



Reformation Reflections



In Luther's day, it was not uncommon for minstrels to sing the news in rhyming verse so that people would know what had happened in the surrounding region. Luther tried his hand at this genre when he wrote a song about two Lutheran men who were martyred in

Brussels on July 1, 1523. Shortly after that, he began to regularly use music and verse, not merely to broadcast the news, but to proclaim the Good News.

At the dawn of the Reformation, worship was conducted in the Latin language which most people did not understand. Even the Bible was inaccessible to their ears because it was read from the Latin translation. What singing there was during worship was typically done by choirs and then it was almost always in Latin.

Knowing the importance of people being able to sing the Good News in their own language, Luther began writing hymns. He wrote both texts and tunes and often collaborated with others. In less than two years (1523 and 1524), he wrote twice as many hymns as he did during the rest of his life—the total number of which is around forty. With his hymns, Luther returned singing to the congregation, so much so that even to this day the Lutheran Church is known as the "Singing Church".

Luther loved the Psalms and a fair number of his hymns are based on them. Psalm 46, for example, was the basis for his most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is our God." Reportedly penned in August of 1527, it eventually became the signature hymn of the Reformation. It has been translated into many languages, and into English dozens of times. Even outside of Lutheranism it is well known and often used. It was used in the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., for example, for President Dwight D. Eisenhower's funeral in 1969, as well as at the prayer service held there on September 14, 2001.

"A Mighty Fortress" illustrates a style of songwriting that Luther liked to use in his hymns. He sometimes repeated a portion of the melody in order to make the hymn easier to learn. In other words, a set of notes (a bar) would be used for the beginning portion of each stanza. That same set of notes would be repeated for the second portion. Then the third portion would conclude with a different melody line. This style is sometimes called a bar tune – which led to the rumor that he used tunes from drinking songs for his hymns. He did not.



Providing German hymnody for his people to sing was not enough, however. So Luther set about translating the liturgy for them, as well. He took the Latin Mass, cleaned it up, translated it into German, and included some of the hymns he wrote. Known as the German Mass, it was printed and used regularly from 1526 onward. It's also the basis for every Lutheran communion liturgy to this day.

With such a strong desire to teach the Good News of the Christian faith, it is not surprising that he also set to music the chief parts of Christian doctrine. He wrote hymns so that people could sing the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Confession, and the Lord's Supper.

Luther took seriously the Bible's often repeated command to sing. He united that with the command to proclaim the Good News and Lutherans have been singing ever since.

MUSIC



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