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Conference

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The Contemplation of Heaven in Lutheran Worship
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Scriptural Basis for the Contemplation of Heaven

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of heavenly contemplation in the spiritual, and particularly the liturgical life of the Church. In the Lutheran Church, a rightfully heavy emphasis on the chief article of faith, on justification before God through the forgiveness of sins that was purchased by Christ's sacrifice on the cross,

should serve to stabilize the Church in orthodox doctrine and practice. This emphasis, however, can lead to the accidental or inadvertent eclipse of other articles of the faith, which are no less critical to the spiritual life and edification of the Church. Concurrently, (in demonstration of the rule of *lex credendi lex orandi*) an imbalance of doctrinal emphasis may also manifest itself practically, in the worship of the Church.

One of the chief characteristics of the preaching of our Lord, his prophets and apostles, is the contemplation of heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God. The numerous parables on this subject, which Jesus told during his earthly ministry, lift the hearts of the hearers above what is visible and earthly, and focus on transcendent spiritual realities. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed; like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened; like treasure hidden in a field; like a merchant in search of fine pearls; like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind;

like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (to take examples only from Mt 13), and so on. These realities cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh, but by the sight of faith they are grasped and believed as unchangeable truths, which pertain not only to the transformation of our lives—the Kingdom of Heaven on earth—but also to that eternal Kingdom, the ‘end’ that lies in store after this life, for all who believe.

The eschatological emphasis of the New Testament is unmistakable, and yet it may seem unfamiliar or an unusual way of thinking, for Christians whose immediate liturgical or hermeneutic context pays too little attention to this form of spiritual contemplation. Nevertheless, for the apostles themselves this was no insignificant element of the Faith.

Paul invites us in 1 Corinthians 15 to contemplate the nature of the resurrected body on the last day: “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body ... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the

image of the man of heaven. ... this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” Again in 2 Corinthians 5, he writes, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling”.

In Ephesians, Paul emphasizes that Christ himself is seated at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly places, and by justifying us before God, has raised us up to be seated there with him, even while we are still in this life (Ephesians 2:6). Similarly in Hebrews Christ’s position is emphasized (Heb 8:1), “seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven”, and we are encouraged to understand the purpose of the earthly commands of the Law as serving to foreshadow or point to the heavenly reality of Christ’s intercession for the sins of the world (Heb 9:23ff.), so that those who believe in him may look forward to his return, “not

to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” (Heb 9:28)

The reader who is alert to such passages cannot fail to see how ubiquitously this spiritual, and particularly eschatological mindset permeates the writings of the New Testament, and that such a mindset necessarily affects how we ought to perceive the proper form of the worship of God. Hebrews chapter 12 stands out as particularly relevant to our meditation, where we read (12:18, 22-23, 28-29): “For you have not come to what may be touched ... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ... Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God

acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Heavenly Contemplation in Scriptural Exegesis

Naturally flowing from the New Testament itself, subsequent Christian letters and sermons from the time of the Apostles onwards came to reflect the same spiritual and eschatological emphasis. Preachers of the Patristic era, such as the well known Origen and Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom in the East, and Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo in the West, routinely interpreted biblical texts in a spiritual manner, applying the text through allegorical interpretation, sometimes even based on philological or numerological significance, to give some spiritual lesson or insight beyond what was signified through the literal meaning. Some definition of hermeneutic principles, including the relation between the signs of Scripture and the signified realities came to be recognized and

expressed with greater precision particularly in North Africa, by Tychonius and St. Augustine. This, however, was only the beginning of a theological conversation on this topic, which continues to be hotly debated today.

