

Keynote Presentation III

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Following the theme of our conference, the topic of this address is “Make this plain in song.” To be clear, this is not an instruction about how to be boring and uncreative in our work as church musicians! No, what we’re considering today is how we make

- “this,” the biblical Gospel content of Christ justifying the sinner by grace through faith,
- “plain,” that is, clear, direct, accessible and faithful in what we say and sing.

How exactly does the Church do this? How does the church “make this plain” in song? When we consider the spectrum of musical choices in the Church of 21st century America, it’s obvious that these questions are being answered in a multitude of ways. For our purposes, I’d like to explore the answers to “how the Church makes this plain in song” by learning from church history, namely, how did Luther and his contemporaries answer these questions in the early years of the Reformation? Then, two hundred years later, how did Johann Sebastian Bach follow and expand that tradition as well?

I can guarantee that this address won’t answer all the questions that the Church has about its worship life. Instead, I hope this will *create* questions for all of us as we consider how we sing the church’s song and what choices we make. I believe that by learning from Luther and Bach, we can make some applications for us to take home to our own congregations as we make the Gospel plain and clear in the Church’s song.

As we look to history for inspiration, we are well reminded of the oft-quoted phrase by Norman Nagel in the preface to *Lutheran Worship (you know, the old hymnal)*, “We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition.”¹ To be **heirs** means to **receive** – by virtue of the goodness of the giver. Indeed, the Christian faith is one of inheritance, as Paul writes to Titus:

“[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5–7).

So, it gives us pause to consider this astonishingly rich tradition that we are privileged to be stewards of. The Church’s song is not our own, but like the rest of creation, it is given to man by God to take care of and use for His glory and the service of our neighbor. But unlike other bequests, this inheritance of the Church’s song is not static and finite. The Church’s song on earth is never quite complete. And the Church’s song in heaven is everlasting. Indeed, as Nagel continues in his preface, “Each generation *receives* from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in its own day—the living heritage and something new.”²

This both/and quality of the Church’s song: old and new, tradition and innovation is why the Reformers rightly called the Church’s song the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel. This living voice of

¹ *Lutheran Worship (LW)*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 6.

² *LW*, 6.



the Gospel belongs to no particular age or culture but endures and expands from generation to generation. Or as Philip Pfatteicher writes, “the Church relives its sacred days and appropriates their graces, bringing the past into the present, making all contemporary.”³

Therefore, our consideration of Luther 500 years ago, and Bach 300 years ago, is not merely a trip down memory lane, but a living, active and even mandatory consideration for us who are heirs of this astonishingly rich tradition.

Part 1

First, let’s consider Luther. In addition to all his other roles, (theologian, doctor of theology, professor, teacher, husband, father) Luther was a considerably good musician. He sang well, could play the lute and composed several hymn tunes and at least one polyphonic motet. Music, remember, was part of the core curriculum of subjects in those days, including the study of music theory and the practice of it, especially by student scholars singing in the choir at school, which functioned as the local parish choir. Despite the errors the Church was teaching, Luther was nevertheless nourished in the faith by the singing of the liturgy. You might even say that for many including Luther, the singing of the liturgy was the richest proclamation of the Gospel they heard and received even in the Church’s dark days.

One doesn’t need to look very far into Luther’s works to find ample evidence of Luther’s high regard of music, not only for its own sake, or for the enjoyment it certainly brings, but especially as it proclaims the Word of God. As he wrote in 1524, encouraging the composition of hymns, Luther said, “Follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and ... 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.”⁴ This is similar to what Paul wrote “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16).

We see further how highly Luther regarded music in his oft-cited quotation on music and theology, often translated as “Music is next to theology.” Originally written in German and Latin, the phrases read, “*Die Musik ist ... nahe der Theologie*,” and “*Music est ... theologia proxima*.”

The “next to” aspect of this phrase is key. Walter Buszin and Robin Leaver give us further insight on the translation of these phrases.⁵ We can associate “next” meaning “subordinate,” or “next in line.” (I’m waiting in line to get ice cream from the cafeteria machine, and you’re next, behind me.) But “next to” can also mean a lateral relationship. (I’m sitting in this pew in chapel and you can sit next to me). The latter approach is what Luther intends here. Music and theology are next to each other, or as Buszin explains, “beside each other,”⁶ not competing, but cooperating, and indicating the degree of importance this gift of music is and how diligently we should treat this astonishingly rich tradition in the Lutheran church.

³ Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Journey into the Heart of God*. (New York: Oxford, 2013), 21.

⁴ AE 49:68.

⁵ Robin A. Leaver. *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 65 and note #1, 373.

⁶ Kirby L. Koriath and Zager, Daniel, ed. *Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin*. (Ft. Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2003), 222.



