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# Cultures, Chorales, and Catechesis

Daniel Zager

This essay explores the philosophical differences between two uses of music in the church: first, music as a tool for outreach and numerical growth in church attendance; second, music as a participant in theological proclamation. It also examines the premise that church music ought, properly speaking, to be countercultural, which means counter to the prevailing popular culture of our day. In this context, it refers to congregational song and to Martin Luther's views on the music of his own time. Finally, it suggests that the way out of the current controversies in worship and music resides not in building a consensus on musical and worship styles in which both "sides" concede certain elements to each other. Rather, the solution must be centered around the recognition that worship is not coterminous with evangelism, and that the "unchurched" are brought fully into the Christian community not through the music of our worship services but through catechesis and baptism. There is, indeed, a controversy in the church today that centers around music. The solution to this problem, however, lies not in musical considerations but in renewed and ongoing catechesis.

We find today two very different and mutually incompatible streams of thought regarding the purpose of music in the church. One regards music as a participant in theological proclamation. The other views music as a tool for outreach and numerical growth in attendance—targeting a certain demographically defined group and presenting the music supposedly favored by the majority of that group. Typical of this latter perspective are the following statements by Rich Warren:

The style of music you choose to use in your service will be one of the most critical (and controversial) decisions you make in the life of the church. It may also be *the* most influential factor in determining who your church reaches for Christ and whether or not your church grows. You

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must match your music to the kind of people God wants your church to reach.

The music you use “positions” your church in your community. It defines who you are. Once you have decided on the style of music you’re going to use in worship, you have set the direction of your church in far more ways than you realize. It will determine the kind of people you attract, the kind of people you keep, and the kind of people you lose.<sup>1</sup>

In categorizing music as “*the* most influential factor in determining who your church reaches,” Warren elevates music to a position that is untenable for many Lutherans. Yet this statement does illustrate, with great clarity, the stream of thought that conceptualizes music as a tool—even the most important tool—for numerical growth in the church.

There are at least four problems with Warren’s position. First, musical tastes and preferences within a single congregation are always much more diverse than Warren or other church growth writers would have us believe. As organist at a small parish (attendance of sixty to ninety people on a Sunday) I observed individual musical preferences including at least: country, pop, rock, and western art music (or “classical”). There was no single style of music preferred by a majority of the congregation. Larger congregations, of course, will present a correspondingly higher diversity of musical tastes.

Second, if a church self-consciously defines itself in terms of musical style—Warren identifies his church as “the flock that likes to rock”<sup>2</sup>—then it implicitly says: “Don’t come here if you don’t like the musical taste of the majority of our members.” Christian congregations of whatever denominational stripe ought to be profoundly uncomfortable with such a premise. The notion that “You must match your music to the kind of people

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<sup>1</sup>Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 280–281.

<sup>2</sup>Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 285.

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God wants your church to reach" should call from us the response that, in each of our communities, God wants us to bring the gospel to all who will hear, regardless of their musical preferences. The concept of defining evangelism activities by age group and musical preference is simply wrongheaded. Such thinking actually limits our work in evangelism and, by insisting that each group needs its own music, has done incalculable damage with regard to church music and indeed with regard to our concept of Christian community.

Third, there is the expectation, articulated by Warren and other church growth writers, that the "unchurched" and "irreligious" should come to us and fill our sanctuaries. Indeed, there is the expectation that they will come if we provide the kind of music that they like. We need to regard such thinking very skeptically. Instead, we need to go out to them. The Great Commission sends us out into the world—not to share myriad musical styles, but to baptize and to teach.

Finally, worship, contrary to Warren's point of view, is not an opportunity to "attract" a target audience. Rather, in the words of Frank Senn, "worship is the occasion for God and his people to encounter one another, by means of God's sacramental gifts and his people's sacrificial response."<sup>3</sup> Or, as the introduction to *Lutheran Worship* states: "Our Lord speaks and we listen. . . . The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them."<sup>4</sup> Worship is for God's people, the baptized; it is the occasion for Him to give His gifts to us. It is not, in Senn's words, for "those who do not yet confess themselves to be a part of the Lord's people."<sup>5</sup> Worship is not the same as evangelism or outreach, and we diminish worship when we reduce it to marketing a product to consumers.

