



## **The Evangelical Kyrie**

**By T. R. Halvorson**

The character of Lutheran worship is a rich tapestry of traits. It is like the catechism: it can be learned by a child, but no one can master it. Here are a few vital threads woven into the fabric of the liturgy:

- What worship is basically
- What prayer is basically
- The two parts of repentance: contrition and faith

Let's recall briefly what each of these is, and then see how they make the Kyrie evangelical.

### **What worship is basically**

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran church confesses what worship is, saying:

The difference between this faith and the righteousness of the Law can be easily discerned. Faith is the *latreiva* [divine service], which receives the benefits offered by God; the righteousness of the Law is the *latreiva* [divine service] which offers to God our merits. By faith God wishes to be worshiped in this way, that we receive from Him those things which He promises and offers. [Ap IV.49]

God offers and promises. The Word of God, and particularly the Gospel, precedes worship. It makes worship possible. God wishes to be worshiped by receiving his gifts. His gifts are his Gospel promises: forgiveness, life, salvation, the presence of God, and indeed, himself.

Had God never said anything, had God never promised anything, had God never offered gifts, there could be no worship.<sup>1</sup> There could be only speculation, superstition, slavery, and strange,

profane, unauthorized sacrifices. God creates worship by his Word. Faith takes God at his Word. Faith receives the gifts and promises. In this faith, God is pleased, praised, and glorified. (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14)

The Introit and Kyrie work together to embody this.

What is the office of the Kyrie?

The congregation, realizing its infirmity from indwelling sin, calls upon God for that grace which has been announced and offered in the Introit.<sup>2</sup>

God does not need anything from us, and we don't have anything to give. We stand in need. Our gracious God promises us our true needs. Our only sacrifice is thanksgiving. (Psalm 107:22; 116:17); Jonah 2:9) Although we give God nothing and God gives us everything, nevertheless God is pleased with true worship: receiving his gifts by faith. This is the evangelical character of worship.

The difference between their views of God accounts for the divergence between Luther's idea of the mass and that of the Roman church. To Luther, God's character consists in giving, not in receiving. "For this is the true God, who gives, but does not take; helps, but asks no help – in short, who does everything and gives everything, yet needs no one and all this he does freely out of pure mercy and without merit for the unworthy and undeserving, even for the damned and lost. As such he wants to be remembered, confessed, and glorified."<sup>3</sup>

## What prayer is basically

In the Small Catechism, Luther restored the evangelical character of prayer. As you re-read his explanation of the Introduction, remember that we usually think of prayer as us talking to God.

Our Father who art in heaven.

*What does this mean?* With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.

Wait a minute! What just happened? We pray to God, "Our Father who art in heaven." Aren't we talking to God? Startlingly, Luther's explanation turns that around. He says God is talking to us. He says, "With these words [that we say to God] God tenderly invites us [as if He says the words to us!]." God invites us. He calls us to faith. He tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and we are his true children. God is promising. God is offering gifts.

When someone asks, is prayer us talking to God or God talking to us, Luther's says, "Yes!"

Jesus gave us this prayer. First, before we say anything, He spoke. He gave us the Our Father to pray. The Word of God precedes our prayer. It makes prayer possible. The Word of God creates prayer. We receive this Word by faith, believing the tender invitation, and "with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father."

This is true not only of the Introduction, but of the entire



Lord's Prayer. Jesus gave us all of these words. They are God's Word because God gave them to us. Every petition is something we can ask because God invited us to ask for it.

Why did He invite us? Because He wants to give us these things, He wants us to know what his gifts are, and He wants us to believe him for these gifts.

Every petition becomes both a request and a confession of faith. "Give us this day our daily bread." We ask for daily bread, but we also confess that God gives daily bread. Certainly, it never stops being a petition, but it is as if we are also saying, "God gives us our daily bread," or as if God is saying, "I give you your daily bread."<sup>4</sup>

Worship is receiving by faith what God in his Word offers and promises. Prayer is petitioning and confessing faith for what God in his Word offers and promises.

## **The two parts of repentance: contrition and faith**

This dovetails with what repentance is:

Strictly speaking, repentance consists of two parts: One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin. The other part is faith, which is born of the Gospel or the Absolution and believes that for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror. [Augsburg Confession, XII.3-6]

The Word of God creates repentance in the same way that it creates worship and prayer. When the Word creates contrition, we petition for mercy. When the Word creates faith, we confess that God has mercy. Repentance, worship, and prayer all unite. The Word creates them together.

