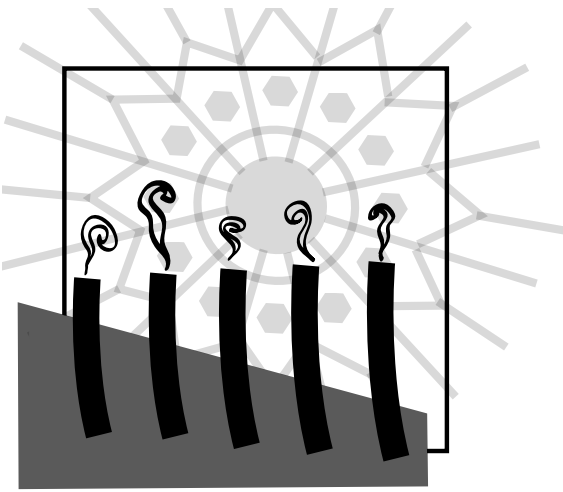


SINGING OUR THEOLOGY

Howard Olson

Theology needs the wings that music can give it; theology can and should be done musically. If, as Eskew and McElrath remind us, “hymns are the ordinary person’s theology,”¹ we theologians who claim to give high priority to the needs of the ordinary person had best devote ourselves intensively to the joyful task of singing our theology. Certainly no one needs a compelling rationale to be convinced that “theology at its deepest has to be a song.” As S. T. Kimbrough Jr. puts it,

Hymns are theology... The hymns of the church are perhaps its finest commentary on faith and practice outside the Scripture. It is time for theological and Christian educators, as well as individual Christians, to take the task of their study seriously so that present and future generations may decrease the discrepancy between faith which is sung and faith which is lived.²

From a pragmatic, nonpoetic point of view, it is obvious that music imprints theology more indelibly on the mind than any amount of ardent effort to memorize theology as cold prose could do. How many of us can sing hymns without a hymnal, yet need to read the printed line when reciting the Scriptures? Apart from the aesthetics involved, it is simply good pedagogy to theologize musically. From my own denominational perspective I can say that the key to the particularity of Lutheran worship is the Lutheran love of hymns.

Although the medium of this article is the English language, much of its content will be informed by the great linguistic and musical diversity of East Africa. Because sung theology is an organism of speech and music combined, it will be necessary to examine some of its constituents, namely meter, tune, text, and rhyme. Meter will be treated first since it is integral to both tune and text.

Meter

The music of the Western Latin-speaking church was basically plainsong until the twelfth century. With the introduction of polyphony, some kind of rhythmical order was necessary to synchronize the various parts, and hence

meters or rhythmic modes emerged. The main meters employed in the texts of Western music are iambic, trochaic, anapestic, and dactylic. The normal conventions used to indicate a stressed (or strong) and an unstressed (or weak) syllable are — and *u* respectively. Thus, iambic (also called the rising foot) is *u* —, an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. Trochaic (also called the falling foot) is — *u*, a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable. Anapestic meter is noted as *u u* —, two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one. The less common dactylic meter is — *u u*, a stressed followed by two unstressed syllables, as in Longfellow’s poem “Hiawatha.” Examples of these meters in Western hymns are:

- Iambic: All PEOPLE THAT ON EARTH DO DWELL.
- Trochaic: HARK, the HERALD ANGELS SING, GLORY TO the NEWBORN KING.
- Anapestic: ’Tis the GIFT to be SIMPLE, ’tis the GIFT to be FREE.
- Dactylic: BRIGHTEST and BEST of the STARS of the MORNING.

The most common iambic patterns are long meter (LM), common meter (CM), and short meter (SM). Long meter consists of four lines of eight syllables each. Common meter consists of four lines alternating between eight and six syllables, sometimes written as 8.6.8.6. Short meter consists of four lines of six, six, eight, and six syllables respectively, or 6.6.8.6. In addition to these, the common and short meters are often doubled and designated as CMD and SMD. Each of these meters in turn lends itself to a specific kind of text. LM is appropriate for long doxologies or praise texts; CMD works well for telling stories or teaching; and SM is suited to exhortation.³

In most cases of Western hymns written or translated into English, the tune and the text scrupulously observe the same meter and correct accent. Because of the monosyllabic nature of many key words in the English-speaking Christian vocabulary (faith, hope, love, grace, sin, guilt, fear, death, life, joy, peace, work, rest, sing, speak, hear, God, Christ, Lord, and the like) English is extremely flexible in employing various meters.

Tune

Provided there is agreement between the meter of the text and the music, the tune as a vehicle of theology may be either original or borrowed. The following guidelines should be kept in mind in either case.

