

Extracted from:

The Battle for Christian Music – By Tim Fisher

Chapter Twelve

The Truth about Luther

In all of church music history, I doubt that there has been a more quoted source than Martin Luther (1483- 1546). Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms is legendary. His writings were at the core of Reformation scholarship. The great reformer is credited with continued influences today, and rightly so. Among his accomplishments was the restoration of congregational singing in the common language. Luther was a lover of music, an accomplished lute player, and a composer. He is the author of one of the greatest hymns in church history, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Many groups have sought to lay claim to Luther's teachings, and he has become the most quoted and misquoted figure on both sides of the current battle for Christian music.

We hear the question constantly asked, "Didn't Luther borrow from the secular music of his day? Isn't that proof that it is all right to borrow from the rock music of our day?" This question comes up so often that it is appropriate to study exactly where Luther stood on this topic. This study should serve to amplify the principles we have been teaching in this volume.

Was Luther influenced by the secular music of his day? Yes, clearly he was. No man lives in a vacuum, and it is ludicrous for him to think that he can be creative while remaining totally unaffected by the culture in which he lives. Luther was no exception, but to assert that "since Luther borrowed from the secular music of his, day, then we can borrow from the rock music of our day' is to be irresponsible with the facts.

Luther made it clear that there was both good music and bad music even in his day:

And you, my young friend, let this noble, wholesome, and cheerful creation of God [music] be commended to you. By it you may escape shameful desires and bad company. At the same time you may by this creation accustom yourself to recognize and praise the Creator. Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings; and be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature, which would and should praise God its Maker with this gift, so that these ... purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God, the enemy of nature and of this lovely art.¹

For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate-and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good?- what more effective means than music could you find?ⁱⁱ

Clearly, he did not believe in the neutrality of music.

To what extent did Luther borrow from secular sources? Of the melodies to Luther's thirty-seven chorales, fifteen were composed by Luther himself, thirteen came from Latin hymns or Latin service music, four were derived from German religious folk songs, two had originally been religious pilgrims' songs, two are of unknown origin, and one came

directly from a secular folk song.ⁱⁱⁱ You can see here that it was not the majority of his songs that came from secular sources. Very little was derived from secular sources.

Remember that in Luther's time culture was controlled by the church. All major universities were under church authority. The fine arts, including most of the great composers, writers, sculptors, and painters, were trained under church sponsorship or were employed by the church. It would be foolish to say that Luther's secular surroundings were similar to ours today, where the leadership in fine arts is in rebellion to the church and traditional culture.

Blume observes: "Protestantism preserved the medieval classification of the world, with secular art subjected to an intellectual discipline characterized by piety and churchliness. Under these conditions the disparity between sacred and secular music could at first hardly become a problem."^{iv} So to say that Luther borrowed from secular sources is to admit that he relied on, at the worst, a religion-based culture.

An important contribution of Luther to church worship was the restoration of congregational singing. He said, "I wish to compose sacred hymns so that the Word of God may dwell among the people also by means of songs."^v

In the days of Martin Luther, congregations were not allowed to sing at all in Roman Catholic services. Their "musical training" consisted only of secular tunes they picked up on the street. Blume points out that "people accustomed to singing only in secular surroundings and to remain[ing] silent in the traditional church . . . now had to learn how to sing in the church."^{vi} It is in this context that Luther made the statement, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?" We must remember that there were no tunes which the people were allowed to sing, and in their services only Gregorian chant and similar austere musical forms were heard at all-and those in the Latin language which the average person could not understand.

Luther's idea was to use more familiar, singable tunes to teach the people quickly the new German texts he was compiling or writing. His plan was to develop a unique style of music for use in worship. Luther didn't rely on the sensual, erotic music of his day. He didn't look to those who would rebel against his very culture to serve as a model for his music. It is more truthful to say that Luther used as his example the "classical" music of his day.

Even then, the practice of borrowing from secular sources-contrafacta-was short lived. Blume refers to the "quick rise and decline of contrafacta"^{vii} and admits that those tunes borrowed from secular sources "rarely attained the timeless greatness"^{viii} of Luther's original compositions-which were, by far,, the greater portion of his work.

So to simply make the statement that "Luther borrowed from the barroom tunes of his day, so we can too" is dishonest. Luther's favorite composer was Josquin de Prez, who is widely acknowledged as the most competent composer of that century.^{ix} Luther had progressive training on the lute and was considered to be very proficient. Contrast this with CCM performers who list their role models:

I love to hear Billy Joel, Kenny Loggins and the Doobie Brothers. -Amy Grant^x

I'll have a Foreigner 4 album going in my car and then the next minute I'm on my knees talking to the Lord about something that is very personal in my life. -Steve Camp^{xi}

My influences were the same as most everybody else's. I didn't listen to religious music. I was into Zeppelin and Kiss. All the hard rock bands were playing the music I loved. Religious music always disappointed me. -Robert Sweet, of Stryper^{xii}

