



The Rhetoric of Martin Luther's Hymns: Hymnody Then and Now

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Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies....We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn that will arouse their faith and fear.

—*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*¹

That Luther thought of the hymn as a way to teach the new evangelical faith is a commonplace among hymnologists and theologians. Nearly everyone knows that Luther wanted worship resources in the language of the people so they could understand the faith he was teaching. In *An Order of Mass and Communion* (1523) he expressed the need for “as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass.”² He lamented, however, that “poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose evangelical and spiritual songs,

¹*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 24, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 258, par. 3 (hereafter BC).

²Martin Luther, *An Order of Mass and Communion* (1523), in *Luther's Works* (hereafter LW), vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 36.

Martin Luther's hymns preached the gospel. Their rhetorical device was downward, from God to us. Changing liturgical emphases have altered the direction in many contemporary communion hymns in which we now address God. The change is not without major theological significance.

as Paul calls them, worthy to be used in the church of God.”³ We read in his letter to the court chaplain George Spalatin that he thought the new evangelical hymn needed to be in the vernacular in order to communicate the word of God to the people. “Following the example of the prophets and fathers of the church, I intend to make German Psalms for the people, i.e., spiritual songs so that the Word of God even by means of song may live among the people.”⁴

These words of Luther have been understood by many who have looked closely at Luther's hymn texts to mean that his hymns *taught* the pure evangelical doctrines of the Reformation. I do not think this fully comprehends what Luther meant to do when he wanted hymns to be the “Word of God.” In his *Preface to the Babst Hymnal* in 1545, Luther wrote that God had called those who truly believed the gospel to “gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.”⁵ What he meant, and what Melanchthon made clear in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, is that the rhetorical—and evangelical—function of the Lutheran hymn is to *preach* the word of God, and thus *be* the word of God, preached to the gathered assembly by those singing it to each other. Luther's hymns, and most classical Lutheran chorales, are sermons.

Fred Meuser noted that most of Luther's discourse, from “treatises, doctrinal writings, commentaries on Galatians, lectures on Genesis and John, expositions of Psalms, devotional and pastoral writings, correspondence, and sermons” all had the quality of a sermon.⁶ Meuser's fairly exhaustive list of Luther's writings, surprisingly, does not include Luther's hymns, for they, of all of Luther's writings, are the most like his sermons. We see this also distinctly noted in Melanchthon's language in the *Apology* cited above. The rhetorical purpose of the word of God is to admonish the people to experience fear, faith, and even prayer. Faith comes through hearing the word of God preached (Rom 10:11–17). Thus, for Luther and his early followers, the hymn should contain the classical Lutheran hermeneutic of Scripture: law and gospel. Furthermore, in preaching to the people, addressing them directly in a memorable form, using meter, rhyme, and a good tune, the people would learn the faith and be able to use it to preach to one another. Most of Luther's hymns address the fellow members of the congregation with the good news, which may be followed by prayer or praise, or, as Melanchthon has it in the *Apology*, “Once a conscience has been uplifted by faith and realizes its freedom from terror, then it fervently gives thanks for the benefits of Christ and for his suffering.”⁷

In addition to being a skilled preacher, Luther was a brilliant rhetorician. As a typical schoolboy of his time, Luther learned Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Cicero's

³Ibid.

⁴LW 53:221.

⁵Martin Luther, *Preface to the Babst Hymnal* (1545), in LW 53:333.

⁶Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 39.

⁷*Apology* 24, in BC, 271, par. 74.

works thoroughly. Since the loss of Latin, we no longer understand this grand tradition, but it is useful to remember that Luther's education made him think about the rhetorical effect his words would have on his hearers. Who was his audience? What was the message intended for? To what end was he speaking, preaching, or writing? What resources from the past was he using to identify with his people, and how did the language he used move them? All these questions would have been part of his thinking as he was writing his hymns.

“Luther wanted hymns that were simple enough so the people could understand them, be moved by them, and be brought to faith by them”

If it is true that Luther used his hymns to preach the gospel, several clichés about Luther's hymns fall by the wayside. Richard Massie, one of Luther's better translators, noted that there was in Luther's hymns “no originality of thought, no splendid imagery, no play of fancy to attract the reader, whose taste has been formed on the productions of the nineteenth century.”⁸ While there is a hint of condescension in Massie's comments, Luther's own words indicate that he is not interested in writing “original” hymns. His art had an evangelical rhetorical purpose. Luther wanted hymns that were simple enough so the people could understand them, be moved by them, and be brought to faith by them—Augustine's version of Cicero's dictum that rhetoricians should “teach, please, and move.” In a letter to his friend Spalatin asking him to help with the task of writing new German hymns, Luther wrote, “I would like you to avoid new-fangled, fancied words and to use expressions simple and common enough for the people to understand, yet pure and fitting.”⁹ What he wanted was to make it possible for the word of God, by means of his German songs, to “live among the people.”¹⁰ In the same way that Calvin feared the innovations of hymn writers who were not using the Bible directly, Luther did not want his preaching to be anything but the pure evangelical faith, expressed without innovations and additions, in order to spare his people the torments of conscience they had been living under in the medieval church. Luther is not freely paraphrasing psalms; he is preaching them.

