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Title: The Hymns of Luther

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Confessing the Holy Trinity (Part 1)

After Martin Luther returned from his stay at the Wartburg Castle, he was confronted with the need to develop practical reforms of the church in accordance with his new evangelical insights. One project which he had already begun while at the Wartburg was the translation of the Bible into German. Another, which he would soon take up, was the writing of hymns in the language of the people.

In all, Luther composed some three dozen hymns over a span of 20 years. Nearly two-thirds of these were written within a couple of years, beginning in 1523. Always concerned with the instruction of the people, Luther's hymns, together with his Bible translation and later his Small Catechism, quickly became an important vehicle for imparting the faith to God's people.

Because Luther used a variety of sources and wrote for a number of different purposes, his hymns contain a wide assortment of theological topics. Not surprisingly, his rediscovery of the Gospel—that in Christ God has reconciled the world to himself—figures prominently.

But what about the Trinity? A cursory examination of Luther's hymns could lead to the conclusion that the Trinity does not play a prominent role in the hymns. But is this accurate?

Luther's Doctrine of the Trinity

While there isn't sufficient space here even to begin to consider Luther's teaching on the Trinity, a few comments are necessary. To begin, one can say without reservation that Luther accepted the church's unanimous teaching on the Trinity as it had been handed down during the previous 15 centuries. This was the teaching of the Lutheran Church as confessed in the very first article of the Augsburg Confession (1530). Similarly, in the first article of his Smalcald Articles (1537), Luther reiterated the classic teaching on the Trinity.

More telling of Luther's approach to and understanding of the Trinity are some concluding remarks that he made in several significant writings. For example, in the Large Catechism Luther concludes his treatment of the creed with these words:

In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. . . . We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit (Large Catechism II, 64, 65).

And in Luther's Great Confession of 1528, he concluded his personal confession of faith with the following:

These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us. . . . The Son himself subsequently gave himself. . . . The Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely (Luther's Works, 37:366).

In both of these quotations, the emphasis in Luther's trinitarian understanding comes into focus. Rather than dwelling on the inscrutable mysteries of the divine essence, Luther is interested in exploring what it means that God is triune—specifically, what it means for our salvation.

PART 1: THE FATHER

With this admittedly brief consideration of Luther's trinitarian thought, we will now proceed to consider how his hymns reflect this understanding. In this first part, our focus will be on the Father. The following themes are prominent to some degree in the hymns. While many examples could be provided, the following offer a glimpse into the richness of Luther's hymns.

Creator and Preserver

In his catechisms, Luther deals almost exclusively with the Father's work of creation and preservation in his explanation of the first article of the creed. Two obvious places where this theme is found in Luther's hymns are those based on the creed and the Lord's Prayer. First, the creed hymn:

We all believe in one true God,
 Who created earth and heaven,
 The Father, who to us in love
 Has the right of children given.
 He in soul and body feeds us;
 All we need His hand provides us;
 Through all snares and perils leads us.
 Watching that no harm betide us,
 He cares for us by day and night;
 All things are governed by His might.

The following stanza is Luther's expansion of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer:

Give us this day our daily bread
 And let us all be clothed and fed.
 Save us from hardship, war, and strife;
 In plague and famine, spare our life,
 That we in honest peace may live,
 To care and greed no entrance give.

Beyond these extended descriptions of the Father's role as creator and preserver of all things, however, this topic is seldom found in the rest of Luther's hymns.

Relationship of the Father to the Son

To speak of God as Father is necessarily to speak of his relationship as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Given Luther's interest in God's work of salvation, it is not surprising to find this relationship described in the hymns. The words that Luther uses frequently highlight the intimacy of the relationship. For example, in the following lines from st. 3 of the baptism hymn "To Jordan Came the Christ our Lord," Luther paraphrases the voice of the Father with these words:

This man is My beloved Son,
In whom My heart has pleasure.

In his Christmas hymn, "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth," Luther focuses on the timeless aspect of the relationship:

God's Son from eternity

The translation, however, does not quite capture the meaning of Luther's original words which are translated literally as:

The eternal Father's only child

In his hymn "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," arguably Luther's most significant hymn, he uses particularly vivid language to describe this relationship between the Father and the Son:

But gave His dearest treasure. (st. 4)
Then go, bright jewel of My crown. (st. 5)

These descriptions begin to reveal the profound depth of the Father's love for us in terms of the ultimate relationship of love that he eternally has with his Son.

The Father's Mercy and Grace

Behind all of Luther's theology is his understanding that, in Christ, God is merciful and gracious. In his paraphrase of Psalm 14—a hymn not generally included in modern hymnals—Luther points to the mercy of God when he writes:

God will take pity on his people,
And release the captives.

