

Paul Gerhardt as a Teacher of Lutheran Spirituality

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Symposium for Paul Gerhardt: Hymnwriter, Theologian, Church Father
Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saint Catharines
May 7-9, 2007

1. Singing with Devotion

In 1664 Paul Gerhardt wrote a short poem as a foreword to a book of poems by his fellow poet and close friend Joachim Pauli. It goes like this:

**In the circle of the living
Each man works at his own craft,
Which, he knows, is duly fruitful;
Yet the one that gains most praise
Brings high honour to his God
With the songs that praise his name.**

**In his circle every singer
Who has made a skilful song
As a present to his Maker
Will receive his due reward;
But the best is he who sings
With devotion in his song.¹**

* The first of these two papers has been published in the *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 41/3 December 2007, 167-179.

¹ See Eberhard von Cranach-Sichart, *Paul Gerhardt: Wach auf, mein Herz, und singe. Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Lieder und Gedichte*. Number 48. Fourth edition. Brockhaus: Wuppertal, 2007. Henceforth each song will be cited as ECS with the number assigned to it in this collection. His songs will also be cited with the letters PW with the number assigned to it in the well-known but now incomplete collection compiled by Philipp Wackernagel, *Paulus Gerhardts geistliche Lieder*. Samuel Gottlieb Liesching: Stuttgart, 1861. This is my translation. The German text is:

**Unter allen, die da leben,
Hat ein jeder seinen Fleiss
Und weiss dessen Frucht zu geben;
Doch hat der den grössten Preis,
Der dem Höchsten Ehre bringt
Und von Gottes Namen singt.**

**Unter denen, die da ssingen
Und mit wohlgefasster Kunst
Ihrem Schöpfer Opfer bringen,
Hat ein jeder seine Gunst;
Doch ist der am besten dran,
Der mit Andacht singen kann.**

In this charming little poem of two verses Gerhardt claims that all those craftsmen who work diligently at their craft, no matter what it may be, reap the fruit of their work if they stick at it. They all get their due recognition. But those poets who honour God by singing his praises receive the highest praise of all. Then Gerhardt goes one step further than that. While God is pleased with all those religious poets who sing his praises with well-crafted songs as an offering to him their Creator, he is most pleased with those who sing them with devotion.

In this Gerhardt tells us something about his own work as a song maker and singer. Singing with devotion is the hallmark of the songs that he composed, the reason why they still sing for us today and touch us so deeply. As a devotional hymn writer he is one of the outstanding teachers of Lutheran spirituality. His songs help us in our practice of evangelical spirituality. Yet that is not a word that Gerhardt and his contemporaries ever used. The term that they used was piety (Latin: *pietas*), godliness (German: *Gottseligkeit*).²

Gerhardt was part of a profound devotional movement that swept through the Lutheran churches of Germany in the first half of the seventeenth century.³ This movement promoted a practice of piety that was characterised by personal devotion to Jesus. Unlike the later pietists, its advocates held that liturgy and piety went hand in hand together. They linked orthodoxy in teaching with orthopraxy in corporate worship and personal devotions. The focus of their teaching on piety was the mystical union, from heart to heart, of Christ with each faithful Christian.⁴ The leading lights of that devotional movement worked hard to forge a distinctive kind of evangelical piety for themselves and their Lutheran congregations, a piety that focused on reception rather than performance. Its most obvious instigator and advocate was Johann Arndt in his best-selling book *True Christianity* which came out in seven volumes from 1605 to 1610. Its impact was huge. His influence on Paul Gerhardt is evident from the six songs that were inspired by Arndt's devotions in a book called the *Little Garden of Paradise*. Arndt was followed by his friend Johann Gerhard, the greatest Lutheran teacher of theology in that century. He wrote two influential treatises, a book that was meant to teach the art of meditation called *Sacred Meditations* (1606)⁵ and a handbook on Lutheran spirituality called *The School of Piety* (1622).⁶ These two men were not isolated examples but were surrounded by many other teachers and preachers,⁷ musicians and hymn writers,⁸ who joined with them in this project.

² See the use of this term in Acts 3:12; 1 Tim 2:2; 3:16; 4:7,8; 6:3,5,6,11; 2 Tim 3:5; Tit 1:1; 2 Pet 1:3,6; 3:11.

³ See Udo Sträter, *Meditation und Kirchenreform in der lutherischen Kirche des 17. Jahrhunderts*. J.C.B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1995.

⁴ It is significant that the leading teacher of theology at Wittenberg during the time that Gerhardt studied there, Johann Hülsemann seems to have been the theologian that introduced the topic of the mystical union into dogmatic theology. See Christian Bunnens, *Paul Gerhardt: Weg-Werk-Wirkung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2007, 186

⁵ This work was so popular that by 1700 it had appeared in at least 115 editions in 12 different languages.

⁶ Johann Gerhardt, *Schola Pietatis*, Tobias Steinmann: Jena, 1622. See also Gaylin Schmeling, *Gerhard - Theologian and Pastor*, <http://www.blts.edu/essays/schmelingGR/Gerhard,%20Theologian%20and%20Pastor.pdf>

⁷ See Ludwig Dunte, *Übung des rechtmässigen Christentums*, Lübeck, 1630, and Johann Schmidt, *Zelus Pietatis*, Stassburg, 1641.

Most of this great work on Lutheran spirituality has been lost due to the ravages of the Enlightenment and its split of the head from the heart and the body. Even those of us who claim to be the heirs of Lutheran orthodoxy know far too little about this aspect of our heritage. The little that we know has come down to us in the few hymns of Gerhardt that are found in our hymnals, such as “O Sacred Head” or “Now Rest Beneath Night’s Shadows.” In this paper I would like to explore what we can learn from Gerhardt about the place of meditation and prayer in Lutheran piety. He presents us with a brand of receptive piety that is scriptural, liturgical, sacramental, physical, and joyful.

a. Scriptural Piety

In Colossians 3:16 Paul urges his hearers to let the word of Christ dwell richly in them, so that it would produce songs in which they teach each other the gospel communally and respond to the gospel devotionally. This is what Paul Gerhardt does with his hymns. They do not just arise from meditating and praying scripturally; they too teach those who sing them to meditate and pray scripturally. They get people to use God’s word to sing his grace and his Holy Spirit into their hearts. They show them how to exercise their faith in Christ and his word. By his meditations on God’s word he teaches the art of meditation.

This happens in a number of different ways. First, many of his songs simply paraphrase Scripture. The most obvious instances of this are his metrical psalms. In all, he recasts 26 psalms in metrical form for singing in the church.⁹ This seems to have been part of a deliberate project to get people to sing the Psalter, liturgically and devotionally, because he does not provide versions of those psalms that Luther had already paraphrased. Besides these psalms, he also composed extended paraphrases of other parts of the Bible, such as Paul’s confession of faith in God’s grace in Romans 8 in “If God Himself Be For Me” (*The Lutheran Service Book* [LSB], 724).¹⁰ So Gerhardt, quite deliberately, turns Scripture into poetry that can be easily sung and memorised by being sung.

