

# The Gospel in Song

**D**er LXXIII. Psalm  
der XXIII. Vers.  
*Ego autem semper tecum  
ero &c.*  
Paul Gerhardt.



*Warum sollt ich mich denn grämen? Hab ich doch  
Christum noch, wer will mir den nehmen? Wer  
will mir den himmel rauben, den mir schon  
Gottes sohn beygelegt im glauben?*

gezeichnet von E. H. Bälou

Insights and Applications from the Life  
and Hymns of Paul Gerhardt

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# The Gospel in Song — Insights and Applications from the Life and Hymns of Paul Gerhardt

2007 marked the four hundredth anniversary celebration of the birth of Paul Gerhardt. In America, at least in Lutheran circles, some note was taken of that fact. Special services were held and papers were delivered in Lutheran venues. Yet in Germany, the anniversary was virtually impossible to miss, even among those who do not regularly worship. Churches throughout Germany celebrated with special Paul Gerhardt services and hymn sings. Even the international broadcast arm of the German government, Deutsche Welle, produced a half hour long special on Paul Gerhardt, his music and his influence, which was broadcast around the world both in German and in English, and has been viewed many times on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> From Sweden, a busload of fifty of our confessional brothers and sisters made the trek, just to tour the historic sites of Paul Gerhardt (along with Luther) and sang Gerhardt hymns both in Swedish and German as they rode through the German countryside on the bus.

Why all this fuss? What is it that has made Paul Gerhardt one of the most beloved



hymn writers of all time? What is it that caused Yale University Press to publish a book with the title *Paul Gerhardt as*

*a Hymnwriter, and His Influence on English Hymnody* in 1918? That book was written precisely because of the influence Paul Gerhardt has had on English Hymnody. Obviously Paul Gerhardt had and continues to have a far greater influence on the German people, not only those who regularly attend church, but even on many of the multitude who do not.

Judging him one of the most influential hymn writers of all time is not *my* judgment. It is a consensus judgment attested to not only by the way he is still regarded in his highly secularized homeland. It is also attested to by the fact that his hymns have been translated and used in the many languages of churches, both Lutheran and not, all around the world. Thirdly, this consensus judgment is attested to by its tremendous breadth, namely the fact that it is not only the opinion of scholars, but also of the ordinary Christians across the globe who have loved to sing his hymns through the centuries.

Today we want to make an attempt toward understanding this consensus judgment. Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul Gerhardt's life and hymns.

## 1. Paul Gerhardt's life

Without his hymns, of course, no one would remember Paul Gerhardt. And yet his hymns could not have been written apart from just who Paul Gerhardt was, and the way in which God made him into who he became through the circumstances of his life and work.

Paul Gerhardt was born on March 12, 1607 in Gräfenhainichen, a village near Wittenberg. Through his mother's family he was from a family involved in the ministry. His mother's father was a Superintendent (like a district president in our synod) and her grandfather was a court preacher in Dresden. Paul's father was a hotel keeper as well as Gräfenhainichen's mayor. Paul's family had enough money to send him to "The Prince's School" in Grimma when he was fifteen, with tuition, at a time when many of the students there were not required to pay—this despite the fact that his father had died when he was only twelve, and his mother when he was fourteen. Paul had been prepared for this "prep school" by his grammar school in Gräfenhainichen where he had learned Latin and Catechism. At Grimma the students said their daily chapel prayers in Greek, Latin and German. Latin was the language of instruction and orthodox Lutheran theology was one of the major subjects. The students had long and well ordered days which began at 5 AM each day and ended at 7 PM. There were no vacations, and students were rarely permitted to head into town. In 1623, the year after his arrival at the school, Paul Gerhardt's older brother Christian decided to run away from school, not being naturally inclined to study. For that act he was captured and incarcerated, before being finally dismissed in peace. In 1626 the plague came to Grimma, taking more than 10% of its population of 3000. More than half the students left the school to avoid the disease, but Paul Gerhardt and 32 others remained. Paul graduated in December of 1627. His poetical skills in Latin were rated "tolerable" in his final report card from the school. Clearly the teachers at the Fürstenschule used the same grading system as the former Northwestern College in Watertown.



By January 2<sup>nd</sup>, in 1628, Paul had enrolled at the University of Wittenberg, a city in which he would live for a good number of years, first as a student of theology, then as a tutor, and in which he would experience both highs and lows. To the former belongs the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Augsburg Confession in 1630.

From June 25-27, 1630, the centennial of the Augsburg Confession was celebrated. Between 3 and 4 a. m. the orchestra played from the garlanded towers. The guns of the fort followed, firing a salute. At 6 the university and the magistrates paraded into the Court Church, at 9 to the City Church, where the whole Augsburg Confession was read, the princely and noble guests following audibly from printed copies in their hands. The Holy

Communion was received by 1,381 persons. The next day, Saturday, was given over to a great musical celebration.<sup>ii</sup>

The second highpoint of his time as student came in 1631 when Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden came to the university. Gustavus was viewed as the conquering Lutheran hero from the north, without whose intervention, the Lutheran cause would have been lost in the 30 years' war. At the university he spoke to the students, including Paul Gerhardt and said, "Gentlemen, from you at this place the light of the Gospel has come to us. But because enemies would darken it here, we must come to you and with God's help relight that light."

