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## What Makes a Hymn Lutheran?

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*This question will continue to rage in our midst as long as there are Lutherans!* Is a hymn Lutheran because its writer grew up as a Lutheran? Or is it Lutheran because it expresses Lutheran theology? To think that only Lutherans can write Lutheran hymns is to confuse genetics with confession. Sadly, it is easy to be a genetic Lutheran these days and not have the slightest idea about Lutheran theology.

At the beginning of the last century, Lutherans numbered more than they do today, and they argued vigorously about what a Lutheran hymn was. The debate was occasioned by the question one church leader, Paul Glasoe, posed specifically in the January 1, 1931, edition of the church paper, *The Lutheran Herald*: “Are we singing our children out of the Lutheran church?”

Some feared that by insisting on singing only from the old German and Scandinavian hymns without any engagement with the American hymn-book their children would leave for other more evangelical and American churches.

Some thought a Lutheran hymn could only be a hymn by a Lutheran, which narrowed the number of hymns available for a Lutheran hymnal. What about those from the ecumenical church?

To their credit, others argued persuasively that it was the words that made a hymn Lutheran.

N. Astrup Larsen, a missionary in China, settled it for good by saying that any hymn that told of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ for us was Lutheran.

In other words, a hymn that preaches or assumes faith alone, grace alone, word alone, Christ alone, the cross alone is a Lutheran hymn.

### LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND HYMNS

The Lutheran Confessions are clear on this. We read from Melanchthon’s “Apology to the Augsburg Confession” in which he said, “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies... We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn that will arouse their faith and fear.”

This means hymns can do more than help us preach the gospel to our neighbors. They can help us praise God and pray to him. Some of our greatest and most popular hymns by

non-Lutherans do that, from “Praise to the Lord the Almighty, the King of Creation,” to “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” to “On Eagle’s Wings.” Other favorites help us pray to God, such as Luther’s “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word,” or Anglican bishop Reginald Heber’s “Holy, Holy, Holy,” or Taizé’s “Jesus Remember Me When You Come into Your Kingdom.” These kinds of hymns are classics that are perfectly acceptable in Lutheran services.

We are rich in hymns from the entire ecumenical and global church. Many are much beloved by people in our Lutheran churches as well as popular around the world. We can bring them into the canon of Lutheran hymns because they preach the pure gospel of Jesus, or teach of Jesus, or pray to him in the words of Scripture.

## LUTHERAN AND ECUMENICAL HYMNS

We Lutherans, whose ecumenical strategy at its best rejoices in the unity we already have in Jesus Christ, can accept these hymns with pleasure into our hymnals, as we have over the generations. When Lutherans came to America and started preparing their first English hymnal, there were no serviceable English translations of German or Scandinavian hymns. So by necessity they opened up their hymnbooks to a wide variety of great English hymns. They took in many favorite hymns by Isaac Watts and Charles

Wesley, which Lutherans have sung ever since with joy.

After Catherine Winkworth in the mid-nineteenth century provided English-speaking Lutherans with a treasury of German Lutheran texts in good English, Lutherans began publishing hymnals with many more Lutheran chorales in them. The Norwegian Evangelical Church in America in 1912 produced *The Lutheran Hymnary*, which contained mostly classic Lutheran chorales and made very few gestures toward American hymnody, although it did include classic Anglican hymns such as “Holy, Holy, Holy.” *The Hymnal* (1925) by Swedish Augustana was very friendly to the American songbook, including gospel hymns such as “In the Sweet Bye and Bye.”

## LUTHERANS AND CONTEMPORARY HYMNS

We should continue including new hymns as well as old ones by our Christian brothers and sisters around the world, hymns that teach us how to preach, praise, and pray to Christ alone. We should not take them, however, just because they come from the global church.

Some contemporary hymns are not Lutheran hymns because they do not preach or assume the Lutheran theological fundamentals. To some, the idea that a hymn has to fit theological norms can be repellent. There are hymnwriters who want to be as ignorant of theology as they can be, because theology brings

division, in their opinion. It is the truth, however, that causes divisions, and there is always much strife involved in defending the faith.

Not every hymn or spiritual song written today preaches the gospel. Hymns that tell God what we are doing, and seem to imply that our works should do anything to win us favor with God, should be banned no matter where they come from or how popular they are. As

the old spiritual says, "Give me Jesus." That's the main thing.

Gracia Grindal

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gracia Grindal". The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first and last letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Editor-in-Chief