

INTRODUCTION

THE HYMNAL IN *EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP*

A hymnal companion is a barrage of details. That is not surprising, since a hymnal is composed of many details, and a companion is intended to bring them into view. A hymnal is not just details, however. It is a whole with coherences that hold it together. My original intent was to stop along the way in this companion, at the ends of each heading perhaps, to pause and look at the whole. That made too many pauses and wasted space by repeating some things with minor variations. It also delayed and buried what might be better said with more visibility at the outset in one place. This preface is the result.

A denominational hymnal is a series of checks and balances necessitated by conflicting requirements and desires. What hymns and tunes from the denomination's traditions should be included? What worthy newer possibilities should be tried from within the traditions and from outside them? What older hymns and tunes are no longer used and need to be dropped? What older ones deserve to be kept or retrieved for future generations even if our present tastes do not incline to them? What is fitting language for worship, for God, for humanity? What more archaic or more vernacular expressions are to be used? What editorial changes need to be made in texts and translations? What is fitting music for worship? What tunes need to be kept, dropped, or modified?

These are interesting questions. They provide fodder for engaging theoretical discussions without pressing consequences. A class, for example, can and should pursue discussions of these questions for the learning it breeds. A representative group that prepares a hymnal, however, does not have the luxury of theoretical discussions or the classroom. It has to make choices. The choices are not only related to how each hymn and tune is edited; they concern the hymns and the tunes themselves. Only a limited number is possible for any portion of the Christian community that is always finite. A hymnal is a cue card for a people's memory. It is not an anthology. How many hymns will be included? Which ones?

Since I was not on any of the committees that prepared *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, I have the luxury of analyzing it not on the basis of what was intended but on the basis of what is in it—intended or not.⁹ What is in it?

1. This is clearly a book that expresses the trinitarian faith of the church catholic. A symbol of this is the doxology to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which

⁹ After I had finished the Companion and submitted it to the publisher, I saw the "Guiding Principles and Goals" of the Hymnody Editorial Team. They are included on page 833.

not only concludes many of the hymns but is implicit throughout, as are the ecumenical creeds.

2. This is clearly a Lutheran confessional book. The merciful God we know by grace through faith is celebrated in various forms of confession, doxology and petition, praise and lament, with a multiplicity of imagery.
3. The themes of the various sections of the hymnal organize the hymns and give them shape as a whole, though because hymns are so multivalent they transcend the sectional divisions.
4. The overriding theme of each section holds together many themes. Advent, for example, includes announcing, rejoicing at, and waiting for Christ who came, is present among us, and will come again, and who brings peace, justice, truth, love, and freedom.
5. The themes of the various sections join together with many more themes. The totality, as for individual hymns themselves, transcends both the parts and the whole. Hymnody is synthetic, not systematic. By its very nature, its individual parts and its whole draw together many connections in a totality about the Christian faith that is fundamentally doxological and cannot be easily systematized.
6. We have theology here therefore, but it is not theology carried out the way systematicians do it. That has its place, just as this does. Here we deal with synthetic theology in sounding proclamatory form via singing congregations, with a cue card called a hymnal that stands in a Lutheran stream dating back to 1524. In that stream is found the work of Luther, Nicolai, Gerhardt, Crüger, and others, translated through Winkworth and others. Lutherans are not the only ones with such a stream. The Eastern Church has John of Damascus and a massive hymnological treasury.¹⁰ The Western church before the Reformation has Ambrose, breviaries, sequences, and *Leisen*. From the Reformation, Calvinists have metrical psalters. Anabaptists have martyr ballads. English Baptists, after overcoming their antipathy to singing, developed their collections. After the Reformation, Methodists have, in John Wesley's words about his hymnal, "a little body of experimental and practical divinity."¹¹ Anglicans have *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Groups too numerous to mention have contributed and continue to add more. Underneath all of these streams flows the wonder of the whole. The whole treasury is available to us though beyond us. Our hymnals—*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* included—point to what transcends them.

10 See H. Leigh Bennett, "Greek Hymnology," *The Christian Remembrancer* 39 (April 1859): 292–293.

11 Wesley, "Preface" to *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of People Called Methodists* (1780) in Hildebrandt and Breckerlegge, *The Works of John Wesley* (1983), 7:74.

7. Liturgically this hymnic treasury fits a huge mosaic. Around God's word publicly read, psalms and their christocentric progeny at the gospel acclamation sing the story that the readings and their proclamation parse throughout the church year piece by piece. Around the table, the Sanctus sings the holiness of the one who graces the meal. Hymnody explores these themes in the hymn of the day and the song at the meal, binds itself around the Lord's Day service like bookends, explores the rhythm of day and night at daily prayer all week long, and pushes into every nook and cranny of the Christian message as it lives itself out into the world's needs, generation after generation.
8. This hymnal is not about that mosaic's choral treasury, which includes works by an enormous stream of composers like Hildegard, Machaut, Palestrina, Schütz, Bach, Brahms, Poulenc, or Ives, where the mystery of the faith has been explored in lengthier musical ways both in and out of the liturgical context. Such a limitation should not blind us to the potency of the expressions that are here in briefer miniature and incipient forms.
9. The Scandinavian and Germanic heritages, with their Latin background and subsequent English and Anglo-American envelopes, form a core here, as one should expect from a hymnal with the ethnic backgrounds of this one; but various other ethnic materials are welcomed in the spirit of the church's universality. The Advent section, for example, includes Yiddish, Korean, Cameroon, French, Italian, Basque, and Catalan contributions. The Christmas section includes Irish, Chinese, Native American, French, African American, Malawi, and Catalan ones.
10. This hymnal is filled with many contributions from people who are active among us in our time and place, as one should expect, since God addresses us now. It is also filled with contributions from people of many times and places, since we are united with the baptized who have gone before us and have given us their gifts. For Advent at least eight centuries and seventeen countries are included, for Christmas at least nine centuries and fourteen countries.
11. Like the church itself, men and women of high and low degree are contributors here, from many walks of life.
12. Again like the church itself, a variety of talents is welcomed. Some of the church's finest hymn writers, translators, composers, and arrangers are represented with multiple entries, but so are little-known people who may have made but a single contribution. What the church has found enduring is here, and so are newer expressions that may or may not last.

