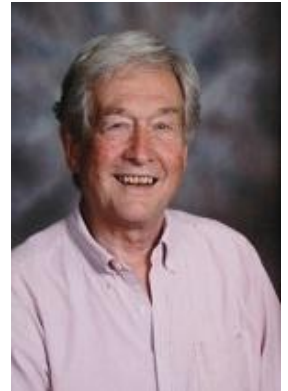


Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 214 + December 2017
Copyright: © 2017 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of < www.worship.ca > as the source.



MY TEN GREATEST HYMNS **A Personal Reckoning**

1 Here's yet another spiritual discipline for you, faithful reader: Pick out your own Top Ten Christian Hymns. There'll be no test. Your list would be strictly a private, personal judgement.

2 This posting presents still a fourth exercise to awaken and enlarge and enrich your spiritual life. Previous entrees in this series include: Essay 204 "Signs of the Kingdom"; Essay 208 "A Spiritual Autobiography"; and Essay 211 "Daily Prayer".

3 Here is a list of my personal favourites. I'll start with my own Number Ten and work up. To keep you in suspense! Hymn numbers in each case will refer to those in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), our current Lutheran worship resource.

4 Here's my Number Ten: 524 *What is this place / Komt nu met Zang*. Here is a great joining of an old Dutch tune with a great new text.

5 This hymn is specially dear to me because it's part of my own biography, in a sense. In 1968-69, I lived with my family for a year in Europe, taking advantage of a Danforth Campus Ministry grant I had won to enroll at the Graduate School of Ecumenical studies in Bossey, Switzerland.

6 We arrived in Europe at Amsterdam, Holland, and spent a week there with old friends from home in Syracuse, New York, who were directing the Syracuse University program abroad. During that week, I looked up Huub Oosterhuis, the author of this text. He was at that time a Roman Catholic priest and a Campus Pastor, like myself, and I had the opportunity to attend his campus mass and interview him for an hour afterward. He was utterly charming and open and accessible. I love that line "*...we are each other's bread and wine...*"

7 Even more: During that week with Syracuse friends in Amsterdam, we lived in their rented home – on Valerius Street! He's the composer of this hymn's wonderful tune!

8 Here's my Number Nine: 478 *Father, We Thank You / Rendez a Dieu*. This hymn text is a paraphrase of one of the oldest documents of the Christian Church, the Didache, or Teaching [of the Apostles], dating from the Second Century! At least two other hymns in ELW use the Didache's metaphor of scattered grains gathered into one loaf as a picture of the Church.

9 And the tune is a splendid 16th Century chorale from the Reformed tradition, with the typical chorale form: AABC, with the first musical line repeated.

10 Number Eight: 520 *Dearest Jesus, at Your Word / Liebster Jesu, wir sint hier.* A lovely tune, in typical chorale musical form, with a soaring tenor on the last syllables! By all means, encourage this to be sung in parts, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass (SATB).

11 And that text! I love those feminine (two syllable) rhymes at the ends of almost every line! Sounds supremely engaging and winsome and child-like to me! Further: Doesn't the Christian Church own an enormous debt to Catherine Winkworth, a British Anglican of the 19th Century, who rescued these splendid German texts and translated them into graceful English. For me, she's the Fifth Evangelist! (After Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that is.)

12 Number Seven: 322 *Oh, Love, How Deep / Deo Gracias.* A strong Lenten text translated from Thomas a' Kempis, and a magnificent melody from the 15th Century, the so-called Agincourt Hymn of Henry V, presumably sung by his troops at the battle of Agincourt. William Walton's score for Laurence Olivier's stirring 1945 movie of Shakespeare's play incorporates this melody.

13 And that repeated "*For us...*" that begins stanzas 3 and following! Breath-taking! Luther would have loved it! Few hymn tunes start out with their climax, and descend from there! This one does!

