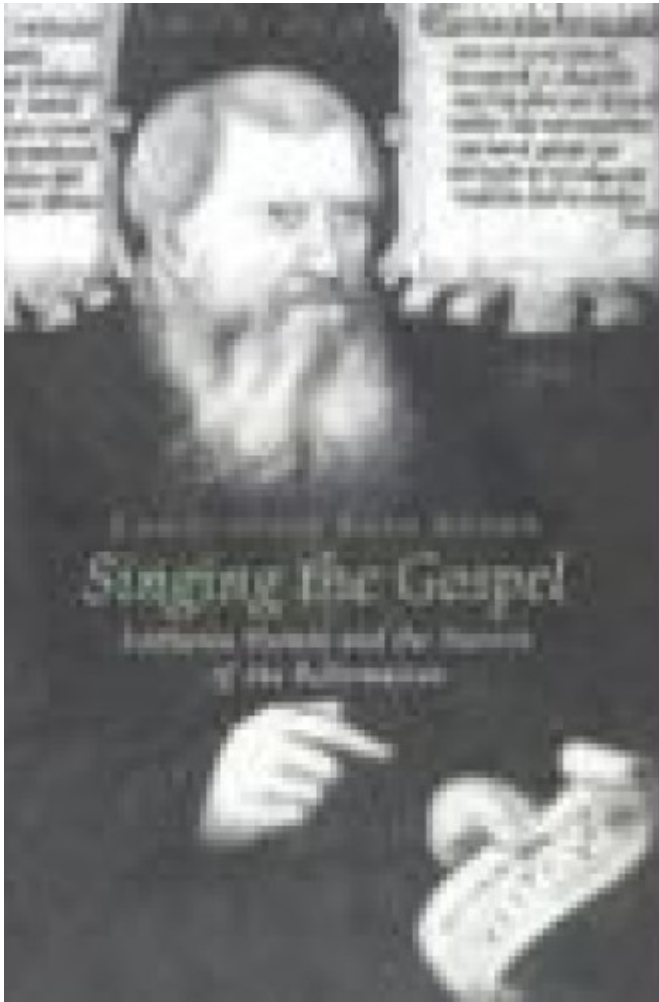


Singing the Gospel

reviewed by [Paul Westermeyer](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation

Christopher Boyd Brown
Harvard University Press

Joachimsthal is a town in Bohemia that was founded on the eve of the Reformation. Silver was mined there and turned into “the standard silver coin of sixteenth century Germany, the Joachimsthaler or simply Thaler, whose name lives on in the modern dollar.” This city was also a Lutheran center where vernacular hymns played a critical role. Christopher Boyd Brown, assistant professor of church history at Boston University School of Theology, has investigated the Lutheran hymnic aspect of the town’s history in this engaging study.

Analyzing a range of sources, Brown makes a compelling case against those who have argued that the Lutheran Reformation failed “to create a new kind of devout Christian among the popular masses.” Joachimsthal, in Brown’s view, represented a healthy Lutheran symbiosis of high art and folk art, Latin school and German vernacular, upper class and lower class, literacy and illiteracy, clergy and laity, men and women, worship in public and worship at home. The bridging element in this synthesis was the singing of Lutheran vernacular hymns.

Though Brown assesses a broad scope of institutions and individuals, much of the story revolves around Cantor Nikolaus Herman (c. 1500-1560) and Pastor Johann Mathesius (1504-1565). (Herman wrote the “great exchange” hymn and its tune “Lobt Gott, ihr Kristen.”) After the town was taken over by Hapsburg Catholicization in the 17th century, Brown demonstrates, Lutheran identity not only resisted the new establishment, it even survived for another generation primarily through the influence of hymn singing in the home.

It is instructive to compare Brown’s study with another recent one, Joseph Herl’s *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Herl pits choral services against congregational ones and argues that Lutheran congregations sang very little until 250 years after the Reformation, when the Reformed conception of congregational singing won out at the expense of choral singing. Brown thinks that Herl does not sufficiently question the biases of visitation reports.

The context of 16th-century Joachimsthal was obviously quite different from ours. First, at that time Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Calvinists had stronger centers of gravity. Lutherans tied their music to proclamation, Roman Catholics used it as intercession for the purpose of satisfying a debt, and Calvinists saw it as congregational prayer. There are still echoes of these themes in our confessional

groupings, but they are much less pronounced, and in some cases they have been radically altered, especially since Vatican II.

Second, the people of 16th-century Joachimsthal unconsciously assumed a common folksong. We have no such thing. At most we have music in the service of a ubiquitous advertising medium with a consciously ephemeral intent. That leads to the third and most important consideration.

We live in a world where technique, allied to advertising, is determinative in all areas of our life, not just in the technical ones. Because we read the past in our image, a study like Brown's tempts us to view 16th-century Lutheran hymn singing as a skillful technique, a means to get people to buy into Lutheranism. We then jump to the conclusion that if we could only find a comparable technique, we could get people to buy into our version of Christianity. Sometimes this perspective is even considered evangelical and missional. But it widely misses the mark, partly because the freedom of the Christian message itself breaks the tyranny of such manipulative intent, and also because it misconstrues the Christian community in Joachimsthal and the Lutheran understanding of the faith.

The Christians in Joachimsthal did not believe in a technique. They believed in the God who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies" the church, as it says in Luther's *Small Catechism*. Proclamation then was not about technique. It was about the centrality of God's gracious action and the comfort the recipients experienced. Hymns were not gimmicks. They were part of the fiber of life together under God.

Joachimsthal was not perfect, as Brown's book indicates; but the overall shape of what was going on there leaves little doubt that God's grace was the central feature of the Christian community's piety. We could do worse than to let the Christians of 16th-century Joachimsthal teach us something.