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The Birth of the Evangelical Hymn.

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At town-fairs in Germany, during the latter part of the year 1523, tradespeople offered for sale small leaflets on which a German hymn was printed. During the next years these leaflets were displaced by small booklets, containing 8, 25, and finally 32 hymns. The earliest title under which these collections were published was *Enchiridion, or Handbook*. They issued from presses in Wittenberg, Nuernberg, Erfurt, and other places. A later title was *Geistliches Gesangbuechlein* (Booklet of Spiritual Songs). The author of most of these hymns was Luther. As a rule, the tune for these hymns was indicated at the head, and for some of the hymns the notes were printed with the hymns, especially where an entirely new melody was offered. For most of the hymns a melody with which the people were familiar from the old Latin service was used, sometimes in an adaptation to make them fit to the new German text.

These leaflets and booklets are the embryo hymnal of the Reformation. The thought of producing them originated in Luther's mind. While reconstructing the order of service for the church at Wittenberg, after the break with Rome, Luther felt the need of good German hymns being sung by the congregation, now that the sermon and the reading of the Scripture-lessons took place in the people's language. First he thought of translating the best-known Latin hymns into German and using them alternately with the Latin hymns of the old ritual. He actually produced a few translations himself, but found that few of the hymns in use breathed the proper spirit and were worthy of being taken over into the reformed German service even in a translation. Accordingly, his next effort was to find poets for composing proper German hymns. His correspondence since 1523 is teeming with appeals to his friends to get busy and furnish him one or more

hymns. From Spalatin, whom he credits with speaking an elegant German and having at his command a copious vocabulary, he expected much. He only warns him against the use of new-fangled terms and court phrases and urges him to talk a simple, popular language and make his meaning as plain as the Hebrew poets made theirs in the Psalms. To show Spalatin just what he wanted, he submitted to him a sample of poetry composed by himself, but confessed that his was a poor effort, and that he did not possess the gift of producing what he wished. He also suggested particular psalms from which Spalatin might build up a good hymn. He got nothing from Spalatin nor from the court marshal John Dolzig, whom he had importuned in a similar manner. From his colleague Justus Jonas he obtained the hymn "Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns haelt,"¹⁾ composed from Ps. 124. Agricola furnished a hymn from Ps. 117: "Froehlich wollen wir Hallelujah singen." The finest contribution came from Paul Speratus: "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her." Erhart Hegenwalt, from Switzerland, happened to visit Wittenberg and was pressed into service for the new hymnary; he composed "Erbarm' dich mein, o Herre Gott," from Ps. 51. Luther published each hymn as soon as he received it. His own productions, however, surpassed all contributions that he received, spite of his modesty and deprecating remarks about them. Not only by the quality of his hymns, their profound spirituality, their fervor and sturdy, striking diction, but also quantitatively Luther in the course of time became the chief builder of the hymnal of the Reformation. The St. Louis Edition of his works, on the basis of Wackernagel's research, ascribes to him 41 hymns and poems.²⁾

1) No. 284 in the *Ev. Luth. Hymn-book* of the Missouri Synod.

2) X, 1422—1481. This entire chapter, together with the introductory paragraphs in cols. 115—122, deserves study because of its minute information. This would be the most intelligent and profitable way of celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran church hymn. The Erlangen Edition offers Luther's hymns in Vol. 56, 293—370. For collateral reading the following may be suggested: Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied*, Vol. III, 1 ff.; Koestlin, *Martin Luther*, Vol. I, 535—542; *Four Hundred Years*, pp. 159—172; 240—253; Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology*. During the late war there appeared: K. Balthasar, *Luther der Saenger des deutschen Volkes* (Guetersloh, 1917), and P. Althaus, *Luther als der Vater des evangelischen Kirchenliedes* (Leipzig, 1917). The greatest source-books for hymnological studies still are Koch, *Geschichte des Kirchenliedes* (1852 ff.), and Nelle, *Geschichte des deutschen evangelischen Kirchenliedes* (1904).

