

THE LITURGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARTIN LUTHER

LOUI NOVAK

Martin Luther was hesitant to change the old Roman Catholic liturgy so that it would properly fit the creed of the new Evangelical church. The Roman Mass was dear to him and dearly loved by many people in his day, and Luther felt that any radical changes would do more harm to the Evangelical Christians than was advisable. Changes should come slowly because people often regarded the liturgy as a personal treasure dear to their hearts. Luther was a conservative in regard to changing things and he changed only so much as was necessary. But while he was still at the Wartburg Castle during the early days of the Reformation, Luther realized that some liturgical changes were essential. Two particularly sore points were the claims of the old service to human merit and the repetition of Christ's sacrificial death in the Lord's Supper. Therefore in 1523, Luther began to make such changes as were necessary.

In the autumn of 1523 Luther completed his *Formula Missae et Communio*, a Latin Lutheran Mass. It was characterized by an element of prayer and praise. Luther brought into the service an emphasis on thanksgiving to God and a fellowship through Christ with God and with one another.¹ This latter characteristic was an emphasis of the early Christian Church but had been lost in the Catholic tradition. In spirit the Lutheran service was to be joyful.

The order of Luther's *Formula Missae et Communio* is as follows:²

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| 1. <i>Introit.</i> | This introduction to the mass was mostly in the form of a psalm verse. Luther preferred to use an entire Psalm as was done originally. |
| 2. <i>Gloria Patri.</i> | The choir was to sing this as a polyphonic motet while the minister stepped to the altar. |
| 3. <i>Kyrie Eleison.</i> | This was a nine-fold <i>Kyrie</i> like the one in the Roman Mass. |

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¹Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*. New York: Abingdon, 1950. p. 339.

²Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948. pp. 69-71.

4. *Gloria in Excelsis*. This was a polyphonic motet for the choir.
5. *Salutation*.
6. *Collects*.
7. *Epistle*.
8. *Gradual*. It received its name from the Latin word *gradus* which means "step". The word was used because of the position of the minister on the steps before the altar. Luther wanted the single *Gradual*, not the one of the longer mass.
9. *Hallelujah* with its *verse*, then a repetition of the *Hallelujah*. The early Lutheran church, as in the Catholic church, chanted sequences from a non-Biblical text in poetical form.
10. *Salutation*.
11. The *Gospel* was announced and then chanted.
12. The *Nicene* (Latin) *Creed* was chanted by the minister alone, sometimes with the choir.
13. The German *sermon*. It was usually based on the Gospel and had a practical application. Luther made the sermons predominant because he felt the people should be educated; the Catholics, on the other hand, made the sermon quite subordinate. This ended the first part of the Mass.

The Communion Liturgy, second part of the service, begins at this point. The bread and wine were immediately placed on the altar.
14. Here the Lutheran Church seemed to drop the offertory (a Psalm verse sung by the minister or the choir) and the *Canon Missae* of the Catholic Church. Only the *Preface* remained, and this was a short, introductory prayer.
15. *Words of Institution*.
16. *Sanctus and Hosanna* with the *Benedictus* were sung or chanted by the choir. During the singing the wine was elevated.

17. *Prayers*, including the *Lord's Prayer* without the ending, concluding, "Deliver us from evil."
18. The *Pax Domini* which was the announcement of peace and forgiveness.
19. The culmination of the ceremony is the *distribution* of the elements during which the choir sang the *Agnus Dei*.

This ended the second part or Communion of the service. The Post-Communion, which ended the service, contained the following:

20. *Prayers*.
21. *Salutation*.
22. *Blessing*.

Luther wanted hymns to be sung at the church services. When the *Formula Missae* was published, he said, "I wish that we had many German hymns which the people might sing in the Mass with the *Gradual*, the *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*."³ It was in a later liturgy, the *Deutsche Messe*, that the hymns became established as a regular feature of the worship service.

Luther realized that the peasants and other poorer classes (which made up the majority of the Evangelical congregations) could not understand this Latin Mass, especially since it was revised. Many would not recognize that the idea of the sacrifice was gone in this new Mass. The only solution was to have a German Mass. Although it was important as a service in its own right, Luther also used the *Formula Missae* to ease the way toward a Mass in the German language. The *Deutsche Messe* was introduced in the parish church in Wittenberg on October 29, 1525.⁴

Luther's *Deutsche Messe* was not the first German Mass to be introduced to the Evangelical congregations. The oldest German Mass belongs to the year 1522; it was compiled for the Carmelite monks at Nördlingen by their reforming friar, Kaspar Kantz. This mass was a mere translation from Latin to German and was never officially used. In 1523 Thomas Münzer introduced a German order in Alstadt. This service was more important than the one by Kaspar Kantz because it was a completely German service and gave Münzer a great influence

³Edwin Liemohn, *The Chorale through Four Hundred Years*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953, p. 15.