Ask yourself what university student would not have always carried the memory of these two momentous occasions in his heart, and been profoundly influenced by those memories when asked in later years to compromise his Lutheran convictions?

But there were also low points which would leave a permanent mark on Gerhardt. The year after his speech to the students, having defeated the papist generals Tilly and Wallenstein, the latter of which had occupied Gerhardt's former school at Grimma, Gustavus met his death in the historic battle of Lützen. His body was carried through



*Gustavus Adolphus' burial place and memorial church at Lützen*

Wittenberg in solemn procession on its way back to Sweden. Hedging his bets after the death of the Swedish hero, the elector of Saxony switched sides in the war, and the land of Luther would pay the price. The Swedes, already provisioning themselves at the expense of the Saxon farm fields, began burning down towns, one after the other, among them Paul Gerhardt's home town of Gräfenhainichen. Paul's older brother Christian,

who had quit school and become a farmer, was living there at the time, and the family farm suffered the Swedish devastation. The town was reduced to ashes in what became known as the "Red Easter" of 1637. Shortly thereafter, 322 of the survivors had succumbed to the plague's return. Three miles away, in Wittenberg where Paul was living at the time, he saw much of that town abandoned due to the plague and then partially burned due to an accidental fire in 1640.

All these heart-rending experiences, endured in staunch Lutheran faith, shaped the words Paul would later write in his hymns. But the difficulties were hardly over. In fact, they would continue throughout his years as a hymn writer, which were perhaps just beginning.<sup>iii</sup> In 1643 Paul moved to Berlin, at that time still a very small city of 6000. Berlin had also not been spared by the ravaging Swedes. The suburbs had been burned



down. Many had died of the plague and thus many of the homes stood deserted and crumbling. Paul moved there to continue on in his work as a private tutor, by which he had supported himself in Wittenberg. He remained unmarried, thinking his income unsuitable to support a family. As tutor in the home of Andreas Barthold, senior lawyer of the Elector's Court, Gerhardt instructed a daughter, Anna Maria, who was later to become his dear wife.



During his time in Berlin, Gerhardt began writing his hymns in earnest. Among his friends he counted Johann Crüger, organist and minister of music at the Nikolaikirche (St. Nicholas Church). In 1647, after four years in Berlin, Crüger, who composed melodies for Gerhardt's hymns, published eighteen of them in his hymnbook *Praxis Pietatis Melica* (The Melodic Practice of Piety). By the end of Crüger's life, he had published eighty-eight of them. Both by setting Paul's hymns to music and then by publishing them for congregational use, Crüger is perhaps most responsible for the fact that we still sing Gerhardt's musical words of faith today.

After many years of tutoring, the trained theologian finally received a call to serve as a pastor at the age of forty-four in 1651 at Mittenwalde, now part of greater Berlin. By that time war and pestilence had reduced Mittenwalde's 1000 parishioners to 250. Their ability to support a pastor was therefore understandably meager. The recommendation on the call list given to Mittenwalde has been preserved. It says Gerhardt is "a person of known diligence and learning; of a fine mind and pure doctrine; of honest, peaceful disposition and Christian, blameless life; highly thought of by high and low in Berlin, from whom he could at any time get the testimonial that with his splendid gifts he had often earned the love and thanks of the church."<sup>iv</sup>

Having a more respectable income, Paul Gerhardt finally proposed to his former student Anna Maria and the two married in February 1655. Gerhardt was forty-eight. Anna Maria was thirty-three. Their first child was a daughter born in 1656 who lived only eight months. The grieving parents placed a plaque on the wall of the church dedicated to her which is still there. During his six years at Mittenwalde, Gerhardt wrote sixty-six

hymns. In 1657 Gerhardt received a call to be the second pastor at the Nikolaikirche in Berlin where his friend Johann Crüger still served as organist and the two served in “harmony” together until 1662. In that fateful year Johann Crüger was called home to heaven, and more tragic for Gerhardt, Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg expanded his efforts to merge the Lutheran and Reformed faiths in his territory. On June 2 of 1662 he published an edict forbidding Lutherans to preach anything against the Reformed doctrine.

The prince had been working toward this for some time, causing offense by promoting the Heidelberg Catechism and removing pastors who objected, by installing pastors who did not swear allegiance to the Formula of Concord, and then forbidding its subscription. He brought in Reformed professors for pastoral training and subsequently, in that fateful summer of 1662 banned his subjects from studying in Wittenberg. Gerhardt’s predecessor at the Nikolaikirche had in fact had been one of the pastors removed. Gerhardt was not by nature a polemical preacher, and so he had not fallen directly under the prince’s wrath. Under the circumstances, his acceptance of the call to the Nikolaikirche shows clearly that Gerhardt was no firebrand. But now that the Great Elector had decreed it forbidden to speak of the doctrinal differences between the Reformed and the Lutherans, it had become a matter of confession and conscience for the peaceable pastor.

