Singing with Grace in Our Hearts
The Function of Hymnody in Its Cultural Context

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In 1996 a body called the National Church Life Survey did a survey of 324,000 church attenders across all Protestant denominations in Australia. As with most such projects, this piece of research confirmed what most of us already knew. It revealed that, practically speaking, the churches in Australia were divided right down the middle over the question of hymnody. While 46% found hymns most useful for congregational worship, 48% held that choruses and contemporary songs were most helpful.[1] This state of affairs is mirrored in my own congregation where members polarise over their preference for either traditional or contemporary songs. While the extent of the polarisation is not as great as it used to be in the Lutheran Church of Australia, it is still so sharp that we would, presently, be unable to gain the consensus needed for the production of a new hymnal.

Now it is true that this disagreement has much more to do with the style of music than with the words which are sung. Yet the problem does go far deeper than that. To be sure, there are profound cultural, sociological and even commercial reasons for that division which I am not properly qualified to analyse. But they do not by themselves sufficiently account for the appeal of this new hymnody. Its popularity comes, I maintain, from the pervasive influence of the charismatic movement which has popularised its theology of worship and its piety largely through the medium of the music and songs used in its worship. Its practice of 'praise singing' has spawned a style of worship which identifies worship with praise and praise with worship.[2] Within this tradition the director of music replaces the pastor as the worship leader of the congregation, which gathers primarily for the performance of praise. Worship is identified almost exclusively with the performance of praise.

If we wish to understand this praise singing and the songs which are used in it, we need to appreciate the basic structure of charismatic worship and the ritual function of the songs sung in it. A charismatic service, typically, falls into three parts which are said to correspond with the three areas of the tabernacle in the Old Testament: the outer court, the inner court, and the Holy of Holies. The service begins in the outer court with full-bodied, extraverted thanksgiving for God's past benefits; it proceeds to the inner court with the performance of praise for his present activity through the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers; it ends up in the Holy of Holies with quiet adoration, and speaking in tongues, in the very presence of the living God. Both the music and the songs derive their character and function from that liturgical context. They are part and parcel of that unscripted 'liturgy'.

Now I would be the first to concede that this is far better than the manipulative use of the same or similar songs by some proponents of church growth and entertainment evangelism. Such people divorce these charismatic songs from their supernatural, liturgical context which gives them their integrity and spiritual power by virtue of their performance in God's

[1] P Kaldor and R Powell, *National Church Life Survey. Initial Impressions 1996,* Openbook Publishers,Adelaide, 1997, 13-16.
[2] See PW Wohlgemuth, 'Praise Singing', *The Hymn* 38/1, 1987, 18-23, for a helpful analysis of this.

presence. The problem is that, even though much of this practice of praise singing is scriptural and devout, it is partial and disembodied. Praise is divorced from its divinely instituted connection with the absolution, the preaching of the word, the intercession of the church for the world, and the celebration of the Lord's supper. It is a eucharistic celebration without the real presence, disincarnate praise. It is, if you like, a truncated form of matins rather than the full divine service.

It would be easy for us to condemn this kind of song and to use our pastoral authority to banish it from our congregations. But we would, however, accomplish little or nothing of value by this course of action. It would, in the long run, prove to be counter-productive and serve only to impoverish the performance of praise in our congregations. We should rather take up the challenge from the charismatic movement, learn what we can from its emphasis on praise, investigate the full teaching of the Scriptures on the function of praise in the divine service,[3] and renew the proper performance of heartfelt praise by the whole congregation in the divine service.

We Lutherans, strangely, do not seem to have engaged in much reflection on the function and place of hymnody in the divine service. This is surprising, given that we, in fact, have taught the western church how to use hymns in the divine liturgy.[4] To be sure, much has been written on the history of hymnody,[5] but little work has been done, as far as I can gather, on the function and purpose of hymns in the divine service.[6] This means that we often tend to use hymns rather indiscriminately, without due regard to their liturgical location and their function in that location. Such careless use of hymnody deforms the liturgy and robs the hymns of their ritual power.