We get further insight from Luther's preface to a 1538 volume of church music. Here Luther says,

"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

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."⁷

Note the purposes of music Luther gives here. First, he correctly identifies that music "moves the listener's soul." That's true, but lots of things can move the soul, even music intended for purposes other than the proclamation of God's Word. What is the listener's soul moved to? The ultimate purpose of such 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."

If we look even more closely at Luther's words here, it helps us clarify some definitions:

Praise God

With both word and music, namely,

By proclaiming the Word of God

Through and by providing sweet melodies with words.

Or, to simplify matters even further:

Praise God by proclaiming the Word of God.

To praise God and to proclaim God's Word are one in 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 what she says and sings. In her song, the Church praises God by proclaiming His Word, and the Church proclaims God's Word when He is praised.

Remember, the Lutheran ideal in the Reformation was that if the Church's practice was not contrary to Scripture, it was to be retained. That included the worship life of the Church. Abuses in the Mass were to be removed, but everything that was good, right and salutary was to be retained, including singing. Luther wrote,

"I believe that many hymns were included and retained in the Mass which deal with thanking and praising [God] in a wonderful and excellent way, as for example,

the Gloria in Excelsis,
the Alleluia,
the Creed,
the Preface,
the Sanctus,
the Benedictus,
and the Agnus Dei.

In these various parts you find nothing about a sacrifice but only praise and thanks. Therefore, we have also kept them in our Mass. Particularly the Agnus Dei, above all

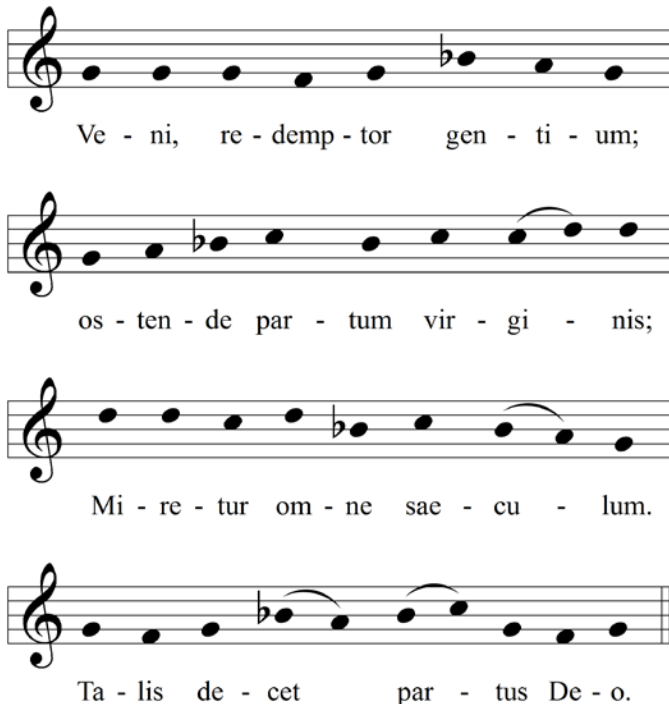
⁷ Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Iucundae*, Wittenberg, 1538. See AE 53:321 ff.

songs, serves well for the sacrament, for it clearly sings about and praises Christ for having borne our sins and in beautiful, brief words powerfully and sweetly teaches the remembrance of Christ.”⁸

Luther’s words about the Agnus Dei are particularly insightful. Luther calls this a canticle “above all songs,” and the church has been singing this text for centuries, following the example of John the Baptist’s first proclamation of these words. Whether it’s the paraphrase from the 16th century hymn, “Lamb of God, Pure and Holy,” one from the various Divine Service settings or more recent contributions for congregation or vocal ensembles, the “living tradition” of the church’s song and within the Church’s tradition is evident.

This leads us to a further characteristic of Luther’s theology and practice of church music, namely that he was in many ways a **liturgical and musical conservator**: As Robin Leaver explains in his new book, *The Whole Church Sings*, “Luther’s primary principle of reform [was] not the wholesale replacement of the old by the new but rather the *re-formation* of what was *old and good*, a conservation of what was valuable from the past rather than *the wholesale rejection of the old in favor of the new*.”⁹

Let’s consider an example of how Luther did just that, taking the old and good, but re-forming it. Among Luther’s hymns are revisions of classic Latin chants that Luther had grown up with, such as the chant, *Veni redemptor gentium*, which Luther re-formed into the hymn “Savior of the Nations, Come.” Let’s look at the original chant.



Ve - ni, re - demp - tor gen - ti - um;

os - ten - de par - tum vir - gi - nis;

Mi - re - tur om - ne sac - cu - lum.

Ta - lis de - cet par - tus De - o.

Compare it with Luther’s revision.

⁸ AE 38:123.

⁹ Robin A. Leaver. *The Whole Church Sings*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 80, emphasis added.



Sa - vior of the na - tions, come,



Vir - gin's Son, make here Your home!



