

Christians Go to the Divine Service

Since people often seem to be too busy to attend church, we need to be reminded just how important it is for Christians to attend the services of the church. First of all, who is the church? The church is the congregation of saints, the people of God, among whom the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments (such as Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper) are rightly administered. The Gospel and the Sacraments are the "lifeblood" of a Christian (and of the whole church of believers), because it is through these very means, as through instruments, that our Lord comes to the sinner to bring him to repentance and to bestow on him forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Those who have been baptized continue in their Christian life by gathering with their fellow believers to hear the Word and receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Gathering for services of the Word and the Sacraments (where God serves you with these good gifts so that you may continue in the faith and be saved) is not optional or an occasional "extra" for the Christian life, but rather is the very center of your life in Christ.

Just being baptized or being on the "membership list" of a congregation does not make you a Christian if you do not continue to hear the Word and continually abide in Christ. As Jesus says, *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."* (John 15:4) Christians "abide" in Christ. Many are under the false perception that if they "believe in Jesus" (or at least think they do), they don't need to go to church, when in reality it is people who believe in Jesus who indeed do go to church, that they may continue to "abide" in Christ. Again, it is in the preaching of the Word and in the Sacraments where Christ has promised to be for us for the salvation of our souls.

Just "saying" you believe in Christ, and using His name and thinking that saves you apart from hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments is a false delusion and has led you to a false security that may end up damning you. As Jesus says when speaking of the day of judgment, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Mat 7:21-23)* How horrible it will be on that day for those who must hear these dreaded words from the mouth of the Lord, *"I never knew you, depart from me..."* But how could He have ever known you, if

you have refused His coming to you though His Word and in His Sacraments? Saying that you believe in Jesus, and rarely hearing His Word or receiving His very body and blood is like telling your spouse that you love him or her, but never spending any time at all talking to the person or seeing the person. That is no love at all, but a lie.

Our Lord has given us the command to hear His Word in the Ten Commandments. As we learn in the Catechism: *"What is the Third Commandment? Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it."* We despise God's Word when we refuse or deliberately neglect opportunities to hear it, for hearing the word is something we should do "gladly." If you are not glad to hear the Word, then how can you consider yourself to be a believer? Why does God give us this commandment? Is it because He wants to burden us with "having" to go to the Divine Service? No. He gives us this commandment for our own good, so that we may not neglect His Gospel gifts and so that ultimately we can be with Him in His eternal kingdom. He knows how the world, the devil, and our own sinful flesh easily become weak and cause us to drift from the faith that saves, so He has provided His services of Gospel and Sacrament, so that we may be strengthened and nourished and kept in the one true faith as we wander in the wilderness of this life. The services of the Gospel and Sacraments are given to us out of love for us, for our own eternal good, so we should be devoted to them.

In Acts, chapter 2, after many of the people became Christians through the preaching of the Word and Baptism on the day of Pentecost, we are told what the believers did after converting to faith in Christ. We are told that *"...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* (Acts 2:42) Christians are "**devoted** to" 1) the apostles' teaching, which is the preaching of the Word; 2) the fellowship, which is the gathering together of Christians to be in communion with one another; 3) the breaking of the bread, which is the Lord's Supper; and 4) the prayers, which is the church making petitions to God and praising Him. This is exactly what Christians do when they gather for the Divine Services of the church (as Christians have historically done). In fact, they are devoted to this, because this is the very center of the Christian life and Christ is at the center of these things for us and for our salvation. This passage from Acts describes what the Christian is devoted to after his Baptism into Christ. And parents who have their children baptized, if they care about the eternal salvation of their children, will bring their children up in this faith and

practice. In Acts 2, Peter says the promise is for the people and their children. This is why Lutheran day schools and Sunday schools are important as well. We need to take seriously what Moses said to the Israelites: *"You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates..."* (Deu 11:18-20) This is how much our lives should be saturated with the Word of God, not only for our own benefit, but for the benefit of our children as well.

The apathy and indifference of Christians toward the services, schools, Sunday school and Bible studies of the church is astounding. We still live in a country where we are free to attend services and believe in the one true God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In some countries, people literally die to go to church! And yet we sit here with all our comforts and could care less. If people who profess to be Christians and allow their names to stand on congregational membership lists don't even take the faith seriously, why should anyone else? Why is church attendance often so poor? There is no excuse for this. We need it more than anything else in the world. And no, it is not a good excuse to not come to church because you don't "like" the pastor, or you don't "like" some of the people, or you don't like "having" to stand up, or you don't like doing similar services all the time, or because your favorite hymns aren't always sung, or because the service is too long, or because it is your only day to go shopping, or to sleep in, and so on and so on. When an excuse pops into your head, just think, "Would God be pleased to hear this excuse from me on Judgment Day?" And besides, Christians don't look for excuses not to go to church. Are the Law and Gospel preached and are the sacraments correctly administered in the services? If so, then you have no excuse. If you cannot come to the services due to infirmities of some sort, notify the pastor, and he will come to you.

Let us hear encouragement from the book of Hebrews. The author is addressing the very same problem we face here: *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will*

consume the adversaries." (Heb 10:23-27) Either Christ will come again in glory or we will die before that. Either way, we need to be prepared, or we will be caught unaware and be damned forever, which would be completely senseless, because God has graciously given us His means all along so that we may escape the day of wrath and be saved. This is no joke. It is deadly serious and has eternal consequences. As the church here in this place, we must pray that we may be led to repentance for thinking little of God's Word and Sacraments and pray that all who have fallen away may be returned to the fold, so that we may all at last gather around the Lamb who was slain, so that we may sing His praises eternally in the peace and joy of His presence.

When you come to the Divine Service, you are partaking of heavenly worship itself. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John gets to see the veil between heaven and earth pulled aside, while he is worshipping "in the Spirit," "on the Lord's Day." He sees the heavenly worship and describes it in Revelation 4, 5, 7, and other places. While we cannot see behind the veil between heaven and earth, we can be certain that the services where Christ Himself is present are no small thing and that there is much more going on than we can ever see now. In the book of Hebrews, we are told what we are coming to when we come to the Divine Service: *"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. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken--that is, things that have been made--in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 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."* (Heb 12:22-29) That says it all. No matter how plain the services may appear to us, or how ordinary or insignificant, God tells us that much more is going on than we can now see. May we abide in Christ now, so that one day we shall see the other side of the veil, which is more than we could even take right now. *Lord, have mercy.*

✠ Pastor Cota