

# Debunking the Drinking Song Myth: A Mighty Fortress

This short article is reproduced from [The United Methodist Church](#) website, and written by [Dean McIntyre](#).

I include it here because of the rumor that Martin Luther used drinking songs for the melodies of some of his hymns. This false idea is commonly used as an excuse for lowering the standard in religious music, so as to copy the world.

**QUESTION:** If Martin Luther DID NOT make use of drinking or tavern tunes for his hymns, then what is the original context of *A Mighty Fortress* and its tune, *Ein' Feste Burg*?

In the early stage of the Protestant Reformation, Luther was far more concerned with theology and politics than with worship and music. During this period, he thought little about changes to the order of worship, the methods of singing and the genres of music used; and he certainly gave next to no time to composing hymns and tunes.

By the mid-1520s, however, his thoughts included reforming the worship service. He eliminated what he considered unimportant elements. He invigorated and gave greater importance to preaching and the centrality of Scripture. He retained the Mass in an abbreviated form (*Deutsch*, or *German Mass*). He called for Gospel and Epistle in all services. He changed the custom from daily Mass, as had been the custom since the early years of Christianity, to weekly.

Roman Catholic worship then assumed that worship goes on constantly whether there are people present or not, while Luther instituted the concept of the Mass as a celebration enjoyed and participated in by all the people. He contributed to this sense of community and body of believers by instituting congregational singing in place of some musical sections that had previously been chanted by monastic choirs. Luther wrote in his 1523 *Order of Mass and Communion*:

The hymns and the *Te Deum Laudamus* at least confirm the same thing as the *Deo gracias*, namely, that after the

exposition and homilies they used to praise God and give thanks for the revealed truth of his words. That is the kind of songs, but in the vernacular, that I should like us to have.  
-*Luther's Works*, v. 53, p.39

This is the context for the text and tune of *A Mighty Fortress*, composed probably in 1527, a few years after the earliest official Lutheran hymnals. It fits right into what Luther was doing at the time:

1. use of German rather than Latin;
2. congregational song rather than choral song;
3. use of popular musical style (in the Minnesinger and Meistersinger tradition) to engage the people rather than medieval chant style;
4. hymns as commentary on and response to Scripture and sermon.

**Sources:**

Routley, Erik. *The Music of Christian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA, 1981)  
Young, Carlton R. *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993)