

LEVERAGING THE LUTHERAN LEGACY

How Reformation Perspectives on Worship &
Hymnody Shape the Singing Church Today

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Abstract

This conference essay seeks to examine how Martin Luther and his successors impacted the singing assembly during the Lutheran Reformation and give an honest assessment of the challenges to maintaining a distinctive hymnological emphasis in both congregational and educational ministries today. The twenty-first century church can struggle to face the discrepancy between the rising consumption of music on digital playlists in society and the actual production of hymn singing in the church. At the same time, some areas of the church have become polarized in their preferences for the forms and styles of so-called “traditional” and “contemporary” hymnody. If left unchanged, this essay contends it could not only fail to leverage but also threaten the legacy Martin Luther has left the church. After assessing the challenges, it examines criteria for determining the best hymns today and concludes with a case study of Luther’s own hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (*Nun freut euch, liebe Christen, ge’mein*). No matter where an individual congregation or school falls on the worship spectrum, Luther’s approach of careful innovation has the potential to greatly contribute to the worship dialogue of the singing church today.

Keywords: worship, hymnody, church music, Martin Luther, Reformation

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Introduction: The Transformation of the Singing Church

As part of its “Reformation Relived: After 500 Years” series, this past September I attended a “Reformation Roundtable” at Concordia University Ann Arbor whereby four panelists discussed the Reformation, its impact, and its legacy from the diverse theological perspectives of the Catholic church, Presbyterian church, Episcopal church in the Anglican communion, and Lutheran church.¹ Moderated by a Concordia theology professor, it opened with a discussion of the Reformation’s on-going significance and then Martin Luther’s two catechisms.² After much discussion about central historical factors and theological truths, including my own rather pointed question to the Catholic representative,³ the Lutheran representative, whose dissertation was in liturgics, was the only one to say about Luther during the Q & A session (almost in passing), “His hymns spread the gospel more than anything else.”

It strikes me that is often how commemoration of the Protestant Reformation can go. During this celebratory quincentenary year now only a few months in the rearview mirror, both the academic world in its commemorative scholarship and individual Christians in their local celebrations have rightfully delved deeply into what the Reformation was all about. However, if it only treasures the *what* of the Reformation (as important and right as that is), but fails to

¹ Eduardo Echeverria (Ph.D., S.T.L), professor of philosophy and systematic theology at Archdiocesan Seminary of Detroit and Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, provided the Catholic perspective; Bob Lynn (M.Div., M.A.), pastor at Knox Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, provided the Presbyterian perspective; Robb Kerr (Ph.D.), professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, priest at the Church of the Redeemer in Southfield, and counselor in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, provided the Episcopal perspective; and Naomichi Masaki (Ph.D.), professor of systematic theology at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, provided the Lutheran perspective.

² On the relevance question, the Catholic panelist distinguished between “reformation” and “renewal” and pointed to Luther’s original intent not to separate from the Catholic church. Since that renewal was not incorporated into the church but instead resulted in the splintering of the church, he viewed the Reformation as a failure in its original purpose. The Presbyterian panelist pointed to Luther’s quest for the truth as impactful and relevant in our skeptical, scientific age that often questions what it cannot see. The Episcopal panelist, especially from his work as a counselor, pointed to how people in moments of tragedy and hardship want to know that God is loving and gracious. The Lutheran panelist, who was born and raised in Japan, said that the Reformation is not about Luther the man, nor German beer, but about Jesus and the power of the Word. The discussion on the catechisms got into doctrinal differences on the sacraments.

³ As introduction, I shared my experience in one of my undergraduate courses on Ecclesiastical Latin where we read Luther’s tower experience: his struggle to understand the “righteousness of God” language in Romans and the Psalms. I then compared that to my understanding of the theology Luther probably would have been taught at the time about justification. I asked him, if in Catholic theology (as I understood it from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) that justification is not forensic but a process which must be completed by *fides formata* (our faith that is active in love and charity), if he were Staupitz in the monastery, where he would point a struggling Luther to for the certainty of his salvation. To my pleasant surprise, he answered that both the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Trent would point to the finished merits of Christ. However, he did not correct my understanding of the CCC, even though I gave him permission to do so. While I rejoice in the answer he gave, as I left I could not help but wonder that if justification is a process that must be completed by our love and charity, how you would ever know that you have done enough. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 2010, “Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life” (2nd edition, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000, emphasis original). The panelist then started to talk about his rejection of irresistible grace, and with such a diverse panel, it quickly got off track (as one could imagine) discussing predestination.

consider *how* that message of the gospel spread from one flawed, brash, sinful German monk writing in a small university town of ill repute into a global movement that impacts hundreds of thousands in the worshipping assembly of the Lutheran church and beyond, then we have deprived the Reformation of its impact and failed to leverage the legacy we as its heirs have inherited. If consideration of Luther's hymns and worship turns into a passing thought at the end of much deeper theological reflection, if we have renewed our appreciation and commitment to central Reformation doctrines but at the same time failed to renew our appreciation and commitment to the arts, hymnody, and worship, then Reformation 500 commemoration will be sorely lacking.⁴

The Reformation was not just a Reformation of doctrine, education, and the public sphere; it was also a Reformation of worship life.⁵ If music is the *viva vox evangelii*, the "living voice of the gospel" that was rediscovered in the Reformation, then the results of such short-sighted commemoration would be tragic. No matter what ministry we may find ourselves in, worship is the heart and core of what Christians do and most often the greatest opportunity to impact the most amount of people in a Christian congregation. Even for those congregations that have thriving educational ministries, the end goal is to instill in young people a regular, gospel-motivated habit for worship and connect them to the worshipping assembly for the rest of their lives. No greater joy can be in the heart of Lutheran educators than that their former students are still worshipping regularly far after the time in their classrooms. The very gospel is at stake in our approaches to hymnody and worship, whether they are ill-informed, complacent, and unreflective approaches that are content with the way we have always done it, or well-researched, intentional, and reflective approaches that strive to more excellently proclaim Christ.

Such commemoration that treats hymnody and worship as a mere passing thought would be all the more surprising given Luther's own treatment on music, hymns, and worship. Only one volume of *Luther's Works* gives a comprehensive treatment of Luther's thoughts on the matter. Although not all Luther's references to music are positive,⁶ therein lies considerable evidence to the great value Luther placed on music. In it one can formulate his theology of music and see how his approaches to worship innovation are highly relevant to our situation today. In the preface of Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*, Luther opens by stating, "I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its virtue and benefits that I can find neither beginning nor end or method for my discourse. As much as I want to commend it, my praise is

⁴ Although I did not focus on Luther's life as part of my research and certainly grant that any treatment of Luther's life, impact, and legacy will be selective, I was surprised at how little treatment was given to Luther and hymnody in many of the commemorative biographies published around 2017 which I consulted. For somewhat of an exception, see Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, trans. Rona Johnston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). He employs an interdisciplinary approach from a theological, political, social, and cultural history. However, even with Shilling it is nonetheless limited. He gives eleven pages (of 544) of explicit treatment on painting, poetry, and music (452-455, 459-465).

⁵ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M.H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 27. He perhaps overstates the case by calling the Reformation "*first of all* a reformation of the worship service;" however, in context he is arguing how a proper doctrine of worship, connected to God's Word, can bring to light concerning discoveries about worship, which certainly happened in the Reformation.

⁶ For a summary, see Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 6-10.

bound to be wanting and inadequate.”⁷ He closes by famously stating that, next to God’s Word, music deserves the highest praise and then (in his characteristically vibrant way) lamenting those who remain unmoved by music and neglect this very gift from God.⁸ Hidden under such colorful language is a very important insight: Luther considers an appreciation for music to be in our very nature since music, as his gift, is meant to be appreciated and enjoyed by humans, as his creatures.

In his theology of music, Luther distinguished himself from the Swiss reformers Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, who were somewhat suspicious of the power of music. Although Zwingli was ironically the most accomplished musician in private life, he did not allow music, even unaccompanied singing, because true worship is in spirit, while Calvin allowed only the singing of biblical texts in the vernacular (especially psalms), because more complex music would take the focus away from the biblical text and onto music for music’s sake.⁹ Because of his high regard for music, his capabilities as a musician and hymn writer, and his central insight into worship as the proclamation of the gospel by trained clergy and the universal priesthood of all Christians, the Lutheran church became known as “the singing church.” Even Luther’s opponents admitted that his hymns caused more damage to the Catholic cause than his writings or preaching.¹⁰ How that historical process exactly happened is debated. Especially in light of how Carl Schalk notes the considerable difficulty in portraying Lutheran worship from the Reformation to the present and his warning against generalization,¹¹ his fellow LCMS musician and theologian Walter Buszin has almost certainly exaggerated the case when he says, “Hardly had Luther’s first hymnbooks left the presses before the great spiritual movement he had set in motion was carried on the wings of song to all parts of Germany and thence to other countries in northern Europe.”¹² By amassing a considerable amount of scholarship from his doctoral dissertation, Joseph Herl has challenged the classic idea that Luther, the father of congregational hymnody, instituted a decisive transformation:

In the popular imagination, Martin Luther is the father of congregational singing in the modern western church. Before his time, so the legend goes, average churchgoers were mute, denied the chance to express themselves in song or speech. But Luther opened

⁷ Martin Luther, “Liturgy and Hymns,” vol. 53, *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 321–22.

⁸ LW 53.324, “But any who remain unaffected are unmusical indeed and deserve to hear a certain filth poet or the music of the pigs. ... Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings; and be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature which would and should praise God its Maker with this gift, so that these bastards purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God, the enemy of nature and of this lovely art.”

⁹ Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108–10. For more on the differences between the three, see Carl Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 10; Carl Halter and Carl Schalk, eds., “Music in Lutheran Worship: An Affirmation,” in *A Handbook of Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 15.

¹⁰ For examples, see Christopher Boyd Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1, 10, 23; Walter E. Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 43.

¹¹ Carl Schalk, “Sketches of Lutheran Worship,” in *A Handbook of Church Music*, ed. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 57.