Warren comes out of the Baptist tradition, which, of course,

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<sup>3</sup>Frank C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 88.

<sup>4</sup>*Lutheran Worship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Senn, *Witness*, 3.

embraces a different set of presuppositions regarding worship and music than does the Lutheran tradition. The writings of two Lutheran pastors currently active in the area of so-called contemporary worship, Timothy Wright and David Luecke, will illustrate that the use of music as a tool for outreach and numerical growth in church attendance is conceptually consistent across denominational boundaries.

Wright, a pastor at the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix (an ELCA congregation), states:

As people shop for a church, they look for congregations that value them by valuing their music.

. . . no other ingredient shapes the relevancy of a service more than the choice of music. The music used should reflect the styles of music heard on the radio today.

Today's worshippers see music as the most important part of the worship service. No other communication tool has more impact on these new church shoppers.<sup>6</sup>

For Wright, music is a tool, useful primarily to make visitors feel comfortable, and to encourage them to return. Thus, he requires that the music used in church be a reflection of music heard on adult contemporary radio stations, in his words "the heart language of today's generations."<sup>7</sup>

David Luecke, an LCMS pastor, provides a similar point of view regarding music in worship. "The music at seeker services is decidedly contemporary, ranging from Christian rock to country and western. The intent is to be similar to the music these people most commonly listen to." He goes on to say: "Music alone does not explain all the differences between contemporary and traditional worship. But it explains more

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<sup>6</sup>Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 22, 68, 71.

<sup>7</sup>Wright, *Community*, 33.

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than any other single factor.”<sup>8</sup>

There is substantial agreement among these writers, denominational differences notwithstanding, that the primary purpose of music in the church is simply to attract people to attend some sort of worship service. There is near unanimous agreement among these writers that music is the single most important ingredient in contemporary services. It is not an overstatement to assert that the movement toward contemporary worship is primarily a musical phenomenon.

One searches the writings of Warren, Wright, and others in vain for even a hint that music might play a role in theological proclamation. Luecke recognizes that music in the church—he points particularly to hymns—can have a teaching function. But he deprives music of participating in the task of theological proclamation:

Yes, many contemporary praise and worship songs fall short of a full Christological message, or do not present a good reminder of sin and justification. But that is not the intent. There are other parts of the time together, chiefly the sermon, for the full message.

Is it OK in authentic Lutheran worship to sing simple praise and worship songs that fall short of teaching the full message of sin and salvation in Christ? A reasonable answer is Yes, assuming other parts of the service present law and gospel proclamation.<sup>9</sup>

For Luecke there is a compartmentalization in which music is simply “a time for praise,” and the sermon is necessarily the time to present “the full message.” Luecke is much too quick to diminish the enormous potential of music wedded to theology; of the well-planned service in which music complements theology; of the rich potential for interconnections among

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<sup>8</sup>David S. Luecke, *The Other Story of Lutherans at Worship: Reclaiming Our Heritage of Diversity* (Tempe, Arizona: Fellowship Ministries, 1995), 7, 23.

<sup>9</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 33, 35.

appointed readings, congregational song, instrumental music based on hymns, and choral music that proclaims proper portions of the liturgy to the gathered assembly. There is another point of view that sees music as a well-integrated participant in theological proclamation, rather than merely an outreach tool to promote numerical growth.

In what ways might music participate in theological proclamation? The most common way is in the realm of congregational song or hymnody, when music is wedded to and thus bears a theological text. Frequently, a melody will become so singularly connected with a particular text that the mere suggestion of the melody brings to mind a specific text, for example, the tune *Saint Anne* and its connection with "O God Our Help in Ages Past," or the tune *Lobe den Herren* and its connection with the text "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." In choral music the same is true—music bears a theological text, but there may be an added interpretational dimension in which the music underlines, emphasizes, interprets, and proclaims particular nuances of the theological text. The cantatas and passion settings of Johann Sebastian Bach come readily to mind as examples. Finally, in instrumental music, such as an organ prelude, the presence of a well-known hymn melody triggers an associative communication process: the perception of a well-known hymn melody leads to the recall of an associated hymn text, which in turn leads to a recognition of theological concepts conveyed by that hymn text.<sup>10</sup> We take such a process somewhat for granted—it often occurs without our really thinking about it. However, if an organist were to play a setting of "Silent Night" during the offering on Easter Sunday, it might cause one to pause. In such an absurd situation, the obvious potential for associative meaning—for proclaiming the resurrection through an organ setting of, for example, the Easter hymn "I Know that My Redeemer Lives"—would be badly misused. Whether in congregational song, choral music, or even instrumental music,

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<sup>10</sup>Daniel Zager, "On the Value of Organ Music in the Worship Service," *The Diapason* 79 (June 1988): 18–19.