The early leaflets and pamphlets containing the first evangelical hymns proved a powerful missionary agency for the Reformation. They put the great principles for which Luther and his associates were struggling against Romanism and fanaticism into song. On the wings of stirring melodies the profound truths of human misery under sin and the rescuing mercy and redeeming love of God flew to every part of Germany. Eagerly the people, young and old, reached for the precious little sheets, committed them to memory, hummed them while at their daily tasks, and sang them in company on the village green under the great linden-tree where they would gather at evening when the day's work was done. Truly, a splendid pastime! But the glorious value of these hymns was most strikingly revealed during the service at church, when the entire congregation, with the new songs of salvation, filled the stately edifices that had echoed formerly with melancholy litanies and *aves* and *salves*. Then the heart of the people was poured out in Christian elegies of sorrow and angelic chorals of joy; then profound convictions found utterance, faith spoke in melodies, blessed assurances were sunk more deeply into consciences calmed with the great peace of God, courage for life's battles rose, and joyful hope made all the worry and strife of this earth seem paltry.

The early evangelical hymns are worthy of theological study. Never has the evangelical *ordo salutis* found more adequate expression. Many famous treatises of that age might perish; the genuine Gospel would continue to live in these songs of the justified. Also the historian has reason to study these hymns carefully; they were, and still are, a spiritual dynamic of matchless effectiveness in the work of the Church. Pfarrer Eichner, of Wilhermsdorf, has attempted a study of the three great hymns of Luther in 1523,³⁾ from which we cull excerpts and offer them herewith in a free reproduction.

"On account of its historical import the hymn 'Nun freuet euch' ⁴⁾ deserves universal notice this year, for the inner development of Luther is reflected in it as in a wonderful mirror. Its characteristics are: powerful force, childlike simplicity, and soulful depth. Its central thought is the sublime article of faith concerning the justification of a sinner by grace alone, through faith. This article contains the program of the Reformation. Luther gave several headings to this hymn in its various editions; they

3) *Pastoralblaetter* for October, 1923, pp. 13—17.

4) *Ev. Luth. Hymn-book* of the Missouri Synod, No. 310.

can all be comprehended most aptly in the heading which he chose last, in 1545: 'A Hymn of Gratitude for the Highest Favors Which God has Shown Us in Christ.' The original melody for this hymn strikingly reproduces the basic tenor of the entire hymn: 'The voice of the German church-hymn was heard in it for the first time, and with lightning force it went through all German lands, inviting men to praise God's eternal decree of redemption of the human race and evangelical liberty.' Paul Gerhardt had conceived a special love for this hymn and frequently permitted thoughts from this hymn to echo in his own poems.

"In the first stanza the singer calls upon all Christendom to join him in rejoicing over 'God's sweet, wondrous deed,' namely, His redeeming work. In the second and third stanzas Luther's ego speaks, depicting his personal religious experiences. We behold, in spirit the young Augustinian monk prostrate in his cell and wrestling with God for the salvation of his soul. He has learned to know how powerless is his sinful will and how inadequate his works. Despondency, yea, despair seizes him and drives him to the gates of hell. Presently he has reached the turning-point in his soul-battle, and the opening word of the fourth stanza, 'da', signals the event. The blessed light of a new knowledge of salvation falls into his weary, agonized heart. He beholds paradise opened and is made a witness of God's eternal decree of redemption. He hears the Father and the Son deliberating on the way of salvation (fourth and fifth stanzas). In the sixth to ninth stanzas there is presented to us the portrait of the life of Jesus, with its Biblical basis in Phil. 2. The seventh stanza lays bare to our eyes the pulsating heart of this entire evangelical poem: it offers us a description of justifying faith such as has not been given us since the days of Paul. Full of significance is the tenth stanza, — note also the second half of the ninth! — where emphasis is placed on what is demanded of the pardoned sinner, *viz.*, that he continue the work of Christ in His Church. The phrase 'zur Letze,' is to be interpreted, 'for your refreshing at your departure.'"⁵⁾

This is the first evangelical church-hymn. It is actually a monument of the Reformation. With shocking truth and frankness it marks the way which Luther had to traverse from the day that he entered the monastery until he obtained perfect peace in his heart by justification through faith. Our congregations should