In "From Depths of Woe," his paraphrase of Psalm 130, Luther uses the vivid imagery of the biblical text to describe the basis on which we bring our petitions before God:

Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,
Lord, hear my supplication.

Later in this hymn Luther again emphasizes the grace of God:

Though great our sins, yet greater still
Is God's abundant favor.

In the hymn “In the Very Midst of Life,” Luther repeats in all three stanzas the following refrain:

Holy and righteous God!
Holy and mighty God!
Holy and all-merciful Savior!
Eternal Lord God!

The third phrase, which is the highlight both textually and musically, places the emphasis squarely on the mercy of God.

Author of Salvation

One last theme for our consideration concerns the role of the Father in planning for the salvation of mankind. Turning again to the hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” one can see the clear emphasis Luther places on the Father's role as the author of salvation:

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

This plan, as St. Paul writes to the Ephesians (Eph. 1:4), was from eternity. In the remainder of this stanza, Luther describes how the plan was carried out:

He turned to me a father's heart;
He did not choose the easy part
But gave His dearest treasure.

Note the reference to “a father's heart,” words that appeared nearly verbatim in the Large Catechism, which Luther wrote five years after composing the hymn.

In the Christmas hymn, “From Heaven Above,” Luther again acknowledges that the saving work of the Son was part and parcel of the Father's plan for our salvation:

He will on you the gifts bestow
Prepared by God for all below.

In another Christmas hymn, “We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth,” Luther links the Father's sending of His Son with his plan for our salvation:

All this for us our God has done
Granting love through His own Son.

Part 2: The Son

When the first Lutheran hymnal was published in Wittenberg in 1524, Luther not only took an active role in determining its contents but also provided a brief preface which supplied the rationale for its publication. Using examples of singing from both the Old and New Testaments, Luther wrote,

Like Moses in his song (Ex. 15:2), we may now boast that Christ is our praise and song and say with St. Paul (1 Cor. 2:2) that *we should know nothing to sing or say, save Jesus Christ our Savior*.

Since the Reformation was about Jesus and his free gift of salvation that we receive through faith, it should come as no surprise that the person and work of the Son of God would figure prominently in Luther's hymns. What is surprising, however, is the way in which Luther goes about singing our Lord's praises.

Several decades ago a French scholar by the name of Patrice Veit did a linguistic analysis of Luther's hymns. He identified 126 references to Jesus in the hymns. The most interesting part of his analysis was the way in which Luther referred to Jesus. In only 11 cases did Luther use the names Jesus or Christ. What about the other 115 references? For these, Luther chose to use names and language that portray his relationships to his Father, his mother, and to us. In other words, Luther's portrayal of the Son of God opens up the rich biblical imagery that brings to life Christ and his work for us.

True God . . . true man

Luther uses a variety of expressions to lead the singer to recognize both Jesus' true divinity and humanity. Quite naturally, many of these are found in Luther's Advent and Christmas hymns. Consider the following expressions from the hymn, "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (*LSB 382; LW 35; TLH 80*, with different titles):

God's Son from eternity,
The gift from God's eternal throne . . .
The Light Eternal, breaking through . . .
The very Son of God sublime . . .
Granting love through His own Son . . .

Luther clearly sets forth our Lord's divinity, but he also speaks at length regarding Jesus' humanity:

We praise You, Jesus, at Your birth;
Clothed in flesh You came to earth.
Now in the manger we may see
God's Son from eternity . . .

The virgin Mary's lullaby
Calms the infant Lord Most High.
Upon her lap content is He
Who keeps the earth and sky and sea.

The very Son of God sublime
Entered into earthly time . . .
In poverty He came to earth
Showing mercy by His birth . . .

Here, using simple, picturesque language, Luther places into the mouths of God's people the most sublime mystery of the faith—namely, that the eternal God has chosen to clothe himself in our flesh and blood.

In his Advent hymn, “Savior of the Nations, Come” (*LSB* 332; *LW* 13; *TLH* 95), Luther very directly states the reality of the two natures in Christ:

Then stepped forth the Lord of all
From this pure and kingly hall;
God of God, yet fully man,
His heroic course began.

In another of his Christmas hymns, “From East to West” (*LSB* 385; *LW* 43; *TLH* 104), Luther portrays the paradox of God becoming man with vivid imagery:

Behold, the world's creator wears
The form and fashion of a slave;
Our very flesh our maker shares,
His fallen creatures all to save.

