

### Essay 3. Luther's Hymns<sup>1</sup>

Essay 1 enumerated some significant changes Luther made to the worship, the Offices and the Mass, among them the inclusion of hymns sung by the laity. Essay 2 listed various hymns associated with Luther's *German Mass*, 1526. This essay discusses hymns written by Luther himself. Luther was a skilled amateur musician. He sang with a strong tenor voice, played the flute, and strummed the lute (sort of the guitar of his age). He gained his musical skills in his early studies at Eisenach as a child and furthered these when he entered the monastery. He was astute to consult with some of the leading musicians of his day after he began his worship reforms.

Luther's writings bear witness to his attitude about music. Below is one of his more well-known statements:

Here it must suffice to discuss the benefit of this great art. But even that transcends the greatest eloquence of the most eloquent, because of the infinite variety of its forms and benefits. We can only mention one point (which experience confirms), namely, that ***next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise***. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions—to pass over the animals—which as masters govern men or more often overwhelm them...For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or to good?—what more effective means than music could you find? The Holy Ghost himself honors her as an instrument for his proper work when in his Holy Scriptures he asserts that through her his gifts were instilled in the prophets....

Thus it was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener's soul...After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely by proclaiming the Word of God through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.<sup>2</sup>

Luther wrote hymns between the years 1523 (the year of the *Formula Missae*) and 1543 (three years before his death), providing 36 to 39 hymns, depending on what counts as a genuine "hymn." For example, several items such as the Litany corrected and some verses of poetry may or may not be properly termed "hymns." When we use the term "hymn," we refer to *writing the texts*, but in many cases Luther additionally provided the tune. Luther used a variety of methods in providing hymnody. When we say "written" by Luther, we generally mean one of the following methods:

1. Lyrics completely original with Luther, often based upon a specific Scripture such as a Psalm.
2. German translations—transcriptive paraphrases is a more accurate term—of pre-existing Latin liturgical texts, e.g. the *Te Deum*.
3. Translations of Latin texts of others, such as those of Ambrose and Jan Hus, which included additions and alterations. Luther often used the words "*verbessert und vermehrt*" which are akin to our saying, "new and improved," or "bigger and better!"
4. Additions and alterations made to pre-existing German hymn texts.

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other "Essays" may be reproduced as handouts. Subsequent "Suggested Activities" can be adapted as desired.

<sup>2</sup> In bold print italics, the oft-quoted phrase in its broader context, part of the preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae* (1538). Ulrich S. Leupold, *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). For the entire preface cf: pp. 321-24.

We will take up each of these methods in due course. First, let us note a few highly popular *myths* that simply refuse to be stamped out. They are the result of sloppiness and reiteration – if one says it often enough, it must surely be true! – or prolonged attempts to discredit Luther. Several of these are the following:

That Luther used popular bar (tavern) tunes for his hymns. In an attempt to discredit Luther, some people spread the rumor that his hymns were composed to tavern songs and bawdy tunes. This is far from the truth. In fact, Luther used as examples music sung by the Meistersinger (Master singers). This was courtly music of the highest quality with a complex melodic structure we now term “bar form,” a reference to the structure of the poetry and music: a type of AAB form and not anything having to do with drinking songs. Luther’s composed tunes mirror that of the Meistersinger, highly developed in structure. It is true that some folk-like tunes were used, especially if a pre-existing text which he edited/expanded came associated with a tune. The tavern tune charge usually emanated from critics of the Reformation.

That Luther said, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” – another attempt to discredit the worth of Luther hymns. In fact, it was the Rev. Rowland Hill, pastor of Surrey Chapel, London, in an 1844 sermon who said, “*The devil should not have all the good tunes.*” This has been misattributed to Luther.

That Luther wrote “Away in a Manger.” This cradle song is American in origin. Stanzas one and two (“Away in a manger” and “The cattle are lowing”) appeared in the *Little Children’s Book*, Philadelphia (1885), and stanza three (“Be near me, Lord Jesus”) in *Vineyard Songs*, Louisville (1892). This song may have been written for a Christmas pageant commemorating a Luther anniversary, hence incorrectly fostering an association with Luther as the author.

