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# Timeless Treasure: Luther's Psalm Hymns

Oliver C. Rupprecht

Perhaps nowhere is Martin Luther's interest in "the common man," as he called him, and in the affairs of ordinary folk demonstrated more clearly and more beautifully than in his adaptations of Scriptural psalms for hymnic purposes. Although his monumental achievement in providing a suitable and normative translation of the entire Bible is in a class by itself, and although his pioneering work as an educator displayed passionate concern for the spiritual and intellectual enlightenment of the people, his work in hymnody, particularly his use of Biblical psalms for devotional purposes, brings significant evidence of his intense desire for the spiritual instruction, nourishment, edification, and well-being of average persons — those who might be without the benefit of high culture and scholarly training.

## The Source

Luther loved the Psalter — not with a vaguely sentimental attachment to the book but because of specific and precisely identifiable points of merit. In his magnificent "Preface to the Psalter" Luther lists, first of all, the element of Messianic prophecy contained in the psalms.<sup>1</sup> In addition to that prime distinction the psalms are notable, says Luther, because of their clear and comprehensive presentation of the human condition — not merely the outwardly visible works and deeds of human beings, but their words, their very thoughts and emotions, the inner workings of heart and soul.<sup>2</sup>

Luther's most famous reference to the Psalter's disclosure of personal emotions has become a classical statement concerning this prime and precious feature of the divinely inspired psalms: "Here you look into the heart of all the saints, as into a lovely garden of pleasure and delight. You see what beautiful flowers grow there because of joyous thoughts concerning God and His numerous blessings. Yes, you seem to be looking into heaven itself. You see what pleasant trees grow there. You sense the heartbeat of those trees, and you discover a great variety of beautiful, joyous thoughts concerning God and the benevolent acts He performs."<sup>3</sup>

No one need fear that this otherworldly climate is too rarefied or remote for flesh-and-blood people living in the present world.

The thoughts and statements of the psalmists invite personal identification with those who sing and speak the words. "You will notice that the saints sing one song with you . . . . In sum, if you wish to see a picture of the holy Christian Church, presented in miniature and set forth with vivid colors and in lively figures, take the Psalter; there you will have a bright, clear, excellent mirror that will show you what Christianity is. In fact, you will find yourself in the psalms; you will imagine that they were written only for you, and you will admit that you could not have said these things any better yourself.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, recognizing yourself in the Psalter, you will find in it the true 'gnoothi seauton' ('know thyself'), as well as God Himself and all His creatures."<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, Luther did more than to translate the Psalter from Hebrew into German. A man so vibrantly alive, responding so sensitively to every shade of meaning and to each delicate nuance of thought and emotion contained in the original text, would not — could not — be content with lexicographical accuracy and precision. He would reach beyond these for the intangible but vital elements that make up the soul and spirit of the original utterance.<sup>6</sup> But to reach for these he must be aware of them, and to be aware of them he must have more than a concern for literalistic definitions. His work as a translator must be the outgrowth of a passionate desire to utilize words for a presentation alive with ingredients that lie at the heart of human existence transfigured by divinely wrought spiritual regeneration. Such an assignment, to be successfully performed, involves more than intellectual resources. It demands the presence of a strong and vibrant personality — the ultimate secret of a translation distinguished by high nobility of thought and emotion, by an onrush of power, and by enduring beauty transcending the glory of what is commonly known as "literary style."

"The power of a translator," said C.A. Dinsmore of Yale University, "really comes, not from his intellect, but from the depth of his personality. The choice of a word or of a rhythm is not a matter of thought; from the depths of one's being comes a compulsion which forces words to fall into their places by a sort of inevitability. No one can translate a great piece of literature who is not one in spirit with the original author. He must catch the same vision, quiver with the authentic passion, enter into the innermost soul of the writer. The heart must feel what the hand writes."

Referring to the work of England's foremost translator of the Bible, Dinsmore says: "He [William Tyndale] could translate the Bible because first he experienced it. The moods of high serious-

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ness and intense moral earnestness, out of which came the sacred books, were his habitual moods.<sup>7</sup> He could not only render the words of Paul, he could transmit his spirit. In plain and vivid sentences he reproduced the Gospel thought, and caused the rhythm of the Gospel passion to beat again in our English speech. Perhaps I cannot better state the peculiar note in Tyndale's translation than by claiming for it the quality which John Morley asserts belongs to good writing. Style, he says, 'is agitation rigorously restrained, the touching and penetrative music which is made prose by the repressed trouble of grave and high souls.'<sup>8</sup>