Scholars have tended to examine the forms or sources Luther used for his hymns, using something like the critical methods of the previous generation of biblical studies, rather than asking what the Reformer was trying to do rhetorically or homiletically. Ulrich Leupold, for example, editor of volume 53 of *Luther's Works* (on “Liturgy and Hymns”), looked closely at the sources of Luther's texts and tunes and his choice of Germanic poetic and musical forms. While there is an impressive amount of learning in Leupold's work, he does not consider, explicitly,

⁸Richard Massie, quoted in *LW* 53:199, note 35.

⁹Martin Luther, “From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee,” in *LW* 53:221.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

the rhetoric of Luther's hymns.¹¹ Finally, not many appear to have read the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* and its tantalizing statements about the rhetorical purposes of German hymns: to cause people admonished by the word to "experience faith and fear and finally even pray."¹²

These themes will emerge as we look more closely at two of Luther's hymns, taking particular note of their rhetorical purposes, that is to say, how they preach the particular passage of Scripture, to whom they are addressed, whether or not they observe the form of the typical Lutheran sermon, and to what end they are aimed.

"A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD"

About Luther's most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," we know next to nothing. When and for what purpose it was written and when it first appeared are all matters of wild conjecture. Scholars have ransacked Luther's letters, treatises, *Table Talk*, everything, to find hints of the hymn's origins. There is nothing. It was reported to have been published in a hymnal in 1529, but there is no extant copy of that book. The Reformer said nothing about it, and Ps 46, the biblical basis for the hymn, appears not to have interested him exegetically. In his extensive writings on the psalms, he wrote no exposition exclusively on Ps 46. He does refer to it in other commentaries on the psalms, but not very extensively. It is usually assumed that the hymn was written during some of Luther's darkest years, 1527–1528. On December 31, 1527, Luther wrote about himself in the third person to Jacob Propst in Bremen: "We are all in good health except for Luther himself, who is physically well, but outwardly the whole world and inwardly the devil and all his angels are making him suffer."¹³ On January 1, 1528, he wrote to Gerhard Wiskamp in the Herford brotherhouse that "this period of temptation has been by far the worst. Since my youth I have known about this sort of thing, but that it would intensify like this is something I had not expected."¹⁴ Out of this terror, and after the death of his young child, Elisabeth, Luther's great hymn may have emerged.¹⁵

Most say that the hymn is a paraphrase of Ps 46, but very little of the language of the original psalm exists in the hymn. If there is any connection, it is in the language of "refuge" and "fortress." Luther takes the message of the psalm and transfers it to late medieval Germany with the images of fortresses, knights, armor, and weapons of his own time. It is almost as if Luther is "remythologizing" the concepts of the ancient Jewish text to make it relevant for his people—or more likely, simply using the images of war current in his day. Luther begins with a medieval version of

¹¹Leupold does note, in his commentary on "Ein feste Burg," that Luther wrote his hymns "not as a means of self-expression, but to serve his fellow-believers," but says no more. *LW* 53:283.

¹²*Apology* 24, in *BC* 258, par. 3.

¹³Cited in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career: 1521–1530*, ed. Karin Bornkamm, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 560.

¹⁴Cited in *ibid.*

¹⁵This was the considered opinion of my late colleague James Kittelson.

God as our “refuge and strength”—a “fortress” or “shield and weapon.” Like the skilled preacher that he was, Luther develops the theme of the proclamation from the controlling metaphor of weaponry, battle, knights, and fighting of his first line—as any good sermon should. Immediately, he proceeds to name the danger—the old knavish foe. The psalm does not speak of a personal devil, but rather of an earth that is thoroughly shaken, with mountains falling and the water troubled. Luther locates this cataclysmic threat in the devil, the strongest force on earth. Nothing of this ancient foe can be found in the psalm, although there are, to be sure, threatening forces at work in it. Luther’s second stanza describes the vanity of our own efforts to defeat this foe; in other words, he preaches the law, and then he announces what God has done in sending Christ, a knight—in the language of both the psalm and hymn, the Lord of hosts. The third stanza elaborates on the terrible situation for the Christian in this world, with devils all around and the raging of the devil, which nothing can defeat except for the “little word”: Christ Jesus. We, as the audience of the proclamation, find our own work to be rather piddling; although we are fighting, we have no hope of victory without Christ at our side. This causes both fear and faith—and then even praise, as the fourth stanza bursts forth in exultation for what Christ, the champion, can do, regardless of what the world does to us. We will inherit the kingdom forever, or as the psalm has it, “The Lord of hosts is with us.”