Methods of spiritualized exegesis continued into the Middle Ages, and the heritage of the patristic era was promoted to a great extent especially through the Ordinary Gloss – a commentary that accompanied the biblical text both in the margins and literally between the lines. As preaching expanded, however (particularly with the proliferation of monastic and spiritual orders), the problem arose and became widespread, of an over-spiritualization and absurdity of spiritual exegesis among poorly educated preachers, frequently resulting in the obfuscation or even contradiction of the literal meaning. This problem in turn precipitated the more precise definition of the relation between the literal and spiritual meaning of Scripture. The great Dominican and Franciscan teachers Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra in

particular became most influential in establishing the literal meaning as foundational to any spiritual interpretation. Thus the methodological framework for the interpretation of Scripture came to be articulated with greater clarity, in promotion of properly understanding the literal meaning, while at the same time permitting a continued prominence of place to the spiritual meaning, for the edification of the meditative, catechetical, and liturgical life of the Church. For the Lutheran reformers, what Nicholas of Lyra had taught in the 14th century continued succinctly to express their understanding of the plurality of the potential meanings of Scripture.

The letter teaches deeds, what to believe does allegory;

The moral what to do and where you'll go does anagogy.¹

¹ Many scholars have supposed that these verses originated with Nicholas of Lyra, who uses it in his *Literal Commentary on Galatians 4*, and in his prologues to the *Postilla*. Henri de Lubac, however, notes that this couplet was quoted “as early as the year 1286,” by John of Genoa in his *Summa quae vocatur Catholicon*, and he traces its origin to Augustine of Dacia’s *Rotulus Pugillaris*, “a work of fifteen chapters, around [AD] 1260.” See his *Medieval Exegesis* (trans. Sebanc), 1:1.

At the culmination of the scholarly (or scholastic) expression of our own Lutheran hermeneutic, taking into consideration the writings of previous Lutheran expositors, including Luther himself, Matthias Flacius, and Johann Gerhard, as well as the views of opposition writers including Cabbalist interpreters, prominent Jesuits, and the counter-reformer Robert Ballarmine, stands Solomon Glassius' *Philologia Sacra*, – a work that is often touted as the gold standard for the Lutheran hermeneutic textbook, and yet is also frequently misunderstood from all sides (since the knowledge of Latin has all but disappeared in the Lutheran Church today). Far from rejecting the use of spiritual exegesis, Glassius follows the inherited Medieval tradition of founding spiritual interpretation upon the literal meaning, and clarifies through sets of Rules – in much the same manner that Augustine had done a thousand years prior – how allegorical, typological, and parabolic interpretations may be employed without

damage to the literal meaning or to the rule of faith (*regula fidei*).

In his presentation of the Lutheran hermeneutic, it is true that Glassius taught that there is one literal meaning of Scripture (*sensus literalis unus/simplex est*), but by this he did not exclude the possibility of another, spiritual meaning, intended by the Holy Spirit, which stands as a second meaning. In this the Lutheran doctrine does not depart from its inherited Catholic tradition, but the Lutherans are by contrast with the post-Tridentine Romanist position careful to distinguish between the innate spiritual meaning, which may be supported and proven by other passages of Scripture, and any imported or invented spiritual meaning, which may be drawn out from a text according to the opinion or arbitration of the interpreter, and therefore lacks authoritative status regarding the binding of consciences to faith and mores of the Church. This is an important distinction of the Lutheran position from that of the Romanists, in view of the insistence

of the latter that the obscure spiritual meaning of any given passage may, upon illumination by the living tradition of the Church, be used to establish new doctrines, which the literal meaning of Scripture need not anywhere support.

The modern-day Lutheran 'tradition' of preaching, however, broadly speaking, reflects a total ignorance of the Lutheran hermeneutic tradition as framed and represented by Glassius. Instead, in reaction to the increasing skepticism of the mode of critical Biblical interpretation originating from mid-19th century Germany onwards, and in the wake of the intellectual battles being fought over the authority and inspiration of Scripture, we see a heavy singular emphasis upon the literal meaning of Scripture, together with the insistence of its historical truth, with little to no regard for any underlying spiritual meaning or the methodology by which any secondary meaning might be unearthed and used fruitfully for the edification of the Church. Concurrently, spiritual application of the literal meaning of Scripture

(which, though it was not to be considered authoritative, was nevertheless deemed useful and edifying, if done within the 'Rules' of interpretation) has likewise suffered a near total eclipse in Lutheran preaching. The contemplation of heaven, or 'anagogy' as it is called by its technical term, being a category of the allegorical method of spiritual interpretation, has subsequently also come to be neglected.