Second, all of Gerhardt’s hymns are prayerful meditations on texts from the Scriptures. The most artful of these is the acrostic hymn “Entrust Your Days And Burdens” (LSB, 754), which many of you will know as “Commit Whatever Grieves Thee” (*The Lutheran Hymnal* [TLH] uses the words of Psalm 37:5: “Commit/ to the Lord/ your/ way/ and/ hope/ in/ him/; he/ will/well/do it” to provide the initial word for each of the twelve verses of that hymn.¹¹ While many of these songs look like

⁸ The most noteworthy and most influential teachers of this new Lutheran spirituality were hymn writers such as Philipp Nicolai, Valerius Herberger, Johann Hermann, Johann Meyfart, and Georg Neumark.

⁹ They are 1, 13 (2x), 23, 25, 27, 30 (2x), 34, 39, 42, 49, 52, 62, 71, 73, 85, 90, 91, 103, 111, 112, 116, 121, 139, 143, 145, 146.

¹⁰ ECS 82, PW 63. See too the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:1-43; Job’s confession of hope in his redeemer in 19:25-27; the prayer for moderate wealth from Proverbs 30:7-9; the song of praise for a good wife in Proverbs 31:10-31; the fourth servant song in Isaiah 52:13-53:12; God’s lament for Ephraim in Jeremiah 31:16-20 and Hosea 11:8-9; the call for repentance in Hosea 6:1-4; and the prayer of repentance from Micah 7.

¹¹ ECS 84, PW 66. The German text of the verse is: “Befiehl dem Herrn deine Wege und hoffe auf ihn, er wird wohl machen.”

versified sermons, complete with text, exposition and application, they do not address people with God's word, but use God's word to evoke the response of faith in those who sing them. They are meant to arouse devotion and foster piety. In them meditation on God's word usually culminates in prayer, or else prayer prepares for further meditation on it.

More generally, Gerhardt's songs are steeped in the language, contents and imagery of the Bible, so much so that almost every phrase and sentence alludes to some passage from it. They sing God's word from the head into the heart and respond to it in meditation and prayer. The theological reason for this use of the Scriptures is profound and highly significant. Like his peers, Gerhardt held that God-pleasing piety, true godliness, was not produced by human effort or commitment, but by the Holy Spirit. It was a gift of the Spirit. The Spirit worked in people's hearts through God's word and faith in that word, for God's word was not just inspired by the Spirit but is also filled with his Spirit. The word is the means of the Spirit. The Spirit does not just produce faith in the hearts of those who heard the word; it produces meditation and prayer and song in those who paid faithful attention to it. Since it is the Spirit-filled, Spirit-giving word of God, it is performative and productive; it was both effective and affective. Just listen to how Gerhardt himself describes this connection between the word and the Spirit in the fourth verse of "I Will Sing My Maker's Praises," a verse which is omitted in all English hymnals:

**In his word God gives his Spirit
To me daily as my guide,
As I travel on my journey
Through this world to be with God.
By his Spirit he enlightens
Me with faith, that radiant light,
Conquering the realm of darkness,
Breaking death and hushing hell.¹²**

The Holy Spirit lights up the lamp of faith and keeps it alight. He speaks sweet words within us, words that encourage and empower us, words that teach us how to sing and pray, words that produce prayer to God the Father and a song of praise in our hearts.¹³ The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of piety and devotion.

So Gerhardt uses God's word in a way that has become rather alien us who have been so deeply steeped in generic Protestant piety. He does not use it to show us what we need to do devotionally in response to what God has done for us and in our commitment to him. Instead, he encourages us to listen to God's word faithfully and to receive the Holy Spirit and all the many gifts that God offers to us, day by day, as

¹² ECS 99, PW 81, v.4. This is my translation. The German text is:

**Seinen Geist, den edlen Führer,
Gibt er mir in seinem Wort,
Dass er werde mein Regierer
Durch die Welt zur Himmelspfort,
Dass er mir mein Herz erfülle
Mit dem hellen Glaubenslicht,
Das des Todes Reich zerbricht
Und die Hölle selbst macht stille.
Alles Ding währt seine Zeit,
Gottes Lieb in Ewigkeit.**

¹³ See ECS 29, PW 32, v.5, 6; ECS 82, 63, v.9.

he accompanies us and travels with us through life here on earth. He helps us who hear God's word to see what it says, to feel its warmth, and to taste what it gives us. All his songs come from faithful meditation on God and so teach us the art of receptive meditation on God's word.

b. Liturgical Piety

Under the influence of pietism in the eighteenth century and of the revival movements that have come in its wake, hymnody has become increasingly disconnected from the divine service in the Lutheran church. It has become privatized. Even though songs are still sung in it by the congregation, their function seems to have changed. They no longer enact the word of God as law and gospel and respond to it in faith, but they have become instruments of religious self-expression, or aids for spiritual ascent, as on a ladder, from earth into the heavenly realm. Even if they are still used in their traditional places in the liturgy, they no longer serve a clear liturgical function there. They are no longer based on the readings for the day and no longer relate to the whole counsel of God as it is proclaimed in the year of the church and enacted in the divine service.

At first glance Gerhardt's hymns also seem to promote religious self-expression rather than the liturgical reception of God's gifts together with the congregation, as is the case in the classical Lutheran chorales. But that is rather deceptive. His use of the "I" is corporate and inclusive, like the "I" in the psalms. It is used to speak of our common reception and experience of God's grace. It is the "I" of personal meditation and prayer. Thus his songs still make good sense if that "I" is changed to "We". So Gerhardt speaks personally to promote Lutheran liturgical piety in which faith receives what the triune God gives to each person through his word.

The clearest evidence for this is his cycle of songs, 39 in all, that follow the liturgical year as they embed the devotional life of the faithful in the divine service. As far as I can gather, he seems to have been the first Lutheran hymn writer to set out to compose a cycle of hymns for the main parts of the liturgical year. Thus we have two hymns for Advent, the most famous of which is *O Lord, How Shall I Greet You* (LSB 334),¹⁴ seven hymns for Christmas, three of which are included in the LSB (360; 372; 375), a hymn for New Year's Eve and another for the Circumcision of our Lord, fourteen hymns for Lent and Holy Week, three of which are included in the LSB (438; 449; 453). He also composed three Easter hymns, one of which is *Awake, My Heart, With Gladness* (LSB 467),¹⁵ three Pentecost hymns, one hymn for the Holy Trinity, and a series of six songs for the last three Sundays in the church year.¹⁶

Gerhardt's hymns clearly promote the exercise of personal liturgical piety. Their function is both liturgical and devotional; they encourage involvement in public worship as well as the practice of personal spirituality. This dual function is most evident in Gerhardt's five daily office hymns, which contain some of his finest poetry.

¹⁴ ECS 1, PW 2.

¹⁵ ECS 26, PW 29.

¹⁶ See ECS 128, PW 112; ECS 129, PW 113; ECS 115, PW 120; ECS 130, PW 121; ECS 120, PW 122; ECS 134, PW 123. In many of the Lutheran churches the last three Sundays of the church year focused on the three last things: death, the last day as the day of resurrection and judgement, and eternal life in heaven.

