

Revitalizing Congregational Singing

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IF YOU agree with me at the outset that our congregational hymn singing does need revitalization, I hope you will take the next step and bear with me as I expound my second conviction, namely, that the solution does not seem to me to be a matter of some special technique, some gimmick which might "put some pep" into our singing. The plan which I am herewith presenting for your consideration is not suggested as such a "cure-all," even though I do believe that it can be extremely helpful in getting us on the right track toward a real revitalization of our hymn singing. I propose therefore to begin a bit more humbly and realistically with a brief survey of five factors which seem to me to be devitalizing our congregational hymn-singing. Once I have discussed them, I think you will more readily understand the nature of the solution which I am herewith advocating.

Monotonous, Dull Hymn Tunes

One of the foremost devitalizing factors in present-day hymn singing seems to me to be monotonous music. Have you ever been at a Service where *all* the hymns that were sung had tunes of the sleepy, monotonous type of "la, la, la, la, la, la, la"—e.g., the first phrases of the isometric Pietistic hymn tune "Meinen Jesum lasz ich nicht." I am afraid that this sort of thing happens more often than is generally realized. In such a situation the congregation half-heartedly sings along simply because it knows it is expected to do so, but not because it has been challenged or inspired by the tune. Some time ago I was asked to preach at a mission festival in a congregation where *all* the hymns were of such an isometric, Pietistic type (one syllable on one note); every single hymn in the service came from the same period of church history, from the Pietistic last half of the 17th century. Musically at least, that was no festival; that was musical monotony!

It does not, however, have to be that way. Our church has a rich heritage of various types of hymn tunes, most of them the finest available anywhere. We have light and flexible *plain-chan*

melodies like "Of the Father's Love Begotten." We have sturdy *Reformation-Age prayer-melodies*, based on plain-chant, like "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word"; we have *Reformation-Age proclamation-melodies*, based on the lively folk songs of the day, like the bright and cheerful tune of "The Day is Surely Drawing Near"; we have well-conceived *composers' melodies* like Johann Crueger's famous "Beloved Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken?" in which the melody musically interprets and heightens the words; we even have the solemn and staid hymn tunes of the *Geneva Psalter*, like "Before Jehovah's Awe-full Throne," with their striding rhythm and strict rhythm-pattern; we have *florid tunes* like "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun," with their graceful curves; we also have *isometric Pietistic hymn tunes* like "Jesus Sinners doth Receive," and, even though I did just a moment ago criticize a too-wholesale use of such tunes, some of them do have a rightful place in our heritage; we have *Victorian-Age church hymn melodies* like that of "The Church's One Foundation" which are not genuine unison melodies but depend on supporting harmony and rhythm for their color. We have a *rich* variety of many types of hymn tunes at our disposal. Some are like oaks; some are like maples; some are like weeping willows; some are like green fir trees; and we should not restrict our hymn singing to one or two types of melodies, even if that type be as important a type as that of Reformation prayer-melody; if we, however, do restrict our hymn singing to only one or two such melodies, we will soon find that the singing has lost its vigor. It will be devitalized.

Inadequate Texts

A second devitalizing factor in congregational hymn singing is, I submit, the use of hymns with *inadequate texts*. I do not mean that the texts of such hymns are un-Christian or even that they are awkward literarily (some are polished English, for all of that); but what I mean is that they are not an adequate response to the Word of God which sounds forth in the Divine Service. I must explain what I mean. Many hymns, especially those of the last half of the 17th century and of the 18th century, are so interested in describing man's experience, man's feelings, man's pious response to God and His revelation that man finally does become the center of attention in these hymns rather than God. That is unfortunately the case with many Pietistic hymns. Many of them

have ceased to be genuinely God-directed, and are actually man-directed. What is lacking is the all-important element of actual calling on GOD, of genuine worship of GOD, of simple, unaffected adoration of GOD, of awe at the presence of GOD, as He comes in Word and Sacrament. For example, the text of "Oh, For a Faith that will not Shrink" is, in my opinion, inadequate for use in the Divine Service, not because it is awkward poetry, or because it is un-Christian, but simply because it so concentrates upon describing man's reaction to various situations and trials that it is in effect man-centered and does not enable us to really call upon God in the same, unaffected way that that is done, for instance, when we sing "God the Father, Be Our Stay." In this latter hymn we do not just describe faith at a distance; we practice it; we call upon God for the biggest things in heaven and earth: forgiveness of sins, preservation in the faith, victory over Satan. When, in contrast, a worshiper is called upon by an inadequate text to sing about experiences which he has actually never had and to express sentiments that presuppose such a high degree of sanctification that he cannot unaffectedly make the words he is supposed to sing his own words, then there is something untruthful about the entire situation, and naturally he will not sing out of a full heart. The singing of such inadequate texts will quite naturally be devitalized singing.

