Music, Faith, and Spirituality in the Lutheran Tradition

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Music has been a part of Christian worship from the very beginning. After Christ celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples, they sang a hymn (Mt 26:30). Music figured prominently in the Old Testament, as David appointed musicians to serve in the house of God (1 Chr 25). And heavenly worship in Revelation is portrayed as being full of song (Rev 4 and 5).

At the same time the church has sometimes voiced concern that the power of music may not always be used for good. St. Augustine famously worried that he enjoyed music so much that it distracted him from the words, and so he was not sure whether music should be used in church.[1] Yet Luther had a high regard for music because it governs the emotions. He says, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions . . . which as masters govern men or more often overwhelm them."[2]

Given music's importance and undeniable power, it is worth thinking about what we are trying to do with it in worship. We speak about "formation" in the Christian life. Does that include formation of the emotions as well? In this short essay, I will look at some hymns from the 16th century to try to discern what Luther and early Lutherans thought faith felt like and how it fit into a Lutheran spirituality.

Some might think that this is not a question worth asking. When I was a seminary student, for example, I got the impression that Lutherans were actually opposed to feelings. It seemed that Lutherans thought that the Evangelicals were obsessed with feelings, while Lutherans know that our salvation depends on the promises of God, not on our emotions. I

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think it is unwise to ignore the emotions, however. I do believe that our salvation is based on the promises of God, not on our feelings, but those promises have content, and they elicit an emotional response. So, thinking about the emotional response is really a way of thinking about the content of the promises.

One reason I never bought into the polemic against emotions is that I am also a church organist. As such, I constantly think about things like the mood of the readings and the hymns so that I can pick a prelude and postlude that emotionally matches the theme of the service. I also choose alternate harmonizations for some hymn stanzas to better portray the mood of the text. It has always been clear to me that whatever we might imply or tell ourselves, emotions do in fact play a key role in our services.

I'm not suggesting a narrow list of approved emotions for Christians. Ironically, in terms of the breadth of different emotions, you might even say that Lutheran worship is more emotional than that of the Evangelicals. Evangelical worship is often structured around the categories of praise and worship, which are terms that refer to the emotional tenor of the music. Praise music is upbeat and energetic, while worship music is slower and more meditative.[3] The service often starts with praise music and then transitions to worship music. While the procedure used in these services is not scripted, the emotional journey is: first upbeat and then meditative. Lutheran worship provides a wider range of emotions for Christians to experience in church. To mention just one obvious example, Lutherans observe Lent. We experience sadness in church, which helps people to feel that sadness is an emotion that they can experience before God. It's not necessarily a sign that something is wrong with them spiritually.

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I don't mean to suggest that we want to limit the kinds of emotions we have in church. Nevertheless, I want to ask if there is a particular ideal emotional life that we want to hold up as an example. Put another way, for Lutherans, the Christian life is a life of faith. So what does faith feel like?

My observations about this come not from academic research on the topic, but from my own experience as a church organist and a professor of Systematic theology. There are some very fine academic studies, like Susan Karant-Nunn's *The Reformation of Feeling*.[4] She traces how medieval Catholic spirituality focused on reliving the sufferings of Christ in graphic detail, while Lutheran's focused on the emotion of comfort as a consequence of the Gospel. I see my observations as a supplement to hers. While she focuses on the texts of sermons, I want comment on the mood of the music itself. This is admittedly more subjective and so impossible to "prove," but I hope that it at least gets us thinking about

the question of the formation of the emotions and what we might want to try to do with that going forward.

Before we get to the music, however, I want to look at Luther's own description of spirituality. He says that the three things that make a theologian are *oratio, meditatio*, and *tentatio*.[5] The first two, prayer and meditation on a text of Scripture, come from the tradition of medieval monasticism. The third element, *tentatio*, or struggle, represents a significant break from the monastic tradition of spirituality. In monasticism, the goal of reading Scripture is to ascend to heaven. Through prayer and meditation, the soul leaves the constraints of the earthly and comes to experience God more directly. For Luther, on the other hand, prayer and meditation lead directly to the Christian life, which is one of struggle. This effectively reverses the direction of the spiritual exercises from a spiritual ascent into heaven to an incarnational descent into the world.

The key to this spirituality is to understand what he means by struggle. He has in mind not only struggle against sin and the devil, but struggle with God. Luther brings this out with particular clarity in comments in his "Lectures on Genesis" on Jacob wrestling with God, in which he examines the struggle of temptation from the perspective of the one suffering as well as from God's perspective.

Luther states, "God in His boundless goodness dealt very familiarly with His chosen patriarch Jacob and disciplined him as though playing with him in a kindly manner. But this playing means infinite grief and the greatest anguish of heart."[6] He goes on to say that:

> God plays with him to discipline and strengthen his faith just as a godly parent takes from his son an apple with which the boy was delighted, not that he should flee from his father or turn away from him but that he should rather be incited to embrace his father all the more and beseech him, saying, "My father, give back what you have taken away!" Then the father is delighted with this test, and the son, when he recovers the apple, loves his father more ardently on seeing that such love and child's play gives pleasure to the father.[7]

Now it is important to realize that what Luther is actually referring to here are the worst kinds of temptations to despair and unbelief. From the perspective of the one enduring such an attack, it is no child's play, but means "infinite grief and the greatest anguish of heart," as Luther puts it. Faith, then, involves battling against these experiences, as Jacob wrestled with God, and coming to view the struggle from God's perspective. This has direct implications for the question of what faith feels like.

