



Wisdom from Wittenberg - Part 1

Martin Luther's Pastoral and Practical Revisions of Worship

By Mark Tiefel

The story behind Luther's creative worship

In the year 1517, The Feast of all Saints—November 1—just so happened to fall on a Sunday.¹ The alignment of this date and the day of the week wouldn't have escaped the notice of Christian worshipers. In fact, it would have amplified the din in town and city streets throughout Christendom. Across Europe, thousands of Christians would have thronged to the doors of their churches for what must have seemed like a Sunday morning, Christmas Day, and Memorial Day all rolled into one.

The scene in northern Germany would have been no different. But something different was about to happen, and it happened, in large part, due to a brilliant bachelor professor who, like the rest, would have been walking to and from worship on that particular Sunday morning. On All Saints Day, 1517, Martin Luther could not have imagined how much a document which he had written to his archbishop and posted publicly the night before was going to change his life and his congregation. So much, in fact, that now, even 500 years later, we are still celebrating the man and his moment at the church door.

Though we often tend to focus on the man and his moment, we rarely take the time to imagine what was actually happening on the other side of the door. In fact, it's rather difficult to imagine. The style and pattern of worship inside the All Saints' Church on that famous All Saints' Day, 1517 would hardly be recognizable to us.

Perhaps some figures might be illustrative: In 1517, mass was celebrated 9,000 times at the Castle Church alone—a public

or private mass offered every 53 minutes, without letup, for an entire year.² 40,000 candles were burned, consuming four tons of wax at a cost of \$100,000. The prime attraction at All Saints Church was the collection of relics: 19,000 cataloged items neatly arranged in ten aisles.³

But the real heart of Wittenberg worship on All Saints Day was receiving the indulgence: walk through the door, say the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, confess your sins to one of the dozen extra priests available, say a prayer for the pope. Once done, most people simply left once the priest had elevated the host. This was worship in Wittenberg under which the people were held captive to the careful control of the Catholic church and enslaved to the indulgence of the papacy. No one at the time could have known that the detailed document which Professor Luther had posted to the church door was about to change all of that.

The document that Luther had posted, *95 Theses, or A Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*,⁴ was a breach in the dam. What flowed through that breach was Christian freedom. Throughout the five years that followed 1517, Luther began to experience for himself the unexpected effects of freedom. Sometime in 1518, Luther had a spiritual breakthrough in which the truth of the gospel finally set him free from the terrors of his conscience.⁵ By 1519, he was set free from his vows of monasticism. By 1520, he was publishing *The Freedom of a Christian*⁶ throughout Germany. And by 1521, Luther was finally

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called to defend that freedom before the Holy Roman Estates at Worms. Luther stood firm in his freedom, and the rest is history.

However, a breached dam often presents something of a problem. That problem was quickly experienced by the worshipers in Wittenberg. Luther's associates in Wittenberg saw their new-found freedom as something to be experimented with. After Worms, Andreas Karlstadt concluded that since Rome had broken with the preacher of Wittenberg, it was time for the people of Wittenberg to return the favor. While Luther was away at the Wartburg, Karlstadt took over in Wittenberg and went on an "iconoclastic binge."⁷ Worship services were flooded with new ideas and new forms. Suddenly, Germans who were used to Latin chants and prayers were hearing loud German phrases while receiving communion in both kinds from priests who wore no robes. None of them were sure why it was happening. It seemed the only reason was 'because of Rome.'

Luther defended the gospel from the burst dam of freedom and creativity.

Throughout the five years that followed 1521, Luther would need to defend the gospel from the burst dam of freedom and creativity. Luther would respond from the Wittenberg pulpit in a way that was direct and abrupt.⁸ But he would also respond from his Wittenberg desk in a way that was subtle, quiet, and patient. Luther would find ways to change how communion was received. He would find a way to give the Wittenbergers a service of their own. But he would take his time in finding that way, and his approach would be pastoral and highly principled.

It would come about through a three-year-long worship project, begun in 1523 with an order of service meant to demonstrate how the mass could basically be used as is, save for a few critical changes. The project would reach its conclusion in 1526 with a second order of service, meant to show how worship life could be completely and creatively—but still pastorally and practically—adapted. These two documents, in which Luther recognized "something must be dared in the name of Christ,"⁹ would serve as two poles, each connected to the other, between which an ancient-future pattern of Christian worship would emerge.

Five hundred years later, the past is present. We worship in the land of the free. Innovation is addictive. Our creative impulses are rocket-fueled by communication technology. Often the question we hear isn't "what can we change?" but "how much of this do we really have to keep in order to stay Lutheran?" We enjoy our liberty to tinker and experiment with worship. But perhaps Luther's principled project can compel us to be careful with our creativity as we seek to adapt and shape the worship life of our congregations.

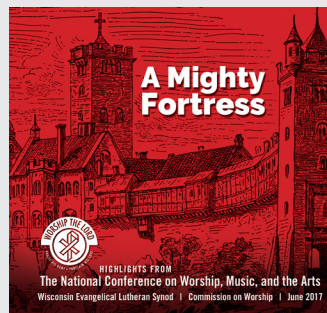
The remainder of this article and its part two companion will explore four aspects of Luther's approach to creativity.