¹² Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 10.

the floodgates of song to the people, and suddenly churches were filled with eager singers belting out *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* at the tops of their lungs. One can almost imagine Luther on his white horse, waving a banner reading 'Here I stand' and riding off into the sunset as throngs of newly vocal Christians followed. It is an inspiring picture, but even allowing for a bit of Hollywood excess, it isn't even close to reality. As this book shows, German congregations sang even before the Reformation, although a choral liturgy predominated. The choral liturgy continued its dominance in Lutheran churches for many decades after Luther's death, and it took over two centuries for a service to develop that would be familiar to Lutherans today, with the congregation accompanied by organ and singing hymns from a hymnal.¹³

Along with other scholars who rightfully caution against sweeping statements that turn Luther into the founder of Christian hymnody,¹⁴ in his book *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* Herl finds no problem in a tension that existed for centuries after the Reformation between services that were choral-led and congregation-led. Although it was a common practice to alternate hymn singing between the choir and congregation (*alternatim praxis*), he finds no evidence that Luther considered a liturgy sung by the congregation the only permissible liturgy, and his analysis of sources of German hymns from the twelfth century and later notes the difficulty in determining whether in practice they were sung by the choir, congregation, or anyone at all.¹⁵ In addition, it would depend on the location and size of the congregation and the extent of their musical resources.¹⁶ Herl advocates strongly for a gradual change from choral to congregation over centuries due to four primary factors: the introduction of hymnals, a change in the style and perception of choral music from a liturgical ensemble to a performing ensemble (e.g. under J.S. Bach), an increased Pietistic emphasis on the universal priesthood, and the use of the organ to accompany congregational singing.¹⁷

Other scholars have, to various degrees, interacted with and critiqued Herl's position. Noted musicologist Robin Leaver shares his view that a complete vernacular mass composed primarily of congregational hymns would have been the exception, found in smaller towns with no Latin schools, and believes it likely that, from a pedagogical and liturgical point of view, the choir introduced the singing portions of the liturgy for the congregation.¹⁸ He contends that a primary goal of Luther's reformation was congregational participation in the singing of Lutheran chorales (the distinctive and to a considerable extent defining feature of Lutheran church music), but it was nonetheless augmented by a wide variety of choral, congregational, and instrumental music.¹⁹ His critique is stronger in his Reformation 500 commemorative book *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther's Wittenberg*. He analyzes a hymnal sold by a Berlin antiquarian bookdealer in 1894, whose significance has been limited to German scholarship of the late nineteenth century but not comprehensively investigated in English. Its

¹³ Herl, *Worship Wars*, v–vi.

¹⁴ Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, ed. Paul Richardson (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 1.

¹⁵ Herl, *Worship Wars*, 20–22, 27.

¹⁶ Herl, 68.

¹⁷ Herl, 130.

¹⁸ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 194–96, 205. So also Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 10, 81.

¹⁹ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 209.

title clearly indicates it was meant for the laypeople to sing: *Enchyridion geistlicher gesenge und psalmen fur die layen/ mit viel andern/ denn zuvor/ gebessert* (“Handbook of spiritual songs and psalms for the laity, with many others than before, improved”). By analyzing the table of contents compared to Walther’s 1524 *Chorgesangbuch*, Leaver hypothesizes (quite convincingly) that the original edition was published at or near the same time as the “choir songbook,” so that the choir would have one edition and the congregation another edition of the same hymns. He concludes, “The long-standing assumption – that the first Wittenberg hymnal was choral and primary and that the congregational counterpart was secondary and later – can no longer be maintained.”²⁰

Christopher Brown has also examined the role of hymns in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the city of Joachimsthal and provided a fuller picture from Herl, in particular the impact of Lutheran hymnody on home life.²¹ An analysis of the size of hymns printed in the sixteenth century suggests the vast majority of hymns were meant for private use.²² In noting how the pastor Johannes Mathesius would say in his sermons “as the Church sings” in regard to pre-Reformation German hymns, but “as you sing” or “your hymns” in regard to Reformation-era German hymns, Brown advocates for the close familiarity with hymnody among the lay people that was cultivated on Sunday mornings but above all in the home.²³ The success of the spread of German hymnody is seen in how its music penetrated the town’s society, from the patricians singing Latin motets to the miners and craftsmen who attending pre-service hymn singing.²⁴

This mixed analysis can be due to the complexities of historical analysis, the complicated interaction between the *liturgy* and congregational *hymns* that could replace or supplement the liturgy, Luther’s introduction of the *Deutsche Messe* and his ultimate intentions,²⁵ and different performance practices that skew our perspective of what “congregational singing” actually means. Despite the historical difficulties in determining the manner and length of the process, the Lutheran church has historically enjoyed the status of being “the singing church.” Five centuries later, it must look in the mirror to see if it still is today. Without such honest reflection, it has failed in its Reformation commemoration, and one of its greatest assets in its churches and schools could be squandered.

Contributing Factors for Hymnological Challenges in the Lutheran Church Today

Several factors create doubt whether the Lutheran church today can still retain the status of “the singing church” as it has in past generations. Now it is quite rare to not have Lutheran

²⁰ “A Congregational Hymnal in Wittenberg, 1524-26” in Leaver, 102–16. See also his section “Psalms, Hymns, and Congregational Participation” (131-139), where he argues that the pastor or boys in the school choir (before the wide prevalence of the organ) would introduce psalms and hymns for the congregation to sing.

²¹ See Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 171. There he cites a sermon by Cyriacus Spangenberg, who pointed the lay people to Luther’s hymns to support them if the state and church should turn against the gospel, as happened in the Counter Reformation in the city.

²² Brown, 11–12.

²³ Brown, 102–3.

²⁴ Brown, 169.

²⁵ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 195.

congregations that do not possess some (or a sizable majority) who simply murmur along on Sunday morning because “I don’t really like to sing” or “I’m not very musical.” Some who attend worship give it their best try, but their tonality and pitch are poor, while others simply sit silently and do not feel comfortable to even attempt singing at all. Almost any attender of a Christmas concert or children’s program can find students who simply stand up front and almost need to be forced to sing. Pastors and teachers do not have to look (or listen) too far to see students who love to belt out their favorite songs on their Spotify, Pandora, or iTunes playlists but conveniently turn quiet once a hymnology lesson comes around. In his article, “Reflections on Children and Hymnody,” renowned Lutheran music scholar Carl Schalk laments the change that has happened over his lifetime:

That, as they say, was then. This is now. Left to ourselves in this television age, we don't sing much anymore – children or adults – around the piano or anywhere else. Instead, we watch (or listen to) others sing for us. What songs beside ‘Happy birthday’ can most people really sing at the drop of a hat? And as for hymns? Not too many decades ago, most children in Lutheran school learned virtually all the hymns in the hymnal over the eight years of elementary school. ... Those days, we say, are gone forever. Today we complain that children can’t or won’t memorize any more, and if they do, hymns are hardly at the top of their list.²⁶

If the present trend continues, Schalk warns us to “get ready for a generation which knows only ‘Twinkie tunes’ with a theology to match.”²⁷ No matter the specific ministry, many pastors and teachers share the common concern – and even lament – of T. David Gordon in his book *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*.²⁸ Asking why Johnny won’t sing hymns anymore is a multi-faceted, complex investigation, but if worship leaders and music educators fail to honestly and courageously face the answers, then leveraging the Lutheran legacy we have inherited becomes all the more precarious.

Factor 1: By focusing exclusively on hymnic content and not hymnic function, some worship leaders and hymnody educators select hymns too poorly.

In the Lutheran church, a rightful and healthy emphasis on the priority of Scriptural content can lead some to either minimize or forget about the various functions of hymns. It is certainly true that as confessions of faith, not of feelings, “Luther’s hymns were meant not to create a mood, but to convey a message.”²⁹ However, advocates of Lutheran worship falsely champion Luther to their side and abuse his perspective if they claim that because God’s Word must always remain central, church music simply conveys doctrine without also moving the

²⁶ Carl Schalk, “Reflections on Children and Hymnody,” *CrossAccent*, Spring 2014, 15.

²⁷ Schalk, 16.

²⁸ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*, Kindle Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010). What distinguishes Gordon’s work is his perspective as a media ecologist, a subset of cultural anthropology.

²⁹ Ulrich Leupold’s introduction to the section on hymns, LW 53.197.

emotions. Luther speaks very positively of music's impact on the human emotions,³⁰ and in his *Preface for All Good Hymnals*, Dame Music possess such great power to shirk the devil himself of his evil works.³¹ Luther was not inherently suspect of emotions, and nor should we.

Over the past few decades in theological scholarship, great strides in literary analysis have filled a gap in viewing Scripture both from the perspective of content *and* form, in other words, not merely what the text *says* but also what it *does*.³² Like spoken communication, hymns are sung communication and form a powerful example of indirect communication in worship. Hymns do not simply convey a message, they *do something*. As in sound homiletical and pedagogical theory, hymns impact all three domains: the cognitive, affective, and volitional.³³ In other words, hymns impart knowledge, impact emotions, and inspire action. If hymns *only* convey content, then there would be nothing stopping a teacher from replacing hymnology with more lectures or a pastor from abandoning hymnody altogether to simply preach more. Hymns certainly convey Scriptural content, but they *function* differently from a sermon or Bible history lesson. Hymnody is so powerful precisely because it plants the truths of God's Word onto the heart and emotions of people in a way that simply preaching or teaching cannot do. Worship so powerful precisely because it is a multi-layered communicative event where the gospel is implanted deep on the heart through the Word in speech, language, architecture, ritual, and music. That is why Christians throughout the centuries have not simply abandoned hymn singing to cover more biblical content. That also makes hymn selection exceedingly more complex than simply asking, "What hymns fit what I'm going to talk about in my sermon or lesson plan today?"

Although it makes hymn selection much more difficult, I am convinced a choice does not have to be made between either hymnic content or hymnic function: both must be achieved simultaneously. Various hymns function differently, and thus they must be selected according to the overall function of the service. In her chapter, "Selecting Songs for the Movement of Worship: Creating Logical Flow," Constance Cherry advocates for a form of worship called the Gospel Model over against the Isaiah 6 and Tabernacle models.³⁴ Although I do not share all her

³⁰ LW 53.323, "She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions—to pass over the animals—which as masters govern men or more often overwhelm them. No greater commendation than this can be found—at least not by us. For 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?"

³¹ LW 53.320

³² For a New Testament perspective, see the literature review in Jacob Haag, "Lent's Forgotten Joy: Contemporary Depiction and Emotionalization of the Passion History Evaluated in Light of a Literary Analysis of the John 19:1-37 Narrative" (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary thesis, 2015), 11–15, <http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/25>. For an Old Testament perspective, see the section "In support of a literary approach to the Old Testament" in Mark Paustian, "The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament" (PhD dissertation, Regent University, 2016), 54–58.

³³ For more on Reformation and modern perspectives on all three, see James Rawlings Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses: A Guide to Improved Congregational Singing* (Carol Stream, IL: Agape, 1982), 119; Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 410–11; Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 52.

³⁴ Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 80–86. The summary of the four main parts are: Gathering where God invites, we come; the Word,

theological perspectives (especially on sanctification, faith, and conversion), her point is well taken: the medium of worship is itself the message; its narrative structure tells God's story.

Taken together as a whole, the four³⁵ hymns in every worship service therefore function as a mini-version of the church year and the Christian life. The opening hymn sets the tone and mood for worship and introduces the theme. Ideally, it should not be too long – no more than five stanzas – nor each stanza longer than three or four lines, or else worshippers might start to think worship can't seem to get off the ground.³⁶ It should be a well-known hymn the congregation can sing with life,³⁷ or else worship can get off to a slow and methodical start. The opening of worship functions physiologically in the sense that it prepares worshippers for the service. It is best for the congregation to stand for the final stanza so that (especially in the winter) their bodies physically get warmed up and ready to sing.

Contrary to the impression that the sermon is the most important part of worship, the Gospel of the Day forms the high point of worship. In a properly planned worship service, everything builds up to the Gospel of the Day, and then everything after explains, reflects on, or applies it. Of all the hymns, the Hymn of the Day³⁸ functions most didactically and as such is sometimes called "the teaching hymn." It has a rich tradition in the Lutheran Church of being connected to the Gospel of the Day on which the lectionary is based, thus acting as a commentary on the text. (Practically, it should be the easiest to select because it is already done in *Planning Christian Worship*.) It may include less-singable hymns, including modal hymns³⁹ from the Reformation era. Well-informed worship planners expose the congregation to this classic corpus of hymnody anyways, even if they are more difficult, while at the same time they understand the important function of the third hymn.

