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The Reformation Hymn of Martin Luther

Shelby Earl Cowling

Ouachita Baptist University

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THE REFORMATION HYMN
OF MARTIN LUTHER

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A Special Studies Thesis
Presented to
the Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Honors Program

by
Shelby Cowling
January 1969

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Luther proclaimed as did no other religious leader of his century the value of music in church life. A performer and a composer himself, he strove for superior quality in music. When stating that the singing of praises to God was profitable to devotion, Luther was on common ground with his fellow reformers. In his encouragement of all forms of church music appropriate to worship, Luther was very much alone. Since Luther was anxious that music in church fulfill its true purpose, the service of God, he preferred the music of voices. He did not, however, discourage the use of the organ or other instruments as long as he felt they fulfilled the basic purpose of worship.

Much has been discussed as to Luther's merits as a poet and a composer. Just as almost all inventions and achievements that had any bearing with music in the Middle Ages were attributed to Guido of Arezzo, so now with Luther a great number of hymns have been accredited to him. Scientific historical research has put an end to this uncritical tradition. But critics pass from one extreme to another. Luther has been accredited with as few as two hymns being original as opposed to some accrediting him with a large host of hymns.

It is generally agreed that Luther wrote thirty-six hymns. But, by far the greater part of these thirty-six are not entirely original. Many of them are translations or adaptations of psalms, some of which are nearly literal transfers.

Other selections from scripture were used in a similar way, among which are the Ten Commandments, the Ten Santus, the Song of Simeon, and the Lord's Prayer. Similar translations or free paraphrase was made of certain Latin hymns by Ambrose, Gregory, Hus, and certain religious folk-songs of the pre-Reformation period. Only five hymns are completely original. The most celebrated of Luther's hymns is "Ein' feste Burg," and was suggested by the forty-sixth Psalm.¹

No other poems of their class by any single man have exerted so great an influence, or received so great admiration, as these few short lyrics of Martin Luther. Yet at the first reading it is not easy to understand the reason for their celebrity. As poetry there is no artfully modulated diction and no subtle and far-reaching imagination. Neither do they seem to meet with our devotional needs; there is a note of fanaticism.² It is said they are not universal. But the clue to their proper study and their success is they belong to a time, and not to all time. The hymns reveal the motive of the great pivotal figure in modern religious history. And more than that the hymns have behind them the great impelling force of the Reformation. Luther dropped the theological

¹Edward Dickson, Music in the History of the Western Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 251.

²Ibid.

style, and sought among the people for phrases as artless and simple as those of the Hebrew writers. Their simple, home-bred, domestic form of expression caught the public ear in an instant. Luther's hymns may not be poetry in the high sense; but they are eloquence, popular oratory in verse. These hymns are a powerful witness to the great truths which were the corner-stone of the doctrines of the reformed church.

Along with the production of hymns must go the composition or arrangement of tunes. The same uncertainty prevails when we consider Luther as a musical composer. His musical talent is undoubted.³ Evidence of it is found in his keen appreciation of music and his severe criticism of those who despise it.

Down to about the year 1600, the scientific musician always borrowed his themes from older sources and worked them into choral movements according to the laws of counterpoint. He was, therefore, a tune-setter, not a tune-maker. The same custom prevailed among the German musicians of Luther's day. The task of Luther and his musical assistants, therefore, was to take melodies from music of all sorts and alter them to fit the metre of the new hymns, and add the harmonies. In course of time the enormous multiplication of

³Dr. Karl Weinmann, History of Church Music (Boston; McLaughlin and Reilly Company, 1952), p. 62.

hymns brought about a union of the functions of the tune-maker and the tune-setter. In the latter part of the sixteenth century the modern method of inventing melodies took the place of the mediaeval custom of borrowing and adapting.

Down to the very recent period it has been believed that Luther was a musician of the order of tune-maker, and the melodies of many of his hymns were of his own production. This belief has been proven false. Luther composed no tunes.⁴ The melodies originally associated with Luther's hymns have been traced to their sources. The tune of "Ein' feste Burg" was the last to yield. Its germ is found in a Gregorian melody.

The hymn tunes, called chorals, which Luther and others provided for the reformed churches were drawn from four sources.

- (1) Official Latin hymnody, tunes and texts from Latin sequences, and plainsong.
- (2) Pre-Reformation popular hymns and folk songs.
- (3) Melodies of secular songs.
- (4) Melodies written especially for the Lutheran service.⁵

The German chorale is strong, impersonal, and simple. It is eminently suitable for an expression of congregational praise rather than merely subjective individual feeling,

⁴Dickson, op. cit., p. 1259.

⁵David P. Appleby, History of Church Music (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 80.

although the emotional element is strongly present.

Luther proclaimed as did no other religious leader of his century the value of music in church life. Music in his scale of values ranked second only to theology itself.⁶ The specific reasons that make Luther's principles of church music seem attractive today maybe listed: (1) he showed admirable discrimination in his own evaluation of contemporary composers and thus set a standard of correct musical judgement; (2) he defined music as an art which to be appreciated properly must be studied rather than merely listened to; (3) he made music study a mandatory part of the curriculum in all schools organized under his auspices; (4) he required the ministers who followed his lead to study singing and made an understanding of music a prerequisite to ordination; (5) he overrode those who, following St. Augustine's example, feared elaborate church music on moral grounds; (6) he spoke often and ardently in behalf of excellence in church music; (7) while exalting the role of the congregation, he never minimized the role of the organist or the choir in church music; and (8) he upheld the right of musicians to an adequate and assured income from church sources.

⁶Robert M. Stevenson, Patterns of Protestant Church Music (Durham: Duke University Press, 1953), p. 3.

