The Precious Gift

The Hymns, Carols and Translations of Henry L. Lettermann

Compiled and Edited by Scott M. Hyslop

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The following are people who have supplied me with hymn texts and background information on Dr. Lettermann’s life and work: Dr. Paul Bouman, Dr. Carl Schalk, Dr. Ralph C. Schultz; the sainted Dr. F. Samuel Janzow, Dr. Paul G. Bunjes, Dr. Richard W. Hillert, Prof. Victor G. Hildner; the staff of Klinck Memorial Library at Concordia University Chicago; and Dr. Wayne Lucht.

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SOLI DEO GLORIA

Scott M. Hyslop
Introduction

The title for this anthology of original hymns, carols, and translations by Henry L. Lettermann is a verse from one of his original hymns on the Incarnation—“The Precious Gift.” In this text Dr. Lettermann tells us that “In mystery the Father sends the precious gift of light. His Son, our substitute, descends, redeems us from the night.” God’s Son did descend into the darkness of our world to become a beacon of light, illuminating the path of our pilgrim journey. The hymns, psalms, carols, and songs which the church has sung throughout history are a sure sign from God, a reflection of Christ the Light of the world, which emanates from a loving, caring Creator whose Spirit has not forsaken the wandering pilgrims, but continues to light the path and gives new songs to sing along the way.

The hymns, carols, and translations of Henry Lettermann are ruggedly hewn, and well-crafted. They reveal an author who was astutely aware of the rich legacy of confessional, didactic, and scripturally sound hymnody which is the heritage of the Lutheran Church. Lettermann’s ability as a craftsman and artist can be seen throughout his work, as it is a rare person who has the true gift to combine a sound theological understanding with an poet’s sense of style, image and meter. Lettermann works with language in the same manner that a sculptor might work with metal or stone. He takes the raw material of God’s word, working it so that its divine message is brought forward and elevated.

From an academic and historical perspective, Lettermann’s texts show us how matters of language and poetic structure have dramatically changed in the world of hymnody over the course of the last half of the twentieth century. When Lettermann began writing his hymns, The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) was the primary
source and model for those wishing to create new liturgical song and hymns within the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. His work clearly represents how one author and one church body grappled with issues of language used in worship during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is fascinating to look over these texts and watch the transformation from the language of *The Lutheran Hymnal*, as reflected in some of Lettermann’s early writing, to the leaner poetry of his later work, devoid of all “thees” and “thous” as well as capitalized pronouns referring to the Deity.

Lettermann’s work culminated in the Missouri Synod’s *Lutheran Worship* published in 1982. *Lutheran Worship* was as dramatic a departure from *The Lutheran Hymnal* as could be imagined at that time. Hymns, liturgies, and language which had been familiar to generations of worshipping Missouri Lutherans were now replaced with new, and in some cases, challenging materials. Some of these changes were very well done and have been embraced over time, while other changes, well intended as they may have been, fell short and became points of contention and irritation.

Now we are in the early years of a new century and millennium. The Lutheran church bodies in America are further apart than ever regarding issues of language in worship. A multiplicity of worship forms and styles confront and challenge mainline Protestant churches in ways that would not have been imagined even at the time of the launching of *Lutheran Worship* in 1982. These issues, which have exploded over the course of the past twenty-five years, have brought forth a difficult question for thoughtful clergy, musicians, poets, and laity—“What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend?” 1 While there is probably no definitive answer to this question, it is important to look at the writings and materials left to us by those who have wrestled with this question before. As the saying goes, “You can’t know where you are going unless you know where you have been,” and even though some of what has come down to us from the past may appear to be over zealous and even parochial in approach, there are important lessons to be learned and important insights to be gained upon honest examina-

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1 “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (stanza three), *Lutheran Service Book* #449.

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Biographical Information

The youngest of four children, Henry L. Lettermann was born February 28, 1952, to Henry Christopher Lettermann and Anna (née Gerstacker) Lettermann, at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His primary level education took place at First Evangelical Lutheran School in Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania, where his father served as principal. It was in this setting where the riches of the church’s song would be imprinted on the young heart and mind of Henry Lettermann. After his education at First Lutheran, he attended Concordia High School, matriculating to Concordia Teachers College (now Concordia University) in River Forest, Illinois, where he received the bachelor of science degree in 1954. It was at Concordia where Lettermann’s love for literature and poetry, especially the poetry of Americans Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost, began to be formed. With the encouragement and scrutiny of friends and professors, the young writer’s work began to take root and grow.