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the possibilities for music to participate in theological proclamation are endless and rich, and have, in fact, especially characterized the Lutheran tradition.

In 1538 Martin Luther wrote a preface to a collection of polyphonic Latin motets (Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*) in which he articulated his views on music in the church at some length. In a well-known passage, one whose significance we may undervalue simply because the passage is so often quoted, Luther writes: "After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely by proclaiming [the word of God] through music."<sup>11</sup> The operative concept for Luther is "proclaiming [the word of God] through music." For Luther, music is not something to be feared (as it is with Zwingli), or something that needs to be closely controlled (as it is with Calvin). Rather, music is a gift of God useful for proclaiming the word of God.

If we had only this statement from Luther, we might wonder precisely what he means by "proclaiming [the word of God] through music." He was not, however, merely a theorist, he was also a practitioner, and we may look to his chorales for insight in answering the question. For example, in "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice," Luther shows us what it means to proclaim the word of God through music. The text is a magnificent exposition of justification by grace alone, one that he joined to a rhythmically engaging melody for publication in the 1524 *Etlich christlich Lieder*, the so-called *Achtliederbuch*. Another example is the Reformer's great Christmas chorale, "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come." Note the last line of the first stanza: "whereof I now will say and sing," after which Luther proclaims the incarnation, through text and music, in the subsequent stanzas. This union of word and melody, theology and music, fulfilled Luther's intention stated in a 1523 letter to Georg Spalatin: "I intend to make German Psalms for the

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<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, edited by Ulrich S. Leupold, *Luther's Works*, volume 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 323.

people, i.e., spiritual songs, so that the Word of God even by means of song may live among the people."<sup>12</sup> Luther used music to teach, to catechize, to bring theology to the people in a most powerful way, in short, to proclaim the word of God.

While this proposition is hardly new for those who have studied Luther's views on music, it has been largely ignored in the current controversies on music in worship. Instead, one finds an emphasis on a statement incorrectly attributed to Luther: "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?"<sup>13</sup> The intent of this statement is to show Luther as somehow endorsing music from the secular culture of his time. Similarly, we also read today the mistaken conclusion that Luther was not above using popular barroom tunes of his day for his chorales. There is no evidence whatsoever that he did so. That the music most favored by Luther had its origins in the best art music of his day, and was, in fact, distinct from the popular culture of his day, is a premise explored in greater detail in the next section of this essay. For now, suffice it to say that Luther recognized music as a great gift of God, one to be used in the proclamation of theology.

Luther's writings present a unique point of view regarding the function of music in the church. Among the sixteenth-century reformers Luther uniquely encouraged and provided for the participation of music in proclaiming the word of God. To surrender this paradigm diminishes significantly the enormous potential of music to contribute in deeply meaningful ways to the life of the church. To the extent that one takes Luther's view of music seriously, one simply cannot bear the crass late-twentieth-century commercialism that makes music a mere commodity to increase church attendance. There is no reconciling these two views of music in the life of the church. Either church music is deeply connected with theology, or it is

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<sup>12</sup>LW 53:221.

<sup>13</sup>James Brauer sets the record straight on the incorrect attribution of this statement to Luther; one may see his "The Devil's Tunes," *Concordia Journal* 23 (January 1997): 2-3.

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deeply connected with marketing techniques. That these marketing techniques are utilized in a confused conjoining of evangelism and worship only exacerbates matters. We need to recognize that the disagreement today regarding music in the church occurs precisely because we do not agree on whether music should be used simply to attract the unchurched to come to an event in a church, or whether music should be used to participate in a more specific kind of theological proclamation that finds its roots in church year and lectionary and presupposes a participant community that has been formed through catechesis.

