



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

Confessional Musical Choices

By Aaron L. Christie

Musical life in my first parish was typically WELS: liturgies from *Christian Worship* straight up, psalms only from the hymnal, hymns usually easy-to-sing and familiar. After taking a few years to get to know my people, I decided it was time to widen the musical bandwidth of Faith, Antioch, IL.

One of our first “out of the comfort zone” experiments was the pseudo-gospel song *Soon and Very Soon* for Christ the King Sunday. I did my best to improvise a gospel piano accompaniment. The choir sang with gusto. I sat on the piano bench thinking “this is going pretty well.” My mood soured after the service. Several people quietly confessed that they felt like clapping. A dear sister in Christ said, “If we do songs like that every week, things will really get moving around here.” The Lutheran in me was in turmoil. Didn’t my sister realize that only a clear proclamation of law and gospel can truly move the church? Why not clap for *A Mighty Fortress*? I felt conflicted. As a musician, I loved the musical experiment. The confessional Lutheran in me wanted to reach for a Tums.

I should not have been surprised, let alone conflicted. As a musician, I know that if you play a march, people march; a waltz, and people waltz. If you play a gospel accompaniment that sounds more like the Blues than Bach, some people will feel like clapping. The danger? It’s easy to mistake people’s reaction to a musical beat for the Spirit’s fruits and clapping hands for a quickened heart.

What should a parish pastor do? He should strive to be a confessional Lutheran in his use of music—not just in theory, but in reality. I don’t mean that every hymn has to teach the entire *Enchiridion* or proclaim the vicarious atonement. I don’t mean that the best songs are old. I do mean that we need to be clear about our confessional principles. Then play and sing accordingly with artistic creativity and pastoral diversity.

Confessional Lutheran music confesses Christ

“A confessional church is conscious of what people like. But a confessional church never stops at what people like. Why? Likes

are fickle and trends are tricky. Discerning good music and bad is always somewhat subjective. Ideas like “people’s heart music” and “music that’s in people’s ears” have surfaced in early committee discussions for the new WELS hymnal project. The answer to those ideas, however, will always depend on whose heart we are talking about or whose ears have the ear buds crammed in.

Unfortunately, musical style is often the beginning and end of church music discussions. Musical style is not unimportant; just as teaching practices, homiletical methods, and counseling techniques are not unimportant. But the practices, methods, and techniques are not the content of our lessons, sermons, and counseling sessions. Briefly said: *Confessional Lutherans are all about content. Christ is the key to content!*

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Christ, not music nor musical style, is the center of Christian worship. “If church music claims the centre of the sanctuary it has displaced the centrality of Christ and has lost its distinctive mission within the life of the church.”¹ Music doesn’t build the Church. The Gospel builds the Church. Music isn’t the Gospel. Music proclaims the Gospel. “Music in worship is the language of

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faith, the response of the redeemed to the grace of God. If, as St. Paul says in Romans 10:17, 'faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ,' then music in worship must have a proclamatory function."² What a marvelous musical insight confessional Lutherans have to share! Proclaiming the Gospel is praising God. Praising God is proclaiming the Gospel. Our people sing: "God loved the world so that he gave His only Son the lost to save That all who would in him believe Should everlasting life receive" (CW 391). When they do, they proclaim John 3:16 in 3/4 time.

Proclaiming the Gospel in hymns isn't only Lutheran. It's biblical. The hymns of the New Testament (Philippians 2:5-11; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Revelation's hymns, etc.) are Christological and proclamatory. The best of the church's song, even in the Scriptures, has often been in the "deep end" of the theological pool—even in a mission church with a tiny core group like Philippi!

Not everyone shares this Lutheran craving for Christ at the core of the church's music! Much of Rome's most sublime music is sung to Mary. Calvin's Geneva sang metrical psalms. German pietism and American revivalism sought validation of genuine faith in their songs. They demonstrated that *personal expression is often the chief purpose of a church's music once the true marks of the Church have been minimized.*

Does every song need to be about Christ? No. But for the sake of argument: does every sermon need to be about Christ? Does every Bible class need to teach Christ? Does every counseling session need to comfort with Christ? Does every evangelism visit need to share Christ? No. But don't these questions sound a bit strange coming from those who are called to preach the Gospel? Why ask that question only regarding the church's song?

