

# What's With That Chanting?

*Responsive Liturgical Chant of Both People and Pastor  
in the Long Tradition of the Lutheran Church*

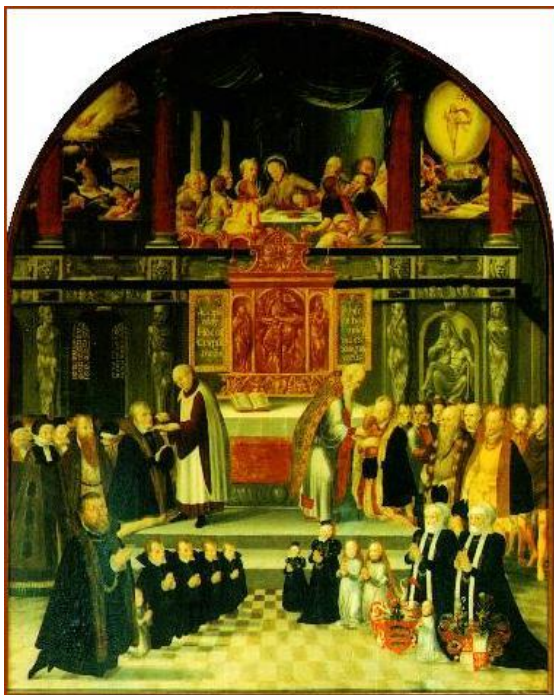


Abb. 13. Epitaph des Abraham von Nestitz  
Städt. Müseem, Kaiserstuhl  
Foto: Kulturhistorisches Museum Görlitz

*With us [Lutherans] many use the Lord's Supper [willingly and without constraint] every Lord's Day, but after having been first instructed, examined [whether they know and understand anything of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments], and absolved. The children sing [chant] psalms in order that they may learn [become familiar with passages of Scripture]; the people also sing [Latin and German psalms], in order that they may either learn or pray.*

**Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XV.40**

## **BACKGROUND & HERITAGE OF CHANT AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE**

The worship life of the people of Israel in the Old Testament was filled with singing, included forms of Hebrew chant. This can be seen in the musical inscriptions that go along with the psalms. Chanting of the Psalms and other Scripture was also known at the Tabernacle, the Temple, and in the Jewish synagogues. It is not surprising, then, that since the early Christians were to a large degree Jewish Christians, that the patterns of the synagogue carried over into early Christian liturgy, including chant.

The history of the church has known various kinds of chant, the most famously known type being Gregorian chant. But there are other kinds as well – Byzantine, Anglican, plainchant, Gallican and others. Early Christian liturgy was always *a-capella*, that is, sung without instrumental accompaniment. The liturgy followed set orders and so chanting could be done by the entire congregation who learned the various regular parts of the liturgy (the “ordinaries”) such as the Gloria in Excelsis, Kyrie Eleison, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, etc. Additionally, the psalms would also be sung and memorized along with other Scripture and canticles or hymns. When people were not widely literate this greatly helped teaching (catechesis) and the prayer life. In those days, also, the cultures of the Middle East, north Africa, Asia and Europe were more oriented toward speaking and listening carefully. Add to this the lack of public address systems and chant could also help project the words being delivered in the liturgy and even the readings.

Chanting in the Church set the music of the Church, specifically the Divine Service and other prayer offices (Matins, Vespers, Compline, etc.), apart from what was sung out in the world. It consecrated the song of the Church for sacred use for the giving out of the means of grace in Word and Sacrament and for addressing the Lord together as His Body, the Church, in prayer and thanksgiving with reverence. Chant reminds us that there is more going on than what we see with our eyes – that Christ and His Church are conversing.

This pattern was basically universal throughout the early church and the middle ages in the Church of East and West. While in the West, the pipe organ eventually began to accompany liturgy and hymns on occasion, after careful reflection on its use and abuse, chanting expressed continued with the early church and the believers of the Old Testament. It helped to confess that we believe in one, holy, catholic (Christian), and apostolic Church which continues until the Lord returns again in glory on the Last Day. While it was not seen as divine law it was viewed as the music yielding to the words and not the other way around – what so often happens today, the words yielding to cultural musical tastes and fads, and

even our personalities. To many, chanting may seem to be a combination of singing and speaking, with regulated changes occurring after singing the body of a text on a sustained note. This is true with many chant forms, while many others are more melodic, but also more difficult in some cases.

