



Luther and the Arts: A Study in Convention

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Martin Luther stands at the great divide between the medieval and modern worlds, and the question of how medieval or modern he was—how traditional or innovative he was—is still one of the most tantalizing questions in historiography. While I make no pretension of answering the question, I cannot ignore it as I seek to discover what Luther's appreciation and use of the arts were. The history of the arts is, by and large, the history of conventions and how succeeding generations appropriate and change the conventions they have inherited from their forebears. One can learn much about Luther by knowing what his context was and how he used it in his work.

The medieval tradition weighed heavily on Luther, and we would miss a great deal about him if we failed to investigate how thoroughly imbued Luther was with medieval life and thought. Perhaps it was his thorough knowledge of the artistic conventions of his past which made it possible to forge something radically new.

This is most obvious in any study of Luther's hymns. His skills, both in music and in poetry, were skills every cultivated hero of the Renaissance would have had some practice in, but Luther did not put them to much use in his work until it became apparent to him that the German people needed hymns and liturgies in their own tongue and musical idioms. Then he, along with others of his colleagues, set to work to remedy the situation, creating an almost peerless collection of hymn texts and tunes, hymns which are the backbone of any Lutheran hymnbook still.

I

Luther's education had involved him in the language arts and their pleasures

from the first. His primary schooling had very likely been arranged in the old and ancient division between the trivium and the quadrivium, a division we might describe as being between skill and content. The trivium involved the enabling arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, the arts concerned with the manipulation of ideas and language so that the student could proceed—with the proper tools of thought—to study what was known, or the quadrivium: geometry, mathematics, music, and astronomy. During his study of the trivium, Luther also learned Latin, as did every young person of the time, and in doing so gained entry into the world of ideas and the great conversation which had been going in the West since the time of Plato. By the time he completed his B.A. he had gained mastery over the ancient arts of logic and rhetoric, in addition to grammar, which was rather more like our study of English—from grammar to literature. After his training in the trivium, which he learned while at school in Erfurt, he began his study for the

M.A., the quadrivium.

In addition to learning the quadrivium, Luther developed his musical skills, learning to play the lute rather expertly. Along with his study of music, both its practical and theoretical side, Luther also drank deeply of Latin literature, as many students of the time did. Erfurt was not necessarily a center of humanistic learning, but it was affected by the great outpouring of interest in great and ancient texts which had begun with the work of Lorenze Valla in Italy.

Those not acquainted with medieval thought might find it odd that music was so fundamental to the education of students, but music, in its most theoretical moments is the study of proportion, something we can see readily if we think of a string strung across a harp and the different sounds it will emit when shortened. The fundamental order obvious in that study appealed to the medieval mind as it did to Luther's. It spoke of an order in the universe that could be heard in the music of the spheres as well as in a lute.

Along with the idea of music as a science of proportion, Luther shared a typical set of conventions about the musical modes. From the time of the ancient Greeks, philosophers had pondered the various effects of the modes, or scales (though different from our scales). Each mode was thought to have a different emotional effect, and when setting texts to melodies, composers always considered how the mode complemented the text. Luther wrote to his colleague, the composer Johann Walter, once as they were considering how to set the German mass to music: "because Paul is a serious apostle, we want to arrange the 8th mode for the Epistle."¹

Such sensitivities to the musical conventions of the day would baffle most moderns and certainly most Lutheran clergy whose acquaintance with music is more a matter of happenstance than a planned consequence of curricular requirements.

Luther's love of music is well known. Not only was he a gifted singer and performer on the lute, he needed it for his own mental health. It was only music that could coax him from his frequent and violent fits of depression and despair. Frequently during his life he spoke of the powers of music to charm the soul and

¹Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 53.56; hereafter cited as *LW*.

cause Satan to flee. Luther was certain that the devil, whose work was chaos, could not abide music, which was a beautiful order.

With such a love and knowledge of music it should not surprise us that Luther's other great love in the arts was literary. Luther liked the *sound* of language. One cannot help but remark that Luther's artistic pleasures were almost exclusively auditory and oral. Standing as he did at the end of the oral age and at the beginning of the age of print, Luther developed a theology which seems almost consciously oral and acutely sensitive to what happens when the human being *hears* the Word of God. For Luther the aphorism *seeing is believing* would have to be changed to *hearing is believing*.

