

## Unwrapping the Gift — The Lutheran Confessions By Victor Gebauer

### No. 1: About God and Music

The LCMS's worship staff has proposed a series of short articles about worship and music focused on the Lutheran confessional writings in *The Book of Concord* (translation edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, 2000). Admittedly, the Confessions are not always prime reading for church musicians. Those 660 pages of solid theology (plus 174 pages of indexes) can be daunting, even for pastors and theologians, and don't fit well in a demanding schedule of practice and choir rehearsals. Unfortunately that leaves a rich resource on the shelf, and we miss out on a profound understanding of who we are, what worship is all about, and what makes good music. Which leads to a two-part invitation.

- Let's take up our music and worship questions in this "e-zine" format and look at them confessionally from *within* our faith to strengthen what we believe, teach, and sing in worship.
- Share your questions or experiences in music and worship either here or by email ([vgebauer@bitstream.net](mailto:vgebauer@bitstream.net)). What questions might we explore? How can theology impact the real week-by-week calling of worship leadership? I can't promise that every thought will find its way into future articles, but each will be considered.

In this first unwrapping of the Confessions, let's explore a fundamental, universal question: **just what is the music for worship; how do we know it when we see it?** At first glance it's pretty obvious. It's the music used in the worshiping assembly of baptized people: hymns, choral pieces, organ or instrumental arrangements. But there's more to it in this age of diverse cultural preferences, competing claims about styles, even divergent purposes for worship. We are all tired of the arguments — which have sometimes escalated into "worship wars" — but still we search for answers.

For example, a well-known choral director recently wrote that churches should widen the circle musically because "all good music is *sacred* music" (original emphasis) and should not be excluded from worship "simply because the word 'God' is not in the text." In this view any truly "good" music is good for worship. Of course, that begs the question of what is "good" and who decides. An organist once argued to me that he was the professional expert in music and that the congregation owed him the courtesy of listening to a Messiaen work as postlude if he took the trouble to learn such a difficult piece. In this view, what's good for worship is what the musical expert decides. Others have passionately argued that all music in church must be the popular music of our own times. And they all have a point. The quality of the music (and its performance!) is important. How worshipers hear and respond deeply concerns those who serve the assembly. Music beyond the congregation's experience can be like trying to worship in a foreign language.

To think confessionally about all this, let's begin where the confessions begin — with the three creeds (Nicene, Apostolic, and Athanasian) because those creeds are about God and the Church's core beliefs about God. Similarly the Augsburg Confession (AC), the foundational Lutheran

statement, begins not with the human condition or humanity's search for the eternal but with God's way of being known among us, echoing the language of the creeds. It is theological language, but that first irreducible article in AC I launches all the rest of what we believe.

If we follow AC I we gain perspectives on music which serves in worship.

(1) Whichever music or texts we use, irreducibly everything we do will be about God. Messiaen or Mendelssohn or "CCM" may be "good" music. But only if such music always proclaims and worships God for those assembled to worship. St. Paul had the same idea (I Corinthians 14).

(2) AC I.1 (first sentence) tells us who this God is in terms the whole church teaches "with complete unanimity." We might, of course, do music which is artistic, contemporary, classical, popular, or esoteric — each may have some value for certain gatherings of people — but music ought express "who we are" or "what speaks to us" in a way which connects us with the "unanimity" of the Church that holds one faith and one Lord.

(3) Theological statements are needed to clarify our faith, but theology is the teacher not the goal. The goal is worship. And the center is Jesus Christ. Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon once commented that it is better "to adore the mysteries of the Deity than to investigate them." Melancthon went right on to specify that adoration inevitably draws us not so much to God's majesty as to our weak humanity in the flesh. What we adore is what God chooses to reveal, centered in Jesus Christ, the Son made flesh. And our music must be about that incarnate Son — every time!

Church musicians and worship leaders will inevitably struggle with the choice of music in a context of conflicting opinions. It's part of the job. But when we think confessionally, we will more clearly recognize the music appropriate for worship when we see it.