While at Concordia one of the foremost influences on Lettermann was Arthur E. Diesing, professor at Concordia Teachers College from 1923 to 1958. In a tribute to Diesing, which appeared in the spring 1966 issue of Motif—a literary journal published by the faculty and students of Concordia, River Forest—Lettermann wrote the following words to honor a teacher who had profoundly influenced his own life and work:

His (Diesing’s) only fault was that he loved excellence inordinately. He could fix you with his penetrating demand that you “get to the point,” and heaven help you if you had no point to get to. Yet his unrelenting pursuit of meaningful interpretation of the aesthetic inspired you to be dissatisfied with the superficial, the
Giving Wings To Prayer

In Memoriam
+ Henry L. Lettermann+
2/28/32 – 9/24/96

I was raised in a literary household, a veritable incubator for linguistic endeavors. Some of my happiest childhood memories revolve around family suppers which were festive occasions for creative storytelling, feeding my fertile young mind with lessons in puns, alliteration, onomatopoeia, symbolism, metaphor, paradox, and—above all—the invaluable place of humor as a safety valve in the expression of life’s pain. I learned to value expressing images in the most precise of ways, always striving for exactly the subtle shading required to convey the essence of thought.

Both my parents had chosen teaching as their professional careers. My mother taught kindergarten and my father was a professor of English at Concordia Teachers College, as it was called in those days. My brother and I spent endless hours wandering around the campus as youngsters, learning all the secret passages known only to the buildings and grounds engineers, studying all the stuffed animals on display in the science building, and listening to future teachers practice piano or organ in the music building.

We lived in college-provided housing, a three-flat not far from the campus. While our household belongings reflected the early 1960s income of Lutheran schoolteachers with two kids, my father’s greatest material possession was a baby grand piano, which the Spirit had sent our way. In addition to directing college plays and other duties routinely assigned to him, my father had the unusual good fortune to mingle creatively with some of the most talent-
ed Lutheran composers—most notably Carl Schalk and Richard Hillert, now of international fame. They composed church music and, when it came to writing texts, they often asked my father or his colleague, F. Samuel Janzow, to collaborate.

When my father was in the grip of his musing, it was palpable and audible to the rest of the family. He would sit at the piano and play the wordless composition over and over for hours, like Lady Macbeth washing her hands, sometimes stopping to jot down a phrase or two, but mostly I think he was mesmerized by the very life and spirit of the music, listening to the chording and tone, opening himself up to the creative inspiration about to be given to him. He would sometimes pace back and forth, fertilizing an idea in his head. Then he would return to the piano and play out a section, comparing the imagined jigsaw fit of a piece of text in his mind with the real, uncompleted puzzle on the music stand.

And then, usually in a matter of days, a penciled text would mysteriously appear on the dinette table, written on the reverse side of an old copy of a purple dittoed college course outline, completed by Dad in the wee hours of the preceding morning and left for my mom’s critique. I remember discovering these poems first thing in the morning and I stopped to read them, too, but often the subtlety of his genius or the obscurity of his biblical reference missed its mark with my yet developing mind and soul. But each new citing spawned a celebration.

Dad would take the text to school with him and engage his literary colleagues in a round-table coffee break triage, discussing everything from choice of meter and words to images and themes. He would then refine and revise the text, and a final hand-written draft of the hymn would magically reappear on the dinette table, its apparent effortlessness betraying his labor-intensive process. And so it went with the dozens of hymns and carols he wrote during the years of my childhood.

Understanding well my part in the academic Lutheran legacy intended for me, it seemed only natural that I would fulfill my parent’s expectation of becoming the third generation on both sides of the family to graduate from Concordia. Accepting that this pre-pro-
“Make It New”

The following is excerpted from an article written by Dr. Lettermann for the January-February 1982 edition of Lutheran Education, the official publication of the Lutheran Education Association. In this article Dr. Lettermann explains his process of updating and revising the hymn texts which appear in Lutheran Worship (LW). As issues regarding relevance and inclusivity of language were in their infancy at the writing of this article, Lettermann’s article serves as a window into his mind regarding these issues as well as hymn writing in general. This article is reprinted by permission of the editor of Lutheran Education.