One might argue that his education had prepared him for the oral culture, as indeed it had with all its emphasis on verbal dispute and rhetoric, but there also seems to have been some predisposition for it, too. Even though Luther was a close friend of Lucas Cranach, the painter who painted his portrait several times, he rarely praised the importance of painters to the

preaching of the gospel. His most clear defense of painting as away to teach the gospel came after he began to see that people were reading in his work an iconoclasm which he had not intended. His polemic essay “Against the Heavenly Prophets” speaks rather clearly to those who, under the influence of Karlstadt, were destroying the images and statues in the churches. His defense of images comes from his reading of the Word where, he notes, there are many images which are important to faith. “Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals....Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding, since they do no more harm on walls than in books.”² He goes on to say that it is better to paint pictures on the walls from the biblical stories than worldly ones, revealing a kind of distaste for sensual representations of the classical past, and wishes he “could persuade the rich and the mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the outside and inside, so that all can see.”³

The statement is a typical overstatement, but it is not really a very warm recommendation of painting. Still, it is consistent with his concern that the arts be used in their fullness to preach and tell the biblical story. Luther understood, as few before or since, how crucial it is to teach children about the faith. Few theologians have thought so much about the education of children and few have done so much effective writing of material to be taught children. While his chief aim as an educator was to inculcate the faith, he also knew there could be no good government without well educated citizens.

In his treatise “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” he writes

For my part, if I had children and could manage it, I would have them study not only languages and history, but also singing and music together with the whole of mathematics. For what is all this but mere child’s play? The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines; yet they grew up to be

²Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets,” *LW* 40.99.

³*Ibid.*

people of wondrous ability, subsequently fit for everything. How I regret now that I did not read more poets and historians, and that no one taught me them! Instead, I was obliged to read at great cost, toil, and detriment to myself, that devil’s dung, the philosophers and sophists, from which I have all I can do to purge myself.⁴

One can see in that statement Luther’s love of learning, his unabashed interest in learning for himself, so that he would not have to take truths unexamined from the past. Some have said that the typical humanist of the Renaissance was a lover of the particular, and here Luther shows his oneness with the humanists in his preference for the poets and historians to the received truth of the sophists, or Scholastics.

And so it follows that if students are better served when they can learn about the past through its poetry and singing, it is also true that they can learn about the faith through such arts. Luther’s concern for the young in the faith was fundamental to his decision to help produce a German liturgy and German hymns for the German people. In his introduction to “The German

Mass and Order of Service,” Luther wrote that

the immature and young...must be trained and educated in the Scripture and God’s Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to each other and to increase the kingdom of Christ. For such, one must read, sing, preach, write, and compose. And if it would help matters along, I would have all the bells pealing, and all the organs playing, and have everything ring that can make a sound.⁵

And that is precisely what he did. It is of some interest that Luther seemed not to feel the need to write or compose hymns until after his excommunication when it became obvious to him and his compatriots that they would have to provide new materials for their followers. When they set themselves to the task of providing materials, they showed the utility of their humanistic interest in language and the arts of poetry and music; it is still among the greatest hymnody we have in the church.

II

It is difficult for us to imagine what a new thing Luther and his friends created when they created the Lutheran chorale. Reading Luther’s letters at the time they began (ca. 1523-1525), we can get a picture of how confidently they began their work, but also how new it really was.

When they began, they had at least three models before them of how to proceed: (1) they could translate and revise suitable Latin hymns into German, a language which was only beginning to become literary; (2) they could revise many of the old German hymns and carols that had arisen out of the sequences in the Roman liturgy; or (3) they could produce original and new texts and

⁴Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” *LW* 45.369-370.

⁵Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” *LW* 53.62.

tunes. That they did all three with success is a tribute to their artistic sensibilities.

