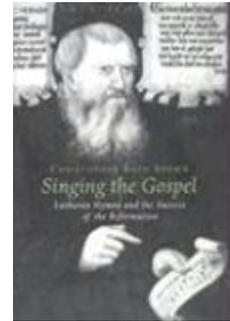


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Christopher Boyd Brown. *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. i + 298 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01705-4.

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Another Look at the Reformation in Germany

Between 2001 to 2005 at least three American dissertations in musicology were revised and published as monographs investigating music in the history of the German Reformation. Each one dealt, in part, with sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century religious vernacular song and hymn-singing in worship, devotion, polemic, or the recatholicization of Lutherans.[1] A fourth book, however, the one here reviewed, now joins the other three in treating music and especially vernacular hymns and songs, but in this instance under the rubric not of music qua music but of Reformation history. The author's *Doktorvater* was the well-known Reformation historian Steven Ozment, who in recent years has turned his attention to personal documents and sources that put human faces on the events, attitudes, and lives of actual people of the past. Christopher Boyd Brown's book is also highly personal and, in the reviewer's opinion, courageous scholarship with an agenda.

In the current academic climate, the book's subtitle, *Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation*, is easily provocative. That this subtitle is not meant ironically is immediately clear from Brown's apt summary of the last half century of socio-economic research; research that insists that the high hopes and ideals of Luther and his followers were not fully realized, especially in the lives of ordinary people.[2] Brown acknowledges the accuracy of some of these charges, but in addition to questioning the heavy reliance on surviving visitation reports, he faults scholars for paying little attention to letters, diaries, sermons, pamphlets, and other

sources recording the thoughts, religious attitudes, and convictions of the laity. Brown proposes to show that, contrary to its critics, the Lutheran Reformation not only succeeded, it also created a new and distinctive Christian piety and Lutheran theological identity among the German laity. It did so, he argues, both through Luther's Bible, preaching, and catechisms, but also through the learning and singing of vernacular hymns in churches, schools, and, especially, in homes. According to modern critics, the prevailing methods of the reformers appear, with all good intentions, to have been those of power and control. But Brown believes that this current scholarly mindset has produced a bias that distorts sixteenth-century reality and ignores significant evidence. He does not attempt to refute the charge that such evidence is merely "anecdotal," and thus without statistical force, but he does insist that some modern academic choices reflect a negative bias in selection or interpretation.

To illustrate his argument of modern bias, Brown cites an unusual publishing event in 1529, when Luther issued his unique, attractive, three-volume set consisting of the Small Catechism, a revised edition of his prayer booklet (the *Betbüchlein*), and his very first authorized hymnal of vernacular hymns. Of these items, all for popular use of some kind, only the Catechism has attracted modern scholarly interest and attention (p. 4).[3] It may be that Brown underestimates the controlling strategies of confessionalizing princes, magistrates, and clergy as bases for lay indifference and antagonism to church reform (including matters of worship, catechesis,

and moral expectations), which are cited by critics as sure signs of failure. However, Brown also has good reason to point to the neglect of the role of devotional and hymnic sources in communicating evangelical messages to the laity.[4] One hardly needs ask why scholars pay so little attention to the singing of hymns in the religious and social life of the people. It is simply because, experienced subjectively, their effects are not susceptible to quantitative measurement.

This observation leads Brown to his next section: “Hymns and Hymn Printing.” To establish a minimum statistical baseline for the printing of vernacular hymns in sixteenth-century Germany, Brown makes thorough use of the major hymnological resources available—primarily, but by no means exclusively, Philipp Wackernagel, *Bibliographie zur Geschichte des deutschen Kirchenliedes im XVI. Jahrhundert* (1855) and Konrad Ameln et al., *Das deutsche Kirchenlied* (1975). He finds that the total number of hymn prints, from broadsheets to full scale hymnals, numbered well over two thousand published editions between 1500 and 1599, of which about three-fourths were identified as Lutheran, and even more if prints identified as “Evangelical” are also included. Conservative estimates of a print-run suggest that printed hymnic materials numbered over two million copies.[5] Many of these were reprints, and the total number clearly suggests the high demand and profitability of the enterprise—raising serious questions about the alleged indifference of the laity for whom these prints were designed. Luther dominated the scene, but he was not alone. Clergy and some laity, including women, also contributed to the overall output. No later than 1524, hymns were also employed in art music by both Lutheran and non-Lutheran composers. Altogether, it seems clear that Brown has made the case: hymns deserve the attention of social historians and not only students of popular culture.