Mar - vel now, O heav'n and earth,



That the Lord chose such a birth.

We can see the similarity in the contour of the melody and the shapes of the phrases. But what Luther also does here is simplify the tune and re-form the lyrics to make this hymn more accessible for congregational singing.

As an aside, this same practice was exercised by Paul Weber in his re-formation of the hymn, “The Royal Banners Forward Go” in *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*. You may remember that this hymn appeared in *Lutheran Worship* according to its original plainchant melody. Beautiful and lyrical, yes; but not as conducive to congregational singing as others. It certainly was used in some congregations, but in most places the hymn really went, for the most part, unused.



The roy - al ban - ners for - ward go;



The cross shows forth re - demp - tion's flow



Where He, by whom our flesh was made,



Our ran - som in His flesh has paid.

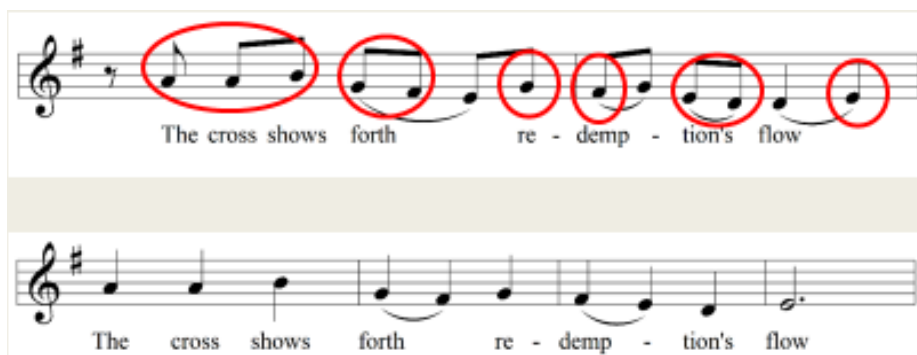


But this is a hymn worth singing. So, in the preparation of *LSB*, the composer Paul Weber altered the melody, similarly to how Luther altered the melody to create “Savior of the Nations, Come,” making it a bit simpler, with sequential and metrical musical phrases.

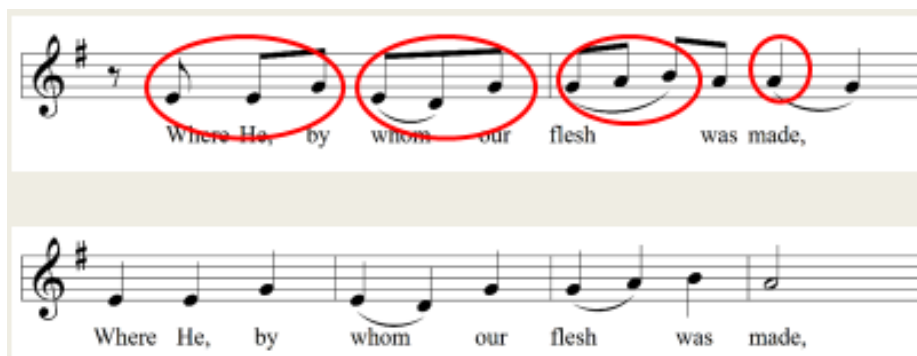
Here is the first phrase of “The Royal Banners,” showing the comparison between the original chant and Paul Weber’s revision:



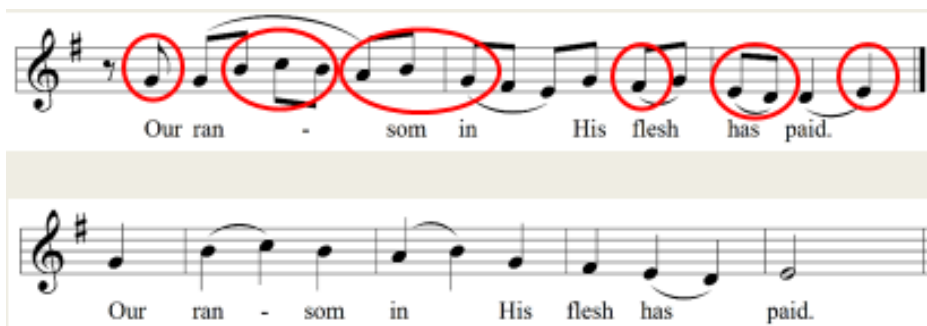
The second phrase.



The third phrase is the shortest, and thus has the least amount of revision necessary.



The final phrase shows a larger amount of simplification, particularly in the modification of how the word “ransom” is rearranged from having six notes in the original chant to only three in Weber’s revision.



