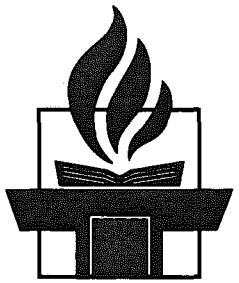
Reformation & Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 4, Number 4 • Fall 1995

A Reason to Sing

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Why do we sing in church? Some will give the logistical argument: since much of what happens in the worship service occurs at the chancel, singing a Psalm, hymn, or spiritual song will provide the congregation with an opportunity to become actively involved. Others may cite the "community argument": They see congregational singing as an activity which dissolves social and community differences. In their opinion, therefore, it serves as a tool which creates a sense of unity and solidarity.

While statements such as these are undoubtedly true, they merely note some of the "beneficial side effects" instead of the true reason for congregational singing. If we wish to establish why it is we sing in church, we need to examine the roots of singing. There is indubitably no one else who has played such a central and pivotal role in the establishment of the congregational song as Martin Luther, and we will do well to find out what it was that caused him to incorporate congregational singing as an essential element of the worship service. Nearly half a millennium has passed since Luther restored congregational singing and, as often happens over time, the original intention is easily forgotten. It is important, however, to regain an understanding of the original intent since it can teach us not only what Luther believed about why the congregation should sing, but also why we have a reason to sing. Therefore, we will consider the four points: (1) Martin Luther and the chorale; (2) The hymn text in service of the Word of God; (3) The relation of both text and tune in the service of the Word of God; and (4) The purpose of hymn singing.

Martin Luther and the Chorale

The introduction of congregational singing in the Lutheran church was not an invention of Luther, but existed already in some form before 1517. As with all of Luther's reforms, he did not really introduce something new; rather, he excised from the Roman Catholic practice that which was contrary to the

Bible, and restored what had become misused and neglected by the Roman church.

In earlier times the Roman church did allow the congregation to take part during the singing of doxologies, kyries, hymns, and amens but, with the reform of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), the song of the church was transferred from the congregation to the priests and the choir. In Roman Catholic practice, singing was done by a special group of trained singers

> which, unlike a Lutheran church choir, represented not the congregation, but the clergy. Because of the hierarchical character of the Roman Catholic services of corporate worship, the choir thus constituted a lower clergy.[1]

However, in the ninth century, particularly in Germany, the congregation began to demand that they be allowed to participate in the service. Originally their participation was limited to saying *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) at appropriate moments in the liturgy, but "this concession eventually gave rise to the singing of the so-called *Leisen* in which each stanza closed with *Kyrie eleison*."[2]

Luther's objection to this practice was obvious. The congregation was not allowed to participate in an active manner in the liturgy, except for the very occasional saying or singing of a phrase. To compound matters, everything in church was done in Latin. Even many of the priests did not fully understand the Latin they were reading, so it is not surprising that the congregation by and large did not know what was going on. Luther firmly believed that the congregation needed to be able to understand the Scripture reading, the sermon, and the singing. One of his major accomplishments was the translation of the Bible into German. In this way the people could read the Bible for themselves. The other major accomplishment was, of course, the establishment of congregational singing.

These things could have come only from a man who held

firm convictions. Luther did. He rejected the hierarchical system of the Roman church which held not only the monopoly on reading the Bible, but also taught a salvation through works instead of faith. In contrast to the teachings of the Roman church, Luther believed that believers did not need a human intercessor. Believers do not need a priest or pope as an intermediary because they have Christ as their intercessor. Thus, all believers have been made priests, and in the Lutheran church this is known as "the royal priesthood of all believers." It is this understanding which led Luther to emphasize active congregational involvement in the worship service, particularly through congregational singing. The music of the church was no longer performed by "a lower clergy," but by all believers.