He wrote three hymns of prayer and praise for the morning, including *The Golden Morning*,¹⁷ of which you have four verses in the LSB, beginning with *Evening And Morning* (LSB 726).¹⁸ He also composed two hymns of meditation, prayer and praise for the evening, including the one that is perhaps still his best loved song, “Now Rest Beneath Night’s Shadows” (LSB 880). All of these songs function equally well as songs for Matins and Vespers, for morning and evening prayer and praise at the family altar as taught in Luther’s Small Catechism, and for daily personal devotions. They envisage each day as our whole life in miniature, a life in which we rise with Christ and die with him, a life that is marked by the daily thanksgiving and prayer, daily reception of God’s gifts and repentance for sin, and daily reliance on protection from Satan and daily commitment to God. Their riches and beauty have yet to be discovered and appropriated by us English-speaking Lutherans.

c. Sacramental Piety

Gerhardt teaches Lutheran sacramental piety, a piety that presupposes regular participation in the divine service. His songs help those who sing them to meditate on the sacraments and connect all aspects of Christian teaching and life with them.

Thus we have a hymn of twelve verses in which he meditates on the benefits of holy baptism, called “All Christians Who Have Been Baptised.”¹⁹ This didactic song addresses God’s people personally as single person, “you.” It begins with a call for me, named as I have been by Christ, to consider the blessings of my baptism (v. 1). This is followed by a meditation on original sin, its devastating effect of me, and my consequent imprisonment by Satan (vv. 2-4). All this was ended, I am told, by my release from the dominion of Satan, my adoption as God’s son and heir, and my investiture with Christ and his holiness in baptism (v. 5-8). Then baptism itself is praised for its wonder-working power which comes from God’s creative word and his life-giving Spirit (vv. 9-10). The last two verses of the song call on me to prize my baptism with thanksgiving for the nourishment that it brings as long as I live, and to use it well by living out my life on earth as a person who been cleansed by Christ and destined for divine honours, my investiture in a royal robe for eternal celebration in the palace of the heavenly king (vv. 11-12).

That meditation on the benefits of baptism is matched by a prayerful meditation on the Lord’s Supper.²⁰ In this song the accent falls on the provision of rest for the troubled heart in Holy Communion. This meditative prayer begins with an admission that whenever my heart is not fixed on what Christ has won for me by his suffering and death, Satan uses my uneasy, guilty conscience to confuse me and draw me away from Christ (vv. 1-2). To counter the devil’s demoralising attacks on me, Christ hosts the meal in which he gives me his body that was put to death for me and his blood that was shed in payment for my guilt, so that I may remember him and his faithfulness to me as my redeemer (vv. 3-4). So, whenever I receive his body and blood, I contemplate his longing for me and my salvation that is evident in three things, his

¹⁷ ECS 37, PW 98.

¹⁸ See also the fine translation of six verses of Gerhardt’s “Morgenlied” (ECS 36, PW 100) by Friedemann Hebart from one of these, “Praise God the Saviour” in *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement*, Openbook Publishers: Adelaide, 1989, 890.

¹⁹ ECS 33, PW 33. Six of its twelve verses have been included in LSB 596.

²⁰ ECS 34, PW 34.

suffering for me, his payment of his body and blood as a lasting ransom for me to God the Father, and his gift of them to me as a pledge of his acceptance of me (vv. 5-7). The meditation culminates in call for all, including those whom Satan has led astray, to receive rest for themselves from Christ in the sacrament. It concludes with a prayer for healing and for hunger and thirst for the sacrament as a prelude to my final ennoblement by him as a prince in his heavenly palace (v. 8).

While Gerhardt wrote only two songs on the sacraments, he mentions them and alludes to them much more often than we can ascertain from our English translations. Thus in his lovely hymn for the invocation of the Holy Spirit, “Zeuch ein zu deinen Toren,” he uses vivid imagery to acknowledge the work of the Spirit as life-giver and consecrator in baptism in these two verses:

**You pruned my dying branches
That could produce no wine;
By grafting me in Jesus,
Made me a living vine.
In your baptismal flood
You drowned cruel death, that tyrant,
And made my spirit vibrant
Through Jesus and his blood.**

**You give us your anointing
Through God's most holy word.
You've made us priests and prophets
And kings with Christ our Lord.
You are the holy oil,
The oil of consecration
That makes us Christ's possession
And marks us with his seal.²¹**

We also find allusions to baptism and its ongoing effect in the life of the Christian. Thus the fourth verse of his famous evening hymn: *Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadow* alludes to baptism as putting off the old self and putting on the new self (TLH 554):

²¹ ECS 29, PW 32, v.3, 4. This is my translation. The German text is:

**Ich war ein wilder Reben,
Du hast mich gut gemacht,
Der Tod durchdrang mein Leben,
Du hast ihn umgebracht
Und in der Tauf erstickt,
Als wie in einer Flute,
Mit dessen Tod und Blute,
Der uns im Tod erquickt.**

**Du bist das heilig Öle,
Dadurch gesalbet ist
Mein Leib und meine Seele
Dem Herren Jesu Christ
Zum wahren Eigenthum,
Zum Priester und Propheten,
Zum Kön'ge, den in Nöten
Gott schützt vom Heiligtum.**

**To rest my body hasteth,
Aside its garments casteth,
Types of mortality;
These I put off and ponder
How Christ will give me yonder
A robe of glorious majesty.²²**

Here the act of undressing before going to bed anticipates the experience of death and interprets it as prelude to my investiture by Christ with a new glorified body in the resurrection. So baptism interprets the experience of falling sleep, while the experience of falling asleep throws light on what happens when we die.

In his hymns Gerhardt also refers to the Lord's Supper and alludes to it. So, for example, verses 7-9 of the hymn: "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth"²³ meditate on the blood that flows from the wounds of Jesus. The first four verses of this Eucharistic hymn speak about the Father's slaughter of his Son as the sacrificial lamb. He himself opens up the wounds of Jesus so that the blood flows from his arteries and drains his heart. In the middle two verses I, the contemplative believer, embrace Jesus in devotion just as he has embraced me and I dedicate myself to him in thanksgiving and love. Then in the last four verses my heart is depicted as a shrine for the reception and retention of Christ's blood. This is transfused from his heart into mine.²⁴ Now, even though the Lord's Supper is not explicitly mentioned, the lyrics make little sense unless they are taken sacramentally.²⁵ The greatest treasure in the world is the blood of Jesus that flows from his wounds. It gives me protection in the battle, laughter in sorrow, music in celebration. It provides manna when all other food has become tasteless, gives drink to quench thirst, and speaks to me in my loneliness. The blood of Jesus offers me life in the face of death, shelter in times of heat, relief from the pain of depression, and an anchor in the storms of life. But best of all it covers me as with the purple robes and the crown of a queen for my appearance with Christ as his bride before the heavenly Father. All this imagery is inappropriate and overblown unless it refers to the reception of Christ's blood in Holy Communion.

More broadly, all the language of the mystical union and communion between Christ and the believer is based on Christ's gift of himself in love in Holy Communion. Similarly Gerhardt's talk about "tasting" the sweetness of God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit arises from meditation on the significance of the Lord's Supper for the spiritual life.²⁶

d. Physical Piety

The songs of Gerhardt present us with a kind of piety that is alien to our dissociated modern sensibility and our discarnate post-modern cyber-sensibility. It is much more physical and yet also more spiritual, much more this worldly and yet more other-

²² ECS 38, PW 102, v.4

²³ ECS 13, PW 13. All of these are missing from LSB 438. While verse 8 is included in TLH 142, it there refers to Christ rather than his blood.

