

## A Foundation for Lutheran Music: The Hymns and Hymnals of 1524

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The year 2017 found Lutherans observing the five-hundred-year commemoration of the sixteenth-century German Reformation. Numerous publications and conferences provided important new resources and viewpoints on this theological movement, as well as on the life and work of Martin Luther. Indeed, here at the 2017 “Lectures in Church Music” Dr. Robin Leaver gave the plenary lecture on Luther and hymns in the Wittenberg churches (a lecture preserved as a video resource at the website of the Center for Church Music). As you well know, 1517 marked the year when Luther wrote and distributed his Ninety-Five Theses, his “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.” He sent this document, written in Latin, to a printer in Wittenberg, and copies spread rapidly, with Luther’s prominence growing accordingly. 1517, then, becomes for us a convenient chronological marker for the beginning of religious reform in the German-speaking lands—emanating from the university town of Wittenberg and led by Luther. But, of course, in 1517 the work of theological reform was only in its *beginning* stages.

When we look back on the chronology, we may well marvel at how quickly Luther and his coworkers defined and defended their program of reform. For example, it would be only thirteen years from the printing of the Ninety-five Theses in 1517 to the 1530 presentation of the Augsburg Confession to Holy Roman emperor, Charles V. The text of the Augsburg Confession was subsequently published in 1531, as was Phillip Melanchthon’s Apology, or defense, of the Augsburg Confession. From our vantage point five centuries later, it is perhaps too easy to say that it was *only* thirteen years from the Ninety-five Theses to the Augsburg Confession, in a

sense almost cavalierly suggesting that defining and defending this Wittenberg theological movement was somehow a relatively quick and straightforward proposition. In fact, it happened gradually and with difficulty, as Luther and his coworkers wrote, lectured, preached, and taught. The edifice, necessarily, was built brick by brick.

Prior to the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, more concise confessional writings appeared in print. For example, Luther's Small Catechism appeared in printed form in 1529. I have no doubt that in 2029, God willing, we will see conferences and publications observing five-hundred years of Luther's catechisms.

Five years previously, in 1524, the first Lutheran hymnals appeared in print—an even earlier manifestation of these ongoing efforts to set out and define central teachings of this Reformation movement. Like the Small Catechism, the hymns of Luther and his coworkers are *concise* expositions of Christian doctrine and teaching, a necessary corrective to false teachings that had, over the centuries, accumulated in the medieval western church. Thus, from a historical perspective, we study the hymns and hymnals of 1524 as one of those confessional “bricks” that played a role in the gradual remodeling of the edifice of the western church.

But there are further reasons for studying the hymns and hymnals of 1524. In the larger sense that I just spoke of, these hymns and hymnals played their part in defining Lutheran theology during the lengthy course of the sixteenth-century Lutheran reformation movement. But these early hymns also taught the people of 1524, and they continue to teach the people of 2024. They are *not* outmoded objects that we study solely for historical interest and perspective. Further, these hymns and hymnals enabled the people of 1524 to proclaim the Gospel in a specific way—by *singing* the faith. They do the same for us in 2024 as we sing these same hymns—now translated into English, Spanish, French, and a host of other languages in which

Lutherans today all over the world proclaim the faith—to each other and to all who come into our assemblies. Finally, we may study these hymns of 1524 on a musical level, as they have provided the basis for musical elaborations by composers from the sixteenth century to the present day. Such musical elaborations, perhaps for voices and instruments, or for the organ, also function to teach and to proclaim; they are so much more than musical objects for the concert hall. Just as a hymn is a theological expression clothed in poetry and music, so also musical elaborations of hymns are theological expressions—further ways of conveying theological truth through music.

I turn now to Luther’s call for hymns in 1523, then on to identifying four printed hymnals from 1524. Third, we will look specifically at two of the 1524 hymns in terms of their theological content. Fourth, I want to consider briefly the early seventeenth-century theorist and composer Michael Praetorius, who provided an important conceptual foundation for the role and function of music in the Lutheran Divine Service. Fifth, we will consider musical elaborations of chorales from these 1524 hymnals, for the hymns in those first books provided composers with the hymn tunes—or chorale melodies—on which they built stunning musical elaborations.

