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## An Embarrassment of Riches: Choosing What to Sing

Paul J. Grime

To begin my examination of the topic at hand, I would like to draw your attention to two historical figures: John Calvin and Martin Luther, specifically to their contribution to the church's song. Calvin, the great reformer based in Geneva, was a generation younger than Luther. By the time he began to exert significant influence on the reformation of worship, a fairly established tradition of psalm singing was already in place in Switzerland and parts of France. The popularity of these psalm hymns was cemented in their original function as songs of protest against the Roman Catholic Church. It was hardly surprising when Calvin, among others, later provided theological justification for the singing of the psalms by arguing that using God's own words was the best way to praise him.<sup>1</sup> And if they were the best, then it was but a short step to contend that they were the only way.

Now compare this approach with Luther's. Rather than make the theological claim that God's own words, namely, the psalms, were the only way to praise him, Luther provided a rationale for congregational singing that was not only less limiting but also theologically more substantive. In the preface to the first large collection of hymns, published in 1524, Luther simply stated that "we should know nothing to sing or say, save Jesus Christ, our Savior."<sup>2</sup> For Luther, it was about the content—Jesus Christ—and not the particular genre or mode that mattered.

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<sup>1</sup> Corneliu C. Simuț, "John Calvin and the Complete French Psalter," in *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions*, vol. 2, *From Catholic Europe to Protestant Europe*, ed. Mark A. Lamport, Benjamin K. Forrest, and Vernon M. Whaley (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 55. The entire chapter, pages 49–63, provides a helpful background to the development of the French Psalter.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns* (1524): vol. 53, 316, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed.

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The result? A diverse collection of hymns the likes of which Calvin and his followers could not have imagined. To be sure, Luther also dropped his net into the Psalter as a source for hymns. In fact, one of Luther's earliest attempts at hymn writing was likely a psalm paraphrase. In a letter at the end of 1523 to Georg Spalatin, the court chaplain to Frederick the Wise, Luther urged him to have a go at adapting a psalm into a German hymn. Luther even mentioned an example of his own work that he sent along with his letter. Within the year, Luther would produce six examples himself of such psalm hymns.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, he was tracking right along with the French Huguenots who had begun the same process in France and Switzerland.

But even as he was paraphrasing psalms, Luther was reaching beyond that self-imposed limit of those of the Reformed persuasion. Drawing, for example, on his years of praying the eight daily prayer offices while in the monastery, Luther turned to some of the ancient hymns of the Latin tradition that he knew and cherished and gave them new life by translating them into German. That is how "Savior of the Nations, Come," which is attributed to Ambrose, an important pastor and leader of the church in Milan in the fourth century, became a staple of the Advent season among Lutherans. As with the psalm hymns, Luther made no attempt to provide a comprehensive collection of Latin hymns, but was content to produce a half-dozen or so model translations.<sup>4</sup>

Luther was also aware of the simple German hymns that had sprung up in the centuries prior to the Reformation. Contrary to popular opinion, it simply is not true that there was no use of the vernacular in worship before Luther came along. The Mass in all its parts was sung in Latin, of course. But opportunities were found for the people to participate in some fashion. In all likelihood, such singing would have first begun with a choir or cantor singing to the people simple songs that

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Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009-), hereafter AE.

<sup>3</sup> *Ach Gott, vom Himmel* (Psalm 12), *Es spricht der Unweisen* (Psalm 14), *Es wollt uns Gott* (Psalm 67), *Wär Gott nicht mit* (Psalm 124), *Wohl dem, der* (Psalm 128), *Aus tiefer Not* (Psalm 130).

<sup>4</sup> *Herr Gott, dich loben wir* (*Te deum laudamus*, attributed to Augustine and Ambrose, fourth century), AE 53:288, 171-75, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (*Veni redemptor gentium*, Ambrose, fourth century), AE 53:235-36, *Christum wir sollen loben schon* (*A solis ortus cardine*, Sedulius, fifth or sixth century), AE 53:237-39, *Was fürchtst du* (*Hostis Herodes impie*, Sedulius, fifth or sixth century), AE 53:302-03, *Der du bist drei* (*O lux beata trinitas*, fifth century), AE 53:308-09, *Komm, Gott Schöpfer* (*Veni creator spiritus*, falsely attributed to Gregory the Great and Rabanus Maurus, ninth century), AE 53:260-62, *Verleih uns Frieden* (from the antiphon *Da pacem domine*, sixth or seventh century), AE 53:286-87.

concluded with a *Kyrieleis*, a contracted form of the phrase *Kyrie eleison*.<sup>5</sup> It was among these hymns, perhaps the more popular ones, that Luther also dropped his net. But not satisfied with these songs in their simple form, he went about improving (*gebessert*) them by adjusting the text where needed and, more significantly, adding additional stanzas to treat the topic more fully. The works produced from this effort were even more numerous than either the psalm hymns or the Latin hymns.<sup>6</sup>

Even with hymns drawn from psalms, Latin hymns, and medieval hymns, Luther still was not done. A fourth category could be described as Scripture songs, hymns based on specific passages of Scripture. Several of these, his two hymns on the Ten Commandments and another on the Lord's Prayer, for example, served an additional function as catechism hymns. Two other hymns that fall into this category are based on texts that had long-standing use in various services, namely, Luther's paraphrases of the Sanctus in his German Mass and the Nunc Dimittis, which was likely written for the observance of the Presentation of Our Lord.<sup>7</sup>

There are other hymns of Luther that draw heavily from specific passages of Holy Scripture but were then expanded beyond the biblical text to provide further teaching. In Luther's Baptism hymn, "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord," for example, the first four stanzas unpack the account of Jesus' Baptism, and the fifth stanza turns to the command of Jesus to baptize all nations (Matt 28:19). The familiar hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" begins with the Christmas

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Ruff, "Pre-Reformation German Vernacular Hymnody," in *Hymns and Hymnody: Historical and Theological Introductions*, vol. 1, *From Asia Minor to Western Europe*, ed. Mark A. Lamport, Benjamin K. Forrest, and Vernon M. Whaley (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 224.

