

The myth of Luther's barroom music and A Plea for a Theology of Church Music

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

How many times have you heard or read that Martin Luther borrowed the tune from a popular drinking song and used it for his best-known hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”? This myth has been debunked numerous times in books on church music and musicians, yet we still hear it repeated by speakers who should have done better research.

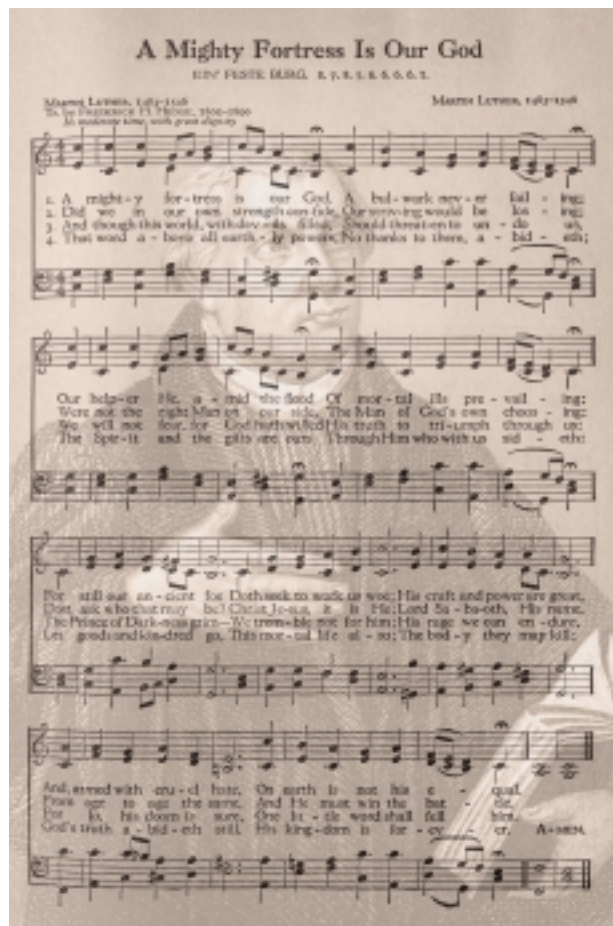
The Myth

Probably the best explanation for how this myth arose is found in David Music’s brief note, “Getting Luther Out of the Barroom.”¹ As Music patiently explains, early Lutheran tunes that included two identical musical phrases followed by a third contrasting phrase were examples of a musical structure known as *bar form*.²

We do not know who, upon reading that Luther wrote hymns in bar form, began to disseminate the notion that Luther (who enjoyed his glass of Wittenberg beer) collected his hymn tunes when he visited the local bar. Apparently it never occurred to this unknown mythmaker that the Germans in Luther’s day did not refer to a drinking establishment as a “bar.”

The Truth

Martin Luther was a knowledgeable and accomplished musician who regarded music alongside theology as vehicles by which God is praised.³ Luther and his successors undoubtedly used some borrowed tunes for the hymns they composed, but, as Music points out, this was not new



music, but old music: “Gregorian chant, medieval vernacular hymns, and secular folk songs.” Moreover, “One basic musical style served most functions, and the same composers wrote secular, sacred, popular, and art music. Luther’s hymns were designed for popular use, but were not radically different in style from the sacred art music of the time.”⁴

What is true of Luther’s music is generally the case for John Calvin, as well, despite the claim that Calvin “hired two secular songwriters to popularize his theology through popular music.”⁵ I have not been able to discover who these songwriters were, nor, indeed, anything at all to support this characterization, even after reading carefully the lengthy article on John Calvin in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

The Plea

The modern debate over appropriate music in the church has been widespread, heated, and often ill-informed. So here is my plea: If the music of our worship is important enough to generate intensive debate, let us work as carefully as we can to develop and articulate a theology of worship in our congregations. Here are some questions it might be well for us to consider:

- If we require our preaching ministers to be well-educated in Scripture, doctrine, church history, and preaching, should we not require our worship minis-

ters to be equally educated in Scripture and doctrine, but also in music and in the history and practice of worship?

- Why have so many church leaders and reformers insisted that congregational singing in unison is ideal? What are the theological implications of choirs, performance music, and musical instruments in worship?

- Is it important for the musical setting to agree with the text being sung? How can we recognize when this is happening and when it is not? Can music, even without words, be disciplined by theology?

- What should we be doing in our colleges and seminaries to prepare the future leaders of our congregations to be knowledgeable and skilled worship planners and leaders?

- What is the relationship between our theology and our use of technology? Since technology is never neutral in its effects, who is helping us think through the spiritual, psychological, and theological effects of the worship programs in our congregations?

- If one of the requirements of faithful Christian practice is the willingness to live together and worship together despite disagreements, what are the implications of providing one style of worship for one group in the church and a different style for another?

I should make it clear that I am not a trained musician, but I have visited the appropriate sections of the library where I teach often enough to know that there is a huge and valuable literature devoted to these and similar matters. Moreover, I know that we have in our colleges and seminaries people who are expert in the history and practice of worship and its music.

We look to the best preachers among us for advice on how to preach. We look to the best counselors for instruction on how to counsel. Are we looking to the experts for instruction on the preparation for and the conduct of worship, and especially the music of worship? Who is really in charge in our churches and what difference does it make?

¹*The Hymn* 45/4 (October 1994) 51.

²*Ibid.*

³*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 11, s.v. "Luther, Martin."

⁴*The Hymn*.

⁵Barry McMurtrie, "Nothing Can Separate Us From the Love of God," *CHRISTIAN STANDARD*, 15 September 2002, 4, 5.

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