



From Broadside to Hymnal: How Things Began in Wittenberg in 1524

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The hymnal is a kind of Lutheran passport. In many respects, it establishes who you are, the congregation to which you belong, and the synod of which your congregation is part. It is the expression in powerful words and memorable music of what it is you believe and practice. Today the hymnal is often large, heavy, with a disparate content of liturgical forms, theological statements, a lectionary or two, prayers, and other elements additional to the hymns. But five hundred years ago, when the first Lutheran hymnal emerged from Wittenberg in 1524, it was essentially a collection of hymns for the people to sing. It was a modest beginning, but it was also powerful and effective; the

The age of Protestant hymnody began in 1524, five-hundred years ago, with the publication of the Achtliederbuch (Eight Song Book). The context of these first hymnals was the conflict in Wittenberg over the reform of worship, from the medieval Mass the new Evangelical worship service. Church leaders and printers alike to part in this revolution of how people were to worship their God.

genesis of the Lutheran hymnal tradition that has, so far, lasted for half a millennium, and we are still singing hymns that first appeared in these earliest of Lutheran hymnals—such as Luther’s *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen* (*Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice*), the first hymn in the first hymnal. But at the beginning, towards the end of 1523, there was no corpus of vernacular hymnody, so Luther and his colleagues had to create it.

THE CREATION OF A CORPUS OF HYMNODY IN WITTENBERG, 1523–1524¹

When Luther returned to Wittenberg from the Wartburg in 1523—where in quiet seclusion he had been able to translate the complete New Testament into German, as well as prepare a string of significant publications—he was faced with two disruptive extremes. On the one hand, there was the aftermath of the chaos created by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, professor of theology in Wittenberg, who, during Luther’s absence in the Wartburg, took the opportunity to push the reformation among the people in a more radical direction. Among other things he called for the destruction of images in the churches, and the parts of the traditional Mass said *sotto voce* by the priest were not only to be spoken out loud but in German rather than Latin. Thus, on Christmas Day 1521 in Wittenberg parish church, when Karlstadt celebrated the Mass in everyday clothes rather than traditional vestments, a riot developed, images were smashed, and priests were attacked. The more violent tendencies may have been mostly curbed after Luther’s return to Wittenberg, but there was still a level of unrest not far below the surface. On the other hand, there was a substantial number of the clergy (canons) of the All Saints Foundation who strongly resisted the reforming movement and who refused to stop celebrating the unreformed daily Latin Mass in the Castle Church of All Saints in Wittenberg.

For Luther, Karlstadt’s radicalism was not the most effective way to further reform since the primary emphasis was on practical action,

¹ The evidence concerning the Wittenberg origins of this early period is unfortunately incomplete. Of the early Wittenberg hymnals there is evidence that there had been at least four published between 1524 and 1529 that have long since disappeared, and the precious editions of 1524, 1526 and 1533 that have survived are either incomplete or exist only in a single copy.

which only served to confuse the people into thinking that reform was essentially the enforcement of change in the externals of religion, something that the people would soon get tired of. Luther's reform was more positive: the primary preaching of the gospel of forgiveness and grace with the expectation that when the gospel is understood and accepted, then necessary changes become apparent and easier to make. When the rioting in Wittenberg under the leadership of Karlstadt was at its height, Luther made a clandestine visit to the town in March 1522. He preached a sequence of eight consecutive daily sermons in the parish church, the so-called *Invocavit Sermons*, in which the recurring theme is that when the gospel is rightly proclaimed, reformation follows. For example, in the second of the eight sermons, he said:

I will preach [the Word], teach it, write it, but I will constrain no one by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing... the Word did everything.²

With the support of Justus Jonas, the dean (Probst) of the All Saints Foundation and the newly appointed pastor of the Wittenberg parish church, Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther set out to revise the liturgy of the Mass so that it proclaimed the gospel, that is, the *Formula Missae* of 1523. While intended for general use in Wittenberg, it would nevertheless undermine the influence of both Karlstadt's sympathizers and the traditionalist priests of the All Saints Foundation by establishing the essence of the evangelical mass.