Faith is not serene. Consider the hymns "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" (*Lutheran Service Book* [8][*LSB*] 555), "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice" (*LSB* 556), and "A Mighty Fortress" (*LSB* 656), all from the 16th century. Note that "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" and "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice" are both hymns that narrate the story of

God's salvation, but neither one has a melody that one might describe as "happy." The tunes do have a certain joy to them, but it is something more like the joy of joining a battle than the joy of feeling fulfilled in all aspects of life. It is very different from the warm and peaceful joy expressed by a hymn like "My Faith Looks Up to Thee" (*LSB* 702), for example. That is because the early Lutheran hymns arise from a spirituality focusing on the battle of faith.

"A Mighty Fortress" is cut from the same cloth, but there are actually two versions, which are quite different. *LSB* 656 is the version that Luther originally wrote. Like "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" and "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice," it has quite a bit of syncopation. That is part of what makes these hymns vigorous and tumultuous. By the 17th century, however, the rhythms of many Lutheran hymns were straightened out. *LSB* 657 is a version of "A Mighty Fortress" where the rhythm is even, not syncopated. To my ear, it is more grand and stately than the original, but it loses the mood of battle.

If we understand these early Lutheran hymns to be communicating boldness, that has implications for the tempo at which they are played and sung. If they go too slowly, they can come across as dirges. Therefore, they should be sung at a tempo fast enough to embody the boldness that they are meant to convey.

Moving beyond the hymns themselves, there are also Lutheran composers who operated with the same musical vocabulary. J.S. Bach is one composer who has deeply imbibed the spirit of boldness one finds in Luther's music. Any number of Bach's fugues could be mentioned as examples of this, but perhaps the one most explicitly tied to the notion of faith is the so-called "Credo Fugue" (BWV 680). This is a piece that is based on Luther's hymn, "We All Believe in One True God" (*LSB* 954). The theme, derived from the hymn tune, exudes confidence and the pedal theme doubles down on that mood.[9]

The portrayal of faith as boldness correlates, in my view, to the perspective of the person undergoing struggle as Luther describes it in his "Lectures on Genesis." Faith is a battle against unbelief, and the vigor of these hymns communicates a kind of joy at engaging this most important battle of our lives[10] in the face of grief and anguish of heart and whatever else life throws at us, (or God allows). That is not to say the Luther makes an explicit connection between his hymns and *tentatio*. To my knowledge he does not. But when I read his description of the Christian life and I play his hymns, they seem to fit together pretty well.

There are also other Lutheran hymns that seem to correspond more to Luther's perspective of the father playing family games with his children. These hymn tunes have a playful quality about them. They are hymns like, "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb" (*LSB* 740), "What is the World to Me?" (*LSB* 730), and "I Walk in Danger All the Way" (*LSB* 716). Here there is no battle in view, but only confidence in God's love which lets us frolic in peace and security. "I Walk in Danger All the Way" is a particularly interesting example

because the tune of the hymn actually fights against the words. If you just read the words, it sounds like we are in a fight to the death:

1. I walk in danger all the way.
   The thought shall never leave me
   That Satan, who has marked his prey,
   Is plotting to deceive me.
   This foe with hidden snares
   May seize me unawares
   If I should fail to watch and pray.
   I walk in danger all the way.

But the tune is utterly playful. In a way, this hymn embodies both perspectives of the Christian life that Luther outlines. And the tune, since it embodies God's perspective, gets the final word!

So, what is the take-away from all this? I think it is fundamentally a point about Lutheran spirituality, a spirituality which is described to us verbally in treatises like Luther's "Lectures on Genesis" and musically in tunes of Lutheran hymnody. The Christian life is a battle, particularly a battle against the temptation to unbelief and despair.

Whether or not these specific hymns are appropriate for any given mission setting, they do orient us and help us grapple with the question of what we are trying to do with music in worship. As Luther shows, one thing that music might do is to help people experience, on a gut level, both the bold grappling with the struggles of the Christian life and the playful confidence that we are really wrestling with our heavenly Father.

Endnotes

[1] St. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.33. See https://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/confessions/1033.html.
[2] Martin Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Iocundae,"* in *Luther's Works,* vol. 53, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), LW 53: 323.
[3] See Ruth Collingridge, "Women's Aglow Fellowship," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, vol. 4, bk.1, ed. Robert Webber (Nashville: Star Song, 1994): 14–15.
[4] Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[5] See John Kleinig, "*Oratio, meditatio*, and *tentation: What Makes a Theologian?"* in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66 No.3 (July 2002): 255–267.
[6] Martin Luther, Luther's Works 6, *Lectures on Genesis,* Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), LW 6: 130.
[7] LW 6:130.

[8] Commission on Worship, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).
[9] To see a video of the piece along with a discussion of the theology behind it, see https://concordiatheology.org/2019/10/bach-on-faith/.
[10] The battle imagery does not at all imply that we are saved by our own efforts in the battle, as the text of these hymns makes perfectly clear!