

## HYMNODY OF THE CONTROVERSIAL PERIOD

### *A Beautiful Confirmation Hymn*

*Let me be Thine forever,  
My gracious God and Lord,  
May I forsake Thee never,  
Nor wander from Thy Word:  
Preserve me from the mazes  
Of error and distrust,  
And I shall sing Thy praises  
Forever with the just.*

*Lord Jesus, bounteous Giver  
Of light and life divine,  
Thou didst my soul deliver,  
To Thee I all resign:  
Thou hast in mercy bought me  
With blood and bitter pain;  
Let me, since Thou hast sought me,  
Eternal life obtain.*

*O Holy Ghost, who pourest  
Sweet peace into my heart,  
And who my soul restorest,  
Let not Thy grace depart.  
And while His Name confessing  
Whom I by faith have known,  
Grant me Thy constant blessing,  
Make me for aye Thine own.*

NICOLAUS SELNECKER, 1572, *et al.*

Any of our great Christian hymns were born in troublous times. This is true in a very special sense of the hymns written by Nicolaus Selnecker, German preacher and theologian. The age in which he lived was the period immediately following the Reformation. It was an age marked by doctrinal controversy, not only with the Romanists, but among the Protestants themselves. In these theological struggles, Selnecker will always be remembered as one of the great champions of pure Lutheran doctrine.

"The Formula of Concord," the last of the Lutheran confessions, was largely the work of

Selnecker. Published in 1577, it did more than any other single document to clarify the Lutheran position on many disputed doctrinal points, thus bringing to an end much of the confusion and contro versy that had existed up to that time.

Selnecker early in life revealed an artistic temperament. Born in 1532 at Hersbruck, Germany, we find him at the age of twelve years organist at the chapel in the Kaiserburg, at Nurnberg, where he attended school. Later he entered Wittenberg University to study law. Here he came under the influence of Philip Melanchthon, and was induced to prepare himself for the ministry. It is said that Selnecker was Melanchthon's favorite pupil.

Following his graduation from Wittenberg, he lectured for a while at the university and then received the appointment as second court preacher at Dresden and private tutor to Prince Alexander of Saxony. Many of the Saxon theologians at this time were leaning strongly toward the Calvinistic teaching regarding the Lord's Supper, and when Selnecker came out boldly for the Lutheran doctrine he incurred the hostility of those in authority. Later, when he supported a Lutheran pastor who had dared to preach against Elector August's passion for hunting, he was compelled to leave Dresden.

For three years he held the office of professor of theology at the University of Jena, but in 1568 he again found favor with the Elector August and was appointed to the chair of theology in the University of Leipzig. It was here that Selnecker again became involved in bitter doctrinal disputes regarding the Lord's Supper, and in 1576 and 1577 he joined a group of theologians, including Jacob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz, in working out the Formula of Concord.

Upon the death of Elector August the Calvinists again secured ecclesiastical control, and Selnecker once more was compelled to leave Leipzig. After many trials and vicissitudes, he finally returned, May 19, 1592, a worn and weary man, only to die in Leipzig five days later.

During the stormy days of his life, Selnecker often sought solace in musical and poetical pursuits. Many of his hymns reflect his own personal troubles and conflicts. "Let me be thine forever" is believed to have been written during one of the more grievous experiences of his life. It was a prayer of one stanza originally, but two additional stanzas were added by an unknown author almost a hundred years after Selnecker's death. In its present form it has become a favorite confirmation hymn in the Lutheran Church.

Selnecker's zeal for his Church is revealed in many of his hymns, among them the famous "Abide with us, O Saviour dear." The second stanza of this hymn clearly reflects the distressing controversies in which he was engaged at the time:

This is a dark and evil day,  
Forsake us not, O Lord, we pray;  
And let us in our grief and pain  
Thy Word and sacraments retain.

In connection with his work as professor in the University of Leipzig, he also served as pastor of the famous St. Thomas church in that city. It was through his efforts that the renowned Motett choir of that church was built up, a choir that was afterward conducted by John Sebastian Bach.