Dinsmore's insistence on the importance of a translator of Scripture habitually dwelling in a genuinely spiritual climate — on intimate familiarity with truths that enrich the soul — applies with special force to Luther's achievements in areas of Bible translation and the production of hymnody. Living in the world of the Bible, Luther absorbed and incorporated its message into his very being. This is the reason for the eloquence, the power, the beauty, the strong emotion distinguishing the excellence of his superb translation of the psalms. The pulsation of his mighty heart, a heart thrilled by God's redeeming love, animates the pages. They move, they tremble in one's hand. They shake with a soaring upward movement as though refusing to be held down while striving for their natural exalted habitat. To miss this sensation when reading Luther's translation of the psalms is to be deprived of one of the most thrilling experiences in all literature.<sup>9</sup>

#### Affinity for Greatness

It would be strange indeed if all these qualities were not present and observable in Luther's hymnic versions of the psalms. To read or to sing hymns like "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" (Ps. 46), "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" (Ps. 12), "The Mouth of Fools Doth God Confess" (Ps. 14), "May God Bestow on Us His Grace" (Ps. 67), "If God Had Not Been on Our Side" (Ps. 124), and "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee" (Ps. 130), is to become aware of a man whose heart was attuned to the grandeur of the underlying concepts. His keen mind seized on the rich potential offered by Scriptural thoughts and words for hymnody in his own day and time. His is an instructive example.

In this connection we need to note carefully that two elements distinguished Luther's procedure in the writing and composition of psalm hymns. One was his search for the lyrical, the singable in textual material. Luther knew that hymns, like psalms, are to be sung. They find fullest expression when joined with music. "Die Noten machen den Text lebendig," he said on more than one

occasion. ("The notes cause the text to become alive" — not as though the Spirit of God were dependent on music for life-giving power, but meaning that the tonal and rhythmic qualities of music may support, supplement, and intensify the impact of the words.) At the same time Luther knew, in his selection of texts, that words of deep feeling are the most natural ally of music. It is possible to write great narrative poetry — and great doctrinal hymns — but as a rule even these, to become songs, are infused with lyrical elements of emotion. Luther's keenly perceptive mind recognized the value of the Psalter's emotional content. He was aware of its remarkable suitability and adaptability for Christian song, even as his delicately sensitive soul responded to the lyricism expressed and evoked by the Psalter's lilting lines and paeans of power.

By common consent, music is the "language" of the emotions. Although lacking — and never replacing — the precision of verbal utterance,<sup>10</sup> music is endowed, as if by compensation, with a potential for power that can vigorously enhance the impact of the spoken word, unless deliberately abnormalized into sterility. The modern distortion and denial of music's true function to provide emotional power caused a New York music critic to complain about "the lack of vitality in contemporary [classical] music."<sup>11</sup> Another critic lamented the current necessity of "Picking Up the Musical Rubble After the [toneless and atonal] Earthquake."<sup>12</sup>

Luther would have no traffic with such aberrations in the realm of music. Focusing on the heart as the seat of human emotions, Luther singled out the Psalter's emotional content as one of its principal virtues. "The Psalter places before us not merely the external works of God's children but also their heart, so that we can look into the fountain and wellspring of their words and works, that is, into their heart. We see what kinds of thoughts they had. We see the condition of their heart and how it responded to a variety of affairs, how it reacted to danger and need."<sup>13</sup>

The other element distinguishing Luther's procedure in the production of psalm hymns was his fastidious adherence to principles determining suitability in the emotional content. For the conscientious writer of hymns, an indiscriminate use of emotional materials will not do. Triviality offers no opportunity for the serious writer of hymns. The best songs deal with emotions of substance, based on universal themes possessing enduring value, enriched by sentiments of nobility, beauty, and grandeur.

Some people are repelled or intimidated by greatness. For

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Luther, one of the humblest and most reverential of persons, the bigness of thought, exalted beauty, and majestic grandeur of divine utterances (in the Bible generally and in the Psalter specifically) had a special attraction directly relevant to his plans for the production of hymnody. Although delighting in simple beauty, Luther recognized the potential in expressions of great substance and worth. This was the reason for his use of the stirring emotional content in the great psalms. Undeterred by bigness of thought, by the vast panorama confronting him in the Psalter, Luther recognized the sterling worth of great emotions experienced by great people on the basis of great thoughts. Great thoughts and great emotions, then, served as a storehouse of rich materials, yielding a timeless treasury of song.

