

‘Dear Christians One and All Rejoice’: Martin Luther’s Theology of Music

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ABSTRACT

In the year 1530, Martin Luther penned the phrase; ‘I am not ashamed to confess publicly that next to theology there is no art which is the equal of music.’ This simple statement has been a favored adage among musicians for generations since. Yet, Luther was not simply extemporising about a favoured pastime. Luther’s statements regarding the exalted nature of music arose directly from his theological worldview. Using Luther’s own outline for a treatise on music, this article examines Luther’s statements regarding the nature of music and how they fit within his theological framework.

*Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,
With exultation springing,
And, with united heart and voice,
And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God hath done,
How His right arm the victory won;
Right dearly it hath cost Him.*

*Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay.
Death brooded darkly o’er me.
Sin was my torment night and day.
In sin my mother bore me.
Yea, deep and deeper still I fell.
Life had become a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me.*

*My own good works availed me naught,
No merit they attaining.
Free will against God’s judgment fought,
Dead to all good remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair
Left naught but death to be my share.
The pains of hell I suffered.*

*But God beheld my wretched state
Before the world’s foundation.
And, mindful of His mercies great,
He planned my soul’s salvation.
A father’s heart He turned to me,
Sought my redemption fervently.
He gave His dearest Treasure.*

*He spoke to His beloved Son:
‘Tis time to have compassion.*

*Then go, bright Jewel of My crown,
And bring to man salvation;*

*From sin and sorrow set him free.
Slay bitter death for him that he
May live with Thee forever.*

*This Son obeyed His Father’s will,
Was born of virgin mother.
And God’s good pleasure to fulfill,
He came to be my Brother.*

*No garb of pomp or power He wore,
A servant’s form, like mine, He bore,
To lead the devil captive.*

*To me He spake: Hold fast to Me,
I am thy Rock and Castle;
Thy ransom I Myself will be,
For thee I strive and wrestle;
For I am with thee, I am thine,
And evermore thou shalt be mine.
The foe shall not divide us.*

*The foe shall shed my precious blood,
Me of My life bereaving.
All this I suffer for thy good
Be steadfast and believing.
Life shall from death the victory win.
My innocence shall bear thy sin;
So art thou blest forever.*

*Now to My Father I depart,
The Holy Spirit sending
And heavenly wisdom to impart
My help to thee extending.
He shall in trouble comfort thee,
Teach thee to know and follow Me,
And in all truth shall guide thee.*

*What I have done and taught, teach thou,
My ways forsake thou never.
So shall My kingdom flourish now
And God be praised forever.
Take heed lest men with base alloy
The heavenly treasure should destroy.
This counsel I bequeath thee.*

Dr. Martin Luther, 1523¹

Introduction

When we think of theology, we often think of lists: deductions made about God's character systematically gleaned from the words of Scripture. To the systematically minded, Luther's non-systematic theological stance could seem muddy or confusing. It may be challenging, for instance, to grasp the notion of music as something to be connected with our theological maxims since we see it as mainly metaphorical and emotional. How can a subjective art form define and enact an objective truth? While this notion may be difficult for the contemporary mindset, to comprehend, for Martin Luther the gap is easily bridged. Indeed there is no gap at all within his understanding of God's spoken Word and how humanity hears and receives it.

The hymn *Nun freuteuch, liebe Christen g'mein* ('Good Christians One and All Rejoice') is believed to be the first penned by the renowned reformer. It is certainly one of his finest. Within its text we find a full picture of Luther's understanding of God's redemptive work in the world. Using only ten verses, Luther weaves together over fifty biblical quotations and allusions from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles. This is theology, the plan of salvation, laid out in a song. What's more, Luther has set this, what many read as an autobiographical hymn, in a context that applies to all believers. This is our story, the Church's story. Within the finely crafted poetry we find a theological exposition of the Trinity's involvement in humanity's redemption.

For Luther, there is no art, no aspect of Creation, to compare with music. From his worldview, in line with the *Great Tradition* of Pythagoras and the early church fathers, music is a reflection of God and

¹ Martin Luther, 'Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,' in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, trans. Richard Massie (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1942), 277-278.

his ordered universe.² Beyond this, Luther holds that music joined with the Word of God is a gift used by God to enact true change within the believer. Through this lens, Martin Luther's theology of music became a key component to the spiritual reformation of the medieval church. The music that was written according to these ideals is still shaping how many Christians view God and his work in the world. For Luther, music not only reflects our theology; it is living theology. Music is theology in action.

I Love Music

Luther intended to write his own treatise on the theology of music, but unfortunately, the project never came to fruition. However, we do have a draft of an outline for the proposed treatise, most likely from 1530:

I love music.