Heavenly Contemplation in Lutheran Worship

It is within this context that we now turn to consider the role of heavenly contemplation in the Divine Service of the Holy Eucharist; for although Christians worship in a variety of forms on different occasions without the Lord's Supper, it is only in the context of the Eucharist that we may understand fully the importance of heavenly contemplation in Lutheran worship, since the Lord's Supper serves as the primary focal point for the conjoining of the heavenly and earthly realms in the life of the Christian. There God is

present as he promised according to his own institution, and I shall assume for the purpose of this paper a general understanding of the Lutheran understanding of the mode of Christ's sacramental presence.

Here I want to demonstrate the centrality of spiritual reflection, and anagogy in particular (where the pastor guides the people to contemplate heaven) in Lutheran worship, where the Lord's Supper is practiced, for which not only the liturgy, but also hymns and sermons serve as ancillary to the task of lifting the hearts of the faithful above the mundane, to contemplation of spiritual realities and mysteries.

Perhaps the easiest way to begin this demonstration is to consider the form of the Divine Service used today, which is based on the Common Service of the late 19th Century, composed by a joint committee representing the two largest Lutheran groups in North America at the time: the General Council (General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

in North America) and the General Synod (Evangelical Lutheran General Synod of the United States of America).

In this liturgy, which is probably the most familiar to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the "Service of the Word" comes first, in a segment that is easily detachable from the "Service of the Sacrament" that follows. The sermon that sits in this part of the service, in exposition of one or more of the Scripture readings of the day, may be used to assist in preparing the people to receive the Lord's Supper. A preacher who is mindful of the coming sacrament, may consequently become intentionally spiritual and anagogical in his sermon. Like the sermon, hymns may also be spiritual and contemplative in their content, but there is no guarantee that this would be the case.

Somewhat more reliably, we read in the general prayer of the faithful, which follows the sermon, set prayers that require an elevation of thought to the spiritual realm. Although such prayers vary widely, they usually include an

eschatologically oriented petition for the preaching of the Gospel and the salvation of all people; for the people's worthy reception of the Lord's Supper, and thanksgiving for the faithful departed. In this manner the General Prayer should sufficiently prepare the people for the Eucharistic liturgy that follows, though the sufficiency of this preparation is endangered when the presider chooses to pray *ex corde*, opening up the possibility of omitting one or more of the usual spiritually uplifting petitions.

Next comes the Preface- beginning with the ancient priestly exhortation: "Lift up your hearts", to which the people respond: "We lift them to the Lord". Here begins the sacrificial language of the Lord's Supper, the import to which many Lutherans today seem to be entirely oblivious, who ironically retain these words while insisting on the absence of any "Eucharistic Prayer" which would seem too sacrificial in character. Nonetheless, the importance of this time, and the necessity of offering the sacrifice of a pure heart to the Lord,

by having the heart raised above all earthly and worldly concerns, is to be impressed upon the people in the strongest terms. Augustine's preaching to the newly baptized gives us an excellent illumination of this necessity (serm. 229.3):

After the greeting that you know, that is, *The Lord be with you*, you heard, *Lift up the heart*. That's the whole life of real Christians, *Up with the heart*; not of Christians in name only, but of Christians in reality and truth; their whole life is a matter of *Up with the heart*. What does *Up with the heart* mean? Hoping in God, not in yourself; you, after all, are down below, God is up above; if you put your hope in yourself, your heart is down below, it isn't up above. That's why, when you hear *Lift up the heart* from the high priest, you answer, *We have it lifted up to the Lord*. Try very hard to make your answer a true one, because you are making it in the course of the activity of God; let it be just as you say; don't let the tongue declare it, while the conscience denies it.