Luther had been working on the Latin liturgy since around the middle of the year, but seems to have put it on one side for a time to attend to a pressing matter of some kind, most likely the martyrdom of the two Augustinian brothers who were burnt at the stake in Brussels for their faith on 1 July 1523, though it was a month or more before Luther received the news in Wittenberg. Their deaths moved him deeply, and he wrote a strophic ballad-narrative of their witness

² Martin Luther, *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955-): 51:77

and death: *Ein neues lied wir heben an* (A new song we now begin). The *Formula Missae* was still incomplete at the end of October, not finished until a month later,³ and not published until late in December 1523.

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Luther was concerned for the participation of the people in the evangelical mass, that it should be active rather than passive. It is here that he brought together his knowledge of the practice of the early church and his experience of strophic vernacular folk songs and news ballads. There is an important passage that occurs towards the end of the *Formula Missae*, implying that it was written after almost everything else in the document, that is, sometime in November 1523. For Luther the practice of the early church is conclusive: then the congregation sang vernacular hymns in the Mass; so should we. He wrote in the *Formula Missae*:

I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular for the people to sing during Mass, immediately after the Gradual and also after the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. For who doubts that originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings or responds to while the bishop [or pastor] is consecrating? The bishops may have these [congregational] hymns sung either after the Latin chants, or use the Latin on one [Sun]day and the vernacular one on the next, until the time comes that the whole mass is sung in the vernacular. But poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose pious and spiritual songs, as Paul calls them [Col. 3:16], worthy to be used in the church of God. In the meantime, one may sing after communion *Gott sei gelobet und gebenediet*... omitting the line, “and the holy sacrament, At our last end, From the consecrated priest’s hand”.... Another good [hymn] is *Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist*, and also *Ein Kindelein so löblich*. For so few are found

³ LW 49:55–6; WA BR 3:184, 198.

that are written in a dignified and prudent spirit. I mention this to encourage any German poets to compose pious hymns for us.⁴

There is quite an agenda here. First, he knows that congregations in the past participated by vernacular singing in the Mass rather than the then current practice of the choir in effect singing on behalf of the congregation. Second, he is frustrated by the lack of suitable hymns, which at this stage had not yet been written because possible poets had not been discovered. Third, in the meantime some of the old religious folk hymns that were sung extra-liturgically, especially on the major festivals of the church year, could be adapted for use, provided they did not undermine biblical theology. Luther refers to three: *Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet* and *Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist*, which, in the months ahead, he would expand the single stanza of each of these folk hymns in order to create new longer hymns; and then there was *Ein Kindelein so löblich*, a common Christmas hymn that continued to be sung in a number of different forms.

The call for poets in this section of the *Formula Missae* did not fall on deaf ears. In particular there was Paul Speratus, avid supporter of Luther who had only recently arrived in Wittenberg in late 1523. Almost immediately Speratus began working on a German translation of the *Formula Missae* even before Luther had completed the evangelical Latin liturgy. Therefore, towards the end of 1523, Speratus, in his role as translator, must have been one of the first to read Luther's call for poets, and was inspired to act on it, since Speratus was among the earliest poets to write new hymns, three of them being included in the *Achtliederbuch*, the first hymnal of 1524, as we shall see.

Ein weyse Christlich Mess zu halten und zum tisch Gottes zu gehen, Speratus's German translation of Luther's *Formula Missae*, was published in January 1524, but the printing is likely to have been completed before the end of 1523, that is, soon after the publication of the Latin *Formula Missae*. At the end of the German version, on a page that would otherwise have been blank, there is a vernacular hymn, a version of Psalm 117: *Fröhlich wollen wir Halleluja singen*. It was written towards the end of 1523 by Johann Agricola, teacher in the university, and at that time a close friend of Luther. Agricola seems to be another poet who started writing in response to Luther's call, since between 1525 and 1529 a further three of his hymns appeared in print:

⁴ LW 53:36–37; WA 12: 218.

Gottes Recht und Wunderthat (1525); *Ach Herre Gott, wie haben sich* (1526); and *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* (1529). The first edition of Speratus's German version of Luther's *Formula Missae* was soon out of print and so a second imprint was issued shortly after the first. It was identical to the first edition except that at the end of the volume there were now two hymns, both Psalm versions: Agricola's Psalm 117, and Luther's recently written version of Psalm 67: *Es wollt uns Gott gnädig sein*—indicating that Luther was emerging as the most prolific author among the new Wittenberg hymn writers.