²⁴ *The Lutheran Hymnal* which translates only six of the ten verses of this hymn obscures its sacramental orientation. It omits verses 4, 6, 7, and 9, and shifts the focus from the reception of life from Christ's blood to the gift of life by him through his death on the cross.

²⁵ For this sacramental interpretation, see Elke Axmacher, *Johann Arndt und Paul Gerhardt*, Franke Verlag: Tübingen, 2001, 209-232.

²⁶ ECS 29, PW 32 v.12; ECS 51, PW 35 v.12; ECS 105, PW 91 v.4.

worldly than our religious poetry. It presupposes a holistic way of knowing and experiencing that integrates the body as a physical entity with the mind as the seat of thought and emotion and with the heart as the seat of the human soul. So curiously it gives far greater weight to the physical realm than we do in our preaching and teaching.

Gerhardt's songs are intensely physical. Their distinctive feature is his poetic appeal to our whole imagination. By imagination I refer to the use of verbal imagery in his poetry to evoke the five senses - sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. The senses were important to him, because, like most of his contemporaries, he held that the natural realm, the realm of creation, was God's work of art in which he communicated his goodness and blessings physically and mentally to those who were properly disposed to receive them. So both in the church and in the world God uses created things to reach out to us physically in our bodily existence.

In his hymns Gerhardt regards our senses as organs for the reception of God's gifts. In one of his morning songs, "Lobet den Herren," he calls on us to praise God for the newly awakened senses that we have as a gift from God for our enjoyment of our daily lives.²⁷ God has not just given us our five senses to discover the world around us; their God-given purpose is to find joy in all the good things that he gives us for our enjoyment and delight in God himself as our loving benefactor. Thus in his marvellous "Summer Song" he encourages himself to seek joy and delight in natural world because God uses the coming of spring to "awaken" all his five senses. He says:

**I cannot rest, I must not rest,
When these great deeds from my great God
Awaken all my senses.
I too must sing when all things sing
And let my song flow from my heart
To God on high in heaven.**²⁸

God uses our senses to set our hearts rejoicing, so that we can use our "delighted senses," already now in this life, to please him physically and to praise him verbally.²⁹

²⁷ ECS 36, PW 100, v.3. The English translation of the two relevant verses in the Australian *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement* (Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 1989), 890, is:

**Lord, you have made us,
and the life you gave us
all night was safely in your care and keeping .
You have awakened us with joy from sleeping:
Praise God the Saviour.**

**That we can daily
use our senses freely,
our hands and feet, our tongue and lips at leisure-
All this we owe his most gracious pleasure:
Praise God the Saviour.**

²⁸ ECS 40, PW 103, v.8. This is my own translation of that verse. The German text is:

**Ich selbst kann und mag nicht ruhn;
Des grossen Gottes grosses Thun
Erweckt mir alle Sinnen;
Ich singe mit, wenn alles singt,
Und lasse, was dem Höchsten klingt,
Aus meinen Herzen rinnen.**

Sadly our senses are so darkened, deluded, and disturbed that our hearts do not rightly receive the blessings that God showers on us day by day. Sin and the envy of Satan diminish our capacity for enjoyment. That's why God "opens up" both our minds and our senses through the hearing of his word and the illumination of his Holy Spirit, so that we can begin to take in and enjoy what he so graciously gives us.³⁰ So in keeping with classical teaching on the art of meditation, Gerhardt exercises all his five senses as he meditates.

Since Gerhardt was such an ardent exponent of orthodox Lutheran theology and such a fierce defender of the Formula of Concord, we would expect him as a poet to

²⁹ ECS 100, PW 82, v.14. This comes from a wonderful song that thanks God for the gift of good health, for only if our bodies are healthy can we use our senses properly. Here is my translation of the first two and the last two verses of this song:

**Let us, if we have good health,
Raise our hearts with gladness;
Let us lift our voices high
For God's lavish goodness,
Thanking him with healthy songs,
Daily, nightly, always,
Since he has provided us
With our healthy members.**

**Healthy body, healthy blood,
Make for life's enjoyment.
If we have this gift from God,
That's enough for living
Well and cheerful here on earth,
Since we have a foretaste
Of still better things to come,
Kept for us in heaven.**

**So as long as I still have
Life and breath within me,
Help me to begin to use
Every breath to praise you.
Help me use my healthy mouth
And delighted senses
Always with each breath I take
To delight and please you.**

**Keep me well and give me strength,
Now that I am ageing,
Up until the hour shall come
For my death and burial.
Grant me, while I live on earth,
No unusual suffering
And then in eternity
Full complete enjoyment.**

³⁰ ECS 81, PW 61, v.10. Here is my translation of that verse:

**Daily God's word brings me life
as I taste the teaching
that all Christians long to hear
for their sweet refreshment.
Thus he opens up my mind
with his Holy Spirit,
for my senses to absorb
all his loving kindness.**

privilege the sense of hearing in his songs. It is true that he does repeatedly urge us to listen to the voice of God as it addresses us personally. But that is not at all as frequent as the call to contemplate what God says to us and to envisage what he gives us. He communicates his theology affectively mainly by the use of vivid Biblical images which evoke a vision of God's gracious and paradoxical involvement with us in our lives. Let me give just one case of this that appeals to me most vividly. In his song about the coming of spring Gerhardt is amazed at how God dresses up the formerly barren winter landscape with a fresh green dress.³¹ Then his admiration for the greening of the earth moves him to pray for God's greening of him, body and soul, for the whole of his journey here on earth.³² He uses the same image in a different way in his famous Advent hymn. There he promises that he will green his own heart with thanksgiving and praise as he welcomes his coming Lord.³³ Visual images from the Bible, like this, provide the main stimulus for his practice of meditation. Sadly, most of them are either obscured or lost in our English translations that try to copy his rhyming and attempt to communicate his concepts rather than his imagery.

In his songs Gerhardt also appeals to the sense of taste in many different and surprising ways, some of which seem rather far-fetched and perhaps even grotesque to us with our literal modern mentality. So for example, he evokes the sense of taste repeatedly by his literal and metaphorical use of the adjective "sweet."³⁴ Thus he relishes the sweet mouth of Jesus that tastes much better than wine and milk and honey.³⁵ Rather strangely for us, he uses this adjective for what is pleasing to the other four senses besides the sense of taste. So he speaks about the sweet words from the mouth of Jesus.³⁶ He also enjoys the sweet touch of Christ's embrace,³⁷ and the sweet perfume of Christ's blood that smells better than wine.³⁸ He even claims that through his love Christ sweetens human suffering and pain.³⁹

Like his contemporaries who were adept in meditation, Gerhardt also at times evokes the sense of smell and appeals to it. A startling instance of this is found in his passion hymn of devotion to the bleeding heart of Jesus as he hangs on the cross. The heart of Jesus is compared with a fragrant blooming rose. Like a rose, his open heart emits the fragrance of its nectar in order to unite the heart of the singer with itself. It nourishes the human heart with its sweetness and sets it alight with its love.⁴⁰ The appeal to the sense of smell, like the appeal to the sense of taste, emphasises the involvement of the body in meditation and prayer as well as the importance of reception and appreciation in the devotional life.

