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IN PRAISE OF 17TH CENTURY GERMAN CHORALES

1 Ever since I was a teenager, I have loved the 17th Century German Chorales in our hymnbooks. The family I grew up in did not speak German in our home, although German was our cultural heritage, on both my mother's and father's side. Their parents did speak German in their homes, at least on occasion, I assume. But I did not grow up knowing German.

2 There's part of me that regrets that loss. There's something admirable about a home that's bi-lingual. Of course, in the early 1930's, when I grew up, anything German in any household came under suspicion in North America for being at least unpatriotic, and at worst, downright treasonous.

3 So it is entirely understandable that my parents wanted to assimilate their kids pretty quickly and completely into North American culture. No foreign influences, please. Especially German

4 Aside: As an adult, I came to regard it as an unwise career move that my father, when he emerged from his Seminary studies, made a name for himself as a hot-shot young preacher in both English and German – in the period just between the two World Wars. I'm pretty certain that the home parish of my childhood, where my Dad was pastor, held German-language services with some regularity. At least until the Second World War.

5 Back to my topic. In spite of the anti-German cultural sentiments around us, I did manage to pick up a few German words and phrases. And I think I disappointed my Father in my own college years, when I selected French, not German, as a second language to study. (I also admired my maternal Grandfather, a Seminary professor of New Testament, Greek, and Liturgy in Chicago, who apparently lectured abroad – in French!)

6 In any case, and perhaps in spite of all the above, I came to love the 17th Century German Chorales, as early as in my teens. See Essay 214 above, my Ten Greatest Hymns. Half of my choices there are Chorales!

7 I'll confess up front: They're not all immediately accessible. You must learn them. It will take some effort. Be certain to check out the hymn tune index in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), our current Lutheran worship resource, pages 1195 - 1198. Also ELW's sources index, pages 1189 - 1194

8 But the effort will be well worth it. These are hymns that ennoble and enlarge our humanum. See Essay 239 above. They are hymns for Grown ups. So many of our contemporary pop hymns and praise choruses are simply infantilizing. Not the Chorales!

9 Yes, some of their texts can be tiresomely didactic. Or even borderline pietistic, not unlike 19th Century "he-walks-with-me-and-he-talks-with-me" Gospel hymns. Many of these texts were written in an age when a rigid, overly rational Lutheran orthodoxy was in conflict with a from-the-heart Lutheran pietism. So it's understandable.

10 An example of a splendid text, rendered from German into English is ELW Hymn 621, a glorious witness to new life in Christ. Check the last words of the second stanza: "Shall I fear then? Can the head / rise and leave his members dead?"

11 Further: ELW pairs some of these terrific tunes with some new texts that are truly wonderful.

12 I love for example the way the German language, when it's translated into English, often produces some winsome feminine rhymes. A feminine rhyme has two syllables. (A masculine rhyme in contrast has one syllable.) Some examples, from ELW 761, "Evening and morning", Paul Gerhardt's splendid hymn of trust: gladness rhymes with sadness, number with slumber, observes us rhymes with preserves us.

13 Those feminine rhymes give these texts an endearing childlike quality, in my view, that makes them specially appealing.

14 A particular word of thanks and appreciation must be added here to Catherine Winkworth, the British Anglican of the 19th Century. She translated many of the German Chorales into English and saved them, you could argue, for posterity! Find her enormous contribution to Lutheran piety in ELW's sources index, page 1194.

15 And those tunes! Magnificent music by any standard! Note the structure of almost all chorale melodies: A-A-B-C. The first musical line is almost always repeated in the second musical line, note for note. The last lines provide a coda or ending, sometimes recalling the first two lines in a direct or indirect quote.

16 Some examples that follow the A-A-B-C scheme: ELW 443, 533, 621, 775, 839, 858. One ELW Chorale that does not follow that scheme is Lobt Gott ihr Christen, 287 and elsewhere. But look at that last line. A startling syncopation, where the text begins, not on the fourth beat of the measure, but on the third! Exhilarating!

17 It is worth noting too that jazz greats from the 20th Century – Dave Brubeck, George Shearing, and Jacques Loussier among them – have found inexhaustible inspiration in the 18th Century Baroque treatments of these melodies, by the likes of Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Philip Telemann, and Johann Pachelbel. Of course Bach's numerous cantatas almost always feature a chorus, at beginning and end, that is based on one of these simple congregational hymn tunes!

18 And that is what these magnificent texts and tunes are ultimately about: Congregational song. In my own parish we regularly sing seven and even eight congregational hymns every Sunday. One hymn often covers an offertory procession to the Table with money, bread and wine. We sing perhaps three hymns during the reception of The Communion. Plus a gathering song, a sending song, and the great Hymn of the Day (HOD) after the sermon.

19 In Lutheran tradition since the 17th Century, the HOD gathers and extends the themes of the Day and of the sermon. Its singing should regularly be embellished by any number of choral possibilities that include choir and people. See Essay 194 above.

20 We are living, faithful reader, in a Golden Age of Hymnody. I rejoice that in our day we have experienced a veritable explosion in hymn writing: texts and tunes. Great new hymns appear among us almost every week! We should make the most of our truly remarkable moment in history, drawing from the widest possible sources, including splendid new offerings of world music.

21 Nevertheless, I regularly amuse (and exasperate!) my parish pastor by maintaining that it simply ain't Lutheran worship without at least one 17th Century congregational Chorale. Every Sunday!

22 Hey, in our parish, that's only one eighth of our weekly hymns!

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