

THE HYMN-WRITERS OF THE REFORMATION

A Metrical Gloria in Excelsis

*All glory be to Thee, Most High,
To Thee all adoration!
In grace and truth Thou drawest nigh
To offer us salvation.
Thou showest Thy good will toward men,
And peace shall reign on earth again;
We praise Thy Name forever.*

*We praise, we worship Thee, we trust,
And give Thee thanks forever,
Father, for Thy rule is just
And wise, and changes never.
Thy hand almighty o'er us reigns,
Thou doest what Thy will ordains;
'Tis well for us Thou rulest.*

*Jesus Christ, our God and Lord,
Son of the Heavenly Father,
Thou, who hast our peace restored,
The straying sheep dost gather,
Thou Lamb of God, to Thee on high
Out of the depths we sinners cry:
Have mercy on us, Jesus!*

*Holy Ghost, Thou precious gift,
Thou Comforter, unailing,
From Satan's snares our souls uplift,
And let Thy power, availing,
Avert our woes and calm our dread;
For us the Saviour's blood was shed,
We trust in Thee to save us!*

NICOLAUS DECIUS, 1526, 1539

The hymns of the Reformation were like a trumpet call, proclaiming to all the world that the day of spiritual emancipation had come. What they lacked in poetic refinement they more than made up by their tremendous earnestness and spiritual exuberance.

They faithfully reflect the spirit of the age in which they were born, a period of strife and conflict. The strident note that often appears in Luther's hymns can easily be understood when it is remembered that the great Reformer looked upon the pope as Antichrist himself and all others who opposed the Lutheran teachings as confederates of the devil.

In 1541, when the Turkish invasion from the East threatened to devastate all Europe, special days of humiliation and prayer were held throughout Germany. It was for one of these occasions that Luther wrote the hymn, "Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy word." In its original form, however, it was quite different from the hymn we now sing. The first stanza ran:

Lord, keep us in Thy word and work,
Restrain the murderous pope and Turk,
Who fain would tear from off Thy throne
Christ Jesus, Thy beloved Son.

When Luther, on the other hand, sang of God's free grace to men in Christ Jesus, or extolled the merits of the Saviour, or gave thanks for the word of God restored to men, there was such a marvelous blending of childlike trust, victorious faith and spontaneous joy that all Germany was thrilled by the message.

The popularity of the Lutheran hymns was astonishing. Other hymn-writers sprang up in large numbers, printing presses were kept busy, and before Luther's death no less than sixty collections of hymns had been published. Wandering evangelists were often surrounded by excited crowds in the market places, hymns printed on leaflets were distributed, and the whole populace would join in singing the songs of the Reformers.

Paul Speratus, Paul Eber, and Justus Jonas were the most gifted co-laborers of Luther. It was Speratus who contributed three hymns to the "Achtliederbuch," the first hymn-book published by Luther. His most famous hymn, "To us salvation now is come," has been called "the poetic counterpart of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans." It was the great confessional hymn of the Reformation. Luther is said to have wept tears of joy when he heard it sung by a street singer outside his window in Wittenberg.

Speratus wrote the hymn in a Moravian prison into which he had been cast because of his bold espousal of the Lutheran teachings. Immediately upon his release he proceeded to Wittenberg, where he joined himself to the Reformers. He later became the leader of the Reformation movement in Prussia and before his death in 1551 was chosen bishop of Pomerania. His poetic genius may be seen reflected in the beautiful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer which forms the concluding two stanzas of his celebrated hymn

All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise
To Father, Son, and Spirit,
The God who saved us by His grace,

All glory to His merit:
O Father in the heavens above,
Thy glorious works show forth Thy love,
Thy worthy Name be hallowed.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done
In earth, as 'tis in heaven:
Keep us in life, by grace led on,
Forgiving and forgiven;
Save Thou us in temptation's hour,
And from all ills; Thine is the power,
And all the glory, Amen!

Eber was the sweetest singer among the Reformers. As professor of Hebrew at Wittenberg University and assistant to Melancthon, he had an active part in the stirring events of the Reformation. He possessed more of Melancthon's gentleness than Luther's ruggedness, and his hymns are tender and appealing in their childlike simplicity. There is wondrous consolation in his hymns for the dying, as witness his pious swan-song:

In Thy dear wounds I fall asleep,
O Jesus, cleanse my soul from sin:
Thy bitter death, Thy precious blood
For me eternal glory win.

By Thee redeemed, I have no fear,
When now I leave this mortal clay,
With joy before Thy throne I come;
God's own must die, yet live always.

Welcome, O death! thou bringest me
To dwell with God eternally;
Through Christ my soul from sin is free,
O take me now, dear Lord, to Thee !

Another hymn for the dying, "Lord Jesus Christ, true man and God," breathes the same spirit of hope and trust in Christ. During the years of persecution and suffering that followed the Reformation, the Protestants found much comfort in singing Eber's "When in the hour of utmost need."

Justus Jonas, the bosom friend of Luther who spoke the last words of peace and consolation to the dying Reformer and who also preached his funeral sermon, has left us the hymn, "If God were not upon our side," based on Psalm 124.

From this period we also have the beautiful morning hymn, "My inmost heart now raises," by Johannes Mathesius, the pupil and biographer of Luther, and an equally beautiful evening hymn, "Sunk is the sun's last beam of light," by Nicholas Hermann. Mathesius was pastor of the church at Joachimsthal, in Bohemia, and Hermann was his organist and choirmaster. It is said that whenever Mathesius preached a particularly good sermon, Hermann was forthwith inspired to write a hymn on its theme! He was a poet and musician of no mean ability, and his tunes are among the best from the Reformation period.

The example of the Wittenberg hymnists was quickly followed by evangelicals in other parts of Germany, and hymn-books began to appear everywhere. As early as 1526 a little volume of hymns was published at Rostock in the Platt-Deutsch dialect. In this collection we find one of the most glorious hymns of the Reformation, "All glory be to Thee, Most High," or, as it has also been rendered, "All glory be to God on high," a metrical version of the ancient canticle, *Gloria in Excelsis*. Five years later another edition was published in which appeared a metrical rendering of *Agnus Dei*:

O Lamb of God, most holy,
On Calvary an offering;
Despised, meek, and, lowly,
Thou in Thy death and suffering
Our sins didst bear, our anguish;
The might of death didst vanquish;
Give us Thy peace, O Jesus!

The author of both of these gems of evangelical hymnody was Nicolaus Decius, a Catholic monk in the cloister of Steterburg who embraced the Lutheran teachings. He later became pastor of St. Nicholas church in Stettin, where he died under suspicious circumstances in 1541. In addition to being a popular preacher and gifted poet, he also seems to have been a musician of some note. The two magnificent chorals to which his hymns are sung are generally credited to him, although there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding their composition. Luther prized both hymns very highly and included them in his German liturgy.