³¹ ECS 40, PW 103, v.1, 2.

³² See also ECS 61, PW 46, v.3.

³³ ECS 1, PW 3, v.2. The translation in the LSB changes the image by speaking about the "blooming" of the heart instead of its "greening."

³⁴ For an analysis of the use of "sweet" by Gerhardt and his contemporaries, see Waltraut Ingeborg Sauer-Geppert, *Sprache und Frömmigkeit im deutschen Kirchenlied*, Johannes Stauda Verlag: Kassel, 1984, 35-50.

³⁵ ECS 6, PW 9, v.6.

³⁶ ECS 2, PW 2, v.8; ECS 53, PW 36, v.6.

³⁷ ECS 5, PW 5, v.12.

³⁸ ECS 21, PW 19, v.3.

³⁹ ECS 21, PW 19, v.4; ECS 82, PW 63, v.10.

⁴⁰ ECS 23, PW 21, v.4, 6.

The most physical of all the senses is the sense of touch. Yet despite that, or, more precisely because of that, Gerhardt evokes it again and again in his hymns. One of his favourite tactile images is the use of our human hands to show affection and love, whether it be the hugging of a child by its father and in its mother's lap, or the holding of hands, or the warm embrace of two bodies. Let me give three examples of this. In his Christmas hymn "Beside Thy Manger Here I Stand" he imagines that the infant Jesus smiles and laughs with joy as he reaches out to us with his little hands.⁴¹ In a hymn for New Year's Eve he compares God's protection of us like a mother who holds her frightened child in her lap during a fierce thunder storm.⁴² The last verse of *Why Should Cross And Trial Grieve Me* prays that Jesus will embrace our resurrected bodies with his own body physically as he welcomes us into eternal life with him.⁴³ So the sense of touch is used to communicate the physical comfort and emotional warmth⁴⁴ that we receive from God the Father and his Son. It affirms the incarnation and real presence of Jesus with us bodily here on earth.

e. Joyful Piety

The hymns of Paul Gerhardt inculcate a paradoxical kind of spirituality, the spirituality of the cross. They encourage us to embrace the life that comes through dying with Christ and the joy that comes through suffering with him. Even though they vividly lament human suffering and pain and sorrow, that is not their dominant theme. Their keynote is joy. Whether times are good or bad, his songs lead us on our way through life, singing and rejoicing.

The monastic teachers of spirituality often used the picture of a ladder or a stairway to heaven in their teaching of spirituality. They spoke about the ladder of devotion by which the faithful climbed, step by step and stage by stage, from earth to heaven, the ladder by which they came closer and closer to God until they were united with him. Amazingly, Gerhardt turns this image around in the passion hymn that he devoted to the heart of the crucified Saviour. There he contemplates Jesus as he bends down and reaches out with his heart to him to bring his heart step by step in rejoicing up the ladder of devotion. So for Gerhardt the ladder of devotion is the ladder of joy. Here is my translation of that verse:

**With all my heart I cry to you,
My heart that keeps my heart awake;
Please answer my petition!
Come, bend right down to open up
The door of my poor heart and lift
Me up in warm devotion
From step to step and joy to joy.
And let my heart in love and pain
Remain devoted to you,
So that I always serve you well
With all my heart in every place**

⁴¹ ECS 6, PW 9, v.8.

⁴² ECS 10, PW 12, v.4, 5.

⁴³ ECS 83, PW 64, v.12.

⁴⁴ It is surprising how frequently he speaks about being warmed by God (eg. ECS 20, PW 18, v.3; ECS 21, PW 19, v.5; ECS 23, PW 21, v.3; ECS 63, PW 48, v.4).

And honour you forever.⁴⁵

Here Jesus is regarded as the author of devotion.⁴⁶ This is the voice of a new kind of piety, the piety of reception, an evangelical piety that has nothing to do with spiritual self-promotion and self-advancement and everything to do with the enjoyment of God's grace and love.

So the keynote, the main theme of Gerhardt's songs is joy. They take us on a joyful journey through life, our journey together with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. That heavenly journey does not take us on a detour around trouble and pain, but takes us right through them. It does not offer us a way of escape from all the difficulties of human life on earth, difficulties that Gerhardt knew all too well and lamented so often. Nor does that heavenly journey bypass all that is good in this good world. Rather it takes us from blessing to blessing, blessings that we receive with thanksgiving to God as his gifts for our enjoyment. Here on earth we are his guests who live in his tent for a while and enjoy his hospitality.⁴⁷ Yet our journey does not end here with death. All that is good in God's good world is but a foretaste of the best that is still to come. We therefore look forward to a life of full, complete enjoyment,⁴⁸ eternal life in God's lovely house in heaven.⁴⁹

In his songs Paul Gerhardt is one of the great teachers of Lutheran spirituality. He does not theorise about it, but actually invites us join with him as he mediates on God's word and responds to him in prayer. He invites us to travel with him and the risen Lord Jesus on the eternal way. That way is the *Freudenbahn*, the way of joy.⁵⁰ It takes us from joy to joy, as we go on our way rejoicing.

⁴⁵ ECS 23, PW 21, v.5. The German text is:

**Ich ruf aus aller Herzensmacht
Dich, Herz, in dem mein Herz erwacht,
Ach lass dich doch errufen!
Komm, beug und neige dich zu mir
An meines Herzens arme Tür,
Und zeuch mich auf die Stufen
Der Andacht und der Freudigkeit,
Gib, dass mein Herz in Lieb und Leid
Dein eigen sei und bleibe,
Dass dir es dien an allem Ort,
Und dir zu Ehren immerfort
All seine Zeit vertreibe.**

⁴⁶ The same idea is also found in the second verse of the passion hymn that is devoted to the breast of Jesus (ECS 22, PW 20, v.2). Here is my translation of it:

**My Jesus, bend right down to me;
Reach out and press me to your breast
And fire my heart with your own love,
So that it leaves the world behind.
Arouse devotion in my heart
And harmonise my will with yours.**

⁴⁷ ECS 72, PW 53, v.2.

⁴⁸ See ECS 100, PW 82, v.15.

⁴⁹ See ECS 74, PW 51, v.16.

⁵⁰ See ECS 66, PW 50, v.20.

Paul Gerhardt as a Teacher of Lutheran Spirituality

2. Singing the Devil Away

Each age has its own blind spots. Blind spots obscure our vision, so that we just don't see what's there before us. The worst of these are our mental and spiritual blind spots. They are imposed on us by our culture with its fashionable demands for social, moral, and spiritual correctness. If we follow the demands of spiritual correctness, we chose not to see something that is presented to us by the Scriptures and confirmed by experience. We are embarrassed by any reference to that topic and ignore anything that reminds us of it.

