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# An Historical Study of the "Dignus Est Agnus" Canticle

John W. Montgomery

Unlike such familiar canticles as the *Magnificat* and the *Te Deum*, the *Dignus Est Agnus* poses a challenging and perplexing historical problem. Detailed historical information, together with further bibliographical leads, may easily be found by anyone wishing to study the more well-known canticles (see, for example, the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology*). Such sources, however, yield no data whatsoever on the *Dignus Est Agnus*.<sup>1</sup> Further checking reveals that *Dignus* is not used in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Anglican Communion.<sup>2</sup>

From the standpoint of the present-day liturgical situation, therefore, the *Dignus Est Agnus* is a peculiarly Lutheran canticle. But when we turn to Lutheran sources of information, we are again faced with a dearth of concrete data on this canticle. The 1917-1918 *Common Service Book* includes the text of the *Dignus*.<sup>3</sup> The general rubrics inform us that in Matins and Vespers the *Dignus* is "proper during the Easter season and Ascension-tide" and "may also be used during the Trinity-season," and that this or another canticle or hymn of praise may be substituted for the *Gloria in Excelsis* in the service except on "Festival Days or when there is a Communion."<sup>4</sup> "The Explanation of The Common Service," however, does not refer once to this canticle. The *Lutheran Hymnal* of the Synodical

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<sup>1</sup>The *Dignus* also fails to appear in Herzog and Hauck's *Realencyklopaedie* (and its English abridgment, the *New Schaff-Herzog*); Meusel's *Kirchliches Handlexikon*; *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*; *Hastings' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*; the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup>Note, for example, the absence of any reference to this canticle in Pierre Batiffol, *History of Roman Breviary*, translated from the third French edition, ed. Atwell M. Y. Baylay (London: Longmans and New York: Green, 1912), W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed., *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (New York: MacMillan, 1932), or the *Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1940, 1943).

<sup>3</sup>The *Dignus* is the last of the twelve canticles, on page 215 in the *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church*, authorized by the United Lutheran Church in America (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the ULCA, 1917, 1918).

<sup>4</sup>*Common Service Book*, 291-292.

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Conference gives the text of the *Dignus*, but permits its use only in weekday Matins.<sup>5</sup> The handbook to this hymnal deals only with the historical background of the hymns that are found in the hymnal, so again we are uncertain as to when or why the *Dignus* appeared in Lutheran liturgy.<sup>6</sup>

Luther D. Reed, in his classic *The Lutheran Liturgy*, repeats the information given in the *Common Service Book* on the use of this canticle, and provides as further data on the canticle only the fact that neither the Roman Breviary nor the *Common Service* text of 1888 contains it (the impression is given that the *Dignus* was first added in the *Common Service Book* of 1917).<sup>7</sup> Strodach makes the tantalizing statement, "It is one of the later Canticles," but gives no authority for this assertion, nor any indication of what he means by "later."<sup>8</sup> Neither Horn, in *Outlines of Liturgics*, nor Alt, in *Der Christliche Cultus*, makes any reference to the *Dignus Est Agnus*.<sup>9</sup> The same is true of R. Morris Smith, who claimed "to trace the origin and give a partial history of the various parts of these [the minor] services."<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the liturgical volume in the Philadelphia edition of *Luther's Works* gives no indication that the Reformer was acquainted with the *Dignus Est Agnus*.<sup>11</sup> An examination of Sehling revealed that the *Dignus* is not employed in the church orders of the Lutheran Church in the sixteenth

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<sup>5</sup>*Lutheran Hymnal*, authorized by the Synods Constituting the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 122, 34.

<sup>6</sup>*The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, comp. W. G. Polack (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1942).

<sup>7</sup>Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy: A Study of the Common Service of the Lutheran Church in America* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 381, 413.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Zeller Strodach, *A Manual on Worship*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 276.

<sup>9</sup>Edward T. Horn, *Outlines of Liturgics* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1910); Heinrich Alt, *Der Christliche Cultus*, 2 volumes (Berlin: Müller, 1851-1860).