Brown temporarily loses focus, however, when faced with the critics’ emphasis on reports of poor church attendance as signs of low participation of the laity in singing. While he rightly points to Catholic complaints of the damage caused by Lutheran hymns as evidence of the hymns’ ability to spread Lutheran teachings; while there is also no question of the importance of hymn singing in Lutheran schools; and while it is significant that hymns are called for, often by name, in the liturgies of the new territorial church orders, it is still a question of how quickly hymn singing became a vital part of Lutheran *congregational* worship. Here the evidence of the visitation reports, especially that assembled by

Joseph Herl, challenges Brown’s optimism.[6] It indicates that the laity was diffident towards singing, especially where no school choir or cantor/leader was able to assist. Brown and Herl had three occasions to debate this issue, but they seemed to talk past one another without giving ground.[7] Brown was unwilling to consider the point that Luther criticized many congregations for not making an effort to learn the hymns, and chastened fathers for failing to master the sacred songs sung daily in school and teach them to their families.

After the turmoil of the Peasants’ War (1524-26) and the results of the Saxon Visitation (1528), Luther also argued that the people required something more. Believing hymns to be the “people’s Bible,” both for the unlearned and the educated, and apparently aroused by the situation, he hastily brought out the three-part set he had been planning, including his hymnal, the *Geistliche Lieder auff’s Neu gebessert* (Wittenberg, 1529). This was precisely the form of hymnal Brown had described as designed not for church use but for the home: it had a very small format, with devotional collects, prayers, and woodcuts of biblical scenes keyed to the hymns, and it contained a treasury of more than four dozen hymns (about half by Luther), a few contemporaries, and some favorites from the pre-reform past. Luther’s edition appeared in multiple and essentially unchanged reprints until the 1545 Babst hymnal, which was then regarded for many years as the definitive collection. While critics see the uniformity of the hymnody as designed to maintain doctrinal purity, it may have been intended simply to help the people learn a standard repertory. In any case, high demand for the set confirmed its popularity and assured profits for the printers. Brown sees this as a demonstration of the absence of governmental control, but this is not certain (p. 12). Pre-print censorship by the authorities antedated the Reformation and then increased rather than diminished. Yet, while preachers understandably had concerns about doctrinal validity, they were also interested in good hymns to use with their sermons. This was especially the case as the *Liedpredigt* became more prevalent, promoting lay reflection and devotion at home. It should also be noted that, contrary to the charge of authorized control of hymn content, the first Babst edition included a third section never known to have been approved by Luther.[8]

In his section on hymnic doctrine and piety, Brown makes a strong case for the educational, proclamatory, and devotional value of Lutheran hymns. Luther was steeped in biblical theology, the “Word of God,” and the compelling power of the gospel, but he was also amaz-

ingly able to articulate their force in singable and evocative imagery. Brown ably illustrates this in his exegesis of “Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein,” which Luther, in his 1529 hymnal, headed with the words “A fine spiritual song, how the sinner is brought to grace.” In this section Brown pointedly contrasts Luther’s paradoxical dialectic with Erasmus’s humanistic critique, and pronounces Luther’s method as truer to the lived experience of the sixteenth-century layman, who could readily identify with Luther’s language in the hymns. Furthermore, while “law and Gospel” is a central theme of Lutheran teaching, its *affective* parallel in the hymns, and a constant theme in the later hymnals, is instead “proclamation and comfort” (“*Lehr und Trost*”).

