

Essay 1. Worship: Before and After Martin Luther ¹

When we worship, we generally expect the service to be in our language, to sing hymns selected from a collection called a hymnal located in our pew, to fully participate in a liturgy perhaps chosen from a variety of available liturgical settings, and to have the service musically led by an organist or pianist. If there is a choir, both men and women may participate. The pastor speaks to us in our language, publicly proclaims God's words in readings and a sermon, and when we commune, we expect to receive both bread and wine.

At Luther's time worship was quite different. "Mass," as the service was called, was spoken and sung entirely in Latin, the language of the Church for a millennium before Luther. Only the professional religious led worship – priests and those aspiring to the priesthood. The congregation came to "hear" Mass, not to participate except as spectators. The choir sang liturgical music based on chant which had developed into a complex system through the centuries. The choir consisted only of men and boys, no women allowed. We might be surprised by the extent of chanting by the priests. Some suggest that chanting was a way to make him better heard in the days before microphones and amplified speech. It was valued for its beauty as well as its utility. When instruments were used, they played in conjunction with the choir. The organ did not accompany congregational singing. Singing by the laity in church had been discouraged for centuries, and with finality in 1415, the Council of Constance specifically forbade the laity to sing in church. This same council condemned the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus to death by burning at the stake for expressing many theological views Luther espoused a century later. There were no such things as pew hymnals—in fact, no such thing as pews. The laity stood throughout the Mass.

The Church maintained a structure of daily worship at various hours of the day known as the Offices. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline were celebrated primarily in monasteries and convents. Matins and Vespers were the most significant. The Mass was the main service of worship, and in it was celebrated the Holy Supper. The laity received only the bread; the priest drank the wine for the people.² The term "Mass" comes from the priest's words of dismissal at the end of worship: "*Ite missa est*" ("Go. You are dismissed"). Some parts of the liturgy remained the same within each Mass, and these parts were called the "Ordinary" because they were *ordinarily* sung every time. Other parts varied with the liturgical season and were called the "Propers" because they were *proper* for some occasions and out of place at others. This was the worship *milieu* into which Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483. Of the several important contemporaneous reformers, Luther was the most musically versed, skilled, and sympathetic. As an Augustinian monk, he became intimately familiar with the Church's worship rites and their attendant music.

It was not the Church's musical practice that concerned Luther but its theology. Celebrating the Mass as a *good work* toward salvation and a *sacrifice* for sin particularly troubled him. He scrutinized the part of the Mass which supported these views. The abuses Luther identified in the Mass were only part of a broader spectrum of issues he addressed. Beginning on October 31, 1517 with the posting of his now famous Ninety-five Thesis, Luther wished to inaugurate a public debate. Instead of a debate, Luther ignited a fire. There was no turning back, and eventually Luther brought about significant reforms, those to the Mass among them. In brief, four reforms impact our worship today: 1) the restoration of regular public preaching of the Word, 2) the celebration of the Holy Supper according to Christ's institution, allowing the reception of *both* bread and wine by the laity, 3) reshaping the content of what we now call the Divine Service and the Offices, and 4) encouraging the practice of congregational singing of liturgy and hymnody.

¹ This and all other "Essays" may be reproduced as handouts. Subsequent "Suggested Activities" can be adapted as desired.

² Reaffirmed by the Council of Trent in July, 1562, Session 21: "Wherefore, this holy Synod...declares and teaches, that laymen, and clerics when not consecrating, are not obliged, by any divine precept, to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist under both species...."

To Luther, as part of the priesthood of all believers [1 Peter 2:5] the laity were to be allowed to participate in the liturgy of the Mass and in singing hymns. He thought doing so would be a tremendous *aid in teaching the faith*. Though significant, the changes he championed were relatively few by comparison to the more radical actions of Carlstadt, Calvin, and Zwingli. Luther feared radical changes would negatively impact the faith of weaker believers. He wrote: “For I have been hesitant and fearful, partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one.”³ The Augsburg Confession, Article 24, “*Of the Mass*,” accurately claims: “Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added *to teach the people*” (emphasis mine).

In 1523, Luther issued a Latin form for worship for the church in Wittenberg (the *Formula Missae*) which retained the major parts of the Ordinary (*Kyrie, Gloria, Creed, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei*) and much of what we have come to know liturgically as the Divine Service. The settings included in the hymnal mostly vary the music, the content being nearly identical. In 1526, to provide a pattern for worship in the vernacular German, he published his German Mass (the *Deutsche Messe*), essentially substituting hymns for the parts of the Ordinary (cf. *Lutheran Service Book* 213), the subject of Essay 2.