In the last few words just quoted, as in many other sermons, Augustine warns the congregation not to approach the Lord's Supper without having their hearts lifted up, lest they receive the body and blood of Christ to their own condemnation. The manner in which the people access the Lord's Supper, directly affected by the contemplation of heaven, is therefore much

more than a gratuitous spiritual embellishment; it is central to receiving the grace that God is offering in the Sacrament. (Augustine gives similar warnings to the people regarding the sincerity of their praying the Lord's Prayer and exchanging the kiss of peace before receiving the Sacrament.)

Clearly the most spiritually contemplative element of the Lutheran service comes in the Proper Preface itself, which finishes with the common refrain, 'therefore with angels and with archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying', which is followed by the angelic hymn, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of thy glory.'

With the end of this hymn, however, comes the end of the liturgically established heavenly contemplation prior to the Lord's Supper. For what follows – namely, the Lord's Prayer, and Words of Institution – bring about Christ's presence in the Sacrament somewhat abruptly, 'without

further ado', as it were, and the Eucharistic adoration that follows prior to the distribution – if it is even recognized as such – is limited to a brief declaration (not exchange) of peace, and the Agnus Dei. Finally the post-communion prayer of thanksgiving allows for a slight pause to reflect on the gravity of what has just taken place.

During the distribution itself, communion hymns may also be sung, to assist the congregation in their contemplation of the significance of the spiritual realities that are unfolding in front of them, and the opportunity to sing such hymns presents the service with a huge potential to compensate for the swift and unremitting progress of the communion liturgy itself. The form of the liturgy, however, does not guarantee any such contemplation from hymns, any more than it does from the sermon or extemporaneous prayers, the quality and edifying character of which fall squarely on the shoulders of the presider, or whoever else has organized and formulated the service for that day.

By contrast with the Lutheran Common Service, older Catholic rites throughout the centuries, in both the East and West, are demonstrably richer in spiritual and eschatological language, especially surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist, and thereby demonstrate greater continuity with the universal, biblical tradition of laying heavy emphasis on the contemplation heaven (together with other spiritual realities).

Why, then, the poverty of Lutheran worship? Although many might consider it heresy even to think such an opinion as I shall now express, I submit for your consideration that we might trace the dearth of heavenly contemplation in the Common Service (and subsequently in the LCMS tradition of TLH and LSB DS3, and overseas wherever the LCMS has left this footprint) back to the operating principles by which the Common Service was first formulated in the late 19th Century (although, it should be

noted, that the elements of heavenly contemplation that still remain in the vestiges of the Eucharistic liturgy serve well to testify to the indispensability of this aspect of Catholic spirituality).

As Edward Horn explains, the Common Service was assembled by compilation of the elements most commonly used in most of the Lutheran liturgies of the Reformation and post-Reformation era, with particular weight being given to the liturgies of Saxony and other regions that were most ‘true’ to Luther’s own orders, namely, the *Formula Missae* and *Deutsche Messe*.² The elements finally included in the Common Service, it is claimed, represent a “consensus of the pure Lutheran liturgies of that age”. Horn gives no explanation, however, for why some orders are to be considered “Romanizing” and others said to contain “un-Lutheran Protestant elements”, upon which basis the committee excluded some from being considered among the

² Edward Horn, “The Lutheran Sources of the Common Service,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (1891), no. 2:239-68.

“Liturgies of greatest weight”. This method, however, short-circuits theological discussion, by downgrading the authority of entire liturgies based on one or two elements – if indeed the negative assessment of such elements is even justified; for it rather seems that the committee’s gauge of “Lutheranism” was permitted a certain degree of Germanic bias.

