

## The Gospel and Worship

The Rev. Stephen R. Bartelt  
October 1997

Presented to the Lutheran Church of Kazakstan  
Reformation Lecture Series  
Lecture IV

In this lecture we are going to depart from our historical presentation of the Reformation to discuss Luther's ideas and principles on worship and music. Luther was a pioneer in helping people to worship God in language they could understand. Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people, using principles of translation that enabled people easily to understand the Word of God. Similarly, Luther advocated worship in the German language for those who could not understand the historical Latin service. He understood well that singing the Gospel was important for people.

In this lecture, we shall take a look at Luther as a musician. We shall examine the principles behind his German service and take a look at Luther's thought on the liturgy. We shall discuss Luther's principles and contributions in the area of church hymnody and music. Dr. Carl Schalk, a professor at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois, has prepared a monograph called *Luther on Music*. Our theological discussion of Luther's musical ideas and innovations will be based largely on the work of Dr. Schalk. I will be leaving a copy of this booklet for your library here.

Martin Luther truly lived with music ringing in his ears. From his student days of singing to support himself, to the rich heritage of church music he heard and sung as a monk and priest, to his own songs and hymns, Luther was a musical person. He saw music as a gift of God to be used in praise and proclamation. He commended music and saw its benefits to people. He saw how it could move the hearts and minds of people. Unlike some of the more radical reformers who removed music from the worship of God's people, Luther gave music the highest place in worship, second only to the Word of God.

For Luther there was a place both for the most artistic forms of music and for the simple music of the people. He encouraged the teaching and singing of the most sophisticated musical forms of his day, such as Gregorian chant and polyphony. These were usually performed, and the congregation listened. But Luther also saw a need for people to sing the Gospel, and to sing it in ways that were meaningful to them. He advocated simpler hymns that the people themselves could sing. He wrote and encouraged others to write both texts that spoke of the Gospel and tunes that were singable and appealing to people.

Luther's introduction to music occurred early in his life. He recalls his mother singing to him as a child. But whatever music there may have been in his home, there is no doubt that music was a large part of Luther's early education. Luther began his schooling in the town of Mansfeld, where his parents had moved shortly after his birth in Eisleben. In the schools of that time, four subjects were taught: reading, writing, singing, and Latin. We know that Luther learned two things most thoroughly in those early days: singing and Latin. Singing was stressed at Mansfeld, because the students were required to sing in all church services, processions, and religious festivals. Already as a youth, Luther learned the words and music to the historic Mass as well as the ancient hymns of the church. The students learned the basics of music theory. They learned the Psalm tones that were the basis of most liturgical chant of the day. As an advanced student Luther would even have learned counterpoint and multiple part singing. It is significant to note that the instruction was given for the purpose of preparing the students to participate in worship. His teachers understood the historic liturgy and prepared the students to be part of the worship life of the community.

Luther continued his education briefly at Magdeburg and then went on for his upper level instruction at Eisenach. He was about 15 years old at the time. There he joined a school choir that sang for stipends at the weddings and funerals of the wealthy and also went from house to house singing and begging for alms. In short, Luther sang his way through school. It was fairly common for students to do this in order to earn their support. Luther stayed in the Cotta residence. According to a well-embellished story, Mrs. Cotta was so impressed with Luther's singing that she took him in. In 1501 Luther entered the University of Erfurt, where music was one of the four sciences to be studied as part of a liberal arts curriculum, along with geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy. These sciences added a dimension to the curriculum which was heavy in natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaphysics. One of Luther's fellow students remembered him from those days as "the musician and erudite philosopher of our old circle." Music and singing were certainly part of what students did when they would get together socially.

Music became an even larger part of Luther's life after he entered the monastery. Monks were required to participate in seven daily prayer services. Most of the liturgy of these services was sung or chanted. The Augustinian Order, which Luther joined, was famous for the way its members sang the Psalms. Luther was an eager singer, often singing so much that he had little time remaining for his studies and prayers.

There is no doubt that as a young priest and professor Luther was well trained also in music. It was a part of his life, and a part of his life that he loved and appreciated.

In those days, the theory of music was far different from today. In its highest form, music was part of philosophy. The "music of the spheres" was related to the harmony and the symmetry to be found in the way things are. It was part of the unity of motion found in the stars and the planets. It had little or nothing to do with performance: singing and the playing of instruments. Luther turned this idea around. For Luther as a

theologian, music was not primarily a matter of philosophy or speculation. Music was a practical art, closely tied to theology and its goal of the praise of the Creator and the proclamation of the Word. Luther changed the course of musical thinking from music as a speculative science to music as a performed art. Luther said that music is a practical art that “is the constant resounding praise of God and his creation . . . [and] leads the man who practices it to God, teaches him to understand better God’s Word, . . . and prepares him for the reception of divine grace, while making him a better man and a happy Christian and driving out the devil and all vices.”