This stanza takes us a step further in that Luther brings up the subject of our fallen nature and explains that God has done all this to save us. In yet another of his Christmas hymns, “From Heaven Came the Angels Bright” (*LW* 52; *TLH* 103), Luther expands upon the purpose for the Son of God becoming man:

Your Lord Christ is incarnate there
To save you all from sin and care.
He took on human flesh and bone,
And you, his brothers, are God's own.

Here Luther has gone still further, describing us as Christ's brothers, which means that we belong to God!

Not just in the Christmas hymns but throughout the hymn corpus Luther refers to the true divinity of Jesus. He is referred to as “God most high,” “Lord of all lords,” “the only Lord,” and “God's true Son.” In his paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed, Luther begins stanza two with this forthright confession of Jesus' divinity:

We all believe in Jesus Christ,
His own Son, our Lord, possessing
An equal Godhead, throne, and might,
Source of ev'ry grace and blessing . . .

And familiar to everyone are Luther's bold confession in the hymn “A Mighty Fortress”:

Ask ye, Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God. . .

Clearly, both Jesus' divinity and humanity find clear expression in Luther's hymns.

Who has redeemed me . . .

The implications of the incarnation receive considerable attention by Luther. In his Large Catechism, Luther explains the purpose for Christ's coming into our world in this way:

We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart (LC, II 65).

Now consider these words from stanza four of Luther's hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (*LSB* 556; *LW* 353; *TLH* 387):

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.

This hymn, perhaps Luther's finest, carefully leads the singer through the entire story of salvation. In stanza five, Luther describes the Father's dearest treasure as the "bright jewel of My crown." Stanza six then speaks specifically of the incarnation, returning to some of the themes described earlier:

The Son obeyed His Father's will,
 Was born of virgin mother;
 And God's good pleasure to fulfill,
 He came to be my brother.
 His royal pow'r disguised He bore;
 A servant's form, like mine, He wore
 To lead the devil captive.

One could spend pages examining this hymn. In succeeding stanzas Luther places in the mouth of Jesus these remarkable words:

For I am yours, and you are Mine . . .
 My innocence shall bear your sin . . .

If the hymn "Dear Christians, One and All" is notable for its comprehensive presentation of Christ's work of salvation, Luther's other hymns are no less important for their fresh and intriguing portrayals of the Gospel. In his Easter hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" (*LSB* 458; *LW* 123; *TLH* 195), the image of battle looms large:

Christ Jesus, God's own Son, came down,
 His people to deliver;
 Destroying sin, He took the crown
 From Death's pale brow forever. . .
 It was a strange and dreadful strife
 When life and death contended;
 The victory remained with life,
 The reign of death was ended.

Holy Scripture plainly saith
That death is swallowed up by death,
Its sting is lost forever.

In this hymn Luther goes on to draw the connection between Jesus and the Passover lamb:

Here the true Paschal Lamb we see,
Whom God so freely gave us;
He died on the accursed tree—
So strong His love—to save us.
See, His blood now marks our door;
Faith points to it; death passes o'er,
And Satan cannot harm us.

It is unfortunate that we must sing this hymn in translation, because in the original German, Luther's language is more vivid. A literal rendering of the third and fourth lines of this stanza read:

He was on the cross
in passionate love roasted.

Luther makes frequent reference to our Lord's bitter suffering and pouring out his blood on our behalf. In his communion hymn, "O Lord, We Praise Thee" (*LSB* 617; *LW* 238; *TLH* 313), Luther speaks the benefits of Christ's sacrifice which are delivered to us:

All our debt Thou hast paid;
Peace with God once more is made . . .

These numerous examples have only scratched the surface concerning all that Luther writes in his hymns about Jesus. Clearly, Luther's commanding knowledge of Holy Scripture was integral to his success as a hymn writer, for in his hymns, the biblical images receive fresh expression.

Part 3: The Holy Spirit

In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther sums up the work of the Holy Spirit with the following: "Creation is past and redemption is accomplished, but the Holy Spirit carries on his work unceasingly until the last day" (LC II, 61). This confession of the ongoing work of the Spirit is clearly evident in Luther's hymns as well.

The Spirit's Divinity

As with his treatment of the Father and Son in the hymns, Luther is equally direct in proclaiming that the Holy Spirit is true God. The first line of one of his hymns says it all:

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord.
(*LSB* 497; *LW* 154; *TLH* 224)

In another of his Pentecost hymns, Luther attributes the activity of creation to the Holy Spirit, again in the very first line:

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest.
(*LSB* 498; *LW* 156; *TLH* 233)

In his hymn based on the Apostles' Creed, "We All Believe in One True God" (*LSB* 953; *LW* 213; *TLH* 251, st. 3), Luther says of the Spirit that he is

God with the Father and the Son.