Horn states in the same article what major additions the committee made to this order, which include hymns and the rite of Confession, and what Lutheran precedent exists for including them, even if found in only one or two previous liturgies. Conspicuously lacking, however, is any theological reflection or justification of why the committee declined to include parts of the liturgy that appear in some (but not the majority) liturgies, which may also have had roots in the older liturgies that pre-dated the Lutheran Reformation, giving the impression that there is no goal to improve or innovate, but only to re-pristiniate, according to the contemporary trends of the day.

Horn sometimes (but not consistently) indicates whether a part or detail of the Common Service has precedent in the older Roman Canon, but fails to make mention of which parts of the Canon (or evangelized versions of them) are excluded, and on what basis.

Regarding such critically important parts of the service as the Eucharistic Preface, and the position of the Lord’s Prayer, Horn entirely bypasses all discussion, and simply lists which manuscripts which contain which part, and in which order, as if the reader should be convinced to follow the majority reading, or simply be impressed by the amount of work that the committee had, even though no theological or confessional reason, argument, or balance of pros and cons is given to justify the final decisions that were made.

Thus the method for the formulation of the Common Service seems to have included some major flaws, including an unrestricted regional bias, and a lack of transparent critical analysis or sufficient theological reflection. (To those who

have had experience working with committees, this should come as no surprising revelation.) At best, Edward Horn gives only a confusing or partial explanation of the finished product.

The problem goes back much earlier than the 19th century, to Martin Luther himself, whose liturgical reforms proved so effective in Germany and elsewhere. Luther Reed expresses Martin Luther's departure from Catholic tradition this way: (p. 80), "His most radical action, and the most questionable, was his omission from the heart of the communion service of all prayers of commemoration and thanksgiving and the limiting of liturgical material at this point to the Lord's Prayer and the Words of Institution. No other Christian liturgy had ever done this. In later years none but Lutherans—and not all of them—followed Luther in this drastic procedure."

In clear dissatisfaction with this action Reed again writes (p. 349), "All other Christian liturgies, no matter what

their doctrinal position—Greek, Roman, Anglican, Protestant of many kinds—provide some extended form of Eucharistic prayer. Luther's reform at this point was drastic, and completely unlike his usual conservative procedure. His amputation of all prayer forms—good as well as bad—surrounding the Words of Institution robbed the liturgy of its historical and ecumenical character and fastened a strange and unique use upon subsequent Lutheran history."

This would all be well and good, if Lutherans had not so frequently claimed to be preserving their Catholic heritage intact, and bringing nothing new to Christendom. In view of the drastic change to the Eucharistic ceremonies themselves, one might reasonably criticize the conclusion to the Augsburg Confession itself, which claims, "in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Catholic Church Catholic" as being somewhat disingenuous.

Mercifully, as Reed notes (p. 78), many of Martin Luther's reforms to the Eucharistic liturgy were ultimately

rejected by the Church. Slowly today Lutheran liturgy is regaining its Catholic heritage and identity, with the rediscovery of the Eucharistic prayer; an increasing ability among Lutherans to understand how the sacrifice of thanksgiving during the Eucharist may rightly be understood without doing violence to the Chief Article on Justification; and an increasing acceptance and awareness of the company of the saints and angels in heaven, to whose chorus we add our own voices during the Divine Service.

We could argue that, for the reformers, in opposition to the abomination of the Roman Canon of the Mass that they knew, a drastic reformation was required, in order to preserve the purity of the Gospel and restore emphasis on the singular sacrifice of Christ on the cross, for the remission of our sins. We who live in the 21st century, however, must forge our own path, and worship God in the manner that most befits our age. This means that we should not be trying today to recreate the “old Lutheran” service of the 16th century (that process

may have been needed in 19th century North America, due to the extreme poverty of the liturgical resources available to them, but it is not needed by us in the same way). Likewise it is not our duty to recreate any “patristic” or “medieval” liturgy. The Church today rather must meet the challenge both of accepting and of criticizing her liturgical heritage, in light of the universal and unchanging Scriptural truths, which necessarily define every facet of her faith and life.