This fundamental question concerning the function of music in the church is followed quickly by other questions that relate to the nature of the music to be used in the church. What should be the overarching characteristics of this music? Just as our theology ought to run counter to our popular, self-help culture, so too music in the church ought finally to be countercultural, in the sense that it should run counter to the popular musical cultures of our day. Indeed, it must be countercultural if it is to be a participant in theological proclamation. Congregational song, the quintessential musical expression of the church, will serve as the primary means of exploring this premise. While that will lead ineluctably to a consideration of text as well as music, the style of the music—in addition to the theological content of the text—needs to be countercultural. The latter premise—that the theological content of the text must be countercultural—is always more readily accepted. However, the former premise—regarding the countercultural nature of the music itself—is no less important.

It is precisely in the area of congregational song that we can see the clearest evidence of divergent directions in church music today. Simultaneous with an “explosion” in the writing of new hymns (both texts and tunes) has come the phenomenon known as “praise choruses.” Luecke offers the following distinction between the two:

The traditional hymn features a text in poetic form that usually offers instruction as well as expression. . . . A

contemporary chorus focuses completely on expression of feeling and sentiment. . . . Implicit is the assumption that the fewer the words the more focus there can be on their meaning. . . . A tendency in contemporary worship is to cluster the songs together, typically at the beginning of the service. They become medlies [sic], with one song flowing into the next and the next, and so on. A medley usually would have three or four songs but might extend to seven or even ten.<sup>14</sup>

Luecke's characterization of praise choruses is consistent with personal observation: 1) they are usually "an expression of feeling and sentiment," often in the first person singular; 2) they employ a minimum of text; and 3) their placement in the service (frequently grouped together at the beginning) is such that these songs often do not function in specific ways, as hymns do, for example, when they relate to the Gospel lesson and sermon, or when they are used during communion distribution.

Luecke characterizes the praise chorus as "an expression of feeling and sentiment" with few words. A chorus entitled "Lord, I'm Gonna Love You" consists simply of repetitions of the text: "Lord, I'm gonna love you with all that's in my heart." Another chorus entitled "I Want to Follow You" says:

Lord I want to follow and serve you alone.  
 Lord, help me to live right and bring glory to your throne.  
 Lord, I am willing to be your servant faithfully.  
 Oh Lord, I want to follow you.  
 I'll follow you. Wherever you lead me, I'll follow you.

What is striking about these two choruses, one of which I encountered in a Missouri Synod congregation and the other in a Wisconsin Synod congregation, is not so much what they say (though decision theology seems to predominate in them), but what they never say, theological roads they never traverse. A veteran pastor once remarked that he expected every one of his sermons to sound the redemptive note. The same kind of

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<sup>14</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 26-27.

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theological intent must be present in hymns because hymns proclaim theology. By way of example, consider this hymn, written by the poet and hymnist Susan Palo Cherwien, which is as recent as the two cited praise choruses.

O blessed spring, where Word and sign embrace us into  
Christ the Vine;  
here Christ enjoins each one to be a branch of this  
lifegiving Tree.

Through summer heat of youthful years, uncertain faith,  
rebellious tears,  
sustained by Christ's infusing rain, the boughs will  
shout for joy again.

When autumn cools and youth is cold, when limbs their  
heavy harvest hold,  
then through us, warm, the Christ will move with gifts  
of beauty, wisdom, love.

As winter comes, as winters must, we breathe our last,  
return to dust;  
still held in Christ, our souls take wing and trust the  
promise of the spring.