Here is a chronological list of Luther’s hymns.<sup>3</sup>

<b>1523</b>	<i>Ein neues Lied wir heben an Nun freut euch, liebe Christen g’mein Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein Es spricht der unweisen Mund wohl Es wolle Gott uns gnädig sein Nun komm der Heiden Heiland Christum wir sollen loben schon Gelobet seiest du, Jesu Christ</i>	A new song now shall be begun Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice Out of the depths I cry to you Ah God, from heaven, look down, behold The mouth of fools doth God confess May God bestow on us his grace Savior of the nations, come Now praise we Christ, the holy one We praise, O Christ, your holy name
<b>1524</b>	<i>Wohl dem der in Gottes Furcht Wär Gott nicht bei uns dieser Zeit Mit Fried’ und Freud’ ich fahr dahin Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns Gott sei gelobet Christ lag in Todesbanden Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der den Tod Komm, Gott Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott Gott der Vater, wohn uns bei Wir glauben all an einen Gott</i>	Happy the man who fears the Lord Had God not been upon our side In peace and joy I now depart Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior O Lord, we praise you Christ lay in death’s strong bands Jesus Christ today is risen Creator Spirit, Heavenly Dove We now implore God the Holy Ghost Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord God the Father, be our stay We all believe in one true God

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<sup>3</sup> Primary sources for information on Luther’s liturgical writings and hymnody: Karl Drescher, ed., *D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 35 (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1923), and Ulrich S. Leupold, *Luther’s Works: Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). The English titles above are those commonly used in English language hymnals.

	<i>Mitten wir im Leben sind</i>	In the midst of earthly life
	<i>Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot</i>	These are the holy ten commands
	<i>Mensch, willst du leben seliglich</i>	Will thou, O man, live happily
<b>1526</b>	<i>Jesaia dem Propheten das geschah</i>	Isaiah, mighty seer in days of old
<b>1527/28?</b>	<i>Ein ' feste Burg ist unser Gott</i>	A mighty fortress is our God
<b>1528/29?</b>	<i>Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich</i>	Grant peace in mercy, Lord, we pray
<b>1529</b>	<i>Kyrie eleison</i>	The Latin Litany corrected and the German Litany
<b>1531</b>	<i>Herr Gott, dich loben wir</i>	Lord God, your praise we sing
<b>1534/35</b>	<i>Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her</i>	From heaven above to earth I come
<b>1535</b>	<i>Sie ist mir lieb, die werthe Magd</i>	To me she's dear, the worthy maid
<b>1537</b>	<i>All Ehr und Lob soll Gottes sein</i>	All glory be to God alone
<b>1539</b>	<i>Vater unser im Himmelreich</i>	Our Father, thou in heaven above
<b>1541</b>	<i>Christ unser Herr zu Jordan kam</i>	To Jordan came the Christ, our Lord
	<i>Was fürchtest du, Feind Herodes sehr</i>	Why, Herod, unrelenting foe
<b>1541/42</b>	<i>Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort</i>	Lord, keep us steadfast by thy Word
<b>1542</b>	<i>Christ ist die Wahrheit und das Leben</i>	Christ is the truth and the life <sup>4</sup>
<b>1543</b>	<i>Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schar</i>	From heaven came the heavenly host
	<i>Der du bist drei in Einigkeit</i>	Thou who art three in unity

Luther wrote approximately two-thirds of his hymns between 1523 and 1526, that is, from the appearance of the *Latin Mass* until the *German Mass*. Interestingly, “Isaiah Mighty Seer in Days of Old” (“*Jesaia dem Propheten das geschah*”)<sup>5</sup> was written in 1526, the year the *German Mass* was published. It is the German substitution for the *Sanctus*. However, we may note that “All Glory Be to God Alone” (“*All Ehr und Lob soll Gottes sein*”)<sup>6</sup>, Luther’s substitution for the *Gloria in Excelsis*, did not appear until eleven years after the *German Mass* was published. We may properly infer that Nicolaus Decius’s hymn “All Glory Be to God on High” (“*Allein Gott in der Höh’ sei Ehr*”)<sup>7</sup> was used first for the *German Mass*, accounting for that hymn’s more widespread use then as well as later.