Our church's hymnological heritage, however, is much richer and more vigorous than the texts of such Pietistic sanctification-hymns would lead us to believe. Our church's heritage includes all types of prayer; it includes the genuine petitions that really pierce the heavens, like "God the Father, Be Our Stay, and Let Us Perish Never!" the church's heritage includes genuine God-centered hymns of *praise*, like "All Praise to Thee, Eternal God"; genuine God-centered laments like, "O Lord, Look Down from Heav'n, Behold, and Let Thy Pity Move Thee"; our heritage includes also such God-centered hymns of joyous proclamations as "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice," which exhort us to "proclaim wonders God hath done, how His right arm the victory won"; the entire congregation (including all types of Christians, not only the pietistically inclined) can join in such hymns and really mean what they sing. Such hymns overcome the devitalization that otherwise stems from inadequate texts.

Lack of a Sense of Church-Year-Celebration

A third factor that devitalizes our congregational hymn-singing is the fact that all too often the hymns that are used are utterly disconnected from the Church Year celebration. In some parishes the same small group of the same hymns are sung year in and year out, church-year-season in and church-year-season out; of course, exceptions are made on major festivals like Christmas, Easter and perhaps Pentecost for at least the one festival day, but otherwise the limited canon of songs reflects a limited, poverty-stricken local tradition that is unaware of the great Church Year principle that each Sunday and each festival be a specific church-year celebration. (It should also be stated, by the way, that the opposite procedure that is occasionally championed, namely, of having the congregation sing *all* the songs in the hymnal, is, as far as I am concerned, just as bad; for a number of the songs in our hymnal, though they might have a limited place in school, in the home, or in private devotions, really are entirely unsuited for use in the Divine Service; in fact, they were never meant to be used there in the first place, but were composed for use in little Pietistic domestic private devotional gatherings—such, for instance, is the background of the hymn “Praise the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation” and many of Charles Wesley’s otherwise fine hymns.) Hence the failure of some hymns to actually participate in the church-year celebration, that is, in the celebration of the event or message that is heralded forth in the Gospel for the day—this failure to integrate with the church-year celebration tends to make singing of such “segregated songs” a singing that is isolated from the real celebration and hence devitalized. And even in cases where such hymns are sung with gusto the hymn-singing is really no longer a response to the Word of God that comes to the congregation in the day’s Epistle and Gospel. The sad fact is that in places the minister has put himself and the specific theme of his sermon into the center of attention and the hymns he chooses serve only to frame his sermon, which, under such circumstances, is usually far removed from the salutary and enriching influence of the church year. No wonder that in such a “Reformed meeting” (we can no longer call such a gathering a truly Lutheran service) the singing is quickly devitalized, despite external attempts at rejuvenation. After all, one of the main reasons why our congregations usually

sing out on Reformation Day, Christmas, Ash Wednesday, is because then, at least, they are aware of the fact that on that day they are celebrating a specific event in the history of salvation; they are in some way conscious of the church year. The singing is spirited; it is part of the larger celebration.

Lack of Integration of Hymn-Singing into the Liturgy

A fourth factor that works toward devitalizing good hymn-singing is the fact that often worshipers are made to sing hymns which are entirely disconnected from the Liturgy. Our order of Service is a salutary form which leads us to Word and Sacrament; certain hymns, however, destroy the liturgy's progression toward the high points in it when the Word is proclaimed and when the Sacrament is celebrated. For instance, anyone with any appreciation for the structure of the liturgy would be rather surprised, not to say disappointed, when called upon to sing "With Peace and Joy I Now Depart" as the first hymn in the Service, especially if he knew that Luther meant it to be the metrical version of the *Nunc Dimittis*. It fits well as a substitute for that final prayer; it does not fit very well as the first hymn in the Service. Similarly with a number of hymns which are simply "unliturgical" in character or which prove to be a drag on the natural flow of the Service. Originally, by contrast, hymns grew out of the liturgy, our Lutheran chorales being composed for the specific purpose of substituting for the various elements of the Service. For that reason it is my conviction that a hymn has no place in the Service unless it does actually amplify or substitute for one of the regular elements of the Liturgy. Some hymns, however, are not responses to the Word that is celebrated in the Service and sometimes even interrupt the basic flow of the Liturgy rather than enabling the congregation to respond fittingly in that dialogue between God and man that goes on in the Liturgy. Such unliturgical hymns devitalize the singing in the Service.