Some eras are relatively or completely barren of greatness. A modern English critic faults the Victorian era because "great thoughts, great emotions were lacking."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, a mere assertion of greatness will not do. The senseless clamor in ancient Ephesus, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians,"<sup>15</sup> merely highlighted the pathetic deficiency in pagan religious culture. The assertion of greatness must be substantiated by incontrovertible evidence. Luther found greatness irrefutably manifest in the divine utterances of Scripture and filled his hymns with them. The grandeur of heaven rings in his paraphrases of Biblical psalms. Luther's sensitive ear caught the tones and overtones of those massive utterances. Here, too, in its own way, was a case of "deep calling unto deep."<sup>16</sup> His own soul had experienced reality in the human plight and in the heavenly promises proclaimed with authoritative voice in the psalms of David, Asaph, and other divinely inspired masters. It was natural for Luther to wish to share that highest kind of reality with others and, for that purpose, to utilize ageless psalmody to respond to his own needs and to the universal problems of mankind.<sup>17</sup> Modest as he was (willing to recognize superior talent and ability in others, and careful to subordinate his own ideas to the tried and tested materials of those who had preceded him and had been noted for great achievements in the realm of religious song), Luther patterned much of his own work after that of Old Testament psalmists and other writers of great hymns.

There was nothing self-conscious or artificial about Luther's care to present and preserve greatness in his psalm hymns. His concern was the outflow of a mind and heart focusing on divine glory and striving to provide hymnic materials that would be suitably expressive of divine truth. In striving for an elevated tone (whether in words or in music), Luther was conforming to

Biblical principles and practice. God Himself emphasizes the majesty that ought to attend worship of the Most High.<sup>18</sup> Nor is this emphasis on majesty and grandeur a matter of divine whim, unrelated to the realities of human life. The practical outcome resulting from an awareness of divine majesty is acutely relevant to hymnic activities; it produces precisely what Luther sought to achieve, a lyrical response on the part of God's children. "They shall lift up their voices, they shall sing for the majesty of the Lord, they shall cry aloud from the sea."<sup>19</sup> It was perfectly natural, then, to base hymnody on the Psalter, the hymnbook of the Old Testament church. But we need to remember that all kinds of unnatural developments have a way of creeping into cultic activities. The evidence of abnormality is all around us in some of the secular and "sacred" grotesqueries of our time.<sup>20</sup> There is all the more reason, then, for gratitude that Luther chose a course dictated by lofty precept and noble precedent. Thomas Campion, an English Renaissance poet, although writing in a different connection, aptly described Luther's goal: "Let well-tuned words amaze/With harmony divine."<sup>21</sup>

What may escape our observation is the *reason* for Luther's choice. Why did he do what he did when focusing on hymnody? He did not approach the task from the outside. He did not ask, "What will sell?" His choice of a perfectly natural procedure was the natural outgrowth of what ought to be natural for the children of God — the habit of living in the realm of divine thought and language. The world of the Bible was Luther's natural habitat. It has been said that to read Luther is to be led more deeply into the Bible. The reason is obvious: Luther's writings — whether poetic or prose — came from the Bible. They were rooted in Scriptural thought and expression. His hymns had the same source; they sprang from the great truths uttered in Biblical psalms. The excellence of Luther's choice and the validity of his procedure have been vindicated by subsequent developments in the church. The figure of Martin Luther stands prominently among those who went from exalted precept to a pattern of excellence.

#### **Balance and Blend**

The balance that Luther achieved and maintained in his composition of psalm hymns, joining imitation with originality, makes them a most remarkable phenomenon in the realm of Christian hymnody.<sup>22</sup> His songs are distinguished by a rare and notable blend in the language which they employ. It is free, but faithfully adhering to exalted precept; original, but authentic; timely, but traditional; adapted to contemporary conditions, but

conforming to timeless thought patterns serving the deepest and continuing needs of the human soul. Luther's psalm hymns are modern without suffering from the short-lived superficiality of modernism. Certainly one of the most easily recognizable instances illustrating Luther's "modernizing" of the psalms is his use of the name of Jesus Christ in "A Mighty Fortress" (Ps. 46) and in "The Mouth of Fools Doth God Confess" (Ps. 14). The name of Christ does not occur in these psalms. But for Luther the Psalter — for that matter, all of Scripture — is Christo-centric. In his "Preface to the Psalter" he singles out the Messianic element as the salient feature of Old Testament psalmody. But Luther sets forth more than the Christological aspect of the psalms. The human element of the psalms is extolled in detail in Luther's "Preface to the Psalter." Even so, however, Luther's deft hand in the psalm hymns draws from the inspired thoughts and words their applicability to modern conditions.

Luther's version of Psalm 12 is a case in point. With a depth of understanding born of personal experience and with a strength of imagination envisaging the collective cry of the beleaguered church, Luther paraphrases Psalm 12 as an intense plea by the persecuted church, answered by the glorious reply of her compassionate and omnipotent Lord. The stanzas of "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" (Ps. 12), like those of other psalm hymns, have a remarkably modern ring. "Heresy" and "false doctrine" refer to the contemporary denial (in his day and ours) of Luther's "pure doctrine." And the beautiful statement about the divine word — "Its light beams brighter through the cross" — is a modern refinement of a basic Biblical teaching. To sing the six stanzas of "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" is to experience deepening thought and profound emotion but, above all, a reassurance of God's supremacy and the power — active through His word.