<sup>6</sup> *Christ lag* (from the twelfth-century Easter verse *Christ ist erstanden*, which was used in conjunction with the sequence *Victimae paschali laudes*), AE 53:255–57, *Nun bitten wir* (from a twelfth- or thirteenth-century Pentecost verse based on the sequence *Veni sancte spiritus et emitte*), AE 53:265–67, *Gelobet seist du* (from a twelfth-century Christmas verse, which was used together with the sequence *Grates nunc omnes reddamus*), *Gott sei gelobet* (from a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century verse for the Corpus Christi festival, which was used in conjunction with the sequence *Lauda Sion*), AE 53:252–54, *Komm, Heiliger Geist* (from a fifteenth-century Pentecost verse used in conjunction with the antiphon *Veni sancte spiritus reple*), AE 53:265–67, *Mitten wir* (from a fifteenth-century German adaptation of the antiphon *Media vita in morte sumus*), AE 53:274–76, *Gott der Vater* (from a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century litany hymn, which was originally used as a processional hymn on Marian festivals and saints' days), AE 53:268–70, *Wir glauben all* (from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century verses based on the creed), AE 53:271–73, *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* (a free adaptation of the fifteenth-century Latin hymn *Jesus Christus nostra salus*, attributed to John Hus), AE 53:258–59.

<sup>7</sup> The complete list of the hymns based on passages of Scripture are the following: *Mit Fried und Freud* (Luke 2:29–32, the Canticle of Simeon), AE 53:247–48, *Jesaja, dem Propheten* (Isa 6:1–4, the German Sanctus), AE 53:282, 82–83, *Sie ist mir lieb* (Rev 12:1, 4–6), AE 53:292–94, *Dies sind die heiligen Zehn Gebot* (Exod 20:3–17; Deut 5:6–21, Ten Commandments), AE 53:277–79, *Mensch, willst du* (Exod 20:3–17; Deut 5:6–21, brief, five-stanza versification of Ten Commandments), AE 53:281, *Vater unser* (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4, the Our Father), AE 53:295–98.

story from Luke 2. The first five stanzas he patterned after the medieval liturgical dramas in which the angel announces to us the good news of the Savior's birth. Luther then continues in the remaining ten stanzas to unpack the significance of that birth for us.<sup>8</sup>

And there are, lastly, wholly original hymns that Luther writes, such as the brief prayer "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word," and his *tour de force*, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice."<sup>9</sup> Even Luther's small output of a little over three dozen hymns makes plain why I chose to title my paper "An Embarrassment of Riches." By refusing to limit the congregation's song to only one source—the psalms—Luther launched a movement that would result in a flowering of hymn writing. By the end of the sixteenth century, some 1,500 editions of Lutheran hymnals had been published, many of them containing hundreds of hymns.<sup>10</sup> Estimates of the total number of hymns written in the first century of the Reformation number in the thousands, with just as many to come in the following century from the likes of poets such as Philip Nicolai, Paul Gerhardt, and Johann Rist. Just as significant was the immense musical creativity that was spawned by Luther's efforts, with Lutheran composers often leading the way in the development of new musical ideas, all through their treatment of the Lutheran chorale.<sup>11</sup>

This proliferation of hymn writing would expand beyond the Lutheran tradition. Though the Reformation in England initially followed the Calvinist inclination to sing only the psalms, over time that tradition would broaden its definition of a hymn. Though using the psalms as his starting point, Isaac Watts incorporated a wide range of biblical imagery that took the hymn beyond a mere paraphrase. His goal, as he expressed it, was to make a Christian out of King David, the poet. By the eighteenth century, England could boast of perhaps the most prolific hymn writer in all history—Charles Wesley—who penned around 6,600 hymns! While a good number of them are unremarkable and others theologically weak, could we ever imagine Advent without "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending" or Christmas without "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"?

In the late twentieth century, a new outburst of hymn writing began to take shape. Centered in Great Britain and North America, tens of thousands of hymns have flooded the market, so to speak. Some of these hymns are also unremarkable, many are great poetic creations but with questionable theology, and a good number

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<sup>8</sup> AE 53:289–91.

<sup>9</sup> AE 53:304–05, 217–20.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Boyd Brown, "The Reformation and Lutheran Confessionalism to 1620," in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> See Carl F. Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001).

are trendy in the worst sense of that word. Yet, again, there are gems among this vast output that have enriched us as they express the gospel with fresh images that hymn writers of the past had never before considered.