In a similar way, Luther also re-formed existing vernacular German hymnody for use in parishes. It's important to remember that Luther did not “invent” congregational singing in the vernacular. During the Middle Ages, there were some isolated examples of congregational singing. Sometimes these were short, one-stanza hymns sung in sequence with the choir singing a more elaborate chant. We see an example of that in the hymn “Christians, to the Paschal Victim,” where the choir has the more elaborate chant, and the congregation responds with short verses of the ancient hymn, “Christ is Arisen.”¹⁰

Cantor/Choir

Chris-tians, to the Pas-chal Vic-tim Of-fer your thank-ful prais-es!

The Lamb the sheep has ran-somed: Christ, who on-ly is sin-less,

Rec-on-cil-ing sin-ners to the Fa-ther. Death and life have con-tend-ed

In that com-bat stu-pen-dous: The Prince of life, who died, Reigns im-mor-tal.

Congregation

I Christ is a-ris-en From the grave's dark

pris-on. So let our joy rise full and free;

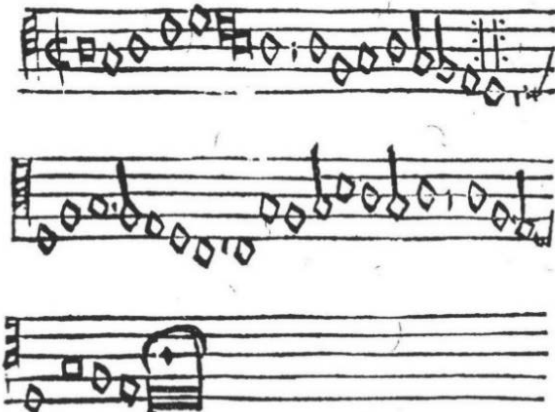
Christ our com-fort true will be. Al-le-lu-ia!

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¹⁰ LSB, 459 and 460.

Luther capitalized on the minimal amount of hymnody that the congregation already sang occasionally and made it better and improved (in German, the word “*gebessert*” means “improved”). In fact, in most early Lutheran hymn collections, the titles of the hymns are described as just that. For example, Luther in turn modeled his Easter hymn, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands” after “Christ is Arisen.” So, the title given in many early Lutheran hymnals is just that, “Christ is Arisen, improved ... *gebessert!*”

Der Lobsanck Christ ist erstanden/
Gebessert.



Christ lag yn todes banden/ fur vnser
sund gegebē. Der ist widder erstandē/
vnd hat vns bracht das leben. Des wir
sollen frolich seyn. Got loben vñ dācke
bar seyn vnd syngen Alleluia.
Den todt niemāt zwingen kund/ bey allē mensche
kündē. Das macht alles vnser sund/ keyn vnschult
war zu finden. dauon kam der tod so bald/ vñ nam
vber vns gewalt/ hielt vns yn seyn reich gefangē.

The genius of Luther’s reforms in congregational singing isn’t primarily in the fact that the congregation was singing at all, or that they were singing in the vernacular, as there were some aspects of that already in the pre-Reformation church. Instead, the significance of the congregational singing in the Lutheran church is the **content and context** of what is being sung. The **content** is the pure Gospel proclamation of the works of God, such as the truths of God’s Word, Law and Gospel, sin and forgiveness and chiefly the article of salvation by grace through faith. The inherent **context** for such proclamation is the Divine Service. Therefore, the ability – the privilege – for the local congregation not only to sing, but to sing *the liturgy* really is an underappreciated hallmark of the Lutheran Reformation.

So far, we’ve been discussing Luther’s re-forming of existing hymnody. But we know, of course, that Luther and others in the early days of the Reformation also contributed their own original hymns to the Church. For example, one of the hymns in the very first Lutheran hymn collection in 1524 is Luther’s own “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” (LSB 556).



- 1 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!
- 2 Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay;
 Death brooded darkly o'er me.
 Sin was my torment night and day;
 In sin my mother bore me.
 But daily deeper still I fell;
 My life became a living hell,
 So firmly sin possessed me.
- 3 My own good works all came to naught,
 No grace or merit gaining;
 Free will against God's judgment fought,
 Dead to all good remaining.
 My fears increased till sheer despair
 Left only death to be my share;
 The pangs of hell I suffered.
- 4 But God had seen my wretched state
 Before the world's foundation,
 And mindful of His mercies great,
 He planned for my salvation.
 He turned to me a father's heart;
 He did not choose the easy part
 But gave His dearest treasure.

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The first stanza is really an invitation to the Church to do what it does best – to sing, to proclaim the wonders God has done. And remember, in doing such proclamation, what is the Church doing? Praising God. So, stanza one is delightful, but it really hasn't told the entire story yet. Luther reminds us to praise God by "proclaiming the wonders God has done." And as a professor who lectured on the psalms, Luther gives us imagery directly from Psalm 98 to describe these wonders of God, "His right arm the victory won," by his payment of our ransom by Christ's suffering and death. But there is still more of the story to be sung.