The entire hymn, addressed to the gathered congregation, proclaims the evangelical faith clearly. One singing it with a congregation is strengthened in his or her faith, because it is all about what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. This is not a psalm paraphrase, it is a sermon based on Ps 46, one that rightly divides law and gospel and preaches it to the congregation. Comforting to anyone in spiritual distress, it shows Luther to be the preacher, the curer of souls. He preaches the gospel so that people’s consciences might be relieved and so they can go on to live in this world, ready to serve their neighbors, rather than try to meet the burdensome requirements of the medieval church for salvation.

“JESUS CHRIST, OUR GOD AND SAVIOR”

Although there are many hymns of Luther that are better known, an examination of “Jesus Christ, Our God and Savior” can show how different Luther’s theology and rhetoric of the hymn is from that of contemporary communion hymns. Such comparison demonstrates how Luther’s theology had immediate consequences in his preaching and theology of worship.

This hymn appeared in 1524 in three sources: a Wittenberg hymnal, the Erfurt enchiridia, and a broadsheet. It was attributed to John Huss (1366–1415), the Bohemian reformer, but was also known as a Latin hymn, *Jesus Christus nostra salus*.¹⁶

¹⁶For background and translation, see *LW* 53:249–251.

1. Jesus Christ, our God and Savior,
Turned away God's wrath forever,
By his bitter agony
Helped us out of hell's misery.

2. That we never should forget it
Gave he us his flesh to eat it,
Hidden in this bit of bread,
And to drink gave us his blood.

3. Whoso to this board repairerth,
Take good heed how he preparerth.
Who unworthy thither goes,
Thence death instead of life he knows.

4. God the Father praise thou duly,
That he then would feed so truly,
And for ill deeds by thee done
Up unto death has given his Son.

5. Have this faith, and do not waver,
'Tis food for every craver
Who, his heart with sin opprest,
Can no more for its anguish rest.

6. Such a kindness and such grace to get,
Seeks a heart with agony great,
Is it well with thee? Take care,
Lest at last thou shouldst evil fare.

7. Lo, he saith himself, "Ye weary
Come to me and I will cheer ye;
Needless were the doctor's skill
To the souls that be strong and well.

8. "Hadst thou any claim to proffer,
Why for thee then should I suffer?
This table is not for thee,
If thou wilt set thine own self free."

9. If such faith thy heart possesses,
And the same thy mouth confesses,
Fit guest then thou art indeed,
And this food thine own soul will feed.

10. Fruit of faith, therein be showing
That thou art to others loving;
To thy neighbor thou wilt do
As God in love hath done to you.

Here Luther has written a classic Lutheran communion sermon. It may surprise contemporary Lutherans to hear Luther warn, in stanzas 3–9, about the dangers of treating this event lightly. By stanza three he is giving us Paul's warning in 1 Cor 11:27 against eating or drinking unworthily, part of the standard exhortation of the older, traditional, Lutheran service.

Whoso to this board repairerth,
Take good heed how he preparerth.
Who unworthy thither goes,
Thence death instead of life he knows.

The fourth stanza also contains one of the classic themes of the Reformation, that we were the ones who killed Jesus: "And for ill deeds by thee done / Up unto death has given his Son." The next several stanzas give sober warnings about partaking of the sacrament inappropriately. Each stanza begins with an invitation and ends with a warning, opposite the form of the explanation to the Ten Commandments. In stanzas seven and eight, Jesus himself warns us not to come to the table if we are not needy. If you are well, my work is useless, Jesus says, referring to his conversation with the Pharisees about those who are well having no need of a physician: "Needless were the doctor's skill / To the souls that be strong and well." Furthermore, Jesus says to us, "This table is not for thee, / If thou wilt set thine own self free." If you do believe, however, and confess with your lips and live in concert with your confession,

then you come and benefit from the food offered at the table. The last stanza commands that we show the fruits of faith and serve the neighbor as God has served us. The rhetorical direction is from the preacher to the hearer. It produces both fear and faith.

