21
Luther and Bar Song: The Truth, Please!

Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good;
sing to his name, for it is pleasant! —Psalm 135:3

If I had a dollar for every time I have heard that Martin Luther used tavern music for his hymns and that "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was a drinking song, I would be a wealthy man. Yet such assertions are simply not true. These are falsehoods perpetrated on the evangelical world. Does that seem overstated? Well it would be an overstatement if this misinformation did not have such overarching ramifications and effects on current church-music philosophy and practice.

On numerous occasions such ideas about Luther and his hymns have been verbalized and put into print to support the CCM (Contemporary Christian Music) industry. Luther's hymn was supposedly a "bar song," in turn validating the use of popular secular music in church. This assumption purportedly corresponds with a question attributed to Luther: "Why should the Devil have all the good music?" On these bases the use of popular music in the church has been championed, provided that it is "sanctified" by the addition of sacred text. The con-

clusion: *as long as the words are Christian words, the music is of little consequence*—worse yet, *the world's music is the best way to win worldly people to Christ*. The careless acceptance of these errant ideas has done great damage to the integrity of church music and worship in our time. There are at least four errors to counter.

First, Luther's battle hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, is not a tavern song, nor is it based on one. Luther composed both the text (based on Psalm 46) and the original tune for this chorale in 1529. Luther was a good composer, who worked closely with eminent musicians Johann Walter and Conrad Rupff. While some of his pieces were derived from Gregorian chant or other preexisting compositions, only one was even based on a secular tune—an extant folk song used for his Christmas hymn, "From Heaven above to Earth I Come" (Vom Himmel Hoch). This tune was replaced after a time because "Luther was embarrassed to hear the tune of his Christmas hymn sung in inns and dance halls."[1] Walter agreed and ejected it from the hymnbook in 1551. Perhaps this matter is the source of some of the present confusion, since it would be natural to hear folk music in such settings. None of Luther's tunes can be traced back to drinking songs.

Luther was careful in his choice of music for the church. And his purposes for composition are entirely other than secular, as is confirmed by his own words:

> Therefore, I too, with the help of others, have brought together some sacred songs, in order to make a good beginning and to give an incentive to those who can better carry on the Gospel and bring it to the people . . . And these songs were arranged in four parts for no other reason than that I wanted to attract the youth (who should and must be trained in music and other fine arts) away from love songs and carnal pieces and to give them something wholesome to learn instead . . .[2]

Luther did use preexisting musical material for some of his chorales, though. He borrowed and adapted from Gregorian chant, as well as from folk music. This was a regular practice from before Luther's time right

up through the Baroque period. Such borrowings were called *contrafacta* (singular *contrafactum*) or *parody*.[3] However, borrowing from secular folk music was much more common in medieval times than in Luther's day and thereafter. Albert Schweitzer said that EIN' FESTE BURG itself was "woven out of Gregorian reminiscences. The recognition of this fact deprives the melody of none of its beauty and Luther of none of the credit for it; it really takes considerable talent to create an organic unity out of fragments."[4] In the cases where the rhythm or other aspects of a tune did not appropriately suit Luther's texts, he would alter the rhythm, smoothing it out, making it more stately or noble (the opposite, incidentally of what many are championing today). Luther was primarily after good melodies or melodic ideas. Many "folk" melodies of Luther's time originated in music of the church, not the other way around.

The primary mistake that people have made is in confusing drinking songs or tavern music with "bar form." Bar form is a standard German music and literature form of the Middle Ages. It normally consists of three or more stanzas, each stanza being divided into two *Stollen* (the "A" lines) and one *Abgesang* (the "B" section). This resulted in an AAB structure common to most Lutheran chorales.[5] A variation on bar form known as "quatrain" form or the "quatrain-stanza" concept was identified by musicologist Dénes Bartha. Quatrain form can be identified by the letters AABA^1, which the English music theorists label "rounded binary songform" and German folklorists call *Reprisenbar*.[6] This form is employed for many strophic hymns, perhaps most commonly in hymns from Germany and the British Isles. Luther's use of bar form has nothing to do with drinking.[7]

The second error is in believing that the statement "Why should the Devil have all the good music?" (as applied to Luther) has anything to do with pop music, or for that matter has anything to do with Luther. Pop music did not even exist in Luther's time; it is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Did secular music exist? Of course it did. There was music of the courts, music of the bards and troubadours, and folk/dance music of the common people. But this music was not mass-produced with the intention of making vast amounts of money. The only association that the statement has with Christian pop music is that Larry Norman wrote a song by that very title as part of the "Jesus movement"

that gave birth to CCM.[8] Norman and others used this song as a means of championing their music within the Christian church and quite successfully managed to build a commercial Christian rock empire. Music and worship in evangelicalism have not been the same since.