#### **Love of Principle and of People**

Luther's modernizing paraphrase of Psalm 12 and of other psalms is vibrant with an emotion foreign to many persons today — a passionate love of that which is holy and true and right and good. To charge the modern era with a lack of passion for high principle is not the result of a biased individual opinion but agrees with observations recorded by competent and objective critics. In a recent comment on contemporary indifference toward viciousness among nations, the well-known columnist George F. Will said: "What is outrageous is the lack of outrage."<sup>23</sup> Will regards this deficiency as "a symptom of the degeneration of the political will," an American phenomenon noted several years ago by



Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Analyzing this phenomenon, a writer in England's *Manchester Guardian Weekly* said: "The leaders [who oppose corrective action] cloak themselves in a moralistic ideology, when it is nothing of the sort. It is fear . . . . [The euphemism] merely serves as a cloak to provide a sort of nobility to cowardice."<sup>24</sup>

But Luther's psalm hymns are distinguished by more than personal devotion to the preciousness of truth or a conviction of its sacred and inviolable character. Concern for the welfare of human beings beats strongly in Luther's lines. "Therefore, says God, I must arise; the poor My help are needing," Luther sings in his paraphrase of Psalm 12. This concern for people is beautifully developed in Bach's Cantata BWV 2, based on Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 12.<sup>25</sup> What is the price of this kind of practicality? Luther was aware of the struggle that is necessary to obtain and retain the truth. He was not "spoiling for a fight," but neither did he shirk his responsibility as a Christian warrior. He could not ignore the divine warning: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion!"<sup>26</sup> The great poet Coleridge, quoting Wordsworth, complained that Robert Southey "writes too much at his ease" and that he "seldom feels his burdened breast / Heaving beneath th' incumbent Deity."<sup>27</sup> Luther knew that the church on earth is the church militant (as Christians in communist countries and also in many free lands know from painful experience), and the beauty of the prize inspired him to go to battle.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the joyous confidence of triumphant faith permeates Luther's psalm hymns and imparts a vigor that dare not be neglected. It is frustrating to hear congregations singing "A Mighty Fortress" and "O Lord, Look Down" in a listless manner that fails to reflect the energy of mood and, above all, the grandeur of concept in the portrayal of the church's unconquerable Lord. Rightly sung, these hymns thrill and invigorate Christian faith. What missionary (to mention another instance) can be timid after hearing or singing Luther's great missionary hymn, "May God Bestow on Us His Grace," based on Psalm 67?<sup>29</sup> But the hymn must be sung with attention to the reassuring divine promises given in the verbal message and to the splendor of the musical setting.<sup>30</sup>

#### Contrast and Confirmation

Luther's psalm hymns do not represent an attempt to replace Scriptural forms. They can never be a substitute for what is offered in the Bible. Let us admit that a paraphrase is a paraphrase. Luther's psalm hymns can hardly be said to have

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reproduced the grandeur, the authoritatively compelling tone, of the divine original. Who can approach the grandeur of “Be still, and know that I am God” or the self-assured calm of “God is our Refuge and Strength” or the absolute finality of the conclusion to Psalm 67: “God shall bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear Him”? Who can duplicate the rhythmic surge in “O Lord, the heathen are come into Thine inheritance”<sup>31</sup> or the intensity of emotion in “Oh, that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion”? These are achievements that stand in solitary grandeur and in unapproachable beauty. There is all the more reason, then, for recognizing the marvel of Luther’s success in providing the people with paraphrases that offer the pure gold of divine thought in attractive and memorable forms.

Luther’s psalm hymns do not achieve the majestic tone of the originals. Yet for vigor of proclamation, “A Mighty Fortress” reaches notable heights. Again, for intensity of emotion Luther’s paraphrase of Psalm 12 (“O Lord, Look Down”) is an achievement in its own right, notable for a comprehensive picture crowded with humanizing details and suffused with elements of divine compassion and triumphant glory. The rhythmic surge of the words (which must be felt and expressed in congregational singing) moves strongly in an ascent to the throne of grace, while the music (usually not ascribed to Luther, but most appropriately joined to the paraphrase) illuminates and intensifies the basic thoughts and emotions, as is shown in a superb and highly imaginative orchestral transcription by Eugene Ormandy for the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra.