As I read what was written about the songs of Paul Gerhardt on this the 400th anniversary of his birth, I have been pleasantly surprised by much of what has been said in appreciation of his songs. I have been even more surprised by the effort that these writers have made to understand Gerhardt himself, his faith and his Lutheran vision of life. This applies even to his defiance of King Friedrich Wilhelm, who, under the pretext of religious tolerance, forbade the Lutheran pastors of his realm to teach and preach according to the Formula of Concord. Yet despite all their sympathies for him, there is one aspect of his piety that they dismiss, because they are obviously embarrassed by it. It is so embarrassing for them that they dismiss it as outdated before they explain it away. The reason for their embarrassment is his belief in Satan and his repeated reference to spiritual warfare.

Let me give you just two examples of this. The leading German Lutheran expert on Gerhardt is Christian Bunnens. He is the current president of the Paul Gerhardt Society and the author of the best book on him in German. Yet when he comes to the topic of spiritual warfare, this is all he has to say:

Suffering raises the question of "salvation" and "grace" most acutely. It seems to us as if God himself has written us off, as if "he no longer asks how we are." Gerhardt associates this temptation with the Biblical discourse about Satan. For him it has to do with final annihilation. So too his discourse about hell indicates the conglomeration of all negative powers.⁵¹

On a much more popular level Frank Pauli has written a lovely little book on Gerhardt.⁵² He ends this book with an imaginary letter to Gerhardt in which he engages with him in a number of issues. One of the things that bothers him and so too, we would surmise, his readers, is Gerhardt's talk about Satan.⁵³ He admits that Gerhardt would find the disappearance of talk about Satan from the Protestant churches in Germany rather odd and perhaps even silly. How else can we name evil and deal with it properly? Yet, while he acknowledges that the silence in the church about Satan impoverishes and damages the life of faith, he cannot accept Satan as anything more than a symbol of evil.

⁵¹ See Christian Bunnens, *Paul Gerhardt: Weg-Werk-Wirkung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2007, 184

⁵² Frank Pauli, *Im Himmel ist ein schönes Haus: Skizzen zu Paul Gerhardt*, Wichern Verlag: Berlin, 2006.

⁵³ See 117f.

You may, of course, have some reason to sympathise with this point of view. The unhealthy obsession that many Protestants have with demonology and the exorcism of demons does not commend the topic of spiritual warfare to us. Yet I would maintain that we as Lutherans have something unique to offer the church catholic on this topic. Luther's teaching on spiritual warfare is, I would maintain, an integral part of our piety. That is its proper context. His teaching on spiritual warfare is something that we need to recover if we are going to meet the challenge from the Pentecostals and engage effectively in evangelism at home and abroad.

As you no doubt know, Luther summed up his practice of spirituality quite succinctly and memorably in the "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings" from 1539.⁵⁴ In that short essay he spoke about his three rules for the affective study of theology – *oratio*: **prayer** to God the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit as his spiritual director; *meditatio*: **meditation** on the external embodied word as the means for the operation of the Holy Spirit; and *tentatio*: **spiritual attack** by Satan on those whose hearts receive God's word and the Spirit through the word.⁵⁵ The German word that Luther uses for temptation is *Anfechtung*, attack. Our experience of attack by the devil is the touchstone of genuine Christian spirituality, for, as we come under attack, we, paradoxically, "experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is, wisdom beyond wisdom."⁵⁶ The attacks of the devil teach us "to seek and love God's word."

In this second address on Paul Gerhardt as a teacher of Lutheran spirituality I want first to summarise his teaching on spiritual warfare and then to examine the one song that deals with it at some length, "Rise, my soul, up high to God."

a. Silencing Satan

In his songs Gerhardt often refers in passing to Satan and his battle against the people of God. There is little that is original in what he has to say on this topic apart from the way that he says it. He has little interest in demonology. His main concern is for competence in spiritual warfare as part of the practice of piety.

Satan is, quite simply, "the enemy of souls,"⁵⁷ "my enemy".⁵⁸ He has gained his power over us through the fall of our primeval parents.⁵⁹ Yet even though Satan exercises his power in the world of fallen humanity, Gerhardt pays little attention to his works in the chaotic world around him as he well might have, since he lived through the terrible devastation of 30 years war. His interest lies in the main battlefield of Satan, the conscience of the faithful, for Satan is the accuser of those who are one flesh with their blood brother, Jesus.

⁵⁴ See EA 34, 283-393.

⁵⁵ See my analysis of this in "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66/3 (2002): 255-267.

⁵⁶ EA 287.

⁵⁷ *Seelenfeind*, ECS 4, PW 8, v.4.

⁵⁸ ECS 34, PW 34, v.2

⁵⁹ ECS 31, PW 31, v.3.

Satan is most crafty and devious in the tricks that he uses to attack our conscience. If we have sinned, he accuses us of falling with Adam⁶⁰ and acts as if he has the right to condemn us.⁶¹ Once guilt sets in he fills us with fear of death and forebodings of punishment.⁶² He deceives us by using God's law to condemn us, so that we deny his grace.⁶³ He attacks us, when we are most vulnerable, in the witching hours of the night.⁶⁴ Even if we have not sinned, he still nags and gnaws at us, like a dog on a bone, trying to draw us away from Christ by undermining our faith in him; he spreads the fog of doubt over us, doubt about our salvation and the things that God has instituted for our salvation, such as baptism, the absolution, the preaching of the gospel, and the gift of Christ's blood.⁶⁵ Yet despite all that, he has so little hold on us that he has to resort to mockery and ridicule, the weapons of one who has been vanquished and disempowered.⁶⁶

There is one image that recurs repeatedly in Gerhardt's depiction of spiritual warfare. Satan is an evil snake that poisons us with his sting. He injects his venom, his gall, into us, so that we become as bitter and hateful and ill-tempered as he is.⁶⁷ He does this in a most unusual way. With his fangs he injects his poison into the wounds that we have in our hearts and on our conscience, the wounds that we inflict on ourselves by our sin as well as the wounds that are inflicted on us by those who have injured us, such as when they slander us.⁶⁸ Here is how he describes Satan's attack on us:

**Satan comes with his deception
And annuls the grace of God,
Just as if I too were prisoned
There with him in hell itself.
Yet far worse than that, he strikes
Me and stings me like a snake;
He infects my troubled conscience
With his deadly, toxic venom.**

The pangs of conscience are "the poisoned wounds," the toxic injuries, that Christ comes to heal with his incarnation.⁶⁹ Christ, the snake treader, removes the snake's sack of venom, so that he can no longer poison us when he sinks his fangs in us.⁷⁰

In all this Satan is motivated by two things. On the one hand, he hates Jesus and all those who are associated with him; he, quite rightly, regards Jesus as such a threat to him that he shuns him.⁷¹ That's why he had his one moment of triumph when Jesus was buried in the grave, for he imagined that he was at last rid of his

⁶⁰ ECS 4, PW 8, v.4

⁶¹ ECS 81, PW 61, v.3

⁶² ECS 25, PW 23, v.5

⁶³ ECS 2, PW 2, vv.2-3; ECS 8, PW 6, v.5; ECS 25, PW 23, vv.12-14

⁶⁴ ECS 35, PW 99, vv.2-5

⁶⁵ ECS 34, PW 34, v.2

⁶⁶ ECS 82, PW 63, v.11; ECS 83, PW 64, v.6

⁶⁷ ECS 4, PW 8, v.4

⁶⁸ ECS 37, PW 98, v.5

⁶⁹ ECS5, PW 5, v.10

⁷⁰ ECS 26, PW 27, v.3

⁷¹ ECS 82, PW 63, v.11

great enemy.⁷² On the other hand, the devil is filled with envy for the human race since God has honoured it by making it physically in his image and by exalting it physically together with Jesus over all creation.⁷³