In several hymns Luther concludes with doxological stanzas that also acknowledge the divinity of the Spirit. For example, in the final stanzas of the Advent hymn "Savior of the Nations, Come" (*LSB* 332; *LW* 13; *TLH* 95), Luther writes the following:

Praise to God the Holy Spirit.

Clearly, Luther wanted the hymns to confess the truth that the Spirit is equally God with the Father and the Son.

Luther goes further in his description of the Spirit as he speaks of the Spirit's relationship to the Father and to the Son. The Spirit is described as the "gift of God most high" (*LSB* 498; *LW* 156; *TLH* 233, st. 2). In stanza 6 Luther speaks of the Holy Spirit as being given by both the Father and Son:

And You, from both,
as Three in One.

In his hymn "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (st. 9, *LSB* 556; *LW* 353/*TLH* 387), Luther again speaks of sending the Spirit, here for a specific purpose:

And, heavn'ly wisdom to impart,
The Holy Spirit sending.

Luther gives perhaps his greatest emphasis on the purpose of the Spirit's sending when he speaks of the Spirit's work of pointing the Christian to Christ. In another Pentecost hymn, "To God the Holy Spirit Let us Pray" (*LSB* 768:4; *LW* 155:4; *TLH* 231:2), Luther puts it very plainly:

Teach us Jesus Christ to know aright.

This example squares well with Luther's well-known words in the Large Catechism, where he writes, "neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit" (LC II 65). In stanza nine of "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (*LSB* 556; *LW* 353; *TLH* 387) Luther again addresses this point. In our current hymnals the line says this about the Spirit:

And teach you aLWays to be true,

In the original German, however, Luther is much more explicit:

And learn to know me [Jesus] well.

Finally, in stanza 2 of his Pentecost hymn, "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord" (*LSB* 497; *LW* 154; *TLH* 224), Luther writes:

Teach us to know our God aright
And call Him Father with delight.

In each of his Pentecost hymns, Luther made certain to address the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity by confessing the unique role of the Spirit in making the true God known.

The Spirit's Work

In 1528 Luther published a personal confession of faith. Strongly trinitarian in nature, this is what he had to say about the work of the Spirit: "By this Holy Spirit, as a living, eternal, divine gift and endowment, all believers are adorned with faith and other spiritual gifts, raised from the dead, freed from sin, and made joyful and confident, free and secure in their conscience" (Luther's Works, 37:366). This summary nicely serves as a guide into Luther's treatment of the work of the Spirit in the hymns.

The preeminent work of the Spirit in Luther's understanding is the Spirit's role in creating faith. The opening words of his well-known explanation in the Small Catechism put it succinctly: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel. . . ." This thought is also found in the hymns:

To God the Holy Spirit let us pray
For the true faith needed on our way
(*LSB 768; LW 155; TLH 231, st. 1*)

The Holy Spirit not only creates faith but also gives himself fully to the believer:

Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord,
With all Your graces now outpoured
On each believer's mind and heart;
Your fervent love to them impart.
(*LSB 497; LW 154; TLH 224, st. 1*)

All of God's graces are poured out on his people, creating a fervent love that characterizes the life of the Christian. In "To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray" (*LSB 768:2; LW 155:2; TLH 231:3*), Luther describes more fully the effects of this love that is imparted:

O sweetest Love, Your grace on us bestow;
Set our hearts with sacred fire aglow
That with hearts united we love each other,
Ev'ry stranger, sister, and brother.

Elsewhere, Luther nicely summarizes this working of the Spirit with these words:

The fount of life, the fire of love.
(*LSB 498; LW 156; TLH 233, st. 2*)

Clearly, among the spiritual gifts Luther mentions in his Great Confession, the gift of love figures most prominently.

But the Spirit's work is far from exhausted. As Christians face the daily struggles of living in a world seemingly ruled by sin and death, the Spirit brings comfort from on high. In his trinitarian hymn "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast" (*LSB 655; LW 334; TLH 261*), Luther begins stanza 3 with this prayer:

O Comforter of priceless worth.

Luther devotes an entire stanza of “To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray” (*LSB* 768:3; *LW* 155:3; *TLH* 231:4) to the Spirit’s work of comforting the Christian:

Transcendent Comfort in our ev’ry need,
Help us neither scorn nor death to heed
That we may not falter nor courage fail us
When the foe shall taunt and assail us.

Elsewhere, Luther uses powerful images to highlight this work of the Spirit:

Come, holy Fire, comfort true.
(*LSB* 497; *LW* 154; *TLH* 224, st. 3)

In each of his Pentecost hymns, Luther gives attention to Jesus’ promise to send the Spirit to comfort and help his people (John 14:26; 15:26).

