

Essays on Martin Luther's Theology of Music explores Luther's thought on the biblical foundation of music beginning in the creation story and leading to its comfort and joy in the Christian life. A scholarly and intriguing discussion.

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## Chapter 1

### Discovering the Theology of the Reformers in Their Hymns

A study of Protestant hymnody and hymn usage is an enormous undertaking. There are many factors that have influenced the music of Protestant churches dating back to its earliest beginnings during the Reformation. Each of the magisterial Reformers had their unique thoughts on the use of music within the liturgy (i.e., the church service) and this affected the hymn styles and song collections of the various Protestant groups. As the Reformation progressed and matured the unique characteristics of each viewpoint became clearer.

The focus of this essay is to discover how the theology of the Reformers is reflected in their hymns. Although interest concerning worship in general has increased in recent years, the connection of *theology* with *hymnody* is an area of study that continues to need attention. As Teresa Berger pointed out, “in spite of the importance of hymn traditions for the life of practically all Christian communities (both liturgical and non-liturgical), theological reflection on hymns remains a stepchild of scholarly inquiry.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, hymn writing and hymn singing was an important aspect of the Reformation and one which helps us understand that era of Church History. In addition, we will examine how various Reformers viewed music in general, since this directly influenced their hymnody (i.e., what they allowed to be used as congregational song).

Let us first consider how the overall belief systems and theological convictions of three of the major Reformers influenced the use of hymns within the church and as part of the liturgy. We will look at the views of those who have had the greatest impact upon Protestant Christianity in this area: Martin Luther, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli.

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## **Martin Luther**

Martin Luther had the broadest views of music of any of the Reformers. James White notes that Luther's "liturgical reform was guided by the principle that if the Scriptures did not expressly reject a particular practice, the church was free to keep it."<sup>2</sup> Luther thought music to be a gift from God and considered it of the highest importance next to the preaching of the Word (i.e., theology). He saw congregational singing as a vital part of church life, and made the singing of hymns in the language of the common people a hallmark of the German Reformation. He also encouraged others to do the same, enlisting help in building a hymnody for the common people. In writing to his friend Spalatin in 1524, Luther encouraged his input for hymns in the German language, "[Our] plan is 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."<sup>3</sup>

Luther was concerned for the common people under his care. He wanted them to have God's Word in language they could understand. The reason for this was that most of the general population during this period of history could not read or write. Music and lyrics were an excellent way to help them remember important Christian truths. In another letter, asking for a translation of a psalm, Luther wrote, "I would ask you, however, to avoid new words and the expression of the courts, so that the people may easily understand. Let the words be as simple as possible but at the same time pure and suitable; and see that the meaning be clear and as close to that of the psalms. We must therefore use our own judgment, determine the original meaning, and translate it freely."<sup>4</sup>

Luther thought highly enough of the importance of hymns that he wrote numerous hymns himself – being a quite gifted singer and lute player. He also rewrote both ancient and common hymns of the day, as well as writing sacred texts for tunes used in everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

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For Luther, church music had a three-fold purpose:

- 1) the praise of God;
- 2) an offering of the congregation; and
- 3) Christian education of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

This is a very broad understanding of the use of music in the church, and obviously comes from his time spent in the study of the Psalms, which also show these purposes in the use of music in the congregation of Israel.

In general, Luther allowed music of all kinds to be an integral part of church life. For him it was another tool to be used in the teaching of the Word of God. His personal love of music, his love of his Savior, and his love of the people were all naturally expressed through song. As Paul Nettle observes, "The jubilant faith of Luther, his joyful experience of God, his teaching of salvation by grace, caused him to break out in exultation before his God, and his feeling could find expression only in music."<sup>7</sup>

### **John Calvin**

John Calvin had a somewhat narrower view of music and especially of the hymnody to be used by the congregation. Although he appreciated and encouraged the use of all forms of music *outside* the church and the liturgy, both vocal and instrumental, *within* the liturgy he allowed only the use of unaccompanied unison Psalms.<sup>8</sup> Under his guidance and influence the Swiss Reformation produced the *Genevan Psalter*, which eventually included metrical versions of all 150 Psalms as well as other biblical texts. This "metrical psalmody" was (and continues to be) the defining mark of the liturgy of the Reformed Church.

The stark simplicity of Calvinist Worship was not negative at all, but was an attempt to solve one of the fundamental questions concerning freedom raised by the Reformation, namely, the relation of freedom to the world. Under the new



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sense of the significance of freedom a new import was given to the truth that the only acceptable worship is that of the heart, and that the intrusion of the merely material attraction is a degradation of its pure service. The best worship penetrates to that region where the things of sense cannot accompany men; where, with nothing to speak to the senses, the Eternal God in purest spirit is present in His supersensible glory.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, unaccompanied unison singing was the purest form of music and eliminated any possibility of distraction from instruments or other vocal parts. This allowed the people to concentrate on the spiritual meaning of the words, and not get caught up in the technicalities of the music.

