

Current Trends in Church Music:
Toward a Theological Appraisal

I. SETTING THE STAGE:

WHAT IS LUTHERAN WORSHIP?

musical confusion

One of the hottest topics in Christian circles today is the issue of the church's worship. Increasingly people in our own congregations are asking why their Lutheran service can't look and sound like the service of the local evangelical megachurch or one they watch on TV. Parachurch organizations and denominational executives alike contend that the key to growth is found in such things as "invitational worship" and "praise songs;" and there's been ominous speculation about whether the church can even survive without such modifications in its liturgical life. Inevitably those who advocate these changes claim they are merely alterations in musical style.

If we are to escape a never-ending debate about church music, the entry point in the discussion must be our theology of worship. Make no mistake about it: today's wrangling over the church's music is not about style. This is a debate about substance: the substance of the church's worship. Our growing confusion over the how of worship reflects a deep confusion over the what of worship. If we don't know what in the world is happening in worship, then we certainly are going to have problems deciding how we are to go about it.

Evidence of this confusion is all around us. Radical departures from the church's liturgical heritage are being introduced. In our own Lutheran church the Lutheran chorale is increasingly regarded as an antique - of interest perhaps to musicologists, but largely unknown in Lutheran parish life. Thanks to desktop publishing and the influence of the electronic church we find more and more Lutheran parishes introducing music which finds its roots in American revivalism and its full flower in Evangelicalism. The Wall Street Journal quoted David Anderson last December as saying that "contemporary" songs and instruments have been adopted by about 1000 Lutheran churches in America in the previous three years. *It's all from the grass roots, Dave pointed out, it's not coming from the seminaries.*¹

And so we are faced with a grass roots movement away from our musical heritage. To be sure, many applaud this movement as vital to the church's mission at the end of the twentieth century. If our church is to grow, the argument runs, we'll simply have to turn our back on our heritage in liturgy and hymnody and adopt the style of music that appeals to the American church going public.

The shift may have been gradual, but it has been dramatic. Any Rip Van Winkle awaking in many Lutheran sanctuaries today after a twenty year slumber might well wonder if he is in a Lutheran church or a Baptist church. Those of us who know and prize our church's heritage in liturgy and hymnody shake our heads and wonder how

we have come to this. How have we arrived at this point? How can some talk so glibly about the substance of Lutheranism being packaged in hymns and spiritual songs that come from the substance of Arminianism? How have we, in just two decades, come to the point where we're apparently on the verge of tossing out not only four centuries of hymnody, but nearly two millennia of liturgy?

a modest proposal

In the face of all this confusion, I have a modest proposal. Why don't we address theological questions theologically instead of sociologically? Why don't we come at the issue of church music as churchmen rather than as salesmen? Why don't we decide what music is acceptable in the church on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions instead of by opinion polls?

Perhaps the reason there is so much confusion in the area of church music in our midst is that we've never stopped to ask ourselves a more fundamental question: What is worship all about in the first place? What in the world is it that Christians are supposed to be doing when they get together on the Lord's Day? How you answer that question will determine what happens in the worship service.

Divine Service

Lutheran liturgical piety understands public worship as *Gottesdienst*, "Divine Service." That is, public worship is essentially God's activity by which He creates and nourishes the church, His new creation. Martin Luther's Small Catechism defines the church as God's own creation:

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, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way also He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Lutherans understand their worship life not as the coming together of like-minded people who wish to create a "worship experience" for one another, but rather as people who are called together by God's own action in Word and Sacrament to stand in His presence and receive the good gifts he dispenses in that same Word and Sacrament (Means of Grace).

In the liturgy the Holy Trinity comes to meet His people through the means of His grace and to serve them with the forgiveness of sins earned by Jesus Christ, the Lord of all life. As it was in the beginning, so it is now. As God first breathed into Adam the breath of life, so he breathes into the church the breath of His life-giving Spirit. Liturgy, in Lutheran thinking, begins in a receptive posture. The Christian first prays: *O Lord, open thou my lips*, and only then: *and my mouth shall show forth thy praise*. [Psalm 51:15]

Dr. Oliver Rupprecht, in his very helpful article entitled "The Modern Struggle for

