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*H*e who is well acquainted with the text of Scripture (*bonus textualis*) is a distinguished theologian. For a Bible passage or text is of more value than the comments (*glossae*) of four authors.

—WHAT LUTHER SAYS, 1355

*T*herefore, my sweet brother, learn Christ and him crucified; despairing of yourself, learn to pray to him, saying, "You, Lord Jesus, are my righteousness, but I am your sin; you have taken on yourself what you were not and have given me what I was not." Beware of aspiring to such purity that you no longer wish to appear to yourself, or to be, a sinner."

—FROM A LETTER OF LUTHER TO A TROUBLED SOUL, QUOTED IN JAMES M. KITTELSON, *LUTHER THE REFORMER: THE STORY OF THE MAN AND HIS CAREER* (MINNEAPOLIS: AUGSBURG, 1986), 94.

## LUTHER IN THE PEW: SONG AND WORSHIP

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*Dennis Marzolf*

*M*uch of the greatest music the world will ever know was composed for the Lutheran divine service. Imagine Luther's amazement to hear a liturgical rendition of J.S. Bach's Magnificat, Mass in B Minor, Passion Music, Organ Chorales or the hundreds of musical sermons called cantatas that were composed for the Sundays and festivals of the church year! J.S. Bach (1685-1750) was not a genetic fluke in the evolutionary development of the musical art. Martin Luther articulated the ideals of vocation, liturgy and music exhibited in Bach's life and work more than 150 years before the birth of the greatest musical servant of the gospel.

Luther loved God's word as the highest treasure and the greatest power in the universe, and, in a typical overstatement, he acknowledged the great power of music:

We can mention only one point, which experience confirms, namely, that next to the Word of God music deserves the highest praise. . . . Whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely the emotions, inclinations and affections that impel men to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find? . . . Thus it was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated with the Word of God as music.<sup>1</sup>

It is no wonder that the musical art had a certain "pride of place" in the Lutheran liturgy, school and home!

Luther's love of the musical art was not the chief factor in his "musical" reformation of the service, however. In the first place Luther's love for the Word of God, and specifically for the doctrine of justification by grace through faith without the works of the law, drew him into a reshaping of the liturgical way of life and worship. In the second place Luther knew of the educational power of melody and rhyme, and it was that educational sensibility that caused him to exploit these arts for the sake of gospel teaching.

Luther and others perceived a variety of liturgical abuses in the Roman services of the sixteenth century. The veneration of the purported relics of the saints, the purchase of indulgences and private masses for the souls of the living and the dead, prayers to the saints, worship services and preaching in a language unknown to many of the people, and legalistic observance of certain rites pertaining to times and seasons take a prominent place on the list of abuses. But all of these culminated in, and were related to, that which Luther perceived to be the chief liturgical abuse, namely, the canon of the Roman mass. A history of the development of the canon is not possible in this place, but Luther and other Reformers (including those outside of the Lutheran fold) saw it as a cornerstone of what they perceived as the tyranny of Rome. The sixteenth century Reformers tended to see the words of Christ in the institution of the sacrament as the great gospel force that changed lives. Luther's *Small Catechism* puts it succinctly, "These words (of institution) along with the eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament; and whoever believes these words has exactly what they say, namely, the forgiveness of sins."<sup>2</sup> They argued that the canon of the mass had hidden both the word of forgiveness and the concept of sacramental forgiveness in the cloth of sacrifice so that the

sacrament was understood as a sacrificial action of man for God rather than as a gracious act of God for man.

Here was the crux of the matter for Luther. All liturgical decisions were weighed in light of this understanding of the canon. When Luther attacked the canon in his writings he was criticizing a part of the service that was really hidden from view—a prayer which was considered to be so holy that it was whispered by the priest who was facing the altar. The people could not hear the words of Christ which were framed by the prayer, nor could they hear the sacrificial teaching proclaimed by the prayer. When this chief abuse was deleted by the Lutherans many of the people in the pew did not even realize it, since they had probably never heard it read, and most certainly had never heard it in a language besides Latin. A regular liturgical directive in many of the new Lutheran Church Orders instructed that the words of Christ's institution in the sacrament should be sung or read loudly and clearly so that everyone in the church could hear and understand them.

