

Sacred Time in Luther's Wittenberg in the Sixteenth Century

Paxson Jeancake

October 12, 2021

Worship remembers God's story through actions and expressions in sacred time. In the Old Testament, God's people remembered the exodus event, how the Lord brought them out of Egypt and rescued them from slavery. As Christians, we remember the Christ event: his birth, death, resurrection, and exaltation. For Christians, these events serve as the cosmic center of time and history. "Everything before Christ finds its fulfillment in him. Everything after Christ finds its meaning by pointing back to him."¹ Throughout its history, the church has celebrated Christ-centered, sacred time through the daily rhythm of prayer, the weekly rhythm of the Lord's Day, and the annual rhythm of the church year. In this paper I will explore sacred time as it was expressed in Luther's Wittenberg at the dawn of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. This act sparked a flame that grew into the fire of the Reformation across Europe. Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony in 1483. By 1507, he earned two degrees, studied theology as an Augustinian monk, and became a priest.² He moved to Wittenberg in 1508, began teaching at the university and earned his Doctor of Divinity degree in 1512.³ After completing this degree, he received a permanent faculty position.⁴ Preparing for his lectures as a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg led to his true understanding of the gospel

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 219.

² Joseph Early Jr., *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 212-213.

³ Early, *History of Christianity*, 214.

⁴ Robert Kolb, *Luther's Wittenberg World: The Reformer's Family, Friends, Followers, and Foes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), vi.

and the doctrine of justification by faith alone.⁵ Luther was also appointed as the head of St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg in 1514⁶ where he preached most of his sermons.⁷ St. Mary's and the Castle Church (All Saints) were the ecclesiastical centers of the city where the various changes in worship took shape. Thus, Wittenberg served as the center of Luther's life and the hub for early sixteenth-century reforms.

As Luther observed the state of the Roman church, he was disturbed by the many abuses such as "the selling of indulgences, the veneration of relics, and masses and offices for the dead."⁸ Unlike some of his peers, however, Luther did not set out to create a new style of worship, but to "cleanse the one in use" with all of its of many "accretions."⁹ He sought to retain the best of ancient practices, but reform them by emphasizing the gospel, putting them in the language of the people, and encouraging participation. Thus, the reforms which Luther sought in Wittenberg in the daily office, the weekly Mass, and the observances of the church year serve as positive examples of how sacred time finds expression in the life of the church. With that background, we will explore each of these three rhythms, beginning with the daily office.

⁵ Early, *A History of Christianity*, 214.

⁶ Early, *A History of Christianity*, 214.

⁷ Patrick Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching: Promises and Problems of the Sermon as a Source of Reformation History and as an Instrument of the Reformation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (1990): 267. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000834838&site=ehost-live>. Acesso em: 30 set. 2021.

⁸ Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 269.

⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford Press, 2006), 395.

The Daily Office

A theme within Luther's reforms is the removal of the many "accretions" that developed in worship practice during the medieval era. This removal is evident in the daily office.

Luther seems to have a genuine affection for the daily office, but... finds it necessary to attack the practice at the level of monastic abuse. Luther had spent some years in a monastery and was well acquainted with the late medieval multiplication of saints' days and additional commemorations, the notion of priestly obligation to say the required hours and the conviction that the daily hours had ceased to be genuine times for prayer.¹⁰

Luther simplified the many monastic additions to two offices: matins (morning) and vespers (evening). A typical matins or vespers service included the singing of psalms, the reading of a chapter from either the New Testament (matins) or the Old Testament (vespers), a lesson, a German hymn, the Lord's Prayer, a collect, and a sung benediction (*Benedicamus domino*).¹¹ Luther felt the office should be edifying and kept to no more than an hour so that the people were not overburdened.¹² His primary use for the daily office was in the schools, and his "concern for catechizing the faithful is clearly evident."¹³ Luther valued investing in the next generation.

A major part of Luther's reforms included the writing and singing of vernacular hymnody. Thus, in addition to teaching students and laity the Scriptures, the daily office was also "the primary context within which the early vernacular hymnody was taught, learned, and

¹⁰ J. Neil Alexander, "Luther's Reform of the Daily Office," *Worship* 57, no. 4 (1983): 349. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000932272&site=ehost-live>. Acesso em: 29 set. 2021.

¹¹ Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, eds., *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2018), 109.

¹² Alexander, "Luther's Reform of the Daily Office," 351.

¹³ Alexander, "Luther's Reform of the Daily Office," 355.

promoted.”¹⁴ The daily office served as a natural vehicle and context in which to introduce Wittenberg to the new, gospel-centered hymnody. This new hymnody was also a key factor in reforming and reviving the weekly Mass, a topic to which we will now turn and explore.

The Weekly Mass

In addition to the daily office, sacred time in Wittenberg experienced its most fervent reform in the weekly Mass. Senn shares that “at no point was Luther so violently opposed to the medieval system as in his repudiation of the Roman doctrine of the Mass.”¹⁵ Luther was shocked at the abuses manifested in Roman liturgy, life, and devotional practices.¹⁶ He, thus, prescribed two services for the Lord’s Day: the *Form of the Mass* (1523) and the *German Mass* (1526).