The Reformation brought about, not only in ecclesiastical matters, but also in musical, a complete revolution. The German hymn was the factor of new teaching musically. The music of the Protestant Church of Germany presents certain points of contrast which are of importance not only in the history of ecclesiastical song, but also as significant of certain national traits conspicuous of the sixteenth century.

The musical system of the Catholic Church proceeded from the Gregorian chant, which is strictly a detail of the sacerdotal office. The Lutheran music on the contrary is primarily based on the congregational hymn. The one is clerical, the other laic; the one official, prescribed, liturgic, unalterable, the other free spontaneous, and democratic. In these two forms and ideals we find reflected the conceptions which characterize the doctrine, worship, and government of these two churches.

The Catholic Church was consistent in withdrawing the office of song from the laity and assigning it to a clerical position. Congregational singing has never been encouraged, and like prayer was looked upon as essentially a liturgic office.

In the Protestant Church the barrier of an intermediary priesthood between the believer and God is broken down. It was a perfectly natural result of this principle that congregational song should hold a place in the Protestant culture.

The struggles over popular song in public worship which appear throughout the early history of Protestantism are thus to be explained. The emancipated layman found in the general hymn a symbol as well as an agent of the assertion of his new rights and privileges in the Gospel. It therefore has a militant ring.

A second radical distinction between the music of the Protestant Church and that of the Catholic is that the vernacular language takes the place of the Latin.

The Lutheran song is important historically. They have a place in the annals of politics and doctrinal strifes. His lyrics were the models of the hymns of the reformed church in Germany for a century or more.⁷ The principle that lay at the basis of his movement gave them their characteristic tone. They were among the most efficient agencies in carrying this principle to the mind of the common people. They also contributed to the enthusiasm which enabled the new faith to maintain itself in the conflicts by which it was tested. These German hymns show in what manner the dogmas and usages of the Church took root in the popular heart and affected the spirit of the time. It was a new spirit which Luther gave to his church.⁸ He was the first who gave the people a voice

⁷Dickson, op. cit., p. 255.

⁸Dickson, op. cit., p. 227.

with which to utter their religious emotions in song. Luther understood the character of his people; he knew where to find the nourishment suited to their wants; he knew how to turn their enthusiasms into practical and progressive directions. This was Luther's achievement in the sphere of church art.

Even though the practice of singing in German in churches was not new, the widespread use of congregational song and the enthusiasm of Lutherans for singing and for rediscovered personal expression in religion created a quality of religious song which seemed of an entirely different kind to the followers and adversaries of the new movement.

When Luther turned his attention to the need of suitable hymns and tunes, a new form in Protestant sacred music came into being. Then it was called the "chorale," and now it is generally referred to as popular melody.

He took up this work not only out of his love for song, but also from necessity. He wrote to Nicholas Haussmann, pastor at Zwickau:

I would that we had many German songs which the people could sing during the Mass. But we lack German poets and musicians who are able to make Christian and spiritual songs.⁹

As a result of this complaint a crowd of hymnist sprang up. Luther was chief among them. Several allusions in his letters

⁹Dickson, op. cit., p. 249.

show that he took the psalms as his model. That is to say, Luther did not think of a hymn as designed for the teaching of dogma, but as the sincere, spontaneous outburst of love and reverence to God for His goodness.

The first hymn-book of evangelical Germany was published in 1524 by Luther's friend Johann Walther. Thirty-eight German and five Latin hymns were contained in the book. Four of the hymns were by Luther. More hymns were written and more books were published until at the time of Luther's death, sixty collections of various editions had been issued. It is to be noticed that almost without exception the chief hymn writers of the Lutheran time were theologians and preachers.

Beside the chorale, there developed a second branch-- the chorale in ployphonic song and motet.¹⁰ The melody is in the Tenor and the other voices sing in counterpoint. Sometimes the melody is in the other voices according to the example of the Netherland School. In this manner a more artistic form of the chorale was prepared and the "art of the chorale" ensued. The delicately-fitted part-writing, not the melody, was now of primary importance. Now the arranger, not the inventor of the air, was the chief person. An important step in this evolution took place, when, towards the end of the sixteenth century, the melody began to be placed in

¹⁰Weinmann, op. cit., p. 64

the highest part. This was the first step which polyphony took in the direction of an approach to the harmonic style.

The polyphonic setting of the chorale melodies led to the establishment of choral groups capable of performing these settings, too difficult for the ordinary congregation. The Kantorun (sacred choral ensembles) and Gymnasialchoere (secondary school choirs) were such groups.¹¹

The chorale in four parts with the melody in the soprano, usually with a harmonization by Bach, is the form familiar to most twentieth century musicians. According to P. J. Grout this form made its first appearance in Lucas Osiander's Fuenfzig Lieder and Psalmen in 1586.¹² The earlier practice was for the congregation to sing the chorale melody unaccompanied in unison, or to alternate congregational unison stanzas and choir polyphonic stanzas. After 1600 the four-part organ accompaniment with melody in the soprano became the rule. The congregation still sang only the tune.

Although chorale melodies were not of uniformly high quality, German musicians of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries found the Lutheran tune books a rich storehouse of melodies which were used as raw materials for the composition of works such as chorale preludes, chorale

¹¹Appleby,, op. cit. p. 80.

¹² Ibid.

cantatas, chorale fantasies, chorale fugues, chorale motets, chorale partitas, and many other works. But the chief interest of Protestant church music continued to rest in monophonic congregational singing.

The congregational song both symbolized and realized the principle of direct access of the believer to the Father, and thus exemplified in itself alone the whole spirit of the worship of the new church. The German hymn was a powerful instrument in the spread of the new doctrine, for it made possible for the people to take part in divine service in the vernacular, to form an integral part. This psychological movement must be duly appreciated if we are to understand the saying of the Protestants that Luther's songs won over whole towns to Protestantism.

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