There is no denying that we have an embarrassingly rich tradition upon which to draw, so much so that we have far more to sing than opportunity to sing it. With fifty-two Sundays in a year, plus another ten or so extra midweek services during Advent and Lent and at festivals, there are really only about sixty-five times a year when a sizeable portion of a congregation gathers together. Singing an average of four to five hymns at each service, that adds up to a total of 260 to 325 hymns that a congregation might sing in a given year. Undoubtedly, some hymns are repeated during that time, so the number of distinctive hymns sung by a congregation is even less. It is also true that the hymns sung from year to year by an individual congregation will vary somewhat, yet the amount of variance probably will not be that much.

So, in the midst of this embarrassingly rich treasure of hymnody, how do we choose what to sing? There are so many theologically meaty hymns just from the first two hundred years of Lutheranism that we could be satisfied singing nothing more than Martin Luther, Paul Speratus, Philip Nicolai, Paul Gerhardt, Johann Rist, and Johann Heermann. And I suppose for good measure we could throw in the Danish hymn writer Thomas Kingo, just so that we won't be accused of being a purely Germanic church!

But we all know that would not work. A lot has transpired since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a particularly significant step occurred at the end of the nineteenth century when the first edition of the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book (ELHB)* was published. The year was 1889, and though *ELHB* was not an official hymnal of the Missouri Synod, those who did much of the work in developing it were closely associated with the Synod. The more significant impact of this hymnal would occur in 1912 when an updated version—with the same title—was published as the first official English-language hymnal of the Missouri Synod. Note the date of that publication: 1912. Just two years later, the Great War would erupt in Europe, launching, among other things, the mad dash among German-speaking Americans to the English language. The Missouri Synod was not immune. Within several decades, the vast majority of congregations would move toward English-language services, even if they still held on to a German service for a while.

The impact of *ELHB* cannot be overestimated. Whereas the Synod's German hymnal, produced by C. F. W. Walther in 1847—the same year as the Synod's founding—included hymns of purely Germanic origin, with a handful of German

translations of ancient Latin hymns, the new English hymnal did not. In fact, of its 567 hymns, only about half were hymns of German origin that had been translated into English. The other half were hymns that had originally been written in English, with the vast majority of them originating from outside of Lutheranism. Of those hundreds of English-language hymns, few if any had been written by Lutherans. Naturally, many of the hymns came from a number of theological traditions in England. Even the translations of the German hymns, like those of Luther and Gerhardt, were mostly done by non-Lutherans, including Richard Massie, an Anglican cleric, and Catherine Winkworth, whose past included a brief time under the tutelage of a Unitarian pastor.<sup>12</sup> Despite the occasional shortcoming in translation, however, the availability of the primary corpus of Lutheran chorales in the English language was a boon for Lutherans in this country as the move from German to English progressed.

It was, however, the inclusion of a great number of hymns of non-Lutheran origin that would have an unforeseen impact on the sung confession of the LCMS in the ensuing decades. To be sure, the new hymnal of the Missouri Synod included the great treasures of the past from the pens of Luther, Gerhardt, and others. But suddenly, they appeared on equal footing with the hymns of Methodists, Anglicans, and even the American revivalist tradition.

You may wonder to what degree we can determine the impact of these foreign traditions on the sung confession of the Missouri Synod. Fortunately, we have actual surveys that were conducted at that time, now nearly a century ago.<sup>13</sup> In 1922, *The Lutheran Witness* carried the report of Theodore Buenger, a professor at Concordia College in St. Paul, Minnesota, who related that the president of that institution had recently sought the counsel of pastors regarding hymns in English that all young men should know before heading off to the seminary.<sup>14</sup> The college polled the pastors of the English District, which had at the time been a part of the Synod for only a decade, as well as two (unnamed) professors at the seminary in St. Louis. Twenty-four pastors sent in replies, as did the Cleveland English Conference, which sent in a joint response, and the two (still unnamed) seminary professors. Two lists

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Leaver points out that although her early theological opinions were on the liberal side, Winkworth gradually moved toward a more conservative theological stance, perhaps aided by the many great hymns that she translated. See Robin Leaver, *Catherine Winkworth: The Influence of Her Translations on English Hymnody* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 13.

<sup>13</sup> The following is drawn almost verbatim from Paul J. Grime, "The Lutheran Hymnal after Seventy-Five Years: Its Role in the Shaping of *Lutheran Service Book*," *CTQ* 79 (2015): 199–201.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Buenger, "Hymns in the Curriculum of Our Colleges," *The Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 5 (1922): 75. The asterisks behind the hymns in the list indicate the recommendations of the Cleveland English Conference's joint response.



of ten hymns were prepared. The first consisted of those hymns deemed important enough to be committed to memory.

Rock of Ages*	24
Just as I Am*	23
Abide with Me	21
What a Friend We Have in Jesus*	21
Jesus, Lover of My Soul*	18
A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*	17
My Faith Looks Up to Thee*	16
Come, Thou Almighty King	15
There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood	14
From Greenland's Icy Mountains	13

The second list provided additional hymns that the respondents believed should be sung more frequently in school chapel services in order for future seminarians to become better acquainted with them.

