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The Hymn-of-the-Week Plan

By RALPH D. GEHRKE

A RECENT development in the field of church music has been the appearance, or better, the reappearance, of the hymn-of-the-week plan, that is, the plan whereby each Sunday or festival has its own particular hymn. Such a hymn is sometimes called the *de tempore* hymn, that is, a hymn that fits the time, the general season and the specific day of the church year. Such a hymn is also sometimes called the Gradual hymn because the historic place for the chief hymn in the service is between Epistle and Gospel where the Gradual is sung. And such a hymn may also be called the hymn of the week.

There is very good precedent for the use of the hymn-of-the-week plan. And a brief introduction into its history may clarify its nature and use. Essentially this hymn is a response to the Word of God. It is part of that continual reciprocal rhythm between God's Word and our response that runs through the entire service. As in the synagog service each lection was responded to with a psalm, so in the early church the reading of the Word was followed by a psalm or psalm verses. The response to the Old Testament lesson was the so-called Gradual psalm; the response to the Epistle was the so-called Hallelujah psalm.

Of them the eminent liturgical scholar Jungmann says,¹ "These songs were not

designed to fill up a pause in the service (while, presumably, liturgical actions were going on) but stood between the readings as independent parts of the service, as periods of pious meditation and joyous singing now that the Word of God had struck human ears." The congregation also took part in the singing of the Gradual and Hallelujah psalms by joining in on the refrainlike antiphon.

THE ORIGIN OF THE PLAN

In his *Formula Missae*, the Latin Mass for use in large churches that had choir schools, Luther retained the Gradual in the rather sophisticated form then current. In the German Mass (*Deutsche Messe*), designed for smaller congregations in villages, etc., however, Luther gave the Gradual back to the congregation, making a significant change in its form. For since the Gradual had in the course of time become a rather complicated song sung by the Gregorian solo cantor and the choir, Luther replaced it by what was to be the psalm's direct successor, the hymn sung by the congregation. In fact, often in the 16th and 17th centuries this chief hymn of the service was simply called the German psalm (*der deutsche Psalm*).²

Many church constitutions during the age of the Reformation followed Luther's suggestions and prescribed the hymns he suggested. And so it came about that

¹ *Missarum sollemnia*, as quoted in Otto Brodde und Christa Mudler, *Das Graduallied, theologische und kirchenmusikalische Handreichung zum Gemeindegesang* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954), I, 533.

² Walter Blankenburg, "Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde," in *Leiturgia, Handbuch des evangelischen Gottesdienstes* (Kassel: Johannes Stauda Verlag, 1961), IV, 618 ff.

already in the 16th century a rather definite series of hymns developed which assigned each Sunday and festival a special hymn that usually reflected the Gospel for the day. Nicolaus Selnecker's "Church Hymns" (*Kirchengesänge*) of the year 1587 make this clear. In his great history of Lutheran worship³ Paul Graff gives a rather clear picture of the nature of the hymn-of-the-week plan that was more or less in force, even through the days of Pietism and Enlightenment, until the plan was entirely lost at the end of the 18th century in the age of Rationalism.

We know that this order was still in force in Bach's day. It was only after the old traditional order of reading the Epistle and the Holy Gospel was no longer followed, and after the number of lessons read in church was reduced to only one, that the Gradual hymn, which "rimed with the Gospel," lost out.

In his wonderful little Bach Centennial address "Johann Sebastian Bach und der Gottesdienst seiner Zeit,"⁴ Christhard Mahrenholz gives an interesting account of Bach's fight against the inroads which were tending to dissolve the *de tempore* hymn plan. In speaking of Bach's tenacious retention of the old chorales and his use of them as *cantus firmus* themes, he says:

This uncompromising holding fast to the traditional series of hymns was not restricted to the field of his own cantatas but extended to the singing of the congregation. And this established the fact that Bach was not interested only in the more

artistic and musically sophisticated side of well-ordered church music. It was traditional in the Lutheran Church of Bach's day that the cantor, as the appropriate trained professional, had the duty of watching over the selection of hymns. He made the selection from a number of hymns established for each individual Sunday. Here Bach was uncompromising, as is clear from the well-known incident of his quarrel with the Pastor of St. Thomas Church, about the choosing of hymns. Even otherwise sympathetic biographers of Bach think that in this instance Bach was showing himself in a rather bad light. After he had once granted Pastor Gaudlitz the right to choose the hymns, these critics feel, he should not have dared, after a year, to take back this prerogative by appealing to his rights as cantor of Saint Thomas! But Bach could delegate the choice of hymns to Pastor Gaudlitz only within the framework of the existing order of hymns. Gaudlitz, however, did *not* confine himself to that order. That is the only reason why Bach took back what he had first granted to the pastor. Characteristically Bach explained his action by stating that it was his duty to keep vigilant watch that the hymns be chosen "according to the order of their Gospels and of the Dresden Hymnbook, which has prescribed their order in that manner." Since Pastor Gaudlitz chose hymns "that were not customary" (*die nicht üblich waren*), i. e., that did not fit the *de tempore*, Bach for the sake of "well-ordered church music" (*regulierte Kirchenmusik*, Bach's ideal) had to take back to himself the function that was his right and duty as cantor of St. Thomas.

In protecting this clear-cut liturgical series of *de tempore* hymns Bach was guarding against a misunderstanding that considers church music only a decorative addition to the service. Even as every

³ Significantly called *Geschichte der Auflösung der alten gottesdienstlichen Formen in der evangel. Kirche Deutschlands* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1937).

⁴ Christhard Marenholz, *Musik und Kirche*, XX (1950), 145 ff.

Sunday had its hymn of the week, its lessons, its sermon, so every Sunday also had church music which was an organic part of the service.

THE LOSS OF THE PLAN

The reason for the eventual loss of this very wholesome liturgical order of hymns of the week has been traced by Philipp Reich to three main causes.⁵ First, the growth in the number of hymns in the hymnbooks of the last part of the post-Bach age meant that there was also a growing number of hymns assigned to each respective Sunday. And as has often happened, a larger selection of hymns in a hymnbook is always made available only at the expense of the "canon," the solid core of good, time-tested solid hymns. Furthermore, the "main hymn" in the Reformation age had not been "the sermon hymn" (that is, the hymn that is sung before the sermon; if anything was sung in the Reformation age at that point in the service it was only a *suspiria*, a small prayer verse) but rather the Gradual hymn, which here we are calling the hymn of the week. Only after the sermon had become the exclusive center of the service did the hymns or the hymn stanzas that framed it necessarily have to relate to its specific theme. Thirdly, with the restriction of the service to the sermon as the only focal point (and the concomitant loss of the old Lutheran understanding and use of the Sacrament) the Reformation age's entire understanding of the service was lost, and as Paul Graff has shown, eventually a vital understanding of the church year was also lost. A *Zeitgeist* that

took its cue from the prevailing movements of the Enlightenment and Rationalism made its influence felt in the service; the church year had to take a back seat in favor of the civil year. Soon the dissolution of the *de tempore* hymn series was an established fact.

A reconsideration of the hymn-of-the-week problems came only with the attempts at liturgical repristination in the 19th century in the works of such men as Freiherr von Liliencron and Ludwig Schoeberlein, who championed the reintroduction of the hymn-of-the-week plan. But it seems the time for such restoration was not propitious. Even the great Bavarian hymnologist Friedrich Layriz (known to many of us because C. F. W. Walther and his friends introduced his *Choralbuch* settings, with their original Reformation age vivacity and color, into so many of our congregations in the Middle West, so that through him we have in many respects inherited the results of the great hymnological research of people like Winterfeld and can sing the best hymns in their original rhythmical settings) opposed the plan because he had no understanding of its value. This writer has often wondered and speculated about what would now be the situation in our midst if Layriz had accepted Liliencron's suggestions and if Walther and the men around him—who gave us such a wonderful little hymnal with all the old Lutheran treasures—had espoused the hymn-of-the-week plan. This writer suggests that we would be a stronger church today, not only musically but also liturgically and doctrinally. But the efforts for restoration in this respect were officially rejected in Ger-

⁵ Philipp Reich, ed. *Das Wochenlied*, (Kassel: Johannes Stauda Verlag, 1952), pp. 4 ff.

many and, to my knowledge, never faced up to here in America.

