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## Henry Melchior Muehlenberg

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## Henry Melchior Muehlenberg

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### An Appreciation

Dr. E. A. W. Krauss, in his *Lebensbilder*, calls Heinrich Melchior Muehlenberg the patriarch of the Lutheran Church in America. Dr. A. L. Graebner, in his *Geschichte der lutherischen Kirche in Amerika*, declares that he was the "greatest man whom God bestowed upon the American Lutheran Church of the 18th century." Dr. G. Fritschel, in his *Geschichte der lutherischen Kirche in Amerika*, writes of Muehlenberg: "So eng war er mit all ihren Interessen verbunden, so hervorragend erscheint er in allen ihren Teilen von Neu-Schottland (Nova Scotia) bis Georgia, dasz die Geschichte der Kirche seit seiner Landung 1742 bis zu seinem Tode zu Trappe am 7. Oktober 1787 kaum mehr ist als seine Biographie." Those are high tributes indeed!

In order to evaluate the services of this man, who is to this day held in high esteem in all branches of the Lutheran Church in America, the 200th anniversary of whose coming to America is being remembered this year, it will be necessary to sketch in broad outline the chief facts of his very full and active life.

Muehlenberg first saw the light of day at a time when George Washington, whose senior contemporary he was to be, had not yet been born; five years after the first collection of Isaac Watts' hymns was published; five years after the first Lutheran missionaries, Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau, went to India; ten years before Hans Egede sailed on his famous missionary journey to Greenland; when our country, our United States of America, was not even dreamed of; when the English colonies on our soil were small and struggling; and when Lutheranism in America was represented by a few scattered groups of different nationalities and various background, unconnected, disorganized, and in no way conscious of the great future which our Church was destined to find on this continent.

Muehlenberg was born at Eimbeck in Hanover on Sept. 6, 1711, one hundred years before the birth of Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. His family, once well to do and prominent, had become impoverished. He was a gifted boy and from childhood seems to have had the ministry in mind. As a boy, probably not over twelve, he showed the serious bent of his nature in a poem which he inscribed on a blank page in the family Bible. Referring to the account of the healing of the man with a withered hand (Matt. 12:10-13), he wrote in German:

Two hands, both fresh and strong, did my Creator give;  
 They shall not idle be as long as I may live;  
 First I will raise them up to God to praise and pray,  
 And then they may begin what labors brings each day.  
 In truth, I never will forget the *Ora*,  
 And with it, hand in hand, I'll practice the *Labora*.

"Certainly, this is satisfactory evidence that the youth intelligently appropriated and applied the Word of God as he read it or was instructed in it." (Mann, *Biography of Henry Melchior Muehlenberg*.)

The evident gifts of the son encouraged the father to plan for his higher education, but the latter's early death forced the son to take up manual labor instead in order to help support the family. His spare time, however, was devoted to study and music (he learned to play both the organ and the clavichord), and when he reached the age of twenty-one, he took up the study of Latin and then of Greek. At 24, when he entered the newly founded University of Goettingen, a step made possible by the financial aid of the city of Eimbeck and some friends, he read the Latin classics fluently and could understand the Greek of the New Testament. It was characteristic that already during his university days he became interested in the temporal and spiritual welfare of some beggar children, instructing them and otherwise looking after their needs.

Upon graduating from Goettingen, he went to Jena for a short period and then taught a year at the famous Halle Orphanage, where at first he had a class of small boys. Later it was also made his duty, "in the higher classes of those extensive institutions, to give instruction in Greek, Hebrew, and in some theological branches, and he was appointed 'inspector' of a ward of the sick, which office . . . gave him opportunity to acquire some knowledge of the medical art, which he had ample occasion to make good use of in the future years of his life." (Mann, pp. 12 and 13.)