Standards in Religious Music" has highlighted the Divine initiative in hymnody: Luther was convinced that the principal function of Christian hymnody is to proclaim the divine Word. Contrary to a popular notion, Christian hymnody is not, first of all, to serve as a vehicle for human *response* to divine goodness. It is to *proclaim* divine goodness. By that proclamation...we live, not by man's thankfulness for it.²

In the liturgy the church receives her Life and gives it back again. It is both the source of her life and the shape of her life. In the liturgy the church inhales; she receives forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation given by the Father in the means of Grace through His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. But in the liturgy the church also exhales; she offers her sacrifice of worship to the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

the breath of life

The church has no life on earth apart from her heavenly Lord and His life-giving Spirit. Jesus Christ is the church's Life. In the liturgy she breathes in His life-imparting power through the means of Grace. And in the liturgy she breathes out back to God her prayers and praises. The church is devoted to the liturgy not for aesthetic reasons, but because she is devoted to the apostles' doctrine, to the breaking of bread, to the fellowship, and to the prayers. She knows no other life than Christ. Therefore she knows no other way to live than the life she lives in the liturgy.

In short, the liturgy is the church's life. She has only one life to live because she has only one testimony to give: *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* [1 John 5:11]

II. CURRENT TRENDS IN CHURCH MUSIC:

FEELING VS. DOCTRINE

musical atmosphere

Therefore the first question we raise in evaluating current trends in church music is an atmospheric one. We must ask which air this music breathes: is it the breath of Life from the divinely appointed means of Grace or the stagnant air recycled from the religious experiences of fellow Christians? Is it heavenly or earthly, in other words. Is it God's Word or man's word? Is it gospel or human feelings about the gospel? Is it proclamation or persuasion? Is God's action highlighted, or is human reaction? These are not inconsequential questions. After all: *The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.* [Romans 8:6] It is the Spirit who gives life, after all, according to Jesus. And the Spirit continually testifies to Him: *All that the Father has is mine,* said Jesus. *Therefore I said He will take from what is mine and give it to you.* [John 16:15]

These gifts of the Spirit are His to give because they were first earned for us by Christ on His cross. The chief gifts delegated to the Spirit for distribution are the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And these gifts are dispensed by the Spirit in the church, we

confess in the Small Catechism - which is but another way of saying that they are distributed in the context of the liturgy.

Now where God is present with His gifts, emotion is sure to follow. Here again, however, confusion reigns. Many believe it's the other way around; that wherever emotions are aroused, God is present. Since emotion is the great false god of our subjective age, there's a dangerous tendency in the church to equate the presence of intense religious feelings with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This presents a great temptation to Lutheran pastors and musicians. Intensity of feeling becomes the yardstick of faithfulness to the gospel. The means of Grace are ignored or downplayed in favor of "whatever works." It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, to observe a growing concentration in our midst on mood altering music instead of the historic gospel and sacraments.

The great church musicians of the past had a healthy respect for the immense power of music over human emotions. Music was always to be the servant of the text rather than its master. Faithful pastors and church musicians resist the temptation to measure the effectiveness of church music by its emotional appeal. Rather, all music of the church is measured by the yardstick of the Gospel: Is this music merely mood music, or does it find its origin and its goal in God Himself?

Increasingly in our fellowship we find that mood takes precedent over doctrine. *Truth must be sung*, Dave Anderson reminds us in the preface to his The Other Songbook.³ And we would agree with him. The question is: what is truth? The implication is that the church's "official book of songs" is not enough. We need another songbook. One that focuses on the subjective emotions of the human heart. The following citation is favorably quoted in Anderson's introduction:

Music prepares the heart for worship and commitment. Music is the greatest mood alternator of all, and unlocks the ministry of God in the untrodden soil of a person's soul. People love singing. They love being moved even when there is not a song in their hearts.⁴

Note what is being said here and what is not being said. Holy Scripture declares that it is the Word of the Lord that prepares the heart for worship and commitment. Here the claim is that music is a substitute Means of Grace, unlocking the human heart for God. No mention is made of the Means God has appointed as channels for His activity. No mention of music as a vehicle for the Divine Word. Rather, God's action is equated with mood changes. The claim is that since people "love being moved," the function of Christian music is to move them; whatever works.

