

PERSPECTIVES IN CHURCH MUSIC



CELEBRATING THE REFORMATION

A Radical Suggestion for Congregations

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The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, observed on October 31, the date when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. A host of conferences gatherings, colloquia, and symposia are being planned to celebrate the occasion. If nothing else, most Lutheran congregations will sing Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and for many that will be the end of it.

One of the great contributions of the Lutheran Reformation was establishing the importance of the congregational song. If Luther

taught us anything, it is that congregational song's function is to proclaim the saving Word of the Gospel. Its purpose is not to entertain, create a mood, give us a warm feeling, but to make us, in Stephen Starke's words, "a people for the praise of grace." That insight has inspired the creation a bolt of hymnody remarkable both theologically and musically. It is a marvelous treasure of words and music, birthed by the Lutheran Reformation, that is the envy of many.

Unfortunately far too many pastors and church musicians are unfamiliar with their own heritage. As a result congregations are cut off from experiencing their heritage. Their leaders, blissfully unaware or ignorant, decide that this musical heritage is simply irrelevant or too difficult to learn. The simple fact is that it is neither irrelevant nor too difficult— it is just *unfamiliar!*

So here is my radical suggestion for every Lutheran congregation, small or large, as it plans to observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Every Lutheran congregation should study, learn to sing, and introduce into its worship five new chorales from its historic heritage and use them throughout the year until they become a regular and familiar part of the congregation's repertoire.

Choose Reformation chorales not presently familiar, hymn texts by authors such as Martin Luther, Elisabeth Cruziger, Paul Speratus, and Paul Gerhardt, and others. Read the texts, study their theology, practice their melodies.

In Bible classes, choir rehearsals, adult education sessions, and other congregational gatherings make them the center of study, discussion, and especially *singing!* Then schedule them to be sung throughout the year as appropriate. Give them time to become a familiar part of the congregation's repertoire. Refer to them in sermons and homilies. Use them as a resource—together with the appointed lessons—for preaching. Use them as the basis for personal and family devotions.

Make your own list. But here are some suggestions to get started:

Advent: *"Savior of the nations, come"*

Christmas: *"All praise to You, eternal God"*

Epiphany: *"The only Son from heaven"*

Easter: *"Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands"*

Other hymns useful at various times:

Close of Service: *"Grant peace, we pray, in mercy, Lord"*

Holy Communion: *"Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior"*

Post-Communion: *"In peace and joy I now depart"*

These chorales from our early heritage as Lutheran heritage are musical gems and carry a theology which stands in stark contrast to much of the shallow theology and musical banality which characterizes so much of contemporary Christian song. These tunes continue to inspire the church's composers. Their texts have nurtured and nourished the faith for generations.

We do not stand in judgment of these texts and melodies. Rather they stand in judgment of a religious culture which too readily gravitates toward shallow theology and ephemeral music,

Faithful and conscientious church musicians and pastors teach, nourish, nurture, and witness through the church's song in good times and bad. It's what we do whether the days are special or ordinary.

The 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation will soon be upon us. Maybe it's not too soon to get started!

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