<sup>10</sup>R. Morris Smith, "The Sources of the Minor Services," *Lutheran Liturgical Association: Memoirs*, ed. Luther D. Reed (Pittsburgh: Lutheran Liturgical Association, 1906), 2:2:35-56.

<sup>11</sup>I have checked all the references under "Matins" and "Vespers" in the index at the back of this volume. The heading "Dignus Est Agnus," needless to say, does not appear in the index. Under "Canticles" in the index one reads "see Benedictus; Nunc Dimittis; Magnificat; Te Deum."

century.<sup>12</sup> A study of Section V of Horn's article on "The Lutheran Sources of the Common Service" confirmed Sehling's omission of references to the *Dignus*.<sup>13</sup> A check of various works by Wilhelm Löhe for some mention of the *Dignus Est Agnus* turned out to be a blind alley as well.<sup>14</sup>

In the face of such an absence of information, is it possible for us to discover when and how and by whom the *Dignus Est Agnus* entered the liturgy of the Lutheran Church? Moreover, can we justify the continued use of this canticle or its variations in Lutheran worship? These two questions are integrally connected, for liturgical form is determined not only by scriptural content, but also by historical usage in the church, which is the body of Christ. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to answering these questions.

### The Entrance of the *Dignus Est Agnus* into Lutheran Liturgical Usage

#### *Entrance into American Lutheran Liturgy*

As pointed out above, the *Dignus Est Agnus* is present in the *Common Service Book* (1917), but was not included in the *Common Service* of 1888.<sup>15</sup> The first question we face, therefore, is why was it included in the former but not the latter? In a significant article in the *Lutheran Church Review* for July 1901, Luther D. Reed informs us that the *General Council Church Book* of 1900 "furnishes twelve Canticles, which are not given in the Standard edition, except as some of them appear in the various Services."<sup>16</sup> Neither the United Synod of the South (which reprinted the *Common Service* exactly) nor the General Synod made a similar inclusion. This section of

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<sup>12</sup>The only church order to mention canticles other than the four listed in the previous note is that of Pomerania (1535), which gives a total of ten canticles, none of which happens to be the *Dignus*. Emil Sehling, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: O.R. Reiland, 1902-1913).

<sup>13</sup>Edward T. Horn, "The Lutheran Sources of the Common Service," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (1891): 239-268.

<sup>14</sup>Those responsible for the *Common Service* relied heavily on Löhe, who lived 1808-1872. For a recent biography of Löhe, see David Ratke, *Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Löhe* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>15</sup>The *Common Service* was developed by a Joint Committee of the General Council, the General Synod, and the United Synod of the South—the bodies that merged to form the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) on November 14, 1918.

<sup>16</sup>Luther D. Reed, "The Standard Manuscript of the Common Service and Variata Editions," *Lutheran Church Review* 20 (1901): 469. See also 460, 472.

twelve canticles (which of course includes the *Dignus Est Agnus*) did not, however, appear in the General Council *Church Book* for the first time in 1900. The editions of the *Church Book* of 1868, 1875, 1891 and 1892 also contain the twelve canticles section (and therefore the *Dignus*). In these editions, the *Dignus* may be used only in Matins, in the (Morning) Service (as an alternative for the *Gloria in Excelsis*), or in the old "Evening Service" (which was later dropped from the hymnal entirely). The Vesper service permits only the *Magnificat* or *Nunc Dimittis*.

Who in the General Council was responsible for the addition of the *Dignus* to the *Church Book*, and why was the addition of this and other canticles made? Two quotations from article by Henry E. Jacobs in the *Lutheran Church Review* offer suggestions toward an answer:

The General Council Committee, in preparing the text of the edition of the *Church Book* published in 1892, after the death of Dr. Schmucker [Oct. 15, 1888], was persuaded in a few instances by several of its older members not to make changes in the text of 1868 until it was certain that the Common Service would actually have wide use in the other Bodies.... The prediction was even made in the discussion within the committee of the General Council, that there would not be over a half dozen English congregations in the General Council in which the Vesper Service would be introduced.