The Lutheran faith, concisely stated, believes in "justification by grace through faith," or the redemption of the sinful world by God the Father who through the sacrifice of His Son redeemed and justified all who believe. "Lutheran theologians rightfully refer to the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ crucified and risen again as the cardinal doctrine of the Christian religion."[3] "Luther differed from Catholic theologians about the nature of grace, the place and importance of preaching, and in sacramental theology, [but] he strongly held that God's grace is received by the preaching of the word of God."[4] Therefore, central to the Lutheran faith stands the *Word of God.* In his *Order of Public Worship* of 1523 he states that the neglect of the Word is the worst abuse of Roman Catholic worship. He writes:

> And this is the sum of the matter. Let everything be done so that the Word has free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among the Christians. And in Luke 10, Christ Himself says: One thing is needful, i.e.,

> that Mary sit at the feet of Christ and hear his Word daily. This is the best part to choose, and it shall not be taken away forever. It is an eternal Word. Everything else must pass away, no matter how much care and trouble it may give Martha. God help us achieve this. Amen.[5]

To Luther, the Word is God; not only the eternal, uncreated and revealed Word (i.e., Christ, cf. John 1:1) but also the incarnate, created and revealed Word (i.e., the Bible). Luther's entire theology is a theology of the Word.

The Hymn Text in Service of the Word of God

Martin Luther on writing chorales: "This should be done that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which through God's grace is now being proclaimed, might be set going and spread among men."[6] In a letter to Spalatinus, secretary to Frederick the Wise, Luther writes: "[Our] plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the] vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the *Word of God* may be among the people also in the form of music."[7] The use of the vernacular instead of Latin afforded the people an *understanding* of what was going on in the service. The Latin liturgy was for many not more than a ritual in which they were merely observers. It did not speak to the congregation in general since many did not fully understand what was being said. Luther's reforms not only supplied a German Bible but involved the congregation in the service through congregational singing which may have been just as important a factor to the Reformation as the printing press, because through the Lutheran chorales the Word of God truly dwelt among the people. "A Jesuit named Conzenius is known to have remarked that Luther persuaded more people with his hymns than with his sermons."[8]

The principle of proclaiming the Word of God through chorale texts was recognized by early hymn writers:

> The principal content of great Christian hymnody is one of downward verticality. God does not need our praise. We need His life-giving word. The upward verticality of answering thanksgiving and praise is not to be forgotten, and lateral considerations of how we can serve our fellowmen are not to be ignored; but early hymnodists, with unerring aim of keen theological and psychological insight, fastened upon man's great need: the Bread of Life and the Water of Life.[9]

It is often said that Luther restored congregational singing. This is true, but he did more than that—Luther restored preaching to the congregation—a most appropriate activity for lay priests! "If, now, the congregation is to proclaim the divine truth, it must have a sermon worth preaching. This is the reason for the substantial ... doctrinal content in many of the Reformation hymns."[10]

Sixteenth-century hymnodists were fully aware of the importance of biblically based texts if their hymns were to fulfil their kerygmatic purpose. The title page of the first Lutheran hymn book, *Das Achtliederbuch* (1524), attests to this as it states: "Some Christian hymns, canticles, and Psalms, made according to the pure Word of God, from Holy Scriptures, by several very learned men, to sing in church as it is in part already practiced in Wittenberg."

The Relation of Both Text and Tune in the Service of the Word of God

According to Johann Walter music is "wrapped up and locked up in theology, so that he who desires, pursues, and studies theology at the same lays hold of the art of music, even though he may fail to see, feel, or understand this."[11] Music and theology share a common root in the Word; both come from God, both employ the sense of hearing. Luther often referred to music as a gift of God and accorded it the highest place and greatest honor after theology.