In recent years, as I have been forced to reflect on our tradition of worship, I have found it most helpful to analyse what we do in worship in terms of the actual function of each component in the service, before I consider its meaning. The key to understanding any liturgical enactment in public worship is to ask what is meant to be accomplished by it there by those people in that location in that order of service. So, for example, even though the Lord's Prayer always has the same meaning wherever it is used liturgically, it functions differently and so has a different significance, if it is used at the end of the prayer of the church, or in the rite of baptism, or in the communion liturgy before the words of institution. The same applies for any hymn. Its actual significance is determined by its function in a particular context, whether that context be a communion service, or an evangelistic service, or a youth camp, or a religious broadcast, or my personal devotions.

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[3] See John W Kleinig, *The Lord's Song. The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1993, for my own investigation of the liturgical setting and use of praise in the Old Testament.

[4] See C Northcott, *Hymns in Christian Worship*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1964, 35.

[5] The standard work on the origin and history of Lutheran hymnody is: W Blankenberg, 'Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde', *Leiturgia IV*, ed FM Müller and W Blankenberg, Johannes Stauda Verlag, Kassel, 1961, 559-660.

[6] The best study on this has been completed by P Brunner, ' "Singen und Sagen". Geistliche Grundlagen des Kirchengesanges', *Pro Ecclesia* II, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin and Hamburg, 1966, 352-378. This paper builds on his observations there. He also touches, more generally, on the function of hymnody in the liturgy in *Worship in the Name of Jesus*; tr M H Bertram; Concordia, St Louis, 1968, 137-139, 210-211, 266-276.

In this paper then, I would like to consider, rather tentatively and all too inadequately, how hymns are meant to function theologically, corporately and devotionally in the divine service as it is conducted by a congregation in its own unique social and cultural setting.[7] The focus in it is on the correlation between liturgical context and cultural setting.[8]

1. The theological function of hymnody

An amazing prophecy is recorded in Zephaniah 3:17. Normally, the Israelites performed their songs of praise to the Lord in his presence at the temple in Jerusalem. These songs of praise were either addressed to God or sung about God. But this prophecy announced that in the age to come, the Lord himself would be the singer of praise in Zion. He would, in fact, rejoice over his people and exult in them with loud songs of praise.

This prophecy is confirmed by the record of the New Testament. It identifies Jesus as the messianic singer of the psalms and the leader of the congregation in its praises.[9] Thus in Hebrews 2:12 Jesus is said to praise his heavenly Father in the midst of the congregation (cf Rom 15:9-12). He does not just proclaim his Father's name to them but also leads them in their praises. The church then joins with Jesus in his praise of God the Father. It gives thanksgiving (Rom 1:8; Col 3:17; Eph 5:20), praise (Heb 13:15) and glory (Rom 16:27; 1 Pet 4:11) to God the Father together with Jesus and through him as the Messiah. Just as David performed the service of praise through the Levitical choir at the temple in Jerusalem[10], so Christ has appointed the church as his choir in the heavenly sanctuary.[11]

The church has, as St Paul declares in Ephesians 1:12, been given its allotted place in the heavenly realm and its allotted task as the choir that exists for the praise of God's glory.[12] In Christ it stands together with the angels in God's presence and praises the Father together with them. So the church does not sing its own song. The song which it sings has been given to it. It is the song of David, the Psalter. It is the song of the Lamb, which is also the song of Moses (Rev 15:3-4).[13] In that song Jesus not only proclaims the gospel to the world; he also helps us earthlings to respond to the gospel. So then, Jesus leads the congregation in its hymns of praise, just as he leads it in its petitions and intercessions (Heb 7:25).

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[7] This essay is presented as a warm tribute to my fellow Australian Glen Zweck in gratitude for his warm hospitality and help to me and my family in Cambridge. He is responsible for my association with Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, where this material was first presented as part of the 1997 Symposium.

[8] The question of the relationship between worship and culture has been explored rather well in the two LWF studies, both edited by S A Stauffer. They are *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 1994; and *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 1996.

