

## Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal

1524

*Translated by Paul Zeller Strodach*

*Revised by Ulrich S. Leupold*

Luther took personal interest in the publication of his hymns. While countless copies of them were printed without his knowledge or authorization, some of the best hymnals of the period appeared in Wittenberg and were compiled under his personal supervision.

The first of these is the *Spiritual Hymn Booklet* of 1524, often called the *Walter Choir Book*. Of all the hymnals published in 1524, this is the most ambitious and comprehensive, and the only one that follows the church year. It contains thirty-seven chorales in polyphonic settings by Johann Walter, Luther's trusted musical adviser. All but five of these hymns are German, and twenty-four of them are by Luther. This earliest hymnal prepared under Luther's auspices offers his hymns in highly artistic musical settings for the choir. As church choirs were composed primarily of boys and older students at school, these settings were supposed to implant the gospel through music in the hearts and minds of the young.

Luther wrote this preface for the Wittenberg hymnal of 1524 to indicate his personal interest in the work and its purpose. From there it passed into many later hymnals. The German text, *Vorrede Martini Luther*, is given in *WA* 35, 474-475; the following translation is a revision of P. Z. Strodach's translation in *PE* 6, 283-284.

### *Preface by Martin Luther*

That it is good and God pleasing to sing hymns is, I think, known to every Christian; for everyone is aware not only of the example of the prophets and kings in the Old Testament who praised God

with song and sound, with poetry and psaltery, but also of the common and ancient custom of the Christian church to sing Psalms. St. Paul himself instituted this in I Corinthians 14 [:15] and exhorted the Colossians [3:16] to sing spiritual songs and Psalms heartily unto the Lord so that God's Word and Christian teaching might be instilled and implanted in many ways.

Therefore I, too, in order to make a start and to give an incentive to those who can do better, have with the help of others compiled several hymns, so that the holy gospel which now by the grace of God has risen anew may be noised and spread abroad.

Like Moses in his song [Exod. 15:2], we may now boast that Christ is our praise and song and say with St. Paul, I Corinthians 2 [:2], that we should know nothing to sing or say, save Jesus Christ our Savior.

And these songs were arranged in four parts<sup>1</sup> to give the young—who should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts—something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place, thus combining the good with the pleasing, as is proper for youth. Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious<sup>2</sup> claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them. I therefore pray that every pious Christian would be pleased with this [the use of music in the service of the gospel] and lend his help if God has given him like or greater gifts. As it is, the world is too lax and indifferent about teaching and training the young for us to abet this trend. God grant us his grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually most of the arrangements are for five parts.

<sup>2</sup> Or super-religious, a reference to the enthusiasts who condemned and, when possible, destroyed sacred art of any kind.