14 Number Six: 631 *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling / Hyfrydol.* Surely among the all time Top Ten. Charles Wesley, John's brother, is the author, and he's surely the Fifth Evangelist, with some splendid hymn texts to his credit.

15 The tune Hyfrydol is lovely, but try singing this text to the tune Blaenwern, not to Hyfrydol as here in ELW and many current hymnals, nor to Beecher, as in many earlier hymnals. See ELW hymn 647 for the Blaenwern tune. Which reminds me: Check out the hymn tune index in ELW, beginning at page 1195. Very handy.

16 Number Five: 776 *What God Ordains Is Good Indeed / Was Gott tut.* I weep when we sing this one. I have confessed to you before my fondness for the 17th Century German chorales. Here's a story from my own biography.

17 In 1972, I sang in the choir of a local Lutheran church where pastor and musician were both good friends and very knowledgeable musically. One Sunday our choir anthem was Pachelbel's On God and not on human trust. It's an exhilarating 18th Century contrapuntal piece, based on this chorale. I came to love both the chorale, text and tune, and Pachelbel's treatment of it, both new to me.

18 Only months later I was to go into surgery for an aortic valve replacement – in those earliest days of open heart surgery, a scary proposition indeed. So I took pains to memorize *What God Ordains...* and sang it to myself as they wheeled me in my gurney down the hospital hall to my operation.

19 I survived, you will be glad to know, and I took to telling this story to all who would listen. Years later, in 2001, I had to suffer a second open heart surgery, this time to repair an enormous aortic aneurism – an even scarier proposition, since two of my three aortic walls had already ruptured. My dear, beloved, thoughtful pastor at the time – I was singing in his choir! – had photocopied this hymn, and distributed it to my children and a family friend who were at my bedside, pre-op. We all sang this hymn, some of us through tears, before I was wheeled away.

20 Understandably, I choke up almost every time we sing this one!

21 Number Four: 665 *Rise, Shine, You People / Wojkiewicz*. Here's a brand new hymn, text and tune! You're living, I hope you know, in a Golden Age of Christian Hymnody. Some terrific new texts being written and tunes composed!

22 I love this text, with those five mighty syllables at the end of each stanza. Knowing the rhyme scheme, you can almost anticipate what those strong, muscular syllables will say!

23 Here's Number Three: 632 *O God, Our Help in Ages Past / St. Anne*. Another all time great hymn, surely one of the Top Ten in anyone's reckoning.

24 Isaac Watts, the 17th Century poet-priest, is surely the Fifth Evangelist! (Or have I said that?) Six adjectives in six stanzas! All nouns and verbs! Brilliant language! That's almost Hemingway-esque! And the tune! Magnificent! A triumph of English hymnody! We taught this to our kids to sing at bedtime!

25 Number Two: 840 *Now Thank We All Our God / Nun Danket alle Gott*. Another on anyone's Hit Parade. One of the all time greats!

26 You have heard the circumstances of its writing? Martin Rinkhart, Lutheran pastor during the Thirty Years War of the 16th Century, wrote this hymn – at the death of his wife and children in the plague! What faith! Again, we have Catherine Winkworth to thank for this marvelous translation.

27 Johann Sebastian Bach uses this text and tune in his magisterial Cantata Number 79! Glorious music, glorious text! A terrific hymn by any standard!

28 Number One on my list: 858 *Praise to the Lord / Lobe den Herren*. Again, what can I say? Near the top of everyone's list of All Time Great Christian Hymns. Great text – Catherine Winkworth again, folks! And great tune. Since childhood I have loved this hymn. The new version at ELW 859 is an improvement upon Winkworth in eliminating those troublesome masculine pronouns in her original.

29 Here's an extra treat. I'd be willing to identify the three greatest secular "hymns" of the 20th Century. I'm thinking of The Beatles – who else? *Let it be; Here comes the Sun* – a Christmas carol, when you think about it! – and *All you need is Love*.

30 Hah!

+++