



We All Believe in One True God

Text: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Tune: Martin Luther (1483-1546)

When we think of the Reformation we often think of the return of the Gospel to prominence, the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. One key part of making this happen was giving the people the Gospel in their own language. This meant translation of texts once locked away in Latin and giving them to the people not only in German, but in simple language that could be understood by all. Luther also understood the power of music to carry the Gospel and aid in education. To help with this he wrote hymns for each chief part of the Small Catechism:

“These Are the Holy Ten Commands” (1524) for the Ten Commandments



Martin Luther

“We All Believe in One True God” (1524) for the Creed,

“Our Father Who in Heaven Above” (1539) for the Lord’s Prayer,

“To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord” (1541) for Baptism,”

“From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee” (1523) for Confession and Absolution, and

“O Lord, We Praise Thee” (1524) for the Sacrament of the Altar.”

Each of these hymns either led to how Luther would discuss their Chief Parts in the Small Catechism (1539) or flowed from his Catechism. These hymns were taught to young people in school who would often go home and teach them to their parents, and in this way young and old, educated and uneducated learned the faith together in a simple way that would become ingrained in them, teaching them always the truths of Holy Scripture and giving the comfort of the Gospel. This was not only true for these six Catechism hymns, but for all of Luther’s

other hymns that have stood as timeless teachers of Christians for more than 500 years.

While Luther is the author of what we know today as “We All Believe in One True God,” he used a one-stanza medieval verse and tune dating to about c. 1483-1520 as the starting point for his hymn, a practice not at all unfamiliar to many of Luther’s other hymns (“Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord,” LSB 497 for example) that sought to preserve and build on the foundation of the treasures inherited from the faithful of previous generations. It is also,

very obviously, based on the Creed, both Apostles’ and Nicene, but it is not a translation of either in the strict sense. In Luther’s German Mass (1526) it was used in place of the Nicene Creed in the liturgy, using the creed more as educational on the work of our Triune God than a confession of the faith, since each stanza for each person of the trinity has a clear “for you” emphasis. However, before it was brought into that liturgical order it first appeared as a hymn for Trinity Sunday, since in its first hymnal, Walter’s *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn* (the first Lutheran hymnal, published in Wittenberg in 1524), it was included with other hymns for Trinity Sunday.

Sadly, this treasure of Lutheran hymnody is unknown to many, though it was widely known and used by earlier generations of Lutherans. Even Catherine Winkworth, the translator of many of our German hymns, attached this note to her 1863 translation that it was “unsuitable for England,” but nevertheless “an interesting specimen of hymnology.” It is characteristic of many Reformation-era hymns that had chant-like characteristics, but was meant to be sung in a lively and light style, making it an energetic confession of the faith and teaching tool of what our God has done and continues to do for His children.



“We All Believe in One True God” in its first printing, Walter’s *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*.