### **“The people could sing during mass”**

In 1523 Luther published his *Formula Missae*, in English translation: “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg.” This publication is yet another confessional “brick” in the edifice of a “remodeled,” reformed Western church. People had been seeking guidance from Luther on how to observe the Latin Mass; they wanted to know how he was conducting the Mass in Wittenberg in light of the emerging theological reforms. We get a sense

of Luther's conservative view of reform when he writes this in the opening pages of the *Formula Missae*:

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use.<sup>1</sup>

Luther goes on to consider in detail the historic Latin Mass, accepting most of what had long constituted that liturgical form, but being careful to avoid the notion of the Mass as a good work or sacrifice that the people present to God. He writes:

Let us, therefore, repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice, together with the entire canon and retain only that which is pure and holy, and so order our mass.<sup>2</sup>

Having provided his outline of the Latin Mass, and making clear his criticism of how the Mass had become a sacrifice offered to God (rather than God providing His gifts to His people), it may come as a bit of a surprise that near the end of this 1523 treatise Luther calls for the creation of hymns in the *vernacular* "which the people could sing during mass." This part of the *Formula Missae* is worth quoting at length, Luther writes:

I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass, immediately after the gradual and also after the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. . . . But poets are wanting among us, or not yet know, who could compose evangelical and spiritual songs, as Paul calls them [Col. 3:16], worthy to be used in the church of God. . . . For few are found that are written in a proper devotional style. I mention this to encourage any German poets to compose evangelical hymns for us<sup>3</sup>

But Luther did not stop at this call for newly written hymns in the vernacular. He felt strongly enough about this proposition that he actively tried to recruit poets to write German hymns.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 20. This source subsequently cited as LW 53.

<sup>2</sup> LW 53, 26.

<sup>3</sup> LW 53, 36–37.

We have a letter from around the end of 1523 written by Luther to Georg Spalatin, a gifted intellectual and advisor to both Luther and Frederick the Wise. In this letter Luther seeks to persuade Spalatin to write some hymn texts, and in so doing Luther spells out his criteria for a worthy hymn text. The letter is worth quoting at length:

[Our] plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the] vernacular, that is spiritual songs so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music. Therefore we are searching everywhere for poets. Since you are endowed with a wealth [of knowledge] and elegance [in handling] the German language, and since you have polished [your German] through much use, I ask you to work with us on this project; try to adapt any one of the psalms for use as a hymn as you may see [I have done] in this example.<sup>4</sup>

We don't know with certainty what example Luther might have enclosed for Spalatin, but it could well be Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130, "Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir," which was included in the 1524 hymnals. Luther goes on to specify his criteria for a hymn text:

But I would like you to avoid any new words or the language used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and the most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be clear and as close as possible to the psalm.<sup>5</sup>

That is a very tall order for a poet! The paraphrase should be as close as possible to the psalm, yet the poet is to use only common words, and those words should be "pure and apt." We have no evidence that Spalatin ever came through with any hymn texts for Luther; indeed, in a letter dated 14 January 1524 Luther reminds Spalatin that he is still waiting for his "German poems."

Apart from these instructions for writing a psalm paraphrase, we lack detailed criteria from Luther for the German-language hymns that he is eager to provide so that "the people could

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Letters II*, ed. Gottfried G. Krodel, Luther's Works. American Edition, vol. 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 68–69. Subsequently cited as LW 49.

<sup>5</sup> LW 49, 69.

sing during mass.” But we must not overlook two of Luther’s phrases from the 1523 *Formula Missae*. The vernacular hymns must be found “worthy to be used in the church of God,” and “written in a proper devotional style.” Lacking more specific criteria, we turn to some of Luther’s earliest hymns as examples, hymns that are found in the 1524 hymnals.

### 1524 Hymnals

Prior to the first hymnals appearing as printed booklets, or collections of hymns, printers printed individual hymns as single sheets, known as *broadsides* (or broadsheets). Thus, during these earliest years of writing hymns, the quickest and most economical way to get a newly written hymn out to the Wittenberg public was to have the hymn typeset at a printshop and then printed in single-sheet form in multiple copies for sale. The earliest hymnals are collections of such broadsides but now reprinted and made into small booklets.

The 1524 hymnals to be considered here are the following (please see the handout):

*Etlich Cristlich lider* (Nuremberg: Gutknecht, 1524).

