

Hymn Festival Meditation

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Luther not only preached and taught the Gospel to the people but he was determined to sing the Gospel into the hearts and minds of God's people with sturdy texts and vigorous rhythms. In contrast to Zwingli who had no place for music in worship and Calvin who accepted only metrical psalm singing, Luther was a radical reformer. He embraced the arts and no art higher than music, the handmaiden to theology itself. Luther was unabashed about this joyful medium. He said, "St. Augustine was afflicted with scruples of conscience whenever he discovered that he had derived pleasure from music and had been made happy thereby; he was of the opinion that such joy is unrighteous and sinful."¹ Not Luther. Instead he encouraged the nurture of this lively art both for the glory of God and for the proclamation of His holy Word. The voice of the Christian community in song was to be the *viva vox evangelic*, the living voice of the Gospel. In this, Luther was not alone.

Luther was surrounded by musicians who shared not only desire but depth in the sung Gospel. Johann Gottfried Walter and Georg Rhau were followed by Hans Leo Hassler, Michael Praetorius, Johann Hermann Schein, Samuel Schmidt and Heinrich Schütz – long before the hallowed name of Bach. And now we have honored two from our own time in Carl Schalk and Henry Gerike. These were men of art and craft united by a common piety and faith as musicians of the Church, serving the cause of the Gospel within the context of the Divine Service and the worship life of God's baptized people. This was not self-expression but the preaching of the Gospel through music.

This was the robust and joyful song of a Church which had learned to rejoice again. "Music creates joyful hearts,"² wrote Luther. This is the fruit of the Gospel, the deep and profound result of the Word of God. "It is the function of music to arouse the sad, sluggish, and dull spirit."³ Luther commented on Psalm 4 and again on Psalm 118 he said, "A good song is worth singing twice. It is customary for people, when they are really happy or joyful, to repeat a word two or three times. They cannot say it often enough, and whoever meets them must hear it. This is the case here, that the dear saints are so happy and joyful over the miracles God does for them when He delivers them from sin and death, that is, from every evil of body and soul, that out of sheer joy they sing their song over and over again."⁴

Every once in a while, I gave my congregation a chance to choose between the hymn we sang, with its dozen or two dozen or three dozen stanzas AND the sermon. My family were the only voices singing the hymn again!

¹ Walter E. Buszin, "Luther on Music," *Luther's Works*. (Erlangen), 89.

² LW, 10:43.

³ LW, 10:43.

⁴ LW, 14:83.



If the cause of the great Reformation has stumbled in our time, could it be that we have forgotten how to sing the Gospel with such fervent and honest joy? Have we found the sturdy songs that helped restore the Gospel's joy too tame or boring or long for our brief attention spans? Have we borrowed so often from others not invested with this musical integrity until we have forgotten the rich treasure of our own music is to serve the Gospel for its holy purpose of faith and good works?

In a vain effort to explain the congregational song of the Reformation some have presumed that Luther had to borrow melodies from the bar or steal folk songs from culture in order to raise a new song to the Lord. The lies have been spoken so often that we have come to believe the devil has all the good music and we are left with somber dirge. But for Luther this God-given music was also the means of stymieing the demons. He wrote to composer Ludwig Senfl, "Manifest proof of this is the fact that the devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight at the word of theology."⁵

What would Luther say to the way we have so willingly surrendered music to the cause of the individual and the celebration of the passions of the sinful heart? Have we also yielded to the idea that music is no more than the expression of the heart? Have we surrendered the idea of joy to the satisfaction of desire and rejoice no more in Christ whose cross has released us from sin's death grip? Have we given up the idea that music is God's gift to accompany the Word into our hearts and minds so that our voices may extend its sound to the world? If our remembrance of the sound of the Reformation is to bear fruit for our own time, let it be from a people who have renewed conviction that "God has preached the Gospel through music."⁶

⁵ LW 49:427–428; WA BR 5:639.

⁶ LW 54:129–130.

