

MARTIN LUTHER, FATHER OF EVANGELICAL HYMNODY

The Battle Hymn of the Reformation

*A mighty Fortress is our God,
A trusty Shield and Weapon,
He helps us in our every need
That hath us now o'ertaken.
The old malignant foe
E'er means us deadly woe:
Deep guile and cruel might
Are his dread arms in fight,
On earth is not his equal.*

*With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye who this may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He,
As Lord of Hosts adored,
Our only King and Lord,
He holds the field forever.*

*Though devils all the world should fill,
All watching to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They cannot overpower us.
For this world's prince may still
Scowl fiercely as he will,
We need not be alarmed,
For he is now disarmed;
One little word o'erthrows him.*

*The Word they still shall let remain,
or any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain,
With His good gifts and Spirit.
Take they, then, what they will,
Life, goods, yea, all; and still,
E'en when their worst is done,
They yet have nothing won,
The kingdom ours remaineth.*

MARTIN LUTHER, 1527?

The father of evangelical hymnody was Martin Luther. It was through the efforts of the great Reformer that the lost art of congregational singing was restored and the Christian hymn again given a place in public worship.

Luther was an extraordinary man. To defy the most powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy the world has known, to bring about a cataclysmic upheaval in the religious and political world, and to set spiritual forces into motion that have changed the course of human history -- this would have been sufficient to have gained for him undying fame. But those who know Luther only as a Reformer know very little about the versatile gifts and remarkable achievements of this great prophet of the Church.

Philip Schaff has characterized Luther as "the Ambrose of German hymnody," and adds: "To Luther belongs the extraordinary merit of having given to the German people in their own tongue the Bible, the Catechism, and the hymn book, so that God might speak *directly* to them in His word, and that they might *directly* answer Him in their songs." He also refers to him as "the father of the modern High German language and literature."

Luther was divinely endowed for his great mission. From childhood he was passionately fond of music. As a student at Magdeburg, and later at Eisenach, he sang for alms at the windows of wealthy citizens. It was the sweet voice of the boy that attracted the attention of Ursula Cotta and moved that benevolent woman to give him a home during his school days.

The flute and lute were his favorite instruments, and he used the latter always in accompanying his own singing. John Walther, a contemporary composer who later aided Luther in the writing of church music, has left us this testimony: "It is to my certain knowledge that that holy man of God, Luther, prophet and apostle to the German nation, took great delight in music, both in choral and figural composition. I spent many a delightful hour with him in singing; and oftentimes I have seen the dear man wax so happy and merry in heart over the singing that it is well-nigh impossible to weary or content him therewithal. And his discourse concerning music was most noble."

In his "Discourse in Praise of Music," Luther gives thanks to God for having bestowed the power of song on the "nightingale and the many thousand birds of the air," and again he writes, "I give music the highest and most honorable place; and every one knows how David and all the saints put their divine thoughts into verse, rhyme, and song."

Luther had little patience with the iconoclasts of his day. He wrote in the Preface to Walther's collection of hymns, in 1525: "I am not of the opinion that all sciences should be beaten down and made to cease by the Gospel, as some fanatics pretend, but I would fain see all the arts, and music, in particular, used in the service of Him who hath given and created them." At another time he was even more emphatic: "If any man despises music, as all fanatics do, for him I have no liking; for music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil and makes people cheerful. Then one forgets all wrath, impurity, sycophancy, and other vices."

Luther loved the Latin hymns that glorified Christ. He recognized, however, that they were so permeated with Mariolatry and other errors of the Roman Church that a refining process was necessary in order to rid them of their dross and permit the fine gold to appear. Moreover, the Latin hymns, even in their most glorious development, had not grown out of the spiritual life of the congregation. The very genius of the Roman Church precluded this, for church music and song was regarded as belonging exclusively to the priestly office. Moreover, since the entire worship was conducted in Latin, the congregation was inevitably doomed to passive silence.