Its censure by fanatics does not please me

For

1. (Music) is a gift of God and not of man
2. For it creates joyful hearts
3. For it drives away the devil
4. For it creates innocent delight, destroying wrath, unchastity, and other excesses. *I place music next to theology.*³ This is well known from the example of David and all the prophets, who all produced poetry and songs.
5. For (music) reigns in times of peace.

It will be difficult to keep this delightful skill after us. The Dukes of Bavaria are to be praised in this, that they honor music. Among our Saxon (Dukes) weapons and cannons are esteemed.⁴

By Luther's time, many treatises discussing the nature and value of music had been written and circulated. As a part of the scholarly community, he would have been aware of and familiar with several

² 'In its Christian form, the central notion is that musical sound, especially musical harmony, coincides with and gives expression to cosmic order, which in turn reflects and in some manner gives access to the Creator...Music gives us not only a model of harmonious balance, unity, and integrity, it actually implants cosmic harmony into the soul of humans.' Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 79-80.

³ Italics my own.

⁴ WA 30II: 696, cited in Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's liturgical music: principles and implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 86.

including those of Boethius, Augustine, Johannes Tinctoris and Jean Gerson to name a few.⁵ The majority of these medieval treatises on music were concerned mostly with the theory of music or a more cerebral appreciation of the structures, sounds and forms. Many spoke of what music reflected or symbolized, but showed little interest in what we might call theology of music for the church. Luther's theology of music is a confession about the nature of God and his work among his creation. What makes Luther's stance on music different from what had been written up to this point is that it is not just a theory; it is also a practice.

Ultimately, Luther's claims about the experiential component of music parallel his convictions regarding the lived character of Christianity. Merely assenting to the doctrines of faith is not faith. Faith must be experienced and it must be lived out. In the same way, music needs to be experienced and its effects lived out. According to Luther, music's purpose has a theological basis. The spoken Word is the building block of our growing faith (faith that comes by hearing). As Robert Goesser states in his article 'Luther: Word of God, Language, and Art':

Fundamental to Luther's view of language is his understanding that the word or symbol bears what it signifies. Words are able to bear the presence of God. As the Word [Christ] is fully God and bears the presence of God, so words bear the Word. This understanding is there early on in Luther's writings and gets articulated constantly. He doesn't hesitate to use the most graphic and shocking language; for example, he says that with the bodily voice of the preached Gospel, the true Christ - as he sits at the right hand of the Father - is brought into the human heart.⁶

This paper explores the points Luther raises in his outline: how they are derived from his worldview, the implications that follow, and finally, how this applies to us today.

⁵ Leaver, *Luther's liturgical music*, 73. Jean Gerson (1363-1429) French theologian, who authored a number of significant treatises on music. His poem *Carmen de laude musicae* as well as other writings were quoted in the writings of faculty at Wittenberg as well as referred to be Luther himself.

⁶ Robert Goesser, 'Luther: Word of God, Language, and Art,' *Currents in Theology and Mission* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 9.

Music is a gift of God

To understand the hymns of Martin Luther one must first understand Luther's worldview and its theological basis. Luther's theology is fully centered on the Word of God: spoken, written, and living. Through this Word, God the Father created the world and all that is in it. After the Fall, Christ - the living Word - was sent by the Father to accomplish what was necessary for the redemption of depraved humanity. Upon Christ's ascension, God the Holy Spirit was sent to carry out this redemption. Within this narrative one finds the ideas of God's created order and the disorder brought about by sin and Satan leaving humanity in need of God's gift of mercy to accomplish our redemption both now and in eternity.

Luther claims that music is a gift of God in his creation. Like the Gospel, it is within the sphere of the *auricularia*, 'the sphere of miraculous audible things.'⁷ For Luther, the spoken Word of God creates reality. He is 'very conscious that music is first and foremost an event that is *heard*. In that way, music resembles the Word itself as a miracle of God that we hear.'⁸ Because of the *Imago Dei* people may create music, but God is the true author. In creation God gives everything needed for music to take place such as the physical vibrations and the mathematical laws that govern the formation of pitches and their relation to each other.

For nothing is without sound or harmony. Even the air, which itself is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses, and which, since it lacks both voice and speech, is the least musical of all things, becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when set in motion. Wondrous mysteries are here suggested by the Spirit.⁹

Music, in its perfection of order, is a reflection of God's perfect order in creation. It reflects God's character and his truth. At the Fall of creation, a liar came into this perfectly ordered world of truth, where all was created good and humans bore the uncorrupted image of their maker. A lie was conceived,

⁷ Oskar Soehngen, 'Fundamental Considerations for a Theology of Music,' ed. Theodore Hoelty-Nickel in *The Musical Heritage of the Church* vol. 6 (St Louis: Concordia, 1963), 15.

⁸ David J. Susan, 'Some Parallel Emphases between Luther's Theology and His Thought about Music, and Their Contemporary Significance,' *Concordia Journal* 11, no. 1 (January 1985): 10.