It would have been easy for Luther, and one can easily sympathize with other Reformers who led the people in this way, to have cast out every element and form that had anything to do with the "old" Roman Church. Some, of course, advocated the destruction of the paintings, the sculpture, the music and the vestments of the Roman Church, but Luther mediated against a negative liturgical principle.<sup>3</sup> The principles of liturgical reform adopted by the Lutherans were simple enough, and had their basis in scriptural "reformations" of the liturgy, especially Hezekiah's liturgical reform described in 2 Chronicles 29.

First, all liturgical elements that were contrary to the teachings of the gospel, of faith and of the cross of Christ were deleted.

Second, all those elements that were commanded by God and commended to His church were retained (Word

and sacraments, absolution, prayer, psalmody, etc.).

Finally those things that were neither commanded nor forbidden were given over to the realm of the unprescribed things (*adiaphoron*). Many of the elements of the liturgical worship of the church fell into this third category, a category that was not always easy to define. Luther exhorted the church to deal lovingly with the ancient traditions and practices where they could be defended in any way, partly because they illustrated that Lutheranism was not a “new” church and partly because the radical destruction or omission of a beloved custom could jeopardize the faith of those who treasured certain rites that could be understood in an evangelical manner. Nonetheless the way of faith and the freedom of the gospel were to be retained at all cost; any sort of legalism, whether it demanded the retention or the destruction of an unprescribed custom, was a mark of Rome and was not to be tolerated. It is partly because of this evangelical understanding of the unprescribed matters that one can encounter such a breadth of practices in the Lutheran Church even in our own day.

One of the happy accidents of the attitude toward the unprescribed matters is that along with the retention of the old, the door was opened for the introduction of the new, not just for the generations of the sixteenth century, but for the coming generations as well. This allowed room for the cultivation of all the arts in the Lutheran communities, but it was the art of music, especially because of its relationship to the proclaimed word, which flourished.

Music was an integral part of the educational curriculum in sixteenth-century Germany, and those who were musically gifted were almost guaranteed an education and a vocation in the church. The worship services that Luther experienced as a student and, later, as an educator were full of rich choral music.

1) The Roman mass—the chief public service—allowed

for significant music making in its historic chants and hymns as well as in newly composed (contemporary) choral settings of the unchanging texts of the service (the ordinary of the mass: *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, Have Mercy), *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the Highest), *Credo in unum Deum*, the *Nicene Creed*; *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*, *Holy, Holy, Holy*; *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord*; *Agnus Dei*, *Lamb of God*; ) and in choral motet settings of those texts that were appropriate on specific Sundays and Festivals (the proper of the Mass: *Introit* and *Gloria Patri*, *Entrance Psalm* with *Glory be to the Father*; *Gradual* and *Alleluia Verse*; *Offertory Verse*; *Communion Verse* ).

2) The Daily Office (observed in religious orders and in academic settings with a religious order) allowed for the singing of the entire psalter each week as well as hymns for the times of the day and for certain festivals of the year, and the canticles, especially the *Benedictus* (Blessed Be the Lord, the God of Israel), the *Magnificat* (My Soul Magnifies the Lord), the *Nunc Dimittis* (Lord, Now You Let Your Servant Go in Peace), and the *Te Deum Laudamus* (We Praise You, O God).

Virtually all the texts were Latin, and while this was not a problem for the educated people and the students in the Latin schools, there were undeniably many among the laity, and even in the religious orders, who did not understand the words they were singing or hearing. Yet even before the Reformation there were “religious folksongs,” similar to our Christmas carols, that were sung on rare occasions in the formal liturgy, and more frequently on pilgrimages and in the unofficial popular “liturgies” (sometimes referred to as 3. prone).

Luther had a love for and a knowledge of the choral service and the popular sacred songs, as well as a grasp of the world of secular music, and he tapped into all of this musical knowledge during the tumultuous decade of the 1520s

with the development of distinctive Lutheran worship forms for the mass, the office, the congregational song, or chorale, and choral music.

The customary services of the church were reformed according to the liturgical principles explained in previous paragraphs. Luther was hesitant to be the "author" of a new liturgical service, but he realized a sense of responsibility as more and more people turned to him for the solution to a mass in the language of the people (a vernacular service).