Brave efforts by John Huss and his followers to introduce congregational singing in the Bohemian churches had been sternly opposed by the Roman hierarchy. The Council of Constance, which in 1415 burned the heroic Huss at the stake, also sent a solemn warning to Jacob of Misi, his successor as leader of the Hussites, to cease the practice of singing hymns in the churches. It decreed: "If laymen are forbidden to preach and interpret the Scriptures, much more are they forbidden to sing publicly in the churches."

Luther's ringing declaration that all believers constitute a universal priesthood necessarily implied that the laity should also participate in the worship. Congregational singing therefore became inevitable.

Luther also realized that spiritual song could be enlisted as a powerful ally in spreading the evangelical doctrines. During the birth throes of the Reformation he often expressed the wish that someone more gifted than himself might give to the German people in their own language some of the beautiful pearls of Latin hymnody. He also wanted original hymns in the vernacular, as well as strong, majestic chorales that would reflect the heroic spirit of the age.

"We lack German poets and musicians," he complained, "or they are unknown to us, who are able to make Christian and spiritual songs of such value that they can be used daily in the house of God."

Then something happened that opened the fountains of song in Luther's own bosom. The Reformation had spread from Germany into other parts of Europe, and the Catholic authorities had commenced to adopt stern measures in an effort to stem the revolt. In the Augustinian cloister at Antwerp, the prior of the abbey and two youths, Heinrich Voes and Johannes Esch, had been sentenced to death by the Inquisition for their refusal to surrender their new-born faith.

The prior was choked to death in his prison cell. The two youths were led to the stake at Brussels, on July 1, 1523. Before the faggots were kindled they were told that they might still be freed if they would recant. They replied that they would rather die and be with Christ. Before the fire and smoke smothered their voices, they sang the ancient Latin hymn, "Lord God, we praise thee."

When news of the Brussels tragedy reached Luther the poetic spark in his soul burst into full flame. Immediately he sat down and wrote a festival hymn commemorating the death of the first Lutheran martyrs. It had been reported to Luther that when the fires began to lick the feet of Voes, witnesses had heard him exclaim, "Behold, blooming roses are strewn around me." Luther seized upon the words as prophetic and concluded his hymn with the lines:

"Summer is even at the door,
The winter now hath vanished,
The tender flowerets spring once more,
And He who winter banished
Will send a happy summer."

The opening words of the hymn are also significant, "Ein neues Lied wir heben an." Although the poem must be regarded as more of a ballad than a church hymn, Luther's lyre was tuned, the springtime of evangelical hymnody was indeed come, and before another year had passed a little hymn-book called "The Achtliederbuch" appeared as the first-fruits.

It was in 1524 that this first Protestant hymnal was published. It contained only eight hymns, four by Luther, three by Speratus, and one probably by Justus Jonas. The little hymn-books flew all over Europe, to the consternation of the Romanists. Luther's enemies lamented that "the whole people are singing themselves into his doctrines." So great was the demand for hymns that a second volume known as the "Erfurt Enchiridion" was published in the same year. This contained twenty-five hymns, eighteen of which were Luther's. "The nightingale of Wittenberg" had begun to sing.

This was the beginning of evangelical hymnody, which was to play so large a part in the spread of Luther's teachings. The number of hymn-books by other compilers increased rapidly and so many unauthorized changes were made in his hymns by critical editors that Luther was moved to complain of their practice.

In a preface to a hymn-book printed by Joseph Klug of Wittenberg, in 1543, Luther writes: "I am fearful that it will fare with this little book as it has ever fared with good books, namely, that through tampering by incompetent hands it may get to be so over laid and spoiled that the good will be lost out of it, and nothing kept in use but the worthless." Then he adds, naively: "Every man may make a hymn-book for himself and let ours alone and not add thereto, as we here beg, wish and assert. For we desire to keep our own coin up to our own standard, preventing no one from making better hymns for himself. Now let God's name alone be praised and our name not sought. Amen."

Of the thirty-six hymns attributed to Luther none has achieved such fame as "A mighty fortress is our God." It has been translated into practically every language and is regarded as one of the noblest and most classical examples of Christian hymnody. Not only did it become the battle hymn of the Reformation, but it may be regarded as the true national hymn of Germany. Heine called it "the Marseillaise of the Reformation." Frederick the Great referred to it as "God

Almighty's grenadier march."