About 150 hymns in all were written by Selnecker. In addition to these he also was author of some 175 theological and controversial works.

One of the contemporaries of Selnecker was Bartholomäus Ringwalt, pastor of Langfeld, near Sonnenburg, Brandenburg. This man also was a staunch Lutheran and a poet of considerable ability. His judgment hymn, "The day is surely drawing near," seems to reflect the feeling held by many in those distressing times that the Last Day was near at hand. It was used to a large extent during the Thirty Years' War, and is still found in many hymn-books.

Another hymnist who lived and wrought during these turbulent times was Martin Behm, to whom we are indebted for three beautiful lyrics, "O Jesus, King of glory," "Lord Jesus Christ, my Life, my Light," and "O holy, blessed Trinity." Behm, who was born in Lauban, Silesia, Sept. 16, 1557, served for thirty-six years as Lutheran pastor in his native city. He was a noted preacher and a gifted poet. His hymn on the Trinity is one of the finest ever written on this theme. It concludes with a splendid paraphrase of the Aaronic benediction. Two of its stanzas are:

O holy, blessed Trinity,  
Divine, eternal Unity,  
God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost,  
Be Thou this day my guide and host.

Lord, bless and keep Thou me as Thine;  
Lord, make Thy face upon me shine;  
Lord, lift Thy countenance on me,  
And give me peace, sweet peace from Thee.

Valerius Herberger was another heroic representative of this period of doctrinal strife, war, famine, and pestilence. While pastor of St. Mary's Lutheran Church at Fraustadt, Posen, he and his flock were expelled from their church in 1604 by King Sigismund III, of Poland, and the property turned over to the Roman Catholics. Nothing daunted, however, Herberger and his people immediately constructed a chapel out of two houses near the gates of the city. They gave the structure the name of "Kripplein Christi," since the first service was held in it on Christmas Eve.

During the great pestilence which raged in 1613, the victims in Fraustadt numbered 2,135. Herberger, however, stuck to his post, comforting the sick and burying the dead. It was during

these days that he wrote his famous hymn, "Valet will ich dir geben," one of the finest hymns for the dying in the German language. The hymn was published with the title, "The farewell (Valet) of Valerius Herberger that he gave to the world in the autumn of the year 1613, when he every hour saw death before his eyes, but mercifully and also as wonderfully as the three men in the furnace at Baby Ion was nevertheless spared."

The famous chorale tune for the hymn was written in 1613 by Melchior Teschner, who was Herberger's precentor.

Other Lutheran hymn-writers of this period were Joachim Magdeburg, Martin Rutilius, Martin Schalling and Philipp Nicolai. The last name in this group is by far the most important and will be given more extensive notice in the following chapter. To Magdeburg, a pastor who saw service in various parts of Germany and Hungary during a stormy career, we owe a single hymn, "Who trusts in God a strong abode." Rutilius has been credited with the authorship of the gripping penitential hymn, "Alas, my God! my sins are great," although the claim is sometimes disputed. He was a pastor at Weimar, where he died in 1618.

Schalling likewise has bequeathed but a single hymn to the Church, but it may be regarded as one of the classic hymns of Germany. Its opening line, "O Lord, devoutly love I Thee," reflects the ardent love of the author himself for the Saviour. It was entitled, "A prayer to Christ, the Consolation of the soul in life and death," and surely its message of confiding trust in God has been a source of comfort and assurance to thousands of pious souls in the many vicissitudes of life as well as in the valley of the shadow.

Although Schalling was a warm friend of Selnecker, he hesitated to subscribe to the Formula of Concord, claiming that it dealt too harshly with the followers of Melancthon. For this reason he was deposed as General Superintendent of Oberpfalz and court preacher at Heidelberg. Five years later, however, he was appointed pastor of St. Mary's church in Nurnberg, where he remained until blindness compelled him to retire. He died in 1608.