⁹ From the Latin draft of Luther's introduction 'Martin Luther to the Devotees of Music Greetings in Christ,' cited in Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 77.

believed, and gave birth to sin. The sin of Adam and all who would follow subverted the created order. Apart from the grace of God there is no means by which fallen humanity may restore that order. Everything, even human reason, has been subverted, distorted, and made subject to the lie of the serpent. But there is hope. As Luther writes in the first line of 'Dear Christians one and all, Rejoice,' we rejoice because God the Father has already planned to redeem us: 'Before the world's foundation...He planned my soul's salvation.'

In Luther's view, music reflects God's plan for redemption. Music is not merely representational, figurative, or metaphorical. Music in its formal arrangement of sound 'was not only a sign of the possibility of order, but was an actual achievement of that order, a sure indication of the stability of God in a shifting and unstable world.'¹⁰ Music, as with all of creation, 'is a gift of God, and not of man.'

For it creates joyful hearts, for it drives away the devil

The foundation for Luther's worldview requires a nonallegorical interpretation of the Book of Genesis. In his commentary on Genesis 1-3, Luther asserts that the days and evenings of the creation account are not merely a mythical tale, but are to be read as a literal narrative 'about real creatures and a visible world apprehended by the senses.'¹¹ When God said, 'Let there be light,'¹² there was light. This means that when God speaks, reality is established.¹³ Luther believed Scripture was the Word of God. Therefore, if the Scriptures are God's Word, then when Scripture is proclaimed, reality is established.

Music, even in its wordless proclamation of God's order 'creates joyful hearts' and 'drives away the devil,' who cannot abide it, just as the music of David's harp dispelled the evil spirit from Saul. Luther writes, 'The miracles one sees are of less importance than those which we hear,'¹⁴ and 'the tones give life to the words.'¹⁵ When music, which drives away the devil, is combined with the Word of God, which establishes reality, the impact cannot be compared to anything else in all of nature. As David J. Susan,

¹⁰ Mark S. Sooy, *Essays on Martin Luther's Theology of Music* (Blue Maroon, 2006), 16.

¹¹ Sooy, 24.

¹² Genesis 1:3

¹³ Sooy, 24

¹⁴ *WA*, vol. 44, p. 352; *LW*, vol. 7, 71, cited in Susan, 10.

¹⁵ *WA*, *Tischreden*, vol. 2, no. 2545, cited in Susan, 10.

explains in, 'Some Parallel Emphases between Luther's Theology and His Thought about Music, and Their Contemporary Significance.' 'When a man or woman in Christ sings the Word, double blessing is here: music's power for good and against evil, and the Holy Spirit's power for good and against evil.'¹⁶

This is why Luther felt it was so important to utilize God's gift of music in bearing His Word: 'Hymns - the union of the Word and music - connect the believer with the Word, and therefore with God himself, in a very concrete way.'¹⁷

*From depths of woe I cry to Thee,
Lord, hear me, I implore Thee.
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,
My prayer let come before Thee.
If Thou rememberest each misdeed,
If each should have its rightful meed,
Who may abide Thy presence?*

*Thy love and grace alone avail
To blot out my transgression;
The best and holiest deeds must fail
To break sin's dread oppression.
Before Thee none can boasting stand,
But all must fear Thy strict demand
And live alone by mercy.*

¹⁶ Susan, 11.

¹⁷ Susan, 11.

*Therefore my hope is in the Lord
And not in mine own merit;
It rests upon His faithful Word
To them of contrite spirit
That He is merciful and just;
This is my comfort and my trust.
His help I wait with patience.*

*And though it tarry till the night
And till the morning waken,
My heart shall never doubt His might
Nor count itself forsaken.
Do thus, O ye of Israel's seed,
Ye of the Spirit born indeed;
Wait for your God's appearing.*

*Though great our sins and sore our woes,
His grace much more aboundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our utmost need it soundeth.
Our shepherd good and true is He,
Who will at last His Israel free
From all their sin and sorrow.¹⁸*

For Luther, as with Church leaders both past and present, there was no better place to look for material in writing these new hymns than in the Bible's own song book, the Psalter. Luther worked more with the Psalms than with any other book of the Bible. He called it a 'little Bible,' saying that it contained the entire story of Christianity. He wrote two major works focusing on the Psalms, *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-16) and *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519-21). By 1517, Luther had already translated all the penitential psalms, and by 1524 he had translated the entire book.¹⁹ Part of what could have made the Psalms appealing is that this is where we see into the hearts of the people of God, not just their actions. After all, David was not a 'man after God's own heart'²⁰ because of what he did, but because of the turning of his heart.²¹

¹⁸ Martin Luther, 'From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee,' in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, trans. Catherine Winkworth (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942), 234-235.