Luther demonstrated this new view of music in his personal participation in music making, his acquaintance and collaboration with musicians and composers, his encouragement of adequate funding for church music, his own writing of hymns and liturgical music, and his encouragement of musical training for both children and especially for pastors and teachers in the church.

There is no doubt that Luther’s life as an adult was still filled with music. There are many references to the presence of music in Luther’s home in the 1530’s. Luther would often accompany singing on the lute. He played the flute, as well. Whoever shared a meal in the Luther home would often share in singing afterwards. Luther described his own participation in what he called his “small, stupid tenor voice.” Luther remarked, “We sing as well as we can here at table and afterward. If we make a few blunders, it is really . . . our ability, which is still very slight even if we have sung [the piece] over two or three times. . . . Therefore you composers must pardon us if we make blunders in your songs, for we would much rather do them well than badly.”

Luther was well acquainted with the music of his day and with many prominent composers as well. His favorite composer seems to have been Josquin des Prez. In an interesting comment that helps illustrate how much Luther appreciated the freedom of the Gospel, Luther commented on the Gospel-like quality of Josquin’s music. It is significant that Luther is here referring not to the message of the words, but to the style and composition of the music itself. “What is law doesn’t make progress, but what is gospel does. 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, and are like the song of the finch.” A similar commentary on law and gospel in music is evident from a quote about an organist whose performance Luther criticized. “That ‘the law works wrath’ is evidenced by the fact that Joerg Planck plays better when he plays for himself than when he plays for others; for what he does to please others, sounds ‘from the law’ and where there is law there is lack of joy; where there is grace there is joy.” In a letter to Louis Senfl, another famous contemporary composer, Luther explains his views on the spiritual value of music: “I . . . affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely a calm and joyful disposition. Manifest proof [of this is the fact] that the devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight

at the word of theology. This is the reason why the prophets . . . held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed the truth through Psalms and songs.”

In the Reformation movement itself there were several prominent musicians who were to have an influence on early Lutheran church music. Johann Walter was the first Lutheran cantor. In 1525 Luther asked for Walter’s help in preparing the music for his German Mass of 1526. Georg Rhau moved to Wittenberg and was one of the primary leaders in the publication of music for use in Lutheran circles.

Luther also argued for the financial support of musicians and choirs. He appealed to the nobility of his day to support musicians both in their courts and in the church. To do so, according to Luther, was a good work to the glory of God. To do less would be a betrayal of the use of God’s good gift in the service of His people.

Luther had interest in writing hymns and liturgical music. He had specific suggestions to make regarding both texts and tunes, and Luther did not hesitate to try to offer examples and models for what he had in mind. In 1523 Luther outlined his ideas for German hymnody in a request to George Spalatin for help in providing texts: “[Our] plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the] vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music. . . . But I would like you to avoid any new words or the language used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and the most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be clear and as close as possible to the psalm. You need a free hand here: maintain the sense, but don’t cling to the words; [rather] translate them with other appropriate words.” Tunes came from a variety of sources: (1) the older chants and the ancient Latin hymns, (2) folk tunes and carol tunes with which the people were already familiar, (3) existing German hymns, and (4) newly composed tunes. The German Meistersinger tradition prescribed that poet and tune writer were one and the same person. To some extent, this remained true for Luther and others. It is generally acknowledged that Luther wrote the words and music to at least three hymns: “We All Believe in One True God,” “A Mighty Fortress,” and “Isaiah, Mighty Seer in Days of Old.”

What was true for hymnody was also true for the worship service itself. In 1525 Luther was contemplating a German worship service. His would not be the first, however. There were a number of previous attempts to do the service in German, the earliest known one already in 1522. Luther was concerned that many of these early services did not take into account the difference between the Latin and German languages. In many instances, the German texts were superimposed upon the melodies that had supported the Latin texts. He was aware of the problems that this caused. Luther maintained that introducing a German mass was more than a matter of translating the text. It required the creation of a new music adapted to the speech rhythm of the German language. He wrote: “I would gladly have a German mass today. I am also occupied with it. But I would very much like it to have a true German character. For to translate

the Latin text and retain the Latin tone or notes has my sanction, though it doesn't sound polished or well done. Both the text and notes, accent, melody, and manner of rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection, otherwise all of it becomes an imitation, in the manner of apes." As we already said, Luther called upon his friend Johann Walter and also Konrad Rupsch to come to Wittenberg to assist him in preparing the German service. Luther himself had specific opinions on the music to be used. Luther was concerned that the music fit the words. He was concerned with the natural flow of the poetic text and that the meter and words of the text match the meter and flow of the music. Luther seemed to have a natural gift for doing just that.