A great change in the methods of the committee followed the death of Dr. Schmucker. The "copy" ready for the printer, which "fell from his hands" as he died, was never published in the form in which he had left it.... Dr. Seiss, as chairman of the editorial committee, applied his industrious energy and his acknowledged gifts as a writer, to a revision of parts of the book.... With his classmate, Dr. Schmucker, as his critic and counselor, the contributions of Dr. Seiss to the *Church Book* were of decided importance. But associated only with those who were less free to offer their objections, his influence has introduced into the issues of the *Church Book* since 1892 some elements that are individual rather than such as really were determined by the Church. This has been noticed above in the reference made to the variations of the *Church Book* of 1892 from the standard text of the Common

Service ... as a comparison with the original text, as determined by the committee, in the *Kirchenbuch* will show.<sup>17</sup>

The questions are, why the incorporation of the canticle and who is responsible for it? Again we quote Jacobs "It seems, therefore, as though the change from the liturgy of 1860 to the form in which it is found in the Church Book [of 1868] was determined principally by the influence of Dr. Krauth, while the chief agent in the preparation of the scheme of details, thus outlined, was always, and to the close of his life, Dr. Schmucker."<sup>18</sup> Dr. Schmucker, moreover, became the leading light on the committee appointed in 1866 to prepare the *Kirchenbuch* (1877).<sup>19</sup> "By his tact, he reconciled conflicting interests, and brought order out of confusion; and by his activity, at the same time, on both the English and German committees, gave assurance that the two books would harmonize."<sup>20</sup> As we have already seen, the General Council *Church Book* published after Dr. Schmucker's death showed variations from the text of the Common Service on whose committee he had been a most influential member. The *Kirchenbuch*, which was completed under Dr. Schmucker's guidance, shows accurately the liturgy he would also have desired in the English *Church Book* (1891 and 1892).<sup>21</sup> The *Kirchenbuch* does not include the canticle section. Moreover, there is no rubric permitting the use—either in the Service, the Matins, or the Vespers—of an alternative canticle section. Clearly, then, Beale Schmucker was not the source for the inclusion of the *Dignus*.<sup>22</sup>

Who, then, was? It appears that Dr. Joseph Augustus Seiss (1823-1904) was chiefly responsible for the entrance of the *Dignus Est Agnus* into the *Church Book* (and therefore into the *Common Service Book*).<sup>23</sup> Three further

<sup>17</sup>Henry E. Jacobs, "The Making of the Church Book," *Lutheran Church Review* 31 (October 1912): 615, 618-619.

<sup>18</sup>Jacobs, "Making of the Church Book," 612.

<sup>19</sup>*Kirchenbuch für Evangelisch-Lutherisch Gemeinden*. Hrsg. von der Allgemeinen Versammlung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Nord Amerika (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1877).

<sup>20</sup>Jacobs, "Making of the Church Book," 613.

<sup>21</sup>"The text found in the *Kirchenbuch* must be used as the standard to determine the ultimate decision of the General Council upon the recommendation of the committee under his [Dr. Schmucker's] guidance," Jacobs, "Making of a Church Book," 617.

<sup>22</sup>See *Kirchenbuch* 5, 22, 27; compare 276.

<sup>23</sup>For biography of Seiss, see Lawrence R. Rast Jr., "Joseph A. Seiss and the Lutheran Church in America," Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 2003; Samuel R. Zeiser, "Joseph

items of evidence support this claim. First, the “Additional Prayers” in the “Pulpit Edition” of the *Church Book*:

To the individual efforts of Dr. Seiss, and not to the work of the Church Book Committee, the so-called “Pulpit Edition” of the Church Book and its “Additional Prayers” must be ascribed. At Erie, in 1897, the preparation of this edition was taken out of the hands of the Church Book Committee and given to the Board of Publication. With this authority an entire pamphlet of forty-four pages, which Dr. Seiss had compiled from various unknown sources and published a few years before, was bodily transferred to the Church Book without submission to the Church Book Committee or revision of any kind whatsoever by it or any of its members.<sup>24</sup>

If this could happen with numerous prayers, why should we doubt an innovation on Dr. Seiss’s part with regard to a few canticles?