One of the first references we have in Luther’s works to the problem of writing hymns appears in a letter he wrote to George Spalatin, his colleague at Wittenberg, at the end of 1523. In the letter Luther asks Spalatin to help him versify some of the Penitential Psalms. As he describes it, he plans “to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to 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. Therefore we are searching everywhere for poets.”⁶

He then appeals to Spalatin’s superior knowledge of and skill in writing German. He urges him to set a psalm into a poetic form suitable for a hymn, warning him to be clear and not to use too fancy or new-fangled words—most likely a fear caused by the humanists’ tendency to make up words in the vernacular that were taken straight out of Latin or Greek. “Maintain the sense,” Luther says, “but don’t cling to the words.”⁷ He then adds, rather by the way, that he has

already done Psalm 130 (*Aus Tiefer Not*⁸), one of Luther's best efforts..

It is natural that Luther's long and passionate attention to the Psalms, both as professor of Old Testament and a member of religious order which built its daily worship around the Psalms, would make him turn rather quickly to the Psalter for hymnic material. He felt as close to it as anyone could, and his ability to make the Hebrew poets sing in German has been justly celebrated. Already in his letter to Spalatin we can see Luther's sensitive understanding of the problem of translating. As a German writer, he wanted to make the Psalms *feel* to Germans the way they felt to the ancient Hebrews. Luther's faithfulness to the original text was total: he well knew that it was not enough simply to translate the words accurately. He needed to know German very well in order to make the text work in people's hearts and minds. That is an interesting contrast to our day when the translators of our new texts and liturgies are assumed to know English simply because it is their native tongue. Luther would not have found that argument convincing at all.

The poetic paraphrase of a psalm may not seem to be a production of a new thing, but the odd thing about these paraphrases is that they are indeed new. Psalm 130 became popular almost immediately; it was printed on a broadsheet in Magdeburg as early as May 6, 1524, and it soon became a favorite hymn for funerals. It was sung at Frederick the Wise's funeral as well as at Luther's own.

Luther felt it was important to paraphrase Psalm 130 rather closely, but he did not hold to that principle always. Some few years later, when he wrote *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*,⁹ he felt no compunction about taking the text as an occasion for meditating on the problems of his own day. One would almost think that the Psalmist had lived in the regions of medieval Saxony for all its images of

⁶Martin Luther, "Letter to George Spalatin, end of 1523," LW 49.68.

⁷Ibid., 49.69.

⁸English version: "Out of the Depths," which is #295 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978).

⁹"A Mighty Fortress"; *ibid.*, #228 and 229.

medieval warriors and castles, and a land filled with devils and Christ the knightly warrior against them.

It is also worth noting that John Calvin and his colleagues, faced with the same catechetical problems, also used the Psalter as their hymn book; however, they made it their only hymn book. As they paraphrased the Psalms, they kept rigorously to the original text, adding neither jot nor tittle, presuming to add nothing of their own voice to the versification. The English were heirs to that tradition, as were the Dutch and the Pilgrims to this country. Anyone wondering why the *Bay Psalm Book* seems to have such barbarous verse in it need only think of how great a poet one would have to be to fulfill Calvin's requirement for paraphrasing the Psalter.

But against the restrained and orderly conventions of the Genevan Psalter (which is a splendid work), Luther's work stands in some relief, almost as if his voice and piety had become the Psalmist's, and he felt free to range widely.

As a poet, Luther inherited the German tradition of poetry which is rather like Anglo-

Saxon poetry, the literature which stands at the head of all English poetry. The poetry generally consisted of narratives of heroic deeds, and one of the strongest conventions of the verse is that it has basically four beats per line with a heavy emphasis on alliteration, or similar sounds in the line. Rhyme came late to most Northern European poetry, and when it came, it was usually associated with Christian poetry or Latin poetry, in which rhyme was becoming almost an obsession with writers. Anyone doubting that can look at Bernard of Cluny's *Hora novissima*, written about 1145. Even the first two lines will demonstrate well enough what I mean:

Hora novissima tempora pessima sunt vigilemus!
Ecce minaciter imminet arbiter ille supremus!