What we have in Luther’s psalm hymns is humanizing without humanism; individualizing without brash individualism; particularizing without becoming lost in details of the immediate and the present; a vigorous concern for the church without ecclesiasticism. Each of the hymnic paraphrases centers on God, “who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason the prevailing mood in Luther’s psalm hymns is one of reverence, and the tone is consistently appropriate. Luther speaks and sings the language of the people, but he assumes that they are the people of God. He does not descend to the tawdry in an unprincipled striving for commercial success or mass appeal. The German word *popular* (untranslatable in English) accurately describes Luther’s achievement. Luther’s hymns, including his psalm hymns, observe an important line of distinction sometimes blurred in modern hymnody; they are popular without becoming vulgar, as Hugo Leichtentritt of Harvard University has pointed out.<sup>33</sup>

### Appropriation and Use

There can be no question as to the validity of Luther's work in paraphrasing Old Testament psalmody. The question is: Will we dig into the treasure trove? To do so is evidence of ripening judgment. Charles Sanford Terry has pointed out that J.S. Bach in his maturer years made increasing use of Reformation hymnody, a treasure that includes Luther's paraphrases of Old Testament psalms.<sup>34</sup> Acquisition of this rich material may entail considerable cost. Fortunately, it is free from inflationary spirals. It may, however, involve time and determination to benefit from its blessed potential. But why balk at the cost? "The only thing more expensive than an education," said Benjamin Franklin, "is ignorance."

### FOOTNOTES

1. "Even if it were not distinguished by any other point of merit, we ought to regard the Psalter as dear and precious because it prophesies Christ's death and resurrection so clearly . . . that it might very well be called a little Bible. In the Psalter everything that is contained in the entire Bible is comprehended so beautifully and so briefly that it constitutes an excellent 'Enchiridion,' or handbook." *Das Weimarische Bibelwerk* (St. Louis und Leipzig: Fr. Dette, 1877), p. 606. (All translations, also from other German works, are by the author of the present essay.)
2. It was to be expected that Luther's intense love for the common people and his desire to make Biblical truths appealing to ordinary and uneducated persons would make him eloquent when singling out the Psalter's vivid portrayal of life among the children of God. What strikes Luther is that the Psalter is representative of all humanity, particularly in its description of God's children. Beginning with a reference to the incarnate Son of God Himself, Luther says: "In the Psalter you find not merely what one or two saints have done but what He who is the Head of all saints has wrought and what all saints continue to do — how they conduct themselves toward God and in their relationships toward friends and foes, how they bear up under suffering and in danger . . . . It seems to me that the Holy Spirit deliberately undertook the task of bringing together material for a small Bible and for a book of examples whose range is representative of all Christendom and includes the lives of all saints, so that anyone who cannot read the entire Bible would here have, in one small book, a kind of summary of all Scripture." *Ibid.*, p. 607.

To the remarkably comprehensive panorama portraying the pious performance of God's children in their everyday affairs must be added the Psalter's constant practice of permitting us to read and hear the very words spoken and sung by those whose statements, through divine inspiration, have been recorded in the Book of Psalms. Scorning the legends and other narratives that purport to relate the deeds of saints but have little to say about their words, Luther terms the Psalter a "prize" because it brings, in abundance, the very words spoken by God's children in prayer and song. Nor is this all. "The Psalter does even more," says Luther. "The subject matter of the words spoken and sung is most precious and of the greatest importance. In the psalms we hear the saints talking with God Himself, in a mood of great

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earnestness about matters that are of the most vital significance." *Ibid.*, p. 607.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 607.

4. Many a parishioner has said: "Pastor, the psalms seem to have been written for me and for my problems" — as, indeed, they were, under inspiration by the omniscient author of universal truth.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 607.

6. To emphasize how faithfully Luther captured and reproduced the spirit of Old Testament psalmody, Blume says: "Luther's psalm hymns really give us the psalms themselves, not merely imitative suggestions or paraphrases; as a result, it was possible to refer to them as 'German psalms.'" Friedrich Blume, "Die evangelische Kirchenmusik," in *Handbuch der Musikwissenschaft*, ed. Ernst Buecken, X (New York: Musurgia Publishers, 1931), p. 21.

7. For the present discussion, which deals with hymnody, it is acutely relevant to point out that this insistence on the presence of a characteristic mood has special significance for requirements involved in the production of church music. Those who venture to write religious poetry or to compose music intended for religious purposes should have a background of personal experience in spiritual affairs, both doctrine and practice. They should dwell habitually in a climate congenial to the development of spiritual life. A sudden generous impulse to "serve the church" with a religious song from someone who has been preoccupied with secular activities can hardly be expected to achieve its purpose, though the intent may be one of genuine sincerity. We do not expect industrial architects to be notably successful in designing a church. Each professional person is deserving of commendation in his own field, but the requirements for suitability and success are divergent. Luther and his fellow hymnists had a rich experience of spiritual truth. Their habituation to spiritual thoughts and emotions and their familiarity with church music of the past became evident in their products of sterling and normative worth. "The sound was right," both of words and of music.