The Kyrie packs all this into a few deep and wide words:

Lord have mercy upon us  
Christ have mercy upon us  
Lord have mercy upon us

The Word of God creates contrition. In contrition, we petition for mercy.

I said, "LORD, be merciful to me;  
Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You."  
(Psalm 41:4)

HAVE mercy upon me, O God,  
According to Your lovingkindness;  
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,  
Blot out my transgressions.  
(Psalm 51:1)

But – and this is what makes the Kyrie evangelical – in faith, we confess that God has mercy. This prayer and worship ask for, confess, and receive the gift of mercy, because preceding anything we do, first there was the Word of God. What is that Word? That we should call upon the Lord and ask him for mercy. God told us to do this not only so that we would petition him for mercy, but so that we would believe He gives us mercy.

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive,

And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.  
(Psalm 86:5)

The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him,  
In those who hope in His mercy.  
(Psalm 147:11)

Contrition: those who fear Him.

Faith: those who hope in his mercy.

Certainly the Kyrie never stops being a petition. We always say, “Lord have mercy upon us,” and it always means what it sounds like it means, a cry to God for mercy. But it also is a confession of faith as if we were also saying, “The Lord has mercy upon us,” or as if God were saying, “I, the Lord, have mercy upon you.” Contrition and faith are together in repentance. Petition and confession of faith are together in prayer and worship. The Kyrie combines it all together.

It would be a strange service that lacked the Kyrie or something like it. It would be like the “strange fire” that Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered before the Lord. (Leviticus 10:1). Remember, the Word precedes and creates worship, but they offered fire “which He had not commanded them.” (Leviticus 10:1) There was no Word of God preceding what they did. He never commanded what they did. That is what made their fire strange. Strange is the word the King James Version uses. The New King James Version uses “profane.” Worship which God has not commanded is profane. The English Standard Version uses the word “unauthorized.”



The faithful people of God pray, “Have mercy upon us,” and our merciful God rewards their prayer.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Word authorizes the Kyrie. It authorizes you to ask for mercy, and that same Word offers and promises that God gives you mercy, to be received by faith.<sup>6</sup> It tenderly invites you to pray the Kyrie in contrition and faith. “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

Lord have mercy upon us  
Christ have mercy upon us  
Lord have mercy upon us

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<sup>1</sup> “Since the Lord had proclaimed that he was a gracious, merciful God ... the Israelites appealed to his mercy as their heavenly king with this formula in the psalms which they prayed at the temple.” John W. Kleinig, *Course Notes for Liturgics*, p. 27 (North Adelaide: Australian Lutheran College, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *An Explanation of the Common Service*, 5th ed. Rev. & Enlarged, pp. 27-28 (Grand Rapids: Emmanuel Press, 2006). The Kyrie is followed by the Gloria in Excelsis, and thus this part of the service strikingly reproduces order of events related in Luke 18:35-43, where the blind man cried for mercy, his prayer was answered, and all the people with him glorified God.

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<sup>3</sup> Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship*, p. 33 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), quoting WA 30<sup>H</sup>, 603.

<sup>4</sup> This simple way of understanding the petitions as both petitions and confessions of faith resolves even the most difficult questions about prayer. Many have asked, why does God teach us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation?” Would He? All kinds of concoctions and rationalizations have been given in answer to this. The simple and faithful approach is to treat it like everything else in this prayer. Jesus gave us this prayer so that we can know what God offers and promises and so that, believing him we can ask. By teaching us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” Jesus reveals that God tempts no one. It is our sinful unbelief that fears He would. Faith confesses that He wouldn’t, even while it still petitions Him not to. Because God’s Word precedes and creates prayer, we petition and confess faith at the same time.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 14:18-19; Nehemiah 1:5; Psalm 6:2; 9:13; 25:7, 16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:10; 31:9; 33:22; 41:4; 51:1; 69:13; 85:7; 109:21, 26; 123:2-3; Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31; Luke 17:13; 18:38.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; 1 Chronicles 16:34, 41; 2 Chronicles 5:13; 6:14; 7:3, 6; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Psalm 23:6; 32:10; 33:18; 36:5; 86:5, 15; 94:18; 100:5; 100:1; 103:8, 17; 106:1; 107:1; 115:1; 118:1, 4, 29; 119:64; 130:7; 136:1, 3; 138:8; 145:8; Daniel 9:4; 9:9; Jeremiah 33:1; Isaiah 54:8, 10.