I encourage you to ask: where is the center of gravity in my parish's song? Is it centered in Christ and the means of grace? Or is it centered in my praise response to an awesome God? A preponderance of First Article texts can lead to an unintended consequence: Christ for us (redemption) is overshadowed by the individual's life lived for his Creator—a Christian life-style motivated by the law's third use instead of the Gospel. Theological priority is critical. *Christ at the center* is the confessional gold-standard for musical choices.

Additional confessional principles

"The people also sing in order either to learn or to pray..."

The Lutheran Church is a teaching church. The Confessions are a body of truth that needs to be taught. Teaching the faith happens in catechism class and Bible class. Teaching can take place in sermons and outreach calls. Teaching also takes place through a "teaching hymnody."

Our Lutheran fathers followed a compelling rationale for music. Music can assist in teaching people the Scriptures. This important concept is evident already in the first Lutheran hymnal (1524), a short hymnal (eight hymns) with a long title: *Several Christian songs, hymns of praise*

and psalms, in accordance with the pure Word of God, from Holy Scripture, produced by various highly learned individuals, for singing in the church, as in part is already the practice in Wittenberg. According to the title, the exposition of Scripture was a chief concern.

Luther once preached: "I see your idleness, how you fail to learn those sacred songs sung every day and how for nearly two years now you have had no interest whatsoever in those enduring songs of the schoolboys, but rather pay much more attention to popular ditties. Would that you fathers might strive to train those under your care! For such songs are a sort of Bible for the uncultivated, and even for the learned. See how the pious are set on fire through these songs!"³ Luther was correct: music is a great pedagogue of the Scriptures. How? Ask any fourth grader which is easier to memorize: a Bible passage or a hymn verse.

Pious hearts were set on fire by the Reformation's hymns.

Pious hearts were set on fire by the Reformation's hymns. The fire was not set with the matches of emotional extravagance. This was means of grace teaching excellence. The "rule of prayer" (*lex orandi*, hymn singing) was forming the faith of the people.⁴ "The children chant the Psalms in order to learn them; the people also sing in order either to learn or to pray."⁵

Lutheran hymns had such an impact on inculcating doctrine that Rome took notice. Lutheran churches could never be dealt with unless Lutheran hymns were dealt with first. Bishop Nausea Blancicampianus wrote to Pope Paul III in preparation for the Council of Trent:

It will not be very easy for them [Lutherans] to agree with us, because it will be necessary after peace is established to do away with those German songs, which they use very much in many of their churches.... Who can say how many persons have easily been drawn away already from the true religion by these same chants, to which they have already become accustomed for twenty years or more? But if the use of songs of this type must remain publicly in the churches.... it will not be possible for long to have unity, since many of the words of the same songs are plainly contrary to the Catholic songs.⁶

History has shown that an orthodox, teaching hymnody may survive in people's piety long after the churches' liberal pulpits have made their peace with Belial.

There are, of course, different opinions about a *teaching hymnody*. Some Protestants (and even some voices in WELS) hold that music is primarily for expressions of praise and that the teaching component in worship is reserved for the sermon. While this approach is popular, the jury on this approach's wisdom is still out—and will

be for two more generations. History alone will demonstrate if a decision to diminish a teaching hymnody will be a blessing to God's people in the long run.⁷ History has shown that an orthodox, teaching hymnody may survive in people's piety long after the churches' liberal pulpits have made their peace with Belial (2 Corinthians 6:15).

***"With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances..."*⁸**

The Lutheran Confessors knew their history and cherished it. They quoted the ancient church fathers often. They were at pains to show that the Lutheran church was not a modern innovation or sectarian. They reiterated again and again that they were the true continuation of the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church.

What does this mean for Lutheran music choices? It means that we have the wonderful ability *both to look back and to look around*. We sing hymns from the ancient Latin hymnodists. Why? We confess Hebrews 13:7. They are our fathers too—fathers who still sing Christ to us. We don't only look back, we also look around to the greater Church. Our hymnal contains hymns by Catholic and Reformed authors. On a regular basis, my parish sings contemporary praise songs. Why? Because they too come from members of the body of Christ. Their Christ-centered poetry may be a "felicitous inconsistency,"⁹ but it is one for which we praise God!

