



Martin Luther's Hymns and the Church Music Repertoire of the Suomi Synod Tradition

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In June of 2017, I was invited to perform at the Luther500 Festival in Wittenberg, Germany. I spent a week playing music for concerts and worship services at various venues around the town, including the historic City Church and Castle Church. I stood at the microphone in the Castle Church, with the Wittenberg Door to my right and the grave of Martin Luther himself to my left. For an audience of hundreds of festivalgoers and tourists I played hymns that reflected my own Finnish Lutheran (Suomi Synod) heritage while representing my denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I chose Martin Luther's hymn "Savior of The Nations Come," (Evangelical Lutheran Worship 263) and Sibelius's FINLANDIA tune (with

Contemporary church musician and hymn writer Jonathan Rundman reflects on the careful art of making old hymns sing again in contemporary times. He illustrates this by demonstrating how he goes about doing this, especially with reformation-era hymns that have come down to him through the hymn traditions of his Finnish-American Lutheran tradition.

the English lyrics “This Is My Song,” ELW 887). It was a musical and spiritual highlight of my life, as if the Great Cloud of Witnesses was joining me in harmony!

The commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation has inspired me to investigate the musical and theological legacy of my ancestors. In 2020, I conducted an independent study at Luther Seminary investigating Finnish and Finnish-American hymnody. My research led me to write a book titled *Lost Songs of the Suomi Synod* which was published in September of 2021. This article continues in that vein, focusing specifically on two hymns written by Martin Luther and their use throughout the history of Suomi Synod congregations. As in many Lutheran traditions, Luther’s most famous hymns such as “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” have never left the Finnish-American repertoire. However, most of Luther’s original compositions (he wrote thirty-eight hymns throughout his life) have fallen out of use. For this article, I have selected two Luther hymns that are no longer (or very rarely!) sung in North American congregations, but have connections to Nordic Lutheranism. I believe these songs deserve a reintroduction to twenty-first-century worshipping assemblies, and hopefully my new arrangements, paraphrases, and translations will help that to happen.

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I suspect Martin Luther himself would approve of my contemporizing and paraphrasing of his compositions. After all, he made similar adjustments and updates to the church music of his day! Augmenting preexisting lyrics and reinterpreting established tunes were fair game for Luther. His ultimate goal was function over form, for the sake of the congregation. As I am fond of saying, “The primary instrument for Lutherans is the voice of the assembly.” This concept

is drawn from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's document *Principles for Worship*, which implores us to make musical choices to encourage congregational singing: "Regardless of musical style or instrumentation, leadership confidently supports and enables the voice of the congregation. Likewise, the voice of a soloist, cantor, assisting minister, or presiding minister is most effective when it does not overwhelm or dominate the congregation's voice."¹

Martin Luther did whatever it took to make lyrics and arrangements of worship music sing-able and meaningful. In 1523 he wrote to his friend George Spalatin, insisting:

I would like you to avoid any new words or the language used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be as clear and as close as possible to the psalm. You need a free hand here: maintain the sense, but don't cling to the words; [rather] translate them with other appropriate words.²

Pastor and hymnologist Scott Moore expounds on Martin Luther's practical approach to lyrical and Biblical translations:

The name of this theory or method of translation is known today as dynamic equivalence, and it was a guiding principle of Luther's that led him throughout his translations of the Old and New Testaments to find ways to bring passages of Scripture to life using imaginative and inventive language, which ended up codifying and in some cases even creating what has become modern German. He employed this skill in his hymn writing, as well. And he desired it of all those that he could win for the task of creating a sing-able faith for the people of God.³

I'll be tracing the pathways of two Martin Luther compositions from their German origins through various eighteenth and

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 27.

² Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther's Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 74.

³ Mark A. Lamport, Benjamin K. Forrest, and Vernon M. Whaley, eds., *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), 14.

nineteenth century European publications, and onward into official hymnals published in Finland and North America. These include the generations of worship resources used in the Suomi Synod tradition:

Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon virsikirja (SVK): The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church Hymn Book, with updates throughout its ongoing publications in 1886, 1938, and 1986.

The Augustana Hymnal (TAH) published in 1925 by the Swedish-heritage Augustana Synod in North America, and officially approved in 1934 by the Suomi Synod for use in English language worship services.

Service Book and Hymnal (SBH) published in 1958, becoming the primary worship book used after the Suomi Synod merged into the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) in 1962.

Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW) published in 1978 by various Lutheran bodies including the LCA, and becoming the primary worship book for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA, formed in 1988) and its Suomi Conference.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) published in 2006, used by the ELCA and its Suomi Conference.

All Creation Sings (ACS) hymnal supplement published in 2020, used by the ELCA (the Suomi Conference was dissolved in 2013, but the individual congregations remain).

As Lutheranism snaked northbound around the Baltic Sea after the Reformation, pastors and musicians were quick to adopt Martin Luther's original hymnody into their worship repertoire and printed resources. From Denmark to Norway to Iceland, and Sweden to Finland, the new Nordic Lutherans put their own interpretations on the hymns from Wittenberg...

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Finnish musicologist and theologian Karl-Johan Hansson has studied Luther's hymns and their impact on the Nordic countries. Hansson contributed to the Nordhymn research project in the 1990s, which calculated the specific usages of Luther's hymns in Sweden (which ruled Finland from the 1200s until the 1800s), in Finland during its period as Grand Duchy of Russia, and eventually in Finland following its independence in 1917. Hansson reports:

Sweden had in 1530 translated four [of Martin Luther's] hymns, in 1562 the amount was 31. Five more hymns were introduced in 1695. All together there are 36 Luther hymns.

Finland, where two languages must be noticed: a) Swedish: follows Sweden (until 1886), 36 hymns. b) Finnish: in 1583 and 1605 all the hymns (two in 1549) which have been used, are already translated. A total of 32 hymns.⁴

Hansson summarizes:

⁴ Karl-Johan Hansson, "Martin Luther's Hymns in the Lives of the Nordic People," *L.A.H. Bulletin* 35/36 (2007): 105–118.

The [Nordic] national reformers played, of course, a crucial role in the dissemination of the hymns. They became, like Luther, hymn writers and translators. They developed and even created written language. The hymns were not always translated directly from Luther's texts but sometimes via translations from other Nordic languages. A Finnish translation could rely on a Swedish version, which in turn could have been made with the help of a Danish translation... The translations of Luther's hymns in the Nordic countries could and can in no way match the original texts. The early translators were at first hand church leaders and not poets. They possessed greater talents as reformers and theologians than as writers. They stressed substance more than rhyme and metre. The results were quite free translations.⁵

In 1886, the Finnish Lutheran Church published its first edition of an official hymnal, the *Virsiokirja* (Hymn Book). Other editions were created throughout the 1900s, and the present-day version contains sixteen of Martin Luther's hymns. Coincidentally, the ELCA hymnal *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, published in 2006, also has sixteen! Hansson's research finds that the most popular Luther hymns in Finland are "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In my experience as a nationally touring church musician for the past three decades, I would guess that the most popular Luther hymns in the ELCA are "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word."

Finland's publication of the *Virsiokirja* in 1886 provided the perfect contemporary worship resource for the Finnish immigrant congregations developing in North America, who would form the Suomi Synod in 1890. The new hymnbook from their fatherland provided an excellent song repertoire for American Finns for a few decades, until the creeping use of English would force Finnish congregations to move to *The Augustana Hymnal* in the 1920s and 1930s. *The Augustana Hymnal* only contained nine Luther hymns, and the 1958 publication of *Service Book and Hymnal* had only eight. For a fifty-year period, Martin Luther's own compositions were gradually fading from use within the Suomi Synod tradition. After Suomi's merger into

⁵ Hansson, "Martin Luther's Hymns in the Lives of the Nordic People" 109–110.

the LCA, American Lutherans took new interest in the music of their founder, and when the Lutheran Book of Worship was published in 1978, sixteen Luther hymns were included. Perhaps the LBW hymnal development committee was particularly aware that 1983 would mark the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth. Whatever the reason, there was renewed appreciation for his songs.

