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# Confessional Music

Daniel G. Reuning

Three basic opinions regarding music have been voiced within Protestantism since its genesis. Even though each regarded forms of worship as *adiaphora* (not prescribed in Holy Scripture), each viewed this assumption in dramatically different ways. The *radical party* (followers of Carlstadt) held that, since music is an *adiaphoron*, it must be abolished. Thus, the sermon-lecture emerged as the dominant or only feature of the service, since, in the opinion of the radicals, that was the only element commanded by God. Today, few Lutherans would identify with this viewpoint.

The *enthusiast party* (followers of Müntzer) was similar to the radicals in abolishing traditional music and making the sermon-lecture the dominant feature of worship. However, it embellished its service with contemporary folk liturgies and popular songs for the congregation. This procedure was a radical departure from past church music, because the “worship service” now featured hit-parade, theatre, and entertainment music, designed for dancing and eliciting bodily responses, such as foot-stomping and hand-clapping, and arousing outward emotional reactions in people. It was a logical departure, however, because the dominant concern of the enthusiast’s theology was with visible, yet very subjective, manifestations of the faith (i.e., tongues, visions, healings, testimonies, uncontrolled outbursts of joy and sadness, etc.) Thus, to use music designed specifically to produce physical and outward emotional reactions was exactly what the enthusiasts needed to support their worship, activity which served to furnish the external, yet subjective, proofs of one’s standing as a Christian. Programs of “spiritual” entertainment were the order of the day, and could rival any secular production available. Today, we see this approach most blatantly evidenced in sectarian radio and television shows, in charismatic prayer groups, and in most “contemporary” liturgies and songs, which have infiltrated even some of our own Lutheran parishes.

The *confessional party* (followers of Luther), most interested in the mind, learning, emotions controlled by conviction, and the response of the heart, chose to follow quite a different musical direction than the outwardly and excessively emotional enthusiasts. As much as Luther and other contributors to the Book of Concord insisted that music was an *adiaphoron*, they

were just as insistent that music was, nonetheless, not a matter of indifference, but a matter that required both theological and musical judgment, especially because the rubrics were not laid out for us in the Holy Scriptures. Logically, the confessional party refrained from using the popular musical idiom which was compatible with the enthusiast's theology. Rather than employing an idiom that was designed to entertain and elicit bodily, outward, superficial responses, they used music to alert the mind to the meaning of the text. They employed a kind of music that emphasized the content of the words — in fact, a craft molded by the words, an idiom designed to deal interpretatively with the text, a music that preached.

To summarize, in Luther's day, as in our own, music served two primary functions: (1) to get physical and outward emotional response, and (2) to encourage an enduring response of the mind and heart. Thus, body-music has the task of getting the body rhythmically responding, outwardly and emotionally, and is logically associated with the entertainment world (those activities that depend upon the pleasure of the people — parties, dancing, popular music) and with the theology of the enthusiasts. In contrast, mind-music is written to move the mind and heart, inwardly and intellectually, in a deep-seated response to the text — by engaging the materials of music to interpret, clarify and reinforce the meaning of words — and is most often associated with education and worship. Incidentally, the notion that Luther used bar songs as sources for his hymns has been totally discredited by modern musicology. Confessional composers who did use bar songs as sources for hymns drastically changed their predictable dance-rhythms in order to prevent bodily reaction. This alteration, furthermore, disguised the source so much that it was hardly recognizable, having virtually no association with the original. Luther's sources, however, were all mind-music sources; which is indeed logical for a man who insisted that music's task in the church was to preach the Gospel, not to entertain as the devil would want, since body-music could easily distract people from the real task of worship.

Luther's most complete descriptions of the learning process appropriate to worship occur in his first Wittenberg sermon, his Torgau dedication sermon, and his introduction to the *Deutsche Messe*. He defined the task of Lutheran worship as a teaching-preaching task, maintaining that every element in worship should serve that function. Worship was to reinforce the following characteristics of faith and love:

**FAITH** (given by God through His Word and Sacraments):

(a) acknowledges that as sons of Adam we are all corrupt sinners under condemnation (Rom. 5:12, Ps. 51:5), and

(b) trusts that as sons of God we are saved through the merits of Jesus Christ from such corruption, sin, and condemnation (Rom. 1:29, 4:25, 5:15 ff., John 3:16)