It must be borne in mind that the Halle institutions were at this time the headquarters of the Lutheran Danish-Halle missions in India, besides being a center for eleemosynary work in Germany generally. These activities brought the fathers of Halle into correspondence with godly men in various countries, for instance, with the German court preacher at London, the Rev. F. M. Ziegenhagen, D. D., who there became a fatherly friend and adviser to many missionaries sent out by Halle. Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau had spent some time in Halle before going to India. Christian Frederick Schwartz, the most successful of all German missionaries of the 18th century, was to come forth out of these institutions a little later. August Herman Francke, the world-renowned founder of the Halle institutions, had died in 1727. At this time his son,

Gotthilf August Francke, was the directing head. Gotthilf August Francke and his co-workers readily recognized the outstanding abilities of young Muehlenberg and hoped to send him to India to establish a new mission in Bengal, but "outward circumstances prevented the execution of the plan." And so after a year at Halle the young candidate entered upon a pastoral charge at Grosshennersdorf in Upper Lusatia (Silesia) where he served from 1739 to 1741.

It was on Muehlenberg's birthday in 1741, when he was thirty years old, having been invited to the home of G. A. Francke, that the latter handed him the call from the congregations in Philadelphia, Providence, and New Hanover in the English Colony of Pennsylvania. This call stipulated that he serve these congregations and the scattered Lutherans in Pennsylvania. Dr. Francke suggested, "zur Probe auf drei Jahre." Muehlenberg replied at once that he would go if it be the will of God. And Mrs. Francke was so overjoyed that she made him a present of a dressing gown, which she had made with her own hands.

It might be inserted here that this call from Pennsylvania went begging for a man for almost seven years, and it is somewhat difficult to get a clear picture of the conditions that prevailed in those days to explain why it should take so long to find a man who would be willing to go to America as pastor of three congregations. As early as 1734 the Rev. J. C. Schultze, the first German Lutheran pastor in Philadelphia, had been commissioned together with two laymen to go to Europe and obtain men and money for the support of the churches in Eastern Pennsylvania. Schultze never returned to America, and the two laymen came back after about a year without having received any definite assurance from the church authorities. Meanwhile the three congregations were being served more or less haphazardly by other "Lutheran" pastors in the vicinity, and their officials were corresponding with Ziegenhagen in London and the Halle fathers. It seems that the leaders at Halle were insistent upon some sort of guarantee that the man who would be sent would be properly supported by the congregations, and the officials of the congregations maintained that they did not want a man whose main interest was a large salary, but that he should be ready and willing to come and serve them; they on their part would take care of him in a suitable manner. In justice to the Halle fathers it must be said that they did not demand a high salary, and the congregations, described in the call as being composed of 500 families each, were certainly able to meet their modest demand. At any rate, matters dragged along from year to year until 1741, and when Muehlenberg received the call and was commissioned, the congregations were not made aware of it and did not obtain

that information until Muehlenberg suddenly appeared in their midst! It is also possible that G. A. Francke would not have submitted the call to Muehlenberg at this particular time if he had not learned that Graf Ludwig von Zinzendorf was in Philadelphia, actively endeavoring to win the Lutheran congregations for his Moravian Church.

It is interesting to read a sectarian judgment on this matter. Leonard Woolsey Bacon, in his *History of American Christianity*, writes:

"At once the 'drum ecclesiastic' beat to arms. In view of the impending danger that their scattered fellow countrymen might come into mutual fellowship on the basis of their common faith in Christ, the Lutheran leaders at Halle, who for years had been dawdling and haggling over the imploring entreaties of the shepherdless Lutheran populations in America, promptly reconsidered their *non possumus* and found and sent a man admirably qualified for the desired work, Henry Melchior Muehlenberg, a man of eminent ability and judgment, of faith, devotion, and untiring diligence, not illiberal, but a conscientious sectarian."

At the suggestion of Dr. Ziegenhagen in London, whither Muehlenberg went to receive the actual call and further instructions regarding it, he was to go to Philadelphia via the Salzburger colony in Georgia in order that Rev. J. M. Boltzius, the main leader of that group, might accompany him to Philadelphia and assist him in becoming established there. Muehlenberg sailed for Georgia on June 13, 1742, and after a voyage of over one hundred days landed at Charleston, S. C., and proceeded to Savannah from there. His visit among the Salzburgers was a refreshing experience for him. Boltzius was willing to accompany him to Philadelphia and journeyed as far as Charleston with him, but unforeseen delays prevented him from going farther. Muehlenberg finally proceeded to Philadelphia alone on a single-masted sloop and had a rather stormy voyage. It was characteristic of him that during his stay at Charleston, as well as on his voyage across the Atlantic, he took every opportunity to minister to the German Lutherans he met. He finally arrived at Philadelphia on Nov. 25, 1742. Five months and twelve days had elapsed since he left England.