After the Hymn of the Day and the sermon expound the Gospel of the Day, the third hymn functions affectively and volitionally. Of all the hymns, it has the most emotional impact. Ideally it takes the message just proclaimed to the mind in the Hymn of the Day and applies it to the heart. The content may not be as deep as what they just sung in the Hymn of the Day, and its style may be very different, but that does not make these hymns suspicious or "less

where God speaks and we attend; the Table/Response, where God awaits, we give thanks and surrender; and the sending, where God commissions and we go.

³⁵ Here I will use a typical service progression. Certain settings like Morning Praise/Matins may only use three hymns, and if the Lord's Supper is celebrated, larger congregations may use two distribution hymns at that time. A specific offering hymn right after the offering is collected is not needed and often distracts from the interconnected theme in the other hymns.

³⁶ Louis Nuechterlein, "The Music of the Congregation," in *A Handbook of Church Music*, ed. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 122.

³⁷ Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, Second Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 275–76; Nuechterlein, "The Music of the Congregation," 121.

³⁸ The Hymn of the Day is not the same as the sermon hymn. A sermon hymn (if ever used) comes immediately after the sermon, not in between the Gospel of the Day and the sermon.

³⁹ For more on modal hymn tunes, see Michael Kennedy, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, ed. Joyce Bourne, Second Edition, revised (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 583–84. A Swiss monk Glareanus developed 12 modes in 1547, but a different mode is not necessarily one of pitch but of the order of the tones and semitones. After harmonized music developed, the modal system disintegrated into the major and minor tonality we have today.

Lutheran.” In their understanding of how the gospel works, Lutherans have noted the connection between teaching and comfort ever since the Reformation.⁴⁰

Though some advocate that a final hymn is not necessary because the blessing concludes the service,⁴¹ the final hymn places the theme of the service on the congregation one last time. Both the third hymn and the closing hymn may have more of a sanctification focus. As such, the closing hymn inspires the gathered assembly to go out into the world and live the message they just heard. Ideally it is a short hymn or a few selected stanzas, since by this point they are eager to leave, and its hymn tune should be well-known so that Christians can hum it or have it in their minds on the way home.⁴²

Thus all four hymns, properly planned and executed, take the specific theme of the service and apply it to the breath of the Christian life and experience. This “balanced hymnic diet,” as Syndor calls it, will in large part depend on the choices of the pastor and educational leaders.⁴³ Due to the complexities of selecting hymns according to function, it is inexcusable for pastors, teachers, and accompanists to not work together. Pastors ought to do advanced planning, and at all costs, refuse to succumb to the temptation to give their accompanists a list of the hymns the week of.⁴⁴ In order for accompanists to actually plan their pre-service music liturgically as music that introduces the service theme based on the selected hymn tunes, as their preludes ought to do,⁴⁵ pastors at the very least need to develop a comprehensive worship planning document in advance of each section of the church year, series, or (if they prepare lectionary-based series) both.⁴⁶ Just like every hymnology curriculum or season of the church year, so also each progression of hymns in a service is a unit, not a disjointed sum of parts, and ought to be planned as such. Pastors who plan worship week-by-week or hymn-by-hymn show the same lack of foresight as hymnology teachers who fail to lesson plan or block plan but start the school year with little idea of what they will teach next week. At the same time, teachers

⁴⁰ Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 24. “The association of the Lutheran hymns with both teaching and comfort, however, was all-pervasive and went to the core of the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel. Hymnal after Lutheran hymnal advertised itself as being filled with both *Lehr* and *Trost* – two sides of the same Gospel coin.”

⁴¹ Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 274.

⁴² Maschke explains “it directs the people back into the world with the use of a more animated and enthusiastic tune” (Maschke, 276).

⁴³ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 25–26.

⁴⁴ See Adalbert Raphael Kretzman, “The Pastor and the Church Musician,” in *A Handbook of Church Music*, ed. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 219. “As the pastor’s sermon thought and themes are reflected in the hymns which he chooses, so he must give the church musician time to prepare music that makes the worship service a unit and not a series of disjointed and sometimes utterly unrelated (good) parts. This requires study and preparation on the part of the pastor, a complete openness and willingness to regard the importance of the work and service of music as being the important, single ingredient of the service alongside Word and Sacrament.”

⁴⁵ Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 266; Daniel Zager, *The Gospel Preached Through Music: The Purpose and Practice of Lutheran Church Music* (Fort Wayne, IN: The Good Shepherd Institute: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2013), 68–71. Zager calls this an “associative communication process” whereby the organ setting is linked to the hymn melody, which is linked to the hymn text, which is linked to the lectionary reading that prompted the selection of the hymn and hymn prelude in the first place. Thus it is important the prelude features the hymn tune in a clear way.

⁴⁶ I am convinced a creative lectionary-based series is the best route to take, both to advertise a new series for outreach purposes and to help congregation members understand the progression throughout a season of the church year. I regularly create a series for Advent-Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, etc.

cannot simply select a generic hymn for their children to sing and then inform the pastor of a day that works. The hymn must fit the theme of the service⁴⁷ and function in an appropriate place in the service. There is no substitute for proper preparation. As Cherry says, “Worshippers benefit greatly from song leaders who have taken the time to invest in preparation. If songs are dull, the buck stops with the leaders. Liveliness of singing is a realistic goal for every congregation.”⁴⁸

Factor 2: In some congregational and educational contexts, hymns simply are not taught.

It may be too self-evident to even mention, but one factor in the high priority Luther placed on hymnody and music was that he was taught it. In the Mansfeld school, singing was valued after the study of Latin, with an emphasis on sight-singing, memorizing the Latin liturgical texts, and basic music theory, and those songs then implanted Scripture onto the minds of the school boys who sang in church.⁴⁹ Shilling notes that Luther’s musical experiences at Mansfeld awakened “a love of singing and music-making that he transferred into a commitment to Protestant songs and hymns, heard both inside and outside the church.”⁵⁰ Later on, polyphonic music was an extracurricular activity in Eisenach,⁵¹ music was part of the curriculum of an arts degree at the University of Erfurt,⁵² and Luther would have been impacted by the polyphonic choral and instrumental music of the *Allerheiligenstift* in Wittenberg, a large choir of clergy and musicians at the university church that doubled in size from Luther’s arrival in 1508 until 1520.⁵³ After the 1528 Saxon visitations, Luther’s ordinances included liturgical training and choral exercises as integral parts of the curriculum.⁵⁴ From Luther’s own education we can learn three applications for today:

Application #1: Hymnology must be retained in Lutheran curriculums.

The Lutheran church has historically enjoyed a strong partnership between congregations and their schools. On multiple levels, present-day ministry realities certainly pose challenges to continuing and expanding our schools across our synod. A recent *New York Times* article noted the growing pressure in higher education and government to cut funding for the arts in favor of more employable educational paths, including STEM education.⁵⁵ Our own

⁴⁷ The service theme is distinct, but related, to the sermon theme.

⁴⁸ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 207.

⁴⁹ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 12–13; Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 22; Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 22.

⁵⁰ Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 50.

⁵¹ Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther’s Wittenberg*, 26.

⁵² Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 460.

⁵³ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 33–35.

⁵⁴ Markus Wriedt, “Continuity and Competition: Luther’s Call for Educational Reform in the Light of Medieval Precedents,” in *Reformations Old and New: Essays on the Socio-Economic Impact of Religious Change c. 1470-1630*, ed. Beat A. Kümin (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1996), 181.

⁵⁵ Patricia Cohen, “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/22/business/a-rising-call-to-promote-stem-education-and-cut-liberal-arts-funding.html>.

synod lives in such a cultural milieu and can start to succumb to the view that hymnology is nice for the dedicated kids of life-long Lutherans but is an expendable part of the curriculum for the majority. One legacy of the Reformation, however, is to understand the vital link between churches and schools: they reflect on one another, and as one goes, in many cases so goes the other. That is no more evident in hymnody. Syndor writes of the tragic results that can occur when hymnology is diminished in the church school.⁵⁶ It is no wonder, then, that in his detailed list of how to encourage more congregational interest in hymns, one was to “integrate hymns and the church school curriculum.”⁵⁷ Children retain the gospel through song arguably more than any other medium and thus can be taught religious truths in this way more effectively than any other.⁵⁸ The AABA hymnic structure, so characteristic in Lutheran hymnody, can easily be taught to young children by asking them to pick up different strips of colored paper that correspond to the individual lines they just sung.⁵⁹ Yet Schalk states the core of the matter: in many places children and their parents simply have never learned, or been taught, the basic core of the church’s hymnody.⁶⁰ It never works too well when worship leaders assume worship “just happens” and worshippers will simply figure it out for themselves; what does result is that worshippers often “have no clue what worship is all about.”⁶¹ Simply put, heirs of the Reformation recognize if music is this important to Lutheran worship it needs to be part of the curriculum of Lutheran schools.⁶² If called workers cut hymnology from the curriculum or simply do not want to teach hymns in their congregations and schools, we will have no one to blame but ourselves when the Lutheran church loses its status as the singing church.

Application #2: Pastors, teachers, and worship leaders must be exposed to and familiar with a wide range of composers.

If hymnody must be taught to the students, then it is even more vitally important that it is taught to called workers who teach our students. Stated bluntly, if worship leaders chose hymns out of ignorance or apathy, then that is how classrooms and congregations will sing them.⁶³ Luther himself was adamant about the musical training of both pastors who lead public

⁵⁶ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 119–20. “The quality of hymn singing in the public worship of a congregation is determined largely by the hymnody employed in the church school. ... It is well nigh fatal to hold one standard in the more formal church worship and then ‘let the bars down’ in the church school. Having one type of Sunday school hymns and then expecting the children to enjoy and appreciate the hymns announced in church worship is an exercise in futility.”

⁵⁷ Syndor, 7.

⁵⁸ So Archibald Alexander, first professor of Princeton Seminary, argues in a preface to a hymnal, quoted in Syndor, 119. See also Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 65.

⁵⁹ See Syndor, 122–23. He suggests after the first line, ask them whether it is the same or different. If same, pick up the same colored strip of paper, if different, a different color. Finally ask, “What do we have?” Red, red, yellow, red would thus be AABA form and would help them understand where the melody repeats itself.

⁶⁰ Schalk, “Reflections on Children and Hymnody,” 16.

⁶¹ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 233.

⁶² Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 277.

⁶³ See Scotty Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody: A Comprehensive and Integrated Approach to Understanding Hymns* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2015), 333. “Due to an all too prevalent neglect of effective music and worship education of ministers and congregations, there has frequently been a lamentable poverty where, given the wealth of texts and tunes, there should be a rich experience. Hymn texts and tunes are too often chosen (and consequently sung) out of the ignorance and apathy of worship leaders.”

worship and teachers who train the young, lamenting those who “want to be theologians when they cannot even sing.”⁶⁴ He did not operate out of ignorance of the most noted composers of his day; he was familiar not only Ludwig Senfl or Johann Walter, but also Josquin de Prez, Georg Rhau, and Jörg Plank, among others.⁶⁵ So too today, pastors and teachers need to be exposed to and familiar with not only Martin Luther and Paul Gerhardt, but also Ambrose of Milan, Philipp Nicolai, Isaac Watts, Jaroslav Vajda, Stephen Starke, Marty Haugen, Keith Getty, and Stuart Townend.