During the last two months of 1523—when Luther, Speratus, and Agricola were writing their hymns—Luther was also writing letters to a number of his acquaintances in Wittenberg to persuade them to try their hand at writing hymns for the people to sing. Unfortunately, only one of these letters has survived, the letter he sent to Georg Spalatin, chaplain and secretary to the Saxon court of Frederick the Wise. Nevertheless, the letter reveals much and echoes what he had written in the *Formula Missae*. He wrote:

[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 and elegance in the German language, and since you have polished 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... But I would like you to avoid any new words or 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.⁵

Luther suggests that Spalatin might consider writing a hymn on one of the Penitential Psalms,⁶ either 6 or 143, and indicates that he

⁵ *LW* 49:68–70; see also *LW* 53:221. The letter is undated but must have been written late in 1523.

⁶ Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

has asked Hans von Dolzig, another official at Frederick's court, to work on Psalm 32. He revealed that two Psalm-hymns had already been written: his own early four-stanza version of Psalm 130, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, and Psalm 51, *Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott*, by Erhart Hegenwalt, an educator who had received a master's degree from Wittenberg in January of 1523. Presumably Spalatin and von Dolzig were too busy with court duties since neither acceded to Luther's wishes. Perhaps they felt inadequate to the task. Luther would have understood if this was so, since he had expressed a similar sentiment in the Spalatin letter: "I myself" he said, "do not have so great a gift that I can do what I would like to see done here."⁷ Nevertheless he persevered and discovered that he could indeed write the kind of hymns that were needed and became the most effective and the most prolific author of hymns for the people of Wittenberg to sing. But it was not only the Wittenbergers who were singing the Wittenberg hymns.

THE PRINTING OF THE WITTENBERG HYMNS IN 1523/1524

Printing was the cutting-edge technology in the early sixteenth century, enabling numerous copies to be produced quite quickly, compared to the old technology of creating a single hand-written copy one at a time. Most towns and cities had at least one printer, some had more than one.⁸ Thus it was possible to make multiple copies of almost any kind of document and to do so relatively cheaply. The printed word became the engine of popular culture and belief, the source of news, propaganda, controversy,⁹ and hymns.

All the Wittenberg hymns created during the winter of 1523/1524 were printed and circulated on individual single-sheet broadsides (Flugschriften), that is, a single sheet of paper printed on one side, usually with just one hymn. At the top of the sheet there would be a heading explaining the content of the hymn together with the name of the poet. On some broadsides this would be followed by the musical

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ See Christoph Reske, *Die Buchdrucker Des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts Im Deutschen Sprachgebiet: Auf Der Grundlage Des Gleichnamigen Werks Von Josef Benzing* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015).

⁹ See the classic study by R. W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

notation of the melody to which the hymn was to be sung; if the notation was not included it was nevertheless usual for the associated melody to be identified. Next came the stanzas of the hymn. At the end of the last stanza, the year was frequently recorded, “1523” or “1524,” and sometimes also “Wittenberg,” as the place where the hymns originated. However, not one of these Wittenberg broadsides has survived, but we know of their existence from the reprints by printers in other places, such as Augsburg, Erfurt, Magdeburg, and Nuremberg. There was no copyright law to worry about, the Wittenberg hymns were in popular demand, and thus printers in these towns and cities were in a position to make a profit without too much outlay by reprinting the single sheet broadsides. However, the printer in Nuremberg was different. Instead of simply reprinting the hymns on individual single sheets he gathered a group of them together and reprinted them on both sides of three sheets of paper which were then folded, cut, and stitched together to make a pamphlet of 12 leaves (24 pages) in order to create what amounts to the earliest known Lutheran hymnal with the Wittenberg hymns:

Etlich cristlich Lider Lobgesang/ und Psalm/ dem rainen Wort Gottes gemeß/ auß der heyligen Schrifft durch mancherley hochgelerter gemacht/ in der Kirchen zu singen/ wie es dann um tayl berayt zu Wittenberg in übung ist. Wittenberg. M.D.Xiiij.

(Some Christian Hymns, Songs of Praise, and Psalms, According to the Pure Word of God from the Holy Scriptures, by Several Learned Authors, to be Sung in the Churches as Prepared and Practiced in Wittenberg. Wittenberg. M.D.X[X]iiij.([Nuremberg: Gutknecht], 1524).¹⁰

The hymnal is generally referred to as the *Achtliederbuch* (Eight Song Book) after the number of hymns that were reprinted from Wittenberg broadsides:

¹⁰ The reference to Wittenberg on the title page refers to where the hymns originated rather than where they were printed and published. Gutknecht, whose handiwork is established by typographical evidence, produced three different imprints in the same year, and the *Achtliederbuch* was also reprinted by Ramminger in Augsburg.