The deletion of offensive portions of the service was probably the easiest part of the liturgical reformation. Luther's first public reform of the liturgy was designed for use in those places with enough Latin scholars to allow for the corrected use of the Latin mass. This first step encouraged the interpolation of sung German texts in choir and for the congregation. It also promoted a spirit of evangelical freedom that invited discussion about liturgical usage while encouraging poets and musicians to come forward to aid in the work of worship renovation. This order, published in 1523, was amazingly conservative. In fact, its renewal was such that visitors to Wittenberg sometimes thought that nothing had changed from the old service. This, of course, was neither Luther's goal nor his chief desire. Nonetheless he was not offended by the fact that the outward appearances of the mass in Wittenberg were not very different from a Roman mass in Bavaria, Spain or France.

But Luther was not content to have the liturgical reformation stop here. There was more than a perceived need for a real vernacular mass. The 1523 service would suit the academic communities. But what of those parishes without a Latin school? Such parishes existed in the Lutheran cities, and they certainly existed in the rural areas. The translation of the service texts and the re-creation of a liturgical music for the German language with the beauty of the Latin

melodies was a daunting task. One of the most touching and clear examples of Luther's concern for beautiful music that exalts and presents the text is written in remarks framed in 1525 before the final draft of the German Mass appeared in 1526.

I would gladly have a German mass today. I am also occupied with it. But I would very much like it to have a true German character. For to translate the Latin text and retain the Latin tone or notes has my sanction, though it doesn't sound polished or well done. Both the text and notes, accent, melody, and manner of rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection. . . .<sup>4</sup>

This is the comment of a singer and a composer; the fact that it comes from Luther helps us to understand why the Lutheran Church, in its infancy, continued to embrace the great music of Christianity while providing a catalyst for even greater artistic achievements.

With the spread of Lutheranism throughout northern Europe elements of both of the mass services were combined in such a way that, while one can trace a lineage to the Latin form or the German form, it was rarely transferred from one region to another based upon a slavish transportation of Luther's original documents. Even in Wittenberg the forms were combined and modified during Luther's life, especially as more and more artistic music was written to be sung in German by the choir and the congregation.

The Daily Office was also modified, especially as the religious communities were abolished. It took on the character of a public service, although its primary day-to-day participants were students. The office services of matins and vespers were retained and expanded through the incorporation of certain prone elements such as extended

preaching, catechetical instruction, and sung portions for the clergy, choir and congregation.

While private masses had been abolished in Wittenberg the actual number of public services increased to establish a pattern that was reflected in other academic, Lutheran cities. The following schedule of services was typical:

Sunday: early morning matins; morning service of word and sacrament; afternoon vespers.

Monday: morning matins; afternoon vespers.

Tuesday: morning matins; afternoon vespers.

Wednesday: morning matins; midday service of word and sacrament.

Thursday: morning matins; afternoon vespers.

Friday: morning matins; afternoon vespers.

Saturday: afternoon vespers.

Festival days during the week: Sunday schedule.

The various choirs from the Latin school and the university usually sang for the services when the schools were in session. One may see how the demand for new musical settings of Psalms, canticles, the mass ordinary and proper as well as choral settings of the new congregational hymns would create a need for theologically trained composers. It is important to remember that the choirs were small, but capable. The two choirs in Wittenberg probably consisted of (1) eight adult male choral scholars and six choirboys, and (2) four adult male choral scholars and six choirboys.

The story of the reformation of the liturgy under Luther's direction is interesting and instructional, especially for Lutherans and others who claim a legacy of liturgical worship, but the story of Luther's re-creation of congregational song is of monumental importance to all of western Christianity.

While we Lutherans are tempted to call Luther the "father of congregational song" it is important to remember that the song of the church existed before Luther, Hus, Ambrose, Paul, Mary, Simeon, Zacharias, David, Hannah, Moses and Miriam. The song of the church is the song of the angels, sung before time and to be sung after time. Nonetheless Luther was a rediscoverer and a refiner whose appearance at the historic crossroads of the Renaissance and Reformation made an almost indelible mark on the history of "modern" congregational song.