On October 29, 1525, the first completely German service in Wittenberg was held. On Christmas Day, 1525, Luther's service was definitively introduced and appeared in print early in 1526. Luther was concerned, however, that what he did would ultimately be used legalistically. Though Luther was interested in a high level of uniformity when it came to rites and ceremonies, he was also concerned about individual liberty and choice. Balance seems to be the key in Luther's approach. He did want his Mass to become something forced upon people. Yet, he saw abuses and self-interest in some of the other work being done to reform the liturgy. In the preface to his German Mass, Luther wrote: "Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or to legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for everyone makes his own order of service. Some have the best of intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers—as is always the case with Christian liberty; very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most use it for their own advantage and pleasure. But while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone's conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man."

Luther did not demand that the Latin service end. He wanted it to continue where it could be understood and appreciated. Latin was still the language of education, and the youth who learned it should continue to appreciate the ability to worship in Latin. Luther also wanted the Latin worship to continue so that there would be a cultural bridge to other people. His concern was for the outreach of the Gospel to people everywhere. Luther was critical of the followers of John Hus who insisted that the only way to worship was to learn the language of Bohemia. As an historical footnote, a similar situation arose in the early days of Lutheranism in North America, when Lutherans with good intentions tried to reach out to the native Americans in Michigan. Their problem was that they insisted that the native Americans learn German first. Luther stated: "I would rather train such youth and folk who could also be of service to Christ in foreign lands and be able to converse with the people there . . . . The Holy Spirit gave manifold tongues for the office of the ministry, so that the apostles could preach wherever they might go. I prefer to

follow this example. It is also reasonable that the young should be trained in many languages; for who knows how God may use them in times to come?” As a second footnote, I believe there is an application of Luther’s principle to you and your work on behalf of the Gospel in Kazakstan. We in the United States are struggling right now with the realization that much of what we have inherited from the time of the Reformation in texts and tunes does not seem to speaking the language and melody of 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans. Luther’s principle may have value for both your culture and the United States culture as we both seek to speak and sing the Gospel with our own contemporaries. In Luther’s day a quality German service was necessary because it was what the people needed simply because most of them could not understand the Latin service. It was Luther’s idea to get those who could write simple, clear, and artistic texts to work together with those who could compose and arrange the music of the people and let them produce quality worship materials in the language of the common people. His own work demonstrates those same qualities. I believe the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require much of the same all over the world.

That same concern, however, did not mean that Luther was interested in appealing to the lowest possible level. Luther was concerned also with education and with education in music. He advocated musical instruction in the schools of his day. It was his hope that the instruction of the young would raise the overall levels of music and worship in society as a whole. The youth would learn in school. What they did in response to their instruction would teach the adults. “The common people will learn from the pupils what, when, and how to sing and pray in church. . . . When the pupils kneel and fold their hands as the schoolmaster beats time with his baton . . . , the common people will imitate them.” Similarly, Luther was a strong advocate for the musical training of pastors and teachers so that they could meet their responsibilities for leading the public worship of the church.

Dr. Carl Schalk summarizes the thinking of Luther on music in terms of what he calls five paradigms of praise. There are certain themes, certain models of thought or ways of thinking about music that Luther raised to a position of decisive importance. These five pivotal understandings helped shape the music of the church of the Reformation for years to come. Those of us who still follow in the tradition of the reformer can find much application from these paradigms to the state of music in the church of today. The five paradigms or themes are the following: (1) music as God’s creation and gift; (2) music as proclamation and praise; (3) music as liturgical song; (4) music as the song of royal priests; and (5) music as a sign of continuity with the whole church.