[9] See D Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*; tr JH Burtness; Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1970, 17-21.

[10] See John W Kleinig, *The Lord's Song*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1993, 89-95.

[11] See W Blankenberg, 'Die frühchristliche Bedeutung des Wortes „Chor"', in *Kirche und Music*; ed E Hubner and R Steiger; Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1979, 11-16.

[12] See O Hofius, 'Gemeinschaft mit den Engeln im Gottesdienst der Kirche', *ZTK* 89, 1992, 172-196, for this interpretation of Eph 1:3-14.

[13] See JG Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven: A Commentary on Revelation*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 1994, 248f.

Now this would all remain rather theoretical and abstract if the teaching of the New Testament ended here. But St Paul goes on to explain how this is actually to be enacted in public worship. In Colossians 3:16-17 he says that through his word Christ actually moves and prompts us to teach each other with Spirit-inspired, Spirit-filled psalms and hymns and songs and to give thanks to God the Father together with him. Thus, the word of Christ, which dwells in the congregation, produces its song, even as it is the content of that song.[14] Christ did not just give us his word to be preached and taught but also to be used in prayer and in songs of praise. It governs and empowers our singing. For that reason we Lutherans have rightly insisted that the language and content of liturgical song should be scriptural. This teaching reached its most extreme application in the Reformed tradition. It prescribed that only paraphrases of the psalms and other parts of the Scriptures were acceptable for public worship. Even though we have never accepted this restriction, we nevertheless agree that hymnody must be scriptural in its content. Hymns are meant to speak the word of Christ to us, in us, and though us to each other and to God the Father. What Calvin says, when he makes the following claim about psalmody, applies equally for us to all hymnody:

> *When we sing them (the psalms), we are sure that God puts the words in our mouth, just as if he himself were singing in us, in order to glorify him.*[15]

We should therefore be wary about using those modern songs in the divine service, no matter how popular they may be, which are often quite unscriptural and so devoid of Christ's word.

According to St Paul in Ephesians 5:18-20, Jesus also gives us his Holy Spirit to empower us to praise God the Father. The Holy Spirit produces praise in us. As the Holy Spirit fills us, the Spirit moves us to sing songs of praise which are spoken to each other, to ourselves, and to God the Father. For this reason we sing:

> *Jehovah, let me now adore you,*
> *For where, Lord, is there such a God as you?*
> *With joyful songs I come before you;*
> *Oh, let your Spirit teach my heart anew*
> *To praise you in his name through whom alone*
> *Our songs can please you through your blessed Son.*[16]

Christ does not just teach us what to sing through his word but actually empowers us to sing that song by the gift of his Holy Spirit. Both the word and the Spirit work together here. The Spirit who moves us to praise God cannot be separated from the word, as so often happens in charismatic circles. The words of Christ give us the content of our song. And even more. They

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[14] See P Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*; tr M H Bertram; Concordia, St Louis, 1968,137-138.

[15] See W Blankenberg, 'Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde', *Leiturgia* IV, Johannes Stauda Verlag, Kassel, 1961, 571, footnote 22.

[16] See *Lutheran Worship*, Concordia, St Louis, 1982, number 446. This classical Lutheran hymn is an excellent epitome of a full trinitarian theology of praise. Some of its richness is lost in translation. Unfortunately, the second verse which is particularly relevant to this discussion is omitted. It reads:

> *Grant that Thy Spirit prompt my praises,*
> *Then shall my singing surely please Thine ear;*
> *Sweet are the sounds my heart then raises,*
> *My prayer in truth and spirit Thou wilt hear.*
> *Then shall Thy Spirit raise my heart to Thee*
> *To sing Thee psalms of praise in high degree.*

are spirit and life (John 6:63). They bring the joy-giving, praise-raising Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who hear them. On the other hand, the word which we sing must also not be divorced from the Spirit, as sometimes happens in traditional circles such as ours, for it is the Holy Spirit who is at work in that word, who sings that word in our hearts.