THE PLAN RESTORED

The honor of having revived and to a certain extent restored the hymn-of-the-week plan in recent times goes to a number of contemporary German scholars, pastors, and church musicians, foremost among whom are Christhard Mahrenholz and Pastor Wilhelm Thomas. In 1934, in the midst of the *Kirchenkampf* (when the Christian church in Germany realized that it was being threatened in its very existence by an anti-Christian nationalistic power that was already seeking to infiltrate the church), these men, at the Pentecost session of the executive board of the German Choral Union, realized, as Mahrenholz himself tells the story,⁶ that the crisis could not be met by clever church-political maneuvering but only by confessing the Gospel as it was given to the church in its confessions and in its heritage. And it was these men who raised the basic demand for the series of original Lutheran Gradual hymns as the basis of their church music work. Other pastors and church musicians of Germany added their contributions, notably Konrad Ameln and Walter Reindel. And despite the evil days that had descended upon them the plan did take root. After the war (in 1948) the plan was revised. And now the new *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* presents the entire series to all territorial churches, and we are told it has found widespread acceptance in various parts of Germany, also in the Free Churches.

In substituting a congregational hymn

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1 ff.

for the ancient Gradual psalmody, the *Deutsche Messe* introduced an innovation. In liturgical practice Luther gave the congregation's hymn the same function and rank as the psalm had possessed. But while the old pre-Reformation Gradual psalm in most cases was primarily an expression of meditative adoration, the Lutheran hymn has a complex character. It is adoration and meditation, and the best hymns of our heritage always have these elements in them. But they are more than adoration. They have, accompanying this devotional aspect, a strong proclamation aspect, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect. They not only praise God, as do psalms of praise and thanksgiving, but like many psalms they "proclaim the wonders He hath done, how His right arm the vict'ry won." In his recent study of the types of psalms Claus Westermann even cites as an example of the type of "descriptive psalms of praise" Luther's "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice."⁷

The advantages of a parish music program which includes the hymn-of-the-week plan are very great. By using such a plan a congregation gradually grows more and more into the church year; the most important hymns of its hymnal are kept alive in its consciousness by being sung and interpreted in a meaningful manner annually; the congregation is also in a measure protected from an all too frequent subjectivism and one-sidedness in the use of its hymnal. Moreover, such a hymn program can be correlated with the hymn singing that is done in meetings of various groups and societies, in the parish education of

⁷ Claus Westermann, *Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), p. 82.

the young, and in the devotions of the home. In this way this program strengthens the bond between private home and public church worship. The church musician is enabled to plan his work far in advance and does not have to wait until shortly before Sunday to find out what hymns will be sung. The church choirs will gradually realize what their position really is. Thus the entire parish music program comes closer to Bach's ideal of being well-ordered church music.

It should not be necessary to point out that if the hymn of the week is introduced in our congregations, this "Gradual hymn" should not displace but should follow the Gradual. The Gradual itself is best sung by the choir.

All practical aspects cannot be dealt with in this paper.⁸ Two practical aspects, however, do deserve special consideration, and the last part of this article will deal with them. Closely related to, and almost part of, this recommendation of the hymn-of-the-week plan is the suggestion that these hymns be sung antiphonally. This is the first practical aspect which must briefly be elucidated.