¹⁹ Aurelius, 22.

²⁰ 1 Samuel 13:14

²¹ Aurelius, 23.

Luther's hymn *Aus tiefer Not ichschreiichzudich*, ('From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee'), based on Psalm 130, is considered one of the penitential hymns. It was enclosed in a letter Luther wrote to Spalatin, Luther's close friend and advisor to Frederick. Luther stated that he wished 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.²²

Luther asked Spalatin for help writing new spiritual songs because of Spalatin's firm knowledge and gift in handling the German language.²³ Luther wished the adaptation of the Psalms to be as close to the original text as possible. His main concern was the message, as he conveyed to Spalatin 'Maintain the sense, but don't cling to the words.'²⁴ The hymns were not only written in German - the native tongue of his congregation - but also with easy-to-understand texts. Each line held interest and conceptual understanding. In his hymnic translations Luther gave the Psalms a very Pauline twist, placing the emphasis on justification by faith. Rather than simply setting the Psalms to music, Luther brings them into the light of the New Testament and the context of his own congregation. After all, these were not hymns to be sung by the people of Israel waiting for the coming Messiah, but by the people of the Church to whom the Messiah had already come.

Luther also took great care to bring union between the text and its musical setting. His sources for these melodies were broad, though the claim that he used popular or secular music is highly exaggerated. While Luther did use the technique of *contrafacta*, setting new sacred words to a secular melody, he did so for the settings of only two of his hymns. These hymns were later separated from

²² LW vol. 49 (ed. Gottfried G. Krodel), (Philadelphia, 1972), 68, cited in Aurelius, 21.

²³ '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.' Gracia Grindal, 'Luther and the Arts: A Study in Convention,' *Word & World* III, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 377.

²⁴ Grindal, 377.

those melodies in favor of new ones.²⁵ What he did do was unite 'old and new, high art and folk art, rural and urban by the chorale itself.'²⁶ He often set new words to older German hymn tunes and chant melodies and he wrote melodies of his own following the character and formal structures of the Meistersingers and in the polyphonic motets of Josquin and others.²⁷ It is even recorded by Johann Walter²⁸ that before Luther began his reforms to the *Deutsche Messe*, he gathered the musical scholars of his day to himself to discuss the Gregorian Psalm tones and how to use the music properly to carry the poetry of his new hymns.²⁹ The care with which Luther composed the music and set the text of these new hymns was due to his high view of the power of music. Through music's proclamation of God's ordained order and joy comes the power to create joyful hearts and drive away the devil.

I place music next to theology.

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On Earth is not his equal.*

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing;
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.*

*And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us;
The Prince of Darkness grim --*

²⁵ Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: the church and music: a textbook, a reference, a history, an essay* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 148.

²⁶ Westermeyer, 149.

²⁷ Westermeyer, 149.

²⁸ An eminent musician in Luther's day.

²⁹ Westermeyer, 142.

*We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure,
On little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Though Him who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.³⁰*

Luther's statement, 'I place music next to theology,' seems to be strangely placed within his treatise outline. As noted previously, this is due in part to our systematic approach to theology, our way of viewing it through the lens of modern thought. It is this same mode of thought that often keeps music separate from theology today. The assertion Luther makes in his treatise outline - that music is next to theology - is found scattered throughout his writings. In a letter to Ludwig Senfl³¹ dated 4 October 1530, Luther writes, 'I plainly judge, and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology, there is no art that could be put on the same level with music.'³² In this letter Luther advocates his high view of music for its similar attributes to theology. It is because of music's close relation to the origin and effects of God's Word that Luther gives it the distinction of being placed next to theology.

One of the primary functions of music is the proclamation of God's Word. In this way Luther's hymns are like sermons. He is not merely paraphrasing the text; he is preaching it. One example is *Ein Feste Burg is unser Gott* ('A Mighty Fortress is our God') a hymn based on Psalm 46, that Luther begins with an almost verbatim quote from the opening of the Psalm: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...'³³ but from there goes on to expound on the work of Satan in the world, human

³⁰ Martin Luther, 'A Mighty Fortress is our God,' Hymn 67 in *The Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN, 1939).

³¹ Swiss composer trained in the Flemish tradition by one of the renaissance masters, Heinrich Isaac. It is believed, due to this letter, that he worked directly with Luther on composing hymn tunes for the new chorales. However, such a claim cannot be firmly substantiated. It is known that he used Luther's edited melody of the German *leise* tune *Christ ist erstanden* (based on the Latin liturgical chant *Victimae paschali laudes immolent Christiani*) in a setting for six voices in the *Neue deutsche Geseng*.

³² LW 49:427-28; WA BR 5:6:39 cited in Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications*, 65.