Application #3: Music must be financially supported.

It is difficult to actually implement music education in congregations and schools if it under constant budget cuts. Luther and Melancthon wrote to the electors and implored them to properly support musicians financially; Luther “was not above sarcastically excoriating those who sought to save money by skimping on their financial support” because the adequate support of musicians was for the glory of God and anything less would be a betrayal of God’s good gift of music.⁶⁶ He protested in writing to Elector John the Steadfast when he disbanded the *Hofkapelle* and the *Allerheiligenstift* because they were too costly, and John Friedrich the Magnanimous thwarted Luther’s attempt to create and endow a professor of music at the University of Wittenberg (likely Sixt Dietrich) because he did not want to spend the salary of 100 gulden.⁶⁷ Thus if hymnody is actually going to be taught in our day, it starts at the top: congregations need to support a worship budget and proper honorariums for musicians, and schools need to providing funding for the arts.

Factor 3: Some Lutheran congregations are confused on the proper function of the singing ensemble.

Thankfully many Lutheran schools still have their children sing in the worship service. However, it does little good if their teachers and congregational members are confused about what they are actually supposed to be doing as a singing ensemble in worship. Most frequently, a choir – whether a class from the elementary school, a high school traveling choir, or a congregational adult choir – performs almost exclusively anthems: songs that are general praise songs, have biblical imagery, or have similar themes to the season of the church year but are not tightly interwoven with the rest of the service. Worshippers then can’t help but wonder, “The kids sounded really nice, but what did their song have to do with anything else?”

In all actuality, choir anthems are a development from non-Lutheran, Protestant worship traditions and are closer to secular music in their origin and purpose.⁶⁸ The high-point of post-Reformation Lutheran church music under J.S. Bach demonstrates that proper choral music functions *liturgically* in that his cantatas recounted (the recitatives), commented on (the

⁶⁴ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 29–30. The quotation is from LW 29:35.

⁶⁵ Schalk, 21–24.

⁶⁶ Schalk, 24–25.

⁶⁷ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 38–39, 42–43.

⁶⁸ Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 280.

arias), and applied (the chorales) the text of the Gospel of the Day.⁶⁹ Today, the primary purposes of a Lutheran singing ensemble employ anthems last:

1. The choir supports the congregation's singing of hymns and the liturgy.
2. The choir enriches the service by bringing variety to the sung portions of the liturgy.
3. The choir presents attendant music as appropriate and possible.⁷⁰

A heavy emphasis on choral *anthems* can result in choirs who don't learn *hymns* or help the congregation do so. Worse yet, it can create a concert performance mentality that fosters passive worship instead of participatory worship – and it is interesting that even those outside Lutheran circles⁷¹ are advocating for this hallmark of Lutheran worship. It may be convenient for the children to sing at the beginning of the service so that they can promptly leave once late service comes around, but all that can imply to children is that they are an ancillary, dispensable part of the worship service whose job is done once their song is. Even more important than singing anthems is for the choir (especially elementary and church choirs) to skillfully introduce and arrange hymns for the congregation. Syndor lists no less than twelve ways to do so by discovering the beauties in the harmony and finding various ways for the music to interpret the text.⁷² Fortunately in recent concertato compositions the Reformation-era practice of the choir alternating stanzas with the congregation has not been completely lost, and it should be revived more. Simply put, teach children hymns, and have them actually sing hymns in partnership with the congregation that function in appropriate locations in the worship service.

By no means is it inherently bad for choirs to sing anthems, and when they do, pastors, teachers, or directors need to select anthems that (like J.S. Bach understood) are connected to the theme and text of the Gospel of the Day. Thus anthems are properly placed between the Gospel and the sermon, because the anthem functions like the sermon in that it is a commentary on that text.⁷³ In addition, choirs need to present the congregation with excellent, quality music. This has nothing to do with whether the choir is made up of children or adults, or whether the music is simple or complex; it has to do with selecting music within their limitation that they can

⁶⁹ A *recitative* is accompanied by *basso continuo* and often sung verbatim from the biblical text by a tenor; an *aria* is a highly-ornamented solo often accompanied by solo period instruments that functions as a commentary and explanation of the recitative just sung; and a closing SATB *chorale* sung by the entire choir is often accompanied by the full orchestra and functions as the cantata's application to the lives of the listeners by using first-person pronouns.

⁷⁰ Halter and Schalk, "Music in Lutheran Worship," 19. See also Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 107.

⁷¹ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 59. Constance Cherry has a DMin from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and is a professor at Indiana Wesleyan University and faculty member of the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies.

⁷² Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 108–9. They include: all voices in full harmony; all sing melody in unison; men sing melody; women sing melody; solo voice on melody while choir hums harmony; ATB sings melody while S sings descant; ST sing parts as a duet if arrangement allows; men on melody while A sing their part and S sings T an octave higher; quartet, trio, duet, or solo voice on melody with varied accompaniments; men in parts or women in parts; modulation to a higher or lower key; and changing from major to minor keys or reverse.

⁷³ Even if the sermon is based on another Scripture text than the Gospel, it should still be preached in light of the theme of the Gospel. In this sense, the thematic lectionaries of *Christian Worship: Supplement* (and the forthcoming new hymnal) are a noted improvement of the *lectio continua* in *Christian Worship*.

perform well, not attempting something that is beyond their abilities in order to impress people or was intended for a different kind of choir.⁷⁴

Factor 4: Some worship leaders and educators fall into either of two extremes in teaching a corpus of hymnody: they either fail to introduce new hymns properly, or they fail to introduce any new hymns at all.

Nothing can be more frustrating for worshippers when a pastor selects a strange hymn they have never heard before and expects them to sing it. Simply imposing a new hymn on a congregation or class with little explanation or preparation is often counterproductive. Pastors need to explain hymns, especially new ones, which is why I include one- or two-sentence explanations for the hymns in all our Sunday morning services. Ideally when a new hymn is introduced, the congregation should hear the melody twice before. An accompanist could easily include new hymn tunes in pre-service music, and I typically always introduce new hymns, psalms, or liturgies with a musical introduction, a cantor singing the refrain/first stanza, and *then* the congregation joins in. Teachers can employ similar methods in their hymnology lessons. Only after hearing it multiple times do most people feel comfortable joining in. And by all means, the music must always be printed out if it is not already printed in a hymnal. Pastors and teachers abuse this whenever they simply provide the text and then expect worshippers or their students to pick up a melody from hearing it. It is a fallacy to state, “They don’t need the music because they can’t sight-read.” Actually, all people in our churches and schools *can* sight-read music – likely not well at all, and they may have no clue of musical notation, but at least they know that when the notes change, the music changes. In addition, that only deprives the less-gifted singers the support of those singers who can pick up new music well.

On the other hand, it is equally problematic when pastors and teachers reason that because people don’t like unfamiliar music, they will not introduce new hymns at all, which will inevitably lead to stagnation and a decline in musical ability. It can stunt the worship growth of a congregation when pastors believe that because the congregation is perfectly content with their previous hymnal (e.g. *The Lutheran Hymnal*), they do not need to be exposed to new hymns, whether from a successor hymnal or from other sources. The irony is that if Luther himself would have taken that approach, the Lutheran church today would be left without such classic gems as “A Mighty Fortress” and “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice.” Luther himself was involved in expanding the repertoire of evangelical hymns.⁷⁵ Like any activity, hymn singing can be learned, and for learning to take place, new content needs to be delivered appropriately.

⁷⁴ Carlos R. Messerli, “The Music of the Choir,” in *A Handbook of Church Music*, ed. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 139; Halter and Schalk, “Music in Lutheran Worship,” 21.

⁷⁵ Martin Hengel, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, trans. James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 284. Hengel cites six hymns published or written from 1535-1543.

Factor 5: Some congregations and classrooms possess acoustical environments that are detrimental to singing.

During the research and implementation stages of the renovation my congregation completed in the summer of 2017, I often asked, “Why do people sing in their showers but not their living rooms?” My point was to illustrate that no matter how talented a singer you may be and no matter how much you may want to sing in your living room, the physical space itself severely limits you. With low ceilings, soft surfaces, and abundant carpet, people just don’t sing in their living rooms; they sing in their showers.

Unfortunately, far too many churches in our synod resemble living rooms. At that point, a Lutheran school may have an excellent hymnology curriculum, the pastor may be an excellent church musician, and the congregation may be exceptional singers, but it will not matter. The physical space will limit you. Perhaps nothing seems more hidden to average worshippers but has more of an impact on congregational singing than proper acoustics.⁷⁶ It is not simply technical jargon for acoustical engineers; it is part of proper Lutheran worship. Typical congregations in our synod built especially around 1950-1990 may possess various features to make a congregation feel more “home-y” – low ceilings, padded pews, banners galore, sound-absorbing paneling, and especially the acoustical culprit *par excellence*, carpeting.⁷⁷ Certain members who love such features in their homes and want to include them in the church sanctuary spell disaster for lively congregational hymn singing.⁷⁸ James Blanton, writing in 1957, does not mince his words when he states the unnecessary and indiscriminate use of sound absorptive materials, which then require a microphone amplification system for the pastor’s voice or additional organ ranks, is “one of the most deplorable developments in contemporary church practice.”⁷⁹ If the music of the congregation is to come alive, “*a live acoustical environment is an absolute necessity.*”⁸⁰ Even worse than some church sanctuaries are some classroom spaces. With bookshelves lining the walls, carpet lining the floor, blinds covering the windows, desks and chairs deflecting the sound, and soft tile in low drop down ceilings absorbing the sound

⁷⁶ James F. White and Susan J. White, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publication, 1998), 95.

⁷⁷ For the importance of removing carpeting, see Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer, eds., *Christian Worship: Manual* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 92; Scott Riedel, “Carpeting,” *The Diapason*, Acoustics in the Worship Space IV, May 1987, <http://www.riedelassociates.com/AcousticsintheWorshipSpace4.htm>. *CW: Handbook* argues that carpeting “should be assiduously avoided” in favor of brick, plaster, drywall, terrazzo, or glazed tile. Riedel demonstrates how poor acoustics transform corporate worship into a solo event.

⁷⁸ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 137. “A certain generous member of the congregation, who enjoys wall-to-wall carpeting, draperies, and overstuffed furniture at home, might donate a lovely deep red carpet for the entire church floor. Unfortunately this act of philanthropy may well take the keen edge off congregational singing for the duration of the life of the rug. In fact, I know of a church interior which not only has wall-to-wall carpeting, pew cushions, but also absorptive fabric attached to front and back of each pew back. Needless to say, the acoustics are atrocious.” See also Nuechterlein, “The Music of the Congregation,” 126. “Well-intentioned as many worshipers and many church building committees may be in wanting to make their church interiors as comfortable and luxurious as their homes, the plush and intimate atmosphere of the living room is altogether incompatible with the participatory demands of the liturgy of the people of God. Carpeting on the floor and acoustical tile on the ceiling absorb not only the sounds of shuffling feet and nervous coughing; they also dampen the enthusiasm and drain the vitality of the congregation’s vocal energy as it tries to sing.”