This blatant focus on human emotion is extremely distressing. It was, after all, an enemy of the church that first caricatured religion as the "opiate of the people." Why

contemporary church musicians should see their craft as a mood altering tool boggles the mind. Of course there is emotion in worship. Of course hearts are lifted and moods are altered. Once music is viewed as the tool for such mood changes, however, it becomes little more than a drug.

If we return to an historic view of church music, sanity is restored. The source and the goal of music becomes God's heart, not man's. It is the Gospel alone which changes the human heart. If church music is a faithful servant of the Gospel, the mood will surely follow.

with heart and mouth

To my knowledge we have no one in our fellowship who blatantly seeks to deny the Gospel we have historically believed, taught, and confessed. Unfortunately we seem to have lost sight of the link between our doctrine and our worship. I would suggest we face a looming crisis in our church; we cannot believe one thing and sing another. Once we abandon confessional hymnody and liturgy, we are living on borrowed capital. We will very soon be paying a very high rate of interest, for doctrine cannot live in the abstract in the church; it will begin to die. (I would suggest it's beginning to look a bit sickly already!)

Scripture teaches us that we confess with our lips - and this includes singing lips - what we believe in our heart. *Correct doctrine*, Wm. Loehe reminds us, *is not only preached in the sermon, but prayed in the prayers and sung in the hymns*. This is only another way of stating the historic dictum of the church: *lex orandi, lex credendi* - what we believe determines what we pray. That's fairly easy to be grasped. The more sobering application of that liturgical plumb line to our day and age, however, is its reverse, which is equally true: What we pray determines what we believe.

And so we have some hard questions to ask. How long can we feed the sheep on spiritual junk food and expect them to maintain spiritual health and vitality? How long can we sing a Christianity that is Arminian, revivalistic, and evangelical in the worst sense and still confess a Christianity that is Lutheran, sacramental, and evangelical in the best sense? How long can we sing a faith that is frequently shallow, often gutless and sometimes mindless and yet expect to retain confessional solidarity with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church?

In the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Melanchthon and the Lutheran confessors were proud to inform the Emperor that the liturgical heritage of the church was in better shape in their churches than in the church of Rome: *We can truthfully claim that in our churches the public liturgy is more decent than in theirs...the children chant the Psalms in order to learn; the people sing, too, in order to learn or to worship.*⁵ The liturgy and hymnody have a teaching function within the church. They were regarded as of one piece with the public doctrine of the church. But this harmony between public doctrine and public worship claimed by our fathers in 1530 could hardly be said today about parish life in

the Missouri Synod.

Richard Resch, in his paper at the 1992 Liturgical Symposium at Concordia Theological Seminary Ft. Wayne, pointed out that there is a double standard operating in many of our churches. We teach children one thing, but then we sing another. Doctrine is thus divorced from practice and becomes a cold abstract rather than a living reality. Resch suggests there seem to be only two criteria operative these days for those who lead children's singing in the church: *No. 1: Children must be able to learn it and love it immediately. No. 2: Parents should see that their children are enjoying themselves.*⁶

Emotion, in other words, has replaced truth as the prime standard by which we judge music acceptable in the church. Is it any wonder that children grow up to find our liturgy and hymnody boring? We have taught them it has no relevance to a vital and committed faith. We have taught them that at best our liturgy and hymns are to be tolerated while we find our real release and praise in songs more focused on exuberance than faithfulness to the Word of God.

How are we to find our way out of this liturgical wilderness? What criteria can we use to avoid the twin pitfalls confronting us in church music: On the one hand, the modern idolatry of emotion and on the other, the idolatry of wooden tradition? All me to suggest some authentically Scriptural and Confessional guidelines for appraising church music.

III. SOME THEOLOGICAL HANDLES FOR LUTHERAN CHURCH MUSICIANS

music: handmaiden of theology

There have been few champions of musical life within the church more vocal than Martin Luther. *I desire that all arts, particularly music, be employed in the service of Him who has given and created them.*⁷ *After theology I accord to music the highest place and the greatest honor.*⁸ In Luther's mind, music was a servant of the Word of God. It had no life of its own, but was to be used only as a vehicle for the teaching of the Word.

Luther's contemporaries tell us he was a fairly accomplished musician himself. Still he looked to others to develop the musical framework for his reforms in the Mass and the church's song. He particularly prized the work of his friend Johann Walter, court musician at the Elector's court in Torgau. Walter thus became the originator and first example in the long and cherished tradition of the Lutheran *cantor*, who skillfully weaves music and theology together into one beautiful tapestry in which music is subservient to the gospel.