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less*	13
All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name	12
In the Hour of Trial*	11
Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed	9
Holy, Holy, Holy*	9
Holy Ghost, with Light Divine*	8
Thy Life Was Giv'n for Me*	7
I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*	7
In the Cross of Christ I Glory*	7
Let Me Be Thine Forever	7

The contents of the lists are most revealing. Only one hymn among the twenty originates from sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Germany, "A Mighty Fortress." To think that in just a single generation, and with the transition from German to English far from complete,<sup>15</sup> the Missouri Synod was rapidly losing its hymnic heritage. Though the Synod was undoubtedly still wearing proudly its Lutheran

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<sup>15</sup> In 1922, 12 percent of congregations in the LCMS were still worshipping only in German and another 32 percent were worshipping more in German than English. Compare that with only 23 percent that were worshipping only in English or more English than German. By 1935, the time when Theodore Graebner published his essay "Our Liturgical Chaos" in *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), 135-66, only 2 percent of congregations still worshiped solely in German and 10 percent more German than English. *Statistical Yearbook*, 1935 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1936), 149-150.

moniker as the singing church, it was, in reality, sounding a lot more like the general Protestants than Lutherans.

Two interesting comments accompany Buenger's report. First, he writes that "the request has been made that we publish the results of the questionnaire." The passive voice is telling in that someone, again unnamed, wanted the results of this survey to be made known to the Synod but apparently did not want anyone to know who had made the request.<sup>16</sup> The second comment comes at the end of his brief report, where he writes that "this list will be taken as a canon in St. Paul at the present." In other words, it is not necessary to guess what future pastors and teachers were singing in daily chapel in at least one of the Synod's prep schools.

Three years later, another report on hymn preferences appeared in *The Lutheran Witness*. Walter Wismar, a church musician in St. Louis, reported that when he spoke to young people's groups on the topic of hymnody, he would always conclude by polling the students, asking them to write down their three favorite hymns, indicating that they could provide either English or German titles.<sup>17</sup> The top twenty hymns identified by these young people are equally telling:

What a Friend We Have in Jesus	284
Rock of Ages	158
Abide with Me	140
A Mighty Fortress (G)	138
Just as I Am	119
Jesus, Lover of My Soul	109
Savior, I Follow On	106
Nearer, My God, to Thee	98
In the Hour of Trial	82
I'm But a Stranger Here	68
From Greenland's Icy Mountains	54
My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less	53
Abide, O Dearest Jesus (G)	31
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty	24
O Friend of Souls, How Blest Am I (G)	22
Lamb of God, Most Holy (G)	20
My Faith Looks Up to Thee	18
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (G)	14
Lead, Kindly Light	12

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<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, this use of the passive voice with an unnamed agent may simply have been common parlance at that time. The result, however, is still the same: we do not know who requested its dissemination.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Wismar, "Popular Hymns," *The Lutheran Witness* 44, no. 17 (1925): 280.

## Beautiful Savior

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The results are quite similar to the “canon” at Concordia, St. Paul, reported three years earlier. One can, perhaps, take solace in the fact that in this case five of the hymns are identified as being of German origin (marked by Wismar with a “G”), although two of those came from the pens of Pietist hymn writers. Of course, the number of votes for those five German hymns tallied together still falls short of the number one choice on the list. One wonders whether Teacher Wismar submitted his report as a retort, to some degree, to the earlier survey from Concordia, St. Paul. While the results were only marginally better, it provided Wismar the opportunity to make the point that the Synod was heading in a new direction: “Contemplating further the above list and figures, we realize that the German choral is losing favor and prestige.” Later, he adds, “While a number of Standard English hymns appear on the list, the best of them are not equal to the German choral.”<sup>18</sup>

These two surveys, conducted in the early 1920s, appeared just a decade after the revised edition of *ELHB* appeared in 1912. Surely, such a change in preference could not have occurred in such a short time. As Jon Vieker has convincingly demonstrated in his doctoral dissertation,<sup>19</sup> there were significant precursors to the Synod’s first official English-language hymnal that shaped the choices of English-language hymns. Among these was a publication in 1894, *Lieder-Perlen*, that consisted of both German and English spiritual songs that were intended for use in school. This collection was expanded just a few years later and then succeeded in 1901 by an English-language book called the *Sunday School Hymnal*. This book drew not only from the German spiritual song tradition that gained currency in the earlier *Lieder-Perlen*, but expanded by drawing on English sources, including the American revivalist tradition. Regarding this tradition, a significant discussion ensued in *The Lutheran Witness* during the 1880s and 90s.<sup>20</sup> While much of the critique was negative, certain aspects of the revivalist tradition would slip past the theological filters. Even the earlier, 1892 edition of *ELHB* already included a few of these hymns.

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<sup>18</sup> Wismar, “Popular Hymns,” 280. While the limited scope of this survey is evident, with a “margin of error” that would likely be quite high, the similarities between the results of Wismar’s surveys and the Concordia, St. Paul, list suggest that both were fairly indicative of hymn preferences at that time.

<sup>19</sup> Jon D. Vieker, “The Fathers’ Faith, the Children’s Song: Missouri Lutheranism Encounters American Evangelicalism in Its Hymnals, Hymn Writers, and Hymns, 1889–1912” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2014). In particular, see his chapter on the *Sunday School Hymnal*, 92–142.

<sup>20</sup> See Vieker, “The Father’s Faith,” 255–274, for an extensive review of this literature.