*Enchiridion* (Erfurt: Maler, 1524)

*Eyn Enchiridion* (Erfurt: Loersfeld, 1524)

*Geistliche gesangk Buchleyen* (Wittenberg: Klug, 1524)

I wish to devote special attention to the first of these hymnals, *Etlich Cristlich lider*, so I will discuss that hymnal last. First, a very brief summary of the two Erfurt hymnals, and then a consideration of the *Geistliche gesangk Buchleyen*, which is not a hymnal in the ordinary sense of presenting texts and melodies, but rather the first collection of polyphonic settings of these early German hymns, in this case composed by Johann Walter, Luther’s primary musical colleague and adviser.

The two Erfurt hymnals, put out by rival printers looking to meet the growing interest in Wittenberg hymns, are virtually identical in terms of their contents: the same eight hymns found

in *Etlich Cristlich lider*, plus sixteen more, fourteen by Luther, thus attesting to how quickly the reformer was moving on his hymn project.

Typical of vocal polyphony of the sixteenth century, *Geistliche gesangk Buchleyen*, sometimes called the “Chorgesangbuch,” was published in partbook format, meaning separate printed parts for soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and so on. Some of the 1524 partbooks are no longer extant, but the second edition, printed in Worms in 1525, contains polyphonic settings in three to five voice parts: 38 German hymn settings and 5 Latin pieces. Like the Erfurt Enchiridia, Walter’s collection reveals us just how quickly Luther’s desired repertory of “hymns for the people to sing” was coming to fruition. We might also marvel at how quickly Walter was able to compose polyphonic settings of these new German-language hymns. He was an accomplished composer, fully conversant in the sixteenth-century contrapuntal language of Josquin and his contemporaries.

Walter’s collection signals something hugely consequential about music in the emerging Lutheran church, namely that polyphony was welcome—both German- and Latin-language texts. This is significant because other of the continental reformation movements had no use for contrapuntal music within public worship services. But just as Luther stressed in the 1523 *Formula Missae*—that he had “no intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely”—so also he wished to preserve the use of polyphonic music, which, for example, was characteristic of the church of All Saints in Wittenberg, which served both the Saxon ducal court and the Wittenberg university. There Luther would have heard the music of Josquin, among others. Thus, the 1524 *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyen* was the beginning of a long line of Lutheran polyphonic music for the Divine Service—extending from Walter to Michael Praetorius, through the seventeenth century, to Johann Sebastian Bach and beyond.

Before leaving Walter's collection I want to call your attention to a 2024 publication from Concordia Publishing House: *Three Reformation Motets* by Johann Walter, taken from *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn* and edited into modern score form, with English text underlay, by our friend Peter Reske. These are four-part settings of the following German hymns: Luther's "Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir," Luther's "Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet," and Paul Speratus's "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her." In each case the hymn melody is in the tenor voice, as is typical of Walter's polyphonic settings. Thanks to Peter and CPH for giving us a selection of Walter's settings, an appropriate 2024 commemoration of one of these 1524 hymn collections.

### **The "Achtliederbuch"**

We turn now to *Etlich Cristlich lider*, often referred to as the "Achtliederbuch" (the "eight song book") because it contained eight hymns, all of which were originally printed as Wittenberg broadsides, but now reprinted and combined into a small booklet. The prominence of "Wittenberg" on the title page (please see the handout) leads one to conclude, logically enough, that this hymnal was printed in Wittenberg. But, in fact, it was printed by Jobst Gutknecht in Nuremberg. The indication of "Wittenberg" on the title page served as a kind of "imprimatur" signifying that the content came from Wittenberg, and it was also a bit of a "marketing" device by the printer—a way to sell more copies. Let's look at the title:

Some Christian songs, hymns of praise and psalms, in accordance with the pure word of God [dem rainen Wort Gottes], from holy scripture, made by various highly learned individuals, to be sung in the churches, as is already the practice in Wittenberg.

There are a few things we should note from this lengthy title. First, the printer claims that these hymns are written "in accordance with the pure word of God, from holy scripture," which accords with the principle of "sola scriptura" ("by scripture alone")—a foundational premise of



the German reformation movement. Second, these hymns are to be sung in the churches, as they are already in Wittenberg.