³³ Psalm 46:1

depravity, and Christ's atonement, ideas not explicitly stated in the Old Testament song. However, the message of the Psalm and the hymn are the same. In the words of the Psalmist:

Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.³⁴

The Hebrew Psalmist was writing to give strength and encouragement to the people of Israel that God has not failed them. See what He has done in the past; see what He promises to do in the future. Neither natural disasters nor human powers will knock him off His throne, for 'He utters his voice, the earth melts.'³⁵ It is a rallying song, a statement of faith in the trustworthiness of God. This hymn became the battle cry of the Reformation and remains Luther's most popular hymn to this day. Even in the midst of persecution and martyrdom, God is indeed a mighty fortress: 'The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.'

Theology, for Luther, is not merely a subjective truth, but an objective reality intended to be lived and not simply contemplated. Music is not merely a discipline to be contemplated and analyzed; It is a gift meant for our use.

³⁴ Psalm 46: 10-11

³⁵ Psalm 46:6b

For music reigns in times of peace

*In Peace and Joy I now depart
At God's disposing;
For full of comfort is my heart,
Soft reposing.
So the Lord hath promised me,
And death is but a slumber.*

*'Tis Christ that wrought this work for me,
My faithful Savior,
Whom Thou hast made mine eyes to see
By Thy favor.
Now I know He is my Life,
My Help in need and dying.*

*Him Thou hast unto all set forth
Their great Salvation
And to His kingdom called the earth,
Every nation,
By Thy dear and wholesome Word,
In every place resounding.*

*He is the Hope and saving Light
Of lands benighted;
By Him are they who dwelt in night
Fed and lighted.
He is Israel's Praise and Bliss,
Their Joy, Reward, and Glory.³⁶*

Luther's hymn *Mit fried und freudich far dahin* ('With Peace and Joy I Go My Way') is a paraphrase of the Song of Simeon found in the Gospel of Luke.³⁷ Upon seeing the promised Messiah, Simeon proclaims that he can now depart in peace. He knows God to be a God of his Word. He knows that salvation has come because he has seen it come. The confidence and conviction found in this hymn is confidence in the Word of God and His redeeming work in Creation. It is a hymn of faith - not blind faith

³⁶Martin Luther, 'In Peace and Joy I Now Depart,' trans. Leonard W. Bacon, 1884, in: NetHymnal, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/p/ipjindep.htm> (accessed April 23, 2010).

³⁷ Luke 2: 29-32

in an unsubstantiated hope, but a faith in an experienced reality. It is a faith that comes from knowing God and finding him to be true. This hymn, like all of Luther's hymns, preaches the Gospel.

Music has a profound connection to the Word of God because it is able to carry words. The reality of God's Word, when sung, connects itself to the singer; it establishes that reality inside the singer as well as those who hear the words. Just as Luther taught that the Eucharist and Baptism are physical realities that effect real changes on the soul, so it is with music, another tool used by God for our sanctification, ('So the Word imparts its qualities to the soul'³⁸). It can be historically verified that music does indeed reign in times of peace. The Thirty Years War that devastated Germany and many other parts of Europe left the musical scene in shambles. More time and resources can be committed to the cause of music during times of peace. Here we can actually prove one of Luther's statements to be right: peace allows for music. Beyond this, however, drawing from Luther's presuppositions about music - its origins, attributes and effects - we can also say that music allows peace.

Its censure by fanatics does not please me

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.³⁹

God created humanity in his image; as a result, humanity is creative. In light of music's power and the biblical example and mandate to sing hymns and spiritual songs,⁴⁰ it is no surprise that Luther states, '(Music's) censure by fanatics does not please me.' For as Mark S. Sooy states in his book *Essays on Martin Luther's Theology of Music*, 'To man alone, and not to the animals, God gives the special gift of *song*: connecting words with music. Censorship of music and creativity means a suppression of the image of God in the redeemed man.'⁴¹

³⁸ Martin Luther, Timothy F. Lull, and William R. Russell, 'The Freedom of a Christian,' in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 2005), 396.

³⁹ *WA, Tischreden*, vol. 2, p. 1258; *LW*, vol. 54, No. 129, cited in Susan, 11.

⁴⁰ Acts 16, Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19

⁴¹ Sooy, 17.

This is where the theologies of the Swiss reformers and Martin Luther diverged. In music, the Swiss saw only a physical action, too easily prone to sin. Luther saw a gift of creation redeemed and mandated by God to be utilised. Nearly every reformer of the Church has had something to say about the role of music in worship. Some, such as Swiss reformer John Calvin, took the 'safe' route of limiting sung praise to words directly from Scripture. Some, such as Ulrich Zwingli, ordered church organs to be nailed shut and music to be confined to the singing of the spirit within the heart. The core of these drastically diverse views of music were not merely the result of varying levels of artistic ability on the part of the Reformers, but of a difference in views of the creation and God's use of the physical world.