Stanza two begins with characteristically frank and vivid language, as Luther describes the sinful state of man:

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay;
 Death brooded darkly o'er me.
Sin was my torment night and day;
 In sin my mother bore me (*we get a little teaching of original sin here*).



And it gets worse from there:

But daily deeper still I fell;
My life became a living hell (*This is not simply a flippant phrase, it's true!*).

Stanza three must have been a revelation to sing for Christians in 1524, in direct contradiction to what they had known previously, “my own good works all came to naught, no grace or merit gaining.” Ultimately, our own good works end up with death and hell. And then Luther does a remarkable thing, he turns the tables and now the Gospel enters in,

But God had seen my wretched state
Before the world's foundation,
And mindful of His mercies great,
He planned for my salvation. (LSB 556:4).

The original German is even more vivid and describes how God despaired, even wailed over losing us. So, what does God do? He turns to me “a father's heart.” That's a phrase that is also in the original German also, *Vaterherz*, and Luther uses this same terminology elsewhere in his writing to describe God's tender love for His children.

Then the hymn goes on to continue telling the story of salvation, proceeding from the Father's heart. In the successive stanzas, Luther retells the story of God's love for his fallen creation and the love for His Son, whom Luther calls the “bright jewel” of the Father's crown. We sing of the incarnation and birth of Christ, his suffering and death and the Christian's comfort found therein. We sing of Christ's ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit, who keeps the Christian church in the one true faith.

Not every hymn can, or should, be ten stanzas of didactic explanation. Not every hymn or song needs to say everything, but every hymn or song needs to say *something*! Evaluating this content in the choices we make is a key consideration for pastors and church musicians.

This is a good opportunity to continue to debunk a myth that refuses to die: the myth of Luther borrowing melodies from non-churchly sources in order to make his hymns attractive. Now it is true that Luther sometimes took existing melodies that were being sung *in the church* and improved them, such as we analyzed in his treatment of “Savior of the Nations, Come.” But that's quite different than the myth of Luther borrowing a popular secular tune and simply inserting Christian lyrics to create a hymn.

An earlier worship gathering over a decade ago included a fine summary of this myth busting in a presentation by Dr. Daniel Zager, then later described in his book, *The Gospel Preached Through Music*.¹¹ Dr. Zager accurately explained that there are simply no examples of Luther's hymn tunes that can be described in the manner of “borrowing from secular sources,” or “tunes that were sung in bars.” And although we know Luther enjoyed his stein of beer, there's no connection between drinking songs and Lutheran hymns. I speculate that the perpetuation of this myth is also due to a misinterpretation of the word “Barform,” a term which describes the form, or arrangement of the musical phrases, in many hymns of the 16th century.

¹¹ Daniel Zager. *The Gospel Preached Through Music: The Purpose and Practice of Lutheran Church Music*. (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2013).



A Dear Chris-tians, one and all, re-joice, With ex-ul-ta-tion spring-ing,

A And with u-ni-ted heart and voice, And ho-ly rap-ture sing-ing,

B Pro-claim the won-ders God has done, How His right arm the vic-t'ry won, What price our ran-som cost— Him.

In this example, we can see that the first two phrases of the hymn have identical melodies. In analyzing this musical form, we'll call the first phrase "phrase A." Since the next phrase has exactly the same melody, we'll also call it "phrase A." Then the rest of the hymn tune has a different melodic structure. Just to keep it simple, we'll call the last half of the hymn melody, "phrase B." So, the musical form here is "A-A-B." Another way of naming this musical form is the German word "Barform." We even use the word "bar" to describe measures (such as, "Why don't you play a few bars of that tune for us, pal?") or "barlines" to describe measure lines. These are very different bars than your local watering hole!

"Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," was in the first Lutheran hymn collection in 1524. Not really a "hymnal" as we know it, this collection was more like a booklet, as it included only eight songs. In fact, in a strikingly uncreative example of "making it plain," this booklet was nicknamed simply, the *Achtliederbuch*, or "The eight songs book." In contrast, 500 years later, churches have almost limitless musical choices at their disposal. Because of that, it's beneficial and necessary to evaluate the content and context of the singing in our own congregations by asking some evaluative questions. For example,

- Are our own congregations taking advantage of the Reformation principle of being privileged to sing the Divine Service?
- Or do they even sing anything?
- Has there been (in Leaver's words) "a wholesale rejection of the old in favor of the new?"
- Or, conversely, is there "a wholesale rejection of the new in favor of the old?"

It is not healthy or helpful to construct some kind of litmus test for our congregations' musical life. However, perhaps we should question whether it's healthy or helpful if our congregations *never* get to know any hymns of Luther or the Reformation, whether they're sung, read, prayed or preached. Or if our congregations never use any aspects of the Divine Service, whether a recently composed or a classic musical arrangement, or never use the language of the Church, like "Lord, have mercy," and "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world," as Luther encouraged. If we believe Nagel's proposition that we are "heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition," then these are questions worthy of our consideration.