⁴Bainton, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-340.

over the people. While Münzer was a radical Reformer who did not

win the favor of conservative Luther, still he was not completely bad! Nor was everything he advocated discarded by Luther. Münzer had German hymns sung in his Mass and some of these were later put into Lutheran hymn-books: *Der Heiligen Leben tut stets nach Gott Streben* ("The holy life continually struggles after God"), the Christmas sequence, *Grates nunc omnes*, which Münzer paraphrased into *Laast uns alle dank sagen* ("Let us all give thanks") and the hymn *Allein Gott in der Höhe* ("All glory be to God on High") which came from the "Gloria" melody of Münzer's Easter Mass.⁵ In addition to this, Luther used certain parts of Münzer's Mass by adapting them into the *Deutsche Messe*.

Early in 1526 Luther edited and published his new German Service under the title, *Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottesdiensts, zu Wittenberg fuergenommen*. This German service was to be held on Sunday while the Latin Service according to the *Formula Missae* was to be used in the weekday services. In general, the order of service in the *Deutsche Messe* remained the same as in the *Formula Missae*. The entire service was in German, however, except for the *Kyrie eleison* which remained in Latin. In the *Deutsche Messe* the *Kyrie* was three-fold as compared with the nine-fold *Kyrie* of the *Formula Missae* and the Roman Mass. The chants were revised because Luther had taken great pains to make this service really German and not merely a mechanical translation. There were a few notable changes from the *Formula Missae*. Instead of the *Introit* at the beginning of the service a hymn or German Psalm was to be sung [*Ich will den Herr loben* ("I will praise the Lord") or *Meine Seele, soll sich rühmen* ("My soul must glorify")]. The German hymn, *Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist* ("Now we beseech the Holy Ghost") was to be sung after the Epistle. The entire congregation was to take part in singing the Creed in German, *Wir glauben alle an einen Gott* ("We believe in one God"). After the sermon came the announcement of Holy Communion and the singing of Luther's *Sanctus*, *Jesaia dem Propheten das geschah* ("Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old"), which was to be sung while the Lord's Supper was administered. In large communions other hymns could be added. Following the Holy Communion came the German *Agnus Dei*, *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* ("O Christ, Thou Lamb of God").⁶

In many ways the new German Lutheran service was similar to the Roman Mass. The elevation of the elements was continued until 1542, and vestments, genuflections, and other Roman customs were

⁵This information is taken out of lecture notes from *Liturgics*, taught by Dr. Samuel F. Salzmänn, Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1956.

⁶Nettl, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

still used in the Lutheran service. Luther felt indifferent about these details and allowed a good deal of variation on liturgical matters. Luther expressed this feeling in his tract *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* (1525):

We take the middle path. We are neither popish nor Carlstadtish, but free and Christian. We elevate the Sacrament or we do not, as, when, if, so long as we please, as God has given us the liberty to do. Just as we are free to remain unmarried or married, to eat meat or not, to wear a chasuble or not, to be cowed and tonsured or not. Here we are masters. There is no law, commandment, doctrine, or prohibition.⁷

The canon of the Mass was missing in both Luther's Latin and German Masses and its place was filled by a simple exhortation to receive communion called the *verba*. The educational element was in evidence because of the emphasis on instruction and the reading of Scripture. The Gospel and the Epistle were more important now that the canon had been removed and the sermon became very important indeed. As Bainton points out, "The church . . . became not only the house of prayer and praise but also a classroom."⁸

Luther gave a great deal of attention to the music of the German Mass in particular. The words of Christ were set apart from the other persons in the text. The melody for Christ was placed a fifth below the vocal line of the other persons, giving Christ a bass range. The Evangelist and others were placed in the tenor range.

Luther simplified the chanting for the minister. Instead of the melismas of the Gregorian chant, the Lutheran minister used the syllabic chant where one note falls on each syllable.

In the German language a question normally is inflected upward in pitch. Luther placed questions on higher notes so they would be more realistic and have more meaning for the people of his congregations.⁹ Here again one sees how Luther constantly had his congregations in mind.

Luther used music to make the liturgical service more meaningful. As an example, one can use the Words of Institution in the Holy Communion. The German reads: *Unser Herr Jesu Christ, in der Nacht da er verraten ward, Nam er das Brod, dankt und brach's, und gab's seynen Jungern und sprach: Nempt hyn und esset, das ist mein leyb, der für euch gegeben wyrd, solches thut so oft yhrs thut, zu*

⁷Luther D. Reed. *The Lutheran Liturgy*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947, pp. 104-105.