Christ, holy Vine, Christ living Tree, be praised for  
this blest mystery;  
that word and water thus revive and join us to your  
Tree of Life.<sup>15</sup>

There are several reasons why this hymn text is a very fine one. First of all, noteworthy is its double entendre of the word "spring," referring first to the source of baptismal water, and then giving way to the seasonal metaphor that uses spring, summer, fall, and winter to represent stages in human life. One cannot but appreciate the poet's reminder that the promise of baptism works throughout our lives: "through summer heat of

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<sup>15</sup>*With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995). Text copyright © 1993 Susan Palo Cherwien, administrated by Augsburg Fortress. Reprinted with permission.

youthful years . . . ,” “when autumn cools and youth is cold . . . ,” “as winter comes, as winters must.” It echoes two statements made by Edward Koehler: “The covenant and the promise of baptism cover the entire life of a Christian, and at any time, even in old age, he may comfort himself with the assurance of God’s grace, made to him in baptism,” and “While baptism is administered but once, it is of use to us every day of our lives. . . .”<sup>16</sup> The fourth stanza of the hymn is particularly striking: “we breathe our last, return to dust; still held in Christ our souls take wing and trust the promise of the spring.” Hymnody should sound the eschatological note—to remind me always that death is the doorway to eternal life, that, still held in Christ, my soul will take wing—because in that baptismal spring God put his name on me; I am a baptized child of God. Such a hymn, joined to a well-crafted and singable melody, proclaims theology.

It is an urgent necessity that we in the church work actively to foster the singing of hymns that proclaim theology. When we give to God’s people praise choruses, such as “Lord, I’m Gonna Love You” or “I Want to Follow You,” we deprive them of hymns that proclaim the Christian faith in its fullness. Instead, we give them the opportunity to sing largely about themselves, about their own “feeling and sentiment,” as Luecke so aptly put it. Congregational song needs to be theocentric rather than anthropocentric, which is, in fact, countercultural—in the sense that it finds its meaning in the richness of the church’s theology rather than in the vagueness of individual emotions and the borrowed idioms of pop musical culture.

What about the music? The music of praise choruses is not countercultural; it takes its cue from the popular musical idioms of our day, particularly that which has been variously labeled “soft rock” or “adult contemporary.” In addition to the medium of accompaniment, the “praise band,” with its emphasis on electronic and synthesized sound, the primary musical

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<sup>16</sup>Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (1939; reprint, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 209–210, 211–212.

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characteristic of the praise chorus is a rhythmic syncopation of the melodic line that emulates the solo pop singer. Such syncopation, easily handled by a solo singer or small backup ensemble, frequently results in rhythmic awkwardness for singing by an entire congregation. The strong and steady rhythmic pulse that facilitates congregational singing is frequently absent in praise choruses. A Wisconsin Synod congregation that featured contemporary worship had the following disclaimer located prominently on the front page of the bulletin: "Please sing whenever you feel comfortable singing. When the music is difficult, please allow us to sing to you." When the music is difficult, we ought to teach it to the congregation, deliberately and carefully. The notion of "allowing us to sing to you" comes out of the church growth concept of using music and musicians to entertain the gathered congregation.<sup>17</sup> The music of contemporary Christian music has its roots in the pop music culture of our day, and brings to the church a rhythmic style ill-suited for congregational singing and a connectedness with the popular entertainment world that belies the countercultural nature of our theology.<sup>18</sup>

It is no doubt unfashionable to say that the quality of contemporary Christian music is poor. There is a line of thinking in the church today that musical quality is completely relative, that quality is merely a function of individual musical preference. That is akin to stating that the quality of preaching is merely a function of what parishioners wish to hear, that preaching is good if the people say it is good. In fact, there is good preaching and poor preaching; preaching founded on thorough exegetical work and preaching founded on indifferent or haphazard preparation. There is, similarly, good church music and poor church music; music that is based on a sure

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<sup>17</sup>One may see, for example, Walt Kallestad, *Entertainment Evangelism: Taking the Church Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup>For further thoughts specifically on questions of musical value and meaning in church music see Daniel Zager, "Church Music or Pop Music: Proclamation or Accommodation?" *Cross Accent: Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians* 7 (Fall 1999).

command of the craft of composition and music that is simply poorly made. Pastors who are formally and thoroughly trained in theology are equipped to recognize poor preaching, even when it masquerades as good communication. Similarly, church musicians who are well trained in music history, theory, and performance are equipped to recognize the music of poor composers, of musical charlatans. And make no mistake about it, such poor church music by far outnumbers well-crafted church music. There are entire music publishing companies that churn out nothing but poorly crafted compositions for the church, whether congregational song, choral, or instrumental music. This is not a statement of opinion or musical preference; any well-trained church musician will attest to this sorry state of affairs.

