
Johannes Brenz was one of the critical figures in the formation of the Lutheran church. As James Estes notes in this revised and updated version of his 1982 study Christian Magistrate and the State Church, “Brenz’s career is one of the best case studies we have of ‘how the Reformation actually happened’ (…). There was no important issue that he did not address as an articulate and influential spokesman of Lutheran orthodoxy and no institutional development in which he did not play a significant role” (p. 15). Estes surveys Brenz’s career as a reformer in Schwäbisch Hall, Ulm, Ansbach, and Württemberg, providing a “clear picture of Brenz’s contribution to the institutionalization of the Reformation.” The revisions are intended to take stock of a quarter-century of studies, in particular the flurry of publications which appeared in conjunction with the 500th anniversary of Brenz’s birth in 1999. The change in the title—the replacement of “state church” with “territorial church”—points to the dominance of the latter term in the current literature. This revised study—half again as long as the original—of what has already emerged as a minor classic remains one of the best conceived and executed studies of a critical but often overlooked phase of the Lutheran Reformation.

The first chapter provides a brief sketch of Brenz’s early life and career. Born in Schwäbisch Hall, Brenz studied in Heidelberg, where he came under the influence of Erasmian Humanism, largely through his teacher and early mentor Johannes Oecolampadius. At the Heidelberg disputation of 1518, Brenz met Luther. Subsequently, he and a number of his classmates were transformed “from Erasmian humanists into partisans of Luther and his theology” (p. 22). After his return to Schwäbisch Hall, Brenz emerged as the leader of the reforming movement, guiding it through the uncertain times surrounding the Peasants’ War of 1525. Brenz proved to be a cautious reformer, working closely with the conservative city fathers while gradually introducing various aspects of Lutheran reform. This pattern—close cooperation with magistrates in a measured process of reform—would be repeated when Brenz went to Ulm, and then later to Ansbach. In Württemberg he encountered a rather different situation. After his restoration to the throne in 1534, Duke Ulrich made a “sudden and sharp” break with the Catholic Church. The result was “a classic case of reformation from above.” Under Duke Ulrich and his son Christopher, Brenz was charged with the creation of a territorial church administration.
The next three chapters examine in detail Brenz’s role in creating the new territorial church. Chapter 2 examines the late medieval background, demonstrating that by the beginning of the sixteenth century the subjects of the dukes of Württemberg had come to see their prince, rather than the bishops, as the source of ecclesiastical reform just as the princes increasingly came to view involvement in church affairs as a fundamental aspect of their duty to promote the common good. Chapter 3 discusses the theological justification for the territorial church, contrasting Brenz’s views with those of Luther and showing how the former resolved the apparent contradiction between Lutheran views on the “two Kingdoms” and the practice of placing the territorial church under princely authority. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the organization of the church in Württemberg, in particular, charting the development of the Consistory and the influence of Brenz’s scheme of ecclesiastical governance in other parts of Germany. One striking feature of Estes’s discussion of the theological foundations of the church (a subject all too often overlooked) was the influence of Erasmian ecclesiology on Brenz’s conception of the church, a point of view that was critical for his revision of Luther’s ideas on church-state relations.

The last two chapters consider particular problems of religious policy. Chapter 6 examines Brenz’s approach to the issue of moral discipline, in particular his unsuccessful campaign to revive the practice of public excommunication. The last chapter deals with Brenz’s approach to domestic and foreign policy, in particular the question of whether armed resistance to the Emperor was justified and whether it was right to persecute Anabaptists. In the first case, Brenz was a champion of non-resistance. Estes notes his conservatism, but also shows how Brenz’s background as a citizen of an Imperial City contributed to his loyalty to the Emperor and led him to be far less sanguine about resistance than the princes. In the case of the Anabaptists, Brenz was influential in preventing the use of the death penalty against Anabaptists in the territories where he had the most influence. In his pioneering work on toleration, *De haereticis, an sint persequendi* (1534), Sebastian Castellio praised Brenz as “one man of sound judgement even in times so corrupt.” Estes confirms that judgement, stating that Brenz’s success encouraging moderation “was not the least significant of his accomplishment” (p. 216).

In a brief Afterword Estes notes the tension between the image of Brenz as an early prophet of religious toleration and his role as principle architect of the state church. In the latter case, it seems clear that “the German Reformation in general and Brenz’s career in particular were part of that long process that produced not only the German absolutist state of the Old Regime but also the