5) The meaning is weakly suggested by "bequeath" in our English rendering.

be made to realize during the course of this year that a record like the one just sketched of Luther's most momentous experience is contained in our hymn-book. At the same time, however, the fact is to be stressed that every one may and should realize in his own life what Luther has recorded in poetic form as his very personal experience; hence what he states in this hymn applies to every Christian. Luther himself has expressed this fact in the opening stanza, where he summons the "Christen g'mein . . . all' in ein" (Christians in common, one and all) to rejoice with him. Accordingly, since the days of Luther this hymn has always exerted a decisive influence and blazed a way into the hearts of men, because it is simply impossible for a Christian not to yield to the power of its truth. True, the hymn may not have been originally intended for use during worship. W. Nelle calls attention to the fact that the singing of this hymn presents peculiar difficulties even in our day, because in this hymn the congregation, the sinner, the Father, and the Lord Christ follow each other as speakers, and while the congregation begins the hymn, it does not conclude it. Still, these difficulties could be reduced if the congregation that is to sing this hymn were to be made familiar with its singular import and glorious content. Vilmer characterizes the entire hymn thus: "It is a complete summary of the experience of Luther, of the entire Christian experience of justification by faith alone, a genuine paean of Christian experience, and as such a symbol of our Church which can never be surrendered. It begins with uttering joy over the fact that was realized, in a note of triumph, and then explains how this triumphant joy was attained. Every detail of the process is explained with the utmost realism."⁶⁾

In the hymn "Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir"⁷⁾ Luther

6) Vilmar also explains the prosodic technique in the construction of the first hymn of the German Reformation: "Gebaut ist es in dem dreitheiligen Strophenbau, und zwar in einer Weise, welche fruher zwar auch schon vorhanden war, aber doch, wie es scheint, erst durch dieses Lied recht allgemein wurde. Jede Strophe besteht aus sieben Zeilen, jede Strophe besteht aus zwei und der Abgesang aus drei Zeilen. Die erste Zeile jeder Strophe ist stumpf und die je zweite Zeile klingend gereimt. Der Abgesang hat ein stumpf gereimtes Reimpaar und eine Waise (reimlose Zeile). Siebenzeilige Glieder finden sich mehr, aber die Verhaeltnisse der Reime sind andere. Es eignet sich dieser Bau ganz vorzueglich zu lebhafter, bewegter Darstellung, jedoch nicht ausschliesslich zur Darstellung des Jubels, wie manchmal ist gesagt worden, sondern auch zum Ausdruck tiefsten Schmerzes. In demselben Mass ist auch gebaut 'Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir.'"

7) *Ev. Luth. Hymn-book* of the Missouri Synod, No. 415.

himself is speaking to us. There are two editions of this hymn, one containing five, the other four strophes. The former, likely, is the older. Luther embodied this hymn, in 1542, in his collection of Christian funeral hymns, and it was frequently used in later times at burials. In the first print, of 1523, this hymn is still without its peculiar melody, which gives beautiful tonal expression both to repentance and faith. Even Catholics seized upon this hymn and published it in a new recension. The hymn boasts mighty achievements in the course of the Reformation. For instance, it is said to have aided materially in introducing the Reformation in the district of Magdeburg. During his sojourn at Castle Coburg in 1530 Luther drew strength from this hymn in hours of deep despondency. During the siege of Strassburg by the French in 1681 the Evangelical congregation started to sing this hymn in the *Muenster*. It proved to be the last evangelical hymn sung in that church, for when the fortress was taken by the French, the *Muenster*, or Dome, had to be surrendered to the Catholics for worship. Also during the late World War many a soldier found in this hymn an apt expression of his own sentiments in moments of supreme danger.

The singer starts with a cry of distress from the depth of sinful misery, as if to induce himself to cling to the grace of God alone, to which he reverts in the second stanza. Embracing the Word of God, he declares in the third stanza that he places all his trust in the mercy of God. Braced by this confidence, he is, in the fourth stanza, seen crushing all his afflictions under foot. Having thus fought the penitent sinner's battle with God to a finish, he declares himself certain, in the fifth stanza, of the successful outcome of his struggle. Step by step the singer has climbed to the summit of his song. He has achieved inward freedom from all agony. He enjoys consolation; that is the trophy of his battle of prayer. Now, too, he is in a position to offer comfort to such as have to fight the same battle. No longer he speaks in the singular, but in the plural number:—

Ob bei uns ist der Suenden viel,
Bei Gott ist viel mehr Gnade.