But that is enough of the historical review. For our purposes, this trip down memory lane is intended to help us wrestle with the subtitle of this paper: choosing what to sing. The reality is that English-language hymns of the American tradition constitute a significant portion of what the congregations in the LCMS have been singing for a very long time. The move from German to English in the Missouri Synod occurred within an ecclesiastical culture rife with revivalistic hymnody. Not surprisingly, this resulted in a new reality in the worship life of the Synod. While many of the stalwart hymns of Luther and others still appeared in the hymnal, they quickly receded into the background when it came to actual use.<sup>21</sup>

What about today? Three hymnals have followed upon *ELHB*, each of them putting their somewhat unique stamp on the corpus of Missouri Synod hymnody, with some hymns being added and others removed at each step. Considering, for example, only the Christmas hymns, with the appearance of *TLH* in 1941, the following hymns joined the official corpus of Missouri hymnody:

Angels from the Realms of Glory  
Behold a Branch Is Growing  
Christ the Lord to Us Is Born  
Come Rejoicing, Praises Voicing  
Now Sing We, Now Rejoice  
O Gladsome Light, O Grace  
O Little Town of Bethlehem  
Of the Father's Love Begotten  
Silent Night

With *Lutheran Worship*, these hymns entered our Christmas vocabulary:

Angels We Have Heard on High  
Away in a Manger  
Every Year the Christ Child  
From Shepherding of Stars  
Gentle Mary Laid Her Child  
Go Tell It on the Mountain  
I Am So Glad when Christmas Comes  
It Came upon a Midnight Clear  
Love Came Down at Christmas  
O Savior of Our Fallen Race

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<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, I am painting with a rather broad brush. The core hymns of the Reformation were still being sung, in some places more frequently than others. But as the surveys from 1922 and 1925 demonstrate, these hymns, for the most part, were not the ones that were capturing the hearts and imaginations of the people.

On Christmas Night All Christians Sing  
 Once in Royal David's City  
 What Child Is This  
 Who Are These That Earnest Knock

In contrast to these robust additions in the previous hymnals, *LSB* added a relatively modest number of new hymns to the Christmas corpus:

Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light  
 God Loves Me Dearly  
 Infant Holy, Infant Lowly  
 O Sing of Christ  
 See amid the Winter's Snow  
 Where Shepherds Lately Knelt

Four of those hymns had already appeared in *Hymnal Supplement 98*, hymns that the Commission on Worship believed should have been included in *LW* but somehow failed to make the cut. So in essence, only two new hymns were added to the Christmas section, and one of those, "God Loves Me Dearly," was already well known.<sup>22</sup>

Hymns have not only been added along the way, but also set aside. An interesting exercise results from returning to those lists of hymns produced in the two surveys of 1922 and 1925 that we considered earlier. Of the thirty-nine hymns in those two lists, ten were duplicates, leaving a total of twenty-nine distinct hymns. Only two of those hymns were not included in *ELHB*, which was the current hymnal at that time: "Beautiful Savior" and "Lead, Kindly Light." When *TLH* appeared several decades later, "Beautiful Savior" was added and "O Friend of Souls, How Blest Am I" was removed. With the arrival of *LW* in 1982, one more was removed, "Savior, I Follow On." As for our current hymnal, *LSB*, five more hymns from those lists have been removed:

From Greenland's Icy Mountains  
 In the Hour of Trial  
 Jesus, Lover of My Soul  
 Nearer My God to Thee  
 There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood

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<sup>22</sup> Given the vast number of Christmas hymns already in use, the *LSB* Hymnody Committee was of the opinion that there was a rather high hymnic saturation for this season that would prevent many new Christmas hymns from ever being able to break in. Thus, they held back in this section in order to save space for new hymns that would more likely be sung at other times of the year.

This little comparison is far too limited to serve as anything more than one small example of how our hymn corpus continues to morph from generation to generation. Even as some of these “favorites” from the early twentieth century have been set aside, hymns of a comparable stripe have been added.<sup>23</sup> And though we have recovered more recently several wonderful hymns from the early centuries of Lutheranism, like Paul Gerhardt’s “Evening and Morning” and Johann Lindemann’s “In Thee Is Gladness,” we have simultaneously seen a reduction in the number of hymns by Luther that are in our current hymnal. Yet, the breadth and depth of the hymnody we now have available is truly remarkable. In addition to our Lutheran treasures, we have a variety of folk traditions represented, with texts and/or tunes from such places as Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, France, Slovakia, Kenya, Tanzania, and China. The Appalachian folk tradition from this country is especially well represented. And this does not begin to take into account the amazing variety of hymns that have come to us in the most recent decades, as I described earlier. It all leads me to say once more that we have an astounding wealth of riches when it comes to all that we might sing.

This leads me yet again to ask the question: what shall we sing? There are some who wish that question could be answered with a simple, “Here you go; sing this.” That would be the easiest, would it not? The more limited corpus of past ages allowed for some of this. Not only was a hymn of the day appointed for each Sunday of the year, but other hymns became strongly associated with particular Sundays. Thus, each year the same basic hymns were sung. With the rich corpus of hymns now available, however, that hardly seems a viable option. Choosing four or five hymns and then simply repeating them every time those readings come around misses important opportunities to select other hymns that may capture the congregation’s attention at a unique point in time.

Even if there were a synodical guru who would pour heart and soul into choosing just the right hymns for each Sunday of the year, there is no guarantee that those “perfect” choices would be the right fit for any particular congregation. The truth is that each congregation has its own corpus of hymns that is slightly different from every other congregation’s. There is overlap, to be sure, with a solid core of hymns that is sung by just about everyone. But each congregation brings with it its own experiences and preferences.