**LOVE** (our response to God's gift of faith; sacrifice):

(a) serves and does good to everyone, as Christ has done for us (Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:13, Matt. 25:40), and

(b) suffers all kinds of evil and gladly endures as Christ did (Matt. 5:11, Heb. 12:6)

In contrast to the radicals and enthusiasts who abolished all tradition, Luther and the churches that adopted the Book of Concord retained all that supported his faith-love hermeneutic. Only that which disagreed with it was abolished. But as insistent as he was on preserving the faith-love tradition, he was just as insistent upon using it in a context of explanation. For instance, when a Latin text was used, it was preceded or followed by a translation, usually in the form of a hymn or choral paraphrase. In this way, anyone that might not understand Latin would not be hindered in the learning process, which required clear explanations if worship was to fulfill its teaching task. Preserving the faith-love tradition also showed that Luther's theology was nothing new. It had been in the church since its beginning. It just became more and more hidden because of the increase of false tradition through the ages. Luther's theology was based on the sure foundation of God's Holy Word and was thoroughly supported by the early church. Thus, the traditions of the early days of Christianity and those that followed their faith-love direction were especially dear to Luther and his church. Here a continuity between the early church and Luther was demonstrated.

Luther wanted to show, however, not only a continuity with the past, but also a continuity with the present, to show that Christianity was for the world. The use of languages in worship other than the vernacular was for Luther a way to help people see beyond their immediate culture and be reminded of their missionary responsibilities. It might even begin to teach people another language that could be used by them in a foreign land. At the very least, it would implant the desire of going beyond one's own nationality with the Gospel. Significantly, Luther's *Deutsche Messe* (German Mass) offered no translation for the Greek "Kyrie eleison"; and the other parts, in the vernacular, were never

intended to be used in isolation from faith-love traditions, other languages, and new contributions. Also, all of Luther's over two dozen hymns were paraphrases of specific traditional elements of Christian worship; he intended his hymns to be used in alternation with these constituents of the tradition. (Incidentally, Luther's *Deutsche Messe* constituted no translation into the street language or any dialect of the people. The German was not common or conversational, but was the language of the Saxon Court and the intellectual world, although, of course, it could be understood by the people in general — which was, reasonably enough, a requirement of worship for Luther. Similarly, King James English provides us today with a form of liturgical language that is clearly understood in most cases, but is no particular dialect, transcending provinciality and representing the most universal and all-encompassing form of the English language in the English-speaking world.) Language alternation was also employed for the purposes of explanation. It is my conviction that language alternation was so much a part of early Lutheran worship that, when phrases were repeated in songs, the choir or congregation would ordinarily take the opportunity to sing the repetition in another language — and in this way to reinforce the concept of the universality of the Gospel and the missionary thrust of Christianity.

Universality was also expressed by Luther and the church that adopted the Book of Concord by employing composers that could write mind-music in a universal idiom. Thus, musicians who had been trained in the international centers of the Netherlands and Italy were ordinarily much preferred to those trained in Germany. Thus, the mind-music produced in the Lutheran Church had truly inter-national, pan-cultural, non-provincial characteristics. This fact was just another reinforcement of the concept of the universality of the Gospel and our mission task. Thus, Luther's "German Chorale" was German only in the sense that the words were in German. But the music showed none of the characteristics of German provincialism; the features were inter-national. In this way, Lutheran music never conveyed the idea that the Gospel was for Germans only or that Christianity was tied to the German culture. No, quite the opposite message was conveyed, namely, that the Gospel was for the world. Thus, the mind-music produced by the Lutheran Church featured these qualities: (1) continuity with the past (it was pan-era); and (2) continuity with the present (it was pan-cultural, international, non-provincial).

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One final footnote: If you happen to be one that does not like Lutheran mind-music, you need not have a guilty conscience — you are not alone. Just do not require of mind-music what is required of body-music, which stands and falls on the basis of whether you *like* it or not — since body-music must *please* and get your body to respond. Rather than *liking* Lutheran music, think of responding to it inwardly, letting it, through the manner in which it proclaims the Word, teach, exhort, comfort, and edify you, taking you beyond your culture to think of a world that desperately needs the Gospel, and taking you beyond your culture again to remind you that you are part of a great eternal company of witnesses, including angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, lauding and magnifying the glorious name of God.