



The Lutheran Church Is the Singing Church

Professor Joel Otto, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Luther's Lasting Impact

INTERACTIVE FAITH

AN ONLINE BIBLE STUDY SERIES



Introduction

Read the following quotes from Luther. Why do you think he spoke so strongly about music?

"I plainly judge, and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition... This is the reason why the prophets did not make use of any art except music; when setting forth their theology they did it not as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through Psalms and songs."

Luther to Ludwig Senfl, 4 October 1530

Luther's Works 49:427-28

"We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."

"Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*"

Luther's Works 53:323

Worship in the Medieval Church

Worship had some good stuff: songs of the liturgy; Scripture lessons; church year

Worship was mostly a "spectator sport"

Flowed from faulty theology

Luther's Reintroduction of Congregational Hymn Singing

Which of Luther's key theological emphases do you think were influential in his reintroduction and emphasis on congregational hymn singing?

Luther's reintroduction of congregational hymn singing served several purposes. Identify those purposes from the following quotes or descriptions.

"Following the example of the prophets and fathers of the church, I intend to make German Psalms for the people, i.e., spiritual songs so that the Word of God even by means of song may live among the people.

"Everywhere we are looking for poets... But I would like you to avoid new-fangled, fancied words and to use expressions simple and common enough for the people to understand, yet pure and fitting. The meaning should also be clear and as close as possible to the Psalm. Irrespective of the exact wording, one must freely render the sense by suitable words."

Luther to Georg Spalatin, 1523
Luther's Works 53:221

Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies. We keep the Latin for the sake of those who learn and understand it. We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn, something that will arouse their faith and fear.

Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:3

"God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it. And whoever does not want to sing and speak of it shows that he does not believe and that he does not belong under the new and joyful testament, but under the old, lazy, and tedious testament."

"Preface to the Bapst Hymnal"
Luther's Works 53:333

"For faith does not rest and declare a holiday; it bursts into action, speaks and preaches of this promise and grace of God, so that other people may also come up and partake of it. Yes, his great delight impels him to compose beautiful and sweet psalms and to sing lovely and joyous songs, both to praise and to thank God in his happiness and to serve his fellowmen by stimulating and teaching them."

"Treatise on the Last Words of David"
Luther's Works 15:273

“That it is good and God pleasing to sing hymns is, I think, known to every Christian; for everyone is aware not only of the example of the prophets and kings in the Old Testament who praised God with song and sound, with poetry and psaltery, but also of the common and ancient custom of the Christian church to sing Psalms. St. Paul himself instituted this in I Corinthians 14 [:15] and exhorted the Colossians [3:16] to sing spiritual songs and Psalms heartily unto the Lord so that God’s Word and Christian teaching might be instilled and implanted in many ways.

“Therefore I, too, in order to make a start and to give an incentive to those who can do better, have with the help of others compiled several hymns, so that the holy gospel which now by the grace of God has risen anew may be noised and spread abroad...

“These songs were arranged in four parts to give the young—who should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts—something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place, thus combining the good with the pleasing, as is proper for youth. Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them.”

*“Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal”
Luther’s Works 53:315-16*

“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 and by providing sweet melodies with words.”

*“Preface to Georg Rhau’s Symphoniae iucundae”
Luther’s Works 53:323*

“Husband and wife, young women and men, so many people have learnt [Luther’s hymns] that his Germans hymns and psalms became so well known that they were sung by the people daily in all churches before the sermons commenced, publicly, over and over again.”

Town chronicle of Magdeburg

“By God’s blessing, Luther’s hymns and other sacred songs swiftly furthered the progress of the Word of God from Saxony to other places throughout the German Nation, unfettered by the dreaded darkness and terrible tyranny of the papacy, and they have done well.”

Cornelius Becker, 1602

“[Luther’s] popular vernacular hymns were able to reach people swiftly, regardless of their ability to read, their social standing or their actual location, and effortlessly crossed national, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries.”

*J. Andreas Loewe, “Why Do Lutherans Sing?”
Church History 82:1 (March 2013), 72-73*

Examples of Luther's hymns

Different types of hymns

- ◆ Hymns for the Liturgy ("Isaiah, Mighty Seer;" "We All Believe in One True God")
- ◆ Hymns of the Ancient Church ("Savior of the Nations, Come;" "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord;" "We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost")
- ◆ Hymns for the Catechism (hymns on the chief parts of the catechism)
- ◆ Hymns based on the Psalms ("A Mighty Fortress;" "From Depths of Woe;" "May God Bestow on Us His Grace")
- ◆ Hymns of Faith ("Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice; "Lord, Keeps Us Steadfast in Your Word")
- ◆ Hymns for the Church Year ("From Heav'n Above to Earth I Come;" "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands")

Luther's hymns preach, proclaim, and interpret; they don't merely paraphrase.

The Lasting Impact of the Lutheran Church as the Singing Church

What do you think happened regarding worship and music in the decades following Luther's death?

"They [the means of grace] are essential especially for the immature and the young who must be trained and educated in the Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ. For such, one must read, sing, preach, write, and compose. And if it would help matters along, I would have all the bells pealing, and all the organs playing, and have everything ring that can make a sound."

"The German Mass and Order of Service"
Luther's Works 53:62

What unique place should music and hymns have in Lutheran worship considering the uniquely Lutheran theological emphases?

How does congregational hymn singing help us live out Colossians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:25?