Norman's song typifies the attitude and philosophy that gave birth to CCM. Perhaps you are familiar with these lines from it:

> I ain't knocking the hymns; just give me a song that has a BEAT.
> I ain't knocking the hymns; just give me a song that moves my feet.
> I don't like none of those funeral marches; I ain't dead yet!

Though he says he is not "knocking the hymns," he calls them "funeral marches." He advocates rock music and claims that in place of hymnody, the music (for him) should generate a physical, dance-oriented response. In short the idea is: away with our Reformation heritage, away with the music of our parents and grandparents, away with the hymns of the church. Instead give me what makes me feel good physically and what I want now! This is somewhat different from the current move back toward hymnody's texts (which is wonderful), though with contemporary musical clothing (which is less than wonderful).

The third error has to do with the statement's attribution. The confusion is understandable. Schweitzer wrote, "Believing, as he said, that 'the devil does not need all the good tunes for himself' Luther formed his Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* out of the melody of the riddle-song *Ich komm aus fremden Landen her*."[9] While Schweitzer is correct about the melody, there is no evidence that Luther made the statement about tunes and the Devil. In the January 1997 issue of *Concordia Theological Journal*, James L. Brauer offered a $25 reward to any Luther scholar who could find the quote in Luther's works. No one met the challenge. Apparently, William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, said something similar as quoted in Helen Hosier's biography: "'Why should the devil have all the best tunes?' William replied when chided for appropriating music of popular tunes for his hymns."[10] Is it possible that Booth was quoting the Rev. Rowland

Hill (1744–1833), the famous London pastor and evangelist, who said, "The Devil should not have all the best tunes"?[11] Hill was concerned over the lamentable quality of music in his church (Surrey Chapel, built for him in 1783), and he wanted do something about it. So Hill wrote hymns and compiled and published five collections of psalms and hymns, three of which were specifically for children and schools. In spite of such readily available documentation, the statement has been misattributed to Luther as well as to both Wesley brothers, Isaac Watts, and even D. L. Moody.[12]

But even if Luther had uttered such a statement, it would not have been in an effort to bring tavern or folk music into the church. It would have been directed at the Roman Catholic church and its pope, to whom Luther frequently referred as "the Devil." In other words, "Why should the pope (i.e., the Roman church) have all the good church music? Our Lutheran churches should have it, too." The music that Luther loved and reclaimed for use in his church was music written for Rome by Josquin des Prez, Louis Senfl, Heinrich Finck, Pierre de la Rue, and other master composers of the day admired for their musical skill and attention to text. In other words, if the question had been Luther's, it would support the idea that artistic music of great composers should be employed in worship—the polar opposite of what those positing it as support for rock music or hip-hop or other pop styles would like for it to mean.

The fourth error is the belief that the simple addition of sacred text or Christian words to a tune makes it worthy of use in worship. A related error is the notion that as long as the words are inoffensive, the music is of little consequence. But adding scriptural text to a heavy-metal tune or even to vapid easy-listening rock does not make it appropriate for worship. The ideological conflict of the two forces is irreconcilable. The music's destructive and purposely anti-God, anti-authoritarian nature remains undiminished even if it is played by well-meaning Christians.

Does music of rebellion fit the worship of our majestic God? No. It may be useful in expressing *angst*, or man's sinful condition, or even the lament or oppression of minorities in some forum, but this forum is not properly a worship service. Some people will be fooled and will put themselves or their congregations in the middle of such confusion,

but careful consideration will uncover the false premises and devastating results of such an action. The music used in worship is of great consequence because it communicates at a level deeper than words. In fact, the musical message in a particular song may be more powerful and insidious than its verbal message can overcome. When the two conflict, the music usually emerges as the victor.

Text and music should match each other well. If the text is trite and meaningless, it has no place in worship. Yet at times profound texts are wed to music with inferior structure or harmony, so that, as Leonard Payton put it, "the aesthetic form communicates fun and good times to most people rather than the worship of Almighty God . . ."[13] This does not mean that light or popular music is "bad"; rather, it suggests that *not all music is appropriate to worship* or to particular thoughts and ideas about God.