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| [1.] <i>Nun freuet euch, lieben Christen gmein</i> | “1523 Mart. Luth.” |
| [2.] <i>Es ist das Heil uns kommen her</i> | “Wittenberg 1523
Pau. Speratus” |
| [3.] <i>In Gott glaub ich, daß er hat</i> | “Wittenberg 1524.”
Speratus |
| [4.] <i>Hilf Gott, wie ist der Menschen Not</i> | “Wittenberg 1524.”
Speratus |
| [5.] <i>Ach, Gott vom Himmel sieh darein</i> | [Luther] |
| [6.] <i>Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl</i> | [Luther] |
| [7.] <i>Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir</i> | [Luther] |
| [8.] <i>In Jesus Namen heben wir an</i> | [Anon.] |

That the earliest extant Lutheran hymnal was printed and published in the free imperial city of Nuremberg should come as no surprise, since there were long-standing connections between the two cities,¹¹ and when the reforming movement headed by Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg was creating widespread interest, there were plenty of people in Nuremberg who were keen to keep up with all of the developments. For example, the *Achtliederbuch* was by no means the first Lutheran publication that Jobst Gutknecht had issued. Between 1518 and 1524 he had printed and published no less than sixty-six books and pamphlets authored by Martin Luther.¹² And there was no shortage of poets in Nuremberg, as there was felt to be in Wittenberg, who could express in hymnic form what Luther was proclaiming, such as: Lazarus Spengler, secretary to the Nuremberg council, who read everything of Luther he could lay his hands on,¹³ the author of the hymn *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt*; and Meistersinger Hans Sachs who had epitomized Luther and his reforms as the singing of *The Wittenberg Nightingale*, the poem first published in the summer of 1523 when Luther’s hymn-writing was just beginning.

¹¹ For the background, see Gerald Strauss, *Nuremberg in the Sixteenth Century: City Politics and Life between the Middle Ages and Modern Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 160–164.

¹² Josef Benzing, *Luther Bibliographie: Verzeichnis der Gedruckten Schriften Martin Luther bis zu dessen Tod* (Baden-Baden: Heitz, 1966), 1: 455.

¹³ Strauss, *Nuremberg in the Sixteenth Century*, 170.

But Nuremberg was not the only city where broadside reprints of the Wittenberg hymns were gathered together and issued in booklet form. Not long after the *Achtliederbuch* was published in the same year 1524 two rival printers in Erfurt (Loersfeld and Maler) each brought out a hymnal that had virtually the same title and almost the identical contents: *Eyn Enchiridion oder Handbüchlein... geystlicher Gesenge und Psalmen....*¹⁴ (An Enchiridion or Handbook... Spiritual Songs and Psalms). Wittenberg hymns were continuing to be written and distributed in broadside form and the Erfurt printers wanted to reflect this expanding corpus and thus were able to create a basic hymnal of twenty-four hymns, comprising the eight hymns of the *Achtliederbuch* plus an additional sixteen—fourteen of them by Luther.

If hymnals of Wittenberg hymns were being produced in Nuremberg and Erfurt in 1524, what was happening in Wittenberg, the source of these hymns?

The title page of the Achtliederbuch indicates that around New Year 1524 these hymns, prepared and practiced in Wittenberg, were sung in the churches. Over the next months there are reports of the people singing vernacular hymns in both of the Wittenberg churches.

The title page of the *Achtliederbuch* indicates that around New Year 1524 these hymns, prepared and practiced in Wittenberg, were sung in the churches. Over the next months there are reports of the people singing vernacular hymns in both of the Wittenberg churches. In St. Mary's "the people sing a German psalm" after the Gradual, and similarly in All Saints, when the new daily office was introduced on New Year's Day, 1525, "a German hymn was sung" at Matins.¹⁵ But what

¹⁴ Enchiridion is Greek for handbook, a term commonly used for practical primers of various kinds. Examples of the time include: Georg Rhau, *Enchiridion utriusque musicae practicae* (Leipzig, 1520); Erasmus, *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (Mainz, 1521); and Luther, *Enchiridion. De kleine Catechismus* (Wittenberg, 1529). In this early period, it was often used for hymnals.