Like worship itself, the performance of the Lord's song is a supernatural, supra-cultural activity. It is without analogy in any culture. On the face of it, each congregation seems to be praising God separately in his absence here on earth in many different languages and many different cultural settings. And yet the song of praise is sung by the whole church together with the angels in the heavenly realm. It is not only performed in the presence of the triune God but also involves the three persons of the holy Trinity. It is an alien, counter-cultural activity, which is at home in no particular cultural setting here on earth. Rather, it is heavenly in its origin and orientation, for it involves our participation with the angels in the heavenly liturgy.[17]

2. The corporate function of hymnody

The present conflict over which hymns or songs are to be sung in public worship is a symptom of a far deeper spiritual problem. It derives from the prevailing current of individualism in the western world.[18] The insistence of individual members that the congregation sing the hymns which they prefer assumes that public worship has been established for individual spiritual self-expression and self-edification. They hold that church is the place for them to share their spiritual gifts and experiences with other like-minded people. What better way could there be of doing just that than by becoming the worship-leader, lead-singer who heads the band and introduces the songs performed by a group of singers for the benefit of the congregation? Nothing could be further from the scriptural teaching on praise than this kind of spiritual self-promotion, for the scriptures teach that the purpose of liturgical song is to edify the congregation as the body of Christ and the holy temple of the living God (1 Cor 14:6-19).

In an essay entitled 'Worship: Ecumenical Core and Cultural Context' Anita Stauffer rightly observes that, unlike the worship of Hinduism and other pagan religions, 'Christian worship does not consist essentially of individual cultic acts'.[19] It is instead a corporate event. It does not express the private experiences and personal spirituality of its adherents but confesses their common faith and common love. Hence common praise has always been the norm in the church (see Luke 24:53; Acts 2:46f). Communal singing has always taken precedence over solo song in the church. But that is becoming increasing counter-cultural in Australia, where the practice of community singing has almost vanished. So here in Australia we have a new national anthem whose words most Australians do not sing or even know. We now usually hear our national anthem sung to us.

Unlike the psalms in the Old Testament, the song of the church has never been mono-cultural. It has been, and will always be, trans-cultural, as is evident from the use of Hebrew and

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[17] Traditionally, this is affirmed by those hymns which link our singing with the praise of the angels in heaven.

[18] An excellent summary of its impact on hymnody and a measured response to the problem is given by P Westermeyer, 'The Future of Congregational Song', *The Hymn*, 46/1, 1995, 4-9.

[19] SA Staufer, 'Worship: Ecumenical Core and Cultural Context', *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 1996, 11.

Aramaic words in the Greek liturgy of the early church. The truth of this is expressed most profoundly in Revelation 5:8-10. There the seer John has a vision of the church, represented by the twenty-four elders, singing the new song in the heavenly sanctuary. They praise Christ for creating a new heavenly choir of people from every tribe and language and people and nation. Since they have all alike been reconciled with God and consecrated as his royal priests, they all alike sing the same song in praise of Christ the Lamb of God. That song transcends all ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political barriers, even as it is to be sung by every ethnic group in every language, culture and political system. It is the 'international anthem' of a trans-cultural, ecumenical community.[20]

The singing of the Lord's song then serves to articulate and consolidate the corporate solidarity of the church universal. Even though there may be many solo voices in the church, there is never a solo song. The most obvious cultural expression of this is the practice of singing in unison. St Paul gives the rationale for this in Romans 15:5-6 where he urges Jewish and Gentile Christians to accept each other and to work together in the church. He says:

> *May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul's argument is as follows. God has joined both Jews and Gentiles together as his people in Christ. They are therefore to live in harmony with each other, so that they may all together glorify him with one voice. For Paul corporate solidarity is both the presupposition for corporate praise and the consequence of it. Christ's body sings with one voice to God the Father.