Luther’s understanding of music as God’s creation and gift stands in stark contrast to the role of music commonly regarded in church in the late Middle Ages. Music was often thought of as a teacher or as a guardian of morals. The idea of music as teacher reflected the continuing need of the church for indoctrination. The idea of music as a guardian of morals arose from a philosophical understanding of music that went back to Plato and Aristotle. Music was thought to have a secret power to move the heart either

for evil or good. Luther did not deny these earlier models. He commended the singing of hymns and songs “so that God’s Word and Christian teaching might be instilled and implanted in many ways.” He went on to say that the songs would teach the young something of value. Luther, however, went to a more basic and fundamental paradigm that encompassed and went beyond both of these earlier models. For Luther music was fundamentally a creation and gift of God. “I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is. . . . At the same time you may by this creation accustom yourself to recognize and praise the Creator.” Luther accepted music and the arts as something that came from God and should be used for God. “Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts . . . But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them.” For Luther music was part of the way in which the world was made. It is the good and gracious gift of God the Creator, given to humanity that we might in turn use it in God’s praise and in the proclamation of the Gospel. Because music could be used in the praise of God, there was a place in Luther’s system for the most artistic and highly developed music as well as the simple hymn of the people. There was a place for music demanding the skilled singing and playing of trained musicians, and there was a place for simple congregational song that any Christian could sing. In emphasizing music as God’s creation and as God’s gift to people to use in His praise and adoration, Luther set the stage for the freedom of composers, congregations, choirs, and instrumentalists to develop their talents and abilities to the highest degree possible. The music that developed in the Lutheran tradition is eloquent testimony that the church, together with its musicians, found Luther’s paradigm of music as creation and gift of God to be a preeminent constructive element in the development of a rich musical culture in which to live, work, play, and praise their God.

Luther recognized that God gave this gift of music to the church for a particular purposes. For Luther, the purpose was two-fold. The chief function of music in worship as well as throughout the Christian life was doxological proclamation. It is doxological in that it is praise to the Creator from whom all good things come. It is proclamation in that it glorifies the work of Jesus Christ in redeeming the world and speaks this glorious gospel to people. A few quotes from Luther: “It was not without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener’s soul. . . . After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both words and music, namely, by proclaiming the Word of God through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.” “God’s Word is presented so powerfully, lucidly, and clearly in preaching, singing, writing, and painting that they must concede it is the true Word of God.” But what is proclaimed is also important. Luther said, “I have no one to sing and chant about but Christ, in whom alone I have everything. Him alone I proclaim, in Him alone I glory, for He has become my Salvation, that is, my victory.” The proclamation is missionary in intent. The Christian can not remain silent. He must speak and sing of the salvation of Christ so that others can hear and believe. “God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the

devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others may come and hear it.” Schalk concludes: Music as praise and doxological proclamation was a second powerful paradigm in Luther’s thought about music in the life of God’s people. It was, in a sense, a logical step from the understanding of music as God’s good creation and as God’s good gift to people. In contrast to some other reformers, who saw music as always potentially troublesome and in need of careful control and direction, Luther, in the freedom of the Gospel, could exult in this good gift of God, rejoice in its power to praise its Creator, and glory in its ability to touch the heart and mind of people as it proclaimed the Gospel.

Luther saw music in worship as functioning within the framework of the historic liturgy. He was basically conservative in retaining the historic worship structure, changing only those portions that conflicted with the Gospel. In so doing, Luther was recognizing the continuity of the reformation with the historic church. Luther retained vestments, candles, ceremonies, anything good from the liturgical heritage of the church. Luther said, “It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God.” In light of this, it is easy to understand that Luther wanted to retain the historic liturgy with its sung or chanted lessons, collects, Creed, and similar elements of the service. Luther desired that the service continue to be sung. Even Luther’s restoration of congregational singing was not unrelated from the liturgy. For Luther, the congregational hymn was often a way for involving people in the singing of the liturgy. In fact, many of Luther’s early hymns were associated with the parts of the service. In Luther’s thought, when people sang his creedal hymn (“We All Believe in One True God”), they were not singing a poor second choice for the prose text of the Creed. They were in reality singing the Creed with a text and a musical vehicle specifically suited to the demands of congregational singing. The hymn was not some generic participation in worship. It was a means to enable the congregation to participate specifically in the liturgy of the Western Catholic tradition, a tradition which the Augsburg Confession in Article 24 states “was retained among us and is celebrated with the highest reverence.”

Luther also related the necessity of congregational participation in worship as a logical consequence of the doctrine of the royal priesthood of all believers. The idea is found in I Peter 2:9, where the apostle reminds Christians that they are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” For Luther this had an obvious connection with the role of music and worship as praise and proclamation. All Christians have free access to God through the one mediator, Jesus Christ. They did not need to go through a priest in the sense in which the medieval church believed. Jesus did it all—and what he did was available to each and every believer. By that same reasoning, praise, proclamation, and adoration were not to be limited to priests, choirs, and leaders in worship. The whole people of God were to be involved in these privileges. No longer was the congregation to be passive in worship but active participants in the liturgy. All were to be involved. All were encouraged to participate. Luther said, “God wants to hear the throngs and not me or you alone, or a single isolated Pharisee. Therefore sing with the congregation and you will sing well.