The poet has arrived at the psychological point which his great protagonist Paul had reached when he broke forth in the triumphant language recorded in Rom. 8, 33. 34. Luther has called the composer of the 130th Psalm "a genuine master and doctor of Holy Writ." The experiences recited in this psalm from

beginning to end, more strikingly than in any other, Luther had personally lived through. Like the psalmist he had called and cried from the depth of alienation from God; like him he had waited from one vigil to the next, until he, too, had found that "with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption." For this reason his hymn "Aus tiefer Not," having been born out of the 130th Psalm, has touched the hearts of men like lightning. Abundant blessings that have sprung from the perusal of this hymn can be exhibited from the records of history.

While the two hymns sketched in the preceding paragraphs delineate to us the inner development of Luther himself, the evolution of the reformatory movement is aptly illustrated by the third hymn of the year 1523. There is no doubt that the hymn "Ach Gott vom Himmel, sieh darein"⁸⁾ had its origin in a very agitated moment of the Reformer's life. It was wrested from him at a time when his mind was directed, not only against the perverters of the Gospel in the Catholic Church, but also against all the false teachers who at that time were putting the work of the Reformation in jeopardy, chiefly against Carlstadt and Muenzer. Accordingly, the first three stanzas depict the deplorable condition of Christendom, while the last stanzas describe the Reformation and the new life in the Church and in the heart of Christians. This hymn has been aptly inscribed "A Hymn regarding the Word of God and the Christian Church." Its prosodic structure is the same as that of the two hymns reviewed in the foregoing and explains why this structure has been termed the psalm strophe or Luther strophe. There is a tone of energetic questioning, of challenge, in it. It draws blasts from the trumpet which the psalmists used. Great effects of this hymn were recorded in the sixteenth century. For the reformatory activity of Ph. J. Spener the fourth stanza became the slogan. On a number of occasions he drew comfort and cheer from the singing of this verse. In the course of time the Catholics appropriated this hymn; they recast it and turned the attacks which this hymn makes on the Catholic Church into attacks on the Evangelical Church. The peculiar melody for this hymn is thus described by W. Nelle: "It moves the heart and yet is full of vigor, thus equaling the text in noble qualities, and even surpassing it in lyrical power. We should love all the more to sing the hymn after this melody because the melody came into existence with the hymn and belongs exclusively

8) *Ev. Luth. Hymn-book* of the Missouri Synod, No. 278.

to it. No hymn of any renown has been composed after this melody." E. Koch characterizes the hymn as follows: "It is a hymn full of ideas that have made world history, a masterful achievement of our faithful father Luther, a twin sister of 'Nun freut euch.' While the latter directs our view to the redeeming acts of God and accordingly starts with a cheerful note, the former makes our hearts feel the full solemnity of those days of historical moment for the world."

Pfarrer Eichner follows up his sketches of the great hymns of Luther in 1523 with a sketch of Paul Speratus's hymn, "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her,"⁹ which Luther had requested of the author for his hymn-book. We must forego the pleasure of reproducing his remarks. He concludes his review with these words: "The Reformer stands towering above his contemporaries and brother poets. Even regarding his prose in his translation of the Bible and other writings it has justly been remarked that it 'exhibits everywhere truly poetical passages.' But his real poems — what mighty force and plenitude of spirit they breathe forth! All that Luther sang as a genuine poet welled up from his innermost depth by necessity, from an innate enthusiasm for 'singing and saying,' from the most personal experiences of a godly heart. There is nothing labored in his hymns; they are heavenly truth that he has witnessed and tested in his inner life. The year 1523 (to 1524) is the four-hundredth anniversary of the German Evangelical hymn and hymn-book; may it kindle afresh and strengthen our love for sacred song!"