Luther's ear responded to a different, more subtle set of sounds and rhythms than that, and we can scarcely fathom his art if we do not pay attention to his work at close range. One can see many of the conventions he inherited from his past almost at first glance at his greatest and most famous hymn, *Ein feste Burg*:

Ein feste burg ist unser Gott,
ein gute wehr und waffen,
Er hilfft uns frey aus aller not,
die uns isst hat betroffen,
Der alt böse feind,
mit ernst ers isst meint,
Gros macht and viel list,
sein grausam rüstung ist,
Auff erd ist nicht seins gleichen.¹⁰

The classic kind of alliteration usual to the Germanic epic is most obvious in the second line with the words *wehr* and *waffen*. The *w* sound is rather straightforward. But more subtle are the *s* and *t* sounds that unite the first line and which are echoed throughout the stanza. It is also clear from this stanza that

¹⁰*Dr. Martin Luthers deutsche Geistliche Lieder*, ed. Carl von Winterfeld (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Hartel, 1840; reprinted, Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966) 64.

Luther's attention to rhyme is much less intentional than Bernard's. Most of the rhymes he uses throughout his work are called slant rhymes. In this stanza, *Gott* and *not* are rather like the rhyme in *love* and *move*.

This text also shows Luther's freedom with accent. The basic rhythm which begins the poem is iambic: Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott. But by the fifth line Luther changes that regular rhythmic pattern for another rougher meter: Der alt böse feind. His ignoring of the steady rhythmic pattern of the first line is consistent with Germanic poetry, but it seems rather shocking and bold from this distance. One must also comment on the fact that the word *alt* receives attention in the tune—metrical attention that most American Christians (including Lutherans), outside the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition will not abide as being too difficult. Luther would

be amazed at their dull ears.

Among the other kinds of texts which Luther used for hymns were the translations of the old Latin hymns. His most famous translation from that corpus is Ambrose's lovely Advent hymn *veni redemptor gentium* ("Come, Thou Savior of the race").¹¹ Luther translated it into *Nun Kom der Heiden Heiland*, and his revision of it is extremely interesting if one remembers Luther's probable love of the mystery of numbers and numerology. He changed the original meter of the lines from 8 syllables to 7 and ignored the final stanza which seemed too Roman for him, substituting a doxological stanza instead.

One can make too much of small things, but it is difficult to escape the hunch that Luther observed the conventions of numerology in all of his hymns. The number 7, of course, is the perfect number the sum of 3 (the Trinity) and 4 (the sign of the world). Seven syllables could best hold the cry from earth that Christ come. That Luther changed it from 8 syllables—8 being the superperfect number—could be a hint that he thought of the Incarnation in more fleshy terms than Ambrose whose text finds it just a bit too interesting that Jesus spent time in a virgin's womb. Of course Luther could have changed the number of syllables simply to fit the tune he also revised from the old chant melody. But I would tend to suspect that Luther always thought of numbers and their secret significance. It is no accident that the first sentence in Luther's Bible has seven words and 10 syllables: "Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde."

Though Luther sputtered almost constantly against the allegorists of Scripture, it would be a mistake to think he could rid himself overnight of these kinds of unities of thought which make the medieval world still so appealing to some. And the numbers would not be secrets to his readers, for the latter would all notice the numbers almost immediately and know what they meant. Luther's follower, J. S. Bach, was also a committed follower of the numbers so we should not be surprised if Luther was.

Another hymn that shows Luther's use of his Germanic past is the great hymn *Nun freut euch* ("Dear Christians, One and All")¹². One of the longest hymns to make it into the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, this hymn is rather like a ballad telling the Christian's story, first describing the Christian's plight and then relating the long and dramatic discussion between God and Christ in heaven over the Christian's plight. It is very much in the tradition of the nar-

¹¹*Lutheran Book of Worship*, #28.

¹²*Ibid.*, #299.

rative ballad which singers would sing in the marketplace before the invention of newspapers. It was one of the best ways to get the story out.

The hymn resembles very much one of his first attempts at a hymn, *Ein neues lied wir heben an* ("A New Song Here Shall Be Begun"), in which Luther tells of the martyrdom of two men in Brussels. But the later hymn moves from being a narrative of a current event, to being a narrative of the saving event. It is a clever thing. Luther uses all the conventions to make the story seem like the old one, beginning with the instruction to listen and rejoice in the new song. The number of stanzas could also be significant: 10 was the number of the 10 commandments, the number of our social life, and this does indeed tell the story of what God intends for us in our lives on earth.

Each of the over thirty hymns that Luther wrote has its own story and its own integrity.