Turning to Luther once more, we find that the Reformer, who regarded music as a gift of God for proclaiming the word of God, not only had a keen sense of musical quality, he wrote about it. He was well acquainted with the best composers and music of his day and desired precisely that music for use in the church. The sixteenth century was one of those ages in music history when there was a kind of musical *lingua franca*; individual stylistic differences among composers notwithstanding, the overall musical language of the sixteenth century was remarkably consistent. That language was defined by a contemporary of Luther, Josquin Desprez (circa 1440-1521). Luther recognized Josquin for what he was: the consummate musical craftsman, one who set the style for the entire sixteenth century. Luther noted: "God has preached the gospel through music, too, as may be seen in Josquin, all of whose compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules. . . ." <sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Luther prized the music of Ludwig Senfl (circa 1486-1542/43), who served Emperor Maximilian I until 1519, when Charles V became Emperor and disbanded the court

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<sup>19</sup>Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 21.

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chapel in favor of Spanish musicians. Subsequently Senfl led the ducal court chapel in Munich. Luther corresponded with him and indeed requested compositions from him. Luther knew the best composers of his time, recognized the best musical craftsmanship, and sought such music for use in the church.

In his efforts to provide the best music for the church, Luther was aided greatly by the Wittenberg printer, Georg Rhau. He published exegetical works by Luther, Melancthon, and Bugenhagen; editions of Luther's Catechism and the Augsburg Confession; as well as anthologies of choral music for use in the young Lutheran church. Rhau was a well-trained musician who served as Kantor of the Thomasschule and Thomaskirche in Leipzig from 1518 until 1520, where he also lectured on music theory at the University. In 1523 he returned to Wittenberg, where he spent the rest of his life engaged in publishing. Between 1538 and 1545 he published fifteen major collections of church music. Many of these collections were designed to provide artistically significant music for the mass and vespers, drawn from the Franco-Flemish repertoires of Josquin, Senfl, and others. The rest of the collections were intended for use in teaching music in the schools. Luther wrote the preface for one of these, the *Symphoniae iucundae* of 1538. This anthology contained fifty-two Latin motets by composers such as Josquin, Senfl, Heinrich Isaac, and others. The statement from Luther's preface, in which he speaks specifically of proclaiming the word of God through music, has already been quoted. In this same preface Luther says of music: "next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise," and he goes on to speak eloquently of the wonder of the polyphonic art of his day.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, for Luther there was such a thing as quality in music—he recognized it, he expected it in the church, and he encouraged it through educational and publication endeavors.

However, appealing to Luther will not prove this case. Pastors and laypeople will expect their church musicians to provide quality music from both our own and previous generations.

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<sup>20</sup>LW 53:323.

Indeed, Luecke, for example, argues against concepts of quality in music and specifically warns his readers that worship planning should not be “left to the experts,” whom he labels as elitists.<sup>21</sup> He sets up a false dichotomy between high culture and popular culture, equating high culture with the music of J. S. Bach and classical music, and popular culture with contemporary Christian music and “music you hear on the most-listened-to radio stations.”<sup>22</sup> Such an approach fails by equating church music with classical music – the music of our western concert hall traditions.

The vast corpus of Christian hymnody, including such hymns as “The Church’s One Foundation,” “Now Thank We All Our God,” “Crown Him With Many Crowns,” “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” is not “classical” music; it has nothing to do with our western concert hall traditions. The music of J. S. Bach, particularly the cantatas and Passion settings, though originally intended as functional music for use in the divine service, is now (unfortunately) largely confined to the concert hall. For most Lutheran church musicians today, the music of Bach hardly predominates as they provide music for each Sunday and festival of the church year. Carl Schalk, Donald Busarow, David Cherwien, Paul Manz, Richard Hillert, Paul Bouman, and a host of other talented, living composers provide much of the music that is used on a weekly basis in Lutheran congregations. This is not classical music that is coterminous with the concert hall. Nor is it meaningful to categorize this music as traditional music. It is, in fact, contemporary music in the broadest and best sense of the word, not in the narrow sense that has made the word nearly useless today in the church. The music of these church composers is well-crafted music written to function within Lutheran worship: hymns for the congregation to sing, organ music based on those hymns, choral music based on the rhythm of the church year as well as the individual focus provided by each set of pericopes in the lectionary. This is

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<sup>21</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 111.