The Elector had become Reformed after fleeing the plague in Brandenburg for Holland when he was fourteen years old. Having proven himself a pious and responsible young man, he was appointed ruler of Prussia, a state which was created for him by his cousin in Holland, the Prince of Orange. When Louis XIV was persecuting protestants, the elector had subsequently offered safe refuge to 20,000 of them. By doing so his territory gained a reputation for religious protection, and the elector found himself offering refuge to similarly persecuted protestants from many other countries. While the Reformed refugees eventually numbered as many as 15,000, the native Lutherans in the territory numbered in the range of 3,000,000. Nevertheless Frederick William put a Reformed clergyman in charge of the consistory which ruled over the Lutherans!



From September 1662 to May 1663 meetings were held in the Elector’s castle to try to resolve the differences and form a working agreement between the Reformed and the Lutherans which would allow the Lutherans to remain confessional. The Lutherans were willing to be cordial, as long as they could be allowed to remain faithful to their Lutheran teaching. Nevertheless, after seventeen meetings, the Lutherans withdrew from the talks when it was insisted they give up their allegiance to the Formula of Concord. Gerhardt was one of the most often consulted and influential brethren among the Lutherans, though he offered his advice in writing and personal consultations, not being himself publicly

involved in speaking at these meetings. William Dallmann quotes Philip Wackernagel's assessment:

Paul Gerhardt appears in the course of all these proceedings as the purest character; he was the soul, I might say, the good conscience of the Berlin clergy. He was led neither by stubbornness nor by passion. His official business was to outline the documents of attack and defense; these are written with the greatest skill and acuteness, frequently with Lutheran boldness in surprising countermoves, yes with logical humor, and they furnish a new proof that a critical mind and poetical faculty may very well be united.<sup>v</sup>

Once again, the discussions having broken down, Frederick William demanded that the Berlin clergy sign an edict in 1664 forbidding any doctrinal polemics. Under threat of removal from office, some 200 of them gave in. Many refused, including Gerhardt. They stalled, seeking official opinions from theological faculties at various universities. This simply made Frederick William all the more angry and impatient. On April 28, 1665 the Elector summoned them to unceremoniously hand over the various *Gutachten* they'd collected and sign on his dotted lines. Among others, Archdeacon Reinhardt, who had headed the discussions for the Lutherans refused. He was immediately relieved of his office and promptly exiled. Gerhardt was given more time, but on February 6, 1666 he was summoned and urged again to sign the edict abolishing the Formula of Concord. It appears the Elector gave him more time due to his relative tranquility and his well-known popularity among the people of Berlin, but when Gerhardt appeared he himself forced the issue by refusing the extra time given him to reconsider his opinion. He told the elector he had thought enough and would not be changing his mind. On February 13<sup>th</sup> he was removed from office. And thus began the period Gerhardt would refer to as his "little Berlin martyrdom."

Gerhardt had been so popular as a pastor, preacher and hymnist, that there were good-sized protests in the city before the mayor and the aldermen, who, listening to their constituents and also expressing their own convictions, presented resolutions to the Elector on behalf of their "beloved preacher and pastor" Paul Gerhardt. Even some Reformed aldermen signed the resolutions, pleading for this peaceable man whom they said had never slandered the Reformed or their faith and reminding the Elector that he had approved the printing of thirty-three of Gerhardt's hymns in the Reformed Brandenburg hymnal. After the Elector rejected their official plea on March 10, 1666, a second petition was formulated and presented by the cabinetmakers', the blacksmiths' and the weaponsmiths' unions. A month later the Elector gave his official refusal to concede once again. On July 27<sup>th</sup>, another plea was sent to the elector, this time from the Land estates of Brandenburg, at the urging of Berlin's mayor. They included other complaints of mistreatment toward the Lutherans in this plea, leading to the dismissal of more pastors.

The Elector had not been unaffected by all these pleas. He declared Gerhardt restored to his position in January 1667, but sent him a private message that he would be expected to obey the decree even without being required to sign. Now it was Gerhardt's turn to refuse, albeit graciously. He told the city council that he would not enter the pulpit until it was made clear he was not giving up his allegiance to the Formula of Concord. Gerhardt's wife was dying, and urged him not to give in. She was taken to heaven the following March, her remains buried behind the altar in the Nikolaikirche where three of her children had been laid to rest. Four months later Gerhardt's brother-in-law was

removed from office. In August, a replacement was named for Gerhardt. The members of the Nikolaikirche, however, locked the doors and would not admit him to the church on the day he was to preach his inaugural sermon, and he never did take the pulpit. Subsequent calls for a replacement were returned.