Earlier we referred to four methods of hymn writing employed by Luther. Below is a partial listing of Luther hymns for each of those categories, enough to give an indication of Luther’s hymn writing process, which, by the way, did not differ from other writers of his time. Adapting Latin hymns, making translations, and using and adapting texts and tunes commonly known was not considered some sort of “copyright infringement,” as people now would view it. The practice of “parody” was seen as a compliment, not a theft of intellectual property. The common first line in English is listed. If you wish, you may compare the hymns below to the previous listing in both languages.

1. *Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice* (Christian doctrine, including a bit of Luther’s own experience)  
*Out of the depths I cry to you* (Psalm 130)  
*A mighty fortress is our God* (Psalm 46)  
*These are the holy ten commands* (the Ten Commandments with their applications)
2. *The Latin Litany corrected and the German Litany* (“*Kyrie eleison*”)  
*Lord God, thy praise we sing* (the *Te Deum*)  
*Thou who art three in unity* (Luther’s German version of the ancient Vesper hymn “*O lux beata Trinitas*” – also it is Luther’s final hymn)

<sup>4</sup> Probably better considered sacred poetry than a hymn.

<sup>5</sup> TLH 249, LW 214, LSB 960

<sup>6</sup> TLH 248, LW 210, LSB 948

<sup>7</sup> TLH 237, LW 215, LSB 947

3. *Savior of the nations, come* (a translation and change from St. Ambrose's classical Latin poetry)  
*Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior* (an adaptation of Jan Hus's "*Jesus Christus nostra solus*")  
*In the midst of earthly life* ("*Media vita in morte sumus*")
4. *O Lord, we praise thee* (Luther claimed a form of this hymn to have been well known before the Reformation)  
*We praise, O Christ, your holy name* (the first stanza may have dated to 1370)  
*God the father, be our stay* (known perhaps before 1480 as a prayer to various saints. It is sometimes now abbreviated to one stanza: "Triune God, O Be Our Stay")

In Luther's day, the people naturally wanted to sing. Since at the Council of Constance (1514), the Church officially forbade them to sing in the Mass, they sang on their own outside of the church. We are all familiar with carols, religious folk songs of popular origin. Some think carols are only about Christmas. Not so. Vernacular songs such as carols developed for all seasons and occasions, some of them based on the Bible but some based on legends about Jesus or the saints. Many of these consisted of units of poetic lines which together told a story and ended with a common refrain like: "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*" (e.g.: the French carol "Angels We Have Heard on High") or joyful nonsense syllables like "Fa, la, la, la, la" (e.g.: the English carol "Deck the Halls," and others). Villagers danced down the street singing "Fa, la, la" and then *stood still* to sing the story part. This became known as the "stanza" because they *stood* still to sing it. The common ending refrain was called a "burden" because, so to speak, it was *carried along* by the rest of the song.<sup>8</sup> We enjoy singing carols from various countries in worship, many coming from this age though not from Luther.

However, Luther capitalized on a different popular genre. "From Heaven Above" ("Vom Himmel hoch") is based on a commonly used riddle/game: the young fellow returns to the village from far away and tells a story of exciting things he has seen. "If you can guess where I have been, you win the prize!" he says, in effect. In Luther's case, the angel is the one who comes from far away heaven to tell what he has seen - "Glad tidings of great joy I bring whereof I now will say and sing." Among Luther's hymns, this one so familiar to us is a stylistic anomaly.

Other popular sacred songs often consisted of little more than "*Kyrie eleison*" ("Lord, have mercy") repeated at great length. "Kyrie eleison" was also attached to the end of familiar quasi-religious folk songs. These became known as "*Leisen*," a Germanization of the Latin "*eleison*." Luther hymns adapted from *Leisen* include "We praise, O Christ, your holy name," "God the father, be our stay" (point 4 above), and "To God the Holy Spirit let us pray."

