Today's “Worship Wars”

in light of

Martin Luther and the Wittenberg reformation of worship
§1 Some scriptural guidance

§1.1 Worship practices

The Christian liturgy grows out of the practice of temple and synagogue

- Luke 4.16-21
- Acts 2.42
- Acts 13.1-3
- Acts 13.14b-16a
- 1 Corinthians 14.40

Use of hymnody

- Philippians 2.5b-11
- 1 Timothy 3.16b
- 1 Timothy 2.11b.13a
- Revelation—the Great Te Deum

§1.2 Offense/edification

General

- Romans 14
- 1 Corinthians 8

Specific to the church’s worship

- 1 Corinthians 14.2-3

§1.3 Unity in the Faith

- Ephesians 4.1-6

§2 Fast forward: What our confessions teach—and a tension

Augsburg Confession, Article 24

Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the mass. For the mass is retained among us and celebrated with the highest reverence. Practically all the ceremonies that have as a rule been used (usitatae) are preserved, with the exception that here and there German canticles are mixed in with the Latin ones. For, chiefly for this reason is there need of the ceremonies, that they might teach the unlearned. And Paul commands that a language understood by the people be used in the Church. (AC 24.1-4, Lat.)

It is laid upon our people with injustice that they are supposed to have done away with the mass. For it is well-known that the mass, not to speak boastfully, is held with greater devotion and seriousness among us than among our adversaries….Likewise in the public ceremonies of the mass no notable change has occurred except that in some places

1 “Falso accusantur ecclesiae nostrae, quod missam aboleant. Retinetur enim missa apud nos et summa reverentia celebratur. Servantur et usitatae caerimoniae fere omnes, praeterquam quod latinis cantionibus admiscetur alicubi germaniae, quae additae sunt ad docendum populum. Nam ad hoc praecipue opus est caerimoniiis, ut doceant imperitos. Et Paulus praecipit in ecclesia uti lingua intellecta populo.” (BSLK, 2nd ed. rev., p. 91)
German canticles are sung alongside the Latin canticle to teach and exercise the people, since all ceremonies should chiefly serve to this end, that the people learn from them what it is necessary to know concerning Christ. (AC 24.1-2, 5-7, Ger.)

Augsburg Confession, Article 7

It is also taught, that one, holy, Christian Church must always exist and remain, which is the congregation of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely taught and the holy Sacraments are administered in accord with the Gospel. For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian Church, that within it the Gospel be taught harmoniously according to pure understanding and the Sacraments be administered in accord with the divine Word. And it is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by me, be observed everywhere, as Paul speaks to the Ephesians in the 4th chapter, “One body, one Spirit, as you have been called to the unique hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.” (AC 7, Ger.)

They also teach that one, holy Church shall remain in perpetuity. Moreover, the Church is the congregation of the saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the teaching of the Gospel and on the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that the human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, be the same, just as Paul says, “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, etc.” (AC 7, Lat.)

1. What are several teachings about Lutheran worship that can be derived from the citations from Article 24 of the Augsburg Confession?

2. What are several teachings about Lutheran worship that can be derived from the citations from Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession?

3. How would you describe the tension inherent in these two statements?

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2 *Man legt den Unseren mit Unrecht auf, daß sie die Messe sollen abgetan haben. Denn das ist öffentlich, daß die Messe, ohn Ruhm zu reden, bei uns mit großer Andacht und Ernst gehalten wird dann bei den Widersachern.... So ist auch in den öffentlichen Ceremonien der Messe keine merklich Änderung geschehen, dann daß an etlichen Orten teutsch Gesänge, das Volk damit zu lehren und zu üben, neben lateinischem Gesang gesungen werden, sintemal alle Ceremonien furnehmlich darzu dienen sollen, daß das Volk daran lerne, was ihm zu wissen von Christo not ist.” (BSLK, pp. 91-92)


4 Item docent, quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit. Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administratur sacramenta. Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratio sacrae. Nec necesse est ubiqui similes esse traditions humanas seu ritus aut cerimonias ab hominibus institutas; sicut inquit Paulus: Una fides, unum baptisma, unus Deus et pater omnium, etc. (BSLK, p. 61)
§3 How did we get to AC? The example of Luther

§3.1 Formula Missae (1523)

I have been hesitant and fearful [to make innovations to the mass], partly because of the weak in faith, who cannot suddenly exchange an old and accustomed order of worship for a new and unusual one, and more so because of the fickle and fastidious spirits who rush in like unclean swine without faith or reason, and who delight only in novelty and tire of it as quickly, when it has worn off. Such people are a nuisance even in other affairs, but in spiritual matters, they are absolutely unbearable....

But...it is right that we should provide at least for a few, lest by our desire to detach ourselves from the frivolous faddism of some people, we provide for nobody, or by our fear of ultimately offending others, we endorse their universally held abominations. Therefore, most excellent Nicholas, since you have requested it so often, we will deal with an evangelical form of saying mass (as it is called) and of administering communion. And we will so deal with it that we shall no longer rule hearts by teaching alone, but we will put our hand to it and put the revision into practice in the public administration of communion, not wishing, however, to prejudice others against adopting and following a different order. Indeed, we heartily beg in the name of Christ that if in time something better should be revealed to them, they would tell us to be silent, so that by a common effort we may aid the common cause.

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of mass and communion has come down to us.