At Marburg, Zwingli asserted to Luther 'Spirit and flesh contradict each other!'⁴² By this Zwingli was claiming that music was an invention of the flesh, a pleasing one to be sure, but having no relation to God's Word or creation. He was not stating that music had no power, for he was an accomplished musician and often enjoyed music in his private life, but he believed the power came 'from the music itself, not from any relation to the Word of God or to the power of the Holy Spirit.'⁴³ The current of Luther and Zwingli's confrontation over the arts flowed in the same direction as their confrontations over the Eucharist and Baptism. Where Zwingli asserted that the physical is merely a symbol, Luther held that the physical has power ontologically to change the believer.

Luther was not alone in his desire to give music free reign to carry the Word of God, nor was Zwingli the first to be wary of its dangers. Like Ambrose of Milan, Luther believed in the power of music to be a tool to combat heresy.⁴⁴ Like Augustine, Zwingli believed in the power of music, but he was more afraid of the idolatry and hypocrisy that so often comes about when such power is wrongly wielded than he was confident in its power to effect good. Luther, to be sure, knew the seductive power of externals in their ability to promote hypocrisy and false security in one's relationship with God. Throughout his life, Luther spoke out against spiritual abuses of the Church, often focusing on outward physical acts such as masses, fastings, and vigils. However, the core of his argument was with the hypocrisy and false

⁴² Thompson, 'Ulrich Zwingli' in Gerrish, *Reformers in Profile*, 128 cited in Westermeyer, 151.

⁴³ Westermeyer, 152.

⁴⁴ Where Ambrose was writing hymns to counter the teachings of Arianism, Luther was using hymns to counter the teachings of the medieval Catholic Church.

spirituality with which these acts were carried out. For the Lord said through His prophet Amos, 'Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.'⁴⁵ Music bred in hypocrisy and praise without its basis in the Word of God is worth nothing.

For Luther, music and worship is meant for praise, but more exclusively as a vehicle for proclaiming God's Word and imbedding that Word in us. Instead of a response to grace, music, when joined to the Word of God, can be a sacramental-like means of grace. Just as we are justified by Christ through faith by an outward act of the Holy Spirit changing our inward being, music and the Word it proclaims act upon our souls in a real way, effecting real change within us. Proclaiming God's saving grace in the world ingrains in us truths about God. We sing what we believe, and in turn we begin to believe what we sing. God's Word through song propels and enables us to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

⁴⁵ Amos 5: 23

Dear Christians one and all rejoice

On the title page of the Wittenberg hymnal Luther gave this warning:

Many false masters now hymns do write,
Thus discern and learn to judge aright.
Where God his Church and Word is building
The Devil comes lying and killing.⁴⁶

It is Satan's desire to destroy the Church and it seems the strategy he most delights to use is to divide and conquer. Nothing was so powerful in uniting believers in the days of the Reformation as the songs they sang. In the Church today, nothing is so powerful in dividing believers than the songs we sing. Worship wars are prevalent in almost any church body over what we sing, how we sing, when we sing, and even why we sing. It is commonly held that music is powerful, but the origin, attributes and effects of this power are disputed, or worse, disregarded entirely as unimportant. It is imperative that the Church defines these things. This lack of clarity has led to skewed notions of our relationship to God as well as gross abuses and hypocrisy among believers.⁴⁷ The lack of a theology of music has led to no end of misunderstandings of music's role in our worship of the Creator.

⁴⁶ *Luther's Works* vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, edited by Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 318, cited in Robin A. Leaver, 'Renewal in Hymnody,' *Lutheran Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 368, ATLA Religion database (accessed February 12, 2010).

⁴⁷ Sooy, 62.

We typically think of music as a response to God's grace, an offering of praise we give to him. It is most closely associated with the emotions, and in some Christian gatherings a temporary 'high' given by the Holy Spirit. Though it seems we are not trying to get into heaven through good works anymore, a visitor to any number of evangelical congregations may deduce that we are attempting to capture God's attention with our skills in entertainment. Our church culture is one rife with the ideas of Kierkegaard's God sitting in the audience while we fling our praise at Him. Worship is not a drama. It is not merely a symbol of some higher spiritual reality. Worship is reality, a participation in the reality of God.

In the conclusion of his proposed treatise, Luther writes, 'It will be difficult to keep this delightful skill after us. The Dukes of Bavaria are to be praised in this, that they honor music. Among our Saxon (Dukes) weapons and cannons are esteemed.'⁴⁸ He was correct. It has been difficult to keep this delightful skill, yet it is not because of our esteem for weapons and cannons, but perhaps because we do not know what we esteem. The Church is suffering for lack of theology *in* our music, which stems from an overall lack of theology *of* our music. Perhaps we have lost our faith in the power of God's Word. If that is the case, we will be hard pressed to find assurance of anything.