For Calvin, worship was God's activity among the people in the liturgy. John Witvliet explains that "this divine action was construed in Trinitarian terms, where Christ is 'the chief conductor of our hymns (i.e., psalms),' the one who 'hallows our lips...to sing the praises of God,' while the Holy Spirit is the prompter who urges the people to sing."<sup>10</sup> This helps us understand why Calvin limited music in the church to that of the Psalms. The Psalms were considered the purest form of lyric coming directly from the hand of God. Hymns (such as used by the Lutherans) were prohibited. E. E. Ryden observes that this prohibition was put in place because these hymns were "the production of men. God could be worshipped in a worthy manner, according to Calvin's principles, only by hymns which were divinely inspired, namely the psalms of the Old Testament Psalter."<sup>11</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin saw the use of music within the liturgy as a means of praising God, but unlike Luther, not as a tool in teaching the congregation. Again, Witvliet notes, "The Psalms were not sung primarily for didactic purposes but rather, for the congregation to extol God."<sup>12</sup> In limiting its use, Calvin molded the Reformed style, and function, of music within the liturgy. And this continues to be the dominant view in some Reformed circles today.

## **Huldrych Zwingli**

Even narrower than the perspective of John Calvin were the views of Huldrych Zwingli – the Reformer based in Zurich. Zwingli basically omitted music as a whole from the liturgy. In his study titled *Zwingli and the Arts*, Charles Garside gives an excellent synopsis of Zwingli's thought concerning music. In Zwingli's view, liturgical music was "scripturally indefensible on three closely interrelated, yet distinguishable, grounds:

- 1) Music in worship is not explicitly commanded by God in either the Old or New Testament.
- 2) Christ instructed men to pray to God individually and in private. (John 4:24)
- 3) Saint Paul urged men, when together, to worship God and pray to Him in their hearts. (Colossians 3:16)<sup>13</sup>

Zwingli's focus on prayer, as the purest form of worship, dominated his view of liturgical forms. The liturgy was simple and straightforward. Donald Hustad explains, "Zwinglian liturgy tended to be more didactic than devotional. His typical morning service resembled the ancient Prone liturgy, consisting of Scripture reading (Epistle and Gospel), preaching, and a long prayer."<sup>14</sup> This was seen as a pure Pauline form of worship. Music simply had no place.

This attitude toward music in worship led to a sharp distinction between what Zwingli thought to be "true worship" (private, individual prayer), and the "hypocritical liturgy" (public, external show) of the Catholic Church. Garside notes, "The choral and instrumental music of the contemporary Catholic Church was full of the repetition of many words. Furthermore, it had become increasingly a matter of display before men, frequently a dazzling display of the technical abilities not only of the performer, but of the composer."<sup>15</sup> Zwingli sought for pure worship in focusing and communicating with God in prayer. He writes, "But when we wish to pray we should withdraw into our chamber and close

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the door after us and there, in secret, call upon our heavenly Father.”<sup>16</sup> Charles Garside comments on this statement:

With that sentence Zwingli reveals the extremity of his reach. What he seeks is nothing less than an irreducible purity of worship—in other words, an absolutely private prayer: the individual withdrawn from the world and from his fellow men, absolutely alone in communion with his heavenly Father. The Father’s Son has commanded such worship. Therefore, ideally, no other form should be considered, for no other form would accord so literally with the law of Christ. Thus Christ’s instructions stand at the very core of Zwingli’s liturgical thinking, from out of which all else radiates and without which the external forms in which his liturgy was finally cast cannot be comprehended...

Such an ideal could scarcely be realized, however, if the communal worship of the visible Church is to be observed and retained, and this for Zwingli was a necessity beyond dispute. The content of prayer must be given some formal, ritual expression in public. Yet once worship is made public, full opportunity is immediately provided for countless varieties of hypocrisy and display.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly enough, Zwingli himself was a very accomplished musician and could play virtually any instrument he desired. His personal theology simply would not allow the use of music in church, and to that conviction he was true. This conviction was so important that he even had the organs in the cathedrals of Zurich removed!

Having finished this short and elemental discussion of the theological views of music and its liturgical use in these three Reformers we find a quite diverse representation. For Luther, all music was appropriate—Psalms, hymns, instrumental music. For Calvin, only some, and only that which was biblically based—metrical Psalms. And for Zwingli, no music was appropriate for truly pure worship.

