

# Luther, the Musician

As a theologian, musician, and educator, Martin Luther taught of matters close to the heart of God's people. He studied the prophets and realized that music complimented their service to God. He saw in the psalms and canticles (hymns or chants), the desire to praise God and thank Him for His protection.

## **Luther's Life Depicted in Lyrics**

Although his songs depict the struggles and victories of all believers, Luther's own life provided background for songs that teach of repentance and confession. Luther wrote in the first of his theses, "As our Lord Jesus says: Repent, He means that the entire life of a Christian should be one of repentance." Even in the matter of music he referred to the songs of his unbelieving youth, and how the melodies would haunt him. He lamented that error would be set to such captivating tunes.

## **Musical Instruments of Luther's Time**

The musician Luther lived at a time when musical instruments were simple. Although there were smaller organs, the large pipe organs we know today were not yet found in Germany. Common bowed string instruments, such as the violin, were just being developed. Luther taught himself to play the lute and accompanied himself and others in homes and congregational singing. He enjoyed singing with his family knowing that God could be worshipped while enjoying the melodies.

## **Teaching Through Songs**

At a young age Luther already studied music and continued these studies while serving as an Augustinian monk. The skills he developed were then used to teach the German people of the basic tenets of faith. Luther wanted to base some songs on the small catechism. He wrote one each for the Lord's Prayer (SHZ 168), the Creed (SHZ 209), and the Ten Commandments (SHZ 180). These songs were written for the common man to learn the catechism and to help understand the meaning.

In the different areas of his life Luther found music to be an important tool for battling against the enemy. He thought it was important to use music in a good way, to teach and comfort those who found themselves burdened with the trials of life.

## **Luther's Well Known Songs**

*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* (SHZ 181) is Martin Luther's most well-known song, not only in our hymnal but around the world. It is based on Psalm 46 and is many times referred to as the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation." Luther speaks of God's power and authority. He paints a strong picture of the Victor striking down the forces of hell, and of the Word standing strong over darkness, "We tremble not; we fear no ill, they cannot overpower us." This hymn was used by many composers, such as Bach and Mendelssohn in cantatas, symphonies, and organ chorales. The melody itself is beautifully written. It begins with three bold trumpeting notes (the highest part of the melody), representing the hammers on the doors of the Castle Church.

*Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice* (SHZ 272), written in 1523, was the first of Luther's congregational hymns. Many believe that Luther wrote down the melody as was sung by a traveling artisan. This hymn speaks of Jesus' sacrifice and work. It is a hymn of thanks for God's work through Christ. The hymn is usually sung during

the time of Lent and Easter as it tells the story of the crucifixion. It ends with the message of our heavenly goal: “Take heed lest men with base alloy the heav’nly treasure should destroy; this counsel I bequeath thee.”

*From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee* (SHZ 276) appeared in 1524 in the *Achtliederbuch* hymnal. The hymn is based on Psalm 130 and is often considered Luther’s best hymn. It was used in many significant events, such as the funeral of Frederick the Wise, and was sung during the Diet of Augsburg by Luther and his aides. In the early years, the song was sung at almost every worship service, before the mutual confession. It is a hymn of penitence. The melody comes from J. Walther’s Choir book of 1524. Walther also helped write verses two and three of the hymn.

*God Made the Ten Commandments Known* (SHZ 180) was first introduced in LLC’s 2008 hymnal. The first verse tells the story of how we received the commandments. In verses 2–10, the first line includes the commandment, and the following lines include the explanation. The last two verses explain why God gave the commandments and reminds us that we cannot earn salvation through our own doing, “Help us, Lord Jesus Christ, for we a Mediator have in Thee; our works cannot salvation gain; they merit us but endless pain.” This hymn is a Latin sequence hymn, sometimes referred to as a Kyrie hymn. *Kyrie Eleison* translates to “O Lord, have mercy.” We see that at the end of each verse, this line is included. Before the time of the Reformation, one of the few parts the congregation was involved in was to utter the words “*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison.*”

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Source: *This Is Luther*, Ewald M. Plass, Concordia Publishing House

### **Discussion Points:**

1. Which song or hymn of Zion is your favorite? Share reasons why.
2. Can you relate to any of Luther’s songs that are found in our hymnal? In what way?
3. Have you experienced that Christian music is an important weapon for battling against the enemy?  
Why is it so?