ANTIPHONAL HYMN SINGING

At a fairly early period psalms were sung in the church antiphonally, that is, in such a way that two choirs sang alternately,

⁸ Practical materials were recently made available for parish use based upon the hymn-of-the-week plan. *Planning the Service*, "A Workbook for Pastors, Organists, and Choirmasters," prepared by Ralph Gehrke (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961). *The Hymn of the Week*, Vols. I—V, edited by Paul Thomas (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961). Modern and old settings for parish choirs in alternating practice with the congregation. *Organ Settings for the Hymn of the Week*, by

thus inciting each other by the reciprocal rhythm of alternate tension and relaxation. In a similar manner in the Reformation age hymns were sung antiphonally between the unison-singing congregation and either a choir singing unison or a choir singing parts in harmony or the organ (organ chorale!). The congregation was thus usually singing every other stanza. When it was not singing, its "partner"—choir or organ—could bring into play the entire treasure of church music in order to unfold and interpret the melody, or *cantus firmus*, and thus interpret the content of the hymn for the hearers. In this way genuinely artistic music becomes an organic part of the divine service; the congregation is drawn into the musicmaking of choir and organ, even as choir and organ by their subjection to the *cantus firmus* of the congregation's hymn show that they know that they are not called independently to lord it over the congregation but rather to serve it in its worship.

This plan gives a definite task to the organ and to instrumental music. And so far as the choir is concerned, it can have no more beautiful task than antiphonal singing, because the choir functions not only as the congregation's "rival," interpreting the Word of God contained in the hymn for the congregation, but also as the congregation's "partner," as its precentor, leader, and teacher, singing out the melodies and in this way contributing much more to the hymn education of the congregation than even the best organ playing can do. By alternate listening and singing the congregation can learn these fine Lu-

Jan Bender (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961). Preludes and varied accompaniments for congregational use.

theran hymns much more easily—even those in the old church modes and those with intricate and varied rhythms. Its attention is focused on the content of the hymn. It can sing all verses of such a great chorale as “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” without destroying the magnificent unity of its thought by cutting off after four or five stanzas. Moreover, such antiphonal singing will lead the choir away from the mistaken ideal of “beautifying the service” with added selections and will lead it toward the great ideal of performing a genuine service to the congregation as a liturgical group which is ready and happy to help the congregation toward all the blessings of genuine worship.

The goal of antiphonal singing ought to be the singing of all stanzas of the hymn of the week. In the antiphonal treatment of hymns all possible combinations should be exploited (choir alternating with congregation, organ or other instrumental music alternating with congregation, women alternating with men, choir and congregation in unison, alternation by stanzas, alternation by pairs of lines, even alternate singing of stanzas from two different hymns). Unison singing by the choir should not be despised; the goal of having the choir sing every Sunday is impossible in many places if the choir must always sing in parts. What is more important is that the hymn of the week has its regular place in the service every Sunday, even if the choir at first can alternate with the congregation only in unison singing.

An appreciation of, and love for, the best hymns and for the Gospel they proclaim is the primary requisite for introducing antiphonal singing. If such love

and appreciation is present with pastor and church musicians, then it will be fairly easy to lead the congregation in that direction and solve the practical problems, such as how to make the congregation aware of which stanzas of a given hymn it is to sing and which the choir will sing (bulletin, announcement, hymnboard with colored numbers for the stanzas of the hymn to be sung by the congregation antiphonally). The practical problems are not great.

ACQUAINTING THE CONGREGATION WITH NEW HYMNS

The second practical aspect that needs attention is one that has perhaps long since been occurring to the reader of this essay. How are you going to acquaint the congregation with these fine but often unknown hymns? This problem must be faced if this plan is to be more than an academic proposal.

In general people do not like to have new hymn tunes “sprung on them” in the service; they perhaps rightly feel that that is not the time or place for a floundering sort of “practicing” of unfamiliar hymns. On the other hand, some “practicing” of unfamiliar hymns is necessary, since it is a tragic fact that many congregations are able to sing only about one fifth of the hymns in the hymnal with complete assurance, and often that one fifth represents hymns of a decidedly sentimental and subjective nature. Some congregations, it is true, still have a living heritage of many fine chorales, but even in their case that treasure must be augmented by many more fine hymns that are not yet well known. And we must face the fact that the old church modes and the varied rhythm of

many chorales pose more problems to the modern congregation than do the flattened-out "measured" melodies of a later age, even though in the end the congregation will learn to love the chorales much more because of their genuine musical verve and superior Gospel preachment. For these reasons those who are responsible for the music in the service, and especially for the selection of the hymns, will have to make special provision if the congregation is to be enabled to sing the finest hymns.