⁷⁹ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 138.

⁸⁰ Nuechterlein, “The Music of the Congregation,” 125. Emphasis original.

waves, it is no wonder that many children in our schools do not want to sing in their classrooms. For students to feel confident singing, they need to be in an acoustically appropriate space, and teachers ought to take them into the church for hymnology lessons. Although often forgotten about, the importance of acoustics cannot be overstated.

Church renovations⁸¹ to improve acoustics are not simply for large churches with large budgets. My congregation, Redeemer in Ann Arbor, has a membership of 69 and an average attendance of 47. Yet by God's grace, we were able to complete a renovation that totaled around our yearly budget without taking out a loan. The carpet is gone and replaced with a hard surface, luxury vinyl, and the cinderblock walls covered with thick single drywall to improve both the upper and lower spectrums of sound.⁸² New seating included only padding on the seats (not backs) and was arranged in five sections to form a semi-circle and allow the congregation's sound to blend better. For the congregation to feel confident singing, it needs to hear itself. For it to hear itself, the singing needs hard surfaces to reflect off of. Even modest changes like removing banners, unnecessary carpeting, and plants or décor pieces that serve no useful function are steps in the right direction to improve singing.

Factor 6: Some congregations and schools possess inadequate instruments to lead corporate singing or expect accompanists to lead corporate singing without proper training.

Just like acoustics, no matter how much called workers may promote hymnology and no matter how eager the congregation is to sing, hymn singing will either suffer – or perhaps die a slow death – if hymns do not possess proper accompaniment. Despite the popularity of encased, upright pianos, they are not built to be a solo instrument; the top of a baby grand or grand piano is designed to reflect the sound up and over a congregation and properly lead the congregation in singing.⁸³ Despite the popularity of electronic organs, *they are still substitutes* for a pipe organ, which has been the standard instrument for centuries to accompany Lutheran hymnody.⁸⁴ By all means should electronic pianos which have an artificial organ setting be avoided. If the accompanying instrument is out of tune, the congregation will be out of tune; if the accompanying instrument cannot project well, neither will the congregation or students.

Likewise, if accompanists are hesitant in their playing, the congregation or class will likely be hesitant in their singing. Lutheran accompanists do not simply perform attendant (i.e. background) music, nor do they merely assist in worship; they *lead* worship.⁸⁵ They ought to therefore understand the principles of Lutheran worship as well as have some degree of formal training in their craft. Contrary to what some may think, all pianists cannot simply play the

⁸¹ A classic text for those considering changes to their worship spaces is White and White, *Church Architecture*.

⁸² I received the report from Scott Riedel, an acoustical specialist who consulted on the renovation at Resurrection, Maumee, OH. There he included how carpeting will absorb upper-mid and high frequencies of sound, while thin drywall absorbs lower frequencies of sound. Just removing the carpeting can result in a hollow mid-range quality.

⁸³ Kawai or Yamaha are well-reputed mid-range models that can function well for most congregations without costing as much as a performance-grade Steinway, which is out of the budget of virtually all WELS congregations. My congregation recently replaced a donated upright piano with a Kawai GL10 baby grand piano.

⁸⁴ If an electronic organ must be purchased, Rogers is likely the best option.

⁸⁵ This is also part of the reason the doctrine of fellowship includes worship accompanists.

organ because they know the piano. They are two different instruments, and for a pastor to ask a person who has only taken piano lessons to play organ would be tantamount to a fifth-grade band teacher asking a flautist or oboist to play saxophone simply because they have similar fingerings. Organists need to learn how to build organ registration on the swell, great, and choir, as well as proper pedal technique and fingering to connect hymn chords without the benefit of a damper pedal. Likewise do pianists need to learn the proper technique for when to raise the damper pedal so that the hymn chords do not become muddled and confusing to a congregation. C instrumentalists need to learn how to shape phrases and help lead the melody for the benefit of the congregation, and more advanced musicians should have some experience in how to read all SATB parts from the hymnal or use them to create a descant or melodic line. Regardless of the instrument, all need to learn how to use proper tone, proper technique, proper balance, and proper hymn introductions so that the congregation can start confidently. If congregations fall into a predictable pattern for singing hymns with generic accompaniment that flattens out one hymn to sound like all the others, then sometimes it is not simply a matter of laziness or lack of creativity; it may be that accompanists simply have not been taught how to breathe life into hymns.⁸⁶

Summary

Before the Lutheran church can even get into the deeper discussion what makes a good hymn good, it needs to honestly evaluate whether it still wants to sing hymns in general. Why Johnny won't sing hymns in our churches and schools anymore often involves some or all of these factors (or even more). It is not simply a matter of lamenting a trend in society; the Lutheran church also needs to look in the mirror during its Reformation 500 commemoration to see what, if anything, it has done to contribute to Johnny's reluctance. The Lutheran church need not forgo its status as the singing church, but that does require hard work in our churches and schools, among our pastors and teachers. The tremendous value and impact of hymnody leaves us with no other option.

Criteria for Determining the Value of Individual Hymns

Formulating a Lutheran Approach that Goes Beyond Polarization in Hymnody

In addition to the factors for why children (and adults) struggle to want to sing hymns, what greatly complicates Reformation 500 renewal in worship life is the polarization found in certain areas of the Lutheran church. The very words "contemporary" and "traditional" hymnody often bring strong emotions to the fore and draw battle lines between those who are adamant to retain the best of the past with those who strive to find the best of the present. William Eason has even called these major changes in worship, seen mostly in a shift in worship styles, the "second Reformation."⁸⁷ Conflict over hymnody preferences no longer are the

⁸⁶ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 202.

⁸⁷ Frank Burch Brown, "A Matter of Taste?," in *Worship at the Next Level: Insights from Contemporary Voices*, ed. Tim A. Dearborn and Scott Coil (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 182.

exception, but the norm, in virtually every Christian denomination, since worship has now “become contested ground.”⁸⁸

Despite how we have been spared from the post-Reformation worship wars from Luther to Bach⁸⁹ or the present tension between St. Louis and Ft. Wayne in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod,⁹⁰ James Tiefel has noted the struggle in our church, particularly in the liturgy.⁹¹ With hymnody, some churches have even sought to define their worship in terms of style, for example, having a “contemporary” or “traditional” service (and calling it as such).⁹² On the one hand, a congregation may be extremely suspicious of innovation. It may refuse to adapt to new hymn compendiums (e.g. the transition from *The Lutheran Hymnal* to *Christian Worship* or from *Christian Worship* to *CW: Supplement*) in fear that people will lose their beloved hymns. The thought of even considering piano or ensemble-led worship may lead some to accuse others of compromising confessional Lutheran orthodoxy. In this scenario, hymns likely are virtually all Lutheran chorales or hymns from the ancient church, and sacrificing these hymns (and perhaps other “high church” liturgical rites) may be perceived as capitulating to the whims of the present. On the other hand, another congregation may want to desperately reach out to the unchurched and young people in its city. Thus it may embrace innovation so much to the point of disparaging past hymns as no longer relevant. It may forgo organ-led worship as passé, snobbish, and too “high culture” that does not communicate well in our age and instead use ensemble-led worship. It may accuse others who do not adapt as not caring about the Millennials. In this scenario, its hymns are likely the most current hymns in popular Christian culture, even if their shelf-life is only a brief passing moment.

The Lutheran church is adamant in its refusal to adopt either alternative. Structuring (and advertising) various worship services as “contemporary” or “traditional” can be tragic, since it will almost inevitably lead to polarization and may even communicate the implied message that a group is unwilling to sacrifice for the benefit of others.⁹³ The very words “traditional” and “contemporary” are often so poorly defined that they come to mean little more than words that

⁸⁸ Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs: How Guitars Beat Out the Organ in the Worship Wars,” in *Worship at the Next Level: Insights from Contemporary Voices*, ed. Tim A. Dearborn and Scott Coil (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 76.

⁸⁹ For a comprehensive analysis, see Herl, *Worship Wars*.

⁹⁰ For an example from the Fort Wayne perspective, especially in the introduction “The Debates about Lutheran Worship and Music,” see Zager, *The Gospel Preached Through Music*.

⁹¹ James Tiefel, “The Liturgy and Its Use In Our Church,” in *Heritage and Hope: Essays in Honor of the 150th Anniversary of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*, ed. Kenneth A. Cherney Jr. (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013), 433–72.

⁹² For an example of Vestavia Hills United Methodist Church near Birmingham, which has 5000 members and an array of services according to demographics and worship styles, see Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” 74–75, 83. He writes, “Increasingly, people choose their churches by the type of worship and music they feature. Increasingly, churches sponsor multiple services for multiple musical tastes. Increasingly, we are grouping ourselves with the musically like-minded. This is the root, stem, and branch of the new sectarianism that is flowering in American church life.”

⁹³ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 60–61. “But providing services based on diverse styles does not call the church to sing the whole church’s song - *together!* There is something to be said for a community that is willing to sing one another’s worship songs, even if some songs are not the personal preferences of certain individuals. Communal worship is self-sacrificial. Being together and singing what is of value for other persons is more important than being apart so that each group is gratified.”

arouse intense emotions and therefore ought to be avoided.⁹⁴ As Richard Hillert has noted, our time has required an exceptional adaptability to church music in this tug-of-war between innovation and tradition that recalls the challenges of the Reformation era.⁹⁵ As such, we cannot be blind to the lessons learned there.

The irony of our contemporary debates on hymnody is that if Luther would have adopted such a polarized approach, it is likely the Reformation of Lutheran worship would not have succeeded. Still to this day, there has been considerable “prattling and rattling”⁹⁶ about worship forms that has been the norm in our circles as well as Luther’s, but when his friend Nicolaus Hausmann wanted him to enforce liturgical uniformity on the basis of his *German Mass*, Luther objected since each evangelical center should be free to create its own or borrow from elsewhere.⁹⁷ Luther is masterful in his approach of applying *On the Freedom of a Christian* to the role of worship in his treatise *A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord*, a must read for the situation we find ourselves in five hundred years later. In demonstrating how we can go down the narrow path of between license and legalism, he is critical of those who get so wrapped up in worship customs that they make laws out of them and create factions. He contends that singing is, in and of itself, an external rite, and as such it is un-Christian to quarrel and confuse the people over it. As such, like any external thing, it “can without scruples be changed by anyone at anytime, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people.” Luther does not only address the Livonians’ pastors, but he also directly addresses the people as part of the solution to promote unity.⁹⁸ Therefore, pastors, teachers, and congregation alike need to be active in understanding this principle of freedom in worship.