That summer, Frederick William withdrew his demand that the Lutherans sign his decree. That same year his own wife died and he subsequently married a Lutheran woman, and his sour disposition toward Lutherans faded gently. Gerhardt had “won.” But he would never again serve in the Nikolaikirche. Rather, that autumn he received a call to Lübben, a small town parish in a Lutheran jurisdiction which, however unfortunately, was reluctant to appreciate or take good care of its pastor. After several delays, some due to the Lübbeners’ slowness in making the parsonage livable, Paul Gerhardt finally began his service there the following Trinity Sunday. There he lived out the rest of his years, never fully loved by the Lübbeners as he had been by his dear Berliners. It seems his days of hymn writing had also come to an end, perhaps coincidental with the death of his dear wife.<sup>vi</sup>

Nevertheless, it is in the church in Lübben that the one life-sized painting of Gerhardt hangs, from which all other drawings of the poet are derived. On that painting is written his now famous epitaph: *Theologus in cribro Satanae versatus* (A Theologian sifted in Satan’s sieve). It is there also that his remains lie in repose awaiting the great day of resurrection.

## 2. Paul Gerhardt’s hymns

It is my hope that no one has been burdened by this brief biographical sketch of Gerhardt’s life. Rather, I believe you see with me that it would be impossible to fully appreciate Gerhardt’s hymns without some understanding of the context of his life. When he wrote, “Why should cross and trial grieve me?” we can understand just what he meant by “cross and trial.” Literally he said, “Why should I complain? I still have Christ, and who can take *Him* away from me?! Who will rob me of the heaven that God’s Son has already set aside for me through faith?” The hymn was first published in 1647, after he had seen so much death and destruction, and while he was still waiting to receive his first call as a pastor.

Though a heavy cross I’m bearing  
And my heart Feels the smart  
Shall I be despairing?  
God can help me, who doth send it.  
He doth know All my woe  
And how best to end it.

God oft gives me days of gladness,  
Shall I grieve If he give  
Seasons too of sadness?  
God is good, and tempers ever  
Every hurt, Me desert  
Wholly can He never.

By 1653, the third year of his calling as pastor in the Nikolaikirche, “Rejoice, My



Heart Be Glad and Sing” had been published:

Why spend the day in blank despair,  
In restless thought the night?  
On your creator cast your care;  
He makes your burden light.

Upon your lips, then, lay your hand,  
And trust his guiding love;  
Then like a rock your peace shall stand  
Here and in heav’n above.

When the demands of the elector had reached their culmination following the fruitless negotiations of 1662-1663, Paul wrote his stalwart hymn:

If God himself be for me,  
I may a host defy;  
For when I pray, before me  
My foes confounded, fly.  
If Christ, my head and master,  
Befriend me from above,  
What foe or what disaster  
Can drive me from his love?

No sin can now condemn me  
Or set my home aside.  
Now hell no more can claim me;  
Its fury I deride.  
No sentence now reproves me;  
No guilt destroys my peace.  
For Christ, my Savior, loves me.  
And shields me with his grace.

No danger, thirst, or hunger,  
No pain or poverty,  
No earthly tyrant’s anger  
Shall ever vanquish me.  
Though earth should break asunder,  
You are my Savior true;  
No fire or sword or thunder  
Shall sever me from you.

No angel and no gladness,  
No throne, no pomp, no show,  
No love, no hate, no sadness,  
No pain, no depth of woe,  
No scheme of man’s contrivance,  
Though it be great or small,  
Shall draw me from your guidance  
Not one of these, nor all!

We often have available to us very limited numbers of stanzas even in the limited number of hymns we have in our present English language hymnals. One of the things that is therefore often lost on us as we seek to appraise the appeal Gerhardt's hymns have had on the German people (and for that matter the Swedish people, or those who learned to know Gerhardt through the work of translators like Kelly in the nineteenth century) is the frequent references to God's providence in nature. Perhaps it has something to do with our modern technological lifestyles which keep us working according to clocks rather than sunlight, protected from heat in summer and cold in winter by wonderfully climate-controlled homes and workplaces, but no matter what the specific causes may be, nature clearly plays a smaller role in our lives, and therefore even in our worship than it once did (and still to some extent does) in the lands of most Lutherans' European forebears. Pentecost Sunday in Germany, for example, has long found many country churches lined with green boughs cut from trees. In Sweden Ascension Day holiday services are, weather permitting, celebrated almost exclusively in outdoor services. John the Baptist's day coincides with a festival of nature, midsummer. And except perhaps for Muslim immigrants, rare are the Swedes who do not associate the beginning of summer outdoors with Paul Gerhardt's beautiful hymn, *Geh aus, mein Herz und suche Freud*, sung to an equally beautiful tune composed by Archbishop Nathan Soderblom in the 1920s.

1. Arise, go out, sweet pleasures find,  
My wintry heart in summer time;  
Delight in ev'ry blossom!  
See all the gifts of God displayed,  
How beautifully all is made,  
God's garden rich and awesome.

2. Those worlds of living green, the trees,  
The soul itself beneath our knees,  
Our praise and thanks engender.  
All nature dressed with perfect skill  
Narcissus, tulip, daffodil  
In Solomonic splendor.

3. The lark swings joyful through the air,  
While fledgling doves their crevice share,  
Their mother bird awaiting.  
The richly gifted nightingale  
Fills gorges, meadows, hill and dale  
With music bright cascading.