In his concluding section, Brown contrasts Catholic vernacular hymns with those of the Lutherans and Calvinists, and simply asserts their easily recognized confessional identity. Perhaps with more detail than necessary, he traces the minimal success of Catholic attempts to rival and even imitate Lutheran models. As usual, his scholarship here is selective but exemplary. He insists that although there were devoted Catholics providing vernacular sacred songs for the laity, e.g., in the hymnals of Michael Vehe (1537) and the huge collections of Johann Leisentrit (1567 and many later editions), many features contributing to the success of Protestant songs were unacceptable to Catholic authorities. In some cases only because they were in German and were popular in social and familial settings, bishops and priests saw them as vehicles of heresy and as something to be resisted and condemned. Brown does recognize the irenic, though unsuccessful, efforts of Georg Witzel (1501-73), priest and former Lutheran, to have more vernacular versions of the liturgy and hymns available for the laity. He also mentions that some allowances were made if the songs were used in public celebrations or devotions distinctly Catholic in content, or were used during communion or sung before or after the sermon. Brown has little to say about Calvinist Reformed song, however, other than to suggest its slim parallel with Rome as being an offering of worship owed to God in congregational prayer, and in requiring the use of “God’s words” in versified biblical psalms (p. 24).

Because of the story he tells in the body of this book, Brown drives home the special function of hymns as “*Trost*”: comfort, consolation, solace. For Lutherans under fire in those years, this emphasis is in no way exaggerated or inappropriate. As conveyed by the hymns, its counterpart is joy and thanksgiving, as in the Apostle’s advice (Col: 3:16) to use music to express faith in thanks-

giving for the gospel, the “good” news, and the richly indwelling Word. He might also have added, with Ephesians 5:19, the spirit-filled, “singing melody to the Lord in your hearts with thanksgiving to God.”

Of this book’s eight chapters, only two do not include the word “music” or “hymns” in their titles. I would argue, however, that music is not the principal subject of Brown’s book. The focus is rather the function of music in communal life and its power to nourish the experience of faith in community at all levels. Like faith, according to Luther, music was a divine gift to be treasured and made for service. For that reason, at least, Brown is determined to tell an unusual story, which begins in his second chapter, continues throughout the book, and is important enough to his argument to discuss here in detail. The story’s locale is the mining town of Joachimsthal (now Jáchymov, Czech Republic) in Habsburg Bohemia. The town was founded c. 1516 by Count Stephan of the noble Schlick family to ensure that its valuable silver mines would be well managed. The town grew rapidly, and within four years Joachimsthal supported about five thousand resident miners and citizens, and was named a “free royal mining town” (p. 26). Catholicism did not disappear immediately with the Reformation; it lingered for some time as various religious influences were introduced into the life of the town. This development was especially evident in the arrival about 1520 of Nicolaus Herman (c. 1500-61) as organist and cantor of the church and the new Latin school. His attempt to bring Wittenberg musical traditions to Joachimsthal was complicated by opposition to Latin chant, polyphony, and organ music, especially from Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (Luther’s disaffected colleague) (pp. 35f.). Herman would have resigned but for Luther’s intercession. In 1532 Lutheran music was further advanced, together with Reformation preaching, by the appointment of Wittenberg graduate Johannes Mathesius (1504-65) first as rector of the Latin school, then preacher, and finally senior pastor. Inspired by Luther’s hymns and love of music, these men worked together to shape “a flowering, distinctively Lutheran musical culture” in the life of the town (p. 29). Humanist interest in classical literature was revived, and Latin chant and polyphony returned to the liturgy. Its popularity induced citizens to sing along with the boys of the Latin school. Similarly, in the liturgy the use of Latin was increased so that Scripture readings were chanted in both languages on festival days. Significantly, however, to compensate for the reduction of formal worship in German, the hour before the scheduled Sunday service was devoted to singing vernacular hymns in the

church, a practice that became a regular and beloved institution. The church life and music Brown portrays here generally seem to resemble those of other middle class German Lutherans of the time: fairly conventional and conservative. One might wonder, then, whether Brown is correct to aver that their biblical knowledge was “sufficient to enable [the laity] to minister to their own religious needs” (p. 40).

