

## Perspectives on Church Music #12—No Fleecy Clouds and Little Lambs (PDF)

What makes a hymn good for children?

Answers may vary, but much religious song foisted upon children today suggests that the silly, the puerile, and the childish have taken over. Examples are legion. Generally sensible suggestions which have long served to shape texts and melodies for children have been twisted by current politically correct thought to serve their own ends. The results have generally been disastrous.

Where the simple and childlike is desired, we are given the simplistic and the childish. Writing texts “at a child’s level of understanding” seems to result in a general aversion to significant subjects (when have you last sung a children’s hymn about death or dying?). Use of repeated melodic and rhythmic figures to aid learning devolves into trite and boring melodies. And where children’s voices should soar, we are given low-pitched tunes that encourage the worst kind of sound.

Children are capable of more than this. Our adult cock-sureness of what children like, want, or are capable of, however, has resulted in a patronizing diet of religious junk food being fed to our children in too many churches.

It was not always so. Go back, for example, to Reformation times. The political situation was desperate. The Turks were at the gates of Europe. King Ferdinand had suffered a great defeat at the hands of the Mohammedan Turks at Budapest in 1541. The king of France had made a pact with Suleiman against the empire. Things could hardly have been worse.

In these threatening circumstances there appeared in print a song entitled simply “A Children’s Hymn.” It was most likely to be sung by the boys’ choir in a special prayer service. It read as follows:

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;  
Curb those who by deceit or sword  
Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son  
And set at naught all He has done.

Lord Jesus Christ, Your pow’r make known,  
For You are Lord of lords alone;  
Defend Your holy Church that we  
May sing Your praise triumphantly.

O Comforter of priceless worth,  
Send peace and unity on earth;  
Support us in our final strife  
And lead us out of death to life.

[LSB 655]

Would such a hymn pass the politically correct test for a children’s hymn today? No dallying with diminutives (“little Jesus,” “little lambs”); no keeping children stuck in a land of “fleecy clouds and little lambs”; no hesitation to address situations of life and death. Besides, what author sensitive to a child’s world would attempt to introduce Trinitarian language, or would speak of life, death, and “our final strife” with children? Definitely not for children. Such a hymn would hardly pass muster today.

The author of “A Children’s Hymn” was Martin Luther.

In 1542, one year after this hymn was probably written, in a letter to the headmaster of the Torgau Latin School, Luther indicated that he was sending his son John Luther to be drilled in—among other things—music. It is not unlikely that while there Luther’s son sang “A Children’s Hymn.”

Perhaps we might make a start at improving today's situation by teaching it to our children.

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[This essay is reprinted with permission from *First Personal Singular: Reflections on Worship, Liturgy, and Children* (1998) by Carl Schalk and is available from MorningStar Music Publishers. MSM-90-26/ISBN 0-944529-29-1]