



# Back to God We Sing What He Has Inspired For Us

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From the beginning of the world and in the original intention, design, and creation, God's gift of music was given to the earth and to all its living creatures. Is there anything that is not without sound or harmony? Even the air, which is invisible to our senses, when set in motion becomes audible, rhythmic, and sonorous. Music is more delightful in living things, such as songbirds that with art, ease, and devotion welcome a new morning in a concert of joyful wonder. And within God's human kingdom, we should not be surprised to find the most eloquent competencies for using and enjoying His unbelievable gift of music.

For among other living creatures music remains a language without words, but in us human beings the gift of language combines with the gift of music to govern the emotions. And in our modern world we receive and grasp music with facts about which the most gifted from the past—grand composers that we still know and celebrate—knew little of it, yet practiced it and benefited from it. Science informs us that the human being is “hard-wired” to respond to music. Music stimulates more parts of the brain than any other human function; therefore verbal learning, prevention of certain diseases, health recovery, and many other effects have been shown to positively impact those who listen to and make music. We even now know the ear is active already in the womb, which means music impacts the unborn baby human.

Christians own this whole reality! Prophets and kings in the Old Testament, apostles in the New Testament, and the Church Fathers in the early centuries of Christianity sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to teach, comfort, encourage, inspire, admonish, and even terrify people with the truths of Holy Scripture. And here is the best and most excellent wedding—of God's Word and music that edifies the ear, the brain, the mind, the heart, and the spirit.

But here we must interrupt the blessed tenor of our thoughts so far to acknowledge another reality—every gift of God can be used to confess His holy name and truths, or it can be misused and abused by perversion. For this same gift that can teach and guide a God-pleasing morality and ethic, can also promote idolatry, rebellion, hatred and murder, sexual immorality, prejudice, fraud, and slander. For every accomplished musician like King David, Martin Luther, Johann Sebastian Bach, and countless others since, there always seems to be a higher number of talented poets, lyricists, and composers to tempt, encourage, and equip the sinful nature in us.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformer Martin Luther reclaimed and restored the gift of music to the Church, instructing and preparing with patience congregational members to respond to God's Word in singing with their own voices psalms and hymns. Luther, himself both an accomplished



hymn writer and a master of public promotion, injected meaningful energy in worship, in the daily family household, and in community politics. He said, “next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise...for what more effective means than music could you find?”

In Pickler Memorial Library at Truman State University here in our own Missouri District, the student of hymnody can see the first source of a decades-long project called “The Dictionary of American Hymnology.” There is an index of the first line of hymns from 1649 to 1978, with a supplement index from 1978 to present. There is a bibliography of some 5000 hymnals published in America, an author file, and a biographical file. It is only an estimate that some 1.5 million Christian hymns and songs have been published! Along with continuing record numbers of publications and sales of Bibles, Christian books, and sermons, the proliferation itself points to what God’s Word tells us about Christ’s unending energy and work through His people on earth to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching.”

The hymnody of the Christian Church serves: the proclamation of the Gospel within the Church and into the world; the confession of divine Truth as it is revealed in Holy Scripture; the faithful teaching of Biblical doctrine for the spiritual nourishment of believers; and, the witness of a faithful practice shaped by the Word. These are primary. But our church music and hymnody should also be conducted, performed, and presented by us poor and miserable sinful people with the highest standards of truth, beauty, and goodness we can muster with the help of God.

And, finally, as we sing God’s Word, let us faithfully and boldly be the Church—the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church! Here we have nothing new of ourselves. Here we inherit Christianity’s living legacy.

The Christian Church is one, united, living Body of Christ. The content of our worship, teaching, and witness should not be contradictory, competitive, confusing, or compromising.

The Christian’s holiness is not of its members, but of its Head—Jesus Christ—whose divine perfection and holy life on earth is given to be ours by faith. And so our public witness sets both minds and hearts on things above. We purposefully distinguish ourselves above the levels of the secular modes and melodies. With the rich legacy of music we have inherited and the prolific production of Christian music happening today, our task is doable with discretion.

The catholicity of the Church is supported by a recognition that all Christian hymns and songs that are faithful to Biblical doctrine and do not do harm to faithful witness and practice may well be considered the hymnody of the Church at any one time in history. This is a global reality. The question arises, “who determines what is faithful?” The question is wrong! The question is “what determines?” The answer is Christ and His Word. No, He Himself personally in His own handwriting on the wall, will not send a new revelation that designs one new hymnbook in every language for us to use. Yet what He has clearly said and preserved in His Word, His continuing and constant presence in Word and Sacrament, and the always-working Holy Spirit will enlighten and guide, correct and throw away, and add and subtract as time goes on.

Catholicity also invites us to acknowledge, again, our unity. Singing the hymnody



of other cultures and other eras is a powerful and consistent way to celebrate that the Church on earth is indeed one people. (This has always been a powerful reality when I have been blessed to attend as a visitor Christian worship services away from America; most interestingly was a 2011 Pentecost service in ancient Antioch, Turkey, where persecuted Christian refugees from Iran and other places were present.) It is also a powerful reminder that the Church on earth and the souls in heaven are united, awaiting the return of Jesus and the culmination of our deliverance and restoration.

To remain apostolic simply means that the absolute source and norm of our doctrine and teaching be and remain the Holy Scriptures, the inspired Word of God without error. So we also submit ourselves to such review and criticism of the lyrics and music. Lyrics that teach Arminian (decision) theology, that would deny or leave vague the reality and miracle of the sacraments, or would include other false doctrine have no place in our hymns and songs. In other particulars around music, there can be acceptance and even disagreement. For example, a debate over a more secular melody or tone may take place without condemnation or division. (A faithful, beloved brother once burst one of my cherished bubbles—inviting me to hum a resurrection hymn in LSB (480), and notice how it sounds a lot like a popular secular 1884 song “O My Darling Clementine”—say it ain’t so CFW!) On the other hand, I found sad a mission congregation almost two decades ago that threw away the Lutheran liturgy and hymnody, producing its own songbook (about 40 songs written in the 1970s and 1980s). All except a few of the songs were faithful in lyric content to Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions. All but a few represented one strand of American Christianity—evangelical neo-Pentecostalism—from that time known as the “Me Decade.” When Lutheran Service Book was published in 2006, some of the best hymns of this strand that had staying power and had been used in many other denominations were included.

Rather than focusing on two or three points in this article—and more fully explaining them—this article contains several principles and suggestions without elaboration, leaving the reader to find those most useful to further pursue and/or to find those to question, in the process furthering understanding for continued discussion.

Let us end where we began—God’s gift of music to us. Could this gift be one of the breaths of life. We eat and drink so that we do not physically die of hunger and thirst. Perhaps we sing so we can hear ourselves live by God’s gracious preservation.