There was no reception committee awaiting him at Philadelphia, no congregation anxiously looking for its new pastor, no one even aware of his coming; nothing but confusion as far as the congregational matters were concerned. Some of the people had accepted Zinzendorf as leader; others had gathered around a vagabond preacher named Kraft. At New Hanover, 36 miles northwest of Philadelphia, an unfinished log house was used as a church, and that congregation was divided over another tramp-

preacher, an ex-druggist, named Schmid. At Providence, Kraft was also in charge. Here was a critical situation, that called for a large measure of good judgment and tactfulness.

In this maze of confusion, in which he found himself, although only 32 years old, he exhibited such fine qualities and good sense, sober-mindedness, judgment, and tact that he fully confirmed the confidence which the fathers in Halle had reposed in him by giving him the call to these churches. In the *Hallesche Nachrichten*, we have his own story of his arrival in Philadelphia and the subsequent events, and it is intensely refreshing to read the account.

Valentine Kraft, it seems, at once recognized Muehlenberg's right to the congregation but tried his best to retain his own position in Philadelphia and to turn the country churches over to the new man. He traveled with him into the field and sought to persuade Muehlenberg to be content with one of the country places; but Muehlenberg carefully listened to him, took an insight into affairs at each place, and met Kraft's suggestions with silence. Again and again we read his somewhat laconic statement: "Ich lies es beruhen bis auf weitere Einsicht." "Ich schwieg stille bis auf weitere Einsicht."

His quiet demeanor, his firm stand on his call, his sincere interest in the people, made an impression on the leaders among the laity, and gradually the members rallied to his side. Finally, at a meeting called to settle Muehlenberg's right as pastor and the validity of his call, in which Count Zinzendorf was chairman and in which Muehlenberg was treated in a most humiliating manner, he was able to carry the day. Zinzendorf had to give up in defeat and soon afterwards returned to Germany. Kraft and Schmid also receded. Muehlenberg was accepted as pastor by his flocks.

Bacon's view of the matter as given in his *History of American Christianity* is colored by his antipathy to confessionalism:

"At the time of Muehlenberg's arrival, Zinzendorf was the elected and installed pastor of the Lutheran congregation in Philadelphia. The conflict could not be a long one between the man who claimed everything for his commission and his sect and the man who was resolved to insist on nothing for himself. Notwithstanding the strong love for him among the people, Zinzendorf was easily displaced from his official station. When dispute arose about the use of the empty carpenter's shop which they used for a church, he waived his own claims and at his own cost built a new house of worship. But it was no part of his work to stay and persist in maintaining a division. He retired from the field, leaving it in charge of Muehlenberg, 'being satisfied if only Christ

were preached,' and returned to Europe, having achieved a truly honorable and most Christian failure, more to be esteemed in the sight of God than many a splendid success."

If ever a man had reasons to be disheartened with conditions, it was Muehlenberg. His battle was by no means over after Zinzendorf left, for the years that followed were years to try the soul of the strongest Christian. The self-sacrificing diligence of the man, his great love for the souls in his charge and for others languishing for want of spiritual care, are evident on every page of his reports. He set an example for the Church that was needed and that helped to plant the Church on American soil. He had true zeal but was not a *Schwaermer*. His training, though strongly pietistic, had been according to true Lutheran principles. He worked to build up his congregations. He established a school for the children in each and was insistent upon careful indoctrination.

The poverty he met with was extreme. His home in Philadelphia was a lean-to of the home of a member, so small that he remarks it was a little roomier than the famous "cask of Diogenes" and gave him sufficient space to study and sleep, but not to walk around in. His salary, to start with, was nothing per month. He supported himself for a time by giving music lessons on the side. One congregation contributed a horse for his trips back and forth, another paid his rent, the third contributed nothing. But he stuck to his post. Things improved in the course of time.