Second, certain statements by Dr. Theodore E. Schmauk in his obituary notice for Dr. Seiss:

It is the common impression that the General Council Church Book in its liturgical portions are almost entirely the work of Dr. B. M. Schmucker, and, in its hymnological portion, the work of Dr. Seiss. Almost the reverse is the case as far as Dr. Seiss is concerned.... It is quite true that ... improvements and alterations were made as a result of their [the Committee’s] united consideration. But the moving mind and the formative hand were those of Dr. Seiss.... It will be remembered that when Dr. Schmucker died, nothing but the Morning Service and what belonged to it was complete.... Though we have never been able to give complete assent to all the principles of Dr. Seiss ... and, on important points we take the position of the *Kirchenbuch*, yet it is our firm belief that ... the present English Church Book of the General Council, which was the pioneer work in the field, owes much to Dr. Seiss in substance, and more in form, than to any other writer.<sup>25</sup>

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Augustus Seiss: Popular Nineteenth-century Lutheran Pastor and Premillennialist,” Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 2001.

<sup>24</sup>Jacobs, “Making of the Church Book,” 619.

<sup>25</sup>Theodore E. Schmauk, “The Death of Dr. Seiss,” *Lutheran Church Review* 23 (July 1904): 619-622.



Finally, the *Dignus Est Agnus* is taken entirely from the Revelation of St. John, and Dr. Seiss was almost certainly the greatest Lutheran commentator on this Bible book during the nineteenth century. Thirty-thousand sets of his three volume *Lectures on the Apocalypse* had been published by 1917, and the work is still in print. Although chiliastic in point of view, this book is even today held in high esteem in many quarters. The writing of this book spanned fifteen years (1865-1880) of Dr. Seiss's life, and would obviously have influenced him in areas other than the strictly expository.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Dignus Est Agnus and Continental Lutheran Liturgy*

We should also briefly face the problem of a possibly continental liturgical origin for the *Dignus*. It seems doubtful that American Lutherans—or even an individual American Lutheran—would have introduced this canticle into our liturgy without continental tradition favoring such action. Two possible continental origins suggest themselves, and we can only make cursory mention of them here.

The first is the Western Breviary tradition. Clarke writes: "The Monastic Breviary, and the French diocesan Breviaries issued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are rich in canticles."<sup>27</sup> But note that Batiffol nowhere mentions the *Dignus*.

The second origin is that of individual European Lutheran liturgists and church musicians of the Reformation period, such as Lukas Lossius (d. 1582) or Johann Spangenberg (d. 1550). Archer and Reed mention both of these men in their preface to *The Psalter and Canticles Pointed for Chanting*, which contains a musical setting for the *Dignus*.<sup>28</sup> Wackernagel's bibliographic description of Lossius' four volume *Psalmodia* (Nürnberg, 1553 edition) indicates that the entire second book is devoted to "cantica veteris ecclesiae selecta de praecipuis festis sanctorum Jesu Christi."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Where Dr. Seiss himself got the notion of introducing into the Church Book the *Dignus* (and, for that matter, the whole twelve canticle sections) is a question the answer to which we cannot attempt to give here. Rast argues that the incipient form of the *Dignus Est Agnus* appeared already in the hymnal that Seiss developed for St. John congregation in Philadelphia in 1859, the *Evangelical Psalmist*. See Rast, "Joseph Seiss," 154-159.

<sup>27</sup>Clarke, *Liturgy and Worship*, 273. See also Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 381, 354.

<sup>28</sup>Harry G. Archer and Luther D. Reed, eds., *The Psalter and Canticles Pointed for Chanting* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897), ix, x.