In his *Table Talks* Luther said, "The notes bring the text to

life,"[12] and elsewhere he stated, "After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music."[13] This means that hymn singing is preaching, a return of God's Word to the people! Luther, then, restored singing to the church as preaching, the speaking "to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19) so that "the Word of Christ [might] richly dwell" in them (Col. 3:16). Because the hymn was regarded as a *prædicatio sonora* — a resounding sermon, it was placed "on the same level as the proclamation and prayers of the pastor."[14] Consequently, the Reformation accorded congregational song an autonomous place in the liturgy. It was not simply regarded as the people's answer to the sermon, but instead stood side by side with the sermon, albeit in sequential order.[15]

The Word of God could become the Living Word only when it was preached, and only then could it awaken faith. Since music (the notes) "make the text live," God preached the Gospel also through music. Both music and theology then are "bearers and interpreters of the *Word of God,* being living voices of the Gospel."

The Purpose of Hymn Singing

The purpose of the Lutheran chorale was to let the Word of God dwell among the people. The poetry of the hymn needed to be thoroughly biblical, but devoid of complex imagery; the words had to speak to the people. From a letter to Georg Burkhardt, whom Luther had requested to write hymn texts based on the Psalms, it is clear that Luther wanted the congregation to understand that which they were singing, so that they could indeed sing with heart and mind. He wrote:

> I would like you to avoid any new words of the language used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and the most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be clear and as close as possible to the psalm. You need a free hand here: maintain the sense, but don't cling to the words; [rather] translate them with other appropriate words.[16]

For his hymn texts Luther translated Latin hymns and liturgical chants of the Roman church, and "improved them in a Christian manner," i.e., purged them from wrong doctrine. Luther's own religious poetry adhered closely to the everlasting truths of Scripture. He based some of his chorale texts on the Old Testament Psalms and on other Scripture passages. Luther did not insist that all texts used in the church service had to be literally from the Bible or close adaptations thereof; however, he did require that texts be theologically sound. Whatever the source of the text, it had to be doctrinally "pure and apt," for Luther recognized the power of hymnody. Hymnody could either proclaim truth or error, and the Lutheran chorale was to preach the Word of God so that also through song the message of salvation would be disseminated.

Music. Luther acted with regard to the melodies on the same principles as he had done with regard to the text; he took whatever old melody suited his purpose and "improved" it—only the improvement was often more drastic in the case of the tune than in that of the words, for it was his first care to see that the melodies were singable and easily grasped.[17]

As with the hymn texts, the sources of the melodies were varied: Gregorian chant, nonliturgical hymns, and even secular song.

It is important to remember that a "secular song" in Luther's time was rather different from a secular song in our time. In the sixteenth century, both secular and sacred music drew upon the same storehouse of music materials: that of the church. Thus, when we recognize that Luther refashioned "secular" melodies, we need also recognize that this is in effect a

reclaiming of melodies which had been part and parcel of the church for centuries. Luther, then, did not introduce secular elements into the service. Instead, secular music was affected by the music of the church. In our society the opposite is the case: secular music is no longer affected by sacred music, and in many churches the influence of secular (rock) music is clearly felt. That this is inappropriate needs hardly be mentioned. The church is to be a light to the world, not the other way around!

In all cases, however, the tunes were molded to fit the words. Although no distinction was made between secular and spiritual materials, a distinction was made between good and bad (or moral and immoral) materials.

> Let no one remind me that the German chorale was an importation from the old Plain Chant hymns.... The point is not where a composer gets an art from, but what he makes of it when he has got it. The German Protestants made of the chorale a living thing.[18]

Text and tune had to suit each other perfectly.

The determination of sixteenth-century hymnodists to have congregations sing the Word of God resulted in a remarkable proclamation in which message and melody were so intimately—almost indissolubly—joined as to form a new kind of utterance distinguished by a high degree of eloquence, a song in which the tune accurately and vividly reflected and expressed the text to which it was wedded.[19]

In drawing on liturgical, nonliturgical, and secular music, the Lutheran chorale had a sense of familiarity. By using appropriate material from the folksong Luther and his coworkers sanctified

> melodies familiar to the populace. The blending of Gregorian grandeur and exalted solemnity, on the one hand, with the intimate flavour of the folksong, on the other hand, has given the music of the chorale an eminently desirable quality. It represents an achievement in church music of the highest order.[20]

Gregorian chant lent itself eminently to a word-tone relationship since the music was the handmaiden of the word. Music gave a tone of reverence to the words; it added a mood (mode) in keeping with the character of the text. By using Gregorian material and casting it in a folk idiom, Luther and his colleagues preserved a nexus with tradition—and with the church of all ages—and at the same time elevated the musical taste of the common, ordinary man.