Lutheran church musicians historically have blended artistic quality and confessional integrity in their music. They have refused to drive a wedge between music and theology. Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, in the now famous marginal note in his personal copy of the Calov Bible Commentary, remarks how God's provision for

liturgical music in the temple was integral to the Divine Service established during David's reign: [1 Chronicles 28:21] *Splendid proof that, besides other arrangements of the service of worship, music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David.*⁹

There is no one fixed style for Lutheran church music. Lutheran church music has always been flexible - ranging in its early years from the clear, soaring tonalities of the late renaissance through the elaborate artistry of the Baroque all the way to twentieth century innovations in rhythmic and harmonic structure. The constant thread through every stylistic change, however, has been the unchanging substance of the gospel as it is believed, taught, and confessed in the church. The church's doctrine and its music were viewed as a seamless garment, in other words, not a patchwork quilt.

The teachings of the Lutheran Reformation freed artists and musicians to use their gifts in service of the gospel. While music in the Roman church tended to be a prisoner of scholasticism, and while music among the radical reformation was either merely tolerated or else eradicated entirely, in the churches of the Augsburg Confession music was freed to serve as a partner in the proclamation of the free Grace of God, lavishly bestowed through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. Music was not simply "mood music" or a cover up while the priest performed the sacrifice of the Mass, but music became a partner in the proclamation of the gospel, the highest expression of the *vivendi vox evangelii* - the "living voice of the gospel."

In a remarkable epic poem, "In Praise of the Noble Art of Music," Johann Walter himself has expressed the posture of the Lutheran church musician for all time:

For music and theology
 Were given by God concurrently.
 The former with its lovely sound
 Was in the latter hidden found.

God for His Gospel oft employs
 The art of music's joyful noise.
 The Apostles teach with clarity
 What music's use and goal should be.
 By singing psalms and hymns and songs
 God's people should do what belongs
 To glad instruction of each other
 Or admonition of a brother.
 What's taught by song and harmony
 Must flow from true sincerity.
 We must each well our lips the art
 Of praising God with faithful heart.
 Does music not accompany

God's Word and prayer and liturgy?
 What gift most pleases God above?
 Our praise that glories in His love.¹⁰

And here evangelical Lutherans have something to teach the Evangelicals of our day.

evangelicals on a treasure hunt

Recently a new glossy magazine appeared on the desk of pastors across the country. Its title, "Worship Leader," gives away its purpose: to stimulate and encourage meaningful worship among protestants. In his inaugural editorial, the editor invites evangelical Christians on a *treasure hunt to discover true worship*. He observes:

The desire for "true worship" today--spurred on by its association with church growth--has produced a myriad of techniques and products that hold great promise. The result is a Church in transition regarding its rituals and forms of worship. ¹¹

the missing jewel

The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has exhibited a tendency to join movements just as others are abandoning them. When the Missouri Synod was hotly debating the historical-critical method of hermeneutics, other scholars were already forsaking it. It would be unfortunate to see history repeat itself, yet it seems that's precisely the danger. Many evangelicals are jumping off the bandwagon of entertainment-oriented worship just as more and more of our congregations are enthusiastically climbing on. They are looking for just what we seem to be abandoning. The old dictum of the rummage sale seems to hold true: "One man's junk is another man's treasure." While many Lutherans are willing to toss their hymnody and liturgy out back door, evangelicals seem eager to import it through their front door.

Already back in 1950, A.W. Tozer, professor at Moody Bible Institute, preached a sermon titled "The Missing Jewel of Evangelicalism." He identified the missing jewel as worship. Some forty years later, his sermon still reverberates within Evangelicalism. The simple truth is that evangelicalism is still searching for moorings within the church catholic - a mooring which the Lutheran Church possesses in its liturgical heritage.