### **THE LUTHERAN CHURCHLY CONTINUATION OF LITURGICAL CHANT**

Both of Luther's conservatively revised Communion orders featured chant prominently (the Latin *Formula Missae* of 1523 and the *Deutsche Messe* of 1526). **These Divine Service settings clearly set forth the Lutheran intention to keep whatever was not in error and to make clear that Lutherans have no intention of being a "new church."** Only Jesus institutes the Church, therefore we cannot be a new church. The early orders of other Lutheran reformers also followed the same attitude toward chant as did Luther (such as the orders of Johannes Bugenhagen, the orders of the Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish Lutherans). One certainly also sees this in the famous Lutheran church musicians as well – Johann Walther, Johann Pachelbel, Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz, Michael Praetorius, and others, not to mention the classic Lutheran hymnals and liturgy books. The Lutherans desired to be both "evangelical" (*gospel centered*) and "catholic" in the best sense of those terms, without being radical protestants (like the Calvinists or Zwinglians) or "Roman Catholics."

However, after the death of Luther in 1546 and the publication of the *Book of Concord* in 1580, the Lutheran Church soon suffered through a difficult time in the Thirty Years War that swept Europe (1618-1648). Many pastors were conscripted into military service, plagues swept Europe, and war devastated church life, liturgical practice, and teaching of the people. In over-reaction, the subjective, quasi-Calvinist movement of Pietism affected Lutheranism, severely distorting Lutheran theology and practice in the churches and homes. Liturgical scholar Luther D. Reed comments:

So far as ordered public worship was concerned, Pietism's influence was unfavorable. Beginning with the attempt to supplement the regular services and usages of the church, it soon supplanted these by meetings in private homes which included religious discussions and administration of the Sacrament. As its spirit entered to the established church, the services of the latter became more and more subjective and emotional. The struggle for personal consciousness of conversion and regeneration led to an under-evaluation of the means of grace. The historical and the formal in liturgical worship gave way to expressions of individual ideas and emotions. The liturgy and the church year were too objective and constraining. The formal common prayer of the church gradually disappeared under a flood of extempore utterances by ministers and laymen. Hymns based upon the objective facts of redemption were discarded for others expressive of immediate, personal experience. New and emotional tunes displaced the more vigorous chorales. [*The Lutheran Liturgy* pp.145-146].

After some considerable time of liturgical disintegration among the nominally Lutheran churches, from Pietism as well as Rationalism, there began to be some considerable doctrinal and liturgical renewal among Lutherans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These dedicated orthodox Lutherans reached back beyond the era of Pietism to better times of Lutheran practice during and before the Thirty Years War for liturgies, hymns, rites, and chant. Wilhelm Löhe, C.F.W. Walther, F.C.D. Wyneken, and Friedrich Lochner were among many of those and they also happened to be founders and strong influences in the foundation of what came to be later known as the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Similar work was also done many of the Swedish and Norwegian immigrant Lutherans to North America and other places. In the aftermath of the “Prussian Union” the early founders of the Missouri Synod wanted to found a distinctively Lutheran synod in contrast to the German fatherland where the government had been forcing the Lutherans and Calvinists into a union state church with a hybrid Calvinist—Lutheran liturgy. **Lutherans want to distinguish themselves from not only Roman Catholics but also the (non-Lutheran) Protestants.** C.F.W. Walther, one of the first German Saxon immigrant pastors, and the first president of the Missouri Synod noted about chant in one of his writings:

*It is too bad that such entirely different ceremonies prevail in our Synod, and that no liturgy at all has yet been introduced in many congregations. The prejudice especially against the responsive chanting of pastor and congregations is of course still very great with many people -- this does not, however, alter the fact that it is very foolish. The pious church father Augustine said, "Qui cantat, bis orat--he who sings prays twice." [Walther, Explanation of Thesis XVIII, D, Adiaphora, of the book *The True Visible Church*, delivered at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, Beginning August 9, 1871, at the 16th Central District Convention, translated by Fred Kramer, printed in *Essays for the Church* (CPH: 1992), I:193-194].*

Add to this the general cultural trend in the United States against things perceived to be Roman Catholic, and the oversimplification of dividing Christianity to the generic categories of “protestant” and “Catholic,” no wonder many Lutherans have sadly fallen into an unintended aversion to many old Lutheran practices. Only teaching and willingness to learn can remedy this situation. But chanting is clearly part of our heritage as apostolic Christians, confessional Lutherans, and even without our North American Lutheran synods. While the publication of *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) without the pastor’s chant as part of the book gave the unintended impression that there wasn’t any pastor’s chant, the reality is that it was published in a separate book called *Music for the Liturgy of The Lutheran Hymnal* by Concordia Publishing House. Later Lutheran hymnals attempted to correct this misconception. The separate publication was done to save type-setting space in the pew book. But chant enjoys much renewal today!