8. Charles Allen Dinsmore, *The English Bible as Literature* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), pp. 84-85. Speaking not merely of translations but of qualities inherent in the original Biblical writings themselves that make those writings great as works possessing supreme literary merit, McAfee courageously strikes a note rarely encountered in surveys and evaluations discussing reasons for the Bible's unique greatness as a work of literary art. With an excellent sense of proportion McAfee says: "The Bible is a book of religious significance from first to last. If it utterly broke down by the tests of literature, it might be as great a book as it needs to be. It is a subordinate fact that by the tests of literature it proves also to be great. Prof. Gardner, of Harvard, whose book *The Bible as English Literature* makes other such works almost unnecessary, frankly bases his judgment on the result of critical study of the Bible, but he serves fair warning that he takes inspiration for granted, and thinks it 'obvious that no literary criticism of the Bible could hope for success which was not reverent in tone. A critic who should approach it superciliously or arrogantly would miss all that has given the Book its power as literature and its lasting and universal appeal.' Farther over in his book he goes on to say that when we search for the causes of the feelings which made the marvelous style of the Bible a necessity, explanation can make but a short step, for 'we are in a realm where the only ultimate explanation is the fact of inspiration; and that is only another way of saying

that we are in the presence of forces above and beyond our present human understanding.'” Cleland Boyd McAfee, *The Greatest English Classic* (New York: Harper, 1912), pp. 89-90.

The “Gospel passion” to which Dinsmore refers in the quotation beats more strongly at certain times than at others. It is no secret that certain periods of history have been marked by a prevailing and widespread mood that could be called genuinely and predominantly spiritual. Dr. McAfee makes the pertinent observation that England’s “early seventeenth century was an opportune time . . . . Theology was a popular subject. Men’s minds had found a new freedom, and they used it to discuss great themes. They even began to sing” (evidence that the response was not merely one of intellectual assent but of emotional identification). “It was a period of remarkable awakening in the whole intellectual life of England, and that intellectual life was directing itself among the common people to religion. Another English writer, Baton, says a profounder word in tracing the awakening to the Reformation, saying that it ‘could not fail, from the very nature of it, to tinge the literature of the Elizabethan era. It gave a logical and disputatious character to the age and produced men mighty in the Scriptures.’ A French writer went home disgusted because people talked of nothing but theology in England. Grotius [Dutch jurist and statesman, 1583-1645] thought all the people in England were theologians.” McAfee, pp. 97-98.

9. In tracing the origin of Luther’s hymns Blankenburg makes this remark: “In choosing a pattern, Luther adhered to Scriptural thought and expression, but his primary source was the Psalter.” Walter Blankenburg, “Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde,” *Leiturgia*, ed. Karl Ferdinand Mueller and Walter Blankenburg, IV (Kassel: Johannes Stauda, 1931), p. 580.
10. Although celebrating the uniqueness of music as a source and expression of emotional power, Sidney Lanier, one of America’s great Southern poets, concludes his long poem “The Symphony” with a statement that is both descriptive and concessive: “Music is love in search of a word.” Thus, even one of its most ardent advocates admits that music cannot supply the words that provide life with a rational and intelligible basis. This point is all the more significant, since Lanier’s poem begins with an impassioned plea for a fuller use of emotional expression: “O Trade! O Trade! would thou wert dead! / The time needs heart — ’tis tired of head . . . / When all’s done, what hast thou won / Of the only sweet thing that’s under the sun? / Ay, canst thou buy a single sigh / Or true love’s least, least ecstasy?”
11. Harold C. Schonberg, “Contemporary Music Glanced Backward,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1979.
12. Donal Henahan, *New York Times*, September 6, 1981.
13. *Bibelwerk*, p. 606.
14. William Gaunt, *Aesthetic Adventure* (Philadelphia: Richard West, 1945), p. 216.
15. Acts 19:28.
16. Psalm 42:7.
17. It should be carefully noted that the true servant of God desires to share his discoveries and experiences with others. His is a selfless objective (as far as this is possible in a sinful human nature); his procedure is not the strutting of a person vying and competing with others for grandiloquent utterance and flattering adulation. Far from reveling in vainglorious achievement, the conscientious hymnist actually is troubled and concerned about adequately fulfilling the demanding obligations of his task.