In its song of praise the church speaks to the world with one voice across all the great cultural barriers which separate people on the face of the earth. It is a truly all-inclusive activity, for all nations are to join together in the church in praising God (cf Ps 117; Rom 15:8-12). By joining in that song, each congregation reveals its ecumenical character, even as all congregations thereby acknowledge their co-existence as parts of a single heavenly community located in many different places on earth. The song of praise to the triune God is, in fact, the only truly trans-cultural human activity, for the poetry and music of each culture find their true function and place when they are employed to glorify the living God.

The song of the church, however, does not just serve to confess the common faith and corporate solidarity of the church; by it the members of the congregation also use the word of Christ to 'teach and admonish' each other, as Paul reminds us in Colossians 3:16. The congregation does not do this, in a theoretical way, by speaking about faith, repentance, prayer, praise, thanksgiving and adoration; it teaches these things practically, as it does them 'in all wisdom', by confessing its faith, seeking forgiveness, praying to God, praising, thanking, and adoring him. As the members of the congregation do these things together publicly, they teach how these things are done and encourage others to join with them in doing all this. Thus all the members of the congregation are involved in both teaching and learning. They teach by learning from each other and learn by teaching each other.

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[20] See JG Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 1994, 113.

Songs of praise are a form of corporate teaching and preaching.[21] This has, I fear, been forgotten in many parts of the church today. When modern Christians speak of praise, they, at least if they have been influenced by the charismatic movement, identify praise, by and large, with either thanksgiving or adoration, which are quite properly addressed to God and spoken to him. Yet the psalms, the Scriptures as a whole, and our Lutheran tradition hold that we speak to each other when we praise God. We do not sing Hallelujah to the Lord but to each other. When we praise the triune God, we address each other and tell one another how good he is. Our song of praise, then, is the corporate proclamation of the gospel by the congregation in the very presence of the living God.

Now God's grace is so wonderful and rich that mere prose and plain human language are quite incapable of adequately and comprehensively communicating his goodness. The mystery of his gracious presence with us in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus is best announced and best proclaimed in full-bodied, wholehearted, corporate praise. The marriage of poetry and music in the song of the whole church alone suffices to preach the gospel to the world in a way that leaps across the normal barriers of communication and reaches the very heart of the hearer. Hymnody therefore, as Luther and Watts and the Wesley brothers knew so well, serves to teach the gospel vivaciously in the congregation, even as it preaches Christ liturgically to all creation[22]. That, by the way, is why we have so many hymns in our hymnals which speak about God in the third person, like 'Now Thank We All Our God'. Have you noticed how unfashionable they have become, and how few are to be found in most modern collections of songs for public worship? This means that a whole dimension of praise has almost become completely lost.

All this has profound implications for the composition and selection of hymns for public worship. They must be able to be sung by the whole congregation. Both the words and the music must be most accessible to most members of the congregation. This excludes many modern songs whose metre is irregular, whose sentiments are idiosyncratic, and whose melodies are unsuited for unison singing by the whole congregation, since they have been designed for performance by a lead singer with a band. While the language and poetry of the hymns must be readily accessible to the people and not culturally alien to them, they must use the language and imagery of the Scriptures and avoid what is only currently fashionable and culturally correct. Since hymnody is meant to be ecumenical and trans-cultural, it should be inspired by the psalms and, ideally, include the best compositions from all ages and cultures. It should not represent the work of only one tradition or of the present generation.[23] The songs sung in a congregation must bridge the generations and join the young with the old. This means that we must avoid unnecessary polarisation between so-called traditional and contemporary hymns. Both are needed. Old hymns need to be modernised for the benefit of young people, and new hymns need to be learnt by elderly saints to refresh their faith. This is done best by blending the old with the new as has become acceptable and even fashionable in our postmodern culture. Yet as this is done, the actual choice of hymns for worship must respect and consolidate the common tradition, the collective memory of the congregation. As

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[21] See W Blankenberg, 'Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde', *Leiturgia IV*, Johannes Stauda Verlag, Kassel, 1961, 565-575, for the Lutheran emphasis on this function of hymnody.

[22] See P Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*; tr MH Bertram; Concordia, St Louis, 1968, 97-104, for the inclusion of all creation in the praise of the church.