Even if your singing is not melodious, it will be swallowed up by the crowd. But if you sing alone you will have your critics.” In Luther’s thought the choir was not there for the sake of performance. It was there as a part of the gathered congregation to serve the congregation in its own unique way. Worship was the collective work of the people of God, not an act of individual or private piety. Worship was the assembly of royal priests exercising their common priesthood in praise, proclamation, and prayer both on their own behalf and on behalf of the whole world. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers also required that all present give their best in praise and proclamation. As in all of life, those who were strong should strengthen the weak and so help all to offer their best.

Finally, Luther viewed continuity with the practice of the whole church to be an important factor in shaping the music and worship of God’s people. The Swiss reformers, for example, tried to emphasize their differences from the historic church. They disposed of relics, removed paintings, destroyed statues, removed vestments and elaborate service books, and closed or dismantled organs. Zwingli even made this extreme comment, which was modified somewhat by his later followers, “No music of any kind would resound in the churches again; the people were to give ear to the Word of God alone.” Luther, on the other hand, sought to affirm the continuity of the Reformation movement with the historic and universal church. This had implications both for liturgical forms and for musical practice. To try to go it alone would be for the church to cut itself off from the mutual edification of the whole company of saints. The present generation isn’t the only generation of royal priests. To accept the gifts of tradition was, for Luther, to be linked with Christians of other times and other places and to be reminded in a unique way that the church of his day was indeed part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic company of saints.

Dr. Carl Schalk wrote his monograph *Luther on Music* almost 10 years ago. In his final chapter he drew some implications for the modern world. Even though these are now almost ten years old, there is still food for thought in what Schalk suggested. In the final minutes of this presentation, it would be well for us to consider a few of them.

First, the primary paradigm for music in the life of the church is the creation and gift of God. What other models are competing for primacy in today’s church? Schalk suggests that perhaps two widely held ideas might be in conflict with Luther’s paradigm. One is the paradigm that regards music as a teacher. The primary purpose of music, Schalk suggests, is not to fill people with useful information about God or people. True, it does instruct, but there is a danger when this model becomes its primary intent. The other, perhaps even more serious, is the idea that music is primarily entertainment. This reduces the congregation again to being just a spectator in worship. It leads toward structuring the music of worship to that which “attracts people,” rather than gives praise and glory to God.

Second, the paradigm of music as proclamation affirms the function of music as the “living voice of the Gospel.” Music participates in the proclamation of the Word. It is part of worship not because it beautifies, but because it proclaims. Consequently, how

it is crafted, put together, created, is important. It is not the result of artistic inspiration. It is carefully constructed. It must precisely proclaim the truth of the Word. It takes skill and time to create such music.

If church music is a function of liturgy, then music is not a mere addition to the service. Schalk calls for a return to what he calls “radical simplicity.” Music and musicians, as well as preachers, need to place themselves under the discipline of the liturgy. This discipline is radical in the sense that it is a return to the root or source of things. This discipline is simple in the sense that it is not pretentious or assuming. In other words, music underscores liturgy and liturgical action. It does not detract from it or place itself over it.

If the music of worship is part of the exercise of the people’s royal priesthood, then church music is not primarily something one listens to but something in which the faithful participate. We come to worship to be involved. There is still a place for the choir and soloists, of course, but as they proclaim the Word in song, the faithful will be hearing and applying that Word just as they do when the sermon is preached. Musicians constantly need to keep in mind as they both compose and prepare music for worship that the ultimate purpose is involvement of God’s people.

Finally, Luther saw continuity with the whole church as a crucial element in shaping the music and worship of the people of God. Continuity goes in all directions, however, the past, the present, and though Schalk doesn’t say it, the future as well. Schalk does suggest five implications of this paradigm. First, we receive with thanks the heritage of music from the past as God’s gift to us. Second, we avoid, whenever possible, going our own way in matters of worship and church music. Third, we emphasize those aspects of our worship and musical life that we hold in common with Christians everywhere. What now exists in common among all Christians is far greater than at any time in the past. Fourth, we are always open to the new, not just for the sake of novelty, but because we recognize that the Spirit has not ceased to work among musicians today. Finally, we should not hang on to the substance of the past just because it came from our unique denominational heritage. We may have to give up some of our cultural heritage for the sake of continuity with the whole Christian church.

Schalk concludes: Such then are some aspects of the promise of Luther for our own day. Much will depend on whether we treat Luther as a plaster saint that we bring down from the shelf occasionally to bless a current project or concern only to place him back on the shelf once he has served our purpose, or whether we let his thinking about worship and music penetrate our parish practices in practical and provocative ways.