Perhaps no one has stated the case better than Ludwig Lewisohn in his description of the conscientious artist (whether in the realm of literature or elsewhere), whose efforts frequently are dismissed by an uncomprehending public as nothing more than an attempt at self-glorification. He observes that “the sullen dilettante and dabbler” scorns the conscientious artist for his attempt to produce a great, or at least appropriate, work. Greatness — “an occasional glimpse of it followed, as the dabbler could not know, by other moments of anguished doubt — this is resented as arrogant detachment from the gay crowd of purveyors of merchandise in the pseudo-literary market-places . . . .” Quoting Zelter, a contemporary and companion of Goethe, Lewisohn says: “The true artist often lives in loneliness and despair, the while he is convinced that men are in search of the very thing he possesses and can communicate.” Lewisohn speaks of the true artist’s “determination — unrelated to argument or polemic — to make his” or God’s “vision of the sum of things, ‘of man and nature and of human life,’ prevail. Thus he needs to persuade yet cannot stoop to please. He is immensely willing to yield to the demand of his day . . . . But it is hard for him when his day, his age, does not make that demand upon him and seems to have no need of him.” Ludwig Lewisohn, “The Man of Letters and American Culture,” *Chap Book* (Brandeis University, May 1949), pp. 2-3.

Luther, too, encountered this kind of churlish misinterpretation of his work. But he forged ahead with undiminished zeal in his determination to provide the best possible kind of hymnody. He could rise above feelings of personal frustration because his dominating interest was not self-advancement but the glorification of God in a faithful portrayal of divine majesty and mercy. The secret of Luther’s successful persistence lay in his devotion to a cause — to *the* cause. Subjectivity succumbs. Objectivity overcomes obstacles and opposition.

18. Isaiah 6.

19. Isaiah 24:14.

20. One of the more glaring examples of hymnological absurdities was cited recently by a Chicago newspaper columnist, a member of a Roman Catholic church. He and his wife Lori asked their six-year-old son Alec, “What did you sing in church?” (This was a weekday service.) “Hooray for God. Hooray for Mom. Hooray for Dad,” Alec replied. “Lori,” said the columnist, “broke up a second before I did. Though she is not a Catholic, she has had some experience monitoring what passes for Catholic hymns in the new post-Vatican II age . . . . Bach Sunday in many churches Catholics are asked to sing the sappiest collection of non-tunes this side of WLUP. Limp music and limp words are printed in limp little booklets that have replaced the St. Joseph Daily Missals of yore . . . . How can your heart be uplifted when you hear a song ask God how He feels today? To suggest that Catholics need a Bach, quick, is obvious; but what can we do until Bach arrives? When a six-year-old boy sees through the mealy-mouthed sentiments of modern Catholic songs, it may even be too late to wait . . . .” Bill Granger, “The Trouble with Catholic Hymns,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1982.

21. Thomas Campion (1567-1620), “Now Winter Nights Enlarge.”

22. Actually, Luther’s psalm hymns are distinguished by an even more important kind of proportion than the balance he maintained in matters of hymnic form and structure between imitation and originality. Of primary and decisive significance is the fact that Luther’s psalm hymns are pre-

dominantly utterances of *proclamation*, rather than of petition, or even of praise. Adhering to the principle that Christian song, like everything else in the church service, should, for the most part, bring God's message to man rather than man's response to God, Luther was careful to enrich his psalm hymns with manna from heaven, the divine word, which alone can instill, nourish, and sustain spiritual life. Petition and praise have their place (as in the divinely inspired Psalter itself), but priority and pre-eminence must be assigned to the proclamation of divine truth. Only so will the congregation, and the individual souls constituting it, grow strong in faith and be equipped for the challenges and opportunities confronting the children of God in every era.

Luther's dicta concerning the downward, upward, and horizontal purposes of hymnody (downward — bringing food from heaven; upward — lifting the human heart into its proper relationship, reunion with God; horizontal, to right and left — creating proper relationships with friends and foes) are so vital and essential for a correct understanding and use of hymnody, yet are so frequently overlooked, that we urgently need to recall the direction of his thought. Specifically, Luther held that the primary purpose of Christian hymn singing is identical with that of the Christian sermon; it is to proclaim divine truth. To find that many people are startled, even shocked, by an announcement of that kind is to observe how far we have traveled from Luther's scripturally oriented position. One of the most excellent summaries of Luther's statements on the primacy of preaching and teaching in hymnody has been provided by Oskar Soehngen in his masterful essay entitled "Theologische Grundlagen der Kirchenmusik," (*Leiturgia*, IV [Kassel: Johannes Stauda, 1961], p. 76). Here are a few of his pertinent observations: "For Luther, congregational song constitutes a part and a form of preaching . . . Even as the sermon is a special instrument used by God for the proclamation of His word, so Christian song, too, is a divinely appointed means, tool, and device for the same purpose; for what is sung in church consists of the words of Holy Scripture. If, in addition, music is used to supplement and support the words, the presentation of the divine message may be even more effective . . . In his letter to Georg Spalatin (1523), announcing the forthcoming publication of a hymnbook, Luther took for granted the Scriptural purpose of the book: 'We are issuing a hymnbook so that the word of God may remain among the people by means of song.' In his preface for Johann Walter's hymnbook (1524), Luther said: 'I have collected a few hymns to promote the Gospel and to cause it to circulate among the people.' In a sermon of 1525 he says: 'The word of God wants to be preached and sung.'" Quotations like these may suffice to show that the principal factor of "balance and blend" maintained in Luther's psalm hymns was *theological*. His statements indicate the intensity of his desire that hymnody serve primarily as an instrument for the (downward) proclamation of divine truth and not merely, or mainly, as an outlet for an upward or horizontal response on the part of the singing congregation.