<sup>22</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 98.

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neither classical nor popular music, neither traditional nor contemporary music (in the current narrow sense of these terms). This is *church* music—a category that transcends individual musical preferences. We do not have to worry about how to please a congregation full of people who listen to all kinds of different music on the radio, in their homes, in their cars, or through the privacy of headphones: classical, jazz, folk, ethnic, pop, rock, heavy metal, rap, reggae, blues, or country western music. No matter what kinds of music people listen to during the week they can come together on Sunday to sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Beautiful Savior,” “Children of the Heavenly Father,” “Lift High the Cross,” or “Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise.” Church music, particularly the congregational song of our worship books, is the common denominator that unites people of disparate musical tastes and preferences—at least it ought to. Church music has done so in the past and can continue to do so—if we allow well-crafted church music to function within the liturgy as it is intended; if we cease our fixation on musical styles; and if we realize that worship is not the primary means for outreach to the unchurched.

Proponents of contemporary music attempt to take the moral high ground by insisting that they are the ones who are reaching out to the unchurched and meeting them on their own ground. Or they might say that, like the Apostle Paul, they wish to become all things to all people (1 Corinthians 9:22), which usually means nothing more than giving people pop music and perhaps a pastor looking appropriately informal in sport shirt and athletic shoes rather than in vestments (which are considered too foreign for the outsider). The problem with proceeding this way Sunday after Sunday is that there is never a provision for growth in faith and knowledge. Further, if well-crafted church music in a liturgical context and clerical vestments are too foreign for the outsider, how much more foreign will be law and gospel, confession and absolution, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper? The church cannot provide entertainment, the “lite” version of Christian theology, and tips for practical living—all packaged in good humor and soft rock

music—if it wants to make an impact on a world infected with sin. Instead, we need to regain a focus on forming Christians through catechesis; that is the context in which we need to meet the outsider.

At a meeting of pastors and church musicians in the metropolitan Chicago area, the conversation focused on the sorts of issues this paper has addressed. One pastor remarked that as the members of his congregation were out in the mission field during the work week they subsequently needed a specific kind of Sunday morning worship opportunity to which they could bring the unchurched “inquirers” they might have encountered during the course of the previous week. This pastor stated his preference for a “seeker service” as the best option. I suggested that a Sunday morning educational experience specifically for such inquirers might be more beneficial. In the seeker service, the inquirer will be primarily an observer. For example, he is unlikely to interrupt the pastor’s message to ask a question. In an educational setting the inquirer may, of course, choose to be a passive observer, but at the very least the possibility for the person to ask questions and participate in conversation is present. This is not the time to consider the specifics of implementing such a Sunday morning opportunity in the large parish. Rather, this anecdote brings to the fore a common assumption—that de facto we must meet inquirers, seekers, the unchurched, the irreligious, or “pre-Christians” (all of these terms are used by the writers alluded to earlier) on Sunday mornings in the context of some kind of worship experience. Luecke writes: “The current contemporary worship movement has its base in congregations pursuing mission outreach to people not yet in the church.”<sup>23</sup>

Note the assumption: Luecke links “contemporary worship” with “mission outreach to people not yet in the church,” the latter being dependent on the former. Outreach for Luecke is primarily accomplished through worship, though it must, of course, be a particular kind of worship. He also writes: “What

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<sup>23</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 113.

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about the unchurched today who are turning to God and are ready to come to church? Many find the highly developed and even complicated ritual of current service settings in Lutheran worship books to be a burden on their way to being drawn to God."<sup>24</sup> Luecke's solution, of course, is to provide "simpler, more accessible, more 'user-friendly' forms of worship." What he fails to recognize is that of course "the unchurched who are turning to God and are ready to come to church" will find worship to be unfamiliar territory. Until they are formed in the faith they cannot understand that worship is primarily God coming to us in word and sacrament—that in worship we receive God's gifts. Until they have been baptized and formed in the faith they cannot understand, for example, that the very first words spoken by the pastor, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" remind each Christian of his or her baptism.

