



able Talk

College Hill Lutheran Church - LCMS

by Rev. John Wegener

Why Are Our Hymns So Traditional?

It's not that the hymns we sing at College Hill Lutheran Church are sung because they come from a long tradition. Rather, the hymns that are sung come from the full catalog of hymnody that includes those hymns passed onto us by the saints who have gone before us *and* hymns that are being written today.

The criteria for Lutheran Hymns is summarized well by Chad L. Bird in his little book "Why Lutherans Sing What They Sing: An Apology for Lutheran Hymnody." The following are excerpts that explain the criteria:

1. A Lutheran hymn aims not to create the right atmosphere or mood for worship, but serves as a vehicle for the Spirit-filled Word of God.

The singing of [Lutheran hymns] may well alter moods or create atmospheres, but that is not their goal. Their aim is to plant the Chosen Seed, Jesus Christ, in the ear and in the heart. They bear the resemblance of a sermon, shrunk in length, rhymed, and set to music. Many a hymn preaches more in four stanzas than a pastor struggles to say in six pages of sermon text. And in the preaching of the hymn, the Spirit is at work through the Word to rebuke and console, to pierce and heal through the law and the Gospel. (19)

2. A Lutheran hymn is not entertainment but proclamation.

The music and song of entertainment aim to gratify the emotions of man but the music and song of the Church aim for something far, far more important: to give voice to the Gospel of salvation which alone satisfies man's deepest need: communion with the incarnate God. (23)

3. A Lutheran hymn is shaped by the theology of the cross.

Whatever the given subject of the Lutheran hymn—be it Epiphany, the Church, missions, prayer, or praise—the singer will hear *who God really is*: The God who reveals Himself and gives Himself to us in His Son. Such hymnody, like the cross itself, will always be a stumbling block to those who seek God apart from where He hides, reveals, and gives Himself. But to those with eyes of faith, eyes enlightened by the Gospel of a crucified Christ, Evangelical-Lutheran hymnody will not be a stumbling block but an immovable rock of refuge. (30)

4. A Lutheran hymn is not bound merely to paraphrase the biblical text; rather, it interprets the Scriptures in reference to Christ.

In our monolatrous culture, the Church stands in constant need of hymnody (ancient and modern) that remains true to the exclusive claim of the crucified Christ as *the* revelation of the Father. It is precisely this "scandal of particularity" that the best of Lutheran hymnody will continue to proclaim. (36)

5. A Lutheran hymn is bound to no culture save the culture of the Church catholic (i.e. of all times and of all places.)

Rather than filling sacred space with "the kinds of music people listen to all week long," the Church fills that space with her own music, a melody of beauty and dignity that mirrors her own beauty and dignity as the Bride of Christ.

Rather than constantly marrying and divorcing one musical style after another in the ever-changing secular culture, the church has nurtured her own music in her own culture. Perhaps in days long gone, when Holy Mother Church held great sway over her surrounding culture, her sounds and the world's sounds were not in such disharmony. But today, the sway has vanished. The Church's culture is a counterculture, a culture whose ideals, beliefs, and purposes are at loggerheads with the vast array of secular cultures in which she sojourns. But be not misled: this is not a static and stagnant culture, but vivacious, throbbing with life, for hers is the culture of real abiding life in the living God. Each generation carefully adds a few fresh strokes to the portrait she has been painting for millennia, but they do not scrap it all to begin anew. (41) ✠