Now, of course, special song services can and should be arranged wherever possible in order to teach the congregation, say, three or four new hymns in a carefully organized and prepared program (which will include an address, perhaps, and various other interesting church music selections). More promising, however, than the institution of such a special song service now and then (which might not reach the entire congregation) would be the utilization of part of the time allotted to the parish's traditional "sacred concerts" or "special services" (such as anniversary services, Christmas concerts, etc.) for the learning of several new congregational hymns. Meetings of the various groups in the congregation offer opportunities for learning the better hymns — in fact, a goal to strive for would be: No meeting without the singing of at least the hymn of the week!

But perhaps the most practical of all methods of acquainting the congregation with the better hymns would be to institute hymn sings at the end of the Sunday service in given periods of the church year. For instance, during Advent in preparation for Christmas, or during the last Sundays in Lent in preparation for Easter, or

during Ascensiontide in preparation for Pentecost. The suggested length for such a hymn sing is ten minutes, no longer! It should begin after the Benediction before the postlude and the dispersing of the people. Naturally the size and situation of each congregation varies, but in the following we are thinking of even a fairly large congregation, where the practicing of hymns is fraught with greater difficulties than in smaller congregations.

Careful preplanning for the hymn sing and prepractice of the new hymn by the leading group (the choir, volunteers from the choir, or if necessary, some other capable group, such as upper-grade school children or the confirmands), is absolutely necessary, as is also the full co-operation of all concerned (pastor, organist, choir director, and leading group). Otherwise the hymn sing will not be effective. Within the congregation there must already have been formed a live "cell" of singers who have mastered the new hymn and are therefore capable of leading the congregation. This cell should ideally include not only "the leading group" but also the school children of the upper grades who have been taught the new hymn and who will be in the church (perhaps even at assigned places) to aid with the "practice."

The leading group should take its place at the front of the church, facing the congregation. After a few brief, well-prepared words of introduction (concerning the general thought of the new hymn, or its relation to the church year, or even perhaps its origin or background), the leading group may sing in unison the entire hymn for the congregation. It may do this, if necessary, antiphonally, alternating between men and women, boys and girls, precentor

and group, right and left, etc. Then the leader (pastor, organist, choir director, or anyone else qualified and called to do so) should ask the congregation to read the first stanza prayerfully together. This serves to impress the text, frees them for more attention later to the melody, loosens up their voices, and lets the foregoing presentation of the hymn impress itself more deeply.

Next, individual units (never less than a whole line and often the first two lines) are sung by the leading group and immediately after repeated by the congregation. If necessary, the leader may ask the congregation to repeat the units twice or even three times. It is imperative that the leading group resist the temptation to sing along with the congregation. That would mislead the congregation to a comfortable dependence on the leading group; also the congregation would in that case not follow so attentively, or put its memory to work so much, because it would know it could depend on the leading group to carry it along. After the first unit has been mastered, the second is attacked in a similar manner. Before, however, proceeding to the third unit, the group should sing the

first two units together. In this manner the entire first stanza is practiced and mastered.

After the first stanza has been sung, a "change of scene" is brought about by the congregation rising; then the leading group sings the entire first stanza, and the congregation answers with the same stanza in exactly the same manner. A word of commendation or encouragement or even a prayer wish, such as "May the Christ Child grant this prayer to every one of us," finishes the practice of the new hymn.

In this manner a new hymn can be learned in, say, six or seven minutes, leaving three or four minutes of the hymn sing for practicing all or part of a recently learned hymn. The plan works best if one starts early and prepares the hymn at least three Sundays before it is sung in the service as the hymn of the week. Then when the hymn is sung on its appointed Sunday, the congregation will be amazed how well it can sing the new hymn. Over a period of five years or six years such a careful program can rejuvenate congregational singing as well as put the entire hymn-of-the-week plan into vital use.

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