He paraphrased the texts for the German Mass so they could be sung as hymns;¹³ he wrote hymns with purely catechetical intentions such as the hymns which contain versions of the 10 Commandments; he paraphrased other psalms and Latin texts; and he revised a good number of old German carols or hymns known as the *Leise*, German texts written to the long melisma that began to follow the Alleluia after the Epistle in the medieval church. Perhaps the finest work Luther did with an old German *Leise* is his recasting of the tune *Christ ist erstanden* into *Christ lag in Todesbanden*.¹⁴ His text is masterful. Each stanza has 7 lines of 7 syllables, except for the last line which has 8 plus an alleluia. The 7s here remind us rather clearly of Christ's resurrection and perfection. And the 8 syllables in the last line give a sense of superperfection. No wonder Bach used it for his great Easter Cantata, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*.

One could go on and on marveling at Luther's skill as a poet. His work is subtle and bold and worth far more attention than Lutherans have given it, too frequently preferring his theology or music to his poetry. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* contains over 20 of his hymns, hymns for all seasons. We still have much to learn from him as we write our own hymns and liturgies.

III

I have dealt very little with Luther's skill as a composer. It is every bit as considerable as his literary skill. We seldom see Luther in our mind's eye as a man of such delicate gifts; we mostly see him blustering against the Pope and do not often see him with his friends and family singing and playing the sweet music of the day on his lute. Those who would read more on Luther's musical gifts could well begin with the articles on Luther's music by Theodore Hoelty-Nickel.¹⁵

But one thing needs to be developed. Luther's theory of music can be helpful to pastors who are interested in rightly dividing the gospel and the law. For Luther understood music to be very like the gospel and frequently used it to explain what happens when the sinner hears the gospel. In the *Table Talk*, Luther is reported to have said:

¹³See *ibid.*, 120.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, #134.

¹⁵*Luther and Culture* (Martin Luther Lectures 4; Decorah: Luther College, 1960).

What is law doesn't make progress, but what is Gospel does. God has preached the Gospel through music, too, as may be seen in Josquin all of whose compositions flow freely, gently and cheerfully are not forced or cramped by rules and are like the song of the finch.¹⁶

For Luther it was impossible to remain gloomy and full of despair upon hearing music. The power it had to work change in people was very like the power the gospel had—it drives away Satan and sets things right in the soul. We all know how the efforts of friends and family to cheer us up can only send us deeper into gloom, especially if those efforts are filled with exhortations to be happy. At the same time we understand Luther's experience of changing from gloom to joy on hearing music. We know, as he did, that it comes as a gift, through the loss of the self in the sound of the music. It can change our very temper.

Because we live in an age that thinks of messages, content, and explanations as the way

words mean, we can scarcely believe that it is sounds, the sounds of words, their very physicality which can have much effect on us as well. So we tend to think of the gospel as a message, as meaning, not Word or words. It is here that Luther's comparison of gospel to music is illuminating. Luther would insist that the actual words, the sounds of the preacher's voice, must be heard before they can "drive Christ." Lecturing about the gospel and failing to proclaim it would be like lecturing on a piece of music. Nothing much would happen in the believer's heart.

Luther lived some time before the idea that one could be objective about one's beliefs and understandings had been much developed. It would have appalled him, for his teaching was preaching and his preaching, teaching. But his use of the analogy of music to explain the gospel's work may help us get at the elusive thing he means by the gospel.

The gospel changes people as does music. So then, how much more powerful must it be to unite language, God's great gift to humankind, with singing, another gift peculiar to people. The combination of the two arts in the hymn thus made for Luther a peculiarly effective pedagogical tool, as well as a homiletical one. Not only did the tune make the words more winsome, but it also made them almost immediately memorable. It was a way to teach that was both pleasing and moving, the two things Augustine had urged on the successful preacher after instruction.

So it is no wonder that Luther became a skillful hymnwriter. The irony of it all is that it was for strictly utilitarian motives that he began. But that yeoman work produced gems which transcend his time and place quite simply because he was also skilled enough and clever enough to know how to make these texts and tunes lovely. Even today their power and beauty can thrill congregations as almost no other hymnody can.

¹⁶Martin Luther, "Table Talk," *LW* 54.129-130.