It is for that reason that I give my students the strong encouragement to become familiar with a congregation’s hymn corpus. Upon becoming the pastor of a congregation, I believe it is essential to determine what the congregation has sung in recent years. If such records have not been kept, that means digging into every

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<sup>23</sup> E.g., “How Great Thou Art.”

church bulletin for the past several years and recording the hymns that were sung. It is painstaking work, something I wish I had done more of when I arrived at my parish more than thirty years ago. From such an analysis, one gets a feel for the congregation's hymn preferences. You learn what they sing and how often they sing it. And, not surprisingly, you also learn much by taking note of the hymns that they do not sing. Ideally, you need several years worth of data to get an honest picture of the congregation's hymn repertoire.<sup>24</sup>

Once you have the data at hand, then comes the fun work as you try to tease out some insights. Which hymns are sung most often? What genres of hymns receive the greatest attention? Do the majority come from the Reformation era? Or are the bulk of the hymns from the Pietist and American revivalist traditions? In addition, what can you learn from the hymn genres that are slighted or ignored?

While there are no right or wrong answers at this or any stage in the process of choosing hymns, I would suggest that there are better and worse paths that one might follow. If a congregation sings no hymns from the Reformation era besides "A Mighty Fortress," we would probably agree that there is an impoverishment that could stand some improvement. Imagine the enrichment the congregation would experience by singing "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice." Now, at ten stanzas, that could prove to be an immediate impediment, so one would have to do some careful planning in order to make sure that the congregation does not get worn out. Yet just consider the benefits that might accrue over time by taking Luther's descriptive words of our sinful condition into our own mouths.

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay;  
 Death brooded darkly o'er me.  
 Sin was my torment night and day;  
 In sin my mother bore me.  
 But daily deeper still I fell;  
 My life became a living hell,  
 So firmly sin possessed me.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Luther's picturesque description of how God's plan of salvation took shape could provide fodder for an entire Bible class hour.

But God had seen my wretched state

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that this objective data of how often particular hymns were sung does not take into account the reception that the hymns may have received. Just because a pastor dutifully scheduled Luther's Creed hymn, "We All Believe in One True God," every year on Reformation Sunday does not mean that it went well or that the congregation appreciated it. Such a level of familiarity with a congregation's hymn repertoire can only come from conversation.

<sup>25</sup> *LSB 556:2. Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

Before the world's foundation,  
 And mindful of His mercies great,  
 He planned for my salvation.  
 He turned to me a father's heart;  
 He did not choose the easy part  
 But gave His dearest treasure.<sup>26</sup>

Or, if ten stanzas is too daunting to start out—and it truly might be—then one could consider instead Luther's wonderful little prayer, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word." Trinitarian in structure, it provides the Christian with as fitting a prayer in our age of moral decay as it was in Luther's time as the Muslim conquest was knocking on the door of Europe.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;  
 Curb those who by deceit or sword  
 Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son  
 And bring to naught all He has done.

Lord Jesus Christ, Your pow'r make known,  
 For You are Lord of lords alone;  
 Defend Your holy Church that we  
 May sing Your praise eternally.

O Comforter of priceless worth,  
 Send peace and unity on earth;  
 Support us in our final strife  
 And lead us out of death to life.<sup>27</sup>

And what if your analysis of the congregation's hymn repertoire reveals the opposite, namely, that they sing every hymn of Luther, Gerhardt, and all those stalwart hymn writers of Lutheranism's earliest centuries? That is a great problem to have, wouldn't you agree? But I used the word "problem" on purpose, because I would suggest that limiting one's hymnody to only the classic Lutheran hymns is, in fact, problematic. It is not that those hymns are bad; rather, it is simply that, as good as they are, they do not provide the full range of expression that the church's song has attained over the centuries.

Consider the first two stanzas of the hymn "What Wondrous Love Is This."

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!  
 What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

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<sup>26</sup> *LSB* 556:4.

<sup>27</sup> *LSB* 655. In the original version, the second phrase of stanza 1 reflected quite explicitly the occasion that led Luther to write it: "Restrain the murd'rous Pope and Turk." *ELHB* 274.



What wondrous love is this  
 That caused the Lord of bliss  
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,  
 To bear the dreadful curse for my soul!

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,  
 When I was sinking down, sinking down,  
 When I was sinking down  
 Beneath God's righteous frown,  
 Christ laid aside His crown for my soul, for my soul,  
 Christ laid aside His crown for my soul.<sup>28</sup>

A cursory glance at these stanzas suggests something very different from what we saw a short while ago in those stanzas from “Dear Christians, One and All.” Yet, similar ground is covered. The culpability of our sin is uniquely described as “sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown.” Furthermore, we are described as being under a dreadful curse. The good news expressed here, however, is that there is a love almost too good to be true, a wondrous love that would cause the sinless Son of God to lay down his crown in order to bear that curse. No, it is not packed as densely as Luther’s text. But there is another matter to consider: the poetry and the music. A distinctive feature of this text is the repetition of short phrases that bear down on us like incessant pleas. Coupled with the music, this hymn haunts us, demanding that we come face-to-face with the very heart of the gospel message, that Christ laid aside his crown *for my soul, for my soul*.

Another hymn that functions in a similar fashion is the Ethiopian hymn “When I Behold Jesus Christ.”

When I behold Jesus Christ,  
 True God who died for me,  
 I wonder much at His love  
 As He hung on the tree.

*Refrain*

What kind of love is this?  
 What kind of love is this?  
 You showed Your love, Jesus, there  
 To me on Calvary.  
 What kind of love is this?  
 What kind of love is this?

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<sup>28</sup> LSB 543:1–2.

