the setting for the service, convey who Jesus is for this Christian community, and what is the basis or foundation of the congregation’s interpretation of Biblical Christianity.

**Who is Jesus?**

Jesus is primarily regarded as savior from sin, death, and hell to the Christian community at St. Paul Lutheran Church. He is at the center of their worship life together. The people of St. Paul Lutheran Church also regard Jesus as the Son of God, part of the Holy Trinity.

The importance or centrality of Jesus to the life together of the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church can be identified first by the architecture of the church. A close examination of the exterior of the church sanctuary reveals that among the varied brick work of the exterior is found a cross, distinctly incorporated into the church’s architecture. Likewise, in the interior of the church, one’s attention is immediately drawn to a large wooden cross that is located above the altar area. Both of these images make clear that not only is Jesus important to the people of this congregation, but it is His death on the cross that is of vital importance to them. In other words, their Jesus is a Jesus who dies on the cross in their place. As was made clear during the worship service, this death on the cross is for the forgiveness of their sins.

In addition to the large crosses, the church contained many stained glass windows. The windows along the north side of the sanctuary contained images that seem to come out of the passion accounts found in the various Gospels. There were images related to the last supper, the arrest of Jesus, and his crucifixion. This again indicates the centrality of these events found in the Biblical narrative for this community at St. Paul Lutheran Church. But the most distinctive stained glass window that features Jesus is found in the front of the church. It is located above the altar and above the wooden cross mentioned earlier. This is an image of the man Jesus. As the service was in the morning, the morning light streaming through this window made this image of Jesus almost seem to glow. Further inquiry with the pastor revealed that this window depicts Jesus risen from the grave and victorious over sin and death. It is not only at the cross where this Christian community finds their savior. His resurrection is of immense importance as well.

The congregation followed a set order of service. The service contained a confession of sins and declaration of forgiveness, several prayers, the recitation of the Nicene Creed, a sermon, Holy Communion, and a benediction.

The confession of sins that began the service (following the opening hymn) was interesting. In this confession of sins, the church members first talked about themselves. They said that they had sinned in a variety of ways. But then, they asked God to forgive them because of Jesus. The pastor responded to this by saying back to the church that God had given His Son Jesus to die for the people, and because of Jesus the sins of the members were forgiven. This again indicates the centrality of Jesus as savior for this Christian community.

The prayers that the congregation recited were varied. In some cases, the prayers were directed to “Almighty God,” “Heavenly Father,” or “Lord.” On at least one other occasion, a prayer was directed to “Lord Jesus Christ.” There is perhaps more to be said about the congregation’s belief in the Holy Trinity, but at the very least, these prayers indicate that this Christian community regards Jesus as someone to whom they can direct their prayers.

It was in the recitation of the Nicene Creed that the congregation expressed their belief in the Holy Trinity a little bit more clearly. The confessed in this creed a belief in “one God.” Yet also, they confessed a faith in “the Father Almighty,” “one Lord Jesus Christ,” and “the Holy Spirit.” Jesus is, for this Christian community, part of what they at other points in the service called the “triune God,” or “Trinity.” This belief is further reflected in other parts of the service where the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were mentioned together in close proximity; for example, when the forgiveness of sins was proclaimed by the pastor, it was done “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

The sermon repeatedly mentioned Jesus. During the sermon, the pastor remarked several times about the Bible lesson that had been read during the service, the story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10:38-42. The pastor spoke about the actions of Jesus and those around Him in this text. He commented upon the things Jesus said in the text, particularly the comment Jesus made about “one thing needful.” But after he had spoken about the specific Bible text, the pastor continued to expand about how each of the members of the congregation also had need of Jesus, because each member of the congregation struggled with sins. He pointed the members of the congregation to the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and said that through this, Jesus had made the members of the church to be forgiven and righteous. The sermon very much reinforced for this observer the centrality of Jesus as savior for this Christian community.

As the congregation participated in Holy Communion, the centrality of Jesus as savior was yet further emphasized. In this part of the service, the congregational members ate bread and drank wine. Before doing so, the pastor recited the words in the Bible spoken at the last supper by Jesus, where He told His disciples to take and eat His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of their sins. These words were repeated during Holy Communion, making clear that what they were doing was no mere empty thing, but that they truly believed that Jesus was really giving them forgiveness through this eating and drinking. This further reinforced the centrality of Jesus as savior for this Christian community.