4. The hen directs her little brood,  
Who diligently scratch for food;  
The stork constructs his dwelling.  
The speedy stag and nimble doe  
Descend the heights to graze below  
Their joy and hunger telling.

5. The brook runs through its sandy course  
With splashing noise and lively force,  
Dense myrtle bows reflecting.  
Green meadows stretch to either side,  
Where shepherds echo far and wide,  
Their bleating sheep directing.
6. The energetic swarm of bees  
Th' advantage of the summer seize,  
To search for sweet resources.  
While grapevines daily grow in length,  
And slowly gather up their strength,  
Their joyful, cordial forces.
7. The tender crops rise green and tall,  
A source of joy to one and all—  
Who thank and praise their maker,  
For kindness, overflowing good,  
For health and family, daily food,  
All gifts of their creator.
8. I neither can nor ought to rest  
When all my senses are impressed  
With God's most fine creation.  
When nature sings, I also sing,  
All heaven echoes, bright the ring  
Of my heart's adoration.
9. If you, my God, on earth surround,  
Your creatures with such joys profound,  
Such wealth of summer pleasure,  
What must the vault of heaven contain,  
When after life your golden reign  
Brings joy beyond all measure?
10. What high delight, what brilliant light  
Will shine in Christ's own garden bright?  
What melody astounding—  
When countless thousand seraphim  
In tireless voice sing psalm and hymn,  
Exquisite praises sounding?
11. If only I already stood,  
My palm in hand, before my God,  
That glorious throne attending—  
Then I could, with the angel choir,  
In ecstasy, my heart on fire,  
Sing lovely hymns unending.
12. Just so, while I live here on earth

And wear this flesh of mortal birth,  
My lips will not stop singing.  
My heart will bow unceasingly  
Before the One who's all to me  
And was from the beginning.

13. Help me and bless me, mind and soul;  
From heav'n let all your mercies roll,  
So I shall bloom forever.  
So may the summer of your grace  
Yield manifold sweet fruits of faith  
Now, then, my soul, and ever.

14. Provide within me space for you,  
Sufficient space for healthy roots,  
For wide and faithful growing.  
So may I prove a plant in flow'r,  
Attesting to your righteous pow'r,  
Your own perfection showing.

15. Allow me still to grow and thrive,  
My soul and body all alive,  
Until you bring me over  
To live with you in Paradise,  
Where all I am and all I prize,  
Will you, my Lord, discover.

That same respect for God's creation is seen in the bedtime hymn of which we still have half:

Now rest beneath night's shadow  
The woodland, field, and meadow;  
The world in slumber lies.  
But you, my heart, awaken;  
With prayer and song be taken  
Let praise to your Creator rise.

*O sun, where hast thou vanished?  
The night thy reign has banished,  
The foe of day, the night.  
Farewell, for now appeareth  
Another Sun and cheereth  
My heart—'tis Jesus Christ, my Light!*

The rule of day is over  
And shining jewels cover  
The heaven's boundless blue  
Thus I shall shine in heaven,  
Where crowns of gold are given  
To all who faithful prove and true.



It's not just nearness to and love of nature, however, which characterizes Paul Gerhardt and serves as part of the explanation to his hymns' popularity and longevity. It is also the fact that Gerhardt uses so much imagery from the world right around us, the body, even the furniture. Again, from the same hymn:

*Nun geht, ihr matten Glieder,  
Geht hin, und legt euch nieder,  
Der Betten ihr begehrt.  
Es kommen Stund und Zeiten,  
Da man euch wird bereiten  
Zur Ruh ein Bettlein in der Erd.* <sup>vii</sup>

While Paul Gerhardt is noted for this earthly imagery, he is especially noted for seeing cheerfully the bountiful hand of God in the earth and all God's gifts, despite all the horrors he experienced in his lifetime. He sees God's very present blessings in creation, in daily life and daily routines. One could argue that this is not much unlike Luther, who saw the devil at work in nature and wicked men. Whether Luther really threw an inkbottle at a fly pestering him in the Wartburg or not is beside the point. Luther knew that the devil is very real and finds whatever he can to distract us from God's Word. Gerhardt is no different in seeing the intimate relation between God and the world in which he works. Only Gerhardt seems to have had a such a naturally cheerful disposition in facing hardship, that he focuses profusely on the wonderful providence of a hands-on Creator. But his flesh and blood earthiness also gives him a special ability to help us focus on the dirty, painful, bloody, precious redemption of an incarnate, human Savior.

In one of the churches where Paul Gerhardt served as pastor, on the altar, directly in front of him every Sunday was a vividly realistic picture of Jesus' head, crowned with thorns, dripping with blood, agonizing in pain, yet looking longingly and lovingly at the sinner. It is said that this altar painting inspired Pastor Gerhardt to translate from Latin and rework an existing hymn into the chorale we now know as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," the verses of which J.S.Bach later interspersed with the words of the Passion history in his famous masterpiece, "The St. Matthew Passion."