You showed Your love, Jesus, there  
To me on Calvary.<sup>29</sup>

That incessant question, “What kind of love is this?” draws us deeper and deeper into the message as the stanzas unfold the work of Christ on our behalf. And note how the music reinforces that plea, repeatedly descending from the highest note.

Perhaps these two examples do not do a lot for you. For some folks, the pleading questions and the introspection are not their cup of tea. Instead, they resonate much more to the straightforward language of Paul Speratus’s hymn, “Salvation unto Us Has Come.”

Since Christ has full atonement made  
And brought to us salvation,  
Each Christian therefore may be glad  
And build on this foundation.  
Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,  
Your death is now my life indeed,  
For You have paid my ransom.<sup>30</sup>

What does all of this have to do with the choosing of hymns for congregational singing? I would suggest that an important consideration in the determination of what to sing is to be found in the people who will be doing the singing. God has uniquely created each of us and given us different dispositions. Some folks are cerebral, others quite emotional. Some like simplicity, others thrive on a complexity that invites further contemplation. Some long for the poetic, while others are more matter-of-fact and just want a straightforward telling of the faith.

I would suggest that Christians have different faith languages by which we both take in and express our Christian faith. Some are more emotional in their expression of the faith, while others prefer more precise expressions that carry few emotive characteristics.

The reason I suggest this concept of faith languages is because our congregations have members at every point along this continuum. If a particular hymn does not strike your fancy or does not get you all worked up with a sense of awe, that does not mean that it will not have that effect on someone else. Not everyone thinks or feels the same way I do. Thank God for that! Worship planners need to remember that and plan for worship accordingly. This suggests that a wide swath of hymns from every time and place will best serve the whole congregation and perhaps also us as individuals. Stepping slightly outside my comfort zone forces

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<sup>29</sup> *LSB* 542:1.

<sup>30</sup> *LSB* 555:6.

me to consider the work of God in Christ from a slightly different perspective. It also helps me to step into the shoes of my fellow Christians who do not think or feel the way I do, thus teaching me humility and respect.

The two hymns I cited previously, “What Wondrous Love Is This” and “When I Behold Jesus Christ,” I would classify as fairly substantive hymns. The gospel is faithfully and accurately presented, which is more than can be said for a lot of popular hymns. But what are we to do when we bump into those less-than-solid hymns that have worked their way into our members’ hearts after many decades of use? As an example, consider “I’m But a Stranger Here.”

I’m but a stranger here,  
Heav’n is my home;  
Earth is a desert drear,  
Heav’n is my home.  
Danger and sorrow stand  
Round me on ev’ry hand;  
Heav’n is my fatherland,  
Heav’n is my home.<sup>31</sup>

This hymn was high on the list a century ago, and it has appeared in every synodical hymnal since. While the hymn expresses a commendable sentiment, it really does not go beyond that. At worst, one could argue that it proposes a form of escapism, as though this life is not worth living. What does such a sentiment do, however, to the doctrine of the body and even more significantly to the doctrine of the incarnation, which acknowledges that the Son of God took on our very flesh in order to restore our humanity? It is true that Paul expresses a somewhat similar thought in his letter to the Colossians: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:2).<sup>32</sup> But Paul goes on in the very next verse to provide the rationale for his invitation: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). That is baptismal language that centers our life in Christ, into whose death we have been buried. Such imagery is not found in the hymn, which cannot get past the denigration of this life and longing for the next.

So does that mean that we should not sing “I’m But a Stranger Here”? To be honest, that would be my preference. Not only does it not resonate with my faith language, but it has weaknesses. Yet, I also must acknowledge that it does speak the faith language of some in the congregation. There will be members, for example,

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<sup>31</sup> *LSB* 748:1.

<sup>32</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

who vividly remember the hymn being sung at the funeral of a close relative. For others, whose lives are filled with pain and heartache, the hymn may be a helpful way of expressing the longing desire for their heavenly reward.

As a pastor charged with choosing the hymns that a congregation sings, I might have to continue selecting this one. But I would not leave it at that. There is more to sing, and I would make every effort to sing those deeper truths. Consider, for example, this familiar hymn and the antidote it provides:

Lord, Thee I love with all my heart;  
 I pray Thee, ne'er from me depart,  
 With tender mercy cheer me.  
 Earth has no pleasure I would share.  
*Yea, heav'n itself were void and bare*  
*If Thou, Lord, wert not near me.*  
 And should my heart for sorrow break,  
 My trust in Thee can nothing shake.  
 Thou art the portion I have sought;  
 Thy precious blood my soul has bought.  
 Lord Jesus Christ, my God and Lord, my God and Lord,  
 Forsake me not! I trust Thy Word.<sup>33</sup>

While still acknowledging that this earth has nothing lasting to offer, Martin Schalling's hymn places Christ squarely at the center of all our desires: "Thou art the portion I have sought; / Thy precious blood my soul has bought." That provides the foundation for the marvelous statement made earlier in the stanza that heaven itself would be of no interest or value if Christ were not there.

A similar example can be seen in the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." At the top of that 1925 survey, having garnered more than twice as many votes as "A Mighty Fortress," the hymn makes a rather questionable claim about prayer, suggesting that the suffering we endure is a result of our lack of praying, which all but implies a lack of faith on our part. Again, the hymn does not speak my faith language, yet for others it is almost the equivalent of a direct-dial call to God. Pastoral wisdom might necessitate the use of this hymn occasionally, but only with the caveat of introducing stronger hymns that could eventually take its place. In that vein, one might consider the hymn "In Holy Conversation." While I do not resonate particularly well with this Swedish folk tune, I can imagine a lot of people who would simultaneously benefit from the text.