First, the range of the melody is important. Theology that is to be sung must be suited to the capabilities of the average singer—the worshiper in the pew rather than the choir loft. That means that the vocal range, or tessitura, must be reasonable and comfortable. Peter Cutts recommends that the range of a congregational hymn should normally not exceed an octave, and that “most of the tune be in the middle of the compass.” He also warns against introducing “sudden leaps” in a tune, not only because of the difficulty in singing, but also because of the possibility of creating an unintended accent in the text.⁴ As a general rule, songs for congregational use should not have a melodic line that goes above the second E flat above middle c.

The next consideration is quality. A memorable hymn tune must keep a balance between repetition and variety. Repetition develops a feeling of familiarity and variety prevents anesthetizing monotony. Traditional African music has an infinite capacity for variety and repetition through the devices of antiphony and refrain. The leader introduces variety in the recitative, the variety is echoed in the response, and the refrain merges the leader and the congregation in a satisfying unison.

One of the difficulties for the composer is the fact that the same tune must serve different stanzas adequately. While the same words are not repeated from stanza to stanza, the same tune is repeated. As Cutts says, “To bear repetition it must be sufficiently interesting.”⁵

Another consideration is theological orientation. Theological positions will affect musical interpretations at least, if not the composition itself.

While many composers will indicate a pianissimo in the score of a choir anthem or longer sacred work when the libretto or text deals with peace, others like Cutts who interpret peace more dynamically do not. For example, when Johann Sebastian Bach introduces the theme of peace in the *Christmas Oratorio*, he employs a harsh dissonance to show that for him peace is dearly purchased, bought for us by the cruel death of God’s Son.⁶

Next, we should look at musical technique. Differing note values should be employed to add interest to a musical composition; but here too, the note values should not cause problems in diction. For example, the note set to a word like *hosts* or other words with long vowels should be long enough for adequate pronunciation.

Chromaticism—the frequent use of notes that are foreign to the basic key of a piece of music—may be ideal for the clever chord progressions in barbershop harmony, but is hardly appropriate for congregational hymns. The use of accidentals, i.e., the temporary raising or lowering of a note within a measure, creates particular problems in African singing. This characteristic may be explained in part by the fact that most ethnic scales are not chromatic. Jones maintains that for African congregations, “Except in tunes where ‘fe- is preceded by •soh’ we must abandon all tunes which have a single accidental in them.”⁷ Although accidentals are to be avoided, harmony need not be dull and restricted as in the mere three chords used in the hymn “Standing on the Promises.”

Lovelace summarizes his advice to would-be hymn tune composers thus:

1. Think textually. The tune is designed to clothe the text with beauty.
2. Think melodically. The tune must stand alone.
3. Think musically. A hymn tune should be just as good as any other kind of music.⁸

Jones has the following advice to compilers of hymn books for African Christians:

1. Exclude all hymns with false accents or unsingable tunes.
2. Write new hymns to some of your old words.
3. Try all new hymns for a month or two.
4. Let most new hymns have a chorus.
5. When writing words to a tune, be sure of the accent of the music. If it has iambic endings don’t attempt it.
6. Do not forget African musical instruments.
7. Urge musical Africans to write hymns and tunes.⁹

Text

Purists would have us believe that one should write poetry only out of an inner compulsion, when an idea’s gestation has reached full term and has no alternative but to burst into life. Lovelace urges that we “say things because you must, not because you may.”¹⁰ K. Amri Abedi says, “Write poetry only when you can’t help but write. Don’t compose poetry about anything except that which really grabs you. Poetry written with such intensity has the strength to penetrate the heart with an abiding beauty.”¹¹ I am attracted by the idealism of these words, but they do not square with the demanding realities of a professor’s life. I have found that inspiration is about 95% perspiration. More to the point is the practical view of Fred Pratt Green, who writes, “Inspiration? If we wait for it, we may wait forever.”¹² Inspiration comes in the doing of the task, just as in the Christian life knowledge enters through the act of obedience.