Before we cast off that mooring, we need to listen to Peter Gilquist, who led an exodus of 2,000 evangelical Christians into the folds of the Orthodox Church. The pilgrimage which led them to Orthodoxy was a search for the church and its worship. Gilquist writes:

For nearly two decades of my adult life I evaluated worship in such categories as: Does it hold me? Is it exciting and invigorating? Is it fresh and creative? Does it meet my needs? But as I studied the roots of Christian worship, starting back in the Old Testament, I found, of course, that those categories were not there. Instead I was confronted with such

questions as: Is this done in spirit and in truth? Is it patterned after things in the heavens? does it glorify God? Liturgical and sacramental worship were in the church at the start. I embraced it not for the exhilaration or ecstasy, but because it was right. It felt as though I had come home to worship.¹²

Now there's a personal testimony for you! It is refreshing to see a man like Peter Gilquist, former leader in Campus Crusade, embrace liturgical and sacramental worship in the name of faithfulness and vitality. Yet sadly we observe increasing numbers of Lutheran parishes willing to denigrate these sacred mysteries or at least down-play them.

How are we to recapture a vision of music as a handmaiden of theology and partner in gospel proclamation?

A Trinitarian model for church music

The problem in evaluating music for use in the church is the inherent subjectivity of musical form. What is pleasing to one person's ear is not to another. I have already suggested that church music must be judged on the basis of its overall focus and message, the theological air it breathes, so to speak, its atmosphere.

Still, we need a more thorough and objective standard on which to base our judgments. I propose a Trinitarian model. What could be a more fitting way to evaluate music for use in the Divine Service of the Holy Trinity than to look at it in light of the three articles of the Creed?

First Article

CREATIVE

The obvious first question in evaluating good church music is simply this: Is it good music? We understand that God the Father has given us every good and perfect gift, including the gift of art and music. It is indeed fitting that we should use these gifts in His service - which is simply another way of saying it is fitting that He should use the gifts He has given us as vehicles for His Holy Word.

Dr. Rupprecht reminds us that God demanded only the best of His Old Testament people when it came to worship in His Holy Temple. Inferior or blemished animals were unfit as offerings in the House of the LORD. [Malachi 1:7-8]¹³ Sadly this idea is largely missing in parish life today. Too many congregations are willing to excuse mediocre music rendered in a slipshod fashion in the name of sincerity. "It's the thought that counts," is the general idea. As long a song has spiritual overtones, its musical structure and level of performance would appear to be above criticism.

The Psalmist seems to have a different opinion: *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness*, we read in Psalm 29:2. It is fitting that the vehicle of the sacred mysteries should reflect the sacred mysteries. Doxology

demands our highest praises, and the best we have to bring is not too much to offer Him. Liturgical music offered to God in the Divine Service is quantitatively different than what we put in an offering plate; this musical offering is His tool to serve us through His Holy Word and Sacrament.

Of course there is no room for musical snobbery in the church. Few parish choirs can muster a Bach motet or a Distler chorale setting. The musical resources of small rural parishes may be more limited than those in large metro areas. To ask the question "Is it good music?" is not to prescribe what music is brought to the Divine Service. It is simply to encourage that the music be within grasp of the musicians and be adequately rehearsed.

Second Article

Redemptive - Sacrificial

It is God who has acted redemptively and sacrificially in His Son Jesus Christ at the cross. That was done once, and for all. But in the means of His Grace He goes on continually bringing to His church the benefits of that redemption and sacrifice. In the liturgy God speaks, and we listen. And when we open our mouth to praise His Name, He uses that very praise sacrificially; that is, to proclaim the salvation He has done.

When we talk second article language, we are talking the church's mother tongue. For the second article is Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ is the Life of the Church. Our church rightly confesses that *the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel*. (Apology XV (42)¹⁴ All discussion of musical form and aesthetics is idolatrous apart from this central article: that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

The heart and center of the faith, the article by which the church stands or falls, is the article of Justification. And this is the article on which church music stands or falls. The question posed to Philip often inscribed on pulpits could well be inscribed on organ consoles and choir lofts: *Sir, we wish to see Jesus*. (John 12:21)

But our appraisal of church music goes beyond a simple word search for the name "Jesus." For all talk about Jesus is not necessarily gospel. Elsewhere I have argued that though today's evangelical church is drowning in talk about Jesus, there is precious little gospel present.¹⁵ The focus is clearly on the moral implications of the gospel, not the gospel itself. So also, much of today's so-called "Christian music" sounds very pious, but it is only skin deep.