<sup>29</sup>Philipp Wackernagel, *Bibliographische zur Geschichte des deutschen Kirchenliedes im XVI. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Heyder und Zimmer, 1855), 253-254.

Unfortunately, I have not had access to the works by Lossius or Spangenberg through which one might determine if these men were acquainted with the *Dignus*. It certainly seems more likely that the Lutherans who first introduced the *Dignus* in this country would have read Lossius than that they should have been influenced by Roman or Gallican Breviaries.

### Historical Justification for the Continued Use of the *Dignus Est Agnus* in Lutheran Worship

Regardless of the somewhat individualistic manner in which the *Dignus* canticle entered the Common Service Book tradition, and in spite of the absence of this canticle from the 1888 text of the Common Service, I believe that sufficient historical evidence exists for its retention in succeeding Lutheran service books. I base this contention on four arguments.

First, Rietschel considers that the very verses in the Apocalypse which make up the *Dignus Est Agnus* are in the nature of New Testament Psalms, and he associates these verses with the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis* passages.<sup>30</sup> Weizsäcker goes even farther, and states concerning these and a few other similar verses in the Apocalypse: "The separate short songs ... fit into one another like strophes of a complete ode."<sup>31</sup> He says that they may be "traditional songs," and quotes the famous line from Pliny's letter to Trajan, "*Carmenque Christo quasi Deo dicere secum invicem.*"<sup>32</sup> Thus from a liturgical standpoint the *Dignus Est Agnus* seems to have a precedent in very early church usage.

Second, even if the *Dignus* were not used in the Lutheran Church during the early years of the Reformation, "the rubrical permission to use another Canticle or Hymn" for the *Gloria in Excelsis* in the Service "except on occasions when a full Service is desirable, accords with Lutheran usage" during the Reformation period.<sup>33</sup> This being true, there has been a place in Lutheran liturgy ever since the Reformation for alternative canticles having the quality of the *Dignus*.

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<sup>30</sup>Georg Rietschel, *Lehrbuch der Liturgik*, 2. neuberb. Aufl. von Paul Graff, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1951 [Bd. I], 1952 [Bd. II]), 201.

<sup>31</sup>Carl von Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, trans. from the second, rev. ed. by James Millar (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), 260.

<sup>32</sup>Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age*, 262.

<sup>33</sup>Horn, "The Lutheran Sources of the Common Service," 251.

Third, even from the standpoint of the Common Service tradition the use of the *Dignus* can be defended. Reed may have written in 1901 concerning the Common Service of 1888, "every variation from the standard form is alike unpardonable," but even before this (in 1897) he had set the *Dignus* and other canticles to music in his *Psalter and Canticles*.<sup>34</sup> He refers to this work frequently, moreover, in his later publications.<sup>35</sup> The *Dignus Est Agnus*, regardless of the rather arbitrary way it entered the Church Book liturgy, was here to stay. In 1917 the same Lutheran bodies that had approved the Common Service of 1888 (without the *Dignus*) placed their stamp of approval on the Common Service Book (which includes this canticle).<sup>36</sup> Here we have an excellent example of the ongoing force of a Spirit-motivated tradition in its continual process of refining and perfecting.

Finally, we note the tremendous value of having a canticle of Johannine authorship in Lutheran liturgy. Our Church has always had at the center of its theology the Lamb of God who shed his blood upon the Cross to save a fallen race; it is therefore only fitting that this sentiment should be expressed in canticle form for use in our services of worship.

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<sup>34</sup>"Reed, *The Common Service and Variata Editions*," 472.

<sup>35</sup>See Archer and Reed, eds., *The Choral Service Book* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1901); Harry G. Archer and Luther D. Reed, eds., *The Music of the Responses* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1903); and Harry G. Archer and Luther D. Reed, eds., *Season Vespers* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1905).

<sup>36</sup>See Strodach, *A Manual on Worship*, 188.