Of the eight hymns four are by Luther, three by his coworker Paul Speratus, and one is anonymous. Four of the hymns are dated—two from 1523 and two from 1524. Five of the hymns are printed with musical notation for the melody, the other three are text only. In order, here are the eight hymns (please see the handout):

Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein  
Martin Luther 1523  
With melody

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her  
Paul Speratus 1523  
With melody

In Gott glaub ich, das er hat  
Paul Speratus 1524  
With melody

Hilf Gott, wie ist der Menschen Not  
Paul Speratus 1524

Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein [Psalm 12]  
Martin Luther  
With melody [Es ist das Heil]  
[“One sings the three following psalms to this melody”]

Es spricht der unweisen Mund wohl [Psalm 14]  
Martin Luther

Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir [Psalm 130]  
Martin Luther

In Jesus Namen heben wir an  
With melody

The melody “Es ist das Heil” is printed twice and specified for four of the eight hymns, including all three of Luther’s psalm paraphrases. And, in truth, the first hymn in the collection, “Nun freut euch” has the same metrical structure as “Es ist das Heil” and could be sung to that melody. The

point is that at this very early stage of hymn singing it made sense that people could be taught a single melody that subsequently could accommodate several hymn texts. Within a short time more melodies were introduced so that eventually each text had its distinctive melody. I now want to look closely at the first two hymns in the “Achtliederbuch,” both of which are included on your handout.

### **Luther: Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein**

The very first hymn in the “Achtliederbuch” is Luther’s “Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein,” or “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice.” The heading above this hymn states: “A Christ-centered song of Dr. Martin Luther, comprehending the inexpressible grace of God and the true faith.” This hymn is likely the first one he completed, for if you look at the end of the hymn you will see that it is dated 1523, the same year Luther first expressed a desire for vernacular hymns (in his *Formula Missae*) and then started seeking poets to assist him.

Let’s examine the theology of this hymn via its English translation; please open *Lutheran Service Book* to hymn 556. The ten stanzas in *LSB* are in the very same order as in the “Achtliederbuch.” What is Luther teaching in this, one of his earliest, hymns? Note in stanza 1 that we are to rejoice and proclaim with *singing*, proclaiming “the wonders God has done.” He has won the victory, but the last phrase of this stanza sounds an ominous note: “What price our ransom cost Him!” In other words, our exultation, our rapturous singing, the victory on our behalf all came at a very steep price.

Stanzas 2 and 3 shift to the first-person to declare the harsh reality of the Law. “In sin my mother bore me” (Psalm 51:5), and “sin possessed me” as a constant torment. In seeking a way out of this miserable condition, I found that my good works were insufficient, “no grace or merit

gaining.” I was left with nothing but fear and despair. But then in stanza four the Gospel! God my loving Father “planned for my salvation”! In His great love for sinners, He “gave His dearest treasure.”

Stanzas 5 shows us the Father’s charge to “His dearest treasure,” telling His beloved Son that it is time “to have compassion,” “to bring to all salvation,” to set us free from sin, sorrow, and death that we might live forever with Christ. Stanza 6 allows us to sing of the Son’s obedience to His father, and His Incarnation.

And then the last four stanzas, where Christ speaks to us. Here Luther richly proclaims our redemption through Christ’s blood. Here Christ speaks one reassuring word after another: “Your ransom I myself will be,” “My innocence shall bear your sin.” Stanza 8 is a concise summary of Christ’s saving work on our behalf, similar to Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. In stanza 9 Jesus tells us of His ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit, who will comfort and teach us, guiding us into the truth.

In this hymn Luther tells the whole story of salvation, giving us words to sing and proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus for sinners. The melody for this hymn is most likely by Luther, written in an AAB form, which made it easier to learn by rote, since the first phrase is repeated before moving on to new melodic material. While I have suggested that it is a “concise” exposition of the doctrine of justification, I suppose some might question that word “concise.” After all, the hymn is ten stanzas long! We will have the privilege in Chapel this morning of singing Luther’s first hymn.