It is an astonishing piece of work from the Reformer whom current Lutherans have tended to make into an antinomian. The idea that one's confession had to be consistent with the witness of one's life would strike many a Lutheran seminarian today as un-Lutheran, because, according to the commonplace, there are no requirements at the table. In Luther's hymn, however, Jesus uses both keys of the kingdom, both forgiving and retaining sins (the latter a very rusty key today). Our sense of discomfort at this language shows how much we have moved from the penitential spirit of the traditional Lutheran Lord's Supper to the eucharistic theology of today.

COMMUNION AND COMMUNION HYMNS TODAY

Over the centuries, Lutherans have pretty much held to Luther's theology of the Lord's Supper preached by Jesus in this hymn. The supper was for the forgiveness of sins, and the penitential nature of the event is set into many Lutheran hymns from Luther until today. "Eating and drinking unworthily"—being properly aware of one's need for it—troubled many an old saint, terrified that they would eat and drink unto their own damnation. That understanding has disappeared, and the supper has become a celebration of community. After the 1960s and Vatican II, many Lutheran churches began to change in their frequency and mood for communion. The excitement about a Catholic church opening its windows to let in the fresh air caused many Lutheran leaders to celebrate the possibilities for ecumenical work that would, they hoped, result in, if not a united church, at least common liturgies, which in turn would result in common pieties.

Those who constructed the *Lutheran Book of Worship* were swept up into this liturgical movement along with nearly every mainline Protestant leader. The ecumenical and liturgical parties among Lutherans enthusiastically bought into a more Catholic notion of the liturgy, especially the restoration of a version of the Eucharistic Prayer, which changed the emphasis from penitence to the celebration of the community. Thomas Schattauer, worship professor at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, described the change in his own personal piety when "the focus of worship shifted from matters of personal salvation and devotion to matters of the liturgical assembly's significance 'for the life of the world.'"¹⁷ This was a major change for Lutherans, and it found its way into the hymns of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, *With One Voice*, and now *Renewing Worship*.

These changes have been coming for the past fifty years, but most Lutherans in the pew have not marked them until now, because most Lutheran piety tends to be located in the sermon and the hymns, not the liturgy. It is not surprising, then,

¹⁷Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 9.

to see how, since the debates of the 1970s, the rhetoric of our hymns, that is to say, the audience for our hymns, has changed.

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We can see this in the language of some popular contemporary eucharistic hymns in current Lutheran hymnals, all of which speak of the actions of the community more than the action of God; they tend to speak more about the elements than about the actions of God. Like a Eucharistic Prayer, they are addressed to God and speak of our actions in the service, rather than God's word to the congregation. One very popular hymn by Marty Haugen, “As the Grains of Wheat,” is a good example with its imagery and theology taken directly from the *Didache* of the second century.¹⁸ Like many contemporary eucharistic hymns, the emphasis is on the grains of wheat, individuals, becoming one loaf of bread, as we become one body in the communion service.¹⁹ By gathering together, the hymn assures us, we become the body of Christ, as the grains are made into one loaf. Praying that all people will be made one, the “cup of blessing” is given so we “may share the presence of your love.” Our sharing and our action become the focus as we tell God what we are doing, in a kind of quasi-prayer directed as much to God as to the congregation in the form of stage directions. Likewise, the second stanza asks that the sacrament give us a foretaste of the final banquet, as we share the feast in heaven. The burden is put on the singer to help realize this oneness, rather than hearing the proclamation of the assurance that we are already one in Christ Jesus, who, surprisingly, is never mentioned in the hymn.

The theme of inclusiveness is also dominant in these hymns. Cesáreo Gabaraín's popular “Grains of Wheat” rejoices in our communion with everyone.²⁰ Stanza two declares that “We enjoy true communion in this meal.” The hymn concludes that “in this hope we rejoice as we go forward in peace, loving sisters and brothers of the Son.” The focus is on all people being together. Once again the hymn focuses on us, our feelings, liturgical actions, and potential political work.

Hymns as prayers, an old hymnological tradition and one of the rhetorical effects of a Lutheran hymn, appear in these new hymns as well, but frequently, in-

¹⁸Hymn 705 in *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) (hereafter *WOV*).

¹⁹See the comments on the Eucharist in the *Didache* 9.3–4, “And with regard to the Bread: ‘We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have made known to us through Jesus your servant. To you be glory for ever. As this...lay scattered upon the mountains and became one when it had been gathered, So may your church be gathered into your kingdom from the ends of the earth.’” Translation by Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 144.