Part II

Now let's time warp forward two hundred years from 1517 to consider the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), particularly as this conference coincides with the July 28 commemoration of Bach in the church's calendar. We can learn a great deal from Bach's life and how he served as a church musician as we consider how to make the sung confession of the faith plain and clear in 2017. Like Luther, Bach's early life was molded by rich musical and liturgical examples, setting the stage for Bach's own considerable contributions to the church's musical and liturgical life down the road, especially as we consider his career as Kantor in Leipzig in the early 1700s.

Bach's job as Kantor was to instruct the school students in music (and oversee the instruction of Latin and the catechism), and to oversee all the music making in the city churches, particularly the two biggest ones, St. Thomas and St. Nikolai. How Bach functioned as a faithful Lutheran church musician in Leipzig can give us insight into how we also serve our congregations.

Predominance of the Chorale

The first thing for us to learn from Bach is the predominance of the Lutheran chorale in his life and works. Like Luther, Bach forged a synthesis of old and new with his use of the Lutheran chorale, both in his instrumental and vocal works. *The church's hymnal* was the backbone of and source of inspiration for much of Bach's compositional output in Leipzig. We see this exemplified with particular distinction in his sacred cantatas.

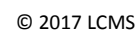
The cantata of 18th century Lutheran church practice functioned as another proper of the day in the Divine Service. It would usually be sung before the sermon, or if it was particularly lengthy, sometimes half would be sung before the sermon, and the second half would be sung after the sermon or during the distribution of the Lord's Supper. Typically, Bach would collaborate with a text writer, a librettist, who assembled the text for the cantata. These texts would generally be drawn from the Scripture reading(s) for the day, appropriate hymn stanzas and sometimes freely-composed theological poetry expanding on the themes presented in the Scripture and hymns. All in all, the cantata would do what the hymns, liturgy and sermon do, that is, to proclaim the Gospel message for that Sunday or festival.

Let's consider some examples of how Bach used these hymns and chorales in his cantatas. He typically concludes a cantata with a stanza of a four-part chorale. Or sometimes a cantata will begin with an opening chorus that is a full-blown fantasia on a hymn stanza. At other times, Bach uses a hymn stanza as a commentary on an additional text: In cantata 106, "God's Own Time is the Best," a reflection on the Christian's death, there is a wonderful moment where the bass soloist is singing the words of Jesus spoken to the dying thief on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise." As the listener hears those words of comfort, Bach layers the first stanza of Luther's hymn paraphrase of the Nunc Dimittis above it, "In peace and joy I now depart, as God now wills it," sung by treble voices.



We see how Bach makes a proclamation about the Christian's death and eternal life by combining these two texts and melodies. And it's not just simply a perfunctory inclusion of the chorale stanza. He uses the text as inspiration for how the music is composed. When the choir sings the word "sleep," look what happens, there's a very long note that paints that text through the music.

Or, Bach even uses the associations that a melody or musical style has to his advantage. In the Christmas Oratorio, for example, he couples the melody for “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” with Paul Gerhardt’s hymn text, “O Lord, how shall I meet You, How welcome You aright?” It’s Christmas morning, and the congregation has heard only a few minutes of the Christmas story so far, and we’re already being reminded of Good Friday. Here Bach uses that melody to make that association – viewing the manger in the light of the cross.



Later, at the end of the first movement of the Christmas Oratorio (the cantata for Christmas Day), the closing chorale is a combination of the sweet, simple text of Luther's "Ah, Dearest Jesus, Holy Child," interspersed with raucous trumpet fanfares and timpani echoing the first movement. Who plays trumpet fanfares and beats drums loudly while a baby is sleeping?! (Not a little drummer boy, that's not Biblical!) But Bach does, as a theologically sensitive musician. When trumpets and drums play, that signifies that royalty is present. The music is not neutral, but instead, Bach uses this effect to proclaim that this sweet, small child (*herzliebster Kindelein*) is also the king, the king of the universe, God incarnate in swaddling cloths in a lowly manger, the king whose throne is the cross and whose crown is thorns.

That brings us to our second point: **Bach demonstrated his skill at the highest level of his ability and with theological discernment.** Bach's musical genius is evident for the listener from the first few bars of the swirling orchestra introduction in the opening chorus of the St. John passion, or those five timpani notes to begin the Christmas Oratorio, or even the gentle ritornello of what's commonly known as "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." Although Bach was born into a family where music making was the chief vocation, and he obviously had great aptitude in musical performance and composition, these things don't just happen. Bach worked at it. He studied it in school, at home, was taught by his father and brother, sought out other teachers to learn and study from, and kept refining and honing his art and craft throughout his lifetime. He even revised and reused some of his work throughout his life, making modifications along the way.