As stated earlier, one of the criteria which leads us to prize a hymnwriter is the effect he has had on others through the ages. No less a light than J.S.Bach has shown his appreciation of Gerhardt in his use of his chorales in some of his most enduring works. It is fascinating, at another point on the spectrum, what an affect Gerhardt had on the English parson John Kelly, who translated himself (despite other translations available) seventy-three (!) of them into English in his book *Paul Gerhardt's Spiritual Songs*.

Much further along the spectrum, in the darkest times of the twentieth century Germany, even German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer—inadequately trained Lutheran that he was—found comfort in Gerhardt's hymns, not less during his imprisonment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor put to death for his opposition to Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany. From childhood, Dietrich was surrounded by hymn singing, and drew particular strength and inspiration from the hymns of Paul Gerhardt. Arrested and

imprisoned because of his connections with plans to overthrow Hitler's government, Bonhoeffer wrote that "Paul Gerhardt has been an unexpectedly helpful standby." In a letter to his parents he said, "It is good to read Paul Gerhardt's hymns and learn them by heart, as I am doing now."

Bonhoeffer was upheld by Gerhardt's hymns not because they appealed to him simply as poetry, or as songs of personal devotion. For him, their inspirational power was inseparable from their function as congregational songs. He recited them, or hummed them to himself in his prison cell, because they were songs he had sung in company with other Christians. In a book written before his imprisonment, he writes: "It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing, and you as a member of the church may share in its song."<sup>viii</sup>

It's this function as "congregational songs" that leads us further into our appraisal of Gerhardt's hymns as worthy of preservation and singing by subsequent generations of Lutherans. This is particularly true in the light of Gerhardt's frequent use of the first person and second person singular. When we assess the great chorales of the past and compare them with much of what is called contemporary "praise music" today, one of the factors by which we negatively judge modern "Christian contemporary" music is the personal subjectivism which often predominates. Yet it is not the use of the personal pronouns themselves which make for subjectivism. It is the subjectivism itself that focuses on feelings that are not universal, or the use of lyrics to manipulate a la Charles Finney the listener into feelings he or she would not necessarily be brought to by the universal message of Law and Gospel. Luther loved the personal plural pronouns: "A mighty fortress is *our* God." "He helps us free from ev'ry need that has *us* not o'ertaken." Gerhardt loves to speak of the same universal truths of Scripture. He simply uses singular pronouns to accomplish the same beautiful goal. "O Lord, How Shall *I* meet you." "O Jesus Christ thy manger is *my* paradise at which *my soul* reclineth." "Awake *my heart* with gladness." "Rejoice *my heart* be glad and sing." "Jesus, your boundless love to *me*."

All this personal application does not leave the objective truths of the Gospel, the preached word in song, unproclaimed. It simply applies the firm foundation of the word to my trembling heart and makes it quake with conviction, trust and anticipation. Listen to the profound truths of what Christ has done for us portrayed in Scriptural imagery that can be easily pictured with the mind's eye, and then applied in equally vivid imagery made concrete, all while using the special technique of having God the Father and the Son discuss their plan for our rescue. What mastery—bordering on divine inspiration!

A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth  
The guilt of all men bearing  
And, laden with the sins of earth  
None else the burden sharing.  
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint  
To slaughter led without complaint,  
That spotless life to offer,  
Bears shame and stripes and wounds and death,  
Anguish and mockery, and saith,  
"Willing all this I suffer."

This lamb is Christ, the soul's great friend,

The Lamb of God, our Savior;  
Him God the Father chose to send  
To gain for us his favor.  
“Go forth, my Son,” The Father saith,  
“And free men from their fear of death,  
From guilt and condemnation.  
The wrath and stripes are hard to bear,  
But by Thy passion they will share  
The fruit of thy salvation.”


“Yea, Father, yea, most willingly  
I’ll bear what Thou commandest;  
My will conforms to your decree;  
I’ll do what Thou demandest.”  
The Father offers up his Son,  
The Son, content, descendeth!  
O Love, how strong thou art to save!  
Thou beddest Him within the grave  
Whose Word the mountains rendeth.

*(lit.: Before whom the cliffs sprang into being.)*


Thou lay’st Him, Love, upon the cross,  
With nails and spear Him bruising;  
Thou slay’st Him as a lamb, His loss  
From soul and body oozing;  
From body ’tis the crimson flood  
Of precious sacrificial blood,  
From soul, the strength of anguish.  
May gain it is; sweet Lamb, to Thee  
What can I give whose love to me  
For me doth make Thee languish?

From morn till eve, my theme shall be  
Thy mercy’s wondrous measure;  
To sacrifice my self to thee  
Shall be my aim and pleasure.  
My stream of life shall ever be  
A current flowing ceaselessly,  
Your constant praise outpouring  
I’ll treasure in my memory,  
O Lord, all you have done for me,  
Your gracious love adoring.

Enlarge, my heart’s own shrine, and swell,  
To Thee shall now be given  
A treasure that doth far excel  
The worth of earth and heaven.  
Away with all this old world’s gold,  
With treasures of an earthly mold!