²⁰Hymn 708 in *WOV*.

stead of directly praising or beseeching God, they speak to God about what the assembly is doing. We see that in another popular hymn, “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart,” by Omer Westendorf.²¹ A prayer declaring our love for the Lord (who is named Christ only in the third stanza), the hymn addresses him and tells him what we are doing: “So when you call your fam’ly, Lord, we follow and rejoice.” The rest of the hymn continues to tell the Lord of our activities: “With joyful lips we sing to you our praise and gratitude / that you should count us worthy Lord, to share this heav’nly food.” The hymn continues in that vein until it closes with a prayer that we will be made selfless “to serve each other in your name in truth and charity.” While this is consistent with Luther’s statement at the end of his hymn that we are called to serve our neighbor as Christ served us, the rhetoric, or the direction of the address, is to God, telling about what we are doing, not merely giving thanks for what God has done. These hymns mark a decisive turn in our worship as they keep reminding God of what God and we have done, rather than proclaiming to us the marvelous works of God.

All of these contemporary hymns were included in the ELCA’s *With One Voice* (1995) and will be in the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* resource (scheduled for publication in October 2006), as far as I can tell. The difference in rhetoric between Luther’s hymns and contemporary ones should be noted: Most obvious is that God is the audience, not the congregation. There are those who would see in these hymns the kind of narcissism of the current age, a lurking of the old Adam and Eve whose interest in their own experience is fathomless. Augustinians might note the emergence of semi-Pelagianism in the language about all we do to assist God in his work. Radical Lutherans might worry about the emergence in their liturgies of a Roman Catholic theology that sees, in the action of the mass, Christ represented again, to say nothing of a robust third use of the law, in which we are told, as Christians, what to do. Luther’s hymn inveighs against thinking we can bring anything to the table except a repentant heart. He repeatedly proclaims what Christ has done for us, announcing it as a word that frees us and sends us forth. Luther noted the importance of this in the conclusion to his preface to the *Babst Hymnal*, in his contrast of the proscription against worship in which the worshippers “show great humility, and bow and scrape in their worship, which worship I do not want.” The better part, he concluded, came when those who desired forgiveness of sins should “take their refuge in thee, and serve thee as those who live by thy grace and not by their own righteousness, etc.”²² The readings of Scripture, the sermon, the sacraments, and the hymns were proclamations telling what God had done for us, not what we are doing for God.

The Service Book and Hymnal (1958), the hymnal most Lutherans in the United States started using in the 1960s, began this change in rhetorical direction. The editors marked it in the preface to their hymnal when they wrote that they pre-

²¹Hymn 711 in *WOV*.

²²Luther, *Preface to the Babst Hymnal*, in *LW* 53:334.

ferred hymns that were “devotional rather than didactic or homiletical, and their direction Godward, not manward.”²³ Only this past year have I finally come to understand how fully that sentence describes what was happening to worship and hymnody over the past half century. The rhetoric, or direction, of the Lutheran language of worship has changed, causing radical changes in the theology of worship as well. The hymns found in the *Renewing Worship Songbook* and other resources provided by the project continue that change of theology in the understanding of the sacrament.²⁴

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A study of Luther's hymns can reveal what Luther thought about preaching and worship. Opposing the theology and liturgical practices of the medieval church, Luther wanted to make it clear that in the service of worship God meets us in the word. The hymns, like other parts of the service, also proclaim the word.

Things are different today. The current mantra has it that worship is about God, that we go to church to worship God. This shows that we have abandoned the cosmological shift of the Reformation, in which Luther understood that the direction of worship should always begin with God. In worship, God's word is proclaimed to us in its many and diverse ways—verbally and visually. Thus, all services should be “seeker” services, because none of us is truly “Christian,” as Luther wryly suggested in his preface to the German Mass.²⁵ The kind of music, the style of the leaders, whether worship is “high” or “low”—all of that should give way before the notion that those planning worship should assure that God's word has free and active course in the service. This means that I, as a planner of worship, must know my congregation intimately, what “teaches them, pleases them, and moves them.” Whether or not everyone can agree with Luther on these issues, it is instructive to look at the rhetoric of Luther's hymns and those of today to see the major changes that have occurred in Lutheran piety since the beginning of the liturgical revival of Vatican II. These considerations might be useful to those who want to plan truly evangelical services that will preach and teach the gospel so that others, even seekers, “may come and hear it.”²⁶ ⊕

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²³“Introduction to the Common Hymnal,” in *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958) 286.

²⁴See the Holy Communion section in the *Renewing Worship Songbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) 168–177.

²⁵Martin Luther, *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), in *LW* 53:62.

²⁶Luther, *Preface to the Babst Hymnal*, in *LW* 53:333.