The *Form of the Mass* (or Latin Mass) was “aimed at university or city churches with trained choirs,” while the German Mass “had a wider focus and encouraged territories to have a single liturgical order rather than a confusing multiplicity of forms.”¹⁷ Both orders involved a variety of music, however, the Latin Mass retained more traditional elements such as the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Gradual*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei*, and *Benedicamus*. The German Mass included new, German hymns as well as new settings for some of the traditional elements.¹⁸ Both orders -

¹⁴ Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther’s Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 143.

¹⁵ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 267.

¹⁶ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 268.

¹⁷ Gibson, *Reformation Worship*, 77-78.

¹⁸ Gibson, *Reformation Worship*, 80-81.

described as Wittenberg practices, not law - are characterized by the prominence of Scripture, the rejection of sacrificial language in the Lord's Supper, and the composition of new hymnody.

Regarding the reading and preaching of the word, Luther retained the Gospel and Epistle pericopes appointed for the seasons in the church year. He found no reason to eliminate this practice and embraced the use of the historic lectionary in the weekly liturgy.¹⁹ We will discuss this in more detail, but for now it is important to note that Scripture was prominent in the liturgy and that Luther continued the practice of using the lectionary while other reformers discarded it.

In addition to Scripture, Luther sought reform in the Lord's Supper. While he kept a weekly observance of the sacrament, he did away with language that expressed the meal as a sacrifice. Luther, instead, sought to frame it as a means of grace for receiving and celebrating what God has already done for us in Christ. Regarding the Eucharistic Prayer, Luther felt that

almost everything smacks and savours of sacrifice. And the words of life and salvation (i.e., the Words of Institution) are imbedded in the midst of it all, just as the ark of the Lord once stood in the idol's temple next to Dagon...Let us, therefore, repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice...and retain only that which is pure and holy.²⁰

To reclaim the gospel of grace, Luther focused on the nature and order of the words of institution. For Luther, after the bread and wine had been consecrated and blessed by the words of Christ, they could only be received as a gift.²¹ Thus, he eliminated "any statement of oblation between the consecration...and the communion."²² The sacrament was not a sacrifice to God.

¹⁹ Gibson, *Reformation Worship*, 108.

²⁰ Robin A. Leaver, "'Verba Testamenti' versus Canon: the radical nature of Luther's liturgical reform," *Churchman* 97, no. 2 (1983): 123. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000933995&site=ehost-live>. Accessed em: 29 set. 2021.

²¹ Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 273.

²² Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 274.

In addition to Scripture and the Lord's Supper, the weekly rhythm of sacred time was reformed through vernacular hymnody. Luther valued the role of music in the liturgy, seeking neither to do away with it nor reduce it to exclusive psalmody. Wilson-Dickson writes, "Once more his starting point was the church's long-standing musical traditions. He and his helpers set about translating the Latin texts into German while carefully...re-moulding the tunes so that they could fit the different stress patters of the German language."²³ Luther and other composers were intentional about the composition of vernacular hymns for the Mass and the church year.

The *Geistlich lieder* of 1529 represents a milestone in vernacular hymnody in Wittenberg, serving as the basis upon which all subsequent Lutheran hymnals were created.²⁴ It contained fifty hymns under five classifications: church year hymns, catechism hymns, metrical psalms, old church hymns, and contemporary evangelical hymns.²⁵ White writes:

Luther exulted in music...he is credited with about 37 hymns. By the end of the sixteenth century, a whole series of hymns of the day had been codified to accompany each gospel reading in the Luther Sunday service. The congregation participated fully and vigorously in the singing of hymns as well as the rest of the liturgy.²⁶

Luther valued the church year, writing not only new hymns for the gospel readings, but sermons that could be published as well. We will explore this topic in this final section.

²³ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel* (Batavia: Lion Publishing, 1992), 62.

²⁴ Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 161.

²⁵ Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 167-172.

²⁶ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 137.

The Church Year

As with other aspects of sacred time, Luther remained conservative in his approach to the church year. He sought “to keep the major festivals of the historic year with the long established epistle and gospel lessons.”²⁷ However, Luther was concerned with the many saints’ days that had accumulated within the church year and purged these, keeping only the days and festivals that centered on the Lord.²⁸ Thus, saints’ days were discarded, but Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday remained intact.

In addition, the lectionary readings were embraced and preached on in his sermons at St. Mary’s and published and circulated through the *Church Postil*. The *Church Postil* was a needed resource for the preachers of his day. Through it, Luther explained the Epistle and Gospel lessons for each Sunday in the church year with gospel-centered commentary and explanations.²⁹ The *Church Postil* represents the integration of Luther’s high view of Scripture and his understanding of God’s grace. It also exemplifies his desire for continuity with ancient practices such as the church year and the historic lectionary system.

In summary, Luther’s reforms to the daily, weekly, and annual rhythms of sacred time in Wittenberg truly exemplify a healthy and pastoral balance of old and new and serve as a model for integrating worship practices today.

²⁷ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 127.

²⁸ Gordon Lathrop, “Luther: Formula Missae: Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg (1523),” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 2, *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 190.

²⁹ Thomas Coates, “Luther’s Picture of Christ on the Basis of the Church Postil Sermons,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20, no. 4 (1949): 241. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000660733&site=ehost-live>. Acesso em: 29 set. 2021.

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