Despite various theological trends across the centuries, Hansson argues that Finland retained Luther's original tone more accurately than its Nordic neighbors:

Sweden and Finland preserved the hymns in the time of enlightenment, almost until the 20th century. Then some of the hymns were rejected. The reason why they were retained so long, i.e. in Finland, is that the Lutheran confession has a strong position in the country, also among members of revival movements. Luther's significance as a teacher is emphasized. This has kept the hymns alive. But there have also been theological changes. Finnish translations in the 19th century express the spirit of pietism. Dark feelings and man's helplessness are emphasized. In our days, in the hymn books of 1986 [the most recent edition of *Virsikirja*] Luther has come closer again.⁶

These days, as the world observes a series of important 500th anniversaries (this year in 2024, the 500th anniversary of *Das Achtliederbuch*, the first Lutheran hymnal), Martin Luther is enjoying more attention than he has in centuries. Finland, too, has generated more press thanks to their 100th anniversary of Independence back in 2017. I'm excited to look at a couple of Luther's lesser-known musical compositions through a Finnish-American lens at this significant moment in history. In addition to the cultural and historical significance of these hymns, the pure pleasure of good church music has made this project a personal delight. As Martin Luther wrote in *A Preface to All Good Hymn-Books* from Joseph Klug's *Hymn-Book*, Wittenberg, 1543:

⁶ Karl-Johan Hansson, "Martin Luther's Hymns in the Lives of the Nordic People" 112.

Of all the joys that are on earth
Is none more dear nor higher worth,
Than what in my sweet songs is found

And instruments of various sound.
Where friends and comrades sing in tune,
All evil passions vanish soon;
Hate, anger, envy, cannot stay,
All gloom and heartache melt away;
The lust of wealth, the cares that cling,
Are all forgotten while we sing.⁷

DEAR CHRISTIANS, ONE AND ALL, REJOICE⁸

Surprisingly, Martin Luther was forty years old when he wrote this hymn, his first composition for assembly singing! To me, that seems very old to begin what would become a world-renown song-writing career. Also, it's quite remarkable that he's credited with writing words and music to this song in an era where those roles were rarely combined. In continuing with the heartfelt singer/songwriter model, Luther's jarringly personal lyrics obviously reference his youthful days in the monastery, struggling with "anfechtung" and the Dark Night of the Soul.

The Concordia Seminary Choir of St. Louis recorded "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice" in 1967 in commemoration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation on the album *The Singing Church: Hymns of Martin Luther*. Dr. William B. Heyne, conductor, wrote in the album's liner notes,

This is Luther's first congregational hymn. Written in 1523, it appeared in Wittenberg under the title 'A Christian Hymn of Dr. Martin Luther, Setting Forth the Unspeakable Grace of God in the True Faith.' The blessings wrought by this hymn are well summarized

⁷ Leonard Woolsey Bacon and Nathan H. Allen, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's Deutsche Geistliche Lieder. The Hymns of Martin Luther Set to Their Original Melodies with an English Version* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), Preface. See <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/luther-the-hymns-of-martin-luther>.

⁸ See *The Free Lutheran Chorale Book*, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," <https://www.lutheranchoralebook.com/texts/dear-christians-one-and-all-rejoice/>.

in this paragraph of Tileman Hesshusius: 'I do not doubt that through this one hymn of Luther many hundreds of Christians have been brought to true faith. The noble, precious words of the hymn have won their hearts so that they are constrained to embrace the truth, so that in my opinion, such hymns have helped the spread of the Gospel.'⁹

In *The Whole Church Sings*, Robin A. Leaver describes Luther's sophisticated understanding of melodic composition which he was exercising during that Winter of 1523/24:

...in the case of 'Aus tiefer Not' and 'Nun freut euch,' ['Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice'] Luther had created notable new tunes. But both these tunes began with significant repeated intervals, 'Aus tiefer Not' with fifths, and 'Nun freut euch' with fourths, which might have been thought too much for congregations to deal with all at once, even though such intervals were not unknown in folk melodies... here Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues were adopting the practice of the folk-song tradition... at this early stage the concern was to consolidate and expand the practice of congregational singing.¹⁰

Accomplished in music theory, poetry, lute-playing, harmony singing, and personal charisma, it's not unreasonable to see Luther as the prototype for acclaimed twentieth Century singer/songwriters like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, or Bob Dylan. A decade after "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" Martin Luther would write words and music to what would become his signature song, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Although this hymn has never disappeared for long from Lutheran consciousness (its omission from SBH notwithstanding), it's my observation that it's rarely played or sung in the Suomi Synod or ELCA experience. The hymn makes an appearance in the following hymnals:

SVK 261 "Oi iloitkaa, te kristityt"

TAH 433 "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice"

⁹ The Concordia Seminary Choir of Saint Louis, *The Singing Church: Hymns by Martin Luther*, vinyl LP (St. Louis, Missouri: KFUE The Gospel Voice, 1967).

¹⁰ Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 80.

