

The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess

Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
Martin Luther, 1523
Tr. composite

8.7. 8.7. 8.8.7.

Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn, 1524

1 The mouth of fools may well con-fess, "True God, we glo - ri - fy Him";
2 God from the heav'ns looked down be - low, On all man-kind to-geth - er,
3 None walked up - on the nar - row way, There-from they all had wan - dered;
4 How long shall they as fools en-dure, Who bear such need-less bur - dens

Yet full of un - be - lief their breast, With deeds do they de - ny
Yea, He be - took Him - self, to know If a - ny He'd dis - cov -
Each did what - e'er his dreams might say; In wick - ed ways they foun -
And who My peo - ple thus de - vour And feed on their mis - for -

Him. Their na-ture is cor - rupt - ed quite, And loath-some are they
er Who all their un - der - stand - ing bent To do His Word with
dered. Not one did an - y good at all, And yet full man - y
tunes? They do not trust in God in - deed, Nor call on Him in

in God's sight, Not one does good a - mong — them.
good in - tent, In - to His will in - quir - ing.
had the gall To deem their deeds God - pleas - ing.
time of need; They'd be their own pro - tect - ors.

- 5 Therefore their heart seeks peace in vain,
Fears constantly dismay them;
God with the pious will remain,
Who in true faith obey Him.
The poor man's counsel ye despise,
And scoff when unto you he cries
That God is made his Comfort.
- 6 Who shall to Israel, poor and lone,
From Zion bring salvation?
God shall have mercy on His own,
And loose His captive nation.
This shall He do through His own Son;
So shall for Jacob joy be won,
And Israel leap with gladness.

The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess

LUTHER'S HYMN "The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess (*Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl*)" is a metrical setting of Psalm 14. Probably written late in 1523, its first appearance in print was in the *Achtliederbuch* of 1524, where, together with the Psalm settings "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold (*Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein*)" and "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee (*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*)," it was assigned the tune "Es ist das Heil," now associated chiefly with the hymn "Salvation unto Us Has Come (*Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*)." The present tune appeared with this text later that same year, in Johann Walter's collection of polyphonic hymn settings, the *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*, Wittenberg.

Notable is Luther's shift from the literal meaning of the Psalm. Whereas the original begins, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God," Luther has the "fools" publicly making the claim that they worship the one true God. But Luther contrasts mouth and heart, attributing the hypocritical worship of God to the mouth alone, and placing the atheism of unbelief in the heart. The entertaining of false doctrine, particularly in the service of spiritual enthusiasm, is for Luther no different than the denial of God altogether. Furthermore, the cause of the fools' oppression of Christ's Church Luther locates in their dependence upon their own works, an example of the opposite of Christian freedom leading to abusive works toward the neighbor. Because their sufficiency is not in Christ, they must turn to other sources for support, devouring God's people.

"The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess" is included in neither *The Lutheran Hymnal* nor the *Lutheran Service Book*, but it appears in the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book*, No. 277, in the translation of Richard Massie, "The Mouth of Fools Doth God Confess." Since there is no currently established tradition of singing this hymn in English, it was thought appropriate to offer a new translation for the *Free Lutheran Chorale-Book* that remains as close as possible to Luther's original word choice and phrasing. The musical setting, adjusted to fit the original form of the melody, is slightly altered from the setting found in the *Mehrstimmiges Choralbuch*, 1906, which is based in turn upon the 1627 setting of Johann Hermann Schein. Both text and music may be freely used and reproduced for any purpose whatever, and are offered with the prayer that they may serve for the edification of Christian people everywhere. For more information, visit the *Free Lutheran Chorale-Book* at:

The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess

Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
Martin Luther, 1523
Tr. composite

8.7. 8.7. 8.8.7.

Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn, 1524

1 The mouth of fools may well con-fess, "True God, we glo - ri - fy Him";
2 God from the heav'ns looked down be - low, On all man-kind to-geth - er,
3 None walked up - on the nar - row way, There-from they all had wan - dered;
4 How long shall they as fools en-dure, Who bear such need-less bur - dens

Yet full of un - be - lief their breast, With deeds do they de - ny
Yea, He be - took Him - self, to know If a - ny He'd dis - cov -
Each did what - e'er his dreams might say; In wick - ed ways they foun -
And who My peo - ple thus de - vour And feed on their mis - for -

Him. Their na-ture is cor - rupt - ed quite, And loath-some are they
er Who all their un - der - stand - ing bent To do His Word with
dered. Not one did an - y good at all, And yet full man - y
tunes? They do not trust in God in - deed, Nor call on Him in

in God's sight, Not one does good a - mong — them.
good in - tent, In - to His will in - quir - ing.
had the gall To deem their deeds God - pleas - ing.
time of need; They'd be their own pro - tect - ors.

5 Therefore their heart seeks peace in vain,
Fears constantly dismay them;
God with the pious will remain,
Who in true faith obey Him.
The poor man's counsel ye despise,
And scoff when unto you he cries
That God is made his Comfort.

6 Who shall to Israel, poor and lone,
From Zion bring salvation?
God shall have mercy on His own,
And loose His captive nation.
This shall He do through His own Son;
So shall for Jacob joy be won,
And Israel leap with gladness.

The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess

LUTHER'S HYMN "The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess (*Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl*)" is a metrical setting of Psalm 14. Probably written late in 1523, its first appearance in print was in the *Achtliederbuch* of 1524, where, together with the Psalm settings "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold (*Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein*)" and "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee (*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*)," it was assigned the tune "Es ist das Heil," now associated chiefly with the hymn "Salvation unto Us Has Come (*Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*)." The present tune appeared with this text later that same year, in Johann Walter's collection of polyphonic hymn settings, the *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*, Wittenberg.

Notable is Luther's shift from the literal meaning of the Psalm. Whereas the original begins, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God," Luther has the "fools" publicly making the claim that they worship the one true God. But Luther contrasts mouth and heart, attributing the hypocritical worship of God to the mouth alone, and placing the atheism of unbelief in the heart. The entertaining of false doctrine, particularly in the service of spiritual enthusiasm, is for Luther no different than the denial of God altogether. Furthermore, the cause of the fools' oppression of Christ's Church Luther locates in their dependence upon their own works, an example of the opposite of Christian freedom leading to abusive works toward the neighbor. Because their sufficiency is not in Christ, they must turn to other sources for support, devouring God's people.

"The Mouth of Fools May Well Confess" is included in neither *The Lutheran Hymnal* nor the *Lutheran Service Book*, but it appears in the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-Book*, No. 277, in the translation of Richard Massie, "The Mouth of Fools Doth God Confess." Since there is no currently established tradition of singing this hymn in English, it was thought appropriate to offer a new translation for the *Free Lutheran Chorale-Book* that remains as close as possible to Luther's original word choice and phrasing. The musical setting, adjusted to fit the original form of the melody, is slightly altered from the setting found in the *Mehrstimmiges Choralbuch*, 1906, which is based in turn upon the 1627 setting of Johann Hermann Schein. Both text and music may be freely used and reproduced for any purpose whatever, and are offered with the prayer that they may serve for the edification of Christian people everywhere. For more information, visit the *Free Lutheran Chorale-Book* at: