The Singing Heart: An Analysis of the Morning and Evening Songs of Paul Gerhardt as Exercises in Evangelical Piety.

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Abstract

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) was a German Lutheran pastor who was also a writer of spiritual songs. As both a pastor and a song writer, Gerhardt was strongly influenced by a devotional movement, often referred to as the *Neue Frömmigkeit*, that developed within the orthodox Lutheranism of the late sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. It encouraged both orthodoxy and orthopraxy in all spheres of Christian life; its proponents upheld the liturgical life of the church, while also encouraging daily devotional piety; they emphasised reception over performance in both corporate worship and private devotions; finally, they promoted the mystical union of Christ with each faithful Christian. These characteristics were brought together most profoundly in regular, scriptural meditation. The *Neue Frömmigkeit* directly influenced many influential theologians, song writers and musicians of the seventeenth century before it gradually faded towards the end of the century.

The influences of this evangelical piety movement are clearly evident in Gerhardt’s songs. These songs can be considered, in many ways, exercises in Gerhardt’s evangelical piety. This is especially the case with Gerhardt’s morning and evening songs. In total, three of his morning and two of his evening songs are known today. These five songs can be considered sung devotional meditations; they have meditational devices woven into their texts that naturally lead those who are singing to meditate upon the scriptures. Many of these devices are able to be examined and explored through the analysis of Gerhardt’s texts. This study firstly seeks to examine the background to Gerhardt’s morning and evening songs; and secondly, to engage in the analysis of selected song texts in order to investigate how they may indeed be considered exercises in evangelical piety.
Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or another institution, and affirm that to the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.
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\begin{quote}
Du willst ein Opfer haben:
Hier bring ich meine Gaben;
Mein Weihrauch und mein Widder
Sind mein Gebet und Lieder.

Die wirst du nicht verschmähen,
Du kannst ins Herze sehen;
Denn du weißt, daß zur Gabe
Ich ja nichts Bessers habe.
\end{quote}
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1. Introduction

In 1647 the cantor of the Nikolaikirche in Berlin, Johann Crüger (1598-1662), published a hymnbook entitled *Praxis Pietatis Melica*. Over the next century, this title would become something of an institution in its own right, being republished by a variety of editors in more than forty editions, the last of which was produced almost a century after Crüger himself had died.¹ This collection of songs, together with the many melodies Crüger composed for it, remains one of Crüger’s lasting legacies to Lutheran hymnody.

There is a clear connection between the publication of Crüger’s *Praxis Pietatis Melica* and the promotion of Paul Gerhardt’s songs to a wider audience. At the risk of over-stating the importance of Crüger’s contribution, it is entirely possible that Gerhardt’s songs could have been lost in time had it not been for Crüger’s promotion of Gerhardt’s work, and his inclusion of Gerhardt’s songs in *Praxis Pietatis Melica*; Gerhardt, from all accounts, made no efforts of his own to publish his work.

It is evident that Crüger held Gerhardt’s poetry in high regard. This can be seen in the way he dramatically increased the number of Gerhardt’s songs over subsequent editions of *Praxis Pietatis Melica*; fifteen of Gerhardt’s songs were included in the 1647 edition, but eighty-one songs were included in the 1651 edition, only four years later.² While it is likely that this period also represents a season of prolific composition on Gerhardt’s part, it is also clear that Crüger was

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sufficiently impressed with Gerhardt's work that he was willing to actively promote it to a wider audience.

Gerhardt's songs also met the criteria well for Crüger's hymnbook. The purpose of Praxis Pietatis Melica is outlined clearly in its rather lengthy full title:

Praxis Pietatis Melica, that is: practice of divine-blessedness in Christian and comfort-rich songs principally of Herr Dr Martin Luther, and also others of his faithful followers and confessors of pure evangelical teaching; brought together in an orderly fashion and augmented with 1204 of the newest, most beautiful and comfort-rich songs...4

From this we can presume that, in Crüger's opinion, Gerhardt was both a faithful follower of Martin Luther, and a confessor of pure evangelical teaching.5

Even more notable, however, is the fact that Gerhardt's songs were considered by Crüger to be works of beauty, with Christian texts that were rich in comfort

3. This is the number of songs in the 31st edition of Praxis Pietatis Melica published in 1708. This number appears to increase with subsequent editions, as the size of the collection also increased.