Christian freedom

Previous articles in this series have dealt with the topics of Christian freedom and adiaphora. The Lutheran Church's clear confession regarding adiaphora and freedom helps keep worship from getting caught in a rut. *These teachings logically lead us to cherish diversity and creativity*. Along with textual truth, musical innovation has been a hallmark of Lutheran worship.

Confessional Lutherans have never found a need to dump the musical inheritance of their fathers. They have embraced the best of the past and merged it with the best musical practices of their day. Are you surprised to know that sopranos didn't sing the melody until two generations after Luther? That organs didn't accompany hymns until three generations after Luther? What about modern instruments in worship like guitars, keyboards, and percussion? The progression of music from Walter, Luther's colleague, to Bach is at least as large a jump as from organ to guitar. Confessional Lutheran musicians can be repristinators and innovators all at the same time.

What would a census of your musical selections from the past several weeks show? In two months, my parish has used Luther's *Deutsche Messe* with Luther hymns, an old Anglican psalm by Byrd, and a modern Anglican psalm by Hallock. Our church band, *Justified*, led contemporary music by Tomlin, Redman, and Baloché for Saints Triumphant. Christ the King was celebrated with piano, guitar, bass guitar, and trumpet renditions of classic hymns by Phil Magness within a contemporary setting of Morning Praise by Marty Haugen. Advent featured ancient hymns, Renaissance polyphony, Buxtehude of old on organ and modern piano settings of the old *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*. The Holy Spirit is no monotone!

Simple suggestions

Get to know the Confessions all over again

This article is about musical choices, but the starting point is: get to know the Confessions all over again. Why? I have taken two oaths in my life: to be faithful to my wife, and to preach and teach in accordance with the Confessions. Stay faithful to your confessional bride! My third year in the ministry it dawned on me that I had studied the Confessions at the seminary, but hadn't read them in the ministry. I'm now on my fourteenth reading of the Book of Concord. The result? Gospel blessings. It changes the way we think, preach, teach, and relate with each other.

Get to know the story of confessional musicians and music

I try to read a book each year that stretches my literary tastes. Recent years have included *Surprising Insights from the Formerly Unchurched* by Rainer, *Comeback Churches* by Stetzer, and *Advanced Strategic Planning* by Malphurs. Why these? To balance my love of reading the books that follow. Our liberal arts education taught us that music and history are worth our attention.

Stay faithful to your confessional bride!

For a great overview of the first 150 years of Lutheran music covering the golden age of Lutheran orthodoxy, check out *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524-1672)* by Carl Schalk (CPH 2001). It contains seven brief biographies of Lutheranism's early musical greats.

The best study on worship and music in Lutheranism's early years is Joseph Herl's *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* (Oxford 2004). Take time with the endnotes! It is a treasure trove of anecdotes showing how churches have struggled with music throughout our history.

JS Bach is the greatest musician in the western world. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* by Christoph Wolff (Norton 2000) is my favorite Bach biography. It provides significant insight into Lutheran church life in Germany during Lutheranism's waning years. Rather than bash Bach as opium for musical snobs, he is after Luther and Chemnitz the most significant Lutheran, in my opinion. He deserves better from us.

In *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Harvard 2005) Christopher Boyd Brown provides an amazing case study of a Gospel-proclaiming, teaching hymnody. It chronicles the importance of good hymnody when church life is going well. Even more so, it shows how, in an age of persecution, Lutheran teaching in the hymnal was all that remained for a generation of believers after the last pastor was driven out of town.

Listen to confessional music

I enjoy listening to Bach cantatas as a devotional activity. Bach wrote hundreds of cantatas—musical commentaries on the weekly

themes of the church year. English translations are readily available. Google them. Every cantata is available **free** in dozens of recordings on Spotify.¹⁰

Other confessional music worth a listen: the *Psalmen Davids* by Heinrich Schütz. Ton Koopman is recording Buxtehude's complete works (16 volumes to date). The vocal works and organ works are worth a Lutheran pastor's time. They are great sermon writing music! Paul McCreech's Gabrieli Consort recordings are the three best in my library: *Praetorius: Mass for Christmas Morning*; *Schütz: Christmas Vespers*; and *Bach: Mass for Epiphany*. (Spotify!)