Brown portrays the events of 1545 and 1547 as a difficult test for the town. In those years King Ferdinand of Bohemia, a passionate Catholic, arbitrarily altered the constitution of Joachimsthal by stripping the Schlicks of their rights over the city and the mines, punishing them for alleged mismanagement, Lutheran allegiance, and supporting the Schmalkaldic League against the emperor. Joachimsthal was forced to accept the oversight of a Catholic imperial captain. Facing such a crisis, the city council threw its support behind Mathesius, even though the imperialists found him suspect. Taking their inspiration from Luther’s example, Mathesius and Herman then began a fruitful collaboration to keep the faith alive by nurturing knowledge of the Word of God in Scripture and the internalization of its meaning in the people. They both believed that simple language, rhyme, and singing of hymns were effective tools to educate children. Like Luther, Herman and Mathesius laid the responsibility for this education on the family, especially the “House-father” and “House-Mother” (p. 105). Here Brown draws on Paul Eber’s preface to Herman’s *Sonntags-Evangelia* (1560), in which the father is advised to explain each stanza of a hymn and provide a fatherly “house-sermon” to aid family devotion and increase its spiritual self-sufficiency (p. 108). Sharing this power of sacred text and music in the family circle was intended to form independent men and women strong in spirit and so able to help others in need. To make his hymns still easier for girls and boys to learn and remember, Herman composed several simple, attractive tunes to fit many of his hymns, so several different texts could be sung to a single familiar tune. Herman’s contributions were warmly appreciated by Mathesius, whose hundreds of printed sermons not only expressed the value of music in general, but also used the hymns of Herman and Luther as preaching resources to focus his messages and connect with the congregation (pp. 152-153). Brown cites here the preacher’s telling remark that “music carries the words along with it ... [and] penetrates the heart, for the text is the soul of the notes,” and also mentions Luther’s firm conviction that “the notes make the text live” (p. 232 n. 88).

Many years later the people of Joachimsthal, to all appearances still firm in their faith and Lutheran identity, were faced with the test for which they had been prepared by their parents, teachers, and pastors: the recatholicizing attempts of the imperial Habsburg Counter Reform. Brown has recovered many of the little-known details of this period in Jáchymov archival materials in the Czech Republic. Although Bohemian Lutherans had been granted some toleration after the Augsburg Peace, and Emperor Rudolph II had affirmed religious freedom in 1609, Brown cites the wariness of the Joachimsthaler in their restrained memorial of the 1617 Luther centenary. With the Bohemian uprising in 1618-19 and the death of Emperor Matthias, their prospects worsened with the election of Ferdinand II. The local imperial captain required the city council, the clergy, and teachers to do homage to Ferdinand, and he also demanded observation of Marian feasts. Soon an imperial order required dismissal of all non-Catholic pastors, banned all services, and closed the church. Deposed clergy were supported privately for a time; exiled clergy consented to have the council appoint a teacher to baptize. A few clergy remained in secret, protected by the laity, and continued to serve. Women were especially strong resisters; about a third of the households were headed by women (p. 114). Since the council chose to delay nominating a Catholic priest, the Prague archbishop sent a Dominican to investigate, but when he held mass in the church he was driven out by a group of angry boys and left town. The event, however, brought a threat of military occupation, forcing the council to punish the adult agitators, exiling three. It finally had to accept a regular priest in 1625 and resigned itself to hypocrisy in “externals” in order to appear obedient and forestall the punitive actions of investigating reform commissioners, who were ready to dispatch soldiers and Jesuits.

Still, the council insisted it was powerless to force attendance at Catholic mass or individual acceptance of Catholic teachings, and it was given brief periods of relief from pressure until 1636, when it was made contingent on the conversion of all public officials. Throughout the Thirty Years War, however, active persecution continued intermittently. The people maintained their religion in private, though deprived of their schools, library, and public institutions (pp. 136-140). With the 1635 peace agreement between Emperor Ferdinand II and Saxon Elector Johann Georg, as well as the dramatic conversion of the Roman-trained Dr. Franciscus Albanus, the Joachimsthalers’ spirit of resistance revived at the same time that their persecution relaxed. Especially im-

portant for Brown is the fact that the council was able to avoid ruling for or against Lutheran preaching and hymn singing in private homes. He attributes the improvement largely to the town mayor, Jacob Schedlich (earlier the organist) who, despite the imperial mandate, had never become a Catholic (p. 146).