The news that the congregations in and near Philadelphia had received a worthy man as their pastor quickly spread abroad. Soon Muehlenberg was besieged with requests for spiritual services from all sides. Wherever he could be of assistance, he gave it freely, teaching, baptizing, confirming, preaching, settling disputes, advising, building, administering the Sacraments to the living and to the dying. He journeyed hither and thither over almost impassable roads and trails, in winter and summer, and was often in danger of life and limb. Some of the places which he visited again and again are historic in the annals of the Lutheran Church: Tulpehocken, Frederick, York, Chester, Reading, etc. To these churches, many of which had suffered at the hands of clerical vagabonds, his coming was like life from the dead. He reconciled jarring factions, encouraged formal organization, and brought the frontier churches into vital relations with the eastern parishes and with the mother church in Europe. He was able to imbue pastors and people with a Lutheran consciousness that was extremely necessary.

One of the far-reaching results of his tireless activity was the organization of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the first permanent Lutheran Synod in America, which took place on August 26, 1748.

This was the greatest step forward in the planting of the Church in America. Dr. A. L. Graebner calls it "the most important event in the history of the American Lutheran Church of the 18th century."

One of the important matters before this synod was the acceptance of a proper liturgical service order. The common liturgy prepared by Muehlenberg and his co-workers was examined and adopted. It was a fairly good Lutheran liturgy and essentially the Common Service of today.

#### Liturgy

1. Opening Hymn. 2. Confession. 3. Kyrie. 4. Gloria in Excelsis ("Allein Gott in der Hoeh' sei Ehr'"). 5. Salutation and Response. 6. Collect. 7. Epistle. 8. Hymn. 9. Gospel. 10. Credo. 11. Hymn. 12. Sermon. 13. General Prayer. 14. Announcements. 15. Offertory. 16. Salutation. 17. Collect. 18. Benediction. 19. Closing Hymn.

B. M. Schmucker, who was in his day one of the most learned liturgiologists of our country, said of the Muehlenberg liturgy:

"It is the old, well-defined, conservative service of the Saxon and North German liturgies. It is, indeed, the pure, Biblical parts of the service of the Western Church for a period of a thousand years before the Reformation, with the modifications given it by the Saxon Reformers." (*Memoirs*, p. 88, Vol. IV.)

Though this liturgy was copied by pastors, but never published, it was used for 38 years. When publication was ordered by the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1786, it was much altered.

During the following years the extent of Muehlenberg's activity increased greatly. Troubles in the churches of New York called for a peacemaker. He visited various congregations on the Hudson and preached in New York City. He was so impressed with the need in that city that he allowed himself to be prevailed upon to spend six months there in the summer of 1751 and three months in 1752. He had to preach Dutch, English, and German every Sunday, but he brought unity to the distracted congregations. Till 1761 he was active again in Pennsylvania (New Hanover, etc.) and in that year returned to Philadelphia to quell the troubled waters that threatened the church there.

In 1762 a congregational constitution was prepared by Muehlenberg for St. Michael's Church in Philadelphia. In it he embodied his rich experiences in pastoral work among the German, Dutch, and Swedish Lutherans. This constitution was long used by ministers who organized churches in Pennsylvania and the neighboring states. It also served as a foundation for the congregational constitution of the General Synod later and was thus the basis for the congregational constitution of practically all synods until 1840.



In it the pastors were pledged to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, to strict discipline, and to the founding of parish schools. In the election of pastors, regulations were made for holding "Probepredigten." A pastor could be called with the consent of two thirds of the communicant membership and two thirds of the "Kirchenrath."

The instruction of catechumens was also carefully regulated. It was to be a thorough course in the fundamentals of the faith. There must be a public examination. Fourteen years was the minimum age of confirmation. The "Pruefung" should be "mehr zur Aufmunterung und Besserung der Gemeinde, als zu zeigen, wie viel Muehe der Lehrer bei der Arbeit angewandt habe; mehr wie der Verstand der Jugend erleuchtet und ihr Herz gebessert sei, als wie sehr sie ihr Gedaechnisz angefuellt haben." The examination was to be limited in time to one and one half hours. (A. L. Graebner gives the confirmation pledge, p. 597.)