Language: The strong feeling of the LCMS Commission on Worship (like that of the people who produced LBW [Lutheran Book of Worship]) was that to be effective, the language of worship must not be allowed to be separate from the language which is used every day by the worshipper. When these languages become different, separate from each other, one also is promoting an unhealthful separation of religion and worship from life. This is probably not true for people of mature age whose many meaningful spiritual experiences are (for them) inseparable from the hallowed forms of the language, but I would propose that it is progressively more true for most of us as time passes and as language inevitably continues to change. In addition, there are impeccable literary grounds: we live in a world different from that of our fathers of 1913. Though the spiritual realities have not changed, we have, and our language has, and a just embodiment of our experience of the spiritual realities is better met in materials of worship that reflect our own times and experiences. Why do new poems and novels continue to be written? One does not put new wine in old bottles.
Let me reflect another “prejudice” I have on this subject. I believe strongly that worship materials have a profound influence on the life and the faith that the church professes. It is in the forms of worship that one finds the living embodiment of the creeds and confessions of the church, and therefore one “tampers” with the forms of worship with great fear and trembling. Each generation must approach this ongoing evolution of its forms of worship with reverential orthodoxy, with theological acuity, with piety, and with prayer. And for perhaps many, any change in language hallowed by long use and meaningful experience will seem to be a kind of reductionism. (the other side of that is that new language might also invigorate, enliven, perhaps even supply new insight.)

**Updating:** This updating of language of the hymnody of LW is the only part of this complex subject that I can address with any degree of knowledge. Changes number in the thousands. To a great extent, the pronouns “thee,” “thou,” “thy,” and “thine” disappear in the new hymnal. Archaic “King-Jamesian” words are altered. (I will never again have the completely harmonious relationship I once had with one of my colleagues in the English department, because I dared to suggest the alteration of the word “fain” in “Jerusalem, Thou City Fair and High”—“my longing heart fain, fain, to thee would fly”—because any alteration of this in no way meets with her approval.) The forest of capitalization which one finds in *The Lutheran Hymnal* has been reduced; crabbed and convoluted word orders have been smoothed and made to follow more naturally, though surely some still survive. (The dimensions of the problem are almost infinite.) The problem becomes most acute in hymnody when riming is involved. Could one consider altering “My faith looks up to thee/Thou Lamb of Calvary” (TLH, 394)? What happens to “Take my life and let it be/Consecrated Lord to thee” or “Take my will and make it thine/It shall be no longer mine” (TLH 400), when one has decided that “thee” should be “you” and “thine” should be yours? (The first thing I expect to hear is that the writers of LW are theological liberals whose intention it was to subvert the theology of the church and corrupt the morals of the young.) Nor do any linguistic arguments (even if they are valid) change the feeling that the hymn book has been violated.

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Original Hymns, Carols, Sacred Texts, and Secular Poems
Abraham’s God and Ours

To Abraham’s God and ours,
The God of the promise, who gave His name to him,
Calling him to a far country, full of strangers,
Be glory, honor, praise and dominion,
As each new generation faces
The challenge of the Lord’s own choosing!

To Israel’s God and ours,
The pillar of flame in the trackless wilderness,
He who leads us through large troubles, always faithful,
Whose Spirit forms us pilgrimage people
Let each new generation witness
The wonder of the Lord’s leading!

Our father’s strong God, and ours,
Our refuge of ages, who made us sons of His,
He whose death on the cross covers our transgression,
And turns our living upward and outward
Let each new generation grasp it:
The rescue of the Lord’s redeeming!

In darkness and sin we pray,
For light of Thy coming, for courage, strength, and joy,
God of Abraham, our Father make us worthy
To sing Thy praise with saints and with martyrs,
In white of Thy salvation robe us,
In witness clouds of heaven’s glory!

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A Carpenter My Father
A Song of Jesus

A carpenter my Father,
A gentle man is He,
His hammer blows resounding
Not far from Galilee!
He planes His planks of cedar,
He joins them craftily,
His corners clean and fitted so
His work’s a joy to see!

My Father’s skill in shaping
The knotted wood to hand,
With iron tools for cutting,
And smoothing tools to sand,
Has carved me to his purpose
Upon His lathing stand,
Has turned and shaped His sure design
Exactly as he planned!

The cheerful chips fly upward,
The beam is made to be
The central soul’s abutment,
The soaring ceiling free!
The work I do, He saw it,
In what He formed in me,
The house of refuge dearly bought
By way of Calvary!