The content of a hymn text is important. Carl P. Daw, Jr., uses two technical terms to describe two essentials of worship: anamnesis and prolepsis.¹³ Good hymns can fulfill these functions of worship in the stimulation of memory and the restoration of hope. Actually achieving this goal, however, remains a constant challenge to hymnwriters. The hymn must be able to convey Christian truth understood by all, but which perhaps only

its hymnwriter can express adequately. For the hymn to be convincing, writers should confine themselves to that which is familiar to them and in which they believe implicitly. Gracia Grindal maintains that hymns can be spoiled by the writer's obsession with being different. "The major pitfall is our great modern romance with originality."¹⁴

Sila Msangi was the first African teacher on the faculty of the Lutheran Theological College in Makumira, Tanzania. One of his great gifts was in the field of music. He wrote the words and music to well over three hundred hymns before he died in 1956. In sharp contrast to many modern Tanzanian hymns that stress the final judgment, Msangi's hymns concentrated on the grace of God in Christ. His positive, joyful Christian texts set a high standard for those following in his train. The texts of Msangi are objective and express enduring Christian truths that will continue to be relevant in every age.

Language is another critical dimension of hymn writing. Fred Pratt Green says the language of hymns should be "simple enough to be understood, fresh enough not to be boring, and rich enough in meaning not to become stale with repetition."¹⁵ Margaret Clarkson echoes this sentiment with a slightly different formulation: "Good hymns should have loftiness of concept, dignity and reverence, beauty and simplicity of expression."¹⁶

The hymnwriter will also want to choose language and images that reflect the corporate experience of the worshipping community rather than the perspective of one individual. Concern for corporate expression also helps one avoid the sentimentality that comes with many subjective hymns.

While it may seem platitudinous to say that the text must be clear, the point cannot be overstressed. When you sing a hymn in the fellowship of a worship service, there is no way to go back over an unclear passage unless you quit singing the rest of the hymn. An example of the subtlety

that compromises lucidity is found in the Lenten eucharistic preface in the *Service Book and Hymnal* of the former Lutheran Church in America:

...Who on the Tree of the Cross
didst give salvation unto man-
kind; that whence death arose,
thence life also might rise again;
and that he who by a tree over-
came, might likewise by a Tree
be overcome, through Christ our
Lord...¹⁷

A hymn has even less opportunity to be reread than does this prayer. Therefore if the meaning of a hymn text is not clear on the very first reading, it should be altered accordingly.

Gracia Grindal shares some uncommon common sense when she writes about the importance of the commonplace in hymns. She boldly asserts in the indicative mood:

Hymnody...belongs to the people far more than it does to the poets. It is simply not possible to sing hymns in church which are too idiosyncratic. Sometimes I describe the work of the hymnwriter's craft as being one of trying to suppress the Muse as much as possible.¹⁸

In some instances you get the very uncomfortable feeling that both poets and musicians treated the *Lutheran Book of Worship* as a private arena for exhibiting their own peculiar virtuosity.

The source of a hymn text matters, too. The Scriptures provide one of the most reliable, relevant, and satisfying sources of inspiration for hymn texts. Grindal laments, "The Biblical witness, to my ears, is growing more and more faint in modern hymnody, as the clash of our own modern platitudes grows disturbingly louder."¹⁹ The best in devotional literature across the ecumenical and historical spectrum of the church can provide the stimulus to creative hymn smithing. Even a cursory survey of such literature reveals the recurrence of themes that are constant from age to age but need to be vested anew in modern dress.

Rhyme

The simplest rhyming allowed in the long, common, and short meters is the rhyming of the last word(s) of lines two and four. More accomplished poets will rhyme lines one and three also. This double rhyming has the technical name of cross rhyming and is denoted by the letters ABAB. It is also possible to rhyme lines one and two as well as three and four, yielding the rhyme pattern AABB. Austin Lovelace discourages the latter pattern, saying, "The danger is that the mind is inclined to settle down at the end of line two."²⁰ The greater the number of lines in the stanza, the greater the possibility for varied rhyme patterns; Lovelace suggests six- or seven-line stanzas with such rhyme patterns as ABABCC, ABABCCB, and AABCCB.

In addition to the preceding examples of end rhyming, one occasionally encounters internal rhyming between the fourth and eighth syllables in lines of eight syllables. The third line of each of the stanzas of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is a case in point. These lines read as follows:

1. Above thy *deep* and dreamless
sleep... 2. while mortals *sleep*, the
angels *keep*... 3. So God *imparts*
to human *hearts*... 4. Cast out
our *sin*, and enter *in*...

This internal rhyming pattern is called direct rhyme. There is another type of rhyme that appears to be derived from visual rather than aural images; that is, from the way the words look on the printed page rather than from the way they sound when spoken. American examples of this type of rhyme include *again/pain*, *love/move*, *good/food*. Isaac Watts may have been satisfied with eye rhymes, but to most people it is a distraction in singing. In Robert Grant's "Savior, When in Dust to Thee," the word *litany* was rhymed with *high*, *eye*, and *cry*. This pattern made some singers so uncomfortable that they refused to use the hymn. In the *Lutheran Book of Worship* version (#91) Grant's original word *litany* was changed to *cry* so that it would rhyme directly with *high*,

eye, and sigh.