The pastors were held to keep a register of all communicants and by means of "Beichtanmeldung" to exercise discipline. On the day before Communion a preparatory service was conducted.

In the troubled times leading up to the Revolutionary War it seems that internal congregational strife was the order of the day, and everywhere Muehlenberg's strong hand was sought for relief. In 1774 he went to Charleston, where he successfully settled congregational difficulties, and thence to Ebenezer, where by request of the authorities in Europe he was to repair the damage done by Triebner.

In 1779 the correspondence with Halle was broken off on account of the war, but the work had been done to plant the Lutheran Church in America, so that the shock of the war and the severing of relations with Halle did not seriously affect its life. Muehlenberg died Oct. 7, 1787, 76 years old, respected and beloved by the people for whom he had labored long and patiently. His work had been done. Congregations had been properly organized and somewhat united by synodical ties. With all the imperfections of the work which had been accomplished, it is still an abiding monument to the genius and labors of the man who was "the greatest man whom God had given to the Lutheran Church of America in the 18th century," "the patriarch and father of the American Lutheran Church."

As far as Muehlenberg's personal Lutheranism was concerned, there can be no question as to his sincerity in his devotion to the Confessions of the Church, actualized by a noble, exemplary life and service. To those who tried to detract from his position, he stated: "I ask Satan and all his lying spirits to prove anything against me which is not in harmony with the teachings of the

apostles or of our Symbolical Books. I have stated frequently that there is neither fault nor error nor any kind of defect in our evangelical doctrines, founded on the teachings of the prophets and the apostles, and set forth in our Symbolical Books."

On another occasion (June 14, 1774, in a letter to the Charleston Church) he stated: "During the 32 years of my sojourning in America, time and again occasions were given me to join the Episcopal Church and to receive four or five times more salary than my poor German fellow members of the Lutheran faith gave me; but I preferred reproach in and with my people to the treasures in Egypt." (Bente, *American Lutheranism*, I, p. 71.)

The same is true of Muehlenberg's colleague, Brunnholtz, for instance, who stated: "I, Peter Brunnholtz, do solemnly swear and before God Almighty do take an oath upon my soul . . . that I will abide by the pure doctrine and unadulterated Word of God . . . and the true Lutheran Church books . . . and that I will teach according to them."

All pastors of the synod were pledged to the Confessions. In the congregational constitutions the congregations were pledged to the Symbolical Books, and the pastors were pledged to preach "the Word of God according to the foundation of the apostles and prophets and in conformity with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession."

Though the synod organized by Muehlenberg had no regular constitution during the first years, yet in the Agenda, prepared and distributed in manuscript, it was regarded as self-evident that all pastors and congregations subscribe to the Lutheran Symbols. The same Agenda asks at confirmation of the catechumens: "Do you intend to remain true to the truth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as you have learned to know it and solemnly confessed it?"

In the synodical constitution of 1778 the following paragraph covered this point: "As to his life and teaching every pastor is to be found in consonance with the Word of God and our Symbolical Books of faith." (Bente, I, p. 72.)

The pietism of Halle was also the pietism of Muehlenberg. Only those who had passed through a spiritual awakening were regarded as truly converted children of God. The result was that Muehlenberg and his co-workers frequently judged congregations and individuals unduly when they did not see all the outward marks of piety they looked for. He advocated private prayer meetings for the awakening of those who were still in the sleep of sin, and that did not mean unbelievers, but baptized and confirmed members of the churches in most instances. The result was that revivals, or meetings of a similar nature, were held, and later when the fire of revivalism swept sections of the country, the

Lutheran churches frequently took part, introduced the mourners' bench, protracted meetings, emotional preaching, and Methodist revival hymns, etc.