The date of the hymn cannot be fixed with any certainty. Much has been written on the subject, but none of the arguments appear conclusive. D'Aubigne's unqualified statement that Luther composed it and sang it to revive the spirits of his friends at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 can scarcely be accepted, since it appeared at least a year earlier in a hymn-book published by Joseph Klug.

The magnificent chorale to which the hymn is sung is also Luther's work. Never have words and music been combined to make so tremendous an appeal. Great musical composers have turned to its stirring theme again and again when they have sought to produce a mighty effect. Mendelssohn has used it in the last movement of his Reformation symphony; Meyerbeer uses it to good advantage in his masterpiece, "Les Huguenots" ; and Wagner's "Kaisermarsch," written to celebrate the triumphal return of the German troops in 1870, reaches a great climax with the whole orchestra thundering forth the sublime chorale. Bach has woven it into a beautiful cantata, while Raff and Nicolai make use of it in overtures.

After Luther's death, when Melancthon and his friends were compelled to flee from Wittenberg by the approach of the Spanish army, they came to Weimar. As they were entering the city, they heard a little girl singing Luther's great hymn. "Sing on, my child," exclaimed Melancthon, "thou little knowest how thy song cheers our hearts."

When Gustavus Adolphus, the hero king of Sweden, faced Tilly's hosts at the battlefield of Leipzig, Sept. 7, 1631, he led his army in singing "Ein feste Burg." Then shouting, "God is with us," he went into battle. It was a bloody fray. Tilly fell and his army was beaten. When the battle was over, Gustavus Adolphus knelt upon the ground among his soldiers and thanked the Lord of Hosts for victory, saying, "He holds the field forever."

At another time during the Thirty Years' War a Swedish trumpeter captured the ensign of the Imperial army. Pursued by the enemy he found himself trapped with a swollen river before him. He paused for a moment and prayed, "Help me, O my God," and then thrust spurs into his horse and plunged into the midst of the current. The Imperialists were afraid to follow him, whereupon he raised his trumpet to his lips and sounded the defiant notes: "A mighty fortress is our God!"

George N. Anderson, a missionary in Tanganyika Province, British East Africa, tells how he once heard an assembly of 2,000 natives sing Luther's great hymn. "I never heard it sung with more spirit; the effect was almost overwhelming," he testifies.

A West African missionary, Christaller, relates how he once sang "Ein feste Burg" to his native interpreter. "That man, Luther," said the African, "must have been a powerful man, one can feel it in his hymns."

Thomas Carlyle's estimate of "Ein feste Burg" seems to accord with that of the African native.

"It jars upon our ears," he says, "yet there is something in it like the sound of Alpine avalanches, or the first murmur of earthquakes, in the very vastness of which dissonance a higher unison is revealed to us."

Carlyle, who refers to Luther as "perhaps the most inspired of all teachers since the Apostles," has given us the most rugged of all translations of the Reformer's great hymn. There are said to be no less than eighty English translations, but only a few have met with popular favor. In England the version by Carlyle is in general use, while in America various composite translations are found in hymn-books. Carlyle's first stanza reads

A sure stronghold our God is He,
A trusty Shield and Weapon;
Our help He'll be, and set us free
From every ill can happen.
That old malicious foe
Intends us deadly woe;
Armed with might from hell
And deepest craft as well,
On earth is not his fellow.

The greater number of Luther's hymns are not original. Many are paraphrases of Scripture, particularly the Psalms, and others are based on Latin, Greek, and German antecedents. In every instance, however, the great Reformer so imbued them with his own fervent faith and militant spirit that they seem to shine with a new luster.

The hymns of Luther most frequently found in hymn books today are "Come, Thou Saviour of our race," "Good news from heaven the angels bring," "In death's strong grasp the Saviour lay," "Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord," "Come, Holy Spirit, from above," "Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy word," "Lord, Jesus Christ, to Thee we pray," "Dear Christians, one and all rejoice," "Out of the depths I cry to Thee," and "We all believe in one true God."