**Speratus: Es ist das Heil uns kommen her**

The second hymn in the “Achtliederbuch” is “Es ist das Heil uns kommen her” by Paul Speratus (1484–1551). Like Luther’s hymn it is also dated 1523. Speratus’s hymn is in fourteen stanzas, each stanza identified not with a sequential number but rather with an alphabet letter, from A to O. It is usually translated into English as “Salvation unto Us Has Come” (please see hymn 555 in *Lutheran Service Book*). You will notice immediately that *LSB* has 10 stanzas instead of 14, stanzas 8, 11, 12, and 14 of the original being omitted. The heading above the hymn in the “Achtliederbuch” identifies this hymn as “A song of law and faith powerfully underlaid with God’s Word.” Indeed, one of the interesting things about all three of Speratus’s hymns in the “Achtliederbuch” is his detailed listing of scripture verses that relate to and support each stanza. See the handout for the first of these pages that immediately follow the fourteen stanzas of “Es ist das Heil.” The heading at the top of the page states: “Evidence from the Scriptures on which this hymn is in all respects grounded. Thereupon all our concerns may rely.” The reader could see that each stanza, labelled from A through O, has several scriptural citations. Speratus is making the point that his hymn stanzas are thoroughly grounded in Scripture. For the first stanza he cites supporting passages from Ephesians, Romans, and Hebrews. For example, he cites Romans 3:20: “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.” The scriptural quotations related to his hymns demonstrate his high regard for Scripture as authoritative. Secondly, they are particularly valuable for his readers who perhaps could not afford to have in their homes “the complete German New Testament that Luther had published toward the end of 1522.”<sup>6</sup> But via Speratus’s hymn they could at least have access to these scriptural references.

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<sup>6</sup> Robin A. Leaver, “Hymnals 1524,” in *A New Song We Now Begin: Celebrating the Half Millennium of Lutheran Hymnals 1524–2024*, ed. Robin A. Leaver (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 47.

Speratus's hymn is a masterpiece of clear Law and Gospel proclamation. At the outset we sing "Salvation unto us has come by God's free grace and favor; good works cannot avert our doom, they help and save us never. Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, who did for all the world atone; He is our one Redeemer." The distinction between faith and works could not be clearer. Later in the hymn, stanza 9, the poet adds something important that clarifies the place of good works in the life of the believer, writing that while "Faith alone can justify; works serve our neighbor and supply the proof that faith is living." Stanzas 2 through 4 are an exposition of the Law, including this statement from stanza 3: "The Law is but a mirror bright to bring the inbred sin to light that lurks within our nature." Stanzas 5 and 6 comfort us with the Gospel of Christ's full atonement on our behalf. Stanza 7 refers beautifully to Baptism: "Baptized into Your precious name, my faith cannot be put to shame, and I shall never perish."

Luther's and Speratus's hymns on justification by grace enjoy pride of place in this first Lutheran hymnal, engaging head on with essential theological issues, distinguishing Law and Gospel, and always pointing singers—of 1524 and 2024—to Christ, our redeemer from sin and death. In short, the hymns of the "Achtliederbuch" do, in fact, place the Word of God "among the people also in the form of music," as Luther wrote to Spalatin in late 1523. These hymns are, by any objective evaluation, "worthy to be used in the church of God," as Luther wrote in his 1523 *Formula Missae*.

The Erfurt Enchiridia of 1524 brought the total number of German-language hymns in printed hymnals from 8 to 24. By 1545, the year before Luther's death, the hymnal *Geystliche Lieder*, published in Leipzig by the printer Valentin Babst, and known popularly as the "Babst Gesangbuch," included some 60 German-language hymns, in addition to German-language psalms and canticles, as well as some Latin texts. Clearly, the repertory of German-language

hymns was growing steadily and would continue to do so. Luther wrote a preface for this “Babst Gesangbuch,” noting:

For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.<sup>7</sup>

Luther often coupled the verbs “singen” and “sagen,” singing and speaking, as he does here. You will recall, for example, that he does the same thing in the first stanza, last line, of his Christmas hymn “Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her,” “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come,” where he writes: “Davon ich singen und sagen will,” “Whereof I now will say and sing.” Singing and saying—both are means of proclaiming the Word of God.

The German-language hymns of 1524 and beyond unleashed a new potential for singing the faith—in unaccompanied unison by the “unrehearsed” voices of the congregation, and in hymn elaborations by the “rehearsed” voices of the church’s musicians. I turn now to that amazing Lutheran musician of the early seventeenth century, Michael Praetorius, who compiled and composed chorale harmonizations as well as elaborate polyphonic settings of chorales for voices and instruments. Moreover, building on Luther, he provided a quite detailed rationale for the place of music in the Divine Service.