The Suitability of the Music. If there is anything which seems open to differences of opinion, it is certainly the suitability of the music. If music is to support the words, it needs to be able to stand on its own legs. This means that any tune which depends on an accompaniment cannot be accepted. For example, the familiar hymn "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" employs a melody which very much relies on its accompaniment. It sounds "bare" and "incomplete" to sing the melody by itself. Another example would be a melody which relies on a rhythmic component (such as drums) for its effectiveness.

A further criterion for the proper melody is that it should not draw attention to itself. For if it does, it can no longer support the text, since it draws attention away from the text. As soon as a melody says, as it were, "Look how pretty I am," it ceases to be effective in supporting the words. Pop or rock music can never be a suitable bearer of the gospel text, for its indigenous characteristics are opposed to the Gospel message. Dr. Calvin Johansson, professor of music at Evangel College (Springfield, Missouri), compared the characteristics of the Gospel and pop music as follows:

Gospel Characteristics	Pop Music Characteristics
Individuality	Quantity
Non-materialism	Materialism

Creativity	Novelty
Sacrifice	Immediate gratification
Discipleship	Ease of consumption
Joy	Entertainment
High standards	Least common denominator
Principles above success	Success first of all
Reality	Romanticism
Encouragement of the best	Mediocrity
Meekness	Sensationalism
Permanence	Transience

Dr. Johansson concludes that "if music is to be analogically related to the message of the words, then there is no possibility whatsoever of successfully matching the two in a pop song.[21]

Do the many blessings and conversions caused by a hymn justify its tune? No. It is possible for God to work good out of incorrect methodologies. For instance, when Moses disobeyed God and smote the rock with his rod, rather than speaking to it, water still came. To say, "It works, therefore it is good," is a pragmatic approach. Such an approach is not necessarily compatible with the Gospel. Dr. Johansson says about this that pragmaticism

> dilutes the gospel by allowing the music to be separated from and unaffected by Biblical discipline; it naïvely supports a worldview in which the absence of objective musical standards often leads to or is symptomatic of the erosion of a widely sweeping Biblical authority.[22]

Some might say at this point, "I find that this or that hymn tune brings me in a worshipful mood. Who are you to tell me what hymn tunes are proper." Such a statement indicates, however, that the questioner is more concerned with himself than with God. The question should never be whether a hymn is pleasing to our ears, but to God's. It is not whether *we* feel

"worshipful," but rather that *God* is praised.

This difference between God's ears and ours is most evident in the *sacramental* hymns of the Reformation, and the *sacrificial* hymns of Pietism. Whereas sacramental hymns caused the congregation to sing, teach, and preach God's Word to one another, the pietistic sacrificial hymns caused the congregations to arouse *themselves* so that with a heart thus stimulated they might sing hymns of praise and petition.[23]

The Significance of Hymn Singing. It is believed that of the spoken word only twenty percent is normally retained by the listeners. In contrast, the combination of melody and word is a stronger edifying tool than a sermon; not only are hymns repeated frequently—which is a most important factor in memorization—the combination of rhymed verse and music also serves as an excellent mnemonic device. This important quality of hymnody, little recognized today, was generally accepted in earlier times. True and false doctrines impress themselves quickly on the minds of people if they are sung. That Luther did not approve of Thomas Müntzer's liturgical reforms is well-known, but the danger of his liturgical endeavors

