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Music and the Church

26 January 2007

A Mighty Fortress: A powerful hymn for desperate times

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg castle church door in 1517, he set off a firestorm of controversy that would soon engulf the entire continent of Europe. Luther’s central contention was that the Roman Catholic Church had erred in naming itself the sole mediator between God and men. He contended that every member should be able to come to God on his (or her) own, without relying on a priest. Consequently, members should be able to read the Scriptures on their own. Some would say that Luther worked to abolish the priesthood, but perhaps a more accurate description would be that he worked to abolish the laity. Every member became a priest, with direct access to God.

This thinking also extended to music in the church. Guye Johnson describes Luther as a talented singer who paid for his education by singing at the windows of wealthy citizens (262). This interest in music apparently never left him, and one of his goals as a reformer was to return the church to congregational singing. Accordingly, he translated Latin hymns into his native German, and encouraged contemporary poets to write whatever they liked—provided it was evangelical in nature. In addition, Luther penned 37 hymns of his own, though only ten survive in English. Albert Bailey argues that it was the Hymnal Luther produced that “generated the power” of his movement (313). This is, of course, debatable, but it is clear that Luther’s contribution to hymnody was significant. The continued popularity of his “Ein’ Feste Burg,” better known in English as “A Mighty Fortress,” is a testament to this fact.

The exact date of this hymn has not been established, but most scholars agree that Luther wrote it during a pivotal moment of his movement. Bailey writes that numerous Lutheran soldiers had been involved with the struggle between Emperor Charles V and Pope Clement VII. Upon vanquishing the pope, these soldiers had looted the Vatican, prompting the Catholic majority in the German Reichstag to condemn the Protestant movement. Charles V moved to suppress the Lutherans, and the battle for survival was on. It may have been during these dark days that Luther turned to Psalm 46 for inspiration. Out of this came “Ein’ Feste Burg.”

If this is correct, “A Mighty Fortress” was written to encourage Lutherans who were facing the persecution of the Roman Catholic Church. Since then, though, it has been applied to countless other situations. Military leaders used it to rally their troops. Other Protestant groups used it both in celebration and in memorial of historic events. Modern Christians used it following the attacks of September 11, 2001. The seemingly universal appeal of this song is evidence that its imagery speaks to a deep-seated human need for reassurance in times of trouble.

The vehicle by which this imagery works, though, is the rugged melody, also composed by Luther. Opinions vary concerning Luther’s inspiration for the tune. Bailey suggests it may have been adopted from an old Gregorian melody (315). Paul Westermeyer points out that it follows the pattern of very old Eurasian migration tunes (59). Johnson suggests that Luther composed this tune from fragments of tunes he sang as a monk (262). Regardless of the inspiration, it is clear that this tune was composed for congregational singing rather than for polished choirs or soloists. True to Reformation form, this tune helped to abolish hierarchical structure in worship, not by abolishing the choir, but by eliminating the audience. Every member could sing along, entering fully into the worship process. It is a testament to Luther’s creativity and skill as a composer that he was able to write a tune sufficiently easy to master for untrained singers, and sufficiently complex to hold the attention of those to whom it had become familiar.

It is interesting that we as Anabaptists also find “A Mighty Fortress” appealing. At first glance it appears that the bellicose imagery stands in contrast to our nonresistant stance. A closer look, however, clearly shows that it is speaking of a spiritual battle. The military commanders who rallied their troops with this song probably omitted the final stanza, which plainly separates the singer from earthly powers and proclaims that God’s truth stands independent of human institutions. Though Luther did not have a modern understanding of the separation of church and state, this hymn testifies to his recognition that, ultimately, our salvation must rely on God’s power, rather than our own.**Works Cited**

Bailey, Albert. *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and interpretations.* New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950.

Johnson, Guye. *Treasury of Great Hymns and Their Stories.* Greenville, SC: Bob Jones U P, 1986.

Westermeyer, Paul. *Let the People Sing: Hymn tunes in perspective.* Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005.