



HENRY MELCHIOR MUHLENBERG (1711 – 1787)

... was to North American Lutheranism what George Washington was to the fledgling United States, for Muhlenberg fathered the first union of Lutheran congregations on these shores. Following theological study at Göttingen, young Muhlenberg spent a short term in the small village of Grosshennersdorf, then taught at the orphanage in Halle, the center of the Pietist movement. The Pietist leader, Johann H. A. Francke, was deeply committed to the immigrant congregations in America and chose Muhlenberg to provide spiritual leadership for the Germans in Pennsylvania.

Muhlenberg reached Philadelphia in 1742 only to discover deep spiritual distress. The young pastor threw himself into the work of creating spiritual power out of ecclesiastical confusion. A serious shortage of pastors during surging North European immigration had opened the door for imposters who usurped spiritual authority — and fees! — for themselves. Muhlenberg met the challenge head on, even confronting the Moravian Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf and his grandiose claim to be bishop of all the separated churches. Conscious of the opportunity to create a powerful church without the constraints of Europe's religious despotism, he adopted the motto *ecclesia plantanda* (the church must be planted). By 1748 Muhlenberg had created an orderly church organization, generally known as the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

Adding to the confusion was the multiplicity of hymnals the immigrants had brought from the various German states of their origins. Common worship and hymn singing were difficult at best. Lack of musical leadership created yet another burden for the overworked pastor, who was actually proficient on organ, cittern (a type of guitar), violin, and harp. Often he had to fill the

role of organist or song leader in addition to preaching and liturgical leadership. Muhlenberg clearly valued music enough to make sure that his principal church in New Hanover (or Trappe) was furnished with an organ to support the singing.

In each locale Muhlenberg established regular worship, eventually embodied in a 1748 liturgy crafted from the best Lutheran sources. An unpublished version was circulated, then adopted by the new union of pastors and congregations. The urgent matter of a common hymnal, however, was not addressed until 1782 when Muhlenberg and three other pastors (J. C. J. Kunze, J. H. C. Helmuth, and F. A. C. Muhlenberg — one of Henry's three sons) were commissioned to produce such a book. In 1786 they presented the first Lutheran hymnal in North America to the young church. Titled *Erbauliche Liedersammlung* (Devotional Hymn Collection), it included a liturgy (which foreshadowed the Common Service adopted by Lutherans a century later) and 750 hymns plus an introduction by Muhlenberg himself.

The young missionary pastor had envisioned a North American church united in liturgy and song, sharing one hymnal for one unified church. His vision has, in fact, been the driving hope in Lutheran worship life for two and half centuries, leading most recently to the work of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship known to us in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, *Lutheran Worship*, and their successor worship books. In many ways Lutherans still find themselves challenged to fulfill Muhlenberg's dream of one, united church worshipping with common materials.

Muhlenberg's introduction to the *Erbauliche Liedersammlung* (the hymnal used by the people) and the related *Choral-Buch* (accompaniment book used by the organist) included guidelines for hymn singing well worth remembering. They are selectively reviewed here (see Schalk's *Source Documents* or Muhlenberg's *Journals* for the full texts; with further information available in Muhlenberg's *Korrespondenz*, vol. IV).

Gifted teachers will choose hymns suitable for mixed assemblies that make accepted truths impressive. Muhlenberg's "mixed assemblies" were nothing like the racial ethnic, and cultural diversity we experience today, but clearly he would prefer unity over worship in separated "contemporary," "traditional," or "blended" enclaves. It is the "truth" of the Gospel that joins us and allows us to worship together, overcoming cultural or ethnic separations.

All singers ought to "remain conscious of the meaning of the text." Here Muhlenberg reminds post-Reformation Christians that the text is paramount. Hymns are, among other things,

proclamation. They do awaken appropriate moods, as Muhlenberg makes clear elsewhere; but banal and trivial texts obscure the power of the Gospel.

Singing in public assemblies will be “chaste and harmonious.” The alternative occurs, Muhlenberg notes, when singers strain every muscle and produce “braying or roaring,” once associated with the priests of Baal (I Kings 19:27). Such singing causes “negative sensations in one’s neighbor.”

Christian singing (including regular part singing) should be taught to children in Christian schools. The children’s skills will in turn refresh the congregation. Muhlenberg strongly cautioned the church to share “this treasury of hymns with your children . . . that they may not come forward on the great day of judgment and complain against you and say, ‘You provided us with nourishment for our bodies, and with clothes, but our souls you forgot and neglected. Woe to us and you.’”

Pastors should take special care to teach the core hymns (“Kernlieder” or “Kernchoräle”) widely valued and known by all, with emphasis on those by Luther and early writers. Muhlenberg emphasized teaching *common* materials that allow us to worship together. The Church, following Muhlenberg, cannot abandon its responsibility to teach its members so that they might join the song all Christians share, regardless of local or cultural differences.

There is always something new to cultivate and improve in our poetry and music until the earth becomes “full of lively knowledge of Jesus Christ” and people sing “in the highest choir.” Good hymns show the way to eternal life through life’s suffering and conflict. They point us to the life promised by grace in Christ. Without that we are not nourished. Further, we and our children should always sing the “old hymns” (the ancient hymns and chorales) even though new hymns provide poetry and art which is “widened, refined, and improved” from time to time.

Muhlenberg’s wisdom offers true guidance as we create our own vision of the worshipping church from now and into the future.

Victor E. Gebauer

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