Fortunately for the rest of us, we need not perform or compose at the ability level of Bach, or else none of us would even bother. We thank God for the great skill and artistry of Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Walter, Felix Mendelssohn, Richard Hillert and Paul Manz. But what the Church also needs are those musicians who operate at the best of their ability in their congregations and schools, week in and week out. For most, that will mean diligently preparing the music for each week so it is played with skill and confidence to encourage the congregation's singing. Even, or especially, music that is simple but not simplistic, played skillfully, is the basis for well-ordered church music.

Continuing education, such as this conference, is part and parcel of the church musician's ongoing training. And not only does excellence in our vocation include our own performance, but also the resources we have to serve God's people, seeking excellence and quality in the instruments used to lead God's people in song; evaluating architecture and acoustics so that the congregation's singing is encouraged – and not discouraged – by the room itself; planning well in advance so that pastor, musician and congregation are well rehearsed, well studied and well prepared.

In addition to musical skills, Bach's theological wisdom informed his musical choices and planning. We know Bach himself was catechized with faithful Lutheran materials and resources, especially the Scriptures, catechism and hymnal. Bach's library was filled with Luther's works and other faithful Lutheran material. His own Bible commentary, including many annotations in his own handwriting, provide further insight to Bach the faithful Lutheran theologian. This provides us even further questions to evaluate our own work:

- Can this example from Bach also inspire us as well?
- Are we choosing music that is not only appropriate, but at an appropriate ability level for us and our parish musicians to perform skillfully?
- What are we reading and studying? What is forming and informing our theological study and practice?
- Like Bach, does faithful Lutheran material inform us and the musical choices we are making?



A third consideration in Bach's life and work is how his music is framed according to the church year and lectionary. The tradition in Leipzig was that there was a cantata sung every Sunday and festival in the Church Year except for the Sundays in Lent and the final three Sundays in Advent. We have record of five years' worth of cantata cycles that Bach composed, and about 60% of them survived. That makes about 250 cantatas that Bach would have written during those first years in Leipzig. And the inspiration for that industrious writing was the church calendar and appointed Scripture readings. Even one of Bach's organ collections, the *Orgelbüchlein*, is organized according to the Church Year.

What does this mean for us? To be subject to the Lectionary and the Church Year really is a discipline – and the root word here is disciple, one who learns. There is much more for us, like Bach, to learn from this practice than we may initially realize. As Philip Pfatteicher says, “The liturgical year is not a lifeless representation of the events of the past or a bare record of a former age. It is rather Christ himself who is ever living in his Church.”¹² Being subject to the Church Year and lectionary isn't a shackle on creativity; Bach disproves that idea handily! Instead, the Church Year and lectionary shapes and forms us by what God has to say to us in his word for each particular Sunday and festival. My former colleague, Richard Resch, put it this way in his hymn text,

The gifts are there each day
the holy Word is read;
God's children listen, hear,
Receive, and they are fed.
Christ fills them with Himself,
Blest words that give them life,
Restoring and refreshing
Them for this world's strife.¹³

A final consideration of Johann Sebastian Bach's music is how church music in his congregations was intended for the entire congregation. One thing worth remembering when considering Bach's vocal music is that his choirs would have been composed of students from the St. Thomas School. That is, the singers were largely children and teenagers. This is not the Thursday at 7 p.m. church choir as we know it! They were full time students, and intense musical education was part of the core curriculum. These boys at St. Thomas had choir rehearsal for one hour every day. They were all musically literate, and extremely capable of singing some of the most complex music ever written.

Now, we can't easily recreate an 18th century European education system in our day and age. Those factors are simply out of our control. But there are some factors that Bach's students experienced that we can control. First, these boys lived and sang within a rich musical and liturgical environment, just like Martin Luther. Exactly how rich, how musical and how liturgical of an environment we are providing for the children in our churches is something we can easily affect.

Second, we can make choices for our choirs or vocalists or bands to sing like Bach did – based on the church year and lectionary, having them function within the Divine Service singing psalms, alleluia verses, creative hymn settings, Scripture texts or other parts of the Divine Service. This is all part of that “astonishingly rich tradition” we have been reflecting upon today.

But why bring children along into this rich tradition at all? The answer is the same reason that Bach did ... to teach the faith, to confess the faith, by singing the faith. It is to proclaim the wonders God has done

¹² Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God*, 21.

¹³ *LSB* 602:4.



by singing of Christ and His gifts to His Church. When children are singing “God’s own child, I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ,” they are praising God by confessing that faith they have received in Baptism. They’re not just the future of the church – they **are** the church right now.

Luther wrote a hymn which was subtitled, “a song for children.” It’s “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word.”¹⁴ In this ever-hostile world that we and our children find ourselves in, perhaps children need to sing this hymn now more than ever. Praying to be steadfast, that Jesus would preserve them in His Holy Church, and then to sing of a Christian’s death – or more accurately, that the Lord would “lead us out of death to life.” This children’s song doesn’t deny the ravages of this sinful world, but acknowledges them and teaches us all to sing about dying in Christ and rejoicing in eternal life. It’s really what the children sing every year on Christmas Eve, when they sing about dying and rising again in Christ.