I'm not connected to Christian music at all. I can't stand Christian radio stations, and Christian TV makes me barf. -Joel Taylor, of Undercover^{xiii}

He [John Lennon] was a big hero of mine. -Rich Mullins, CCM Performer^{xiv}

My all-time favorite group was the Byrds. -Dallas Holm, CCM Performer^{xv}

I consider it an honor to tour with Stevie [Wonder]. I'm thrilled. [Stevie has been a mentor to Jon for the past three years.] -Jon Gibson, CCM Performer^{xvi}

On **the** *Heaven* album, the pair put their personal stamp on Paul Simon's "Bridge Over Troubled Water". . . . Another surprise guest on *Different Lifestyles* is rapper MC Hammer. -review of Be]Be and CeCe Winan, CCM Performers^{xvii}

... Playing in various venues and sharing the Gospel with a unique Pop-rock sound forged from an eclectic bag of influences like Rush, Genesis, Deep Purple, Paul Mccamey, Journey. -review of CCM group In Reach^{xviii}

In *CCM Magazine's* Reader's Survey (1991) they found that the least-liked musical style among their readers was-Southern Gospel and classical music.^{xix}

What a stark contrast to the influences upon the life of Martin Luther.

Even the music that Luther did borrow from secular sources did not remain in its original form. Luther changed the melodic and rhythmic structure to take away any worldly influences that the music might have. Robert Harrell explains:

The most effective way of [negating] that worldly influence would be to "de-rhythm" the music. By avoiding dance tunes and "de-rhythming" other songs, Luther achieved a chorale with a marked rhythm, but without the devices that would remind the people of the secular world. So successful was the work done by Luther and other Lutheran musicians that scholars were often unable to detect the secular origins of chorales. The other way in which Luther sought to remove secular associations from the minds of the congregation was through the use of Scripture and scriptural allusions in his texts. By filling his chorales with the written Word, Luther sought to direct the thoughts of his people toward the Living Word.^{xx}

Harrell, in his excellent and well-documented study, concludes:

A study of Luther's chorales reveals two important facts about Luther's use of secular elements in his sacred music:

- (1) Although there was much popular music available to him, from drinking songs and dance tunes to religious folk songs and carols, Luther chose only those tunes which would best lend themselves to sacred themes and avoided the vulgar, "rollicking drinking songs' and dance tunes.
- (2) No material which Luther used for a chorale remained unchanged, except for the one case noted previously. Rather, "he carefully tested ... the melodies he considered, and when necessary molded them into suitability. ... Alterations were freely made."^{xxi}

Luther's love for music and his love for the youth in his church gave impetus to his work. He delighted in arranging music for his young people to teach them the fundamentals of music theory, as well as an overall appreciation of good music.

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, so that they can enter with pleasure into that which is good, as is befitting to youth.^{xxii}

It would help the discussion if we could put this controversy to rest. But those who are dishonest with the Word of God will no doubt continue to be dishonest with Luther's statements. The battle won't be over even if the CCM crowd were to give on this point. But Martin Luther's use of secular sources should teach us some valuable lessons. We must desire to sing the Word of God above all else. Only then can we take that which culture offers as excellent music to use as a vehicle to communicate God's Word. To avoid worldliness we need not only an intent to communicate truth, but also a good knowledge of music. Then we will be competent to use our talent and creativity to help teach others that which is good. What a tremendous example we have in Martin Luther!

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ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music* (New York: W. W Norton & Co., 1974), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Data compiled from several sources. Quoted in Robert Hamil, *Martin Luther, His Music, His Message* (Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, 1980), p. 18.

^{iv} BLUME, p. 29,

^v Kenneth Osbeck, *Singing with Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), p. 48.

^{vi} BLUME, *Protestant Church Music*, p.65

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 45

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 44

^{ix} Luther said concerning Josquin de Prez, 'Josquin is the master of the notes: they must do as he wishes; the other masters of song must do what the notes wish' (Blume, *op cit*, p. 8).

^x "New Lyrics for the Devil's Music," *Time*, March 11, 1985, p. 60.

^{xi} Interview in *CCM Magazine*, November 1986, pp. 20-21.

^{xii} Interview in *Hit parade*, November 1986, p. 21

^{xiii} Interview in *CCM Magazine*, June 1986, p. 15.

^{xiv} Interview in *CCM Magazine*, June 1992, p. 20.

^{xv} Interview in *CCM Magazine*, April 1992, p. 33.

^{xvi} Interview in *Inside Music*, June 1992, p. 20.

^{xvii} Interview in *CCM Magazine*, July 1991, p. 35.

^{xviii} "Faces, New Artists," *CCM Magazine*, August 1992, p. II.

^{xix} "Intro," *CCM Magazine*, August 1991, p. 4.

^{xx} Harrell, *Martin Luther, His Music, His Message*, p. 21.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

^{xxii} Luther's foreword to Johann Walter's collection. Quoted in Blume, P. 78.