The benediction passed by very quickly at the end of the service, but the words spoken there conveyed a sense that the presence of Jesus, the savior, in the life of the congregation members does not end with the 70 minutes or so that the service lasted. In this benediction, the pastor said “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.” The members of the congregation then left the service bearing the hope and promise that this Jesus who is their savior from sin would continue to be with them, giving them grace and peace as they go about their lives.

The hymns that were sung during this particular service reinforced that the congregation regards Jesus as their savior. In one hymn, entitled “One Thing’s Needful,” the congregation sang “I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.” Later in that hymn, they sang, “Nothing have I, Lord, to proffer but Your crimson colored blood. Your death on the cross has death wholly defeated and thereby my righteousness fully completed.” Another hymn, sung during Holy Communion, was entitled “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” In this hymn, they sang, “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.” Later in that hymn, they remarked “Precious savior still our refuge.” It is interesting to note that the music that the people of St. Paul Lutheran sang seemed to be a little more “free” with how things were worded. That is to say, it seemed like the music they sang allowed people to delve further into the realm of emotion and feeling and to word their confidence in Christ their savior in a more artistic way. It was almost more of a response to everything the service proclaimed about who Jesus is for this community: their savior.

**Foundations**

The foundation of the congregation’s confidence that Jesus is indeed their savior was very clearly based upon the text of the Bible, or at least their particular interpretation of it. Much of the content of the service was found directly in the Bible. Moreover, the overall message of the service was consistent with the overall message of the Bible as explored in this course. That is to say, the narrative of the Bible is that God in Christ saves humanity from sin; the narrative of this service was that God in Christ saves *us* from sin.

The Biblical basis of the service is made clear by the way the service is laid out in the congregation’s hymnals. For each part of the order of service, there are specific Biblical references in the hymnal. These references indicate that the words that are spoken were not generated by the pastor or people of St. Paul Lutheran, but rather are taken from the text of the Bible itself, or at least heavily influenced by these particular Biblical texts.

Likewise, each of the hymns in the hymnal lists, at the bottom of the page, several Biblical texts that serve as the basis for the words of that hymn. Sometimes, the hymns seem to directly take from the listed texts, like with “One Thing’s Needful.” Other times, maybe they might only have similar content. Nevertheless, such references make clear that the hymns are based on the Bible.

The service prominently featured three scripture texts, which were read aloud in their entirety: Genesis 18:1-10, Colossians 1:21-29, and Luke 10:38-42. These three texts seemed to form the content of the service that was specific to the day of the visit, such as the sermon. The sermon made repeated reference to these texts that had been read earlier, using those texts as the basis for what the pastor had to say.

The importance of the Biblical text for this Christian community is further reinforced by the fact that they follow their worship service with a separate time for Bible study. This period of time allows the members to delve into a particular Biblical text with their pastor to gain a further understanding of the Bible and what it means.

It is not just that the service largely drew upon the Bible. The service also was a distinctly *Christian* service. In this course, the central Biblical narrative that God in Christ is at work to save humanity from sin and death has been emphasized. To emphasize obedience to a set of directives or to proclaim positivity and happiness is not distinctively Christian. One certainly could make use of the Bible to do such thing, but one could also do so without any mention of God, Christ, or the Biblical text. Biblical Christianity places the emphasis on God’s saving actions for humanity, and how these saving actions across the centuries find their culmination or fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection.

In that regard, the service at St. Paul Lutheran was distinctively Christian. It could not be mistaken for a self-help seminar or a lecture on proper citizenship. Instead, in this service, the members of the congregation were repeatedly pointed toward God’s work in Christ for their forgiveness and salvation. They did confess their sins, but their sins were not the focus; rather, God’s forgiveness given in Christ was the focus. The people were pointed toward their place within that overarching narrative. Not only is God in Christ at work to save humanity, but God in Christ has saved *them*, as individual Christians.

**Conclusion**

The community at St. Paul Lutheran Church has a distinctive understanding of who Jesus is. He is their savior from sin. He is their God, part of the Holy Trinity. This belief is emphasized in their architecture, in the pastor’s preaching, and in the words their use and sing during their service. Their basis for this understanding is their study of the Bible, which leads them to adopt a distinctively Christian understanding of God’s work in the world as being at work, through Christ, to deliver humanity as a whole, and these members as individuals, from their sins.