



What Happened to the "Salutation"?

When I was a boy, churches in the Reformed tradition always printed the Order of Worship in their church bulletins, and they commonly began something like this:

Votum
Salutation
Invocation
Doxology...

Today, we don't seem to have a common order of worship anymore, and I think that we may have lost something.

I am most concerned about the radical change in the opening portion of our worship services. Perhaps I can get at the heart of it by asking, "What happened to the 'Salutation'?"

Most of our churches do, indeed, still have a "salutation" in their Order of Worship. But I no longer recognize it.

For example, in one church I know, the minister simply walks in, looks around, and says, "Good morning." And the people say to him and to those around them, "Good morning." In another church, after singing a Hymn of Praise and already giving a Call to Worship, the minister *then* says to the people, "God be with you." And the people say to him, "And God be with you." Obviously something about the salutation has changed, but what?

I suppose we all know what a salutation is; it is a greeting. We have all read salutations in the Bible; many of them are greetings between people, especially between *God's* people. So, what's the fuss?

The salutation as used in our older orders of worship was patterned after the salutations in the New Testament Epistles, especially those of Paul. While these Epistles are letters in the true sense of the word (arising from actual situations and directed to particular people), they were all official letters, carrying the weight of office. All of them (except possibly Philemon) were written to be read in the churches and to be passed on, officially.

Therefore, the "salutations" in the Epistles were not merely greetings between people. Like in the original military usage, the formal salutation at the beginning of the Epistle was not so much from the writer, as from the Authority who commissioned him. That is, the apostles were obediently and officially conveying the "greeting" of the Lord.

That is what the "salutations" in our former orders of worship were intended to do. They were not simply well-wishes between pastor and people. They were official proclamations from God — as the order of worship indicated.

When the worship service began, the people were immediately reminded that *"Our help is in the name of the Lord, Who made the heavens and the earth"* (The Votum, as it was then called). In some cases, the New Testament declaration, *"(And) our hope is in Jesus Christ, Who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light,"* was added.

Then we received the Salutation, uttered by the minister of the Word but originating from God. After that, it was still felt necessary to offer a prayer invoking God's blessing that His people might

truly worship Him. Only then did the people open their mouths — not in dialogue with man, but in doxology to God.

The point that I am making is more than a plea to restore the Salutation to its previous glory. I am fearful that the degradation of the Salutation is indicative of the disregard of God Himself in our services.

Where is the reverence we once displayed by being quiet when we entered the place of worship (not because of the place, but because of the Person whom we expected to worship there)? Where is the awe we once felt when we heard the sermon (not as the word of man, but as the Word of God?) Where is the commitment we once made in word and song (not to our fellow Christians, but to our Lord Jesus Christ)?

One more thing about the Salutation. Why can't we learn to leave it what it is? It is not a benediction of grace from the triune God, so we don't have to "squeeze in" the Holy Spirit. It is a *greeting* from God the Father and God the Son (Who abide in heaven), delivered by the official minister of the Word. The Holy Spirit need not be included in the Salutation, because He is present "in person" and delivers His own greeting.

In conclusion, let's try to restore to our worship service more of the dignity which they once had. It is not that the old ways are always better, but that the new ways are sometimes worse. In this case, the new ways have diminished the worship of God in the very name of worshipping Him.

Allan Dykstra

© 2015

www.christianstudylibrary.org