Edification is the defining Lutheran approach to hymnody. In this sense, advocates for the two sides in contemporary worship debates are *often both right, as well as both wrong*. An approach that values the edification of the Christian assembly gathered in congregation or classroom demands far more effort and roots out all complacency. It is far easier to justify any hymnological decision merely based on “this is what we’ve always done” or “these are hymns I like.” Though it may seem benign, unfortunately such approaches can ultimately reveal some degree of selfishness on the part of hymnody planners and educators.⁹⁹ There is no place for

⁹⁴ For example, traditional or contemporary in what sense? According to the time of publication? The life of the composer? The date of the text? The time period of the instrumental accompaniment? Once a month my congregation uses a setting of the historic liturgy (*Mass for a New World*) in which the congregation sings “*Kyrie eleison*” (not “Lord, Have Mercy”), the most ancient response in the church, to a setting published in 2011 with piano, flute, and sometimes guitar. It purposefully uses both ancient and modern elements. I have also used a setting from CPH’s *Hymns for the Contemporary Ensemble* of CW 142, “Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain” by John of Damascus (A.D. 696-754) with me on oboe along with piano accompaniment.

⁹⁵ Richard Hillert, “Music in the Church Today: An Appraisal,” in *A Handbook of Church Music* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 232.

⁹⁶ LW 53.14

⁹⁷ LW 53:53. Schalk also notes Luther’s orders were meant as “description, not prescription” (Schalk, “Sketches of Lutheran Worship,” 62).

⁹⁸ LW 53:43-50.

⁹⁹ See James F. White, “On Starting with People,” in *Worship at the Next Level: Insights from Contemporary Voices*, ed. Tim A. Dearborn and Scott Coil (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 72. “We ministers are often hardly aware of how arrogant our presuppositions with regard to worship have been. We knew what was good for people, and that we

those who understand a distinctively Reformation approach to hymnody to ever select a hymn purely¹⁰⁰ on the basis of “this is what I like.” Not only is that an inappropriate approach for the body of Christ to be taking to any issue, but Luther's approach to worship and hymnody requires all who follow him to sacrifice personal preference and a personal comfort zone on the altar of mutual edification – whether that be hymns from *The Lutheran Hymnal* or hymns heard on Christian radio. It may be true that either *TLH* hymns that an experienced pastor can never dream of losing or new hymns that a young teacher has found from outside our circles are edifying today. However, it requires theological clarity and musical understanding to constantly evaluate whether such hymns are in fact still edifying today. Simply because a hymn is old or new does not inherently make it edifying. Simply because it was edifying five hundred years ago in Luther's day or five years ago the last time one used it in a worship service or hymnology lesson plan does not necessarily make it edifying now. A proper approach requires respect for the past, clarity about the present, and vision for the future.

Following Luther, who proved himself to be a middle of the road man with a healthy balance in worship matters,¹⁰¹ who created the *Deutsche Messe* but did not demand everyone use it, who both wrote new hymns as well as adapting Ambrose of Milan's ancient hymn *Veni, redemptor gentium* (CW 2) for a German audience, heirs of the Reformation today neither disparage past hymns nor are they suspicious (or ignorant) of new hymns. Avoiding both extremes, synthesizing a respect for the best of the old with the best of the new, and finding edifying hymns of every age is one of the most consistent appeals across the spectrum of the scholarly literature,¹⁰² and it is time for the Lutheran church today to listen. Pairing the past with the present is a defining aspect of Lutheran worship, as Halter and Schalk have so clearly stated, “Building on the experience of the past, the church moves confidently into the future.”¹⁰³ Valuing the old is not a simple, naïve repristination of the archaic past,¹⁰⁴ yet at the same time we do not deify, ossify, or uncritically accept our heritage – making Lutheran worship both conservative and open to the future.¹⁰⁵ Following Luther's legacy, post-Reformation composers like Hans Leo Hassler, Michael Praetorius, Johann Hermann Schein, Samuel Scheidt, Heinrich Schütz, and to a lesser extent, Johann Walter and Georg Rhau, labored in the difficult struggle to adapt Lutheran chorales to the changing Baroque landscape and found a way to emerge from the tension between a fossilized past and a rootless present.¹⁰⁶ Thus Schalk can write that they

gave them. Nowhere is this more evident than with regard to church music.” He reflects on how sometimes pastors enforce rather arbitrary determinations of what “quality” or “good taste” means onto the congregation.

¹⁰⁰ “Purely” is the operative word. It may certainly be true that called workers will love the hymns they select; however, that can never rise above the criteria of mutual edification.

¹⁰¹ Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 41.

¹⁰² Brown, “A Matter of Taste?,” 191; Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 264, 279; Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 334; Halter and Schalk, “Music in Lutheran Worship,” 9–18; Hillert, “Music in the Church Today”; Dan Schwandt, “Music That Makes Community in Particular Contexts,” *Cross Accent*, November 2012, 17; Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 44; White, “On Starting with People,” 72–73; Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 184; Nuechterlein, “The Music of the Congregation,” 107; Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” 84.

¹⁰³ Halter and Schalk, “Music in Lutheran Worship,” 17.

¹⁰⁴ Carl Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524-1672)* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 12.

¹⁰⁵ Halter and Schalk, “Music in Lutheran Worship,” 14.

¹⁰⁶ Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism*, 181–84.

“remained open to the musical culture of the day and produced – in faithfulness to the essence of Luther’s thought – some of the greatest music in the history of the church.”¹⁰⁷ With such an approach today, it is a false oversimplification to state that what makes Lutheran hymnody Lutheran is simply the German chorale, just as it is precarious to try to advocate for creating a distinctively American form of church music, as Steve Pilkington has attempted to do.¹⁰⁸ Those among us whose congregations and schools are preoccupied with the past must learn to appreciate the present, while those who are only concerned for the present must learn to appreciate the past. *Both need to desperately broaden their outlook.* Lutheran worship does not turn a healthy respect for tradition into traditionalism, nor does it ever fail to advance that heritage in new places with new forms and styles that are relevant and edifying today. That is how the Lutheran church five centuries later leverages the legacy we have inherited.

What Makes a Good Hymn Good

Once the Lutheran church today realizes the potential of blending the hymns of the past with the hymns of the present, it will enjoy the benefit of a wide corpus of hymnody from which to select excellent hymns today. What makes a good hymn good, however, is a very complex investigation. It makes as little sense to select hymns anyway one likes as for teachers to teach anyway they like or pastors to preach anyway they like because “it’s an art, not a science.”¹⁰⁹ Like preaching and teaching, sound principles undergird how one determines the value of individual hymns. Since many people in our pews give precious little thought to what actually makes a hymn good, mediocre, or bad, pastors and teachers ought to “have some idea of what constitutes excellence in hymns.”¹¹⁰ Cherry has cautioned against four common approaches:

1. The *pragmatic approach* that sings songs because they work, since it can lead to manipulating the mood or producing results. Songs certainly affect worshipers, but they should be selected because they serve the liturgy, not serving their own purposes.

¹⁰⁷ Schalk, 28. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Steve Pilkington, “A Is for Apple: The Search for an American Church Music; or The ABCs of American Church Music: A Is for Apple, B Is for Billings, and C Is for Chapman,” in *Music and Theology: Essays in Honor of Robin A. Leaver*, ed. Daniel Zager (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 193–212. Using a comparison to the folk hero Johnny Appleseed and agricultural metaphors for how an apple grows, his whole essay is a somewhat confusing appeal for creating American styles of church music. He advocates for more outstanding American composers and using a broad range of styles. It’s possible he is arguing in line with Terry Schultz to let a culture or sub-group determine for itself what is the “heart language” instead of assuming (or worse, forcing) something from the source culture [Terry Schultz, “Ethnomusicology from the 1500s: Applying Luther’s Revolutionary Musical Practices to Today’s Mission Field,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 114, no. 3 (Summer 2017)]. Then I could not agree more. If he is advocating for a distinctively American style of hymnody, it is an exercise in futility, and worse yet, compromises the Lutheran approach which seeks to find edifying hymns from the best of the old and the best of the new, from a wide range of hymns and cultures that have served the larger Christian church.

¹⁰⁹ For example, see Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 15. “A comprehensive and integrated hermeneutics of hymnody can be an important response to subjectivity in thinking about hymnody – the concept that you cannot dispute taste and that beauty is only in the eye of the beholder.”

¹¹⁰ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 24–25.

2. The *relevance approach* that selects songs because they are popular, since popularity does not necessarily mean it is relevant. Popularity is a moving target and does not make a song bad or good. Relevance deals with whether songs are meaningful.
3. The *personal preference approach* that selects songs because leaders like them, thus controlling the church's repertoire according to their own partiality.
4. The *spiritualized approach* that selects songs because God inspired¹¹¹ them simply because it uses Christian words, since that is a messy and subjective process. Sometimes non-believers compose religious songs for other purposes.¹¹²

It's not simply a matter of a hymn being a favorite simply because it is *familiar*.¹¹³ Scotty Gray has listed the following principles for evaluating hymnody: the *biblical principle* that focuses on how a hymn is consistent with biblical teaching; the *theological principle* that focuses on the doctrines the hymn presents; the *liturgical principle* that focuses on the use of the hymn in the context of worship; the *literary principle* that focuses on figures of speech and language in the hymn; the *musical principle* that focuses on the interrelated aspects of tempo, melody, harmony, form, and timbre of the hymn as they relate to the text; the *historical, biographical, and sociocultural principle* that focuses on the background of the author, circumstances of writing, and sociocultural context of using the hymn today; the *practical principle* that focuses on the performance and experience of hymn singing; and the *principle of interrelatedness* that focuses on how all the above principles relate to one another.¹¹⁴ Aaron Christie has explained the eight-fold criteria for determining the hymns in our synod's new hymnal currently slated for publication in Advent 2021.¹¹⁵ What is all expected of each hymn is virtually impossible for it to fulfill at once.¹¹⁶ Therefore, only music of merit can navigate between the conciseness and familiarity of hymnody on the one hand, while still being fresh and opening up new insights and experiences on the other.¹¹⁷ While a comprehensive study is out of the parameters of this essay,¹¹⁸ we can isolate a few key factors in the considerations of text and tune.

¹¹¹ "Inspired" is here used in the popular sense, not the technical theological sense.

¹¹² Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 100–102.

¹¹³ Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 6.

¹¹⁴ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 6–7.

¹¹⁵ Aaron Christie, "God's Love: Our Song Forever," *Forward in Christ*, August 2017, 12–13. The hymns should "(1) be centered on Christ, (2) be in harmony with the scriptural faith as confessed in the Lutheran Book of Concord, (3) be rooted in the church year with its emphases on the life of Christ and the Christian's life in Christ, (4) be drawn from classic Lutheran sources and deliberately inclusive of the church's broader song (including so-called international or global music), (5) be superlative examples of their genre in regard to both content and musical craft, (6) be accessible and meaningful for God's people at worship in both public and private settings, (7) be useful for those who preach and teach the faith, and (8) be parts of a body (corpus) of hymns that will find wide acceptance by the vast majority of our fellowship."

¹¹⁶ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 224. "There is an incredible burden on the short, 'simple,' strophic, oft-repeated hymn tune in its composition, in its selection, and in its 'performance' to have artistic integrity in itself, to honor the subtleties of fine literature, to bear the biblical and theological message, and to be singable by relatively untrained and unrehearsed singers."

¹¹⁷ Gray, 231.

¹¹⁸ For more, see the chapter on "Evaluating Worship Music: Creating a Canon of Song" in Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 97–116.