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
**Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with Thee there.** (LSB 364/365:3)

Or when we teach them to sing with us,

Who so happy as I am,
Even now the Shepherd’s lamb?
**And when my short life is ended,
By His angel host attended,
He shall fold me to His breast,
There within His arms to rest.** (LSB 740:3)

I think an illustration of church music belonging to the entire congregation is shown on the cover of our programs for this week. This interesting altarpiece from the town church in Wittenberg. This is a wonderful picture of Christ’s Church – look at the congregation: old, young, men, women, little kids, listening to the preaching, being pointed to Christ, receiving Christ’s gifts, and of course, all singing together.

Despite the passing of 500 years, the church finds itself today in similar circumstances to the Reformation era – a Church which is struggling with its identity, beset with no small amount of toil and tribulation and tumult, in a society which in many ways is hostile towards the Church, a government which at times acts in opposition to the Church and with the threat of Islamic terrorism making headlines around the world.

But whether we’re speaking of life in 1517 or life today in 2017, what is the Church to do? Well, in good times and bad, the Church should do one of the things it does best – the Church sings. In fact, *especially* when the Church is experiencing the cross should we sing. We need to hear of the wonders God has done and how, despite the world being filled with devils eager to devour us, God’s right hand has won the victory through his Son, Jesus Christ, and He holds the field forever. This is what we hear and proclaim in the Church’s song. This is what the Church *makes plain* in every time and place.

¹⁴ Literally, the title in the 1533 *Geistliche Lieder* published by Joseph Klug is not the first line of the hymn text as we typically use today, but rather, “Ein kinderlied zu singen wider die zween Ertzfeinde Christi und seiner heiligen Kirchen den Papst und Turcken,” (A children’s hymn, to be sung against the two archenemies of Christ and his Holy Church, the pope and Turk.”) See also Precht, Fred, ed. *Lutheran Worship Hymnal Companion*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 352.



Conclusion

What happens the day after Oct. 31, 2017? It will be All Saints Day, Nov. 1, 2017, and we will begin the *next 500 years* of preaching, liturgy and church music. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Indeed, and particularly *because* of our colleagues Martin Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach, who contributed so magnificently to the richness of this tradition – and the astonishment of it. The hymns of Luther and the early Reformation are still alive and well, and so is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. But that doesn't happen by itself. It requires dedicated pastors, musicians, teachers and families to pass along that tradition.

In fact, many of those early Reformation hymns that were sung in the little town of Wittenberg in the 1520s are now known in languages and settings all over the world. Could Luther have ever imagined that? And Bach's music is known and loved by exponentially more people now than ever heard him perform it in Leipzig. An astonishingly rich tradition? Yes. And all of us, and the dear Christians we serve in our parishes and schools, are the heirs and stewards and beneficiaries of this ever-expanding tradition.

Whether it's new arrangements of old hymns, or new songs yet unwritten; new original texts or new translations of older resources, it is our responsibility both to maintain and to contribute to this astonishingly rich tradition. How the tradition expands, or how it doesn't, is still something the Church is figuring out. The Church in its wisdom moves slowly in these matters. It is not always easy to figure out how to conserve what is valuable from the past and avoid "*the wholesale rejection of the old in favor of the new.*"

I will conclude with two proposals and two hymns. The first proposal is that we meet again in three years, and six years and beyond, to reconsider and reevaluate these principles of Luther and Bach, and to reconsider and reevaluate how we are doing as heirs of this astonishingly rich tradition. The second proposal is that we also meet again in fifty-years for the 550th anniversary of the Reformation (everyone mark your calendars now, please).

And now, related to that proposal, two hymns: First, the final stanza of Martin Franzmann's "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth," written fifty-years ago, for the 450th anniversary of the Reformation. These words, although fifty years old, are quite timeless.

O Spirit, who didst once restore
Thy Church that it might be again
The bringer of good news to men,
Breathe on Thy cloven Church once more,
That in these gray and latter days
There may be those whose life is praise,
Each life a high doxology
To Father, Son, and unto Thee.¹⁵

And finally, two stanzas of Philip Melancthon and Nicolaus Selnecker's Reformation hymn, "Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide." May these stirring words be our prayer as we approach this year's Reformation anniversary.

¹⁵ LSB 834:4.

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide.
O let Your Word, that saving light,
Shine forth undimmed into the night.

May glorious truths that we have heard,
The bright sword of Your mighty Word,
Spurn Satan that Your Church be strong,
Bold, unified in act and song.¹⁶

¹⁶ *LSB* 585:1, 4.