For all his huffing and puffing and bluffing, Satan has no power over those who are united with the risen Lord Jesus,⁷⁴ for just as the rising sun banishes the darkness, so Christ has vanquished him by his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension.⁷⁵ Together with his cronies, sin and death and hell, the devil has been put to shame by the incarnation of God's Son.⁷⁶ By his death he has crushed the devil's head, like the head of a snake, and has harrowed hell.⁷⁷ Satan has been forced to submit to the risen Lord Jesus who binds him hand and foot and puts him under his feet.⁷⁸ Yet Jesus does none of this by himself and apart from us. He has brought us with him as his companions when he fought his way through sin and death and hell.⁷⁹ By raising us with him as his own flesh and blood to the right hand of the Father, he has silenced the devil once and for all and seated us safely with him in the heavenly realm.⁸⁰ Through the waters of baptism he has freed us from the shackles of Satan and has put all the armies of hell under our feet.⁸¹

Yet for all that, Satan is still not finished with us. He still uses the darkness in our hearts to attack us, the darkness of guilt and shame, anxiety and fear, pain and sorrow, resentment and hatred, doubt and despair, self-pity and depression. He uses these things to undermine our faith in God's word, to disconnect us from Jesus, and to drive the Holy Spirit from our hearts. We therefore are caught up in a lifelong battle against Satan who dogs and hounds us on our journey through life.⁸²

In this battle we have two main weapons, meditation on God's word and prayer as guided by God's word.⁸³ As we listen to the voice of Jesus, the voice of Satan is silenced inside us.⁸⁴ We can also pray for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of victory.⁸⁵ He keeps the lamp of faith alight in the storms of life and frees us from all that ails our hearts;⁸⁶ he drives away the evil spirit when attacks us and tries to confuse us;⁸⁷ he gives joy and power to resist the devil and all his works.⁸⁸

Just as the evil spirits join Satan in his battle against us, so God sends us his holy angels, the golden heavenly army, as our bodyguards on our journey through life.

⁷² ECS 26, PW 27, v.2

⁷³ ECS 4, PW 8, vv.4-5; ECS 43, PW 106, v.15

⁷⁴ ECS 28, PW 28, vv.6-7

⁷⁵ ECS 4, PW 8, vv.5-6

⁷⁶ ECS 8, PW 6, v.2

⁷⁷ ECS 8, PW 6, v.5; ECS 15, PW 14, v.3

⁷⁸ ECS 26, PW 27, v.3

⁷⁹ ECS 26, PW 27, v.7

⁸⁰ ECS 4, PW 8, vv.3-5

⁸¹ ECS 33, PW 33, vv.4-7

⁸² ECS 29, PW 32, v.15; ECS 81, PW 61, v.12

⁸³ ECS 91, PW 59, v.8

⁸⁴ ECS 28, PW 28, vv.4-6

⁸⁵ ECS 31, PW 31, v.7

⁸⁶ ECS 31, PW 31, v.8

⁸⁷ ECS 29, PW 32, v.14

⁸⁸ ECS 29, PW 32, v.15

We may therefore pray for their protection.⁸⁹ In this he follows Luther with his prayers for each evening and morning. The holy angels protect us at night when we are most open to spiritual attack.⁹⁰ So in the hymn *Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadow* we ask Jesus to post them at our bedsides as our body guards and to bid them to sing the devil away from us.⁹¹ They also travel with us daily on our journey through life as they did with Jacob on his journey to his homeland.⁹²

b. Calling the Devil's Bluff

Gerhardt wrote a remarkable song about how to deal with the devil and call his bluff in spiritual warfare. He entitled it: *A Song of Comfort in Depression and Attack*.⁹³ In this song he does not begin, as we might expect, with his experience of guilt; he begins with his experience of depression. Just as joy is the hallmark of life with Christ, so depression is the evidence of a soul under attack by Satan.

The song begins with a call to his soul to renounce depression:

**Rise, my soul, up high to God
From the pit of sadness!
Why remain down there, depressed?
Why despise his goodness?
Can't you see the devil's tricks,
Scheming to attack you?
He is set to fog and mute
Christ's good words of comfort.**

Our attention is immediately arrested by what is said here. By the use of a pun, the "pit" of depression, "*Höhle*" in German, is associated with the "hell" of depression, "*Hölle*" in German. When we wallow in depression we side with Satan. Our decision to remain in that state may be regarded as mockery of God, scornful disregard of him and his goodness. So when we yield to depression and revel in it, we fall for the devil's trickery. Even though Satan does not create depression, he uses it, like a grey fog that envelops us and removes all color from the world around us, to blot out the comfort that we have in Jesus and to mute the message of the gospel. That's why the singer urges his gloomy soul to turn to God, as to the sun, and rise up to him, like an eagle uplifted on a thermal current.

In the next three verses he addresses the devil and sends him packing:

**I will shake my head and say:
'Flee, you snake, you dragon!
You can't strike me with your sting;**

⁸⁹ ECS 3, PW 10, 6; ECS 38, PW 102, vv.8-9

⁹⁰ ECS 56, PW 49, v.4; ECS 35, PW 99, vv.2-5; ECS 36, PW 100, v.5; ECS 39, PW 101, v.5; ECS 38, PW 102, vv.8-9

⁹¹ See verse 4:

**Lord Jesus, since you love me,
Now spread your wings above me,
And shield me from alarm.
Though Satan would devour me,
Let angel guards sing o'er me:
"This child of God shall meet no harm.**

⁹² ECS 2, PW 2, v.10; ECS 99, PW 81, v.8; ECS 43, PW 106, vv.1-11,15

⁹³ ECS 81, PW 61

**You can't make me fearful!
Christ has crushed your toxic head
With his painful passion.
He has snatched me from your reach
To his hall for feasting.'**

**'If you tell me I have sinned,
I will answer boldly:
I don't take my lead from you
For my self-appraisal.
Who has given you the right
To condemn God's people?
Aren't you now already stuck
In hell's fiery fury?'**

**'If I've sinned and done what's wrong,
Then I say I'm sorry.
My one antidote for guilt
Is the blood of Jesus.
That's the ransom for my soul
From all evil-doing.
If I show it at God's throne,
I have his approval.'**

He defies the devil because he no longer has any power over him; he has nothing to fear from his toxic insinuations. Christ, the snake-treader, has crushed the snake's head and removed the poison from his fangs. He has snatched the believer from the reach of Satan and brought him, enraptured, to the hall of joy, the bridal hall, the Eucharistic chamber, the place for feasting and celebration where Satan cannot come.⁹⁴ So all Satan's efforts to discount God's approval of him and to keep him depressed are an audacious bluff, for he whom Christ has condemned to hell has no right to accuse and condemn anybody. Even if a Christian has sinned, Satan cannot use that against him, for he has the blood of Jesus as his antidote to sin, the ransom for his misdeeds and the proof of God's acceptance of him.