Because Luther also dispensed with monastic life, no one remained available to celebrate the daily monastic Offices on a regular basis. However, he retained Matins and Vespers and commended them for public worship. The changes that were made in Luther’s lifetime have shaped our concept and practice of worship for the succeeding five-hundred years, including the liturgical section of the recent *Lutheran Service Book*, or *LSB* (references following in parentheses). Most Lutheran hymnals contain Matins (*LSB* 219) and Vespers (*LSB* 229) and their English counterparts Morning Prayer (*LSB* 235), Evening Prayer (*LSB* 243), and Compline (*LSB* 253). The little Offices have been retained in a reduced and combined form called “Responsive Prayers,” (*LSB* 282 and 285), previously in *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)* called the “Suffrages.” Matins and Vespers are highly musical and include verses, psalms, hymns, and canticles to be sung or chanted, as well as Scripture readings. Responsive Prayer is entirely spoken and includes only short verses, readings, prayers, and a creed. Contemporary Lutherans might find these Responsive Prayers valuable for small group or personal devotions, the opening of church meetings, school chapels or classroom devotions, and the like.

In order to utilize the riches of the various liturgical settings passed down to us by the reformers, pastors and people might well avail themselves of the opportunities to worship with each of the various worship forms as appropriate. Restricting public worship to only one or two settings at best deprives God’s people of their rightful heritage and refreshment through the variety they offer.

In order to be better acquainted with these worship forms, I offer the following suggested activities. They can be done selectively or in any order, as seems fit for your parish situation. Note that for the most part references are to *LSB*, but by way of information and comparison one might wish to refer also to *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) and *Lutheran Worship* (1982).

Dr. Kenneth T. Kosche
Montana District, LCMS

³ Ulrich S. Leupold, ed., *Luther’s Works: Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965) “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” p. 19.

Suggested activities for Essay 1:

1. Locate and sing the parts of the Divine Service that Luther retained called “the Ordinary”: the *Kyrie*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, *Credo* (usually now spoken, but can be sung), *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*. The more familiar you are with them, the easier it will be to compare Luther’s hymn substitutes for them in the *German Mass* (*Deutsche Messe*), 1526. Please note that Essay 2 discusses the hymns of the *German Mass* in more detail including additional activities.

Kyrie – *Lord have mercy upon us*

TLH 6, LW 209, LSB 942 – “Kyrie! God Father in Heav’n Above”

Gloria – *Glory be to God on high*

TLH 237, LW 215, LSB 947 – “All Glory Be to God on High” (Nicolaus Decius)

~ OR ~

TLH 248, LW 210, LSB 948 – “All Glory Be to God Alone” (Martin Luther)

Credo – not strictly the Apostles’ nor the Nicene creed (but much closer to the Nicene)

TLH 251, LW 213, LSB 954 – “We All Believe in One True God”

Sanctus – *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth*

TLH 249, LW 214, LSB 960 – “Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old”

Agnus Dei – *Lamb of God*

TLH 148, LW p. 151, LSB 198 – “O Christ, Thou Lamb of God”

~ OR ~

TLH 146, LW 208, LSB 434 – “Lamb of God, Pure and Holy” [LW: “Pure and Sinless”]

2. Sing the texts and music of the four canticles (songs) in Matins and Vespers: the *Te Deum*, *Benedictus*, *Magnificat*, and *Nunc Dimittis*. These are known as “Gospel canticles.” Though not biblical in origin, the *Te Deum* presents the gospel in a creedal fashion. The other three are directly recorded in the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1 and 2. Read these chapters to identify them, their contexts, and their origins.⁴

Luther accepted an ages-long tradition that the *Te Deum* was spontaneously improvised by Sts. Ambrose and Augustine when Ambrose baptized Augustine. There exist wood carvings and paintings depicting the two of them with the Holy Spirit descending upon the scene. Of course, to Luther, an Augustinian, this narrative would have seemed natural. Luther called the *Te Deum* the fourth ecumenical creed,⁵ and indeed it is composed mostly of creedal statements, especially about the person and nature of Christ, the essence of the 4th century Arian conflict during Ambrose’s time. The traditional conjecture of its origin is therefore understandable, though it is not true. Research indicates that the text of the *Te Deum* was initiated by Nicetas, Bishop of Remesia in the early 5th century. Additions were made subsequently. Note that much of the text of the *Te Deum* is prose, not poetry, and therefore unlike most other hymns we know. There are a multitude of musical settings for the text so that none can lay claim to being the true, original tune or musical setting. Our Lutheran hymnals include several liturgical settings of the four canticles and also hymn paraphrases: the *Magnificat* (LSB 933-35), the *Benedictus* (LSB 936), the *Nunc Dimittis* (LSB 937-38), and the *Te Deum* (cf. LSB 939-41).

3. Read the *Suffrages* in TLH or the *Responsive Prayers* in *Lutheran Worship* (LW) or LSB. They are much shorter and less complex than Matins or Vespers in content, and they lack music. Use a *Responsive Prayer* at your next church meeting or use them for personal or family devotional time. They are a great resource and a rich legacy of the Church’s worship before and after Martin Luther.

⁴ The *Magnificat*: Luke 1:46-55; the *Benedictus*: Luke 1:67-79; the *Nunc Dimittis*: Luke 2:29-32.

⁵ The Nicene Creed (c. 325/381 AD), the Apostles’ Creed (c. 390 AD), and the Athanasian Creed (late 5th-early 6th century AD) are the commonly accepted three ecumenical creeds.