Text

First of all, the text must obviously be biblically sound and conform to Scripture, which means that those who compose and select hymns have the great responsibility to understand the original biblical text.¹¹⁹ In many ways, hymnody has shaped theology throughout the history of the church, which leads many to say, “Let me write the hymns of the church and I care not who writes the theology.”¹²⁰ It is a distinctively Lutheran emphasis to state that we praise God *by proclaiming the gospel*,¹²¹ and that is nowhere more evident than in hymnody. Luther himself stated that everyone must be done “so that the Word may have free course.”¹²² Although individual texts of hymns focus on different aspects throughout the service and church year, the hymnic repertoire of a congregation or school needs to be centered on proclaiming the macro-narrative of God’s work on behalf of humanity. If a specific Sunday focuses on a certain doctrine, then the text should teach, highlight, or apply that doctrine. The text needs to be elevated enough to cause the hearers to ponder it, yet not too deep as to be erudite. Quality texts may repeat or seem simple on the surface (e.g. African-American spirituals), but they are never trite. The language needs to speak to the people, not beyond them.¹²³ Yet often the most powerful texts employ poetic language that compress deep, moving thoughts into an economy of words, and it is a false assumption to say that the “average worshipper” today is no longer capable of appreciating or understanding such literature.¹²⁴ By all means hymnology teachers need to explain the background of the text and composer to their students,¹²⁵ and pastors can find brief ways to do so in worship folders. Whether or not the text appears deep and eloquent or simple and straightforward, it must powerfully, concisely, and beautifully proclaim God’s Word.

Tune

Just as the text balances eloquence and accessibility so that it is understandable yet still communicates something new every time it is sung, the tune strikes a similar balance. It is not *choral* singing but rather *congregational*. It is neither too complex for mostly untrained singers to sing it without rehearsal, yet it is not so simple that it is simply boring. In other words, it needs to be interesting, but not too ornate that it is not singable. The average congregation or class cannot sing much more than an octave and a third, and thus pastors and teachers need to be aware of hymn tunes that extend below a B^b or higher than a D, certainly E^b. The simple rhythm of quarter notes followed by a held note, so characteristic in Lutheran chorales, can (but by no means must) lead to boring singing. At the same time, the rhythm cannot be too complex or syncopated that the congregation constantly stumbles through it. The best hymn tunes stand

¹¹⁹ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 41.

¹²⁰ Gray, 64. See also Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 43. “Hymn melodies have a power all their own and, like their texts, are living voices either of truth or of error. In the course of its history the church has experienced this repeatedly.”

¹²¹ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 32–39; Schilling, *Martin Luther*, 463; Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 139; Zager, *The Gospel Preached Through Music*, 8–14.

¹²² LW 53.14

¹²³ Pilkington, “A Is for Apple,” 208.

¹²⁴ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 155.

¹²⁵ An easy resource here is *Christian Worship: Handbook*.

on their own artistic merit and do not necessarily need harmony just to make them attractive.¹²⁶ Louis Benson has said so powerfully,

The hymn and its tune together compose the unity of the hymn as sung, and together stand or fall. An inartistic tune will kill the most poetic hymn ever written. A dull or unwelcome tune will impart to the most spiritual words an atmosphere of insincerity that makes one's spirit shrink. A tune adequate to the spiritual values of the words interprets them. A great tune does more; it adds something to the printed words by way of suggesting things of the spirit unprinted between the lines.¹²⁷

How the tune needs to match the text is one of the most complex and nuanced aspects in determining hymn criteria. Although Luther adapted folk tunes of his day for his hymns, the distinction between the sacred and secular then does not exactly correspond to the distinction today. Therefore, although it's impossible to say a secular tune could never be used for hymns, extraordinary care and insight needs to be taken to avoid the unintended consequences when sacred texts are imported onto rock or pop tunes.¹²⁸ Sometimes a tune simply will never fit the text.¹²⁹ Nor is it necessarily a good practice that a hymn tune is sung to many hymn texts in our hymnal. The entire hymn tune should match the meaning and mood of the text, ideally each phrase,¹³⁰ and thus its melody and rhythm function as an exegesis or interpretation of the text.¹³¹ The music should be shaped so that the tones lead to the phrase's climax, often with a longer or higher note,¹³² and finally resolve from the apex to final tone,¹³³ almost always the tonic.

Ideally, the music would change to match each individual stanza, but that would mean that a hymn would be through-composed, not strophic, and place an undue burden on the congregation. That requires, however, accompanists to thoughtfully study the text and include ways to play each stanza differently in keeping with the changing texts in each stanza. Organists need to play triumphant stanzas on the great with a plenum registration, while more reflective stanzas on the swell with a flute-based registration (or possibly strings, depending on the organ). Pianists need to pay attention to subtle differences in dynamics and articulation.

¹²⁶ Nuechterlein, "The Music of the Congregation," 109.

¹²⁷ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 45.

¹²⁸ Brown, "A Matter of Taste?," 189–90.

¹²⁹ See the sections "Popular Music in the Lutheran Church," "Music and Meaning," and "Implications for Using Popular Music in Lutheran Worship" in Zager, *The Gospel Preached Through Music*, 33–39. While many of his points are valid, Zager is at times too strong in his denunciation of popular music in the church. While he states that he does not advocate for resolving worship debates by limiting musical selections to the first three centuries of Lutheranism (5), one can get that impression here. Zager is certainly correct in raising legitimate questions about the inherent communication of music by itself, but if it is true that the Lutheran church must inherently reject forms of music from Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, then the Lutheran church must also reject forms of music stemming from Catholicism that Luther retained. See Tiefel, "The Liturgy and Its Use," 463. "Since the introduction of Christian Worship twenty years ago, all of us have heard WELS members pose the question, 'Isn't that Catholic?' If we want to remove contemporary worship forms from the list of adiaphora because their use might lead people to wrong ideas about our teaching, we had better be ready to remove a few liturgical customs from that list as well." As I have argued throughout, any attempt at defining a singular Lutheran style of music is fraught with difficulty.

¹³⁰ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 237.

¹³¹ Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 43.

¹³² Keith Getty and Stewart Townend are masters of this, since the third system of their hymns typically soars.

¹³³ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 41.

Various instrumentalists, like flute or trumpet, can add different timbres to the tune that fit moods in the text. When the hymn tune is simply performed with no variation, especially in hymns with many stanzas, it is contrary to textual understanding, textual expression, and musical aesthetics.¹³⁴ Gray laments, “Practice and tradition in hymn singing too often ignore these aspects, and congregations plod thoughtlessly through hymn tunes with little realization of what could and often should be done musically for the interpretation of the text.”¹³⁵ The tempo can be slightly (not significantly) altered for each stanza to match the text, and above all, accompanists cannot simply use one stock “singing tempo” for every hymn they play.¹³⁶ Since hymns and their performance are so complex, worship planners and hymnology educators need to give careful attention to selecting the best ones and then give their students and accompanists sufficient time to perform excellent hymns excellently.

Case Study: Luther’s “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”

One such excellent hymn that has stood the test of time and been found edifying for centuries is Luther’s hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” to the tune NUN FREUT EUCH (CW 377). What follows is a short case study to illustrate the aforementioned principles of hymn selection and analysis that could be adapted for a hymnology lesson in our classrooms or a hymn festival in our congregations.

Biblical, Theological & Liturgical Principles

“Dear Christians” is a masterful presentation of the chief Scriptural teachings of sin and grace in regards to justification. After the presentation of the theme in stanza 1,¹³⁷ stanzas 2-3 describe the complete inability of Luther to gain his own standing with God based on his own works, which only drives him deeper into despair. Contrary to our modern, secular understanding, such an emphasis on the bound human will and lack of spiritual potential was actually liberating to the original audience.¹³⁸ Stanzas 4-8 then introduce the narrative of God’s intervention on behalf of humanity in the person of his Son. Stanzas 9-10 then close with a commissioning to the listeners as Jesus himself commissioned his disciples. In this sense, the book of Romans’ influence on Luther flows clearly through this hymn. Robin Leaver has called it a “hymnic expression of Pauline theology” and “in a sense a commentary on the first eight chapter of Romans,” in which stanza 1 comments on Romans 1:16-17, stanzas 2-3 on 1:18-3:20, stanzas 4-6 on 3:21-6:23, and stanzas 7-10 on chapter 8.¹³⁹ In addition to justification, the

¹³⁴ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 253. Gray tells the story of an organist at an American Guild of Organists (AGO) audition, who is asked to play a hymn tune. She perceptively asked, “To what text and to which stanza should I play it?”

¹³⁵ Gray, 343.

¹³⁶ For four tempo guidelines, see Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 196–97. Consider the lyrics and tune, the song’s place in the service, the wordiness of the song, and how familiar the song is to the congregation.

¹³⁷ Hymns properly have “stanzas;” psalms properly have “verses.”

¹³⁸ Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 93. “In its original context, however, the somber tones of human impotence and depravity were intended to sound a liberating note to sixteenth-century ears. The opposite theme – that human beings were basically good, endowed with free choice and the ability to improve themselves, which may sound so human and liberal to modern ears – was in fact perceived by many late medieval Christians as a terrible burden.”

¹³⁹ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 163.

Trinitarian focus cannot be missed between the interaction of the Father planning redemption (stanzas 4-5), the Son accomplishing it (stanza 6-8), and the Spirit applying it (stanza 9-10), which leads Oswald Bayer to say that this hymn is “the most telling and appropriate confession of the triune God that I know.”¹⁴⁰ As a didactic hymn, this hymn functions extremely well as the Hymn of the Day (e.g. Easter 6), but due to the length, melody, and content, it probably ought not be positioned elsewhere in the service without modification.

Literary, Historical & Sociocultural Principles

Those Lutherans whose love for objective Scriptural proclamation leads them to be suspicious of subjective hymnody immediately confront a problem: the first-person pronoun abounds in this highly personal hymn. Luther does not simply state objectively the facts of sin and grace; he states how they impact him deeply and personally. “Dear Christians” functions as an autobiographical reflection, translated in iambic meter, of Luther’s “tower experience” when he was wrestling with the “righteousness of God” language in the Scriptures and, once properly understood, “felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”¹⁴¹ Thus, the listener is invited to join in with Luther’s experience¹⁴² as “the past becomes ‘today’.”¹⁴³ Subjectivity in hymnody is not wrong in itself; it is wrong by itself. When paired to the basis on which it stands within the hymn itself or the overall flow of the service and church year, the literary approach can become immensely powerful.¹⁴⁴

“Dear Christians” was Luther’s first congregational hymn,¹⁴⁵ included in the *Achtliederbuch*, commonly called the first Lutheran hymnal.¹⁴⁶ It became immediately popular since it had three melodies attached to it and was quoted to a certain extent by Amsdorf’s and Gerhard’s hymns.¹⁴⁷ Buszin records how this hymn even disrupted Catholic masses when the people, so eager to obtain a copy of it on the streets, began to burst out singing it.¹⁴⁸ In its day,

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Robin Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 100.

¹⁴¹ LW 34: 336–337.