Note the  
imagery of  
Holy  
Communion  
throughout  
these verses,  
clearly  
distinguishing  
Gerhardt as  
an orthodox  
Lutheran in a  
time of forced  
compromise.




I've found a better jewel.  
My priceless treasure, Lord my God  
Is Thy most holy, precious blood,  
Which flowed from wounds so cruel.

This treasure ever I'll employ,  
This every aid shall yield me;  
In sorrow it shall be my joy,  
In conflict it shall shield me;  
In joy, the music of my feast,  
And when all else has lost its zest,  
This manna still shall feed me;  
In thirst my drink; in want my food;  
My company in solitude  
To comfort and to lead me.


Of death I am no more afraid,  
New life from Thee is flowing;  
Thy cross affords me cooling shade  
When noonday's sun is glowing.  
When by my grief I am opprest,  
On Thee my weary soul shall rest  
Serenely as on pillows,  
Thou art my Anchor when by woe  
My bark is driven to and fro  
On trouble's surging billows.

And when Thy glory I shall see  
And taste Thy kingdom's pleasure  
Thy blood my royal robe shall be,  
My joy beyond all measure.  
When I appear before Thy throne  
Thy righteousness shall be my crown –  
With these I need not hide me.  
And there, in garments richly wrought  
As Thine own bride, I shall be brought  
To stand in joy beside Thee.

*(In Europe, a  
bride frequently  
wears a special  
crown on top of  
her veil.)*



Yet it is  
written  
meditatively,  
longingly, not  
polemically,  
and seems to  
flow straight  
from the  
heart, not the  
head.



In all, seventeen of Gerhardt's hymns appear in *Christian Worship*, (eighteen if one counts the final verse of *A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth* which appears as the separate hymn *Lord, When Your Glory I Shall See* with Kurt Eggert's beautiful melody "Wedding Glory"). Of those seventeen, most are truncated, some severely. To get a better feel for what Paul Gerhardt really said in those hymns which we do have readily available, *Christian Worship: Handbook* offers the full text as well as the original German. John Kelly's translations were published in his *Paul Gerhardt's Spiritual Songs*, which is unfortunately a very rare book, and has not been digitized. It can be obtained with special permission through a university inter-library loan. I regret that I did not dare to scan in myself the copy I had available, due to its fragility, nor did I have the time to



type in Kelly's seventy-six poetic translations of Gerhardt's hymns. Thirty-six Paul Gerhardt hymns appear in full form in the *Lutherisches Kirchengesangbuch* of our sister church in Germany, ELFK.

(Update: Kelly's book is scanned and available for viewing or download at: <http://books.google.com/books?id=fg8DAAAQAAJ&pg=PR3&dq=john+Kelly+paul+Gerhardt%27s+spiritual+songs#PPR12,M1>).

In conclusion, then, let me hint at my personal answer to the question with which we began, namely: *What is it that has made Paul Gerhardt one of the most beloved hymn writers of all time?* Paul Gerhardt was trained both by his family, his teachers and by life itself to be a true Lutheran in the head and in the heart. He was trained to be a poet in school. He was given by God a special gift of expressing the faith in terms both Scriptural and very real to his contemporaries. Above all, perhaps, he understood the chorale as the joint song of the church and at the same time as the individual prayer of the Christian. And finally, thanks to the gifted musicians who worked with him, and even thanks to some who recast his hymns after him, the melodies accentuated the words and paved the way for them to pour into and then out of the hearts of Christians everywhere.



### 3. Discussion: Judging the Quality of Hymns

As *Christian Worship: Supplement* is being introduced, we have the privilege of discovering some new hymns that most of us have never sung before. The committee that chose the hymns for inclusion in our new worship resource no doubt wrestled with which hymns to include and which to exclude from the many that were suggested. Of those new hymns several by Stephen P. Starke and Herman G. Stuempfle are modern Lutheran compositions deemed worthy of inclusion also have been included in the new *Lutheran Service Book* of the Missouri Synod. As you become familiar with them, and ponder anew the Gerhardt hymns you sing, you may find yourself comparing them, wondering what the judgment of the next 300 years will be on these relatively recent compositions.

I'd therefore like to conclude today with some discussion points that can help us consider Paul Gerhardt, as well as other, newer hymns, the production of which has somewhat flourished anew since the middle of the 20th century. You may notice, as did I, that the criteria here listed may have hampered Paul Gerhardt a little, if they'd been in use in just this form in his day. The set here given was actually put together by a Lutheran hymnwriter, none other than the same Stephen P. Starke, who used them together with other members of the committee who chose hymns for the LCMS's Hymnal Supplement 98. <sup>ix</sup> The second set is taken from the booklet "*Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship.*" <sup>x</sup>

#### 1. Text is the soul of a hymn. Music is the body.

##### a. *Evaluating the text:*

##### i. Poetry, "downbeat"

##### ii. Theology

#### 1. Is it Christ centered, or man centered; does the pronoun "you" or the pronoun "I" predominate?

- *"I" and "me" aren't bad per se, as long as the focus of the hymn remains on Christ*