[23] For a refutation of the charge that the Lutheran chorale is mono-cultural, see RA Leaver, 'The Chorale: Transcending Time and Culture', CTQ 56/2-3, 123-144.

we all know, each congregation has its own favourite, unique repertoire of best-loved hymns. They embody and communicate the common history, shared experience, and corporate spirituality of that congregation. The power of these hymns does not just derive from their content but from their use. By association with particular events, seasons in the church year, and stages in the lifecycle of people, they have gained a special resonance, personal connotations, and particular historical significance for those who sing them. The musicians of the congregation are the custodians of that tradition which is strong in any healthy Christian community. Whenever you have a complete revolution in singing, as has happened in some congregations over the last two decades, the common memory of the congregation has been damaged. As a result of careless change the piety of the people is nearly always unnecessarily disrupted and at times even dangerously disturbed.

So then, the song of the church is necessarily trans-cultural. By this song we confess our common faith and our mutual submission to each other in our congregation, in our denomination, and in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.[24] As we sing that song, we find our own voice and learn to sing for ourselves with each other, for as Luther once said: 'Sing with the congregation and you will sing well'.[25]

3. The devotional function of hymnody

In 1538 Georg Rau published a collection of liturgical music for the divine service in the Lutheran Church which was entitled *Delightful Symphonies* (Symphoniae iucundae). Luther wrote the preface for this book. In it he has this to say:

> *the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated so closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message (sermo) and music (vox: voice) join to move the listener's soul.*[26]

Hymnody then is meant to move the hearts and souls of the faithful. The Lord's song is the song of the faithful heart, just as it is the song of the church.

St Paul describes how this works in two places. In Colossians 3:16 he speaks about the communal and personal correlation between Christ's word and our song. By means of Christ's word, the song of the church and the song of the heart are attuned to each other and correspond with each other. What's more, this happens communally. The indwelling of Christ's word in the congregation produces the song which it sings, even as the singing of that song causes that word to dwell ever more richly and productively in that congregation. Singing plants the word of Christ ever deeper in the hearts of the faithful. But it does not stop there. St Paul says:

> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you (plural) richly ... singing Spirit-inspired psalms and hymns and songs to God with grace/gratitude (charis) in your hearts.*

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[24] A strong case can be made for connecting Ephesians 5:21 to 18-20 rather than, as is now exegetically fashionable, to 22-33. See J G Strelan, *Ephesians,* Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1981, 70-71.

[25] M Luther, 'A Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen', *Luther's Works,* 42; ed HT Lehmann; Fortress, Philadelphia, 1969, 60.

[26] M Luther, 'Preface to Georg Rau's Symphoniae iucundae', *Luther's Works* 53; ed US Leupold; Fortress, Philadelphia, 1965, 323.

We have here a pun on *charis* which is lost in translation. It means both 'grace' and 'gratitude'. Just as *charis* is the cause and content of the heart's song, it is also the result of the song. Grace alone makes the heart sing songs of thanksgiving to God the Father. Nothing else can do that. As the members of the congregation sing of Christ and his word of grace, that word brings God's grace right into their hearts. That grace in turn produces thankfulness which in turn issues in thanksgiving.

Hymnody, then, functions evangelically and devotionally. As we sing the song of grace, that song sings God's grace deep into our hearts and lodges it there. Once the word of grace has been musically impressed in our hearts and fixed there, it moves our hearts and governs all our affections. We do not just sing that song; it sings itself in us and moves us to song. It fills us with joy and wonder, gratitude and reverence, thanksgiving and devotion. It makes us thanksgivers, eucharistic people whose hearts are so full of God's grace that we overflow with thanksgiving and praise. The conjunction of Christ's word with a melody helps to accomplish this. Calvin speaks rather vividly of the melody of a hymn as the funnel for God to pour his grace into our hearts.[27] Through the melody of a hymn Christ speaks his divine word of grace into our hearts. So then, as Christ's word dwells most graciously in our hearts, it produces a never-ending song of thanksgiving to God the Father.