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It is probably because Luther was a linguist and a Scripture scholar with an intimate knowledge of the Psalms that his pen gave such a clear direction to those who celebrated the congregational song. He knew the emotional power of the sung psalter, and with the apostle Paul he rejoiced to

speak the Word of God via the medium of song. It may be that Luther's first attempts to produce sacred song were limited to the old "prone" notion of group singing outside of the formal liturgy, but this changed by the 1520s. Sacred songs of some sort of evangelical or reformation persuasion were being sung in many parts of Germany prior to Luther's efforts. The miracle of the printing press allowed for the relatively quick and widespread dissemination of new music, and the Lutherans were not afraid to use the new technology for the benefit of their cause.

Luther's first song celebrated the martyrdom of two men in Brussels who had died for their evangelical convictions. This "hymn" was cast in the form of a court ballad, and set the stage for other "quasi-dramatic" lyrics of Luther. "A New Song"<sup>5</sup> launched Luther's career as lyricist, and his subsequent efforts took on a decidedly liturgical and didactic turn. Believers should be able to sing the wonders of the faith, and not just outside of the church building. In the recreation of the congregational hymn (or chorale as it was called in Lutheran circles) Luther invited the faithful to sing the Psalms of David, the verses of Scripture, the doctrines of the church alongside the most intimate and personal reflections and confessions of faith.

Whether or not he knew it, Luther's development of the chorale created a situation in which liturgical song became catechetical and catechetical rhyme became liturgical. Luther the poetic singer turned to the liturgy for pattern and inspiration, not just because he was familiar with the liturgical structure but, more importantly, because he saw in the liturgical structure a method of rhythmic and predictable proclamation that was not just an "aid" to preaching the gospel, but a means of gospel teaching that could permeate the fabric of everyday life with a poem or a melody that would continue to teach and praise even after the people had left nave and altar.

The example of the daily office gave Luther a pattern of psalmody, hymnody, canticle and prayer that invited imitation in the vernacular song, the liturgical "chants" given over to the people. The mass presented opportunities to the poet, not only in a vernacular representation of the texts of the ordinary of the mass, but especially in the new presentation of the propers for the day and season. The prone "non-liturgical" services of preaching, pilgrimage and catechesis provided examples of poetry that linked the objective reality of commandments, creeds and sacraments with the subjective realities of life and death in sixteenth-century "Middle Europe."

The chorale or congregational hymn burst into bloom during Luther's lifetime, and the example of his poetry inspired countless poets, some less capable than Luther, and many others who were more convincing, during his lifetime and in the generations that followed.

Luther exercised a considerable degree of artistic freedom as he brought the Scripture narratives and liturgical texts into the realm of the chorale. He was a slave to the liturgical and scriptural texts, but he was not slavish in his translations. He created paraphrases of the old texts in order to preach and teach; in this way he foreshadowed the "liberation of the psalter" that Isaac Watts would achieve for English and Reformed hymnody almost two centuries later.

#### Paraphrastic Psalmody:

##### *A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD*

With might of ours can naught be done, Soon were our loss effected;  
But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord,  
and there's none other God; He holds the field forever. <sup>6</sup>



(In this hymn, and other psalm hymns, Luther connects Jesus and the Christ concept of the Old Testament.)

Paraphrastic liturgy:

**SANCTUS HYMN**

Isaiah, Mighty se'er in days of old, the Lord of all in spirit did behold  
High on a lofty throne in splendor bright . . . etc.<sup>7</sup>

(In this liturgical paraphrase Luther invites the singer to enter into the glories of the most holy place; this invitation is inextricably bound to the sacrament of the altar and the consecration and distribution of the most holy body and blood of Christ—the very same physical body and blood that were nurtured at the breast of the Virgin and that bled and died on the cross; see also his reworking of the medieval pilgrimage hymn “O Lord, We Praise Thee.”)<sup>8</sup>

Examples of Church Year (proper) hymns in which Luther ties the liturgical celebration to the life of the believer in a manner that expands the liturgical precedent of a handful of vernacular hymns suitable for use in the mass (notice how doctrinal and liturgical “severity” is the basis for that which is personal, practical and catechetical) :

**EPIPHANY: “TO JORDAN CAME THE CHRIST”**

And though our mortal eye is dim and sees but simple water;  
Faith sees Christ Jesus, and in Him The Lamb ordained for slaughter.  
We see the cleansing fountain, red with the dear blood of Jesus,  
Which, from all sins inherited, and our misdeeds, can free us;  
Eternal life bestowing.<sup>9</sup>