2. Does the text speak from a “theology of the cross” perspective or a “theology of glory” perspective? (note: orthodoxy can be translated as “right praise”)
3. Does the text emphasize the “special revelation of Christ” in God’s word, or the “natural revelation” of creation?
  - *“How Great Thou Art” is an example of a hymn which emphasizes the natural revelation, but, says Starke, it is ‘redeemed by its fourth verse.’*
4. Are the Means of Grace highlighted?
5. How is “Faith” used – trusting God’s mercy in Christ, or “feelings”?
  - *e.g. of correct use of “faith”: “I Know My Faith Is Founded”*
6. Does the hymn have an “incarnational” or “wishful” world view?

## **Ten points from the booklet “Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship.”**

### *A Good Hymn...*

1. Speaks the Gospel clearly, pointing to the crucified & risen Christ.
2. Expresses the necessary relationships between Law & Gospel.
3. Embraces justification by grace through faith.
4. Acknowledges God’s presence through the Word & Sacraments.
5. Express both the lament and the glory of the Christian journey.

## **6. Acknowledge worship as a communal act of proclamation.**

- *Many texts are suitable for personal devotion but not for congregational singing due to theological unclarity or irrelevance to the life of the parishioner.*
- *Forcing people to say what they could not possibly want to say at that time makes them unsuitable as congregational hymns.*

## **7. Texts to be sung in Lutheran worship employ the vast array of Scriptural images for God and God's people, using language that is both literal and figurative (HS98: 831)**

## **8. Are well crafted texts**

- *rhyme, stress, meter, grammar, syntax, scansion*

## **9. Give primary voice to the congregation**

- *many contemporary praise songs are overly dependent on beat. They are often best suited for solo voices, performance based.*

## **10. Texts to be sung in Lutheran worship should be drawn from both the church's historic repertoire and newly written literature, originating from a variety of cultures.**

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HrXxqoC0gI>

<sup>ii</sup> Dallmann, William, *Paul Gerhardt, His Life and His Hymns*, St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, No date given. p.14

<sup>iii</sup> The exact dates of most of Paul's hymns are unknown. Some can be dated approximately, but it is not possible to associate specific hymns with specific tragedies he experienced.

<sup>iv</sup> Dallmann, William, *Paul Gerhardt, His Life and His Hymns*, St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, No date given. p. 20.

<sup>v</sup> op. cit. p. 32.

<sup>vi</sup> Some suggest that it was in order to cheer his wife who had taken care of her mother who died slowly of tuberculosis, and who then herself died in the same slow manner, that Paul wrote many of his hymns of comfort.

<sup>vii</sup> One is reminded of J.S.Bach, Paul Gerhardt's fellow pipe smoker, who later made heavenly applications of the earthly joys of smoking:

Whene'er I take my pipe and stuff it  
And smoke to pass the time away,  
My thoughts as I sit and puff it,  
Dwell on a picture sad and grey.



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## Endnotes (cont.)

It teaches me that very like  
Am I myself unto my pipe.

Like me, this pipe so fragrant burning  
Is made of naught but earth and clay;  
To earth I too shall be returning,  
It falls and, ere I'd think to say,  
It breaks in two before my eyes,  
In store for me a like fate lies.

No stain the pipe's hue yet doth darken;  
It remains white. Thus do I know  
That when to death's call I must hearken  
My body, too, all pale wilt grow.  
To black beneath the sod 'twill turn,  
Likewise, the pipe, if oft it burn.

Or when the pipe is fairly glowing,  
Behold then instantaneously,  
The smoke off into thin air going,  
Till naught but ash is left to see.  
Man's frame likewise will burn  
And unto dust his body turn.

How oft it happens when one's smoking:  
The stopper's missing from its shelf,  
And one goes with one's finger poking  
Into the bowl and burns oneself.  
If in the pipe such pain doth dwell,  
How hot must be the pains of Hell.

Thus o'er my pipe, in contemplation  
Of such things, I can constantly  
Indulge in fruitful meditation,  
And so, puffing contentedly,  
On land, on sea, at home, abroad,  
I smoke my pipe and worship God.

Cited from <http://postmode.reformedblogs.com/2007/04/24/bach-on-pipe-smoking/>

<sup>viii</sup> Sydnor, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hymns," p. 20. quoted on p. 94 of Brian Wren, *Praying Twice, The Music and Words of Congregational Song*,

<sup>ix</sup> *Hymns in the Life of the Church*, Journal for the Fourth Annual Conference of the Good Shepherd Institute for Pastoral Theology and Sacred Music for the Church, held on the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana on November 2-4, 2003. The points here given are summarized from the section by Stephen P. Starke, pp.29ff. titled *Discerning Strengths and Weaknesses of Hymns*.

<sup>x</sup> Collins, Dori Erwin and Weidler, Scott C., *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*. Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997. Cited in the same article by Stephen B. Starke. Here also the points made have been summarized by the author of this paper.