

Most Certainly True

Learning Luther: a New Catechism Hymn

William A. Pasch and Robert J. Weaver

ONE OF THE MOST important traditions of the Lutheran Church is its emphasis on education about the faith in catechetical instruction, now almost exclusively a rite of passage for middle-schoolers in Confirmation classes. As Joseph Herl reminds us, however, in Luther's time adults were also required to learn and memorize the Small Catechism.¹ Also quintessentially Lutheran is congregational singing, which (as Herl points out) even predated the Reformation.²

Doubly Lutheran, then, is the long existence of a combination of these two traditions in *Katechismuslieder*: catechism songs. Both Herl and Robin Leaver³ remind us that as early as about 1530 the Catechism was the preaching focus of Sunday vespers, thereby reinforcing the importance of learning the Catechism for adults as well as for youth. Hymns sung at such services, then, would reflect what Leaver identifies as the function of all early Lutheran hymnody, "not only as worship songs, expressing the response of faith to be sung within a liturgical context, but also as theological songs, declaring the substance of the faith to be sung with catechetical intentions."⁴

As Luther recognized, the mnemonic appeal of the "Catechism Song" is compelling: we will more likely remember and "internalize" these important subjects of the faith if their imprint is deepened by multi-sensory stimulation, especially the musical effects of melody, rhythm and (often) rhyme.

Early catechism songs included Luther's own paraphrases of the Creed (*Wir glauben all an einen Gott*), the Lord's Prayer (*Vater unser*), and the Ten Commandments (*Dies sind die heil'gen Zehn Gebot*)—also reflecting the role of these particular texts as major components of Luther's Small Catechism. But "catechism songs" could also include any important

Christian instruction set for congregational singing: for example, Luther's hymn on the Gospel story of the Baptism of the Lord, *Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam* ("To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord").

Thus, the traditional "catechism song" is a hymn paraphrase of an important "primary" text: either a biblical passage or a doctrine (e.g., the Creed) deemed essential to learning the faith.

Less common, however, is the use of a "secondary text" as itself the basis of a teaching/learning hymn. The latter is the purpose of the hymn offered here: "Most Certainly True," whose text is a paraphrase of Luther's explanation of the Creed from the Small Catechism.

A setting of a catechetical explanation is not unique to this hymn. A recent collection called *Sing the Faith* with music by Phil Magness⁵ sets the entire Small Catechism to music. Luther's explanation of the Creed, for example, is divided into ten individual songs in varying musical styles. Calvinist tradition also offers a variety of explanatory catechism songs, including a number of recent settings of the elements of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

What "Most Certainly True" offers, however, is a single hymn paraphrasing the entirety of Luther's Explanation of the Creed. The tune is simple enough to encourage quick learning. The minor key tonality (though including a hint of the major toward the middle) lends folksong-like dignity to the simplicity. The "Trinitarian" organization of Luther's Creed explanation is reinforced in an option for a thrice-sung descant (super-adding an allusion to the famous "Here I stand" motto).

The hymn-friendliness of Luther's Explanation of the Creed owes to Luther's conciseness. Leaver points out that Luther settled on the

threefold division of the content of the Creed because of the clarity and simplicity that structure offers for use in teaching.⁶ Luther's explanation is especially well suited to a "catechism song" precisely because it is so central to Lutheran theology. Hardly a better distillation of the doctrine of justification by Grace through faith can be found.

While historically important to Lutheran worship, Creed hymns—and Creed explanation hymns—may be especially useful in 21st-century times when the Creed is often a "stumbling block" to "seekers" and "searchers." If, as in "Most Certainly True," we can sing Luther's own effort to explain the Creed, we may find both the Creed and Luther-as-teacher even more accessible, and in turn possibly more persuasive to the otherwise theologically or devotionally reluctant. Perhaps another sign of the ripeness of the opportunity to re-emphasize Luther's catechetical importance is the ELCA's inclusion of the Small Catechism in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) after its omission from predecessor hymnals, perhaps suggesting the growing recognition of the relevance of the Small Catechism even among increasingly diverse contemporary approaches to Lutheran worship and devotion.

Like the Small Catechism, itself a basis for study, "Most Certainly True" may be sung either in private devotion or in corporate worship, at any time. It is especially useful for the Festival of the Holy Trinity or in any setting (e.g., Reformation Sunday worship) in which Luther's service to the Church is celebrated. It could be preceded by a recitation or singing of the Creed, with a transitional invitation (or intonation) "What does this mean [for us]?" added as a further introduction. (Editor's note: it could also be sung in alternation with the chorale, "We All Believe in One True God," in D as in *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Lutheran Service Book*.)

The text was originally written for the ordination of the Reverend Katherine Pasch (now pastor at Saint John Lutheran Church in Griffin, Georgia). Seeing the "fit" between the tune, composed by Bob Weaver, and the Luther paraphrase, Bill Pasch (with Bob's enthusiastic blessing) dedicated the composite

work to his spouse as a gift for the occasion. The setting presented here reflects subsequent collaborative revisions in both text and music.

Weaver and Pasch are long-time Lutheran avocational musicians. Bob comes from a family church music tradition, as the younger brother of noted organist John Weaver and himself a student of composition from youth at the summer Junior Conservatory Camp in Vermont (now the Walden School in Dublin, New Hampshire). He is also Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and Computer Science at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Professor Emeritus of English at Clayton State University in metropolitan Atlanta, Bill Pasch currently serves as organist and choir director at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, a multicultural congregation in Atlanta. His hymn texts have been published in *Lutheran Forum* and awarded in national competitions.

They also share a special interest in setting Luther to music. The Pasch anthem "Baptized in Jordan" (Augsburg Fortress) features a paraphrase of Luther's hymn *Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam*. A more recent Weaver/Pasch collaboration is a Creed-paraphrase anthem in the tradition of Luther's hymn *Wir glauben all*.

The composers welcome the use of and feedback on the hymn, at bweaver@mholyoke.edu or at billpasch@mail.clayton.edu. They also thank CA Editor Mark Bighley and editorial board member Victor Gebauer for their help in the preparation of this introduction to the hymn. ✽

(Endnotes)

- 1 Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 235, n.6.
- 2 Herl, 27–28.
- 3 Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 300; Herl, 64.
- 4 Leaver, 107–108.
- 5 *Sing the Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008).
- 6 Leaver, 126.