And you who know my story,
My suff’ring and my pain,
Have seen my Easter rising,
The grave where I have lain,
And let no skeptic Thomas
Obscure the truth so plain,
My Father’s love triumphant stands,
The grace within the grain!

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My Father's will forever,
My Father's will for me!
The churchly house he builds here
Stands full and fair to see!
The corner stone is certain,
The beam a blooming tree,
The threshold leads into His love,
The door—eternity!

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America the Blest

My country, my country
America the free,
From ocean to ocean,
The land of liberty!

Her forests, her mountains,
Her people’s humble pride,
Her great bustling cities,
Her peaceful countryside!

My country, my country,
In all her beauty dressed,
From ocean to ocean,
America the Blest!

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An Angel Came to Mary

An angel came to Mary,
When she was all alone,
To tell of Jesus coming,
To make the Good News known.

An angel came to Joseph,
To warn him in a dream,
To take the child and Mary,
To Egypt’s distant scene.

An angel walks beside us,
Today he takes our hand,
And he will surely guide us,
Into a heav’nly land.

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Translations of
German Hymns
A Lamb Alone Bears Willingly

A lamb alone bears willingly
Sin’s crushing weight for sinners;
He carries guilt’s enormity,
Dies shorn of all his honors.
He goes to slaughter, weak and faint,
Is led away with no complaint
His spotless life to offer.
He bears the stripes, the wrath, the lies,
The mockery, and yet replies,
“Willing all this I suffer.”

This lamb is Christ, our soul’s great friend,
The Lamb of God, our Savior,
Whom God the Father chose to send
Our rebel guilt to cover.
“Go down, my Son,” the Father said,
“To free my children from their dread
Of death and condemnation.
The wrath and stripes are hard to bear,
But in your death they all can share
The joy of your salvation!”

“Yes, Father, yes, most willingly
I bear what you command me;
My will conforms to your decree,
I risk what you have asked me.”
O wondrous love, what have you done?
The Father offers up his Son,
The Son, content, agreeing!
O love, how strong you are to save,
To put God’s Son into his grave,
All people thereby freeing!
Then, when you come before God’s throne,
This little lamb shall lead us;
His righteousness shall be our crown,
His innocence precede us.
His grace our dress of royalty;
His all forgiving loyalty
Unites us with our Father,
Where we shall stand at Jesus’ side,
His Church, redeemed and glorified,
Where all his faithful gather!

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Ev’ry Year the Christ Child

Ev’ry year the Christ Child
Comes again to earth,
Where his people long for
His redeeming birth;

Coming with his blessing,
Silently, secretly;
Cradled in the softness
Of the heart of me.

All unseen his presence
Walks with me, I know;
Lovingly he leads me
Everywhere I go.

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Background Notes

Hymns, Carols and Translations

Abraham’s God and Ours
Written: April 1970
Theme: Anniversary
Suggested tune: Original tune by Paul G. Bunjes
Written for the 125th anniversary of St. Lorenz Evangelical Lutheran Church in Frankenmuth, Michigan.

A Carpenter My Father
Written: 1974
Theme: Faith, renewal
Suggested tune: CARPENTER by Melvin W. Block
This text first appeared in the Spring 1975 issue of Motif.

America the Blest
Written: 1967
Theme: Patriotism

An Angel Came to Mary
Written: 1961
Theme: Annunciation
Suggested tune: MAGDALENA
This text first appeared in volume one of the Concordia Music Education Series published by Concordia Publishing House in 1961.
And When the Lord Said
Written: 1967
Theme: Christmas
Suggested tune: Original tune by Gerhard C. Becker

As Moses, Lost in Sinai's Wilderness
Written: 1964
Theme: Anniversary
Suggested tune: RIVER FOREST by Richard W. Hillert
This text was written for the centennial of Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Illinois in 1964.

A Strangely Quiet Bethlehem
Written: 1966
Theme: Christmas
Suggested tune: RADKE by Carl F. Schalk
With original music by Carl Schalk, written for and published in the December 1966 issue of Lutheran Education.

At Evening
Written: 1965
Theme: Evening, protection
Suggested tune: Original tune by Victor Hildner
This text was written for volume two of the Concordia Music Education Series published by Concordia Publishing House in 1965.

A White Lily Blows
Written: 1966
Theme: Easter
Suggested tune: Original music written by Richard W. Hillert
With original music by Richard Hillert, written for and published in the April 1966 issue of Lutheran Education.

Best You Sleep Now, Little Jesus
Written: 1972
Theme: Christmas
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