

The Divine Service: Kyrie

< 3rd–5th C.

☐ Lord, have mercy upon us.

Christ, have mercy upon us.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Mark 10:47

Historically, the Divine Service has had five *ordinaries*, fixed parts of the liturgy that generally surround the Lord's Supper each time it is celebrated. The Kyrie is the first of those, named after the beginning of the first line in Greek, *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." (The other ordinaries are the Gloria in Excelsis, the Nicene Creed, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei.)

The Kyrie has been used in Christian worship apparently from the beginning. Nearly every liturgy contains it in some form. Earlier liturgies, and later festival ones, tend to have an extended Kyrie, with numerous petitions, each followed with the fixed responses we know and sing. A modern-day version of such a responsive Kyrie is included in Divine Services I & II (*LSB* pp. 152–3, 168–169). The three-fold Kyrie of Divine Service III (or a three-fold repetition of it, to make a nine-fold Kyrie) has been the general custom in the Western Church, though, since about the year 600. For much of that time, when there were few hymns for the congregation to sing, the Kyrie was their song!

We recognize the words of the Kyrie from the New Testament itself, as the cry often addressed to Jesus for mercy. See, for example, Matt 15:22; 17:15; and Luke 17:13. This is our first prayer in the Service of the Word. It is not strictly a confession of sins or a plea for forgiveness, but a cry to our Lord that he have mercy on us wherever we need it. What kinds of needs did those have who cried out to Jesus for mercy? What kinds of needs might you imagine addressing to him as you sing the Kyrie?

As in the New Testament, the Kyrie today is addressed to our Lord Christ. Its three-fold nature has led some to see it as a Trinitarian prayer. *LSB's* Hymn 942, *Kyrie! God Father*, dating from the time of the Reformation, is an example of such an understanding. The text of this hymn draws in the whole Trinity, but also reminds us of the works Luther's Catechism attributes to each person (see *LSB* pp. 322–23). We cry for merciful providence, merciful salvation, and merciful sanctification, for all of life.

The Kyrie gives us a regular opportunity to gather up all our concerns, known and unknown, and bring them to our Lord Jesus. It is also an opportunity to think on mercy. What is mercy? (see the end of Luther's explanation of the 3rd Article of the Creed, and then the 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer, *LSB* pp. 322, 324). The Kyrie situates us as those who have nothing to offer, nothing to give, but nonetheless expect, for their Lord Jesus' sake, great and abundant mercy from their God. How does God mean this mercy to move us? (Luke 10:25–37; Matt 18:21–35; Mark 5:1–20)