### **Analysis of "A Mighty Fortress is our God"**

With this diversity in mind, we turn to consider the actual theological convictions of the Reformers as discovered in their hymns (at least those who used hymns!). The best place to turn for this part of the study is Martin Luther, since there is such a rich field of texts and songs to study. Considered the father of Protestant hymnody, the examination of one of his hymns will give us the best perspective on how hymns were used to pass on important aspects of theology, at least in the German Reformation. Remember, Calvin only allowed the used of Psalms and Scripture texts which dictated what theological elements would appear in the congregational songs. Though certainly not exhaustive, this will give us a good indication and example how Luther passed Christian truth to the common people and his followers.

Berenard Kreuzer observed, "Hymnody is 'theology.' As a form of art, synthesizing both literature and music, it is not necessarily always in accord with dogmatic theology, however. When the hymnody does not mirror faithfully the dogmatic theology of a Church, then we find that it mirrors the practical theology of the people."<sup>18</sup> This is true of Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. We will be analyzing the translation by Frederick H. Hedge, which is the most popular in the United States. The text is as follows:

**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,**

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

**That word above all earthly powers,  
No thanks to them, abideth;  
the Spirit and the gifts are ours  
Through 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.**

We must note that Luther used Psalm 46 as the basis for this hymn. It could almost be considered a “jump-off point” from which he then constructed the flow of the verses – moving from one to the other to complete the thought of the whole song. It touches on aspects of theology and life that would instruct, admonish and encourage both those who sang and those who heard the message. Though referencing another of Luther's hymns (*Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*), the following quote from Oliver Rupprecht can equally be applied here:

Unless we sense these psychological and emotional elements—founded on Scripture and emphasized by the vivid and suggestive power of music—we are missing many of the riches of this song. Rightly considered, they are riches of a theological kind. Properly used, the psychological and emotional elements stimulated and supplied by musical tones can serve as valuable adjuncts to the verbal message: they can help equip the mind and empower the soul for victory in the struggle of divinely-given powers against forces that cause disaster and disarray.<sup>19</sup>

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In our analysis we will simply point to the major theological concepts represented in *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

First, we can find references to the power and majesty of God. This is evident in His person (a *mighty fortress*, a *bulwark*), as well as His intervention and providence in our lives (our *helper amid mortal ills*, the *right man on our side*, *He must win the battle* – not us). His power can also be seen in His triumph over Satan (*God has willed His truth to triumph through us*) and over death (*let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, etc. – His kingdom is forever.*)

Second, notice the Christological focus of the hymn. Christ is *the right man on our side* (note the reference to His humanity), chosen by God. He is also the *Lord Sabaoth* (note the reference to His divinity), everlasting (*age to age the same*), and the ultimate warrior against Satan (and *He must win the battle*), winning the battle on our behalf.

Third, we can note the reminder of the inability of man to provide for his own salvation. We need help (*our helper amid the flood*). We are weaker than our foe and enemy (*on earth is not his equal*). We cannot count on our own strength to deliver us (*Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing*). We have no need to fear, for God will triumph through us. And again, Christ is on our side (*through Him who with us sideth*) to conquer sin, death and the Devil.

Fourth is the recognition of the reality of Satan and his forces. He is *our ancient foe*, seeking to harm us (*Doth seek to work us woe*) and *armed with cruel hate*. He is powerful and mighty beyond human abilities (*his craft and power are great*, and *on earth is not his equal*). The world is filled with his forces (*though the world with devils filled*), and they seek to harm us as well (*should threaten to undo us*).

Fifth, we find references to each person of the Trinity. God is the *mighty fortress*. Christ Jesus is the warrior conqueror in our battle with Satan. And the Holy Spirit is the One who endows us with gifts, as a result of Christ's work on our behalf

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*(The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us  
sided).*

Overall, we can find – even in this short analysis – that Martin Luther filled this hymn with profound theological concepts and references. No doubt that in a full study of Luther’s hymns we would find a complete representation of many more ideas which Luther sought to pass on to the people through the use of congregational song. Other groups that used hymns (the Anabaptists for example) in their liturgies also used hymns in similar ways, as well as passing on in song traditions specific to the group.

In conclusion, we have found a very diverse representation of the use of hymns and music within the Reformation. Though this study has been limited, it has given us a good indication of how the Reformers viewed music as used in the church as well as how some passed on their theology in congregational song.

## Chapter 2

### Luther's Theology of Music

Martin Luther's significance in the reshaping of Christian theology and molding a theology based upon the five *sola* statements (*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, sola cristo, sola Deo gloria*) is widely recognized. His theology is broad, and the various ways in which he rethinks and modifies areas of theology – doctrine, church authority and structure, social concerns and others – touch every part of life and are quite expansive. Research into Luther's thought is as deep as it is wide, and yet there is evidence that in the midst of all of this research, Luther's thought is wider and deeper still.

