

## Celebrating 500 Years of the Lutheran Chorale



In 1524 the first three Lutheran hymnals were issued. The first appeared in late 1523 and early 1524, only six years after Martin Luther (1483-1546) had posted the 95 Theses on the door of the main church in Wittenberg, Germany. It was a small book of German songs containing eight hymn texts and five melodies. Four texts were by Luther, three by his colleague Paul Speratus (1484-1551), and one has been ascribed to Justas Jonas (1493-1555). These songs had previously been printed and sold on the streets as broadsides (i.e. large single sheets). They sold well and were popular enough that Luther collected them into a book which was published by Jobst Gutknecht (d. 1548), a printer from the town of Nuremberg. The full title of the book explained its content and purpose: *Some Christian Songs, Canticles, and Psalms According to the Pure Word of God from Holy Scripture Written by Several Learned Men to Be Sung in Churches as Is Practiced Already to Some Degree in Wittenberg.*<sup>1</sup> This book came to be known as the *Achtliederbuch* [*Book of Eight Songs*]. It was the beginning of the great tradition of Lutheran hymnody and music. These hymns generated much interest, revived congregational singing, taught the faith, and inspired the faithful. They were so successful that about 100 years later in the early 1600s even Luther's theological opponents admired these hymns and complained about how effective they were in teaching Lutheran theology, something of course we consider to be a good thing.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the 1500s these hymns were called "chorales."<sup>3</sup> The first chorale in the *Book of Eight Songs* was "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (LSB 556) by Luther. The second was "Salvation unto Us Has Come" (LSB 555) by Speratus. Both are still sung in homes, schools, and churches today. Also

included were "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee" (LSB 607), a paraphrase of Psalm 130, and "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" (TLH 260), a paraphrase of Psalm 12.<sup>4</sup>

A second hymnal was published in 1524 that came to be known as the *Erfurt Enchiridion*.<sup>5</sup> Two editions were printed by separate publishers, one with 26 chorales and the other with 25. This hymnal contained all the chorales from the *Book of Eight Songs* along with 18 more including "Savior of the Nations, Come" (LSB 332), "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth" (LSB 382), "The Only Son from Heaven" (LSB 402), "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" (LSB 458), "Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord" (LSB 497), "Come Holy Ghost Creator Blest" (LSB 498), and "O Lord, We Praise Thee" (LSB 617). Altogether, 18 of its hymns were by Luther.

These first two hymnals included only melodies and texts. Later in 1524 a third hymnal intended for choirs was published in Wittenberg. Entitled *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn* [*Little Spiritual Hymnbook*], it contained 43 works arranged for 3-5 parts by Johann Walter (1496-1570). Included were five Latin motets and 38 settings of 32 German chorales, 24 of which were by Luther. The first work in this hymnal was "To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray" (LSB 768). Four more editions were subsequently published from 1525-51 with significant alterations and additions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the image above for the title in the original German. For a facsimile, see *Das Achtliederbuch Nürnberg 1523/24*, facsimile ed. Konrad Ameln (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1957). Some scans of the original book are also available online.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of the first 100 years of Lutheran hymnody and a list of additional resources see Christopher Boyd Brown, "The Reformation and Lutheran Confessionalism to 1620" in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 13-25. See also *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Chorale."

<sup>3</sup> "Chorale" is the English translation of the German word *Choral* which referred to plainsong or monophonic church music (*cantus choralis* or *gregorianischer Choral*). It became associated with the new German hymns because they replaced chant in worship.

<sup>4</sup> During the early years of the Reformation "O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold" was the Reformation *Kampfflied* (Battle Song). "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was published in 1527 or 1529 as a "Hymn of Comfort" in response to the plague, military threats, and the ongoing theological disputes. It wasn't until many years later that it was designated as the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation." See *LSB Companion*, 1, 836.