Our heavenly Father deserves and demands the best we have to offer. Our lives are to be living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). We are told to think on whatever is good, lovely, and virtuous (Phil. 4:8). This requires us to make choices. As literature or art can be critiqued according to certain standards, so music can be judged according to objective parameters—specifically, melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. While some judgments will be subjective, the laws of science and nature reveal the Creator's absolute principles. Along with those borne out in human experience, it is these absolute principles apprehended through education that inform our knowledge of good form, artistic content, and musical excellence. Our relativistic, pluralistic society says otherwise, of course, in direct opposition to the gospel and to biblical standards for godly living.

Everyone will have an opinion about music and will know what they *like*, but a trained church musician with theological understanding will be best equipped to make decisions about what is "good" church music. One of the primary responsibilities of the church musician is to be a steward and protector of the church's worship music. This responsibility points to our need for musically educated, theologically astute church musicians who will care for us in this regard. It also points to our need for congregations and pastors who will search for and value these kinds of musical leaders. Such is the kind of person whom Luther commended, and such is the quality of music that he sought for the church. Any myth

that misrepresents Luther and others in support of commercial "pop" music in worship (Christianized or not) should be silenced.

Notes

1. Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. F. Best and R. Wood (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 48.

2. Martin Luther, from the foreword to the first edition of Johann Walter's hymnal, the *Wittenberg Geistliche Gesangbüchlein* (1524), in *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, vol. 53 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 315–16.

3. Manfred F. Bukofzer, "Popular and Secular Music in England," in *The New Oxford History of Music 3: Ars Nova and the Renaissance, 1300–1540*, ed. Anselm Hughes and Gerald Abraham (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 108.

4. Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach* (1908), trans. [English] by Ernest Newman, 2 vols., enlarged and illustrated edition (Neptune City, NJ: Paganiniana, 1980), 1:16.

5. "*AAB* form can exist in various ways. The most important possibilities are as follows: (1) *AA/B*, (2) *ABAB/CB*, (3) *AA/BA*, (4) *AA/BB/A*, (5) *AA/BB/C*, (6) *AA/BB*. These forms are taken from medieval German song, but are also more generally applicable . . . The *AAB* form—one of the most common of all musical form genres—can be documented from the time of the classical Greek ode with its *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*. In the early Middle Ages it can be found in the Gregorian chant repertories and later in many hymns . . . In Germany it was moreover of paramount importance in the *Tenorlied* of the 16th century and for the Protestant *Kirchenlied*. In the more recent history of German song it receded in importance in relation to other form schemes, but saw a significant revival in the songs of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. The importance of bar form for Wagner has been shown exhaustively by Lorenz." Horst Brunner, "Bar Form," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (accessed 20 October 2004), http://www.grovemusic.com.

6. Dénes Bartha, "Song Form and the Concept of 'Quatrain,' " in *Haydn Studies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 353–55. See also "Binary and Ternary Form," in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 4th ed., ed. Don Michael Randel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2003), 100–102.

7. This does not imply, however, that Luther did not enjoy good beer.

8. "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?," words and music by Larry Norman as recorded on *Only Visiting This Planet*, Verve Records, copyright 1972. One of the refrains states it this way: "I know what's right, I know what's wrong and I don't confuse it. Why should the devil have all the good music? I feel good every day 'cause Jesus is the Rock and He rolled my blues away."

9. Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, 17–18.

10. In Helen K. Hosier, *William and Catherine Booth: Founders of the Salvation Army* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1999) as quoted at http://www.apologetix.com/faq/faq-detail.

11. See John Bartlett, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 10th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1919), 861, as well as the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1979), and E. W. Broom's biography of Hill, *The Rev. Rowland Hill: Preacher and Wit* (London, n.p., 1881 or 1883) all of which attribute the quote to the famous preacher, as does V. J. Charlesworth in *Rowland Hill: His Life, Anecdotes and Pulpit Sayings* (London, n.p., 1879), 156.

12. Mark Nabholz, "Give Luther a Rest" in *The Journal of the Church Music National Conference* (Fall 2002), 19.

13. Leonard Payton, *Reforming Our Worship Music* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 14.