It is believed that Martin Luther wrote at least thirty-six hymns, two-thirds of which were written from the fall of 1523 to the summer of 1524, while Luther was being kept at Wartburg Castle by Frederick the Wise for his protection. Alongside his translation of the New Testament in German he was also writing commentaries, prayers, sermons, and hymns.⁴⁹ Luther applied just as much care, attention and time to the composition of these hymns as to all his other theological writings, to the point that some could make the case that Luther believed these hymns to be as great in importance as his sermons - perhaps more so. Luther did this because he believed that Christ, God the Father's most precious gift, was truly the 'Word made Flesh.'⁵⁰ This Word redeemed us. He actively rescued us from our sin while we could only passively receive his grace.⁵¹ Music wedded to the spoken Word of God is a means to enact the Word within us, and in response we offer back that which we have been given. According to the biblical

⁴⁸ Cited in Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 86.

⁴⁹ Carl Axel Aurelius, 19.

⁵⁰ John 1:14

⁵¹ Martin Luther, 'On the Councils and the Church,' in Lull and Russell, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 367.

mandate, we let the Word of Christ dwell in us, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God.⁵² Music must be made in subordination to the Word of God and 'allow the Spirit of God to transform the music.'⁵³ In turn, we allow the music, used by the Spirit of God, to transform us. God the Father speaks the Word, which is Christ. The Holy Spirit brings this Word into our hearts.⁵⁴ This is the blessing Luther saw in God's gift of music. Music is not merely an ornament or superfluous addition to the proclamation of God's Word but a gift whose intrinsic essence is well fitted to bring God's Word into our very beings. Music, as with theology, is not fully realized through contemplation and intellectual pursuit. Both must be experienced; they must be lived. Music does not simply reflect our theology; it is our theology in action: animating and enacting the Word of the Lord within us. Therefore, dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!

⁵² Colossians 3:16

⁵³ Sooy, 56.

⁵⁴ Sooy, 80.

Appendix

Texts of Luther's hymns in the original German⁵⁵

Nun freuteuch, liebe Christen g'mein⁵⁶ *(Dear Christians one and all rejoice)*

Nun freuteuch, liebe Christen g'mein,
Und lasstunsfroehlichspringen,
Dasswirgetrost und all' in ein
Mit Lust und Liebesingen,
Was Gott an unsgewendet hat,
Und seine sussesWundertat;
Gar teu'r hat er'serworben.

Dem Teufelichgefangen lag,
ImTod war ichverloren,
Mein' Suend' michquaelteNacht und Tag,
Darin ich war geboren.
Ichfielauchimmertieferdrein,
Es war kein Gut's am Lebenmein,
Die Suend' hatt' michbesessen.

Mein' guteWerk', die galtennicht,
Es war mitihn'nverdorben;
Derfrei' Will' hassteGott'sGericht,
Er war zumGut'nerstorben.
Die Angst michzuverzweifeltrieb,
DassnichtsdenSterbenbeimirblieb,
ZurHoelle muss ichsinken.

Dajammert' Gott in Ewigkeit
Mein Elenduebermassen,
Erdacht' an sein' Barmherzigkeit,
Erwollt' mirhelfenlassen;
Erwandt' zumir das Vaterherz,
Es war beiihmfuerwahrkeinScherz,
Erliess'sseinBesteskosten.

⁵⁵ Though some changes in spelling may have been made in consideration of the evolving nature of the German language.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther, cited in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942), 277-278.

ErsprachzuseinemliebenSohn:
``Die Zeitisthierzu 'rbarmen;
Fahrhin, mein'sHerzenswerteKron',
Und sei das HeildemArmen
Und hilfihmausderSuendennot,
Erwuerg' fuerihn den bittern Tod
Und lass ihnmit dir leben!"

DerSohndemVaterg'horsam ward,
Erkamzumir auf Erden
Von einer Jungfrau rein und zart,
Ersollt' meinBruderwerden.
Gar heimlichfuehrt' ersein' Gewalt,
Erging in meinerarmenG'stalt,
Den Teufelwollt' erfangen.

Ersprachzumir: ``Halt dich an mich,
Es soll dir jetztgelingen;
Ichgeb' michselberganzfuerdich,
Da will ichfuerdichringen;
Dennich bin dein, und du bistmein,
Und woichbleib', dasollst du sein,
UnssollderFeindnichtscheiden.

VergiessenwirdermirmeinBlut,
DazumeinLebenrauben;
Das leid' ichalles dir zugut,
Das halt mitfestemGlauben!
Den Todverschlingt das Lebenmein,
Mein' Unschuldtraegt, die Suendedein:
Dabist du seligworden.