Now the additions of the early fathers who, it is reported, softly prayed one or two Psalms before blessing the bread and wine are commendable. Athanasius and Cyprian are supposed to be some of these. Those who added the Kyrie eleison also did well. We read that under Basil the Great, the Kyrie eleison was in common use by all the people. The reading of the Epistles and Gospels is necessary, too. Only it is wrong to read them in a language the laity do not understand. Later, when chanting began, the Psalms were changed into the introit; the Angelic Hymn Gloria in excelsis: et in terra pax, the graduals, the alleluias, the Nicene Creed, the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, and the communio were added. All of these are unobjectionable, especially the ones that are sung de tempore or on Sundays.

But when everyone felt free to add or change at will and when the tyranny of priestly greed and pride entered in, then our wicked kings, i.e., the bishops and pastors, began to erect those altars to the images of Baal and all gods in the Lord’s temple....What I am speaking of is the canon, that abominable concoction drawn from everyone’s sewer and cesspool. The mass became a sacrifice. Offertories and mercenary collects were added. Sequences and proses were inserted in the Sanctus and the Gloria in Excelsis.5

5 LW 53.19-21.
1. What caveats does Luther give here in respect of liturgical reform, change, and innovation? What are the dangers, to his mind, of liturgical reform, change, and innovation?

2. In spite of the caveats he gives, Luther remains [somewhat] motivated to engage in the liturgical reform laid out in *Formula Missae*. What is his motivation?

3. What specific changes does he make, and why?

4. Above in our look at AC, we noticed a tension between AC 24 and AC 7. Return to your thoughts there (§2, question 3). Do you see Luther wrestling with the same tension? How does he resolve it?

5. How would you describe Luther’s overall attitude toward liturgical change, reform, and innovation?
§3.2  Deutsche Messe (1526)

I would kindly and for God’s sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone’s conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long as, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or to legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for everyone makes his own order of service. Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers—as is always the case with Christian liberty: very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most use it for their own advantage and pleasure. But while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone’s conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man.

Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the conscience before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love, as St. Paul teaches [Rome. 15:5-6; I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2]. As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar] and no one has received a special one of his own from God.

This is not to say that those who already have good orders, or by the grace of God could make better ones, should discard theirs and adopt ours. For I do not propose that all of Germany should uniformly follow our Wittenberg order. Even heretofore the chapters, monasteries, and parishes were not alike in every rite. But it would be well if the service in every principality would be held in the same manner and if the order observed in a given city would also be followed by the surrounding towns and villages; whether those in other principalities hold the same order or add to it ought to be a matter of free choice and not of constraint.6

1. Luther again here in Deutsche Messe takes up a matter implicit in his thinking in Formula Missae—the matter of freedom and Christian love. What does he here teach about this issue?

2. How does what Luther teaches on freedom and Christian love inform his judgment on liturgical change, reform and innovation?

3. How does the unity of the Church come into play in Luther’s thinking regarding liturgical change, reform, and innovation?

4. Is there a tension between what Luther teaches in Deutsche Messe and AC 7 (see above, p. 2)? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

6 LW 53.61-62.
§3.3  Open Letter to the Livonians (1525)

I have heard from reliable witness that faction and disunion have arisen among you, because some of your preachers do not teach and act in accord, but each follows his own sense and judgment.…

This causes confusion among the people. It prompts both the complaint, “No one knows what he should believe or with whom he should side,” and the common demand for uniformity in doctrine and practice. In times gone by, council were held for this purpose and all sorts of ruling and canons made in order to hold all the people to a common order. But in the end these rulings and canons became snares for the soul and pitfalls for the faith. So there is great danger on either side. And we need good spiritual teachers who will know how to lead the people with wisdom and discretion.…

Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the laity. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the laity get confused and discouraged.

For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet form the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the laity, as St. Paul says, I Corinthians 14[.40], “All things should be done to edify,” and I Corinthians 6[.12], “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful,” and I Corinthians 8[.1], “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up....”

Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, “Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.” But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. By faith be free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor’s edification, as also St. Paul says, Romans 14 [15.2], “Let each us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him.” For we should not please ourselves, since Christ also pleased not himself, but us all.

But at the same time the preacher must watch and diligently instruct the people lest they take such uniform practices as divinely appointed and absolutely binding laws. He must explain that this is done for their own good so that the unity of Christian people also find expression in externals which in themselves are irrelevant. Since the ceremonies or rites are not needed for the conscience or for salvation and yet are useful and necessary to govern the people externally, one must not enforce or have them accepted for any other reason except to maintain peace and unity between men. For between God and men it is faith that procure peace and unity.

This I said to the preachers so that they may consider love and their obligation toward the people, dealing with the people not in faith’s freedom but in love’s submission and service, preserving the freedom of faith before God. Therefore, when you hold mass, sing and read uniformly, according to a common order—the same in one place as in another—because you see that the people want and need it and you wish to edify rather than confuse them.…

At the same time I also ask the people to have patience and not to be astonished if differences in teaching and practice are caused by factions and sects. For who can stop the devil and his legions? ... Thus among Christians there must also be factions and heretics who pervert faith and love and confuse the people.7

7 LW 53.45-49.
1. What dangers are inherent in uniform orders of worship? How does Luther suggest that the dangers be headed off?

2. There are many evils, according to Luther, attendant upon lack of uniform orders of worship. What are they?

3. What role does the “unity of the church” play in Luther’s thinking on worship?

4. Luther presses further in the Open Letter on the matter of freedom and love than in any other piece we’ve thus far read. What new insight does he share in this work on freedom and love?

5. What, at the end of the day, is the usefulness of uniformity in ceremonies and rites?

6. How far does Luther see the uniformity in ceremonies and rites extending? How might that apply today?

7. Imagine a situation in which such uniformity would impossible to achieve. What would that situation be?