### **Michael Praetorius (1571–1621)**

Michael Praetorius was one of the most prolific of early Lutheran composers. His nine-part series of publications entitled *Musae Sioniae* (“Muses of Zion”), published during the years 1605 to 1610, included over a thousand harmonizations as well as extended elaborations on German

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<sup>7</sup> LW 53, 333.

chorales. He was also a prolific writer, publishing three of a projected four volumes of his encyclopedic treatise on music, *Syntagma Musicum*. Volume 1 (1615), written in Latin and intended for the clergy, was a philosophical and historical treatise on sacred music. Volumes two and three were written in German and intended for musicians. Volume 2 (1618) dealt with instruments, including a substantial treatment of the organ. Volume 3 (1619) focused on musical forms, aspects of music theory and notation, and matters of performance practice. A projected fourth volume on composition never came to fruition.

I am concerned here with the first volume of *Syntagma Musicum*. The German musicologist Walter Blankenburg characterized volume one in this way: “The first volume deals with religious music . . . It is of real value only in its wealth of quotations from every period,”<sup>8</sup> meaning primarily quotations on music from the church fathers. But I think there is more to volume one than Blankenburg acknowledges. In *Syntagma Musicum* Praetorius articulates a foundation for the place of music in Lutheran liturgy.<sup>9</sup>

In the very first sentence of *Syntagma Musicum I* Praetorius uses two similar sounding Latin words—“concionem” and “cantonem”—to make his point. A “concio” is a speech made in a public assembly; a “cantio” is a song. Here is what Praetorius has to say:

Two occupations are required for the complete and finished perfection of the divine liturgy, as it is carried out at the public gatherings of the church, namely, speech [concionem] and song [cantonem].<sup>10</sup>

Here in a single stroke Praetorius places preaching and music—concio and cantio—on the same plane. Further, he states that both are *required* for the liturgy. The liturgy—the Mass or the

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Blankenburg and Clytus Gottwald, “Praetorius [Schultheiss, Schulze], Michael.” *Grove Music Online* 2001. Accessed 6 August 2024.

<sup>9</sup> In what follows I draw on the English translation: Michael David Fleming, “Michael Praetorius, Music Historian: An Annotated Translation of *Syntagma Musicum I*, Part I (PhD Diss., Washington University, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Fleming, 4.

*Gottesdienst* (Divine Service)—will, in Praetorius’s view—be incomplete unless the spoken word and the sung word are both present. That this proposition mirrors Luther’s linking of “singen und sagen,”—singing and saying—is not coincidental, for Praetorius’s father worked with Johann Walter, Luther’s primary musical colleague, at the Latin school in Torgau. Defending his assertion that speech and song should never be separated in the public liturgy,<sup>11</sup> Praetorius adds that “speech and song preach and celebrate the doctrine of the same confession of Christ, and of the propitiation made by his blood.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in Praetorius’s view, there is not only a shared purpose but also a shared Christological content between the sermon and the music of the *Gottesdienst*. Further, just as the hymns in the “Achtliederbuch” were drenched in Scripture, so also Praetorius asserts that the music of the Lutheran church is built on Scripture:

The music adopted by our churches . . . sings only of that which is consonant with the preaching of the Prophets and the Apostles . . . exactly in agreement with Holy Scripture, and varying [but] little from it.<sup>13</sup>

In his 1619 collection of chorale settings, the *Polyhymnia Caduceatrix et Panegyrica*, Praetorius repeated the guiding principle, first stated four years previously in *Syntagma Musicum I*: “. . . for the completeness of worship, it is not only appropriate to have a *Concio*, a good sermon, but also in addition the necessary *Cantio*, good music and song.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, he asserts yet again that in the Divine Service music and preaching exist on the same plane, for the same purpose, with the same rich theological content.

### **1624: Samuel Scheidt, *Tabulatura nova***

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<sup>11</sup> Fleming, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Fleming, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Fleming, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 287.