Hierarchical tendencies are seen in the fact that under the arrangement of "united pastors" the congregations were subordinate to synod, and as the lay delegates had no voting power at synod, the pastors were the ruling body. The pastor of the congregation ruled the elders, the pastor and the elders ruled the congregation. And the "united pastors" had the rule of the individual pastors, who could place a man at a congregation or take him away as they saw fit, and the congregation had to submit. (Bente, I, p. 78.) In addition, all pastors and congregations were subject to the Fathers in Halle. (Bente, I, p. 80 ff.)

The unionism of Muehlenberg is evident from the fact that he exchanged pulpits with ministers of other denominations, e. g., with Episcopalians. When Whitefield, the evangelist, came to Pennsylvania, he was invited by the Ministerium (1763) and took part in their service. He also occupied Muehlenberg's pulpit. At the dedication of Zion Church in Philadelphia (1769) the whole non-Lutheran clergy was invited. Episcopal ministers delivered addresses, and Muehlenberg thanked them publicly for the part they had taken.

At one time a union of Lutheran and Episcopal churches was contemplated. It is difficult to account for the fact that Muehlenberg and Wrangel believed that there was no serious difference of doctrine. It is also true that Lutheran ministers (for instance, Muehlenberg's eldest son, Peter Gabriel, afterwards Major General under Washington) went to London to receive the Episcopalian ordination. This, however, was probably done chiefly because in the Southern Colonies the Episcopalian ordination alone was recognized by law. (Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 18.)

Dr. H. E. Jacobs suggests another explanation of this inconsistency. He ascribes the tendency toward union with the Episcopalians to the times of dejection that came over Muehlenberg and his co-workers when they compared the manner in which other denominations received financial aid from Europe with the niggardly way in which the German Lutherans were taken care of. He says: "If there was any time when, even for a moment, Muehlenberg entertained the suggestion of transferring the care of the Lutherans of Pennsylvania to the Church of England, it was only at such times when he and his associates in synod were allowed to struggle on under burdens almost unaided, while union with the Church of England would at once have provided all missionaries sent thither with an appropriation almost sufficient for their sup-

port and with far better protection against the prevalent disorder. If the Lutherans in Europe could not meet the demands of the hour, we can pardon the thought, which never became a fixed purpose, that sooner than have the thousands for whose care he felt himself responsible neglected, some other mode of relief would have to be sought. However, they never denied their confessional viewpoint. Everywhere and at all times they taught and preached as true Lutherans. They never for friendship's sake would be silent concerning a Lutheran doctrine or deny the full consequences of the teachings of their confessions."

In conclusion, let me add a few tributes paid to H. M. Muehlenberg by men of prominence in the Lutheran Church in America, statements which stress the characteristics that made up his true greatness. Dr. A. Spaeth in his life of Krauth says: "In missionary zeal, in pastoral tact and fidelity, in organizing ability and personal piety, he had no superior."

Dr. H. E. Jacobs: "Depth of religious conviction, extraordinary inwardness of character, apostolic zeal for the spiritual welfare of individuals, absorbing devotion to his calling . . . these were combined with an intuitive penetration and extended width of view, a statesmanlike grasp of every situation in which he was placed, an almost prophetic foresight, coolness, and discrimination of judgment, and peculiar gifts for organization and administration."

Dr. A. L. Graebner: "Where could a second man have been found at that time who would have proved equal to the task in the same measure? . . . Muehlenberg was splendidly equipped, both as to degree and variety of gifts which a missionary and organizer has need of. And from the first day of his planting and watering God gave a rich increase to his labors, so rich that Muehlenberg could say with a grateful heart: 'It seems as though now the time had come that God would visit us with a special grace here in Pennsylvania.'"

Dr. Krauss: "Muehlenberg continued faithful in things both small and great. . . . He was the counselor of poorly served congregations, the judge in their quarrels. Confidence was everywhere reposed in him. By reason of his talent for organizing, his erudition, but, above all, his unselfishness, his modesty, dignity, and piety, he was in universal demand, and was compelled to take the lead, which he also kept till his blessed departure from this world."

Muehlenberg's body was laid away just outside his old church at New Providence (Trappe). A marble slab over his grave bears the inscription:

*Qualis et quantus fuerit, non ignorabunt sine lapide futura saecula  
Who and what he was future ages will know without a stone*

W. G. POLACK