Lack of a Positive Plan

Finally, perhaps another, a fifth factor, that devitalizes our hymn-singing may be found in the fact that even when there is a certain awareness by pastor, organist and perhaps even the congregation itself of some of the pitfalls that I have warned against and a certain appreciation for the best hymns, for the church year, and

for the liturgy, nevertheless there is no concerted and coordinated action toward the actual practical alleviation of the difficulty. Everyone talks about doing something about it; but no one actually does anything concrete in a systematic and purposeful manner. One will have to grant, of course, that this sort of work is not "jedermans Sache" and that it is often very difficult to master the problem despite best intentions and willingness to learn. Hence it unfortunately often happens that these well-intentioned, partially-perceptive people do what they can, but find themselves hopelessly unable to cope with the entire situation which is admittedly complex. And so a defeatist attitude devitalizes the very half-hearted, occasional attempts which they do make at betterment.

But it was not always so; and it does not have to be so now, nor remain so in the future. Once upon a time our Lutheran congregations did sing a solid core of the finest hymns; they even knew that core by heart, as well as they knew Luther's catechism by heart; once upon a time our church deserved the name "the singing church", and created a marvelous hymnological heritage for which other churches envy us even today. And it is to that basic core of fine hymns (hymns which are of the first water, both musically and textually and also in their relation to the liturgy and to the church year) that I wish to direct your attention, because it is my conviction that this basic hymnological heritage (if it is recovered in a realistic and imaginative manner) is able to revitalize our hymn-singing.

The Hymn-of-the-Week Plan

The plan which I refer to, which goes back to the very formative days of the Reformation, is the so-called Hymn-of-the-Week plan, a plan by which each Sunday is assigned its proper hymn. In the concluding section of this paper I should therefore like to present briefly this plan for your earnest consideration as responsible Lutheran pastors and church musicians.

When it came to providing for the congregational hymn singing which he sponsored and encouraged, Luther did not restrict himself to using only the new hymns which he himself composed; nor did he do what John Calvin and the Reformed sectarians did: throw out anything that smacked of Rome (be it organs, altars, crucifixes, plain-chant tunes, the church year, the historic liturgy

—and we Lutherans should never forget that, after the Calvinists had rejected the church-music heritage of the historic church, they went on to model their own new type of severe, puritan psalm tunes on the secular court music of the day with its solemn, striding, court-dance rhythms). Luther and his followers, however, wisely appropriated the rich heritage of the historic church, Luther himself translating many of his favorite Latin hymns into German, writing similar new hymns, and finding tunes in the ancient musical heritage to enable the congregation to participate actively in the Service.

Luther had a very good practical understanding of church music; more than that, he himself lived entirely within the heritage of the church year and loved and appreciated the historic liturgy. When he reformed the Service for use in village churches—where there was no established choir school, as was the case in the cities—, the significant change which he made (the change which resulted in the formation of the hymn-of-the-week plan) was that he suggested that a “German Psalm”, a choral, substitute between Epistle and Gospel for the Latin Gradual Psalm. As a result there soon developed in the Lutheran church a wonderfully rich hymnological heritage which fit the church year, the Liturgy, which included the best tunes and the best texts. And thus each Sunday and each festival soon had its special hymn that reflected the theme of the day, e.g., “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” came to be sung on Cantate Sunday (Sing-Sunday); “Our Father, Thou in Heav’n Above” came to be sung on Prayer-Sunday (Rogate); “Wake, Awake” came to be sung on the last Sunday in the Church Year (in response to the Gospel concerning Wise and Foolish Virgins).

How this wonderful plan, which continued in force for over 200 years, throughout the Golden Age of Lutheran church music, was later lost (because of a break-down in the Old Lutheran understanding of theology, of the Liturgy, of the Church Year) is a sad story which does not have to be detailed here (I refer those of you who are interested in the exact church-history particulars to the October, 1959 issue of the *Quartalschrift*); it may suffice here to state that this plan reappeared in the last century at the Reawakening of Faith and the Resurgence of Confessional Lutheranism. It is in many ways a pity that this Old-Lutheran hymn-of-the-

week plan was not included among the restorations which took place when our Old Lutheran forefathers established our church here in the Midwest. More recently, however, a slightly revised version of the plan has successfully established itself in many parts of Germany and the sheets which have been distributed to you present a version of that plan that has been adapted to our hymnal and which I believe holds much promise for us.

The Advantages of This Plan

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 hymn singing that is done in the meetings of various groups and societies, in the parish education of the young, and in the devotions of the home, thus strengthening the bond between school and church, between private home and public church worship. The church musician is enabled to plan his basic church music program 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 and will be drawn away from the mistaken ideal of adding frosting to the Service ("beautifying the service" it is usually termed) and led to function as the musically trained part of the congregation which is not called to give sacred concerts to an "audience in church" but rather to interpret those parts of the Service which invite or require such interpretation as only a trained group can give. In this way the entire parish music program comes closer to what was Johann Sebastian Bach's ideal, "well-ordered church music."

Details of the Hymn-of-the-Week plan are given in *Planning The Service*, one of the books reviewed in this issue. EDITOR.