> was not as grave as that which Luther found in the hymns of Thomas Müntzer. Just as Roman Catholicism diverted attention away from Christ to His Mother, so did Müntzer employ in his hymns a Christology which diverted attention away from Christ's work of atonement and away from the *pro vobis*, away from the "for you" of his blessed Gospel to the exemplary character of Christ's life.[24]

How did Luther fight this doctrinal error? By posting another thesis on the church door, this time directed not at the church of Rome but at Müntzer? No, his response was through hymnody. His chorales *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* and *Nun freut euch lieben Christen g'mein* were written as a

corrective measure, counteracting the errors of the enthusiasts such as Müntzer who stressed the works of man rather than those of God. The hymn texts of the enthusiasts were sung to catchy tunes, and "it shows that hymn melodies have a power all their own and, like their texts, are living voices of truth or of error."[25] Luther's aim, of course, was to impress the everlasting scriptural truths upon the minds of the people, and he used hymnody to this end. In a time where literacy was not widespread, memorization was an important tool in having the Word dwell in them richly (Col. 3:16). In Luther's day, therefore, children were not only required to recite the six chief parts of Luther's *Small Catechism,* but they were also taught to sing them. The notes bring the text to life. Thus, religious poetry and music were used as a means to an end; both were used as God-given gifts in the service of religion. Hymn texts were in the service of the Word of God, and their melodies were bearers of the Word of God. The Lutheran chorale, then, served a dual purpose: as a *prædicatio sonora* it was a means of Christian education, but because music is also a creation of God, it had to be returned to Him in praise. Although Luther did not state the following, it certainly could have been one of his dictums: I am of the opinion that we should be singing more.

What Can We Learn from This? First, congregational singing is something which is primarily an act of thanksgiving to God. We give thanks to God for His granting us forgiveness for our sins through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, who thus bought for us eternal life.

Second, congregational singing has educational value. While we sing to God (a vertical activity), we also address one another (a horizontal activity). It is a true dictum that in the worship service only the best is good enough. One might think back to the Old Testament where all offerings to God were either the firstborn or the best. What we offer to God in our song is no different—only the best will do. Words and music

which cater to the lowest common denominator have no place in worship. Calvin believed that the best we have in terms of words is that which God Himself has given us: the Bible. Therefore, he insisted that congregational singing was singing the versified Psalms and other portions of Scriptures (Song of Mary, Song of Simeon, etc.). In terms of music, Calvin believed strongly that music should be the ancilla, the handmaiden, of the text. No catchy tunes, but simple music, which enabled the singer to focus all his attention on the words. At the same time, however, the melody had to have *poids et majesté* (weight and majesty), since it was sung in the presence of God and His holy angels.

When we realize that the educational power of congregational singing is so strong, we need also be aware of what we choose to sing in our services. We will need to ask ourselves: "Is this hymn true to Scriptures? Is it the best text and tune we can find? Does it indeed express our faith, so that at the same time when we offer this song to God, we will be strengthened in our faith?"

We have noted that hymn singing needs to be primarily vertical (praising God), and secondarily horizontal (as an edification for the congregation). When this is represented graphically, the result is: a cross. This is an interesting concept, for our reason to sing is founded in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ—His atonement for our sins on the cross. Our worship services are a rehearsal for God's plan of salvation; and when we have "finished" singing a hymn here on earth, the angels in heaven continue. When we realize this, we will sing with renewed vigor.

Endnotes

1 Buszin, W. E. "Melodies of Lutheran Chorales," *The Development of Lutheran Hymnody in America* (n.p.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 40.

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22 Ibid., 7.

23 Kliefoth, T. *Liturgische Abhandlungen, V: Die Ursprungliche Gottesdienstordnung in den deutschen Kirchen Lutherischen Bekenntnisses, Ihre Destruktion und Reformation*, pp. 232-35; quoted in *The Lutheran Heritage of the Church*, III:26.

24 Buszin, "The Dynamic Power of Christian Hymnody," 45.

25 Buszin, "The Melodies of Lutheran Chorales," 43.

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