We find ourselves, then, at the crux of the matter. Do we bring people into the church through worship and music or through teaching and formation? The current assumption in many quarters within the church is that we bring people in through worship and music; that the unchurched should find their first point of contact with the church in the context of a worship service. This point of view has led to the sorts of things that we argue about today: the rejection of the richness of the western liturgy, the writing of homemade creedal statements, the rejection of "Lutheran" in the public name of a church, the use of vapid and trite poetic texts coupled with inferior music that takes its cue from pop music, and the list could go on.

Might we not do far better to focus on bringing people into the church through teaching and formation, that is, through catechesis? Recall Luecke's statement: "The current contemporary worship movement has its base in congregations pursuing mission outreach to people not yet in the church." I would very much like to see the day when we might say: "The current movement toward *a revitalized adult catechumenate* has its

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<sup>24</sup>Luecke, *Other Story*, 70.

base in congregations pursuing mission outreach to people not yet in the church." That is an urgent goal for the church at large, for the way out of the current controversies in worship and music is precisely through the development of revitalized programs of adult catechesis in individual parishes. Church musicians must see it as an urgent necessity to participate in such programs by collaborating with their pastoral colleagues in teaching about topics such as worship, liturgy, hymnody, and music.

The Fall 1998 issue of the *Lutheran Forum* provides a thought-provoking introduction to the adult catechumenate; the articles by Frank Senn and Arthur Just are particularly beneficial. Just points out that "Catechesis is more than *instruction* in the faith; it is *formation* into the life of Christ." He points out that catechumens are "formed gradually by Scripture, liturgy, and catechism, the three sources of catechesis for life in Christ."<sup>25</sup> He couches all of his observations on catechesis within the concept of the journey:

As Christians journey to their destination of full communion with Christ in heaven, they live under the cross where they are continually living in Christ as they hear his Holy Word and feed upon his Holy Food that sustain them on the journey. Their pilgrimage climaxes in their physical death which is an entrance to full communion with Christ in their heavenly home. The goal of the journey is to live in Christ's presence forever and to feast at his table for eternity. Christian pilgrims follow Christ in their journey to a life that never ends.<sup>26</sup>

This journey to full, abundant, and eternal life is central to the Christian faith. In His divine service God freely gives us through word and sacrament what we need most deeply to sustain us on the journey. The liturgy of the western church,

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<sup>25</sup>Arthur A. Just Jr., "Journey to Life in Christ: An Introduction to the Catechumenate," *Lutheran Forum* (Fall 1998): 27.

<sup>26</sup>Just, "Journey," 24.

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evolving over the early centuries of the church's existence, has become for us what Philip Pfatteicher appropriately terms "the school of the church."<sup>27</sup> For catechumen and baptized Christian alike, the liturgy teaches through the richest kind of repetition. It is far more than a mere "order of service" and is not adequately defined when referred to as "the work of the people."

We stand at a critical juncture: some in the church would have us embrace the culture around us, using entertainment and pop music in a desperate and ultimately futile attempt to win popular approval for the church in a postmodern world. In reading and listening to such individuals one marvels at their willingness to downplay the means of grace and their eagerness to abandon the liturgy as "the school of the church." They wish to bring the good news of this journey to eternal life, but they deprive themselves of the very tools that they need to do so, squandering the theological, liturgical, poetic, and musical riches developed by the church over centuries. Instead, they borrow from the popular culture of the moment and appeal to the hopelessly vague subjectivities of human emotions.

There are, however, others in the church—gifted theologians who are reacquainting us with catechetical processes that will form Christians in our increasingly secular world, and gifted poets and musicians who create theologically grounded and well-crafted hymns and musical expressions that we may use to proclaim the theology of the church. This theology speaks of sacrifice, of death leading to life, and stands squarely against our contemporary culture. As theologians and church musicians we do well not to lose sight of the fact that we are engaged in a countercultural enterprise. We should not, therefore, expect to derive our inspiration or our intellectual materials from the popular culture around us. That the church itself is so badly divided on these questions makes our enterprise more difficult. We must continue to work in our individual parishes, schools,

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<sup>27</sup>Philip H. Pfatteicher, *The School of the Church: Worship and Christian Formation* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995).

universities, and seminaries, always remembering God's promise through the prophet Isaiah: "my word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).