In holy conversation

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<sup>33</sup> LSB 708:1. Emphasis added.

We speak to God in prayer,  
 And at His invitation  
 Our deepest thoughts we share.  
 We come, His will obeying,  
 As children bringing needs;  
 And to support our praying,  
 His Spirit intercedes.<sup>34</sup>

This discussion could, quite obviously, go in any number of directions. As an example, consider Jaroslav Vajda's 1969 hymn "Now the Silence." Many look at this hymn and immediately roll their eyes. Perhaps one of the first truly postmodern hymns—completely devoid of punctuation—it presents us one image after another regarding the high points in the Divine Service. I know that most of us do not think this way; it is not how we have been trained. Yet, consider for a moment how it portrays Confession and Absolution, noting in particular the brief but effective reference to the parable of the prodigal son:

Now the empty hands uplifted  
 Now the kneeling  
 Now the plea  
 Now the Father's arms in welcome

The description of proclamation of the word comes through in just two lines:

Now the hearing  
 Now the pow'r

As for the Sacrament of the Altar,

Now the vessel brimmed for pouring  
 Now the body  
 Now the blood  
 Now the joyful celebration  
 Now the wedding  
 Now the songs  
 Now the heart forgiven leaping<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, this hymn will not speak to everyone. But as we attempt to invite the increasing number of unchurched into our sanctuaries, imagine for a moment how deeply this hymn, sung at the beginning of the service, might communicate the mysteries of the faith to all of those Gen-Xers, millennials, and Gen-Zers.

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<sup>34</sup> *LSB* 772:1.

<sup>35</sup> *LSB* 910.

One other cautionary warning bears noting. Sometimes I fear we have expectations of individual hymns that are simply greater than the hymn intends, or even needs, to provide, and if it does not cover a certain number of points of Christian doctrine, then it is suspect. I think we have to be careful of falling into this trap, lest we disqualify a few of our own favorites. Consider the hymn for the celebration of All Saints' "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones." I know this is going to sound heretical, but there really is not that much there! Note the text with the alleluia refrains stripped out.

Ye watchers and ye holy ones,  
 Bright seraphs, cherubim, and thrones,  
 Raise the glad strain: "Alleluia!"  
 Cry out, dominions, pryncedoms, pow'rs,  
 Virtues, archangels, angels' choirs:

O higher than the cherubim,  
 More glorious than the seraphim,  
 Lead their praises: "Alleluia!"  
 Thou bearer of th' eternal Word,  
 Most gracious, magnify the Lord:

Respond, ye souls in endless rest,  
 Ye patriarchs and prophets blest:  
 "Alleluia, alleluia!"  
 Ye holy Twelve, ye martyrs strong,  
 All saints triumphant, raise the song:

O friends, in gladness let us sing,  
 Supernal anthems echoing:  
 "Alleluia, alleluia!"  
 To God the Father, God the Son,  
 And God the Spirit, Three in One:<sup>36</sup>

What this hymn is really doing is providing an expansion of that wonderful conclusion to the Preface that leads us into the Sanctus: "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven . . ." There is one oblique reference to Christ in the second stanza where we implore Mary, the "bearer of the eternal Word," to join the heavenly throng in praising God. But nothing much else. No reference to the saving work of Christ, to the forgiveness of sins; nothing about our

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<sup>36</sup> *LSB* 670.

sinful condition; nothing about the church. It is just a grand rallying cry for the whole heavenly host to sing praise to God.

So should we stop singing this hymn? Of course not. It fulfills a useful function by focusing our attention on that great company of heaven. My point is simply that the church has never operated on the principle that every hymn must proclaim the whole story of salvation. For that reason, we need to be careful that we not make additional demands of hymns that come from other streams of the tradition.

Selecting hymns from the vast treasury that the church has bequeathed to us should never be an easy task, yet neither should it be a burdensome one. There are no quotas requiring us to sing a certain percentage of hymns from the various eras of the church's history. Imagine trying to make the right choices so that you hit an arbitrary 35 percent of hymns from the Reformation era or 15 percent from modern times. But, I think it's fair to say that our congregations ought to make an effort to draw hymns from every era, past and present. One of the strengths of *LSB*, in my opinion, is that in addition to the treasures from the past it presents a fairly strong collection of new hymns, hymns that for the most part speak directly of the saving work of Christ. I would argue that drawing from the richness of these modern treasures enriches the church's expression of the truths of Holy Scripture. And I would go so far as to say that if we do not draw from the vastness of this great treasure house, we will be shortchanging our people of expressions both with which they can resonate and into which they can grow.

In the end, I cannot choose which hymns you and your congregation should sing. And no one else can either. My encouragement to pastors and musicians is that as they make these decisions, they take into consideration their congregation's past and the varied experiences of all their people. While conversations with fellow pastors and musicians can be insightful, it is of no benefit for anyone to feel pressured by those who are not a part of the congregation. Just because Congregation A in the neighboring county is singing "Isaiah, Mighty Seer" does not mean that your congregation should also be singing it. You are called to serve your people, to guide them to the green pastures of the church's song, and to enable them to lift up their voices to the best of their collective ability. And then you leave it to God to bless that sung confession, the prayer and praises that rise up before God's mighty throne, as, with Luther, you sing of Christ our Savior.