Its subjective focus on human emotion leaves little room for the objective proclamation of God's mighty salvation in His Son. Christian contemporary music makes for good entertainment, but very little of it makes for good worship. It is articulate in describing

the vagaries of the human heart, but becomes tongue-tied in gospel proclamation. It may advertise the gospel, but it stumbles in proclaiming the gospel. That is, it describes the internal sensations of one who follows Jesus; it does not speak the Word Jesus has entrusted to His church to proclaim.

Under the first article, we suggested that good church music must first of all be good music. Under the second article we come to its content: good church music is kerygmatic, that is, it proclaims God's action in Christ. Contrast, for example, the strength and depth of these lines: *Salvation unto us has come by God's free grace and favor with the sweet shallowness of these: I have decided to follow Jesus...no turning back, no turning back.* The one rests on the mighty rock of the incarnate flesh of God's own Son. The other is based on the shifting sands of human commitment. True, one may sound sweeter and more moving to ears tuned by our subjective culture. But the real question is: when the storm rises, which faith rests secure?

In our subjective age this is not very popular to say, but the most genuinely moving music is not the music that tugs at the heart emotionally. You can get results that way, but it will not be genuine spiritual renewal. It will be psychological manipulation. Paradoxically, the more God-centered Christian music is, the more man-centered are the results.

The term "liturgy", our church confesses, squares well with the ministry.¹⁶ But contrary to current thinking, by that we do not mean the ministry of music is equivalent to the ministry of the telephone chain or the ministry of the coffee hour in the congregation - "ministry" as the service rendered by one member of the Body of Christ to another. Rather, our church understands "ministry" always in terms of the Means of Grace. It is God Himself who ministers in His Holy Church through His divinely appointed means. When a minister consecrates bread and wine, for example, he shows forth the body and blood of the Lord to the people. In other words, it is the public service of Christ Himself to His people.

The ministry of the church's liturgy and song is a ministry of the gospel - a channel and setting for voice of God in His Holy Word. All liturgy and church music must be understood under the second article in this kerygmatic sense; that is, as God's activity by which He causes His Name to be proclaimed. And where His Name is, there He is to bless with His gifts.

Third Article

Sanctifying/ Sacramental

The moment we speak of the blessings God brings in His gifts, we have moved to the third article. All that God the Father has accomplished sacrificially through the Son He mediates sacramentally in the Spirit. And He does this not everywhere, but through the means He has appointed and in the place He has appointed. *In this Christian Church, we confess in the Small Catechism, He (the Holy Spirit) daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.*

Just as God accomplishes our justification by His free grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, so He accomplishes our sanctification alone by His free grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The vehicle by which He makes us holy is the same as the vehicle by which He declares us holy: His Holy Word.

The Holy Spirit works through the Word and the sacraments, we confess, to kill and to make alive. Just as God dealt conclusively with sin at the cross and open tomb, so He goes on in the preaching of His Word, in Baptism, Absolution, and the Holy Supper, dealing death to the old Adam and raising us to newness of life in Jesus Christ. This is genuine sanctification, and it is God's work from beginning to end.

eyes to see

Therefore we also define worship as God's activity, not human activity. In the twenty-fourth article of the Apology we confess: *The use of the sacrament, when faith gives life to terrified hearts, is the worship of the New Testament, because what matters in the New Testament is the spiritual motivation, **dying and being made alive.***¹⁷

Those who serve in the sanctuary, according to Scripture and the Confessions, are first and foremost agents of God's activity. Like the levitical singers in the temple of Solomon, church musicians stand between God and His people. They have one foot in heaven and the other on earth.

The levitical singers in Solomon's temple took up a position between the court of the Gentiles and the Holy Place. And as they proclaimed the Name of the Lord, God Himself was present to bless:

All the Levites who were musicians--Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives--stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God. [2 Chronicles 5:12-14]

In so far as church music has one foot on earth, it is subject to all of the artistic norms of human musical endeavor. But because its content is the living voice of the gospel, church music always has one foot in heaven. It breathes the atmosphere of heaven to give life on earth. And the life it gives is always the life of God - given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

Good church music is like a window; you don't look at it, but through it to the very

courts of heaven. It is music that proclaims sacrificially the sacrifice accomplished once and for all at the cross, and then conveys over and over again sacramentally the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation earned at that cross. In the church's song men do not hear the echo of their own heart, but the voice of the Father himself: "You are my beloved child."