Polyphonic elaborations of Lutheran chorales came into being at the very same time that Lutheran hymnals were first printed. Walter's 1524 polyphonic settings signaled from the outset that the Lutheran church welcomed both congregational singing and choral singing. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Michael Praetorius would provide straightforward harmonizations of chorales as well as elaborate multi-voice choral and instrumental settings, thus pointing the way for a multitude of seventeenth-century German composers to provide a stunningly rich repertory of chorale-based music. One such composer was Samuel Scheidt (1587–1654), who worked as an organist, and eventually Kapellmeister, in the city of Halle. In 1616 Praetorius was in Halle and collaborated with Scheidt. Two years later Scheidt had another opportunity to work with Praetorius, this time in the company of Heinrich Schütz as well, when all three Lutheran composers collaborated to provide festival music at the Magdeburg Cathedral.

Among Scheidt's publications was his three-volume collection of organ music—both sacred and secular—*Tabulatura nova*, published in Hamburg in 1624. This was the first German publication of keyboard music published in score rather than German organ tablature. The sacred pieces were based on sixteenth-century chorales, with the chorale tune usually placed as an unornamented cantus firmus, the goal of the composer seemingly being a *perceptible* chorale melody. Volume 1 of Scheidt's collection opens with four cantus firmus settings of Luther's creedal hymn, "Wir glauben all an einen Gott," a melody first printed in Walter's 1524 *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*. This may well have been Scheidt's intentional recognition of one-hundred years of Lutheran chorales.

### **1724: Johann Sebastian Bach in Leipzig**

Johann Sebastian Bach came to Leipzig in late May of 1723 as cantor of the St. Thomas School and director of music in Leipzig. The former appointment meant that he was responsible for the musical training of the students at the school, the latter that he supervised music at four of the city churches. The students at the school were divided into four graded choirs. Choir four, the least accomplished, led the singing of German hymns at St. Peter Church. The third choir served at the New Church, leading the singing of chorales and occasionally singing motets. The two principal churches in Leipzig were St. Thomas Church and St. Nicholas Church. The first choir, under Bach's direction, provided music at these two churches on an alternating basis, one Sunday at St. Thomas, the next at St. Nicholas, and so on. The second choir also alternated at the two principal churches, that choir singing "motets and figural works that were less complex than the repertoire of Choir I, and then only on major festivals."<sup>15</sup> Choirs 2, 3, and 4 were led by prefects, rather like teaching assistants, who were supervised by Bach. In a letter to the Leipzig town council from 1736, Bach distinguished the music of the first choir from that of the second choir in the following way: "the concerted pieces that are performed by the First Choir, which are mostly of my own composition, are incomparably harder and more intricate than those sung by the Second Choir."<sup>16</sup> The "concerted pieces" (music for voices and instruments) that he referred to in this letter are his cantatas.

When Bach came to Leipzig in May 1723, arriving on May 22, he immediately got to work on a new cantata, which was performed on May 30. For the next two years Bach was composing cantatas (or reworking older cantatas) at a rate of one per week, thus compiling annual *cycles* of cantatas for the church year. This first cycle ran from the first Sunday after

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<sup>15</sup> Robin A. Leaver, *Bach Studies: Liturgy, Hymnology, and Theology* (London: Routledge, 2021), 24.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, rev. and enl. by Christoph Wolff (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 176.

Trinity 1723 to Trinity Sunday 1724. The second cycle ran from 1724 to 1725. This second cycle has a high proportion of cantatas based on chorales. Why? To observe and celebrate 200 years of Lutheran hymnody.

One of the eight hymns in the “Achtliederbuch” is Luther’s paraphrase of Psalm 130: “Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir.” Recall that all three of Luther’s psalm paraphrases in the “Achtliederbuch” were to be sung to the tune “Es ist das Heil.” It works in terms of metrical structure, but Luther had in mind a new tune that would fit the text of this hymn of confession and absolution much more appropriately. That tune is found in two of the 1524 hymnals—one of the Erfurt hymnals, and Walter’s *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyen*, specifically in the tenor partbook. The melody is in the Phrygian mode, and Luther brilliantly makes the opening melodic gesture of a falling fifth illustrate the word “depths,” in German “Aus TIEFER,” in English “from DEPTHS.”

