

Amen. Our Yes to God's Yes

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Last week I attended the funeral of a dear friend. There I heard that his last word was an Amen at the end of the Lord's Prayer that his brother said for him as he was dying. It then occurred to me that this was also the first word that was spoken for him as a child of God at his baptism. I wondered how many times he had spoken it in his life and concluded that it could be said that his whole Christian life from the font to his deathbed was a largely unspoken Amen.

As I thought more about it devotionally the next morning, I used my Greek dictionary and New Testament Greek concordance to locate each occurrence of Amen in the Bible and reflect on its function in each case. Then I considered its use in the Divine Service, noting that it was also the first and last word set for the congregation to sing. When I counted each occurrence of in the Common Order of Service as given as Setting Three in the Lutheran Service Book, discovered that was used eighteen times by the congregation. In fact, it seemed to be the main way that the congregation participated in each part of the divine service. But why was this Hebrew word used and not translated into English? In answer to that, I considered the Biblical foundations for its common liturgical use in the Church from its beginning to the present and discovered its often unrecognized importance.

The term itself is an odd Hebrew word derived from a verb for the provision of something reliable and sure and true, like the foundation of a building, and the trust that that rests securely on it. In its meaning it has notions of truth and truthfulness, faith and faithfulness. Like 'Yes' in English, it functioned as a particle in the Old Testament that gave spoken assent and agreement with what was said, such as an oath (Neh 5:13) or a curse (Deut 22:15-26), a prophecy (Jer 28:4) or a royal decree (1 Ki 1:36). Liturgically, it was the response of congregation to the singing of a psalm by the Levitical choir (1 Chr 16:36). Its meaning came from its use as a formal declaration of assent, like "Yes, let it be so!" or formal affirmation, like "Yes, that is so!"

While the New Testament borrows the liturgical use of Amen from the temple and the synagogue, it reshapes its purpose in the light of the mysterious prophecy of Isaiah 65:16 about God's blessings of his people with the coming of the Messiah. There God himself promises that Amen will be used in a new way by his servants in the age to come. He says: "Then whoever invokes a blessing shall bless by the God of Amen, and whoever makes an oath shall swear by the God of Amen." Here blessing includes both the acknowledgment that someone is blessed and the performance of a benediction and an oath is a spoken commitment and vow to do something. Thus the use of Amen in the new age will differ from its previous employment in two ways. On the one hand, it will be used in convey God's heavenly blessings for his people on earth and acknowledge their reception. On the other hand, these blessings and commitments will be performed by the use of a new divine name, the God of Amen, the God who is Amen.

While that mysterious name is left unexplained in the Old Testament, its designation and purpose is disclosed in two places in the New Testament. The first explanation of it is given by Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:18-22. There he makes this claim for himself and the congregation in Corinth: "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it (the word) is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him (Jesus) that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has put his seal (of ownership) on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (own payment, deposit)." Jesus is God's Yes, his Amen to us, because all God's promises are fulfilled him and given to us through him; he has claimed us for himself through him and anointed us with his Spirit as the down payment, the first installment of all the blessings that he gives us. Since God's glory is revealed to us through proclamation of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit in the divine service (2 Cor 3:17-4:6), we say Amen to God for his glory through the performance of doxologies to him together with Jesus. So Jesus is both God's Yes to us and our Yes to him.

The second explanation of Isaiah 65:16 comes from Jesus himself in Revelation 3:14 where he introduces his message to the church in Laodicea in this way: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of creation." Jesus is the faithful witness to God because he was not just at work with him in the creation of humanity but also its redemption (Rev 1:5). Like a witness in a court of law, he bears witness to the truth of what God has said and done. Since he is the incarnate Son of God, he is the promised "God of Amen." He is God's Yes to us as His spokesman and our Yes to God as our spokesman.

Our Amen depends on Jesus and our response to him. It has to do with his proclamation of God's sure and certain word to us and our confession of faith in him and his message in the church as his heavenly community on earth. That accounts for the surprising use of Amen by Jesus in his proclamation to his disciples as well as its use by the church in response to its reception of him and his blessings.

In the Gospels Jesus employs a unique formula in his teaching that had never been used before, a formula that matches his status and authority as the Messiah. When he taught his disciples he often introduced decisive statements in which he proclaimed the word that he had received from his heavenly Father with the odd formula: "Amen, I say to you," 31 times in Matthew, 13 times in Mark, and 6 times in Luke, or "Amen, Amen, I say to you," 25 times in John. This formula does not just emphasize the importance of what he says, it asserts the certainty, reliability and truth of it as God's word to them as the foundation for their faith and life.

Broadly speaking, this is the formula for four kinds of pronouncements about himself and his disciples. First, in a few cases he asserts his status and authority as a true witness to his heavenly Father and reliable spokesman for him (John 3:11; 5:19-23). Second, he also instructs them about their life and work as his disciples (Mt 5:18; 10:23; 11:11; 12:31-32; 13:17; 24:2, 34; 26:13; John 8:34-36; 10:7-10; 12:24-26; 13:16, 20). Third, he warns them of God's judgment on those who were unfaithful to him and his word (Mt 5:26; 18:3; 19:23-24; 23:36; 25:12; 26:21, 34; John 6:26). Four, he, most often, tells them what he gives to them and does

for them as his disciples (Mt 8:10; 10:28, 42; 16:28; 17:20 18:13-14, 18, 19-20; 19:28; 21:21; 24:47; John 1:51; 3:5; 5:24, 25; 6:32, 47, 53; 8:51; 13:20; 14:12-14; 16:20, 23).

In all these pronouncements he uses Amen to provide certainty for his disciples, the certainty of God's word for them as the basis for their faith in him and life with him in the church. In them he presents himself to them personally to vouch for the truth of what he says. For me all that is summed up best by this amazing pronouncement I John 5:24: "Amen, Amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

The use of Amen by Jesus determines the use of Amen in the Early Church as the congregational response after the following enactments. Since doxologies acknowledged the disclosure of God in his hidden glory with them in the divine service, the congregation responded to them with its Amen (Rom 14:36; 16:47; Gal 1:15; Eph 3:20-21; Phil 4:20; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim 4:16; 1 Pet 4:11; Heb 13:20-21; Jude 24-25). They thereby joined with the angels and saints in their performance of doxologies in heaven (Rev 5:14; 7:11-12; 19:4). Amen was said in response to the benedictions that conveyed God's heavenly gifts to them for the life on earth (Rom 15:33; 1 Cor 16:24; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 6:21). It was also the response of the congregation to the performance of thanksgiving and praise to God for the blessings it had received from him (Rom 1:25; 9:5; 1 Cor 4:16). It was the response to the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:13) and later to the other petitions and prayers in the divine service.

In sum: Amen is our word of assent to what God says and what he offers to us through Jesus. It is our Yes to God for His Yes to us. By our use of Amen we agree with Him in a number of different ways. Amen is our word of faith in him and his faithfulness. With that comes the Amen of acceptance and reception of his blessings. With that comes the Amen of certainty and assurance. With that comes the Amen of thanksgiving and petitionary prayer and the Amen of obedience and commitment. With that comes the Amen of doxology and praise to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And that Amen is eternal in duration and cosmic in its extent (Rev 5:13-14; 7:11-12). It begins now in the church on earth and continues forever in heaven. It is our last word as God's holy people.