¹⁴² Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 19. “Luther’s hymn is a remarkably clear and complete summary of the Evangelical message, but in addition to summarizing the content of the doctrine, it also emphasizes the emotional contrast between anguish and doubt on the one hand and trust and comfort on the other. As the hymn is sung, the singer is drawn to identify with the ‘I’ of the song and encouraged to appropriate Luther’s conversion experience as his own.”

¹⁴³ Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 138.

¹⁴⁴ See Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 16. “It [i.e. ‘Dear Christians’] shows clearly the special genius of the hymns for presenting the Evangelical religion to a popular audience in a way that not only engaged the hearer’s understanding but also sought to evoke an appropriate affective response.”

¹⁴⁵ Luther wrote his earlier *Ein neues Lied wir heben an* in memory of two Lutheran martyrs in Brussels, which was not meant to be a congregational hymn but rather a prophetic narrative. See Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 43.

¹⁴⁶ For more, see Stephen A. Crist, “Early Lutheran Hymnals and Other Musical Sources in the Kessler Reformation Collection at Emory University,” in *Music and Theology: Essays in Honor of Robin A. Leaver*, ed. Daniel Zager (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 13–14. The *Achtliederbuch* (“eight-song-book”) is more properly called *Etlich Christlich liden* and includes four hymns by Luther, three by Paul Speratus, and one is anonymous. It was printed in Nuremberg by Jobst Gutknecht, though Wittenberg is stated as the place of publication. The Roman numerals (i.e. date) is wrong in many of the exemplars, which state 1514 instead of the correct 1524.

¹⁴⁷ Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 163.

¹⁴⁸ Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 43.

the power of Luther's hymn was seen chiefly in its evangelistic use, as Tileman Hesshusius explains in the preface of Johannes Magdeburg's 1565 *Psalter*:

I do not doubt that through this one hymn of Luther many hundreds of Christians have been brought to the true faith, who before could not endure the name of Luther; but the noble, precious words of the hymn have won their hearts, so that they are constrained to embrace the truth: so that in my opinion the hymns have helped the spread of the Gospel not a little.¹⁴⁹

Such an understanding of a hymn's background can greatly enrich the experience of hymn singing to the millions of people who sing each week oblivious to the historical period and the author's circumstances of writing.¹⁵⁰

Musical & Practical Principles

Leaver states that Luther had few rivals in his understanding of how to create melodies, making the Lutheran chorale in many respects his creation.¹⁵¹ Luther used the popular folk song *Ich gleich sie einem Rosenstock* as the model for this melody.¹⁵² In typical barform,¹⁵³ the first system repeats itself (87 87 887 meter), which leads to the ascending melody line in the third system. That line must soar in performance, since it matches the increasing intensity in the text of each stanza (e.g. "proclaim the wonders God has done," "yet deep and deeper still I fell," etc.). With a range of just over an octave (C to D), its range is comfortable and thus very accessible. As with many German chorales, the quarter note predominates, but the dotted quarter/eighth note rhythm that begins each phrase must be emphasized and clearly articulated to create excitement. Like many original Lutheran melodies, it is meant to be a dance, not a dirge.¹⁵⁴ In addition, it functions as a *Freudensprung* ("a leap of joy") that symbolizes the gospel message.¹⁵⁵ With ten stanzas, much of what was stated earlier concerning the creative performance of long hymns applies here. The mood covers the despairing depths and soaring highs of human experience, and its musical performance needs to reflect that.

Conclusion: Toward a Pursuit of Worship Excellence in the Singing Church Today

In his Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary in 1926, Louis Benson stated, "There is a great deal of half-hearted and perfunctory singing in our services; an atmosphere of indifference or inattention from which it must be rescued. It was quite vain to deny that our pastors are to a considerable degree responsible for this. The indifference in the pews is very apt to be the reflection of the indifference in the pulpit."¹⁵⁶ Whether or not the half-hearted and perfunctory singing continues pervasively throughout our synod is virtually impossible to substantiate with any degree of solid academic research. What remains true from Benson's

¹⁴⁹ C.T. Aufdemberge, *Christian Worship: Handbook* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 395.

¹⁵⁰ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 288.

¹⁵¹ Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 59.

¹⁵² Leaver, 29.

¹⁵³ Contrary to what is sometimes stated, the *barform* of sixteenth century Germany had nothing to do with Luther using tavern or drinking songs for his hymns. *Barform* is a style of AAB folk music.

¹⁵⁴ Brown, *Singing the Gospel*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Buszin, *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America*, 43.

¹⁵⁶ Syndor, *Hymns and Their Uses*, 84.

address almost a century ago is that in many cases the status of hymnody in a local context begins and ends with the pastor. Attempts at improving hymnody in our Sunday schools, elementary schools, and high schools can quickly be thwarted if pastors do not know how to support vibrant singing once Sunday comes around. A lack of cooperation on all sides can be exceedingly frustrating for those in both pastoral or educational ministry who do strive to renew and rejuvenate worship life as a lasting legacy of the Reformation five centuries later.

Renewal in hymnody among us cannot simply be limited to teachers who have focused on music in their undergraduate degrees, nor to pastors who happen to have choral and instrumental experience. Certainly they need to lead the way, but hymnody affects us all. Worship is simply that important. It is the core of what the church does, and it often reflects on how seriously it takes the rest of its ministry.¹⁵⁷ As such, as Gray explains, "There is no place for deliberate mediocrity in any area of a Christian's life, especially not in the worship of God."¹⁵⁸ Those who understand the Reformation's impact on worship understand that Lutheran worship has the hallmarks of being doxological, scriptural, liturgical, proclamational, participatory, pedagogical, traditional, eclectic, and creative, but they also recognize that Lutheran worship aspires to excellence.¹⁵⁹

Worship renewal first needs to begin with a study of the principles that undergird worship, and without that theoretical foundation any attempt for improving hymnody may not last since people will likely not understand why. It is not simply a matter of pitting simple congregational song against more elaborate forms. In Luther's time, his ideas gave direction and focus to those musicians who created a living tradition of both, which resulted in "an outpouring of music which has few parallels in the history of church music."¹⁶⁰ There is no reason that outpouring of music had to stop five hundred years ago and cannot continue today. Music is God's gift to us, which is why it is incumbent on us to use it as best as we possibly can:

In emphasizing music as God's creation, not people's, and as God's gift to people to use in his praise and adoration, Luther set the stage for the freedom of composers, congregations, choirs, and instrumentalists to develop their agents and abilities to the highest degree possible. The music that developed in the Lutheran tradition is eloquent testimony that the church, together with its musicians, found Luther's paradigm of music as creation and gift of God to be a preeminent constructive element in the development of a rich musical culture in which to live, work, play, and praise their God.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Halter and Schalk, "Music in Lutheran Worship," 14. "For Lutherans, corporate worship is not simply a pleasant option; it is the indispensable [*sic*] and central work of the gathered Christian community from which all other facets of the church's life and mission, including one's individual worship life, derive their strength, purpose and direction." See also Hillert, "Music in the Church Today," 248. "To begin with, it is certain that church music will never fare better than the church itself. Worship above all is a direct reflection of the inner state of the church's health. With all its elaborate superstructure, the church buildings, the wealth of instrumental resources, publications of music and worship materials, educational facilities, and professional and scholarly competence, the practice of music in worship at the parish level is still, in many places, quite a dismal affair."

¹⁵⁸ Gray, *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 265.

¹⁶⁰ Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism*, 17.

¹⁶¹ Schalk, *Luther on Music*, 36.

Striving for excellence in worship and hymnody, of course, is preconditioned on the exact definition of excellence. Cherry examines two approaches: a performance view and a dynamic view. In a performance view, the quality is tied to aesthetics and meets an agreed-upon standard of musical criteria and accomplishment, whereas a dynamic view is a constant process of seeking to improve. In other words, it does not emphasize the arrival at the destination but rather the process or journey there. While not dismissing the first, she advocates for the second, "Indeed, we must pledge ourselves to the necessary, ongoing pursuit of developing musical expertise, both for those we lead and ourselves."¹⁶² Later she states, "Our communities await the breath of fresh air that such a pursuit of excellence will bring. Good enough has been good enough for too long. Holy shoddy is still shoddy."¹⁶³

Cherry's approach can be helpful. She is certainly correct in her critique of a justification of poor worship in churches simply because it is religious or a justification of poor hymnody in schools simply because it is sacred music. If that is ever the case, then we need to examine whether we are truly offering to God our best. Faithfulness can never be abused to say that called workers need no continuing education, or that they are justified in plateauing their own musical and worship ministry because there is nothing that could be done better. Faithfulness is not an excuse to be lazy, perpetuate the past, or simply settle for the view that worship excellence is an idealistic but unattainable vision. It can never transform into the resignation – whether overtly expressed or not – that settles for the least common denominator because "we're doing what we can." Jesus does require his followers to carry their crosses in ministry, but he does not ask us to create our own crosses with the trap of pessimism that eschews any notion of ministry excellence. On the other hand, pursuing excellence can emotionally and spiritually tear up any called worker with the classic trap of comparing ourselves to someone else's ministry. That is where the dynamic view can be helpful. Worship renewal is a constant process where we look at how we individually can use God's diverse gifts to better serve his people with the gospel, not try to exactly copy what professional musicians are doing in another corner of Christ's kingdom. In that sense, we will never be done until we sing the most glorious biblical hymns of Revelation with the angels in heaven. God, after all, is the agent of worship renewal, but that does not diminish the fact that he uses us as his instruments to do so.

In worship, the very gospel is at stake because hymnody proclaims and adorns the gospel. That is why heirs of the Reformation seek to sing hymns as excellently as possible, not simply to shine the spotlight on our own musical accomplishments. That requires all of us who wish to leverage the Lutheran legacy to constantly seek to improve our musical understanding and proficiency in Lutheran worship. For as rich and diverse as our legacy is, it can adapt to face the challenges of a new time and place. The Lutheran church can still be the singing church. It can still instill the gospel deep onto the hearts of our people and students and move them to take it with them into the world. Armed with the power of the gospel paired with God's beautiful gift of music, what happened five centuries ago can still happen today.

¹⁶² Cherry, *The Music Architect*, 257–58.

¹⁶³ Cherry, 263.

Discussion Questions

1. From your ministry experience, defend or disprove the assessment, "The Lutheran church is no longer the singing church today."
2. Scan the factors for why "Johnny won't sing hymns" anymore. Which factor is most pronounced in your ministry and why?
3. Look over the last worship service you planned, hymnology lesson you taught, or time your children sang in worship. Evaluate how well you selected a hymn (or anthem) based on its function, rather than just its content. What do you want to change in the future?
4. In our polarized climate of worship tension, evaluate where you would place your congregation or school on a scale of 1-10 compared to our synod's spectrum of worship (1: high regard for "traditional" hymnody that is suspicious of innovation; 10: high regard for "contemporary" hymnody that views the past as irrelevant). Ask someone else if they agree. Name two things you want to do to move more to the middle of blending the best of the old with the best of the new.
5. Agree/Disagree: "I tend to pick hymns for my congregation/school that I like or am familiar with, rather than going through a process of evaluating whether they are good or not."
6. Complete this sentence: "Pursing excellence in ministry means this ..." Create one goal for this next year that you want to pursue in order to renew hymnody in your ministry.

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