Luther applies the Spirit’s work of calling us to faith also to the church: “In the same way, he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church . . .” (Small Catechism). This theme is also evident in the hymns. In stanza 4 of the hymn “From Depths of Woe” (*LSB* 607; *LW* 230; *TLH* 329), a paraphrase of Psalm 130, Luther writes:

O Israel, trust in God your Lord.
Born of the Spirit and the Word.

Here Luther is thinking not only of the people of Israel, but of all who are born of the Spirit—namely, the church. The Spirit calls the church into being from every “nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev. 7:9):

Lord, by the brightness of Your light
In holy faith Your Church unite;
From ev’ry land and ev’ry tongue.
(*LSB* 497; *LW* 154/*TLH* 224, st. 1)

In his creed hymn, “We All Believe in One True God” (*LSB* 954; *LW* 213; *TLH* 251, st. 3), Luther combines the Spirit’s work of calling the church into being with another ongoing work—preserving the unity of the church:

Who the Church, His own creation,
Keeps in unity of spirit.

Similarly, in stanza 3 of “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast” (*LSB* 655; *LW* 334; *TLH* 261), Luther speaks of the Spirit’s role in binding the church in one:

O Comforter of priceless worth,
Send peace and unity on earth.

In his communion hymn, “O Lord, We Praise Thee” (*LSB* 617; *LW* 238; *TLH* 313, st. 3), Luther again addresses this theme:

Let not Thy good Spirit forsake us;
 Grant that heav'nly-minded He make us;
 Give Thy Church, Lord, to see
 Days of peace and unity.

Such peace and unity come only through the forgiving work of the Spirit. In his creed hymn (*LSB* 954; *LW* 213; *TLH* 251, st. 3), Luther describes the church as the place where God's forgiveness is distributed:

Here forgiveness and salvation
 Daily come through Jesus' merit.

It is this same Spirit who leads God's children on the path to eternal life. In the hymn "To God, the Holy Spirit" (*LSB* 768:1, 4; *LW* 155:1, 4; *TLH* 231:1, 2), Luther makes several references to the guiding of the Spirit:

That He may defend us when life is ending
 And from exile home we are wending.
 That we may abide in the Lord who bought us,
 Till to our true home He has brought us.

In "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast" (*LSB* 655; *LW* 334; *TLH* 261, st. 3), Luther's prayer to the Holy Spirit concludes with these words:

Support us in our final strife
 And lead us out of death to life.

Luther uses a rich vocabulary to describe this work of the Spirit, including words like "support," "lead," "keep," and "guard." In the hymn "Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest" (*LSB* 498; *LW* 156; *TLH* 233, st. 6) Luther describes this work of the Spirit in yet another way:

Drive far away our wily foe,
 And Your abiding peace bestow;
 With You as our protecting guide,
 No evil can with us abide.

Conclusion

As in the previous sections of this article demonstrating Luther's treatment of the Father and the Son in his hymns, the preceding discussion of the place of the Holy Spirit in the hymns again shows the rich language that Luther enjoyed using. Far from perfunctory presentations on the Holy Trinity, Luther's hymns delve into the relationships between the three persons and always drive home the implications for the life of the Christian.

In conclusion, we will consider briefly the doxological stanzas with which Luther concluded several of his hymns. At the conclusion of his Advent hymn, "Savior of the Nations, Come" (*LSB* 332; *LW* 13/*TLH* 95, st. 8), Luther writes:

Glory to the Father sing,
 Glory to the Son, our king,
 Glory to the Spirit be
 Now and through eternity.

The ascription of praise to each person is simple, with the slight elaboration of the Son, who is described as “our king.” Luther’s Christmas hymn, “From East to West” (*LSB* 385; *LW* 43:5/*TLH* 104:7), concludes:

All glory for this blessed morn
To God the Father ever be;
All praise to You, O Virgin-born,
And Holy Ghost eternally.

Again, the elaboration appropriately focuses on the Son, here described as the “Virgin-born.” In his Pentecost hymn, “Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest” (*LSB* 498; *LW* 156; *TLH* 233, st. 7), Luther concludes:

Praise we the Father and the Son
And Holy Spirit, with them One,
And may the Son on us bestow
The gifts that from the Spirit flow!

In this instance, it is the Spirit who receives more elaboration, with attention given to the role between the Spirit and the Son. This text is a fitting conclusion to this study in that it reminds us that for Luther the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was a vital teaching of the church that had eternal consequences for all Christians.

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