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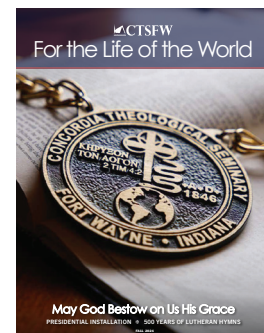
Stephen P. Starke
In 1999, I came across “O God, Beyond All Praising,” a hymn written by Michael Perry to the tune THAXTED. It was then that the thought came to me that the Te Deum, that great confession of faith from the ancient Church, could possibly be versified to fit that tune. Such a strong tune could well carry such a strong text!

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On the Cover

The chain of office, presented to new presidents at the time of their installation, features the seal of the Seminary with its motto, “Preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2) and the year of the Seminary’s founding, 1846. The president wears the chain of office at occasions requiring academic regalia, chiefly the opening service and commencement. (Photo: Marcos Navarro)



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).



LUTHER ON MUSIC IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

*Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
With exultation springing,
And with united heart and voice
And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done,
How His right arm the vict'ry won.
What price our ransom cost Him! (LSB 556:1)*

By Kevin J. Hildebrand

As the church celebrates the 500th anniversary of the first Lutheran hymnals, the words from “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” one of Martin Luther’s earliest hymns, help introduce his views about music within the life of the church. His work as hymnwriter can help guide the church’s study and practice of church music in our own day.

In the first phrase of the hymn, Luther encourages the entire church to sing. For Luther, singing is not an option reserved for the select few, for only those trained in music, or for those who may have a certain predilection for singing. Instead, this directive to rejoice with singing is for the entire body of Christ. Our English translation of the text directs this to “Christians, one and all,” similar to Luther’s original German, “*All und Ein*” (all and one, that is, everyone all together as well as individually). No one is excluded from the invitation, just as the church sings in the Venite, “Come, let us sing to the Lord.” There aren’t conditions or prerequisites. This singing is for you and for all.

Every culture in every time and place celebrates singing. In the Christian church, singing is more than merely an enjoyable activity (although it certainly should be). More significantly, the singing of the church’s song is proclamation of God’s grace and favor, his goodness and mercy, all shown in Christ Jesus. “Proclaim the wonders God has done,” Luther’s hymn states. CTSFW Kantor Emeritus Richard Resch taught many students this concise definition of a hymn: it is a sung confession of the faith. In fact, the remaining nine stanzas of “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” proceed with a strong sung confession.

Music and Theology

An oft-quoted phrase of Luther is “music is next to theology.” He wrote this in two different letters, once in German, and once in Latin. The “next to” aspect of this phrase is important. Liturgical scholars Walter Buszin and

Robin Leaver provide further insight on the translation of these words.¹ “Next” can mean “subordinate” or “next in line.” For example, I might be waiting in line at the CTSFW dining hall, and you are next, behind me. But “next to” can also mean a lateral relationship. I might be sitting in a pew in Kramer Chapel and you can sit next to me, side by side.

Both of these meanings are appropriate when considering Luther’s view of music. Nothing ever supercedes the Word of God, and our confession and practice (including music) are subordinate to God’s Word. However, for Luther, music and theology are also next to each other, or as Buszin explains, “beside each other,” not competing, but cooperating, and indicating how important this gift of music is and how diligently we should treat this astonishingly rich tradition in the church.²

Music as Praise and Proclamation

Luther wrote the following in the preface to a 1538 volume of church music:

It was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener’s soul, while in other living beings and instruments music remains a language without words.

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 and by providing sweet melodies with words.³

Luther states that music “moves the listener’s soul.” That is true, but many things can move the soul, even music intended for purposes other than the proclamation



Luther in the circle of his family, Gustav Spangenberg (1828–1891)



Photo: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/Erk M. Lunsford

LUTHER ON MUSIC IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

of God's Word. So what is the listener's soul moved to? The ultimate purpose of music, Luther concludes, is "to praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through and by providing sweet melodies with words."

Let's read that last phrase again with some further explanation. Luther writes that man should:

- ✦ Praise God [part of the Christian's vocation]
- ✦ With both words and music [the methods used in such praising of God], namely,
- ✦ By proclaiming the Word of God [another part of the Christian's vocation]
- ✦ Through and by providing sweet melodies with words [how the proclamation happens].

For Luther, the Christian is called to "praise God . . . by proclaiming the Word of God." To praise God and to proclaim God's Word are one and the same. God is praised when his Word is proclaimed, and God's Word is proclaimed when He is praised. This happens most significantly in the church's song—in hymnody, liturgy, canticles, and vocal and instrumental music, especially within the Divine Service. In her song, the church praises God by proclaiming His Word, and the church proclaims God's Word when He is praised.

An Ever-Expanding Tradition


Luther wrote about forty hymn texts. Some of them, like "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," were new and original texts. But some of Luther's hymns were based on Latin hymns of the early church, such as his translation of Ambrose's "Veni, redemptor gentium," which we know as "Savior of the Nations, Come" (*LSB* 332), or hymns based on medieval German hymns, including "Christ Jesus Lay In Death's Strong Bands" (*LSB* 458). In early Lutheran hymnals, hymns like these were headed with the German word *gebessert*, meaning "improved" or "made better." Luther was firmly rooted in the church's tradition, and he didn't throw out pre-Reformation song. Instead, he updated some of the errant theology in the text and sometimes altered a chant melody to make it more conducive to congregational singing.

On the other hand, the hymnals of 1524 and beyond did not include only pre-Reformation hymns that had been made *gebessert*. Luther, assisted by Kantor Johann Walter and other like-minded hymnwriters and composers, kept adding to the church's song within the church's tradition. This view of church music paved the way for a wealth

of hymnic and liturgical treasures in the Reformation era and beyond. Thousands of hymns were written, and many musical settings of the Divine Service were used in congregations. Composers wrote organ, choral, and instrumental music based on this growing repertoire of hymn tunes and liturgical music.

This is the ever-expanding tradition of church music that Martin Luther modeled in his hymns and liturgical writing. Here the church's song is never merely old or new, but faithful, thriving, and innovative. Hymnody never stops. Church music on this side of heaven is never finite or complete. Hymnwriters continue to create texts for the church to sing, and composers continue to craft melodies and musical settings for this proclamation. Daily chapel at CTSFW and the annual hymn festival at the Good Shepherd Institute are testimonies to this. (See page 13 for details about a new recording of hymns from CTSFW). One of our hymnal's prefaces called Luther's legacy of church music an "astonishingly rich tradition" (*Lutheran Worship*, CPH). Whether it's new arrangements of old hymns or new songs yet unwritten; new original texts or new translations of older resources, it is the church's responsibility both to maintain and to contribute to this astonishingly rich tradition.

The CTSFW community sang "May God Bestow on Us His Grace" at the opening service of this academic year, and the third stanza is a fitting conclusion to our consideration of Luther's views of music in the church, as we praise the Triune God by proclaiming the wonders He has done.

O let the people praise Thy worth,
In all good works increasing;
The land shall plenteous fruit bring forth,
Thy Word is rich in blessing.
May God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit bless us!
Let all the world praise Him alone,
Let solemn awe possess us.
Now let our hearts say, "Amen!" (*LSB* 823/824:3) 

- 1 Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications*, 65; 373, note #1.
- 2 Kirby Koriath, *Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin*, 222.
- 3 Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Iucundae*, Wittenberg, 1538. See LW 53:321 ff.



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