Fluency in rhyming depends in large measure on a good vocabulary and a vivid imagination. In the case of Swahili poetry, rhyming is made easier by a thorough knowledge of the speech of the elderly. In producing theological poetry, a hymnwriter needs to be at home in the language, idioms and metaphors of Scripture.

Advice

This section simply collates varied bits of knowledge gleaned from experience over a long period of time that may prove helpful to the reader interested in hymnwriting.

Choose the theme of your hymn carefully. Make sure it is developed with clear and logical progression. Avoid stringing stanzas together that are all on different subjects.

After choosing an interesting theme, expend much effort on the opening line. It should appeal to both the ear and the eye. If the singer's attention is not caught at the outset, you are not likely to capture it midway.

Be concise. Martin Luther did not think it strange to create and sing fifteen stanzas for a hymn such as his "Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her."²¹ Archbishop Johann Olaf Wallin of Sweden produced many very long texts for some of his 269 hymns. Modern hymnody will not permit such lengthy hymns; a hymn today must be short enough to be sung unbroken to the end.

Be concrete. In both English and Swahili, hymn texts that utilize strong nouns and verbs are more effective than those filled with adjectives and adverbs. Texts should be pruned of every unnecessary modifier. English texts are best which avoid polysyllabic

words, but this advice would be hard to follow in many Bantu languages.

Before sending a hymn text to the publisher, subject it to the criticism of someone who is not a close friend—someone who will not be tempted to flatter you. Critics are to be sought, not feared, for an able critic may improve your text considerably and save you from embarrassing infelicities.

A good example of a compelling text may be more helpful than reams of advice. It is hard to imagine any finer artistry than Jaroslav Vajda's translation of Tranovsky's text for a twelfth-century Bohemian carol, "Come Rejoicing, Praises Voicing" (*Lutheran Book of Worship* #66).

1. Come rejoicing, praises voicing;
Christmas Day is breaking. / The
eternal Lord supernal human form
is taking. / He is born in a stall,
now he lies, infant small, / In a
manger, heav'nly stranger, Lord
of all; / In a manger, heav'nly
stranger, Lord of all.
2. Whom the sages and the ages
anxiously awaited, / Angels
proudly herald loudly in their
songs elated. / Let us, too, in these
days, thankful hearts gladly raise,
/ To the tender infant render all
our praise; / To the tender infant
render all our praise.
3. Child appealing, light revealing,
Jesus Christ, our pleasure; / God,
yet very Son of Mary, heav'n's gift
and treasure. / Mighty king, gentle
friend, as our Lord to us bend /
And caressing us with blessing,
now descend, / And caressing us
with blessing, now descend. *LF*

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Notes

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2. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., "Hymns Are Theology," *Theology Today* (1985): 67ff.
3. Austin C. Lovelace, "Basic Tools of Hymn Writing," *Hymn* 35/2 (1984): 75.
4. Harry Eskew, "Writing Hymn Texts and Tunes: Interview with Brian Wren and Peter Cutts," *Hymn* 35/2 (1984): 73.
5. Ibid.
6. Howard Olson, "Johann Sebastian Bach, God's Musical Ambassador," *Africa Theological Journal* 14/1 (1985): 31.
7. A. M. Jones, "Hymns for the African," Parts III and IV, *Books for Africa*, 28/1-2 (1958): 85.
8. Lovelace, 78.
9. Jones, 3.
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11. K. Amri Abedi, *Sheria za Kutunga Mashairi na Diwani ya Amri* [The Poems of Amri, with an Essay on Swahili Poetry and the Rules of Versification] (Kampala: Eagle, 1954), 23.
12. Edith Margaret Clarkson, Carl P. Daw, Jr., and Fred Pratt Green, "Approaches to Hymn Writing," *Hymn* 35/2 (1984): 82.
13. Ibid.
14. Gracia Grindal, "Pitfalls in Hymn Writing," *Hymn* 35/2 (1984): 82.
15. Clarkson, Daw, and Green, 81.
16. Ibid., 79.
17. *Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958), 30.
18. Gracia Grindal, *Lessons in Hymn Writing* (St. Paul: Luther Northwestern Seminary, 1983), 28.
19. Grindal, "Pitfalls in Hymn Writing," 84.
20. Lovelace, 76.
21. Howard S. Olson, "Luther's Legacy of Hymnody in Africa," *Africa Theological Journal* 12/1 (1983): 23.