Easter: “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”  
So let us keep the festival Whereto the Lord invites us;  
Christ is Himself the Joy of all, The Sun that warms and lights us.  
By His grace He doth impart Eternal sunshine to the heart;  
The night of sin is ended. Alleluia!<sup>10</sup>

Ascension: “Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice”  
He sweetly said: Hold fast by me,  
I am thy Rock and Castle. Thy Ransom I myself will be;  
For thee I strive and wrestle.  
For I am with thee, I am thine,  
And evermore thou shalt be mine;  
The fore shall not divide us.<sup>11</sup>

Pentecost: “We Now Implore”  
Shine in our hearts, O most precious Light,  
That we Jesus Christ may know aright.  
Clinging to our Savior, whose blood hath bought us,  
Who again to our homeland hath brought us.

Kyrieleis.<sup>12</sup>

An examination of Luther’s hymn texts reveals that the poetic Reformer was guided by the living liturgical and catechetical confession of the church because it was drawn from the Scripture. This is probably why the hymn texts of Luther have survived the centuries, not just as a nationalistic or denominational banner, but as the property of catholic Christendom.

The tunes associated with Luther’s chorale texts and liturgical revisions are products of the time in which he lived, a time which was particularly rich in the production of lush choral music. It is perhaps because of that rich vocal tradition that the melodies associated with Luther’s hymns may seem to be challenging for singers today.

There were three musical sources or models used by

Luther (and Johann Walter, his musical advisor) in the construction of the chorale tunes.

The first was the historic chant of the church. In some instances ("We Sing Thy Praise, O God")<sup>13</sup> the chant is borrowed directly, and in others ("Isaiah, Mighty Se'er")<sup>14</sup> it is the basis for a new melody.

Second, the tradition of the medieval pilgrimage hymn or carol figures prominently in the chorale melodies. Examples of tunes from this source include "We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost,"<sup>15</sup> "These Are the Holy Ten Commands,"<sup>16</sup> "O Lord, We Praise Thee,"<sup>17</sup> and "God the Father, Be Our Stay."<sup>18</sup>

Newly composed chorale melodies form the third group. We are not sure how many of these "courtly ballads" are from Luther's hand, or if they were a collaboration between Luther and Walter or if they were produced by Walter alone. Examples of this secular artistic style are "Out of the Depths,"<sup>19</sup> "To Jordan Came"<sup>20</sup> and "From Heaven Above."<sup>21</sup>

The high musical standards of the chorale tunes also inspired subsequent generations of composers to create new music that spoke the gospel in a manner that was both challenging and within the grasp of the common people. The combination of the old and the new, as well as the use of both sacred and secular musical models, allowed the composers to adorn the houses of worship with music that was fit for the court or the opera; not for the entertainment of the people, or for the reputation of the composer or performer, but for the divine service in which God's Word was proclaimed and taught for the eternal well-being of souls purchased by the blood of Christ.

Luther's influence on the liturgical renovation and the reinvigoration of congregational song was profound and long-lasting. The combination of word and melody was a powerful force that shaped generations of theologians, pas-

tors, and musicians. But for all of that, I think Luther would have been most pleased to hear the Word of God as it is sung by the little children in their liturgy of church, school and home:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled  
Within my heart that it may be,  
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.<sup>22</sup>

#### Author

Dennis Marzolf is a professor of music at Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota, where he conducts the concert choir and teaches courses in church music. He is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and the chair of the Synod's worship committee which recently published the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*.

#### Notes

1. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Pelikan and Lehman, 53:323.
2. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music, 1996), 36.
3. See "Against the Heavenly Prophets," *Luther's Works*, 40:74ff.
4. *Ibid.*, 40:141.
5. *Ibid.*, 53:213 ff.
6. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, 250:2
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. *Ibid.*, 327.
9. *Ibid.*, 247.
10. *Ibid.*, 343.
11. *Ibid.*, 378.
12. *Ibid.*, 33.
13. *Ibid.*, 45.
14. *Ibid.*, 40.
15. *Ibid.*, 33.
16. *Ibid.*, 490.

17. Ibid., 327.
18. Ibid., 327.
19. Ibid., 452.
20. Ibid., 247.
21. Ibid., 123.
22. Ibid., 123:14.