Now back to Bach, who composed a cantata on the chorale “Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir” for Sunday 29 October 1724, the 21st Sunday after Trinity in 1724. The cantata (BWV 38) is in six sections, with the opening chorus and the closing chorale using Luther’s hymn text word for word. Sections two through five, two recitatives and two arias, for the most part paraphrase Luther’s second, third, and fourth hymn stanzas, meaning the librettist uses the sense and meaning of those stanzas as a point of departure for his poetry. I will focus here on the opening chorus. In addition to the customary continuo and strings (two violins and viola) Bach employs four trombones to double each of the four voice parts. And because the hymn melody is presented in long notes in the soprano part, he also uses two oboes, together with violin and trombone, on the soprano part, thus really emphasizing that hymn melody as *cantus firmus*. Proceeding phrase by phrase of the hymn melody, the three lower voices, in imitative

counterpoint, announce each musical line of the hymn prior to the soprano voices and doubled instruments presenting it in long notes. The movement is relatively brief—just over three minutes; let’s listen to how Bach’s chorale cantata of 1724 uses Luther’s chorale melody of 1524.

The third part of Bach’s *Clavier-Übung*, published in 1739, his most extensive collection of printed organ music, includes a monumental setting of “Aus tiefer Not,” in six parts—four in the manuals and two in the pedal. Here again Bach uses long notes in one part—the upper pedal part—for the cantus firmus. Even more so than the opening chorus of the cantata, the organ setting (BWV 686) is saturated with Luther’s hymn melody.

Just to summarize briefly as we’ve considered elaborations of the hymn melodies from the 1524 hymnals. Johann Walter led the way with his *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn*. In 1624 Samuel Scheidt published his *Tabulatura nova*, which included organ settings of some of the 1524 hymns. In 1724 Bach began his second Leipzig cycle of cantatas for the church year, many of them based on chorales—thus observing the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Lutheran hymnals. You might ask, what about 1824? Permitting just a bit of chronological leeway, it was in 1832 that Felix Mendelssohn published his *Drei Kirchenmusiken* (Bonn, 1832), which included his setting of “Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir.”

### **Conclusion**

The Lutheran hymnals of 1524 are foundational for Lutheran church music. In his 1523 *Formula Missae*, Luther was both conservative and innovative with respect to liturgy and music. His conservative revision of the historic Mass meant that musical possibilities within the Mass, both the Ordinary and the Proper, were retained. But simultaneously hymns in the vernacular made it possible for the people to sing during Mass, as Luther put it in 1523. Our orders of the Divine

Service today preserve the possibility of congregational singing of portions of the Ordinary as well as hymns. We should not take that for granted; Luther's love of music made all the difference.

The hymnals of 1524 provided truly extraordinary models for subsequent generations of poets and composers. Luther and Speratus provided hymns "worthy to be used in the church of God," as Luther put it in 1523. These were hymn texts saturated in God's Word, properly distinguishing Law and Gospel, and pointing us always to Christ. Subsequent generations of poets continued to expand the repertory of Lutheran hymns with a depth of theology and beauty of language. There is a theological through line from Luther and Speratus to later Lutheran theologians and poets such as Philipp Nicolai, Paul Gerhardt, Martin Franzmann, Herman Stuempfle, and Stephen Starke, to name only a few. Luther, moreover, provided musical models in the hymn melodies he composed, to cite only a few: *Aus tiefer Not*, *Nun freut euch*, *Vom Himmel hoch*, and *Ein feste Burg*.

The importance of Johann Walter's 1524 choral hymnal cannot be overstated. His work signaled in no uncertain terms that polyphonic elaborations of Lutheran hymns were welcome. Contrapuntal art music was not sidelined but welcomed in Luther's view of the Divine Service. Elaborations of Lutheran chorale and hymn melodies continued to be composed in every generation since Walter. Lutheran chorale melodies have given rise to a rich repertory of music. There is a musical through line from Luther and Walter to Praetorius, Scheidt, Bach, and Mendelssohn, to Jan Bender, Paul Manz, and Carl Schalk—again, to name only a few.

Looking back over the vast expanse of the Christian church and its music, Norman Nagel memorably wrote:

We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in our day—the living heritage and something new.<sup>17</sup>

For us, Luther’s 1523 hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” is part of that living heritage. So is Pastor Stephen Starke’s 2002 hymn “In the Shattered Bliss of Eden.” Both give the opportunity to sing the faith and to proclaim the saving Gospel. “The living heritage and something new.” For such riches we can only say: “Thanks be to God!”

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<sup>17</sup> *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 6.