Teach confessional music

Be creative here. Luther wrote hymns on the chief parts of the catechism. Our children memorize the *Enchiridion* in catechism class and often as part of the regular LES memory curriculum. Why not slowly memorize Luther's catechism hymns as you teach through the catechism? Better yet, queue up HymnSoft to sing them. Lutheran children can learn to sing Luther's hymns. What do we gain by neglecting them? Singing them puts the Gospel on children's lips—and for that their angels rejoice!

Lutheran children can learn to sing Luther's hymns.

Parts of worship are "caught" and parts are "taught." Some music needs to be taught, and children tend to tolerate—and then embrace—things for which their teachers show enthusiasm.¹¹

Study confessional music

Consider using the hymns of Luther or Gerhardt for your morning devotions. The hymnal is perhaps the best, yet most under-used, devotional book.

I've always found that people like classes based on hymns. Here are some options: the catechism hymns of Luther, the hymns and life of Gerhardt, the hymns of the Latin church fathers (Ambrose, Fortunatus, etc.). Let people experience a hymn in different styles. A recent class I taught featured *Jesus, Priceless Treasure* in versions by Buxtehude, Bach, Koiné, a Canadian contemporary musician, and a Romanian jazz ensemble. (Spotify!) Good tunes attract many different styles!

Sing confessional music

This is perhaps most difficult. I wouldn't suggest an every Sunday diet of Schein, Scheidt, and Schütz. We live in 21st century America! These golden oldies, however, are still our very own. Consider a selection or two from the old repertoire every year, perhaps at festivals. Encourage your musicians to offer something by an old Lutheran master and explain it in the service folder.

WELS professor William Braun has made some of this music accessible to average choirs.

The Lutheran Church has been dubbed the "singing church." May the Lord richly bless our efforts at keeping it that way by keeping Christ in the song!



- ¹ Leaver, Robin. *The Theological Character of Music in Worship*. CPH: 1989, 13. Leaver's short essay is from *Duty and Delight: Routley Remembered*, Hope: 1985.
- ² Leaver, 10.
- ³ Cited in Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*, Oxford: 2004, 15.
- ⁴ The use of the *lex orandi, lex credendi* maxim for some is not only formative of belief, but normative in that worship (for them) precedes doctrine. Hymn-singing is formative of faith for Lutherans because it conveys the means of grace, but not normative.
- ⁵ Ap XV:40
- ⁶ Cited in David Music, *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings*, Scarecrow Press: 1996, 42.
- ⁷ "Melanchthon once said, parenthetically, that when the Church's music ceases to sound, doctrine will disintegrate; Bucer held that the Church is built around the hymn; and a Jesuit complained that Luther's hymns had damned more souls than all Luther's sermons put together! In fact, a study of the Church's liturgical music often provides a truer understanding of the Church's mind than a study of the formal writings of her theologians." Leaver, 9; citing P.W. Hoon, *The Integrity of Worship...*, Nashville: 1971, 88.
- ⁸ Ap XII:33.
- ⁹ Franz Pieper.
- ¹⁰ A weekly line up of cantatas for the entire church year is at www.bach-cantatas.com/LCY. Is weekly too much? Consider listening to a bit of Bach every season: **Advent**: *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 61 - *Savior of the Nations Come*. Christmas: *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248. **Epiphany**: *Sie werden alle aus Saba kommen*, BWV 65 - Based upon Isaiah 60. **Lent**: *St. Matthew Passion*, BWV 244. Some consider this the greatest music written for Christian worship. I've listened to it every Ash Wednesday for 16 years in the ministry. **Easter**: *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, BWV 4 - *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands*. **Reformation**: *Ein feste Burg*, BWV 80.
- ¹¹ Are the catechism hymns too much? Consider showing the BBC's superb documentary "Bach and the Lutheran Legacy." It is available on YouTube in six ten-minute segments. My students thoroughly enjoyed this.