a song to sing

There must be a sense of Real Presence in the music brought into the service of the church, because it is God Himself who gives us a song to sing: *You shall have a song*, writes the prophet Isaiah, *as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. And the LORD will cause his majestic voice to be heard...* [Isaiah 30:29f., RSV]

Ultimately it is God who gives the church's song. Left on our own on the horizontal level, we cannot sing a *Gottesdienst* (Divine Service); we can only sing a *Menschen dienst*, or human service. Our problem is that of the children of Israel in captivity: *How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?* [Psalm 137:4] Man's liturgy has no vertical dimension and no depth. Man's liturgy can only confess sins; it has no absolution to bring. Man's liturgy can only describe feelings; it cannot proclaim the sacred mysteries. Man's liturgy can only sing the blues; it has no praise to bring.

No, if we are to sing the songs of the LORD in this fallen world, it is God who must give us a song to sing. Thus the atmosphere of the church's earthly song is always the atmosphere of heaven. It may seem like a foreign atmosphere, but that's because we live here on earth in exile. For here we have no continuing city. *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.* [Philippians 3:20-21]

Like the Old Testament tabernacle, the place where God's font and altar stand is holy ground. It is a definitively different place than where we live from day to day. And so we take off our shoes; holy ground calls for holy songs. Songs that breathe vertically, not merely horizontally. Songs that breathe the lively air of heaven into the stagnant atmosphere of earth.

the living Christ

The living Lord of the church has given us a song to sing here in this foreign land. He who once took up residence in human flesh now gives His heavenly power hidden in the lowly human word of His holy gospel - and, wonder of wonders, once again God dwells among His people in that holy Word. Thus the best liturgical direction the apostle can give the Colossian church is to remind them what is going on in their prayers and praises:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one

another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. [Colossians 3:16]

the distant triumph song

The church on earth sings continually the distant triumph song of those whose rest is won. And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Her terrestrial song is an echo here of the celestial hymn: "And from morn to set of sun, through the church the song goes on."¹⁸ The church's song is her testimony in this dying world to her living Lord and the Life that is in Him alone. The church's song is as old as creation. It is the Song of Moses at the Red Sea: "*I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.*" [Exodus 15:1]

Yet the church's song, no matter how old, is forever new. The church's song is a foretaste here of the eternal wedding banquet where death and night are no more, and forever and forever the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven join continual sing the Song of the Lamb: "*Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*" [Revelation 5:12]

Harold L. Senkbeil
Friday after Easter

Elm Grove Lutheran Church
24 April, 1992

ENDNOTES

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2. Oliver C. Rupprecht, "The Modern Struggle for Standards in Religious Music: A Theological-Musical Appraisal Viewing the Work of Luther, Bach, and Mendelssohn," Concordia Journal, July 1983, p. 128.
3. ed. Dave Anderson, *The Other Songbook*, (Edina, Mn: The Fellowship Publications) 1987, p. i.
4. Ibid.
5. *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, Art. XV (39-40), p. 220.
6. Richard Resch, "Hymnody as Teacher of the Faith," 1992 Liturgical Symposium, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne. Unpublished paper in possession of author, p. 4.
7. Luther's preface to the *Geistliches Gesangbuchlein*, [SL X, pp. 1422ff.] quoted in Walter E.

Buszin, "Luther on Music," Musical Quarterly, 32:1 (1946), p. 88.

8. Luther, "Concerning Music," [SL XXII], Buszin, p. 88.

9. J. S. Bach, quoted in *J.S. Bach and Scripture*, Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985, p. 95.

10. Johann Walter, "In Praise of the Noble Art of Music," Wittenberg, 1538. transl. by F. Samuel Janzow, 1983. Unpublished paper in possession of author.

11. Chuck Fromm, "Come join us in the search for `true worship'", *Worship Leader* Vol. 1, No. 1 [February/March 1992], p. 4.

12. Peter E. Gillquist, "Evangelicals Turned Orthodox," The Christian Century, March 4, 1992, p. 244.

13. Rupprecht, p. 126.

14. Tappert, p. 221.

15. Senkbeil, "The Liturgy as the Life of the Church," Lutheran Forum, Vol. 26, No. 1, February 1992, p. 28.

16. Apol. XXIV (81), p. 264.

17. Apol. XXIV (71), p. 262.

18. *Holy God, We Praise Your Name*, Lutheran Worship, 171.