The Peace of Westphalia ended the “Great War” in 1648 and meant the departure of foreign soldiers from Joachimsthal in 1650, but Brown found no evidence of a special celebration. The peace’s provisions had little effect on Lutherans under the Habsburgs, for their religious freedoms had been legally suppressed well before the decisive date of 1624, and the Counter Reformation was pursued with more severity than before (p. 147). One right, emigration, was affirmed by the peace, and in those two years about eighty citizens left Joachimsthal. By 1651 the number of Catholic converts had risen from 9 to 122, an increase Brown attributes to harsher methods and threats, though he cites evidence that women were the more resistant to conversion (p. 266 n. 122). In 1652 the Jesuits arrived, and many resisters finally accepted the reality that Lutherans had no future in Joachimsthal. 854 citizens and miners (at least half the remnant population) then moved where they could freely and openly sing the Gospel again: to the town founded by elector Johann Georg of Saxony for Bohemian Protestant refugees. Brown notes the fading remnants of Lutheran piety in the town’s monuments and memorials. One was a painting of the Resurrection bearing as a motto the first line of “Christus der ist mein Leben, Sterben ist mein Gewin,” an anonymous hymn inspired by Philippians 1:21, and printed with the beloved tune of Melchior Vulpius in Jena, 1609 (p. 149).

While Joachimsthal was hardly typical of sixteenth-century Germany, Brown adds an eighth chapter and brief conclusion to discuss whether the Joachimsthal experiment might have been duplicated in, or influenced, other Lutheran lands. He argues that the cultural and religious achievements of Joachimsthal’s Lutherans were magnified by the extensive influence the community and its leaders gained throughout Lutheran Germany. Mathesius and many other citizens maintained numerous contacts and correspondents, and the hundreds of past students from Joachimsthal’s school, many of them pastors, cantors, and teachers, also kept the heritage alive. Furthermore, many of their works were printed in the major centers of Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Wittenberg and distributed widely. Mathesius’s catalogue of works alone numbers fifty-six, mostly collections of sermons and hymns (by Herman, Luther, and himself), and there

are nearly two hundred known sixteenth-century editions, thus spreading Joachimsthal’s model of dedication and piety through much of Protestant Germany. With thirty-seven editions and reprints of Herman’s *Evangelia* (1560-1630) and twenty-one of his *Historien der Sindflut* (1562-1607) listed in Brown’s appendices, and with surviving copies showing active usage over the years, the number of his hymns in use must have approached two hundred, nourishing the faith of countless adults and children for decades. Brown also counts at least sixty-seven individual hymns printed separately, which spread to Basel, Strasbourg, and northern Germany. This book is overflowing with such careful analysis, so this long review only begins to hint at the extent of the influence of the Joachimsthal experiment on Lutherans and others then and in the future. Brown’s remarkable essay attempts to defend what at first glance seemed a questionable hypothesis. It should be read as an unusual story, told as truthfully as an idealized narrative can be, but undergirded by painstaking, skilful, and dedicated research.

Notes

[1]. Alexander John Fisher, *Music and Religious Identity in Counter-Reformation Augsburg, 1580-1630* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Rebecca Wagner Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001).

[2]. The most cogent portrayal of this alleged failure is still Gerald Strauss’s *Luther’s House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

[3]. Marcus Jenny, ed., *Luthers Geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesaenge*, Vollstaendige Neuedition in Ergaenzung zu Band 35 der Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers, Band 4 (Koeln u.Wien: Boehlau Verlag, 1985), p. 37.

[4]. See Strauss, pp. 231-236, for his sensitive appreciation of German hymns, but also his inability to imagine their effectiveness.

[5]. See Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 39.

[6]. Herl, pp. 69-86, especially pp. 85-86.

[7]. Brown challenged Herl's 2000 dissertation on congregational singing in his own Harvard dissertation (2001), answered by Herl in *Worship Wars*, pp. 85-86. See Brown's rebuttal in his book, p. 206, n. 44.

[8]. See the facsimile edition of the *Babst Gesangbuch*, Konrad Ameln, ed. (Kassel: Baerenreiter, 1966), p. 14, the new section of which had forty additional hymns, old and new, the orthodoxy of whose authors was not always certain.

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