13. Again, like the church itself, this worship book is consistently inconsistent. Mostly it tries to use our vernacular as one would expect a Lutheran book to do, but sometimes it uses Elizabethan English. For the sake of justice it seeks to use all-embracing language, but it sometimes prints two versions of a hymn, one of which may not be considered inclusive but which deserves to be included because of the value of the memory bank and its own matters of justice. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* tries to align itself with the most common ecumenical uses, but it keeps uniquely Lutheran features. A variety of musical styles are present. I take this to mean that no individual or group completely got his or her own way as this book was being fashioned. It represents the current and sometimes confusing state of our life together, with a salutary series of checks and balances.
14. Like all good hymnals and like the church itself, this worship book represents a remarkable variety and diversity, not only of styles, but from the ephemeral and experimental to the durable and well-worn, from what is fundamentally congregational with a push here and there to what is choral and soloistic, and from a wide variety of different theological and liturgical opinions and traditions. (One learns that, though there are some important differences that have to be sorted out carefully and taken very seriously, most of the disputes that plague us have little or nothing to do with the substance of the faith and are inconsequential.) A hymnal has the unique capacity to pull this all together so that the richness of the church's evangelical and catholic being and doing is harnessed poetically and musically in usable ways, in this case through a Lutheran lens.
15. This variety and diversity has a danger. There are over 650 hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and over 530 tunes. Few, if any, congregations could or should attempt to sing all of that. A hymnal is not an anthology, and congregations are finite. While pressing beyond a core is a good thing, the core of a congregation's mnemonic base is also a good thing and a critical one if there is to be any song at all. There cannot be pressing beyond a core if the core does not exist. The stronger the core, the wider the pressing beyond it can be. Each congregation has to determine its makeup and what that means for the composition of its particular core of hymns.
16. The study of a hymnal like this one brings with it this mystery. To write about the people who have created these hymns and tunes for us is to witness a stream of faithful Christian witnesses, with all their foibles and weaknesses just like us, from across the church's history. There is something presumptuous about doing this. I, who know a little about some of these persons and less about most of them, am to find whatever sources I can assemble and synthesize in the space of a paragraph or two what we hope will be at least provisionally accurate about someone's whole life. Though presumptuous, it is profoundly right to do

this—to recall as best we can, with all our mistakes and misperceptions, this incredible congregation of the baptized carrying out their hymnic vocations. One stands in awe before it and before the God in whom they and we together dwell.

17. The church is often rightly criticized for doing awful things that do not fit its being, for not witnessing to what God has done, and for not carrying out its mandate to care for the neighbor or for social justice and peace. Those criticisms are often well-founded, need to be candidly acknowledged, and are apparent in these pages. But a study like this also reveals another side to the story. In the church's song and among those who sing it and make it possible, proclaiming the word, celebrating the sacraments, and caring for the other at individual and systemic levels are present everywhere. A study like this, as of worship and church music more generally, teaches us that the church is a community of faith that gathers in prayer and song around word of God, font, and table, and then embodies its song in individual and communal words and deeds—broken ones, to be sure, but healing ones that, like a potent mustard seed, are often unseen and more powerfully faithful than we are willing to admit. The song is tied to the church's living, and the health of the one relates to the health of the other.

18. Finally, this hymnal, like all good hymnals, suggests seriousness of purpose as the church continues day after day to take up its role in the world. Hymn singing is fun, or, perhaps, better, delightful play, just like all music-making. But it is not a mindless or entertaining diversion that gives the church a break from the really important stuff or serves as a manipulatively attractive ploy. It is the sounding form of the body of Christ, with its own discipline and integrity, gathered and refined from the riches of the church's practice over centuries, and laced with new things to be tried. It is not the easy superficiality to which the church is tempted and which the skeptics rightly deride. It is the communal doxology and edification that arise partly through the quotidian but also through the struggle with pain, doubt, despair, and sadness and through the exultation of joy, hope, healing, and new life. It comes from the tedious and delightful daily round, as well as from grappling with the faith and with God when God seems both absent and present. These are no small matters. They are what the church's song is about and lie in, with, and under it, sometimes like "grain that sleeps unseen." The church's song is as important as all the other things to which the church is called and gathers an unusually large number of connections to its living. It deserves the careful thought a hymnal companion implies and the intentional practice a faithful church is called to embody.

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