⁸Bainton, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

⁹Nettl, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

meynem gedechtnis. Translated, these words are, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples saying: Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me." Paul Nettl, in his *Luther and Music* tells how Luther set these words:

As with other texts which deeply stirred him this too begins with a high note, "C", stressing the first syllable, *Unser*. Then the voice, as though in humility, drops a third and plays around with "A", then to sink down to the "F", at the second syllable of the word *verraten*, as though expressing deep despair at the misdeeds of His disciple. There, where Jesus himself speaks, *Nempt*, the melody starts in with a low "F", with concise simplicity, moves around this repercussion tone, to rise at the phrase, *für euch*, as if to give melodious expression to salvation by the Saviour's death. What we experience in this simple sequence of tones, full of symbolism, is that deeply personal, sorrowful, yet consoling devotion which radiates from the mystery of the communion as Luther felt it.¹⁰

Luther was careful in regard to details of the musical part of his *Deutsche Messe*. He gave minute instructions for its use. For example, the entire choir was to sing a spiritual song or psalm at the beginning and again before the Gospel. The congregation was to sing during the celebration of the Holy Communion. A choice of hymns to be used for this purpose was given: the German *Sanctus*, "God be Praised," "Jesus Christ Our Saviour" by John Huss, or the German *Agnus Dei*.¹¹

In arranging the *Deutsche Messe*, Luther had the assistance of the two musicians who also helped him with the chorales of the new church, Conrad Rupff and Johann Walther. Walther himself wrote of this musical experience:

When Luther, forty years ago, wanted to prepare his German Mass he requested of the Elector of Saxony and Duke John. . . that Conrad Rupff and I be summoned to Wittenberg, where he might discuss music and the nature of the eight Gregorian psalm-tones with us. He himself selected finally the eighth tone for the Epistle and the sixth for the Gospel, saying at the same time that Christ is a friendly and charming Lord, hence we shall take the sixth tone for the Gospel. Since St. Paul is a very serious-minded

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹*Loc. cit.*

apostle, we shall use the eighth tone for the Epistle. He [Luther] prepared the music for the Epistles and Gospels, likewise for the Words of Institution of the true body and blood of Christ; he chanted these for me and asked me to express my opinion of his efforts. At that time he kept me in Wittenberg for three weeks; we discussed how the Epistles and Gospels might be set properly. I was in Wittenberg with Luther until the first German Mass had been presented [October 29, 1525]. I had been asked to listen to this first performance and then take a copy with me to Torgau and report, at the command of the Doctor, my impression to His Grace, the Elector.¹²

Neither of Luther's Masses was adapted intact. Instead, they formed the basis from which many combinations were made in the various Protestant regions for nearly two centuries. To the end of his life, Luther was opposed to uniformity and centralized authority. The principle possibilities are listed here:

- 1) Every service could be sung entirely in Latin.
- 2) Every service could be sung entirely in German.
- 3) For any part of the Latin text a German prose translation could be substituted.
- 4) For any Latin or German prose text a German lied could be substituted.
- 5) A German lied could be added to any German or Latin prose text.
- 6) At certain places such as before and after the sermon and during the Holy Communion, German lieds could be freely added.¹³

The Lutheran Mass had *propers* (the texts of which vary from day to day according to the season or special day) and *ordinaries* (the texts of which do not vary) much the same as were found in the Roman Mass. In the Lutheran service Latin ordinaries could be replaced only by specified vernacular chorales:

The *Kyrie* by *Gott Vater in Ewigkeit* ("God the Father in eternity")

The *Gloria* by *All Ehr und Lob* ("All glory be to God alone") or *Allein Gott in der Höhe* ("All glory be to God on high")

¹²Walter E. Buszin. "Luther on Music," *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXII (January, 1946), 1, pp. 95 f.

¹³Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance*. New York: Norton, 1954, p. 676.

The Creed exclusively by *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott* ("We all believe in one true God")

The *Sanctus* exclusively by *Jesaia dem Propheten das geschah* ("Isaiah, mighty seer, in days of old")

The *Agnus Dei* by *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig* or *Christe du Lamm Gottes* ("Lamb of God, pure and holy" or "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God").¹⁴

Luther could have prepared a simple Order of Service which would have made a much easier task for him. Other reformers, such as Ulrich Zwingli, did this. But Luther realized the importance of retaining the good that was in the old service, and that destroying it would cause a loss of much of the devotional, artistic, and spiritual inheritance of the church. Luther took the old Roman Mass and perfected it for use in the Evangelical church so that it lost little and gained a great deal of the vital strength of the early New Testament church. Luther's aim was to purify the liturgy from the errors it had accumulated during centuries of use.¹⁵ And the liturgical advances of Luther resulted in a kind of standard upon which the Lutheran churches since his time have based their liturgies.

¹⁴Nettl, *op. cit.*

¹⁵Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

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