In Ephesians 5:19-20 St Paul touches on another aspect of this. There he concentrates on the correlation between the gift of the Holy Spirit and our singing. He says:

> *be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in Spirit-inspired psalms and hymns and songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.*

Paul uses the passive imperative: 'be filled' to indicate that God fills us with his Spirit. This, however, does not describe a single event, as some Pentecostals claim, but the recurrent infilling of the congregation by the Holy Spirit whenever it assembles for public worship and prays for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon it.

We get the same correlation and correspondence between the communal and the personal here, as in Colossians 3:16. Communally, the Holy Spirit fills the congregation and produces its song of thanksgiving, even as the singing of that song in turn fills the whole congregation with the Holy Spirit. Personally, as the members of the congregation sing that song, their hearts are filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not just operate on them; it operates within them from the very centre of their being. The Spirit, as it were, sings in them and plays on their hearts, like the strings of a musical instrument. The Spirit puts his melody and song into their hearts. That song has to do with the Lord Jesus, while its melody is music of thanksgiving. So then, the Holy Spirit moves our hearts to sing about our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may become more completely devoted to him.

The spiritual power of music has always been acknowledged. Yet by itself even the most religious music is spiritually ambiguous. No kind of music is by itself a means of the Holy Spirit. However, as Luther and our Lutheran teachers recognised, if music is combined with Christ's word of grace, it can be used by the Holy Spirit to move our hearts. It can bring us into the fullness of God and turn our whole life into a continual song of thanksgiving and praise to God the Father. Thus when music is used to invoke the triune God by name, when it

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[27] See W Blankenberg, 'Der gottesdienstliche Liedgesang der Gemeinde', *Leiturgia IV*, Johannes Stauda Verlag, Kassel, 1961, 570.

accompanies God's word and so preaches the gospel, it has great spiritual power and is able to move the spirits of people most profoundly.

If the song of the church is to accomplish its evangelical and devotional function, it must move the hearts of people in their particular cultural context. Now this will obviously vary from culture to culture, from ethnic group to ethnic group, from country to country, from generation to generation. The hymns that move an Aboriginal Lutheran in the centre of Australia will differ from the hymns that move an American Lutheran of Germanic descent in the mid-west of the USA. The hymns that speak to my heart may not speak in the same way to my children. Much discernment is required here. And patience. Matters are most complicated in dealing with Generation X and beyond in multicultural Australia and America where we have many subcultures, but no common culture any more. These days most new hymns vanish as quickly as they have come, because they speak only to a particular group of people at a particular point in time. Only a few have the power to transcend their original cultural context. These, however, are eventually sung all over the world and appear in one hymnal after the other.

We should, I think, not be unduly censorious nor naively enthusiastic about the creation of new hymns and songs for public worship. Each new generation should be encouraged to attend to its unique cultural context and use the Scriptures to create new songs which speak into and out of that cultural setting. Wherever that happens, some hymns will be produced which are not just songs of the devout heart but also songs of the church. And a few of these songs of the church will also prove to be true songs of the Lord. These will be both earthly and heavenly, poetic and scriptural, doctrinal and eucharistic, devotional and doxological. They are in part the true cultural wealth of the nations, described in Revelation 21:24, which the nations of the world bring as their offering into the heavenly city to glorify the living God. They are the song of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

Conclusion

What then is the function of hymnody in its cultural context? I can do no better than to conclude with the word of Luther from his preface to the Wittenberg hymnal in 1524. This was the first Lutheran hymnal. I give his words in my own translation:

> *As a stimulus for others who may be able to produce something better, I ... have collected some spiritual songs to promote and enact the gospel ... so that, like Moses in his song in Exodus 15, we too may be able to boast that Christ is our praise and our song and know how to sing and speak of nothing except our Saviour, Jesus Christ ...*[28]

[28] WA 35, 474; see M Luther, 'Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal', *Luther's Works* 53; ed US Leupold; Fortress, Philadelphia, 1965, 316, for an alternate translation.