Gen HimmelzudemVatermein
Fahr' ich von diesemLeben,
Da will ichseiner Meister dein,
Den Geist will ich dir geben,
Derdich in Truebnistroestensoll
Und lehrenmicherkennenwohl
Und in derwahrheitleiten.

Was ichgetanhab' und gelehrt,
Das sollst du tun und lehren,
Damit das Reich Gott'swerd' gemehrt
Zu Lob und seinenEhren,
Und huet' dichvorderMenschenG'satz,
Davonverdirbtderedle Schatz!
Dass lass' ich dir zurLetze."

Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir⁵⁷
(From deepest woe I cry to Thee)

Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir,
Herr Gott, erhör mein Rufen;
Dein' gnaedig' Ohrenkehr zu mir
Und meiner Bittsüß' eröffnen!
Denn so du willst das sehen an,
Was Süend' und Unrecht ist getan,
Werkann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?

Bei dir gilt nicht denn Gnad' und Gunst,
Die Süende zu vergeben;
Es ist doch unser Tun umsonst
Auch in dem besten Leben.
Vor dir niemand sich rühmen kann,
Des muss dich fürchten jedermann
Und deiner Gnade leben.

Darum auf Gott will hoffen ich,
Auf mein Verdienst nicht bauen;
Auf ihn mein Herz soll lassen sich
Und seiner Güte vertrauen,
Die mir zusagt ein wert's Wort,
Das ist mein Trost und treuer Hort,
Des will ich allzeit harren.

Und ob es wehrt bis in die Nacht
Und wieder an den Morgen,
Doch soll mein Herz an Gottes Macht
Verzweifeln nicht noch sorgen.
So tu' Israel rechter Art,
Daraus dem Geisterzeuget ward
Und seines Gott's erharre.

Ob bei uns ist der Süendenviel,
Bei Gott ist viel mehr Gnade,
Sein' Hand zu helfen hat kein Ziel,
Wie gross auch seider Schade.
Er ist allein der gute Hirt,
Der Israel erlösen wird
Aus seinen Süenden allen.

⁵⁷ Martin Luther, first published in: *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein*. Wittenberg, Germany 1524, cited in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, 234-235.

Ein' feste Burg is unserGott⁵⁸

(A Mighty Fortress is our God)

Ein' feste Burg ist unserGott,
EinguteWehr und Waffen;
Erhilftunsfreiausaller Not,
Die unsjetzt hat betroffen.
Der alt' boeseFeind,
Mit Ernst er'sjetztmeint,
Gross' Macht und viel List
Sein' grausam' Ruestungist,
Auf Erd' istnichtseingleichen.

MitunsrerMacht is nichtsgetan,
Wir sind gar bald verloren;
Es steit' fuerunsderrechte Mann,
Den Gott hat selbsterkoren.
Fragst du, werderist?
Erheist Jesu Christ,
Der Herr Zebaoth,
Und istkeinanderGott,
Das Feldmuserbehalten.

Und wenn die Welt vollTeufelwaer'
Und wollt' uns gar verschlingen,
So fuerchtenwirunsnicht so sehr,
Es sollunsdochgelingen.
DerFuerst dieser Welt,
Wiesau'ersichstellt,
Tut erunsdochnicht,
Das macht, eristgericht't,
EinWoertleinkannihnfaellen.

Das Wortsiesollenlassenstahn
Und kein'nDankdazuhaben;
Eristbeiunswohl auf dem Plan
MitseinemGeist und Gaben.
Nehmensie den Leib,
Gut, Ehr', Kind und Weib:
Lassfahrendahin,
Siehaben'skein'nGewinn,
Das Reich muss unsdochbleiben.

⁵⁸ Martin Luther, 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God,' cited in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, 192.

Mit Fried und Freud ichfahrdahin⁵⁹
(*In Peace and Joy I now depart*)

Mit Fried und Freud ichfahrdahin
In GottesWille,
GetrostistmirmeinHerz und Sinn,
Sanft und stille.
WieGottmirverheißen hat,
DerTodistmeinSchlafworden.

Das machtChristus, wahrGottesSohn,
DertreuHeiland,
Den du mich, Herr, hast sehenlon
Und machtbekannt,
Daßersei das Leben
Und Heil in Not und Sterben

Den du hast allenvorgestellt
MitgroßGnaden,
Zuseinem Reich die ganze Welt
Heißen laden
DurchdeinteurheilsamsWort,
An allen Ort erschollen

Erist das Heil und seligLicht
Für die Heiden,
Zu;reuchten, die dichkennennicht,
Und zuweiden.
Es istdeinsVolks Israel
DerPreis, Ehr, Freud und Wonne.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, First published in: *Geistliches Gesangbüchlein*. Wittenberg, Germany 1524. Cited in 'In Peace and Joy I Now Depart,' NetHymnal, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/i/p/ipjindep.htm> (accessed April 23, 2010).