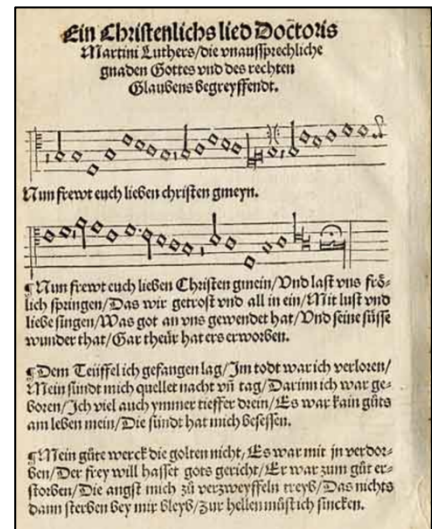
<sup>5</sup> *Eyn Enchiridion* (Erfurt, 1524). The full title translated is *An Enchiridion or Handbook for Every Christian to Keep at Hand for Continual Practice and Contemplation of Spiritual Songs and Psalms Faithfully and Artfully Translated into German*. For a recent facsimile, see *The Erfurt Enchiridion: A Hymn Book of 1524* (Kartoffeldruck-Verlag, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> For more on these hymnals see Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings: Congregational Singing in Luther's Wittenberg* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 65-101, and Robin A. Leaver, et al., *A New Song We Now Begin: Celebrating the Half Millennium of Lutheran Hymnals 1524-2024* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).

From these first hymnals a great body of hymnody developed that has proclaimed the pure Gospel and ministered to the faithful for 500 years. These hymns are exceptional in the clarity of their message, the vibrancy of their rhythms, and the beauty of their melodies. Furthermore, Lutheran composers throughout the centuries were inspired by these chorales to create a great *corpus* of music that is still revered, studied, and performed in churches, schools, and concert halls worldwide. The tradition of hymns that came from these songs of 1524 isn't simply one of historical interest. Rather, it is a living and breathing tradition that continues to be practiced and thereby continues to proclaim the Good News of what God has done through His Son Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Holy Spirit continues to move poets to add their voices to this tradition and to inspire composers to write new melodies and creative settings of the hymns, both old and new.

May we continue to sing songs that proclaim the pure Gospel until that day when we join the Eternal Choir and sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” with the “angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.”

Martin Dicke



This brief historical account of the first Lutheran hymnals is taken from *Hymns of the Reformation*, a recent publication by David's Harp ([www.davidsharpmusic.org](http://www.davidsharpmusic.org)) commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Lutheran hymnals. *Hymns of the Reformation* provides Easy to Intermediate settings of ten of the first great Lutheran hymns. The publication is intended for keyboard students who are learning piano or organ and for church musicians with no to little formal training.

We would like to congratulate the Lutheran Heritage Foundation ([www.lhfmissions.org](http://www.lhfmissions.org)) for continuing and expanding the great tradition of Lutheran hymnals with the publication of the second edition of the Spanish Lutheran hymnal. Call for information.

*That singing sacred songs is good and pleasing to God, which is no secret to any Christian, is made known to everyone not only by the example of the prophets and kings of the Old Testament (who praised God with songs and joyful noise, with poetry and all kinds of stringed instruments), but also by common Christians who from the beginning sang, especially with psalms, in the same way. Indeed, St. Paul asserts this in 1 Corinthians 14 and instructs the Colossians to sing hymns and psalms with all their heart to the Lord so that God's Word and Christian doctrine may be proclaimed and taught in many ways.<sup>7</sup>*

*For that purpose I along with several others, in order to make a good start and encourage those who are better able, have compiled some sacred songs to extend and proclaim the Holy Gospel, which by the grace of God has arisen once again, so that we too may rejoice singing, like Moses does in his song,<sup>8</sup> that Christ is our praise and song and that we know nothing to sing or say except Jesus Christ our Savior, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2.<sup>9</sup>*

Martin Luther (1524)

Translated by Martin Dicke

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Corinthians 14:15 and Colossians 3:16.

<sup>8</sup> See Exodus 15:1-21.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Corinthians 2:2.