In two vivid verses the singer then meditates on the comfort and protection that he has in Christ.

**Jesus is my innocence,
Righteousness and glory.
He has gained for me a place
Where I live in safety,
Like a fortress so secure
That no foe can conquer.
Even hell's artillery
Cannot break and take it.**

Let the devil rant and rage;

⁹⁴ This is one of Gerhardt's favourite images (eg. ECS 1, PW 3, v.10; ECS 29, PW 32, v. 6). It comes from the Song of Songs 2:4.

**Death has lost its danger.
God protects me from his threats
With his grace and favour.
Since he honours me and loves
Me as he loves Jesus,
All the devil's scornful taunts
Will not make me gloomy.**

Like a well-fortified fortress that is safe against the cannon fire of an army that besieges it, Jesus is the one safe place from Satan and all the powers of hell. Because the singer is covered with Christ's blood, everything that belongs to his blood brother Jesus, such as his innocence, his righteousness and all his achievements, belongs to him. So, since God the Father favours him and honours him together with Jesus, death has lost its power to harm him. With all this backing he therefore has good reason to dismiss the devil and his threats.

In three new verses the singer turns away from the devil and defies his ally, the world, the world of godless humanity that contradicts his faith in Jesus and in God's acceptance of him.

**Let the crazy world shout out:
'God does not accept you.'
That is nothing but a lie,
Nothing but deception.
If God were displeased with me,
He would not have given
All the good things I've received
For my sheer enjoyment.**

**What in all the sky above,
Or below the ocean,
What is good that does not serve
Me and my existence?
All the stars that shine at night,
All the wind and water,
All that's good in all the world
Is for my enrichment.**

**For my good the rain and dew
Wet the earth's dry surface.
For my good the grass grows green,
Trees and plants all flourish.
Yes, for me God's blessing fills
Hills and fields and forests.
To delight me he provides
This good earth to house me.**

The argument here is quite simple and yet effective. It runs from the lesser to the greater. Since God has given him so many good things in this good world for his bodily sustenance and enjoyment, God is not his enemy; he is not angry with him. Rather he must be pleased with him and ready to give him still greater spiritual gifts.

The next three verses develop that rich theme.

**Daily God's word brings me life
As I taste the teachings
That all Christians long to hear
For their sweet refreshment.
Thus he opens up my mind
With his Holy Spirit,
For my senses to absorb
All his loving kindness.**

**All that the apostles say,
Which confirms the prophets,
Is a light in a bleak place,
Bright with welcome radiance,
Driving shadows from my heart,
Bringing me assurance
With a faith that's firmly fixed
By a peaceful conscience.**

**On this holy ground I build
All my thoughts and actions,
Even though the hound of hell
Howls and snaps against it.
Satan cannot ever shake
What God has established.
Everything the devil plans
Must collapse and vanish.**

By itself the experience of all the good things in God's good creation is not enough to banish depression. It is not enough just to silence the combined message of Satan and fallen humanity. So God also gives his word and Holy Spirit. These two work together to enlighten the mind and the heart of the singer. Through his word God keeps on giving his Spirit, just the sun keeps on giving its light to those who welcome it. The Spirit enlightens the mind of the singer so that he can recognise and enjoy God as the giver of all the good things that he experiences with his five senses. Through the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures the Spirit also illumines his heart, so that he has the assurance of salvation and such a secure foundation for his faith that it not only withstands the rage of Satan, the hound of hell, but also brings about his undoing.

After setting out these things as the foundation for his "*Gemüthe*", his mood, his good temper, the proper way of thinking and feeling about himself and his world, the singer tackles the practical problem of depression in its two main guises, its extreme lows and its oscillation between extreme highs and lows.

**I am God's and he is mine;
Who can ever part us?
Even if the cross slips in
Painfully between us,
Let it be because it comes
From my God who loves me,
Making, in his time, a door**

Open up before us.

**Children whom a father trains
In what's good and wholesome,
Seldom grow and flourish well
Without firm correction.
So if I am God's dear child,
Why should I resist him
Who instructs me from my sins
To receive his blessings?**

**God treats Christian people well
Even in their troubles.
Those who cry a while on earth
Will not wail forever.
They will take complete delight
In Christ's heavenly garden
Which he has prepared for them
For their full enjoyment.**

**Though God's children sow with tears
In a time of sorrow,
Yet at last the year brings on
More than they have longed for.
After winter comes the time
To bring in the harvest;
Then their pain and trouble bear
Fruit in joy and laughter.**

Here Gerhardt is not interested in arguing for the truth of St Paul's teaching that all things work together for good for those who love God. Rather he draws on the wisdom that comes from the practice of piety, the wisdom that is taught by God's word and his Holy Spirit in the school of life. Those who live wisely do not dwell on the misery of depression, nor do they crave a life of untrammelled happiness. They learn the lessons of life. The spiritual sting of depression has to do with the attack of Satan upon us. He exaggerates it and uses it to propagate his message. The secret of managing depression spiritually is also the secret for the full enjoyment of life. It is the secret of the cross, the holy Easter journey through death to life, through sorrow to joy, through hell to heaven. God is equally at work in times of trouble and in times of happiness. He, in fact, uses our sins and our troubles to refine us and increase our capacity for richer and fuller and deeper enjoyment, both in this life and in the life to come.

In the last verse of the song the singer actually does what he had urged himself to do in the first verse. He renounces his depression:

**So then let me take my pain,
My depression boldly,
Take and throw it all away
Joyfully behind me.
Like a candle, let me burn
With increased devotion,**

**Praising God for all his help,
For his comfort! Amen.**

Comforted and strengthened by his faith in Christ, he gets rid of his sadness and pain, as if it now no longer burdened him, as if it had nothing to do with him. In a bold act of will he picks it up and throws it far behind him. He does not hold on to it, nor does he pretend that it does not bother him. He sings it away. Yet he does not just sing it away. By singing it away, he sings the devil away as well.⁹⁵

c. The Singing Heart

In Colossians 3:16 Saint Paul urges his hearers to let the word of Christ dwell richly among them and in them, so that it may bring God's grace into their hearts and produce a heartfelt song of thanksgiving and praise to God the Father. Gerhardt and his contemporaries therefore rightly concluded that the practice of piety included the song of the heart. They maintained that *Kirchengesang*, singing the psalms of the Old Testament and the hymns of the church, was meant to produce *Seelengesang*, the song of the soul, "spiritual songs." Gerhardt is a great teacher of Lutheran spirituality because he composed devotional songs that were both hymns of the church and songs of the heart.

Gerhardt's songs teach our hearts to sing at all times and in all places. His songs sing the word of Christ and the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that they set our hearts singing. Whether we are awake or asleep, they sing the song of Jesus. Whether we lament or rejoice, they keep on singing about the grace of God the Father. They sing in summer and in winter, in prosperity and adversity, in our highs and in our lows, in health and in sickness, in life and in death. Here on earth they begin to sing the song that never ends. And as they sing, they sing the devil away, for he has no hold on the heart that is devoted to Jesus.

⁹⁵ See ECS 137, v.1. There Gerhardt claims that whenever David became distempered and despondent from the attack of the Enemy on his heart he routed the Enemy by singing a song of praise to God.