In the tradition of the times, the choir led all the singing, sometimes in unison and sometimes with a choral setting. Therefore the tune needed to be recognizable in one of the voice parts. The tune was called a *cantus firmus* (fixed voice) most frequently sung in the tenor part of the choir. The other voices played counterpoint to the *cantus*. These choral settings were not like our hymns in which all the parts move as chords with the same rhythm as the melody.<sup>9</sup> They were more complicated musically in the compositional style of the time. Luther's musical right-hand man, Johann Walter, through the course of 27 years and several editions provided

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<sup>8</sup> It is proper to speak of hymn *stanzas*, not *verses*. A verse is a line of poetry akin to a sentence, especially in the Psalms, but also the rest of the Bible (which was first divided into identifiable chapters in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and verses much later). With the stationary singing of the major part of a carol, one has the derivation of the word "stanza."

<sup>9</sup> Polyphonic (multi-voiced counterpoint with parts interweaving), not homophonic settings (chordal with a melody on top- think hymns from *TLH*), usually unaccompanied.

121 choral settings in Latin and German of hymns in a collection titled “*Geistliche Gesangbüchlein*.”<sup>10</sup> Walter wrote the settings and sometimes also the tune.

Possibly through trial and error it was discovered that leading congregational singing with the tune *in the top voice* (we call it the *soprano* part; they called it the *discantus*) was far easier than following a tune somewhere lower in the middle of the vocal texture (they and we called it the *tenor*). We have come to expect to hear the tune in the top voice in our hymns.

Over time the organ and instruments took a stronger role in leading singing. We think of our choir leading a hymn *a cappella* as something unusual or special; in Luther’s era it was the way hymns were sung. We read our hymns from a hymnal; they learned everything by rote (repetition). Can you imagine learning all the new hymns, many of which were quite lengthy, by rote with only a choir to accompany the singing after more than a century of being forbidden to sing in church? Some people today complain about learning a new hymn they can clearly read from a book with an organ or keyboard leading the singing. Somewhere I sense a disconnect!

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<sup>10</sup> Or Johannes Walter (1496 –1570) *Geystliches gesangk buchleyn* (Little Sacred Song Book). The first edition (1524) contained 43 polyphonic works. The final edition (1551) contained 47 Latin and 74 German pieces. Walter also provided the music for Luther’s *Deutsche Messe*.

### Suggested activities for Essay 3:

1. Speculate: was worship in Luther's day more uniform than it is in ours? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Luther appeals to emotions in his hymns? If so, in what way? If not, why not? (how objective is he?)

Hint: except for "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice" which begins with a bit of Luther's own personal experience, note that Luther's point of view is communal/collective. He directs his hymns toward the community, not toward individuals, *per se*. Compare this hymn with his others to discover this fact.

3. Which aspects of Luther's hymns do you find appealing? Unappealing? Why or why not?
4. Consider that manuscripts of Luther's hymns were not in the hands of the whole congregation, and even if they were, how many could read them? Speculate on how you think the laity learned to sing hymns in Luther's era. Compare what you think was their experience learning new hymns to ours.
5. Study a specific Luther hymn in depth to discover if familiarity with the text improves your ability to sing the hymn effectively. Can you identify steps to enhance a congregation's learning a new Luther hymn? Identify hymns that you wish to include in worship. What characteristics do you discover about Luther hymns (such things as length, content, point of view, how thoughts are expressed, other ideas)?

6. Use the chart "**4. Luther's Hymns in Lutheran Hymnals: Uses, Titles, Locations**" to identify hymns you easily recognize by title. Sing one or more of them. Then select one or more not as familiar and sing them.

Regarding the possible difficulty of singing hymns from Luther's era: note that there have been ongoing attempts to replace some of the melodies for various Renaissance era hymns with modern versions more "appealing" to worshippers today. (c.f. several Luther hymns not part of the German Mass: *LSB* 406 – "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord" (Luther's great baptism hymn) with ELVET BANKS, *LSB* 407, a tune © 2004, and *LSB* 823 – "May God Bestow on Us His Grace" (Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 67) also with ELVET BANKS (*LSB* 824).

7. Does this line of questioning apply to other hymns *not* of the Luther era? If so, in what ways? How would you suggest your congregation approach the issue of learning unfamiliar hymns?
8. Select one or more of Luther's hymns and discover how Luther specifically teaches Scriptural doctrine. Can you "proof text" items from any of his hymns? For example, how does Luther present the Biblical doctrine of justification in "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice"? Or the blessings of baptism in "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord"? Or any other of your choice.