5. The use of the word “evangelical” both here and elsewhere in this thesis needs to be carefully defined. In recent decades, the English word “evangelical” has come to be associated with a general movement within Protestant Christianity. There is a great deal of variety within the contemporary evangelical movement itself which makes it difficult to define, however it is relatively safe to presume that the vast majority of “evangelical Protestants” in the English speaking world would teach that salvation is only possible through a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Accordingly, most evangelical Protestants would also give preference to individual confessions of faith over against the corporate confession of creeds, or the use of traditional liturgical forms. When Crüger makes reference to “reiner evangelischer Lehre” in the title of Praxis Pietatis Melica, he would have meant something very different by the word “evangelischer” to this modern understanding. At the time of the Reformation, the followers of Martin Luther assumed the descriptor “evangelisch” in order to distinguish their teachings from Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and from more radical forms of Protestantism on the other. They derived this term from the Greek ἐβαγγελίσκω, meaning of, or according to, the good news. The “good news” they were referring to is the promise of justification by God's grace in Christ Jesus, which is received through faith (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:8-9). Accordingly, the terms “evangelical” or “confessional” as used throughout this study refer to Christian teaching which proclaims the “good news” of Christ Jesus, as it is taught in the Lutheran confessional writings.
and that promoted the practice of *Gottseligkeit*. This is presumably the reason why an increasing number of Gerhardt's songs was included in subsequent editions of *Praxis Pietatis Melica*: Gerhardt's songs were considered scripturally faithful and in keeping with the Lutheran confessions; they were considered useful for bringing comfort and encouragement to Christian people; and they were also considered valuable for use in Christian devotional piety as a means for building people up in faith and bringing God’s blessings to them.

These observations from the title of *Praxis Pietatis Melica*, are helpful in highlighting the key foci of this study, and they resonate closely with the topic of this thesis: *The singing heart: An analysis of the morning and evening songs of Paul Gerhardt as exercises in evangelical piety*. At the centre of this study lies the analysis of selected songs written by Paul Gerhardt. As with many hymn writers, Gerhardt wrote songs which applied to a variety of pastoral situations, and various seasons of the church year. The focus of this study, however, will be specifically on the set of songs which he wrote for use at the beginning and end of each day, as part of morning and evening prayer. These morning and evening songs, as they are often referred to, provide a useful window into the daily devotional practices of the period. They also provide us with a good opportunity to explore a particular devotional movement which was prevalent in seventeenth-century German Lutheranism, commonly referred to throughout this study as the *Neue Frömmigkeit*. Gerhardt was influenced greatly by this

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7. See footnote 4 on page 2.
8. Literally, the “new piety.” I have opted for this terminology in deference to Udo Sträter and others who use it quite freely. The movement may be considered “new” in that its proponents sought to correct certain perceived deficiencies in post-Reformation Lutheranism. This term and the movement it describes will be unpacked further in section 2.3.1 of this study.
devotional movement, and the evidence for this can be seen clearly in his writing.

It is fascinating to consider how well Gerhardt’s songs have withstood the test of time. Gerhardt’s words clearly spoke deeply to Crüger in the mid-seventeenth century, leading him to set them to music and include them in *Praxis Pietatis Melica*. These same words have also demonstrated a remarkable and enduring quality that has appealed to people throughout the generations; Gerhardt’s songs are still sung by people today, and treasured by them. By studying Gerhardt’s life and work, by exploring the factors which influenced and shaped him as a writer, by analysing his morning and evening songs, it is my hope that we may also discover something of what gives Gerhardt’s songs this enduring quality.