SBH not in it
LBW 299 “Dear Christians, One and All”
ELW 594 “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”

MY ARRANGEMENT AND PARAPHRASING

Musically, I syncopated the ending of each phrase to allow for a rock-informed groove. In fact, it works quite well played on guitar with a Chuck Berry-esque interpretation.

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I love Martin Luther’s very confessional and vulnerable lyrics, but at ten verses, the hymn is too long for typical use in Sunday morning worship. I wanted to stay focused on the bulk of the song, a heartbreakingly personal account of a young man’s crisis of faith. The Augustana Hymnal version in 1925 strategically eliminated the final few original verses where the narrative switches to Jesus talking about the ascension, Pentecost, and warnings for the future. Instead, TAH inserts a hopeful, joyous verse to summarize the hymn. My own paraphrase is a hybrid of the common German-tradition English translation from the 1800s, along with the best moments from the Augustana version.

Remarkable consistency of ideas and images flow throughout the lifelong writings of Martin Luther, and “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” is no exception. Verse three of the hymn previews *The Bondage of the Will* which Luther would write two years later:

My own good works all came to naught,
No grace or merit gaining;
Free will against God’s judgement fought,
Dead to all good remaining.

Later in the hymn, Luther refers to the Song of Solomon and his concept of the Happy Exchange:

To me He said: "Stay close to Me,
I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I Myself will be;
For you I strive and wrestle.
For I am yours and you are Mine,
And where I am you may remain;
The foe shall not divide us."

LORD JESUS CHRIST, TO YOU WE PRAY¹¹

Some translations credit Luther's lyrics as "improved from the Communion Hymn of Jan Hus." Hus composed the first stanza more than a century before, and in 1524 Luther took Hus's small idea and exploded it into an epic ten-verse catechism hymn on the Lord's Supper. In 1925 The Augustana Hymnal whittled the number of verses down to seven, either to make the song more manageable for Sunday morning use, or perhaps because it was the only way to fit it on one hymnal page.

Suomi Synod Lutherans in North America had an opportunity to experience this hymn from a uniquely Nordic perspective, thanks to its inclusion in TAH featuring a beautifully melancholic Swedish folk melody from the year 1697. Upon the publication of SBH in 1958, the hymn disappeared from the Suomi Synod repertoire for sixty years, until 2020's hymnal supplement All Creation Sings. The new ACS version features a fresh translation by ELCA hymn scholars Martin Seltz and Paul Westermeyer, and the text is reunited with the original 1524 tune from Erfurt, Germany. The hymn appears, or does not appear, in the following hymnals as such:

SVK 222b	"Jesus Kristus, elämämme"
TAH 240	"Lord Jesus Christ, In Thee We Pray" with Swedish melody
SBH	not in it

¹¹ See "Jesus Christ, to Thee We Pray" Hymnody.org, https://hymnary.org/text/lord_jesus_christ_to_thee_we_pray.

LBW	not in it
ELW	not in it
ACS 963	“Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior”

MY ARRANGEMENT AND PARAPHRASING

There are plenty of German-tradition hymnals with the Erfurt melody available for church musicians, so I was very excited to have the opportunity to exhume the Swedish folk version of the tune, lost since the obsolescence of TAH in the late 1950s.

The German versions have ten verses, the Swedish version has seven, and in my new arrangement I edited it down to five. My paraphrase is a hybrid of the German and Swedish interpretations, erring a bit closer to the Nordic perspective. I found Luther’s original to be very repetitive, so I attempted to preserve only the most essential Eucharist-themed images using half the words. I also changed all the “thees” and “thous” for “yous” and “yours.” For my fifth and final verse I took the most artistic liberty by consolidating ideas and highlighting hopeful, joyous language:

So set the table, do not fear,
And welcome neighbors far and near!
Praise heav’nly Father, Holy Ghost,
And Christ himself the banquet host!

In the closing doxology of this final verse, I chose the term “heavenly Father” to refer to Luther’s own addressing of the first person of the Trinity in his morning and evening prayers, as well as the Swedish hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father,” beloved in the Suomi Synod. ⊕

Jonathan Rundman has been a songwriter and performer for the Lutheran church for 30 years. In 2022 he graduated from Luther Seminary and began serving as Pastor of Worship and Music at Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran Church in Prior Lake, MN. He has released several albums of original music, composed a Holy Communion setting entitled “A Heartland Liturgy,” and authored the ethnomusicological memoir Lost Songs of the Suomi Synod.