23. George F. Will, "What Is Outrageous Is the Absence of Outrage," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, December 27, 1981.
24. H. Tekamp, "Europe Must Wake Up to the Nature of Soviet Power," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, December 27, 1981.
25. Of similar beauty is the tender concern for lowly folk displayed by Robert Burns in "The Cotter's Saturday Night." The lovely picture of evening devotions in the family circle of the humble cottager is an unforgettable one — showing, as in Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 12, love of principle and of

people; the cottager's earnest devotion to Biblical truth is joined with loving concern for the spiritual well-being of his family members. True love of pure doctrine is not coldly "doctrinaire." To think so is to distort and misrepresent the Biblical concept of love for divine truth. Genuine concern for purity of teaching begins in the intellect (John 17:3), but from there it radiates to ever-widening circles of people. They are the ultimate object of doctrinal concern. Purity of teaching is focused on their welfare. It is a means of grace, an instrument for salvation. It has, as Luther knew, a thrillingly practical purpose; human beings ("the poor") are to be reclaimed and won for a life so beautiful that it moved Robert Burns to attempt a description ennobled by deep reverence and enlivened by sustained rapture (*The Cotter's Saturday Night*, 138-144):

Hope 'springs exultant on triumphant wing,'  
 That thus they all shall meet in future days;  
 There, ever bask in uncreated rays,  
 No more to sigh, or shed the bitter tear,  
 Together hymning their Creator's praise,  
 In such society, yet still more dear,  
 While circling Time moves round in an eternal sphere.

26. Amos 6:1.
27. Letter by Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Joseph Cottle (Spring 1797), *The Best of Coleridge*, ed. Earle Leslie Griggs (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1934), p. 582.
28. "Then shame, thou weary soul! / Look forward to the goal: / There joy waits thee. / The race, then, run, / The combat done, / Thy crown of glory will be won." *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 444:2.
29. Reinhold J. Mueller (Kerrville, Texas), former missionary in China (1929-1951), told a church music conference at Camp Okoboji, Iowa: "You may be surprised to hear me say so, but the truth is that the natives in China love to sing Lutheran chorales." (Who ever said that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet"?) "In fact," said Rev. Mueller, "I have to say that the Chinese Lutherans sing them better than many Lutherans in the United States. I was somewhat shocked by the relatively weak and listless singing of Lutheran chorales by some persons in this country. In China our church members sing them with a will. (In recent years, Communist influence has interfered, but in areas like Hong Kong and Taiwan the work is still going on, also in regard to church music.) It was especially thrilling to hear Chinese children sing Lutheran hymns during the Christmas season. It would be an inspiration for Lutherans in the U.S. to observe the vigor and enthusiasm with which Chinese Christians sing Lutheran chorales. We can learn from them." A similar statement was made a few years ago by a visitor from India who had come to the United States for work in the Lutheran Lay Ministry program.
30. Regrettably, limitations of space in the present survey prevent giving attention to the superbly eloquent musical settings of Luther's psalm hymns. This vital aspect of the songs calls for detailed consideration in a separate discussion.
31. Some Bible readers may readily recognize the striking similarity between the cry uttered in Psalm 12 (and in Luther's paraphrase of that psalm) and the passionate plea of another great singer, Asaph, recorded in Psalm 79 (perhaps especially vv. 1, 5, 9, 11).
32. Ephesians 4:6.



33. "Since his [Luther's] intention was to make the common people in the churches sing the chorale tunes, he made them as plain and as popular as possible. At the same time he knew how to give them a dignified spiritual character, with no trace of vulgarity, of cheap popularity, emptiness, or insignificance. The most famous chorale attributed to him is 'Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott.' . . . It is a poetic paraphrase of the Forty-sixth Psalm. But what a power of language, what a strong manly soul in these verses, what a consoling confidence in the help of God, what a courageous militant spirit against the evil in the world!" Hugo Leichtentritt, *Music, History, and Ideas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 105.
34. Terry mentions "Bach's delight in the stalwart Reformation tunes" and "his bias towards the masculine words and melodies of the Reformation century." Charles Sanford Terry, *Bach: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940 [1928]), p. 255; *Bach: The Cantatas and Oratorios, Book II*, in "The Musical Pilgrim" series, ed. Arthur Somerville (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 11.

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