Creativity is careful to serve the gospel.

"The preaching and teaching of God's Word must remain the most important."¹⁰ This was Luther's foundational worship principle. Everything he thought and did was not for himself, and not against Rome, but for the gospel. This is where Karlstadt had gone astray in 1522 and why his worship adjustments caused so much consternation. Karlstadt's reforms were not initiated by or driven by an understanding of the gospel. This is what Luther addressed in the eight sermons that he preached following his sudden return to Wittenberg on Invocavit Sunday. Rather than allowing the gospel to do its subtle, quiet work through its various and familiar forms, Karlstadt sought to immediately renovate and redefine nearly every aspect of worship and preaching. His impatience, combined with a desire to liberate himself and the Wittenberg laity from the forms and patterns of Rome, drove him to a point where the gospel's power was flouted in favor of his own fanatical enthusiasm.

Luther's sermons were a call to faith, love, patience, and a renewed appreciation for the gospel principle: since God changes hearts through the power of the gospel, everything that we do—especially what we do in worship, and to an ultimate degree what we choose to add to or remove from worship—is done in the interest of conveying the gospel to people's hearts. The Word must be allowed to do its subtle, quiet work. "We do nothing, the Word does everything."¹¹

The gospel principle did not lead Luther to the same conclusion that Karlstadt had reached. Wittenberg's worship was free to change, but it was also free to be retained. In fact, much of the service ought to remain, owing to love for people and faith in the gospel. Much of the present order of service, after all, *did* preach the gospel, provided that it was heard in public (not just said in private) and provided that the clutter of indulgences was done away with. If the people were present, they would have heard sermons preached in their everyday language, just like we do. At



This article, part 1 of 2, is adapted from a presentation at the 2017 WELS national worship conference. Those interested may find additional information in a handout of the same title along with the worship folder for All Saints' and recordings from that service at worship.welsrc.net/downloads-worship/worship-conference. Additional recordings are on the double CD "A Mighty Fortress" available from NPH.



Weimar altarpiece, by Lucas Cranach the Younger, 1555. An analysis by Michael Zarlino is at breadforbeggars.com. For another instructive image of early Lutheran worship, search for the 1561 altar panel from Torslunde Church. (Photo by Wolfgang Sauber, Wikimedia Commons.)

the same time, they would have heard prayers *not* in everyday language, just like we do. The people knew what “Kyrie eleison” and “Credo” meant. Why alter them? Luther’s advice in 1523 but also in 1526 was to adhere to established patterns, since arbitrarily departing from them could be self-serving or Karlstadtian.

“We do not avoid the new but are careful to avoid novelty....”

In both services, the established pattern of liturgy was retained. Luther said, “This is necessary so that no sect arises from public worship as if I had devised this service out of my own head.”¹² Luther’s subtle critique of Karlstadt and his motives deserves to be emphasized: “An order of liturgy is not simply to fulfill a personal need or plan or idea but must always serve the gospel.”¹³ On its surface, Karlstadt’s Wittenberg movement might seem driven by the desire for greater inclusion or clearer communication. But desires for better things ought to be checked carefully less like Karlstadt we charge ahead and miss our target. “Since we are rooted firmly in a rich tradition, we do not avoid the new but are careful to avoid novelty, eccentricity, or quixotic attempts at newness for its own sake.”¹⁴

On the other hand, perhaps Karlstadt had raised an interesting question. “If there are moments when the service isn’t clearly communicating the gospel, what do we do then?” To many, the Lord’s Prayer had become automatic. To many more, the mystery

of the Lord’s Supper was just that—unintelligible. Here, Luther found ways to adapt. And Luther’s ‘way,’ as published in 1526, would be a form of *worship catechesis*.

The preface of the 1526 *Deutsche Messe* seems to be written by a man more interested in ‘a good catechism’¹⁵ than ‘a new service.’ In fact, when we look at the service, we recognize that the two interests are one and the same. “The preaching and teaching of God’s Word must remain the most important.”¹⁰ Where the Lord’s Prayer needs to be taught, teach it. Where the Lord’s Supper needs explanation, provide one. And so Luther did.

It is important to realize that Luther’s intention was primarily catechetical. Otherwise, there is a temptation to extract Luther’s statements from their context and then to force his ‘new service’ to serve modern ideas about what worship should be. Those ideas might sound like this:

- “Such orders are needed for those who are still becoming Christians.”¹⁶ i.e. Luther was providing a new service that was more approachable to those new to the faith. This idea overlooks the fact that in Luther’s day, no one church shopped, adult baptisms were nearly unheard of, and every parishioner had been trained in the routines of church life almost since birth. It seems that in Luther’s mind, the service was about more than initiation.
- “This service should be arranged for the sake of simple laypeople”¹⁷ i.e. Luther was adapting to the culture of the people in Wittenberg. Unless the service was translated into their language and idiom, they would be unable to hear and respond to the gospel. This idea might overlook the fact that Luther’s Latin service had been translated into German only a few weeks after it had been published and that people all over Germany were already worshiping in German. It seems that in Luther’s mind, the service was about more than language.
- “Now there are three kinds of liturgies or Mass”¹⁸ i.e. Luther was willing to offer alternatives. A Latin service was preferred by some, a German service by others, another service by yet others. This idea might overlook the fact that Luther never drafted a third service. Nor did he object as the first two were merged.¹⁹ It seems that in Luther’s mind, the service was about more than preference.