One area that scholars have missed, or only hinted at, is how Luther's theology in the arena of creation has informed and molded his theology of the arts. Many have recognized in Luther's thought the connection between God as the Creator and man who is creative as a result of being made in God's image – especially as he is re-made (redeemed) in Christ.<sup>20</sup> However, only Brian L. Horne has observed that Luther's thought on music is built upon his reading of the creation account in Genesis, and his comments are limited to one paragraph in a larger discussion.<sup>21</sup> The next few chapters will pursue this idea in greater depth by considering Luther's statements on the use and function of the arts (especially music) side by side with the essentials of his doctrine of creation. In so doing we will seek to draw further conclusions concerning Luther's commitment to, and inclusion of, the arts for the church.



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### **Music and Creation in Luther's Thought**

Though lengthy, it is helpful to begin with Horne's answer to the question, "What does Luther believe to be the truth about the importance of music?" Horne responds in this way:

There are many clues scattered throughout his work, but the most interesting is, perhaps, found in the exegesis he provided of the opening chapters of Genesis. In discussing the nature of God's creative activity, Luther's mind revolved around the question of order. These opening chapters of the Bible tell the story of the establishment of order in the original creation of the world, and the destruction of that order by the rebellion of Adam. The creation of the world is, for Luther, the revelation of a divine order in the life and purpose of God himself. The Word, through which the world is made, and the world itself, do not appear as two different kinds of revelation; they are part of a single revelation of the divine order which is in the mind of the Creator. In the aftermath of the terrible disruption of that order by the sin of Adam two things remain: theology and music. Why music? For Luther the entirely non-figurative, non-representational, non-verbal world of sound in which every note and rhythm finds its proper place in the whole, and is indispensable to the whole, 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. It seems clear from everything he said that he could not have borne a world without music: 'I hope my life is nearly at an end (this was in 1530), for the world hates me and I am sick of it...So I keep humming this canticle.' Music in its utterly formal arrangement of sound was a means of holding the chaos of life at bay, of imposing order upon the frighteningly disparate pieces of experience. In a world without music chaos is come again.<sup>22</sup>

Besides Horne, other authors only mention this subject in passing when they refer to God's creative nature and music as a gift of the creative God, never really delving into the

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foundations of it as found in Luther's concept of creation. Paul Althaus generalizes this idea in the following observation:

God 'showers us with his own being.' He gives us what he is. For Luther, God's sharing of himself is the highest expression of the fact that God is God. It means that the attributes of God are by their very nature creative and are not only his own and remain in himself but are also shared with men. Luther feels that this is true of all God's attributes. Luther first became aware of this in the biblical concept of the righteousness of God...All of God's attributes therefore describe an activity in which God shares himself with men and allows them to participate in his being. God brings this about in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

God's creativity, therefore, is passed on to man as seen in his creative endeavors in the artistic world. To suppress that creativity in man is to suppress the very image of God found in man and redeemed in Christ. Even in this short synopsis, one can see a connection in Luther's thought between the arts and creation.

It is commonly acknowledged by scholars that Luther's theology of the arts, and of music in particular, is quite accepting and open-ended. His attitude was that if Scripture did not forbid it, then it was acceptable (and redeemable) for use by the church in its worship of God. Charles Garside notes, "Luther...placed few, if any, such limitation either on text or music. So long as musicians and poets, separately or together, were enriching the liturgy to a 'pious use,' their imaginative faculties were unrestricted."<sup>24</sup> It was this open and accepting valuation of the arts that led to the rich and diverse heritage of German protestant music, for example, in such composers as Bach, Haydn, Handel and others. Luther's impact upon German culture in this manner is truly remarkable and shows his influence was much broader in the society than purely as a theologian and reformer. This is in stark contrast to the arrested development of the arts within other parts of the

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Reformed tradition, especially within the influence of Calvin, but even more so in that of Zwingli.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Focus and Importance of This Study**

It seems then, that Luther's theology concerning the arts, especially music, is intertwined with his doctrine of creation. One cannot truly understand his openness for the artistic endeavor (in all of its forms) unless at a more basic level a foundation is laid for his holistic approach to, and understanding of, creation. God created the whole man, the whole man is infected by sin, and the whole man is redeemed in Christ. Music swirls around this holistic ideal in Luther's mind, as well as how music itself reflects creation, fall and redemption and the re-establishment of the created order. There seems to be more to this than current scholarship has thus far revealed and a study of these areas of Luther's thought, side by side, will be quite beneficial.

This study will first consider the foundational characteristics of Luther's theology concerning creation, especially as he finds in it the evidence of *order*. From that foundation, parallels and connections will be drawn between Luther's creation theology and his theology of music.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, a discussion and comparison of Luther's views of music with both Calvin's and Zwingli's will help to put his theology into the broader context of the Reformation and the thought of the major Reformers.

Finally, a short synopsis of the major points will be presented followed by a discussion considering why this study is important and pertinent to the church today, especially in its ongoing development and use of creativity in music and worship.

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