¹⁵ For the details see, 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

did they sing from? Did they sing from individual broadsides, or, as in Nuremberg and Erfurt, from small hymnals? The incomplete sources¹⁶ make it difficult for us to answer such questions, since the only extant source of hymns actually printed and published in Wittenberg in 1524, was a specialist collection of contrapuntal settings intended for the singers and instrumentalists of the All Saints Foundation, and/or of the ducal court chapel (*Hofkapelle*) rather than for the assembled congregation. And it was not a single “book” but a collection of five individual “books,” that is, part books, one for each voice-part: Discant [Soprano], Alto, Tenor, and Bass, with the fifth part-book containing various additional voice parts that some of the contrapuntal settings required. The composer was Johann Walter, singer and composer of the ducal *Hofkapelle*, and the collection was printed by Joseph Klug, who was to produce an important sequence of congregational Wittenberg hymnals in the years ahead: *Geystlich gesangk Buchleyln. TENOR. Wittemberg. M. D. [xx] iiij*, usually referred to as the *Chorgesangbuch* (Choral Hymnal). In another context these compositions will rightly be acclaimed as the foundation of Lutheran church music, but in this context these 38 settings are no less important for establishing that in 1524 the Wittenberg churches had access to a basic corpus of 32 Wittenberg hymns.¹⁷ One would have expected that there would have been a congregational counterpart of the *Chorgesangbuch*, printed and published in Wittenberg in 1524 and containing the same 32 hymns. But if there was one, it has not survived. However, two years later, in 1526, a congregational hymnal was published in Wittenberg by Hans Lufft that throws considerable light on the possibility that there was such a congregational hymnal in 1524. The Lufft hymnal was: *Enchyridion geistlicher Gesenge und Psalmen fur die leyen/ mit viel andern/ denn suvor/ gebessert* (Enchyridion [Handbook] Spiritual Songs and Psalms for the People with Many Others than Before, Improved). Unlike the settings of the hymns in the *Chorgesangbuch* part-books, which would be sung by a small group within the congregation, the unison melodies of the Lufft *Enchyridion* were to be sung by the whole congregation. The title page of the 1526 collection is

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 59–60.

¹⁶ See note 1.

¹⁷ Some of the hymns were given more than one setting, hence 38 settings of 32 hymns; see Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther's Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 97–101.

explicit: the hymns are “for the people” (*fur die Leyen*).¹⁸ The 1526 title page also carries the information that these hymns have been augmented “with many others than before, improved.” In other words, there had to have been at least one earlier edition, and quite possibly two. When the content of the *Enchyridion* is compared with that of the *Chorgesangbuch* it is clear that they are closely related. Indeed, the *Enchyridion* contains the same 32 hymns which appear in exactly the same unstructured sequence as in the *Chorgesangbuch*, but the *Enchyridion* includes an additional ten hymns. It is how these ten hymns are distributed in connection with the same 32 hymn sequence found in the *Chorgesangbuch* that is revealing. There are two distinct groups. The first is of three hymns that are individually integrated within the 32-hymn sequence; the second is of seven hymns that appear following the 32-hymn sequence as a kind of appendix. This strongly suggests that the 1526 *Enchyridion* was in effect the third edition (32 + 10 hymns), that there must have been a second edition in 1525 (32 + 3 hymns), with the first edition in 1524 (32 hymns) appearing around the same time as the *Chorgesangbuch*.¹⁹

This is, of course, conjectural but certainly plausible. Nuremberg and Erfurt had their own hymnals in 1524 but they were dependent on Wittenberg where it all began. As reflected in the 32 hymns found in both the *Chorgesangbuch* and the editions of the *Lufft Enchyridion*, Wittenberg must have had its own hymnal in 1524, which provided the basic corpus for the many hymnals that quickly followed. ⊕

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¹⁸ Luther used the term in titles of practical theology, such as *Sermon on the Sacrament* (1518) (WA 2:742–758), and *Exposition of the German Our Father* (1518) (WA 2:81–130); the title of the latter in the Wittenberg edition issued by Melchior Lotter, the younger, in 1520 is particularly emphatic: “for the simple people... not for the learned” (*fur die Eynfeltigen Leyen... Nicht fur die gelerten*).

¹⁹ See Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 102–116; Leaver, *A New Song We Now Begin*, 55–58.