Luther’s service was about more than initiation, language, or preference.

Rather than pitting these efforts against the other, Luther honored them all as expressions of catechesis. And he employed ancient and modern tools simultaneously in this effort. Luther sought to defend the gospel for a Christian culture which had a good knowledge of Christian tradition. To do this, he produced a Formula Missae which removed everything at odds with the gospel, while retaining everything that wasn’t. At the same time, he sought to declare the gospel to a “population becoming

secularized and needing reintroduction to its Christian roots.”²⁰ To do this, he produced a *Deutsche Messe* in which the truth of the gospel could still be ‘caught’ (as emphasized by the retained rituals²¹) and ‘taught’ (as emphasized by the added explanations).

Creativity in service of the gospel is the primary principle. Part two of this article will explore additional principles:

- Creativity is careful to honor the arts
- Creativity is careful to serve the community
- Creativity is careful to serve the congregation

¹ Google, using the Gregorian Calendar, specifies Thursday. But prior to 1582, dates were determined according to the Julian Calendar. In that calendar, November 1 fell on a Sunday.

² To say the Castle Church alone is tongue and cheek. The masses weren’t said constantly, but dozens were offered privately and simultaneously, often with no one else in attendance.

³ This is the scene described by Martin Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 118.

⁴ LW 31:17-34

⁵ The date of this breakthrough is uncertain, but likely happened during the summer of 1518, while Luther was preparing his lectures on the Hebrews. Luther referred to it as a moment when “the gates of heaven were suddenly opened to me. Cf. Brecht, *Road*, 225.

⁶ LW 31:327ff

⁷ The phrase is coined by Frank Senn, page 275 in *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*. Fortress, 1997.

⁸ Many can remember the scene from the 1953 film: “How dare you lay hands upon the crucifix!”

⁹ The phrase is from Luther’s Preface to the *Formula Missae*. LW 53:19

¹⁰ AL (*The Annotated Luther*) 3:146, LW 53:68

¹¹ LW 51:77

¹² AL 3:142

¹³ Dirk Lange provides this note on the above quotation in AL 3:142 n.19

¹⁴ Schalk, *Paradigms*, 55

¹⁵ “Onward then in the name of God! First the German service needs a down-to-earth, plain, simple, and good catechism.” (AL 142)

¹⁶ AL 3:141

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 140.

¹⁹ Even during Luther’s lifetime, it was common for Latin and German settings of the same texts to be sung alongside one another.

²⁰ Maschke, Timothy. *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*. Second Edition. Concordia, 2009, 155.

²¹ “The congregation assembled around the Word and the sacraments needs other forms than an individual needs when reading the Word or praying by himself. Unity demands the individual’s regard for the whole. Conversely, however, it also demands that the whole have regard for the individual. It demands regard for the ‘weak’—a demand, which in accordance with what Luther requires, is emphasized by many church rituals.” Elert, Werner. *The Structure of Lutheranism*. Tr. Walter Hansen. Concordia, 1962, 328-329

RECOMMENDED READING

For a fuller list, see Tiefel’s handout from the 2017 worship conference. The list below includes only newer or lesser known items.

Books:

Luther, Martin. “The German Mass and Order of the Liturgy, 1526.” Ed. Dirk G. Lange. *The Annotated Luther. Volume 3: Church and Sacraments*. Fortress, 2016.

Brecht, Martin. *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation (1483-1521)* Tr. James Schaff. Fortress, 1985.

———. *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation. (1521-1532)* Tr. James Schaff. Fortress, 1990.

Leaver, Robin. *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther’s Wittenberg*. Eerdmans, 2017.

Maag, Karen and John Witvliet. *Worship in Medieval and Modern Europe: Change and Continuity in Religious Practice*. University of Notre Dame, 2004.

Schalk, Carl. *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise*. Concordia, 1988.

———. *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition*. Concordia Academic, 2001.

Zager, Daniel. *The Gospel Preached Through Music: The Purpose and Practice of Lutheran Church Music*. Good Shepherd Institute, 2013.

Articles and Essays:

Herl, Joseph. “Seven Habits of Highly Effective Liturgies: Insights from the Sixteenth through the Eighteenth Century” in: *Thine the Amen: Essays on Lutheran Church Music in Honor of Carl Schalk*. Lutheran University Press, 2005.

Koelpin, Arnold. “Luther Reforms the Mass.” *Focus on Worship*. Summer, 1989.

Leaver, Robin. “Luther and Bach, the ‘Deutsche Messe’ and the Music of Worship.” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001).